

Speech on The Home education conference in Germany 27. – 29. of April:

## **THE HOMESCHOOLING IN BULGARIA**

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters,

The idea of homeschooling penetrated into Bulgaria through the influence of some American missionaries, who served here with their whole families in the beginning of the 1990s, after the fall of the communist regime. The home based education stayed in general constrained in the missionary circles, but fortunately there emerged some pioneer Bulgarian families, who took the decision to educate their children at home.

During these 15 years the network of the homeschoolers steadily grew to include approximately 15-20 families. It should be pointed out, that there is not accurate statistics as to the number of the homeschoolers in our country. The presented figures are for families, whom we personally know. Most of those families are from the Reformed faith.

The inner life of the homeschooling community is developing successfully. Once a year we are holding a national homeschooling conference, whose goal is to popularize the idea of home education, to educate the families and to bring the children together to develop friendships and to give them a broader audience for their talents. Thus far the topics of the lectures included the moral base of the home education, practical introductions to the homeschooling for the new families, the question of the socialization of the children, short presentations of the different subjects from the Biblical point of view and etc. We have a shared library with Christian educational resources. Most of them are generously donated from American homeschoolers, but also from some Bulgarian homeschooling families, that have emigrated in the last two years to USA or Canada. Several families translate actively homeschooling materials, and thus far we have into Bulgarian books about the philosophy, methodology, practice of home education and many children's books, though none of those is available in a print copy, just in an online version. Thus far our oldest homeschooled children are in their 11-12 years, two boys being enrolled in the distance learning program of CLASS.

Most, if not all, of the families in Bulgaria, who are teaching their children at home, are doing this for religious and educational reasons. The public school system is in a slow, but increasingly obvious process of decay. The state run schools have become unsafe places for the children – problems ranging from physical assaults, rape, abduction, robbery to drugs, and alcohol abuse. The moral environment there is conducive for the corruption of the children. There is no wonder that the academic achievements of the children are dropping. But while those problems are bad enough to give the parents reasons to seek alternative ways of education, there are also more serious questions for the Christian parents in particular. By law all education is secular, and the philosophical framework of the subjects is presented invariably from

atheist and humanistic point of view. The communist regime left a far reaching legacy of intellectual hatred and opposition to the Christianity, which affects even the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which is the established church, not to mention the Protestant and Evangelical minorities, who are still considered as sects in some mainstream media. This secular educational system has prompted the homeschooling families in Bulgaria to choose the home based education, mainly to have the control of the educational process of their children, and to be able to shape their children's worldview in a Christian framework.

As for the attitude of the law and of the state officials to the education of the children, it is viewed as a competence of the state, the parents being excluded from the opportunity to choose the curriculum or the teachers for their children. By law the education of the children is under the authority of the Ministry of Education, who has jurisdiction even above the private schools. As for the existence of private Christian schools, there is just one elementary Christian school in our capital, and it still struggles with the Ministry of Education for its accreditation.

Thus far the most common way to homeschool is never to enroll the child in a state educational institution. The children enter in the compulsory educational age in their sixth year. Once a child is enrolled in a state educational institution, it is very hard, not to say impossible, humanly speaking, to withdrawal that child from the system. It is so, because the schools report the children to the inspectorate, and if later that child is missing from the inspectorate records, the authorities begin to trace out the children and to compel their parents to send them to school, using fines for that end. But, if a child is never enrolled in a state run school, the authorities have not accurate information about that particular child, and the parents can have their way, provided there are smart enough not to get themselves into troubles (for example: the children to stay unsupervised on the street or in parks during school time and etc). The tradeoff in this homeschooling scenario is the lack of Bulgarian diploma. Almost all of the families in our homeschooling community are in that category. And thus far the children are showing very good achievements, being 1 to 3 grades ahead as a rule, not as an exception.

There are two families that have found another way to homeschool – they have enrolled their children in a state school as a private students, and in fact are teaching them at home following the state program, and meeting with the school teacher once a month. That scenario will have a diploma, but will limit the parents in a certain way. Those two particular cases are connected with the crisis of the educational system. Because of the demographical decline, many schools have to cut down the number of classes, and of course to fire teachers. Because of that, the school principals actively seek out ways to find students, and those two families has found one such cooperative principal to allow them to teach the children at home, provided they will be enrolled in his school. Just to mention, that scenario did not work with a two other families, who tried to find a legal way to teach their children at home. There were not such cooperative principals in Plovdiv (Bulgarian second biggest city), and finally those families enrolled their children in public schools. Thus far most of the homeschool families prefer the underground, but free way to educate their children.

As for the public opinion for the homeschooling, we are still not in the mainstream of the public attention. Many families report they meet more favorable response from

their unchristian colleges and business partners, than from their fellow Christian brothers. In fact, there is a homeschooling family, who was excommunicated for their homeschooling sake. The president of the High Evangelical Theological Institute denounced publicly the home education in a seminar “Christianity and Education”, sponsored by the Christian Publisher “New Man” and the Sofia University. There are reasons for the indifferent or negative attitude of the Christian leadership: the communist regime achieved effective control over the evangelical protestant denominations in the past, and therefore the question of the Christian education has been stifled in general in all those years of the democracy.

As to the relations with the general public, there are two internet libertarian sites, which are supportive for the homeschooling. Some of our members participate regularly in online discussions, or are online columnists. Now the Reformed community in Bulgaria is sponsoring the development of internet forum and internet bookstore as steps for broader publicity for the homeschooling and the Christian worldview in general.

The perspectives before us are mainly two: The first is to stay underground and free as long as possible, to be able to develop effectively good precedents, and to have enough time to enroll broader popular support. The other perspective, which is pushed on from circles outside of the current homeschooling parents, is to plead for a legal and regulated way to homeschool (e.g. for parents with pedagogical education, approval of the homeschool program by the state and etc.). My personal opinion is that we do not need to prematurely close the doors for those families, who will not meet those criteria, neither do we need a strict state regulation in order to educate our children. We need rather more brave families to establish a better educational precedent.

Thank you for the attention.