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## **SCHOOL IN A TRANSITIONAL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF SERBIA<sup>9</sup>**

### ***Abstract:***

*This paper explores the possibilities, scope and limitations of modernization of education in Serbia in the second decade of the XXI century. Together with social and political changes that started in Serbia in the year 2000, considerable changes were initiated in the area of education as well. Modernization of education became one of the proclaimed goals of social development, and decentralization, democratization and improvement of the quality of education were defined as the basic directions for a school system reform. The experience with the specification, implementation and duration of the planned changes reveals their direct dependence on the changes that were taking place in the political government, as a result of which some changes have been partially implemented, while others have been postponed. The transitional society with a low level of socioeconomic development and newly established democratic institutions views the reform of education as an instrument of economic revival and progress and development of the civil society, the stronghold of democracy. However, both the educational system and the society as a whole are in a state of incomplete modernization, which is reflected in the chronic social crisis and stagnation that has been going on for decades. This has practically resulted in the retraditionalization of the dominant value system, whose characteristic, among others, is resistance to change. The Serbian educational system therefore finds itself in a paradoxical situation – what should change the society must also be changed itself, while society itself resists the changes that should be brought about by the modern school. The concluding part of the article discusses some possible outcomes of modernization of education in conditions of an absence of a supportive social context.*

**Key words:** EDUCATION, MODERNIZATION, TRADITIONALISM, SERBIA.

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### *1. Introduction*

Highly unfavourable circumstances in the Serbian society during the 1990s caused serious difficulties in the functioning of the educational system, which demanded urgent resolution: impoverishment of the entire educational sector and lack of basic physical and technical working conditions, insufficient accessibility of education for all categories of students, a high level of state control over school work, a low level of quality of educational work reflected in unsatisfactory results, poorly devised curricula and dominance of the traditional teaching method (Hebib & Spasenovikj, 2011; Maksikj & Gashikj-Pavishikj, 2007). The Serbian educational system stepped into the new millennium with a long list of objectives that should be reformed and modernized – starting from physical and spatial conditions (the number of classrooms, safety and equipment in schoolyards, availability of textbooks and teaching aids etc.), to work organization and methods, curricula and teaching contents, and in-service teacher training.

Together with social and political changes that started in Serbia in the year 2000, considerable changes were initiated in the area of education as well. Modernization of education became one of the proclaimed goals of social development, and decentralization, democratization and improvement of the quality of education were defined as the basic directions for a school system reform. The school system reform was initiated with the aim of using education to provide efficient support to economic recovery and development of the country, development of democracy in the country and its international integration. School stands as one of the main agents of (political) socialization and represents a very powerful instrument of systematic propagation of acceptance of the newly established system and the values it is based on. The high level of education in a political community is considered as one of the indicators of the level of modernization of the society and structural requisites of democracy (Almond & Verba, 1989/1963; Lerner, 1964; Lipset, 1959; Smith & Inkeles, 1966).

The higher educated social strata indeed act as propagators of modernization (Inkeles, 1969; Pantić, 2003; Smith & Inkeles, 1966). This bears special relevance when the society faces a change of social and political system and the need for a thorough change of the dominant political culture – from the authoritarian pattern, dominant for decades, to the democratic. The educated society is a fertile ground for swift and extensive development of devotion to democracy and its core values, and hence a guarantee of long-term stability of the newly established system, so “the most obvious substitute for time would be education” (Almond & Verba, 1989/1963: 370). In a certain way (and to a limited extent), education provides the possibility to make up for and overcome certain structural deficiencies in effective functioning of the newly established democratic system, the removal of which by natural course of social development would last for decades and mostly take place through generation replacement. Therefore the role of school in a situation of sudden and turbulent social changes, as one of the chief mechanisms of changing the dominant value system, becomes more important and reforming school in keeping with altered social circumstances more urgent.

## *2. What changes were initiated in the serbian educational system*

There were three phases in education policy in Serbia in the first decade of the XXI century: the first phase comprises the period from 2001 to 2003, the second phase from 2004 to 2008, while the third phase started in 2008 (Stankovikj, 2011). In each of these phases, certain changes, enabled by the passing of appropriate programme documents, were planned and realized. The first phase was marked by the passing of The Law on the Fundamentals of the Educational System (*Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja*, 2003), which enabled implementation of the planned curriculum reforms starting from the 2003/04 school year. In the second phase, The Law amending The Law on the Fundamentals of the Educational System (*Zakon o izmenama i dopunama Zakona o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja*, 2005) abandoned some of the planned changes and adhered to the two-level cycle of primary education. In the third phase, The Law on the Fundamentals of the Educational System (*Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja*, 2009) was adopted, enabling the continuation of the changes initiated in the first phase. A compulsory preparatory preschool program introduced in the previous phase was expanded by the new Law, and self-evaluation became a legal obligation for schools.

The planned and realized changes in the field of education in the past decade comprised redefining the jurisdiction of the Serbian Ministry of Education and School Administrations as regional organs of government and School Boards as management organs at school level. National counsels were formed with the aim of monitoring the condition, development and advancement of education quality, while the function of inspection and expert pedagogical supervision was redefined. Starting from the 2010/11 school year, an inclusive approach to education has been implemented. The legal foundation for participation of the local community in school work and the autonomy of school and teachers in developing the school curriculum was set. Expert institutions were founded for the purpose of performing developmental, counseling, research and other professional activities at the system level: the Institute for Advancement of Education and the Institute for Educational Quality and Evaluation. The educational standards for the end of the compulsory education and standards of textbook quality were defined. The system and institutional solutions for external and internal evaluation of school work were developed. The law prescribed the obligation and procedure of acquisition and maintenance of a teaching licence and the obligation of in-service training for teachers through attendance of accredited seminars.

The National Millennium Development Goals in Serbia (*Nacionalni milenijumski ciljevi razvoja u Republici Srbiji*, 2006) comprise the following in the area of education until the year 2015: increasing the number of children with primary education, acquiring professions, promotion of the life-long learning concept and access to higher education, improved quality of education and establishing additional databases for monitoring and evaluating the achievement of the national goal and targets. The Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education (*Strategija razvoja stručnog obrazovanja u Republici Srbiji*, 2007) is especially relevant, since it identifies vocational education as the factor of improvement of modern social and economic relations. In order to link the educational

sector and labor sphere, the Strategy of Career Guidance and Counselling (Strategija karijernog vođenja u Republici Srbiji, 2010) was adopted.

The priorities of the Serbian Ministry of Education in development of the education are entirely in accordance with the proclaimed development of education in the European Union (Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training “ET 2020”, 2010). According to the available data,<sup>10</sup> the planned directions of further development of education in Serbia until 2020 include increased quality of knowledge (promoting usable knowledge, creating motivation for learning in students, in-service training of teachers, development of a standard for knowledge and new curricula, etc.), ensuring equity in the system (inclusion of marginalized children and children with special needs, education and training of adults who dropped out of school, etc.), ensuring higher system efficiency (development of an information system, the new financing mechanism, etc.), prevention of violence, a safe school environment and advancement of school sports.

### *3. Context and effects of educational reforms*

The first decade of the third millennium in Serbia was marked by late and incomplete transition (Knezhevikj, 2010). Democratic changes did not imply an end, but the continuation of a long transitional journey carrying along new problems, which among other things resulted in regression and retraditionalization of the dominant value system instead of its democratization or modernization. Research shows that even after the changes the value systems that were old-fashioned, non-functional and incompatible with the newly established system managed to survive, while acceptance of pro-democratic orientations stagnated or even regressed.

Immediately after the democratic changes, it was possible to perceive certain tendencies towards a higher acceptance of new pro-system values, such as valuing democracy or some other syndromes of democratic orientations (Pavlovikj, 2009; 2010), while acceptance of certain non-democratic orientations, such as ethnocentrism, was decreasing (Biro et al., 2002). However, these changes were soon undone, and acceptance of certain non-democratic orientations not only remained on the same level as the 1990s, but was even increased. In 2001 acceptance of authoritarianism was much higher than in 1997, implying that two thirds of Serbian citizens belonged to the category of high authoritarianism (Biro et al., 2002). Authoritarianism remained widespread in the following years as well (Pantikj & Pavlovikj, 2009), culminating at the end of the first decade of the new millennium, when high authoritarianism was registered in as many as 61% of Serbian citizens (Kuzmanovikj, 2010).

There is a similar trend for some other non-democratic orientations in the observed period. After the record-breaking level of 2000, ethnocentrism temporarily decreased, only to increase once again in 2002 (Biro et al., 2002). At the beginning and in the middle of the previous decade, one quarter of the citizens exhibited strong identification with the nation,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mp.gov.rs>.

while at the end of the decade this became the primary frame of collective identification for every second citizen of Serbia (51%) (Pantikj & Pavlovikj, 2009; Vasovikj, 2010). Accordingly, there was also acceptance (by the majority) of other similar traditional and conservative orientations (looking back into the past, resistance to change, collectivism, patriarchy, promoting status quo condition, accepting traditional beliefs and norms of behavior, etc.) (Pantikj, 2003; Pantikj & Pavlovikj, 2009).

The citizens' dissatisfaction with life and the newly established system has been increasing over the years ever since 2001 and one of its consequences has been the loss of the positive connotation of democracy, which only a minority of citizens accepted unconditionally by the middle of the decade (Pavlovikj, 2010; Stojiljkovikj, 2007). Democracy practically became less popular than in the middle of the 1990s. Trust in the institutions of the democratic political system had been decreasing during the whole decade and at its end the regime was facing the deepest crisis of legitimacy ever since the introduction of the multi-party system (Slavujevikj, 2010). As a result, nostalgia for socialism, registered as early as the beginning of the 1990s, and also during that decade, was still present in the first decade of the new century – the attitude towards communism and Tito's reign was often more positive than the attitude towards democracy, and, on the whole, it is the citizens' opinion that it had been the best in socialism, while in post-October Serbia it is only slightly and insignificantly better than during Milošević's reign (Pantikj & Pavlovikj, 2009; Mihailovikj, 2010; Stojiljkovikj, 2007).

In other words, the planned outcomes of the modernized education system were not supported by a wider social context. As a consequence of the long-lasting social crisis, the budget funding of schools is insufficient, the stagnating economic activity cannot create a stimulating economic and market environment for educated experts, who then emigrate due to a lack of a systematic strategy of keeping the young in the country and a high unemployment rate, while education itself is not a necessary precondition of status and power because they are easily acquired in other ways (through nepotism and corruption). To top all this, the society itself resists change and the values that should be brought about by modern schooling. The democratic view of the world, civic values and norms, and social and political activism – some of the planned effects of the reformed school – do not have a great chance to succeed outside school in a society that does not want such transformations, since it is still authoritarian, collectivistic and nationalist-oriented.

A policy of education as the starting framework has not yet been developed nor defined, and the process of reform implementation, due to frequent changes in political government, is burdened by discontinuity. Action plans for activities of all the responsible parties have not been placed in harmony and individual activities of different organs, bodies and institutions within the school system are not coordinated. Teachers and other employees in education resist changes because they are insufficiently prepared for their implementation and due to the non-developed system of professional support and help, i.e. planned and systematic strengthening of capacities of teachers and schools for the reform process, in-service training of teachers is conducted ad hoc and subsequently, after political decisions have been made and changes introduced without enabling the necessary conditions. For

example, the compulsory elective course in Religious Education or Civic Education was introduced without an existing curriculum or adequately prepared teachers.

It is therefore not surprising that the opinion of teachers, parents, students, school headmasters, education experts and decision makers in education about the educational changes conducted in Serbia is mostly negative (Pavlovikj, 2011). According to research results, the main movers in the educational process point to unstable and chaotic changes, a low level of participation and negative mutual perceptions of actors, as well as the gap between expectations and outcomes. The prevailing opinion is that the changes were introduced without a clear strategy, too quickly and too soon, with a low level of control over the process, out of context, without sufficient transparency, without enough information, and discontinuously. The Ministry of Education is perceived as the agent of change with a low level of participation of other parties, without the cooperation of parents, and with a negative school climate. Both processes have led to the gap between expectations and outcomes, hence it is objected that the newly implemented changes have failed the expectations; that the form was changed but not the essence; that school does not keep up with students' needs; that teachers have not been trained enough; that inclusive education is problematic; that student personality is neglected; that schools are not sufficiently equipped and that all the parties are already tired from changes.

The examples of courses in the field of social sciences can serve as illustrations of the uncertain effects of educational reforms in the accomplishment of the designed outcomes as well as achievement of wider social consequences. Several analyses performed from the introduction of Civic Education in primary and secondary schools in Serbia (the year 2001) indicate that the effects of Civic Education are partial and insufficient. Improved interpersonal relations, higher tolerance, respect for one's self and others and more successful conflict-solving, are some of the personal changes reported by secondary school students themselves or their parents (Maksikj, 2003; Joksimovikj, 2003; Joksimovikj & Maksikj, 2006; Joksimovikj et al., 2004). However, only 8% of secondary school students stated that the course in Civic Education had contributed to better knowledge of their own rights and obligations (Joksimovikj, 2003).

One other study that indicates the inconsistent effects of studying Civic Education analyzed the acquired knowledge (about civil rights, democracy etc.) and social and political attitudes of students attending the course (Baucal et al., 2009). The greatest number of students (but not necessarily the majority) know, for example, about the tripartite division of government, correctly identify some of the essential characteristics of democratic elections (such as secrecy of voting), understand the meaning of the concept of the rule of law, adequately recognize the key characteristics of some forms of government, etc. However, the largest number of secondary school students perceive the role of citizens in democracy as obeying authorities (38%) or as caring about their own interests (36%), while two thirds of young people think that the essence of the government's role regarding elections is encouragement of citizens to take part in them. Political engagement, whose nature is generally poorly understood among secondary school students, is infamous among the youth, as well as political institutions, towards which there is a prominent distrust. The young barely differentiate among the concepts of autocracy, democracy and monarchy,

and only a minority understand the concepts of chauvinism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism and nationalism.

History instruction which, along with Civic Education, probably plays the most important role in the promotion of institutionalized (in this case, democratic) values, in its present form is a poor foundation for the development of pro-democratic orientations of the young generations and is often more of “a set of ideologically usable facts than historical” (Stojanovikj, 2010: 105). Through history instruction, the school system still proves to be authoritarian and patriarchal, since it favours mechanical memorization of a large amount of information and hinders every attempt at criticism and the possibility of free interpretation and drawing of conclusions (Stojanovikj, 2010). History lessons are suffused with the ideas about the historical righteousness of one’s own nation, about the nation as the victim and “otherness” as a danger tearing the national unity. Democratic changes in 2000 and subsequent educational reforms did not change much about this. The nation has remained the supreme criterion of values, collectivist, national and pre-modern values are glorified, promoting retribution and intolerance, and an authoritarian, anti-plural and non-democratic view of the world.

#### *4. How to reform school*

How is it possible to modernize the education in Serbia in the period of retraditionalization of the society and reluctant modernization without structural prerequisites to support it? Can modern school exist in a traditional society and is it realistic to expect school effects to be in the sphere of value change? The period from 2000 to 2010 was marked by changes in educational policies that depended on the current political and social context (Spasenovikj et al., 2010; Stankovikj, 2011). The social crisis is slowing down the modernization of education through exacerbating the social conditions for acquiring education and the teaching conditions, as well as pruning its public financing (Ivanovikj, 2011). The new cycle of the continuous process of the modernization of education demands further decentralisation of education system and its educational autonomy as a precondition for school as an initiator of modernization (Indzikj, 2009). These items figure as the planned goals of educational development in Serbia in the decade that has just begun (Nacionalni prosvetni savet, 2011).

The transitional society with a low level of socioeconomic development and newly established democratic institutions views the reform of education as an instrument of economic revival and progress and development of the civil society, the stronghold of democracy. However, both the educational system and the society as whole are in the state of incomplete modernization, which is reflected in a chronic social crisis and stagnation that has been going on for decades. The Serbian educational system therefore finds itself in a paradoxical situation – what should change the society must also be changed itself, while the very society resists the change that should be brought about by modern school. Resistance to change is a basic human reaction that is activated whenever people feel they are in danger or feel insecure when facing the unknown. The educational sector can contribute to the

development of society by initiating changes within itself. Some of promising approaches in that stream are concepts of multiperspectivism (Đurišić-Bojanović, 2011) and mindful learning (Langer, 1997).

The Serbian education needs mechanisms that would enable the modernization processes to take place continuously and in coordination, and lead towards palpable positive effects on the individual and national levels. The first prerequisite for this is achieving a wide consensus about the changes to be introduced and reasons for that. Serbia today is a post-socialist society struggling between the retraditionalization and modernization processes and without a clear political strategy which would promote modernization and create conditions for change for better (Lj. Mitrovikj, 2010; M. Mitrovikj, 2010). Without a clear plan for overcoming the crisis and the general direction of further social development - what are generally accepted goals, when they should be achieved, in which way and how we can know whether they have been achieved - there can be no clear plan about the role of education in this and how to fulfil it, hence no active educational reform.



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