



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

OPENING REMARKS

by
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OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

at the
Launching Event for the Policy Paper
“Steps Towards an Integrated Education System”

Skopje, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – 8 October 2009

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be back in Skopje. As many of you know well, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities has had close relations with your country for many years. It is telling that this is my third visit here since taking up my post two years ago. During these visits I have had the privilege of meeting a great number of people representing authorities and civil society and all the different ethnic groups living here. I have been struck by the great hopes and aspirations for the future expressed by all the people that I have met. An important theme in all these conversations has been the key role of education. Good education is a priority for the Government, and all communities see high-quality education as the gateway to their personal success and the success of the country at large.

The benefits of education go beyond pure educational advancement. It provides a common platform and set of values within a State of divergent peoples. At the same time it gives the various communities an opportunity to maintain and further develop their mother tongue and culture. More than many, this country has respected the various communities' right to enjoy "instruction in their language in primary and secondary education," as stated by the Constitution. This respect for diversity does not in any way contradict the effort to build a cohesive society. To the contrary, this approach is likely to facilitate integration and help cement the foundation for a more cohesive society.

I am therefore pleased to note the significant achievements in your education system since the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. For example instruction in mother-tongue in secondary schools has become routine practice. Your universities are witnessing increasing numbers of students from different ethnic communities. Political influence on appointments in the educational system has been reduced. The process of decentralization has given ethnic communities more "ownership" of schools in their municipalities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While these achievements are commendable, other developments are troubling and give reason for concern.

Firstly, if we look below university age, schoolchildren of different ethnic backgrounds are often separated into different linguistic shifts or housed in different

buildings. Even in the places where children share the same school building – as is the case in Kicevo and Struga – there are few opportunities for them to interact, to learn about each other and to develop friendships.

There is an understandable concern among minority communities that they may be totally absorbed by the majority if efforts are not made to preserve their language and culture. It is generally thought that this is best achieved through separate education facilities and curricula. There is therefore sometimes resistance to projects intended to create a common learning environment for children of different ethnicities. However, I would like to stress that integrative measures and education in the languages of ethnic communities are not mutually exclusive. The pressure and threats used lately to stop ethnic Albanian schoolchildren from attending classes in the Macedonian language in the village of Preljubiste, bring unwelcome interethnic tensions to the school playground and to the community. All communities should appreciate and grasp the opportunity to become proficient in the State language. Only through such proficiency can they be fully integrated into society.

In this respect, I commend your Government's decision to introduce classes in Macedonian from the first grade onwards. In due time, this should ensure a better command of the State language among all schoolchildren and will by extension contribute greatly to improved communication between the communities.

Having said this, I would like to stress that communication is a two-way street. It requires effort on the part of all parties involved. While encouraging all ethnic groups to study Macedonian, I would also like to challenge ethnic-Macedonian pupils to show a greater interest in – and even learn – the languages of other ethnic communities: Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, Bosniak, Vlach and Roma.

Another concern of mine is the rise of ethnocentrism. As a consequence, pupils from different ethnic backgrounds are taught different versions of history. The result is a markedly different understanding of their past and the role played by the various ethnic groups in the country's history. These children are offered few opportunities in the classroom to learn about each other's traditions, customs and cultures. This causes a dangerous in-group and out-group relationship – “them” and “us”, which only becomes more entrenched with time.

This combination creates a fertile breeding ground for ethnic stereotypes and prejudice. This will be detrimental to your country's rich diversity and the potential it holds for future generations.

What we teach our children will therefore have a bearing on the future. I recall a quotation by a well-known human rights activist, John W. Whitehead, who said, “Children are the living messages that we send to a time we will not see.” We need to decide which message we want to send with them – one of mistrust and misunderstandings or one of respect and tolerance?

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to say that there is an effort underway to tackle these negative trends. International donors have been involved in projects to improve interethnic communications in your schools. My office is no exception. However, these projects are an addition to, and not a substitute for State action. The success of these efforts depends on the capacity and political will of your country’s politicians, educationalists and parents. A response to this challenge requires a comprehensive governmental strategy.

During my visit in January this year, your Government stepped up to the plate and accepted my proposal to commission an expert to assist the Ministry of Education and Science in designing a set of new policies for such an overarching approach.

This Policy Paper is a product of broad consultations with Government officials, representatives of international and regional agencies, and civil society. The Ministry of Education and Science took an active part in these talks. Genuine and wide consultation is important if we are to achieve success. We need to have consensus between the various actors representing the international community and local authorities. We need to ensure that our individual contributions to the goal of integrated education draw on each other’s strengths and expertise.

The role of local authorities is particularly vital. Their knowledge of local challenges and specific circumstances means they can help chart the right course and ensure that new policies are sustainable.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Policy Paper offers practical advice on how to transform your education into an integrated system. It identifies five areas where further action is necessary.

First of all, there is a need to create more opportunities for interethnic interaction. This requires a comprehensive and sustainable approach to joint multi-ethnic curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Secondly, it is high time to reconsider approaches to language acquisition. When graduating from school, young people should be able to speak not only their mother tongue and one of the international languages, but also have a basic command of some of the other languages spoken by the ethnic communities of their country.

Thirdly, each school curriculum and the accompanying textbooks should be mainstreamed to incorporate the issues of interethnic dialogue and tolerance. They should teach pupils how to respect and appreciate diversity

Fourthly, teachers need to receive regular in-service training on intercultural education. They need to be prepared to answer sensitive questions and promote tolerant attitudes in the classroom.

And finally, there is the on-going process of decentralization. It is important to transfer competencies to the local level. Co-ordination between central and local authorities is crucial. This will help ensure a clear definition of roles and division of responsibilities, as well as cultivate a willingness to further decrease the influence of politics on school appointments and policies.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

A Macedonian proverb says, “Teach children at a young age, in order to avoid regrets in your old age.”*

We need to act today to transform the education system in order to avoid troubles in the future. The fragmentation along ethnic lines must be reversed. I trust the Policy Paper will provide the guidelines to make this possible. I encourage the Government to embrace these policy recommendations and to carry them through.

Today’s event can serve to promote co-operation between international and national actors pursuing a common goal. This is crucial for effective and timely action.

* Учете деца на младост па кога ќе дојдете на старост да не ви биде жалост.

It will be necessary to sustain the political efforts and to allocate sufficient resources. I would therefore like to suggest organizing a donors' meeting as a follow-up event to today's launch. This would provide an opportunity for the various international donors to discuss what support they can provide to the Government in promoting integrated education.

Change will not happen overnight. It will take time before the results become visible. What matters is your dedication. What matters is the ability to demonstrate political courage: the courage needed to translate words, like those in this Policy Paper, into action.

As OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I am committed to supporting you on this path and I wish you every success in this important undertaking.

Thank you for your attention.