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The 20th meeting of the Council of Europe Network of Coordinators for Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education

Palais de l'Europe, Room 6
Strasbourg, France

14 November 2013, 9.30-10.30 opening session

It is a great pleasure for me to address you at this 20th meeting of the Council of Europe Network of Coordinators for Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education. Your **network** plays an important role in the Council of Europe work in this field, by ensuring the vital connection between the ideas and projects developed at the European level and education policy and practice in your respective countries. We are delighted to see that so many of you have joined us today in Strasbourg, at this very busy time of the year.

This morning I would like to recall the **current context** in Europe and in the Council of Europe that sets the background for our work.

First of all, the challenges that we are facing today are many and diverse.

- There is an **economic crisis**, and some shocking statistics were published by Eurostat in December 2012: almost a quarter of the European Union's population – almost 120 million people – live near poverty line. We must, alas, assume that the picture is no better for the nearly one half of the countries of the European Cultural Convention that are not members of the EU. While this is clearly an unacceptable situation, there is often a tendency to look for “quick fix” solutions, which are short-sighted and not sustainable. This includes cuts in public spending, and education is often among the most affected areas. It is worth recalling that the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights is particularly concerned about the effect of the crisis on the most vulnerable members of our societies. Access to education is, very rightly, among his main concerns. We can see that the crisis sometimes leads to citizenship and human rights education being put aside, while priority is given to preparation for the labour market. This narrowing of the mission of education is a serious concern for many of our countries, and this is a serious concern for the Council of Europe. This mission includes preparation for sustainable employment; preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies; personal development; and the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base¹. It is

¹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research

only by developing a sense of shared ownership of our democratic societies that sustainable solutions can be developed – in the interests of all, and not just a few. We need to help young people to develop the broad range of competences that are necessary for full participation in democratic societies, including – but not restricted to - those that are needed for the participation in the labour market.

- There is also a disturbing growth of **intolerance, hate speech, different forms of extremism and violence**. In the past such growth often preceded violent wars on our continent. As the Secretary General of the Council of Europe put it in one of his speeches “Holocaust did not begin in the death camps – it began with words of hatred”. There is a clear sense that urgent action needs to be taken in order to prevent a new hardening of our societies, making them less humane. But what kind of action is required? Sometimes the immediate response to extremism and violence is to strengthen law enforcement. While this may well be necessary and effective in the short term, it cannot be the only response. With unemployment of young people reaching 50 per cent in some of our countries, young people are often an easy prey for recruitment by extremist groups. It is important to “win their hearts and minds”, and our education systems do have the capacity for that, if given the right means and priorities. We need to make sure that no opportunity is missed in this respect. We must be willing to accept that building and sustaining democracy is not done overnight. That makes it all the more important to start now, and education is a fundamental part of it.
- It is said that “A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members”. Most regrettably, we are witnessing today an unprecedented deterioration of the situation of many **vulnerable groups**. These groups need to be empowered – in particular through education – and the majority needs to be convinced that improving conditions for vulnerable groups is not only ethical, but also pragmatic, as there can be no safe environment for anyone in a society where there is too much exclusion and deprivation, not to mention the economic cost of social exclusion. Democracy will only work in practice if all members of society commit to democratic participation and feel their voice is heard.
- We need to rebuild **trust in political institutions**. And it is by practical experience of the very basics of democracy – such as having a say on important matters - in the everyday school life that the principles of democracy can be best promoted. The skills and attitudes developed through such participation can then be used successfully for making democratic institutions work in broader society.

Education for democracy and human rights is therefore more needed than ever. At the same time it is also under threat. The Council of Europe was given a mandate by its member states to draw attention to such threats and to assist countries in addressing them. And in order to fulfil this mandate, we rely, to a great extent, on your commitment and cooperation.

I would also like to say a few words about the general context within the Council of Europe. We are currently in the final stages of the preparation and adoption of the Programme and Budget 2014-2015, in which the emphasis has been put on the Council of Europe's unique set of assets: its **pan-European platform for cooperation and dialogue** and the integrated character of its operational dimension – **standard setting, monitoring and assistance**.

The Council of Europe Programme on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights to a great extent reflects this set of assets:

- Indeed, the multilateral activities provide a **pan-European platform for cooperation and dialogue**. For example, at the annual meetings of your network you have opportunities for sharing and peer-learning. The publications developed in the framework of the programme aim to build on the wealth of expertise available in the countries of the European Cultural Convention and to make it easily accessible for all those interested. The EU/CoE pilot project scheme “Human Rights and Democracy in Action”, which was launched in 2013, allows 2-5 countries to work together on this topic.
- The Charter outlines the common **standards** in EDC/HRE, in the sense that it describes the relevant objectives and policies, in a legal text adopted by the Organisation’s member states.
- The Charter is a non-binding document, and it does not provide for a monitoring mechanism. However, **support mechanisms** are put into place to ensure that progress is discussed on a regular basis and further development is encouraged. Such mechanisms include the 1st report on the Charter prepared in 2012, and the 1st Conference on the implementation that was organised in Strasbourg in cooperation with the European Commission and the European Wergeland Centre in 2012, in the framework of the Andorran Chairmanship of the CoE Committee of Ministers. The next review cycle is foreseen in 2017. In the meantime, it remains to be seen how such review mechanism could be further developed and improved.
- When possible, targeted **assistance** is provided, as is currently the case with the EU/CoE Joint Programmes for Turkey and Kazakhstan. Such programmes allow us to put into practical use, in specific countries, the expertise developed in the framework of the multilateral activities. The others can in turn benefit from these experiences, and from the lessons learned there.

In short, the work on the Charter is very much in line with the Council of Europe priorities, and it builds successfully on the Organisation’s set of assets. The current priority is to ensure that the Charter support mechanisms are used effectively as **tools for change** and have real **impact** on the development of education for democratic citizenship and human rights in Europe.

To conclude, there are a lot of **challenges to democracy and human rights** in Europe today. These challenges need to be urgently addressed, and education for democratic citizenship and human rights education can play a crucial role in this respect. The Council of Europe member states gave the Organisation a mandate for supporting and promoting this work in Europe. In doing so, we rely on many partners and supporters, with the EDC/HRE coordinators network playing a crucial role. We trust and believe that we can count on your continued **cooperation and commitment** to the Council of Europe work in this field.

I wish you a very fruitful meeting. I hope that many creative ideas and suggestions will come out of your discussions. I look forward to hearing about your conclusions, and I wish you the best of success in your future work.

Thank you.