

Textbook Review in the Canton of Sarajevo

The Co-chairs of the Sarajevo Education Working Group, Ian Martin, Deputy High Representative for Human Rights, and Gabriele Mazza, Head of the Education Department of the Council of Europe, are deeply concerned about recent press reports on the textbook review that is carried out under the Sarajevo Declaration.

In an unprofessional manner and with very few exceptions, local media have conducted a campaign of disinformation, if not an outright smear campaign, based on biased, incomplete or simply wrong information with the apparent goal to confuse and alarm the public. Nowhere, for instance, was it ever suggested that the word “crime” disappear from all textbooks and be replaced by the word “mistake.” This suggestion applied to one sentence in one book for teaching grammar rules to eighth-graders. Nor is it the case that UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) is dictating what teachers are to teach in Sarajevo’s public schools.

The aim of the Sarajevo Declaration is to underpin the role of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s capital “as a model of co-existence and tolerance for the rest of the country.” Under the chapter on education issues, the Declaration specifies that “Sarajevo education authorities, under the supervision of the Education Working Group, shall list and review all textbooks currently in use... and will ensure that those texts judged to contribute to ethnic hatred and intolerance are withdrawn from all schools as soon as possible.”

After the adoption of the Sarajevo Declaration in February, the Sarajevo Education Working Group (SEWG) was established in conjunction with the Sarajevo education authorities. It includes some 20 members and observers representing the Cantonal education authorities, international and non-governmental organizations and the local community, including minority groups. In order to carry out the textbook review, the SEWG formed a subgroup tasked with analyzing the books used in primary and secondary schools for history, language and literature, geography, nature and society, fine arts and music. The subgroup comprises of local teachers and educational experts as well as representatives of the Cantonal Ministry of Education, UNESCO and OHR.

The members of the subgroup discussed and agreed unanimously on all its findings and compiled them in an interim report, which was endorsed and adopted in principle by the SEWG. The findings referred to whole texts or single paragraphs, sentences and words that promote ethnic hatred and intolerance directly or indirectly. Obviously, such findings can only be understood with reference to the context in which they are found.

In order to help the Cantonal Ministry of Education with the task of implementing the mentioned findings, the SEWG subsequently established an Implementation Task Force. Chaired by UNESCO, the Task Force is made up of subject experts from the Pedagogical Institute and was charged with deciding on appropriate solutions as to how to implement the most urgent (if not all) findings of the interim report; for example by blackening words or passages in the books or issuing supplementary information for teachers. Upon agreement on the solutions, they were listed in reports referring to the books for each subject, which the UNESCO representative as chair of the Task Force and the subject expert signed.

The reports completed so far have been presented to the Director of the Pedagogical Institute and the Cantonal Minister of Education for approval and endorsement. Upon approval, the Cantonal Minister of Education is to issue instructions to all public schools in Sarajevo. However, the report referring to books for language and literature was made public before the Cantonal Minister and the Director of the Pedagogical Institute had the opportunity to endorse and sign it. Allegations in the media that the report was publicised by UNESCO are incorrect.

The Cantonal Minister has now referred the matter to the Cantonal government, which is currently considering it. It is of paramount importance for the fulfilment of the Sarajevo Declaration that the textbook review process underway be fully supported by the Cantonal authorities.

This textbook review in Sarajevo is not taking place in isolation. It is reinforced by the textbook review project at Entities level, which is coordinated by the OHR. Education Ministers from both Entities have agreed to review each other’s textbooks. The books in question cover the same subjects as the ones reviewed in Sarajevo, and they are being analyzed with the same goal — to identify and eliminate elements likely to induce intolerance and ethnic hatred. The review is well underway, and an Independent Arbitration Commission composed of representatives of the Council of Europe and UNESCO is being set up to resolve contentious cases.

Both the textbook reviews in Sarajevo and on the State level are essential in creating the country envisaged in the Dayton Peace Agreement: a Bosnia and Herzegovina in which all its citizens feel fully accepted and respected, regardless of their place of residence and their ethnic affiliation. A successful completion of these exercises requires responsible behaviour, farsightedness and courage on the part of all involved.

The High Representative Carlos Westendorp welcomes the progress made through the work of the SEWG and insists that it be given full support and the textbook review carried forward in the spirit of cooperation that has characterized its work.