

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

Welcome address

Check against delivery

Dear Minister, Secretary-General

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure and an honour to be with you today to address an issue of such importance: education for democracy and human rights in Europe.

When the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education was presented in 2010, all the Member States of the European Union adopted it immediately.

There could be no delay or ambiguity on this point. The Treaty on the European Union states in its article 2 that: "The Union is **founded** on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, **democracy**, equality, the rule of law and **respect for human rights**".

Thus fundamental rights and freedoms, such as those enshrined in the European convention for the protection of

Human Rights and which result from the constitutional traditions common to the Member States, constitute general principles of the European Union's law.

But even if we all agree on the principles, it is nonetheless very important that we reach a common understanding also of the means by which those principles, fundamental rights and freedoms can be implemented in the daily life of our citizens.

The aspiration to freedom is innate; but how to achieve that freedom and how to exercise one's rights can be taught, and must be learnt. Dictatorships old and new thrive on fear and ignorance. Modern, democratic societies need educated citizens, who are both willing and able to play a full and active part in democratic, social and economic life, and who are ready to take responsibility for the common good.

It is therefore essential that European citizens are educated about their rights, so that they can be able to claim and enjoy them to the full, and to defend them, if and when they are threatened.

The importance of the Charter, in the EU context as well, is that it provides a solid basis for designing and implementing policies aimed at educating citizens to know, respect, and practise the democratic values we cherish.

Later today we will be hearing examples of how European countries are faring in the implementation of the Charter's provisions in their national education systems.

What I would like to do now is to give you just a brief outline of how, at the EU level, we work to integrate the dimension of education for democracy and human rights into our wider strategies for social and economic progress - and in particular into the current reflections on education and skills.

Social and civic competences are a prominent feature of European cooperation in the field of education; they are among the eight **key competences** identified in 2006 by the Council and the European Parliament as essential for citizens living in a knowledge society.

Citizenship education is now part of **national curricula in all EU countries**. These citizenship curricula cover a wide range of topics. They address the fundamental principles of democratic societies, contemporary societal issues such as cultural diversity and sustainable development, and consider the European and international dimensions of democracy and governance alongside local issues.

These are positive developments, and – let me say - they come not a moment too soon. Because, despite all the vibrancy of our democracies, the crisis we are going through is nonetheless

exacting a heavy price in many of our Member States: in economic, social and political terms.

Economic hardship puts a severe strain on social cohesion. Economic exclusion stemming from unemployment and poverty thwarts democratic and active citizenship. Extremist reactions may arise that threaten in particular the rights of the weakest members of society, for instance ethnic or other minorities.

This is why in this current context the issue of education for democratic citizenship and Human Rights comes before us with a new sense of urgency. It demands to be addressed in earnest.

Upgrading skills for achieving better employability is inevitably the first objective of education and training systems at this moment, but this goes hand-in-hand with other no less important objectives that also fully belong within the broad mission of education, such as active citizenship, personal development and well-being. The challenge for decision-makers and educational practitioners alike is exactly to rethink education to integrate and synergise these two sides of the educational coin. We know that it can be done, since we have evidence that the best education systems manage to excel in both dimensions. There is definitely room for peer learning and knowledge sharing then.

The Commission is also taking part of this debate. It has just adopted a new **Communication on "Rethinking Education"**, in which we underline how education and training institutions should focus on delivering the right skills for the 21st century.

Specialist knowledge remains important; ICT competences and knowledge of foreign languages are crucial; and it could not be otherwise. But the right skills for this century include also transversal and basic skills. Let me just remind you that the share of 15 year olds in Europe who have not acquired basic skills is around 20%, and in five countries the share of low achievers in reading at this age reaches 25%.

Will these young boys and girls manage to overcome their educational disadvantage, and become full and active members of our democratic societies? Will they be able to know, protect and extend their rights? The question is well-worth asking, the answer may not be one we would like to hear. Unless action is swiftly taken, these young people will face a difficult future; and our democracies will be weaker because of those difficulties.

The advantages of **mastering basic skills** for a strengthened active citizenship are evident. But let me add that this is also true for **transversal skills** such as the ability to think critically, to take initiative and to work collaboratively – all of which are extremely relevant in the context we are discussing now. With "Re-thinking education" we hope therefore to have started a

debate with and within the Member States about how to make progress in tackling these thorny issues.

My overview wouldn't be complete if I didn't recall that the European Commission and the Council of Europe have been working together in the field of youth policies for almost 15 years. Our partnership has evolved, but the core pillars have remained the same: strengthening democracy and human rights, citizenship and youth participation.

Our cooperation does not stop at the borders of the Union. A concrete example is the symposium on youth participation held in Tunis earlier this year and organised by our two institutions, with the cooperation of the League of Arab States. Young people from many countries of the Southern Mediterranean region including several European countries came together and discussed the core values of this same Charter that is at the focus of today's conference.

I am very grateful to our colleagues in the Council of Europe for our fruitful cooperation. The increased importance of the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, including in our North African neighbourhood, is a concrete sign of what our cooperation can achieve, and of the manifold reasons for continuing it.

Thank you