

ANNAMÁRIA VICSEK

MINORITY EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC  
OF SERBIA – A SUCCESS STORY  
WITH CHALLENGES

**Abstract**

Minority education in Serbia dates back to and relies on the policies and practices inherited from the former Yugoslavia, and there is a rather elaborated and sophisticated system of minority education which relies on two strong pillars: one pillar is the right to full education in one's mother tongue and the other is acquiring the state language to a satisfactory level at the same time.

The paper is more of a reflection on the current status and challenges of minority education from the viewpoint of the author who at the time of writing was serving as state secretary in charge of minority education at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. Therefore, the paper should not be considered an academic approach on the matter.

**Legal Framework of Minority Education**

The foundation of the right to minority education is embedded in the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, which dedicates an entire section to human and minority rights.<sup>1</sup> Among other human and minority rights, the right to preservation of specificity of national minorities is also determined (Article 79). Moreover, the right to education in minority languages in all kinds of educational institutions is also defined in the same article of the Constitution. Article 20 of the Constitution determines that the attained level of human

---

1 Official Gazette of RS, No. 98/2006, Section II. <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/74694/119555/F838981147/SRB74694%20Eng.pdf>

and minority rights must not be decreased. This gave a strong reasoning against any legal attempt to restrict minority rights in the last few years.<sup>2</sup>

There are two laws that define the rights of national minorities and their national councils: the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities<sup>3</sup> and the Law on National Councils of National Minorities,<sup>4</sup> both of which were adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia in 2018. The first one regulates, among others, linguistic rights and the right to education in one's native language, while the latter one has sections that describe the responsibilities and competences of national councils of national minorities in four areas: education, culture, official language usage and public information. These two laws are very specific from another viewpoint as well: while ordinary laws proposed by the government in the four areas mentioned above can be adopted by the parliament if the majority of the attending members of parliament vote for them (i.e. the simple majority of votes is needed), the adoption of minority-related laws, such as the two laws in question, have to be voted for by the majority of all 250 members of parliament, regardless of how many of them are present at the time of the voting. This difference in the requirement of adopting laws shows some type of superiority of minority-related laws. Therefore, all other laws have to be aligned with the minority laws, and the attained level of minority rights in the four areas cannot be reduced.

The Education Development Strategy in Serbia 2020<sup>5</sup> discusses under section III the education of particular categories of students, and within those, national minorities are addressed as a particular category. It is stated that the education of national minorities is an integral part of the education system and that all strategic measures are to be applied to the education of national minorities as well. According to the Strategy, quality education has to be provided for all. In case of national minorities, this means high quality education in their native languages in order to assure the right to preserve national and cultural identity, but at the same time enabling the integration of national minorities by providing them the possibility to acquire the state language. The strategy recognizes that some of the measures

---

2 The Parliamentary Group of the Alliance of the Vojvodina Hungarians at the Parliament of the Republic of Serbia has used this reasoning when proposing several amendments to laws in the parliamentary procedure. One of the examples is the amendment on the Law on Higher Education which was proposed in September 2018 and which was eventually adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia which was originally submitting the Law proposal: <http://www.pasztorbalint.rs/hu/modositasi-inditvanyok/afelsooktatasrol-szolo-torveny-modositasarol-szolo-torveny-eljarasban#.W8lyf2gzbiU>

3 [https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon\\_o\\_zastiti\\_prava\\_i\\_sloboda\\_nacionalnih\\_manjina.html](https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_zastiti_prava_i_sloboda_nacionalnih_manjina.html)

4 [https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon\\_o\\_nacionalnim\\_savetima\\_nacionalnih\\_manjina.html](https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_nacionalnim_savetima_nacionalnih_manjina.html)

5 "Official Gazette of RS", No. 107/12, <https://erasmusplus.rs/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Strategy-for-Education-Development-in-Serbia-2020.pdf>

impose additional costs. For example, classes with smaller numbers of students, printing of a fewer copies of textbooks, and development of curricula for additional school subjects are of particular importance for the preservation and development of the national and cultural identity, but they might result in additional costs. Financial aspects of minority education are yet not shown as a separate item in the state budget, so the surplus cost of minority education within the state education budget is yet to be determined.

In addition to the aforementioned legal acts, there are several laws defining the education system on all levels, and in all aspects of education,<sup>6</sup> and all of them have to be and are indeed aligned with the aforementioned constitutional and other legal determinants. Consequently, the right to education in minority languages is reflected in the Law on the Foundations of Education, the Law on Textbooks, the Law on Pre-School Education, the Law on Primary Education, the Law on Secondary Education, the Law on Higher Education, and the Law on Pupil and Student Dorms as well. The significance of these laws is immense because, on the one hand, they determine the right to education in one's native language, and on the other hand, they guarantee the employment of speakers of minority languages in institutions that provide education in minority languages, which is an important element of minority rights and is aligned with the Constitution (second paragraph of Article 77.) and with the Law on Employees in Public Institutions.<sup>7</sup> Both of these documents define affirmative actions for the employment of members of a minority. The Constitution states that the representation of national minorities shall be taken into consideration when hiring in public institutions on national, provincial and local levels as well. In addition, the Law on Employees in Public Institutions suggests that if two people with the same qualifications apply for a position, the person who speaks a minority language has to be granted priority.<sup>8</sup>

Besides legal determinants of the Serbian government, the education system of the Republic of Serbia has to comply with international legal agreements that the country has signed and ratified. Such agreements are the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities,<sup>9</sup> ratified in 2001, and the European Charter for Regional and Mi-

6 All laws and by-laws determining education are available in Serbian on the Ministry's website at the link: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/dokumenta-i-propisi/zakonski-okvir/>

7 Official Gazette of RS No. 113/2017: <http://demo.paragraf.rs/WebParagrafDemo/?did=412859>

8 All four of the amendment proposals of the Parliamentary Group of the Alliance of the Vojvodina Hungarians, which refine the matter of prioritizing members of national minorities when employing in public institutions, were adopted in the parliamentary procedure: <http://www.pasztorbalint.rs/hu/modositasi-inditvanyok/a-kozzszolgalatokban-foglalkoztatottakrol-szolo-torveny-elfogadva#.W8mOYG-gzbIU>

9 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007cdac>

nority Languages,<sup>10</sup> ratified in 2006. Since their entering into force, the government has regularly reported about their implementation.<sup>11</sup> Recommendations regarding the reports give a strong basis for actions for improvement.

The Action Plan for the Realization of the Rights of National Minorities<sup>12</sup> (hereinafter AP), which was adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in 2016, is a very important document within the Negotiating Chapter 23.<sup>13</sup> Section 6 of the AP for Realization of the Rights of National Minorities discusses several issues related to minority education that need to be improved. The reports<sup>14</sup> on the AP provide data on the implementation of the actions prescribed by the AP. The considerable delays in almost all areas give grounds for the review of the AP, and the potential amendments should give a steady basis for future improvement of both the implementation of the actions and the reporting procedure.

Some of the delay can be justified by the rigidity of the AP, and the fact that some determinants of the actions have not been taken into account when the AP was drafted. Eventually, during the implementation it became evident that the action could not be fulfilled precisely the way it had been defined in the document. For example, there are sections about the support for minority education through developing the linguistic competences of teachers who teach in minority languages. This seems reasonable, considering that only a limited number of universities provide teacher training in minority languages, and therefore, teachers who speak minority languages sometimes have difficulties with the specific terminology in certain subjects, because they have acquired teacher training in Serbian. In addition, there is a certain number of teachers whose native language is a minority language, so it would be logical if they taught classes in minority languages regardless of the language of their training, but their linguistic competences in the minority language are

10 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680695175>

11 Previous report on the Charter is available at [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Report/EvaluationReports/SerbiaECRML2\\_en.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Report/EvaluationReports/SerbiaECRML2_en.pdf); however, after the recent mission in 2018 the Committee of Experts is preparing the accurate report after meetings and interviews were held with all governmental stakeholders.

12 [http://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/prilog\\_fajl/akcioni\\_plan\\_za\\_sprovođenje\\_prava\\_nacionalnih\\_manjina\\_-\\_sa\\_semaforum.pdf](http://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/prilog_fajl/akcioni_plan_za_sprovođenje_prava_nacionalnih_manjina_-_sa_semaforum.pdf)

13 The Republic of Serbia became a candidate for European Union membership in 2011. In the EU Negotiating Framework there are 35 negotiation chapters which determine the conditions Serbia has to meet in reforms of the national legislation, administration and institutional infrastructures. Chapter 23 covers Judiciary and fundamental rights, and there are two action plans relating to this Chapter: the Action plan for Chapter 23 and the special Action Plan for Realisation of the Rights of National Minorities, both adopted in 2016. Further information: <http://www.eu-pregovori.rs/eng/negotiating-chapters/>

14 All reports are available in Serbian and English on the website of the Office for Human and Minority Rights of the Government of the Republic of Serbia: <http://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/en/node/21794>

not satisfactory, especially in written language. In order to ensure quality education, the best qualified candidate should teach any subject, at any level, in any language. But if the school does not find a qualified teacher, another, less qualified teacher can be hired temporarily, until a better one applies for the position. At the moment, there is unofficial information but no statistical proof that there are under-qualified teachers employed by schools, and the Ministry of Education is putting serious efforts in gathering data to improve this matter. In terms of the AP, this is just the first step towards quality improvement of minority education, but it is evident that the deadlines proposed by the AP cannot be kept.

One of the most difficult actions in the Action Plan is the realization of bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries whose minorities have full education in their native language (Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia). Most of these countries already have some type of memoranda with Serbia on different levels, e.g. Intergovernmental Joint Committee between two countries consisting of all ministries working on different issues that touch upon education or minorities, or Joint Projects between universities of two countries that support teacher training of the minority in the particular language. It would be time-consuming to work out the bilateral memoranda as envisaged by the Action Plan, because it involves other countries' governments, which sometimes have different visions of the cross-border collaboration with other countries. These are only some of the reasons why the delay in the implementation of the AP is understandable. The revision of the AP should give recommendations on how to modify the actions, the deadlines or the indicators defined by the AP.

## **Models of Education in and of Minority Languages**

The Law on the Foundations of the Education System states that national minorities can be educated in their native language or bilingually. Even though all national minorities have the same rights and same opportunities in education, in practice, minority education is realized differently, depending on the number of the members of certain national minorities and also on other specificities of the national minority. There are three models of education in and of minority languages in Serbia:

*Full Education in Minority Languages*

Full education for national minorities in their native languages is provided in 8 languages: Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Hungarian, Rumanian, Ruthenian, and Slovak. These eight national minorities have the possibility to have all classes in their native languages with the same curricula as the students who choose their education in Serbian language.

Even though numbers of students are gradually dropping year by year because of the worsening demographic tendencies, the percentage of students who attend education in minority languages remains fairly solid compared to the number of students enrolled in education, a little over 5%.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, despite the fact that the number of students who attend education in Bosnian and Hungarian is similar (12000 and 13000, respectively), education in Bosnian language is provided in 21 schools whereas education in Hungarian is realized in 72 schools. This shows the difference in geographical spread of minorities: Bosniaks are mainly situated in and around Novi Pazar, Prijepolje and Tutin, while Hungarians are spread out all over Vojvodina, with percentages of Hungarians in the local population varying between under 4% (Novi Sad, Zrenjanin) and over 80% (Senta, Ada, Kanjiža, Subotica, etc.).

It is interesting to further observe the data on numbers of schools providing minority education: out of 1240 public schools in Serbia, 1114 schools (i.e. 89% of the schools) provide education in only one language. This data counts for schools with monolingual (Serbian or any minority language) education. Besides Serbian (1077), there are 12 Albanian, 8 Bosnian, 8 Hungarian, 4 Rumanian and 4 Slovak monolingual schools, and one school where education is provided in Ruthenian only. These schools might seem to segregate minorities, but the truth is that these schools operate in municipalities and areas where the national composition make monolingual education reasonable: these areas have the largest proportions of minority inhabitants, so this practice should not be considered as segregation. 122, or 10% of the schools are bilingual, which means that they provide education in two languages. Most of them provide classes in Serbian and Hungarian (68), and there are bilingual schools that, in addition to Serbian, provide education in Bosnian (18), Rumanian (12), Slovak (12), Croatian (5), Albanian (4), Bulgarian (2), and Ruthenian (2) languages. There are three trilingual schools, two of which have classes in Serbian, Hungarian and Slovak, and one school offers education in Serbian, Hungarian and Rumanian.

---

15 Internal data in the information system "Dositej" of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.

The curricula are the is the same for the majority of subjects for all students, regardless of the language of instruction. The only significant difference is the subject native language and literature. It is designed particularly for the given minority language, and is not a simple translation of the curriculum for the subject Serbian language and literature. Also, the curriculum for literature in minority languages somewhat differs from the curriculum of Serbian students, because minority students read Serbian authors translated into their mother tongue, and in addition to that, they learn about works of authors who originally wrote in a minority language. There is a category of subjects that are considered to have particular significance to national culture: those are the subjects that can have topics that relate to the history, culture or other specificities of the national minority, e.g. history, geography, music, and arts. The curricula of these subjects are also somewhat different in minority languages from the curricula used in education in Serbian, because in addition to the general topics they get an extra 30% for national-related content that is specific for the particular minority. This additional content is another way of providing the right to preservation of specificity of national minorities.

*Education in Serbian with the Option of the Subject  
„Mother Tongue with Elements of National Culture”*

There are some national minorities who cannot opt for full education in their native language because of the small number of their members (e.g. Macedonian, German, Bunjevac and Slovenian minorities). The Vlach (Or Wallachian) minority does not have a standardized written language yet, therefore it can only be taught as oral Wlach with elements of national culture. There are minorities that do not have qualified teaching staff who could provide education in the particular minority language: neither the the Bunjevac, the Czech, the Roma, the Macedonian nor the Ukranian have university level education in their language for teacher training yet, nor is there a faculty for those languages at any university in Serbia. Therefore, there could not be any primary or secondary school level education provided in either of those five languages, regardless of the number of students who would opt for it. These groups of students attend school in Serbian language, alongside with a certain number of students of the aforementioned eight minorities in the first category, who, despite their option for native language education, still choose education in Serbian. All students who opt for education in Serbian have the opportunity to study the subject mother tongue with elements of national culture, which is an optional subject.

Practice shows that attending these classes will not give full linguistic competences in the given language, unless the family uses the same language at home, since only two classes per week are hardly enough to acquire full competencies in any language. Still a considerable number of students (around 11,500) opts for this subject each academic year, and this number is rising not only because of the growing number of students who apply for the subject, but also because there are new languages introduced as Mother Tongue with Elements of National Culture. In addition to the languages previously mentioned in this section, Czech and Ukrainian are also being taught, and German will soon be introduced as minority language. Until now German was only taught as a (mostly second) foreign language alongside with English, French and Russian, but once the new curriculum is adopted, German as mother tongue with elements of national culture will be available as optional subject for the German national minority, which traditionally lives in Vojvodina.

### *Bilingual Education*

Even though the law provides legal basis for bilingual education, opting for this model of minority education is not practised widely. The decree on bilingual education recognizes bilingual education as in Serbian and in a foreign language (practised in both primary and secondary schools as Serbian–English, Serbian–French, Serbian–German and Serbian–Italian bilingual classes) or as in minority language—as mother tongue—and in a foreign language (Hungarian–German). However, the decree determining bilingual classes, mixed in the state language and in the minority language, yet has to be drafted and adopted.

The Action Plan for the Realization of the Rights of National Minorities proposes the introduction of new models of minority education and bilingual education. The state language combined with a minority language could be one of the introduced models. However, there have been some controversies around the topic, and bilingual education has been highly disputed. Thorough research<sup>16</sup> has proved that, if not realized properly, bilingual education can lead to assimilation and the disappearance of minority education. This negative outcome has happened in Slovenia and Croatia where minority education was realized mainly as bilingual education, as a result of which minority education gradually dropped down and eventually disappeared from numerous schools. Keeping in mind these

---

16 Göncz Lajos, *A magyar nyelv Jugoszláviában (Vajdaságban)*. [The Hungarian Language in Yugoslavia (Vojvodina)] Budapest – Újvidék: Osiris Kiadó – Fórum Kiadó – MTA Kisebbségkutató Műhely (1999) <http://real.mtak.hu/24410/1/AMagyarNyelvJugoslaviaban1999.pdf>

threats and tendencies, some national minorities in Serbia (Albanians, Bosnians, Croats, Hungarians and Slovaks) voice their protest quite strongly against bilingual education. However, there are minorities that would gladly opt for bilingual education if it was allowed. Romanians, for example, do not have qualified teaching staff in the upper grades for certain subjects, so in some schools most subjects are taught in Rumanian but some are taught in Serbian. These classes are legally considered not bilingual, but regular classes with minority instruction, because this practice is simply using the option given by the law to hire unqualified teachers until qualified staff is found to be hired. However, Bulgarians opt for bilingual education, and for the first time in recent years, bilingual education was approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development in a school in Dimitrovgrad starting from September 2018 upon request of the National Council of the Bulgarian National Minority. This practice shows that the legal framework can and should take into account the particularities of national minorities, and the opinion and standpoint of the national councils should be considered and accepted, as they legitimately represent the best interest of the national minorities.

## **Textbooks in minority languages**

Textbooks for minority education are provided in minority languages. The Law on Textbooks offers three options for minority textbooks. Most of the textbooks published in minority languages are the translations of the approved Serbian textbooks. However, this can be applied only for those subjects for which the curricula are the same in each language. For subjects such as mother tongue, textbooks have to be written, approved and published as original because the curricula are different. Subjects that have sections of particular national significance (such as art, music, geography and history), and thus might have a somewhat different curricula, are partially translated and partially written as original; the additional 30% content that is of national significance is being written as original.

There is also the opportunity for textbooks to be imported from countries where the same languages are spoken, and those imported textbooks have to be approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, just like any other textbook. The most important component in the procedure of approving imported textbooks (besides making sure that they comply with regular textbook standards) is to check to what extent they comply with the curricula in Serbia for the particular subject and particular grade. Since there is often a significant difference between the Serbian curricula and the

curricula of countries in the region, imported textbooks usually do not reach the required 70% of compliance with the Serbian curricula, and therefore they cannot be approved as textbooks in schools, but they can be used as additional teaching materials by the teachers.

The Law on Textbooks,<sup>17</sup> which was adopted in 2018, is of great importance for minority textbooks, since this version of the law has brought back the category of textbooks printed in a reduced or limited number of copies, which applies for textbooks in minority languages and secondary school textbooks. This category had been eliminated by the previous 2015 Law on Textbooks. Now the new version offers the establishment of a Centre for limited-print copies, and as soon as the Centre starts working, all missing textbooks in minority languages will be printed by the Centre upon demand of the national councils of national minorities submitted to the Ministry.

The procedure of approving textbooks very much involves the national councils of national minorities. If a publisher agrees to translate an approved textbook into a minority language, the application document submitted to the Ministry has to include the written consent and positive opinion of the particular national council to the translation. National councils also have a significant role in lobbying with publishers, both public and private, in case there are missing textbooks in the particular minority language after the first round of application and after the catalogue of approved—and ready to be printed—textbooks is submitted to the Ministry. If after the negotiations no publisher is determined to print the minority textbook, the Ministry delegates this duty to the public publisher, which then has the obligation to print the textbook in the minority language.

## **The Role of the National Councils of National Minorities in Minority Education**

The national councils of national minorities are self-government bodies of national minorities, which represent the particular minorities in four areas: official language usage, education, public information and culture. They take part in some procedures of decision-making, have the power to establish institutions, or can partially or fully take over founders' rights of institutions from the state, province or municipality.

---

17 <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon-o-udzbenicima.html>

In some aspects of education, national councils of national minorities have the competencies to give opinion, to propose, or to give consent. According to the law, national councils can propose members of the school boards or give opinion on the candidates for directors and also on the yearly programs of schools where education is conducted in a particular language. This way the national councils of national minorities can influence the decision making process and the governing and managing of public educational institutions on all levels.

One of the most important roles of national councils is to be found in procedure of approval of classes where there are less than 15 students enrolled. In case a school demands the approval of a class that has fewer enrolled students than required by the decree on the financing of schools, the national councils have to give a written consent of support for the approval. For schools in Vojvodina, it is the Provincial Secretariat for Education that has to pre-approve these classes before the Ministry gives final approval for them. Regarding secondary education, national councils have an effect on the decision of the minister by giving their opinion on which areas of secondary vocational education should be starting first grades in the next school year. Besides these roles, the previously described responsibility of national councils is also significant in the approval procedure of textbooks in minority languages, since they approve the translations of Serbian textbooks and negotiate with the ministry regarding missing textbooks.

National councils differ in sizes and programs of functioning. In this regard, the Hungarian National Council has a unique and highly elaborated system of support within all four areas of its competences, but this paper only addresses education. The elaborated system of educational support by the Hungarian National Council is partially possible because the Hungarian minority is one of the largest among all minorities in Serbia, and since the state budget financing is determined by the number of members of the national minorities, the Hungarian National Council gets considerable support from the state budget. The other—even more significant—portion of funds of the Hungarian National Council is the financial support provided by the government of Hungary as the kin-state, through the Bethlen Gábor Fund. These funds are transferred directly to the Council, which then distributes the support according to its Educational Strategy<sup>18</sup> on all levels of education.

It is worthwhile to mention a few actions of the Hungarian National Council, since they have proved to be a very significant support for the persistence of the Hungarian language in the recent past. At the preschool level, parents are handed out brochures with

---

18 [http://mnt.org.rs/sites/default/files/attachments/oktatasi\\_strategia.pdf](http://mnt.org.rs/sites/default/files/attachments/oktatasi_strategia.pdf)

information about the advantages of native language education. When children enter primary school, a school-starter-package is given to every first grader, which is a significant support for the parents, since the packages contain all school supplies a student needs in the first grade. In addition, the Hungarian Government provides a 22,400 HUF scholarship in Euros to families who enrol their children in educational institutions with Hungarian instructions at all levels from preschool to university. Moreover, besides the already mentioned support provided throughout Vojvodina, some municipalities that have fewer numbers of minority students elaborate complex support systems, which considerably encourage families to enrol their children in Hungarian education.<sup>19</sup> The Council provides school buses in places where there are not enough students to provide classes in Hungarian, and transports these students to places where they can attend classes in their mother tongue. Furthermore, the Council provides teachers for after school classes to help the students with their homework and tutor them, so they do not have any school-related obligations at home. This is a particularly important support for ethnically heterogeneous families, especially when the mother does not speak Hungarian. In these cases, it is likely that they would not enrol their child in Hungarian education without the homework support and tutoring being provided in the school. Great emphasis is put on the development of the quality of minority education: preschool teachers and primary and secondary school teachers are offered teacher trainings financed by the Council to improve their linguistic and teaching competences in the mother tongue. The Council has a deliberate support system at the higher education level through scholarships and mentor programs; the mentors are students in advanced years with good grades and they provide support for first year students in academics and everyday matters.

---

19 In the early 2000's the number of Hungarian students in six primary schools in Novi Sad (including its suburban villages Budisava and Rumenka), which until then provided Hungarian instruction, gradually dropped to about half. In 2008 there were around 20 students altogether in Hungarian classes, and by September 2010, the Nikola Tesla primary school in Novi Sad could not start first grade in Hungarian language because of the lack of students, and a year later the primary school Rumenka could not start first grade in Hungarian language either. In 2009, the Project for Protection of Hungarian Education in Novi Sad (Az Újvidéki Magyar Oktatásért Projekt), supported by the Education Board of the Novi Sad branch of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, was launched to save Hungarian education in a town where the Hungarian population had dropped to under 4%. The actions included: establishing a Hungarian nursery; providing free seminars for preschool and primary school teachers in Hungarian; organizing free-time activities; parent-baby clubs; playhouses; summer camps for Hungarian children and families; organizing presentations for parents to promote Hungarian instruction schools, etc. In addition, other forms of support were provided and financed by the Hungarian Rákóczi Alliance, by the Hungarian Government, and by the Hungarian National Council. As a result, the number of students has been steady and not dropping in the last couple of years: there are constantly about 36–40 first graders who choose Hungarian education in and around Novi Sad.

The Student Dorm Európa Kollégium in Novi Sad—funded by three entities: the Európa Foundation, the Hungarian National Council and the Government of Vojvodina—is a unique establishment managed by the Council. It houses about 350 students who study at the University of Novi Sad, and also provides a very complex and elaborated system of specialized college activities, ranging from cultural programs to academic courses, including lectures on national identity and community-centred activism. The aim is for these young people to become competitive and competent citizens of the Hungarian minority after they graduate.

## The Status of the State Language within Minority Education

One of the most important elements of minority education in Serbia is the matter of teaching the state language for minority students who attend school in minority languages. This is actually one of the reasons why Serbia's minority education is often recognized as uniquely sophisticated and one-of-a-kind in the region.<sup>20</sup>

The education system in Serbia recognizes three curricula for Serbian, the state language. One curriculum is for Serbian students who attend education in Serbian language. The second one is Serbian as non-native language, which is taught for minority students who attend education in their mother tongues. The third one was developed recently upon the demand of the migrant crisis: it is Serbian as a foreign language, and it is taught to migrant, refugee and Roma returnee students. In consideration of the topic of the paper, only the second will be discussed in further detail.

The introduction of the state language into minority education dates back to former Yugoslavia,<sup>21</sup> and Serbian as non-native language relies in great portion on the practices and curricula inherited from those times. However, recent reforms of the subject developed a methodology and curricula that takes into account the mother tongue of the minority, and also the national composition of the municipality where the school is located (depend-

20 Some examples of conferences where Serbia's minority education was described as sophisticated: Horizontal Facility Regional Closing Conference, organised by the Council of Europe Anti-discrimination Department, April 2019; Challenges of Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Eastern and Central Europe in the Light of Educational Reforms, March 2019; Language Policy and Conflict Prevention, May 2018; Tolerant and Inclusive Societies in the Western Balkans, November 2018, organised by the Council of Europe Anti-discrimination Department; Mother Tongue Vs State Language? The Questions of Language Education, March, 2017.

21 Dr. Rehák László et al, *Anyanyelv – "államnyelv"*, [Mother tongue – "state language"] FORUM Könyvkiadó (1976)

ing on whether the majority of inhabitants are Serbs or belong to a national minority). This reform was started by the Pedagogical Institute of Vojvodina in the early 2000s, and resulted in a draft of a differentiating curricula incorporating two models: one that is methodologically closer to Serbian as a second language, and the other that is similar to Serbian as a foreign language. The first model was intended for students whose native language belongs in the Slavic language family and thus is close to Serbian, and for students who live in localities where the majority of inhabitants are Serbs or Serbian speaking, therefore there are a lot of chances to experience and acquire the Serbian language in everyday situations. The second model was proposed for students whose native language is very different from Serbian (such as Hungarian and Albanian), or who live in municipalities where mainly a minority language is spoken, and thus they do not have the opportunity to practice the Serbian language on an everyday basis. Even though the differentiating curricula was published in 2006 by the Pedagogical Institute of Vojvodina,<sup>22</sup> and the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians has for years given support and has lobbied for it, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development began to take over the initiative only in 2016, after the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) supported the creation of the Study on the Possibilities of Improving the Teaching and Learning of Serbian as Non-Mother Tongue in the Municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa<sup>23</sup> in 2014. Since then, the Standards of Learning Outcomes for Serbian as Non-Mother Tongue have been elaborated, and the curricula for the subject is gradually being worked out, and it will be implemented successively in the coming years in all grades of primary and secondary education. The OSCE continues to support the training of teachers of the subject, which is important for the quality assurance of teaching Serbian as Non-Mother Tongue.

## **Projects and Actions Supporting Minority Education in Serbia**

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development is currently working on reforms on all levels of education that aim for new, competence-based curricula. It is very important to keep in mind that most of the changes in the curricula require changes in the curricula of minority education as well. Moreover, new curricula require new text-

---

22 Dr Dušanka Zvekić-Dušanović i Nataša Dobrić, *Srpski kao nematernji jezik – Predlog diferenciranog nastavnog plana i programa od prvog do osmog razreda osnovnog obrazovanja i vaspitanja*, Pedagoški zavod Vojvodine, 2006

23 [http://www.kt.gov.rs/images/Studija%20o%20mogucnostima%20unapredenja%20nastave\\_engleska\\_elektron.pdf](http://www.kt.gov.rs/images/Studija%20o%20mogucnostima%20unapredenja%20nastave_engleska_elektron.pdf)

books. It is important to identify that there is a natural delay in the provision of curricula and textbooks in minority languages, since they can scarcely be prepared simultaneously with the Serbian ones. First, the Serbian curricula have to be finalized and approved, and then the translation into minority languages can begin. As next step, Serbian textbooks have to be written according to the new curricula and approved by the Ministry, and only then can they be translated into minority languages. The process requires highly coordinated actions by the Ministry, by the Institute for Education Development—which produces the new curricula—and by the national councils of national minorities. So, developing human resources of the institute for the minority education might be a step forward in resolving or at least reducing the delay.

The Ministry is engaged in some projects that provide support to many of the aspects of minority education that were previously discussed. “Strengthening the protection of national minorities in Serbia” is an action supported by the European Union and the Council of Europe within the framework “Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey”.<sup>24</sup> This project analyses minority education models alongside with the recommendations for the potential introduction of new models of minority education. This might be a great opportunity to come up with the sub-models of bilingual education, which could be accepted and supported by the national councils of the national minorities. Majority students learning minority languages was a very common practise in Yugoslavia: students who attended school in the state language could choose additional classes to learn the minority language that was represented in their surroundings. The subject was called language of social surroundings. Just a few decades ago this practise was still common in some schools in Vojvodina, but recent curricula do not include the subject “language of social surroundings”. If the analysis and recommendations support this option, it would be worthwhile to introduce the subject again. It certainly would mean a great value in developing intercultural and democratic citizenship competencies in students. Until this possibility is elaborated, students who attend education in Serbian or any minority language have the option to choose the elective subject “mother tongue with elements of national culture”.

Another action of the “Strengthening the protection of national minorities in Serbia” project is the analysis of Serbian curricula and textbooks (for subjects that are not science-related, such as Serbian language and literature, history, geography, etc.) in regards of whether national minorities are represented in them, and if they are, in what context. The expert provided by the Council of Europe has finalized the analysis, and one of the

---

24 <https://rm.coe.int/strengthening-the-protection-of-national-minorities-in-serbia/168071039c>

most interesting findings was that if a national minority appears or is discussed in curricula or textbooks, it is most often mentioned in a folkloristic context. Recommendations that derive from this analysis have to provide ideas on how to change that picture of minorities. Since the curricular reform is still happening, it is clearly good timing for those changes to be implemented in the new curricula right now.

## **Closing Remarks**

The current status of minority education in Serbia is on a satisfactory level if we take into account the rights and possibilities given by the legal framework. However, there is still room for improvement if we take into consideration the challenges the implementation is facing. Besides continuing the existing good practices, it would be very important to allocate the personal and financial resources to make sure that all determined processes run on a satisfactory level.

It is important to acknowledge that there are multiple factors which can either significantly facilitate or obstruct the processes. Thus, there must be a good cooperation between all stakeholders, most importantly the national councils of national minorities and the various sectors and institutions of the Ministry of Education. Practice has shown that national minorities whose national councils perform a better motivation for cooperation can indeed produce quicker results in the education in and of particular minority languages.

It is noticeable that some of the tendencies and processes in the education reforms are inevitably guided by the EU accession negotiation process and the action plans affiliated to them usually provide specific tasks and duties that need to be fulfilled. However, due to the lack of allocated financial and personal resources there is often a significant lagging behind. Consequentially, one of the main goals of the teaching in and of minority languages should be the identifying of existing resources and searching for additional support.

Most importantly, it has to be emphasized that no reform process, no novelty may harm any of the two pillars of the minority education in Serbia: both the right to full education in one's native language and, parallel to that, acquiring the state language should be kept as number one priorities.