

ASPECTS OF THE EDUCATION POLICY OF MODERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract. The article presents the issue of the development of educational systems in modern European countries. On the basis of the dynamics of our time, provoking the search for and formation of adequate strategies in the educational policy of Europe, the modernization of education in Europe is traced. The factors that significantly determine the priorities of modern education policy, as well as the priority development of one or another aspect of the educational system, aimed at ensuring quality education and sustainable social development, are specified. The article examines various educational initiatives that are being taken in the single European space. Emphasis is placed on the initiatives for: compulsory pre-school education; increasing the duration and quality of the secondary school education; making "higher education equally accessible to all" one of the principles of state strategies; introduction of the practice of adult education; developing criteria for recognizing the results of non-formal and informal education. The article seeks projections of these initiatives in the Bulgarian educational system.

Keywords: education policy; pre-school education; secondary school education; higher education; informal education; non-formal education

At the beginning of the 21st century, the world is changing significantly. The main factor for the change is the formation of an information society.

Humanity is entering a new stage of development, in which there is an implementation of a transition to a new form of post-industrial society and information is considered the most valuable resource, and its accessibility is essential. There is an awareness of the role of knowledge as a condition for success in any field of activity, information as an important cognitive tool, not knowledge in itself.

New technologies are accelerating the creation and dissemination of knowledge everywhere. Learning is becoming a key value. The ability to navigate the information flow, cognitive abilities, critical mind, to distinguish useful information from useless, acquire extremely important significance in society. The need for priority development of one or another aspect of the education system, aimed at ensuring quality education and sustainable social development has been provoked.

The modern educational policy demonstrates priorities that are largely determined by:

- what is put in the concept of education today - it is from the accepted definition of education that the concept of the applied educational policy is built;
- what is seen in the values of education and its strategic goals;
- to what extent the subject of regulation is understood in determining the state educational strategy;
- clear identification of the nature of the connection between education as a humanitarian value and the state policy in the field of education, aimed at the realization by man of this personal right. The concept of "educational policy" reflects the focus of the decision-making process on the application of the constitutional right of every citizen to receive an education.

Considering the importance of knowledge in the modern stage of social development, where the dominant value, economic and resource, becomes "knowledge" as such, Efremenko (2010) draws attention to the relationship between risk and knowledge in human activity. Knowledge and risk are interrelated aspects of the decision-making process in a society. The specificity of risky solutions lies in the need to make a choice from a number of available options with the uncertainty of consequences, i.e. in conditions of incomplete knowledge. However, knowledge in principle cannot be complete, in pragmatic terms it can be considered complete in relation to the specific circumstances in which one or another decision is made.

Education policy or state policy in the field of education is a state-regulated decision-making process regarding the implementation of the constitutional right of a citizen to receive education, taking into account the influence of various political actors.

All policy decisions need to be made on the basis of scientific analysis. Undermining the credibility of expertise not only reduces the political demand for expertise, which is particularly dramatic compared to the scale of the accumulation of new knowledge, but also creates favorable conditions for conflicts to arise.

In modern society, the changes that have taken place require new ideas, new expertise, new thinking, in order to respond appropriately to the changed structure of labor and labor relations, employment and production, the norms of social protection of people. The emergence of problems unknown to previous generations often requires non-standard solutions, which require scientifically literate people trained to discover, formulate and solve problems. All this *naturally provokes a change in the education system in Europe.*

In response to the challenges of the times, Europe is taking action to integrate EU countries in the most appropriate way possible in the face of new realities. In this context, Member States are strengthening their intellectual, cultural, social, and technical base and are introducing innovations in education. The emerging term "Europe of Knowledge" reflects these key trends and eloquently demonstrates the

importance of Europe as a single educational space. All structures of the education system in Europe - both higher and secondary schools - under the influence of the Bologna concept strive not only for knowledge of "how to act", but also for knowledge of "how to coexist".

The development of educational systems in modern European countries is primarily due to the need to understand the situation and develop approaches to assess the multifactorial political dynamics of our time and the formation of strategies in European educational policy.

Timely forecasting of the future, the realization that not only knowledge and information, *but also the motivation for their updating*, supported by the construction of practical skills, makes it possible to modernize training in Europe and increase the efficiency of the labor market. In the changed realities, if one fails to adapt to cultural and linguistic diversity, one will remain a passive observer of the life of society.

The previously created and approved models of the educational policy are transformed and adapted to the new institutional conditions of the Bologna Process. The single European area is open to all, the same principles of teaching and assessment of knowledge are adopted in each country. However, the process of transition and the degree of adaptability of the models to the new institutional environment has its own specifics in different countries. Along with the many common features corresponding to the Bologna Declaration, *the educational policy of modern European countries at the same time has special, corresponding to national traditions, culture, and specific experience*. There are many educational initiatives that are taken in the single European area. Among them of particular importance are such as:

- *Compulsory pre-school education is introduced or discussed;*
- *The duration and quality of secondary school education is increasing;*
- *“Higher education equally accessible all” is becoming one of the principles of state strategies;*
- *The practice of adult education is introduced;*
- *Criteria for recognizing the results of non-formal and informal education are being developed.*

Compulsory pre-school education is introduced or discussed

Early childhood education and care should be more widely available. At present, no country allows a situation in which children over the age of seven are left without any pre-school education. All EU countries are convinced, for internal and external reasons, that it is necessary to invest in early childhood education and care, regardless of factors that vary from country to country. In most countries, there is a central management of pre-school education. In some countries in Northern Europe (the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) it is combined

with autonomy at the institutional/regional level, in Italy, the policy is determined at the municipal level. Some countries have separate systems: care for children under 3, education for children over 3, for example France, the Netherlands. Others use autonomous systems, the management of which does not depend on the school system, for children aged 0-6 years, e.g. Scandinavian countries, Spain, Germany. Most countries provide free education to children who are 2/3 years old but may charge fees for any non-educational care.

Most countries offer additional support for children from low-income families, as well as for children with special needs or special language programs for children who do not speak the language. There is an idea for additional support staff for working with children with disabilities in specialized institutions - UK, Spain.

It is widely acknowledged in EU documents that the quality of pre-school education exists at a systemic level and that some policy frameworks are more appropriate than others to achieve good results. In general, quality is achieved through highly qualified and highly paid employees working at good premises, in accordance with well-defined training programs, which are implemented in well-designed and equipped with the necessary material conditions.

The duration and quality of secondary school education is increasing

The European Commission supports national efforts to develop school education policies and systems by encouraging the exchange of information in the development of policies and approaches. In the established framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), the Commission encourages cooperation in the search for and development of best practices in the field of education and training.

EU countries identify priority areas aimed at making progress in the development and reform of education and training systems: developing key competencies for lifelong learning for all students; high-quality training; inclusion in school education; improving support for students with SEN, including migrants to the EU, and reducing early school leaving; ensuring more efficient, fairer and more efficient management of school education; providing sufficient opportunities for teachers, principals, and professionals who implement the preparation of teachers to receive greater support, including for professional development, as well as flexible and motivating career opportunities.

Through the Erasmus + program, the Commission makes a significant contribution to European cooperation projects and to the promotion of the mobility of teachers and students.

The Europe 2020 strategic program improves the efficiency of European education systems by integrating the high school-college-university chain. Member States are encouraged to increase creativity and to implement innovations in education, including school education.

An emphasis in curriculum and in school education is placed on creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

In this context, the Law on Pre-school and School Education, which entered into force on 1.08.2016, is the first official State document in Bulgaria, which provides legal grounds for the implementation of innovations in Bulgarian schools. The law regulates the functioning of innovative schools - schools that aim to improve the quality of education and prevent early school leaving. With Decision № 472 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria from 9th of July 2018, a list of innovative schools in the Republic of Bulgaria for the 2018/2019 school year is adopted. The list includes 290 innovative schools. Each next year the number of these schools is rising, the quality of the implemented innovations is being improved. Now, for the school year 2020/2021, according to Decision № 584 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria from 20th of August 2020, the newest list already includes 504 innovative schools.

The European Commission is making considerable efforts to promote quality education and reduce early school leaving. It also takes action to motivate participation in various project activities by awarding grants to the Member States.

In this context, the number of schools in Bulgaria that implement project activities under the Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth”, co-funded by both the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) for the period 2014 – 2020. One of the main goals is through timely identification of the systemic gaps in the competencies of students to provide an opportunity for additional training aimed at compensating of their gaps and increasing their motivation for success.

Bulgarian school education rethinks and updates the objectives of education, which are aimed at developing skills for solving real problems, in view of the new requirements of a dynamic global economy and the challenges of a highly competitive labor market within the European Union. Regarding the curricula and the educational content, the key competencies are integrated (in the state educational requirements, in the curricula, in the textbooks). Mechanisms are applied to diversify the basic educational content at the school level in order to respond to the variety of specific conditions, individual interests, and needs of the student.

“Higher education equally accessible to all” is becoming one of the principles of state strategies

University education is aimed at preparing for a harmonious life based on professional qualifications. The research are directed towards practical projects focused on a future job. This orientation is actively supported by all European countries. An essential task is to stimulate them to increase creativity and introduce educational innovations, to reform national systems for research and innovation, and to strengthen cooperation between universities, science, and research, as well

as to increase the capabilities of the European labor market. Those who study in European educational institutions have great opportunities for realization.

Despite the common Bologna course that is being followed, each country retains its own system characteristics. Education in Europe includes a large part of the master's programs – 1/3 in English and much less than the bachelor's programs. In some countries, additional requirements are set for trained foreign nationals. For example, to study in Spain, Iceland, France, and Italy you need to know the national language. Those who do not know it do not receive scholarships.

In other countries the conditions are different. Austria is a country that allows you to enter a university without knowing German. There are programs in English, and German can be studied a year after enrollment in the university. In Poland and Estonia, higher education is offered, in some specialties in Russian, in addition to English and the national language. The Republic of Bulgaria offers bachelor's and master's programs taught in Bulgarian, English, German, French, and Russian too.

The structure of Bulgarian higher education is being rationalized – it is getting closer to the needs of the labor market. The Law on Higher Education (2020) provides for the preparation of a National Map of Higher Education, which defines the territorial and profile structure of the institutional network for higher education, in order to stimulate higher education institutions to focus their efforts on training with the necessary quality and meeting the needs of the labor market.

The draft Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021 – 2030 presents the main principles and priorities in the development of the higher education system and defines specific goals, activities, and measures for their implementation. Key processes in the functioning of the higher education system are covered, such as management of higher education institutions, maintenance and improvement of the quality of education, development of research and innovation, improvement of funding and admission models, digitalization of the educational process and administrative services in higher education institutions, career development of teachers, internationalization, professional orientation of students, student entrepreneurship, etc.

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In order to facilitate the realization of those who received their education in foreign universities, it is envisaged to introduce a two-month period for the recognition of diplomas for higher education obtained abroad, including diplomas for a degree corresponding to the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”.

The management of the higher education system in the Republic of Bulgaria is carried out at the state and institutional level. The state develops and implements a long-term national policy for the development of higher education and guarantees the academic autonomy of higher education institutions, takes care of the quality of training and research. The number of scientific publications of Bulgarian universities in international bibliographic databases is constantly increasing.

A feature of higher education in Europe is its duration. Students study from 3 to 6 years. The two-level structure of higher education – bachelor’s and master’s degrees has different durations in different countries. In Bulgaria the bachelor’s degree is at two levels “professional bachelor” (ISCED 5) and “bachelor” (ISCED 6) with a duration of study of 3 and 4 years, respectively, in other countries this duration is 3 years. For example the average duration of a full-time bachelor’s degree programme is 3 years in Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland etc. In Bulgaria the duration of the master’s degree programme is 1 – 2 years.

The practice of adult education is introduced

All EU countries are making efforts and taking measures to further develop lifelong learning systems, with a special focus on adult education. They accept this training as a key factor for progress, development, employment, and social inclusion. They develop tools to support the process of transition between the different parts of the education and training systems.

Most countries define clear and consistent strategies, the adequacy and effectiveness of which implies an increased impact and motivation to participate in training, as well as the need for greater stakeholder engagement. The success of the implemented strategies requires better cooperation with policy sectors beyond education and training. It imposes the need for adequate mechanisms for strategic deployment of resources, to take into account emerging needs for new skills.

The National Strategy for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Bulgaria defines the strategic framework of the state policy for education and training in the period 2014 – 2020 and defines the main policies and aspects for the development of the adult learning system. Actions are being taken to change the system of adult education and training, which are aimed at creating the necessary new skills. An educational environment is created that provides an opportunity for adults, regardless of their personal, social, or economic status, to acquire, enrich and develop throughout their entire life specific to their work skills and key competencies that are necessary for their full realization on the labor market.

The National Lifelong Learning Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria aims to create a diverse learning environment for vulnerable groups, including adults with

special educational needs and chronic illnesses, as well as those who are disadvantaged.

Criteria for recognizing the results of non-formal and informal education are being developed

The Council of the European Union makes recommendations on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Official Journal of the European Union, C 398, 22 December 2012).

Taking into account the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 165 and 166 thereof and the European Commission proposal, as well as the importance of validating learning outcomes - skills and competences achieved through non-formal and informal learning aimed at increasing the employability and mobility, as well as increasing the motivation for lifelong learning and its valuable contribution to improving the functioning of the labor market, increasing competitiveness and economic growth, the European Union recommends that the Member States to implement „ ... no later than 2018, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning ...“. The aim is to give everyone the opportunity to validate what they have learned outside of formal education and training - including the experience gained through mobility, and to use it in their professional development and further learning.

Depending on their needs, Member States may identify certain areas and/or sectors as priorities within the framework of their validation systems. Member States may provide for each person to benefit from these types of learning, individually or in combination, depending on their individual needs. The European Commission should ensure a level playing field between formal education and training, non-formal learning, and self-directed learning by introducing a system for validating learning outcomes.

Today, validation in Europe is based on the assessment of the individual's learning outcomes, which can lead to the issuance of a certificate or diploma. It is essential how this assessment is carried out, by whom and by what criteria. There is still a need for more reliable mechanisms for recognizing skills and competencies acquired by informal and non-formal learning.

At the national level, specific measures are being implemented to build an adaptive system for adult education and training. It covers all educational and qualification levels of general, vocational, higher education, and adult learning and in all its aspects – formal, non-formal, and informal learning.

Formal education and/or training is that which takes place in the education system or in vocational training centers and which leads to the acquisition of a degree and/or a degree of professional qualification.

In Bulgaria, non-formal education is purposeful and organized, but its successful completion does not lead to the acquisition of a degree or a professional

qualification. The most commonly used forms of non-formal learning are courses, private lessons, seminars and training workshops, on-the-job training, and occupational safety training. Successful completion of non-formal learning may or may not be accompanied by the issuance of a document – a certificate, certificate, or other.

A topical task of the European Commission is to support the Member States and stakeholders by stimulating effective peer learning and the exchange of experience and good practice, by regularly reviewing the European guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, within in-depth consultation and cooperation with the Member States. Another task is to improve the transparency throughout the Union of validated learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning.

Conclusion

There is no European state educational policy that does not comply with the basic humanistic provisions of the Bologna Declaration. At the same time, the value of the preservation and development of the national culture, traditions, and experience is not diminished or neglected in the pan-European educational space.

The effectiveness of the educational policy is determined by the feedbacks between the object of the educational policy and the subject applying the educational policy (the state). The quality and degree of implementation of the constitutional right to receive education, as well as the possibility to apply this right in existing European models of educational policy are an essential element of this policy and its practical implementation.

The ultimate objective of the European education policy is education as a social value. The realization of the stated goal presupposes ensuring accessibility, quality, normative-legal basis, financial support, impact on the social differentiation. Its adaptability is crucial for the effectiveness of this policy.

The system is considered adaptive if it can adapt to the changing conditions - internal and external. The main criteria for adaptability of the educational policy model are:

- necessary diversity – manifested in each of the available characteristics of education;
- double reaction – flexibility and variability of the policy in case of change of results, properties, and regularities of a given policy;
- feedback – targeted analysis of data and results of reforms and other changes in the education policy.

In European countries, the number of subjects managing the educational process is increasing every year. This shows the existence of a direct link between the continuing democratization of society and *increasing public participation in the management of education*.

Based on a study of the main trends in the educational policy of modern European countries at different levels of education, I can conclude that belonging to one or another model of educational policy largely depends on the subject that is playing a key role in the implementation of the political course in education. In modern European countries, the state, the market, the academy (scientific community) have a key role.

Our finding is that it is impossible to distinguish the advantages of one model over another, among the three models of educational policy in Europe: liberal (with the key role of the market); state-paternalistic (with a dominant state); socio-corporate (with a dominant role of the academy). All countries are in the specific conditions of their economic and socio-cultural development, the prevailing traditions and conditions, and therefore the advantages of one model over another cannot be determined. There is a tendency towards the universalization of the educational space and management methods.

European education policy is based on the sovereignty of the Member States. It defines the main educational goals, outlines specific sub-goals, topics and tools for their implementation. It is aimed at promoting lifelong learning and improving the quality of education systems. It involves determining the content and scope of educational programs. The policy provokes serious investment in education, development of new technologies, innovation and job creation, including through various financial instruments to encourage more private investment.

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