



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

H.E. Mr Rosen Plevneliev
President
Republic of Bulgaria

Esteemed Mrs. President,
Esteemed Mrs. Deputy-Secretary General of the Council of Europe,
Esteemed Mr. Deputy Prime Minister,
Esteemed Ministers, Deputy Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am proud that a tradition is being established in Bulgaria whereby important international forums devoted to the rights of the child, are held under the auspices of the Head of State. This is an expression of the importance which Bulgaria attaches to the policies on children and to good practices. Therefore it is a great honor to me to host the high-level Council of Europe conference on children's rights. An event of extreme importance, which will be part of our plans and our daily lives in the next six years. Currently here, in the heart of Bulgaria, the new Strategy for the rights of the child, unanimously adopted by the Committee of Ministers, will be presented. It is not by chance that our new strategic document was approved namely during the Bulgarian chairmanship. In the past years Bulgaria has made the policies on children a government priority



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and logically this was the first declared priority of our chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Therefore today in Sofia the implementation of the Strategy for the Rights of the Child is launched. The implementation of the Sofia strategy is launched.

The Strategy from Sofia, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 2 March 2016, will guide 47 countries in the next six years in their work on five priority goals related to the child's rights – equal opportunities for all children; participation of all children; a life free from violence for all children; child-friendly justice for all children and the rights of the in the digital environment. The current conference is organized within the framework of the Bulgarian chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. It is hosted by the State Agency for Child Protection and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and I would like to warmly thank these two institutions and all other institutions that wholeheartedly organized this extremely important conference. The most important thing is that 47 member states of the Council of Europe will assume commitments in today's debates, and just as we adopted the strategy in full agreement, we will also implement it in full agreement.

Almost 10 years have passed since the program "Building a Europe for and with children" was adopted. The Council of Europe and its member states achieved a lot in constructive partnership with the UN and EU, with international and national NGOs in this period. The documents we adopted outline an ethical vision of and high standards in the rights of the child and we built good practices on them. We addressed a lot of challenges, but are we ready to adequately react to the new challenges we are facing?

We are passing through a period of turbulence. The record number of crises in the world and their interaction make the international environment more insecure, even more unpredictable. And this environment is becoming increasingly more ruthless towards the children, who pay the highest price. Despite our efforts, despite the results we have achieved, we still witness violation of children's rights on a daily basis.

There are many risks that create vulnerable children – children living in poverty, deprived of parental care, disabled children, children belonging to minority groups, victims of human trafficking, deprived of freedom. Once placed in such situations, they easily become targets of violence, abuse, neglect. And we should admit that despite the development of our societies, violence against children is not something unusual. Rooting out the stereotypes is a difficult and slow process that requires not only perseverance in pursuing policies, but also a complete change of the attitudes of society and the individual. This is the only way we can guarantee sustainable progress. We are happy about the achieved success in removing physical punishments. However, we are witnessing new threats, new forms of violence emerge.

The children-migrants and the unaccompanied children are mostly affected by violence. Whether we will manage to defend their rights depends on our readiness to cope with the humanitarian crises themselves in their very essence, to avoid and settle conflicts, not merely register them and feel concerned about them.

The development of technologies, the widespread use of the new means of communication undoubtedly creates a lot of opportunities for the young people today and has a positive impact on their knowledge, creativity and development. However, they also involve a lot of risks. On the one hand, the escalation of violence in the social networks, which are today's reality for all young people, raises concern. On the other hand, the virtual world offers a favorable ground for radicalization, for promoting extremist ideas, which are already being put into practice.

We run the risk of creating a lost generation of disillusioned young people in the spiral of poverty which is passed on to next generations, which will undermine the foundations of our society. And if a year ago this was a hypothetical danger, after Paris and Brussels it has become the new reality. A second generation of migrants, which have lost their illusion of personal fulfillment in the receiving societies, proved to be most susceptible to radical ideas and ideologies that internet generously offers. I hope that the fifth priority in the Council of Europe strategy - the rights of the children in the digital environment - will help us address together the problem of global terrorism.

When we invest in children, we invest in the next generation, in the prosperity of our own societies. Therefore every crisis should become a reason not to limit the range of the pursued policies, but to reconsider their range and quality. The objective appraisal of the policies and their efficiency will help us progress. We should not only be honest and united in our assessment of where we made mistakes, but also in the choice of adequate solutions. The new Sofia strategy not only makes a complex assessment, but also gives a complex response to the contemporary challenges the world and the children are facing. On the other hand, we are proud of the approach adopted when working out this strategy – we express our deep gratitude to the Council of Europe and the institutions that took part in this extremely worthy initiative because the Strategy for the Rights of the Child was worked out in the context of full agreement, openness, transparency and dialogue with everyone. All interested parties, including the children themselves, had a say while working out the strategy and it was adopted in full agreement. This is a guarantee for its sustainable implementation.

I am happy that Bulgaria is hosting this extremely important conference because my country conducted dynamic and difficult reforms related to child care. We remember where we used to be and where we are today. Even more importantly, we know where we would like to go. For instance, one of the earliest results we take pride in was the shutdown of all residential care institutions for children with disabilities in 2015. The achievements have been possible because there was a political will, a clear priority, a strong civic participation and because the planning and implementation of the process was open. Bulgaria is setting a good example in this respect and the results show that we are on the right road. Of course, we are absolutely aware of the serious challenges we are facing in order to ensure sustainability of this process. New reforms will be conducted, among which I would like to highlight the reform in juvenile justice. And that is also a reason for holding the conference. We will share our ideas, but we, Bulgarians will proudly share our experience – in the good practices and the lessons we have failed to learn on our road

to a successful deinstitutionalization and development of alternative social services. I hope that our experience in making a vision come true will be useful in the debate on ensuring the implementation of the Strategy of the Council of Europe.

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

The road before us is clearly outlined. It will neither be short, nor easy. We need a political leadership and we need to pool efforts. Today is an important day – a day in which we should confirm our commitments to implementing the Strategy. Leaving Sofia and the current forum, we will together cover this road and achieve this most worthy goal. In the name of our children's well-being.

Thank you and I wish you success!