



**Dubrovnik Conference on Higher Education: Addressing Questions of
Institutional Reform in Creating the European Higher Education Area**
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Dr. Erhard Busek, Special Coordinator, Stability Pact for SEE

“Higher Education Institutional Reform as an Advance Guard for the Cooperation within
Regional Cooperation Council”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to participate at this conference.

This Conference is an excellent proof that the universities are taking things in their own hands. They are increasingly taking responsibility for the emerging European Higher Education Area.

First of all, please allow me to highlight the important achievements of the Novi Sad Initiative. Since they started being active, in 2005, an additional impetus was given to the higher education reform in the area of South Eastern Europe. Higher Education is extremely important, and must be accordingly addressed. It provides an opportunity for interaction between national identities and the promotion of common interests, for the benefit of students, lecturers, society and, above all, future generations. It has played an indisputable role in the economic and socio-cultural changes in South-Eastern Europe during the post-communist transition period within which the Stability Pact was playing an important role. Higher education is therefore crucial in establishing and consolidating stability, peace and democracy in the region, all the more so given the still delicate situation in some parts of the region.

The Regional Agenda is moving forward. In February the RCC will take over the regional cooperation process from the Stability Pact. The transformation of the Stability Pact into a more regionally-owned, streamlined and effective regional co-operation framework in South Eastern Europe is important for the European integration of the Region.

“How can regional cooperation be developed to play a full role in enhancing the realization of the European Higher Education Area?” This question was addressed by the Novi Sad Initiative in 2005. I can just stress that Education and Research (within the framework of the Fostering and Building Human Capital will remain one of the five priority areas of the new Regional Cooperation Council. Parliamentary cooperation becomes an overarching area.

Not only that politically speaking Regional Cooperation Council remains fully in charge of higher education but through the Task Force Building Human Capital (Chaired by the Romanians and co-chaired by the Austrians) and the Education Reform Initiative for SEE, with a seat in Zagreb, the region will be working on creating synergies and increasing the efficiency of reform in all relevant fields related to education and research – with a special emphasis to higher education.



Let me draw your attention to the importance of addressing the institutional reform of higher education in SEE. Bologna is important for the reform of the curricula and mostly 'software' within the higher education. However, issues regarding the 'hardware' of the higher education remain of utmost importance and the countries of the SEE region cannot afford to undermine it.

Let me underline some of the crucial aspects of the reform of higher education.

Firstly, it is important assuring the autonomy of the university vis-à-vis the government and relevant ministries; Secondly, the centralization of the universities should be introduced as means of creating a more efficient balance between the prerogatives of the university and the faculties within the public sphere; Thirdly, it is important to guarantee an equal access to institutions of higher education for students belonging to minorities; And finally, we need to continue with the process of inclusion of the student body in the decision making process within the university.

We often hear complaints that the governments of SEE embark on the process of institutional and other reform in the field of higher education often sidelining and insufficiently consulting the universities. Tendency that the government directly takes on the reform often sidelining the universities should be address in the direction of an ever-increased interaction with the universities. E.g. the Bologna process we often hear that at times there is Insufficient financial backing to the Bologna reform on the side of the governments in the sense that certain measures required to be taken by the university in this context cannot be undertaken because resources required to do so are lacking.

We must not forget the important issue of finding an appropriate balance between the universities in some countries of the region and its faculties. In these countries in the past there was substantial decentralization in the sense that faculties had most of the prerogatives, had independent legal personalities, while the universities had very little power. This often led to paradoxical situations: e.g. faculties were receiving funds according to the number of students they enrol each year. In this way large faculties benefited from significant state financial contributions whereas small ones suffered. This system of redistribution of resources did not always correspond to the needs of each faculty. For example law, political science that require less teaching tools to work with the students and who could afford having as many as several thousand students enrolling each year clearly benefited. Smaller faculties that require comparatively more resources to conduct their programmes and that simultaneously could not afford to enrol many students (because their work is often based on one-on-one classes) e.g. chemistry, biology, physics clearly suffered. These are just examples but that point out to the necessity of having a certain degree of centralization at the level of the university in order to assure efficient spending of resources allocated from the state.

Finally, I would like to thank once more the organizers of this event. Addressing the questions of Higher Education Institutional Reform in SEE will be certainly a central issue within the RCC.