

18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Lanzarote Committee

Strasbourg, 12 May 2017

## Speech by Johan van den Hout (Netherlands, SOC), Congress Spokesperson on Children

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is with great pleasure that I take part in this 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Lanzarote Committee, in my capacity as a Congress Spokesperson on children.

Recently, the information about a large number of minors lost in the wild after their arrival in Europe, running the risk of exploitation, sexual abuse and trafficking has horrified us all and has reinforced our will to take strong action against this phenomenon.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities that I represent has been active through the 1 in 5 campaign of the Council of Europe and through its standard-setting work in raising awareness on this issue. We have encouraged elected representatives to take steps to prevent sexual violence against children at local and regional levels in the member States.

Local and regional authorities, as public authorities closest to its citizens, are at the frontline of the fight against sexual crimes and exploitation committed inside their own communities. Their responsibility is to safeguard and promote the best interests of the children.

One of the first actions undertaken by the Congress has been the promotion of the Pact of Towns, initiated in 2012 in the framework of the ONE in FIVE campaign of the Council of Europe.

The Congress adopted a Strategic Action Plan in this framework. The objectives were several:

- raising awareness among its members,
- promoting the use of the Council of Europe legal standards and instruments,
- encouraging local authorities to launch campaigns,
- promoting a multi-stakeholder approach and
- developing a culture whereby towns and regions are more child-friendly.

This initiative to stop sexual violence against children encompasses more than 60 cities, regions and associations today. A toolkit, that includes the Pact, has been developed and exists today in 37 languages.

Moreover, since 2015 we have been organising a biannual seminar for national associations of local and regional authorities.

One of our aims is to explore how the local government associations can cooperate in order to continue raising awareness among European cities and regions on this subject. We also encourage them to sign the Congress Pact. The second of these meetings will be held in Belgrade in June this year.

The second part of the seminar will be consecrated to discussing what local authorities can and should do with regard to refugee children and minors. We will have mayors, councilors, public administration staff working on child-related issues and experts in the seminar to help us brainstorm about what direction to take. These exchanges will feed into our report.

In 2016, the Congress took part in the events organised on the occasion of the European Day on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse that took place on 18 November 2016.

Congress President, Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, issued a statement calling local and regional authorities to take part actively in this Day and to decide on the initiatives they can take to fight against these crimes. Congress members addressed the public on that issue in their own language, on videos available on the ONE in FIVE webpage of the Congress website.

Another step forward in our work is the new report we are preparing, entitled "Refugee children and minors in Europe: What role and responsibilities for local authorities?".

The report is planned to be submitted to the Current Affairs Committee for approval in October this year. This report will be a follow-up to the report recently adopted on the 32<sup>nd</sup> session, on the role of local and regional authorities regarding the reception and integration of migrants. It will focus on what local authorities can and must do for refugee children and unaccompanied minors.

Thanks for your attention. I look forward to cooperate with you actively on this issue.