

Speech by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch to a conference on the new positioning of the University of Sarajevo, held at the Marsal Hotel, mount Igman

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Deans

Distinguished guests,

Thank you for inviting me to join this discussion on the future of Sarajevo University. It is a centre of learning which can look back on a distinguished history, and with imagination and wise management, it can take its place again

among the best European universities. However, instituting reform and sweeping away the unacceptable habits which have accrued during a long and trying period of war and stagnation is not something that can be considered at leisure. Improving the quality of Higher Education, in Sarajevo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, must be accomplished without delay. Young people are leaving the country, or wish to leave the country. One of the avenues they believe are closed to them is a first class university education.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has still to become a signatory to the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of Higher Education qualifications. If academic qualifications are not accepted, inside the country and outside, they are reduced to the level of mail-order degrees. The failure to secure domestic and international recognition for academic qualifications represents an unforgivable disservice to the student body – it devalues the currency of their hard work, it reduces their job prospects and it reduces their chances of gaining knowledge and skills overseas which can then be put in the service of Bosnia and Herzegovina when they return home. The Entity Ministries of Education are committed to signing the Lisbon Convention before the end of 2002. They must do so.

In 1999, 29 European education ministers signed the Bologna Declaration, committing themselves to the creation of a common European education space within a period of ten years. The principal practical instruments of the Bologna process are the European Credit Transfer System, which now operates across the whole of Europe in a growing number of universities, and Quality Assurance schemes which help develop comparable criteria and methodologies. In September, Bosnia and Herzegovina agreed to prepare an implementation plan to be presented to the secretariat of the Bologna process. Completion and acceptance of the plan will allow BiH to become a signatory to the treaty. Implementation of the plan will allow

BiH students eventually to take advantage of this system. The plan, which ought to be developed by all the universities, was supposed to have been coordinated by the Ministries and presented by now. It has yet to be completed.

At the administrative level, the system of allocating funds from the cantonal Education budget directly to university faculties, rather than to the university as a whole, means that public money is not used transparently or efficiently; funds are not allocated according to performance and need, and university administrators are denied the capacity to plan and spend in a strategic way.

Management of state owned university property is equally inefficient; some Faculties with relatively few students dispose of excessive space while Faculties with large numbers of students are crammed into inadequate and underequipped facilities

The result is, not surprisingly, profound student dissatisfaction. Recently, a protest was organised by students at the Political Science faculty in Sarajevo. They complained that some professors don't turn up for lessons. They also complained about situations where students turn up for exams at nine in the morning, hang about until two in the afternoon and are then told that the exam has been postponed. And they claimed that some tutors at the university routinely refer to their students as "idiots" and "imbeciles".

Furthermore, we have trustworthy reports on the enormous amounts of money that young Bosnian graduates have to spend just to get their foreign degrees and diplomas evaluated and recognized; is this how Universities mean to encourage the return of young professionals?

The war devastated the universities. It also witnessed

instances of real heroism on the part of professors and tutors who continued to teach in abominable – often life-threatening – circumstances. And since the end of the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina's difficult economic condition has meant that teaching conditions are often very basic and uninspiring. But this does not excuse the use of teaching methods which were abandoned decades ago elsewhere on the continent. For example, you don't need extensive exposure to teaching practices abroad to know that non-participatory, lecture-based rote-learning does not constitute a legitimate pedagogic method.

This conference is the right place to address these issues, because Sarajevo University, which accounts for almost half of the 80,000 students in BiH, sets the trend for the national Higher Education system. This afternoon we have together in one place representatives of the Federation political authorities and representatives of the university administration and teaching staff. Together you can chart a way forward. The university representatives cannot put their ideas into practice without the help of the politicians, and the politicians cannot take the correct initiatives without guidance from the university.

The number of universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina has to be reduced. This is not a matter exclusively for those present today. But it is a matter which will have a defining impact on the success or failure of your own reforms. The duplication of teaching courses offered by a fractured Higher Education system represents a scandalous waste of scarce resources. Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot afford seven universities. It doesn't have the facilities, the money, or the necessary numbers of qualified teaching staff.

Under the Dayton Peace Agreement, the funding of universities in the Federation rests with the cantons. The role of my office is to ensure the fair and efficient implementation of

Dayton. There exist in the settlement mechanisms whereby arrangements can be altered with the consent of all parties. With good will and consensus it will be possible to change the legal mandate for the provision of Higher Education and move this to the Entity level, where it can be properly coordinated. Equally important, in view of the urgency of reform, consensus can boost efficiency under the existing legal arrangement. Nothing prevents the cantonal education ministries, for example, from working together within a framework established and maintained by the Federation Education Ministry.

In the six years since Dayton, the focus of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been on keeping the peace and kick-starting the economy. There have been many commendable efforts by NGOs to make a positive impact in the field of education, yet it may have been the case that insufficient attention has been paid to this area, at least by the lead agencies. It has become clear, though, that as long as the education sector severely underperforms, this will threaten the economic and social future of BiH and its prospects of European integration. We still have directors in the school system who would rather deny pupils the use of computers than allow the computers to be shared with children of a different community. We still see textbooks in use which perpetuate vicious nonsense about ethnic separation. We still see children obliged to travel many miles to school because of communal considerations.

Is the situation hopeless?

No it isn't. Because in this country there are legions of honest, hard-working, competent and principled educators. There are teachers whose guiding light is the welfare of their students and the pursuit of knowledge. And there are administrators too, who work long and hard to provide these

model teachers with the facilities and equipment they need. These are our partners.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is now on the brink of breaking away from its recent past and setting out on the road towards Europe, with a functioning political system and an improving economy. Refugees are returning home and a sense of normality is more and more apparent. Yet the challenges are huge. The central social function of education is to give young people the skills they need in order to meet challenges. Just as Bosnia and Herzegovina faces particularly demanding challenges, its education system needs to be particularly good.

And it can be. Creativity, originality, enquiry, and wit are the stock in trade of Sarajevo's university culture. These qualities must be harnessed in the cause of reforming the university and reforming the education system across the country. There is no time to lose. Your students will not forgive you if you fail.