

## Regional Profile

# South Central

### Key facts

Population (2018): 1.417.432

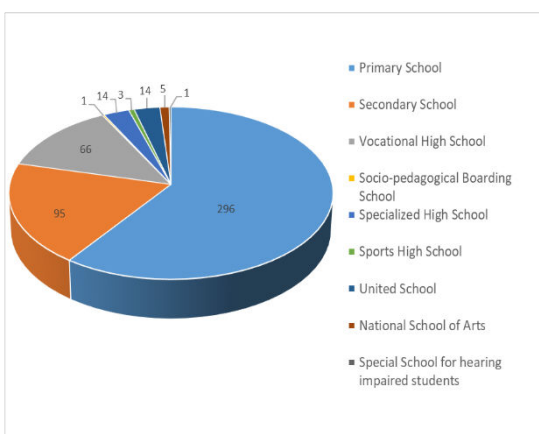
Territory (sq. km): 22.365

Regional GDP (2022) (€): 15.400

### Educational provision in South Central Region

In 2023, the South Central region had the **highest number of pupils** of the NUTS 2 regions in the country. Overall, there are **495 schools**, most of which concentrated in the Plovdiv district. There are significant intra-regional inequalities with the Plovdiv district boasting with a dense network of higher education institutions and a high share of students while the Kardzhali district lags behind having the highest relative share of the population aged 25-64 with primary education and below.

**Access to education and employment** varies considerably between the capital city Sofia, the other cities and the smaller towns and villages in this NUTS 2 region. These conditions enhance important inequalities and affect the population.



Source: Ministry of Education and Science, 2024

### Learning outcomes in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria the concept of learning outcomes is a new-comer in the education policy debate in the past ten years and its dominant definition is **skills-based** and **quantifiable**. The latest education strategy defines it as “a coherent set of knowledge, **skills and competences**, which could be assessed and validated through a certain number of credit points linked to them”. On the other hand, public debates focus on **low academic achievement**, as measured by large-scale surveys such as PISA and the declining results from the national external examinations. The academic community deliberates on the **low quality of education** and highlights **the growing socio-economic and regional inequalities** as the key challenge. Common concerns are the high rate of early school leaving, the low attractiveness of vocational education and the low share of university graduates.

### Socio-economic characteristics of the region

The South Central region covers 20% of the territory of Bulgaria. The biggest city in the region - Plovdiv (second largest in Bulgaria) is the **most dynamically developing centre** in Southern Bulgaria, which shows in the second highest GDP per capita in the country. The main sectors of the regional economy are **services** with 54%, followed by industry with 38% and agriculture with 8%.

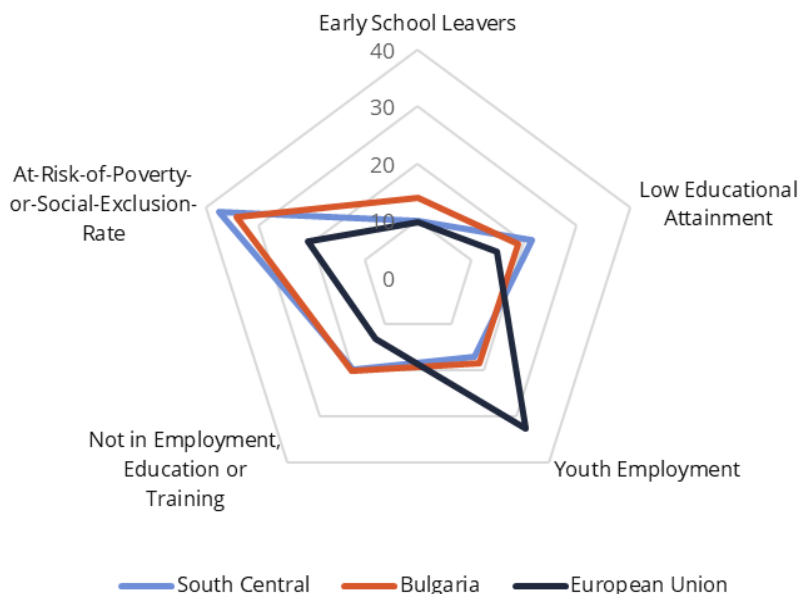
An advantage of the region is that it borders Greece and Turkey allowing the **development** of various mutually beneficial links and fruitful cross-border cooperation. Another benefit comes from the relatively **good road infrastructure** and the closeness to the capital Sofia. The continued attraction of capital and people to Plovdiv is the basis for future development of the district and the region. However, there is a **high internal migration** from the mountainous districts in the region towards Plovdiv, and the region continues to experience a **population decline** due to low birth rate and emigration.

Young people with ethnic minority backgrounds, early school leavers and long-term unemployed are the most vulnerable sectors of the population.

## Regional performance

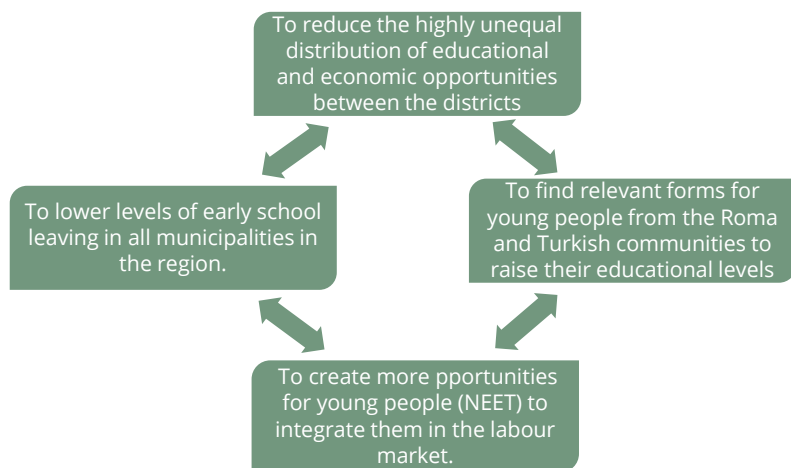
This region has the **worst performance** of early school leavers and young people with low educational attainment. The closure of educational institutions in small towns and villages has resulted in **significant drop-out rates**, even though the region has a well-established network of universities (9 in Plovdiv only) and is experiencing a rapid economic growth.

Despite **high levels of investments** and a good economic situation, the labour market access for youth with low education is particularly difficult. The employment rate among those with primary, less than primary and lower secondary education is significantly below the overall employment rate. There are municipalities with a **very high unemployment rate**. In small settlements the biggest "investors" are the municipalities, which through temporary social programmes are struggling to "contain" unemployment and reduce poverty and social exclusion, which rate is of 37,5%.



Source: Eurostat, 2023

### Policy challenges



### Further reading

Hristova, Assenka; Tosheva, Ekaterina & Stoykova, Ivelina (2020) *Back to School: The Quality of School Life as a pre-condition for student engagement and prevention of school dropout.*

Pepka Boyadjieva, Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, Valentina Milenkova & Rumiana Stoilova (2020) The local embeddedness of graduates' education-job mismatch and the role of lifelong learning policies for its overcoming, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 39:1, 104-118 (In Eng).



**Project title:** Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: a multi-level analysis of (under)achievement in the life course

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#### Project partners

- University of Münster
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- Autonomous University of Barcelona
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- University of Vienna
- University of Lisbon
- University of Porto
- University of Genoa
- University of Urbino
- Codici Cooperativa Sociale
- University of Plovdiv
- Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

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