Press release

**IOM supports the initiative for institutionalization of learning of official languages in Kosovo\***

**Milestone Conference**

Monday, 29th March 2021

**Pristina –** The International Organization for Migration (IOM) organized on Monday the Milestone conference on the initiative for the institutionalization of the learning of official languages in Kosovo.

The conference rallied both local and international high representatives and stakeholders with the aim to discuss key developments and future plans. The aim of the initiative is to enable curricular and extracurricular learning of official languages, as well as to enable certification of the language knowledge. An international support group (British Embassy, IOM and OSCE) has been working intensively with relevant institutions (University of Pristina, Faculty of Philology, Ministry of Education, the Office of Language Commissioner and Accreditation Agency) on supporting the faculty in preparing the documentation for the reaccreditation of the Balkanistics programme(s) and the regulations for the Language Center.

The event was hosted by the Office of the Language Commissioner (OPM) and the Faculty of Philology and organized within the framework of the project “Building Societal Connections and Support to Reconciliation and Social Cohesion” supported by the British Embassy Pristina and implemented by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

**Ms Anna Rostocka**, Chief of the IOM Mission, gave the opening remarks. “The project aims to contribute towards a more inclusive society for all communities in Kosovo by promoting their language rights, fostering cooperation and developing joint initiatives”, she said.

“We know integration is not a one size fits all endeavor. Integration is a cross cutting and multi-sectoral issue, also defined as a two-way process of mutual adaption in which non-majority communities are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the society”, she added.

As such, integration entails a set of joint responsibilities of all and in this broadened understanding incorporates other related notions such as social inclusion and social cohesion, Ms Rostocka emphasized.

Acknowledging the work put forth in achieving the progress in this field of crucial importance for society, **Ms Arbërie Nagavci**, Minister of Education and Science, said that both, herself and the Ministry she leads, will be committed to providing equal opportunities for all young people in all institutions.

“The help and contribution you give through this project I believe will be of great help so that our institutions will be able to offer their services in the best possible way”, Ms Nagavci said.

Thanking the organizers and all the partners who are implementing the project, she emphasized that communication is the bridge that connects people.

“Language as an instrument of communication is extremely important in order to achieve goals and our individual and social development. I consider very important the help and contribution you offer us through this project, so that the citizens of the Republic of Kosovo can cooperate, know each other, and progress together. By knowing each other we understand each other better and we manage to accept each other and make sure that we build bridges of cooperation, supporting each other and moving forward together through dialogue to overcome dilemmas,” concluded the Minister.

**Rector Naser Sahiti** emphasized that the inclusion of community languages in higher education is a need and necessity, both in society and at a scientific level.

The rector said that he supported the deans, saying he will provide support to the dean of the Faculty of Philology in this initiative, i.e. the Center for Languages, emphasizing that every success of the Faculty of Philology is also a success of the university.

"Certainly, part of our strategy as an educational institution is for these initiatives to take the form of joint projects that would increase inter-institutional cooperation with organizations and agencies inside and outside the country in order to support the nurturing of existing cultures," the rector said.

**Dean Lindita Rugova,** one of key movers of the project recalled the challenging but successful implementation by joint forces:

“In 2019 I had to explain to stakeholders what a Balkanistic programme was, what a long process we had in advance to prepare the documentation for this programme and now I can just confirm to you that we are in the process of accreditation. We are waiting for the foreign experts to review the programme, if we get positive feedback from them - to start with that in October 21/22. In December 2019, in the premises of the Faculty for Philology where we met for the first time, I eventually succeeded to summarise in one sentence that the establishment of a Language Centre within the framework of the Faculty of Philology will make a difference in providing extra curricular activities related to the learning of languages in Kosovo and other foreign languages for all communities in general. And now in front of you I have the decision for the establishment of the Language Center approved by the Steering Board of the University of Pristina.

In addition, the friends of Balkanistic support group also agreed on searching for potential teaching staff to support the faculty in the revitalization of the programme and the Language Center.

As a result, Mr. Josip Lasić and Ms Ana Sivački. expressed their interest to come to Pristina and work as full-time staff with the Faculty of Philology, confirmed Ms Rugova, while adding that the programme is waiting for a green light from the Kosovo Accreditation Agency.

In addition, the possible reaccreditation of the professional Master program for translation and interpretation was also discussed in 2019. Now, with the support of the IOM and the British Embassy’s fund, the working group is intensively working on compiling, creating a one year professional master program that would, the Dean said, serve first of all the government in its needs for future translators and interpreters in official languages in Kosovo, as well as other institutional needs in general.

“As a professor of text grammar, speaking of past and present by comparing all the time since 2019, I cannot leave out of this discussion on futurity, the possible modalities for the present perspective. And speaking of modalities, it is an urgent need to fully support the language center in order to establish its modern infrastructure and provide the best services possible. The designated premises for this important cell within the Faculty of Philology have already been chosen and a very deep revitalization is needed in order to change its appearance and make its performance more efficient in front to the public and other stakeholders”, concluded Ms Rugova.

**British Ambassador, Mr. Nicholas Abbott** echoed the common objective, that is the improve of the interethnic relations through improved language rights. Therefore, the establishment of the Language Center and Balkanistic studies are an essential part of this development.

“Language is an aspect of human life that either divides or connects people,” he told the conference.

“There are many obvious reasons why the Language Center and the Balkanology programme should be established and supported by all relevant institutions, but I am only going to name two. Firstly, of course the Law on the Use of languages said that official documents must be translated into both official languages. I think we all know that it’s often not the case - they are not either translated, or they are not translated properly. However, equal access to services and information in official languages is essential, essential to all citizens, especially during the time like this of the pandemic when people rely on official information. Secondly and equally important is communication between people, communities and neighbours. That’s important in Kosovo but also in any other country where there are people who speak different languages, but who are living side by side, they need to communicate,” were his remarks.

Mr. Abbott pointed out the importance of yet another successful component of the IOM language project – The VocUp language platform, supported also by the UK Embassy. “A survey that was done with the VocUp language course participants showed that social interaction between the communities and increased employment opportunities were listed as the main drivers for learning of the community languages”, he said.

His Excellency listed key problems in the area: the insufficient number of language professional, lack of funding for translation services, discrepancy in legislation but also the issue of mutual recognition of diplomas between Serbia and Kosovo.

“All of those challenges need to be addressed properly and I look forward to working with the new government to do so,” concluded Mr. Abbott.

**OSCE Ambassador to Kosovo, Michael Davenport,** in his first public address since taking office a week ago, congratulated on the successes achieved so far through these joint efforts.

He was particularly pleased that more concrete results followed the initiative of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, while the OSCE systematically and consistently supported the entire project in Kosovo.

In his previous position as the EU Ambassador in Belgrade, he also worked very closely with a high commissioner on establishing a multi-lingual faculty of economics in Bujanovac. Although it took many years of hard work, it is now making a great contribution to enriching the lives of young people in the area, said Mr. Davenport, recalling its success. With the same support, he embraced the new tasks:

“I do believe that this is very much the kind of investment in young people which is needed in this region. So I welcome the Government's commitment and the University of Pristina for establishing the Balkanistic study programme and the language center (…) The idea is that the Balkanistic studies programme will indeed create a sort of pipeline of professional and efficient interpreters, both in government and crucially in the private sector”.

“Please count on me Dean as a friend to Balkanistic studies,” highlighted Mr. Davenport.

**UN Development Coordinator in Kosovo, Ulrika Richardson,** who has been in Kosovo for three years, said that one of the greatest barriers to communication and interaction of young people in Kosovo is the language barrier, adding that it should be the key priority going forward.

“I believe that we can all agree that language is indeed the best bridge that we can find between people. Language allows us not to only connect intellectually, but also to connect emotionally.”

According to Ms Richardson, learning a language means that you are trying to understand the other side and it goes to the heart of social cohesion.

Thus, she highlighted the institutionalization of learning of official languages and the initiative of establishing a Balkanistic Faculty at the University as extremely important.

After keynote speakers, the assessment report on the need for language professionals was presented, followed by a panel discussion and a moderated Q&A session with audience present online as well. Other international and governmental high level official contributed to the discussion, emphasizing the importance of the initiative and expressing their commitment to support its further development.

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