

Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing Global Citizenship Education Policies in Bulgaria

STUDIES

GCE
in policy

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ARCI -Bulgaria

September 2024 - May 2025



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Acronyms

BPID	Bulgarian Platform for International Development
EU	European Union
GCE	Global Citizenship Education
MES	Ministry of Education and Science
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PSEA	Pre-School and School Education Act
RED	Regional Department of Education



1. Contextualisation of Global Citizenship Education in Bulgaria

Bulgaria's educational system gradually modernises, especially after it became a member of the European Union (EU) in 2007. Among others, the competence based educational model is progressively introduced in the recent years. Most significant and progressive changes were introduced by the 2016 Pre-School and School Education Act (PSEA), which aims to overhaul school education and which will be discussed later in the report.

1.1 Bulgarian educational system

In Bulgaria education is a fundamental right for all citizens, regardless of gender, social position, ethnicity, or religion, as declared by the Bulgarian Constitution from 1991. This underlying democratic concept of free access to education is reflected in all law instruments governing the operation of the educational system. Education is mandatory for children aged four to the age of sixteen. Basic education in Bulgaria is divided into two stages: primary/elementary education and lower secondary/junior high school.

Lower secondary education is imparted by junior high schools and covers grades 5 to 8. Children aged 11 to 15 may attend lower secondary education. Their curriculum includes Mathematics, Chemistry, Bulgarian Language and Literature, Music, Geography, Fine Arts, Technical Education, Physics, History, Physical Education, Biology, and one Foreign Language. Instruction per week is between 27-30 hours. This educational level ends with Basic education completion certificate. Students who have completed lower secondary education are eligible for secondary education. Secondary education in Bulgaria is optional and is offered by comprehensive/general secondary schools, specialized schools and vocational secondary schools. This educational level prepares students for higher education or labour market.

Schooling is accessible in state, municipal, or private institutions, and education is free of charge except in private schools. Furthermore, all students from grades 1 through 12 receive free textbooks.

The academic year in Bulgaria runs from mid-September to end of June. The academic year is divided in two semesters. Semester one starts in mid-September till January. Semester two starts in February and ends in June. During the academic year, there are Easter, Summer and Christmas holidays.



The Ministry of Education and Science is primarily responsible for educational policy. As part of broader decentralisation initiatives, Bulgaria's school education responsibilities are divided among three government levels: national, regional, and municipal. However, schools are free to plan and manage their own budgets and staff. The Ministry coordinates education policy, informing and implementing strategic priorities and legislative actions defined by the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers. The Ministry is divided into 16 specialty directorates, including the Inclusive Education Directorate, the Vocational Education and Training Directorate, and the Education of Bulgarians Abroad and School Network Directorate. Each of Bulgaria's 28 administrative regions has a regional department of education (RED), which reports to the MES and oversees assisting with the implementation of national pre-school and school education programs. Until recently, REDs were tasked with monitoring and evaluating schools; however, with the establishment of a new National Inspectorate of Education, the REDs are now responsible for providing methodological support to schools. The heads of these regional departments are also responsible for appointing school principals in their region.

Bulgarian schools now exhibit a relatively high degree of autonomy in managing their budgets, staff, and curriculum development, as part of broader decentralization reforms. Since 2008, schools have operated under a delegated budget system, meaning that while funding is still allocated by the government, schools have full discretion over how to allocate these resources once received. School principals hold authority over the recruitment and management of teaching staff, including all personnel-related decisions.

Furthermore, the current Pre-school and School Education Act enables certain institutions, known as “innovative schools” (see Chapter 4), to tailor and design their curricula based on student needs. A portion of the curriculum, approximately 10%, is developed at the school level by teachers and approved by the school principal. These school-based curricula are structured in accordance with the framework curriculum established by the Ministry of Education, which, along with national education standards, outlines the learning objectives for each subject at the conclusion of each educational stage.

In last decades, Bulgaria has started somewhat hesitantly to implement education reforms aimed at improving learning results, enhancing equity, and tackling management difficulties such as managing teacher supply and demand and allocating school resources, with slowly growing levels of decentralization. It has implemented already several large-scale education reforms to address system inefficiencies and disparities. Thus, in 2007, the country began to rationalize its school network in response to demographic shifts, introducing a per capita-based financing model for schools and giving school administrators more control over financial issues and decision making. The already mentioned Preschool and School Education Act of 2016 introduced substantial policy reforms, such as the establishment of a new framework for school evaluation and the implementation of a new learner-centred and competency-based curriculum.

In fact, the adoption of PSEA constituted a beginning of another cycle of substantial reforms, which aimed to modernize the country's curriculum by emphasizing competences and student-centred approaches, as well as making education more inclusive. Apart from everything mentioned above, this Act requires all schools to implement efforts to reduce early school dropouts and include pupils from vulnerable demographics. A recent update to the Act in 2020 made schooling obligatory from



the age of four, ensuring that more children, especially those whose families do not speak Bulgarian, are prepared to begin their basic education. Another aim has been to increase the quality and relevance of the country's vocational training, ensuring that programmes are better aligned with labour market needs and more appealing to students with diverse preferences and competencies.

Despite this development, Bulgaria continues to experience high levels of poverty and socioeconomic inequality. Schools suffer significant educational gaps based on geographic location, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The government recognizes the need of long-term education reform in increasing national production, meeting the requirements of an aging population, and improving citizens' quality of life. In practice, much remains to be done.

1.2 Citizenship Education – but not for all

At last, during the 2021/2022 school year a Citizenship Education was introduced in the Bulgarian educational system. In the Bulgarian context, the term “Civic and Citizenship Education” is commonly translated as “Гражданско образование” (“Grazhdansko obrazovanie”). This term encompasses both the civic dimension (focused on knowledge of democratic institutions, laws, rights, and responsibilities) and the citizenship dimension (focused on values, identity, participation, and active engagement). Although English distinguishes between civic education and citizenship education, the Bulgarian curriculum typically integrates both under the umbrella of “Гражданско образование.” State Educational Requirements for the Curriculum Content of Citizenship Education are well defined in the law. In the Republic of Bulgaria, the subject of “Citizenship Education” is taught in the 11th and 12th grades of secondary education. The curriculum for Citizenship Education is grounded in several key international and national frameworks, including: the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”; the “Convention on the Rights of the Child”; the “European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”; the “European Framework of Reference for Key Competences”; the “Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria”; and the “State Educational Standard for General Education”, which outlines the required learning outcomes for Citizenship Education. In 11th grade, the curriculum emphasizes topics such as citizenship, politics, and democracy; citizens' rights and responsibilities; and societal identities and differences. In 12th grade, the focus shifts to the relationship between citizens, government, and the state; the interaction of citizens with the economy; and Bulgaria's place in the world, including global challenges. Many teachers were trained to become teachers of Citizenship Education between 2020 and 2022 school years.

However, as it is for now available only for students from 11th and 12th grade many activists, including the authors of this report, consider this insufficient as this is the part of the secondary education that is not compulsory and many of the students finish their education by that time and join the Bulgarian workforce.

In the curriculum on Citizenship Education for 12th grade there is an independent section called “Bulgaria and global problems”. And one of the expected results in it is for students to be able to



utilise the possibilities of Global Education to understand social problems at regional, national and global levels. This fact is what gives hope for a future broadening of these topics to result one day in a global education.

As we are still in the early days of introducing first the citizenship, and hopefully sometime soon the Global Education, there are not many different key concepts used officially in Bulgaria. Citizenship Education is the only widely used official term as this is the name of the subject taught at the last secondary school grades. In other documents, such as papers, reports and project briefs, the terms "Global Education" and "Citizenship Education" are often used to describe educational approaches that aim to prepare students to be responsible global citizens. Global Education focuses on understanding global interdependencies and promoting sustainable development, while Citizenship Education emphasizes the development of citizenship competencies and democratic values. It can be argued that the term "Global Education" is more often used by GENE and the Council of Europe, while the term "Global Citizenship Education" is more aligned with the SDGs. However, in recent years, especially with the plethora of EU projects and bad translations, with the lack of academic discipline on the matter, there is a chaotic mixture of terminology freely used in Bulgaria.

1.3 The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study - ICCS 2022

Results of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study were announced on 28 November 2023 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).

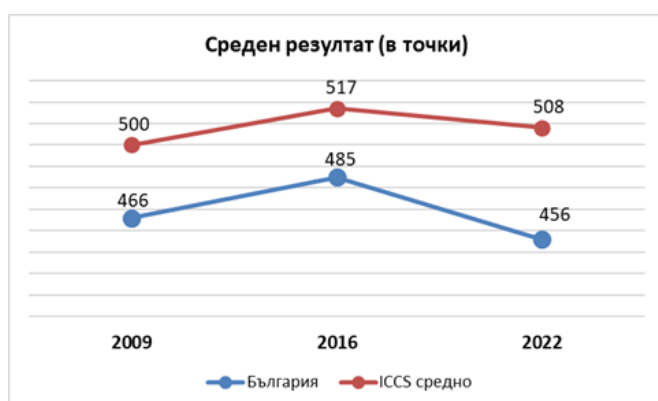
This research has typically remained outside of public attention, overshadowed by more well-known studies, such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and two major international assessments for 4th-grade students: the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), a non-governmental organization with research centers in over 60 countries, including Bulgaria, leads the study. Additionally, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), the Laboratorio di Pedagogia Sperimentale at Roma Tre University in Rome, and LUMSA University in Rome are actively involved in the design and execution of the ICCS. These institutions oversee the overall project management, as well as the development of the research framework and concept.

It is deemed important to mention this study as it is the only international study on Citizenship Education that investigates how young people are prepared for their roles as citizens. It focuses on the elements of schooling designed to provide students with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to develop into active, independent individuals who are motivated to participate in citizenship life.

ICCS 2022 includes participants from 22 countries and two regions in Germany, with Bulgaria among them. The target group, unchanged since the project's inception, consists of students around the age of 14 at the time of the survey. In most countries, including Bulgaria, this corresponds to students in grade 8. In those countries where eighth graders are younger than 13.5 years, students in grade 9 were included in the survey. The 2022 survey components (tests and questionnaires) were available in both computer-based and paper-based formats. This dual format enabled the majority of participating countries (two-thirds) to utilize the computer-based module, placing students in simulated real-life citizenship action scenarios. In these scenarios, students engaged in dynamic interactive tasks, some of which included feedback.

Some of the results of Bulgarian students, summarized by the Institute for Research in Education ([Гражданското образование в България | Институт за изследвания в образованието \(ire-bg.org\)](http://Гражданското образование в България | Институт за изследвания в образованието (ire-bg.org))) are as follows:

- Bulgarian students' scores are notably lower than the ICCS average, aligning them with peers from Cyprus and Colombia.
- After a relative increase in Bulgarian students' results in 2016 compared to 2009, we are now seeing a significant decrease.



Source: Institute for Research in Education

- The gap between the results of girls and boys is quite wide, in 2016 Bulgaria was in second place in this indicator after Malta, and now - in 2022 - Bulgaria has the biggest difference of 41 points.
- Family background and socio-economic background of students are among the factors that have the strongest impact on educational achievement. The gap between Bulgarian students in the two extreme categories - low and very high socio-economic and cultural status - is the largest compared to other countries in ICCS 2022.
- A third of 14-year-olds in Bulgaria are interested in political and social issues.
- 64% of Bulgarian students believe that democracy is still the best form of government.

- 4% think that the political system in Bulgaria is functioning well. Bulgarian students' trust in political institutions is low and has significantly decreased in 2022 compared to 2016.
- Bulgarian students view politics predominantly as a male domain. They show significant differences from their peers in other countries regarding gender equality, political participation, and the activism of both women and men. Notably, the index measuring Bulgarian students' support for gender equality is among the lowest in 2022.
- Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the citizenship competencies and attitudes towards citizenship participation among students in all participating countries.

The results of the study convincingly underline the need for a Global Citizenship Education curriculum in Bulgarian schools. Alas, with growing political instability and the rise of ultra-right, pro-Russian and “patriotic” coalitions, the education in Bulgaria becomes a hostage and whether any sensible improvements in the curriculum will be possible, remains to be seen. For the moments it may seem that Bulgarian educational reforms in this particular field are going backwards.

1.4 Banning of the "non-traditional sexual orientation" propaganda

Recently, the Bulgarian Parliament passed a law banning the *propaganda* and promotion of "non-traditional sexual orientation" in Bulgarian schools. The bill was sponsored by members of the radical pro-Russian “Vazrazhdane” (meaning “revival” party. Russia first passed a law 11 years ago banning "homosexual propaganda" aimed at minors. After the start of the war in Ukraine, Russian law outright banned "non-traditional sexual relations," which was used to drastically restrict the rights of homosexuals and LGBTI people in the country. Laws against '*LGBTI propaganda*' have subsequently also been adopted in Hungary and Poland.

The law in Bulgaria introduces a prohibition in the system of pre-school and school education to "carry out propaganda, promotion or incitement in any way, directly or indirectly, of ideas and views related to non-traditional sexual orientation and/or the determination of gender identity other than biological." Parliament also gave a definition of 'non-traditional sexual orientation' which is heavily influenced by the topic of homosexuality on Wikipedia.

The definition written in the law states that non-traditional sexual orientation is "different from the generally accepted and enshrined in the Bulgarian legal tradition notions of emotional, romantic, sexual or sensual attraction between persons of opposite sexes". The Vazrazhdane political party justified its proposal with the Constitutional Court's case law, which banned the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

At the same time, the Bulgarian Constitution proclaims that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights. "All citizens are equal before the law. There shall be no restrictions on rights or



privileges based on race, nationality, ethnicity, sex, origin, religion, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal and social status or property", Article 6 of the Main Law states.

1.5 Stakeholders

Global, Ecological, Development and Citizenship Education remain mostly in the non-formal education and are subjects of interest from a diverse range of stakeholders, including local, national, and EU-based political entities and foundations, public institutions like research institutes, Ministry of Education and Science (MES), youth agencies, university research centers, schools, teachers' unions and professional organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), the national network of cultural centers known as 'tchitalishte', libraries, public media, and students.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in supporting global and citizenship education initiatives. Schools often partner with NGOs to provide students with opportunities to engage in community projects and international exchange programs. The extent of involvement and the effectiveness of outreach efforts vary significantly depending on the target audience, as well as the resources, funding, and nature of the topics addressed by these entities. Among most prominent is the [Bulgarian Platform for International Development](#) (BPID), and all its sixteen members, acting together, as a platform, or separately, according to their specific target groups.

The most popular and widely used teaching resources are products of the BPID's member NGOs. Non-exhaustive list of resources includes the following:

- GE Resource Platform – LET'S LEARN! – <https://devedu.eu/>
- GE and SDGs Resources and Lessons – Get Up and Goals Project, DEAR – <https://getupandgoals.bg/resources/>
- Global Education– “World from our Doorstep” project [World from our Doorstep Practitioner Handbook – CDEC › Global Dimension](#)

2. Key policy documents

As evident from the brief introduction above, the key development education actor in Bulgaria is the Ministry of Education and Science (MES). Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as UN structures also play a significant role in introducing the very concept and substance of GCE in the country. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also some relevance in the matter.

2.1 Medium-term Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2020-2024 and the Programme for Global Education

Starting from MoFA and our Bulgarian development policy, the main document is the “Medium-term Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2020-2024” ([Портал за обществени консултации \(strategy.bg\)](http://strategy.bg)). It does state that: *“To ensure sustainable change, Bulgarian development policy will concentrate on raising awareness and creating active civil society, including through the opportunities of global education. The Programme for GE and Awareness Raising of Bulgarian Development Aid supports projects engaging the Bulgarian public and sensitising/informing it on the global challenges facing social, economic and environmental development. The Programme works with civil society organisations at the local and national level to promote strengthening the assertion of the universal values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law and enables the Bulgarian public to contribute positively to global development.”* (from Mid-Term Programme for Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid of the Republic of Bulgaria for the Period 2020-2024, Chapter Visibility of the Development Cooperation Policy). The development cooperation policy is an integral part of the foreign policy of the Republic of Bulgaria and, in accordance with Article 1(2) of Decree No 234 of the Council of Ministers of 1 August 2011 on the policy of the Republic of Bulgaria on participation in international development cooperation. It is implemented in synergy with the policy of the European Union (formulated in the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). In general terms, Bulgarian development cooperation assists partner countries to achieve the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), adopted by the United Nations in September 2015. Placing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at its core focus, the 2030 Agenda is a transformative policy framework for eliminating inequalities and achieving sustainable development globally. It balances the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, including key issues of governance and peaceful and inclusive societies.

In the “Mid-term Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2020-2024” there is a [Programme for Global Education](#) that is foreseen. Moreover, it was written by the Bulgarian Platform for International Development (BPID) in cooperation with other institutions some years ago but is pending approval by the MES and MoFA.

The document outlines Bulgaria's "Program for Global Education and Raising Awareness on International Cooperation for Development," which is proposed to serve as a strategic framework

for promoting Global Education and awareness of Bulgaria's development cooperation policy. The key aspects are as follows:

- **Framework and Goals.** The program focuses on educating citizens about global realities, fostering justice and human rights through Global Education. It incorporates elements such as Development Education, Human Rights, Sustainable Development, and Intercultural Education, aiming to integrate these themes into Bulgarian society.

One of its primary goals is to mobilize public support and increase awareness of Bulgaria's development cooperation and global challenges, such as poverty, climate change, gender equality, and youth employment.

- **Priorities.** The program aims to enhance awareness of Bulgaria's development policies and encourage public engagement in building a just and sustainable world. It seeks to build competencies in addressing global issues, foster critical thinking, and promote action-oriented participation among citizens.
- **Target Groups.** The program targets youth and educational institutions, civil society organizations, unions, informal networks, media, business entities, and migrant communities.
- **Institutional Support.** The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education and Science play key roles in policy implementation. They are supported by partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), educational institutions, and international organizations like UNESCO.
- **Tools and Monitoring.** The program is implemented through funding for projects aimed at Global Education, capacity-building initiatives, and public awareness campaigns.

Monitoring and evaluation are based on global indicators tied to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that education aligns with sustainable development, human rights, and social inclusion.

In summary, the program seeks to integrate Global Education into the national agenda, promote sustainable development, and foster active citizenship engagement in addressing global challenges.

Since the moment is approaching for developing the new "Medium-term Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period ""2025-2029", our hope remains that the Global Education programme will be accepted and endorsed by the respective ministries.

2.2 Ministry of Youth and Sports¹

¹ <http://mpes.government.bg>

Ministry of Youth and Sports is the Bulgarian official agency that in 2022 signed the new “European Declaration on Global Citizenship Education to 2050”, promoted by GENE – Global Education Network Europe, that was adopted in Dublin, Ireland. It marked the 20th anniversary of the “Maastricht Declaration”. This updated strategy outlines how education will inspire individuals and communities to act toward creating a fairer, more tolerant, and sustainable world for everyone.

However, after the change of the leadership in that Ministry, there is no continuity, nor visible interest on behalf of this institution towards the GCE. Interviews and focus groups with different stakeholders confirm this observation.

2.3 Pre-School and School Education Act of 2016, Ordinance 13 and citizenship values

The “Pre-School and School Education Act” of 2016 as mentioned above introduced significant changes in the philosophy and purpose of education in Bulgaria and defines school education as competency based. Thus, social and citizenship competences are defined as one of the primary groupings of competencies that pupils must learn during general education.

The PSEA defines twelve primary goals of pre-school and school education, at least seven of which are closely related to Global, and Citizenship Education. For example, one of the stated aims is to help students develop competencies for comprehending global processes and their interrelationships. Other educational goals for Bulgarian secondary education include acquiring the competencies required for effective personal and professional achievement, active and responsible citizenship participation in modern communities; developing competencies for sustainable development; understanding and implementing the principles, norms, responsibilities, and rights that come with EU membership; acquiring competencies for understanding and implementing democratic values, human rights and liberties; promoting tolerance and respect for diverse ethnic, national, cultural, linguistic, and religious identities among citizens; promoting tolerance and respect for the rights of children, students, and individuals with disabilities. This cluster of competencies that students must gain during their general education is one of the key groups of expected outcomes and the goal is to increase the activity and involvement of young people in political and social activities. Although there is no GCE in Bulgarian general secondary educational system, nongovernmental organisations and activists believe that there are all the prerequisites for it.

Finally, what gives hope to all organisations that advocate for modernising the Bulgarian education are the following sections of the law. In the PSEA, Section II. School Preparation - Nature and Content (In force since 14.11.2015) it is stated that *“In the process of school education, subjects from the field of global, citizenship, health and intercultural education, entrepreneurship, personal finance management and programming, protection of the homeland, population and environment, subjects that form national self-esteem, patriotic spirit and patriotism in children and students may also be taught, expanding and complementing content that is present in an integrated way in other*

subjects.” (article 5). Further, it goes that “General support for personal development shall include: ... Interest activities shall be organized for the development of children's and students' abilities and competencies, for the expression of their gifts in science, technology, arts, sports, global, citizenship and health education, and for the acquisition of leadership skills.” (Art. 181). It also states that “...the types and content of bullying and violence prevention activities shall be subject to an overall school policy, shall be developed independently by the school community, and may include:” ...among other things “addressing global, citizenship, health and intercultural education topics in class, interest and elective lessons”.

Following and being part of the PSEA, the Minister for Education and Science published “Ordinance 13 on Citizenship, Health, Environmental, and Multicultural Education” on September 21, 2016. This Ordinance defines the nature and aims of the learning outcomes that are required in schools, kindergartens, and personal development support centres. It establishes institutional policies to encourage these forms of education. Up to this day, the practice needs to follow.

Being an official policy document, the Ordinance defines the essence and objectives of citizenship, health, ecological and intercultural education in the following way:

Art. (1) Citizenship, health, environmental and intercultural education are interrelated and form an interdisciplinary complex aimed at the acquisition of social, citizenship and intercultural competences and competences related to health and the maintenance of a sustainable environment. (2) Citizenship education is aimed at the formation of citizenship consciousness and citizenship virtues and is related to knowledge about the structure of a democratic society, the rights and duties of the citizen and the skills and readiness for responsible citizenship.

“Ordinance № 13” outlines that one of the key objectives of Citizenship Education is to cultivate individuals who are autonomous and engaged, committed to upholding universal values, as well as the principles of democracy and human rights. It aims to prepare individuals to participate responsibly, creatively, and effectively in citizenship, political, and social life. Additionally, it seeks to develop an understanding of the institutions, structures, and processes of a democratic society, as well as the economic and political dynamics of a globalized world, enabling individuals to express their citizenship views thoughtfully and critically.

In analyzing the Ordinance content there are two themes that may be considered preconditions for future introduction of the GCE in Bulgarian formal education. Firstly, these are the main traits of the Citizenship Education, defined in the document – namely it being pragmatic, interdisciplinary, systematic, important to the everyday life of the students, with a global outlook, focused on the importance of pluralism, and using dialogue and discussion as learning tools. Secondly, this is the fact that citizenship competencies of pupils need to be developed during school education, and that these competencies are not to be taught as a separate subject (Ordinance № 13/21 September 2016).

Although not followed by practice yet in most of the schools, this Ordinance is the possibility, that coupled with principals’ and teachers’ enthusiasm and motivation allows more and more schools to introduce Citizenship and Environmental Education as an extracurricular activity or separate projects, usually run together with NGOs.



No other official policy documents in Bulgaria contribute to introducing Global and/or Citizenship Education in the formal education.

The international report “Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) in Bulgaria” (2016), by the Council of Europe, outlines the state of Citizenship and Human Rights Education in Bulgaria. It provides insights into the challenges and opportunities for implementing EDC/HRE in the country, although challenges prevail. The questionnaire is filled by Bulgarian MES. It presents a picture of a Ministry and government that are not prioritizing Citizenship Education and human rights. The hope remains that eight years after the report and following a probable evaluation of the introduction of the Citizenship Education in the 11th and 12th grades, GCE will be formalized in Bulgarian education in the coming years.

3. Stakeholder inputs

Every effort was made during this study to secure interviews from all responsible government agencies. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even having responsibilities for GCE in Bulgaria, was not available to an interview. Therefore, five interviews were conducted altogether, with the commitment of anonymity, with stakeholders sharing different perspectives on the topic of GCE in the Bulgarian formal educational system. All of the interviews were based on the semi-structured questionnaire provided by the research team.

3.1 Brief description of the methodology

The respondents were as follows:

- a government expert from the Ministry of Education and Science, Pre-school and School Education Content Directorate, responsible for Citizenship Education (from now on referred to as MoE). This Directorate is one of the biggest in the Ministry and assists the Minister in the development and implementation of the state policy in the field of school education; also develops and is responsible for the introduction and implementation of the state education standards for the curriculum, for general education, for special profile education, for assessment of the results of the pupils’ education, and for citizenship, health, environmental and intercultural education. The Directorate also develops framework curricula in school education, coordinates the development and is responsible for the implementation of curricula under the educational subjects in the general and special profile education, among others.
- a member of the Board of the Bulgarian Platform for International Development (from now on referred to as BPID). The BPID is a non-profit organization that unites the efforts of 16 NGOs to work for the solution of social, economic and environmental problems both in our

country and in the priority countries for Bulgarian development policy. The platform was established in 2009 after a 3-year preparatory period with the TRIALOG project partnership, designed to facilitate dialogue between old and new Member States of the European Union and countries of the Global South. All organisations that are members separately, as well as BPID itself work to raise public awareness on development policy issues. The Platform also lobbies for the application of the methods and principles of Global Citizenship Education, executing various projects on introducing Development Education in Bulgarian schools.

- a Geography teacher (from now on referred to as Teacher), with more than 20 years of experience, who is teaching children from 5th to 12th grade, participates in the National Committee that designs geography contests, trains Bulgarian team of students that represents Bulgaria in geography contests worldwide and is also an author of textbooks on Geography and Economy, as is the name of the subject in Bulgarian curriculum. The teacher is well acquainted with the substance of Development and Citizenship Education and is an advocate for it to be studied in Bulgarian schools.
- a representative of one of the political parties which has a designated position for Liaison with nongovernmental and civic organisations. This is also a party that openly declares and follows commitment to the civilizational values and ideals of developed democratic societies and the European Union. The idea of this interview
- was a consequence of the conversation with the Ministry of Education representative, when the author decided to pay closer attention to the political situation, since the will of the government in charge is the deciding factor whether new programs will be introduced in the school curriculum. a representative from an old NGO, member of the BPID, with many executed Development and Citizenship Education projects, programs and partnerships. This nongovernmental organisation focuses on children at risk to support them and develop their potential. Simultaneously, they teach all children how they, their decisions and actions have an impact on the overall world and on all other people living in it.

Although many of the shared opinions were somewhat similar, the variety of viewpoints was informative, notwithstanding the fact that we do not have Development and/or Citizenship Education in our curriculum for students aged 11-15 years old.

3.2 Integration of GCE in formal education – policies

The MoE representative did not see any integration of the GCE in formal education as a policy for this precise age group – 11-15 years. To quote: *“this is for me the crisis stage, the junior high stage from fifth to seventh grade, when students are hardly learning about issues related to global, not just global, but even citizenship education.”* He/She thinks that the presence of GCE topics for students 1-4 grades, as well the subject Citizenship Education for older students, 11-12 grade, is an achievement and hopes that maybe in the future more can be done for 11–15-year-olds.

In terms of documents and regulations, again, the MoE recognizes the “Education Act”, and secondary legislation, “Ordinance 13”, where there is a clear reference in the Citizenship Education annex, a very clearly spelled out text on Global Education. This is in its part of the social and citizenship competences.

He/She also mentions other interagency documents and working groups about misinformation, the problem of terrorism, the problem of migration and immigration. He recognises them as global challenges. One could say that these types of challenges have official documents that are related to that, but the expert would not say that they are related to Global Education or have any repercussions for school teaching.

The political party representative said that they are not involved in introducing GCE in formal education: *“...we do not bear responsibilities, but we share the core values of GCE, many global and citizenship topics that are in our platform”*.

The Teacher considers the main guiding policy framing documents to be the Geography curriculum, “Ordinance № 11 ” of 1.09.2016 on the evaluation of the learning results of students and the Sustainable Development Goals, as the latter shape the teaching content of everything that has to do with GCE.

Both NGO representatives consider mainly (and only) the “Education Act” of 2016 to be the policy document outlining policies, pertinent to GCE introduction in the formal system. One of them suggested that in order to introduce GCE in formal education, a strategic vision and planning is needed – a new and modern understanding of the purpose of Bulgarian education. And, unfortunately, such strategic reforms do not happen in Bulgaria to the short-lived political lives of parties. Four years remain the maximum of the planning span for each Minister of Education. Securing next elections and votes prevails strategic vision, even when it exists.

3.3 Integration of GCE in formal education – Implementation

According to MoE, the Global and Citizenship Education is currently present in Bulgarian formal education in two ways. The first, the direct way, is through the Civics curriculum. It's clearly there, although only for the last two grades, 11th and 12th. For those grades there is a clear theme of Development Education and clear expected outcomes related to Citizenship Education. The theme for these two grades is “Bulgaria and global issues”. And the expected outcomes are for students to make sense of the global nature of various environmental and demographic issues, as well as understanding global issues to make sense of social issues at the regional, national and global levels. Second, there is now also a clearly visible territory for Citizenship Education.

in the curriculum for fourth grade, in the subject of “Humans and Society”. Before the new law from 2016, the curriculum did not have this possibility. Across themes, it is also a matter for individual

teachers to follow the ideas of Global Citizenship Education. *“Following the curriculum should introduce students to issues of citizenship education.”*

The Teacher was less positive about it – *“...it is not studied. It is just being marked that there are sustainable development goals... we explain what the goals are...one or two hours”*. He/She shared similar to the MoE understanding that fifth grade is the point at which the foundation of understanding Global Citizenship must be laid. He/She also said that in a way these foundations are laid, even now, through Geography.

The political party representative was adamant that there is no political will for the GCE introduction in formal education. *“I do not see any political will or political understanding that this is a priority. Maybe many people will tell you this is a priority, that it is important. But the truth is that the priorities are quite different now”*.

He/She went on suggesting that there might be many papers and documents that she is not even aware of, *“but they are only on paper”*. In terms of informal education and NGO initiatives, he/she could think of many good examples, including some NGO and political parties promoted frameworks, such as the “Open Government Partnership Initiative”, but the party representative was not sure what happened with this initiative.

Both NGO representatives, who have vast experience in different programs and projects on GCE, implemented in schools, suggest that when Global and Citizenship Education is happening in schools, it is because of the willingness and commitment of the school principal or the teachers in the school. *“If teachers recognize that the topic is important to them and are curious about using it, it's in their hands to make it a thing.”* There is that opportunity. The law does not restrict schools, it gives them the option to choose it. The law or ordinances also do not encourage or promote the introduction of GCE topics, there is no such mechanism. What remains of most importance, then, is teachers' willingness and expertise. *“I mean, it's a very important point for teachers to be motivated enough, inspired enough to be able to use it and apply it.”*

3.4 Limitations and obstacles for the introduction and implementation of GCE in formal education

According to the MoE expert there is one major obstacle *“that is deeper and harder to overcome. It is not that we should not work in that direction, but the fact that we have very strong division between subjects in our educational system contributes to it in a large extent.”* Further, he/she goes on to say that the integration of different subjects into GCE will not happen soon. His/Her prediction was that maybe in ten years from now, as this was the amount of time that was needed for Citizenship Education to be introduced in 11-12 grades. The expert recognizes that many policies of recent years have been in that direction but that it is hard to break through because it is also about changing the attitudes of teachers and communities. However, he/she believes that it will still



happen. And then adds *“what always begs my questioning is at the expense of what other subject of study it will be introduced”*.

The Teacher shared that the main and insurmountable obstacle lies in the fact that GCE is not in the curriculum. There is one hour for that, any other hour that a teacher devotes to GCE will be at the expense of some other subject or equally important Geography matter: *“If you decide to spend two hours on global education, you have to take the second hour from something else.”*

Something that many respondents mentioned was political pressure. To quote the MoE expert: *“...but there are separate, so to speak, interests, coming and protected from certain political parties, where on the contrary... (they) basically want to have a patriotic education, without citizenship. How exactly is patriotic education done to people who are not citizens is another question.”*

The representatives of the non-governmental sector categorically outlined the first obstacle to be the lack of a “National Program for Global Education”. This is a policy document that has been discussed for years, initiated by the BPID, and debated trilaterally by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education and different NGOs. The adoption of such a program would increase significantly the visibility of the issue. There is, indeed, a high probability that GCE will no longer be perceived as wishful thinking but as highly desirable to implement in schools. For one of the NGO representatives this was unequivocally the first necessary step – *“... acceptance by the Ministry, by the state, commitment of the state to this, to the subject of GCE. Unless it is institutionally recognized it will not have the effect that we want it to have.”* The other activist was more skeptical, but did confirm the importance of such a policy document. He/She emphasized that in Bulgaria we are currently overcoming the lack of GCE in formal education only through personal motivation of individuals and devoted teachers. But we need legislation and strategic documents to make it more sustainable.

The political party representative sees obstacles twofold. Firstly, he/she believes our educational system to be very old, obsolete, conservative and rigid. On the other hand, he/she believes that there is no felt need among those who will benefit from it - students, parents, teachers. His/Her opinion is that people are generally not interested or see it as a need. *“May be most people just don’t know what it is or why is it needed.”*

3.5 Opportunities for the introduction and implementation of GCE in formal education

The MoE suggested that there are not many best practices for fifth to seventh graders but one, which is the national Citizenship Olympiad. This national competition has been held for 18 years now in Bulgaria. It is divided into four age groups and is not tied to a subject. Even though there is no subject of Citizenship Education in school for the age group of 11-15 years old, in the Citizenship Olympiad they can participate, as they fall into the second age group of grades - five through seven. This practically means that students who want to participate in this national competition, which

address Citizenship and Global Education issues, should study independently and usually they have school projects. According to the MoE expert, some of the projects are focused on more classical citizenship issues, but there are some that are related to ecological balance, global warming as well as some that are related to friendship. Students can choose countries for their Olympiad projects, for example African, European or other countries, including real activities implemented. None of the other actors interviewed mentioned or has even heard of the Olympiad.

The Teacher did not view the Olympiad as relevant or significant. In his/her opinion, the only meaningful approach is through the official learning programs (curriculum). Alternatively, interest clubs could be formed—inviting genuinely interested students to join. Within these clubs, students could explore and discuss Global Education issues.

Another opportunity, however distant, the MoE sees in the future positive evaluation of the ongoing Citizenship Education subject that is now available for the 11th and 12th grades. He/She also added that it is too early for an impact evaluation, since the Citizenship Education subject was introduced only five years ago. *“The possibilities are, I think, that what we are doing right now for 11th and 12th grades turns out to be good, and on that basis only we can, at least I think so, step up and introduce it to other grades.”* How many more years are needed was not discussed.

The political party representative sees opportunities in the mere fact that many of the topics and issues that GCE deals with are a sphere of interest for different actors in Bulgaria and that ensures that these topics will always be kept in focus. For their party, for example digitalization and globalization are priorities. He/She also mentioned that there is a plethora of interesting programs and initiatives led by NGOs and civic actors, which makes some of the GCE topics interesting for society.

NGO representatives mentioned different projects, executed under DEAR framework, as well as others, such as “North-South Connection” and “Get Up & Goals”. They both recognized the annual conference on Global Education, which has been held for eleven years in a row by the Bulgarian Platform for International Development and its members, not supported by Ministry of Education or any other governmental actors. The conference is already recognizable among schools, it is already a regular annual event that is expected by schools. They also mentioned that under a DEAR funded project in Bulgaria, NGOs made a Global School Scorecard, which is used in other European countries: *“...we have used the experience of the European partners so that we get closer to their criteria for a global school assessment.”* They shared that in some other European countries it is very prestigious to be a Global School. *“In Bulgaria we have done some pilot test assessments of schools to see where they are, how far they are.”*

One of the NGO activists considers that NGO representatives’ participation in working groups, at the Ministry of Education, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, where they put all their expert resources will at the end help get to the end product, which is the National Program for Global Education. He/She also outlined that most of NGO colleagues are working *pro-bono* on this. The other colleague was more sceptical, mainly because of the transitional nature of the governments and priorities in recent years. He/She did see the biggest opportunity in raising expectations of parents, students, teachers, general public of more contemporary, modern education, which includes GCE.

To sum up, much more work must be done, there is a long road ahead of us. The MoE expert asserted that we need some more positive examples, to serve as a foundation, on which the Ministry can step on for their next steps. To expect more, the expert said, especially today, when we have obvious problems, not only in our society, but geopolitically in terms of growing opposition from nationalistic values, will be futile. *“Nothing will be achieved if one wants everything, but through positive examples, one can more easily achieve better results, but one must not forget that one must work in such a direction, results cannot come without working in such a direction, one must lobby, not to rely only on the Ministry of Education, but one must actually work through civil society organizations as well, through the university community...”*.

3.6 Importance given to GCE and global issues and its relationship with the curriculum

According to the Teacher, who held somewhat anguished views on certain topics, *“nothing is important to the Ministry of Education... maybe apart from the financial dimensions...”*.

The MoE expert held more moderate, but not a different view. He/She suggested that the importance given to GCE and global issues is *“not very big”*. He/She then went on to say that it is a pity since it is very important, especially at the age 11-15 years as that is the age when students are starting to really and independently form their values. He/She clarified that obviously value orientation starts at kindergarten, but at that period there is still very little self-determination. According to him/her, the curriculum writers are obliged to give references to competences, in fact to citizenship and social competences. And since this is compulsory, it can be considered a first step, since every curricular subject must have some reference to social and citizenship competences and this has been done. How exactly should teachers nurture these competencies, how these curricular aims can be implemented remains to be seen, but the first step is there, on paper. There are not yet external or internal assessments of these competencies, has not been assessed to what extent what is made as a reference is actually happening. It is not being examined are students acquiring such competences. But the importance is still understood, and this is a valuable beginning, according to the MoE expert.

The political party representative shared a very strong view: *“It has zero importance, max 0,5 % importance.”* He/She then added: *“Nobody wants to change the system and protect democracy. It is not difficult to educate citizens, just we don’t want to do it. We prefer to live in this corrupt and cozy system and have thousands of excuses why we can’t change. I think the omnipresent and everyday corruption makes us apathic and lazy.”*

He/She did agree that there are a relevant number of teachers who do great things, teach citizenship values, undertake projects with students, but they are a drop in the ocean. According to his/her observations and experience most of the teachers are not as engaged as they should be. And most of the many young people in school are very badly educated on this topic. He/She posted a question about how Citizenship and GCE education is taught at universities.

The NGO representatives agreed that the Ministry is not interested in drastic reforms and is always cautious about changes in the curriculum. GCE, unfortunately, is at the bottom of the list of possible changes.

3.7 Recommendations from the actors

One of the proposals from the MoE is to make the Civics Olympics international. So far, there is no international Olympiad in Citizenship Education, unlike in philosophy, mathematics, biology and so on. They believe that such an international contest can strengthen GCE and popularize it.

The political recommendations are that politicians should be educated in Citizenship Education so that they can lobby for its introduction. And, alternatively, or complementary, people educated in GCE should become politicians.

In the same plan were the recommendations from one of the BPID members. He/She suggested that MoE needs more specialists who understand the subject. Objectively, the situation now is that in the Ministry there are no experts on Global Education. In addition, in the Ministry, Global and Citizenship Education are seen as the same thing. There is no recognition of the subject, there are no trained specialists. *“And as long as responsibility is diluted, there will never be meaningful work in this field.”*

The other NGO representative mentioned this too, but his/her recommendations were more in the sphere of raising public awareness as a first step, as well as introducing a university program on Development Studies. There is no such subject in any of the 52 universities in Bulgaria.

The Teacher recommendation was again in the field of teaching – to teach by example. *“We should start from us first, to be good role models for our students, including on global issues.”*

To conclude with the words of MoE expert: *“In fact, the recommendation is to work with teachers more because if they are not prepared nothing will be done”.*

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

Policy foundation exists but implementation is weak. Bulgaria has a legal and policy framework that supports citizenship and social competence development (e.g., Pre-School and School

Education Act, Ordinance 13). Among the main objectives of pre-school and school Education, as stated in the Education Act, namely Aim 11 is “acquiring competences for understanding global processes, trends and their interrelationships”. However, practical translation of these principles into curriculum and classroom teaching remains limited, especially for students aged 11–15.

Late introduction of Citizenship Education undermines reach. Citizenship Education is currently offered only in 11th and 12th grades, which are not part of compulsory education. This limits exposure for students who exit the system earlier and miss key competencies related to citizenship and global awareness.

GCE lacks institutional recognition. While the term “citizenship education” is embedded in national discourse, “global education” and “global citizenship education” remains marginal, often relegated to NGO-led initiatives without systemic backing from the Ministry of Education.

Dependence on individual teacher motivation. The implementation of GCE is often dependent on the commitment of individual teachers or school leadership. Without systemic support and integration, the reach and sustainability of such efforts are minimal.

High socioeconomic and gender inequalities in citizenship competencies. ICCS 2022 data show a significant disparity in citizenship knowledge based on socioeconomic background and gender, suggesting that the current system is not equitable in developing citizenship and global competencies.

Political resistance and instability are barriers. Legislative restrictions (e.g., on LGBTIQ+ topics), conservative political forces, and unstable leadership cycles within ministries hinder any progressive curriculum reform that GCE would require.

Promising practices exist but are isolated. Initiatives like the Citizenship Olympiad, NGO-developed school scorecards, Annual National Development Education Conference and informal education programs show potential but are largely fragmented and unsupported by overarching national policy.

4.2 Recommendations

Strategic & Policy-Level

- 1) To adopt and institutionalize a National Program for Global Education. The pending GCE program co-developed with BPID should be finalized and formally adopted. It can be embedded into the new 2025–2029 “Medium-term Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid Program.”
- 2) To expand Citizenship and Global Education should be expanded to earlier grades. GCE topics should be integrated into the curriculum for grades 5–8 (ages 11–15) at a larger extent. These are formative years for value development and should not be overlooked.

- 3) To ensure cross-ministerial commitment and accountability. Supporting the already established inter-ministerial working groups including MES, MoFA, Ministry of Youth and Sports, and representatives from civil society to guide and evaluate GCE implementation should be made a priority.
- 4) To create a dedicated GCE department or role in MES, employing or designating trained experts within the Ministry who can oversee, develop, and support GCE initiatives and ensure continuity regardless of political changes.

Curriculum & Pedagogy

- 1) To embed GCE competencies across subjects. Rather than creating standalone GCE subjects, integrate themes like sustainability, human rights, global interdependence, and citizenship participation into subjects such as Geography, Literature, History, and Social Sciences.
- 2) To introduce GCE and Development Studies as modules in teacher training programs and university curricula to build a pipeline of educators with relevant competencies.
- 3) To create clear guidelines and materials is the last recommendation built on the desk research and interviews with stakeholders. Develop official teaching materials and guides in cooperation with NGOs, tailored to Bulgarian context, and aligned with SDGs and the European Education Framework.

Awareness & Engagement

- 1) To increase societal understanding of GCE and its relevance through media campaigns, parent-teacher association discussions, and events showcasing student projects. Launching public awareness campaigns.
- 2) To encourage whole-school approaches and pilot programs. Recognize and support “Global Schools” through a national certification or recognition program. Start with pilot schools and scale up best practices.
- 3) To promote student participation through clubs and projects. This is not new, but fund and promote extracurricular activities and school clubs dedicated to GCE themes, with competitions, exchanges, and community projects.

Will conclude with the beautiful words of the BPID Leader: “... *I think Global Education is at the heart of having a global diplomacy. Between human and human, between humans and nature, between humans and earth.*”

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