



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

**THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN BUILDING A PLURALIST AND
GENUINELY DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY**

address by
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at the
South East European University (SEEU)

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It is a pleasure for me to be with you today at the South East European University (SEEU).

Six years ago we all had the same vision: that the founding of this University would not only contribute to the provision of higher education in the Albanian language but would also promote a multilingual and multicultural approach to education in your country. We also hoped that establishing such a University would support interethnic understanding, which is a necessary precondition for a well-integrated, multilingual society. Today, we can see that our vision is on its way to being realized.

This could not have been achieved without students who, notwithstanding their ethnic background, trusted in the excellence of this University, their dedicated professors and other University staff and, last but not least, the University's management, in particular its Rector Dr. Alajdin Abazi. You should all be proud of your achievements and I congratulate you wholeheartedly.

The first years of the University's existence were crucial, in particular with regard to the language policy of the University which has been assessed by the European University Association (EUA) as impressive. Participation in the so-called Bologna Process is also to be applauded. I would like to support the further strengthening of these policies and practices which will surely justify the assessment of the OECD/IMHE Feasibility Study Report according to which "the University has already shown national and regional leadership..."

We should all be aware, however, that ensuring the competitiveness of any university is not an easy task. It is worth mentioning that in *The Economist* newspaper this week it was observed that "... if you wanted to examine parts of European life that yearn to be world class, but are determined to hold out against market forces and the laws of competition, the continent's universities would be a good place to start".¹

While high-quality education is a precondition for both self-sustaining domestic development and international competitiveness and is a challenge in any State, such a challenge is further increased in culturally and linguistically diverse societies.

¹ See the article "Charlemagne: Winning by Degrees", *The Economist*, 3 May 2007.

My experience as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities has enabled me to identify certain recurrent educational issues that I want to share with you today. I believe that some of these issues are applicable to the present situation in education in this country. [Hopefully we can have a fruitful discussion on this afterwards].

The starting point for my involvement in any specific education issue in any one of the OSCE participating States is that the right to education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. This right should be guaranteed without discrimination of any kind. As such, “education should be directed to the human personality's ‘sense of dignity’, it shall ‘enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society’, and it shall promote understanding among all "ethnic" groups, as well as nations and racial and religious groups.”²

In addition to the universal human right to education, international law recognizes, under certain conditions, the education rights of national minorities. This right is an indispensable means of realizing other minority rights that ultimately serve to protect and preserve individual identity. According to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (the Framework Convention), “a pluralist and genuinely democratic society should not only respect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of each person belonging to a national minority, but also create appropriate conditions enabling them to express, preserve and develop this identity.”³ States are obliged to promote mutual respect and understanding, and co-operation among all persons living on their territory, irrespective of those persons’ ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity, in particular in the fields of education, culture and the media.

An essential component of the democratic process is the effective participation of minorities in the decision-making process. It is important that this be done in a meaningful way, especially in the development and implementation of policies and programmes related to minority education.

² See The General Comment No. 13 on Article 13 (right to education) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

³ See Preamble to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

At present, our societies face a challenge of increasing significance to all OSCE participating States, namely how to accommodate and learn to live with the growing diversity of our societies. Indeed, most modern states are culturally, linguistically, religiously or ethnically diverse. Striking a balance between majority and minority interests that allows all persons to enjoy their individual identities while realizing and valuing shared interests, is essential in order to prevent the emergence of intolerance, racism, xenophobia, secession and violent conflict.

For me, integration respecting diversity is a fundamental approach to both conflict prevention and respect for minority rights. At the heart of this approach lies the notion that States need to encourage minority participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of mainstream society with a view to developing a sense of belonging and having a stake in society at large, while at the same time protecting the right of minorities to maintain their own identity including their culture, language and religion.

I believe that good education should direct everyone's attitudes and experiences, teaching them to learn, and thereby to understand and even to enjoy different cultures, languages and traditions and ultimately to shape future generations for responsible citizenship.

While a pluralist and genuinely democratic society should enable protection of minority rights, **separation** along ethnic lines should be avoided at all costs since it reinforces ethnic divisions within communities and serves as a fertile breeding ground for negative stereotypes and prejudices among different ethnic groups.

It would be naïve to expect that any existing separation can be easily reversed. Indeed the experience of segregated education in Northern Ireland shows, according to Professor Tom Hadden, that “despite formal provisions for a balanced history and for time to be allocated to an official programme of education for mutual understanding there is evidence that sectarian attitudes among children are increasing rather than diminishing.”⁴

⁴ T. Hadden, address entitled “National Minorities and the Content of Education” to the Seminar: International Legal Guarantees for the Protection of National Minorities and Problems in their Implementations, with a special focus on minority education, Strasbourg (France), 18 October 2006

It appears to me that one of the major elements of integration and confidence building is a focus on joint activities in- and outside of school. Working for an integrated programme for formal, voluntary and extra curricular activities is an important foundation for mutual understanding.

Therefore I strongly encourage policies aimed at strengthening contacts between students and teachers from different ethnic communities.

I would therefore encourage your University in any activities focused on strengthening contact and co-operation between students and teachers from different ethnic communities in this country.

Another issue that I would like to raise is the **issue of language**.

It is my view that while language can, on the one hand, be a major source of division within diverse societies, it can, with the right kind of policies, also be used as a tool for integration. However for this to function properly, both the majority and minority must be willing to accept compromise. Integration, therefore, involves responsibilities and rights on both sides. The minority should be prepared to learn and to use the language or languages endorsed by the State, normally the language of the majority. At the same time, the majority must accept the linguist rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

While access to minority-language education at all levels – primary, secondary and tertiary, and even at the pre-school stage – can be crucial for persons belonging to national minorities in its implications for cultural continuity (as well as in terms of easing the educational experience for the child), access to State-language education is also important when it comes to preparing individuals in taking advantage of employment and other opportunities within society as a whole. Lack of proficiency in the State language can further increase ethnic tensions and segregation of communities along ethnic lines.

A long-term strategy for fostering interethnic integration in schools that includes appropriate approaches to language learning (increasing State-language classes in the existing state curriculum and/or introducing bilingual education programmes in schools) is usually necessary in societies that have experienced interethnic tensions.

In some country situations, I have been concerned with **politicization** of schools. In such situations, I advise de-politicization of education, involving the process of developing structures/mechanisms that reduce the influence of politics in schools and allow independent implementation of educational decisions. In addition to depoliticizing the appointment of school directors, it is usually necessary to develop a system supported by educational professionals, trained and qualified in education management and leadership. This usually ensures greater professionalism and reduces the scope for political interference in the appointment process.

Politicization of schools is sometimes coupled with **undemocratic school governance**.

Such undemocratic tendencies must be avoided if effective participation of major stakeholders in any decision making concerning school life is to be accomplished.

In order to achieve a pluralist and genuinely democratic society and as such realize a stable and prosperous Europe, in addition to the creation of appropriate conditions enabling minorities to preserve and express and develop their identity, it is also important to strengthen their integration into society and avoid segregation in education.

While the efforts to strengthen the State language should not be done at the expense or the detriment of the minority language, it is in the interests of minorities as members of the larger society of the state to learn and to use the language(s) of the state. Indeed, the learning of the State language promotes intrastate cohesion and it also benefits linguistic minorities in terms of their integration into society and their access to public goods.

Politicization of schools and undemocratic school governance are, I am sure we all agree, divisive tools and as such should be avoided in a genuinely democratic society.

Thank you!