https://doi.org/10.53656/voc26-1-2-01

Methodology & Experience
Методика и опит

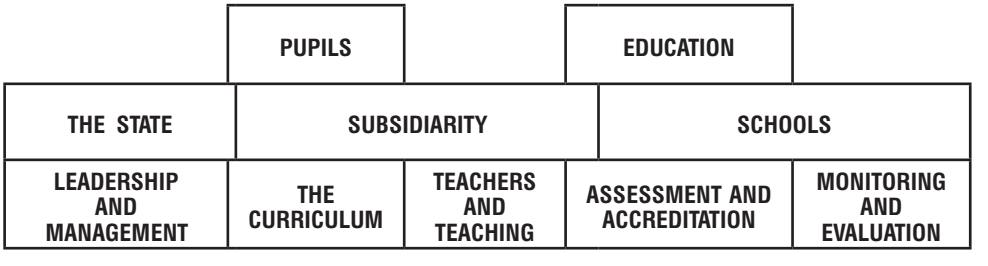
FOCUS ON "DOING THE RIGHT THING" RATHER THAN "DOING IT RIGHT"

The need for a "Paradigmatic shift" in the structure and organisation of the education system in Bulgaria

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Abstract. The author takes, as his starting point, two articles in which Kunchev is very critical of Vocational Education and Training in Ruse. In order to suggest that Kunchev's arguments apply equally to VET and General Education across Bulgaria, he then makes extensive reference to:

1. EU Education and Training Monitor 2025, Country Reports: Bulgaria;
2. OECD (2025), Education and Skills in Bulgaria, Reviews of National Policies for Education;
3. the report from the National Audit Office; and
4. the framework below



The author acknowledges the National Audit Office's conclusion that the Ministry of Education and Science and its Regional Education Directorates:

1. fail to provide quality education;
2. are not effective enough in overcoming problems; and
3. lack the sufficient administrative capacity needed for radical reform.

The author concludes that, in order to **"DO THE RIGHT THING"**, there is need for a **"PARADIGMATIC SHIFT"** in the structure and organisation of the education system in Bulgaria - a shift from an established view of education to a new framework due to new data, tools or ideas, altering how reality is understood and managed.

Introduction

Mitko Kunchev has published (at least) two articles that are very critical of Vocational Education and Training (**VET**) in Ruse.[1,2] In his most recent article "Несбъднатият план", Kunchev presented data on the 554 pupils who graduated from the vocational high schools in Ruse in 2025.

– 297 pupils (53.61%) progressed into higher education and Mitko suggested that they would be unlikely to ever start work in the speciality they studied at school.

– 112 pupils (20.22%) started work in the speciality they studied at school.

– 94 pupils (16.97%) started work in another speciality.

– On 51 pupils (9.21%) there was no information.

Mitko drew attention to two key sources of information:

1. pupils were admitted to particular vocational schools in accordance with the 2020 State Admission Plan; and
2. five years later only 20% of pupils started work in the speciality to which they had been allocated.

However, Kunchev also pointed out that neither the Ministry of Education and Science nor the Regional Education Department analyses and compares these two sources of information. He therefore concludes that:

a) there is a problem with the methodology of planning the intake; or
b) there is a lack of administrative capacity in planning.

That is to say, there is a problem in **"DOING IT RIGHT"!**

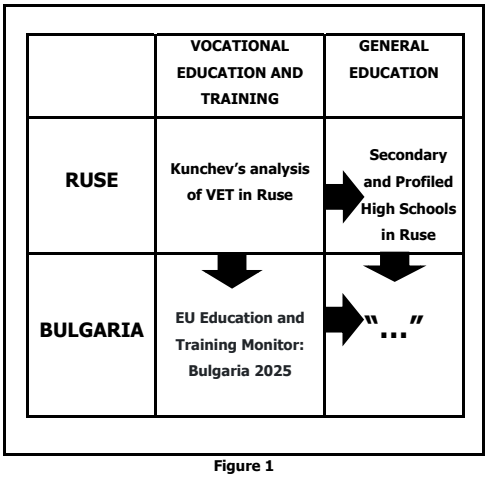


Figure 1

Figure 1 emphasises the fact that Kunchev's analyses focus on Vocational Education and Training in Ruse in 2022 and 2025. However, in the Country Report on Bulgaria attached to the Education and Training Monitor 2025, the

European Union has raised serious concerns about **VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING** across Bulgaria.

Despite high enrolment in medium-level VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING, the labour market relevance and quality of VET programmes remain low. **VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING** enrolment is above the EU average (56.1%, EU: 52.4% in 2023)[3], in part due to the higher number of available places early tracking and the territorial spread of **VET** schools. However, nearly half of **VET** pupils attend small rural schools lacking specialised staff and modern equipment (OECD, 2025)[4]. As a result, the employment rate of **VET** graduates (66.2% in 2024)[5] is significantly below the EU average (80%). In some regions, up to two thirds may not find work in their field of specialisation, pointing to a misalignment with regional economic needs.

EU Education and Training Monitor 2025, Country Reports: Bulgaria

Furthermore, the issues raised by Kunchev are not restricted to vocational schools; they also apply to secondary and profiled schools in Ruse. Although when the pupils graduate from secondary and profiled schools, they usually continue their education at an institute of higher education, they rarely study the subject they specialised in at school.

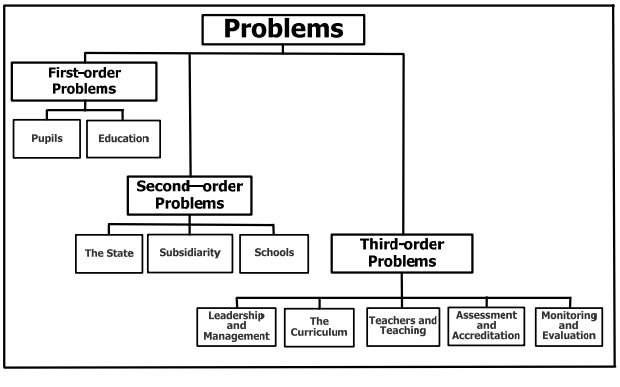


Figure 2

It is important to emphasise, as Kunchev does, that this is not a criticism of the individual schools, their school directors or their teachers, it is a systemic problem that is manifested across the education system in Bulgaria. Using the framework illustrated in **Figure 2**, and developed from earlier work by Budgell and Kunchev[6], this article attempts to:

1. itemise the problems faced by the education system in Bulgaria; and, at the same time,
2. articulate what it would mean to **"DO THE RIGHT THING"**.

Problems that the Bulgarian education system faced

First-order problems

Students

Bulgaria has the highest rate of child poverty and social exclusion in the EU, affecting 35.1% of children in 2024. Poverty, discrimination and weak family support services continue to drive avoidable family separation, disproportionately affecting Roma children and exposing them to higher risks of neglect, institutionalisation, and violence.[7]

Child poverty in Bulgaria remains both widespread and deep. More than 28% of children experience monetary poverty; one in five 15-year-olds reports skipping a meal because there was no money to buy lunch.[8]

– Infant mortality rate (6.5 per 1,000 live births in 2016) is twice higher than the European Union average;

– 9.5 per cent of live births are from adolescent girls and young women aged below 20;

– 13% of all births annually are to women without health insurance and limited access to health care;

– Many children do not receive nurturing care during the first years of life due to poverty, lack of responsive caregiving and insufficient opportunities for early learning from birth.[9]

– **Progress in raising learning outcomes has been slow and around half of 15-year-old students do not meet basic levels of proficiency in reading, mathematics and science.**

The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that about half of Bulgaria's 15-year-olds do not have basic skills:

– 53.6% underperformed in mathematics (EU: 29.5%);

– 52.9% in reading (EU: 26.2%); and

– 48% in science (EU: 24.2%).

At the same time, only:

– 3.1% of pupils were top performers in mathematics (EU: 7.9%):

– 2.2% in reading (EU: 6.5%); and

– 1.4% in science (EU: 6.9%).

Furthermore, only 52.1% of 16-19-year-olds have at least basic or above-basic digital skills.

And yet, despite the extent of child poverty and social exclusion, Bulgaria has a minority of intelligent, academically able young people whose needs are not being met by the education system.

Socio-economic factors remain a strong predictor of educational performance and achievement in basic skills.

In 2022, only 2.5% (EU: 16.3%) of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds obtained a good result (a level 4) in PISA in at least one subject. This was achieved by 33.4% of their advantaged peers (EU: 59.0%).

Education

"Education should be a means to empower children and adults alike to become active participants in the transformation of their societies. Learning should also focus on the values, attitudes and behaviours which enable individuals to learn to live together in a world characterized by diversity and pluralism".[10]

The education debate should exist on three levels.

1. Administrative – how do we schedule classes, how do we block time, how do we prepare and select the textbooks, etc.?
2. Pedagogical – what are the teaching methods, should pupils be self-directed, should there be project-based learning, should there be outdoor education, etc.?
3. "Why school?" Is its primary purpose to benefit the individual or the collective society?

The priority for education must be respect for the **agency** of the individual. Having **agency** and **choice** as a pupil is essential not only because every person is inherently and uniquely valuable, but also because democratic systems of governance depend on voluntary participation by thoughtful people.

In reality, for the pupils, the school is the embodiment of the education system which, in turn, is the embodiment of the state. As the pupils become older, therefore, the whole system must ensure that:

– the curriculum is structured and organized in such a way that the pupils have a choice of subjects and modules that they wish to study;

– parents have appropriate access to the school and detailed information about their child's progress.

Second-order problems

The state

Limited government capacity and co-ordination hinder strategic planning in Bulgaria. In 2024, the Bulgarian National Audit Office (described by SEGA[11] as "the only institution that has finally dared to speak out about the problems in the education system") concluded that

1. the Ministry of Education and Science categorically fails in its task of providing quality education;
2. the actions of the Ministry of Education and Science, in relation to ensuring quality school education, are not effective enough and significant additional efforts should be made to overcome the problems; and
3. the most frightening thing is the lack of sufficient administrative capacity needed for the radical reforms that can no longer be postponed.

Furthermore, the National Audit Office concluded that:

a) the lack of administrative capacity to analyze pupil performance data prevents the real measurement and assessment of quality and the proposal of measures to increase it;

b) the analyses of the results of Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training are incomplete and of poor quality.

According to the National Audit Office, this is a serious problem:

1. creating a "significant risk to achieving the goals of school education"; and
2. questioning the possibilities for taking action for change.

Limited government capacity and co-ordination hinder strategic planning in Bulgaria. Bulgaria still struggles to move from a short-term to a more systemic planning approach. This situation is complicated by Bulgaria's limited access to integrated data and weak analytical capacity within the government. These features make it difficult to strategically reflect on the system's needs and make long-term decisions. Bulgaria's strategic planning challenges relate to the limited capacity and weak co-ordination in the Ministry of Education and Science. Bulgaria's co-ordination and capacity challenges are prevalent across all levels of government, but especially at the central level.

Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is defined as the principle:

1. that a central authority (**the State**) should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level (**the School**);
2. of social organization that holds that educational issues should be dealt with at the most immediate (or local) level (**the School**) that is consistent with their resolution;
3. that **agency** and **choice** should be delegated to the local level.

In as much as education should ultimately be for the benefit of the pupil, the quality of the education system depends on delegating **agency** and **choice** to the level which is closest to the pupil. Consequently, it is **The State's** responsibility to determine the structure and organisation of the education system and the levels to which **agency** and **choice** and their rights and responsibilities should be delegated.

It is clear from what has been said that **Subsidiarity** does not form part of either **The State's** rhetoric or its practice in Bulgaria. At its core, the education system in Bulgaria remains a heavily centralised, top-down autocracy. The Ministry of Education and Science micro-manages every aspect of the education system.

Schools

The greatest challenge Bulgaria faces is depopulation. The country's demographic crisis has been worsening for years, with the population steadily declining over the past three decades. At its peak in 1987, the country's population stood at 8.976 million. By 2024, this had declined by over 2.2 million, representing a 27.5% reduction.

Despite the fall in the number of school enrolments too few schools were closed. This lack of intervention has given rise to a range of problems:

– a large number of surplus places;
– too many small schools;
– large two-shift secondary schools;
– high schools that are too small to provide a wide range of options in the curriculum;
– the retention of profiles; and
– difficulties in the recruitment of specialist teachers.

Furthermore, socio-economic disparities widen as pupils advance through the school system. Whereas disadvantaged pupils are twice as likely to be enrolled in **VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING**, the wide performance gap in PISA outcomes between pupils in general education and **VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING** (i.e. 68 score points) reflects not only lower academic achievement but also issues with the curriculum and quality in **VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING** schools. All this points to the need for a major overhaul of the structure and organisation of the education system in the years ahead.

Third-order problems

Leadership and management

High quality of **leadership** is fundamental to:

– school improvement;
– school effectiveness;
– achieving high performance; and
– bringing about change and innovation.

Far greater responsibility must be delegated to **School Leaders** and the principle of **subsidiarity** must become a more common feature of the education system in Bulgaria. However, school improvement and monitoring and evaluation are not sufficiently developed and aligned to support **School Leaders** in:

– improving the quality of education; and
– raising standards of achievement.

School Leaders in Bulgaria do not participate in mandatory school leadership training or induction and in-service training does not sufficiently focus on the quality of teaching. Furthermore, the professional evaluation of **School Leaders**, notionally introduced to strengthen accountability, does not consistently evaluate their contribution to:

– improving the quality of education; and
– raising standards of achievement.

This, combined with limited differentiation in responsibilities and salaries across career stages, reduces incentives for **School Leaders** to develop and apply strong leadership of the quality of education.

School Leaders responsibility for teacher appraisals and bonus allocations, which can detract from their formative role in teachers' professional development. This challenge is compounded by the lack of clear policies or guidance on in-school, formative appraisal processes; leaving **School Leaders** without the tools or expectations needed to provide effective, ongoing support through classroom observations and other developmental feedback mechanisms. [12]

The school curriculum

Attempts to reform the curriculum in Bulgaria can be characterised as a sequence of failed attempts!

1. Failed education reform ensures that transition remains fragile, thus creating political risks, while the market place suffers from a mismatch of skills sought and skills offered, thus undermining economic stability. Reforms fail under indecisive governments, lacking in public support, incapable of overcoming entrenched interests. [13]

2. The competence-based school curriculum, which was rolled out starting from 2016, was perceived as still heavily content-oriented and overly prescriptive. It was impacted by:

a. a lack of guidance and support for teachers;
b. insufficient teacher training;
c. inconsistent implementation approaches across regions;
d. the non-alignment of assessment practices; and
e. the rather low number of instructional hours.[13]

Institutionally, the Bulgarian education system has continually evaded reform by:

i. de-legitimating and side-tracking it; and
ii. entrenched interests in the Ministry of Education and Science and the Regional Education Directorates preserve the status quo.

Future attempts to reform the curriculum will have to begin with a major restructuring of the education system away from a heavily-centralised and state-run system, and towards competition and accountability, beginning with decisive de-centralisation. [12]

At the upper secondary level, pupils are placed into a wide range of schools with 11 different profiles at an early age. This, combined with high degree of differentiation between schools and profiles, is unusual and contributes to social stratification. This high degree of differentiation:

– makes it harder to maintain programme quality;
– confine pupils to narrower learning opportunities; and
– contributes to greater academic and social segregation.

In principle, pupils can move between profiles however, the delivery of profiles in separate schools and regulatory restrictions, effectively keep students in the profile they entered at the age of 14.

In an overhaul of the structure and organisation of the education system, Bulgaria needs to:

– reduce surplus places;
– reduce the number of small schools;
– reduce social and academic stratification;
– integrate schools to form bigger (6-form entry) schools;
– disestablish profiles and delay specialisation and concentrate on basic competences.

Teachers and teaching

While a new competency based curriculum was rolled out gradually, there is limited evidence on whether the quality of teaching evolved to:

1. improve the quality of education; and
2. raise standards of achievement.

On the contrary, the evidence that does exist suggests that didactic teaching with a focus on knowledge transmission is still the norm.

Limited practical experience during initial teacher training limits transition into and retention in the workplace. Only around half of trainee teachers enter the teaching profession and of those who do, a high proportion leave after their first year. Initial teacher training programmes are heavily focused on traditional teaching methods and subject knowledge, with limited emphasis on the quality of teaching. Furthermore, while the mentoring of newly qualified teachers is compulsory, it is not consistently implemented, with many schools not having the necessary training and resources necessary to provide high-quality support.

While Bulgaria has invested in promoting teachers' professional development, inadequate quality assurance and the limited use of data and evidence raise concerns about the impact of participation in improving teachers' knowledge and practices.

Although Bulgaria has made progress in improving teachers' participation in external training, it faces challenges in transforming the professional development culture within schools.

– **School Leaders** lack the capacity to plan internal training activities in a way that:

1. improves the quality of teaching; and
2. raises standards of achievement.

– Effective forms of collaboration with other teachers; for example, team teaching or peer observation, are rare.

Assessment and accreditation

Formative assessment practices are at an early stage of development and teachers' assessment literacy should be strengthened

Although Bulgaria has updated its regulatory framework for assessment to

include types of formative practice several factors limit the effective use of classroom-based assessments to support pupils' learning.

1. Regulations dictate that teachers conduct up to four traditional, and marked assessments per academic term for core subjects. This leaves little room and incentives for teachers to provide tailored feedback to their pupils and use assessments to inform teaching and contributes to entrenching a culture of valuing grades over progression in the mastery of competencies.
2. Specific training on competency-based assessment and guidance to support teachers in adapting their assessment practices remain limited. Furthermore, while instructional and assessment information has been increasingly made available to teachers, these are not practically oriented and focus on organisational aspects rather than the quality of teaching.

The validity of the State Matriculation Examinations should be improved

Bulgaria has made some progress in improving the reliability and security of the State Matriculation Examinations (Matura); however, some aspects of the validity of the Matura limit its use to assess learning against the curriculum.

The coverage of the Matura is comparatively narrow and very few pupils choose to sit the Matura in mathematics and other STEM subjects. Many of the questions and assessment criteria in the Matura continue to prioritise knowledge recall rather than the application of higher-order cognitive skills. Furthermore, the Matura's inability to discriminate levels of performance, particularly for entrance into higher education, explains why higher status universities set their own entrance examinations.

There is a lack of guidance, resources and capacity to:

– develop complex assessments that measure competencies; and
– introduce criterion-referenced assessment in order to provide results that are comparable over time.

This is further complicated by lack of clarity over the division of responsibilities for the Matura's development, administration and quality assurance between the Ministry of Education and Science's Directorate of Content and Centre for Assessment.

Monitoring and evaluation

Both external and internal school evaluation remain underdeveloped, resulting in relatively weak accountability for school quality

Despite the creation of the National Inspectorate of Education in 2018, external accountability remains limited due to ongoing resource and capacity constraints,

which prevent the NIE from conducting inspections of all schools within the intended five-year cycle. While the Ministry of Education and Science has taken steps to improve data availability, data sharing is highly regulated, and data remain fragmented within and outside the Ministry of Education and Science. Delays in implementing a comprehensive Education Management Information System (EMIS) further restrict:

– the use of quantitative data for monitoring school performance; and

– systemic monitoring and evaluation.

In the context of limited external oversight, school self-evaluation should be crucial for driving improvement from within, yet progress in this regard has stalled. Bulgaria does not have any guidelines or requirements for school self-evaluation. **School Leaders** can access their own administrative data but cannot compare themselves with schools with similar characteristics to better understand and address disparities in learning outcomes. **School Leaders** have limited training in quality management and incentives for school improvement, thus limiting attempts to:

– improve the quality of education; and

– raise standards of achievement.

Although Bulgaria has developed some tools to monitor the performance of the education system against national goals, these have limited functionality.

1. The Ministry of Education and Science regularly publishes administrative data and its specialised agencies produce thematic reports, but these are rarely made public.
2. Policy evaluation and system-level research are underdeveloped.
3. There is no dedicated public body responsible for research into and evaluation of the performance of the education system.
4. While the Strategic Policy Unit in the MES has taken over co-ordination of system-level research, its limited capacity and budget, as well as its lack of independence, undermine its ability to monitor performance of the education system.
5. There is an absence of a clear theory of change management linking the multitude of nationally and regionally funded initiatives.
6. The monitoring of reforms remains project-based focusing on outputs, rather than outcomes or impact.

DOING THE RIGHT THING WOULD NECESSITATE A "PARADIGMATIC SHIFT"

A shift from an established view of education to a new framework due to new data, tools or ideas, altering how reality is understood and managed.

Adapted from Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions

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