



**Czech Presidency of the Council  
of the European Union**

**The Role of Education in Overcoming the Legacy of the Past  
in the Western Balkans and beyond**

Prague, November 23 – 24, 2022  
Chair's Summary

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic organized in the framework of the Presidency of the Council of the EU, in cooperation with the Institute of International Studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University the conference **The Role of Education in Overcoming the Legacy of the Past and Reinforcing Democratic Institutions**,

The conference was attended by representatives of the academic sector, pedagogical experts from the university and scientific environments, specialists on history education, representatives of civil society, non-governmental organizations and international institutions from the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe. The program included a combination of multidisciplinary expertise and approaches, enabling the exchange of experiences of experts and activists from various spheres.

The Czech experience in the field of education from the **Czech-German** reconciliation process served as potential inspiration for the reconciliation process in the countries of the **Western Balkans**. The multidisciplinary composition of participants covered areas from history research, dealing with the German-Czech relations, World War II and holocaust witnesses and victims, experts on minority rights, authors of textbooks, practical pedagogues, young activists, and experts on the application of computer games as teaching tools, comprehensible for the current young generation. **Exchange of experience** from the creation and application of classic and modern didactic tools that could help the teaching of history in a nationally or ethnically mixed school was an important part of the deliberations.

Selected points from the discussions:

- A **fundamental prerequisite** of progress in historical research and education is a **full political autonomy of research**, independence of the creative process and systematic and politically unobstructed sharing of research results within the society;
- "Numbers matter". Facts, dates, names, sequences of events and their interpretation must be performed in an unhindered environment for exploring history and the dealing with the Past:
- What **unites and divides nations** needs to be studied and presented together. Both aspects must be in balance, overlooking the negatives is not sustainable in the long term;

- To reach an agreement on shared/united general narrative concerning the Past is hardly achievable, in particular in the case of the Balkan countries, facing problems of captured and corrupt states;
- Education has a crucial role for the future; recycling nationalist and biased one-sided narratives plants seeds of intolerance, segregation and hatred.
- Gloomy periods of the recent history (holocaust, genocide, war crimes) should be recorded through the optics of the individual memories of witnesses and victims, who create a plastic image of "great history"; Maintaining oral memory is an important tool to **counter revisionist interpretations of the history**;
- The role of historians is to offer teachers **sources of information** and results of historical research, not writing textbooks. To publish textbooks is an excellent business for publishing houses, i.e. the quality and objectivity of the content is not necessarily their priority;
- Changing the approach to teaching/learning history from memorizing and objectivist methods to individual search for contexts, comparing, interpreting and evaluating subjects, is reflected in a more critical and creative understanding of the facts;
- Balanced textbooks and other learning materials applicable across ethnic/national boundaries must be developed with the active participation and **consultations of minority representatives**. It is important for **confidence building** with the majority population;
- New teaching tools and methods are always subject to the subjective **problem of choice**; it is necessary to select positive books, films or computer games, over products that incite hatred, revisionism, or promote national stereotypes;
- The Western Balkan region faces a strong historical burden of distorted interpretation of facts;
- Reconciliation and education on a shared controversial history are often mutually confused, or can be interchangeable. Individual states and nations choose from the common history only what suits them (cherry-picking in the history);
- Several good transboundary/transnational projects, textbooks, and programs existed in the region. Their medium and long-term sustainability were however lacking, the implementation falters or does not take place at all; The responsible state authorities do not want to include them in the curricula, often for trivial reasons (fear of reactions, lack of funds, etc.);
- An inconsistent management of the education sector within one State and its politicisation form huge problem (*in the FBiH, each canton has its own "Ministry of Education"*); Investments into education sector are desperately lacking, the vast majority of budgets is dedicated only to low and non-motivating salaries; Even the nomination of teachers could be a subject to political pressure;
- Educational authorities are subject to the influential lobby of veteran associations, so a compromised/objective approach to the recent history is often impassable;

- Politicisation of the education has serious security and social consequences, segregation significantly limits the possibilities of **full use of human potential**;
- The role of (a large part of) the media is often negative; Positive examples do not attack their interest, they inform negligently and schematically, deepening the gloomy and defeatist mood in the society;
- The seeds of overcoming segregated education often encounter opposition from parents who, as voters, demand the preservation of segregated education;
- The education in BiH is segregated not only in 26 schools within the "*Two schools under one roof*" institutions; Other BiH schools are segregated through the curriculum too, while the pretext of language differences is completely odd;
- In Kosovo, the segregation between Albanian and Serbian communities in education is absolute. In cases of relatively mixed communities, the education would deepen segregation due to, but not exclusively to language differences;
- **Extracurricular activities** are an important **bridge to overcoming ethnic differences** (e.g. summer schools, joint extracurricular programs, sport events), but they must not be misused by political leaders for mere self-presentation, political aims or spinning to other purposes;
- International organizations and aid donors (UN, OSCE, ODIHR, EU, USA, etc.) operate in uncoordinated way, ineffectively and with conjunctural trends. Mostly short-term projects lack strategic programming. Cooperation programs should look strategically over a horizon of several months with the sustainability as a must;
- Activation of **civil society organisations** and individual effort of activists are crucial for effective institution building. Respect for the principles of rule of law is essential for effective solution to the current challenges;
- Higher **quality of education** may assist in overcoming national/ethnic differences; Parents would mostly prefer the quality of education over an "ethnic coat";
- External interventions imposing solutions can't work unless interacting with local authorities and respecting the States' and region's sovereignty. Local ownership can not be substituted;
- Local youth initiatives, if united, can surmount the old ossified party structures. Young people are however discouraged from entering politics as a "dirty business", inter alia due to the negativism of the media;

For reflection and possible action at the EU level:

- The EU should be **significantly more assertive** in consistently demanding that identified shortcomings, including discrimination and segregation (as described in the Progress Reports) be eliminated and real reforms implemented. Appeasement with politicians fomenting problems does not work; their detrimental actions need to be **called out publicly**.
- The EU should **vigorously condition its financial aid** by real progress on the way to rule of law, including by enabling independent historical research and history education based on facts.

- The young generation having an opportunity to travel and study abroad often tends not to return, thus reinforcing the brain drain. Losing a capable and educated young generation further weakens the region, but it at the same time **works for the entrenched political elites**, cementing their positions;
- It is advisable to consider dedicating more of the EU funding provided to the region to education – Erasmus, programs for **improving the quality of education** in the region, through the support of educational infrastructure, computerization, modernization of curricula and methods of learning, etc.

### Conclusions:

The participants agreed that the key prerequisite for improving the situation in the field of education, as in turn a prerequisite for reducing tensions between different national and ethnic groups, is the **need for real political will to carry out reforms**. In order to overcome the vested interests of the political elite, which are part of the current problems in the region, **further galvanisation of civil society** and the involvement of young citizens in state affairs are necessary. The participants consider that the persistent dysfunctional educational systems, which causes *inter alia* the outflow of young citizens, is primarily the result of a **confrontational internal political environment**. This makes the development of better socio-economic conditions of the population, especially for the young generation, impossible.

Many interconnected problems (underperforming economy, failing social system, misinterpretation of the past, shortcomings in rule of law, passivity of civil society, negative influence of neighbouring "sponsor" states, brain drain, etc.) make improvements to the education systems difficult but not impossible; **the lack of political will is the real obstacle on the path**.