

POLICIES FOR LIMITATION OF THE REGIONAL DISPARITIES DIFFERENCES IN THE EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The study is dedicated to the current and insufficiently developed problems related to the setting of priorities in the policies aimed at overcoming the existing regional differences in the educational infrastructure of the country. This statement predetermines the main goal of the study – on the basis of the existing European and national regulatory frameworks in the field of regional development and education, as well as the author's study of the differences in educational infrastructure by regions and districts of the country, to propose policies for their restriction.

In view of the main goal, an analysis and evaluation of the European and national regulatory frameworks, as well as of the current legal documents in the fields of education and regional development have been carried out. The focus of the study is: the proposals made for priority policies to reduce regional disparities by regions and districts, according to their concrete specifics features. These policies have a targeted nature and practical applicability in the activities of the relevant local authorities in this area. The proposed policies in territorial terms are defined by different levels of education.

In a conclusion of the study, systematized conclusions are made, which expresses the opinion that the set of proposed policies is a guarantee for achieving minimal differences between regions and districts in terms of their educational infrastructure.

JEL: R11; I2; J71; R58

Introduction

The European Strategy for the Development of the Member States “Europe 2020” launches the introduction of a European economic model through the achievement of economic sustainability and smart growth; social security and “inclusive growth”, focusing on training and employability. The Strategy devotes an important place to education as an object of socio-economic policies for its innovative development. This fact is expressed in the formulation of two main goals of the development of the educational system:

- At the end of the forecast ten-year period – 2020, on average for the EU at least 40% of the population in the age range 30-34 is expected to have received higher education;

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- The reduction of the share of early school leavers/education will continue as to 2020 the set national goals will be reached (in percentage terms).

In addition to these main objectives, the overall strategy in the field of education defines other objectives of particular importance, namely the transformation of lifelong learning and educational mobility into reality. Policies to increase the quality and efficiency of education are envisaged as universal for all elements of the education system.

The development of the educational system and, above all, of its institutional infrastructure largely determines the changes in the indicators for the level and quality of life of the population. There are direct and feedback links between these two areas, through which the real interactions are revealed, leading to the determination of the priorities and the policies for their improvement. Of special scientific and applied significance is the study of the educational infrastructure in a territorial aspect – by regions and districts of the country. This approach reveals regional differences, as well as opportunities for efficient allocation of investment resources, as a result of which the cumulative effects are multiplied, both in education and in terms of living standards. The identified regional differences point to concrete specific policies to limit them.

It should be noted that the author has completed an in-depth detailed study of the state of educational infrastructure, both with average values of selected specific indicators for Bulgaria and with specific values for six territorial regions and 28 districts of the country (Hyuseinov, 2020, pp. 44-78).

The profile analyzes and assessments of the regional differences provided an opportunity for their measurement by levels of education. The obtained real results allow to systematize the problems in the development and the differences between the territorial units, which is a rich specific information about the regional differences by regions and districts. On this basis, the proposals for conducting targeted policies to limit them are based.

From the point of view of these formulations the main goal of the research is formulated: to propose policies in line with the European and national normative frameworks in the field of regional development and education, aimed at increasing the efficiency and quality of the educational infrastructure on the basis of reducing regional disparities.

The specific research tasks derive from the main goal of the research:

1. Analysis and evaluation of the European and national regulatory frameworks for regional development;
2. Analysis and evaluation of the European and national normative frameworks in the field of education;
3. Proposals for effective policies through which to reduce the differences between the minimum and maximum values of the territorial differences by levels of education – pre-school, school and higher education;
4. Proposals for specific policies and measures to achieve a minimum share of school leavers.

The expected results from the implementation of the main goal and in particular of the research tasks will direct the respective local as well as state bodies to the correct choice of profiled policies for reduction/elimination of inequalities in the development of the educational infrastructure by regions of the country.

1. European and National Regulatory Framework in the Field of Regional Development

It is worth noting that in the field of regional development, there is a very effective regulatory framework and programming documents that address issues related to both regional developments as well as interregional and intraregional differences.

One of the objectives of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union² is to reduce inequalities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the most disadvantaged regions. The European Union also supports the achievement of these objectives through the actions it takes through the Structural Funds (European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund, Guidance Section, European Social Fund, European Regional Development Fund), the European Investment Bank and other existing financial instruments.

First of all, it should be noted that in 2008 a new Regional Development Act (RDA) was prepared and adopted, which is in line with the provisions of European law. With this act, Bulgaria, as a member state of the European Union, has achieved harmony between the national legislation for regional development and the legislation of the European Community. The act regulates the objectives of the policies for regional development and reduction of regional differences with regard to:

- The degree of economic, social and territorial development;
- Providing conditions for accelerated economic growth and a high level of employment;
- The development of the territorial interconnections.

In the same year 2008, the European Commission published a Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, which addresses the current objectives and opportunities of territorial interconnections in order to improve the use of the living environment and the territorial dimensions of sectoral policies.

The objective of territorial cohesion, adopted in the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), has been added to the objectives of economic and social cohesion. Territorial cohesion policies must focus on areas with specific geographical and demographic problems.

² Consolidated texts of the European Union Treaty and of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union – Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – Protocols – Annexes – Declarations annexed to the final act of the Intergovernmental Conference Treaty of Lisbon, signed on 13 December 2007, Official Journal C 326, 26/10/2012 P. 0001 – 0390

Of particular importance in the field of regional development is the EU Strategy “Europe 2020” (adopted in 2010), which aims to improve the coordination and linkage of various policies and national strategies for balanced and sustainable regional development within the EU. Achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth must meet today’s global challenges for the development of countries and regions regarding the introduction of innovative technologies, the creation of highly educated and competitive human resources.

The European policy for territorial cohesion is also implemented through the adoption of the very important document “Territorial Agenda of the European Union – 2020”. This document focuses on the territorial dimension of European cohesion policy, as well as on the Europe 2020 Strategy. The main goal for achievement is “territorial cohesion in the conditions of growing challenges in the field of regional development:

- Growing globalization and structural changes since the 2009 economic crisis;
- The changes of the European Union in connection with the growing dependencies between the regions;
- The demographic situation in the different territories and the social challenges.

Territorial cohesion policies are also relevant in the Fifth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion published by the European Commission in 2011, which outlines cohesion priorities and policies after 2013. The report emphasizes the need to concentrate European and national resources in a limited number of priorities. This approach means setting clear and measurable goals and indicators for the expected results.

According to the requirements of the Europe 2020 Strategy, Bulgaria is developing a “National Program for Reforms of the Republic of Bulgaria”. This long-term framework document sets out ten-year development objectives and policies for all sectors and their territorial dimensions.

The achieved positive changes in the development of the European and national normative frameworks in the field of regional development created preconditions for the development of the National Strategy for Regional Development (NSRD) for the period (2012-2022). This Strategy defines the main goals, priorities and specific goals, in accordance with the requirements of the Europe 2020 Strategy, taking into account the guidelines of the EU Territorial Agenda 2020, as well as the National Reform Program of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020) and the National Development Program “Bulgaria 2020”. The overall system of strategies and programs is the main strategic documents defining the goals and priorities for the regional development of the country until 2022.

From this point of view, it is important to note that the NSRD includes a separate section that deals with the problems of the territorial and spatial development of the country and its regions. The Methodological guidelines for the development of the National Concept for Spatial Development (NCSD) of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period up to 2025 have been reported.³

³ The national concept for spatial development will be developed by the end of 2022.

According to Regulation 2015/1017, the European Parliament and the Council⁴ of the EU need comprehensive action created by the lack of investment and growing disparities between regions, as well as to strengthen confidence in the Union economy, and incentives to create an investment-friendly environment in the EU. Member States could support economic recovery. Along with the renewed boost in investment finance, effective and economically and socially sustainable structural reforms, as well as fiscal responsibility, are a way to create beneficial synergies where investment projects help increase employment and demand and lead to a lasting reduction in the gap between real and potential GDP, as well as to increase potential growth. The European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI), strengthened through the involvement of the Member States, must complement the overall strategy to increase the Union's competitiveness and attract investment. The Regulation emphasizes that the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) should also support projects in the fields of education, training, ICT development and digital education, as well as projects in the cultural and creative sectors, in tourism and in the social sphere. Investment in these areas should be based on a holistic approach, which in any case shows that the value inherent in education and culture is being duly respected.

2. European and National Normative Framework in the Educational Infrastructure

The right to education, according to the UNESCO definition, should be understood as a multilateral law⁵ that has at least two dimensions:

- quantitative – everyone has the right to education⁶
- quality – access to all forms of education.

The concept of primary education has expanded the scope of the right to education, namely: “from primary or elementary education to lifelong learning”.

The need to promote regulation in order to universalize access to primary education is recognized in the UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy (2002-2007). The strategy states: “UNESCO's big task will be to support member states in policy reforms as well as legal instruments to promote universal access to basic education.”

The Convention against Discrimination in the sphere of education⁷ introduces a definition of discrimination. The Convention contains an extremely detailed definition of discrimination

⁴ Regulation (Eu) 2015/1017 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 June 2015 on the European Fund for Strategic Investments, the European Investment Advisory Hub and the European Portal for Investment Projects and amending Regulations (EU) № 1291/2013 and (EU) № 1316/2013 – European Fund for Strategic Investments.

⁵ See Unesco operational definition of basic education Thematic Framework (December 2007).

⁶ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 26.

⁷ The Convention against Discrimination in Education was adopted by the General Conference at its eleventh session on 14 December 1960 in Paris. It was ratified by Bulgaria by Decree 508 of November 17, 1962.

in education, which covers all possible signs that could violate equality in treatment in education.

In the Convention, education refers to all of its types and levels and includes access to education, the level and quality of education, as well as the conditions under which it is provided.

In a recommendation of the Council of Ministers on policies to reduce early school leaving, minimizing early school leaving⁸ is essential to achieving a number of key objectives in the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy. Reducing early school leaving affects both the goals of “intelligent growth” by raising the level of education and training and the goals of “inclusive growth”, addressing one of the main risk factors for unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. School drop-outs are barriers to employment and economic growth and are closely linked to poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. A comprehensive analysis of the factors behind the phenomenon of “dropping out”, including social aspects, is needed. In his publication, the author⁹ defines the scale of the phenomenon of “dropping out of school”. The article reveals the territorial differences by reasons for leaving and by levels of education. The changes in the differences were identified and the changes in the range of drop-outs by groups of classes, reasons for leaving and regions for the whole studied period were analyzed. Proposals have been made for appropriate policies and measures to achieve minimum relative shares of school leavers.

A European Parliament¹⁰ resolution states that from 2008 to 2018, the levels of early school leavers in the EU are consistently high at 10.6%. The European Parliament calls on the Commission and the Member States to step up their efforts to reduce early school leaving, especially among disadvantaged people, as well as to implement comprehensive prevention strategies and to involve early school leavers in education and training. One of the EU's priorities and the main goal of Europe 2020 in the field of education is to reduce the share of early school leavers from 15% to less than 10%, which will significantly contribute to poverty reduction, given the that a sufficient level of skills and competences is a prerequisite for young people to be employed in the labour market.¹¹

In the National Normative Framework in the sphere of education has acted a special Protection against Discrimination Act, which has been in force since 01.01.2004. It regulates the protection of all natural and legal persons on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria against all forms of discrimination. The Protection against Discrimination Act, clearly

⁸ Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving (Text with EEA relevance) 2011 / C 191/01.

⁹ Hyuseinov, B. "The problem of "dropping out of school" – challenges, causes, policies", "Population" Magazine, Institute for Population and Human, Book 1, Article 6, 2020.

¹⁰ REPORT from the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs on the European Semester for economic policy coordination: employment and social policy aspects in the Annual Strategy for Sustainable Growth 2020 Motion for a European Parliament resolution; https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0025_BG.html#title2

¹¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, The European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion: A European Framework for Social and Territorial Cohesion, European Commission, Brussels, 16.12.2010.

regulates the rights of citizens to access education. All aspects concerning the prevention of discriminatory practices in the Bulgarian school are affected.

The exercise of the basic constitutional right to education, which must be exercised without discriminatory manifestations, is also proclaimed in the Law on Preschool and School Education, which contains anti-discrimination provisions.

The preschool and school education act¹² explicitly defines the principles that characterize education as a national priority:

- equal access to quality education and inclusion of every child/student;
- equality and non-discrimination in the conduct of pre-school and school education;
- preservation and development of the Bulgarian educational tradition;
- inclusion through education in Bulgarian language (art. 3, para. 2, items 3-7).

The main goals of preschool and school education are:

- acquisition of competencies for application of the principles of sustainable development;
- early detection of the talents and abilities of each child and student and promotion of their development and realization;
- acquisition of competencies for understanding and applying the principles of democracy and the rule of law, human rights and freedoms, active and responsible civic participation;
- formation of tolerance and respect for the ethnic, national, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of each citizen;
- formation of tolerance and respect for the rights of children, students and people with disabilities;
- knowledge of national, European and world cultural values and traditions (Art. 5, para. 1, items 2, 4, 5, 7-10).

The set of the stated main goals predetermines the motivation of the Bulgarian families to provide their children with quality education, provided by the innovative regional development of the educational infrastructure.

The higher education system has a Higher education act (HEA), which contains regulatory clauses for non-discrimination in the field of education: “In higher education, privileges and restrictions related to age, race, nationality, ethnicity, gender are not allowed, social origin, political views and religion, except for the cases explicitly stated in the Regulations for the activity of the higher school in accordance with the peculiarities of the education and the future profession” (art. 4).

According to the Higher Education Act (Art. 22), the autonomy of higher education cannot be violated by: carrying out activities that violate the constitutional rights of members of the

¹² Law on Preschool and School Education, in force since 01.08.2016 (Promulgated SG No. 79 of 13 October 2015),

academic community related to race, nationality, ethnicity, origin, religion, belief, political affiliation.

The law also contains measures for the so-called positive discrimination against different categories of persons. According to Art. 68, para. 3 of the Higher Education Act, under facilitated conditions and in accordance with the procedure determined by the regulations for the activity of the higher school, the following candidate students are accepted, who have successfully participated in the competitive examinations:

- persons with permanent disabilities and reduced working capacity (70% and over 70%);
- war invalids and war victims;
- round orphans;
- mothers with three or more children;
- twins, when they have applied at the same time in the same professional field and higher school and one of them has been accepted.

In addition, Art. 70, para. 2 stipulates “Students, doctoral students and postgraduates – orphans, people with sensory disabilities and others with permanent disabilities and reduced working capacity 70% and over 70%, war invalids, and war victims and persons raised until adulthood in homes deprived of parental care, mothers with children up to 6 years of age and those who have a medical examination, are entitled to special benefits, regulated in the regulations of the higher school”.

Thus, by creating favourable conditions for training of students with special needs, the opportunities for access and for expanding the range of students in the regional educational infrastructure are significantly increased.

In this regard, an important role is assigned to the so-called Priority axis 3 “Regional educational infrastructure”, which has a greater territorial significance. It covers municipalities in view of its specific profile related to national/regional social and economic needs. The educational infrastructure includes vocational, specialized, auxiliary, sports schools, schools of culture and arts, as well as universities. In this sense, Priority Axis 3 is in support of the measures identified in the Partnership Agreement, in the National Development Program: Bulgaria 2020, as those provided for in the National Reform Program, regarding the regional dimensions of the education system.

The priority axis will ensure the implementation of the most important activities related to the modernization of higher education institutions, in accordance with Objective 5 “Modernization of the university management system and clear definition of university types and educational qualifications” under the plan for the implementation of the Strategy for development of the higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria.

The analyzes and assessments of the European and National regulatory frameworks provide a solid basis for the development of specific policies for the different levels of education regarding the regional differences in the educational infrastructure of the country.

3. Priority Policies for Limiting Regional Disparities in Educational Infrastructure

3.1. Specific policies for changes in the pre-school infrastructure

The systemized analyzes, assessments and conclusions about the development of the educational infrastructure in the regional aspect by regions and districts revealed the specific character of pre-school education as the foundation of the educational system.¹³ Achieving the necessary high quality of pre-school education requires innovative development of the educational infrastructure.

The regional profiles of the study provide opportunities, by analyzing and systematizing conclusions based on rich information processed, to shape the problems in the field of pre-school education. In doing so, the disparities found between regions, and in particular between districts, point to the correct choice of effective and efficient policies that will reduce the differences, especially with regard to their minimum and maximum values.

It should be emphasized that the adopted Law on Preschool Education (in force since 01.06.2016) provides the appropriate policies, measures and modules aimed at achieving innovative education for children. It is extremely valuable to say that it is only through quality pre-school education that it is possible to ensure full individual development of each child in accordance with the modern requirements.

Before outlining the specific policies/measures for individual regions and districts, it is important to note that territorial disparities are not significant and did not cause significant changes in the coverage of children during the 2010/2017 survey. This fact destines the type of policies/measures that should be specific. They should target the regions/districts with lower net odds values, especially those below the average for Bulgaria.¹⁴

High-quality education and care in early childhood play a key role in creating equal opportunities and limiting early school leaving and low achievement at a later stage.¹⁵ In Bulgaria, the percentage of children under 3 years of age enrolled in official childcare facilities is much lower than the EU average (16.2%; EU average 33.2%), especially in some areas and among vulnerable children groups. Attendance is also limited by the lack of places in kindergartens, especially in the large cities.

The high degree of aggregation of territorial differences across regions of the country in some ways limits the possibilities for more specific policies to reduce them. Obviously, at this regional level, policies to increase the reach and availability of children in the age group of

¹³ The indicated analyzes, assessments and conclusions are contained in the above mentioned by the author study (p. 1).

¹⁴ The net coefficients measure the scope, respectively the children's access to pre-school education. The statistical name of this coefficient is: Net enrollment ratio in kindergartens of children in the age group 3-6 years by regions and districts. Its essence consists in calculating the relative share of enrolled children of a certain age group to the number of permanent residents of the same age group.

¹⁵ European Semester 2020: assessment of progress in the structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances and results of in-depth reviews in accordance with Regulation (EU) № 1176/2011, Brussels, 26.2.2020.

3 to 6 are indicative, i.e. they should target the areas with the lowest net odds values, as well as the “Places per 100 children in kindergartens” indicators.

Of interest are the values of these indicators in the Southwestern region: in terms of the number of places in kindergartens, there is a minimal shortage – 97 places per 100 children for 2017. This fact is explained by the formation of the area as a developed educational regional centre, which is confirmed and its net odds ratio of 83% is the highest compared to other regions.

Therefore, policies towards the South-west region need to focus on expanding its kindergarten facilities. All other areas have such a base in excess of their needs. However, it is clear that having a large material base in these areas does not always mean a high level of enrollment of children in pre-school education. This is the case with the South-east region, where the places of 100 children in kindergartens are 105, but in terms of coverage, it has the lowest net coefficient – 76.8%. The situation is similar in the North-west and South-central regions.

The policies in these areas should be differentiated according to the specific regional reasons for the lower reach of children, despite the availability of kindergarten facilities. The aim of these policies should be to limit/eliminate the impact of regional causes of lower attendance of kindergartens.

The results of the horizontal and vertical analyzes of the values of the net coefficients for pre-school education by districts of the country identified the set of areas to which concrete, specific policies should be addressed, though with a slight decrease for the 2010-2017 study period. Such were the districts of Razgrad, Dobrich and Targovishte. Definitely, it could be stated that in these areas not only that there is no deficit of places in kindergartens, but they have a very wide material base compared to their needs. In Razgrad district there are 134 places for 100 children in kindergartens; in region Dobrich – 130 places and in the district of Targovishte – 113. These findings are aimed at developing policies aimed at limiting the causes that have led to a reduction in the reach of children, i.e. targeted policies to increase the reach of children in pre-schools are needed in these areas.

Vertical analysis of the net coefficients shows that 16 districts have values below the average net coefficient for Bulgaria, which amounts to 80%, of which only 5 regions have net coefficients below 75% – Kardzhali, Haskovo, Pazardzhik, Targovishte and Sliven. Again, the lower values of net coefficients in these areas are not the result of scarcity of places in kindergartens, but are due to regional reasons, usually of socio-economic nature. This finding clearly sets out the directions of the relevant regional policies to increase the reach of children in pre-school education, namely to take measures that would ensure the elimination of the reasons preventing the increase in the reach of children.

It is necessary to point out that in 25 districts the places in kindergartens are above the reference level, i.e. over 100 and in only three districts – Sofia (capital), Plovdiv and Varna are 90.94 and 94 respectively, which despite the insignificant differences, directs the implementation of policies/measures to achieve full coverage of children in kindergartens. The main reason for this relatively minimal scarcity of places is the large influx of settlers in these major cities. Policies should be guided in two directions: on the one hand, reaching full

coverage and on the other, measures to limit the influx of settlers, which would complicate not only educational but also economic, social and spiritual infrastructure.

In direct relation and influence on the values of the net coefficients for pre-school education, i.e. the coverage of children by regions and districts of the country is the problem of the fuller coverage of children of ethnic origin from day nurseries and especially in kindergartens and pre-school classes. It is clear that the solution of this problem is first and foremost related to the level of command of the official Bulgarian language. As is well known, pre-school education and training are assigned too responsible tasks to prepare children for a smooth transition to the next educational stage – primary education. The main factor for the realization of this requirement is unconditional knowledge of the Bulgarian language at the necessary level for the school education.

The analyzes and evaluations show that there are no problems with regard to the available material base for more comprehensive coverage of children from ethnic communities. Obviously, the reasons for their incomplete coverage are mainly due to the difficulties associated with their inclusion. This fact, once again clearly proves the need for the development of policies and concrete measures for their integration, first of all, by applying appropriate forms for learning the official Bulgarian language.

The adopted “Strategy for the Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities in Bulgaria” (2014-2020) focuses on the providing access to education and training of disadvantaged ethnic groups with a focus on Roma children. This statement adds to the requirement in the education system to cover all children who have difficulties mastering the official language.

Coverage of all children, and especially children of ethnic groups from the earliest age, can be achieved in the system of childcare facilities for upbringing, upbringing and training:

- Nursery from two/three years of age to the age of four/five; child parenting and upbringing for a period of two years;
- Kindergartens – from four/five to six years of age, i.e. one/two years of parenting, upbringing and appropriate education for children;
- Pre-school class – from six to seven years of age, i.e. one-year education for a full and trouble-free transition to school education not only in speaking Bulgarian but also in the required level of knowledge and behaviour.

The proposed early childhood is an appropriate approach to policies for the coverage and inclusion of young children in a natural social environment, where they will be raised, educated and, accordingly, their age trained with due care and attention. In this way, they will build up modern values, will show curiosity and desire to go to school. It should be emphasized that policies and measures in this area need to include the establishment of appropriate teams with special education and, above all, the educators and teachers to meet the requirement to use literally Bulgarian fluently.

In order to achieve the results that are really desirable and to ensure the highest possible coverage of children, it is appropriate to make the attendance of childcare facilities compulsory. This applies more strongly to the children of parents who do not have or have

an educational degree lower than primary education and are therefore unable to educate and provide a quality environment for their children's education. Naturally, the approach proposed does not limit families with children whose parents have a higher level of education to prefer, i.e. on request, their children attend nurseries and gardens.

As a result of the proposed productions and approaches, a considerable potential contingent of young children was formulated, especially Roma, who will attend childcare facilities. Obviously, at district and municipal level, it is necessary to evaluate the available facilities by type of kindergarten, to prepare information on the number of parents with low/ no education and, accordingly, the number of their children who will attend obligatory kindergartens. This administrative act is of high social importance, especially for municipalities with compact Roma population. It should be noted that for families with children/in a relationship for who have been found by social workers that the home environment is completely unsuitable for their upbringing, behaviour and education, the compulsory approach is taken when placing children in appropriate childcare institutions.

The proposed approaches and measures require appropriate changes and additions to the existing legal framework in terms of material, financial and educational structure with a view to ensuring the full day coverage of children in pre-school education.

3.2. Priority regional policies for school education

The nature of policies to increase the reach of pupils in school education (grades I-XII) is determined by the degree of differences between territorial units. With the exception of the Southwestern region, which ranks first in student enrollment (85% in 2017), the other districts have lower enrollment and minor differences. From this point of view, it is appropriate to target regional policies to limit the differences to the areas with the lowest net odds values (below 80%). These are the districts of Silistra, Pazardzhik, Sliven and Targovishte. As a main reason is the decrease in the number of students in all three levels of education. One of the main reasons for the decline in the number of students is the phenomenon of "leaving the education" with its inherent specific causes that cause it.

The aim of regional policies is to bring students closer to the standard maximum, especially by limitation/elimination the phenomenon of "leaving school education". Obviously, this phenomenon, despite the not high values of its scale, has an effect on reducing the reach of students in the age range from 7 to 19 years.

The implementation of regional policies aimed at reducing the number of school leavers at the district level is mainly indicative, due to their high degree of aggregation. In order to achieve regional policy specification, it is necessary to disaggregate them by area, incl. in the constituent municipalities.

Over the course of study, an interesting paradox has emerged in a result of the increasing tide of population/students in the age group 7-19 from smaller to larger regional educational centres. This process leads to a decrease in student reach in large areas, incl. and in Sofia

(Capital), where for the eight-year period it is close to 5%.¹⁶ It is clear that, in the districts/municipalities that are the “source” of students dropping out of local schools, active socio-economic policies need to be pursued. In this way, they will retain students and their families. First of all, it is appropriate to study their educational preferences and, accordingly, to provide the adequate facilities.

Through the implemented analyzes by grade level ascertained that the inflow of primary school students is highest, which implies an expansion of its school base. Obviously, this process is gaining speed, so it is imperative that appropriate policies be developed and implemented for young families with young students in primary education in order not to leave their places of origin. These policies must be targeted and based on an economic and social stimulus.

It should be made clear that the reach of students in school education is conditioned mainly by the leaving/drop-out of students from the education system. This is a serious limitation/liquidation problem that focuses mainly on the efforts of the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as the relevant regional authorities by districts and municipalities. It is appropriate they to direct their policies and measures to remedy the causes that have caused more the school leaving. Of particular importance is the approach that differentiates the strength of manifestation of the main reasons for leaving by education level.

The priority character of the policies to minimize the school leavers requires the organization and implementation of appropriate action measures, especially for primary education, for reasons that have left school. This approach provides valuable information needed to make specific targeted management decisions by districts/municipalities.

The results of the assessments of the ranking of the degree of influence of the main causes on the scale of school leavers show that the “family reasons” are identified with the greatest weight in all districts except Sofia (Capital). For these reasons, not only the socio-economic conditions but also the level and quality of family motivation and value orientation of both parents and children should be taken into account. Obviously, in a family situation that does not prevent leaving, it is necessary to implement prevention policies and, in some cases, intervention by the municipal authorities.

In these directions is orientated the developed Strategy to reduce the proportion of early school leavers (2013-2020), which is at the heart of policies and key measures to prevent early school leaving. The main prevention policies are:

- providing a positive educational environment;
- access to education especially for children with special educational needs;
- increase parental involvement; financial support for families in need.

Of particular note is the important reason for dropping out of school, namely the manifestations of various forms of discrimination against students. This factor is not examined directly by national statistics and therefore, no relevant information is published.

¹⁶ Obviously, the reason for this paradox arises from the lack of school facilities, which cannot cover the high influx of students to the large regional centers.

However, there are scientific and sociological studies that reveal the existence of discriminatory manifestations in the field of education. This fact obviously has a negative psychological impact on discriminated students, who often leave school in a traumatized mental state.

Of interest are the results of an empirical legal and sociological study conducted by the Institute of State and Law (IDP) at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences on “Discrimination in the field of school education – building anti-discrimination legal awareness”.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that the prevalence of discrimination on the grounds of “education” ranks second in the ranking by the degree of manifestation “very common” and “rather common” – 32.3%. With a higher prevalence is discrimination on the grounds of “ethnicity” (38.9%).¹⁸

The assessments of the anti-discriminatory legal awareness of teachers towards students are especially indicative. When asked whether they are aware of different treatment of students in similar circumstances, 14% answered “yes” and 86% answered “no”. Again, the attribute “ethnicity” ranks first – nearly 35%, followed by the attributes “material status” – nearly 20%, “religion” – nearly 15% and “gender” – 5%. Another important point is the identification of the perpetrator of the discriminatory act: with almost 70% these are classmates and with almost 15% – teachers.

The results establishing the degree of risk of discrimination on various grounds are also of high significance – with equal relative shares in the second place are the students of Roma origin, as well as the students with disabilities – 43%. The first place, however, is occupied by students who come from poor families – 51%, i.e. poor students are at risk of discrimination by their classmates. This defines them as a strong vulnerable group with low social status. As the majority of poor families with students are predominantly of Roma ethnicity, the signs that discriminate against students are superimposed. In this case, there is multiple discrimination, which exacerbates the negative consequences mainly in psychological and social aspects.

The mentioned facts illustrate the complex but particularly important problem of discrimination against students, which requires counteraction with the application of European standards in order to significantly reduce it. This is the mechanism that would lead to a significant “narrowing” of the phenomenon of “dropping out of school”. Exploring the close link between discrimination and school drop-outs by students at risk of discrimination and actual discriminatory action will allow specific anti-discrimination actions to be taken in school education, which in turn will limit the phenomenon of “dropping out” for this group of students.

In this regard, the results of the study conducted under the project “Prevention of discrimination and creation of equal opportunities” (funded by the Operational Program “Human Resources Development”, co-financed by the ESF) are also of interest. With regard to the manifestations of discrimination in the field of education, the emphasis is on the

¹⁷ Commission for Protection against Discrimination, 2017, “Identification and development of profiles of the groups and communities most affected by the risk of discrimination”, Consolidated analytical report by BGASIST OOD;

¹⁸ As a percentage of the total number of respondents.

policies and measures, the implementation of which will ensure the so-called inclusive education. This process, in turn, as well as the implementation of the laws, will gradually lead to the “elimination of negative discriminatory practices in education”. The risk groups of students at risk of discrimination are identified: from Roma origin, with disabilities, victims of violence, from rural areas, i.e. students at risk depending on their personal characteristics and social background. Important are the specialized educational problems for educating students in the behaviour of tolerance and mutual assistance.

It is necessary to create an environment of safety, security and appropriate protection of students from discrimination in the schools. Through the introduction of multicultural education, as well as the organization of the so-called mentoring programs for students at risk of dropping out of school education is possible to create conditions to prevent discriminatory actions.

Measures, taken to limit the number of school drop-outs by the Ministry of Education, have had some positive results – since the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year, when 3000 students who left/drop-outs school came back to the classrooms through “door-to-door” approach.

This fact confirms the implementation of a successful targeted policies by the Ministry of Education and Science, which realizes its operational goals, consisting in the development, implementation and monitoring of a comprehensive and integrated policy to increase the scope of the education system based on international cooperation with a clear division of responsibilities, interaction between different levels of management. A key point in the Strategy is the goal of “providing appropriate educational support for the development of each child and student”.

Under the opinion of the author of this study, the multidisciplinary analyzes and evaluations of the phenomenon of “drop-out” show that it can be more restricted, since the necessary conditions and prerequisites for the education system and the relevant state, district and municipal authorities are available to integrate a mechanism to accelerate the achievement of real results with regard to the significant reduction of drop-outs. The modern educational infrastructure excludes manifestations of this negative phenomenon, which is incompatible with the requirements for a high quality of education.

3.3. Innovative policies for the regional development of the higher education

The condition and policies for changes in the educational infrastructure largely determine the access and reach of the population by regions and districts of the country in the higher education system. Its high importance places modern requirements on the structure and quality of the regional educational infrastructure. They consist not only in its quantitative but also in qualitative development, which provides dynamic links and interdependencies between the educational profiles of training and the demand on the labour market by highly educated specialists at European level. Obviously, the central problem lies in both improving access and increasing the share of graduates of higher education, as well as in achieving a purposeful, business-oriented structure of majors in higher education. The defined staging is

present in a number of strategies, programs and action plans, but has not yet been real implemented.

The share of higher education graduates is still below the target of Strategy Europe 2020, and the provision of higher education is partly in line with the needs of the labour market. In 2018, their share among people aged 30-34 reached 33.7%, but is still below the national target of the Europe 2020 strategy of 36%. In 2017, 8.1% of high school graduates, secondary education in Bulgaria completed their higher education abroad, and this number significantly exceeds the number of international students in the country. The share of higher education graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is still small (20.5% in 2017 compared to the EU average of 25.8%).¹⁹

In this context, the realization of the mentioned relations between the business and the educational infrastructure of higher education in territorial aspect and mainly by districts/municipalities is of particular importance. Only in this way can it be purposefully restructured and formulated on a territorially determined market principle. This approach ensures the effective use of the existing higher education infrastructure as well as its updating according to the needs of the business profiled expansion.

Such a statement could be applied to the **Northwestern region**. In view of the strategic goals for its development, it is necessary for the relevant authorities to update their projected views on the structure of the economy of this region, which they should carry out jointly with business representatives. As a result of these actions, the need to create a higher education institution with appropriate profiles will emerge, which in turn will move the Northwestern region not only educationally and economically but also spiritually.

In view of the made proposal, it is appropriate to reduce to some extent the development of higher education in established university centres. This will lead to the regulation of a number of demographic, social and educational problems in territorial terms. Specifically, for the case "Northwestern region", such changes are appropriate in closer territorially located university centres. These are the districts of Veliko Turnovo and Gabrovo with the value of the net coefficients for 2017, respectively 186.5% and 167.5%. The determined values of the net coefficients, which are significantly higher than the coefficients for the districts of Varna (115.7%), Plovdiv (109.3%) and Sofia-Capital (128.1%) prove not only the possibility but also the need for transfer/return of students to the Northwestern region. It should be emphasized that the districts of Veliko Turnovo and Gabrovo are territorially smaller than the stated large districts and it can be argued that this fact causes a number of serious problems for the economic, social, transport, housing, health, etc. infrastructures.

The presented considerations for the development of the Northwestern region by creating the conditions for the construction of a modern educational infrastructure, including a higher education segment directly related to the current and future profiles of local businesses, will surely change the level and quality of life in the area. This act will also be in line with

¹⁹ Report for Bulgaria for 2020 accompanying Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Central Bank and the Eurogroup.

European requirements for building a knowledge-based society and economy to provide innovative specialties/profiles in the labour market.

3.4. Synthesized conclusions concerning the proposed policies for reduction of the regional disparities

In a conclusion of the proposed in the study-specific policy for and the concrete changes in the different levels of education related to the respective educational infrastructure could be synthesized as the most important aspects of the policies:

Preschool education

- policies to make fuller use of the available educational infrastructure in order to increase net odds values, i.e. the reach of children in kindergartens. These policies should be of a differentiated nature and aim at limiting/eliminating the impact of regional causes that have led to lower attendance at kindergartens;
- policies to reinforce the fundamental nature of the objectives of pre-school education, namely to ensure that children move smoothly into the next educational stage – primary education. The main factor for achieving this goal is the removal of the language barrier, respectively the command of the official Bulgarian language, which implies a fuller coverage of children from ethnic communities, as well as the implementation of appropriate forms for its learning;
- policies to cover all children, and especially Roma children from early childhood, in the system of childcare facilities for upbringing, behaviour and education. In doing so, it is necessary to ensure regular attendance at childcare facilities by children whose parents do not have or have a low educational level, i.e. these parents are unable to educate and provide a quality environment for their children's education.

School education

- implementation of regional policies to limit the reasons for the incomplete reach of students in the age group of 7-19 years;
- policies to regulate the flow of students to the larger district centres, and in particular to Sofia (Capital). Implementing student retention policies in areas where there is a high tide, creating an appropriate educational infrastructure to suit their educational preferences;
- specific policies for young families with primary school children who register the highest inflow to larger district centres;
- a system of appropriate policies to limit/eliminate the “drop-out” phenomenon. They should aim at eliminating the reasons behind his “placement” in the school education;

- a package of policies targeting the families of children who have left school for family reasons, which have the greatest weight in all districts except Sofia (Capital). When conducting them, it is important to take into account not only the reasons of socio-economic nature, but also such as family motivation and value orientation.

Higher education

- policies for changes in the structure and quality of the higher education infrastructure in the regional aspect;
- policies to ensure a dynamic link between the educational profiles of training and the demand on the labour market for highly educated professionals at European level;
- policies for the creation and development of higher education infrastructure, tailored to the specific characteristics of relatively less deprived areas (Northwestern region), directly linked to current and future local business profiles in order to achieve noticeable changes in the standard and quality of life of the population in this region.

In conclusion, it is obvious, that in all three levels of education, there are important problems related to the development of their educational infrastructure, which requires the development and implementation of effective policies for its improvement, modernization and expansion in accordance with the contemporary requirements for achieving innovative education and, respectively, high-tech economic development and the society.

The development of the regional education system must guarantee equal access to quality education in order to ensure competition on the labour market and equal starting positions in equal other conditions. The existence of regional educational differences is a result of both economic imbalances and ethnocultural and social inequalities at national and local levels. The compensatory mechanisms are the policies for overcoming the differences – the social policy of the country in general and the possibilities for conducting the regional educational policy.

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