



Are BiH Curricula serving Children or National Politics?¹

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A Call to Action to Ministers of Education in BiH

This paper is a call to action to the ministers of education in Bosnia and Herzegovina to cooperate within the Conference of the Ministers of Education in BiH, in order to address and coordinate solutions to the politically sensitive issues that otherwise undermine educational quality in the country.

The quality of curricula in BiH needs to be in the best interests of children, in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and with regard to the post-war BiH. Two causes are currently preventing curricular approaches in Bosnia and Herzegovina from delivering such quality:

1. The separation of students in schools according to their national and/or linguistic background, and
2. The design of some curricula for a target audience of students belonging to a specific national group.

Convention on the Rights of the Child on quality education: Children's education should be directed to the development of respect for other cultures, and the preparation for a "responsible life" in the "spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance...and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups..."².

Who can help?

As of the beginning of 2008, the two entity, ten cantonal ministries and one district office of education in Bosnia and Herzegovina have the advantage of the body called the Conference of Ministers of Education (CME) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) which represents a unique forum for the ministers to consider and take a common stand on policies which affect education throughout the country. Instead of a state-level executive body in education, the CME BiH

is a solution that allows the individual ministers to maintain their executive powers, but at the same time enables them to ensure that BiH's international obligations in education are implemented and that their actions are coordinated. The ministers of education and their assistants interviewed as part of this paper expressed faith in the work and potential of the CME BiH.

"The situation in the country is reflected in CME BiH. Although, CME BiH works quite well. The steps are slow, but they exist," Vjekoslav Camber, Minister of Education, West Herzegovina Canton³.

"There is a significant improvement in the work of CME BiH...A collegial relationship has been developed between the ministers, while an open discussion takes place during meetings, without incidents," Antun Kasipovic, Minister of Education and Culture, Republika Srpska⁴.

The CME BiH provides a unique forum within which the ministers' personal initiative and vision can result in the urgently needed curricular changes across the post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, which can serve in the best interests of children. This concept is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, to which BiH aspires on its path towards European integration, and which states that "in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration"⁵.

Children and their enemies

In her analysis⁶ of history textbooks authorized by the BiH ministries of education for the final grade of primary school for the school year 2007/2008⁷, historian Haike Karge (2008) found

¹ This brief is part of a larger policy study which is available on www.soros.org.ba, titled: *Ensuring quality education in BiH: Towards the new curriculum through an improved performance of the Conference of Ministers of Education in BiH*

² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, article 29.1(c) and (d).

³ In an interview for this study.

⁴ In an interview for this study.

⁵ *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000) Official Journal of the European Communities, 2000/C 364/01

⁶ Karge, H. (2008) *20th Century History in the Textbooks of Bosnia and Herzegovina: An analysis of books used for the final grades of primary school* (s.n.)

⁷ The 2008 analysis by Heike Karge has relied on the following History textbooks, which had been approved for school use 2007/08 in BiH: a) Hadžić, H., Dervišagić, E., Mulić, A., Mehić, V. (2007) *History. History textbook for 8 grade of primary school* Tuzla, Bosanska Knjiga; b) Matković, H., Goluža, B., Šarac, I. (2006) *History 8. History textbook for 8 grade of primary school* Mostar, Školska naklada (in text referred to as *Matkovic*); c) Šehić, Z., Marčić-Matošević, Z., Leka, A. (2007) *History. Textbook with historical reading book for 8 grade of primary school* Sarajevo, Sarajevo publishing; d) Tešić, S., Gavrić, S., Pejić, R. (2007) *History textbook for 9 grade of primary school* Istočno Sarajevo, Institute of textbook and teaching aids (in text referred to as *Pejić*); e) Valenta, L. (2007) *History textbook for 8 grade of primary school* Sarajevo, Bosanska riječ

⁸The author has relied on the following History textbooks, which had been approved for school use 2009/10 in BiH: a) Hadžić, H., Dervišagić, E., Mulić, A., Mehić, V. (2008) *History. History textbook for 8 grade of primary school Tuzla*, Bosanska Knjiga; b) Matković, H., Goluža, B., Šarac, I. (2008) *History 8. History textbook for 8 grade of primary school Mostar*, Školska naklada (in text referred to as *Matkovic*); c) Šehić, Z., Marčić-Matošević, Z., Leka, A. (2009) *History. Textbook with historical reading book for 8 grade of primary school Sarajevo*, Sarajevo publishing; d) Tešić, S., Gavrić, S., Pejić, R. (2007) *History textbook for 9 grade of primary school Istočno Sarajevo*, Institute of textbook and teaching aids (in text referred to as *Pejić*); e) Valenta, L. (2007) *History textbook for 8 grade of primary school Sarajevo*, Bosanska riječ; f) Valenta, L. (2007a) *History textbook for 8 grade of primary school Sarajevo*, Bosanska riječ; g) Miloš, M (2008) *History of a New Age. History textbook for 8 grade of primary school Mostar*, ZNAM; h) Bekavac, S., Jareb, M., Rozić, M. (2008) *History 8. Textbook for 8 grade of primary school Mostar*, ALFA.

⁹Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, article 29.1(c) and (d).

¹⁰ UNESCO (1960) *Convention against Discrimination in Education* 14.12.

profound shortcomings in some, in terms of inappropriate content. Karge found the textbooks used for the final grade of primary school in the Republika Srpska entity, *Pejić, 2007*, and in cantons with Croat majority population, *Matkovic 2006*, as using "hate speech" at several points, "including pejorative comments against one or more national groups". Karge excluded from her analysis the textbook by *Milos 2006*, taught in the cantons with Croat majority, for excessive use of hate speech.

Going beyond Karge's analysis, the research and analysis by the author of this policy brief has considered textbooks approved for the school year 2009/10⁸, and focused on the references to the main three national groups living in BiH - the Bosniaks/Muslims, Croats and Serbs - as they featured in the chapter dealing with the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941, and how this affected BiH territory and its peoples. The main finding is that except for *Valenta 2007 and 2007a* the content of all the other textbooks focuses the history of BiH peoples at that time around a specific national group, and then amplifies the extent of crimes perpetrated by others against that national group. This is an example of how the curricula in BiH are designed for a targeted national group of students. This does not prepare students to live "in the spirit of understanding,

peace...and friendship among all peoples"⁹ and such education is therefore not in their best interests.

Divided for better or for worse?

The separation of students according to their national/linguistic belonging in BiH schools is granted by international conventions such as the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), but only if such a right is not exercised in a manner which prevents the members of these minorities from understanding the culture and language of the community as a whole and from participating in its activities, or which prejudices national sovereignty..."¹⁰ (underlined by author). Based on the analysis of history textbooks which impedes the understanding and the existence of the wider community in BiH, the current separation of students in BiH schools according to language and/or nationality is not founded. And while the CRC also grants separated schooling based on parental choice and cultural identity, such curricula in BiH, based on the history textbooks analysis, are not conducted in the spirit of "tolerance...and friendship" among all national groups. And finally, crucially, in many parts of BiH children have no choice but to go to schools teaching a particular language and curriculum only.

The inside cover of *Bekavac, 2008*



The front cover of *Hadziabdic, 2008*



Mostar Gymnasium - administratively unified, but its Bosniak and Croat students still study in separate classrooms





Calling it discrimination

Proponents of separation may argue that it is only linguistic, whereby students of any national background could access any school provided they accepted the school's language. However, the result of such an approach in BiH are mono-national schools which, according to the latest progress report of BiH conducted by the European Union¹¹ „result(s) in de facto segregation of pupils from the very beginning of their schooling“. Therefore, even if the division of students did not intend a segregatory (and therefore discriminatory) approach, segregation was the 'de facto' result of such divisions.

Will it bring anything good?

The website of the Delegation of the European Commission to BiH states that “many believe that the current status of education in BiH represents a violation of human rights and a lack of fulfillment of international obligations”¹².

The 2008 study by Save the Children Norway¹³ shows that the practice of separating students in schools indeed affects students' attitudes as students in BiH schools „do not notice individual discriminatory conduct so much, because they are growing up in an environment in which the indifference toward the needs of another and different, especially towards minority groups, is institutionally established and does not seem to be a problem“.

In the general context of education and conflict, experts have noted that education can play a crucial constructive role in preventing conflict, including that “ethnic attitudes are formed early, and that once positive or negative prejudices are formed, they tend to increase with time. Early socialization experiences are, therefore, critical in the formation of ethnic attitudes”¹⁴.

An observer commented: ‘national’ subjects such as history were being used by the Bosnian politicians “as a means of enshrining and sustaining social division in curriculum areas that would, in more stable circumstances, lend themselves most productively to encouraging social cohesion”¹⁵.

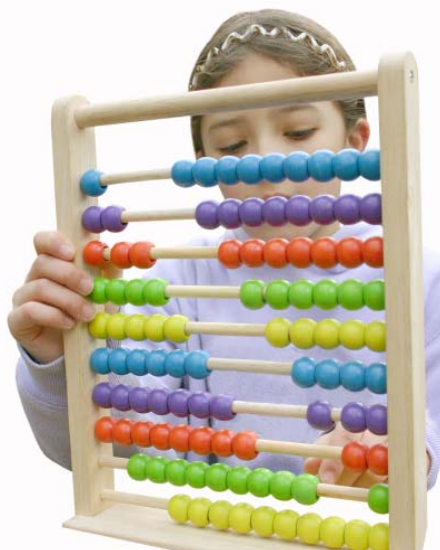
Getting the timing right

In December 2009, assistant to the Minister of Civil Affairs said in an interview for this study that ministers were asked to comment on the alarming findings by Save the Children as well as by another report by the Open Society Fund BiH, “What are we teaching our children?”, and that they all denied the presence of any problems in their cantons or entities.

If the current political situation in BiH is considered by decision-makers as not right for solving such politically sensitive challenges (as have been raised by this policy brief) then a situation exists where party politics are permitted to directly affect the wellbeing of children. On the other hand, these sensitive issues, as they are referenced in BiH's international obligations, fall directly under CME's mandate.

First steps (only) to improving the quality of education in BiH

The option of maintaining a status quo is not an option, as has been argued in this paper. The least painful solution which presents itself is to increase the efficiency, and thereby the effectiveness of the existing CME, whose mandate provides for the ministers to address sensitive issues.



¹¹ Commission of the European Communities (2009) *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2009 Progress Report*

¹² Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina (n.d.) *EU Assistance to BiH, Democratisation and Human Rights: Education*. (Online). (s.n.)

¹³ Save the Children Norway (n.d) *Diskriminacija djece u bosanskohercegovačkoj školi*. Naučna studija (s.n.)

¹⁴ Bush, K.D. & Saltarelli, D. eds. (2000) *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict, Towards a Peacebuilding Education for Children* UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre

¹⁵ Stabback, P. (2004) Curriculum Development, Diversity, and Division in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In: Tawil S. and Harley A. eds. *Education, Conflict and Social Cohesion* UNESCO International Bureau of Education, pp. 37-84



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	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>The ministers of education, within the CME BiH, could <u>without any change in legislation</u>:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take personal initiative to begin discussing sensitive issues and possible solutions; 2. Add to the agenda a regular progress update by each ministry on sensitive issues, and all other issues which pertain to the CME mandate; 3. Take initiative to personally submit key materials to be discussed at CME meetings; this is especially relevant for ministers from regions with positive experiences; 4. Examine the experiences of Brcko District with integrated schooling, as useful material for discussion at CME sessions; 5. Examine the availability of the same curriculum in different languages, as offered by the Federation Ministry of Education; 6. Examine prior examples of framework curricula; 7. Examine the common curriculum for all students as offered by the United World College in Mostar; 8. Operationalise the Council for General Education that would enable ministers to consult the wider group of stakeholders (such as professionals, parents, teachers, etc); 9. Consider the concept of 'what is in the best interest of children'.
<p>What media could do:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Taking an interest in the work of CME; 2. Taking a specialist interest in educational issues as key issues for the future of the country.
<p>What international community observers could do:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conducting more in depth scientific research of the above issues; ensuring that ministers are briefed on research findings or other key materials; eg. propose to submit such materials to be discussed at CME meetings; 2. Promoting local initiative and ownership; 3. Further address causes as opposed to manifestations of problems in BiH education systems.
<p>What parents and students could do:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Getting informed on the substance of educational concerns in your school; 2. Approaching the BiH Ombudsman if concerned about teaching which runs counter to the best interests of students.



A "Policy Development Fellowship Program" has been launched by the Open Society Fund BiH in early 2004 with the aim to improve BiH policy research and dialogue and to contribute to the development of a sound policy-making culture based on informative and empirically grounded policy options. The program provides an opportunity for selected fellows to collaborate with the Open Society Fund in conducting policy research and writing a policy study with the support of mentors and trainers during the whole process. Sixty three fellowships have been granted in three cycles since the starting of the Program. All policy studies are available at www.soros.org.ba