

**Your Excellences,**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Education is crucial for any step forward regarding all SDGs set in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – from better health to high economic indicators, from preserving the planet to fostering innovation, from promoting peaceful societies to building sustainable and meaningful partnerships.

Last December all European leaders paid serious attention to education within the Gothenburg Summit and placed it very high on the European agenda. Bulgaria took over the Presidency of the Council of the EU in this key moment and together with all Member States for 6 months worked on projects and Council documents which shaped a common vision for an European Education Area. Throughout our Presidency we worked an ambitious plan for the development of digital skills and literacy from early school education on in order to address the digital transformation. Council Recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching was adopted as well. Inclusive education has been a horizontal priority for the Bulgarian Presidency and for the Bulgarian government.

In the 4 years of its mandate Bulgarian government will invest additional 1.5 billion EURO for building and renovating education infrastructure, digitalization and inclusive education. By year 2021 teachers' salary will be double and its average will be above the average country salary.

Last July we announced the first interinstitutional action tackling dropout rate, involving teachers, social and health workers, policemen and women, municipal officers and civil society activists. With over 1,000 teams national wide we managed to bring back to school or sign for the first time in kindergartens 24.000 kids and students. A shared information platform has been developed between the Ministry of Education and Science, the Agency on Social Assistance, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior and municipalities for children at risk and for dropout prevention. Due to these efforts the dropout rate last school year decreased with 0.5%.

Mobility came up as reason number one for dropout. Children are travelling with their parents for seasonal work or for short term economic activity engagements and this often leads to school leaving and lack of adequate schemes for adaptation. Upon the proposal of Bulgaria, the European Education Ministers agreed to join efforts through starting bilateral negotiations to find possible solutions of this challenge.

Inclusive education continues to be priority for us, too. Approx. 22 300 children and students with special learning needs are part of the general kindergartens and schools. However we still lack enough human resources such as special teachers, psychologists, education mediators. The

Ministry gradually increases job placements for these professions but demands still lack adequate supply. Education and social ministry work hard to ensure kindergartens, schools and social services work in partnership for the benefit of the children. Public acceptance of diversity in human abilities has moved forward in comparison with the last decade but still is below the necessary levels.

For one year the Ministry of Education closed two institutions for children with deviant behavior and after individual assessment; kids have been re-united in their families or directed to social services.

As inclusive education is education for all, government increases it's financial support to talented and gifted students both in amount and in scope of scholarships including students from private schools.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm the commitment of the Government of Bulgaria to implement the ICPD Programme of Action in the region and to express our interest in exchanging best practices as well as mistakes in fruitful international and bilateral cooperation.

I would like thank to H.E. Ms. Deyana Kostadinova (*Permanent Representative of Bulgaria to the United Nations in Geneva*) for her leadership of the joint statement on "*Empowering children with disability through inclusive education*" - a statement currently supported by 102 countries.

I believe that forums as this are very important and can help transforming high politics into concrete national, regional and local actions.

Thank you for your attention!