



# Ensuring quality education in BiH: Towards the new curriculum through an improved performance of the Conference of Ministers of Education in BiH

March, 2010. godine

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Quality of Education in BiH

The Conference of Ministers of Education (CME) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) needs to ensure that the educational approaches across the country are in the best interests of children in BiH. 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” (*Charter of Fundamental Rights... 2000, Chapter III- Equality, Article 24*). This paper particularly looks at what constitutes the child’s best interests in terms of educational quality, derived from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner... 1989, article 29.1(c) and (d)), and within the specific context of a post-war BiH.

The CRC, which BiH has ratified, posits as one of the indicators of “quality” education - critically relevant in the post-war context of BiH - that 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...” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner... 1989, article 29.1(c) and (d)). Furthermore, the BiH Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education posits as an objective of education “learning about others and different by ... cultivating mutual understanding and solidarity among all people, ethnic groups and communities in BiH and in the world” (*Okvirni zakon...2003*).

This study is aware that there are numerous factors that contribute to “quality” education that is in the best interests of the child. In the case of BiH, these factors that contribute to poor quality in the general sense include poor infrastructure, non standardized teacher training, focus on outdated practices which determine passive learning approaches, which are all listed in the strategic directions of BiH education (*Strateški pravci... 2008*), but also the tendency for curricular focus on content instead of outcomes, as well as the exclusion of over 70% of Romani children from the primary education process, the dominant exclusion of physically and mentally challenged children from the mainstream primary education process (Institucija Ombudsmana... 2009), and the lack of political will to systematically address many of these issues across the country.

However, this paper argues that the phenomenon of “two schools under one roof”, and the inappropriate content of some History textbooks - are examples of where the BiH education systems do not fulfill the “quality” education in line with CRC indicators, and are therefore not in the best interests of BiH children. As a consequence, they affect the children’s ability to develop knowledge (for example, as could be acquired through learning from History textbooks) and skills and competencies (for example, as could be demonstrated through the children’s ability to develop respect for other cultures, in the spirit of tolerance) in line with the CRC indicators. This paper further argues that these manifestations are brought on by two key factors that exist in the BiH education system:

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.



This paper also examines the link between the existing schooling and curricular approaches in BiH and social instability in the country. As the Minister of Education of Republika Srpska put it in an interview as part of this study, “education in BiH reflects the society, and that reflection is of a sickly society. Our society has atrophied morally and ethically. The question before us is how, beyond the family, we can develop a feeling of respect in children”. His view is endorsed by BiH students, two thirds of who consider the society they live in to be “unjust” (Save the Children Norway, n.d., p. 7).

## 1.2 Conference of Ministers of Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina

BiH currently features ten cantonal and two entity ministries of education, and one equivalent district office; twelve of these are fully independent executive bodies in education. This setup is a consequence of the war which lasted from 1992 until 1995; its effects on the pre-war single curriculum include the development of curricula by the cantonal education ministries of Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zenica-Doboj, the Federation entity, the Republika Srpska entity, the Mostar Institute for School Affairs, and the Brcko District.

Within such a diverse educational system, the individual ministries of education are mandated, able to deliver and fully responsible for the quality of education in their Republika Srpska entity and the ten cantons in the Federation. In addition, as of the beginning of 2008, these ministries have the advantage of the Conference of Ministers of Education (CME) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) which represents a unique forum for them to consider and coordinate policies which affect education throughout the country. As such, the members of CME have a unique forum within which to learn, discuss, and offer solutions for the most pressing issues affecting education in the country, including the fulfillment of international obligations which the country has accepted in the field of education, and yet for which there is no state level executive mechanism to assure their implementation. An interviewee who had participated in the development of CME mandate pointed out that the terms of reference for CME “create a mechanism for consensus making as well as semi-binding frames for common decision-making and implementation of the (CME) conclusions”.

The CME was formed and mandated to “encourage” coordinated activity of the thirteen ministries of education, in order to harmonise educational systems and strategies affecting the whole country. The body has a strict limitation though - it must not interfere in the executive legal responsibilities of the individual education ministries (Vijeće ministara... 2008)<sup>1</sup>. As such, CME’s mandate is of a strictly advisory nature, with no sanctioning or other powers except to take a unanimous stand on various educational strategies. The Chair of CME is the state-level Minister of Civil Affairs (MCA) of BiH, whose ministry’s education section is otherwise responsible for “securing the international obligations of BiH” (Ministarstvo civilnih poslova..., n.d.) in education but without the executive powers to do so.

There is a lack of research in the evaluation of the work of this unique and important mechanism since its inception in January 2008. This policy study feeds into that analytical gap. It shows how CME has dealt with the obligation to analyse the needs of education in primary and secondary schools in the country in the context of the research, and in the context of the relevant international as well as local obligations<sup>2</sup> that demand this type of educational quality in schools, with particular focus on the CRC.

<sup>1</sup> CME was founded based on a Memorandum of Understanding (*Memorandum o razumijevanju...*, 2008), and operates according to its Rules of Procedure (Bosna i Hercegovina, *Ministarstvo civilnih poslova...*, 2008), both developed by the European Commission funded programme ICBE in cooperation with and the support of local ministries of education and local and international experts, and adopted at the first meeting of CME in March 2008. The body is expected to meet bi-monthly, and to produce conclusions and recommendations. The CME can work with presence of 2/3 ministers, but cannot take decisions without consultations with all (Bosna i Hercegovina, *Ministarstvo civilnih poslova...*, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The non-exhaustive list of such obligations includes:  
*Convention on the Rights of the Child;*  
*Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in BiH;*  
*Strateški pravci razvoja obrazovanja u Bosni i Hercegovini sa planom implementiranja, 2008.-2015;*  
*Guidelines for Writing and Evaluation of History Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina;*  
*European Partnership with Bosnia and Herzegovina;*  
*Stabilisation and Accession Agreement;*  
*Memorandum of Understanding for the Establishment of the Conference of Ministers of Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina;*  
*Convention against Discrimination in Education.*

### 1.3 Problem definition

BiH has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This research assumes, therefore, that the determinants of quality education as considered by the CRC ought to be a granted component of any primary and secondary school curriculum in the country, and takes a specific focus on CME's work on the aspects of education where such quality is found to be lacking from curricula. This study focuses on the CRC's indicator of "quality" education where 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..." (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner..., 1989, article 29.1(c) and (d)).

As specified earlier, causes that compromise the education systems in BiH in terms of the above aspect of quality, in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, include the separation of students in schools according to their national and/or linguistic background, and the design of some curricula for a target audience of students belonging to a specific national group. The problems caused by the former, though not exhaustive, include the phenomenon of "two schools under one roof", while the most acute problem caused by the latter is the inappropriate content of some school textbooks, as confirmed by independent observers<sup>3</sup>. Both shall be discussed later in the text.

<sup>3</sup> See Karge 2008 and 2009, and Trbic..., 2008

It could therefore be said that the primary and secondary schooling and curricular approaches in Bosnia and Herzegovina that harbour "two schools under one roof" and use History textbooks that are not in accordance with the guidelines for such textbook writing (*Smjernice za pisanje i ocjenu* ..., 2007) are not fully exercised in the best interests of the child, as they do not allow children to enjoy some of the freedoms and rights associated with educational quality in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Institucija Ombudsmana..., 2009). For the list of History textbooks considered in this study, please consult Annex 2.

This study argues that the separation of children according to their linguistic/national belonging in BiH and the design of curricula for a specific national group only, is a problem which needs to be addressed countrywide, and within the unique context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which CME is in a position to address.

### 1.4 Intent of research

The objective of this research is to provide recommendations for how the Conference of Ministers of Education in BiH could effectively address the manifestations of poor quality of education in BiH, where the indicator of quality is a curriculum which develops in children the respect for other cultures, and which prepares them for a "responsible life" in the "spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance...and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups..." (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner..., 1989, article 29.1(c) and (d)).

### 1.5 Methodology

This research has primarily been a qualitative study, relying on the analyses of interviews, documents, studies, reviews, and minutes of CME meetings. It has relied on the target indica-



tors/variables, ways of measuring them, and limitations as described in Annex 1 to this study. The literature used for reference is listed in the bibliography as Annex 3 to this paper.

## 1.6 Road map of the paper

Following the introduction, this paper will further describe the problem background, its context, and its consequences. It will then outline the policy options for solving the problem, including recommendations related to the preferred policy option.

## 2 PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

### 2.1 Problem background

While the CRC concept of quality education represents a clear standard, its implementation has been compromised in BiH due to the country's violent past. In fact, BiH's recent war, fought between 1992 and 1995, is an argument used by some educational stakeholders to indicate that to mix students of different national backgrounds in the same classroom, for the sake of tolerance, would *not* contribute to social stability. After all, they note, the pre-war unified education system in BiH failed to prevent the tragedy of national conflict in the '90s, and therefore the wartime emergence of the different curricula for particular groups of students are justified.

The fallacy of the above argument is that it assumes that it is only education that breeds or prevents conflict. The factors contributing to social instability, just like those contributing to quality education, are many and broad. However, in the general context of education and conflict, experts have noted that education can play a crucial constructive role in preventing conflict. Bush & Saltarelli (2000: p. 3, quoting Padilla, Ruiz and Brand) pointed out 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." This study argues that the linguistic and national separation of children in schools, and their studying according to curricula which have been designed for a specific national group only, tend to create negative prejudices, and therefore contribute to social instability.

The fact that the quality of BiH curricular approaches in the context of this research has been compromised is reported by many key international agencies in the field. OECD, for instance, commented in 2003 that the existing post-war curriculum in BiH was "used mainly to support nationalist issues and consolidate the balance of power". And as far back as 1999, observers noted the importance of "control of curricula, textbooks, and access to education" in conducting politics in post-war BiH (Council of Europe..., 1999: p. 9). As another observer put it, "the legacy of the conflict is a divided, even fragmented, country whose leaders, in many cases, see education as a means of sustaining ideology and promoting politico-cultural identity, and who focus far more vigorously on differences than on similarities" (Stabback, 2004: p.44). To summarise, the situation in BiH could be described in the general context in which University of Oxford researchers Jeremy Rappleye and Judith Paulson (2007: p. 339, citing Cohen, 2000) placed education after conflict, describing it as the "transfer of the terms of the wider struggle into the domain of education".

In March 2008, all the ministers of education publicly committed themselves to the Strategic Directions of Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with an implementation plan, for the years 2008 up to 2015. On the list of the priority issues which affect educational quality, the Strategic Directions notably included the need for equality of student participation in the education process, and committed the ministers to “eliminate” the problem of “two schools under one roof”, to “remov(e)” inappropriate content from some History, Geography and Language textbooks, and other measures (*Strateški pravci...* 2008).

### 2.1.1 History textbooks - the challenge of content

A textbook is the basic traditional foundation of the education systems in BiH - what is written in a textbook is taught by teachers to students with the aim of being taken for granted. This is exacerbated by the fact that research shows Bosnian primary schools students reporting greater trust in what they learn from their textbooks compared to their counterparts in Western Europe (Torsti, 2003).

Under international pressure, several ministerial commissions have attempted to remove inappropriate content from BiH History textbooks since 1999, mostly focusing on hate speech. Each effort bore improvement, but inappropriate content still remained. In 2007, the ministers signed the Guidelines for Writing and Evaluation of History Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Schools in BiH (*Smjernice za pisanje i ocjenu ...*, 2007); however, several of the History textbooks approved for 2007/2008 school year were not reviewed favourably (Karge, 2008), and in particular the textbooks approved in Republika Srpska and for use in the cantons with Croat majority population which are still in use today.

The BiH ministries of education authorise different textbooks for use in their cantons/entity. These textbooks differ in terms of presentational quality, and in terms of historical approach. In her reviews of the History textbooks authorized by the different educational ministries in BiH for school year 2007/2008, Karge (2008) found profound shortcomings in some, in terms of inappropriate content (for a list which includes Karge’s 2008 review of textbooks for the final grade of primary school, see Annex 2). Karge (2008) referred to the textbooks used for the final grade of primary school in the Republika Srpska entity, *Pejic, 2007*, and in cantons with Croat majority, *Matkovic 2006*, as using “hate speech” at several points, “including pejorative comments against one or more national groups”. From her 2008 analysis Karge excluded the textbook by *Milos 2006*, taught in the cantons with Croat majority, for excessive use of hate speech.

The author of this research analysed the references to the main three national groups living in BiH – the Bosniaks/Muslims, the Croats and the Serbs – in one of the chapters in all the textbooks of the last grade of primary school, used for the school year 2009/2010. The chapter in each of the textbooks that was analysed dealt with the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941, and how this affected the administration of BiH and its peoples. Except for the two textbooks by *Valenta 2007*, the findings indicate that the content of all the other textbooks centre the history of BiH at that time around a specific national group, and then amplify the extent of crimes perpetrated by others against that national group. For instance, *Pejic 2007* portrays the Serbs as the main victims during World War II, at the hands of Croats and Muslims. The mention of Croats and Muslims in the chapter is rare and only negative, while the mention of the Serb people is only positive, even in the context when some Serb representatives collaborated with Nazi Germany.



*Matkovic 2009*, on the other hand, does not even mention BiH or Bosniaks, and refers to the Serbs only in the context of Croatia. Although the chapter mentions Croat crimes against Serbs, it still portrays Croats as the main victims and mentions them mainly in a positive light, and especially in the context of the Independent State of Croatia (ISC). *Bekavac 2008* also does not mention BiH or Bosniaks in the chapter, as though they did not exist in the ISC. And although it deals with ISC crimes against Serbs, it deals only with the history of Croatia. *Milos 2008* also deals with Croatian history only.

In the chapter dealing with the same historical period, *Hadziabdic 2008* offers a Bosniak-centric view. This means that although the chapter mentions crimes against Serbs and Croats, it places an accent on the crimes committed against Bosniaks/Muslims. *Sehic 2009* does the same. The two textbooks by *Valenta 2007 and 2007a* are the only ones that contain the same chapter but succeed in narrating it in a more balanced way through the witness accounts of peoples of all nationalities who were present at this historical period on BiH territory.

This is an example of how curricula in BiH are designed for specific national groups of students. Such an approach does not prepare students for a life in the “spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance... and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups...” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner..., 1989, article 29.1(c) and (d)), and such an education is therefore not in their best interests.

### **2.1.2 The challenge of the “two schools under one roof” phenomenon**

The students of Croat and Bosniak national groups, who had studied together in the same school building before the war, found themselves studying according to different curricula during and after the conflict. Furthermore, their wartime and post-war separation, sometimes in the same neighbourhood, manifested itself through separated school spaces. Pressured by some parents and international observers, the local authorities brought together these students into the same school building, but on the condition that they continued to study according to two different curricula, and that the “two schools” continued to maintain legal and administrative independence. This phenomenon became popularly known as “two schools under one roof”.

The post-war physical separation of children in separate school buildings did not appear justified. Those same children had attended school together before the war, and they spoke languages which though constitutionally recognized as separate (after the war), are entirely mutually intelligible. Moreover, the children had been forcefully separated during the war through the political wills of parties to the war, which went contrary to the standard that politics had no place in school. In “two schools under one roof”, students in some schools at least share extracurricular activities, while in others they enter the building in different shifts, with limited contact with each other (Institucija Ombudsmana za ljudska prava..., 2009).

The author has been denied access to the different versions of the draft reports on the issue produced by CME, but the official claims (Bosna i Hercegovina, Ministarstvo civilnih poslova, 2008e) cite the definition of what kind of schools are actually “two schools under one roof” as the problem hindering a solution. International agencies have attempted to unify the management of those schools, i.e. make them administratively integrated, so that they would at least

become “one school with two programmes” as opposed to “two schools under one roof”. This has not happened but in a handful of schools in seven years, despite intense pressure. In an attempt to “solve” the problem, the local proponents of the continued separation of students have recently proposed a “solution” to simply erect another school building, to move one group of students out of the “two schools under one roof”, and as a result to obtain “one school under one roof”, i.e. the “problem” would no longer exist. In such a scenario, the cause compromising educational quality would remain.

### 2.1.3 The challenge of the Language question

The proponents of separated schooling insist on the separation of children on the basis of claiming the children’s right to an education exclusively in their mother tongue. This claim could be justified on the basis of a partial interpretation of certain conventions, including the CRC and the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960); in the BiH education systems, however, this claim *masks* its imposition of factors in the system, such as biased textbooks (see Karge 2008 and 2009), the content of which is counter to those same conventions (see section 2.1.1). In that sense, a factor masked in this case is the tendency towards a curricular bias in favour of the national group for which the curriculum is intended.

As an example of the above, Article 2 of the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) recognises the „right of members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including the maintenance of schools and, depending on the educational policy of each State, the use or the teaching of their own language, provided however: (i) That this 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...“ (underlining by author) The study by Open Society Fund „What are we teaching our children?“ (Fond otvoreno drustvo..., 2007) concluded that the textbooks used in BiH do not contribute to such understanding and attitudes.

Another unsubstantiated claim by the proponents of separate schooling is that their stakes are guaranteed by the CRC’s article deeming the right of “respecting the children’s parents, and his/her cultural identity...” in determining the child’s education (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner..., 1989, article 29.1(c) and (d)). However, schooling in such schools as use the History textbooks that have been negatively reviewed by Karge (2008, and with Barilo 2009) and by the author violate article d) which insists that such schooling must be conducted in the spirit of “tolerance...and friendship” among all national groups.

If the situation were as simple as the proponents of separated schooling based on mother-tongue rights claim it to be, the following situation would exist in BiH: all schools would be able to use (if it were offered) the same curriculum, only in different language variants. In fact, the education ministry of the BiH Federation offers exactly that option, i.e. one curriculum which is available separately for Croat and Bosniak language users. The cantons with Croat majority, however, follow the separate curriculum of the Institute for School Affairs in Mostar, and accordingly use different textbooks; in three of those cantons, based on reports by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE Mission to BiH, 2008), students are further administratively and legally separated in schools based on their national/linguistic belonging, i.e. in “two schools under one roof”. Another example of a possible reference is the education





system of the Brcko District, where students of different national backgrounds are able to use the same curriculum to the extent possible, are exposed to all the constitutionally recognized languages of BiH, and are even taught by the same teachers. At the United World College in Mostar, students of all nationalities also use the same curriculum, and are separated only for mother-tongue classes.

In addition to the above, the Constitutional Court of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina passed a ruling on 3 November 2004 whereby the possibility of education in exclusively one constitutive language (i.e. either Serbian, Croatian or Bosnian) would “represent a violation of the constitutional principle of the equality of all official languages in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Official Gazette of FBiH 70/04, paragraph 6).

The language justification for separate schools is not unique to “two schools under one roof”, and therein lays another issue with treating the problem rather than the cause. The education system in the Republika Srpska is available in the Serb language variant only (except in instances where the national group of subjects is taught - see below), and offers a very specific approach to History, which was negatively reviewed by Karge (2008) and the author. This curricular approach of catering for one linguistic group only, and with one historical approach only makes the quality of schooling in the RS as questionable, in the context of this research, as the schooling in the Federation, including schooling within “two schools under one roof”. Therefore, by attempting to frame the problem of “two schools under one roof” by focusing on the isolated problem alone, the wider scale and cause of this problem throughout the country is not being addressed.

#### **2.1.4 The “national group of subjects”**

Other critical contributing factors to the poor quality of BiH’s current education systems, in the context of CRC indicators, include what is known as the “national group of subjects” which give BiH children, who have returned to their pre-war abodes, the option of choosing to study particular “national” subjects (History, Geography, Language, Literature, Music) in “their own” national curricula (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministry of Education of the Republika Srpska... , 2002). So, for example, minority Bosniak children in Republika Srpska can, provided they are of sufficient number, request to be taught those “national” subjects not according to the RS but according to the Federation curriculum, and vice-versa.

Though seemingly protecting the rights of returnee minorities, this approach separates students according to their national (and not just linguistic) background, and their resulting knowledge is therefore different. In summing up the problem caused by these subjects, an observer noted that the national group of subjects 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” (Stabback 2004: p. 53).

#### **2.1.5 Is schooling in BiH discriminatory, based on the national/linguistic separations?**

The Anti-discrimination Law of BiH (*Zakon o zabrani diskriminacije, 2009*) stipulates that segregation is a form of discrimination through which individuals are divided on the basis of aspects

which include national background. And while proponents of such separation may argue that separation is purely linguistic, and that students of any national background may have access to any school as long as they accept the school's language, the latest progress report of BiH conducted by the European Union (Commission of the European Communities, 2009: p.18) noted that the „divisions in the education system through continuous development of mono-ethnic schools in both entities (in BiH) are still a matter of concern and result in de facto segregation of pupils from the very beginning of their schooling“.

This alludes to the fact that even if the division of students did not have a segregatory (and therefore discriminatory) approach, segregation is the “de facto” result of a such division in schooling which must be addressed as a priority by the local authorities. In that case, is such practice in contradiction with Article 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950), which prohibits discrimination, including on the grounds of language, taken together with Article 2 of Protocol 1, which secures the right to education?

## **2.2 Conclusion of the problem**

When discussing the quality of curriculum in the specific context of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, the priority concerns ought to address the separation of students in schools according to their national and/or linguistic background, and the design of some curricula for a target audience of students belonging to a specific national group. Not only does this create negative prejudices among children, but it affects the children's ability to develop knowledge (for example through what one learns from History textbooks) and skills (for example the ability to learn to live with other children in a tolerant society). Moreover, they are against the best interests of the society because they breed social instability.

As such, those causes are fundamental to a curricular and schooling approach which is not in the best interests of the child as required by the CRC. And the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, a community to which BiH aspires, notes that when considering decision concerning children, the authorities must note the child's best interests as a “primary consideration” (*Charter of Fundamental Rights* . . . , 2000, Chapter III- Equality, Article 24).

## **2.3 Consequences of the problem**

Observers have long indicated that the quality of education systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina will have a consequence on society by affecting the political stability of the country (Spaulding, 1998, Nelles, 2006, Diegoli, 2007, Premilovac, 2007, UN Human Rights Council, 2008, . . . . .). The chief architect of the Dayton Peace Agreement which ended the “90s war in BiH, Richard Holbrooke, noted that „in 20 years people will step on the scene (in BiH) with three differing histories“ which would create “a system for a future tragedy” (Numanovic, 2008: p 5).

Moreover, international and local news reports in 2009 have explicitly reported on the dangers looming over the security of the country, from articles in the Washington Post (Whitlock, 2009) titled “Old Troubles Threaten Again in Bosnia”, to the Foreign Affairs magazine which noted that Bosnia “stands on the verge of collapse” (McMahon, Western, 2009).



Moreover, observers claim that BiH has been continually noted to be failing in the implementation of its international commitments in the field of education, including the Council of Europe's Post-Accession Commitments, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OSCE Mission to BiH, 2005). The official 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" (Delegation of the European Commission, n.d.).

This research notes, based on CME meeting minutes, that not a single alarming analysis or report quoted above, nor many of which will be quoted later in the text, including the timely and alarming report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur in 2008, has been a subject of official consideration at CME meetings by March 2010. 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 OSF and Save the Children findings, and that they all denied the presence of any problems in their cantons or entities.

On the other hand, studies have indicated that the practice of separating students in schools - which in the case of BiH is conducted based on the children's national and/or linguistic background, and the design of some curricula for a target audience of students belonging to a specific ethnic group - indeed affects students' attitudes. The study conducted in 2008 by Save the Children Norway (n.d.: p.5) shows that 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 study, the children's stances vary from negative to positive, where the negative stances range from hatred to ambivalence. An explanation by one child as to why s/he supported separated schooling for students of different national groups, was „because I cannot stand to look at them with my eyes", while another said „I don't know what is good for us young people, whether we should be separated or together" (Save the Children Norway, n.d.: p. 8). This clearly indicates that the education systems in BiH contribute to de-sensitising children to a certain type of behaviour which is harmful to others and therefore to the society, as well as being regressive towards their personal development in what is supposed to be a multicultural society of the 21st century.

The interviews and analyses conducted as part of this research also indicate that the public discussions of curricular quality, in the above framework, represent a taboo. In the meantime, the status quo produces consequences that are manifested and contribute to the lack of social cohesion in post-war BiH, and a growing political instability. The study conducted by the Open Society Fund titled "Education in BiH: What are we teaching our children?" (Fond otvoreno drustvo..., 2007) found that the textbooks of the national group of subjects (Mother Tongue and Literature, History, Geography, Religious Studies) were "basically mono-national and not inclined towards a multicultural society", which violated the provisions as laid down in the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Okvirni zakon...*, 2003), as well as other documents signed by the ministers (including the Guidelines for Developing and Writing History and Geography Textbooks (*Smjernice za pisanje i ocjenu...*, 2007)).

## 2.4 Problem in Context

There have been reform initiatives in post-war BiH which could have contributed to depoliticising the primary and secondary schools and curricula, but which have had limited or no success. Most notably, in 2003 the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education (*Okvirni zakon...*, 2003) was adopted, which included references against discrimination in schools, and confirmed the validity of the Common Core Curriculum (subsequently adopted in August 2003) across BiH which was intended to define and secure a degree of common content across the various curricula. The Open Society Fund BiH has worked with the Tuzla Canton to reform the education system and introduce external evaluation, but the initiative's success has remained specific to Tuzla. The United World Colleges-International Baccalureate (UWC-IB) Initiative in BiH established the UWC in Mostar which offered and successfully delivered a common curriculum for students of all nationalities in BiH, though the curriculum is only being used in Gymnasium Mostar, the Second Gymnasium in Sarajevo, and Gymnasium Banja Luka. Furthermore, as part of the project of the Council of Europe, OSCE and the Georg Eckert Institute (*Smjernice za pisanje i ocjenu...*, 2007), ministers of education agreed on a set of guidelines for history and geography textbooks, and on simultaneous teacher training, which would have secured the removal of inappropriate content from those textbooks. The impact was seen on some Federal curriculum textbooks, while those used for the Republika Srpska and Croat-majority cantons' history curricula remained biased (Karge, 2008).

Furthermore, the European Commission Delegation (ECD)-led Shared Modernisation Strategy for BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina Educational Authorities, 2003) engaged the ministers to agree on a set of basic principles for reforming the system, and a subsequent ECD-led initiative produced the "Framework Modern Curriculum" for BiH (Reform of General Education in BiH, 2005), but which is not being used. The ECD-led initiative called ICBE supported the establishment of CME which then adopted the strategy for BiH educational development 2008-15 (*Strateški pravci...*, 2008), explicitly addressing the need to remove inappropriate textbook content and resolve the "two schools under one roof", but without concrete results thus far. The ministers of education committed themselves to remove politics from the education systems and improve quality in their A Message to the People as far back as 2002, and in the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education (*Okvirni zakon...*, 2003), and the 2004 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for BiH (BiH, Council of Ministers et al, 2004), but none of which have seen full implementation. Furthermore, the resolution of "two schools under roof" is a post-accession commitment of BiH upon entry to the Council of Europe (*Actions taken on fulfilment...*, 2003), and is also explicit in BiH's priority requirements in the European Partnership (Commission of the European Communities, 2007).

### 2.4.1 What hinders the Conference of the Ministers of Education from resolving the above?

Most interviewees as part of this research considered the existence and work of CME as a huge step forward for the BiH education system. Comments range from the CME sessions being open and collegial, to the statement that CME has justified its existence so far. One minister suggested that the CME sessions lacked trust and confidence between the ministers. CME has during its meetings addressed many subjects of importance for education in BiH. However, when it comes to the manifestations of poor quality education, under the CME's



mandate to address BiH's international obligations in education, only one of them had been actively discussed at CME meetings by March 2010 - "two schools under one roof" - though without a solution.

How can this slow pace of tackling such important issues be explained?

The ministers appear to abstain from taking ownership to finding solutions to the politically sensitive issues. The latest CME working group on "two schools under one roof" is being chaired by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe instead of by one of the local ministers.

Interviewees, some ministers included, have indicated that within the current political situation in BiH, i.e. the various goals of their political leaders and parties, the timing for solving such politically sensitive challenges (as have been raised by this policy research) has not been and continues not to be right, and which therefore results in an inevitable absence of the ministers' political will. If that is so, then the ministers openly endorse the situation where party politics directly affect the wellbeing of children under their zone of authority. One minister went as far as to indicate that he did not think that CME should deal with such (politically sensitive) issues at all. However, these issues, as they are referenced in BiH's international obligations, fall directly under CME's mandate.

The CME's mandate is of particular importance here. The current ability of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, to fulfill its own mandate of ensuring the coordination of efforts to implement BiH's international obligations, is limited, as the fulfillment of such obligations is subject to decisions taken by the individual ministries of education. Instead of a state-level executive body in education, the CME 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. It is therefore difficult to explain why some ministers choose to participate at CME BiH only in a minimalistic way.

Even when it comes to the meetings' venues, they have changed each time to accommodate the distances that the ministers must travel. Regardless, some ministers have personally participated very seldom in the two years of CME's existence, i.e. two or three times only.

### **3 POLICY OPTIONS**

The politicized aspects of any curricula could be directly addressed by each ministry of education individually, to produce results in each canton and entity. In fact, the individual ministers of education could try to secure an education system in their zones of responsibility which is in the best interests of their children and which is of the best quality. The factor which appears to hinder such an approach in many parts of the country is the lack of political will at the level of individual ministries to effect the needed change; the result has been an insufficient and uncoordinated approach to resolving these important issues throughout the country.

The ability of CME to address challenges to quality learning in BiH schools must be considered as the only currently available opportunity in BiH education system to coordinate the implementation of education in terms of securing a comparable and improved quality of learning

across the entire country and not just in its parts. The ministers of education and assistants interviewed as part of this study expressed faith in the work and potential of the CME. Therefore, the below policy options consider the possible courses of action on the issues, within the context of the work of CME BiH only.

The option of maintaining a status quo is not an option, as has been argued so far in this study. It is therefore laid out in the table of outcomes, below, only for reference. As a consequence of inaction, the system continues to fail children in Bosnia and Herzegovina by not serving their best interests, by worsening social instability, and continues to violate BiH's international obligations, including the obligation to provide quality education, and to violate the obligation to fully deliver CME's mandate. As such the system is currently failing to fulfil its natural obligation to contribute to constructive solutions, to address key educational issues for the society, and to react and take the necessary position on the studies and findings produced by the local and international academics and researchers. For instance, it was telling that the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) had to invite the local ministers of education to respond to the findings by Save the Children Norway on discrimination in BiH schools, and by the Open Society Fund on the inappropriate content of some textbooks in BiH, without the individual ministers taking the initiative to respond or officially react to such findings on their own initiative.

The fact that MoCA took on such an initiative suggests that it could do even more if it had the mandate to do so. Indeed, MoCA is responsible to BiH's international partners for implementing BiH's international obligations in education, and yet it does not have the executive powers to do so, i.e. it cannot sanction the lower level ministries for non-compliance. While one could propose that MoCA's mandate therefore become strengthened, this would require new legislation, which would be difficult to achieve with the general absence of political will and within the general political discourse. Therefore, although an option, it is not treated as a favoured option in this study. Moreover, there would be no guarantees that as a ministry, MoCA would generate the political will to indeed proceed to do what the ministers of education do not do. The question is therefore of the added value of empowering another body if some of the existing 13 executive bodies already responsible for education are not delivering in certain respects.

Therefore, the least painful solution which presents itself is to increase the efficiency, and thereby the effectiveness of the existing CME. This "increased efficiency" would require first and foremost an increase in political will. What this study points out, above all, is that on the premise of the lack of political will, some ministers of education are explicitly allowing politics to compromise the best interests of children under their authority. Besides, as an interviewee pointed out, the mandate of the Conference is wide enough to address problems such as two schools under one roof, inappropriate content of history textbooks, etc.

The "increased efficiency" would revolve around the common logistical features that would enable regular and constructive communication, as the chief method to breed useful results. Therefore, the ministers could ensure that they meet regularly (as defined by Rules of Procedure) as part of CME, or even that they meet more frequently. This could be eased through introducing tele/video conferencing equipment (or through the simple and free use of "Skype" programme) so that those ministers who are otherwise prevented from attending could nonetheless always take part in the meetings.



Crucially, the ministers could increase effectiveness on the politically sensitive topics by, for example, introducing closed brainstorming sessions on such topics, and continuously discussing the various options. For instance, one interviewee proposed that the ministers could discuss the value of introducing outcomes-based education into BiH systems as a possible solution to addressing the negative prejudices created in children.

Furthermore, the ministers could undertake more personal initiative so as to, for example, individually encourage the submission of key materials to be discussed at CME meetings, to discuss the key materials at meetings rather than through post, and to respect deadlines. For ease of subsequent reference and an increased feeling of accountability, the accuracy of minutes of CME meetings could be improved and could be more detailed. In this context, the Conference could conduct a regular update on progress by each ministry on the sensitive areas, and all other areas which pertain to the CME mandate.

Nothing but politics prevents the ministers from working in the best interests of children in their zones of responsibility. Therefore, with a little effort, the individual ministers of education could ensure a greater effectiveness of the Conference of Ministers of Education so as to ensure coordinated and appropriate results throughout the country. After all, CME provides the ministers with a useful stimulus and forum to make informed, relevant, coordinated, and therefore the most effective choices and actions.

### 3.1 The framework of values

With the following goals and criteria in mind, an outcomes matrix was drafted to consider which policy options would best address:

- 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 ethnic group:
  - *children should develop knowledge, skills and attitudes which harbour tolerance and respect for other cultures, and which are therefore in their best interests;*
  - *there should be a coordinated approach to addressing these issues across the country, to ensure equality of opportunity;*
  - *children should be sensitised to discrimination;*
  - *the system should not encourage discrimination;*
  - *children should be exposed to curricular approach and content which promotes social cohesion;*
  - *society should be safer/less prone to conflict;*
  - *the country should honour its international obligations;*
  - *politics should stay away from the education system;*
  - *authorities should constructively contribute to finding solutions to sensitive issues.*

## 3.2 Outcomes Matrix:

		Reference Option	Option 1	Option 2
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Status - quo: CME continues to operate as until now</b>	<b>An empowered Ministry of Civil Affairs</b>	<b>A more efficient and effective CME, within its existing mandate</b>
<b>Curricula in BiH offer a quality education which is in the best interests of the child</b>	<i>Children develop knowledge, skills and attitudes which harbour respect for a tolerant world and for other cultures</i>	Some of the current systems in practice do not operate in the best interests of the child.	An empowered MoCA may take more initiative to coordinate policies which may produce such an outcome in BiH.	Possible if ministers use CME as a constructive forum to discuss and address: 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 ethnic group.
	<i>There is a coordinated approach for students across the country, to ensure equality of opportunity</i>	Access is currently uncoordinated and is relative to geographical region.	An empowered MoCA may take more initiative to coordinate educational policies in BiH.	Coordination through CME could ensure that such an approach is equally available to students across the country, encouraging full mobility.
	<i>Children are sensitised to discrimination</i>	Research shows that many students are currently desensitised to discriminatory behaviour.	An empowered MoCA may take more initiative to bring in key stakeholders to discuss solutions for BiH's challenges.	Could discuss and develop solutions which do not breed discrimination by ensuring that children are aware of and disapprove of discriminatory behaviour.
<b>Curricula in BiH breed social stability</b>	<i>Children develop attitudes which breed social cohesion and therefore a society which is safer/less prone to conflict</i>	In some curricula, a negative perception of 'others' is currently acceptable.	An empowered MoCA may take more initiative to work with the lower-level ministries to deliver on BiH's international obligations.	CME could discuss and develop a synchronised effort to remove inappropriate content from textbooks, and address the poor quality created by the linguistic and national separation of children in schools.
	<i>Local authorities honour international obligations in education</i>	BiH is currently not delivering on several of its international obligations.	An empowered MoCA may take more initiative to deliver on BiH's international obligations.	An effective discussion and cooperation at the CME level could produce an implementation plan for fulfilling BiH's international obligations. CME should fully implement its mandate.
	<i>Authorities constructively contribute to finding solutions, including to sensitive issues, and respond to critical studies on the issues.</i>	Constructive solutions to 'sensitive' issues are missing; politics dominates the curricular approach.	An empowered MoCA may take more initiative to discuss constructive solutions for BiH's challenges.	CME could meet regularly, discuss key issues, initiate or more concretely continue thematic discussions on 'sensitive' topics, initiate and submit key studies and material for discussion.
<b>Political Feasibility</b>		Political parties allow the status quo.	Change in legislation would be required. Political parties are unlikely to support such a body at present.	No change in legislation would be required. However, increased ministers' efforts, although in accordance with their job description, may not necessarily meet the approval of their party heads.
<b>Financial Cost</b>		N/A	N/A	The system of increased efficiency of CME would add a slight cost for ministries in terms of time spent in meetings and the possible purchase of teleconferencing equipment, but no further costs.
<b>Popular support</b>		N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Limitations</b>		Negative consequences for individual children across the country, and for BiH society.	Requires broad governmental support. There is no guarantee that MoCA would muster the political will to fully deliver.	Cost of teleconferencing equipment?





## 4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is a call to action to the ministers of education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to make the most of the Conference of the Ministers of Education in BiH to address and more effectively coordinate solutions to the politically sensitive issues that otherwise undermine educational quality in the country, where quality is defined as education that is directed to the development of respect for other cultures, and the preparation of children for a “responsible life” in the “spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance...and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups...” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner..., 1989, article 29.1(c) and (d)). The Conference of the Ministers of Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina 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.

### 4.1 Recommendations

The ability of CME to address challenges to quality learning in BiH schools must be considered as the only currently realistically available opportunity in BiH education system to coordinate the implementation of education in terms of securing the political support for a comparable and improved quality of learning across the entire country and not just in its parts. The ministers of education and assistants interviewed as part of this paper expressed faith in the work and potential of the CME.

The option of maintaining a status quo is not an option, as has been argued in this paper. The painless solution which presents itself is to increase the efficiency, and thereby the effectiveness of the existing CME. This “increased efficiency” would require first and foremost an increase in political will and personal initiative. The CME mandate provides for the ministers to address sensitive issues.

**The ministers of education can improve the effectiveness of CME sessions with minimum effort. Among the first steps, institutionally, the ministers could, without any change in legislation:**

1. Take personal initiative to begin discussing sensitive issues and possible solutions;
2. Hold thematic sessions, even closed brainstorming meetings, on key sensitive issues that affect curricular quality, and gradually develop solutions;
3. Add to the agenda a regular progress update by each ministry on sensitive issues, and all other issues which pertain to the CME mandate;
4. Take initiative to personally submit key materials to be discussed at CME meetings; this is especially relevant for ministers from regions with positive experiences;
5. Examine the experiences of Brcko District with integrated schooling, as useful material for discussion at CME sessions;
6. Examine the availability of the same curriculum in different languages, as offered by the Federation Ministry of Education;
7. Examine prior examples of framework curricula;
8. Examine the common curriculum for all nationalities, which is being used by the United World College in Mostar;
9. Discuss key materials together at meetings rather than individually through post;



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10. Operationalise the Council for General Education that would enable ministers to consult the wider group of stakeholders (such as professionals, parents, teachers, etc);
11. Consider the concept of “what is in the best interest of children”;
12. Introduce modern tele/video conferencing so that those ministers who are otherwise prevented from attending CME meetings could nonetheless always take part;

***What media could do:***

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.

***What international community observers could do:***

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.

***What parents and students could do:***

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.