



**STATEMENT BY THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL
ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

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Persisting and emerging challenges in protecting children's rights in Europe

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Note for the interpreters: the speaker will NOT read the text highlighted

Distinguished Delegates, dear Friends

I am honoured to join the Council of Europe's family in Dubrovnik, in this important Conference on "Growing with Children's Rights".

This very year, the world celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is therefore a perfect moment to reflect upon the following question:

Are we 'growing' or are we just... getting older?

I certainly believe that children's rights have made Europe grow stronger and wiser.

Today, Europe is no doubt better equipped to protect children's rights. With the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocols, and with the significant standards adopted by the Council of Europe, we have a sound normative foundation to build upon!

While this is a reason to celebrate, it should not be an excuse to turn a blind eye to the many unresolved issues, to the harsh reality that millions of children still face. If we want to grow better as a society, we urgently need to identify and address the prevailing and the emerging challenges that compromise the protection of the rights of the child. We have to restate our resolve to addressing these challenges vigorously and accelerate progress throughout the European region.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child calls on all governments to take children seriously and to promote children's rights as a distinct priority. One key dimension of this agenda is the imperative to safeguard the right of the child to freedom from violence. This is also a crucial dimension of the Council of Europe Strategy.

(Violence compromises all the rights of the child; but as experience shows, with strong investment in prevention, children can be given a real chance of growing up in safety and developing to their full potential.)

Protecting children from violence is an area where over the past years significant progress has been achieved. Our understanding of how and why children are exposed to violence has deepened, and strategic actions are under way in many countries to translate them into effective protection.

At the international level, there has been an ever-growing ratification and incremental implementation of treaties on children's protection from violence – including in the context of trafficking, gender violence and the sexual exploitation of children. The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography is moving steadily closer to the goal of universal ratification – in Europe, virtually all countries have adhered to this important treaty. The impact of the Conventions adopted by the Council of Europe is increasing, achieving a growing recognition beyond the European borders as well.

(Ratification is a solemn expression of States' accountability for children's human rights. But, as we know well, it simply marks the start of a demanding and continuous process of national implementation.)

Translating international treaties into tangible action is an ethical and legal imperative. Unfortunately, it remains a distant reality for countless girls and boys exposed to violence in schools, in care and justice institutions, and within the home; for those lured into prostitution, portrayed in pornographic materials, groomed through the internet; trafficked for sexual or labour exploitation or illegal adoption; for children placed in detention because of their migration status or for the lack of official documentation; as well as for the many girls victims of female genital mutilation, forced into marriage or killed in the name of honour.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite the seriousness of these phenomena, child victims remain largely invisible and often neglected in statistics and policy action.

Bridging the governance gap between rhetoric and effective enforcement remains a pressing challenge. But this is a challenge we can steadily overcome.

Within two weeks, the third Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure will enter into force, thanks to the ratification of 6 Member States of the Council of Europe. The protocol allows children to seek remedies and bring complaints on the violations of their rights before the Committee on the Rights of the Child. It is a clear recognition that children are people too and full-fledged subjects of rights! **I would therefore like to encourage all States represented here to ratify and support the implementation of this key legal instrument.**

Also connected to this important development is the **need to create the conditions for Children to become fundamental actors in implementation!** It is for instance urgent and indispensable that young people have access to, understand and make use of the provisions of child rights treaties.

This is why I remain strongly committed to disseminate **child friendly materials** on the protocols to the CRC. Two booklets have already been developed in collaboration with many partners, including children from different regions of the world. The Council of Europe has excelled in the preparation of materials and tools specially designed for and with children.

At present, we are preparing together a child friendly version of the Lanzarote Convention. My office has also launched an open call for creative ideas for an on-line tool for children and young people.

I am confident you will support this communication effort, in particular by helping us to translate and disseminate these important advocacy tools. They are a significant contribution to raising public awareness and supporting child rights education initiatives within the school system.

In this context, I wish to call upon the **Council of Europe Steering Committee for Educational Policy and practice to foster children's rights education and to discuss how to better integrate the elimination of violence against children in education policies.**

Dear Friends,

At the national level there is also good news to share. Firstly, we see a clear increase in the number of countries with a comprehensive and multidisciplinary policy agenda to prevent and address violence against children; the most recent was adopted earlier this year, in Slovakia.

Secondly, the legal protection of children from all forms of violence is gaining ground – globally, the number of countries with a legal prohibition has more than doubled since 2006. In Europe, 25 states have a comprehensive legal ban that includes prohibition of all forms of corporal punishment– Malta is the latest to have introduced the ban, with the very recent review of its criminal legislation. In several cases, provisions have been included in the Constitution itself, and important legislative measures have also been enacted to address specific forms of violence, including for the protection of children from sexual violence.

Significant information and awareness raising campaigns have also been launched to keep violence concerns high on the agenda, to prevent abuse, to help child victims gain confidence to speak up and seek support and to promote a change in attitudes and behaviours.

Croatia has been a strong supporter of these initiatives and shown its international commitment, in particular through the launch of the Council of Europe campaign against corporal punishment in 2008 and through the provision of this wonderful setting for us to move the children's rights agenda a step further.

Although it is important to welcome achievements, it is even more important to recognize that **progress has been too slow, too uneven and too fragmented to make a genuine breakthrough.**

Millions of girls and boys continue to be exposed to the cumulative impact of different manifestations of violence, as a result of reactive, ill-coordinated and ill-resourced strategies; fragmented and poorly enforced legislation, and weak investment in family support and in gender and child sensitive approaches. Moreover, data and research on the incidence of violence remain scarce and in fact rarely used to inform policy making and budgetary decisions.

The urgency of our cause has clearly not diminished and some irrefutable figures illustrate this well. **According to a recent WHO Report**, every year, across the European region, child maltreatment leads to the premature death of more than 850 children under 15 years; at least 18 million children suffer from sexual abuse, 44 million from physical abuse and 55 million from mental abuse. Shocking as they are, these figures are understood to be underestimations; in fact, it is believed that 90% of child maltreatment may go unnoticed.

Some children are at a particularly high risk. More often than not, they come from disadvantaged populations. Children from deprived neighborhoods are more likely to be admitted to hospitals as a result of assault and adolescents are highly represented amongst homicide rates. Very young children are also hard hit - death rates are particularly high in children under 5 and affect primarily boys, who account for more than 60% of the victims.

Children's exposure to violence is equally common in the case of families with mental health problems or affected by alcohol or drug addiction, and when parents are young, single and poor.)

This pattern has been aggravated by the recent economic crisis. High levels of unemployment and cutbacks in public health and welfare services have led to increasing levels of stress, depression, anxiety and suicidal thinking amongst affected families, undermining parent-child bonding and constituting serious risk factors for child neglect and abuse.

Cuts in child benefits and services, the loss of social safety nets and reductions in staff providing counselling and support to child victims have added a serious strain on millions of families, constituting aggravating factors of violence, abuse, and

exploitation. These are concerns the Council of Europe has voiced and which we need to seriously monitor, now and in the future.

All of this also shows the importance of holding an **open and honest debate at national level**; an inclusive debate that can review the situation, make constructive recommendations and help to coordinate action. Children's Rights and Violence against children are issues that need visibility and permanent attention. The Council of Europe network of focal points could be instrumental in promoting such debates, at regular intervals.

Dear friends,

Despite the severity of the reality they face, children continue to lack information about where to go and whom to call to get advice and assistance, especially when the perpetrator is someone they trust and feel close to.

(Children's assessment of this reality is quite telling. According to a survey conducted a few years ago by the European Commission, 80% of young people across EU Member States indicated that neither they, nor someone they knew, had sought help when they thought that their rights had been violated. In their view, information was hard to find and procedures too complicated and lengthy to make a difference.)

In still too many nations, **child sensitive counselling, reporting and complaint mechanisms are unavailable or difficult to access**. When in place, services frequently lack the resources and skills to address children's concerns and promote the healing and reintegration of child victims. With the economic crisis, the accessibility and quality of these mechanisms has also suffered. Even national independent children's rights institutions, which play a particularly crucial role during such periods of economic recession and uncertainty, are facing increased demands with less resources.

When violence occurs, children often lack trust in existing services. **They fear they will not be believed or taken seriously; and they are afraid of public exposure,**

stigmatization and possible reprisals if they tell their story. For particularly disadvantaged children, these challenges may become truly unsurmountable.

It is also common that professionals lack the necessary skills and guidance to identify early signs of abuse, to report and properly address incidents of violence. When incidents are indeed considered, there is a persistent risk of multiple and fragmented interventions by different professionals, working in disconnected disciplines. This in turn, generates renewed risks of re-victimization of the child and jeopardizes children's safety and effective protection.

Let's take the example of **children deprived of liberty**.

For children deprived of liberty, surrounded by stigma and hidden from the public eye, these challenges tend to grow exponentially. They are exposed to serious risks of physical, psychological and sexual violence; they endure humiliating treatment by staff, as a form of control, discipline or punishment; and they risk torture, rape and abuse, especially when placed in facilities with adults. In most cases, the situation of girls receives very little attention, although they are at particularly high risk of violence. It is particularly worrying that this also applies to children deprived of their liberty in the context of migration or simply for not having identity papers.

This is an area where serious challenges persist. According to children's own assessment and to use their own words, available procedures seem useless and inadequate to meet their needs; staff in detention centres are ill-trained to treat children with respect and take their views into account; complaints are dismissed without the required investigation, and when they are pursued they may lead to harsh treatment for the child, including solitary confinement.

At the same time, unannounced visits by independent institutions remain the exception rather than the norm. Children feel isolated with no one to trust or talk to; overall, they feel deeply uncertain as to whether and how impunity can be fought. Young people also have insightful assessments of what needs to change and are making concrete recommendations on how to achieve change and accelerate progress.

Young people are also eager to enhance their knowledge of their rights and about ways of ensuring their own protection, including through the use of new technologies. They want professionals who are ready to listen and to take their views into account, people children can trust and who are sensitive and friendly.

These are certainly recommendations we can easily and vigorously act upon! Children's access to child friendly services and systems is an issue that could be further explored by the new **Council of Europe Steering Committee for Social cohesion, human dignity and equality** and by the future **Committee of Experts on the Rights of the Child**.

Dear Friends

This brings me to another question I would like to briefly address – **the potential and the challenges associated with new information and communication technologies**. Mobile phones, the internet and social media are part of children's daily life. In Europe, more than 70% of 9 to 16 year olds use the internet, in some countries more than 90%, with a visible increase amongst younger children.

ICTs offer new means of experiencing creative processes of learning, research and communication, as well as of promoting socialization, entertainment and education. Unfortunately, they also create new situations of risk and abuse. **It is important to note, though, that children master these technologies with ease and are also well placed to become the first line of prevention of abuse.**

This is important, as information and communication technologies potentially make children vulnerable to bullying, abuse and exploitation in ways that are often difficult to detect and respond to, particularly when incidents occur in spaces outside of adult supervision. In the digital world, harmful information becomes more easily available and spreads more quickly; it can reach millions in a fraction of a second and remain in cyberspace for a lifetime.

(Some of the most significant challenges include: child abuse materials and violent imagery; online bullying or harassment; “grooming” and advances from sexual

predators; access to harmful online communities that encourage self-harm or suicide, or incite violence, hate and political extremism; children placing information about themselves in the public domain, or posting pictures, videos or text that might compromise their personal safety or dignity; as well as access to age-inappropriate goods and services.)

When addressing these challenges, it is important to work on three fronts:

- First, we have to implement standards and take measures to **effectively fight crimes** such as grooming, child abuse images or hate speech.
The Council of Europe Conventions against cybercrime and on the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse provide a very solid normative and cooperation framework that I encourage you to fully use and promote.
- Second: it is essential to **invest in children's empowerment and resilience**.
Very often, responses to threats are driven by fear and censorship. The truth is that prevention is viable and achievable. Children can be supported to gain the skills they need to navigate the digital universe with confidence, to make informed decisions and avoid risks, and to report and seek help when incidents take place. Parents, caregivers and teachers should also have access to training and resources to gain confidence and be able to fulfill their education and guidance role in the cyberspace as well. Online safety and cyber literacy should be a natural part of the school curriculum therefore reaching also those children lacking the necessary support at home.
- Last, but not least: **each of us should take responsibility for making sure that information and communication technologies develop and are used in full respect of children's rights**. Governments, the industry, civil society, consumers, parents: we all can and should help technology to become a real factor of growth for children's rights.

In Europe there have been important initiatives to enhance knowledge about on-line behavior, to fight cybercrime and to implement safeguards to ensure children's safety. The many standards, tools and materials developed by the Council of Europe and the EU Kids Online research provide a sound reference to inform effective action.

This is no doubt an area where the Council of Europe can make a real difference. Being a high priority for my mandate, this is also an issue I remain very committed to pursue together with you.

Dear friends

Challenges, as the ones highlighted above, may at times seem daunting. But they must be vigorously addressed if we are to genuinely place children's rights at the center of Europe's policy agenda.

As we know well, preventing and ending violence against children requires a steady effort on an unprecedented scale, an effort that includes political leaders as well as ordinary citizens, and children as well as adults. But the cost of inaction for every child and for nations' social progress is simply too great to be tolerated. Let's use this conference to define, precisely, what we are going to do next, together.

Europe has indeed grown with children's rights. But it should not get old and tired in the process. On the contrary. We need more creativity, energy, passion, ambition and determination. We need more children and young people on board. In fact: what we need, is to grow younger!

Thank you very much for your attention.