

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**10th anniversary Conference for the European Wergeland Centre
and Launch of the Council of Europe Campaign FREE to SPEAK-SAFE to
LEARN, DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS FOR ALL**

**Remarks by Thorbjørn Jagland
Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

Oslo, 15 November 2018

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Minister, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here marking, not one, but two important milestones in the history of the European Wergeland Centre.

We are of course here to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Centre itself.

And we are also gathered to launch the Council of Europe's new and ambitious campaign, FREE to SPEAK – SAFE to learn, Democratic Schools for All.

But I want to begin with a few words on the strong impact made by the Wergeland Centre over the course of just a decade.

In 2008, the Council of Europe and the Norwegian authorities opened this facility as a resource centre for our member states, focusing on education for democratic citizenship, human rights and intercultural understanding.

It was the first such Council of Europe facility in Norway and, the following year, it was joined by the first Norwegian Secretary General of the Organisation.

I remember very well the inauguration conference that I addressed back in 2009, my first year in office.

Back then, we all had high hopes for the Centre; as I have said before and am happy to repeat today, those expectations have been more than met.

Since its opening, the Wergeland Centre has developed an impressive array of co-operation programmes with national educational authorities, higher education institutions and civil society.

These have involved 65,000 teachers, plus teacher trainers, researchers, parents and students, across 30 member countries – so far.

But if the numbers of people are impressive, the difference that they have made matters even more.

Last year, for example, the Centre's work benefitted more than 40,000 people in Ukraine through the use of the education material developed by the Council of Europe, alongside close co-operation with education professionals.

Similarly, a new project involving teacher training institutions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Montenegro and Kosovo* aims to improve the quality of teacher training, in line with democratic education reforms that emphasise inclusiveness and democratic competences.

** All references to Kosovo*, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text, shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo*

Such a regional approach and partnerships are playing a crucial role in addressing challenges in the Western Balkans with regard to inclusion, democracy and the best route to balanced, effective and honest teaching about controversial topics such as history and religion.

These are just examples of what the Centre has achieved so far – and markers of what more it can go on to deliver.

But we are also here to kick-start the Council of Europe’s forward-looking campaign FREE to SPEAK-SAFE to LEARN, Democratic Schools for All.

This is a dynamic response to a specific call in my Annual Report of around two years ago.

I said then that we needed to set up a safe spaces project around teaching controversial issues, supporting educators across Europe in their role while promoting freedom of expression, inclusion and tolerance.

I noted then that the best response to current challenges faced by democratic societies is the democratic engagement that allows people to develop mutual understanding of one another as well as a shared set of civic values that can exist alongside their different beliefs.

And it was published at a time of mounting evidence that education professionals in a number of our member states consider themselves ill-equipped to navigate difficult discussions among young people.

These topics include terrorist attacks, conflicts in the Middle East, and migration and the refugee crisis.

Failure to deal with them properly can lead easily to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of racism and discrimination.

So action is needed.

And that is what FREE to SPEAK-SAFE to LEARN will provide.

It will focus on ensuring that children and young people at school feel able to explore ideas and express their views, even on controversial topics.

That way, opinions which might lead to bullying, discrimination or hate speech – or even veer towards violent extremism – can be challenged and discussed, rather than being driven underground.

The campaign will run for four years at the national, regional and European levels.

It will involve 50 countries across Europe; the Council of Europe's 47 member states as well as the additional parties to the European Cultural Convention: Belarus, the Holy See and Kazakhstan.

And we have great confidence in its potential.

It comes in the wake of our recently-concluded No Hate Speech Movement Youth Campaign to combat hate speech on line, which similarly harnessed education, training and the multiplier effect that comes with them.

This enabled us to help identify, report and prevent hate speech in its many forms: work that is now continuing at the national level on the basis of the expertise passed on by the campaign.

No Hate succeeded, and I am certain that this new campaign will mirror that achievement.

In the last two years, the problems we face in Europe have not abated: if anything, the picture is darker:

Human rights are being violated.

The rule of law is coming under increasing challenge

And our institutions are being undermined and threatened: the focus of my annual report from this year.

Pockets of extreme populism and nationalism are fueling these fires, and it is often the most vulnerable who take the greatest heat.

I am, for example, deeply concerned by the language being used in official statements – some in recent months, weeks and days – targeting migrants, who have come to seek a better, safer life in Europe.

Words have consequences: they legitimise wider prejudice and create both the demand and the environment in which discriminatory and troubling legislative initiatives are proposed and adopted by politicians.

I have always firmly believed that the first place to tackle these phenomena is through education, in schools.

This is the foundation on which we build inclusive societies.

This campaign does not of course exist in isolation.

It is part of a spectrum of measures included in our recently-concluded action plan to “Fight against violent extremism and radicalisation” and our current action plan on “Building inclusive societies”.

It will operate within our tried and tested Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.

And it will be run by partners with the experience and skills required to make it work. The European Wergeland Centre with its qualified staff will be front and centre in this regard.

And that's why we are so fortunate to be able to launch the campaign here today.

So now, at this conference, you will be discussing the next steps forward: how we move from policy to practice.

Not only the means by which to empower young people with facts, opinions, and the confidence to share them.

But also to consider how these inclusive, safe learning environments can learn best practice from one another and spread their success wider.

Including the development of a network of democratic schools, formally recognised by the Council of Europe itself.

Hundreds of schools have submitted themselves as case studies for this launch: demonstrating both their appetite and the potential for democratic, inclusive, education.

So we have the knowledge, the experience and the demand.

Together, let's make it happen.