

Non-technical summary

EDUCATION REFORM IN BULGARIA: A study in failure

Evgenii Dainov

Without reform in school education, transition to democracy is not sustainable. Yet transition countries repeatedly fail in this crucial field. The aim of this article is to understand why, and how to avoid future reform failure.

The paper finds three clusters of blockages, and structures recommendations around two main lines. Blockages are *organisational*, *institutional* and *cultural*.

Organisationally, no government has managed to construct a systemic picture of the problems in education, or a coherent set of reforms activities to redeem the situation. A solid attempt was made, with the World Bank, over 1998-2003. It was, however, sabotaged by institutional resistance, with only 5 per cent of the loan utilised.

Institutionally, the education establishment halted reform by:

- down-sizing its aims
- not implementing its main activities
- refusing to create the administrative units forming the reform's institutional basis.

The Ministry of Education understood that modernisation means decentralisation, re-distribution of power and empowerment of schools, municipalities, the public. The education establishment defeated all government reform attempts, successfully mobilising, in this effort, crucial cultural anxieties.

Culturally, the public feared that "reform" would undermine the historic aims of education: upholding the national consciousness and providing equal upward mobility avenues.

The recommendations arise from the finding that blockages are primarily to do with unreformed administrations, acting as vested interests. The way forward lies in their re-structuring on the principles of competition and accountability.

Competition entails:

- competition between schools, such as devolving funding and hiring/firing powers to the Heads, introducing external examinations and objective school grading
- competitive curricula
- empowerment of Heads and Boards to introduce wage differentials for teachers, linked to the performance of students in external examinations
- encouragement of private education and constructing a system of public scholarships.

Accountability entails:

- external examinations to grade teachers and schools
- construction of information systems to make the system transparent
- decentralisation of decision-making towards municipalities, thus encouraging forward planning and good management
- decentralisation of funding and introduction of freedom to schools to change funding structure; ending individual discretion of Ministry officials over funding
- creation, at all levels, of public advisory and control bodies
- encouragement of voluntary adherence to EU education guidelines
- an easy complaints system, including Education Ombudsman.

Politically, governments must learn to think clearly, speak convincingly, show tenacity of effort, construct coalitions and allay cultural anxieties.