

“Embracing Diversity through Education”

6 and 7 November 2013, Tirana, Albania

Opening Speech by Villano Qiriazhi, Council of Europe

Dear Ministers and deputy ministers,

Dear colleagues

On behalf of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, it is my great pleasure to welcome you today. I would like to thank the Minister of Education of Albania for hosting this regional event and also our partner, the European Commission. And last but not least, a special welcome to our colleagues in the region – ministries, representatives of the pilot schools and other organisations and institutions, all of whom are represented here today.

For some 60 years now, the Council of Europe has been developing together with our 47 member states various standards and policies in the field of education. It can be a long and sometimes laborious process, but the results are both politically relevant and practical, and, I would suggest, even progressive. Frameworks for deeper co-operation in our member states, are adapted, of course to the specific context of each country.

Allow me to give you some examples. In December 2012, the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers adopted a legal text on ensuring

quality education. The main idea is that quality education should seek to be inclusive – for without inclusion, or perhaps to put it another way, without diversity, the quality of education suffers for all children. A quality education system must enable and encourage all learners to develop their abilities and aspirations to the full. This is going one step further than simply the “right to education” enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and the Revised European Social Charter. The fundamental right to education does not mean any more a right to access any kind of education, but an education where learners are put in a position to access and complete quality education programs with success.

The Project is an example of how these intergovernmental programme’s standards and guidelines can be used as a solid basis and indeed inspiration to support reforms through targeted technical programmes with privileged partners such as the EU. Politically, then, this project is fully in line with the priorities of the Council of Europe, the EU and most importantly, the beneficiaries themselves.

Two weeks ago in Belgrade the Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice of the Council of Europe discussed during an informal 2 days meeting the new priorities of the Education programme of the Council of Europe for the years 2014-2015 and Inclusive Education was one of the three major themes that Committee members discussed. The other 2 were devoted to the follow up of the conclusions

of the Ministerial Conference organised in April this year in Helsinki on Governance and Quality Education, with specific focus on corruption, and the Development of a Framework of Competences for Democracy and Intercultural Dialogue. The conclusions of our discussions in Belgrade correspond very much to the definition given by your project to Inclusive Education: children friendly policies and children friendly education institutions; cross sector cooperation and new partnerships with families and local community; competences for all teachers on diversity;

The Project is therefore a powerful vehicle through which we can all work together towards one goal - if I may put it simply, to break down barriers for all vulnerable groups in the education sector. And when we say vulnerable groups, we mean a broad definition of inclusiveness – from children with disabilities, minorities, Roma, girls, children with lack of proficiency in languages of instruction etc. Any child who may be excluded from mainstream education programmes.

Before giving the floor over my colleague Sarah Keating, who is responsible for our regional and bilateral projects in the education sector in South East Europe and will give more details of the Project itself, I would like to say a few words on the context in which this Project is being carried out.

First, a bit of background. This project was not developed in Strasbourg or Brussels, but by a network of experts from the region over a two year

period organized by the European Training Foundation. Therefore it is a project from the region, for the region.

We are also fully aware that there are already numerous initiatives going on in the region. We are respectful of these initiatives and it is our hope that this project will build upon these achievements and go a step further, together and in complementarity.

And while there are many activities within each beneficiary foreseen in the project, the regional aspect should not be underestimated. So much can be learned from sharing experiences and we feel that this is a powerful aspect of the project.

Finally, I would also like to emphasize the integrated framework approach of this project. There are two other regional projects in South East Europe currently being supported by the EU – one on minorities, implemented by the Council of Europe and another with Roma, with the OSCE ODIHR. These three projects are complementary and aim to address all aspects of access to public services for vulnerable groups.

Allow me to end with a quote from a classmate of a blind student from one of the pilot schools:

“He taught me to stand up for myself throughout life and to realise that the problems which may seem huge to us are actually tiny, compared to the real-life obstacles.”

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We can learn so much from each other. During the next day and a half, I look forward to reflecting on how we can move forward together to make our schools – and indeed societies – more inclusive.

Thank you very much for your attention.