Learning Curve

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Lessons for Life in 64 Squares

Beloved in Armenia, chess becomes a mandatory part of the country's curriculum.

by Sona Kocharyan
18 January 2012

YEREVAN | Arbi Khachatouryan teaches chess for a living, not an unusual job in a country where chess masters are treated like sports stars.

Khachatouryan, 30, works at the state-run Chess Academy of Armenia, but in September he began giving lessons twice a week at a primary school in Yerevan. He says he enjoys seeing second-graders' relish for checkmating their classmates.

Not only their classmates. Grigor Gevorgyan, one of Khachatouryan's students, revels in his newfound skill, boasting, "My grandfather is the best chess player in the world and I once mated him."

But it is a class, after all, and there's more to it than the thrill of conquest, Khachatouryan says. "Every day we start by going over the rules taught during the previous lesson. The children are eager to start their games, but revision is very important, too."

Khachatouryan is not the only chess player teaching in Armenian public schools. In fact, since September more than 1,000 expert players and chess-savvy schoolteachers have been instilling the rules of the ancient game to 7-year-olds.

Armenia became the world's first country to teach chess in every primary school and to include it in the national curriculum, Education and Science Minister Armen Ashotyan said in August, just before the new school year began and chess became a compulsory subject for second-graders.

Chess teacher Arbi Khachatouryan explains the rules of the game to second grade pupils at School No. 55 in the Armenian capital, Yerevan.

"In the past Armenia often drew on the experiences of leading countries when making education reforms. Because of this innovation, the situation has changed. Now the eyes of the global educational community are on us," Ashotyan said.

In 2010, the government tasked the Chess Academy with setting up a course. The Education Ministry experimented with teaching chess in two Yerevan schools in spring 2011 before recommending the program be expanded nationwide at a cost of 600 million drams ($1.5 million) in the 2011-2012 school year. The academy is responsible for writing textbooks and manuals and training chess teachers.

The academy even produced a psychology handbook to help chess teachers better understand how young children think and learn.

All 1,287 Armenian primary schools where second-grade classes are offered are taking part in the chess program, according to the Education Ministry. There are about 35,000 second-graders this year, all taking twice-weekly chess lessons. One lesson is an addition to their normal program and one replaces a physical education session.

Most of the new chess teachers are chess experts, and they are joined by teachers of math, informatics, and physical education, according to program organizer Varsine Manandyan of the Chess Academy.

After going through training sessions and seminars, aspiring chess teachers had to take an exam before 1,150 of them were hired for terms ranging from one to three years.

Chess experts do not expect every Armenian youngster to become a lifelong player, but they say the subject can help children in other areas of school and life.

"Six or seven is the best age for children to start learning chess," says Tigran Petrosian, a 27-year-old grandmaster, no relation to the Tigran Petrosian who was world chess champion in the 1960s. "I also took my first steps into the field at the age of 6."

Some chess instructors think the game will help children better understand subjects such as algebra, geometry, and logic.

"This game develops other values. The child learns to think, to make decisions, to play an honest game, to win and lose," Chess Academy director Smbat Lputian says.

Jasmine Khachatryan does her chess homework.

Armenians have an enviable record in the annals of modern chess. The country's latest honor came last summer when the Armenian team led by Levon Aronian, the world's second-ranked player, won the world team chess championship. The Armenian team was heavily weighted with players who had won two consecutive world Chess Olympiads, in 2006 and 2008.

Chess has been among the country's most popular pastimes since the original Tigran Petrosian became world champion in 1963 by beating one of the greatest Soviet players, Mikhail Botvinnik. Petrosian successfully defended his title in 1966 against Boris Spassky, finally losing it to Spassky in 1969.

"I was a little boy of 8, living in the small city of Meghri" at the time, writer Mesrop Harutyunyan says, recalling how Petrosian's achievements set off a chess boom in Armenia. "I remember that everyone in town followed his matches and discussed every single move he made. It was like that not just in my city, but the whole country."

Memories of past glory help explain why the government's decision to teach chess in schools met with wide support. Another is that the country's powerful president, Serzh Sargsyan, is also the chairman of the Armenian Chess Federation and liked the idea when Lputian, the federation's vice president, suggested it.

The program has also been praised by educators, teachers, and parents, and Lputian says countries such as Russia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have expressed interest in adopting it.

"My daughter takes painting classes twice a week. She's also studying piano in a music school. So she wouldn't have time to start learning chess if the school didn't make it possible for her," says Lilit Hakobyan of Yerevan, the mother of a second-grade student.

Gayane Saroukhanyan, a primary school principal in Yerevan, says the program is popular with her students' parents. "The parents of third- and fourth-graders wish their children were also learning the subject, but in my opinion, this should be a gradually developing process," she said.

And it will be. Compulsory chess lessons will be extended to the third grade next year and to the fourth grade in the 2013-2014 school year, according to Education Minister Ashotyan.

Sona Kocharyan *is a journalist in Yerevan.*

Lithuania's Dispensable Teachers

As the countryside empties out and schools close, thousands of teachers lose perks and even their jobs.

by Linas Jegelevicius
3 February 2012

TAURAGE, Lithuania | As a secondary school teacher, Lina Baltiene used to earn almost $800 a month, the average national wage, and she received another $100 to cover bus fare for the 30-kilometer (19-mile) ride to her school in the countryside.

What a difference a few years makes.

Now working part time, she's lucky if she makes one-third of her old salary. Gone is the perk of bus fare, though she still has to make the same daily trek, without a car of her own.

In some ways, Baltiene is a symbol of a shakeup in Lithuanian education spurred by the financial crisis and dramatically shifting demographics.

As in many countries, local governments in Lithuania used to offer incentives to teachers to work in rural communities. Those who commuted were reimbursed for transportation expenses; those who moved close to their schools received more generous benefits.

Rimantas Uzumeckas

"Before the crisis, we would rent out apartments and even houses, and pay the rent for the teachers from town," said Rimantas Uzumeckas, principal of Upyna Secondary School in the western district of Silale. Other benefits included free firewood and cut-rate school meals.

"Even villagers would treat them really well. Some local dairy farmers would provide the newcomers with milk," Uzumeckas said.

"Now, forget it."
The perks have fallen victim to shrinking budgets and dwindling enrollments. Austerity measures have seen Vilnius cut education spending to $800 million – 4 percent less than last year, and 17 percent below spending in 2008.

At the same time, the ranks of Lithuania's schoolchildren are thinning. In the past four years, the country's primary and secondary schools have lost at least 130,000 students, a decline of nearly 30 percent, according to the Ministry of Education and Science.

The trend is hitting the countryside especially hard. Ministry spokeswoman Nomeda Barauskiene said the number of primary and secondary schools in the countryside has gone from 645 in 2008 to 575 this year, an 11 percent drop, compared with a 2 percent decline in urban areas.

Gintaras Steponavicius

The ones to suffer from the decline will not be the shrunken army of Lithuanian schoolchildren but rural teachers, Education Minister Gintaras Steponavicius said. Their numbers have declined from 12,179 in the 2008-2009 school year to 10,679 this year.

"The process of the primary and secondary school reorganization that the country is carrying out now is inevitable," Steponavicius said. With the budget cuts, older, more experienced teachers are the most likely to be laid off, he added – it is cheaper to pay their pensions than their salaries.

"I've always liked my job and children. And the teachers' benefits, like reimbursed bus fare, were a good incentive. Today I have no benefits and very few choices," said Baltiene, who is 58.

Now she catches a ride with other teachers who live near her, when there is space in the car. If not, she calls a grown son or her husband at work and asks for a lift to school. Even if she wanted to pay for a bus ride, most lines to her school's village have been canceled as the population decreases.

Baltiene's situation is precarious for other reasons as well; two years ago, when the travel reimbursement was canceled, she left behind her rural school and the 60-kilometer round trip to look for a job in Taurage, the southwestern city where she lives. When nothing materialized, she was rehired by the Adakavas Secondary School, but at fewer hours and without the chance to work on extracurricular activities that earned her more money.

Now her colleagues tease her about being the "returnee," but it bites. She has lost money and seniority, at a time when even more senior teachers are being laid off.

NO ONE LEFT TO TEACH

Lithuania's rural schools are emptying out because the birth rate fell steadily after the fall of the Soviet Union and because families have decamped to other EU countries in search of work.

Though emigration figures are notoriously under-reported, the country's statistics agency records a nearly four-fold increase in the number of people who left Lithuania in 2010 – 83,157, compared with 21,970 the year before.

And although it has picked up since, the country's birth rate fell by 23 percent from 1994 to 2005, roughly the period when today's schoolchildren were being born.

The combined effect has been stark: provisional census results show that the country has lost 430,000 people, or about 13 percent of its population, since 2001.

"The birth rate has dropped dramatically in the country in the last decade, especially in the countryside, from which residents have left in large numbers for the towns or emigrated," said the Education Ministry's Barauskiene. As a result, she said, many rural schools have been closed down. The Taurage district saw one of the steepest population declines in the country, losing 18 percent of its residents over the past decade. Last year 400 babies were born in the district, compared with 1,000 in 2002, said Birute Joskiene, a member of the local council. The area has lost roughly 400 schoolchildren each year since 2008 and has closed seven of its 20 schools since 2009.

In the neighboring Silale district, the Upyna Secondary School has lost 350 pupils over five years and fired seven teachers. Only a few years ago, principal Uzumeckas said it was nearly impossible to attract teachers from Silale, a city 17 kilometers away.

"Not now. Of our 33 teachers, 25 come from Silale every day. And certainly no one offers them any compensation. We've laid off most of our teachers of retirement age to give jobs to the teachers from Silale," Uzumeckas said.

Of the 18 teachers at the Adakavas Secondary School in the Taurage district, where Baltiene works, only eight are locals.

Steponavicius, the education minister, said Vilnius had encouraged local governments to preserve the travel reimbursement, but none did.

The director of Taurage's education department, Egidijus Steimantas, said the benefit cost the municipality $9,950 in 2008-2009 and $16,000 the following school year.

The principal of Baltiene's school, Romualdas Levanauskas, said schools with fewer than 80 students are being closed or merged with others. His own school, he said, is "on the brink" – its student population has slid from 115 in 2008 to 80

this year – although its low per-pupil cost may save it.

For now, at least. "In the longer run," Levanauskas predicted, "all rural schools, like the countryside itself, will die out."

Linas Jegelevicius *is a freelance journalist in Klaipeda, Lithuania.*

Polish-Lithuanian Education Dispute Spills Over

Changes in Lithuanian schools further strain already-frayed ties.

by Wojciech Kosc
16 February 2012

WARSAW | The decision in December by Poland's largest energy utility, Polska Grupa Energetyczna, to pull out of a Lithuanian nuclear power station planned jointly by the three Baltic countries and Poland was framed in economic terms.

The official reasons behind PGE's exit from the project, which had been on the drawing board for years, stressed the economic difficulties and pointed out that PGE is involved in another nuclear plant to be located in Poland.

To listen to some commentators in Lithuania, though, you might think the Polish government was using state-owned PGE to punish Lithuania for what many Poles see as its longstanding discrimination against its Polish minority.

A screen grab, with added English subtitles, from a report on Polish TVN television about a boy who claims he was beaten by Lithuanians for speaking Polish in the street. Source: Polvenger/YouTube.

Two years ago, an ill-tempered quarrel broke out over the use of Polish names in Lithuanian documents.

Now the Polish government charges that changes in Lithuania's high-school graduation exam will put the Polish minority at a disadvantage. Prime Minister Donald Tusk asked his Lithuanian counterpart, Andrius Kubilius, in November to show "good will on [your] side with regard to changing the education law."

There is no formal linkage between Lithuanian education policy and Polish energy policy. However, former Lithuanian Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas likely spoke for many on both sides when he recently told a Polish radio station in Vilnius, "the decision for PGE to pull out of the [nuclear] project was political, just as the decision to get involved in it was political."

Poles make up the largest minority in Lithuania. According to 2007 estimates, the Polish community numbered 212,000, or 6.3 percent of the country's overall population. The Russian community is also large, comprising 5 percent of the total, but is mostly of recent origin, while Polish speakers have lived in what is now Lithuanian territory for hundreds of years. The two countries share centuries of joint statehood as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Later, when the Polish state was restored after World War I, its borders contained a slice of modern Lithuania, including the capital, Vilnius, or Wilno in Polish.

In 2010, Warsaw went to bat for the right of Lithuania's Poles to spell their names in official documents using Polish diacritical marks. Polish-speakers also requested bilingual street signs in predominantly Polish areas.

The spelling dispute remains a sore point. On 17 January Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Azubalis restated his government's position that allowing variant spellings on official documents would violate the constitution. Putting bilingual place-name signs in areas with Polish communities, however, is "doable," he said, according to the Polish Press Agency.

The school dispute broke out last year when Lithuania adopted a new education law that, in part, revised the comprehensive exams Lithuanian secondary school students undergo in order to graduate. Dusting off complaints that have surfaced off and on for years, Polish officials, media, and Polish organizations in Lithuania fumed that the changes would disadvantage students at Polish-language schools.

Starting in 2013, students in minority-run schools will have to take the same Lithuanian-language part of the exam as Lithuanian students. About 22,000 students attend schools run by the Polish community.

"The changes are prejudicial to Polish-speakers because poorer results on the graduation exam will harm their chances of admission to university," said Janina Lisiewicz, editor of *Nasza Gazeta*, a newspaper of the Association of Poles in Lithuania.

The law also requires minority schools to teach history and geography in Lithuanian. Currently Polish-language students spend two to five hours per week studying in Lithuanian, depending on grade level.

"Poles speak Lithuanian because you have to speak it to get around here. And it's not true what the Lithuanian media are saying, that Poles don't want to learn it. We do, but we don't want the authorities to twist the system so that it puts Poles in a worse position," Lisiewicz said. "It smacks of a plan to show minorities where they belong."

Lisiewicz and other Polish activists in Lithuania also say Polish schools tend to be better than Lithuanian ones, and they accuse Lithuanian authorities of manipulating data, by comparing the best schools in Vilnius with the results of rural Polish schools to bolster their claim that the new law will improve rather than harm Polish students' test scores.

Lithuanian Poles are also upset about plans to end government subsidies for schools with classes of fewer than 25 pupils starting next year. Polish schools, often located in rural areas, tend to have smaller class sizes. Without subsidies they may

have to close, with children going either to a more distant Polish school or to a local Lithuanian one.

Lithuanian Poles are not merely bombarding Warsaw with pleas to take action. They think they can gain enough political power to take action themselves.

"The changes in the educational law should be postponed by a few years at least. The best way to introduce those changes would be that the new rules start with the first grade so that everyone has an equal chance," said Albert Narwojsz, a member of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (AWPL), the main political voice of the Polish community, who unsuccessfully ran for local office last year.

Students at a Polish-language high school in Vilnius tell TVN's reporter about the pressure to speak Lithuanian. Source: Polvenger/YouTube.

He added, "If the new rules take effect now, how would minority students, educated from different curricula, be able to make up for differences in just two years?"

AWPL regularly wins seats in the Seimas, the Lithuanian parliament. The party is now readying for this fall's parliamentary elections.

Even though AWPL has just three seats in the current parliament, its planned coalition with Russian Alliance, a party of the Russian minority, could win 10 or more seats in the 141-member chamber, enough to make AWPL an important political player in Lithuania's highly fragmented parliament.

The party has optimistic goals, especially considering that it has never been in government.

"AWPL will want to be in the new government and, if possible, take the ministries of agriculture, economy, transport, and, first of all, education," Narwojsz said.

If that happens, its top priority will be to revise the new education law to eliminate discrimination against minorities, he said.

Should AWPL join the next Lithuanian government, it may be hampered by the growing sense of distrust between Vilnius and Warsaw. In the Polish capital, ties with Lithuania are perceived as being at their most strained in years. "Relations with Lithuania, contrary to what the Lithuanian side is saying, are not blossoming and are not satisfactory. We think they should be better," Maciej Szymanski, the Foreign Ministry's liaison officer with the Polish diaspora, said at a meeting of a parliamentary commission on Poles abroad in January.

In a letter to the ministries of foreign affairs and education, the commission called for the government to devise an educational support program for the Polish minority in Lithuania and to propose concrete steps to help Polish-language schools.

These would not be unprecedented moves. Recently, the Polish government has held training sessions for Polish-Lithuanian teachers and organized summer "leadership schools" for Polish-speaking teenagers to perfect their Polish language skills and learn social activism. Warsaw also provides books and other materials to Polish schools in Lithuania.

The commission also asked the government to raise its concerns about minority education in Lithuania internationally in order to get a "relevant reaction of international organizations to Lithuania's violations of minority and human rights."

In a reply, the Foreign Ministry said the ministries of education and science were better placed to respond to such concerns. However, the letter

shed light on the sources of Warsaw's grudges against Lithuania. "Despite [Polish] efforts, the policy of Lithuanian authorities toward minorities – burdened with 19th-century anxieties, anti-Polish and nationalist stereotypes – is not changing, or is changing to the disadvantage of the Polish minority," it said.

In November, the OSCE's high commissioner on national minorities, Knut Vollebaek said he was "worried" about the education dispute during a visit to Lithuania.

"It is tension, not a conflict but tension. My aim is to try to identify the problem before it escalates into a serious conflict," Vollebaek told the LTV news service, according to the Baltic Course news site.

Lithuanian authorities, however, have so far dismissed the complaints by Polish organizations. Education Minister Gintaras Steponavicius told Lithuanian television last year that the calls to revise the education law were nothing more than early campaign actions by AWPL designed to boost its support in an election year.

Wojciech Kosc *is a TOL correspondent in Warsaw.*

Lithuania's Boy Smugglers Go Back to Class

The numbers say that fewer children are skipping school to help with the illegal trade.

by Linas Jegelevicius
29 May 2012

PAGEGIAI, Lithuania | Just a couple of years ago, it was not unusual for groups of boys at the high school in Lumpenai, a few kilometers from the Lithuanian-Russian border, to run out of class as the teacher looked on helplessly.

The command usually came as an SMS to a boy as young as 15, using a pre-paid, easily disposable phone card, and even the teachers would know the content: the cargo is about to cross the border and "*schuchers* and cuckoos" – snitches and lookouts in Lithuanian prison jargon – are needed. The boy would jump up and hurry out, followed by a several others lower down in the gang hierarchy. Some would monitor the movements of border guards, others try to distract officers' attention from the real business: smuggling cigarettes across the river from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

"In border schools, events like this in class were almost a daily occurrence. When brawls broke out among rival schoolboy gangs, teachers would shut up and simply walk out of the classroom fearing for their life," said Rima Austriene, principal of Lumpenai's Enzis Jagomastas secondary school.

Sometimes, cash-strapped teachers would join their gangster pupils to pick up a little spending money.

The days of teenage smugglers are past, the Lithuanian Border Guard Service insists. In just three years, with the EU pumping nearly 5 million euros into patrolling the 678-kilometer (420-mile) length of Lithuania's border with Belarus and the

265-kilometer (165-mile) border with Kaliningrad, arrests of teen smugglers have dropped drastically in the Pagegiai district alone, where Lumpenai is located, from 144 in 2008 to 15 in 2011.

A smuggler nabbed by border guards in 2010 after attempting to swim across the Nemunas River, trailing boxes of cigarettes. Photo courtesy of the Lithuanian Interior Ministry.

Giedrius Misutis, spokesman for the Border Guard Service, attributed the drop to a major strengthening of border defenses, including the acquisition of radar and thermal sensors, along with a beefed-up corps of guards.

But former border guard Arunas Jokubauskas cautioned that the official figures may not tell the whole story.

"Until 2010, when cracking down on contraband gangs was reinforced with this technology, the border was very porous," Jokubauskas said. "So the actual numbers could be 10 times bigger than these." He said smugglers have become smarter at outwitting the stepped-up defenses, including using divers to bring goods under the waters of the Nemunas River. '"These 'submariners' pose a challenge even to the sophisticated border guard systems," he said.

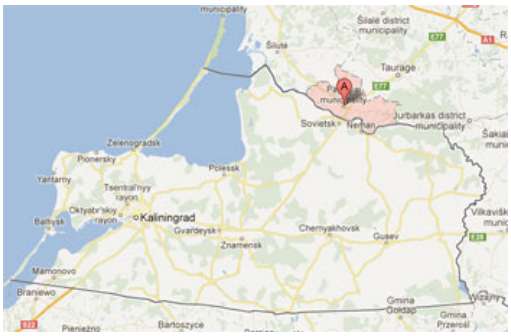
WHEN SMUGGLERS WERE HEROES

Teen smuggling may no longer be a critical problem in the border schools, but contraband remains a topic of daily discussion in class – and a point of national pride. Lithuanian children are taught all about the smugglers of the 19th century, who risked exile or death to bring in books under the noses of Russian soldiers. And not just any books: This contraband was printed material in Lithuanian, using the Latin alphabet that Tsar Alexander II banned in 1864, during the uprising centered on what today is Polish and Lithuanian territory.

Over four decades, until the ban on the Latin alphabet was lifted in 1904, smugglers brought countless Lithuanian books into Russian-occupied Lithuanian territory from nearby German-ruled Konigsberg, now the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

Recently eighth- and ninth-graders from Lumpenai played smugglers and tsarist soldiers in a re-enactment of those 19th-century events.

"There is a huge difference between the staged smuggling and the real-life chasing of a scrawny, big-eyed 16-year-old with a box of illegal cigarettes from Russia," said Rimantas Tyminskis, commander of the State Border Guard's Pagegiai division.



Pagegiai sits across the border from Kaliningrad.

Encouraged by the recent successes against smugglers, principals in some border schools have mulled inviting former *schuchers* to speak to their students.

But the principal of Algimantas Mockus secondary school in Pagegiai, Vaclovas Navickas, doesn't approve.

"Personally, I don't think this is a good idea. Those kids [former *schuchers*] should not be reminded of it, as most of them need to do some healing," he said.

Mindaugas, a former smugglers' helper who spoke on condition that his last name not be used, agrees. "No, I really don't want to go back to it," he said. "Even in my memories. Now I just need some inner solace and clarity as to what the future holds for me."

A beefy 19-year-old, Mindaugas, who lives in a neaby town, said he worked for local smugglers for a year a half until border guards nabbed him in 2010.

"Like a third of my male classmates, I used to work for local contraband ringleaders as a lookout. I'd be stationed in a tree or on a roof, where my job was to be on the lookout for police or border guards' cars, using night vision binoculars. As soon as I saw a law enforcement vehicle approaching I'd warn the ringleaders," Mindaugas said. He agrees that the number of teens involved has dropped recently.

He said he could earn as much as 100 litas, the equivalent of 30 euros, for night lookout shifts lasting up to four hours.

"To make nearly 400 euros a month so easily was not a bad thing for a 16-year-old," he said, noting that it helped prop up his family's sagging finances. "My parents silently disapproved of my activity, but they never insisted I give it up. For one reason: with no jobs in that little town, they relied on me. Otherwise they would have had to get involved in contraband themselves. A lot of entire families would do that," he said.

A Pagegiai community activist, who agreed to speak anonymously about an activity that many still rely on, said that despite the crackdown on smuggling, contraband cigarette vendors have not been affected in the Pagegiai bazaar. "If you were to look around in the bazaar, it all looks like it did three or five years ago, with all those old and very young vendors soliciting passers-by," he said.

Though contraband goods are not displayed openly in the market, a buyer need only ask about "cheaper cigarettes" to be directed to an idle elderly person or youngster at a customer-less stall.

Smugglers tend to recruit retirees and teenagers as vendors because they get lighter sentences, when they are prosecuted at all. After a searching look to assess whether the buyer is an undercover cop, the seller will take him or her to a nearby vegetable stall or to a car in a nearby parking lot where the deal will take place.

Lithuania's gray economy is among the largest in the European Union, worth an estimated 8.6 billion euros ($11 billion), or 30 percent of the country's GDP, according to a 2011 study by the A.T. Kearney consultancy and an economist at Johannes Kepler University in Linz, Austria. It is fed by persistent high unemployment and lower prices and taxes on goods across the borders.

An EU leader in contraband cigarette shipments, Lithuania is an entry point for organized groups in Kaliningrad, which Europol calls a "hotspot for cigarette smuggling," into the EU. According to the Lithuanian Customs Department, nearly 20 million euros' worth of goods was smuggled into the country in 2011, nearly all of it cigarettes.

Though official border crossings are well-guarded, smugglers manage to sneak the goods into the EU using false car trunks or by stuffing contraband into legitimate shipments of goods like flour and grains. A relatively small percentage of smuggling goes on through unguarded crossings, customs officials say.

In addition to the Lumpenai border post, smugglers use a handful of crossings within a 40-kilometer radius of the town.

His job as a lookout, Mindaugas says, was much easier and much less well-paid than actually moving the goods across the border.

The smugglers sometimes recruited teenagers to drive the cargo across the border and deliver it to a secret location, he says.

"If they were caught, the teenagers would usually see serious charges against them dropped," he said.

However, after at least two chases of contraband-laden vehicles resulted in crashes and the deaths of the boy drivers in 2010, smugglers have apparently given up the practice.

Arrested in 2010, Mindaugas escaped jail but is burdened with a fine of nearly 2,000 euros.

"I'm not concerned so much about that as about the future, because the involvement with gang activities definitely left an imprint on my psyche," he said.

Unlike some of his ex-smuggler friends who dropped out of school and are now in juvenile detention centers or adult prisons, Mindaugas managed to finish high school and get a legitimate job.

"The past still haunts me," he said. "Whatever happens in this small community, I'm always the one everyone suspects. It sucks."

He added, "I'm really thinking of getting out of here. But some of my gang peers went to the UK for a better life, then got hooked into local criminal networks and are already serving sentences. Is that where I'm gonna end up?"

"Indeed, some of these kids have ruined their lives for good. With the contraband money flowing freely, some of them now can't imagine getting any other job," school principal Navickas said.

"But what reassures me is that their younger siblings haven't followed in their footsteps. And the situation is generally different now. The kids still talk about smuggling, and even imitate it. Not with cigarettes, though, but with books.

Linas Jegelevicius *is a freelance journalist in Klaipeda, Lithuania.*

Equal But Separate?

Kyiv has an ambitious plan to integrate disabled children into mainstream classrooms, but many fear the potential for bullying, *de facto* segregation, and other pitfalls

by Ksenia Korzun
15 June 2012

ODESSA, Ukraine | An avid painter, 9-year-old Darina Matsenko is looking forward to September, when she'll transition from home schooling into third grade at a local primary school where she can showcase her portraits and still lifes. But she's also concerned, and not just about first-day jitters.

"I'm a little worried about how physical education classes will be held," says Darina, who has dark hair and big brown eyes. "I can't walk. Will I skip these classes, or have to sit on the sidelines and watch the other kids?"

Darina has cerebral palsy, a brain disorder that can affect movement, hearing, and other functions. For two years, she's studied at home with tutors rather than in one of Ukraine's roughly 50 special needs schools, where, according to her father, Nicholas, Darina says she would feel "ugly."

But Svitlana Matsenko is interviewing teachers to choose between two schools for her daughter to attend this fall. The schools are part of an ambitious reform initiative launched this year by Ukraine's Ministry of Education, Science, Youth, and Sports to integrate children with mental and physical disabilities into mainstream education.

Following a decade-long pilot program, the ministry has ordered schools to upgrade infrastructure, train teachers, and hire new staff so Ukraine's roughly 120,000 special needs children may study alongside their peers in primary and secondary schools. It approved the initiative last year, partly to address the country's weak special education system.Education Minister Dmitry Tabachnik also says disabled children should

attend mainstream schools to be full members of society with equal opportunities, not outcasts.

"We have to socialize these children, to let them study in normal classrooms," Tabachnik said when announcing the reform in April.

But despite broad public support and models of "inclusive education" in nearby countries, some parents, rights groups, and even students worry about implementation, from the obstacles to teaching disabled children in integrated classrooms to the potential for bullying.

Envisioning the challenges ahead, Darina cuts to the essence of these concerns. "Will I be a black sheep?" she asks.

EDUCATION OVERHAUL

Today, many Ukrainian classrooms are already inclusive. The 2001 to 2012 pilot program of 22 schools helped to inspire local reform among Ukraine's 25 regions, especially in the Crimea. But, often, classrooms are integrated in only one or two grades.

The new reform will not make all Ukrainian schools fully inclusive in the near term, but the ministry wants every special needs child in the country to be able to attend mainstream schools by around 2020 and for inclusion to be the norm for future generations.

This represents an overhaul of Ukraine's education system, according to the Union of Disability Organizations. While all new schools will be built with ramps, special toilets, and other necessary infrastructure, many existing facilities must be retrofit. Teachers will receive supplementary training designed by the ministry on working with special needs children. A new position, the teacher's assistant, has been created to help disabled students navigate the classroom and generally facilitate the learning process. Schools are also introducing psychological counseling.

Kyiv is offering the regions extra money for the new infrastructure and staff. There is no set budget because local officials will apply for funding on an *ad hoc* basis. Regions with fewer special needs students, such as Lugansk, will need less money or rely on local coffers. Odessa, on the other hand, requires more federal assistance.

Both during and after the transition, which is already underway, special needs schools will stay open so parents can choose where to send their children. But the ministry emphasizes that mainstream education will be transformed. Even Braille textbooks, sorely lacking today in general, will be readily available.

BROAD SUPPORT, BIG CONCERNS

Some 70 percent of Ukrainians support inclusive education, according to a survey conducted from June 2011 through January 2012 by the European Research Area, an arm of the European Commission, and several partners from the private and public sectors. Nearly a quarter of respondents called the reform an opportunity to educate their children on physical and mental disabilities.

Other Eastern European countries have had success with inclusive schools. Yevgeny Stepko, a top education official in Cherkassy, central Ukraine, said he and his colleagues were inspired by a 2009 visit to Georgia, which reformed its education system in 2006. Though many Georgian schools are still being retrofit, special needs children study in mainstream classrooms, and Tbilisi is reportedly pleased with the transition so far.

Ukraine itself demonstrates the potential of inclusion. Eight-year- old Maxim Kurylenko, who, like Darina, has cerebral palsy, has attended a mainstream secondary school in Kharkiv, northeastern Ukraine, for two years. He is one of three disabled students at the school, which built ramps, adapted toilets, and bought a special bus with a wheelchair lift.

"I feel normal attending classes," Maxim says. "I have a few classmates I hang out with after school."

But, as Darina fears, Maxim is sometimes excluded. "When [the other students] attend physical education classes or go to school parties with a disco," he says, "I usually stay home."

When it comes to integrating mentally disabled students into classrooms, some parents are skeptical if not opposed. Anna Kopylova, the mother of a ninth-grader in Kyiv, says children with Down Syndrome, for instance, belong in special schools.

"Why should my daughter sit next to a mentally challenged child?" she asks. "I have nothing against these kids, but it will hinder my daughter's learning process, as the teacher will be less demanding because of the disabled children."

Parents on the opposite end of the reform also have doubts. Tatyana Nazarenko's daughter Catherine, 10, is one of the roughly 4,000 Ukrainian children with Down Syndrome.

"These children are usually bullied," she says. "I do not want to send my child to an ordinary school. She is now studying in a special school, where everybody has Down's. Healthy kids can make fun of a child."

Moreover, Nazarenko says, the curriculum won't be tailored to her daughter's needs. She might fall behind.

Ukrainian schoolchildren at a toy-painting workshop. Photo by Kharakhu/Wikimedia Commons.

A DIFFICULT DECISION

Even disability advocacy groups recognize the challenges ahead, while standing behind the reform.

"Disabled persons must be full members of society," says Marina Chukova, deputy director of Happy Childhood for All, which works with a variety of children in need. "But we cannot allow disabled students to be made fun of. This will take the efforts of all school personnel, from directors to teacher's assistants and psychologists."

Teacher's assistants, in particular, will be key to helping special needs students adapt to their new environment and, at times, to keep up with the curriculum, according to Antonina Kalinina of the Kyiv-based Darnysta orphanage for disabled children. The specially trained assistants will do everything from managing bathroom and other breaks to keeping an eye on when a child might need a supplementary lesson or two.

Ultimately, some educators say, children with potentially severe disabilities like Down Syndrome may be best served by special needs schools. This is even despite glaring shortages of staff and supplies like Braille textbooks and no serious reform agenda on the horizon.

"If the disabilities are prominent, the child will feel like he's lagging behind, which will only exacerbate the sense of alienation," says Igor Mamatkazin, director of a Kyiv school with inclusive classrooms. Parents, he says, must weigh their options carefully.

For her part, 9-year-old Darina is eager to make friends this fall after two years of home schooling. She wants to share her artwork and paint a portrait of her class.

But mostly, Darina says, she wants to be treated like any other third-grader – no one should feel sorry for her.

"If I deserve it, I want to receive bad marks," she says. "But I am sure the teacher won't expect much from me and will try to help, which only makes me feel less self-confident."

Ksenia Korzun *is an editor at Excise magazine in Kyiv.*

Hungary's New Curriculum: Writing Wrongs?

Politics and literature clash in a controversy over the government's sanction of authors linked to the country's fascist past.

by Peter Murphy
6 July 2012

BUDAPEST | It is not uncommon in Hungarian living rooms to find the walls lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Nor is it odd to find on those shelves a novel or two by the 20th-century Transylvanian writer Jozsef Nyiro.

Nyiro's heroes are ordinary folk. In books such as *Jezusfarago ember* (The *Jesus Carving Man*, 1924) and *Uz Bence* (1933), their adventures unfold amid the villages and hills of the Hungarian-populated Szekely Land in the heart of Romanian Transylvania, a region severed from Hungary by the post-World War I Treaty of Trianon. They are stories, Nyiro's fans say, that burst with *magyar lelkiseg* – Hungarian spirituality and soul – and are an important part of the national identity.

A bust of Jozsef Nyiro in his native Odorheiu Secuiesc (Szekelyudvarhely), Romania. Photo by Gombabandi/Wikimedia Commons.

So far, so inoffensive. But the inclusion of Nyiro in Hungary's new National Core Curriculum for high schools, and of fellow Transylvanians Albert Wass and Deszo Szabo, has opened a new front in the country's ongoing culture wars. On one side are those for whom the three interwar writers are Hungarian patriots; on the other, those who view them as anti-Semitic fascists with no place in the state's official literary canon.

The new curriculum is a central part of what the government, led by the conservative Fidesz party, calls a "fundamental reform" of all elements of the country's education sector. Rozsa Hoffmann, secretary of state for education and member of junior coalition partner the Christian Democrats, calls the revamp "modern and in line with the latest EU trends." To Andras Nyiri – formerly a leader of the Hungarian Association of Independent Teachers, now an education consultant and a member of the Network for Freedom of Education, one of several groups that have sprung up in opposition to the changes – it's a "nightmarish centralized system with a strange retro-Hungary image that prioritizes a 'national middle class.' "

The curriculum, set to be implemented in September 2013, contains plenty of retro. According to Hoffmann herself, it represents a return to the old traditions and baseline standards of cultural literacy. Around 90 percent of what high school teachers can teach will be fixed, providing the basis for a unified "cultural language" throughout Hungary.

The literature element includes hundreds of writers, among them the three Transylvanians, who, grouped together as a "national conservative school," made the final cut after being omitted from a first draft. The controversy over their inclusion has less to do with the authors' literary prowess than with their political stripes.

Nyiro, a former Catholic priest, edited far-right propaganda newspapers during World War II and was a member of the wartime Hungarian parliament following the annexation of northern Transylvania in 1940. An admirer of Joseph

Goebbels, he kept his seat even after the fascist Arrow Cross coup in October 1944 toppled Miklos Horthy, the regent who had ruled Hungary from 1920.

"Long live Adolf Hitler," Nyiro told parliament on one occasion. Jews are "foreign to *magyar lelkiseg*," he said, and liberal Jewish tradition "has infected many Hungarians and must disappear from Hungarian life."

Both Wass, whose novels still sell well, and Szabo, an essayist regarded by many as a brilliant talent, had significant anti-Semitic strains in their work. Szabo would later become strongly anti-fascist, but Nyiro and Wass, both of whom fled Hungary at the end of the war, believed until their deaths that America had made a fatal mistake in siding with the atheist Bolsheviks against Nazi Germany. Wass is still considered a war criminal by Romania for his alleged role in atrocities during the annexation of northern Transylvania, charges he denied until his death in Florida in 1998.

Laszlo Kover

Whether the works of such writers should be taught to high-school students depends on what filter you view them through. Jewish-American author, Holocaust survivor, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, a native of northern Transylvania, renounced a state award given to him by Hungary in 2004 after hearing that Laszlo Kover, co-founder of Fidesz and current speaker of the parliament, had attended a ceremony honoring Nyiro in late May. In a letter to Kover, Wiesel called Nyiro "a fascist ideologue."

Kover replied in writing that postwar Allied generals had not deemed Nyiro a war criminal, fascist, or anti-Semite, and had refused to extradite him back to Hungary to stand trial. Nyiro deserves respect, the speaker said, not for his "tragically mistaken political activity, but for his body of literature," in which "Nazi sentiments or anti-Semitism do not appear."

Kover's implication – that a distinction should be made between the quality or content of a writer's works and his or her philosophical, ideological, or political views – has become a hot topic of Hungarian debate.

"A literary work is not an 'object' that is independent from its author," says Peter Rado of Expanzio Human, an education policy consultancy in Budapest. "It is interpreted in the light of the whole personality of the person. This doesn't mean that a person's politics discredit a literary work, even if his political views are questionable. Great writers with controversial views, be they conservative, liberal, or leftist, can be exciting raw material for discussion and free interpretation in the classroom. These are very different, though, from anti-Semitism, which is not a legitimate value."

Quality should be the key criterion for inclusion in a curriculum, according to Laszlo Arato, president of the Hungarian Language and Literature Teachers Association. The literary bona fides of American poet Ezra Pound or German essayist Gottfried Benn go unquestioned, he says, despite their having been linked with fascist parties. Two other Hungarian writers of that era, poet Lorinc Szabo and essayist Laszlo Nemeth, are regarded as eminences in spite of some anti-Semitic or pro-fascist references in their works or statements.

Arato does not believe the Transylvanian writers make the grade but says his judgment is strictly literary. If the curriculum represents baseline national knowledge, he says, "it should contain only the greatest works of the greatest writers. Nyiro, Wass, and [Dezso] Szabo do not belong in that category."

Despite their lack of literary gravitas, Nyiro and Wass retain an appeal for many Hungarians, especially those with family connections to or sympathies with Hungarian communities in Transylvania. Both writers were banned during the decades of communism, but there are plenty of

pensioners who remember buying their books illicitly in secondhand shops in the 1950s. Their works, accessibly written and rich with anti-communist sentiment, portray lives in the post-Trianon "lost lands" in a way that resonates with the Hungarian psyche and experience. To curriculum critics, politicians are using the education system to play to these sentiments.

"What we are dealing with in the curriculum is political intention, definitely not a scientific discussion about literary merit," Rado, the education consultant, says. "The inclusion of these authors serves nothing else but the delivery of political-ideological expectations."

The Transylvanian trio's route to the curriculum was largely paved by historian Mihaly Takaro. A member of the Cecile Tormay Association – named for another anti-communist author – Takaro has written two books about Albert Wass and delivered lectures at meetings of Jobbik, the radical nationalist party that finished third in 2010's parliamentary elections. Furious at the composition of the first draft curriculum, Takaro launched a media campaign to include Wass, Tormay, playwright Ferenc Herczeg, poet Istvan Sinka, and other writers he called "national conservatives," urging teachers to lobby the Education Ministry.

The insertion of Nyiro, Wass, and Szabo in the final version was announced with great fanfare (although Hoffmann, the education secretary, would subsequently, and more discreetly, reveal that teaching them would not be compulsory). According to many political analysts, Fidesz played up the decision in a bid to win votes from Jobbik.

"The government has been trying to steal the symbolic and ideological proposals of Jobbik for two years now," says Andras Biro Nagy of Policy Solutions, a political research and consulting house in Budapest. He notes several such gestures: the naming of a Budapest square for Albert Wass; the removal from outside parliament of a statue of Mihaly Karolyi, the left-leaning post-World War I prime minister; compulsory school visits to parts of Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine that were part of Hungary prior to the Treaty of Trianon. All were proposed by Jobbik in its 2010 election manifesto. Lately, statues of the interwar authoritarian ruler Horthy, who made a pragmatic alliance with Nazi Germany in order to win back the pre-Trianon territories, have begun popping up in provincial towns and villages, a phenomenon many say Fidesz has been conspicuously quiet on, even tacitly sympathetic toward.

"The purpose of the strategy is clear," Biro Nagy says. "They want to defend the border between Fidesz and Jobbik voters. Polls are showing that several hundreds of thousands of people are hovering between the two parties, so Fidesz is trying its best not to lose them to Jobbik. They appear to have calculated that they have more to lose on the far right than to win in the center."

The need to outflank Jobbik could also explain the circus over a failed campaign to transport Jozsef Nyiro's ashes from Spain, where he died in 1953, to his hometown of Odorheiu Secuiesc (Szekelyudvarhely to its ethnic Hungarian majority), which caused an ugly diplomatic spat. Bucharest refused entry to the train carrying Nyiro's remains, and Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta denounced the attempt to honor "a person who, according to all international assessments, conducted far-right, anti-Semitic activities." Fidesz's Kover, who had traveled to the Transylvanian town for the abortive 27 May reburial, said denying Nyiro the opportunity to rest in his native land was "unfriendly, uncivilized, and barbaric behavior." Ponta requested an official apology from Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orban, in vain.

How teachers will approach figures such as Nyiro and Wass in the classroom is unclear. While the Core Curriculum has passed into law, school-specific "framework curricula" drawn from the state's authorial roster have not yet been decreed. The controversial Transylvanians are unlikely to be required reading.

Laszlo Arato, a high school teacher himself, predicts that most of his peers, faced with an overloaded curriculum that leaves little time to cover much of anything in depth, will ignore them,

giving a nod to the national conservative school's existence but little else.

"Teachers who want to be loyal to the government, or those whose views are close to those of Jobbik, will be happy to teach them, but most won't," Arato says. "Some will teach them in a critical way, which I think is fine. I have already taught Albert Wass as a popular best-seller writer, and may do again just to show students why he is not so valuable."

Peter Murphy *is a freelance journalist in Budapest. He tweets at @MurphyPeterN.*

Tough Talk on Kyrgyz Schools

Heated rhetoric from Bishkek stokes ethnic minorities' fears of losing education in their native tongues

by Bakyt Ibraimov and Temir Akmatov
6 August 2012

OSH | When Kyrgyz Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov addressed the issue of language in the country's classrooms last month, his message seemed clear enough.

"Education services at schools should be delivered either in Kyrgyz or Russian, and no other language should be applied," Babanov said at a 17 July cabinet meeting. "English, Spanish, Chinese, etc. may be used as a second language." Noticeably absent from even the list of "second languages" were Uzbek and Tajik, the tongues of two of Kyrgyzstan's ethnic minorities.

An ethnically mixed group of children studies at a Russian-language school in Osh.

It was only the latest comment from high-level Kyrgyz officials and lawmakers that seemed to foreshadow an end to schooling in minority languages. In June 2011, one year after violent ethnic clashes killed hundreds, most of them Uzbeks, in southern Kyrgyzstan, then-President Roza Otunbaeva was quoted by news agency 24.kg

as saying that "all teaching processes [in the country] must be switched into the Kyrgyz language." And in April, several members of parliament demanded that the Education Ministry stop administering an Uzbek-language version of the National Scholarship Test, a set of written exams taken by students after they finish high school that is necessary to get into college.

"In Kyrgyzstan, there are state and official languages" – Kyrgyz and Russian, respectively – "so why is national testing conducted in Uzbek?" lawmaker Jyldyzkan Dzholdoshova asked in parliament on 18 April, according to the *Vecherniy Bishkek* national newspaper. "Perhaps we should become part of Uzbekistan and submit to Islam Karimov."

Such talk is convincing many in Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek and Tajik communities that the government aims to effectively abolish minority-language education.

"In the wake of such statements, ethnic Tajik parents believe that only new Russian and Kyrgyz schools will be opened, and Tajik-language schools will start having problems," said Rano Tursunalieva, the director of a Russian-language public school that serves ethnic Tajik and Uzbek students in the southern Kadamjay district.

A Kyrgyz government source said such fears are exaggerated. Babanov's statement, the source said, was not about eliminating minority-language schools but referred to "an alternative plan to encourage ethnic minorities to learn the Kyrgyz language."

"The government is not going to change the position and the tradition that has existed for many years, whereby ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks, as citizens of Kyrgyzstan, are able to access education in their native language, supported by the government," the source continued. "But children from Uzbek- and Tajik-language schools where the number of ethnic minority children is decreasing will be educated in Kyrgyz or Russian."

Regarding the national test, the government refused the lawmakers' entreaty. Education Minister Kanat Sydykov said canceling the Uzbek-language exam would violate the country's constitution. Tursunbek Akun, the government's ombudsman, said it would also be contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, rouse ethnic hostility, and be an "infringement against a certain diaspora community."

But even Akun's comments – referring to Uzbeks as part of a diaspora even though they are indigenous to parts of what is now Kyrgyzstan and have lived in those areas for centuries – seemed to send a mixed message about their place in Kyrgyz society. Amid the harsher talk from some Kyrgyz leaders, it does little to ease minority parents' anxieties about the future of their children's education.

"Three of my kids go to an Uzbek-language school, and if the authorities switch it into a Kyrgyz-language school, I am at a loss," said Rozakhon Khakimova, a mother of eight in Osh, which has a large ethnic Uzbek population.

Uzbek-language instruction was dropped at the former Kyrgyz-Uzbek University in Osh when it was renamed Osh State Social University last year.

"My kids can't go to a Russian-language school since they don't speak it well. The only option for them is to go to a Kyrgyz school, but I want my kids to speak, write, and read in Uzbek. It's our language, it's a big part of our culture, and we want to keep it."

Aliyma Sharipova, head of the Osh-based nonprofit group Culture Plus, contended the prime minister and other politicians are making a rhetorical play for nationalist-minded voters.

"Key leaders of the country should not make such hasty statements and artificially divide the society based on language differences," she said. "The situation in the country, particularly in southern Kyrgyzstan, is still tense after the June 2010 ethnic bloodshed."

Kyrgyzstan is home to some 786,000 ethnic Uzbeks – more than 14 percent of the overall population of 5.5 million – as well as 47,000 ethnic Tajiks. Throughout the Soviet era children in both groups had access to mother-tongue education at public schools.

The Kyrgyz constitution approved by voters in June 2010 stipulates a universal right to education, and the right of the country's ethnic groups to preserve their language. Under Article 6 of the national education law, "education services can be delivered in any other language given appropriate conditions," said Kerez Zhukeeva, the spokeswoman for the Education and Science Ministry.

"Nobody is going to close schools for ethnic minorities," Zhukeeva said. "Subjects in the mother tongue at Uzbek- and Tajik-language schools will not be scaled back."

But if a retrenchment in native-language schooling is not official policy, it seems to be a fact on the ground, at least for ethnic Uzbeks. According to the National Statistics Department, there were 141 Uzbek-language primary and secondary schools in Kyrgyzstan in 2003, and 129 in 2008. This year, according to Education Ministry figures, there are 91. (The number of Tajik-language schools has not changed in this period: there were and are three, all in southern Kyrgyzstan.)

Uzbek-language higher education has also suffered. Before the June 2010 violence there were two Kyrgyz universities offering instruction in Uzbek: Kyrgyz-Uzbek University in Osh and Friendship University in Jalal-Abad. The former was transformed into Osh State Social University, offering classes in only Kyrgyz and Russian; the latter has been shut down.

According to government officials, such changes have been driven not by policy but by the wishes of ethnic communities, who want their children to be educated in Kyrgyz to brighten their prospects for higher education and employment.

"Parents ask for Kyrgyz-language classes so their children can easily pass the national test after they leave high school," said Almagul Tilekmanova, a representative of the Kyrgyz Development Fund attached to the Osh governor's office. "After they graduate from universities, they can get hired by government bodies, as those who do not speak Kyrgyz cannot. This will facilitate the integration of ethnic Uzbeks into Kyrgyz society."

Such sentiments are not heard only in government offices. Tavakkalkhan Kamilova, a secondary-school teacher in Osh, said parents there "don't want their children to go to Uzbek-language schools, because graduates from such schools have no future."

But Kamilova also said that given the country's ethnic divisions, many minorities think little of their prospects even if they master the state language.

"Ethnic Uzbek teenagers are not interested in going to high school as they do not want to continue their education," the teacher said. "They, and their parents, say they don't have any future in this country, even if they speak Kyrgyz well and get proper higher education."

The former director of an Uzbek-language school, who spoke on condition of anonymity for safety reasons, claimed to have seen firsthand evidence of government indifference or hostility toward native-tongue education, citing one Uzbek school that was never rebuilt after being burned in June 2010 and another that was disbanded and its students sent to other institutions. When it does not close Uzbek-language schools, this educator said, the

government "does not provide them with textbooks and training facilities."

"The number of Uzbek-language schools goes down. In addition, they closed the two Uzbek-language universities. What does this mean?" the former director said.

Valentina Gritsenko, head of Spravedlivost (Justice), a Jalal-Abad civic organization, said Kyrgyz officials need to take responsibility for their rhetoric and uphold the country's law.

"Did we adopt the constitution only to please the Venice Commission?" Gritsenko said, referring to the body that advises the Council of Europe on constitutional matters. "Reduction of hours or subjects at Uzbek- and Tajik-language schools may lead to loss of national identity of ethnic minorities, which contradicts international practice."

***Bakyt Ibraimov** is a freelance journalist in Osh. **Temir Akmatov** is the pseudonym of a reporter in Bishkek. Photos by Bakyt Ibraimov.*

Arrested Development

Long kindergarten waiting lists in Lithuania have officials scrambling for answers and desperate parents ponying up bribes.

by Linas Jegelevicius
5 September 2012

VILNIUS | Edita Bagdoniene is a happily married mother of two, but sometimes she gets so frustrated taking care of her young sons day in and day out that she mutters, "If only I were a single mother ..."

Were that the case, Bagdoniene could send her son Mykolas, nearly 3, to kindergarten by now, thanks to a government policy granting special-needs families priority for spots that are becoming harder to land by the day in Vilnius following a recent baby boom. Instead, like thousands of Lithuanian mothers, her family's life is stalled along with her child's education.

Vilnius parents Edita Bagdoniene, center, and Arunas Bagdonas worry that long waiting lists for public kindergartens mean their 2-year-old son, Mykolas, could be years away from getting a placement. Photo by Linas Jegelevicius.

"Not being able to send my kids to kindergarten stresses out our family and might cripple my career," said Bagdoniene, a 35-year-old fashion designer who worked at a major Lithuanian label before taking consecutive maternity leaves

following the births of Mykolas and her second son, 4-month-old Gabrielius.

Fewer than 10 percent of Lithuanian children under 3 are in kindergarten or other formal childcare, putting the country 18th in the 27-member European Union, according to a report by the Vilnius-based European Institute for Gender Equality. In the capital of Vilnius, where kindergarten seats are scarcest, public schools will admit only around one-third of the 1,700 eligible children this year, officials say.

Waiting lists are so long, Bagdoniene said, that Mykolas could be 10 before he begins school.

"I am not exaggerating," she said. "Here is my calculation: I put Mykolas on the waiting list for the Seskine kindergarten when he was born, in 2010. He was No. 128. Now the boy is over two and a half, but the list has inched up only 30 places. At this pace, my son will clinch his spot in around seven years."

And Mykolas is relatively lucky. Waiting lists in most Vilnius kindergartens top 200 names. Desperate parents are resorting to bribing school administrators as they await implementation of a reform city authorities say will make the admissions process more efficient and transparent.

"All my female friends with kids have tackled the problem with bribes," Bagdoniene said. "It has worked for most of them, and just a few have been turned away – not because the kindergarten heads were honest, I reckon, but because the envelopes were too thin."

'THE CONSERVATIVES ARE TO BLAME'

The cruel irony is that kindergartens in Vilnius, or Klaipeda and Siauliai, two smaller cities in northern Lithuania that also have shortages, had plenty of open seats just four or five years ago.

"Parents didn't even have to think of bothering with a waiting list," said Viktoras Malinauskas, the father of two toddlers in Vilnius. "The Conservatives are to blame for the situation, which has worsened in recent years."

The Conservatives – as the ruling Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats are known – won the 2008 parliamentary elections with a simple majority of seats. Their strong coalition quickly passed a raft of social legislation, including longer maternity leave and bigger benefits. A baby boom followed, with births in Vilnius increasing 16 percent, from 9,048 in 2008 to 10,500 in 2009, according to the city's Civil Registry Department.

The Malinauskases were among the many couples encouraged by the benefits (since rolled back amid the downturn and state budget cuts) to start a family. The government, however, didn't prepare for the subsequent baby boom by investing in new schools – an oversight that, coupled with relatively low rates of emigration from urban areas, has taxed public kindergartens.

"No state kindergartens were built in Vilnius in 2012, but several private ones have opened their doors," Malinauskas said. "A bad piece of news for us."

More than 25,000 youngsters in Vilnius attend public kindergartens. Some 450 are enrolled in private facilities, which charge up to 1,000 litas ($364) a month – out of reach for the Malinauskases. Their monthly income of 2,400 litas – Viktoras' salary plus 800 litas in maternity benefits – hardly covers their bills as it is.

To get his children into a public kindergarten, Malinauskas said he's considering offering a bribe. So is Edita Bagdoniene, who's heard 1,000 litas usually suffice.

A DUBIOUS REFORM?

At the same time, both families and many educators are eagerly anticipating the results of a municipal overhaul of kindergarten admissions. On 1 September, the Vilnius Department of Education, Culture, and Sport assumed control of admissions, taking it out of the hands of school officials, to improve transparency and efficiency.

Following the lead of Lithuania's second city, Kaunas, which introduced similar changes in July 2010, the Vilnius municipality has replaced paper logs compiled by individual schools with a centralized electronic system to track and manage admissions. Moreover, only municipal officials may now process enrollment paperwork. The reform will also eliminate the so-called "primary right" of single mothers and other socially vulnerable groups to skip to the front of the school line.

"The primary right was often abused," said a Vilnius kindergarten administrator who agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity. "Some parents would manage to obtain the status, but it would be very awkward to see the child's daddy dropping his son off in a luxury SUV and the mother puffing smoke on the balcony of an apartment in the exclusive neighborhood across the street."

Rasa Grigaliuniene, deputy director of a Vilnius kindergarten, said she's rooting for the reform.

"We really hope this will work for the sake of the parents and kindergarten authorities," she said. "There has been much frustration and even threats over the years when our kindergarten managed the queue itself. We admitted 61 children this year, but there are more than 300 waiting."

Asked about bribes, Grigaliuniene shook her head.

"Sure, many tried to bribe us," she said. "I remember when someone flung an envelope at me and ran for the door. I had to chase him all the way to the parking lot and tuck the envelope into his pocket. Some crazed person even threatened to blow us up if we didn't find a place for his child right away. We did not relent."

Klaipeda, Siauliai, and other municipalities are considering similar overhauls, but many parents, including the Malinauskases, are skeptical. Though authorities in Kaunus say the "e-rollment" system has reduced backlogs – by eliminating duplicate registrations, for instance – public kindergartens are still short up to 1,000 seats, a top education official recently conceded. And rumors abound online that the e-system is already compromised by IT staffers who manipulate the lists for a price.

"For IT specialists, this is a way to rake in some nice stash," Malinauskas said. "So corrupt kindergarten directors are effectively being replaced with corrupt IT specialists."

Gintaras Petronis

Gintaras Petronis, director of the Vilnius Department of Education, Culture, and Sport, dismissed the rumors, saying he is confident in the reform.

"The e-system will sort through the existing waiting lists, annulling multiple registrations," he said. "It has already uncovered 600 duplicates. Repealing the priority-enrollment benefits for socially supported families will also help."

But the reform does little to address the key problem: a shortage of open kindergarten seats. Dzeraldas Dagys, head of schools within the Department of Education, Culture, and Sport, said some municipal officials want kindergartens to enlarge class sizes.

"We won't give the green light for that because it violates stringent hygiene rules," Dagys said.

For her part, Bagdoniene is optimistic that emigration – low in urban Lithuania compared with rural areas but still prevalent – and the government's spending cutbacks will solve the problem organically.

"Women are reluctant to have kids because of the persistent shortage of kindergarten spots," she said. "But with the maternity privileges axed and emigration, the issue will dwindle in a couple years."

Linas Jegelevicius *is a freelance journalist in Klaipeda, Lithuania.*

Macedonia´s Cooling-off Period

The country tries again to devise a single history curriculum for its different ethnicities, but one subject remains too hot to handle.

by Ljubica Grozdanovska Dimishkovska
28 September 2012

SKOPJE | Macedonia has two recent histories: one for ethnic Macedonians and another for the ethnic Albanians who make up about a quarter of the population.

The two sides fought a short-lived conflict in 2001 for which they have no shared definition. Was it an armed conflict (the most commonly accepted term), a terrorist campaign, or a war for Albanian civil rights?

That divide has left the history classroom a potential minefield, and this summer a group of European and Macedonian history teachers launched the latest of several attempts to mine-sweep the curriculum.

A Macedonian army reservists tank crew at the battle for the village of Aracinovo. Photo by Military Journal/Wikimedia Commons.

Some of the resulting recommendations – to focus on agreed-upon historical events and avoid contested issues – can hardly be called bold. Those involved, however, hope the approach can hold until a time when the facts and not the myths of the conflict can get an airing in the classroom.

History teachers "need training on how to teach history by respecting the diversity in the country but also supporting a sense of belonging by overcoming the present separation in Macedonian and Albanian narratives," said Jonathan Even-Zohar, a senior manager in the European Association of History Educators, which worked on the project along with the History Teachers Association of Macedonia.

Not that children are learning much about the conflict anyway. Mire Mladenovski, president of the Macedonian teachers group, said primary and secondary school students do not learn about the history of Macedonia since its independence in 1991, simply because the last 21 years are not treated in the history books. Albanian and Macedonian students use the same textbooks.

Most educators agree that most recent history should no longer be avoided. Mladenovski said the effects of Macedonia's transition from socialism to capitalism, for instance, should be included in history books; although it's recent, it's hardly a divisive subject.
"People from different nationalities were and still are facing high unemployment. That's common for many people, regardless of their nationality or religion," he said.

But the conflict is another matter.

"In order for a historical event to be processed in the books, you have to have a historical distance from it," said Todor Chepreganov, director of the Institute of National History.

Chepreganov said he supports the effort to write a common history book, but aside from issues of timing, he is skeptical that it can succeed, given that any new curriculum or books must be approved by ministers who are the product of the country's rancorous and divided politics.

"Everybody involved in the writing of the new history will have their own starting point of view

about the historical facts and events," he said. "We, the historians, might find some common ground. But, in the end, the final word must come from the politicians. And that's doubtful."

Indeed, while historians search for a model that helps students of different nationalities learn to communicate, the country's politicians embrace policies that emphasize their differences.

A recent rift between the two largest parties in the governing coalition, the VMRO-DPMNE and the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), has been exacerbated by the VMRO-DPMNE's support for a measure that would confer special benefits on those who fought in the 2001 conflict on the side of the Macedonians and exclude the Albanian fighters.

The political crisis peaked on 18 August – the Day of the Army of the Republic of Macedonia – when Defense Minister Fatmir Besimi, an ethnic Albanian from the DUI, placed flowers at a monument to Albanian Liberation Army fighters in the northern village of Slupcane. Inhabited largely by Albanians, Slupcane was heavily shelled by the national army in the 2001 conflict. The act angered many Macedonians, including inside the government.

Xhabir Deralla, the president of the CIVIL – Center for Freedom think tank and human rights watchdog group, said the parties in Macedonia's dysfunctional politics have an interest in keeping the nationalist fervor alive, since it gives them a way to distract people from ineffective governance and more pressing issues. Macedonia's unemployment rate has been stuck above 30 percent for years, and the average monthly wage is 30,323 denars ($638).

At least on paper, however, the effort to write a shared history has the support of the government.

"All nationalities living in this region fought together for the freedom, the independence, and the statehood of Macedonia, even though everybody writes their own history," said Deputy Education Minister Safet Neziri in a statement. "Instead of uniting, the facts present in history books are dividing the students."

A working group of historians is advising the ministry on a revision of history books, but the group has not said which events will be included in the new versions. The European history teachers association has criticized the process as opaque and called for members of the Macedonian teachers group to be included. The review is likely to take years.

Among the recommendations in its August report on history education in Macedonia, the European association also called for new online educational materials to better engage students and more transparent procedures in the Education Ministry for textbook writing and publishing.

TRY, TRY AGAIN

The country's recent past is littered with attempts to devise a shared history curriculum.

In 2001, under the aegis of the European history teachers group, education officials in Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Albania teamed up to train teachers in a curriculum that promoted democratic values, human rights, and multiculturalism. The program also aimed to create apposite teaching materials, including textbooks.

Five years later, the country's Helsinki Committee for Human Rights launched a reconciliation project for Macedonian and Albanian students at one high school in Skopje. In a debate, students presented radical versions of each side of the 2001 conflict. The point was to make the history teachers – one Albanian and one Macedonian – who oversaw the debate try to bring those competing versions closer together.

Then in 2008 Macedonia was one of 12 countries in southeastern Europe to take part in a project that examined how schools across the region taught about the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman Empire, World War II, and the establishment of Balkan nation-states.

It's not clear if these efforts have made a lasting impact on schools.

Macedonia-born Shadije Rushiti Ibraimi is a junior researcher at the Swiss Center for Peace Studies in Basel who is studying whether there are effective models already in place in Macedonia for teaching peace and reconciliation.

Given that new textbooks will take years to produce, Ibraimi said the short-term focus needs to be on teaching methods. Specifically, she said, teachers should encourage their students to spot discriminatory language and passages in textbooks and to seek out other sources of information that could provide a different angle.

But she said real progress will depend on politicians, who "set the agenda of the system," as well as parents and the media, who help shape children's attitudes.

Deralla, of the CIVIL think tank, said it's worth waiting to get the "common history" approach right. He said communities need to hash out their own history before they can start talking to each other.
"Once the silly nationalist myths and ghosts are cleared out within each community, the historians will be ready to work together to create a common understanding of history," he said. "If this doesn't take place first, this initiative will be sidelined by politics."

Ljubica Grozdanovska Dimishkovska *is a TOL correspondent in Skopje.*

Teachers in Double Jeopardy

A new law to purge Russian schools of criminal offenders is destroying the careers of many valued educators.

by Galina Stolyarova
25 October 2012

In August, Konstantin Shcherbina, the director of a sports academy in the town of Krasnoturansk in Siberia, was looking forward to receiving the title of "honorary master of education of Russia." Yet, when the papers arrived, the coach, well known and respected in his community, did not celebrate. Because Shcherbina was shocked to find that, along with the award, there was an order from the regional prosecutor's office stipulating that, as of 1 September, he must be fired.

The order did not mean that the state award was withdrawn. Shcherbina lost his job as the direct result of a new law, passed by the State Duma earlier this year, which bans anyone who has ever had a criminal record from being employed in any Russian school or other state-funded educational institution. The law also orders that any current school employee with a criminal record, regardless of how long ago it was or what sort of offence was committed, must be dismissed.

It turns out that 20 years ago Shcherbina, now in his 60s, was convicted of the crime of insulting a woman.

"I just was arriving at school," Shcherbina recalled, "and a group of girls was standing in the way. I asked them to move so I could park, and they refused and a quarrel started. One of the girls happened to be a friend of the head of the local police station. And so the 'insult' case ended up in court, and I got six months of community service."

Later he was able to go back to his job as a school sports coach, but now, two decades later, in the

wake of the new law, Shcherbina has been forced out of his post because prosecutors refused to consider the circumstances.

The purpose of the law is straightforward. It is meant to safeguard children from criminals and protect them from malign influences. On that pretext, a moral cleansing campaign on a grand scale is under way in Russian schools as teachers like Shcherbina lose their jobs without any recourse.

Victims of the campaign have begun to tell their stories online. One, Ivan, says he was fired as a music teacher because it came to light that he had once received a short prison sentence for being involved in a fight.

"Nothing else mattered – not my conservatory degree, not international competitions nor the successes of my students," he wrote last week in the reader comments field of an article on the law on a nationwide news website.

"It has ruined my life," he continued. "Employers are afraid to give me work. The directors of my school told me that everyone was happy with my work, but they had to do what the prosecutors ordered."

The law has even hit school workers who are not teachers. Vladimir, who reveals his plight in a comment to the same article, says he was convicted after a fight 31 years ago. He has spent the last 17 years working as a school plumber. But he has now been fired under the new law.

"I have two years left until retirement," he wrote. "Who on earth will employ me now?"

Neither the Education Ministry nor the State Prosecutor's Office has given any figures for how many school employees have been let go under the new law. Yet reports from across Russia suggest many are losing their jobs. In Shcherbina's region of Krasnoyarsk, more than 300 teachers have already been ousted.

The law seems to have been drafted without any possibility of compromise in mind. Even award-winning teachers and "honorary teacher of Russia" titleholders are being put on the scrap heap.
The law has been welcomed by some Russian parents, however. One typical opinion was expressed by Mariku, who posted a comment on the Big Question news forum in September.

"As a mother, a former primary school teacher, and the daughter of a police officer, I do not want my kids to be taught by a former criminal," she wrote. "Education provides good employment. In Moscow a teacher's salary starts at 25,000 rubles [$800]. You get two months' paid vacation and there are opportunities to give private lessons that pay at least 300 rubles an hour."

The law may well have been conceived with good intentions – it's hard to argue against the goal of shielding children from criminals – but for many school workers it has turned into a road to hell. Although schools may have been able to sack some bad people, it's also clear the law has destroyed the careers of many valued teachers and school staff.

What is most amazing is that Russian legislators have not learned anything from their country's own history. Since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Russia has been plunged into all sorts of cleansing campaigns: against people of aristocratic birth, against "pseudo-scientists," dissidents, and all sorts of other "enemies" of the state.

It goes without saying that there should be no place for a habitual criminal or a child abuser in schools. But the law in its current form is also destroying the careers of dedicated teachers like Konstantin Shcherbina – people whose original offence was either questionable or minor, or who have long ago paid the penalty for whatever offence they committed.

The Russian legal system has the equivalent of a statute of limitations, which applies even in cases of murder.

Yet large numbers of people whose offences were less serious even than assault, let alone murder, are

now being hounded years after their crime was forgotten and probably forgiven. From all appearances, this campaign has become little more than a witch-hunt. Even school staff who received only a suspended sentence must still lose their jobs.

Dismissing teachers with a criminal record en masse appears especially hypocritical in Russia, where convicted criminals seem to have had no problem getting jobs in government, being elected to parliament, or, as businessmen, winning tenders to carry out plum construction projects.

If the state wants to awaken schoolchildren to the dangers posed by immoral adults it might do better to put on a course of lectures about some of the convicted offenders who have risen to become Russian regional governors.

What schoolchildren really need to learn is that Russia remains a country of double standards. And the purge of teachers with any kind of criminal record, while other convicted criminals continue to play key roles in running the country, is proof of this sad fact.

Galina Stolyarova *is a writer for* The St. Petersburg Times*, an English-language newspaper.*

Kyrgyzstan´s Disappearing Kindergartens

Preschool attendance is the basis for a successful education, but it's a luxury many in this Central Asian country can no longer afford.

by Hamid Toursunov
5 November 2012

OSH, Kyrgyzstan | Chinara Iminova says with a third child on the way, she badly needs to enroll her two toddlers in preschool, but those in her neighborhood of Kyrgyzstan's second largest city have turned her away.

"The people at the kindergartens say they can't take more children. They even refused to put my daughter and son on the waiting list and told me they already have more than 200 children there," the 30-year-old said.

Iminova's plight is increasingly common in Osh and across the country. Just 13 percent of children under 6 years old in Kyrgyzstan attended preschool in 2011, government statistics show.

"There are lots and lots of children on waiting lists because we don't have enough kindergartens," said Manas Ergeshev, mayor of the fourth district of Osh. "For instance, in our council [district] of 27,000 residents, we have only one kindergarten."

The number of public preschools in Kyrgyzstan today, 741, is less than half as many as in 1990. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many preschools were privatized and converted to other uses. Meanwhile, since reaching bottom in 2000, the country's birth rate has been steadily climbing.

Legislators are concerned about the shortage of preschools, national parliament member Roza Aknazarova said. She said parliament will take up

the question of restoring privatized preschools to their original function.

Children play at the Kapitoshka private preschool in Osh. As public preschools become more crowded, private kindergartens are an option for those who can afford them. Photo by Hamid Toursunov

However, in a country where more than one-third of the population lives below the poverty line, some observers say the government on its own simply can't afford this solution.

"There's no money. We need grants and donors to build new kindergartens," Ergeshev said. "It's difficult to change anything regarding facilities once they have been privatized. It's a long and complicated process. I have sent letters to the city mayor, the national parliament, the national government about the lack of kindergartens. No results."

RURAL DISADVANTAGE

Although the government spends an estimated 20 percent of the budget on education, and literacy rates are near 100 percent, from kindergarten and beyond Kyrgyzstan's educational system has not kept pace with the challenges of transition. The share of preschool-age children in preschool plummeted from 35 percent in 1990 to 13 percent today.

"Children who do not attend kindergarten have much slower progress in school compared with those who have access to preschool education," said Munojat Tashbaeva, a sociologist in Osh.

"The situation regarding availability of kindergartens in rural areas is catastrophic and alarming," Tashbaeva said. "Since almost no children in villages attend kindergartens, unlike their peers in urban areas, they appear unable to compete for higher education and employment opportunities after they finish secondary education."

According to a 2010 UN Development Program report, only 4.7 percent of children in rural areas, where the overwhelming majority of Kyrgyzstan's poor live, attend preschools, compared with 25 percent of children in urban areas.

Preschool attendance is relatively high in the country's wealthiest city, Bishkek,

According to the city administration, 48 percent of children under 6 there have access to preschools. City hall says 50 new facilities must be built to soak up the demand for preschool places.

The situation in Osh is similar.

"About 8,500 kids attend 30 kindergartens in Osh," said Gulayim Mashrapova, director of the Osh education department. "There are 6,000 more on the waiting lists."

"A new kindergarten has been built in Osh and will open soon. Another kindergarten will be built next year," Mashrapova said. "These kindergartens were built by city authorities. No money is allocated from the national budget."

According to Education Minister Kanat Sydykov, with 240 new facilities the country could get back to the 1990 level of 35 percent preschool coverage, the 24.kg news agency reported on 1 August.

However, "there is not enough money in the budget to build new facilities," Sydykov said.

PRIVATE SOLUTION?

Though the number of preschools is growing, existing facilities are overcrowded, as schools enroll more children than they were meant to hold. The 89 preschools in Bishkek enroll 22,000 children, twice the planned capacity. The situation is similar in other cities.

New preschools are opening in the cities, but most are out of reach for the average Kyrgyz family.

"Two private kindergartens opened in Osh within a couple of months," Mashrapova said. "Although we have public preschool facilities, it's good that private facilities are opening. It's a relief for us that access to kindergartens is growing, more or less. We now have five private kindergartens in Osh."

But with monthly fees averaging 3,000 to 5,000 soms ($65 to $105), private preschools are an option only for the wealthy. Annual income is around $900 per person. After the political turmoil of 2010 and steady rises in food prices in 2011 and 2012, the absolute poverty rate increased from 33.7 percent in 2010 to 36.8 percent in 2011, according to the UNDP.

Unlike most public schools, state preschools also charge fees, although at 500 soms a month many families can afford them.

Nevertheless, the number of registered private preschools is growing, from 27 in 2009 to 43 last year.

Elnura Bazarbaeva said she and her sister decided to open a private preschool after seeing the poor conditions in public kindergartens when they had children. "They have overcrowded groups with 40 to 45 children in each group, and in some cases two children share one bed," she said. Her preschool charges 10,000 soms a month, well above the average salary for a public-school teacher, for instance.

At first, the sisters feared the high fee would keep away the customers, but Bazarbaeva said they have enrolled 75 children in three groups.

"They bring their children here because we have good conditions for children, and we work 11 hours a day, six days a week," she said.

Hamid Toursunov *is a TOL correspondent in Kyrgyzstan.*

Macedonian Schools Face the Shock of the New

Five years into an education revolution, teachers hang on to old ways to keep from drowning in a sea of innovations.

by Zaklina Hadzi-Zafirova
16 November 2012

SKOPJE | In the past five years Macedonian classrooms have seen many changes. An additional year of mandatory education; "interactive" teaching in place of the rote learning of the past; new textbooks; a computer for every pupil – it all foretold a radical transformation of what most agreed was a woefully obsolete school system.

The view of many teachers and experts is that the reforms are taking hold much more slowly than expected. Many children have yet to see the promised computers, especially in rural areas. Teachers have been slow to adopt new methods, and many of those whose pupils have computers say they are now more like IT administrators than educators. There have been problems with the new textbooks.

Sometimes, the old ways are the best ways. A third-grader writes on a blackboard at Vera Ciriviri-Trena Elementary School in Skopje.

Some experts say teachers now have precious little time to digress from micro-managed teaching plans that, for instance, require computers to be used for 30 percent of class time. No nationwide assessments of the effectiveness of the reforms have been done, but small-scale studies indicate slow, if any improvement.

BOTTOM OF THE CLASS

Officials cited Macedonian pupils' consistently poor performances in international tests as the main driver behind the reforms in primary education.

On the widely used PIRLS assessment of reading skills, for instance, Macedonian fourth-graders were ranked 29th of 35 countries in 2001, and 38th of 45 countries in 2006.

Results were hardly better on the TIMSS survey of eighth-graders' math and science ability. Macedonia ranked 30th of 45 participating countries in 2003, six places behind Serbia. Macedonia came last among Southeastern and Eastern European countries at both the 2003 TIMSS and 2006 PIRLS assessments.

The most recent nationwide tests, in 2006, also flagged up poor results, says Beti Lameva of the National Examinations Center and national coordinator for the 2011 TIMSS assessment.

"We found the same weak results," Lameva said, adding, "We really expected a lot more."

Lameva also said teachers are picking up new knowledge in training sessions but have not learned how to incorporate their new skills in the classroom.

"Teachers still have not changed their way of teaching," she said.

The center, then part of the government's Education Development Bureau, helped steer the switch from an eight- to a nine-year education system beginning in 2007 – a keystone in the education reforms. However, so far there has been no research into the effects of the nine-year system on educational practices, center director Jusuf Arifi said.

At the same time, major curriculum changes and new teaching methods were introduced. Students now begin studying English in the first grade; a second foreign language is studied from sixth grade.

COMPUTERS VS. TRADITIONS

Another big, and expensive, innovation that promised to improve the quality of teaching was the "computer for every child" plan. Starting in 2008, every elementary and secondary school was supposed to receive computers at a cost estimated by the media at 60 million euros ($76.5 million). At some schools, however, many computers were stolen or broke down before the first year of the program ended. Other schools lock them up to prevent theft. The Education Ministry announced, but never released, a survey of how many computers were being used in schools. The ministry now plans to distribute 300,000 tablet computers to students in 2015 and says parents will be responsible for them.

Digitizing classrooms was seen as crucial to reforming outdated teaching methods. Yet computers have not always lived up to expectations, even at the math-and-technology-oriented Rade Jovcevski Korcagin High School in Skopje, known as one of the best schools in the capital.

"The classic way of teaching is still mostly being used in schools, but it is the most practical at the same time," school principal Dragan Arsovski said. "I personally believe it should be improved. Innovative methods are being tried, but some have not had the desired effect. For example, the 'computer for every child' program did not produce the required results in the way it was implemented."

Another innovation burdened with high hopes has also been slow to take root, Arsovski said.

"We have a problem with implementing interactive teaching because the material is too extensive and the teachers must work to annual teaching plans, and they're also too extensive."

Students are now encouraged to ask questions and interact with the teacher, rather than simply absorbing the teacher's lessons. But as with the old rote-learning system, students are still expected to retain large amounts of information.

"There are a lot of things pupils don't need to learn, like how many sheep there are in Australia and if they're sheared in the spring. A larger revision of the taught subjects is needed, and to decrease the amount of material in each subject," Arsovski said.

Elementary school teachers too are hemmed in by rules, said Snezana Karas, principal of Vera Ciriviri-Trena Elementary School.

The minutiae of setting up teaching plans according to set rules takes up so much time that teachers are becoming more like administrators, she said. And they get conflicting signals from different parts of the educational bureaucracy. Every three years inspectors visit schools to check that teachers are following the approved plans.

"When the inspectors come they want to see the yearly planning, the thematic planning, and the teaching material for the day," Karas said. Yet when staff of the Education Development Bureau visit classrooms, they tell teachers not to be so rigid. "They assure the teachers that they can have more freedom," Karas said.

One of the only systematic attempts so far to assess the wide-ranging educational reforms was carried out three years ago by the Education Development Bureau in cooperation with the independent Macedonian Civic Education Center. In the UNICEF-supported survey, experts examined the first-, second-, and third-grade teaching programs at 15 pilot schools where teachers had undergone training to apply the new methods. The aim was to compare the pilot schools with 15 control schools. The results were not encouraging.

Gorica Mickovska of the Macedonian Civic Education Center said overall the survey confirmed that Macedonian pupils learn more by memorization than by understanding, although she cautions that the results may not be representative.

"The general conclusion was that the pupils cannot pull out the information from a text, either explicit or implicit. The results were lower compared with the expectations for the kids at their age. They generally have a problem with understanding the texts they read," Mickovska said.

Education Development Bureau director Vesna Horvatovic is another expert who says merely delivering computers to schools is not enough to change entrenched teaching methods. Although many teachers have not given up the traditional lecturing method, she believes they will gradually be won over.

"The modernization of schools with computers and smart boards is a revolutionary beginning, after which there is no turning back. We are quite aware that we can't make all 16,000 teachers perfect, but what has been set up as a standard cannot be undone," she said. "We're not discouraged by the fact that there is some proportion of teachers who don't work professionally."

The new textbooks commissioned by education officials have also taken their share of criticism, especially when factual errors and cultural blunders were found in some of them.

The new textbooks also introduce some complicated subjects at too young an age, said Vlado Timovski, dean of the pedagogical department at Sts. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje.

"I can't understand why a fourth- or fifth-grader must learn about the EU and European integration in social studies class, or rather learn so many facts about something that is so abstract for them," he said.

Some educators worry that so many changes in classroom methods, technology, and textbooks are actually setting students back, to the point that some teenagers can't do basic arithmetic.

The principal of Mihajlo Pupin High School in Skopje said the skills of entering freshmen are declining year by year.

"We have had issues with kids having problems with multiplication and division, and also reading problems," Eftim Pejovski said.

"Lately, we've had problems with kids who can't write all the letters of the alphabet."

The number of such children is not large, but the fact that such badly prepared students even make it to high school is alarming, Pejovski said.

BOTTOM-UP REFORM

The traditional, lecture method is most prevalent in secondary schools, while interactive teaching is found more often in the lower grades of elementary school, the Education Development Bureau concluded after a three-month survey earlier this year.

More modern methods may be starting to have an impact in the classroom. The bureau asked nearly 1,500 fifth-graders about their teachers' expectations in the classroom. Almost half said their teachers preferred them to answer questions in their own words, based on the teacher's explanations, while 21 percent said they were expected to repeat the lesson exactly as delivered.

Teachers also complain that in order to satisfy school inspectors' demands for hard data they are forced to administer many more written tests than in the past.

The patchy nature of the reforms is easy to see at rural schools, many of which lack even basic amenities.

One village teacher confessed that all the reforms can be a heavy burden for teachers and children alike.

"From my experience I can see that the pupils are burdened with textbooks and teaching. There are a lot of lectures and no time for revision," said Kenan Ismaili, a teacher at an elementary school in the village of Dracevica, near Skopje.

"We're expected to set more tests, so we test the children and have less contact with them."

It is too early to evaluate the ongoing reforms, Ismaili said.

Although Dracevica is only a short drive from the capital, the electricity supply is unreliable. The elementary school moved into a new building this year but still lacks running water. Children fill bottles at the village tap to use for flushing toilets.

"Regarding village schools, I believe that the [reform strategy] was a bad investment because conditions in village schools are at the minimum. For example, we have no computers here because there is no infrastructure," principal Ali Nafiz Asani said.

*Story and photo by **Zaklina Hadzi-Zafirova**, a journalist in Skopje.* *This article was produced for the Reporting Education project, which is funded by the Open Society Institute's Education Support Program.*

Tongue Twisting Reforms

Wide-ranging education changes meant to end the cultural isolation of Georgia's Azeri minority may end up forcing Azeri-language schools out of existence.

by Shahla Sultanova
30 November 2012

KVEMO KARTLI REGION, Georgia | When her second child began school in September, Jamila Omarova felt a mixture of happiness, pride, and anxiety. It was a struggle to convince her family that her daughter, Ayten, should be taught in Georgian rather than Azeri at the local school. Three months later, she is optimistic about Ayten's future.

Omarova, 27, was born and raised in Georgia but knows only a few words of the language. That was not a life she wanted for her children.

Irma Begiashvili teaches the Georgian alphabet to Azeri first-graders in Kosaly, an all-Azeri village in southern Georgia.

"I insisted that my son attend classes in Georgian, but my family decided that he would be taught in Azeri, because we are Azeris," she said. "I'm disappointed about it. I've spent all of my life in Georgia, I'm a Georgian citizen, but I can't speak Georgian and don't understand it. It was all right before, but not anymore. I have to take a Georgian speaker with me to local offices so they can help me communicate. I don't want my kids to experience that."

Only Azeris live in Kosaly, Omarova's home village of about 6,000 residents. Parents now have the option of enrolling their children in the Georgian-only part of the village school, but her schooling was in Azeri. For communication with Georgians she relies on a few basic Russian words.

The language barrier has long been one of the tallest hurdles facing the Azeri minority's integration into Georgian society. In the mid-2000s, the government began an effort to lessen the isolation of minority communities by ensuring a better grasp of the majority language and by integrating their schools into the Georgian national system.

The reforms do not affect minorities' constitutional right to education in their own languages, but officials in Tbilisi, rather than Baku or Yerevan, now set the curriculum. The changes significantly cut the use of Azeri in classrooms and led to Georgian textbooks almost completely replacing books published in Azerbaijan. Coupled with stricter Azerbaijani migration rules, more Azeris in Georgia are choosing to send their children to Georgian schools, and more ethnic Azeris now continue on to university in their country of citizenship rather than in Azerbaijan.

Most Azeris, however, still know little if any Georgian. Very few Azeris hold administrative or management positions in Georgia, or teach in the universities. Just two ethnic Azeri members of parliament represent the interests of a community that makes up 6.5 percent of the country's population.

Difficulty in interacting with officials, problems finding a job, lack of knowledge of their civil rights, and mutual distrust between the Azeri and Georgian communities – these were some of the consequences of the language divide identified in a 2006 report by the German Organization for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the Caucasus

Institute of Peace, Democracy, and Development (CIPDD).

Azeris and Armenians, the two largest minorities, make up about 12 percent of the Georgian population and are concentrated in small towns and villages, often having little contact with Tbilisi. Most of the country's nearly 300,000 ethnic Azeris live in the Kvemo Kartli region of southern Georgia, on the border with Azerbaijan.

AZERI ISLANDS

Ulviyya Mammadova, 39, attended Azeri-language schools in Georgia, graduated from medical school in Azerbaijan, and now practices medicine in Kosaly.

"My family watches only Azerbaijani TV, which is why we know nothing about what's happening in Georgia," she said, laughing.

Mammadova is pressed into service when her non-Georgian-speaking patients need to see other specialists.

"If the doctor is Georgian, the patient can't explain his or her problem. That discourages people and they don't continue their treatments. So I have to accompany that patient and act as a translator. I'm responsible for their health."

During Soviet times, little attention was given to Georgian-language studies in minority-language schools, and the Azeri community's poor knowledge of Georgian was not perceived as a problem. Kosaly resident Shafiga Kerimova, 26, recalled that in the past Russian served as an optional language of communication between Georgians and Azeris. "We can still use Russian, but many officials, especially young ones, don't speak Russian. It's already losing its function," she said.

In post-Soviet Georgia, emigration to Azerbaijan peaked in the 1990s, starting with the presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, said Alovsat Aliev, director of the nongovernmental Azerbaijan Migration Center in Baku.

"Georgia for Georgians" and other nationalistic slogans marked Gamsakhurdia's unstable tenure in 1990 and 1991, when the names of many Azeri villages were "reorganized."
The tenure of his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was plagued by war with two of Georgia's breakaway regions and economic collapse.

Thanks to emigration and falling birth rates, the total population (including the breakaway regions) plummeted 20 percent to 4.4 million from 1989 to 2002.

A similar decline hit the two districts of the Kvemo Kartli region where Azeris are concentrated, Gardabani and Marneuli: the population dropped by 18 percent, to just under 500,000, between 1989 and 2002, the last time a nationwide census was taken. The fall in the number of school-age children was even greater: 27 percent in Gardabani district and 30 percent in Marneuli, according to a second 2006 GTZ-CIPDD report.

In recent years ethnic Azeris in Georgia have grown more willing to integrate into Georgian society, as both the economy and people's faith in government slowly recuperated. Georgia is now a country where the rule of law is respected, said Gardabani district resident Gulnaz Ismailova. "Trust in government encourages Azeris to be part of Georgian society, and this is possible only through education," she said.

The flow of Azeris out of Georgia slowed after President Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, Aliev said, because they now felt safe in Georgia.

"They simply compared the border checkpoints on the Azerbaijani and Georgian sides. Seeing much better democratic processes made them feel proud of the country they are citizens of. Now they trust Georgia."

In 2007, Azerbaijan introduced tougher migration policies, treating ethnic Azeris from abroad the same as non-Azeri migrants, and this, too, acted to slow the stream of Georgian emigrants, Aliev said.

Mammadova's two children are learning Georgian at their Azeri school in Kosaly, and she is keen for them to improve their fluency through additional lessons.

However, for a growing number of parents, merely studying Georgian as a foreign language, especially in local schools, may not ensure their children's future success.

The Georgian language is not taught effectively in Azeri-language schools, said Hasan Ganbarov, a resident of Sabir village in the Marneuli district. So he decided to send his grandson to a Georgian school in a neighboring village. "It's expensive, since we have to hire a taxi driver. But it's important," he said.

Ganbarov's criticisms are echoed in the GTZ-CIPDD report, which identified stumbling blocks for would-be learners of Georgian, including outdated teaching methods, poor quality textbooks, and a scarcity of bilingual teachers.

An article published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in 2009 noted, "Teaching of Georgian has hitherto been inefficient, due to insufficient financing, a lack of qualified teachers (in spite of government programs aimed at attracting teachers to minority regions), and inadequate teaching methodologies. Furthermore, schoolchildren in minority regions have little contact with the Georgian language outside the classroom."

Local educators say Azeri parents increasingly prefer to send their children to Georgian-only schools, with significant impacts on both Azeri- and Georgian-language schools.

"They believe Georgian schools are much more effective in preparing their children for higher education and later job opportunities in Georgia," said the principal of an Azeri school in Marneuli, Ruslan Hajiev.

Lela Kashiladze, the principal of Georgian School No. 5 in Marneuli, said the number of Azeris there has risen rapidly in the last five years, until they now make up almost 70 percent of the student body of some 1,000 pupils in grades one through 12.

"Our three classes of first-graders consist of 30 kids each. Two are mostly Azeris and the other is entirely Azeri," she said.

Azeri speakers are clumped in the first to fourth grades, Kashiladze said.

"It seems that Azeri parents are getting more serious about preparing their children to be educated in Georgian, so they don't experience linguistic barriers."

So many Azeri families are applying to enroll children that the school cannot accept them all, she said.

"We have a significant number of fourth-grade students who transferred here from Azeri schools," she said. Last year an Azeri ninth-grader even offered to enroll in the seventh grade if only the school would take him.

Eshgin Aliev is one student who transferred to School No. 5 from an Azeri school for the sake of greater linguistic and educational opportunity.

Although the 11th-grader attended several Georgian-language classes to prepare for the university entrance exams, he felt the teaching was not effective.

"But at this school most teachers are Georgan and even the Azeri pupils speak Georgian with one another. It's much more effective. That's what I wanted. I want to attend university in Georgia."

LANGUAGE GAP PERSISTS

For students intending to go on to university, Azeri-language education puts them in a tight spot. The uneven Georgian-language teaching in Azeri schools limits their chances of passing the entrance exams for Georgian universities, but studying a Georgian curriculum makes it harder to be admitted to university in Azerbaijan.

Gaining fluency in Georgian before starting university was not easy, said Tbilisi State University freshman Serjan Eminova, 20, from Kosaly.

Eminova supplemented her Azeri-language high school studies with intensive Georgian on the side, but the language classes did not prepare her for the standard university entrance exams, she said. She took advantage of an exception that allows minority students to take exams in their native language.

After passing the Azeri-language exam, she had to take an additional year of intensive Georgian before beginning her studies in business administration, and she still experiences some difficulties in comprehension, especially in math courses.

"I guess I'll have some language trouble during my first year, but I think it will be all right after that," she said.

The educational and other reforms brought in by the Saakashvili administration "marked a genuine effort on the part of the government to engage members of national minorities in public life," Jonathan Wheatley of the European Center for Minority Issues wrote in a 2009 paper. But he noted that Tbilisi expected too much progress too quickly from the reforms, given the low level of Georgian competence among Azeris and Armenians. "The rapid introduction of examinations in the Georgian language with a minimum of preparation may have had a contrary effect to that which was intended, as university applicants from regions such as Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti in which minorities are concentrated are in effect unable to go to Georgian universities and continue to follow the time-honored practice of going to Yerevan and Baku to study," he wrote.

TEXTBOOK PROBLEMS

A controversial aspect of the Georgian education reforms in the mid-2000s was a rule requiring minority-language schools to start teaching Georgian history and geography, and Georgian language and literature in the Georgian language. That reversed a years-long practice of the Azerbaijani government supplying almost all textbooks used by Azeri schools in Georgia, which in turn had essentially steered university-bound students toward Azerbaijan rather than Georgia, since they had not been taught based on the Georgian national curriculum.

One such student, Kosaly native Vagif Mustafaev, 34, emigrated to Azerbaijan as a teenager and attended Baku State University.

"I had no chance of studying in Georgia because I didn't know the language. Azerbaijan was the only option, but not an easy one. I had to spend the last year of high school in Azerbaijan and hire tutors to learn Azeri geography and history," he said.

As the reforms kicked in, Azerbaijan supplied fewer textbooks to Georgia, so that today Azeri schools receive only language and literature textbooks from Baku. That change has flipped the dilemma that once faced Mustafaev.

Sayali Mahmudova graduated from Azeri School 1 in Marneuli. Although she had once planned to study in Azerbaijan, she had to give up the idea because she has received an essentially Georgian education.

"My education was in Azeri, but textbooks were translated from Georgian. The only textbook we had from Azerbaijan's high school system was in language and literature. I had to focus on education in Georgia."

A law student at the Georgian branch of the Ukrainian Interregional Academy of Personnel Management, Mahmudova said people like her – neither fluent in Georgian nor conversant with the curriculum of Azerbaijan – are hemmed in on both sides.

Increasingly, the solution for ambitious students may be to give up on Azeri-language schools.

Elnur Aliev, a 10th-grader in Kosaly, said his parents regret not sending him to a Georgian

school. "We study in Azeri and our Georgian-language classes aren't enough for us to acquire academic language, so that we can compete with those in entrance exams who studied in Georgian."

Cultural and religious differences also play a part when parents decide which school their child should attend.

Azeri children wait for the school bus in front of School No. 3 in Gardabani.

One Gardabani woman, Leyla Hajieva, 27, said she wouldn't want her first-grade daughter to go to a Georgian school because smoking is common for Georgian women, but frowned on among Azeris.

"What if she smokes? It's against our social norms," she said.

For many Azeri parents, however, there are clear advantages for children who use only Georgian in school.

Nureli Galandarov, from the Marneuli district village of Kizilhajili, said, "I wanted my kids to be educated in Georgian so they never have a problem with integrating into Georgian society. Just learning the language doesn't give them that opportunity."

His two children attend seventh and ninth grade at a Georgian school.

"We live in Marneuli, where we can survive with Azeri and a little Georgian. But our home country also expands beyond Marneuli."

*Story and photos by **Shahla Sultanova,** a freelance journalist in Baku. This article was produced for the Reporting Education project, which is funded by the Open Society Institute's Education Support Program.*

In Lithuania, Too Many Teachers Chasing for Too Few Pupils

The Baltic state's schools are struggling with the consequences of the slump and unrelenting population loss. Is firing older teachers en masse the solution?

by Linas Jegelevicius
12 December 2012

VILNIUS | At 75, Algimantas Adomenas is still spry, agile, and exuberant. He has another reason to feel satisfied with his life: he still works, in a job he loves.

Adomenas has taught physics at the Vilnius Zverynas Gymnasium, a high school in the Lithuanian capital, for 27 years. "People change, but not classical physics. I feel awestruck in front of the class," he says. And he bristles at the notion that he may have outgrown his profession: "Though I'm no IT nerd at my age, I use computers in my classes."

The septuagenarian has not only surpassed the average life expectancy for Lithuanian men by seven years, he has withstood the tide that has swept hundreds of senior Lithuanian teachers from their jobs.

In the last three years nearly 500 teachers have been let go before reaching the statutory retirement age of 60 years for women and 62 1/2 years for men. The exodus is part of a radical school overhaul undertaken by the outgoing center-right government to modernize the education system in the face of rapid social change caused by the economic crisis and a continuing emigration wave. Unless the new government taking office this

month reverses the plan, thousands more teachers may soon follow.

Algimantas Adomenas

The controversial education reform, known as the Teacher Skills Improvement Concept (TSIC), was spearheaded in 2009 by Gintaras Steponavicius, the minister for education and science in the government that was voted out of office in October. The victory by a coalition of left-leaning parties was widely seen as a rejection of austerity measures enacted to combat the devastating economic slump.

Like welfare cuts and layoffs of public workers, education reform turned out to be very painful, with more than 100 schools closing. Many of those remaining have had to cut teachers' pay and shrink staff, with the oldest instructors bearing the brunt of the reductions.

Under pressure, Steponavicius' ministry retreated from some parts of the school overhaul, such as a proposal to downgrade many senior teachers to the status of teaching assistants, with smaller salaries and pensions. But even the less-harsh plan has had a ripple effect, especially after Steponavicius, in a speech in March, unambiguously urged older teachers to "vacate schools" to free up jobs for younger colleagues.

"We saw the TSIC thing, enhanced by the speech, as an unwritten order to be tougher on teachers of that age in the schools under reform," said the top education official at a municipality in southwestern Lithuania, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"When making the lists of teachers to be affected by the downsizing, frankly speaking, we made two kinds of lists: one with the names of younger teachers and the other with the names of teachers at pension age or close to it," the official said. "When decision time came we sacked most teachers on the second list."

The number of teachers above the statutory retirement age dropped from 3,591 in 2008-2009 to 2,960 in 2011-2012, according to Elona Bagdonaviciene, a spokeswoman for the Education Ministry.

The overhaul has cut deeply as well for teachers just starting out, with the number of under-25 instructors dropping from 1,219 four years ago to just 618 in 2011-12.

Audrius Jurgelevicius

Audrius Jurgelevicius, chairman of the Lithuanian Education Trade Union, says many teachers have left on good terms, but others were "coaxed and threatened" to quit.

Outgoing Deputy Education and Science Minister Vaidas Bacys defends the controversial reform. "With the significant decrease in the number of schoolchildren, down by 20,000 this year alone, to 367,000, the school reform was inevitable, and its aftermath is a need for fewer teachers," he said.

Lithuania's population has been falling steadily for decades – from 3.67 million in 1989 to an estimated 2.98 million this year – pushed by a low birth rate, economic hardships, and changing perceptions of women's role in society. Emigration is the chief contributor: around half a million Lithuanians have decamped since 1990, 54,000 in 2011 alone.

School enrollment has dropped by 90,000 in the last six years, and Bacys said it is likely to keep falling through 2017 before leveling off.

Few in Lithuania dispute the need for the school system adapt to a plunging population, but in a

country where teachers aged 60 and over make up around 18.5 percent of a total teaching corps of 27,000, the whip seems to be falling disproportionately hard on seniors.

"The TSIC, for many older teachers, has become more of a scarecrow than a skills development guideline," said Jurgelevicius, whose union is the country's largest for teachers, with some 5,000 members. "Many school principals are applying it in other forms without waiting for its full adoption, sacking older teachers first."

Jurgelevicius contended the previous government botched the urgent job of education reform, turning an opportunity to improve the quality of instruction with new skills and training into a lever to pry out hundreds of older instructors. Steponavicius' approach, the union leader said, amounted to "cut it if you can't fix it."

Departing Deputy Minister Bacys said the ministry took a number of measures to cushion the social impact of the layoffs.

The issue of teacher layoffs will persist even beyond the expected stabilization of student numbers in five years, Bacys said, "but many redundant teachers will be employed in new multi-purpose educational facilities. Some 500 will be retrained as preschool teachers, while 700 will assume jobs in other education-related capacities, especially at primary schools. If we were to add up the numbers, we'd have pretty much the total of teachers who have lost their jobs."

However, the ministry planned far deeper cuts for the next two years, with more than 5,000 more teachers slated to go. Their fate now lies with the new, more labor-friendly Social Democratic government.

JOB LOSS, PENSION PAIN

Job security is not the only economic issue facing Lithuania's teachers. The country, unlike most EU member states in Western Europe, has taken no steps to create pension plans for teachers.

"The government pledged to create such plans in its 2008 program, but ... it has never raised a finger in that direction," Jurgelevicius said. "What we have been hearing all the time is that the crisis-stricken budget could not bear the burden."

The union chief said he has "heard assurances from very high-ranking Social Democrats that the single-profession pension plans will be created. The union will try to make sure they will end up in the new government's program. And, certainly, to scrap the current Teacher Skills Improvement Concept."

A prominent Social Democrat, former Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas, confirmed that the new administration intends to set up teachers' pensions plans, although he said it was too early to put a price tag on the scheme.

"Undoubtedly, the entire school reform and all the teacher issues have to be addressed. We're really dissatisfied with the rushed reform by the former ministry, which has brought so much irritation and uncertainty to schools, teachers, and society," Kirkilas said.

Asked why the matter of teachers' pensions plans was not pursued when he stood at the helm of the 2006-2008 Social Democratic government, Kirkilas said the government was "preoccupied" above all with teachers' salaries.

If the Teacher Skills Improvement Concept is canceled, it will remove one barrier to senior teachers serving out their full careers. But it would do little to reverse what some say is the growing problem of age discrimination in Lithuania.

"Age-related discrimination is perhaps most active in the education sector, where teaching quality is often associated with a fresh teaching staff and being able to adapt to innovations. But it has been increasing in other fields as well," said Ausrine Burneikiene, the country's equal-opportunity ombudsman.

"The discussion about whether sexagenarian teachers meet the modern requirements for the job

has gone beyond the boundaries of the TSIC," Jurgevicius said. "There are many 30-year-old teachers out there who have little clue of what they are mumbling in front of the children. You can't just write off old teachers with their expertise and life experience."

Not all educators agree. Arunas Aleksandravicius, principal of a high school in the northwestern town of Silale, backs the reform plan, and even favors lowering the statutory retirement age.

"I am really against any age-based discrimination against teachers, but over many years I've seen many senior teachers who come to class to 'sit out' the lessons, not to teach," he said. "In these cases, we do a favor to the teacher, but the schoolchild yearning to learn is the one who suffers at the end of the day."

Aleksandravicius said he has laid off about 10 retirement-age teaches in the past four years while retaining two who continue to work "successfully." He believes the retirement age should be dropped to as low as 52: "There are just too many stressed-out and – excuse my language – whacked-out teachers in their 60s or older out there."

Other school heads stoutly defend their older teachers. Daiva Ziuriene, principal of at the Vilnius high school where Algimantas Adomenas teaches physics, said most people "don't give a thought to his age when they see him explaining the subject in a matter-of-fact and articulate way.

"The pupils and their parents love him, and he pays everyone back with his love, passion for physics, and, most important, his deep knowledge of it."

Linas Jegelevicius *is a freelance journalist in Klaipeda, Lithuania. Photo of Audrius Jurgelevicius courtesy of Sarunas Mazeika.*

In Azerbaijan Free Education Comes at a Price

Public schooling is so inadequate for those preparing for university that expensive tutoring is the norm.

by Arifa Kazimova
9 January 2013

BAKU | Under the laws of Azerbaijan, 15-year-old Sabina is entitled to a free education. She attends free public schools, yet her parents feel obligated to pay an annual 3,000 manats ($3,800) for tutors to ensure that she gets enough from her education to gain entry into a university or other form of higher education.

"It's impossible for secondary school graduates to pass higher education exams without individual tutoring," said Dilshad Azimova, Sabina's mother. "We can hardly manage these expenses. I have two more children and we have to save money for their tutoring as well."

Sabina is among a generation of Azerbaijanis promised a free education but denied it, according to parents and education experts, because public school instruction seems inadequate to prepare students for higher education. While education officials acknowledge the problem, so far they have not put forth a solution. Observers inside and outside of the state system also maintain that costly tutoring required for university admission has become institutionalized in the Azerbaijani public education system and is tacitly encouraged by the government.

Sabina says most of her fellow students do not go to formal classes regularly and attend two or more tutoring sessions a day, each lasting an hour and a half. "Tutors' schedules are also very intense," she said. "They're working until midnight."

'MY DAUGHTER WAS BEHIND'

Elementary-school parents also use private tutoring. Gulnara, 32, who asked that her last name not be used, makes a living cleaning central Baku's business centers. She says she has to pay 50 manats out of her 275-manat monthly salary for her 7-year old daughter's tutoring. It has paid off.

"Before, the teacher repeatedly stressed that my daughter was lagging behind classmates, mainly in math. But now I hear only praise," Gulnara said. The praise came only after that same teacher collected her after-hours tutoring fee, however.

What faces Azerbaijani students are classrooms where few understand what's going on and can absorb the information needed to get out of high school and proceed to higher education.

"Only five or six students in a class comprehend what you teach. Moreover, some topics are so difficult that a teacher cannot explain it within the given hour," said a tutor-teacher who, like many interviewed for this story, spoke on condition of anonymity.

A SCHEDULE OF FEES

The average tutoring price for each student in a group ranges from 50 to 60 manats. The price lowers in suburbs to 30 manats but goes up to 70 to 100 manats for individual tutoring. There are also so-called "bunker teachers" who prepare students for higher education admission tests. They charge 120 to 150 manats a month.

The practice of hiring tutors dates back to Azerbaijan's birth as a nation in the early 1990s. Most teachers left their low-paying public-sector jobs for more lucrative private-sector work. That included tutoring, which evolved into something resembling a second education system that was clearly not free.

Azerbaijan spent more of its government revenues on education in 2005 than neighboring Armenia, according to a European Commission report from September 2011. Four years later, that percentage dropped from nearly 20 to 9 percent, falling behind Armenia's 15 percent.

REFORMING A 'FREE' EDUCATION

At the same time, parents have lost faith in public classroom instruction, despite government efforts to modernize education. The passive learning practiced in Soviet-era schools has been replaced by a more interactive approach, with students discussing what they have learned and teachers encouraged to stimulate creativity.

Elvin Rustamov, an Education Ministry project director, said the modern curriculum, introduced for first-graders in 2008, offers broader chances to develop students' capabilities. "Teachers are required to be more creative; certain textbooks are recommended, but they are free to choose their own online sources," he said. "Teachers were led to destinations via certain roads before, but now only the destinations are declared, and [teachers] are to find roads leading there."

Despite that new freedom, Rustamov said, teachers seem mired in the past. "Our teachers are simply not used to choosing teaching methods independently," he said. Others, however, see a different problem at work.

One teacher who moonlights as a tutor said some government schools profit from the tutoring business. The tutor-teacher said officials of some schools take bribes to report students in attendance when they are actually elsewhere, receiving outside tutoring.

High-level government officials admit that the demand for tutoring – and the attendant irregularities – are a drag on the nation's education system.

"Tutoring is a major obstacle in development of Azerbaijan's education system and shadows public schools' activity," Education Minister Misir Mardanov said in September, before the academic year started. "Most people think one cannot get a credible education without tutors."

Mardanov warned several months ago that the government would take action against abuses such as phony transfers and doctored attendance records.

LOW PAY, LOW PERFORMANCE

Getting more out of teachers seems to work perfectly well if they're getting paid more money, according to parents and teachers. After working their standard government 24-hour week, many teachers then begin teaching their paying customers in earnest. Education officials are divided on this, with some encouraging higher government salaries and others saying that teacher pay is sufficient.

Consider the salary of the 7-year-old's mother, Gulnara. Taking home 275 manats a month, she would likely make less money teaching than she does cleaning offices. The government pays teachers between 150 and 350 manats per month, a fraction of the 2,000 manats that successful tutors reportedly make.

Then consider Adil, who, as a physical education teacher, can't offer the kind of tutoring paying clients demand. So to supplement his meagre government teacher's pay, he says he commutes several kilometers from his home after school and on days off to move stock in a supermarket.

Critics say the lagging pay lowers government teachers' enthusiasm and thus their performance, leaving untutored students at a disadvantage.

'TEACHERS SHOULD NOT COMPLAIN'

Others blame the way higher education admission tests are written, with questions so complicated that expensive tutoring is required to prepare test-takers.

In 2011, the most recent study of admission test success by the State Commission for Admission of Students showed that fewer than 29 percent of secondary school graduates passed. In the wake of these findings, the commission took the unprecedented step of lowering the points needed to pass the test by 25 percent.

In spite of the stark numbers, Education Minister Mardanov said teachers are adequately compensated, and he criticized those who spend their off-hours tutoring instead of boning up on the curriculum.

"When teachers' salary is discussed, critics refer to the fact that some teachers earn 1,500 to 2,000 manats from tutoring. How does it happen while a teacher cannot teach more than 24 hours a week? Then such teachers should not complain of low salaries," he told journalists in mid-November.

Until the "major obstacle," as the minister put it, of a shadow education system is addressed, parents appear willing to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with public schools with their cash, paid to teachers who regularly demonstrate their capacity to educate for the right price.

*Home page photo and story by **Arifa Kazimova**, a correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Baku*

To the Mattresses

The Catholic Church has launched one of the fiercest anti-government campaigns in Croatia's history over a new sex education initiative.

by Kruno Kartus
15 February 2013

ZAGREB | In January, Croatian schools began teaching issues of sexuality and gender under a new health education program, but a bitter fight between the Catholic Church and the government over the initiative rages on.

On 6 February, the sides faced off at a session of parliament's human rights committee proposed by the Croatian Bishops' Conference. Defending the government program, gynecologist Dubravko Lepusic said youth need sexual education early "to protect themselves" because they become sexually active as teenagers. Marijana Petir, a conservative lawmaker with close ties to the church, countered that the initiative, which also touches on homosexuality, undermines family values and vowed to abolish it.

Critics of the new sex education program say it undermines families, but supporters say schoolchildren need the information. Photo by Kruno Kartus.

The exchange follows months of acrimony between, on the one side, the Catholic Church, allied with conservative lawmakers and especially the opposition Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and, on the other, the Social Democratic coalition of Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic in arguably the fiercest anti-government religious campaign in Croatia's history. It is a fight that has seen clergy and theologians decry "lesbians and fags" and call for Milanovic's ouster despite sizeable public support for the education initiative.

THE BATTLE BEGINS

Presented publicly in December before the January launch, the so-called Health Education Curriculum is a pet project of Zeljko Jovanovic, minister of Science, Education and Sport, who wants to encourage critical thinking and independent decision-making. Split into four sections, the program covers everything from healthy lifestyle choices to addiction over 12 hours of workshops and discussions per year in Croatia's 1,300 primary and secondary schools. Two hours go to sexual education, "Section Four."

Schools have long addressed similar topics in informal, optional question-and-answer-style sessions between students and teachers, but the new program is structured and obligatory. Ljubica Ljubojevic, a secondary school principal in Osijek, eastern Croatia, said students enjoy the health lessons, which incorporate discussion topics and reading lists developed by the State Education and Teacher Training Agency. For sexual education, she said, gynecologists and other health-care experts are often brought in.

These lessons begin in the third grade, focusing on puberty, gender roles, and societal expectations regarding family and sexual orientation. At 15, students discuss issues like contraception and sex in the media, while lifestyle choices, health care, stereotypes and discrimination, common sexual problems, and parenting and the family follow two years later. The lessons teach gender and sexual equality.

"Children become interested in sexuality early," said Lara Cakic, a scholar and lecturer in the University of Osijek's teacher education department. "They start to talk about it at 7, and interest increases through the age of 13. So it is

necessary to tell children what is happening" to them and their peers, mentally and physically.

Some 42 percent of Croatians support the health education program, according to an HRT public television survey, with 22 percent opposed. And 56 percent say they don't want the church meddling in education.

Josip Bozanic

Nevertheless, religious leaders have railed against the health program, the sexual education module in particular, from the start. In early December, Josip Bozanic, the archbishop of Zagreb, said it would undermine the beliefs of religious parents and the Catholic Church in Croatia.

"This kind of health education is dangerous," he said, adding that teaching gender and sexual equality, for instance, destroys the essence of what it is to be human.

Within days, an opposition leaflet began appearing in churches, public hearings, and religious gatherings – Section Four would promote pornography and the "disease" of homosexuality while undermining traditional values.

"Your child will learn that the sexual act is completely normal for a 15 year old," the leaflet warned parents, "and about a type of sexual relationship that in itself has no meaning and no connection to universal human values such as love and faithfulness."

Firing back, Minister Jovanovic said, "The leaflet is full of falsehoods, misinformation, and malicious data that completely distort the truth about health education." The program aims to help youngsters live healthy, longer lives, he added.

The church and its allies didn't back down. At a January religious meeting in Zagreb, Deputy Bishop Valentin Pozaic said the "baleful" program was a tool of indoctrination. He called for Milanovic's ouster, comparing his government to the Nazis and Communists. In a newspaper interview, a prominent theologian said "lesbians and fags will destroy Croatia." And the HDZ invited Judith Reisman, a controversial U.S. writer who advocates abstinence-only sex education, to address parliament late last month.

"If you start with this program, you will see a large increase in sexually transmitted diseases and abortions among children, because children mimic what they see," she told HDZ and several other conservative legislators, all other parties having boycotted the presentation.

A representative of the Catholic Church did not respond to a request for comment by press time.

A DETERMINED OPPOSITION

The scholar Cakic said she is shocked by the church's campaign.

"Education should be based on scientific facts, not traditional and religious misconceptions and myths," she said. "Unfortunately, Croatia is witnessing a debate in which the Catholic Church and its associates are trying to take advantage of its social and political influence to impose just such unscientific opinions. If the education system relents, it would be to the detriment of children and parents, and finally the family."

Marina Trbus, program coordinator of the Step-by-Step parents association, also said the initiative is important because sexual education is weak in socially conservative Croatia, especially regarding abuse. Studies show that nearly 20 percent of children are victimized but that most cases go unreported, she said.

"Sexual abuse, child pregnancy, and other problems show that our society mishandles the sexual development of children," she said. "This program is just a beginning, but it is an important step forward."

In the past, Step-by-Step has organized related workshops for young people. Attendees said they wanted to learn more, according to Trbus.

"In this whole back and forth on the health education program, nobody asked children what they think, what their problems and difficulties are during childhood," she said.

Antonella Nizetic-Capkovic of the State Education and Teacher Training Agency said it's too early to talk about impact but that so far the health education program is moving along "without a hitch" despite the church's opposition. For his part, Prime Minister Milanovic wants officials to stay out of the public row.

"I appeal to you ministers not to comment on the health education program anymore," he said at a January government meeting. "We are doing our job and believe it is the right thing."

But Zelimir Puljic, president of the Croatian Bishops' Conference, says the church will fight on. "[We] are not against the health education program, but cannot and will not give up on the truth about … sexuality, marriage, and the family, which is being presented in a distorted and incomplete way by Section Four," he said in a 2 February interview with Croatian media.

And the church's allies the HDZ appear equally committed to abolishing what they see as a threat to the youth of Croatia.

"It is not just an attack on the church," HDZ President Tomislav Karamarko said at a 9 February party conference, "but also an attack on our children."

Kruno Kartus *is a reporter at Tportal, a Croatian online daily.*

Ethnic Studies

The education system in the Presevo Valley reflects the complex ethno-politics of southern Serbia, and the wider Balkans.

by Uffe Andersen
27 February 2013

BUJANOVAC, Serbia | Shpresa thought "very, very hard" about emigrating to the West, even of claiming asylum in Switzerland or Germany, where some of her family and friends live.

Had she gone, she'd have joined thousands of others from southern Serbia, mostly ethnic Albanians and Roma, who've emigrated to Western Europe, the numbers making some EU countries ponder re-introducing visas for Serbian citizens.

But that was before Shpresa, an ethnic Albanian, started college. "Now, there's no point in it," she said, smiling, in a corridor at the local Faculty of Economics, where she was among the first 69 students to enroll in October 2011.

The faculty looks nothing special on the outside – in fact, it's still housed in the local cultural center. But special it is, because this is the first and so far only institution in Serbia, since the secession of Kosovo, where university level education is provided in Albanian. The attendance at the opening ceremony of the U.S. and British ambassadors to Belgrade and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's envoy to Serbia lent an importance to the event that reached far beyond sleepy Bujanovac.

Yet, the tale of this college and of Albanian-language education in the Presevo Valley is less glossy than the diplomats' and Shpresa's enthusiasm suggests.

One telling fact is that "Shpresa" isn't the young woman's real name. She agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity, a widespread attitude in

the far south of Serbia, where ethnic Albanians are sizeable minorities in the towns of Bujanovac and Medvedja and the large majority in Presevo – all in all some 50,000 to 60,000 people. Residents of all nationalities often prefer anonymity to avoid getting mixed up in politics – and in this region, everything is politics, including education. Politicians in Kosovo and Albania regularly comment on events here, drawing the Presevo Valley into the ongoing political game over Kosovo and the whole balance of power in the Balkans.

Caught up in this whirlpool are the lives of individuals trying to make a living in one of the most deprived parts of Serbia. Shpresa's faculty is one sign that things may be changing, but there are worrying reminders as well of the climate of violence that threatened to spread into the valley in the aftermath of the Serbia-Kosovo conflict. In January, police in Presevo on orders from Belgrade removed a monument to the Albanians who waged a low-level secession struggle in 2000 and 2001. With tempers only just beginning to cool, the president of the Coordination Body for Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja stepped up. Formed in 2001 when NATO brokered a peace deal to stop the guerilla fighters' efforts to make the area a part of Kosovo, the body's members are the local mayors with a state official, Zoran Stankovic, as president. It mediates between the local community and the Belgrade government, delegating funding for projects that it itself suggests and oversees.

After the monument incident, Stankovic stressed the role of education in helping Albanians integrate into the wider local community; the OSCE showed its support by sending its high commissioner on national minorities, Knut Vollebaek, to Bujanovac. In late January he and Stankovic inspected the site where Shpresa and her colleagues will start the next academic year in a new faculty building paid for by EU funds.

THE VOJVODINA MODEL

Branko Balj teaches both in Bujanovac and at the faculty's main location in Subotica, in the Vojvodina province at the other end of the country. In a break between classes, he explained that the OSCE and the Serbian Education Ministry chose the Subotica faculty to bud off the southern branch because of the multinational and multifaith character of both regions.

The diversity of the Vojvodina region, home to sizeable Hungarian, Romanian, and other minorities, gives the Subotica faculty useful know-how and experience which can be tapped to "cultivate a spirit of tolerance" in Bujanovac, Balj said.

Balj teaches business ethics, among other subjects, but he doesn't speak Albanian. Many ethnic Albanian students, on the other hand, aren't too good at Serbian. He explained the cumbersome process devised to accommodate both Albanian speakers and Serbian law.

"Speaking Serbian, I teach both ethnic Serbian and Albanian students from 9 to 12, and then at 12:15, Ermal arrives," Balj explained, pointing to staff member Ermal Rexhepi.

"I then make a briefer summary of the material which Ermal translates into Albanian, and again everyone is present, both Serbs and Albanians."

Other classes are held in Serbian for Serbs and Roma, while Albanians are taught in their mother tongue by staff of the Albanian-language Tetovo State University in Macedonia. Roughly 40 percent of the student body is non-Albanian.

"The law allows only 30 percent of the teaching to be in the minority language, with 70 percent in Serbian," Rexhepi explained, "which means that students must know Serbian." All ethnic Albanian students have been through a seven-month course in Serbian offered free of charge by the Coordination Body, he said – though outsiders often wonder why it's necessary to teach people the country's official language.

Albanian youngsters begin learning Serbian from the first grade, but in most cases the teacher speaks no Albanian, says Jasmina Lazovic of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, a Belgrade-based group that promotes inter-communal projects in southern Serbia.

"These children have no idea what's going on," she said.

Telling for the result is that a group of ethnic Albanian Bujanovac high school students when asked where their knowledge of Serbian comes from, didn't even mention school.

One student, Rexhep Hasani, said he picked up the language through living in a mixed part of town, while Besiana Fejzullahu said it was harder for her because no Serbs live in her village.

"But I watch a lot of Serbian television," she said.

That young Albanians learn Serbia's official language more or less at random – so that many happen not to learn it – is an embarrassment to the country's education system, Lazovic said.

She applauds the opening of the Economics Faculty, but insists the Coordination Body needs to prioritize the quality of teaching in Serbian primary and high schools.

Milica Rodic, an adviser to Stankovic, said the body is now giving scholarships to students from the area, and that two Albanian women students are now studying Serbian language and literature at the University of Novi Sad.

She expects the pair to begin teaching Serbian back home after graduation. Two Serbian-speaking Albanian teachers would mark a start, of course, but communication between Serbs and Albanians is just one part of the story about education in the valley. Another chapter concerns education in Albanians' mother tongue – and that tale is hardly brighter.

LEARNING BY THE BOOK

Until five years ago, there was no shortage of Albanian-language textbooks, since Kosovo, with its large Albanian majority, is just down the road. After Pristina proclaimed independence in 2008, Serbia stopped bringing in textbooks and banned the use of the old ones. The old books are still in circulation, although many teachers are said to avoid them for fear of punishment. In 2010, the authorities began bringing in schoolbooks from Albania.

Just 19 Albanian language textbooks have been approved for the use of primary schools (grades one through eight), although schools need around 100 books, according to local educator and coordinator of the Albanian-language textbook project, Zejni Fejzullahu.

Zejni Fejzullahu

Fejzullahu (no relation to Besiana) teaches high school in Bujanovac and also serves as chairman of the education board under the National Minority Council of Albanians. Recognized national minorities in Serbia are entitled to establish such a council to deal with cultural issues, media, and the preservation of "national identity."

Education is another key task, with the council recommending textbooks for approval by the Education Ministry. Books for the use of Albanian schools are in some cases simply translated from Serbian, some are newly written by local authors,

and others are imported from Albania – although these still need to be adapted, as the curricula differ, Fejzullahu explained.

"We hope to have 20 more textbooks ready for next year, but the ministry is taking an unreasonably long time to examine them," he said.

But according to Rodic, 77 Albanian-language textbooks and workbooks are already available for the use of primary schools, and others are being prepared.

While the parties may disagree on the availability of Albanian-language books in primary schools, all agree that they have yet to reach the local high schools.

"We write what our teachers tell us in our notebooks," said Jehona Alyi, a student at the Albanian-language high school in Bujanovac. "When you need to study later, it's a bit difficult as you haven't got anywhere to look things up, and you can't keep everything in your head."

Lazovic, the youth activist, insisted that the lack of textbooks represents what she calls "systematic discrimination" against the Albanian minority.

"It's as though no [officials] understand that the state is obliged to provide teaching for children of national minorities in their mother tongue," she said, stressing the requirement as part of both Serbian law and relevant European conventions to which Serbia is a signatory.

But although the state bears ultimate responsibility for communal relations, Lazovic noted that the National Minority Council "faces great challenges," and that some of those challenges are intra-Albanian.

When the council was formed in special elections in 2010, less than a third of voters turned out. The reason was that the strongest forces are "rightist," especially in Presevo, Lazovic argued, "and their eyes are turned to Tirana and Pristina."

The only significant political force locally to back the formation of the National Council was the Party of Democratic Action, led by the only Albanian deputy in the Serbian parliament, Riza Halimi.

Most local politicians, however, don't support the National Council, and in general don't accept cooperation with Belgrade, Lazovic said. This has created "an atmosphere of ambivalence" because Albanian culture, education, "and everything that characterizes an ethnic community" is in the hands of the council, "and yet, the council has faced strong obstruction at the local level."

This internal split was on display at the start of this school year, Lazovic said, when Halimi called for talks with the Education Ministry and other state institutions on the textbook issue to be speeded up, only for Presevo Mayor Ragmi Mustafa – a proponent of annexing the area to Kosovo and one of the National Council's main opponents in 2010 – to retort, "Our pupils manage without books, and there's no need to talk with Belgrade about new ones."

Fejzullahu acknowledges that intra-Albanian disagreements prevent the council from working optimally, and some potential textbook authors simply refuse to cooperate with the council. In an effort to cool the political heat, Fejzullahu added, he has left the Party of Democratic Action.

THE KOSOVO CARD

But Lazovic said that politicization of daily life in the valley "will continue as long as the Kosovo question isn't definitively solved."

Most politicians in Belgrade look on the valley as an arena in which to show their patriotism and firmness toward the Albanians, Lazovic said. But their posturing comes at a price, allowing Mustafa and others to strike a nationalist attitude.

If that spiral isn't broken, Lazovic warned, Albanians "will stop voting for Riza Halimi, who all the time has wanted to work with Belgrade" – including through the National Council and its

textbooks. But she does see some light in the tunnel.

In Lazovic's eyes, the creation of the National Council was a step forward – both for the position of Albanian culture in Serbia, and for ethnic relations. And the Economics Faculty is welcomed by not the least young Albanians, many of whom cannot afford to leave home for university, whether elsewhere in Serbia or, more often, in Kosovo or Macedonia, high-school student Besiana Fejzullahu said.

The sheer poverty of the area is one reason that it's important to have a faculty locally. Although Belgrade recently agreed to recognize degrees from Pristina University, that process is still expensive and time consuming.

Fejzullahu and her friends from school welcome the arrival of the faculty. However, neither she nor Jehona Alyi, Rexhep Hasani, or another friend, Sarah Shaqiri, said they intend to study there.

Their preferred fields are not on offer in Bujanovac – which shows the limits of the school being restricted to offering business courses, Zejni Fejzullahu said. He notes that while 60 ethnic Albanians began studying at the faculty last year, around 800 graduate from area high schools every year.

On the other hand, not many communities of 60,000 have any kind of higher education facility, and the local economy will struggle to absorb the faculty's graduates, not least because the area is among the most economically backward in Serbia with around half the work force unemployed.

A revealing adage often heard, not least because it rhymes in Serbian, goes, "the farther south, the sadder it gets." In January, Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic said he would soon call mayors from the wider southern region together with the aim of forming a body to nurture the economic development of what he called this "strategically important region."

Shpresa and her fellow students will lend support to that process, Rodic believes. She predicted that in a few years, this cohort of young people will become "initiators of development and progress in business and all other areas."

When Albanian pupils rallied in Presevo 18 months ago under the slogan "We want textbooks in our mother tongue!" local politicians tried to use the event to send political messages, Lazovic said, concluding that textbooks and pupils "are merely a means to score political points."

Education and most other aspects of life may be subject to politicking here, but there is general agreement that ethnic tensions in ordinary life are largely absent. "Only people in *positions* have problems," Alyi said.

Uffe Andersen *is a freelance journalist in Serbia.*

In Macedonia, Evidence of Efforts to Keep Roma in School

Progress is slow but steady as the government puts an overdue emphasis on Roma advancement.

by Daniel Petrovski
4 March 2013

SKOPJE | Ramush Muarem, a prominent Romani journalist in Macedonia, remembers the resistance civil society activists encountered from Roma when, in the mid-1990s, they began trying to raise awareness of the importance of integrating Macedonia's most marginalized community into schools.

Certainly, poverty kept many Romani children from getting an education. Families often relied on their children going to work to make ends meet. But economics weren't the only issue. Many Romani parents worked at Skopje's outdoor markets and earned more than enough to send their kids into classrooms, and still would not. "You could often hear a Rom say, 'My dad didn't go to school, so why would I need an education?' " Muarem recalled.

Today, though, a typical family conversation in his Shuto Orizari neighborhood is likely to be all about schools and scholarships.

More and more Roma in Shuto Orizari – "Shutka" for short, thought to be the biggest majority-Roma settlement in the world – see education as the key to a better future for their sons and, increasingly, their daughters. Two decades ago, a typical girl from Shutka would have been expected to stay at home and marry by age 16. Today, many Romani girls attend secondary schools, and they make up nearly half of all Roma in Macedonian schools and universities.

Macedonian community development organizations help many Romani youngsters like this girl attend preschool. Photo courtesy of the Sumnal Association, www.sumnal.org.

In a community still rent by discrimination, significantly poorer and shorter-lived than any other Macedonian ethnic group, the steadily growing awareness of the importance of education is a success story. Initially this was thanks to civil activists, but since the middle of the last decade the state has taken the issue on board in earnest, implementing overdue policies – and stumping up funds – to provide educational opportunities for Roma and other marginalized groups.

Philanthropist George Soros' Open Society Foundations was at the forefront of those efforts, launching a program in 1996 to raise Romani enrollment, retention, and graduation rates at all education levels. [Editor's note: TOL is the recipient of an Open Society Institute grant to support education reporting.] Its activities ranged from information campaigns and supplying new equipment to underfunded schools to providing scholarships for Romani students.

At the time, the government did not see serving marginalized groups as a priority, said Spomenka Lazarevska, director of education programs for the Open Society Foundation Macedonia. "Until 2005, not a single state institution offered help for the serious development of education for the Roma, apart from declaring their support," she said.

2005 was the year the governments of Macedonia and seven other Balkan and Central European states declared the opening of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, committing to working toward a set of ambitious objectives aimed at eliminating

discrimination and closing social and economic gaps. The initiative, since expanded to 12 countries, was the brainchild of international funders, chiefly the Open Society network and the World Bank. Education was set as one of four overarching priorities, along with health, housing, and employment. National action plans followed, yet the Macedonian government only started putting money where its mouth was in 2008, and even then at levels experts argue are far from sufficient.

PRESCHOOL

Poverty plays the most direct role in precluding many Romani kids from the benefits of an educational head start. To enroll a child in an accredited preschool that provides early education, play facilities, and meals, parents must pay the equivalent of about $30 per month. This is a substantial cost for many Romani families, four-fifths of which receive state support for the poor averaging about $40 per month.

According to the National Statistics Office, just 501 of the 25,056 Macedonian children aged 6 and under attending preschool in the 2010-2011 school year were Roma – about 2 percent of enrollment. Based on the most recent census in 2002, the country's 54,000 Roma represent about 2.7 percent of the overall population, but their seemingly moderate representation in preschools is probably much greater, as the census almost certainly undercounts minorities. (More realistic estimates put the Roma population as high as 135,000, or 6.8 percent of the population.)

With support from a Roma Decade program called the Roma Education Fund (REF), the national government and 18 municipal authorities have been implementing a project aimed at increasing preschool numbers among Romani children. As of October, the project was helping 400 children attend preschool, according to officials from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy.

Backed by the EU and REF, a pilot project called A Good Start is helping more kids go to nursery school and kindergarten. It provides daylong preschool for 57 children in Shuto Orizari.

Latifa Shikovska, executive director of the project's Macedonian partner organization, Umbrella, said two of its main goals are to help children acquire basic school habits and to overcome the language barrier, a precondition for future success in school. The Macedonian educational system does not yet provide tuition in Romani, which for many Roma is their first language.

In Topaana, Skopje's second-biggest Romani neighborhood, the education and community development organization Sumnal helps 94 children attend preschool and runs workshops designed to help mothers prepare their kids for school.

"When we started out, we worked directly with people every day. We went from house to house. We had to do it that way in order to gain trust among the local residents, and then to raise parents' awareness of the importance of education," acting director Stance Dimkovska said. Sumnal has since broadened its scope to run additional services for Romani children and their families in the neighborhood of 5,000 residents.

Shikovska and other activists argue that preschool education should be made obligatory and free, as is the case with primary and secondary schooling. "If preschool education were a legal requirement, the inclusion of children in kindergartens would be 100 percent," she said.

PRIMARY EDUCATION

Roma are better represented in primary school. During the 2011-2012 school year, 9,924 Romani children attended primary school, according to the Education Ministry. Still, they lag far behind other groups.

While primary education is mandatory, UNICEF estimated in 2011 that only 63 percent of Romani 7-year-olds were enrolled in school, compared to 86 percent in the poorest households overall. The rate of irregular attendance is also high, partly

because of children accompanying their families abroad. Visa liberalization, which enables Macedonian citizens to travel freely to most of the European Union, has seen thousands of Romani families opting to leave for long periods, visiting family and friends, doing seasonal labor, or even claiming asylum in prosperous Western countries.

Unlike preschool education, primary schooling has so far seen relatively little intervention by civil society groups, possibly because primary education is considered to be chiefly the state's responsibility. Senad Mustafov, the Macedonia country facilitator for the Roma Education Fund, said REF has done only a few small-scale projects in primary schools.

"We are a foundation that finances projects rather than implementing them. We do not receive proposals from NGOs to fund projects in the field of primary education," he said.

Proposals do not abound, but problems do. In Shuto Orizari – where 13,342 of the 22,017 inhabitants are Roma, according to the 2002 census – there are two primary schools, Braka Ramiz Hamid and 26 July. At Braka Ramiz Hamid, classes are held in three shifts to accommodate 2,300 pupils – almost three times the intended capacity – and two teaching shifts are needed at 26 July School.

Recent negative publicity about the overcrowding in Shutka's schools seems to have prompted the authorities to take steps. According to Redzep Ali Chupi, a Ministry of Education official responsible for minority-language education support, Braka Ramiz Hamid School will soon have 20 new classrooms and four new offices.

"Local authorities submitted planning documentation in the fastest possible manner and new classrooms are expected to be functional in 2013, so the problems with the classroom space in the school will be solved once and for all," said Chupi, who also sits on the Open Society Foundation Macedonia's executive board.

University students take part in an event sponsored by the Open Society Foundation's Romaversitas program. Photo courtesy of Romaversitas.

The prospect delights Shutka parents like Senat Zekir. His daughter, Eleonara, is a fifth grader Braka Ramiz Hamid and one of the best pupils in her class, regularly getting outstanding grades.

"Even though she is still a small child, she is interested in school. She sometimes even cries if she gets a lower mark ... but then she immediately starts to study in order to improve," Zekir said. When the expansion is finished, he added, "the kids will have proper conditions for learning."

SECONDARY EDUCATION

High schools have seen the most rapid advances among Romani students, in absolute numbers. Less than two decades ago, only 300 or so Roma attended secondary schools, but that figure is now over 1,700.

The state has established several inducements to stay in school, some available to all students (like free public transport), others targeted at minorities.

But the measure usually cited as the most effective in helping Roma progress from primary to secondary school is the scholarship and mentoring program developed initially by the Open Society Foundation and operated since 2009 by the Education Ministry, with support from the Roma Education Fund. For the current two-year phase ending in June, the fund allotted 335,000 euros ($447,000) to help 800 students per year. Scholarship winners receive a monthly stipend of

1,500 to 2,500 dinars ($32-$53), which they are free to use for educational or living expenses.

Chupi said the numbers speak for the project's success. In its first year, only 433 of a planned 700 grants were awarded because not enough applicants met the minimum requirement of an average grade of 3 on the 1-to-5 system. "But last year, the average mark level increased. Only 120 of the successful applicants had an average of 3, while the rest had a higher average," he said. "That means that the scholarship is a motivator for learning more and is thus improving the quality of outcomes."

Because those Roma who do attend high school typically go to vocational training schools, another Education Ministry initiative launched in 2009 is trying to steer Romani youngsters into more challenging institutions by permitting them to enroll with a grade average less than that required for other applicants.

The measure "allows Romani children to get into more attractive schools across the country," Chupi said. "More Roma are now enrolling in schools where the emphasis is on business and legal education – also secondary medicine schools, grammar schools, art schools, etc."

But enrollment itself is not the only hurdle. Last fall a business- and law-oriented high school in Skopje, Arseni Jovkov, formed two all-Roma classes, raising concerns among activists about cracks in the official policy of integration.

School officials said the separation policy was implemented for the security of the Roma students, most of whom live in nearby Shuto Orizari. "We believe that these pupils should go home together after classes," said Zoran Zlatkovski, the deputy principal at Arseni Jovkov, which is also attended by students of Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Serbian background.

When some Romani students expressed dissatisfaction with the arrangement, the school called a meeting with parents, whose "attitudes were different," Zlatkovski said. "Most wanted these classes to remain as they are now. Some did want to break up the classes and have the Roma kids study with pupils of other ethnic backgrounds. But the main argument was the protection of the children on their way home. The final decision was made based on the views of the majority of parents who did not want to break up the classes."

The Romani students themselves are divided on the issue. One, Leonard Abaz, said the school's Roma tend to isolate themselves. "During the main break we socialize only within each other. Whenever we need something we turn only to each other. Basically, we don't mingle with the others."

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

The number of Romani university students, while still proportionally lower than in the population at large, has climbed steadily, from 17 in 1994 to 35 in 1998, 126 in 2002, and 350 now. The completion rate is less encouraging. According to data from the National Statistics Office, just 42 Roma graduated between 2001 and 2008. More recently, the rate has been on an upward trend, with 28 Roma, including 17 women, graduating in 2009 and 22, including 11 women, in 2011. The total number of Macedonian Roma with university degrees is thought to be only about 100.

A major factor in the rising enrollment is a quota system, whereby university applicants who do not meet the admission criteria or are unable to pay a higher fee as private students can qualify for a government-funded place. The student quota is directly proportional to the Roma share of the national population, about 2.7 percent.

Universities are also beginning to introduce their own affirmative action measures. At Goce Delchev University in Stip, students of Romani background are exempt from most fees in the first and second year of study.

Tuition represents only part of the cost of study. Considering their often poor backgrounds, many Roma would be unable to attend university without extra help covering the overall costs of higher education, provided initially by the Open Society Foundation and now by the Roma Education

Fund. Open Society's Lazarevska says that without direct aid to Romani secondary school and university students, there would have been very little progress in raising enrollment. Scholarships and mentoring help have increased both the quantity and quality of Romani students, she says.

Senad Mamet is a final-year student in the food and agriculture faculty at Skopje's Sts. Cyril and Methodius University and an activist with Romani organizations. He won a scholarship through Open Society's Romaversitas program, adapted from a similar venture in Hungary, that has helped at least 80 Macedonian Roma graduate from university since 2001.

"It was an additional incentive to continue with my studies," Mamet said. "The scholarship is really important for us students, considering the financial situation of the Roma."

Whether Romani, or other, graduates will find a job in their field of study is another matter in a country where the unemployment rate tops 30 percent, among the highest in Europe. Various quota schemes have helped place a significant number of Roma in public sector and government jobs, though not necessarily in their area of expertise. There are, for example, very few practicing Romani doctors. As of the 2011-2012 academic year some 15 Roma had graduated from Macedonian medical schools but only two were working in the profession, according to the Roma Education Fund.

"If you want to work in your field, your parents have to have worked in that field, or they must have a close relationship with a politician," said Shaip Iseni, who graduated with a dentistry degree and now works for Sumnal.

Still, there has been significant progress for Roma who, a generation ago, had little better to look forward to in the way of employment than work as a bazaar trader. Expanded early education, scholarships, and affirmative action policies, often focused on professional education, are opening doors that were largely closed as recently as a few years ago. Underprivileged parents are increasingly persuaded to focus on education, via both soft methods such as one-to-one outreach by civil society groups and concrete inducements like direct government support to families, conditional on their kids staying in school.

Senat Zekir, the father of a high-achieving Shuto Orizari fifth-grader, said families like his are thankful for such policies. "Instead of having to find additional money from our domestic budget for my child," he said, "now I know there is a scholarship that can help me and relieve the burden of my child's education."

Daniel Petrovski *is a freelance journalist in Skopje.*
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Out in the Street

After getting thousands of disadvantaged kids out of Soviet-era institutions, Georgia faces an increasingly visible tribe of children living largely on the street.

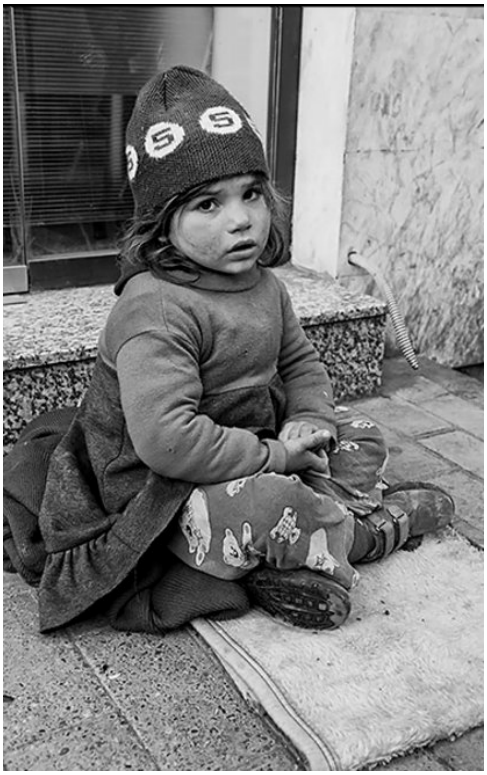
by Onnik Krikorian
6 March 2013

TBILISI | In 2004, some 5,200 Georgian children were living in Soviet-era institutions for underprivileged and disabled minors. Today, there are just 100, seemingly a sign that Georgia's ambitious Child Action Plan – which aimed to reintegrate socially vulnerable kids into their biological families or, failing that, get them into foster care or alternative types of support – has worked. By contrast, neighboring Armenia, with a somewhat smaller population, still houses 4,900 kids, most of whom have families, at its aging children's homes.

But there is a flip side to Georgia's seeming success: unlike in Armenia, street children – minors who spend most of their time roaming the cities, in many cases sleeping rough – have become increasingly visible in the capital of Tbilisi and other urban centers like Kutaisi and Batumi.

"The process of de-institutionalization started in 2000 and out of 42 institutions, only five are left today," said Andro Dadiani, Georgia director for international children's rights group EveryChild. "De-institutionalization has obviously contributed to the problem [of street children], and especially ill-prepared reintegration.

"We have some anecdotal examples of cases when the same children taken out of institutions were later seen begging in the streets, and the main reason was that some social workers were not doing their job well, especially in terms of monitoring," Dadiani added. "As a result, the issue of street children has been totally neglected over the past few years."



According to UNICEF, there were approximately 1,500 children living or working on the streets of Georgia's biggest cities in 2008. Precise figures are hard to come by because many of these children lack proper documentation, such as birth certificates or passports, which also means they cannot attend school. In recent years their numbers have probably increased, swelled by young children believed to be Roma, Dom, or Kurds from Azerbaijan. Aid groups such as World Vision and the local Child and Environment attribute the influx to tight restrictions on begging in Azerbaijan.

Many Georgians dismiss the problem as only afflicting minority groups. International organizations are trying to dispel that notion, but the issue remains largely ignored here. That could change with a new two-year, 850,000 euro ($1.1 million) effort funded by the European Union and UNICEF, called Reaching Vulnerable Children in Georgia. Rolling out in Tbilisi and set to expand next year to Batumi or Kutaisi, the project will use mobile teams of social workers, psychologists, and educators and new transitional and day-care centers to identify some 700 street kids and get

them into existing child-protection and social-service systems.

"Children who are on the streets cannot access education [or] proper health care, are often not registered, and can become subject to various forms of violence," said Sascha Graumann, UNICEF's representative in Georgia, at the launch of the program on 27 February. "This means that they have fewer chances to become active and well-educated citizens that can make a contribution to the development of the country. Addressing this issue requires interventions to restore their human rights."

Some journalists at the launch were skeptical as to what will happen after the project ends, but Maya Kurtsikidze, UNICEF Georgia's spokeswoman, told TOL that the creation of a "self-sustainable state mechanism" is envisaged, with the Finance Ministry among potential partners who will "ensure financial sustainability" for the effort.

Onnik Krikorian *is a journalist and photographer in the South Caucasus and former Caucasus editor for Global Voices Online.*

Fits and Starts

A high-profile court case, angry parents at the schoolroom door, and quiet, persistent efforts tell the story of Roma integration in Croatia's schools.

by Barbara Matejcic
27 March 2013

MEDJIMURJE COUNTY, Croatia | Three years after a landmark court ruling jump-started school integration in Croatia, one of the successful plaintiffs, now a young man, says Roma are doing better in school. But his struggle to express himself in the Croatian language speaks volumes of the poor education available to many Roma in the European Union's soon-to-be newest member.

Croatia began trying to integrate schools well before the case of Orsus and Others v. Croatia went before the European Court of Human Rights in 2003. The slow progress of those efforts – and the obstacles faced by the small Romani minority to find acceptance here – were underlined last fall when Croats shouting racist slogans tried to stop Romani youngsters from entering a Medjimurje County preschool.

A primary school class at Drzimurec-Strelec School.

Dejan Orsus, one of 14 plaintiffs in the case that bears his name, enrolled in the first grade in Macinec, a village in Medjimurje County in northern Croatia, in 1999. In this part of Croatia, most Roma live in separate settlements on the outskirts of predominantly Croat villages, and they speak Romani at home. Dejan spoke no Croatian

when he started school. He was put in a class with only Romani pupils and remained in all-Roma classes until he left school at the statutory age of 15, in 2006, after completing the third grade.

Ten years ago, while Dejan was still in school, his case was submitted to the human rights tribunal in Strasbourg after the plaintiffs had lost their suit at all levels of the Croatian judicial system. On 16 March 2010, the court ruled that the practice of placing Roma in separate classes amounted to discrimination based on ethnicity.

The defendants – four primary schools, the Education Ministry, and Medjimurje County – had argued that separation of Romani pupils was justified because of their poor knowledge of Croatian, as established by appraisals prior to enrollment. But some of the plaintiffs complained that they had spent their entire school lives in separate classes and that their linguistic competence wasn't regularly tested to determine if they could be placed in regular classes.

When I meet Orsus in Parag, the biggest Romani settlement in Croatia, he is holding a baby. He is now 21 and says he is attending the sixth grade at a community school – institutions where many adults, mostly Roma, receive 210 euros ($270) a month from the government to continue their primary education, provided they regularly show up for class. I ask him if anything has improved in schools in the three years since the court ruling. He looks at me in a way that makes me unsure whether he understands the question, so I repeat it. Dejan nods and says, "Better, it's better."

Only rough estimates can be made of the graduation rates of Romani pupils from primary and secondary school, owing to uncertainty over the true number of Roma in Croatia and the fact that the Education Ministry began tracking Roma school performance only in 2005. In Medjimurje County, home to more Roma than any other region in Croatia, it appears that few Roma make it to high school or beyond. Of 1,589 Romani pupils attending the county's primary schools, which run from first to eighth grades, only 92 are enrolled in the eighth grade. Just 123 Roma are attending high school, according to the county's department for education, culture, and sports. About 20 Roma graduate from high school annually.

Dr. Ivan Novak Primary School in Macinec, which was one of the defendants in the segregation suit, is attended by 465 children, 110 of whom are ethnic Croat. Roma children are concentrated in the lower grades: they make up seven-eighths of first-graders, while Croats outnumber Roma by five to one in the eighth grade.

Those figures show not only that most Roma fail to complete primary school, but also that the ratio of Roma to Croats in local schools is changing. Principal Bozena Dogsa, a 20-year veteran of the school, says only one-third of the pupils were Roma when she began working there, compared with more than three-fourths now.

While the overall birth rate in Croatia is declining, the rate among Roma has been on the increase for the last 20-odd years, which many think is a consequence of government policy in the 1990s to arrest the population decline by social benefits to parents.

Against the 2011 census figure of 16,975 Roma – 0.4 percent of the population – more realistic assessments estimate the Roma population at 30,000, with perhaps 6,000 living in Medjimurje County. All-Roma classes still operate in Macinec and other county schools in areas with many Roma. Some children still spend the entire course of their education without sharing a classroom with a Croat, except for the teacher. This is not necessarily a sign of deliberate segregation, some local educators insist.

"We don't have any segregated classes. How can the Roma children be segregated in a school where they are the majority? We can't form classes to avoid creating Roma-only ones. Who will we integrate them with when there are no Croat children?" Dogsa asks. She points out that teachers spend days prior to the opening of school every fall discussing the composition of that year's classes, keeping in mind the children's academic level, friendships, the ratio of girls to boys, and other factors.

"We have 25 Roma children in two seventh-grade classes and only four Croats. It wouldn't be acceptable for us as educators to separate those four students into different classes since they are friends and wanted to stay together. I don't think we should stick to the formalities just to show the world we are doing a good job," she said.

Off the record, teachers in Medjimurje admit that Croat children are typically assigned to classes with the more capable and, as they often say, "more civilized" Romani pupils to make sure they learn at a similar pace. A teacher from the primary school in Kursanec, a predominantly Roma school that was also one of the defendants in the Orsus case, said children in all-Roma classes don't complain about being segregated because the standards are lower in such classes. Pupils can get by with less effort, at the cost of acquiring less knowledge. Even after several years in school some have very poor reading and writing skills, said the teacher, who spoke on condition that his name not be used. He added that it would be more efficient for them to first learn to read and write the Romani language, as this would help them grasp the concept of language-learning more easily.

Three years ago, Croats boycotted the school for a week after mixed classes were introduced, the teacher said. There have been other scattered protests against integrated schools over the past decade. At the outset of the 2012-2013 school year, residents of the nearby village of Gornji Hrascan refused to let a group of Romani youngsters begin preschool at the nearly all-Croat village school, arguing the school could not accommodate the new pupils. After a two-day standoff the Croats relented and the Roma have been attending the school ever since.

Preschools have been one of the biggest beneficiaries of integration schemes in the three years since the Orsus decision. Although the ruling did not obligate Croatia to take remedial action in segregated schools, the government introduced two new programs designed to give Roma a leg up before they start primary school and to help them stay once they get there.

Preschools for children lacking fluency in Croatian now operate throughout the school year, rather than for only three months as previously. Many Romani parents leaped at this opportunity for their youngsters to spend five hours a day in school, with transport to and from school and two meals day, all paid for by the state. School officials in Gornji Hrascan say 90 percent of local preschool-age kids now attend the school, despite the efforts by Croats earlier this year to bar Roma from "their" school.

By keeping the preschools open longer hours throughout the school year, educators hoped to inculcate the habit of attending school at an early age and give Romani speakers a head start on learning Croatian, and they believe the program is already yielding results. Dogsa said only one pupil at her school was held back in first grade last year, compared with an average of five per year before the expansion of preschools.

Dogsa and other principals in the area argue that the next step is to make preschool compulsory for three years in order to further entrench the benefits of early schooling.

The other major integration measure inspired by the Orsus ruling is an after-school homework help program in primary schools. While such programs exist in many schools, here in Medjimurje the main aim is to help Romani students with their Croatian language lessons.

Drzimurec-Strelec School in the village of Drzimurec participates in the homework-help program, but so far only first-graders are included because of lack of funding, principal Djurdja Horvat says. There's reason to believe the program can make a difference: in a similar pilot project three years ago involving fifth-graders, nine of the 15 Roma participating completed all eight grades of primary school, Horvat says. Typically, only one Roma student per year completes the eighth grade. Opening this program to more pupils, as well as extending preschool to three years, would significantly improve the academic performance of Roma children, she says. As things are, her school

is trying its own methods. "This year we have about 30 first-graders, of whom half have been held back. Those who are held back in first grade rarely get held back later because they acquire a more solid foundation. So this has proven to be a good method," she says.

Radovan Balog, head of the village council in Parag, has four children in school. He elaborated on his neighbor Dejan Orsus' answer to the question about what has changed since the European Court of Human Rights ruling.

"It's better than it was before, mostly because almost all children attend preschool now," he said.

"Also, schools are getting parents more involved in their children's education. However, the problem is that even those who graduate from school cannot find jobs, and this causes children to lose motivation for continuing their education. Most often they give up in fifth or sixth grade when they turn 15. That's when they get married and have children. That way they can at least get welfare checks to help them get by."

Balog says segregation is entrenched here: "There are simply too many Roma people and too few Croats for all classes to be mixed."

The teacher from Kursanec proposes an idea that was born out of the civil-rights movement in the United States and has been tried out in a few places in Romania and elsewhere in southeastern Europe. If Roma kids were bused to predominantly Croat schools a few kilometers away, so as to form classes of eight or so Croats and four Roma, they would learn at a faster pace, he suggests.

"It would be an additional expense, but it is more expensive not to educate children who can one day become useful members of society, but rather turn them into welfare cases," he says.

*Story and photos by **Barbara Matejcic**, a freelance journalist in Zagreb.*

Georgia´s Free, Albeit Non-existent, Pre-schools

A move intended to make preschool available to all could have the opposite effect.

by Tamar Kikacheishvili
5 April 2013

TBILISI | Every day Natia Chanukvadze walks her son, 4-year-old Kakhi, the 15 minutes from their Tbilisi apartment to his public preschool. To hear Chanukvadze talk, Kakhi's experience is a testament to Georgia's policy of providing free preschool to children whose families qualify for welfare, as the Chanukvadzes do.

With obvious pride, Chanukvadze said Kakhi can add and subtract up to 20. Kakhi can also count to 100. "I had no idea that he knew some arithmetic, and I was surprised when I discovered that one day," Chanukvadze said.

In addition, she said, her son has picked up verbal skills: "He sings very well, and he knows lots of poems. Everything depends on the teacher; his teacher is very motivated."

Kakhi Chanukvadze, right, and a classmate choose animals to paint at their Tbilisi preschool. Photo by Tamar Kikacheishvili.

But Kakhi's experience is rare. Though preschool education is free or subsidized for needy families,

only about 30 percent of Georgia's poor children have access, according to a November report from UNICEF.

Georgia's rural areas are particularly lacking. UNICEF and Civitas, a civil society group, have opened 120 preschools in the countryside but gaps remain.

UNICEF has directly linked the dearth of preschool education to Georgia's poor performance in international tests of students' skills later on. Of 48 countries whose students participated in two standardized tests in 2009 and 2011, Georgia ranked 33rd in math and 37th in science, the agency noted.

Tinatin Khidasheli, a Georgian lawmaker, recently spoke in parliament about the importance of preschool education. But instead of expanding the coverage of preschool, she wants to make it free to all children, regardless of income.

In an interview, Khidasheli said offering free or subsidized public preschool only to needy families perpetuates social divisions.

"Socially protected and unprotected shouldn't be an issue when it comes to children," she said, referring to the terms used in Georgia to denote who gets state aid and who does not. "The country should take that minimal responsibility to all children, and they shouldn't have been divided into rich and poor."

She acknowledged that many areas don't even have preschools but said that should not preclude the government from offering free preschool where it does exist.

"Having free preschool doesn't rule out having preschools in every village," she said.

But it might, according to Paata Batatashvili, who oversees preschools in a district of the eastern Kakheti region. That's because local governments will have to foot the higher tuition bill, possibly cutting into their budgets for school maintenance and construction.

Batatashvili said all of the Kvareli district's roughly 1,000 public preschoolers get free or heavily subsidized tuition. Still, the local government manages to set aside money to refurbish one or two of the community's dilapidated, Soviet-era preschools per year.

"Now we don't know what it's going to be like in the future. It's obvious that if the preschools are free, more parents will want to put their kids in earlier and it will increase the number of children in preschool," Batatashvili said.

He said one the district's villages in particular could suffer. Tivi is home to a community of Avars, a minority found in parts of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Dagestan, Russian. The village has no preschool and the children there who cannot travel to a nearby village get no early education. Right now, officials plan to open a preschool there with the help of aid organizations.

Debate on the free-preschool bill has broken down along party lines. Alexandre Kantaria, who, like the bill's sponsor, is a member of the ruling Georgian Dream coalition, said funding was the key to broadening preschool access.

Kantaria, who sits on the legislature's education, science, and culture committee, told parliament he gets frequent appeals from constituents who cannot pay their children's preschool tuition or from those who barely miss qualifying for state support.

But Sergo Ratiani, of the opposition United National Movement, said those who need help paying for preschool already get it, and the real issue is developing more preschools.

Ratiani said any proposal to abolish fees should be limited to 5-year-olds, for whom preschool is mandatory, and should be paid for by the Education Ministry instead of local governments.

Khidasheli's bill passed on first reading on 7 March and looks set to make it through the legislature, although it's not known if President Mikheil Saakashvili will sign it into law. If he did, it would go into effect in the coming school year.

Maya Kuparadze, an education officer for UNICEF, said abolishing the fee would make preschool accessible to more families, although she said Georgia also needs to work on making it easier for disabled children to attend.

But given budget realities, developing more preschools should take priority over making it free, according to Nino Tsintsadze, an official with the Georgian Portage Association, which provides home-schooling visits to preschool-age children with special needs.

Tsintsadze said that while parents would obviously welcome the move to make preschool free, there was no groundswell for such a bill.

"The development of preschools, development of infrastructure, implementation of teaching programs, and building new preschools has to be the priority," Tsintsadze said. "I think it was worth thinking about these issues before presenting this proposal."

It is difficult to know how many children are not attending public preschools – and therefore how much more this proposal might cost the public purse. Georgia's census counts the number of children from infant to 4 years old in one category, and puts 5-year-olds in a different age group. But it is children ages 2 to 5 who attend preschool.

Further, the National Statistics Office counts only children in public preschool, although many in private schools would presumably shift to public schools if public tuition were abolished. Georgia has more than 58,000 children ages 2 to 5 in public preschools.

But the proposal would almost certainly heap more obligations on local governments, who already pick up the tab for preschool education for disabled children, those who lost a parent in the 2008 Georgia-Russian conflict, orphans, or the third and subsequent children of any family.

According to Tbilisi City Hall, of the 41,994 children enrolled in public preschools there, 13,726 – about one-third – do not pay tuition and many more receive subsidies. The city's annual tab for preschools is 37 million lari ($22.4 million).

To concerns of cost, Khidasheli said local governments should first do the calculations and request more money from parliament, if necessary.

Nino Katsitadze, manager of a public preschool in Tbilisi that has 180 students, welcomes the proposal. She said many of her parents complain they can't afford the tuition even though most get full or partial subsidies. The full tuition costs 80 lari, which is paid only by the handful of non-Georgian residents whose children attend her school.

According to the National Statistics Office, the average monthly wage in Georgia is 813 lari.

Kuparadze, of UNICEF, said if Georgia truly wants to make preschool universal, the country must do two things: persuade some reluctant parents, mostly in urban areas, of the benefits of preschool, and put more school houses and skilled teachers in rural areas.

"The main priority for Georgia should be to gradually expand early-learning coverage with a special emphasis on the weaker links: socially vulnerable children, ethnic minorities, and rural regions," Kuparadze said.

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