Bosnia: Call for End to Sectarian Education

By Marija Arnautovic

High Representative imposes deadline to resolve problem of schools divided on ethnic lines.

At first sight, lunch hour in the Mushvin Rivzic primary school in Fojnica, central Bosnia, seems no different from similar breaks in schools across the country.

But the sight of laughing children playing in the packed schoolyard conceals the fact that this is a school with a difference.

Though it houses one set of buildings, there are in fact two schools here under one roof - the other called Ivan Goran Kovacic, with pupils taught in Croatian.

Although there are very few differences of language between Croat and Bosnian Muslim children - who can understand each other perfectly - they attend different establishments with their own principals and management.

Mushvin Rivzic is just one of dozens of schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where local authority resistance to the proposed unification of the education system has left schools divided.

However, this may soon be a thing of the past. Bosnia’s High Representative, Lord Paddy Ashdown, has given local authorities a June 5 deadline to unify their divided classrooms, following months of failed negotiations.

The 1995 Dayton Agreement, which ended three-and-a-half years of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, left two entities - Republika Srpska, RS, and the Federation - with their own distinct education systems.

While the education system in RS is unified, the Federation’s is not. Under the Federation’s constitution, all 11 cantons have jurisdiction over science and culture, including schools.

Bosnia’s civil affairs minister Safet Halilovic described this arrangement as “pure nonsense”. Apart from the fact that it left the country with 13 education ministries, critics also complain that local authorities run by Croats or Bosniaks use the system to promote their own sectarian history and language curricula.

They say Bosnia needs a unified education system if it wants to progress towards joining the European Union.

Education reforms in the country started late in 2002, when the local authorities presented the Peace Implementation Council in Brussels with a strategy to develop a modern, depoliticised quality education system.

In 2003, the civil affairs ministry began to coordinate the state entity and cantonal education ministries, and last July, Bosnia adopted a Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education, including a Common Core Curriculum. Entity and cantonal ministries were given six months to harmonise their legislation with that of the state.

But nine months later, only the Brcko district, the RS, and five Federation cantons - Una-Sana, Tuzla, Zenica-Doboj, Bosnian Podrinje and Sarajevo - have harmonised local laws with the Law on Primary and Secondary Education.

According to Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, mission spokeswoman Elmira Bayrasli, there are at least 52 cases of “two schools under one roof” in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Among the cantons refusing to accept the law is Central Bosnia, where Mushvin Rivzic is located.

The canton’s education minister, Nikola Lovrenovic, of the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, has described the law as unconstitutional. “Cantonal education ministers, the only ones with jurisdiction over the matter, never took part in drafting the legislation, nor were they consulted,” he said.

However, the Muslim Party of Democratic Action, SDA, which governs the Central Bosnia canton alongside the HDZ, supports the law.

Salko Selman, the canton’s prime minister and head of the SDA cantonal committee, told IWPR that his party “will not back anything not in line with the proposed Framework Law”. This was why the canton assembly had refused to support amendments to the law tabled by Croat representatives, he said.
The High Representative and the head of the OSCE mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Robert Beecroft, have blamed the ruling parties in the still resisting cantons for undermining efforts to harmonise the school system. In April, Lord Ashdown cut the HDZ party's budget in Bosnia by five per cent as punishment for its role in the education row.

But education officials believe that local failures to adopt the law do not mean that no advances whatsoever have occurred. “Great progress was made in educational reform last year by adopting a common core curriculum,” argued Zijad Pasic, the Federation education minister.

One key reform was the decision to set up joint expert bodies at federal level for the implementation of a nine-year-long school system, he added. The system should be applied in the Federation from the start of the next school year.

In the RS, which unanimously adopted the Law on Primary and Secondary Education on April 21, 2004, education ministry spokesperson Duska Golic told IWPR that reform of primary and secondary education is advancing and that the nine-year school system will be soon be applied there as well.

In the meantime, though the Framework Law expressly rules it out, the “two schools under one roof” phenomenon continues at Fojnica and elsewhere. Mushvin Rizvic’s principal, Mujo Zahirovic, insists his school has no problems sharing space with Ivan Goran Kovacic.

“Classes for Ivan Goran Kovacic are held separately and we work according to our own curriculum and programme, and most of the teaching material is shared,” said Zahirovic, adding that no sectarian incidents have taken place to date.

But minister Safet Halilovic is unconvinced that the system holds any benefits. Having two schools, two principals, two administrations and two management boards is “nothing but a different kind of ethnic segregation,” he argued.

Halilovic told IWPR that the cantons must break the logjam and implement the state law, in line with the obligations Bosnia undertook after it joined the Council of Europe.

“The interests of all people have to be considered when solving the problems,” said the OSCE’s Bayrasli, adding that the international body had been encouraged by the fact that the Framework Law has been adopted at all.

Zijad Pasic told IWPR that the Federation education ministry was well aware of the scale of the problem – and admitted that it would need help to sort it out. “I’m afraid that international organisations focusing on education policy will have to mediate and play an active role in this process,” he said.

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