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BALKANS PROJECT

I am Clementina Muritano, Head of Unit III of the Directorate General for International Relations of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). First of all, I wish to thank ERISSE for giving me this opportunity to describe the project Italy is carrying out with a number of countries of the Balkan area.

Given the geographical proximity to Italy and the central position of South-Eastern European Countries within Europe, in the past few years the Balkan region has become the key area for external projection, also in terms of development for my country. Furthermore, the Thessaloniki European Council of 19 and 20 June 2003 affirmed that the Balkan countries would become an integral part of the EU and also endorsed the conclusions of the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans. The Council also gave a mandate to the European Commission to draw up framework agreements for the opening of Community programmes, taking into account the needs and possibilities of each country. The framework programmes may include the following priority areas: education, training, culture, research, energy, environment, civil society, SME support.

Within this policy framework, the DG for International Relations of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research, has launched a project managed by the Regional Institute for Educational Research of the Veneto Region (IRRE Veneto), in view of enhancing cooperation in the areas of political dialogue, support for institution building and opening of community programmes. The project, which is part of the Stability Pact initiatives, aims at comparing the education and training systems of the Balkan Countries and the EU policies in this area.

The main objective is to promote the use of community programmes in the field of education and training (Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci), and of mobility programmes in general. Representatives from Bulgaria and Romania were asked to give an important contribution, by reporting on the reform of their education and training systems, with particular reference to actions taken to participate in the Socrates and Leonardo programmes. In our opinion this is a crucial objective, considering the geographical proximity of our countries, and in view of future partnerships within Socrates and Leonardo projects.

Moreover, in order to allow the Balkan countries to participate concretely in the Socrates programme, the DG for International Relations has decided to identify six Italian

schools that are currently carrying out projects within the framework of the Comenius Action 1.1 of the Socrates programme. Every Italian school will involve one school from each Balkan country as silent partner of its project. This partnership will allow Balkan schools to cooperate and familiarise with the EU working methods and policies, with the aim of facilitating the exchange of educational experiences.

The project involves, besides Italy, eight Balkan countries: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.

In the first meeting, the experts chosen by the Education Ministries of the various countries, identified the path to be followed for the project implementation. They agreed to select a number of schools (one from each Balkan country) to be concretely involved in a Comenius 1 project, thus playing the role of pole schools in their countries .

Subsequently, the Italian Education Ministry (MIUR) together with the Italian Socrates N.A. (INDIRE) has chosen six Italian schools to play the role of tutors for Balkan schools. The selection was based on the schools' professionalism and according to the themes of the projects. It was decided that one school from Romania and one from Bulgaria would be partners in at least two projects. The six Italian schools were granted from the MIUR a sum of money to finance the participation of the Balkan schools, in particularly to cover the project general expenses, plus a certain amount of money for the travel costs in order to allow the Balkan schools to participate in the project meeting.

It was agreed that the statement of the expenses has to be done by the Balkan schools according to the Comenius I criteria. This is useful in order to teach also the financial and accounting rules of the EU projects.

Involving the Italian schools was not a difficult task: they welcomed the idea immediately and were eager to cooperate. The chosen Italian schools involved in their projects children of the primary level (6 - 13 years old) and almost all were in their second year of the Comenius project. The lingua franca was in most cases English. The themes of their projects were on: citizenship, peace, environment, traditional games, typical foods, history.

In November 2004 an international meeting was held in Abano Terme, with the participation of one representative from the Stability Pact, one representative from the European Commission, one representative from ETF, four experts from each of the eight Balkan countries (more precisely, two expert of the ministry, plus two representatives of the selected school), and the representatives from the various Italian Regional Offices of Education and IRRE (Regional Institutes for Educational Research).

The seminar had a twofold objective: to analyse in detail the different education systems, the reforms underway and the EU policies in the field of education and training; and to promote the first meeting between Italian and Balkan schools, with the aim of getting to know each other and their respective activities. As I have said you before, at the seminar we have involved the Regional Education Offices and the Regional Institutes for Educational Research (IRRE) of the Italian Ministry of Education . In compliance with their specific institutional role, they will promote the dissemination of the pilot project across the country, the ultimate aim being the establishment of partnerships with the Balkan countries for future community programmes.

I recently met in Rome the representatives from the Italian schools that have been working with the Balkan schools since November. I recently met them in Rome. They told me

that the project is going well, although in some cases it has been difficult to develop the dialogue and the integration. However, everybody has made an effort to get to know each other and to overcome the difficulties arising from the organisation and timing of activities, rather than to cultural diversity.

In June a meeting will be held with the experts from the eight participating countries. Every expert will be asked to report on the activities carried out in his/her country. We will also prepare together the closing seminar that will take place in October 2005 in Veneto. This event will give us the opportunity to have a debate on the new European policies after the Maastricht Communiqué, the new instrument for the transparency of vocational qualifications (Europass), the new community programmes (E-learning). We will also give schools the opportunity to talk about their own experiences.

Much work is still to be done.

Although our proposal involves, for the time being, a limited number of schools, we have an ambitious goal, which stems from our firm belief that, in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual Europe, it is necessary to open our frontiers to comprehension and exchange with the neighbouring countries, even though they are not part of the EU yet. Schools and teachers are the most appropriate instruments to develop the culture of cohabitation and dialogue through the acceptance of different identities.