

JS QIE Conference Education, Romania

Speech by Snežana MARKOVIC-SAMARDZIC,

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Good morning everyone,

I am delighted to participate in the launch of this conference, as it addresses a Council of Europe priority: **the right to education**.

The right to education is enshrined in the 1952 Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights and in Article 17 of the European Social Charter.

While **access to education** is in itself an important right, the true value of this right can only be realised if education is of **adequate quality** and if learning opportunities and arrangements enable pupils and students to **complete their education in reasonable time and under conditions conducive to quality education**. Quality education must be **inclusive** and give access to learning to all students, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups.

From the results of our work monitoring the implementation of those treaties, we clearly see the lack of equitable access to quality inclusive education as one of the most pressing issues in this context.

That is also the reason why this issue is one of the top priorities of the Council of Europe's intergovernmental programme in the field of education, youth and vulnerable groups .

Several legal instruments and strategic plans, like the CM/ Recommendation on Quality Education, the Framework of competences for a Democratic Culture or the Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Travellers Inclusion (2020-2025), approved by the Committee of Ministers are powerful references and guiding documents for all policymakers and practitioners in our member states .

I would like to congratulate Romania's Presidency and the Romanian Educatà initiative for the patronage of this important event today which comes at a key moment in Romanian history.

A little more than a year ago, I personally visited a school in Romania together with President Iohannis. I was very pleased to see that the school had fully embraced inclusive education and that as a result, relationships had improved, children felt better at school and their educational attainments in key subjects had improved.

It is crucial to discuss this important topic at a time when educational systems have been shaken and challenged by the COVID-19 lockdown.

Education has been one of the sectors most affected by COVID-19 as most states in Europe and globally closed schools and moved to remote learning as an immediate response to the pandemic. The crisis is likely to exacerbate the different forms of exclusion, disproportionately affecting the educational outcomes of the most vulnerable.

School closures have underlined the importance of keeping teachers closely engaged and connected to their students. The longer students are out of school, the more disengaged and demotivated they are, creating a higher risk of early school leaving.

Schools also offer a variety of services such as meals and psychosocial and health support that are vital for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students who could not be reached through remote teaching need additional support in order to catch up with their peers.

This is also the right moment to acknowledge the courage of teachers, school principals, pupils and parents alike for adapting to new contexts and trying to leave no one behind.

Being inclusive is not about applying a special treatment. It is a state of mind, an approach and a set of values put in action. When all stakeholders work for inclusiveness, not only children at risk come out of the danger zone but **ALL CHILDREN THRIVE**.

We see very concretely how this happens within the INSCHOOL project, which the Council of Europe carries out jointly with the European Commission in several member states at both the practice and policy level, with the aim of ensuring a broader understanding and use of quality inclusive education at system level.

During the pandemic, we have seen school principals who have put on a mask and a pair of boots and have gone to each 'unconnected' child's home to understand their needs.

Teachers gathered online and assessed solutions in order to bring children back into the learning process.

Some benefitted from psycho-emotional support in order to cope with the challenges of isolation, new didactics and endless hours in front of a screen.

Care and mutual respect are at the heart of the inclusive education approach and **that** changes lives.

The opposite brings about dramatic turns in the lives of all children:

where children do **not** feel welcomed or supported – or worse, when they are abused or bullied - they drop out.

Where relationships are **not** cared for, teachers seek other jobs.

Where schools **disengage** from the world around them, segregation follows. This is also visible from the caselaw of the European Court for Human Rights concerning segregation in education, and is a worrying trend in many European countries.

The Council of Europe has recently stepped up co-operation with the Ministry of Education and Research in Romania through a Memorandum of Understanding focusing specifically on the Quality Inclusive Education Agenda. It will offer support to 40 schools and an introduction to methodologies that can bring inclusiveness in schools. A national programme on inclusive education at school level could possibly be a focus of co-operation in the coming years.

Improvements can be achieved in Romania when all stakeholders work together in

- addressing the trends related to the quality of education,
- ensuring access of teachers – particularly in rural areas – to quality and adequate in-service training,
- and most importantly, in addressing segregation of Roma children.

The following weeks will be decisive for the future of the Romanian education system and for society as whole. Parties invited in the debates that will follow in the coming weeks will have the chance to reflect thoroughly on an important choice: whether they will promote a status-quo or whether they will use the lessons learnt, and COVID-19, as an opportunity to bring Romania to the highest standards possible in terms of education. Focusing on early education, vocational training and the transition from education to employment, further and higher education, and also on equity as a transversal issue.

I trust that this will enable parties present today to go to the heart of the education system and show their ideas to Romanian citizens in a democratic exercise.

I would like to conclude by highlighting that in democratic societies, everybody should enjoy equal opportunities so that everybody can exercise the right to education and benefit from quality education, commensurate with aspirations and abilities.

But quality education should also seek to be inclusive. In this respect, public authorities have the duty to ensure quality education also for those who are unable to make use of mainstream education programmes, for different reasons, which may range from lack of proficiency in the language(s) of instruction to severe mental or physical disability.

Finally, let me assure you that also the future Romanian government will be able to count on the continued and continuing support and guidance of the Council of Europe, and through joint initiatives of our Organisation with the European Union.

Multa bafta!*

I am looking forward to following the debates of the coming month.

*Multà bafta = Good luck!