



SIRIUS Welcome Speech

19th November 2014

When Ms. Lana Jurko approached my Office early this year and presented the idea of the SIRIUS conference I was delighted to be able to host it as it deals with some of the values I find to be at the very core of the European idea I believe in. Even more, here today I have an opportunity that does not come my way too often: this is a topic I can speak about not only as a Member of the European Parliament, but also as true social-democrat, as a sociologist and finally, my favourite, as a professor (of sociology).

I have been in politics for quite some time now. I have entered it in early '90s when Croatia was in a specific situation and when I believed that circumstances called for my political engagement. I have never regretted it. It has been over 20 years since then and I have seen plenty of changes brought by politicians: some good, some not so good. A political motto I always felt strong about is that politics is not about changing people but changing circumstances for better in order to allow people to change for better on their own. In such endeavour, I found teachers and professors, the educational system, to be my strongest allies of paramount importance. As a professor myself, and as a politician, I am very much aware that politics brings changes on daily basis, but that educators bring generational changes. In synergy we can solve a great deal of issues.

The history of our continent up to mid-20th century is not a history of inclusiveness, to say the least. Having that in mind we, as Europeans, can only be proud of the achievements in the last 70 years and changes that EU has brought in politics. It has been a project and success of an entire generation. We owe it to that generation, not to take this success for granted and not to leave it unfinished.

There is no place, therefore, for illusions that the job is done and problems are no more. I would rather say: one down and plenty more to go. If we want an inclusive Europe, the one I certainly support, than topics such as comprehensive inclusion of youth with migrant background, and migrants in general, have to be continuously opened. We all feel very good when talking



about EU successes – it is our comfort zone we feel good and safe in. Unfortunately, by doing so we ignore a vast range of human beings who are left out. Therefore, thank you for being here today and forcing all of us to come out of that comfort zone and deal with completing European project in practice.

I do not have to list statistics to you today. You are all very much aware of high drop-out rates, lower educational performances, lower language knowledge of first and second generation migrants. You also know of EU's 2020 strategy goals of being world's leading innovation power with highest percentage of university graduates and trilingual population. And you also know that if 12 million young people with migrant background, who clearly require a specific un-orthodox approach, are ignored these goals will never be achieved. We are talking about over 12 million young individuals: these together would make the 10th largest member state by population and over 2% of the entire Union population.

I was particularly glad to see that your report and recommendation emphasized the socio-economic background and not merely the migrant background. This perspective makes in relevant for not only migrants per se but also other socially disadvantaged groups such as Roma and Travellers. Even more, your recommendations set out principles that can enforce inclusion of groups that are disadvantaged and excluded in different ways at different levels: women, ethnic minorities, LGBT population, youth in general and so on. The way we approach these issues of these groups seeks exactly a sort of generational change that only educators can carry on and I, both as an educator and a politician, can only give you my full support.

The effect of such a comprehensive reform is truly hard to grasp entirely as it is just about education. Or better to say, education is not just about education. It is about overall empowerment on the side of disadvantaged individuals and an overall awareness on the side of the rest. Earlier this year I supported a report on the issue of undocumented migrant women who are often victims of various criminal activities that only enforce their situation. Denying services and support to migrants in the EU such as health insurance, education and



legal remedy will not prevent others from seeking refuge in the EU. The fundamental rights of migrants on the EU territory have to be guaranteed and implemented and their human dignity preserved. If we are to be judged how we treat the most disadvantaged in our society we ought to reconsider our current approach.

I can therefore only endorse your call for a clear agenda to support the equal right to education for all groups with low socio-economic background. It is the only way for perfecting the European project and you have my full support both as a politician and in particular as a professor.

Tonino Picula, Croatian Member of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)