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Human Rights Education Means Empowering Yourself and Others

Address by Nils Muižnieks

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

“Human Rights and Democracy in Action – Looking Ahead”

The impact of the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education

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I am very gratified that human rights education is back in focus at the Council of Europe thanks to the Andorran chairmanship. I understand that this event was preceded by an excellent Janusz Korczak seminar on education for democracy organised by the Polish authorities.

I am sorry to have missed your deliberations yesterday and earlier today. As there is always the risk of repeating what others have said when you arrive late at an event, I have decided to adopt a low-risk strategy today and speak about my personal experience.

Human rights education has a special place in my heart. I began my career in human rights about twenty years ago poring over United Nations and Council of Europe manuals on practical activities for human rights education. My colleagues and I at a Latvian NGO tested these activities on ourselves, adapted them, then went to secondary schools and organised teacher trainings. I am thrilled that a new edition of “Compass” was launched yesterday – we used this as well in our educational work.

In preparing to come here today, I reflected on why I became interested in human rights in the first place. Why did I want to do this work? Somewhere – at home from my parents, at school, through my friends – I had acquired what could be called a rudimentary human rights attitude and human rights sensibility. I will explain what I mean by this in a moment, but note here that this human rights attitude and sensibility are the first steps towards wanting to acquire human rights knowledge. At least they were in my case.

What sparked my interest? In Latvia, both before and right after independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I encountered many bureaucrats who treated me like dirt. I responded to this in anger, thinking “You can’t do that! You work for me! I have rights!” To confront these bureaucrats and make them work for me, I needed to know my rights and I needed for others to know their rights and **want** to assert them. This desire might be called a human rights attitude, which in my view, is one goal of human rights education.

The key, however, is to want rights not only for oneself, but for others as well. Of course, getting others to help you in your struggle is tactically wise, but what about wanting rights for the powerless, the unpopular, the marginalised – for those who cannot necessarily help you in your own struggle? How do we inculcate empathy with their situation and awareness of their needs? How do we get people to want to empower the powerless? How do we get people to want to see their situation and hear their voice? We can, of course, invite them into

our offices and classrooms, see films, and use the internet to learn about various vulnerable groups. But it is best to go and see where and how they live.

I have been in Strasbourg now for about eight months and I am ashamed that I know little about the human rights situation in the surrounding area. As Commissioner, I have travelled and analysed the human rights situation in Portugal, Italy, Austria, Finland, Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Ireland, Albania, and “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, but not in the immediate neighbourhood of Strasbourg.

I have asked my team to compile a list of human rights related sites in the area for me to visit over the coming months and years. If this were a school, I would put site visits such as these on the human rights education agenda:

- The Struthof-Natzweiler Nazi concentration camp near the small village of Struthof;
- The four Roma camps that exist in and around Strasbourg;
- Two NGOs (Casas and Cimade) that work in the centre of Strasbourg helping asylum-seekers, occasionally even providing accommodation for them when the local reception centre is full;
- In the nearby town of Geispolsheim the centre in which rejected asylum-seekers awaiting deportation are held;
- The prison in the nearby town of Elsau;
- Next to the Cathedral in the old town, the NGO that provides support to LGBTI persons;
- There are a host of other sites as well, including the monument where there used to be a synagogue, the new mosque and other places of human rights interest.

In my view, an excellent human rights education lesson would involve having students research their surroundings to find such sites, then going to visit them and talking with people. The next step would be for them to research the relevant human rights standards and mechanisms.

The most interesting part of my job is precisely such site visits during my country work. Sometimes I can draw public and media attention to a human rights problem and raise awareness.

For example, in Italy, my advisors had heard of a place that the authorities were unaware of. It was an abandoned university building on the outskirts of Rome in which more than 800 refugees and persons with subsidiary protection from Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia were living. It was called Salam Palace or Pallazzo della Vergogna (The Palace of Shame). A local NGO took us there – one toilet for 250 people, no support services, the local authorities had even cut the utilities for some time. I was placed in front of the elders, who asked me what I was going to do to help them. Their tolerance for empty chatter was quite low. I told them I could not promise an improvement in their situation, but that I could promise to tell others about their plight. At the end of my trip, I gave a number of media interviews, including to the *Financial Times*, which wrote a story on the situation of these people. I do not know if anything has changed for these people, but at least others now know of their plight.

Changing technology means new opportunities for human rights education. I am very interested in human rights and the internet, particularly in social media, which speak to young people in a special way. My children are 14 and 16 – they live on the internet. I do not know how it is possible, but they can simultaneously be on Facebook, play a game, write a fashion blog, watch a movie and have a Skype conversation.

My eldest daughter is pretty apolitical, but one night she entered my room crying. She had seen on the YouTube film on Joseph Kony, the head of Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army, which documented the use of child soldiers. We had a long conversation about the film, the plight of the children and what could be done to help them. This was great, the film got her interested and had a strong emotional impact.

New technologies can be an important ally in education for democratic citizenship and human rights. I really like the Council of Europe's project "Young people combating hate speech online," which is an excellent example of equipping young people to combat racism on the world-wide web. We need to think creatively about using new technologies. We need to urge young people to do human rights work on social media, find human rights related materials on YouTube, make interesting human rights related blogs or albums.

I intend to pursue human rights on the internet as a major topic and human rights education through the internet as an important subtopic. We need to involve national human rights structures – ombudsman, equality bodies, children's ombudsmen - in this work as well. They have the knowledge about the situation of vulnerable groups and the expertise to play an important role.

In conclusion, I would like to pay tribute to all the competent, talented, committed people and organisations working on promoting human rights through education. I wish us all good luck in fostering a human rights attitude and a human rights sensibility. If we can do this, the human rights knowledge will come of its own accord.