

THE UNIQUE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE EUROPEAN SCHOOLS BUILDS UP MULTILINGUAL YOUNG PEOPLE WITH EUROPEAN IDENTITY

(An Interview with Natalia Staykova,
Coordinator of the Bulgarian Section at the European School Brussels IV)

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Natalia Staykova has a Master degree in "Primary School Education" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She has many years of experience as a primary teacher at 7th School "St. Sedmochislenitsi" in Sofia and as a teacher's trainer at Sofia University, teaching students and supporting their methodological work. In 2002, she was a part of the five-member team of the Ministry of Education and Science for evaluation of textbooks on the school subject "Discovery of the World". Since 2007, she has been living in Brussels. Since 2012 she has been working as a primary teacher at the European School Brussels IV and she is the Coordinator of the Bulgarian section since its establishment.



– Ms. Staykova, since when do the children of Bulgarian diplomats and the employees of the different European institutions visit the European Schools and learn Bulgarian language?

– Before the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union, these children did not have the opportunity to learn Bulgarian language at the European Schools. This became possible after the 1st of January 2007, when the Republic of Bulgaria became a party to the Convention defining the statute of the European Schools. The Convention defines the content of the regulations of the European Schools.

– What does the European School system mean and when the first school of this kind was established?

– The European Schools are especially established organizations for joint education of the children of the employees of the European Communities. This is essential for ensuring the good functioning of the European institutions. The education in each school represents a complete course which consists of several levels: two-year Nursery school, five-year Primary school (years 1 – 5) and seven-year Secondary school (years 6 – 12). The duration of the school year for all students is 180 school days.

The first European School was established in 1957 in Luxembourg. The European School Brussels I in the Kingdom of Belgium was opened in 1958. During the school year 2017 – 2018, Brussels I celebrated its 60th anniversary.

– Are there any Bulgarian students in Brussels I?

Yes, these are the so-called SWALS students (Students without a Language Section). They study in different language sections as no language section in their mother tongue exists but they study Bulgarian language as a first language. Their teacher in Bulgarian language and literature is Mrs. Hrisana Kalbova. The number of the Bulgarian boys and girls in this school is gradually decreasing as the policy of the Office of the Secretary-General of the European Schools is to send all Bulgarian, Romanian and Estonian students to the European School Brussels IV.

– How can a language section be opened at the European school? What are the conditions?

– As I have mentioned already, the idea of the European schools is that all children with the same mother tongue are placed together. The question is, of course, about the sections with smaller number of students, such as Bulgarian, Romanian and Estonian one. Usually a language section is being opened when the number of SWALS students in the school is about 100.

– Does it mean that the number of the Bulgarian students is growing?

Yes, their number is growing and at the moment the Bulgarian SWALS students and the pupils from the Bulgarian section in Brussels IV are about 150. New children are constantly coming to us due to the specifics of their parents' job. I notice that there is no problem with the integration of these children both when they enter the European School and when they return to Bulgaria. I am also extremely glad of the fact that in the Bulgarian section there are children of mixed marriages as well as children who were not born in Bulgaria. I sincerely hope that this trend continues and even increases as there is still a shortage of students in our section. In these cases, our practice in the smaller language sections is students to be taught in mixed classes – the same way as I teach currently – years 1 and 2 of the primary school.

In general, the number of students in the European schools is growing. On average, each European School in Brussels has between 3500 and 4500 students. The functioning of these schools requires a very serious organization of the learning

process. The preparation for each following school year starts in January – February of the previous year. The most European institutions are in Brussels which logically means that the most number of European schools are here: 4 schools. Work is under way also on the possibility of opening a fifth school. On the territory of the Kingdom of Belgium there is one more European School in the city of Mol.

– Tell us more about the Bulgarian section in Brussels IV which was opened in 2012. How did everything begin?

– The European School Brussels IV is the newest one and it has the most modern facilities from all the other schools. It is located in the Laeken district, in close proximity to the Royal Palace. The opening of the Bulgarian section in 2012 coincided with the ceremony for the official opening of the European School Brussels IV, with the attendance of the King Albert II, the President of the European Commission Mr. Barroso, the Bulgarian Deputy Minister of Education Mrs Petya Evtimova and the ambassadors of the countries. We started with 11 children in the Nursery and 4 pupils in the first year of the Primary school. In the current school year, the oldest students in our section are already in second year of secondary school which is corresponding to the Bulgarian seventh grade.

– What is the difference, or rather, what is the advantage of having a separate Bulgarian section in the European school?

– If special care is not taken, the preservation of the mother tongue outside Bulgarian borders is not an easy task. That is why, in my opinion, the opening of the Bulgarian section in Brussels IV is an extremely far-sighted step of national importance. In a foreign, multilingual and multicultural environment, the learning of a foreign language happens in natural way and it is easy for the children, very often through the games they play. However, the preservation of the Bulgarian language is very difficult.

It is typical for the Primary cycle of the European Schools that the subjects in each language section are studied in the respective mother tongue, in our case in Bulgarian. SWALS students study all other subjects in the language of their chosen section, e.g. English, French, Spanish, etc. In Bulgarian they study only the subject “Bulgarian Language and Literature”, according to the officially approved by the Ministry of Education and Science curriculum. The Bulgarian state provides free textbooks of the subject Bulgarian Language and Literature for the students from the European schools under the same mechanism as for the schools in Bulgaria.

From year one, the study of a foreign language begins, and from year six, the study of second foreign language. At the end of the studies (year 12), every student can graduate with 3 or even 4 equivalent languages, regardless of which language section he/she has studied. The interesting fact is that here all children, including Bulgarian ones, even very small in age, start to identify, understand and speak foreign languages. This happens thanks to the constant contact between them. The work here is towards the direction to make children feel

happy, and the knowledge is extracted through projects, experiments and joint activities between the different language sections, especially at horizontal level (school, class level). Such joint activities, for example, are: Science day, sports day, European language day, Europe Day, art week, book week, excursions, green schools, sea schools, etc. which are being planned at the beginning of the school year and organized by the teachers at the given level. The aim is the children to participate, to cooperate and to communicate without borders in different languages with their peers. For example, at the level of year 1, there are 10 classes (about 200 children), divided into 3 French, 1 English, 1 German, 1 Dutch, 1 Bulgarian, 1 Romanian, 1 Italian and 1 Estonian classes. All the school activities and children's breaks are planned in such a way so that they can be together, work in teams and communicate in different languages. From years 3 to 5, the so-called "European hours" lessons takes place (90 minutes each week), during which one-level classes are 'mixed together' and the teachers teach them in different languages (French, German, English). The topics on which they work are related to European cultural heritage, music, fine arts, common European values etc. To illustrate the dimensions of this multicultural and multilingual environment, I will note that our school has students, teachers and staff of more than 31 nationalities.

– **What would you point as a special feature of the educational content in the curriculum according to which the European schools work?**

– An essential feature of the European Schools' system are **the harmonized curriculums**, which are conceptually approved by the Office of the Secretary-General of the European Schools. For example, a unique system is developed in Mathematics – Intermath, specially created for the needs of the Primary cycle of the European schools. This centralization of learning content means that all primary classes of one level, for example – year one, regardless of the language section, acquire one and the same learning content. So, with the establishment of the Bulgarian section, we had to translate very quickly all Mathematics textbooks for years 1 – 5 into Bulgarian language. Another interesting feature is the lack of textbooks on other subjects. The teacher here is a real creator and he/she is completely free to develop and teach the teaching material in his/her own way. Everyone, of course, respects the well-established harmonized curriculum. The harmonized curriculums are mostly distinguished by the degree of abstraction, education has a more practical approach. The learning content seems completely accessible, light, without unnecessary explanations, and above all - without extreme knowledge given in advance. The abstraction and the level of difficulty are being gradually increased without loading in the upper classes.

– **What kind of exams do the students take in the Bulgarian section?**

– The students from the Bulgarian section do not take exams of the type "National external evaluation" as in Bulgaria. At the end of the studies – year 12 of

the secondary school, they should do 8 exams: 5 written and 3 oral ones, just like all students from the European Schools. The compulsory written exams are: First language, Second language, Mathematics and two optional ones. Upon completion of the full cycle of secondary education, a “European baccalaureate” is awarded. Years of study successfully completed at the School and diplomas and certificates in respect thereof are recognized in the territory of the Member States. Holding this diploma, the students can apply at any university on the territory of any EU Member State, including applying without any problem to the Bulgarian ones.

– **What provokes you personally as a teacher at European school, what makes you feel proud?**

– The greatest challenge in my career is my work at the European School Brussels IV and participation in the establishment of the Bulgarian section. That is why the development and recognition of this section has become my professional cause. I would not be able, of course, to cope with this undertaking without the support of the whole Bulgarian team consisting of 12 teachers and assistants. We all make huge efforts to promote the Bulgarian culture, history, traditions and language. The calendar of each school year includes Bulgarian events - concerts, exhibitions and celebrations aiming at the preservation of our cultural and national identity. They are organized on special occasions such as official holidays of the Republic of Bulgaria and they include all Bulgarian students at school. Our guests are often the Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria to the Kingdom of Belgium and the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Bulgaria to the European Union, the directors of the other European schools in Brussels, Bulgarian ministers, diplomats and parents. Every year we celebrate the National Holiday – 3rd of March too, with an official reception that we organize for all school staff. There we present the landmarks and achievements of our country, elements of Bulgarian folklore, folk dances and customs, traditional Bulgarian dishes and drinks etc. It is not a coincidence that many of our colleagues from other nationalities visit Bulgaria in their free time, motivated by the recommendations and advertising from our side. I believe that in this way, my colleagues and me, acting as informal representatives of our country, make our contribution towards popularizing our country, which makes me extremely proud.

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