

# Bulgaria – Swiss training provides “all the answers and the best solutions”

The vocational school in Thun frequently receives guests. After delegations from South Korea, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Russia and Greenland, it is now the turn of groups from Bulgaria to visit Thun. Sofia has sent over company representatives and vocational college lecturers who are meant to take on board the concept of the interconnected Swiss vocational training system where vocational schools, industry associations and the govern-

ment mutually complement one another. Today, we are observing with concern that youth unemployment is high while companies complain that they cannot find skilled specialists.” This paradox – lots of people seeking work while many firms say they cannot find workers – is the principal driving force behind the reform of vocational training based on the Swiss model.

Meglena Plugtschieva, Bulgaria’s ambassador in Berne, is a passionate

failed. Switzerland’s involvement has “resulted in a huge opportunity to push forward a fundamental reform of our vocational training system”, she says.

It is striking how broadly based the reform is. On the one hand, companies are directly involved. On the other, the highest level of government also lends its support. Bulgaria’s President Rosen Plevneliev focused heavily on vocational education and professional training during his first term of office that ended recently. On a state visit to Switzerland in 2014, Plevneliev even left Didier Burkhalter, President of the Swiss Confederation at the time, waiting because he wanted to visit the vocational school in Berne first and talk to apprentices.

Within a year of this faux pas, the first classes of prospective cabinet makers, automotive mechatronics specialists, electronics technicians and dairy technologists began their training in Bulgaria. The first apprentices in other careers will start their courses in 2017. A legislative reform enabling young people to enter into apprenticeship contracts was also pushed through.

“The pressure of reality” has meant reform taking place at a great pace, says Plugtschieva. In addition to its speed, the extent of change is also a key factor. The “Swiss project” extends far beyond education policy: “By increasing the prestige of careers and vocational education, we are changing the mindset. We are creating prospects. We are providing grounds for saying: there is a future in our country for our young people,” she says. That is vital for their self-esteem, especially as everyone knows that “turning our young people into economic refugees is not good”.

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Bulgaria is relying on the Swiss model to improve its training system. (Image: A vocational training delegation visiting the vocational school in Thun) Photo: Manu Friederich

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Vassil Radoynovski of the Bulgarian-Swiss Chamber of Commerce believes there are compelling reasons why his country should rapidly reform its vocational training system. Vocational training had been neglected since the political change in 1989. “There were still vocational schools,

supporter of the Swiss dual track vocational education and professional training system. She says the Swiss model provides “all the answers and the best solutions” for the current challenges facing young people in her country. Plugtschieva also made a strong appeal for Swiss support after the first attempts at improving the education system in her country