

***The 8th Conference of the European ministers of education,
Oslo, 24-25 June 2004***

**Speech of Mr. Alexandru Athanasiu,
Minister
Romanian Ministry of Education and Research**

Dear Colleagues,

On April 21, this year, Romania took over the Chairmanship-in-office of the South-East European Co-operation Process (SEECP) for a period of one year.

This regional cooperation structure, which benefits from the participation of eight South-Eastern European States stands for an intergovernmental body of political dialogue and discussion, aiming at:

- improving the political climate in the region,
- promoting a credible image of stability in South-Eastern Europe and
- changing the international perception on the Balkans.

The main objective of the Romanian Chairmanship is consolidation of the South East European Cooperation Process as platform for European integration.

As was stated in the EU Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, „The European Council, reiterated its determination to fully and effectively support the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, which will become an integral part of the EU. "The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: moving towards European integration", aims at further strengthening the privileged relations between the EU and the Western Balkans, also drawing on the enlargement experience”

The Lisbon European Council has placed the development of the knowledge-based society-as the key to long-term competitiveness and the personal aspirations of its citizens – at the top of the European Union’s policy agenda.

We, the ministers of education from the South Eastern Europe believe that education and training are not only the key to sustainable development, peace and stability within and among countries but also an indispensable

means for our countries on their way to be fully integrated in the European Union.

We value education's role in preparing every student for their best future, despite the barriers in their way. The South East European countries have their best future when the abilities of all their citizens can be utilised.

We must ensure the governments effort is directed at identifying and working to remove those barriers which prevent achievement. This is education's primary aim: the development of the unique talents, character and abilities of every student in order that they may find fulfilment as productive members of their community.

We value education's role in underpinning a peaceful nation; where difference can be celebrated and not cause division. Education is the only hope for a cohesive and harmonious society. It is the best antidote to the anger and prejudice which come from a lack of understanding.

We value education's role in underpinning a productive nation. The economic future of the South East European countries depends on how well we can adapt to the demand not only for a well trained workforce, but a highly trainable workforce; people with the ability and enthusiasm to upgrade their knowledge and skills as the demands of a changing economy require.

We, the ministers of education from the South East Europe, signed a Memorandum of cooperation and we fully commit ourselves to concrete actions to strengthen cooperation with regard to ongoing reform process of the education system, following ongoing European initiatives such as:

- implementation of the Detailed Work Programme on the Follow up of the Objectives of Education and Training Systems in Europe
- implementation of the objectives of Bologna process,as well as
- implementation of the objectives of the Copenhagen Declaration.

The Enhanced Graz Process/Task Force Education and Youth under the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe is the most important initiative to develop a comprehensive and coordinated strategy for education with South-East Europe. The Task Force Education and Youth actively promotes the issue of life long learning. In this respect a third expert seminar was organised in May, in Vienna, basing the seminar on the Declaration on life-long learning signed by Ministers of Education from South East Europe in Skopje in October 2003

The experts from the region with the support of EU and international experts have worked on identifying priorities for development of comprehensive life long learning strategies and their implementation in the context of South Eastern Europe.

The Recommendations include priorities for the South East Europe such as: **Developing the foundation of LLL strategies** and **More and better investments in human capital**. Concrete objectives and activities have been specified, respectively:

- **Developing comprehensive lifelong learning strategies** on national, regional and local level in an inclusive consultation process including relevant stakeholders
- **Increasing partnership among key stakeholders** through the creation of co-ordination platforms on national level
- **Raising the awareness** of all stakeholders to stimulate motivation and participation in Lifelong Learning
- **Making the education and training provision attractive** by increasing its responsiveness to the needs of learners, labour market and civil society
- **Developing initial and continuous education and training in a life-long learning perspective** by facilitating the transition from initial to continuous education and training to work;
- **Developing** standards and mechanisms for validation, certification and the recognition of prior learning;
- **Developing comprehensive guidance and counselling services** for all citizens to support their investment in lifelong learning
- **Increasing and target investments** especially by developing instruments for promoting public-private partnership and by making more efficient use of existing resources
- **Ensuring access to quality Lifelong Learning for all** with a special focus on socially and geographically disadvantaged groups stressing the need for equity and social cohesion.
- **Creating a solid information basis through** enhancing research in Lifelong Learning,

The Ministers of education from the South East Europe support the idea of enhanced co-operation at European level and reaffirm the importance they attach to the European Conferences as fora for exchange of information and experience with a view to strengthening the European Area of Education.

We, the ministers of education from the South East Europe believe that regional cooperation – finding joint solutions to common problems – is the key mechanism available in establishing a knowledge based society as well as in moving closer to our common goal -*European integration*.