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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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

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DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL,
COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Deputy Minister, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure this morning to draw a close to the annual HELP Network Conference and to open the Conference on the Future of Citizenship and Human Rights Education in Europe.

There is of course a synergy between these two Conferences.

In the modern world, the journey through human rights education should be an uninterrupted one: starting in school, continuing at university, and taken forward throughout relevant professional careers.

Let's be clear, education is indeed essential because our understanding is that human rights are universal.

But while they may be inalienable, they are not innate.

To create the open, democratic, and tolerant societies upheld by human rights, we must educate citizens so that they can understand them, demand them and live by them, and educate employers and professionals so that they can provide and enforce them.

And we need to do that especially when the climate is hostile.

This year, our Secretary General's Annual Report on the state of democracy, human rights and the rule of law looked at the issue of populism and asked How strong are Europe's checks and balances?

Populism amounts to an emotional appeal that harnesses public grievance against the establishment.

By claiming exclusive moral authority to act on behalf of the people it threatens to dismantle democratic checks and balances, undermine human rights and the protection of minorities, and delegitimise international checks on unrestrained state power.

In Europe, we have been here before – and we must never go back.

Education is a guarantor of resistance.

An informed and enlightened population will be much more resistant to the siren call of populist rhetoric.

And a trained and effective judiciary will have the tools and the confidence to stop it from eroding the institutional checks and balances that are vital to a democratic society.

That is our challenge.

So, what have we done?

Well, twenty years ago – here in Strasbourg – the Council of Europe held our second Summit of Heads of State and Government.

That Summit recognised that the effectiveness of democratic institutions depends on citizens: on their values, attitudes and readiness to act.

That's why its Final Declaration and Action Plan initiated a project on education for democratic citizenship "with a view to promoting citizens' awareness of their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society".

This understanding was the genesis of our Charter for Education on Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights in 2010.

Recognising the need to foster a culture of human rights, and the role that formal and non-formal education must play, the Charter was developed in consultation with member states' and civil society too.

It requires curriculum-based teaching of the key concepts of democracy and human rights, built on democratic principles: participative decision-making, peaceful conflict resolution, openness to controversial issues; and the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

And it looks to instil that inclusive respect for human dignity outside the classroom too.

Without that benchmark – that culture – it would not have been possible to produce the Report on the State of Citizenship and Human Rights Education in Europe that you will discuss and debate today.

It is a thorough and revelatory piece of work providing real insight into how democracy and human rights in Europe have been promoted through education over the last five years.

40 member states and 44 NGOs responded to the questionnaire on which it is based – with input from governments, civil society and a range of partner organisations.

From this, we know that all 40 countries have taken concrete measures to promote citizenship and human rights education, in accordance with the objectives and principles of the Charter.

We know that the Charter is now widely available in local languages on government and other websites in the vast majority of those countries.

And we know that an overwhelming majority of government respondents felt that the Council of Europe's presence in this field encourages stronger action and increased opportunities for co-operation.

Of course, as always, there is room for improvement.

Two thirds of countries report inconsistencies between policies and practice.

And there exists a gulf between the perceptions of government and civil society: while 78% of government respondents claimed there was a shared definition of democratic citizenship and human rights education in their country, only 17% of civil society respondents agreed.

So therein lies the challenge.

At a time when budgets are tight and programmes are being cut, how do we make progress?

How can we further the reach of education in human rights, bridge the perception gap between government and civil society and iron out the inconsistencies between policies and practice?

What innovative methods can we create and deploy to reach beyond the classroom and work with others so that young people can learn about the benefits of human rights for them and for others?

Ladies and Gentlemen, you have the skills, you have the experience and you have the knowledge to make that happen.

So I call on you to share what you know, so that we can grow together and plant the seeds for generations of young people who will know their human rights, live by them, and embrace an open society.

The same is true for those of you who have been attending the HELP Network Conference.

Lawyers, prosecutors and judges also need training if they are to stay abreast of developments in the evolution of human rights, not least in a context where the human rights challenges facing our member states are fast evolving.

They need that knowledge in order to implement the European Convention on Human Rights effectively.

HELP is the Council of Europe's commitment to making that happen.

At this Conference, you have heard for yourselves examples of the extraordinary work being done alongside national training institutions and bar associations to ensure that all 47 member states can provide legal professionals with the knowledge they need.

Our programmes respond to the challenges of our times.

This year's Conference of the HELP Network placed an onus on HELP for friendly justice: improving access to justice for all, including disadvantaged groups.

I am pleased to hear, for example, that the HELP course on Asylum and the European Court of Human Rights has been implemented in six more countries since last year.

There are also new courses on Child-friendly Justice, Violence Against Women and Internal Displacement.

These are aimed at long-standing but dynamic problems that have been exacerbated by recent events in and around Europe.

It is right that education should keep up with events.

It is also encouraging to see the exponential growth of the HELP Programme across Europe:

HELP in the Western Balkans and Turkey, HELP in Russia and the first phase in the largest ever training programme on human rights for legal professionals in the European Union –

Soon to be followed, with EU financing, by training in the prevention of radicalisation leading to violence and terrorism – one of the Secretary General's priorities for our work here at the Council of Europe.

HELP has done so much to spread expertise, with courses available online, for academics and professionals alike to use.

Here at this Conference you have again been sharing ambitions, ideas and best practice among yourselves.

And that really, is what all of this is about.

Together, at fora such as this, we listen, we learn and we equip ourselves for the fight –

Whether with the prevailing wind of optimism or against the harsh winds of populism, we can embed an understanding of human rights through education of our young people and our legal professionals alike.

Therefore, I thank you all for being here.