



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

address by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

to the
**Conference “Creating vision and standards – the Role of Higher Education in Fostering
Inter-cultural Dialogue and Understanding in a Multiethnic Society”**

Skopje, 16-17 March 2011

Deputy Prime Minister,
Minister,
Rector,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all thank the organizers, UNESCO and the University of St Cyril and Methodius and its Faculty of Philosophy, for inviting me to speak at this important conference on higher education and its role in fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding in a multi-ethnic society.

This conference is very topical, not only for this country, but for all countries that are multi-ethnic and strive to build a cohesive and stable society. Time and again, I have seen that there is a clear link between education and peace. I have learned that it is essential to recognize that education is a security issue, and as such is highly relevant to my conflict prevention mandate.

I am therefore particularly pleased that Deputy Prime Minister Ademi and the Minister of Education, Mr. Todorov, are with us today. Their presence is a confirmation of the importance the Government also attaches to education and its role in building a multicultural society. It also shows the Government's readiness to involve the academic community in the process of reforming the educational system.

There is a long history of co-operation between the institution I represent and this country in the field of education. You will recall that the first High Commissioner, Mr. Max van der Stoel, was actively engaged in addressing concerns regarding access to higher education in the mother tongue for the Albanian community. This involvement was strategic because at the time, tensions had dramatically increased in the country and culminated with open violence during 2001. Efforts were then made to find innovative solutions, which resulted in the successful establishment of the South East European University (SEEU) in September 2001, a private tertiary education institution offering instruction in Albanian, Macedonian and English. This University has played an important role in de-escalating the conflict. It has also demonstrated that members of the two communities can study together if provided

with an enabling environment. I am therefore pleased that, ten years after the opening of the SEEU in Tetovo, universities are once more at the forefront of this debate.

And the timing is right, with two important benchmarks in place:

The first benchmark is the *Ohrid Framework Agreement* (OFA). This country will celebrate the 10th anniversary in August of the agreement which paved the way for substantial progress in the participation of ethnic communities in its society. This was made possible through mother-tongue education in primary and secondary schools, through a process of decentralization which has allowed for more ethnic community ownership in the municipalities, and through the support of equal opportunities in employment, especially in public administration.

Yet, the limited social interaction between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians remains a source of concern to me. In particular the separation of ethnic communities through parallel education systems has nurtured misunderstanding and a lack of trust between the communities, leading to tensions and sometimes violence in schools.

This brings us to the second benchmark, namely the Government's *Strategy for Integrated Education*, adopted last October. This policy represents a long-term commitment to ensure that the country's education system bridges the ethnic gap between the communities and, indeed, fosters integration of the society. The authorities are to be congratulated for having made this decisive step. However, their task is complex and may be resisted, if not sufficiently explained to all segments of society. This Conference allows us to do exactly that, at a time when discussions on early elections dominate the political agenda and make it hard for any idea of education reform to receive the attention it would normally warrant.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As parents we want our children to have a good quality education, and it is important for all of society that education is free of discrimination and ensures equal access for and treatment of all pupils. It is legitimate to expect that education should provide children with the means to develop their capabilities as well as personalities in order

to become full members of society. In many respects, education is a pre-condition for the fulfilment of many other rights and freedoms – such as the right to participation, association, freedom of expression – which are all instrumental for democratic stability and economic prosperity. School provides children not only with educational attainment but promotes social cohesion by enhancing a shared sense of belonging among individuals of different backgrounds

There may seem to be an inherent tension between this societal objective of education and the right of children to preserve and develop their own culture and identity. Therefore, investing in education must be done in a way that maintains an appropriate balance between these two goals. The recently adopted Strategy on Integrated Education fully embraces this approach.

Integrated education is based on the principle that by bringing pupils from different ethnic backgrounds together in a shared learning environment, they can learn to understand, respect and accept each other. Integrated education is an education system that does not assimilate or separate pupils, but rather tries to reconcile the two goals I mentioned earlier, namely societal cohesion and individual identity, by providing a space for children to meet and learn how to understand and respect different cultures, languages and traditions.

In theory the principle is easily understood and its merits recognized. In practice, achieving integrated education is a complex task.

Naturally, language is an essential element of integrated education. Multi-ethnic societies should be concerned with providing opportunities for ethnic communities to learn and receive instruction in their mother tongue. This right, however, needs to be combined with appropriate tuition in the State language in order for all to be able to fully participate in society.

Integrated education is however not confined to language learning. It also involves curriculum development and textbooks, including history textbooks, which should reflect the multi-ethnic composition of the society. In my experience the development of curricula and teaching materials that include the teaching of the history, culture and

traditions of the various ethnic communities can be efficient tools to foster integration. And it can be even more efficient when the curriculum content is developed with the participation of representatives of the various ethnic communities.

Another central component is to ensure engagement. Policies of integrated education should create the necessary conditions to involve all stakeholders at all levels of Government, and at the same time, strive to ensure that decisions are made at a level that is as close as possible to the parents and those receiving education. This will enable those directly affected to be heard and to have their views taken into account.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Our societies are multicultural. This is first and foremost a reality, before it becomes a political model.

I believe that in a contemporary setting, we want our children to be responsible citizens, able to adapt to and access a large range of opportunities enabling them to fulfil their potential and enjoy a meaningful life. This is not an easy path, and being able to embrace the complexity of our world is not something that may be enjoyed by just saying to our children that they have to seize such an opportunity. This comes with education. And it starts by understanding the complexity of our own environment, including the culture and history of different ethnic groups among whom we live.

In my years as High Commissioner, I have observed that a trend of separation along ethnic lines in the field of education is on the rise in many countries. This limits the future of our children and is worrying. I have therefore been engaged in a range of activities – also in this region – to ensure that educational policies address and counter such segregation along ethnic lines and, in so doing, provide a balanced approach, allowing for each and everyone's personal development, while promoting the cohesion of the broader society. I intend to develop some further guidelines on the content of and the means for achieving integrated education in order to assist States and all relevant stakeholders to capitalize on the constructive role of education in managing diversity.

In light of the social processes taking place in multi-ethnic societies, integrated education policies need a solid foundation based on academic research. Interethnic relations are not static. Policies must be continuously evaluated and adjusted as necessary in order to take into account social requirements.

I believe that there is considerable scope for tertiary education to stimulate research on this subject and for academia to work in strategic partnership with the authorities to improve educational policies and to contribute to their realization by providing educational professionals who are trained in multicultural and multilingual teaching.

In this connection, I am particularly pleased that UNESCO has taken up the challenge of facilitating the development of evidence-based policies to better respond to new trends. I had the opportunity to visit the UNESCO Chair in Intercultural Education in Vladikavkaz last year, and was impressed with its academic achievement. I am convinced that the establishment of such a UNESCO Chair with the Faculty of Philosophy here at the University of St Cyril and Methodius will provide you with an excellent tool to take today's discussion on intercultural dialogue in and through education forward. In particular, it could prove most helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of certain areas addressed in the Strategy on Integrated Education, such as developing curricula, teaching materials, language teaching and school governance.

I therefore look forward to exploring the multifaceted role of higher education institutions in promoting interethnic understanding and hope that this Conference will help us in this endeavour.

Thank you.