

THE TEACHER AS A CONSOLIDATING FACTOR IN THE CONTEMPORARY BULGARIAN DIASPORA

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Abstract

The Bulgarian legislative system establishes teachers as a key factor in shaping individuals. Additional requirements for their training and qualifications are also specified, with certain pedagogical skills being required in addition to basic training. The development of education in the Bulgarian diaspora provides an interesting example of the role of teachers in society. This concerns the formation and development of the contemporary (new) Bulgarian diaspora, whose profile shows different motivations for leaving their homeland, as well as additional intentions to return in the future. Of interest is the reception of teachers among the Bulgarian diaspora in Cyprus, where, in addition to their didactic functions, teachers—as the examples show—prove to be key factors for inter-dialogue (community-host country), for maintaining identity through continuous participation in systems of ongoing qualification (the country of origin), as well as through involvement in additional organizational tasks. Since schools abroad, like those in Cyprus, are designated as Saturday-Sunday schools, the principals are also teachers at the school, mainly in the humanities. At the same time, they also have an additional profession, depending on the situation in the host country. Thus, schools abroad are run by a teacher who, in addition to organizing the educational process – attracting students, developing curricula, selecting additional teachers, ensuring contact with the responsible institutions in Bulgaria – also acts as a key figure in the Bulgarian community, who performs the main tasks for its consolidation.

Keywords: *Contemporary emigration, new emigration, teacher, Saturday-Sunday schools, identity, holidays.*

1. Introduction

The Bulgarian legislative system (Law on Pre-school and School Education) establishes the regulatory requirements for teacher training and professional qualification. Persons with higher education in the relevant specialty and with mandatory pedagogical qualification are appointed to the position of "teacher" (<https://www.lex.bg>). In a special section entitled "Improving the qualifications of teachers, principals, and other educational specialists," the ZPUO sets out the principles governing the qualification process. According to the legal texts, qualification is a continuous process that is organized and conducted by higher education institutions according to programs prepared by them. Its purpose is to support the improvement and updating of the knowledge and skills of teachers and other educational specialists and to provide them with modern approaches and teaching methods. Higher education institutions issue a document (diploma) certifying the level of professional qualification obtained.

On the other hand, Regulation No. 15 of 2019 introduces the state standard for the professional development of teachers, principals, and other educational specialists. The state standard specifically outlines the basic requirements for the position of "teacher": *planning, organizing, and conducting the educational process; applying effective educational methods and approaches in line with the individual needs of children and students; effective use of digital technologies; assessing the progress of children and students in acquiring key competences; analyzing the educational results and competencies developed by children and students; providing general and additional support for the personal development of children and students for their full inclusion in the educational and social environment; cooperating and interacting with participants in the educational process and all interested parties; participation in the conduct of national external assessment, state matriculation examinations, compulsory state examinations, or state examinations for the acquisition of professional qualifications and/or the acquisition of legal capacity for professions whose practice requires such qualifications; preparation of examination materials for assessing the knowledge and skills of students in the relevant subject or module; career guidance and counseling for students; development and implementation of projects and programs; participation in*

professional mobility and professional communities; developing and implementing strategic documents related to the institution's activities; protecting the life and health of children and students, including during organized extracurricular activities or interest groups; maintaining and storing mandatory documents; conducting consultations with students and parents; creating a school culture oriented towards tolerance, cooperation, and mutual assistance; conducting or participating in research activities in the field of preschool and school education. (Regulation No. 15 of 2019, <https://lex.bg/>)

As can be seen, the normative texts relating to the job characteristics of teachers in Bulgarian legislation present them as key figures, endowed with the tasks of educating and preparing students, but also with the implementation of a number of organizational goals. In this regard, and as practice shows, teachers are presented as an essential socialising factor – it is well known that the atmosphere in the classroom depends on their skills and competences. On the other hand, the public authority of teachers testifies not only to their personal abilities and qualities, but also to the degree of maturity of society and the formation of sustainable ethical values.

The law also provides for the establishment and development of Bulgarian schools abroad, known as Sunday schools. The initiative for their creation is left to civil society organizations of Bulgarian communities abroad.

Decree No. 90 of the Council of Ministers on Bulgarian Sunday schools (adopted in 2018 and supplemented in 2022) regulates the status of Sunday schools, specifies the commitments of the state, and sets out the requirements for teachers in schools abroad. Article 1, paragraph 1 states that the Bulgarian state shall provide funds from the national budget to support the teaching of Bulgarian language and literature, Bulgarian history and civilization, Bulgarian geography and economics – subjects that preserve and develop national identity. Other issues relating to the activities of Sunday schools and their primary role in preserving and developing the ethno-cultural identity of Bulgarians abroad are also regulated.

The Decree introduces the legal provision that the requirements for holding the position of "teacher" in Bulgaria also apply to holding the position of "teacher" in Bulgarian schools abroad: the teacher carries out educational activities, but at the same time, his or her priority task is to fulfill his or her public commitments in relation to the processes of preserving and developing identity.

The legislative framework gives teachers in Sunday schools abroad the freedom, opportunities, and prospects to expand the scope of their immediate tasks, to support students in their efforts to master the Bulgarian language, Bulgarian history, Bulgarian geography in a foreign environment, and to understand and assimilate the moral and aesthetic values and traditions of both their country of birth (Bulgaria) and their host country. In this way, from the point of view of the normative documents, the teacher emerges as an important factor both in the development of the individual, especially in terms of their ethnocultural identity, and as a driving force in the processes of consolidation and cultural elevation of the Bulgarian diaspora (Decree No. 90 / <https://www.lex.bg/>).

Decree No. 90 also stipulates that every newly established Sunday school must be entered in a register at the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science. A review of this register confirms the upward trend in their number, which, on the one hand, testifies to their paramount importance for the development and consolidation of every Bulgarian community abroad. On the other hand, it also indicates the increased demands on teachers and their ability to unite the community both horizontally and vertically.

In a study on the history of Bulgarian Sunday schools abroad, Boyan Kulov highlights the quantitative growth of Sunday schools abroad and formulates the creation of a new phenomenon: *about 10% of schools that teach Bulgarian language, history, geography, and culture are located outside its borders and are spread across all continents with permanent populations* (Kulov, 2016). It turns out that Sunday schools contribute not only to the preservation and development of Bulgarian identity, but also, indirectly, testify to the formation of the Bulgarian diaspora, the settlement of migrants, and their adaptability in the host country.

2. Sunday school traditions

The historical traditions of Sunday schools date back to the era of Ottoman rule. Sunday schools were established in churches and monasteries with the aim of providing students with basic literacy and skills in simple mathematical operations—addition and subtraction. As for the teachers, they were clergymen and there were no special requirements for their training other than the necessary religious knowledge. In the first decades of the 19th century, when the first secular school was opened in Gabrovo (1835), the clergy, who also served as teachers, possessed more competence, took an interest in secular knowledge, and systematized it in textbooks and teaching aids for the needs of Bulgarian secular education.

With the development of secular education, more and more secular figures who had received their education at renowned schools in Istanbul or abroad were appointed as teachers. It is striking that teachers from this period were distinguished by their high level of humanities education – they spoke languages,

were familiar with classical and modern literary works, but were also interested in the natural sciences. Since the Bulgarian Renaissance period is associated with the development of modern Bulgarian culture, teachers became the driving force behind new ideas, stimulating the organization of the people's energy into a unified whole.

On the other hand, the period of Ottoman rule was also a time of the first mass migrations of Bulgarians and their settlement in other countries. When settling in the host country, as researchers point out, the first institution they introduced was the school as a defining sign of identity. The teachers in these schools were also immigrants from Bulgaria, but over time, teachers who had graduated from renowned schools in the host country or abroad were also appointed. In addition to teaching, teachers in these schools in the diaspora write and publish textbooks and teaching aids, create poems and works of fiction, and translate into their native language. Significantly, these literary and creative texts are distributed in Bulgarian territories. After the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, a large part of the graduates of these schools, as well as their teachers, returned to Bulgaria and participated in the building of the new state.

Therefore, from the very beginning of its establishment, the Bulgarian diaspora identified itself as independent, creating a school where the native language was taught above all else. In turn, teachers took on various tasks—educational, but also cultural and social. They contributed to the preservation and development of cultural memory. But teachers were also the driving force behind the consolidation and modernization of society. Thanks to teachers, contacts with other ethnic groups and other civilizations and cultural spaces intensified. A careful reading of the biographies of Bulgarian teachers who worked in schools of the Bulgarian diaspora during that period shows that most of them (like those living in Bulgarian lands), in addition to teaching, were involved in large-scale cultural activities – they were revolutionaries, thinkers, writers.

That is why teachers during the Bulgarian Renaissance were regarded as important cultural figures, endowed with the additional significance of spiritual guides and leaders, and bearers of the understanding of heroism and self-sacrifice in the name of national dignity and honor. It is no coincidence that decades after the Liberation, in 1922, the then Bulgarian Minister of Education, Stoyan Omarchevski, introduced the holiday "National Revivalists," dedicated to the spiritual leaders of the nation, the majority of whom were teachers.

Therefore, it is traditional in Bulgarian culture for teachers to perform a variety of cultural roles, to be bearers of high knowledge and competence, but also people with high morals and social commitment.

3. Bulgarian emigration in the 20th century and the development of schools abroad

Researchers studying Bulgarian emigration point out that in the 20th century, Bulgarian migrants settled in Central and Eastern European countries, as well as in North and South America (Borisova et al., 2017). In Hungary, for example, Bulgarian emigrants established their own organization, the Society of Bulgarians in Hungary, which in 1918 founded the Hristo Botev Bulgarian school in Budapest (100 Years of Bulgarian School // <https://frognews.bg/obshtestvo/minalo/100-godini-balgarsko-uchilishte-budapeshta.html>).

On the other hand, in North America (Canada and the US), in just three decades (1908-1940), Bulgarians opened dozens of schools, equal in number to the newly established church institutions (Kulov, 2016). The teachers were Bulgarians, part of the diaspora, and their task, as in the previous period, was to provide education in their native language. In addition to their educational activities, teachers devoted themselves to cultural initiatives—publishing newspapers, helping Bulgarian immigrants integrate into their new environment, contributing to the cultural advancement of the community, etc.

In the second half of the 20th century, state schools were also established abroad, in Budapest and Bratislava, areas with a high concentration of Bulgarian immigrants. The practice was to send teachers of the native language from Bulgaria to support the efforts of the diaspora to preserve and develop Bulgarian ethnic and cultural identity. The teachers sent were highly educated, some of them poets, fiction writers, and publicists.

Therefore, the establishment and development of Bulgarian schools abroad and the assignment of cultural tasks to teachers in these schools has become a tradition that is supported by Bulgarian diaspora organizations in their respective countries of residence, and in the second half of the 20th century, with the partial participation of the Bulgarian state.

A new stage in the development of Bulgarian schools abroad began in the second decade of the 21st century, when Bulgaria started subsidizing the teaching of Bulgarian language, history, and geography in Sunday schools. In 2024, there were 396 Bulgarian Sunday schools around the world, located in 42 countries (Ivanov, 2024). These Sunday schools were established as a result of a civic initiative in places with a relatively large community of Bulgarian emigrants, whose children attend both the schools of the host country and, at the end of the week, Bulgarian Sunday schools.

The expansion of the network of Sunday schools requires the provision of teaching staff to take on the education of students in a foreign environment. For several years now, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, universities have been organizing programs for pedagogical qualification and continuing education for teachers in Bulgarian Sunday schools abroad. The diaspora is responsible for organizing candidates for teachers in Bulgaria who will be prepared for teaching in schools abroad.

4. The educational and cultural role of teachers in the Bulgarian diaspora in Cyprus

According to a number of theoretical observations, migrants, including teachers, are bearers of their own identity (ethnocultural), but also acquire an additional one – that of the host country. This is why researchers talk about transmigrants (Shiller et al, 1992: 1-24), who are characterized by multiple identities: identity by birth and identity acquired from the country of residence. In her study "The Island of Aphrodite – 'Home' for Many Bulgarians," Yelis Erolova emphasizes that this type of transmigrant is characteristic of Cyprus and is due to a variety of factors. Among the transmigrants, the researcher also mentions teachers who come to Cyprus either through mixed marriages or economic migration, etc. (Erolova, 2013).

Bulgarian Sunday schools in Cyprus have similar characteristics to other Bulgarian Sunday schools around the world. The representative organisations of Bulgarians in Cyprus include teachers from Bulgarian schools in their management structure, with teachers also being assigned the responsibility of school principals.

The principal of the largest Bulgarian school in Cyprus, Nikola Vaptsarov School in Nicosia, Ms. Lidia Stefanova, is a geography and economics teacher. Ms. Stefanova is an active member of the Union of Bulgarians in Cyprus and one of the founders of the school. In addition to the principal, the school's team includes nine teachers: Bulgarian language and literature, Bulgarian history, Bulgarian geography and economics, choir singing, and folk dancing. All teachers have a university degree in the subject they teach and the necessary teaching qualifications, acquired in Bulgaria.

In addition to Bulgarian, a prerequisite for practicing the profession of teacher in Bulgarian Sunday schools is proficiency in Greek, and knowledge of a Western language, most often English, is desirable. Teachers offer extracurricular activities such as folk dancing, singing, creative and art activities. Assistance with preparing lessons for Cypriot schools is also offered. Additional Greek, English, and Russian language classes are organized, which are also attended by adult migrants, some of whom are mobile migrants. Thus, teachers work with students of different age groups – from the youngest (preschool groups) to their parents, who assist in the process of their adaptation.

In parallel with the programme approved by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, teachers are developing additional lesson plans focusing on the cultural links between Cypriot and Bulgarian traditions and values: family values, historical contacts between Bulgaria and Cyprus, links between the Cypriot and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches, etc. This supports the development of cultural dialogue and interaction. The teachers, led by their principal, actively develop international cooperation. Together with their students, they participate in festivals and festive parades, initiate meetings with guests from Bulgaria and abroad on national and international cultural topics (BU "N. Vaptsarov" // <https://www.bgschoolnicosia.com/>).

Another director of a Bulgarian school in Cyprus is Ms. Zhivka Milova. Four other teachers work at the Narodni Buditeli School, located in Paralimni, Famagusta. (<https://www.bgschoolparalimni.com/>). Ms. Milova graduated with a degree in history in Bulgaria and also holds two master's degrees in education and management. In addition to being a principal and teacher, Ms. Milova is the vice-chair of the Bulgarian Cultural Association in Cyprus, an organization of Bulgarian immigrants who have settled in the Famagusta district. Teachers regularly participate in continuing education courses organized by the Bulgarian state, improving their skills and competencies for working with students in a foreign environment.

Field studies conducted in September 2025 provide grounds for the observation that teachers in schools abroad should be regarded as key cultural figures who, in addition to their educational role, also play a significant socializing role in the diaspora and in the host society. In their managerial role as school principals, teachers organize the educational process. For example, Ms Milova is a teacher of Bulgarian history and civilisation, teaching the programmes approved by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science for this subject. At the same time, however, her students attend Cypriot schools, and some of them are children from mixed marriages. With a view to promoting intercultural dialogue, Ms Milova introduced an additional study of the diachronic contact zones between Cyprus and Bulgaria, using the possibilities offered by modern technologies. As a result of the educational activity with her support, the students create a documentary film about the secrets of Famagusta, the hidden history of Cyprus, and the Bulgarian traces from the past and present, which wins prestigious international awards. Therefore, the teacher takes on the role of driving the trilateral dialogue: community - Bulgarian state - host state.

Another characteristic feature of teachers is that, in addition to their educational and cultural tasks, they also pursue important social goals. The example of Ms Milova is indicative. As a representative of the diaspora, she is the author of journalistic articles, analyses and commentaries on Cypriot culture, and works as a regular correspondent for Cyprus for the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency. These publications establish an important link with her country of birth, present the achievements of the diaspora in Cyprus, and support Bulgaria's state education policy towards Bulgarians abroad by highlighting unresolved problems and emerging issues.

Previous studies on the educational situation in Bulgarian schools in Cyprus (Erolova, 2013) have highlighted an interesting fact: unlike the educational situation in Bulgaria, mobile migrants of Roma origin enrol their children en masse in Sunday schools and they successfully complete the relevant educational levels. This issue is still subject to further in-depth research.

5. Conclusion

The focus on the role of teachers in schools abroad is not accidental. It illustrates – in a categorical way – the historical and cultural continuity with ideas and trends related to the public perception of the role of Bulgarian teachers (especially from the era of the Bulgarian Renaissance). On the other hand, it turns out that, in addition to their educational tasks, teachers are also burdened with the mission of implementing the cultural programs of the diaspora: they are responsible for preserving and transmitting national cultural memory, and for developing skills for constructive dialogue within and outside the community, as studies on the role of teachers in the contemporary Bulgarian diaspora in Cyprus convincingly show.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Scientific Research Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria for the support of the research under the project "Bulgarian Communities Abroad after 1989: Return to the Roots" contract No. KP-06-N90/3 of December 10, 2024.

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