

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Speech by Mr Thorbjørn Jagland,
Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

**“Growing with children’s rights”
A Conference on the implementation of the
Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2012-2015**

Dubrovnik, Croatia, 27 March 2014

Check against delivery

Dear Deputy Minister Opačić,
Dear Ministers,
Honourable Guests,

Let me start by saying that I am very grateful to Croatia’s Ministry of Social Policy and Youth for making this event possible. It is truly a pleasure to be with you today within such beautiful surroundings.

But in its time this building has also been witness to its share of human misery including two world wars and the fighting in the 1990s. Standing here in this elegant room, it’s hard to believe that just over 20 years ago this space temporarily became the home to hundreds of refugees, including many children, seeking safety during the siege of Dubrovnik. Some of us still remember the television footage showing terrified children in the lobby of this hotel. It is always heartbreaking to see those most vulnerable helpless and victim to violence.

It is the underlying belief of the Council of Europe that all children must fully enjoy the protection offered by all international human rights treaties.

Children’s dignity and integrity are non-negotiable.

Children’s rights are human rights.

Dear Friends,

The great Nelson Mandela once said: “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way it treats its children.” I couldn’t agree more.

In Monaco, a little over two years ago, you called for the increased dedication of Council of Europe monitoring bodies to children’s rights. You called for an increased impact of our legal instruments. We have answered that call.

Through a reinforced step by step approach to building a child-focused monitoring agenda we are making concrete progress. We are developing training programmes for professionals. And, by introducing an intensified exchange of good practice, we are boosting co-operation between countries in order to see what really works and what doesn’t.

It is absolutely essential that children living in the Council of Europe member States really benefit from the legal standards that we have developed. That is why as Secretary General I have undertaken important reforms for the Council of Europe to make sure that our standards are put into practice, to ensure that they do not remain a dead letter. Implementation of children’s rights standards is the core objective of the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child, what we call “the Monaco Strategy.” It shapes the agenda of our entire organisation.

This conference marks the mid-way stage of the Strategy. Over the next two days we will take stock of progress achieved within the first two years of implementation of the Strategy as well as look ahead to the future.

No doubt about it, we are making progress.

Today, in almost all of the areas covered by the Strategy we have managed to implement our legal standards more effectively. We have built solid partnerships with our member States, with the European Union, with UNICEF, with the UN Special Representative of Violence against Children, with UNHCR as well as with academics, civil society and experts.

But it is important that we also use this opportunity to pinpoint obstacles to the implementation of children’s rights standards and together find ways to overcome them. With that in mind I would like to touch on three issues which are crucial in cementing children’s rights: first, *child-friendly justice*; second, *reinforcing children’s rights in law* and third, *protecting children sexual exploitation and violence*.

Let me start with child-friendly justice. Children should not be behind bars. It is as simple as that.

I find it encouraging that the “European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment” — the “CPT” — has been updating its standards on children in detention. Through its reports and visits, the CPT is ensuring that rights of children in detention are respected. The Committee also promotes alternatives to detention and stresses that if detentions do happen they should always be a measure of last resort and be restricted to the shortest possible time. I do however agree with the European

Committee on Social Rights, a long standing children's rights advocate, that there is still much to be done in this area.

Second, reinforcing children's rights in law.

The bottom line is that children's rights need to be reflected clearly in all legislation. But more than that, laws need to be enforced. Gaps within legislation need to be plugged.

The Venice Commission has insisted that all countries should take steps to get the message across that children are real holders of real rights.

What does this mean in practice? It means children's rights need to be protected by the family. But also by parliaments and public authorities. It also means that the situation of children should be reviewed through independent human rights mechanisms, such as Ombudspersons of children's rights.

The Report adopted only last week in Venice is a perfect opportunity for our member States to consider if they really are doing all they can to secure the rights of children within legislation.

Third, protecting children from sexual exploitation and violence.

The tragic truth is that many children continue to fall victim to trafficking. This is an unacceptable, intolerable fate for any human being, let alone children. Those most in danger are children in vulnerable situations.

We're talking about children migrants. Children on the run. Children living on the streets. Children living in poverty. And so many more.

We need to follow the advice of GRETA which last year drew attention to the need to not only prevent the risk of children being trafficked but also to protect and help child victims of trafficking. We can no longer turn a blind eye to the evil that is trafficking.

Perhaps the most outrageous and unacceptable of crimes is that of sexual violence against children. Around 20 percent of children are thought to fall victim to some form of sexual violence. Think about it, that's one in every five children. It happens everywhere and it can happen just like that: with a single click of a mouse.

I think of all the much publicized cases of sexual abuse within so-called "circles of trust": crimes committed against children by business leaders, by sports trainers, within faith communities, by parents and friends. People the child trusts.

I think about the irreversible trauma of the victims. I also think about the long years of impunity, which were built on fear and silence. That is why the Lanzarote Convention gives me hope. The Convention and its monitoring committee is a unique and powerful legal tool to instigate change.

As a result, perpetrators are no longer safe. To date, 30 states have ratified this unique Convention. Laws have been changed and measures are now being taken to ensure that all actors working with and for children co-operate more smoothly. New structures have been established to support victims and their families.

We see this in the so-called “children’s houses” in the Nordic countries. We see this in Moldova’s “Green rooms.” We also see this here in Croatia, where structures have been set up to help prevent and protect child victims. This is all a major step in the right direction.

Above all, it is high time that we stop impunity, I am therefore a strong believer in the “One in Five Campaign.” The campaign has been an important tool in raising awareness about the scourge of sexual violence. It has done a great job in developing sex education materials as well as drawing attention to the need to speak up and stop the silence.

I would like to extend my gratitude to our national campaigners in over 20 countries, to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and, of course, the “Network of contact parliamentarians” of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The role of parliamentarians in keeping the fight for children’s rights high on the political agenda cannot be underestimated, and I am very pleased to see such a strong delegation from our Parliamentary Assembly here today.

Dear Friends,

Our struggle to secure children’s rights will only be successful if we keep up the momentum and continue to make sure that preventing and fighting violence against children remains at the top of all our agendas, including the UN Post-2015 Agenda.

The Council of Europe as an organisation will continue to stand strong to protect human rights, to defend democracy and the rule of law. That is our *raison d’être*. This also means that we have the responsibility to sometimes tackle questions which are controversial and uncomfortable.

Looking ahead, at the end of this year the Council of Europe will prepare its next strategy on the rights of the child. A process will be put in place to ensure a solid consultation with all institutional and national partners. My vision is to uphold a strong anti-violence agenda, support our states on the ground in respecting legal standards with the participation of children.

The American social reformer, Frederick Douglass, once said, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” We therefore need to be careful that not only children from good and economically stable families are guaranteed full rights. Today, in parts of Europe, there are children who live a few streets away from big houses and prestigious universities, yet they might as well be living in a different continent.

Let us never forget that children are not just our future – they are also our present.

I would like to thank you all for continuing to support children's rights through the work of the Council of Europe. I wish you all an inspiring and productive conference. Let's make it easy for our countries to respect children's rights.

We need to offer children a future.

Thank you.