



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY

EDUCATIONAL INTEGRATION OF REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN: THE SITUATION IN BULGARIA AND THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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The right to education is endorsed by several international documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 1950, the Convention against Discrimination in Education of 1960, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

The specialised study of the educational integration of refugee and asylum-seeking children (RASC) in the Member States of the European Union¹, conducted in 2011 by the Center for the Study of Democracy, provides a thorough analysis in this area. With regard to Bulgaria, the main approaches, mechanisms and deficiencies in the system for educational integration of RASC were presented and recommendations for its improvement were given.

Main data

From 1993 to March 2012 in Bulgaria were filed 20 081 asylum applications, 17 per cent of which were filed by children. The number of persons with recognised refugee status and granted

KEY POINTS

According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) for 2011, Bulgaria reaches an average of 15 per cent of the internationally recognised standards in relation to policies on access to education, assessment of knowledge upon arrival and assistance during language learning.

The educational integration of RASC in Bulgaria is organised in two stages: preparation for school enrolment and integration into the public school system.

- The main focus is on the preparatory stage which ensures school enrolment. The second stage, during which the true educational integration of RASC takes place, develops in the public schools and is not supported by special programmes and additional resources.

- The studying of Bulgarian language is viewed as the main (and the only) element of the educational integration of RASC. Other particularly important aspects of educational integration like preparatory courses in the main subjects, participation of parents in the education process, providing school materials and appliances or mother tongue training currently remain unconsidered by the responsible institutions.

There is no systematic observation and data collection with regard to RASC presence and performance in the public school system of Bulgaria.

¹ Integrating Refugee and Asylum-seeking Children in the Educational Systems of EU Member States, Sofia – CSD, 2012. (in English) <http://www.csd.bg/artShowbg.php?id=15974>

humanitarian status was, respectively, 1 528 and 4 645.

The level of recognition of refugee status or humanitarian status for children is higher than that for adults. Eleven per cent of the children who applied were recognised as refugees (6 per cent more than adults) and 28 per cent were granted humanitarian status (3 per cent more than adults).

There is no systematic public data regarding the gender, age profile and the countries of origin of the asylum-seeking children.

In 2010, sixty-eight children filed applications for asylum in the country. Of them, thirty-eight (60 per cent) were in school age.

Most of the RASC arrive in the country without any official documents, certifying completion of school level. In 2009, their share was 92 per cent of the total number of RASC in school age who had arrived in the country.

According to the RASC school distribution list for the school year 2010-2011 provided by the Bulgarian Red Cross, the number of pupils per school varies from one to four.

The school with the largest concentration of RASC pupils for the school year 2010-2011 is public school N 149 Ivan Hadzhiiski in Sofia. A total of sixteen RASC were enrolled there in February 2011.

Main Aspects of the Integration of RASC in the Bulgarian Educational System

The educational integration of RASC in Bulgaria is organised in two stages: preparation for school enrolment and integration into the public school system. The institutions responsible for implementation of activities in each of the two stages are different. During the first stage of the educational integration the leading institution is the State Agency for Refugees /SAR/, assisted by the Bulgarian Red Cross /BRC/. During the second stage, the leading institution is the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science /MEYS/, assisted by the SAR.

I. Preparation of RASC for School Enrolment

The educational integration of RASC in Bulgaria is considered to start from the moment of refugee application registration and their accommodation in the Registration and Reception Centres of SAR. The preparatory phase of the educational integration concerns exclusively the study of Bulgarian language, assured by SAR and the Refugee-Migration Service at BRC. SAR's responsibilities include provision of Bulgarian language training, school enrolment test application and assistance for school enrolment. BRC offers a summer camp to motivate RASC and their parents for enrolment in the Bulgarian educational system.

According to the Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR)², children with registered applications who are in procedure are entitled to a compulsory three months of Bulgarian language training at the

² Updated SG issue 54 from 31 May 2002, in force from 1 December 2002, last amended SG issue 39 from 20 May 2011, <http://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135453184>

Integration Centre /IC/ of SAR. If necessary, for some children the course may be prolonged to six months.

The stage of preparation for school enrolment has the following specificities:

1) The training course at IC of SAR has two functions – it serves as a Bulgarian language course for newcomer RASC and as a study room for RASC already enrolled at school;

2) The training course, serving as a Bulgarian language course and a study room, accommodates a dynamic group of different ages, different educational level and different nationality. Children can join the course at any point of the year, according to the time they arrived in the country;

3) The training course, serving as a Bulgarian language course and a study room, is taught by one single teacher – a specialist in Bulgarian philology, who has the task to teach Bulgarian to children of different age, different educational level and different level of fluency in Bulgarian, as well as to provide help with different school subjects to RASC pupils attending different grades in elementary and secondary schools;

4) The Bulgarian language training at IC of SAR follows a textbook, designed especially for the needs of refugees. However, the textbook is designed for adults (not kids), it is printed in black and white and is at hand only for the teacher;

5) In the classroom at IC of SAR there is no audio-visual equipment and additional materials and appliances that would ease the process of language training and make it more attractive for the children;

6) Being located in a distant city quarter, the training course at IC of SAR is not attended by RASC, who live in other city quarters. There are no other preparatory language courses for RASC in Sofia.

Support programmes in the first stage of educational integration

Through its Refugee-Migration Service BRC organises an annual summer camp for RASC. The camp lasts two week, and its programme includes morning classes in Bulgarian language and free afternoons with extra-curricula activities. The group of children is mixed, including newcomer RASC from different countries of origin and children, Bulgarian nationals. The camp, organised by BRC, achieves successfully three important goals:

1) offers intensive training in Bulgarian language to newcomer RASC in a stimulating environment and improves their proficiency of spoken Bulgarian;

2) makes the communication between refugee children and the host society easier and motivates them and their parents to enrol their children in Bulgarian public schools;

3) offers an opportunity for experience in inter-cultural communication and tolerance for the Bulgarian pupils.

II. Enrolment of RASC in Bulgarian Public Schools

After completion of the pre-school enrolment Bulgarian language course at IC of SAR, RASC receive Bulgarian Language certificate which allows them to file a request for school enrolment test at the Regional Inspectorate on Education (RIE). A number of particularities should be noted with regard to the enrolment test and the procedure for school enrolment.

1) The present practice has no valid legal basis. It follows Regulation N 3 of 27 July 2000) on the procedures for reception of refugees in the

public schools of the Republic of Bulgaria³ which was effectively replaced in 2007 by amendment of article 26, paragraph 1 of the *Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR)*. The amendment replaced a previous regulation: “Children of age under 18 have the right to study in public schools of the Republic of Bulgaria by regulation set by the Chairman of SAR and the Minister of Education and Science” and gives a simple provision according to which RASC are given the rights of access to education identical to those of Bulgarian citizens.⁴

2) The school enrolment test at RIE of MEYS involves examination of Bulgarian language proficiency (for kids in the age of first to third grades) and in Bulgarian language and basic school subjects (for the kids in the age above third grade). The preparatory training that RASC received at IC of SAR however, involves Bulgarian language only. There are no additional courses on basic subjects like math, geography, etc. There is no training in the Bulgarian terminology, regarding these subjects. This explains the low results, shown at the school enrolment test.

3) The test for RASC held at RIE of MEYS is not based on a professionally developed test for assessment of knowledge

4) The present system of the school enrolment test determining the educational level of RASC leads to the systematic placement of children in classes several grades lower to those corresponding to their age. This practice often leads to the drop-out of those RASC who are enrolled in lower school grades.

³ Issued by the Ministry of Education and Science, updated SG, issue74 from 8 September 2000 <http://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/-549415424>

⁴ “Minor asylum-seekers are entitled to education and vocational training under the terms and conditions valid for Bulgarian citizens.”

III. Integration of RASC in the Public Schools System

1) At the time of a RAS child’s enrolment the school administration does not receive information about the level of his/her knowledge on school subjects, his/her profile and family environment. This complicates and delays the teachers’ work with children belonging to this group.

2) In the Bulgarian public schools there are no additional programmes, tailored to the specific needs of RASC. RASC follow the general curricula valid for their Bulgarian classmates.

3) There is no financing for individual consultations of RASC in the public schools. The teachers are expected to achieve results with RASC only in the frame of the general school curricula and credit hours.

4) Often pupils from the RASC group demonstrate different levels of knowledge of different subjects. Good knowledge of math and natural sciences are often accompanied with difficulties in Bulgarian language and humanitarian subjects. In the public schools system, however, there are no flexible programmes for provision of specialised assistance to RASC on subjects in which they are experiencing difficulties.

5) RASC enrolled at school suffer from chronic lack of school appliances and working materials which puts them in a disadvantaged situation regarding the training process. Refugee families in Bulgaria are entitled to modest assistance and have very small incomes that make parents unable to cover the costs for school materials.

6) Due to lack of knowledge of Bulgarian, parents of RASC are not in the position to help their children out with the school material. This increases the need for support programmes for RASC in public

schools.

7) At the moment the Bulgarian educational system does not provide good opportunities for mother tongue training to RASC pupils. The Bulgarian Public Education Law provides for mother tongue training in schools where more than thirteen pupils declare desire for the study of particular mother language. In the case of RASC pupils however, kids of the same mother tongue do not reach the number of thirteen in any school.

8) Due to lack of knowledge in Bulgarian, parents of RASC pupils cannot communicate freely with their children's teachers. School teachers in return are not able to communicate the difficulties or problems the children might be facing at school.

9) Teachers receive no support for communicating with newcomer RASC pupils whose language proficiency is at a very insufficient level.

10) At the moment there are no specialised programmes to assist the work of teachers with RASC. There are no specialised trainings in intercultural education or on work with children under stress or on teaching Bulgarian as a second language.

11) In the Bulgarian public schools there is a lack of understanding of the psychological or social condition of RASC pupils. Some of them are heavily burdened with domestic work (probably part of cultural practices in their home countries), while others appear to experience considerable social deterioration compared to their situation in their home countries. These factors, combined with the stress encountered during their long trip and the accommodation in the new country, need to be taken into consideration by the professionals who work with RASC at school.

The Case of Italy

The Italian system for integrating refugees and foreign nationals is decentralised and works through the network of the local municipalities.

Italian schools have the autonomy to make decisions and organise individual educational programmes for refugee and asylum-seeking children.

Italian schools are obliged to admit refugee and asylum-seeking children at any point during the school year.

It is an official rule that children from this group should be enrolled into grades, corresponding to their ages.

In order to be enrolled into school, children between the ages of six and fourteen years do not necessitate official diplomas or certificates for the completion of a grade in the country of origin, nor do they need official validation for their level of knowledge (for example, by taking assessment tests beforehand).

No particular Italian language level is required for the enrolment of refugee and asylum-seeking children.

Children over the age of fifteen may enrol in a secondary school grade corresponding to their age without proving their education level, but after assessment of their knowledge they have to simultaneously attend afternoon courses for adults (at the school) in order to receive an Italian lower-secondary diploma. The school education of RASC in Italy is supported by a system of additional educational services, granted on a project-based principle and managed by the local municipalities and financed by the Italian National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services.

The Case of Sweden

The local municipalities play a key role in the process of admitting, integrating and educating RASC in Sweden.

The educational integration of RASC and foreign nationals is based on the autonomy of the school to make decisions about the individual educational programmes of the foreign students.

No documents for the completion of an education level are required for the school enrolment of RASC. No Swedish language fluency is required.

It is a widely-accepted practice to enrol RASC in the educational level, corresponding to their age.

The educational integration of RASC into Swedish schools is based on a customised and flexible approach, which allows for the simultaneous attending of different grades (according to the level of knowledge in the different subjects), along with individual tutorials and additional Swedish language lessons.

RASC's customised educational programmes are determined on the basis of an adequate professional assessment of the level of knowledge in the different disciplines, which is done by the school itself.

The procedures for educational integration of RASC are an integral part of the procedures for integration of foreign children as a whole.

Main Recommendations

The necessary efforts to improve the policies and practices related to the educational integration of RASC in the country are focused in three main directions:

- 1) Ensuring access to education;
- 2) Assessment of the knowledge and establishment of the specific needs;
- 3) Quality of education.

I. Access to Education

Managed by SAR, the currently existing Bulgarian language course and after-school study room aim to address the educational needs of a small and dynamic group of RASC upon their arrival in Bulgaria. Although this structure has several shortcomings, it can be used as the foundation of a setting, which can become a good practice. For this purpose, the following changes are recommended:

1) The language course and the after-school study, which correspond to different educational needs and serve different target groups of RASC, should be separated and taught with different programmes.

2) By keeping the important functions of SAR to ensure the structural frame, financial control and professional advising regarding the special needs of RASC, the teaching methods and programmes of the language course and the after-school study room should be developed and supervised methodically by professional educational institutions such as MEYS and the Department of Language Learning – IFS, SU “Kliment Ohridski.”

3) The heterogeneous and dynamic profile of the RASC group (an average of six-seven to fifteen children per session at different ages, from different nationalities and staying for different periods) is a challenge that can be overcome through a special teaching methodology, developed by specialists in the field of education.

4) The currently existing preparatory Bulgarian language course should be developed in such a way that it corresponds to the requirements of the mandatory exam for school admission. Along with the learning the Bulgarian language, the course should expand its scope and offer a basic review of the subjects, included in the admission exam, and their respective terminology in Bulgarian.

5) The preparatory Bulgarian language course, conducted in the IC of SAR, should be equipped with audio-visual technology. The teacher and the children should receive the appropriate textbooks and educational materials.

6) The procedures for enrolling RASC in schools need an adequate legislative foundation. The current legislation for giving RASC access to education equal to that of Bulgarian citizens is not a working solution to the enrolling of RASC in schools – in practice, this legislation hinders the adequate access to education. It is worthwhile to consider the possibility to simplify the school enrolment procedure.

II. Assessment of the Knowledge and Establishment of the Specific Needs

1) It is recommended to develop a uniform exam for determining the knowledge level of RASC before enrolling them in schools.

2) It is recommended to prepare specialised reports on RASC's home environments and levels of knowledge in the different subjects. These reports should be shared with the school administration upon school admission while strictly adhering to the Law on Personal Data Protection. This would allow for the precise evaluation of the individual needs and the creation of adequate approaches when working with students from this group.

III. Quality of Education

The quality of the education, which RASC receive in the Bulgarian educational system, could be measured in the best way using the criteria of attendance and pass-rate. However, these criteria are not monitored.

It should be considered to introduce a number of measures, aiming to improve the quality of education of RASC in the Bulgarian public schools.

1) It is worthwhile to study the possibility of moving the preparatory stage of the educational integration of RASC into the public schools. After securing appropriate financing for the schools, such an approach would lead to a more effective inclusion of the children from this group into the overall educational process.

2) It should be further discussed to introduce additional (individual) Bulgarian language lessons for RASC in the public schools. In the Bulgarian legal system, there is Regulation No3 from 19 June 2009 concerning the conditions and order for ensuring free Bulgarian language education, as well as education in the mother tongue and culture, for children in the mandatory school age – children of citizens of EU member states, European Economic Area and Switzerland.⁵ Therefore, the normative act should be accepted in the same way for RASC.

3) It is worthwhile to consider the possibility of introducing resource teachers, with fluency in RASC's mother tongue, who would conduct consultations and tutorials in the frame of the public school.

4) It is necessary to provide specialised textbooks and school appliances for teaching Bulgarian as a second language to foreign children and RASC in the Bulgarian state schools.

5) It is necessary to consider and introduce programmes for effective help with homework assignments for RASC. This is particularly advisable given the fact that the existing study rooms in the public schools are not able to meet the specific needs of RASC.

6) It is recommended to conduct specialised training for teachers of RASC in important areas such as: teaching Bulgarian as a second language; intercultural education; working with students, who have undergone trauma.

7) Mechanisms for interpreting during the meetings between parents and the school administration should be ensured. The parents'

⁵ Issued by the Ministry of Education and Science, updated SG, issue 50 from 3 July 2009, <http://www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2135638669>

ability to communicate with their children's teachers is essential for the integration of RASC in the schools. Thus, one possible solution is to use trained cultural mediators with knowledge in the respective mother tongue from the RASC's community.

8) Refugee and asylum-seeking students at all ages should be granted free school appliances, including pro-bono funds for purchasing clothes and pocket money for food at school.

9) The introduction of a system for regular monitoring of the pass-rates of RASC in the public schools would allow for the formulation of adequate recommendations for improving the system and the adaptation of the teaching methods and techniques according to the needs of RASC.

10) It is necessary to conduct thorough research related to the possibility of applying the existing alternative forms of education in the Bulgarian state educational system (individual study, independent study and evening school) in the cases of older RASC, who are currently placed into primary school grades.

11) It is recommended to provide RASC with psychological support in the public schools, regardless of the number of students enrolled at the school. The introduction of professional psychological consultations for RASC in the school environment would guarantee that their needs are better understood and addressed later in the education process.

Recommendations Regarding the General European Context

The state should take the main and leading responsibility for the educational integration of RASC.

It is necessary to introduce long term and sustainable measures and programmes for the educational integration of RASC.

The national policies and recommendations in the field of the educational integration of RASC should allow for alternative application and adaptation according to the regional and local context.

The measures for educational integration of RASC should surpass the traditional concepts of integration, based on learning the local language and culture.

The principle of early selection in the educational process should be avoided in the case of RASC, who are at a disadvantage compared to their peers from the local nationality.

The open and decentralised educational systems allow for better opportunities to address the specific needs of RASC.

It is necessary to conduct periodic evaluations of the educational integration of RASC.