



## 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

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Dear distinguished speakers and discussants,

Dear participants and guests,

I would like to welcome you and to wish you a fruitful and a pleasant time in Sofia as well at this highly important conference. My name is Velina Todorova, I am docent on Civil&Family&Child Law at Plovdiv University as well as the BAS. *I hope that my more than 25 years experience in child rights advocacy, research and in law and policy making will help to chare this session.*

The objective of our thematic session is to provide a space for true conversation on some key challenges covered by the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child in the field of Child friendly justice: with a focus on hearing of children in judicial procedures.

This audience is well informed about both the normative and policy context of the discussion. No need to name the landmark standards safeguarding the fundamental right of the child to access to justice as well as his or her right to be heard among which are the CRC with its nearly 26 years of implementation, the relevant CoE Conventions, the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights and the rapidly developing EU law on this matter. In addition, the Council of Europe's 2010 Guidelines on child friendly justice has enormously strengthened the implementation of the said standards setting out a series of practical recommendations to member states.



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It is my pleasure to moderate this session that is expected to give policy makers and practitioners an opportunity to discuss: (i) the specific needs of a child in contact with the justice system, whether as victim, witness, offender or petitioner, in the context of hearings; (ii) the key outstanding difficulties faced by professionals in practice in hearing children; and (iii) how can the judiciary build and secure the capacity of the child to be a real actor in the judicial procedure that concerns him or her.

Here are some practical details about how we are going to work in order to have the best possible use of our time, which is only 90 minutes: I am delighted to mention that the interest to this topic is promising for the implementation of the priorities set forth in the Strategy. We have more than 60 participants registered and attending, which means that we should be very strict with the time and it is one of my important tasks to observe that. Our time will be divided strictly between three subthemes that are going to be presented by speakers and discussants, hopefully with respect of their agreed time. After that the plenary exchange of ideas will start and each speaker will have 2-3 minutes to intervene after presenting his/herself. Some time should be left for the final summary of the results of the session. I assume that we all agree on such a time scheme and we can start with our work.

Our first set of questions to be discussed is on the right of the child to be heard in judicial proceedings: progress and outstanding issues.

It is my genuine pleasure to present our first speaker **Mr. Benoît Van Keirsbilck**, President of Defence of Children International, to share his broader concept on child's participation in judicial procedures and on the challenges that the child may face at every stage of the procedures.

Please, you have the floor.

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Now, I pass the floor to **Ms Astrid Podzialowski**, Head of Sector Rights of the Child, Equality and Citizens' Rights Department, to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, before giving you the floor I would like to express my and of the audience highest appreciation for all the comparative research, analyses and ideas of FRA that provide extremely valuable support to all stakeholders engaged with promotion and protection of the rights of the child.

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Now we are going to our next subject area which is the participation of children in judicial proceedings: bridging the gaps between legislation and practice.

I am more than delighted to give the floor to Ms Verginia Micheva-Russeva, a Deputy Justice Minister of Bulgaria. She is a former judge with a profound experience in hearing children involved in civil law procedures in her court, an experience allowing her to address some of the achievements and challenges in the Bulgarian context. Ms Russeva has taken the lead of the current JJ reform in Bulgaria, which another reason to admire her work.

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Now, we shall hear the view of the civil society - **Ms Renata Szredzińska**, Member of the Board of Nobody's Children Foundation (Poland), a very well-known NGO in Bulgaria because of its good practices being replicated here.

Ms Szredzińska will present the successful practices in introducing friendly child interviewing in Poland as well as the challenges in that process.

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We are approaching now our last subject area on the ways forward: Supporting the implementation of the right of the child to be heard in judicial proceedings in Europe.

We have already heard some on this important matter by Mr Van Keirsbilck, but now we will have the great opportunity to listen to **Ms Margaret Tuite**, European Commission's coordinator for the rights of the child. Ms Tuite will not only present valuable information coming from projects funded by the Commission but also will reflect on innovative practices and challenges and even shortcomings identified.

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**Ms Zuzana Fišerová**, Chair of the Council of Europe's European Committee on Legal Co-operation will stimulate our plenary discussion highlighting the importance attached by the Council of Europe on protecting children's rights and ensuring a child-friendly justice in member states. Ms Fiserova will also encourage us to address the challenges explaining what support the CoE can provide to the member states and reminding about the powerful legal instruments produced by the CoE.

Thank you, very much to our panellists that provided us with a clear and thought stimulating frame for discussion. Dear colleagues, the floor is yours.