

## **Opening speech ECNAIS April 2024 conference in Sofia**

*Building and maintaining identity in educational organizations in a rapidly changing World.  
Student contribution focus: Students as a driving force of educational identity*

Ms. Natalia Mihalevska (representing the Ministry of Education), Mr. Yana Genova (Deputy Mayor for Education, Sofia City), Ms. Vanya Kastreva (Head of the Regional Management of Education for Sofia City), Mr. Vassil Velev (Chair of the Association of Industrial Capital in Bulgaria);

Dear Maria Kamenova, Radka Karagiozova and Annie Anjelova, our friends and hosts from the BAPS (Bulgarian Association of Private Schools);

Dear speakers, members of ECNAIS, principals, teachers, students, ladies and gentleman.

Firstly, I feel the need to mention that it is the fifth time we meet in the context of war in Europe. I acknowledge the presence of the Ukrainian delegation and reinforce our commitment to keep by your side.

Secondly, I would like to thank our Bulgarian friends for the hard work and good collaboration put into making this conference a reality. ECNAIS has had a very dear relationship with BAPS for decades and we are very happy to be here.

With this, I welcome you all to the ECNAIS 2024 conference.

For those of you less acquainted with ECNAIS, we are a non-confessional, non-political association based in Helsinki (Finland), founded in 1988, by a group of educators from different countries who wanted to learn more about the challenges and the vision of each other for independent education. We unite national associations of independent schools from all over Europe and we promote dialogue between countries about the freedom of education for parents and educators.

Today, we have gathered representants of independent schools from 13 European countries (Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Türkiye, Ukraine and the United Kingdom). Independent education represents more than 18% of the students in Europe – more than 20 million students. This is us.

And now, let me convey the importance of the theme of this seminar: Building and maintaining identity in educational organizations in a rapidly changing World.

In the 80s, we had to wait weeks or even months to hear the latest hit from English pop groups; we had to wait years to watch German movies and the latest fashion from Paris arrived only the following season.

You guys [*the students in the audience*] have it all, in real time, on the palm of your hands.

Before the internet, globalization was mainly industrial. Raw materials and consumer goods going from one continent to another. Now, globalization has a powerful cultural dimension. Arts, fashion and lifestyle are consumed, in real time, by billions of people.

We even have a term for this: glocal – the universal and the particular combined.

The digital world is a great tool, but our humanity rests in the physical world. It is here that we live, we love, we cry. It is here that we build our identity and the identity of the social organizations we live in. And identity is imperative for our wellbeing.

As we discussed before, *“education for democracy and civil engagement does not mean to water down one’s values or to embrace relativism. It is educating from a specific value perspective or worldview, but with recognition of other perspectives and a will to engage in a meaningful conversation with people that have these other perspectives”*<sup>[1]</sup>.

For independent schools, identity is a core dimension of our educational projects. There is no independent school without identity and identity is a distinctive factor of independent schools.

And so, for the next two days, we will debate on how to build, strengthen, and maintain school identity from the independent school sector perspective and with the participation of our students.

I would like to emphasize that this theme is central to European values. Freedom of education has been reaffirmed by the European Parliament in 2018: *“the right to education includes the freedom to set up educational establishments, on a basis of due respect for democratic principles and for the right of parents to ensure that their children are educated and taught according to their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions”*<sup>[2]</sup>. School identity is therefore at the core of the right to education.

But still, this is being questioned in some countries.

Just last year, the Norwegian Parliament passed an amendment to the Independent Schools Act that reinforces the right of the State to forbid applications to open new independent schools<sup>[3]</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> 2023 ECNAIS Conference (Lisbon), opening speech.

<sup>2</sup> Consideration J of the European Parliament resolution of 12 June 2018 on modernization of education in the EU.

<sup>3</sup> Banning if “approval if its establishment would have a negative impact on the government schools on offer” (Section 2-1 in the Independent Schools Act). Even though parents have a fundamental right to choose the kind of education they wish for

For some time, politicians in the UK are entertaining the idea of introducing VAT in education. Not only does this go against the established European directive on VAT, it doesn't make sense both in financial or social terms.

Other examples exist. But the bottom line is that respect for the fundamental educational rights of parents requires that State authorities (i) recognize independent education, (ii) create fair funding mechanisms, and (iv) cherish school autonomy. Legislation on curriculum and pedagogy must be flexible and accountability must take into consideration each schools` ethos.

Inclusion and social cohesion are not the outputs of a state managed homogeneous school system. Inclusion and social cohesion are the outputs of a school system where different schools cater for the needs of different children and adults dialogue based on mutual understanding.

Identity IS important and we must not let others determine WHO we are.

To end, let me share some issues we addressed at the General Meeting of ECNAIS yesterday.

Firstly, in November 2024 we will have our ECNAIS seminar in Bucharest, Romania. Secondly, in April 2025 we will meet again in Istanbul. Thank you to our Romanian and Turkish friends for hosting these events.

I wish you an inspirational conference. And please take some extra time to enjoy your stay in the beautiful city of Sofia.

Thank you very much

Rodrigo Melo  
ECNAIS Chairman  
Sofia, 18<sup>th</sup> April 2024

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their children, the Norwegian public authorities may forbid alternative offers if these have a negative impact on the existing government offers; even though that is the whole point of alternative offers.