



Reaching the heights for the rights of the child

Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2016-2021

High-Level Launching Conference

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Statements

Mr Michael O'Flaherty

Director

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished panellists,

Thank you for the introduction, and many thanks to the organisers for this important conference. We need the Council of Europe's new strategy and its five priority areas to help empower and protect all children.

The first three of the five priority areas identified in the strategy are:

- 1) equal opportunities for **all** children
- 2) participation of **all** children
- 3) a life free from violence for **all** children

The emphasis on **all** children is welcome, and reminiscent of the UN goal of achieving 'all human rights for all'. That said, certain groups of minors such as those with a Roma background or a disability are in need of our particular concern and attention.



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If we are speaking of particularly vulnerable groups of children, I must admit a preoccupation with refugees. Migrant and refugee children are one of the most exposed groups in Europe today, with thousands of children with families or alone arriving daily and many dying in the attempt. It is barely two months ago that I stood in a camp on Lesbos and saw children gazing at me through a barbed wire fence. Although they had been confined in a compound for their own safety, they could be forgiven for thinking they had been locked up.

Of all the children arriving, unaccompanied minors are of course the most vulnerable. The number of unaccompanied children disappearing from reception facilities in both transit and destination countries after arriving in the EU runs to the tens of thousands, a shockingly high number. In Sweden, one in four children go missing from their accommodation. In Slovenia, an estimated 80% of children accommodated at the Asylum Home disappear.

What can be done for migrant children?

In order to ensure protection and prevent abuse and exploitation, FRA is calling for swift appointment of qualified guardians. The procedure presently takes up to eight months, and even once appointed, some guardians have up to 150 children to take care of. FRA very much welcomes the proposals by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to increase child protection in this regard.

With the steadily rising number of new arrivals, national child protection systems and local communities are also under extreme pressure. To begin remedying the situation, we must concentrate on ensuring that child protection safeguards are in place to protect children from violence, exploitation and trafficking. This includes:

- The deployment of child protection officers and other trained personnel
- The development of a complaints mechanism accessible to children in reception and detention
- Measures to preserve family unity and prevent separation.

Strengthening child protection systems, including in the health, education and justice systems, will help to ensure the best possible protection of migrant and refugee children and their families and support their integration into local communities.

At the Fundamental Rights Agency, we are not just talking about the necessity of child protection, but acting.

- 1) Firstly, the Agency is honoured to have been a member of the Committee of Experts established to develop this new strategy on child rights. This is incidentally just one aspect of the good cooperation between our two institutions.
- 2) Another example is the handbook we issued jointly with the European Court of Human Rights on European law relating to the rights of the child, the first comprehensive guide to European legislation in this area.

- 3) We also recently published a handbook with the European Commission on guardianship for children deprived of parental care. We are now making practical use of this work as we are in the course of deploying migration and child rights experts to the hotspots in Greece, where we will give fundamental rights advice and support to the EU's asylum support office, EASO, and the border agency, Frontex.
- 4) We are publishing monthly reports on fundamental rights concerns related to the current migration situation. The focus of this month's edition is specifically on children. You can access the full report on FRA's website, www.fra.europa.eu.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I began by talking of refugee children and will also end with them. As we meet on this spring day, we face the prospect of greatly increased numbers making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean as the weather improves. What will their fate be? Will their rights be respected? This is the challenge faced by our Europe.

Thank you.