

1st informal Conference on "Education for democratic development and stability in South-East Europe", Strasbourg, France, 2-3 décembre 1999

Ideas based on the debates, the experiences recounted and the needs expressed

Introduction

In the wake of the deadly conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, all the countries of the region agree that one of the prerequisites for stability, alongside the advent of democracy and economic development, is an education policy based on mutual understanding, respect for others, tolerance and human rights. But educational reforms are often very difficult to introduce and have to take account of the complexity and the idiosyncrasies of the region to achieve their aims. Armed with the experience of educational issues it has accumulated since it was founded, the Council of Europe has joined in the project for a Stability Pact for South-east Europe to help these countries to reorganise their education systems and is also involved in various international activities geared to the same aims.

Meeting in Strasbourg on 2 and 3 December 1999 at the invitation of the Council of Europe, the ministers of education of the south-east European countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Slovenia, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and Turkey), as well as representatives of other countries (Austria and Hungary), Montenegro, and international organisations involved in the educational co-operation process, informed the Council of their hopes and their needs, then took stock of the programmes already begun and traced out the main lines of future policies to be set up.

As the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Mr Walter Schwimmer, pointed out right at the beginning of the conference, an education based on common values is essential to guarantee respect for human rights and there will be no economic and social development without such an education policy. He went on to say that if the Council of Europe was to achieve this, the ministers needed to tell it what it could do to support the progress of education in their countries. In Mr Schwimmer's opinion it was equally important to know if the recommendations already made at European conferences on education in south-east Europe corresponded to the approach to regional development endorsed by the countries directly concerned, and, finally, he suggested that the ministers should discuss with the Council of Europe what particular role it might play in the reform process.

Specific situations but shared motivation

When presenting their different education policies at the conference, all the countries expressed the desire to offer their neighbours the benefit of their own experience. Having returned to pluralist, democratic political systems in the wake of the events in 1989, a number of countries had already reformed their education systems in accordance with these principles. They were prepared to help their neighbours who had returned to the democratic fold more recently and support them in their efforts while not hiding from them the scale of the task awaiting them.

Modernising educational infrastructure, improving teacher training and overhauling school curricula are often the first stages of these reforms, but the systems are still constantly evolving. In Bulgaria, for example, the minimum length of studies was recently extended to twelve years and the number of hours devoted to modern language teaching was increased. Romania has recently reorganised its school timetables, set up programmes to evaluate curricula and assess knowledge and rationalised the administration of the education system. It has just launched a modernisation scheme for its 10 000 school libraries and, like its neighbours, it stresses the importance of training in new technologies and computing.

In a different historical and political context, Turkey has also extended the length of compulsory education and introduced language teaching at an earlier age. It places emphasis on training in computing and is taking measures to make school premises more accessible to disabled pupils and adapt curricula to their needs. It has also improved initial and in-service teacher training.

Other countries have not only had to face a change in political regime but have also been transformed into new states and this has raised particular problems in terms of the organisation and the content of courses. The Slovenian Minister of Education, Dr Pavel Zgaga, considered that the reforms introduced between 1991 and 1996 had helped to stabilise democracy, and noted that these developments in education would not have been possible without the active co-operation of the Council of Europe and its experts. He said they now had some experience of the transition process and would like to share it with other countries.

Raising schools from the ashes

Several countries that were directly affected by the conflicts which ravaged the region after the break-up of the former Yugoslavia have had quite literally to rebuild schools wiped out during the wars. This is the case in Croatia, where a quarter of the schools were destroyed between 1992 and 1993 and where the people now have experience of crisis management which they can pass on to people facing similar situations. The Albanian Minister of Education, Ethem Ruka, reported that 700 schools had had to be rebuilt in Albania since the beginning of the war in Kosovo either because they had been bombed, particularly in the north of the country, or because they had been made unusable by the influx of refugees that had had to be accommodated in them. Apart from the purely education-related difficulties of the situation, this required a considerable amount of money for a country with limited resources. The schools in Kosovo had also practically all been destroyed in spring 1999 and there, as elsewhere, getting back to normal would be a long and expensive process.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, economic and practical difficulties were holding back the reconstruction and reform of the education system and the state lacked the means to support the process. Describing the situation in his country, Dr Fahrudin Rizvanbegovic regretted that the weakness of the federal system all too often hampered the introduction of an education policy for Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole. Some cantons were carrying out reforms but others hardly dared to embark on the changes that were necessary for fear of being left to fend for themselves. The minister hoped that Europe might be able to provide his country with the common "educational binding material" that the federal state was having such trouble finding and help it to devise common educational standards based on European principles and not dictated by a peculiar form of isolation which was of no use to anyone.

Overall plans and priority measures

From 12 to 14 November 1999, a conference bringing together education specialists from all over Europe was held in Sofia to devise an action plan to promote educational co-operation for peace, stability and democracy in south-east Europe. The conference was part of the Graz Process, instigated by Austria during its presidency of the European Union in the second half of 1998. It had provided the opportunity to set up a task force for education, comprising the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the Royaumont Group, Unesco, the World Bank and the European Training Foundation, along with Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany and Portugal. The process had been launched before the war in Kosovo and it had already demonstrated a general awareness of the importance of education for the harmonious development of the region, a view which was tragically borne out a few months later by the conflict in Kosovo.

After the war, the need to intensify efforts to promote education geared to pluralism and dialogue as a means of countering hatred and animosity gave some legitimacy to the idea of stepping up the Graz Process through new assignments and increased resources.

The Sofia Conference recommended that this plan of action should include history and history teaching in particular, but also the education and training of teachers, education for democratic citizenship, the management of cultural diversity and the organisation of higher education. It also proposed that a co-operation centre for south-east Europe should be set up to deal with the practical side of programmes and act as a forum for meetings and debate on questions linked to education. According to Dr Anton Dobart, who is responsible for the reinforced Graz Process, this centre could be run "between Graz and Sarajevo", serving as a link between all the countries in the region.

Solutions geared to local needs

Since a number of the priority themes pinpointed in Sofia tallied closely with the education programmes conducted by the Council of Europe, the Council's aim in Strasbourg was to submit these programmes to the ministers of the countries concerned for approval so as to ensure that the policy it proposed was not just endorsed by the Council itself but actually lived up to the aspirations of the countries in which it was supposed to be implemented. The ministers of a number of countries pointed out that this comparison of supply and demand would be all the more useful because the activities proposed were designed to meet needs which had not yet been covered by any of the bilateral or multilateral programmes previously conducted in the region. Several delegations made the point that there was no need to reinvent the wheel and that it was a question of concentrating on filling in gaps. Greece and Albania pointed out that, frequently, little was known, in neighbouring countries not directly involved, about national and bilateral activities, and called for increased exchanges of information between countries confronted with the same problems.

The European message is passed on by universities

South-east Europe should set up a full-blown "regional education area", accessible to all groups and all countries without exception, covering the full range of education, from primary schooling through to upper secondary level, vocational training and universities. The ministers stressed the importance of higher education in the process of opening up their countries to Europe on the grounds that, as the Romanian Minister, Professor Andrei Marga, put it, European integration was brought about via the universities. In his and his colleagues' opinion, the Balkan universities should work in networks with the universities of the entire European continent; intellectual exchanges and co-operation between research workers and students would also encourage the modernisation of infrastructure. Romania had already adopted a policy of decentralising its universities, improving their management and making them more independent. Universities were now subject to evaluation procedures and were expected to become "centres of excellence", closely linked with the world of research.

Apart from their academic aims, universities should also provide their students with employment prospects that would prevent them from setting off to try their luck abroad once they had got their degree. The "brain-drain" had disastrous consequences for the region's countries which financed their future élites' education only to see them turn their back on them. In the absence of dynamic universities, providing genuine domestic opportunities, a whole generation could desert their home countries, which were counting on them to shape their future. Mr Marga also believed that the integration of the region's universities into the European fold should make it possible to raise the question of mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications throughout Europe, though he was well aware of the complexity of this issue, particularly in the light of European Union regulations.

The Bulgarian Minister of Education, Mr Vesselin Metodiev, explained that, by radically reforming its education system, Bulgaria had now become an educational centre of the Balkans. Its forty-one universities took in large numbers of students from neighbouring countries. It had opened its universities to the rest of Europe and brought the standard of its education into line with European norms. He invited the region's countries to join in with this co-operation policy. Albania had also passed new laws on university education, aiming to make it more democratic and more independent. Mr Ruka believed that all these reforms would help the country to get away from old ways of thinking and become a part of the European fold. European studies courses and links and exchanges between institutions should make it possible to recreate a Europe-wide "university family" extending from Tirana to Belfast and from Skopje to Szeged. The ministers considered that, although all these co-operation processes still had to be consolidated, they should be stepped up.

Looking beyond clichés and smoothing out controversies

For too long the history taught in schools has been cast rigidly by the textbooks of another age, riddled with jingoistic or aggressive clichés, and dispensed with no sense of critical-mindedness, and too often it has been the breeding ground of a narrow-minded nationalism, quick to nurture hatred rather than foster exchange and dialogue between peoples. The revision of history textbooks and syllabuses, begun in western Europe right after the end of the second world war, particularly under Council of Europe auspices, helped to appease old enmities between countries and dispel the misunderstandings and prejudice which fuelled age-old rivalries. Today, south-east Europe is as much in need of a way of defusing history as the protagonists of the last

world war in the wake of 1945 and all the ministers agreed that history teaching should be used at last as a unifying force and not a weapon.

A number of the region's countries, such as Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, have already set up joint programmes designed to eradicate the clichés and prejudice marring their portrayal of one another in school books, but all the other states wish to become involved in their turn in devising a form of history teaching which is geared to dialogue and understanding rather than confrontation. Montenegro has also agreed to revise and update its history textbooks with the help of a number of international organisations, including Unicef and Unesco.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was concerned nonetheless about the problem of rethinking history in a country where past wounds have not had time to heal and proposed that the content of less controversial subjects such as life sciences and mathematics be reviewed first. Reacting to Mr Rizvanbegovic's fears, the other countries argued that it was precisely because of the controversial nature of history that it was so urgent to deal with the teaching of this subject. However, the modernisation of history teaching was also dependent on improved training for history teachers. Changing the syllabus was not enough: it was important to train teachers to provide a more critical-minded form of teaching, to question the world and to compare points of view, steering clear of official or supposedly sacrosanct versions of the truth.

Respect for minorities

Managing diversity, or in other words respecting minorities and cultural diversity in regions where minorities are particularly prevalent, could be achieved by means of an education system capable of promoting a harmonious balance between communities and offering equality of opportunity to all of them. Accordingly, education systems should promote equal access to education for all population groups as well as an intercultural approach to curricula. For instance, Romania has set up a special education programme for Roma to help them to integrate more easily into the school education system and train their future élites. The country has introduced a system of positive discrimination in favour of Roma, facilitating their access to upper secondary schools, universities and vocational training. Similarly, the minority languages spoken in Romania, which include German and Hungarian, are now taught and spoken in upper secondary schools and pupils can learn the languages of neighbouring countries, for example Bulgarian, Croatian and Slovak.

Hungary has also set up education programmes aimed at Roma and its other minorities, who are even allowed to use textbooks written for schools in neighbouring countries in their own language. Quite apart from the teaching of languages of neighbouring countries and minority groups, language teaching in general is an essential means for all countries of opening up to the outside world and learning about it, and one which should be regarded as a priority. The same goes for access to new technologies, particularly computing, which is also pinpointed as a priority subject though the growth of training in these subjects is often hampered by major financial constraints. Moreover, apart from their importance for the future, the new technologies make it possible to forget borders and offer new methods of education which are at last taking on a regional or European dimension, in the opinion of the minister of "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Dr Nenad Novkovski.

Though most of the region's countries had already incorporated human rights education into their curricula, the ministers felt that this needed to result in genuine "education for citizenship" and stressed the importance of helping young women gain access to vocational training and university, following the example of Turkey, which has set up a programme to increase the percentage of women students in technical and vocational courses.

Rural areas and youth policy

Finally, in addition to the recommendations made in Sofia, the ministers hoped that other questions would be taken up in the future action plan for education. Bosnia and Herzegovina highlighted the importance of agricultural education for countries which were still highly rural and would take a long time to reconstruct their industrial fabric, damaged in various wars. Slovenia noted how effective sport and physical education were in the fight against exclusion and efforts to open up to the outside world, and Greece took up this idea, referring to the notion of the "Olympic truce" during which violent conflicts were suspended. Sporting

events form part of an overall youth policy and provide a highly effective vehicle for peaceful competition and exchange between communities and countries.

Cultural heritage and environment

In discovering their cultural heritage and acquainting themselves with its value and its message, people are able to forge both a regional and a European identity. On the basis of this idea, the Croatian Minister, Ms Nansi Ivanisevic, proposed devising a European vision of the heritage by launching activities designed to increase its profile and raise awareness of it so as to highlight its cosmopolitan, European message. She was also in favour of environmental education, which logic dictated could not be bound by borders. In Croatia, eighty-seven schools had already launched programmes to raise awareness of the environment and protect it. The Macedonian minister considered that the heritage, which was shaped by all the civilisations which were intermingled within it, should be enhanced for the good of the entire region and hoped that, by making the heritage accessible to everyone, it would be possible to turn it into a tool to promote understanding instead of conflict.

The role and aims of the Council of Europe

Democracy and human rights can be established only if they are applied day in, day out. Alongside the principles and programmes that the Council of Europe can offer the south-east European countries, it must also devise practical strategies, together with the region's countries, to implement them. It is only if these principles and programmes are adapted to what is happening in the field and to local needs and conditions that they will truly flourish. A number of countries have already incorporated Council of Europe values into their youth or education policies or are preparing to launch new schemes based on these principles. These achievements and projects, which can be exported easily throughout the region, are avenues which might be explored in the future as means of appeasing hostility and re-establishing dialogue.

Islands as meeting places

A regional education policy can therefore contribute to the development of the geographical area in which it is to be applied. The Adriatic and the Mediterranean unite the region's countries within the same broad area and their perception of this area can be enhanced by shared educational and cultural activities. With its thousand or so islands, Croatia provides the perfect illustration of this maritime background, redolent of history, heritage and natural assets. However, as Ms Ivanisevic explained, a great many of these islands are now threatened with depopulation owing to the exodus of their inhabitants to the mainland. The population is declining and ageing to such an extent that Croatians refer to this phenomenon as the "white plague". As a result of this migration, nearly one-hundred schools, many of which were built under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, have now been closed down for want of pupils. These schools, which were built last century, are part of the historical and cultural heritage of the islands and deserve to be saved and restored.

The minister proposed that some of them should be converted into accommodation and contact centres for young Europeans. Croatia is lacking in this kind of body and, if these old schools were refurbished, they would be perfectly suited for the purpose. The fact that they are frequently located in quite outstanding sites or villages, their architectural merit and practicality, and their historical significance would ensure the success of the scheme, which would also be of benefit to the islands themselves. The restoration and then the management of these schools would create new jobs and economic activities for the islanders and help to prevent people from leaving. A programme of this type, which would be educational, historical and economic in nature, would help to revitalise the islands while contributing to the development of the entire region.

Human rights: putting lessons into practice

We should not wait until adulthood to promote citizenship and human rights because these values can be put into practice at school. Professor Jozsef Palinkas, the State Secretary at the Hungarian Ministry of Education and co-chair of Working Table 1 of the Stability Pact (on democratisation and human rights), gave details of an unusual project launched quite recently in his country, whereby an education mediator had been appointed to improve the right to education and educational law.

Teachers, pupils, students and families could consult the mediator on problems as broad-ranging as violence in schools, teaching standards and examination marks and the mediator's role was to smooth out difficulties by means of ongoing dialogue. According to Mr Palinkas, when we talk about democracy in schools, pupils and students should be aware of and assert their own rights.

Turkey has also recently set up local advisory bodies bringing together representatives of schools and teachers, pupils, students and families to discuss school-related problems in order to illustrate what a truly democratic education is and ensure that it exists in practice. Turkish schools are now open to the whole community, which can use school buildings outside school hours for various activities. This system helps to make schools more accessible and establishes links between schools and the outside world.

A list of activities

All of these examples illustrate practical applications of education for democratic citizenship in schools. The Turkish Minister of Education, Mr Metin Bostancioglu, highlighted the role of the Council of Europe in introducing these policies and welcomed the efforts already made by the Organisation to consolidate peace and democracy in the region after it had succeeded in re-establishing dialogue between the Balkan countries during the Kosovo crisis. With a view to the next Conference of European Ministers of Education, to be held in November 2000 in Cracow, Mr Bostancioglu asked the south-east European countries to draw up a list of activities and programmes related to education for citizenship and human rights which had already been set up in their countries so that it was possible to have an accurate overview of current achievements and the progress that had still to be made. He hoped that the Council of Europe would step up its education programmes still further both at ministerial level and through its technical and specialist consultancy work.

Increased co-operation in order to provide education day in, day out

Various international organisations such as Unicef and Unesco are also at work in south-east Europe in co-operation with the region's states, the European Union and the Council of Europe. In 1999 Unicef invested 27 million dollars in education in the regions affected by the war and will spend an equivalent sum in 2000 under its programmes for the protection and education of children in these post-conflict areas. It intends to introduce proactive teaching methods stimulating pupil participation and dialogue with teachers; it is working to ensure that education in democratic values begins at the earliest possible age and contributes to the fight against isolation and exclusion. The organisation believes that schools must promote the rights of children and should also be concerned with children's welfare in a broader context, particularly from the point of view of nutrition, health and hygiene. While providing flexible and varied forms of training, schools should be easily accessible to everyone, including children from families with no income. In collaboration with the Council of Europe, Unicef is carrying out prevention campaigns in Albania and Kosovo, aimed at high-risk groups of young people and relating in particular to the transmission of HIV (the Aids virus) and to drug abuse. It also hopes to prevent a part of the young population of the region from becoming the victims or the perpetrators of organised crime. Unesco has also set up a special education plan for south-east Europe which includes conflict management for teachers and programmes on modern languages and cultural heritage awareness-raising.

Ending segregation

As the flesh and the blood of society, education will determine its level of civilisation. Such was the view of Ms Elena Poptodorova, the Bulgarian member of parliament and member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, who said that new educational prospects were vital to end conflict in the region, but that it would be a good idea to pool efforts to cope with the scale of the task and the issues at stake. Going back over the incomplete transitions and partial peace settlements, from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to the fall of communism, which were at the root of the present conflicts, Ms Poptodorova urged the region's countries to make their latest transition, to Europe, a success. She strongly denounced the twofold segregation which still prevailed in some of the region's education systems. On the one hand there was a form of ethnic segregation which allowed pupils to be moved from one school to another for purely ethnic reasons while, on the other, the poorest children were the victims of financial segregation, which deprived

them of a basic education and ran the risk of making them future social outcasts. In the same way as the officials of Unicef and other international organisations working in the region, she protested against the outrageous politicisation of education in certain countries, fearing the consequences for the region's future of this use of education for political purposes.

Ms Poptodorova felt that as well as the new technologies and balanced history teaching, it was important for education to be able to promote genuine equality between the sexes. It was essential to bring about a change in mentalities, which should begin at school and spread to the whole of society. She noted how useful it was for young people to learn to evaluate the information and opinions provided in the media, and concluded with a proposal that a clear definition should be made of the Council of Europe's tasks in the field of education in the context of the assistance it was providing to the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).

Council of Europe bodies, tools and methods

Speaking on behalf of the Committee of Ministers, Mr Janos Perenyi, the Hungarian Permanent Representative to the Council of Europe, explained that, with its Committee of Ministers, its Parliamentary Assembly and its Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, its experience and its strong network of experts, the Council of Europe had a whole range of tools to carry out any educational programmes which might be entrusted to it under the Graz Process or the Stability Pact. Activities were co-ordinated even if each section of the Council of Europe carried them out in different ways according to its individual terms of reference and expertise. For example, while the Congress promoted school twinnings and cross-border exchanges between young people on the ground, the Council of Europe's consultancy work was bringing about radical changes in the content and organisation of curricula and courses.

The main priorities – history and languages

It has been possible to adapt these activities to the situations and the countries for which they have been intended, as illustrated perfectly by the programmes introduced in the area of history teaching, the development of which was reviewed by Mr Perenyi. They were originally devised in the 1950s to eliminate stereotypes and reconcile old enemies but they came to the forefront once again when, after 1989, the former communist countries felt the need to update and reform the content of their curricula. In 1996 the Council of Europe launched a new initiative aimed specifically at the Soviet Union's successor states, covering the content of history syllabuses, teacher training courses, textbooks and all other teaching materials. These schemes, which are continually revised and improved, are geared to local circumstances and have proven their effectiveness. They are now ready to be placed at the disposal of south-east Europe.

Throughout the conference, most of the ministers' requests to the Council of Europe related to history teaching, including the preparation of new syllabuses and training for history teachers. However, the ministers also mentioned their needs in various other subject areas, particularly language teaching, which was referred to as a prerequisite for the establishment of an open, multicultural society. The Council of Europe should also play a standard-setting role in the preparation of the teaching materials to be used in the region.

Democracy, citizenship and Europe

The ministers insisted on the need to set up programmes of education in citizenship and human rights, which should ensure that, by means of participation, dialogue and democratic citizenship, these values became common standards uniting the populations of the region. The programmes devised by the Organisation to promote these principles should be incorporated into the teaching methods of the region's schools.

European studies, by the same token as exchanges between universities, would provide a means of promoting a European dimension and common values throughout the continent. Attention was also drawn to the importance of the social sciences as a means of encapsulating and supporting the processes of transition in south-east Europe. Finally, it was hoped that the activities for young people devised by the Council would spread throughout the region's countries, particularly in the context of work carried out with other organisations, including Unicef.

Educational reforms cannot be carried out without funding

Because of its structure as well as its know-how and its activities, the Council of Europe is the ideal forum in which to establish, in co-operation with its partners in the Graz Process and the Stability Pact, the education policy required to reconcile the region's countries and prevent further conflict. However, to achieve this, it will be necessary to reinforce the system arising out of the Graz Process and increase human and material resources so that the Council of Europe can achieve the aims it has been set. Before going their separate ways, the ministers reiterated that the success of the educational reforms to be carried out was dependent on the question of funding. Though reform was vital to restore peace and stability, it implied a mustering of funds which many countries found it difficult to raise. There was no doubt that the Council of Europe and its partners could help the region's countries to rationalise and improve the management of their education systems, but, on their own, they could not cope with the economic problems created by the need for educational reform despite the fact that, one day, the latter might be used to help to solve the former.