



**BROKEN
CHALK**

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United
Nations Human Rights Council 4th Cycle – 50th Session

Right to Education

Country Review: Bulgaria

Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK

April 2024

By

Marah Makarem

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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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I. Introduction

1. Broken Chalk has drafted this report as a stakeholder contribution to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for Bulgaria. Broken Chalk's main objective is to combat educational human rights violations, and the contents of this report and its recommendations will primarily focus on the Right to Education.
2. Bulgaria is a country in Southeastern Europe with a population of approximately 6.8 million people. Its economy is diverse, with key sectors including energy, agriculture, mining, manufacturing, information technology, and tourism. Bulgaria's education system comprises compulsory primary education for children from the ages of 7 to 10, followed by lower secondary education from the ages of 11 to 13. After this, students enter upper secondary education, which spans from ages 14 to 18, where they can choose between general academic programs or vocational training.ⁱ
3. Article 53 of the Bulgarian Constitution guarantees the right to education for all, stipulating compulsory schooling up to the age of 16. It guarantees free tuition at state and municipal primary and secondary schools, as well as at public higher education institutions under certain conditions. Furthermore, the State supports education by funding schools, assisting talented students, fostering vocational training, and overseeing educational institutions at all levels.ⁱⁱ
4. The Bulgarian Higher Education Act permits free tuition in certain instances, including state-funded programs in high-need fields, merit-based scholarships for high-achieving students, and fee waivers for vulnerable groups, such as students with disabilities.ⁱⁱⁱ
5. This report will examine the advancements made since the third cycle and assess the country's efforts to enhance the education sector. It will present qualitative data to highlight existing challenges and provide recommendations to improve access, quality, and inclusivity in education.

II. Brief Overview

6. In the third UPR cycle, 2020, Bulgaria received 233 recommendations, 193 of which were supported. Marking an increase of approximately 2.74% in the accepted recommendations compared to the second cycle in 2015. Nine percent of the third cycle recommendations were related to the fourth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) concerning the quality of education.^{iv}
7. Out of the 233 recommendations received, 23 specifically addressed the right to education. Bulgaria fully supported all 23 of these recommendations, demonstrating its commitment to enhancing access to and the quality of education as a fundamental human right.^v
8. Out of the 23 recommendations concerning the right to education, four specifically addressed the school dropout rates. Including the recommendations made by Japan, Cyprus, the Holy

See, and Austria, which focus on reducing dropout rates and ensuring inclusive, equitable access to education, specifically those outlined in 134.133, 134.134, 134.135, and 134.199.

9. The UPR Midterm report indicates that Bulgaria has implemented recommendations to reduce school dropout rates by establishing a Mechanism for joint work among institutions. This initiative formed 1,222 teams nationwide to identify at-risk children and address the causes of dropout. Consequently, 1,324 previously unenrolled children were enrolled in schools during the 2022/2023 academic year. ^{vi}
10. Furthermore, seven recommendations focused on the Roma children's right to education, including recommendations 134.132, 134.159, 134.190, 134.195, 134.202, 134.204, and 134.207, made by Nepal, the USA, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Croatia, France, and Iran. These recommendations emphasise protecting Roma children's right to education by addressing discrimination, increasing preschool attendance, reducing dropout rates, and ensuring equal access to quality education and social services.
11. The UPR Midterm report indicates that Bulgaria has made significant progress in implementing recommendations to improve educational opportunities for Roma children. This effort is part of the National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of the Roma (2021–2030). Key initiatives include targeted programs designed to increase access to education for Roma children, campaigns aimed at reducing stereotypes, and investments in educational infrastructure.
12. Five of the recommendations concerning the right to education were regarding people with disabilities, including 134.215, 134.219, 134.220, 134.212, and 134.183 from Japan, Ethiopia, Greece, Mexico, and Laos, which focus on ensuring that children and young people with disabilities have access to inclusive education.
13. The UPR Midterm report highlights that efforts to improve access to education for children with disabilities are ongoing. Current measures include legislative reforms, enhanced teacher training, and initiatives aimed at making mainstream schools more accessible. Bulgaria is also focused on data collection to monitor progress.
14. Bulgaria's national report states that the Ministry of Education and Science recorded a 40% reduction in dropout rates due to the Mechanism for Inter-institutional Work on Enrolment and Inclusion. ^{vii}
15. The Mechanism for Inter-institutional Work on Enrolment and Inclusion coordinates efforts across various institutions to identify, support, and reintegrate students at risk of dropping out. By engaging with social services, schools, and child protection agencies, it addresses issues such as poor attendance and provides targeted support to vulnerable families. ^{viii}
16. Despite some improvements, the dropout rate remained high at 12.7%, particularly among Roma students (67% in 2016) and in rural areas (27.9%). UNICEF reported that approximately 12,000 to 13,000 children leave school each year, with half failing to complete their basic education.

17. Additionally, 40% of 15-year-olds were found to be functionally illiterate, with noticeable gaps between students in rural and urban areas. ^{ix}
18. Bulgaria has made significant strides in promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities. Through its Inclusive Education Framework, the country has prioritised access to mainstream schools by implementing measures such as specialised teacher training, the development of individualised support plans, and the allocation of additional resources to ensure classrooms are equipped to accommodate diverse needs. ^x
19. This framework is further reinforced by the Strategic Framework 2021–2030, which outlines a comprehensive plan for achieving equitable access to education.

III. Barriers to Roma Students' Right to Education in Bulgaria

20. The Council of Europe estimates that approximately 750,000 Roma people reside in Bulgaria, accounting for around 10.3% of the population. Unfortunately, Roma students face various barriers to access education, including social exclusion, systemic discrimination, and financial challenges. The poor housing conditions further limit their educational opportunities, as families often struggle to afford basic school necessities such as notebooks, pens, and uniforms. ^{xi}
21. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights report of 2022(FRA) states that Roma children in Bulgaria encounter consistent educational disadvantages compared to their non-Roma peers. The report states that over 70% of Roma youth between the ages of 18 and 24 drop out of school early, which is significantly higher than that of non-Roma populations. ^{xii}
22. Geographical isolation and segregation in neighborhoods often hinder Roma communities from accessing quality education. This residential segregation forces students to attend nearby schools that mainly serve Roma students, further establishing educational and social isolation. The failure of urban housing policies to address this isolation has reinforced the segregation of Roma communities from broader society and limited their opportunities for integration. ^{xiii xiv}
23. Segregation remains a significant challenge for Roma students. Most Roma students are placed in "Roma-only" schools or classrooms, which are often underfunded and provide a lower education quality. In an interview conducted by Broken Chalk with an informed participant of the educational situation in Bulgaria, it was disclosed that Roma students often attend schools where the majority of the students are Romani due to residential segregation and societal attitudes. The interviewee noted that even in urban centers like Sofia, specific neighborhoods are essentially inhabited by Roma families, resulting in schools in those areas being labeled as "Roma schools." ^{xv xvi}
24. The societal attitudes also play a significant role in reinforcing segregation. Frequently, when non-Roma parents find that the schools have a high Roma population, they withdraw their children from the school, a phenomenon known as "white flight." The interviewee explained that the reasons behind this behavior are rooted in discrimination and lack of education, especially among older generations, and discrimination against Roma children has become a habit for many, reflecting fixed societal biases rather than cautious acts of exclusion. ^{xvii xviii}

- 25.** Fear of discrimination is a huge factor influencing Roma families' choice of segregated schools. The interviewee stated that many Roma parents' main concern is their children not fitting in or facing differing treatment in integrated schools. This concern, along with the historical normalisation of segregation, contributes to building a mindset in which both Roma and non-Roma communities often view segregation as the norm. ^{xix}
- 26.** Despite legal frameworks prohibiting segregation, such as Article 6 of the Bulgarian Constitution and the Protection Against Discrimination Act (2004), de facto segregation continues. ^{xx} ^{xxi} The FRA Roma Survey, 2021, states that approximately 64% of Roma children aged 6-15 attend schools where most or all of their classmates are Roma, the second-highest rate in Europe, after Slovakia (65%). ^{xxii}
- 27.** Bulgaria has adopted the National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of the Roma (2021-2030) to address these challenges, which focuses on integration to improve access to education and promote social inclusion. Key initiatives include supporting municipalities in implementing desegregation activities, providing free tools, materials, and transport for children in segregated schools, and launching training programs for educational advocates. ^{xxiii}
- 28.** However, according to the interviewee, the implementation of these initiatives has been inconsistent due to Bulgaria's ongoing political instability. Since 2020, a series of short-lived governments has created obstacles to effectively enforcing and monitoring these programs. Additionally, resistance to integration from both Roma and non-Roma communities has further prevented progress. ^{xxiv}
- 29.** The interviewee also highlighted that one initiative to reduce segregation involves tying school admissions to parents' residential addresses. While this approach aims to create more inclusive schools, it does little to address segregation in neighbourhoods predominantly populated by Roma families. Non-governmental organizations have also played a significant role in promoting awareness and working toward inclusion; however, these efforts require more substantial governmental support to achieve a lasting impact. ^{xxv}

IV. Barriers to Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities

- 30.** The Human Rights Watch reports show that around 10,000 children with disabilities are out of school in Bulgaria, highlighting the difficulties this vulnerable group faces regarding their access to education. ^{xxvi}
- 31.** Bulgaria is a state party to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which guarantees inclusive education. However, challenges persist in implementing these inclusive practices and ensuring access to education for children with disabilities. ^{xxvii}
- 32.** Although Bulgaria has accepted most of the recommendations promoting inclusive education, the mid-term report highlights several obstacles that prevent effective implementation, including infrastructural barriers, insufficient teacher training, and societal stigma.
- 33.** It also acknowledges the need for improvements in physical accessibility for students with disabilities. Several schools lack essential facilities such as elevators, ramps, and accessible

restrooms, which makes physical access challenging. Broken Chalk's interviewee stated that progress has been made in addressing physical barriers, particularly in renovated schools where ramps and elevators have been installed. However, the older buildings remain inaccessible and need renovations to ease accessibility. Additionally, the infrastructure outside of schools, such as streets, is often also inaccessible, which further complicates access. ^{xxviii xxix}

- 34.** Moreover, another primary concern is the extent to which teachers are prepared to support students with disabilities. The lack of adequate training programs for teachers in classrooms is also highlighted in the mid-term report, emphasising that specialised training is often incompatible and insufficient. The interviewee also noted that many teachers, particularly older ones, cannot address the diverse needs of disabled students, who are usually treated differently from their peers, which undermines the efforts to integrate disabled students into mainstream education effectively. ^{xxx xxxi}
- 35.** The inconsistent implementation of support systems provokes these difficulties. The mid-term report states that due to the unavailability and the irregular application of assistive technologies and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), inequalities in accessing quality education occur. ^{xxxii}
- 36.** Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, significant challenges have been created for inclusive education efforts. The mid-term report highlights that the reallocation of resources and delays in educational reforms during the pandemic worsened the existing inequalities and shifted focus away from improving accessibility for students with disabilities. ^{xxxiii}
- 37.** Nevertheless, Initiatives are being implemented to improve the situation. The interviewee stated that while there has been progress in renovating schools, addressing the needs of older buildings and expanding infrastructure accessibility remains a time-consuming process. Consistent financial support and holistic approaches are essential for effectively addressing these remaining barriers. ^{xxxiv}

V. Dropout rate

- 38.** Despite the current dropout rate in Bulgaria decreasing compared to previous years, early school leaving remains a significant educational challenge.
- 39.** The UPR mid-term report from the last cycle highlights the efforts to address this issue, including the establishment of a comprehensive Mechanism for Joint Institutional Collaboration, featuring 1,222 teams dedicated to ensuring the inclusion and retention of children of compulsory preschool and school age. These team-initiated measures focus on prevention, intervention, and compensation for early school leaving while analysing the root causes of dropouts. The amended Ordinance on Inclusive Education introduced additional support, including after-school and summer programs, for students who need it. ^{xxxv}
- 40.** The World Bank statistics show that the percentage of primary school-age children out of school rose from 11.7% in 2020 to 13.3% in 2021. ^{xxxvi} However, there has been progress among 18-24-year-olds, with the early school leaving rate dropping to 9.3% in 2023, below the EU average of 9.5% and nearing the EU target for 2030 of 9%. Despite these improvements,

significant gaps remain in rural areas, where the dropout rate is 18.8%, and among the Roma community, where only 28% of individuals aged 18-24 have completed upper secondary education. ^{xxxvii xxxviii}

41. Several factors contribute to a student's dropout from school. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education report highlights three key reasons behind school dropout rates, including family-related issues, unwillingness to attend, and the desire to pursue opportunities abroad. The interviewee also confirmed that economic hardships and cultural norms often require children to leave school early to support their families. Additionally, migration for seasonal work further disrupts education, as children usually have to change schools or temporarily pause their studies. ^{xxxix xl}
42. The interviewee also mentioned how cultural norms within Roma communities, such as early marriage, contribute to dropout rates. Moreover, girls often marry and have children at a young age, making it difficult to continue their education. Economic factors also force older children to work, sometimes in illegal activities or begging, to support their families. Such situations are especially prevalent in rural areas, where enforcement of school attendance laws is uncertain. ^{xli}
43. The existence of government initiatives, such as tying child support to school attendance, has shown the potential to reduce dropout rates. However, according to the interviewee, these measures are often bypassed in rural areas. For example, children may be marked as present even when they are not attending school. The interviewee emphasised the need for awareness campaigns to address cultural norms and encourage families to prioritise education. ^{xlii xliii}
44. Differences in economic conditions between urban and rural areas play a significant role. The interviewee confirmed that urban areas generally have more resources; poverty and segregation are more critical challenges in rural areas. ^{xliv}
45. The interviewee also highlighted systemic issues within Bulgaria's education system, including an outdated curriculum and teaching methods that prioritise rote memorisation over practical skills. The absence of engagement and innovation in schools leads to a decline in students' motivation to complete their education and an increase in dropout rates. ^{xlv}

VI. Recommendations:

46. Broken Chalk recommends that Bulgaria enhance the National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of the Roma by implementing urban planning initiatives that address residential segregation. These initiatives should include affordable housing projects to help integrate Roma families into diverse neighborhoods and decrease the concentration of segregated schools.
47. Broken Chalk urges Bulgaria to implement a nationwide campaign to combat discrimination against Roma students in schools, focusing on both educators and students. The campaign should include workshops, curriculum changes to promote inclusivity, and penalties for discriminatory practices.

48. Broken Chalk appreciates Bulgaria's progress in removing physical barriers for students with disabilities, particularly in renovated schools equipped with ramps and elevators. However, Broken Chalk recommends that Bulgaria prioritise retrofitting older school buildings to make them accessible as well by allocating additional funds for ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, ensuring compliance with the CRPD. Additionally, Broken Chalk highlights the need to improve the streets and infrastructure surrounding schools to provide easy access for students with disabilities.
49. Broken Chalk emphasises the importance of comprehensive teacher training programs focused on inclusive education practices. These programs should be mandatory and include modules on the use of assistive technologies and implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).
50. Broken Chalk suggests that Bulgaria initiate a state-funded program to provide assistive technologies and devices to students with disabilities at no cost, ensuring their fair access to education.
51. Broken Chalk recommends that Bulgaria implement stricter monitoring mechanisms for school attendance measures, especially in rural areas, to ensure compliance. This should include training for local authorities to identify and address loopholes that allow absenteeism to persist.
52. Broken Chalk encourages Bulgaria to invest in mentorship programs for Roma and rural students, pairing them with role models from similar backgrounds to inspire them to remain in school and pursue higher education or vocational training.

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