



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

## **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**

**Sofia, 5-6 April 2016**

#### **Statements**

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#### **Introduction: the new strategy**

“Reaching the heights for the rights of the child” - the title of this conference - was inspired by the image you can see behind me: 17-year-old Zev Hoover’s “On a String”, depicting a girl flying across the sky, holding a red balloon.

For me, the word which sums up this picture is “promise”. The idea that children should begin their lives on paths which are unrestricted and unknown: open to the possibilities which life sends their way.

It is this same ideal – of promise – which runs through the Council of Europe’s Strategy for the Rights of the Child, or the ‘Sofia Strategy’.



REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA  
MINISTRY OF LABOUR  
AND SOCIAL POLICY



**Bulgarian Chairmanship**  
Council of Europe  
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Conseil de l'Europe  
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This Strategy is the result of our collective work. You all own it. It seeks to invigorate pragmatism with ambition: identifying the meaningful goals to which all Council of Europe member states can and should aspire, and setting out the concrete actions needed to get us there.

Unlike its predecessor strategies, this one will be driven forward, in part, by a new intergovernmental Committee. This should help sustain high levels of political support, while also assisting member states in meeting their global commitments, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation in Europe of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

### **Instilling the next generation with a commitment to human rights**

I want to thank you all for being here to help us turn this document into a reality.

The child rights agenda is something to which I have long attached great importance. And, as we make it clear in the Strategy, the *child* rights agenda should be understood as part of Europe's wider *human* rights agenda, which is, I'm afraid, not having an easy time.

Our continent is at a crossroads. Ongoing uncertainty in our economies, the refugee crisis, the brutal terror threat – all are challenging solidarity between our nations, our social fabric, and the democratic values on which our societies rest.

Resisting these challenges and keeping Europe anchored in democracy, human rights and the rule of law is our generation's great challenge. But let's be clear: it will be up to the *next* generation to complete the task.

Not only are children full holders of human rights - they are also the future guardians of human rights. So how do we instil in them the understanding that Europe is a place where we protect the rights *of all*? How do we ensure that they grow up recognising that rights are hard-won – something to be cherished and fought for?

We begin with them – with *their* rights.

Lesson one: we teach our children that Europe is a place where no one should ever suffer violence – starting with little boys and girls.

It is a source of great pride to the Council of Europe that the number of member states banning corporal punishment in all settings has almost doubled over the past decade, reaching 29 last year. But this still means that in 18 member states, if you hit a child at home, this is lawful; if you hit an adult in the same place, on the other hand, you go to court.

On sexual violence, again, progress has been made - 40 member states have now ratified our Lanzarote Convention, which outlaws these crimes. It is essential that we now seize this momentum, shifting our focus squarely onto implementation on the ground.

Lesson two: we teach our children that *social rights* are human rights too – beginning with *their* social rights.

We must correct the injustices which still persist: the continued existence of child labour in Europe for example, identified by the European Social Committee in January; the shortcomings in welfare and social policies aimed at families, which we see in many states.

And we need to think carefully about how we give children a voice and a presence in these reforms, for example in the context of “child budgeting”, one of the topics being discussed today.

Lesson three: we teach our children that people must always have a voice in the decisions which affect them. This is what it means to be an engaged, democratic citizen, and it doesn't just start when you turn old enough to vote.

Important advances have been made in this area in recent years, but implementation of the child's right to be heard is notoriously difficult to measure.

The Council of Europe's Child Participation Assessment Tool, which will be presented this afternoon, will help us achieve this aim. And the people who will really be able to tell us if we are getting it right, of course, are the children and young people joining us today as active participants – experts, speakers, observers and rapporteurs.

Lesson four: we teach our children that it is the duty of the majority to protect minorities – making sure they see this in their own lives, among their own peers.

That means guaranteeing the rights of LGBTI children; of marginalised, socially excluded young people; of children who come into the contact with criminal justice systems; *of migrant and refugee children*.

I won't dwell on this last point, because I know that our Human Rights Commissioner will address it in his remarks, and Mr Tomáš Boček, the Secretary General's Special Representative for migration and refugees will talk on the subject later, too. But, let me stress the urgency with which Europe's governments must now act to protect the many refugee children falling into the hands of traffickers and criminals.

This is a priority for the Council of Europe and it must remain at the top of our thoughts – which is precisely why just a few weeks ago our Secretary General issued guidance to all member States on standards relating to the treatment of refugee children.

Finally, lesson five: we must teach our children that there are no human rights black holes – including the Internet. It is not a lawless space. It is not a free for all. We already have a number of legal instruments protecting human rights online: they are listed in the Strategy. But we know that problems like cyber bullying and hate speech on the internet are on the rise. We need to turn standards into reality and I'm very pleased that this issue is on the agenda today.

On that note, let me hand over the floor: we have a rich and busy conference ahead of us. Before I do: a final thanks to you all. We are here, together, because we want to protect the rights of children. By doing so, we will help them become human rights protectors themselves. It is our shared mission and there are few more important endeavours. Thank you again for your commitment and your time.