

DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION PROJECT

LAUNCHING EVENT, ANKARA, APRIL 12, 2012

Speech by Ömer Dinçer, Turkish Minister of National Education

Distinguished Guests and dear members of the press

I would like to welcome you all to the Launching Event of the Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education Project which is implemented by our Ministry in cooperation with the Council of Europe.

If you allow me, I would like to start with a quotation from Montaigne, the master of essay writing. He says; **“Freedom and life are earned by those alone who conquer them each and anew everyday.”**

In other words, freedom is not a constant quality that we have or do not have. We may lose as well as earn freedom every single moment. The history of humanity is in a way the history of the struggle against limitations and discriminatory attitudes that deprive him of his freedom.

On the grounds of this struggle, democracy which emerges as a way of government carrying people to the ideals of humanity should be conquered again each and every day.

The world is transforming at a very fast pace. In this process, our expectations, problems and the meanings we attach to concepts of rights and freedoms also change. Today, we see that the ideals of democratic equality, participation and freedoms are defined at a very high level.

The recent history of Turkey can also be read as the history of our struggle as a result of longing for a strong democracy.

At this point, one of the major steps in this field is the ongoing work on a civil constitution. With this new constitution, Turkey will make huge strides in the way of democratisation and ultimately it will have an advanced level of democracy.

We still have to put a lot of effort in democratisation and promotion of democratic culture as well as development of democratic attitudes. We all have the bitter memories

of the problems triggered by a weak democracy in the past. Indeed the shadow of the past is so extensive that it may still overshadow what we do, or what we would like to do today.

Therefore, it has always been our governments fundamental priority to eliminate malfunctioning aspects of our democracy and to re-establish the reputation of political institution. Many legislative steps have been taken and regulations have been introduced within the frame of EU accession process since 2002. One of the latest developments in this respect was the regulations introduced to ensure democratisation and to establish democratic culture in the society and in organisations within the scope of the constitutional referendum which took place on 12 September 2010.

Turkish democracy, with its many problems and shortcomings, has already defined its path to guarantee human rights and democratic structures by becoming one of the signatories of a number of international conventions.

Conventions including United Nations Convention of Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, European Convention of Human Rights, European Social Charter Rights, and many others play an important role in Turkish national legislation.

“Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education Project”, on the other hand, covers another field which may be much more critical than legislation, it covers our children our young people who, in accordance with our aims, in the end will adopt and instil democratic values and attitudes. We are fully aware that this is a daunting task which requires much more effort and attention, but we also know that this is what will take us to the level of a democratic society in the end.

Much has been done in our country for years to strengthen democracy by means of education and in the same manner to improve our education system in terms of democratic values.

Sensitivity and attention attached to democracy and human rights have been stated in the laws and by-laws, and they were also included in the curricula of various courses.

Although the significance of democratic consciousness and respect for human rights has been underlined both in the legislation and in curricula, it is not possible to say that democratic culture exists in all fields of life as efficiently as it should be.

It shows us that education being in the first place, together with the political system, economy, law, social structure with all their institutions should work harder to become democratised and to make democracy function.

Dear Guests

One of the factors that increase democratic participation is increasing the level of education. A more democratic and liberal education shall leave room for the choices of students and enable students to discover and improve their abilities. This is one of the reasons why we have increased the duration of compulsory education to 12 years.

I am pleased to say that we have made an important step with this regulation which will improve our children's ability to express themselves and reveal their potential.

Within this new structure, our students will have the opportunity to chose from a number of courses, including sports, art, music, religious teaching, literacy skills and culture, social sciences, natural sciences and vocational training, according to their own interests and preferences.

I wholeheartedly believe that this important step will contribute to the development of competences in the society, such as peace, tolerance, love, dialogue, empathy, questioning, influencing government policies, as well as critical and creative thinking.

Assisting individuals gain democratic values is the task of not only education but also all institutions from family to politics. In recent years, our Ministry has managed to increase schooling at the level of primary, secondary and higher education; carried out positive action addressing girls; and organised informal training courses and campaigns within the scope of life long learning strategy to increase the level of literacy among women.

Dear Guests,

We consider education as a fundamental element both for developing a democratic culture and for development in a broader sense, as well as improving the quality of life. Hence, when it comes to the allocation of public funds, we prioritise investments in the field of education to ensure that education is efficient, accessible and that it provides equal opportunities. With its major aim to be among the first ten economies of the world by 2023, Turkey is obliged to educate and raise its young population, which is the most significant treasure of Turkey, in a way that these young people will be competent and will have a say in the international arena. At this point, in addition to all our efforts to improve school environments, to increase the number of

schooling among young people and to increase the level of education, it is also a must for us to equip our schools with modern technology.

For this purpose, through FATİH Project, we started an implementation in education and teaching technologies, which is in line with the requirements of modern technology and which will constitute a model for the rest of the world. In this way we will ensure equal opportunities to all our students in schools. We will equalize the opportunities and facilities provided in schools at peripheries with those provided in central schools. Our aim here is not to supply our students with technology but to ensure equal opportunities in access to information and to offer enriched content in order to create a just and equal learning environment.

Dear Guests,

Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Project also overlaps with some of our activities, mainly our efforts to prepare a new constitution, in the field of democratisation and promotion of democratic culture.

In this context, we believe that this project will contribute to raising our children in a stronger and sounder democratic culture and help the legislative efforts towards democratisation be established on a solid basis.

In a democratic school environment our students will express themselves more easily and will also have more opportunities to have a say in the management processes at school. As a result, our schools will help their students gain the ability and have the responsibility to advocate for their own rights, as well as those of others, and to respect differences and others rights.

As it is known, in our country all the curricula from preschool education to the end of secondary education has been revised since 2004.

In this process, Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education was defined as a inter-curricular subject and topics related to citizenship, democracy and human rights were distributed to other subjects. With an amendment which was made in 2010, democratic citizenship and human rights education became a one hour compulsory course. Consequently, as almost a unique model in the world democratic citizenship and human rights education is included both as an individual course and as a course whose content is also dealt with in other subjects.

The aim of this course is to ensure that students develop an awareness, attitudes and behaviours to exercise and protect human rights in their daily lives, and to provide

them with some basic knowledge, abilities, values and behaviours concerning citizenship, democracy and human rights.

In the scope of Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education Project, the elective “democracy and human rights” course which is currently being taught in secondary schools is reviewed from a modern perspective and in line with the requirements of the day.

In addition, in order to provide people with the ability and values of democratic citizenship by means of informal training, focusing on this topic in family training programmes, as well as in cultural, vocational and free-time courses is one of the priorities of our Ministry.

As a result, a citizenship approach built on democracy and human rights will become a life style adopted by wider society from families to schools, or from business life to state relations. Hence, democratic political system will be fortified by its foundations in the grassroots.

In the scope of the project we will make an important step by reviewing the existing curricula and making sure that our curricula are strengthened in terms of human rights and equal opportunities for men and women.

Before I conclude my speech, I would like to thank all parties who has contributed and will contribute to the implementation of Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education Project which will be finalised in June 2014.

I would like to welcome you all again with my best wishes that this cooperation will empower our hand in our journey towards democracy.