

Joint EU/CoE project “Promoting Human Rights and Minority Protection in South East Europe”

1st Steering Committee meeting

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Draft talking points – Jean-Christophe BAS

On behalf of the Council of Europe, I am delighted to welcome you to the first Steering Committee of the joint EU/CoE project “Promoting Human Rights and Minority Protection in South East Europe”.

I would like to thank our hosts, the Office for Human and Minority Rights of Serbia, as well as our partners, the EU and in particular DG Enlargement that recognized the need and secured the funding for this project. And to thank each and every member of the Steering Committee for being here. Your guidance and support is indispensable and will remain so in the coming years.

The Council of Europe is perhaps best known for the European Court of Human Rights. While the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms is indeed the overarching framework for our work at the Council of Europe, a specific interest in minorities arose in the early 1990s, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The tragic conflicts in this region made it urgent – even essential – to address minority issues. It was from this context that the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities arose. This is now one of the most respected treaties in the minority protection field in Europe and all beneficiaries present here are party to it. In addition to the Framework Convention, the CoE also of course holds other *acquis* in this field, for instance the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

But what is a convention in practice? I also worked in the United Nations and have seen how conventions can work – and sometimes, as noble as the intention may be, not work as effectively as we would hope. The Council of Europe does have monitoring mechanisms through which detailed reports are prepared by eminent experts and adopted by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers. What we are trying to achieve through **this** Project is to actually put these Conventions into practice. We do so by working at the local level on

specific problems raised in our monitoring reports. Or to put it another way, by concretely pairing the needs of vulnerable groups with our Council of Europe standards.

Only after we have evidence from the local level will we try to bring the most useful experiences to the broader level so you, as policy makers, can make informed decisions based on concrete evidence. That is why this Steering Committee is composed of representatives from both the local and central levels. You will build an essential bridge between these two levels of government.

This project should also inform our colleagues working with Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms to have a clearer picture of what is happening on the ground in each of the Project Beneficiaries. There is therefore a possibility that we can develop what we might call a full circle:- recommendations from our monitoring mechanisms – implementation based on these recommendations with the support of this project – and then in the next monitoring cycle, a better understanding among all partners of both progress and specific needs.

We put a lot of effort into developing sound research and evaluating the project results. We intend to involve a competent independent research institution that will be able to confirm whether our impact in the field is bringing us to positive change and if not, why not, and how to tackle the issues in the future.

And I would emphasize we will not only address challenges through this project, but also highlight success stories. Coming from a journalistic background, I think there is a real need to tell these stories in the media. Stories about breaking down barriers for individuals from minority groups that will inspire others, both within the region but also outside the region. Also stories about the impact of working together – two European organisations in partnership with authorities and minority groups from the entire region.

I have touched upon how we will work together at the local and central government levels. But why the regional focus?

We are aware of criticism of regional projects. Not everyone is convinced they are actually very useful. There is sometimes a feeling that these projects just skim the surface of an

issue, but don't really tackle specific problems within individual beneficiaries – which of course all have different needs.

Personally, I am convinced, however, that regional projects do have an important role to play, as demonstrated by our sister project on Inclusive Education. We already see positive results in this project not only in terms of impact, but also in terms of the process. An open and transparent process is central to this Project and I hope will augur well for the new phase of our project.

Regional co-operation also brings in the added value of comparing and contrasting experiences and of learning from each other. For of course, while there are clearly differences between the beneficiaries of the region, many of the challenges are similar.

Also, the regional approach is also a motor for motivation – for instance in Tirana last November at the launching conference of the Inclusive Education project, we witnessed some great synergies among the representatives of the 49 selected pilot schools from the region. We hope to do the same at the end of November in Skopje when we will bring together representatives from the 36 selected municipalities within the scope of this Project. And I would suggest that the Council of Europe is well placed to guide this process through our extensive experience in the region – both political and technical.

Finally, we can see the first phase of our project as a cluster of seven projects implemented in the field at the same time and with good coordination. As of November 2014, there will be a team of 10-20 local short term experts that will work to improve the access to rights of minority populations in each of the beneficiaries under the supervision of the Steering Committee.

As we start this road ahead together, you can count on the full support of the Council of Europe –myself and the dedicated team as well as our field offices and of course the expertise and extensive networks of the Council of Europe in the minority protection field.