Address by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch at the University of Banja Luka: Postgraduate Course in European Studies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank you for the opportunity of addressing you today. I would like to say from the outset that I believe education – or rather, the establishment of a sound education system – to be at the very heart of the solution we are all looking for in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Without it, the long-term implementation of Dayton is unlikely to succeed.

An education system that reflects best western practice is essential if BiH is to be put firmly on the road to Europe. Indeed, reforms in the education sector are, rightly, a pre-condition of entry into the Council of Europe. Education is thus one of the keys to BiH's future.

I should therefore like to hail the initiative which brings us together today: the launching of the University of Banja Luka's Postgraduate Course in European Studies, within the framework of the TEMPUS program of the European Union. Its focus is "Transition and reconstruction", especially economic reconstruction, and it is actually a joint venture of the 5 recognized Universities of BiH. This is a highly welcome development, which follows a similar recent initiative at the University of Sarajevo. I hope that it will be followed by many other positive initiatives of the same nature.

The discourse on Europe, as we all know, is pervasive in BiH

these days. But as yet, it seems, there is little genuine understanding among politicians of what underpins a democratic, open, accountable society. This is precisely what this European Studies course will seek to address.

I therefore consider you, the participants in this endeavor, as the vanguard of the movement, which will eventually lead to the integration of truly European standards in public life in BiH. I shall be most interested in hearing about its results.

Today, however, I would like to focus on the reforms that the education system in BiH so badly needs. Reform has, as I say, become a top priority of the International Community.

By and large, the people of BiH understand the urgent need for a modern, quality education system for their children, and its importance to the project of rebuilding their devastated country. They also understand how education reform can put the country on the road to Europe. This was obvious at a series of round tables which OHR organized last autumn. The impatience of the younger generation for speedy progress in this area was especially palpable.

However, four and a half years after Dayton, there has still not been enough progress. Reform has been hampered by a general lack of political will, and even by outright obstruction.

Let us look at the primary and secondary education sector. The expurgation of textbooks used by primary and secondary schools had to be imposed by OHR.

Meanwhile, the level of compliance with the terms of the Banja Luka Agreement of 20 August 1999 (which mandated the removal of offensive and objectionable material) is still not entirely satisfactory, especially in the Serb and the Croat parts of the country.

The production of “supplemental annexes” for those textbooks

imported from Zagreb and Belgrade also had to be imposed, and were produced only after prolonged delay.

This state of affairs cannot continue indefinitely. OHR has a clear political mandate in this country.

One area of paramount importance is the return of the more than 1 million refugees and displaced persons. It is obvious that the type of education that children are likely to receive in return areas is a significant element in the decisions taken by their parents. But in most cases, sadly, they cannot receive the kind of open, quality education that they have a right to expect.

Why? Because, the recent history of BiH has generated three parallel education systems, together with parallel curricula, parallel sets of textbooks – in which, in many cases, children are not taught about BiH, its history, geography, literature, etc., but about neighboring countries instead!

Moreover, no provision is made for those returnee children who obviously have specific needs in terms of cultural and linguistic identity and traditions.

In other words, education in BiH reflects the ethnic cleansing that ravaged this country during the war. The only description of such a backward-looking system is “educational apartheid”!

Is this the type of education system that the elected officials of BiH believe will open the doors of the Council of Europe and the European Union?

I am resolved, therefore, on speedy progress in the area of education. A Commission of local and international experts, under OHR supervision, is in the process of being appointed. Its task is to prepare measures that will harmonize school curricula.

Ample provision will be made for the expression and protection

of the cultural rights and identities of the three constituent peoples, as well as other minorities present in BiH. An agreement is to be signed on 10 May. This agreement will pave the way to proper coordination between the three education systems.

This will include things like the mutual recognition of school certificates, and the introduction of shared core elements into all curricula, especially a common Human Rights and Civic Education course.

I shall closely follow the implementation of the measures that the May 10 agreements will introduce. As I say, the children of BiH are the single most valuable resource in building the future of this country. Every effort must be made to ensure that they build their lives unhampered by the disastrous errors and corrupt ideologies of the past.

In this context I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Council of Europe, UNESCO, the European Union, and the World Bank for their valuable and continued support in achieving concrete results in this crucial area.

I have no doubt that BiH needs to devise its own curriculum model, which will reflect its own rich cultural and linguistic traditions, but which at the same time will be based on accepted European standards and norms of quality and excellence.

Let me now turn to higher education. The present system seems to be riddled with deep-rooted ills, as evidenced in a recently published report called “Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Governance, Finance and Administration.” It was produced by the Council of Europe on behalf of the World Bank, using trust funds from the Government of Japan, by a team of international and national experts.

It is to be hailed as the first comprehensive report on education in BiH. It provides an unprecedented amount of high-

quality data on educational structures – which existing administrations in the country are apparently unable to provide. It also proposes a course of action, which is worth examining in some detail.

Most of the seven universities (counting also those in Bihac and Zenica) are, as in former Yugoslavia, loose associations of autonomous faculties and other institutions, numbering over 75 in all. At present there is no legislation, nor any procedural mechanisms, to ensure the homogeneity of academic standards, or to allow the comparative assessment of the performance of academic institutions. Higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina thus faces unresolved issues of governance both in terms of coordination, and in terms of managing the institutions.

The need for co-ordination is highlighted by the small size (and smaller resources) of all the units of government that relate to higher education. Political fragmentation has contributed to the proliferation of institutions – The University of Sarajevo (Federation and RS), The University of Bihac, The University of Mostar (East and West). However, resources for higher education are, and will no doubt remain for quite some time, less than in the former Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina with its higher level of economic output. This will inevitably dilute quality.

The universities are, in turn, ill-equipped to succeed in this harsh environment. The central university leadership usually has little legal authority or power over resources (though Mostar and Tuzla are exceptions). They adopt different admission and tuition practices for students, as well as different salary scales and recruiting standards and procedures for staff, even within the same university.

These arrangements create unaffordable inefficiencies and redundancies; it ties students to faculties, freezes course structure, prohibits university-based planning and management,

and weakens the external relations of the institution. It exacts a high price in terms of quality, efficiency, accountability, and national and international recognition and co-operation.

Several reforms are therefore needed to establish a sounder university structure. The legal "personality" of the faculties should be abolished. The authority of the rectors needs to be strengthened. Internal representation needs to be revamped; and budget setting and accounting (though not, of course, budget implementation) must be centralized.

The present system is seriously under-managed, and consequently faces major problems of educational performance. I shall give two examples:

- At present, an impressive 50% of secondary school graduates enter higher education within Bosnia and Herzegovina, but only about 10% are said to complete their studies in the expected time, which is about a quarter of the – already unsatisfactory – rate in some European countries. The reasons for the phenomenon are many, including the "parking" of young people in academia who would otherwise be unemployed. Non-completion on this scale should be treated as a serious problem of fairness, efficiency and quality.
- Far from the desirable uniform standards and free mobility of staff, students and graduates, there are neither mechanisms of mutual recognition, nor joint efforts to set up qualification requirements and accreditation. Federation cantons do not provide a legal basis for diploma recognition (Tuzla is, again, an exception). At present, only de facto recognition exists, inherited from the Yugoslav higher education system. There is willingness by the actors to accept studies and qualifications even beyond BiH's borders. However, in view of the political fragmentation, there are no legal guarantees and hardly any examples in

practice.

It is clear that present structures are too fragmented to attain western European standards in higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The most immediate challenges are:

- To operationalize the Council for Higher Education, and the newly formed Steering Body of that Council, in order to establish a basis for coordination and the development of a coherent strategy for higher education.
- To create the conditions – legal, financial, and professional – for effective strategies and management within individual institutions
- To establish sector-wide funding, qualification and accreditation principles and procedures.

The institutional importance of the Council for Higher Education is paramount. That is why the IC has decided that major donor investments in higher education for BiH will be conditional on the creation of a fully functioning Council.

CONCLUSION

BiH has now reached a stage where change and reform can no longer be put off. This is true in many areas, but perhaps nowhere more so than in the sphere of education.

Public office holders, and school and university administrators, owe it to the whole of society – but particularly to the younger generation which has paid such a high price for the mistakes of its elders – to move ahead with both courage and determination.

The International Community is committed to assist you whenever and wherever necessary. But time is running out, and the window of opportunity will not remain open forever.

I therefore appeal to you, especially to the authorities of the University of Banja Luka, and those of all the other

institutions of higher learning in BiH associated with the postgraduate course which is being launched today, to now translate into concrete, operational plans the concept of coordination which has been under consideration and discussion for several years.

Inter-university coordination and cooperation not only make sense in a small country like BiH; they will also contribute to bridging the gap that separates you from genuine European standards of Higher Education.

I also appeal to you to embrace the information age by supporting the BIH-ARNET initiative, which provides Internet access for all universities of BiH. A shared network will undoubtedly be far less costly than separate arrangements made by individual universities.

Your children are the future of this country, and they must receive the best possible education. This means education that responds to the requirements of our time, and that will ensure jobs for your children and a prosperous future for your country.

It means education that is in accordance with European standards, that instills your children with a cosmopolitan and tolerant spirit; education that teaches them to think critically, and for themselves, so that no more wars can be waged here.

Receiving a good education is the right of every child. If you respect your children, you must offer them a good education.

During my time here, I have noticed that neither people nor their rights receive much respect. This may be a result of decades of Socialist rule, during which the emphasis was on the collective – the workers, the farmers, etc. – but not on the individual and his individual rights.

This will change gradually, as Bosnia and Herzegovina becomes

more democratic. But it is important that you are pro-active and accelerate this process, because it is the very foundation of a civil society.

Thank you for your attention.