



ECNAIS

European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools

Opening speech ECNAIS seminar

Co-creating the Future of Education

Ms. President of the Romanian Accreditation Agency,

Dear Christian Comsa, President of the Association of Private Schools of Romania,

Dear ECNAIS members,

Dear principals,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sadly, we meet again with war still going on in Ukraine. Though our Ukrainian members were not able to join us today, we reinforce our commitment to keep by their side.

Independent schools have had a fundamental role in the consolidation of free societies all over the world. In the last 30 years, this has been the case in Eastern Europe. The free world is in debt with all who have created and sustained independent schools.

The last time we had an ECNAIS event in Bucharest was November 2013. The theme of the seminar was “The role that civil societies play in developing independent education at all levels”.

Back then, we hoped to encourage Romanians in creating independent schools to strengthen civil society and promote democratic values. Our host was Mr. Viorel Enea (chairman UNDIPPR) and we gathered a little over 80 participants from 18 national associations of independent schools. This was in the Parliament building.

We were honored to have Mr. Remus Pricopie, Minister of Education of Romania, as a keynote speaker.

And here we are now, 11 years later, approximately 300 people attending a conference organized by the Romanian Association of Private Schools and ECNAIS members from 14 European countries. Congratulations to our Romanian friends for your hard work and for how far you have come!

Independent education represents more than 18% of the students in Europe – more than 20 million students -. In some countries, as The Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark or Sweden, independent schools make up a very big part of the national school systems. In others not so much. But, everywhere, independent schools are a vibrant sector.

So, even where public authorities are not enthusiastic about independent schools, we have to make their work visible. This is one of the goals of ECNAIS.

For those of you not acquainted with ECNAIS, we are a non-confessional, non-political platform of national associations of independent schools. ECNAIS was founded in 1988, in the UK, and today we are based in Helsinki (Finland).

Back in 88, a group of educators from different European countries started getting together to learn more about each other and to discuss common challenges and opportunities. This is still what we do today. Getting to know more about independent education in different countries helps us all grow and makes us stronger.

So, ECNAIS represents and unites national associations of independent schools from all over Europe and promotes dialogue about the freedom of education at the institutional level.



I would like to emphasize that independent schools are central to the 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”*^[1].

ECNAIS pressure, through our European networks, is not strange to this political declaration of the Parliament. It is not easy and not always visible, but working together at the international stage is paramount to the protection and development of independent education in each country.

We were very happy to know that the Romanian Constitutional Court has just issued a ruling stating that the phrase ‘state’ from Article 82, paragraph (1) of the National Education Law nº 1/2011 is unconstitutional, as it allows for performance scholarships to be granted only to students enrolled in the public education system and that this is an objectively and reasonably unjustified discrimination against students attending private or religious schools.

This decision is very important. Not only for Romania, but for all European countries. It re-affirms a juridical situation that must be brought to the forefront repeatedly.

It is important because freedom of education is always being questioned in different countries.

¹ Consideration J of the European Parliament resolution of 12 June 2018 on modernisation of education in the EU.



Two years ago, 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 [2].

The new Government in the UK just set VAT in education! Others tried to do so in the past, like Greece.

In Portugal, public support for independent schools was greatly limited 6 years ago.

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.

For this, we must make ourselves heard. At the national level, of course, but also at the international level. So let me encourage you, the members of the Romanian Association of Private Schools, to support ASP and it`s leadership in their international efforts. ASP`s presence is growing and this is good for everyone.

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

Firstly, we had an election. I am glad to announce that Christian Comsa, ASP President, was elected member of ECNAIS executive committee. Together with

² Banning approval 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 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.

Anke Tästensen, from Denmark, Markku Moisala from Finland and myself, he will have the task of steering this organization for the next 2 years. With the invaluable help of Peter Warnders from the Netherlands.

Secondly, in April we will have our ECNAIS conference in Istanbul, Turkiye. Thank you to our Turkish friends for hosting this event. In November we will be in Athens. Thank you to our Greek friends.

And with this I wish you all an inspirational conference.

Thank you very much

Rodrigo Melo
ECNAIS Chairman
Bucharest, 13th November 2024