



**Opening Speech by the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, H.E. Dr. Solomon Passy,
Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria
at the Ministerial Conference on Education as an Investment into the Future
*Tashkent, 5 April 2004***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you here in Tashkent for the Ministerial Conference on Education in Central Asia. I am very pleased to see representatives from the Central Asian national ministries for education, as well as representatives from international organizations and donor agencies. I am convinced that our conference is a perfect opportunity to discuss important questions in the education sector and to share lessons learned at first hand. However, before I enlarge on this theme, first I would like to state how horrified I was to learn last week about the slaughter of innocent people that occurred here in Uzbekistan. I express once again my deepest condolences to the Uzbek authorities and to the families of those that suffered from these outrageous acts of terrorism.

On behalf of the entire Organization, I totally condemn these brutal and inhuman acts which endanger the lives of people and pose a threat to the normal functioning of the state institutions and the society.

The Bulgarian Chairmanship will continue to devote every effort to promoting the anti-terrorist measures and activities of the OSCE and its interaction with other international organizations and bodies engaged in the fight against terrorism.

Returning to the theme of the conference, I would like to express my wholehearted thanks to the Uzbek Government for its support in hosting this event. The personal dedication of my colleague Mr. Sodiq Safayev, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan and Mr. Saidakhror Gulyamov, Minister of High and Specialized Secondary Education of Uzbekistan, has contributed immensely to the organization of this Ministerial Education Conference.

In December 2001, the Bishkek Conference on Prevention and Countering of Terrorism, organized by the OSCE and the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime, adopted a declaration and a Programme of Action. Among the measures identified for combating and preventing terrorism were the following: "to promote active civil society engagement in the fight against terrorism; and to offer young people opportunities to learn and practice tolerance, to enable them to actively participate in civil society and to familiarize them with peaceful conflict resolution methods".

The key strategies produced at that conference will guide us in the years to come. Their implementation has started already and the Bulgarian Chairmanship in 2004 will do its best to further advance their realization.

The linkage between education and security is obvious. The time when security was defined solely in military or strategic terms has largely gone. Today, issues like governance, migration, economics, health and education are seen as part of global security. These aspects of security should not be underestimated, especially in a strategically and culturally important region such as Central Asia - linking together, as it does, Europe and Asia.

Education is of particular importance for our Chairmanship. It plays a key role in building security, ensuring political stability and reducing poverty. By prioritizing education, the Bulgarian Chairmanship intended to mobilize national and international political attention to the issue, as well as to activate additional resources, through developing further synergies with relevant partners and raising donor interest, with regard to specific groups and regions. The initiative will cover the whole OSCE area, focusing on specific regional problems and highlighting the issues of common interest. Aligned with the world campaign "Education for all", the Bulgarian Chairmanship envisages targeting a broad spectrum of diverse groups of the population:

- Policy-makers, central and local authorities
- Experts, researchers, teachers, trainers, students, parents
- Employers and professional networks
- Non-governmental organizations.

This theme will be reflected in this year's OSCE Economic Forum on: "New Challenges for Building [up] Institutional and Human Capacity for Economic Development and Co-operation". Enhancing human capital is one of the most important elements of economic transformation. At the Forum's 3rd Preparatory Seminar on "Professional Skills Needed for Developing a Market Economy", held recently in Bishkek, many remaining challenges were identified. Among them: a deficit of faculties for training in market disciplines, a lack of exchange programmes for teachers and students with other regions, problems with the recognition of diplomas, lack of access to the Internet, and the problem we know as the "brain drain". The recommendations will be further discussed at the Economic Forum and the Chairmanship encourages all participating States to actively contribute to that debate.

Today, in a dynamic global environment, education is also the means by which we learn to understand and shape our world, to communicate, and to build solutions that are based on the inclusion of different groups and interests. In its social aspect, education provides the basis for independent thinking, flexibility, the reduction of prejudice and civilized behaviour in general. It has a significant impact on the ability of people and groups of people to peacefully co-exist.

Central Asian countries are all among those nations with the highest percentage of young persons within the population. Of course, we keep in mind that the problems and the prospects for education differ from country to country. We therefore do not need ready-made blueprints for co-operation but rather tailor-made concepts embedded in their respective contexts.

The most important pillar on which future development in the education sector should be based is the traditionally high value placed on education among the peoples of Central Asia. This is a potential we all should be aware of. Adults and children alike should feel that their governments value education as much as they do and appreciate the people's demand for access to information, participation and engagement. The benefits of education are normally not seen immediately but, in the long-run, their impact is profound.

Governments together with civil society should provide all children with access to free compulsory education without using them as cheap labor. Teachers should be paid adequately and on time to eliminate the practice of so-called "examination fees" and other forms of corruption. Governments should pay special attention to promoting the enrollment of girls in education institutions and stimulating their graduation.

I would like to stress here some issues of special importance:

- Urgent action is needed to train the staff at the ministries of education and the regional and district education units.
- An education financing framework is required, which is based on medium- term targets and on the associated costs of inputs.
- The national institutes of education and the scientific research institutes should be further supported, in order to align the education system to international standards.
- Initiatives of informal educational institutions, such as non-governmental organizations or community based self-help groups, to retrain adults should be strongly encouraged.

The Bulgarian Chairmanship is fully mindful of the OSCE's limitations in providing direct assistance for education and training. At the same time, we all know that the OSCE has immense political potential for enhancing awareness and mobilizing resources. Today's conference represents only one effort by our Chairmanship to co-ordinate OSCE activities with other specialized international agencies, for example, the Council of Europe, UNESCO, UNICEF, the UNDP, financial institutions and bilateral donors.

I am convinced that this approach will contribute to further improving the quality of education in Central Asia and will pave the way for new modes of cooperation. Finally, I would like to follow up today's initiative at a future event in Bulgaria, on the invitation of the Bulgarian Minister of Education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I wish you a fruitful and successful conference.

Thank you for your attention.