

**Welcome Adress by Audronė Pitrėnienė, Chair of the Seimas Committee on Education,
Science and Culture**

**at the Annual Conference of the European Network of Education Councils (EUNEC) “Early
School Leaving”**

18 November 2013, Vilnius

How Can Europe Address the Problems of Early School Leavers?

Good afternoon, Mr President and members of the EUNEC, members of the Lithuanian Education Council, honourable guests,

Early school leaving is a recognised problem in the European Union already been covered by the European Trade Unions during the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU. The problem of premature drop-outs or early school leaving was analysed by the managers of the Lithuanian educational institutions and the community of teachers at the conference held in the Seimas a few days ago.

According to various sources, more than six million young people in the European Union drop out of school every year having achieved *lower secondary education at best*. We understand well how serious the social problem is. Early school leavers face severe difficulties in finding jobs, are more often unemployed and more often dependent on social benefits. This hinders economic growth and development of society. Studies also show that people without secondary education are less involved in democratic processes and are less active citizens.

The European Commission, therefore, has set an ambitious target of reducing the EU average rate of early school leavers to 10% by the end of the decade.

The President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, has once said, “Europe cannot afford that so many young people who have the potential to contribute to our societies and our economies are left behind. We need to realise the potential of all young people in Europe in order to recover from the crisis.” The European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, Androulla Vassiliou, added, “Reducing the share of early school leavers across Europe by just 1 percentage point would create nearly half a million additional qualified young people each year. Most EU countries have made progress in reducing the number of young people leaving school with low qualifications, but more needs to be done.”

I think our conference will substantially analyse the reasons for early school leaving and come up with possible solutions for the problem. Although indicators of early school leaving in Lithuania are really low, just seven per cent, we need to closely follow the situation and to find ways to improve it. Lithuania is a small country; therefore sensitive to seven per cent

of early drop outs. I am happy that schools in regions put a lot of genuine effort in order to encourage children of school age to stay in schools and to prevent them from dropping out without having achieved lower secondary or secondary education qualifications. It is easier to do this in smaller towns, where members of communities know each other very well. The staff working in district authorities is best suited to assist schools when it comes to problem solving, including that of early school leaving. In big cities, relationships among people are often broken off; therefore, a child in school is not always under careful supervision.

I participated in quite a few meetings during which Lithuania's indicators for early school leavers were referred to as exemplary. I am convinced that it is possible and necessary to improve them, particularly because of active and targeted social partners, such as trade unions representing educational community and the forum of parents, who contribute to the solution of the problem.

There is room for improvement in Lithuania. I think, information technologies have not been used to their full potential to solve the problem of pupil attendance and early school leaving. For example, instruments for recording the attendance of schoolchildren should also serve as instruments for informing parents. This would definitely serve as a means of control and some sort of "surveillance". I welcome the idea to address the problem of early school leaving by modernising our schools and education and by involving our society into a broader dialogue on education. Various surveys and research have demonstrated that a modern school has already crossed the boundaries of school walls or schoolyards.

Apart from caring efforts by the community, school or social services, or apart from various control measures, I believe we should also develop institutional and personal competences. We should look for new forms to motivate pupils, to balance their workload, learn better the needs of children, and seek development of conflict management skills. In other words, we need to create the conditions at school to show to children that they are welcome there and that they may feel safe there, rather than forcefully make them return to school. We should remember as often as possible that the modern school is much more than a place merely for teaching, but rather an institution intended for upbringing a young human being – a future active citizen.

May I welcome the participants of the conference and wish every success in attaining wise decisions.