

Policy Measures as a Pathway to Improve the Quality of Life of the Elderly Population

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Политическите мерки като път за подобряване качеството на живот на възрастното население

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Abstract

The article is focused on mapping different policies and programs aimed at the elderly population, as well as the incentive for inclusion in these programs. The review of different policies aimed to achieve harmonization and complement the opportunities for the conducting of personal careers, and better quality of life. The consequences of population aging in Bulgarian conditions lead to various changes in the labor market. In this context the policies themselves aim not only to include elderly people in the labor market but also to ensure economic growth, thereby creating the prerequisites for social support and assistance. The overall vision of the article is to provide an overview of the political map in which the various institutional practices stimulate the elderly population to increase their education and qualification as one of the ways of active living. The article uses the results of a representative survey of the 55+ population regarding its participation in various forms of continuing education and qualification. Our understanding is that labor market participation has two important consequences for older people. On the one hand, it is related to the provision of material income and good living conditions, and on the other hand, it has positive consequences affecting the psychological confidence and self-confidence of the elderly that they are useful to society. All this in its entirety shows various aspects related to the quality of life of people in the third age.

Keywords: elderly population, lifelong learning, active life, non-formal learning, informal learning

Резюме

Статията се фокусира върху представянето на различни политики и програми, насочени към възрастните хора, както и стимули за включването им в тези програми. Прегледът на различни политики има за цел постигане на хармонизация и допълване на възможностите за провеждане на лична кариера и по-добро качество на живот. Последиците от застаряването на населението в български условия води до различни промени на пазара на труда. В този контекст самите политики целят не само включване на възрастните хора на пазара на труда, но и осигуряване на икономически растеж, като по този начин създават предпоставки за социална подкрепа и подпомагане. Цялостната визия на статията е да направи преглед на политиките, в които са представени и различни институционални практики, стимулиращи възрастното население към повишаване на образованието и квалификацията, като един от начините за активен живот. В статията са използвани

резултати от представително проучване на населението над 55 години относно участието му в различни форми на продължаващо образование и квалификация. Нашето разбиране е, че участието на пазара на труда има две важни последици за възрастните хора. От една страна, то е свързано с осигуряването на материални доходи и добри условия на живот, а от друга има положителни последици, засягащи психологическата увереност и самочувствието на възрастните хора, че са полезни за обществото. Всичко това в своята цялост показва различни аспекти, свързани с качеството на живот на хората в третата възраст.

Ключови думи: възрастно население, учене през целия живот, активен живот, неформално учене, самостоятелно учене

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Policy Measures as a Pathway to Improve the Quality of Life of the Elderly Population

In the last few decades improving the quality of life of different social groups was a key policy approach. A special focus is on the elderly population and its place in social structures and the labor market. On the one hand, this is related to the aging of the population in Bulgarian conditions. According to the last census of 2021, the population in Bulgaria is in the age group 0-17 years. is 15%; 18-64 years is 58.5%, 65+ is 26.5% (NSI, Census, 2021). On the other hand, it is noted that the population over 65 makes up just over $\frac{1}{4}$ of the entire population and partially continues to be included in the labor market. In the field of employment of the elderly, Bulgaria has a value of 27.9, which is close to the EU average of 29.1 (National Strategy for the Active Life of the Elderly in Bulgaria (2019-2030). In addition, the employment rate of the population in the age group 55-64 is 55.6, and for the age group 25-34, the employment rate is slightly higher at 70.8. This is related to the fact that the young population has a problem with the discrepancy between the acquired educational diplomas and finding a job in different spheres of the economy and the public sector. In addition, the share of young people who are unemployed for a shorter or longer period and who are outside the employment system is persistently extended, which strengthens the conditions for their marginalization and puts them in an unfavorable situation. On this basis, the elderly population in a country still has the potential for work and active living, which is also related to the development of policies at the national level towards the elderly. The policy measures themselves also aim not only to include elderly people in the labor market but also to ensure economic growth, thereby creating the prerequisites for social support and assistance. In this way, policies should aim both at accumulating resources and at turning the elderly population into a social group fit for work.

In this context, we can find a specific instrumental approach - finding an intersection between the needs of the labor market and the opportunities, preparation, and qualifications of people. At the same time, we have to take into account another important layer in the policy programs, related to their humanistic aspect, with the development of the motivation to improve skills, to learn more, as well as the ambition for personal progress. Thus, the multi-faceted orientation is both social and individual.

Focusing on the indicated multidimensionality, in this article, we review several Bulgarian policies and programs at the national level to trace their importance, and applicability in terms of

social context, and employment. In this way, we combine the different approaches in the analysis. The main research questions of the article relate to showing the effectiveness of policies and programs aimed at the elderly population, as well as the incentive for inclusion in these programs. The overall vision of the article is to provide an overview of the political map in which the various institutional practices stimulate the elderly population to increase their education and qualification as one of the ways of active living. The article uses the results of a representative survey of the 55+ population regarding its participation in various forms of continuing education and qualification. Our understanding is that labor market participation has two important consequences for older people. On the one hand, it is related to the provision of material income and good living conditions, and on the other hand, it has positive consequences affecting the psychological confidence and self-confidence of the elderly that they are useful to society.

Specific considerations

The main idea of policies towards the elderly is aimed at increasing equality and responsibility in a social and personal aspect. This can only be achieved if the transformation of the educational and labor system is oriented in an egalitarian direction. In this direction, consistent links between employment and education, more mobile curricula, broad development of non-formal education, and larger budgets for employment are needed.

The main theoretical-methodological concept of the article is the approach of embedding the policies in the institutions at the national, regional, and local levels, as real practices. Thus, through the embedding of policies, the mutual interweaving and influence of macro-social structures and national institutions is achieved. At the national level, the main actors are various ministries and national authorities. The main social partners – employee organizations and the non-governmental sector are also involved in policy implementation. At the mezzo level, specific regions and their associated markets and organizations are considered both for staff qualifications and for the recruitment of trained individuals of different ages. At micro levels, the behavior of individual actors is manifested. The focus of this perspective is on the dynamic interaction in human life embedded in social structures, institutions, and individual actions (Elder, Kirkpatrick, Johnson, Crosnoe, 2003, 3-19). Embeddedness takes into account the constant interaction between different levels, as well as the influence of different cultures, and ethnic, and religious environments, which can leave their mark on the implementation of the relevant policy. Thus, embeddedness shows the relationship between events and institutions, i.e. social processes do not

exist in a vacuum (Bojadzheva, Trichkova, Milenkova, Stoilova, 2020; Desjardins, 2017), they are influenced by other processes and institutions that act, even sometimes without realizing it.

Older people's policies are about developing skills and competencies which are then applied in the workplace (Milenkova, Kovacheva, 2020). It should be especially emphasized that the elderly population as an age group is not homogeneous. Differences are observed in terms of education, ethnicity, cultural characteristics, professional training, and participation in the labor market. All these specifics reflect the needs and expectations of the policies and the manner of their implementation. It is important, however, that in contemporary conditions, more and more older people are turning to various forms of literacy, "second chance" schools, or upskilling, given that they are perceived to be linked to policies that give them a chance to improve quality of life, staying longer in the labor market.

There are several important strategic documents in the Bulgarian context:

- Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-30). The Council of Ministers of Bulgaria adopted the Strategic Framework for Education and Training for the period 2021-30. The framework focuses on the priorities of education and training in the next decade, as well as the specific goals and activities for their implementation. Special attention is paid to the digitization of education and the development of digital competencies of young people of different ages. This necessitates innovative approaches to learning principles, curricula, and the overall learning process. Overcoming inequalities and developing inclusive education for vulnerable groups is a priority of the Framework. Vocational education and training have a leading role, which develops in line with digital transformations.

- The National Strategy for Promoting and Improving Literacy Skills (2014–2020) aimed at the entire Bulgarian population, but the focus was placed mostly on persons without education or with primary education, most of whom are people over 55 years old. All this requires a series of measures, such as second chance schools, recognition of non-formal or independent learning, stimulation of people to increase their education and qualification, conducting courses for the unemployed, as well as literacy practices.

It can be said that within the framework of the presented policies, there are measures aimed at improving learning skills, and attitudes, creating favorable conditions, as well as additional

facilities, which in their entirety activate improving the educational advantages of the elderly in Bulgarian context.

Another important policy specifically aimed at the elderly population is the National Strategy for the Active Life of the Elderly in Bulgaria (2019-2030). This policy is dictated by the increase in life expectancy and the decrease in the birth rate. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce economic, institutional, administrative, budgetary, and financial changes, through which to guarantee cohesion in society and solidarity between generations. The Strategy states that it is necessary to create conditions and guarantee equal opportunities for a dignified and fulfilling life for the elderly. The improvement of health services and social services for the elderly is of key importance for the quality of life. Ensuring financial security, lifelong learning, sustainable and flexible employment, employment during retirement, and affordable long-term care is needed. All these aspects ensure an active life for the elderly, showing a level of independent living, participation in paid employment and social activities, health, and a pleasant environment.

The plan for 2023-2024 for the implementation of the National Strategy for Active Living of the Elderly in Bulgaria was developed within the framework of the interdepartmental working group on demographic issues under the Minister of Labor and Social Policy with the participation of a wide representation from the national state institutions. The Plan includes tasks and systematized measures to promote the active life of the elderly in employment, participation in society, and independent living, as well as measures to create a favorable environment for the independent and active life of the elderly at the national and regional level. A multi-sectoral approach is used, aimed at financing the targeted measures through the budget, the Human Resources Development Program, other operational programs, as well as funding under European and other international projects.

In summary, a key feature of the policies under consideration is the inclusion of people and groups of different ages, including the 55+ community, as well as different ethnic and educational backgrounds. Therefore, it can be concluded that the reviewed policies emphasize social capital and the integration of different individuals and social communities, aimed at a better quality of life.

Methodology

The data in this article is based on a survey that was conducted in 2022, which was upgraded to the National Strategy for the Active Life of the Elderly in Bulgaria (2019-2030), developed

dominantly by the Ministry of Education and Culture in cooperation with other ministries and institutions. The survey itself was under the title "Conducting a study to gather up-to-date information on the monitoring and evaluation indicators of the National Strategy for Active Life of the Elderly in Bulgaria (2019 - 2030)". The purpose of the survey was to obtain information about the participation of the elderly in paid work, education, social relations, and independent living; as well as what is the state of their health and well-being. The survey is nationally representative, with a sample of 1,030 persons in the age group 55+, divided into five age groups: 55-59 years; 60-64 years; 65-69 years; 70-74 years; 75+ years. The choice of people was made through a two-stage quota sample, structured by age and gender. The sample of 1030 persons was presented for each NUTS2 and each settlement such as capital, regional city, town, and village. The sample was based on the adult population for which there was information from the last census in 2021. The number of nests, which include 10 individuals each, was calculated for each settlement. The conducting method is a questionnaire survey. The selection of persons was made according to the method of Leslie Kish - "visiting the homes".

Results and discussion

We briefly present the results obtained from the survey.

In general, it can be said that the elderly population (55+) is characterized by a good educational structure:

- people with secondary special and secondary vocational education are 24.1% of the sample.
- people with higher education, master's degree are 20.5% of the sample
- adults with secondary general education make up 17% of the sample.
- professional bachelor's are 7.7%; higher education bachelor's are 4.5%; persons with a PhD are 1.9% and professional training for the acquisition of the fourth degree of professional qualification are 4.7% of the sample.

In summary, 80.4% of people aged 55+ in Bulgaria have secondary or higher education, which is a prerequisite for a more active and fulfilling life. In addition to the indicated data, 19.6% of the elderly have less than secondary education, among which persons with primary education and professional training are 14.7% of the sample. This requires greater activity towards this group and more effort for their full-fledged active aging.

An important topic in the conducted research was - the participation of older people in continuing education and learning activities. In general, the activity of elderly people in the field of lifelong learning (LLL) is not particularly high. In the conducted research 6.5% of the elderly indicated that they had searched for information about various training opportunities.

37.4% indicated that they did not look for such information because "I do not need education and training".

In addition to the mentioned information, we can specify a little more about the situation with the education of the elderly in our country.

The question "What sources have you used to find information about education and training opportunities?" yields the following results. The sources used are:

- Internet: 37.8%
- Family members, friends/colleagues: 19.6%
- Employers: 14.7%
- Labor Office: 2.0%
- Educational institutions: 8.8%
- Media: 7.8%
- Reference books: 8.9%

With a view to a more precise understanding of the results of the conducted research, it is necessary to make several clarifications. Formal training takes place in the educational institution and ends with obtaining a diploma, which is a prerequisite for continuing education at a higher level in the institutional educational structure. Formal education has the following characteristics: a) follows a state-approved curriculum; b) conducts the exams following standards and requirements approved by the Minister of Education; c) teachers teach according to rules and methods controlled and observed by inspectors (experts) in the relevant subjects; d) the entering school and graduation are under state-approved rules; e) the directors of formal education systems are appointed by the Minister of Education. Thus, formal education means centralized training with scheduled transparency and control of ongoing activities from the "top down". Nonformal education takes place in an organizational environment different from the state-legitimized official system and ends with a certificate, which does not, however, give rights to continue in the formal educational structure. Nonformal education very often takes place in NGOs, and community centers, in the form of courses implemented by various private entities. In fact, in the

distinction: of formal-nonformal education, the main differentiation is along the lines of the "educational structure" and the presence or not of state sanction of this education. Informal learning is self-learning that takes place purposefully, intending to increase the skills, qualifications, preparation, and skills of the individual. In-formal learning defines both the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and the search and use of various sources to facilitate the acquisition. This enables learners to build on previous knowledge and life experiences to use and apply knowledge and skills in different contexts: at home, at work, and in new learning. Self-directed learning develops competence in organizing information and study time. In this way, we can summarize that in in-formal learning, each person carries out his/her learning, focusing on specific activities and topics that are interesting on a personal level. In informal learning, the training is conducted by a trainer who monitors the learning process, gives guidance, assigns tasks to be performed, and assesses the results, and at the end of the training, a corresponding certificate is obtained. We will focus on these two aspects: nonformal learning and informal learning by referring to data from the survey conducted.

Non-formal learning

In non-formal education for the last 12 months, 5.7% of the 55+ surveyed population participated in the survey. Lats in the age group 55-59 showed the greatest activity. In the group over 75 none indicated participation in non-formal learning.

Table 1

Participation in non-formal learning by age

Participated/ average	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75+
5,7%	16,0%	6,4%	4,3%	3,4%	0%

Place of residence also influences participation in learning.

Table 2

Participation in non-formal learning by place of residence

Participated/ average	Capital	Regional city	City	Village
5,6%	10,6%	7,5%	5,0%	1,7%

More women participate in non-formal education: their share is 7% compared to 4.0% for men.

The level of education also has an influence. In the totality of persons participating in non-formal

education, graduates of higher education with a master's degree make up 14.4%; the largest share is held by persons with a doctorate – 15.8%.

Informal learning

9.4% of older adults surveyed said they had been involved in informal learning in the last 12 months of 2022. If we go into the crosstabulations in more detail, we find that: according to the character of place of residence, the persons who participated in in-formal learning are:

Table 3

Participation in in-formal learning by place of residence

Participated/ average	Capital	Regional city	City	Village
9.5%	13,2%	13,8%	8,5%	4,2%

Income also influences participation in informal learning. Individuals with the highest income have the most active participation in the study.

Table 4

Participation in in-formal learning by income

Participate d/ average	Below 400 BGN	401-600	601-800	801-1000	1001-1200	1601-1800	1801-2000	2001-2500
9,5%	3,6%	3,1%	9,2%	7,8%	4,0%	11,4%	23,1%	18,3%

The degree of education also influences participation in learning. Persons with the highest education are most actively involved in informal learning. Among those who indicated that they participate in it, most are persons with a Ph.D. degree - 35.3%, followed by persons with a master's degree 22.7%.

In addition, younger age groups are most prone to independent learning, namely persons aged 55-59 are more prone to learning than persons aged 75+.

Table 5

Participation in in-formal learning by age

Participated/ average	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75+
9,5%	15,3%	14,1%	8,2%	6,9%	4,4%

It can be said that participation in continuing learning, such as non-formal and informal learning, is related to age, place of residence, income, and education. This means that individuals with higher education, living in the capital or large cities, receiving higher incomes, and at the beginning of the aging process are more likely to participate in continuing education.

In addition, the individuals who indicated that they participated in in-formal learning carried out through:

- the assistance of a family member, colleague, or friend – 14.9%
- use of printed publications - textbooks, books - 23.2%
- materials from the Internet – 38.8%
- video materials or television educational programs - 12.9%
- libraries – 4.7%
- educational centers – 2.9%.

At the same time, 98.9% say that "if my employer had requirements, I would participate" in training. This means that if a work-related need arises, i.e. when the employer requires an increase in knowledge or qualification, older people would participate in continuing learning. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that, according to the surveyed persons, it is necessary to have a more active participation of various structures and institutions in the education of adults. The following distributions were obtained for the question "Who do you think should organize the education of people over the age of 55?":

- Employers – 24.3%
- Formal institutions (schools, colleges, universities) – 11.3%
- Vocational training centers – 16.7%
- TradeUnions – 9.2%
- Charitable organizations - 5.9%
- Everyone alone – 15.2%
- I don't know/can't judge – 12.3%
- No answer – 3,8%

It is noteworthy that, in addition to employers (according to 24.4%) and Centers for professional training (16.7%), as well as formal institutions (11.3%), the responsibility for training and increasing knowledge and qualifications is the responsibility of each individual personally (according to 15.2% of the sample). This means that everyone has to largely monitor their level

of training and knowledge. All this shows that adults themselves are aware of the need, on a personal level, to participate in various forms of teaching and learning.

In summary, it can be said that the share of the generation of people 55+ shows a certain activity regarding their participation in various forms of Life-long learning (LLL). Their percentage is not high, but it still marks some activity of the elderly is necessary to emphasize that the share of people who use the Internet to inform themselves about obtaining information about training opportunities is 37.8%. According to 38.8% of individuals, self-learning is carried out through materials from the Internet. This is indicative of the fact that around 40% of adults who participate in continuing learning are people with digital literacy and expectations. This is the most active and probably the most educated part of the group of adult learners who are trying to find different ways to develop themselves.

It is noteworthy that the largest share of persons participating in informal learning is compared to nonformal and formal learning. This means that people continue to be interested in different things related to their daily lives and activities, while at the same time, they tend to deepen their studies if this is required by the employer or the specific duties they perform. This openness of the elderly population to new things is an important prerequisite for lifelong learning. Certainly, education, income, and place of residence have an impact on the propensity and participation in continuing education itself. On the other hand, the increase in age is inversely related to the participation in the LLL.

The mapping of the national policy documents, which have been focusing on LLL shows that consistency in the design, implementation, and evaluation of different policy fields in support of lifecourse has become a significant policy concern. The overarching aim of these policy initiatives is to invest human and financial resources. They are implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP), and National Employment Agency as well as by their regional structures as cross-sectoral policies backed mainly by funding from European programs in several directions:

- guaranteeing equal access and high-quality education to vulnerable communities, through for example the exemption of vulnerable groups from tuition fees for education in university. An important point of the measures for disadvantaged groups is the opportunity for continuing education in the formal system after completing courses in literacy funded by European Structural Funds. In this direction is The Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education and

Training (2015-2020) aimed to upgrade the system of vocational training to a point to become more attractive. A successful example at the regional level is "New Chance for Success" and the Program – module "Improving Adult Literacy": which teaches illiterate and poorly literate people to facilitate their competitive participation in the labor market.

- bringing education closer to the labor market through the introduction of dual training, which means practical training in a real working environment and training in a vocational school or a vocational high school. In this context, we should take into consideration the validation of knowledge and skills acquired through informal training or non-formal education.

Conclusions

In recent years, at the national level, a series of initiatives can be noted, which are indicative of consistency with European policies and measures, and on the other hand, the national characteristics of the country are taken into account, according to the population such as ethnic and age structure, as well as education and qualification. On this basis, policies toward the elderly population can be seen as an important part of the overall approach to increasing the learning of people of all ages. The results of the conducted survey showed that among the elderly population, there is a significant share of people who increase their qualifications and improve their skills both in informal and independent learning. All this showed that among the people of the third age, there are many active persons, aiming at both their improvement and development, and striving to be useful to society and participate in various activities. It was important for us to show that the policies towards the elderly population have not only a humane side from the overall vision at the national and sectoral level but also that there are serious grounds for their activation. Special attention to the elderly population is of great importance, because these are people whose potential could be used more actively, and on the other hand, their life as a quality and as a state could be more fully valued.

The policies reviewed are important because they have both national and regional as well as personal effects and impacts. In this sense, the humane side of policies leads to a better quality of life for the elderly population and they contribute to the inclusion of people of different ages, with different characteristics and personal specifics in diverse forms of increasing their training, qualities, and qualifications. This undoubtedly contributes to a better quality of life for people, because it is related to their knowledge, skills, and qualifications, as well as their satisfaction with the activities performed and themselves.

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