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Learning to Live Together:
a Shared Commitment to Democracy
Conference on the Future of Citizenship
and Human Rights Education in Europe
Strasbourg, 20 – 22 June 2017

WELCOME ADDRESS

JAROSLAV FIDRMUC

DEPUTY MINISTER, EDUCATION, YOUTH
AND SPORTS

CZECH REPUBLIC

Dear Deputy Secretary General,

Dear Madam Chair,

Dear Colleagues,

Dear Guests,

I am pleased to be able to address you on behalf of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic took over the Chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers from the Republic of Cyprus. I am very glad that the education agenda has become one of the priorities of our presidency, since we consider the Council of Europe's activities in this area to be extremely important.

The promotion of human rights and democracy through education is one of the fundamental elements of democracy and also one of the Council of Europe's- as well as of the Czech Republic's - long-term priorities.

Therefore, I truly appreciate the fact that this Conference is taking place under the auspices of the Czech presidency.

Promotion of human rights represents, inter alia, efforts to overcome historical, social, cultural, religious, or ideological barriers to equality. That is why, in our opinion, the fundamental current issue is eliminating of all kinds of discrimination and ensuring the rights of persons belonging to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, such as national or ethnic minorities and child migrants.

The Czech presidency will actively support the efforts to strengthen the rule of law as one of the pillars of the Council of Europe's core values. The widest possible participation of the population in all levels of governance is one of the solid guarantees of democracy. Therefore, we consider it important to support activities in the field of local democracy, leading to the development of participation democracy and to the strengthening of

democratic institutions. Special attention must be paid to the education of youth and adults in order to enhance their role while performing their obligations and exercising their rights in a democratic society.

On 26-27 October this year our Ministry plans to organize already the 8th Prague Forum, whose main focus will be on discussing the possible implementations of the Model of Competences required to participate in a democratic culture, evaluating the phase of descriptors piloting and discussing and determining further activities within this Council of Europe´s project. During the discussions on the European framework of the competences we will strive to underline it is crucial the Framework has the most practical implications and is applicable also to other areas.

In order to further encourage the implementation of the European Model of competences we think it is important to use also other instruments in support of this process. The Czech Republic has recently approved a Call for Proposals (under the Structural Funds Operational Programme of Research, Development and Education) under the title Capacity-building for the development of schools II. The aim of the Call is to support the implementation of formative evaluation, training of the school management and linking formal and non-formal education. Teaching staff will be supported in the development of competences in the field of language learning and competences for democratic culture. The emphasis is on active participation of children and students in decision making processes and in influencing social and democratic life. The Call will further concentrate on the support of building competences of the educators involved in formal and informal education who develop programmes connecting formal and informal education, e.g. through workshops organised at the level of the whole country.

Apart from the financial resources at national levels of individual member states, I find rather important to consider the use of opportunities offered

by the Erasmus+ programme, and, in this respect, to continue the talks with the European Commission on the subject.

For the Council of Europe and its Member States, equal access to education is crucial. The Czech Republic, following the amendment to the Education Act of the year 2015, will continue to promote joint education and equal access to education of all pupils. The goal is to create conditions, with the help of adequate support measures required to ensure the educational needs of each pupil, for the education of all pupils primarily in the mainstream schools. This should also mean significant support to the education of Roma pupils and their inclusion into the mainstream population.

The Czech Republic will also continue to create and improve tools that support linguistic and cultural inclusion in the Czech schools, where the number of pupils whose first language is other than the language of instruction is constantly increasing. In this respect, we consider it important to cooperate actively with the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe on the promotion of activities targeted at teachers and other educational professionals, which should help students develop such intercultural competences and language skills that are prerequisites for successful education.

Let me now say a few words on the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights. Its adoption by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 2010 meant a significant shift in the way these themes are defined by Member states and in the way they are perceived in the field of education.

For us, citizenship education is an integral part of what children have learned for many years. Therefore, I consider it only natural that it is enshrined in the curricular documents for primary and secondary education.

Democratic governance, which is one of the important parts of Chapter III of the Council of Europe's Charter, could become an inspiration for deepening the activities aimed at further strengthening the participation of all actors, i.e. parents, educators, professionals as well as general public and students themselves, in the management of educational institutions. I would like to mention the so-called pupil or student parliaments as an example of good practice based on the Charter of the Council of Europe. The parliaments comprise a group of elected pupils or students of the same school in which, as a rule, each class is represented by two students. During the parliament meetings these representatives discuss current topics relevant to the life of their classes and schools and also propose solutions. The proposals and conclusions of the meetings are then conveyed to the school management, teachers and classmates. Student parliaments are engaged in the activities which should help to make the school a pleasant and inspiring environment. In this way, student parliaments significantly intervene in the atmosphere of the school and positively influence the school climate. Students perceive student parliaments as a platform for voicing their opinions and as a body representing all the pupils of the school. This instrument is currently used in about half of the basic (i.e. primary and lower secondary) schools in the Czech Republic.

In the Czech Republic, experimental verification of the continuing support of civic education in schools is currently underway. One of its aims is to learn from the pilot schools what needs to be done to establish the student parliament at school and to ensure its operation is stabilised and its work is effective. Based on the experience of pilot schools we plan to formulate recommendations for the system support of the civic education in all schools.

It is still true that democracy is best taught in practice. Students taking part in this project, they actively apply skills in concrete situations, skills acquired through gaining theoretical knowledge during lessons. Students learn to participate in democratic debates and together to seek acceptable solutions. Therefore, I think that yet closer cooperation of the Council of Europe, the Member States of the European Union and the European Commission is rather important.

I would like to conclude by thanking the Council of Europe for inviting me and for organising this Conference. I believe it will give the impetus to strengthening the dialogue on experiences and challenges of national educational systems in the area of education on human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Thank you for your attention.