

HR remarks on the First meeting of the Conference of Education Ministers in BiH



I am very pleased to be here today. The fact that we have not had very much good news to celebrate in Bosnia and Herzegovina of late means that this first meeting of the newly established Conference of Education Ministers is a particularly noteworthy. It is an opportunity to register real progress in education, a sphere that is very important for this country's future.

Exactly ten years ago, in March 1998, the Council of Europe and the Office of the High Representative assembled, for the first time after the war, the entity and cantonal ministers of education. Since there was then no state-level institution that could seek to promote cooperation on education reform, for a number of years it fell to the international community to try to set the agenda for education reform and to promote a coordinated approach on the part of the domestic authorities. The OSCE Mission took the lead in 2002, and in 2003 we got a partner at state level in the Ministry of Civil Affairs. In spite all sorts of unfavourable circumstances, intermittent blockages and occasional dead ends, significant progress has nonetheless been achieved in education reform over the past decade.

Following the adoption of several long-outstanding education laws and the agreement establishing the education agencies

last year, it is good to see that the Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of the Conference of Education Ministers in BiH is now being put into effect – so creating a real opportunity to consolidate progress in this sphere during 2008.

When the agencies are up and running, and when the Law on Vocational Education and Training is finally enacted, BiH will at long last have a legislative and institutional framework in place for implementing education reforms in line with its European Partnership requirements and modern European standards.

I hope today truly does establish an effective mechanism at state level for properly harmonising and effectively coordinating the entire education-reform process, including the setting of priorities, strategies and policies.

Full harmonisation and implementation of the education laws is the next step, and that will likely prove to be even more difficult and more time consuming than was their adoption.

I expect all of you to make every effort to ensure that the new education laws do not remain dead letters on paper – or that the new agencies only languish irrelevantly, without either clear roles or useful impacts.

I also wish to ask you to deal with two important issues as your top priorities.

The first requirement is to put an end to the discriminatory practices that still exist in BiH schools, manifested as national and confessional segregation in a few Federation cantons (e.g., ‘two schools under one roof’) and as implicitly assimilation-oriented policies throughout the entire country. Putting an end to both tendencies is vital if BiH is to develop as an inclusive, tolerant and open society – and as a normal, cohesive, legitimate and democratic state.

The second urgent need is to introduce a European dimension and content to BiH schools and universities, so enabling pupils and students to learn as much as possible about the European Union through their regular curricula. Young people need to know not only what EU membership would mean for them and their country, but also how they will eventually help to define the EU's own goals and evolution. Just as education is a life-long process of personal development, so too is the EU itself a work in progress. I am sure that the generation now in school and attending university can and should play a crucial role in taking BiH into the EU. As adults, they will have the responsibility of bringing the EU into BiH.

Finally, let me say that what we are justifiably and proudly celebrating today would not have been possible without the strong personal commitment of Civil Affairs Minister Nović and his colleagues. I want, therefore, to thank and congratulate both him and his staff for accelerating progress in education reform over the past year.

I wish you all a very constructive, harmonious and successful meeting.

Thank you.