

Social Policies: pro or against the school uniform? The third way – the dress code

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This note is made public in the context in which the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research (MECR) of Moldova examines at present the recommendations regarding the school uniform and requests opinions through an online questionnaire on its webpage (with a deadline by May 02, 2018); these are to be followed later on by wider public consultations and an analysis of impact/ costs. The survey made online by MECR questions many aspects, but the questions discussed so far did not include questions on the costs involved and the maximal budget of the parents.

Buying every year a new set of school uniform – involves significant additional expenditures for parents. The price of a new complete school set (autumn-spring and winter, including change), bought once per year, involves for parents in Moldova mandatory expenditures above 2-3,000 MDL (100-150 Euro) for each child – and such a cost is very high comparing to the minimum salary in Moldova (2,380 MDL monthly salary for a parent employed in the real sector, and only 1,100 MDL monthly salary for an employee in the state sector) or the average monthly salary for the economy (6,150 MDL). The schools and the Government have the moral obligation to take a responsible attitude regarding the budgets of all parents. Any compensatory measures (ex. allowances) examined for the social-vulnerable families will not be a sufficient management of the social impact, as these high costs are a problem also for the families with average salaries (so the majority of parents), for ex. a family with 2 children and parents working for the state sector.

Between the 2 extremes (with or without the uniform) it is recommended for the MECR to choose the half-way measure – adopting only a general regulation on the dress code¹ in schools, and the decision to adopt or not a school uniform – to stay at the discretion of every school, under a framework set by the MECR regulation. In this way, schools will maintain their autonomy and will take into account the situation in every community, as well as the opinion of parents and pupils in that school.

Adopting a strict classic uniform in schools – aiming to ensure social equality – may paradoxically have an opposite effect in the context of Moldovan prices and markets, as the uniform may become accessible only for children from high income families, and it may become a problem even for the families with say 2-3 children and average incomes. As the uniforms available for purchase vary greatly as price and quality (ex. the quality can be easily seen after 2-3 washes), than one risks observing an opposite effect to the desired goal: the high income families will wear more expensive and fancy uniforms, while children from medium

¹ A dress code is a set of social norms (or a written regulation, in the case of a dress code for schools) regulating the way people should dress when attending that institution. It might include details on what clothes are recommended and which ones are totally not acceptable. A dress code is less restrictive compared with a school uniform and offers more options for choice, including in terms of price.

and low incomes families will have a more limited set of clothes with a different overall look. Education is mandatory and free, therefore attending a school should not create expenditures for parents.

How much costs a uniform in Moldova: it is recommended for the MECR to make wider internal consultations with the specialists in social protection (from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection) and with the parents with children from various school cycles (primary, gymnasium, lyceum), as well as to attend carefully the market prices of a school uniform. Surprisingly, a school uniform is often more expensive for a boy than for a girl (ex. a pair of classic trousers costs over 500 MDL (one for warm and one for cold weather), a skirt over 300 MDL (also minimum 2 items or alternatively a dress), a jacket over 500-700 MDL, a classic shirt for boys costs 300-450 MDL (being necessary minimum 2 shirts with long sleeve and 2 shirts with short sleeve), white blouses at minimum 150 MDL each, classic sweater at over 400 MDL (one for autumn/ spring and another for winter) etc – therefore one complete set of clothes for all weather costs over 3000 MDL. This amount is too high compared with the minimum salaries in Moldova (minimum salary of 2380 MDL per month in the private sector and 1100 MDL per month in the state sector). It is important to note that for ex. in the EU member states there is greater competition on the market, therefore prices for textiles on the EU market are some 50% lower than in the Republic of Moldova, in the context of significantly higher salaries.²

In this context, it is important to clarify several myths on this subject:

Myth nr.1: The school uniform helps families save money

There was a recent experience that in the former USSR existed cheap affordable single type school uniforms, produced by state factories - however this reality no longer exists and the modern public policies must take into account the new circumstances. The set of clothes required for school is something **additional** to the clothes required by a child to wear every day, therefore it will require a bigger annual budget. In reality, a pair of durable dark jeans – will always be a cheaper and more resistant piece than the classic trousers; the dark jeans being also amongst the few options easily accepted by teenagers. In the same time, the problem of excessive fashion clothes worn by a minority of school children – can be easily eliminated if the ministry or the schools will adopt a dress code, which prohibits certain clothes on the school premises.

Myth nr.2 The school uniform ensures social equality amongst children

At present, the school uniforms available in Moldova differ in terms of price and quality. A cheap shirt or dress for school (ex. 150-250 MDL) will look very different from one expensive and high quality garment (ex. 500-800 MDL), especially after several washes. On the other hand, the school does not have the right to oblige parents to go to a single supplier/ shop, as new risks of corruption appear when this single shop is selected for every school, while the prices in small factories (or for clothes made to order) will always be higher, compared to when the uniforms are produced in large scale.

Myth nr.3 The school uniform increases school discipline and the quality of education

There are not too many studies in this area of public policies, and many of the existing ones are methodologically debatable. To date, there was not sufficient evidence identified to prove that the school

² For example, many online shops, like Tesco, George, Marks and Spencer and many others, offer school tops like 3 items for 20 Euro (so sell in bulks), school dresses for 8 Euros – on the other hand, in Moldova we observe that prices which are at least double are being paid by parents, who have much smaller salaries. In general, the smaller prices can be offered only by the large scale production factories, not the individual sewing shops, as is the trend in Moldova.

uniform is helpful for increasing the quality of education or to create a better school environment.³ In reality, children are different and they react differently to restrictive measures, while some may become more disciplined, others may feel uncomfortable and this detracts them from studying. Certainly, children should wear decent clothes to school and they should learn that some clothes are not suitable for school – therefore in this context adopting a more general dress code would be more useful. In particular for children of 11-19 years old, it is a more useful life skill to learn to choose decent clothes for school, and later also for work and social events.

Myth nr. 4 The parents want uniforms in schools

A reality is that parents want clothes and/ or uniforms for children which have an affordable price – both for school and for the free time; unfortunately this is far from being a reality on the Moldovan market, which is defined at present by low competition, high prices and low quality for mostly imported goods. As long as there are no cheap and good uniforms on the market, a prudent intermediary measure which we recommend to the MECR is to adopt a dress code, which will only prohibit certain (very few) excesses and will make recommendations. The online survey made online during April-May 2018 by the Ministry of Education and Culture questions many aspects, but none of the questions is about the costs involved and the maximum budgets available, therefore in this way we advise the decision makers to come back to these questions in wider public hearings. An online survey cannot serve as a basis for supporting the public policies, as it is not representative (does not include all target groups, particularly the vulnerable population), does not include an evaluation of the costs to be paid by parents etc.

Myth nr 5: All families for which the school uniform is a burden will receive state aid for this purpose

The correlation between the price of a uniform and the average salaries in the state sector, makes the price of a school uniform to become excessive not only for the vulnerable low income families, but also for the families with average incomes – and this includes the majority of parents. And the state at present does not have sufficient resources to provide full aid to a majority group of parents; it is equally not likely that the state will provide an allowance of 2-3 thousand MDL every year for all parents who have small salaries (ex. for parents with the salary smaller than the average salary per country). It is important that the family has money not only for a uniform, but also for books, textbooks, healthy food, shoes and warm clothes, extra-curricular activities for the school vacations. However if there are money available for support to low income families, these should be given better for buying school supply and winter clothes and shoes. Schools too might have higher priorities, where extra money would be helpful.

Myth nr. 6. All developed countries have school uniforms

In reality, the situation varies greatly in the state schools in different countries – from UK and Switzerland where a school uniform is worn (though at present in UK there are debates regarding the excessive cost of school uniform and the need to lower the minimum requirements) – to many European countries, such as Sweden, Finland, France and Belgium, where there is no requirement to wear a school uniform and they have a very good experience in education, being world leaders when the quality of education in schools is evaluated. USA as well does not request school uniforms homogeneously across all states, and some countries (ex. Turkey) have even cancelled the requirements regarding the school uniform. Moreover, the 2017 decision of the Swedish School Inspectorate is that imposing a school uniform is against human rights,

³ Here is a relevant example, showing that the school does not have a direct impact on behavior or school attendance rates, and contrary to the public debates in many countries, the authors have identified that the school uniforms have a negative impact on the school performance – see the “Effects of student uniforms on attendance, behavior problems, substance use, and academic achievement”, 1998, David L. Brunsma & Kerry A. Rockquemore.

and the few cases where children wear inadequate clothes can be discussed in private with the child's family (instead of imposing regulations for the whole school/ class). The excessive requirements, when these are not met, often have as a consequence disciplinary measures against children, which becomes a source of stress for all parties involved, limiting the access to education.

On the other hand – in many private schools in the developed countries indeed there is obligatory school uniform, but this is required from children from families with high incomes, who can also pay high fees for their private education and also for more expensive quality uniforms; these examples should be examined separately from the state schools, as the state schools are part of the free and obligatory education.

Myth nr. 7. The school uniform ensures the unity amongst children

There are alternative, cheaper methods, to ensure this joint identity for children – pins, logos which can be applied on any clothes, same t-shirts for competitions and joint events and other low budget decisions which can be taken by the school administration, in consultation with the parents and the children and youth in every community.

Recommendations to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research:

- It is recommended for MECR to study carefully all 3 options for public policies, and selecting the option which is efficient, but also ensures minimum impact on the budget for parents. These 3 options to be examined could be: (1) the lack of any kind of restrictions, (2) strict single uniform for all and (3) adoption by the MECR of a dress code, which describes the clothes which are not acceptable in schools (ex. jeans with holes, transparent clothes etc.) and the recommended wear (for example, dark trousers and skirts, white or single color neutral tops), leaving more options for parents. **Preliminarily it is recommended to follow the intermediary option – adopting a single dress code, allowing parents to choose also based on prices; this option is also the best as it educates children to make the difference between clothes for school/ work and those for free time and social events.** Adopting a dress code is a more realistic and cheap policy, which can be realistically implemented for all ages, once the older children (ex. gymnasium 11-16 years old and lyceum 16-19 years old) are naturally more reticent towards strict school uniforms.
- To make wider public hearings (both in rural, and in urban areas), including of evaluating the costs for parents, before adopting any regulations; to consult also the civil society, including the members of the APSCF Alliance (Moldovan NGOs working in child protection) and the Ombudsman for children rights. Additionally internally it is advised to seek the avis of the Ministry of Health, Social Protection and Labor and an evaluation of the exact costs of the annual budget required for a school uniform for the warm and cold weather (including change clothes) that the parents should plan, as well as evaluating the public costs for the allowances to be granted to the vulnerable low income families and how feasible is this allocation compared with other options for support.
- To maintain the school autonomy for schools regarding the final decision on this matter, allowing in this way for the opinion of parents and children to be consulted in each community (ex. the supply and the prices differ a lot in rural and urban regions). Only the local consultation of school children will ensure a greater degree of compliance, in particular amongst teenagers.
- Any regulation adopted should be very prudent regarding the application of disciplinary actions and should specify exactly what are teachers allowed to do, and what are not allowed, as they should treat all children with respect. All children have the right to education, attending classes is also obligatory, therefore the non-observance of a dress code should be discussed bilaterally and in a

respectful manner with the parents, as they are the ones who decide what to buy and what budgets are available, not the children alone.

- To prohibit any potential source of corruption – in particular, to prohibit sending parents to a single shop/ producer of school uniform, to prohibit requesting a single color which would be hard to find (the selected color should be easily found in minimum 2-3 suppliers), as a special color or a special print for each school determines a smaller supply and therefore a higher price to be paid by parents. An exception to this rule can be granted only for the private schools, which may have their own shop.
- To adopt rules only for the state schools on this matter, while keeping full autonomy for the private schools (the majority of private schools in Moldova already have school uniforms for the primary school/ gymnasium), including the permission for a single supplier.
- In the medium and long run – if the situation on the market will change and in the Republic of Moldova there will appear a larger diversity of accessible low price uniforms for children, along with a significant growth of salaries – then the public policies in place can be further reviewed and adapted to the new reality.