



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**

Report



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Introduction

1. On 2 March 2016, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a new Strategy for the Rights of the Child for the period 2016-2021. This Strategy was launched at the high-level conference “Reaching the Heights for the Rights of the Child”¹, organised within the framework of the Bulgarian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, and hosted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the State Agency for Child Protection of Bulgaria. The conference was organised under the Patronage of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, H.E. Mr Rosen Plevneliev.

2. The conference provided a platform for an in-depth exchange on the five priority areas identified in the Strategy, namely:

- Equal opportunities for all children
- Participation of all children
- A life free from violence for all children
- Child-friendly justice for all children
- Rights of the child in the digital environment.

3. The objectives of the conference were: (1) to generate awareness of and visibility for the new Strategy, (2) to engage member States and other stakeholders in its implementation and (3) to identify innovative ways for all actors in the field to co-operate in implementing the Strategy over the years to come.

Participants and outreach

4. The conference gathered more than 300 participants, including the President of the Republic of Bulgaria and the President of Malta. A total of 17 Ministers and Deputy Ministers as well as high-level representatives of other international organisations expressed their commitments to the rights of the child. Overall, participants consisted of national delegations from 44 Council of Europe member States, 12 ombudspersons for children, over 30 NGOs, representatives of all bodies and numerous intergovernmental and monitoring committees of the Council of Europe, academic experts, and 10 young delegates. This outstanding participation illustrates the successful mainstreaming results achieved through the previous Council of Europe Strategies for the Rights of the Child.

5. The young delegates participating in the conference were between 14 and 17 years old and have experience in advocacy work on different areas of children’s rights. Guided by an adult team led by the NGO Eurochild, they actively participated in the entire conference alongside the adult participants. The young delegates reported back to the plenary on their views and recommendations from the thematic sessions. Their contributions were highly appreciated by all participants, both for their clear and focused messages as well as for their outstanding presentations. A summary of the young delegates’ conclusions from the conference will be published in a separate report.

6. The conference received extensive coverage by over 25 Bulgarian media sources and by international media in over 10 other countries. There was also wide coverage in social media. Over 700 posts were created by 244 users on the Twitter hashtag #ChildRightsSofia, potentially reaching over one million persons.

¹ For the programme and list of participants of the conference, see www.coe.int/en/web/children/sofia2016.

7. The evaluation of the conference showed that 87% of respondents rated the content of the thematic sessions “excellent” or “very good” and 92% rated the overall organisation “excellent” or “very good”. 63% said that the conference “substantially” enhanced their professional expertise.

Opening ceremony and high-level session

8. The opening ceremony initiated the debate on the crucial need for states to ensure a strong child rights agenda, in line with the Council of Europe Strategy. The President of the Republic of Bulgaria, H.E. Mr Plevneliev, stressed the importance of the rights of the child in Bulgaria, underlining that it was not a coincidence, but rather a strategic opportunity, for Bulgaria to place the rights of the child at the top of its list of priorities for its Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. Mr Ivailo Kalfin, Deputy Prime Minister for Demographic and Social Policies and Minister of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria, emphasised that the maturity of a country can only be measured by the manner in which it protects the rights of the child. He furthermore drew attention to the refugee crisis in Europe, underlining the risks it poses for children. Ms Gabriella Battaini-Draconi, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, placed child rights at the core of the human rights agenda of the Council of Europe and recalled that, by protecting the rights of children, children can in turn develop into human rights protectors. She also drew attention to the importance of the new Council of Europe Ad hoc Committee for the Rights of the Child (CAHENF) in strengthening the European child rights agenda through a sharper implementation of international and European legal standards. H.E. Ms Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, focused on the need to explore the potential of every child, and the importance of ensuring a rights-based approach in any legislative or policy reform. She furthermore stressed the need to ensure that the implementation of the Strategy nurtures resilient communities. H.E. Ms Coleiro Preca underlined that all children should be able to understand legal systems destined to protect them children. In particular, children in vulnerable situations need to be provided with full access to justice, as the pathway through which other human rights are fulfilled.

9. High-level political representatives participating in the high-level session of the conference expressed their satisfaction with the new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (“the Sofia Strategy”), the inclusive and transparent process in which it was developed, and the five priority areas chosen. Ministers reported on the numerous challenges that they are confronted with at national level. These included the need for social protection, in particular for children with disabilities, children without parental care, children affected by migration, Roma children, and other vulnerable groups. In this context, several speakers stressed the benefits of early interventions and early childhood education and care. Violence was mentioned as a problem to be tackled in different settings, including the family, schools, and in cyberspace. The Council of Europe Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Lanzarote Convention) was mentioned as a driver of legislative change in the area of sexual violence. Reform of juvenile justice systems and the need for more child-friendly justice were also highlighted as important concerns. Some countries reported on their work to take a gender perspective in the field of children’s rights, and to tackle discrimination of LGBTI children. Representatives agreed that children and society as a whole need to become more aware of the rights of the child. Child participation was highlighted as a key element of true respect for children and their rights, and training of professionals working with children on a child rights-based approach was considered essential in that regard.

10. Representatives agreed that the priority areas defined in the Strategy reflect well the current situation in Europe and expressed their commitment to its implementation over the coming years at national level. They also stressed the importance of international co-operation and the value of the Council of Europe as a motor for promoting the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Council of Europe standards on children’s rights, as well as a platform for exchange of good practice and co-ordination.

11. The CAHENF, set up by the Committee of Ministers on 2 March 2016, was welcomed as a valuable instrument to guide the implementation of the Strategy and foster synergies with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the European Union, other international organisations, and civil society.

12. Mr Nils Muižnieks, Commissioner for Human Rights, recalled the numerous threats to children's rights which are rooted in the migration crisis, such as the unknown fate of approximately 10 000 missing children, the phenomenon of statelessness, and the need to invest in integration through education. Mr Muižnieks also stressed the role of education in tackling child poverty, which persists throughout Europe despite overall economic recovery. He also referred to the situation in Ukraine and its impact on children.

13. H.E. Mr Daniel Mitov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria and Chair of the Committee of Ministers, emphasised that, while the new Strategy builds on its predecessor, it also takes the action of the Council of Europe in this area a step further. He underscored that the Strategy's priorities address topical issues that require concrete measures and safeguards.

14. Mr Benyam Dawit Mezmur, Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, welcomed the establishment of CAHENF and emphasised the expectations this new Committee generates in acting as a platform to further strengthen the implementation of the UNCRC. He encouraged Council of Europe member States to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on a communication procedure. Finally, he stressed the positive implications which the Strategy and its implementation will have beyond Europe, and which should not be underestimated.

15. Ms Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Regional Director for CEE/CIS, and Mr Michael O'Flaherty, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), stressed the urgency of protecting the rights of refugee and migrant children. For UNICEF, "the migration crisis is a children's crisis", with children representing approximately 40% of the migrants travelling to Europe. Mr O'Flaherty emphasised the need to appoint qualified guardians to protect unaccompanied migrant children from abuse and exploitation, and welcomed the proposals by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to increase child protection in this regard.

16. Ms Marta Santos Pais, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, and Ms Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, welcomed the Council of Europe's continued focus on eliminating violence against children. Ms Santos Pais invited conference participants to join the "High Time" Initiative to end Violence against Children, and noted the Council of Europe's potential to support member States in implementing the specific target on eliminating all violence against children within the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development. Ms de Boer-Buquicchio underlined the importance of breaking the taboo around sexual exploitation in many societies, and the need for strategic co-operation involving all relevant stakeholders, including the private sector.

17. Ms Sevinj Fataliyeva, General Rapporteur on Children of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, recalled the Parliamentary Assembly's contribution to the ONE in FIVE Campaign to stop sexual violence against children, and stressed the need to react to new forms of violence against children, including that which takes place in the digital environment, and in the context of migration.

First thematic session: Upholding the rights of children on the move: learning from the "refugee crisis"

18. The session took stock of the lessons learnt from the refugee crisis from the ground by governmental and non-governmental actors, independent national monitoring mechanisms and networks, and international organisations, and identified remaining challenges. In the panel discussion, speakers emphasised that the protection of children affected by the refugee crisis is a shared responsibility of

European states, building on the proposals for priority actions of the Council of Europe's Secretary General², as introduced by his Special Representative on migration and refugees. The judicial practice and the evolving jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights with respect to the safeguards that require implementation by States to protect children throughout the migratory process, and to uphold the principle of the best interest of the child, were also highlighted. The crucial role of monitoring mechanisms such as the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human beings (GRETA) at European level and of ombudspersons³ at national level was underscored.

19. Additional efforts are required to monitor the situation on the ground with respect to the conditions of children deprived of their liberty, where this occurs, the enforcement of forced returns and repatriation, the access by children, including children with disabilities, to relevant services, and to ensure that effective remedies are in place in member States in the context of international protection. Children's vulnerabilities in the migration process, notably for unaccompanied children, and the seriousness of risks faced, such as trafficking and sexual exploitation, were emphasised. The need to uphold the rights and protection of internally-displaced children, who are on the move for similar reasons as refugees (armed conflict, violence, human rights violations) was also mentioned.

20. Participants concluded that a coordinated child-rights approach should be ensured at European level, inspired by the Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child. International organisations and the Council of Europe were called upon to foster good practices and to promote capacity building and institutional actions to safeguard the rights of children on the move, including through the provision of support for an integrated child protection system, and for effectively addressing the legal and implementation gaps with respect to guardianship. Effective inter-agency co-operation, in particular of child protection agencies in a cross-border context, and the provision of adequate funding to a range of relevant stakeholders and projects, are essential.

Second thematic session: Hearing children in judicial procedures

21. Evidence suggests that in recent years, respect and fulfilment of the right of the child to be heard has improved in Council of Europe Member states, and children have been given a more active role in judicial proceedings. Nevertheless, "hearing" a child within the framework of a judicial process remains difficult to conduct in practice.

22. The session provided an opportunity for policy makers, practitioners and young delegates to share their views, reflect and discuss on: (i) the specific needs of a child in contact with the justice system in the context of hearings; (ii) the key outstanding difficulties faced by professionals in practice; and (iii) how the judiciary can build and secure the capacity of the child to be a real actor in the judicial procedure that concerns them.

23. The session allowed for a number of avenues for future actions to be explored, including the need to increase children's role and participation in civil and administrative proceedings, the need to develop training modules, particularly interdisciplinary modules, for children's rights standards, communication techniques, understanding well the child's views and taking into account the different age groups and stages of development of the child. Establishing panels of appropriately trained and approved justice-sector professionals (e.g. lawyers, judges, court clerks and staff, police officers, prison officers, probation

² Information document SG/INF(2016)9 final.

³ At the occasion of the conference, the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) released a [letter](#) addressed to EU high authorities calling for the protection of the rights of unaccompanied children on the move and expressing serious concerns regarding the safety and the protection of the rights of children on the move in Europe, following the 18.03.2016 agreement between the EU and Turkey.

officers, bailiffs, expert witnesses) was underlined as crucial as well, and so was the need to ensure a child-friendly environment when children are interviewed (for them to feel safe and comfortable). To achieve this it would be important to continue sharing good practices between member States, possibly through regional activities. Developing national protocols or guidelines for professionals working with or for children, and pursuing awareness-raising efforts among children and civil society (through mobile applications, comics, meeting events in schools, posters, etc.) to explain further the right of the child, and to provide related practical information, was emphasised.

Third thematic session: The right of to be heard: taking child participation to a new level

24. The objective of the session was to discuss how to ensure that children are heard systematically whenever their interests are at stake, and what the barriers are to child participation “by default”. The Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool was presented, after having been revised as a result of testing in three pilot countries (Estonia, Ireland, Romania). The Estonian representatives reported on their very positive experience with the tool to assess the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC on the child’s right to be heard, as well as CM/Rec(2012)2 on participation of children and young people under the age of 18, and encouraged other member States to use it as well.

25. Discussions ensued in three parallel working groups, which were facilitated by expert teams composed of adults and young delegates. Participants of the working group on “Protecting the right to participate” were inspired by the Irish National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making, as presented by an expert team from Ireland. The working group facilitated by an expert team from Estonia discussed ways of “Promoting and informing about participation”. In the third working group, an expert team from Bulgaria presented the functioning of the Youth Advisory Council to the Bulgarian State Agency for Child Protection, which introduced a discussion on “Creating Spaces for Child Participation”.

Fourth thematic session: Children’s rights in the digital environment: designing a co-ordinated approach through national strategies

26. For the first time, the Strategy recognises the rights of the child in the digital environment as a priority area, emphasising that all three P-s – participation, protection and provision - should be ensured in a non-discriminatory manner, while simultaneously taking into account the best interest of the child.

27. Speakers welcomed the Council of Europe’s upcoming work under the Strategy to provide guidance and support to member States in ensuring children’s participation, protection and provision rights in the digital environment. To assist this process, discussions in this session highlighted the persisting tensions arising at national and European level surrounding the realisation of children’s rights, as well as some of the key challenges experienced by children as Internet and media users in need of protection and as digital citizens. Several concrete examples of frameworks and partnerships were presented, outlining national and international initiatives, which involved co-ordination and co-operation of various stakeholders mobilised together to address these challenges. Those included contributions made by Safer Internet Centres, national cybercrime units, and the development of a model national response by #WePROTECT Children Online. The importance of the Council of Europe’s Convention on cybercrime was also underlined.

28. Taking into account the fact that child-users of Internet represent a substantial group, participants were invited to look at the digital world from a child-perspective. This was facilitated through the participation of numerous children in the session, whose views were sought on all issues discussed. Participants agreed that further work with all relevant stakeholders will be needed to find ways to embed

the importance of children's rights into the policies and practices of the many organisations concerned with the digital world, while conversely embedding the importance of the digital world into the policies and practices of the institutions concerned with children's well-being.

Fifth thematic session: Radicalisation of children: finding the rights-based approach

29. The session aimed to identify why children and young people join extremist movements, and how to prevent violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism. Social exclusion, discrimination and education inequality combined with a perceived lack of social purpose were discussed as main root causes for extremism and radicalisation. The marginalisation of young people with an immigrant background and islamophobia can lead to a vicious circle making young people susceptible for extremist discourse.

30. To address extremism and radicalisation in the long term, education was identified as key. Several participants mentioned the need to guarantee equal access to quality education for all children, regardless of their origin or the neighbourhood they live in. Segregated schooling was mentioned as being detrimental to overcoming ethnic cleavages. Truly integrated education, both across ethnic groups and social strata, was considered important. Teaching empathy and civic engagement education were presented as effective tools to counter prejudice among and against certain groups of young people.

31. Participants concluded that young people should be used as an asset when addressing extremism and radicalisation, for example, through peer-to-peer education or youth-led research. One of the young delegates summarised her conclusions from the session in the following very clear message to policy makers: "Give children second chances and enable them to be socially useful."

Sixth thematic session: Taking monitoring results forward: follow-up to the Lanzarote Committee's first implementation report on "The protection of children against sexual abuse in the circle of trust".

32. In December 2015, the Lanzarote Committee – the monitoring body of the Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse – adopted its first implementation report on 26 reviewed parties. An NGO representative and an expert in child participation were invited to share concrete suggestions and practices which could take these specific monitoring results and recommendations forward. An independent and critical assessment, and expertise in the field related to sexual violence, could, for example, provide a real added-value for the Committee, especially with regard to the collection of data, which was identified as an issue for most parties.

33. Involving children in the monitoring procedure is unprecedented for the Lanzarote Committee, yet children participating as survivors of sexual violence, and as actors of change, could provide the Committee with a unique insight and chance to be in direct contact with the group it aims to protect. This was particularly emphasised by young people during their reporting-back to the plenary session. As a start, consultations and research should be organised with children who have experienced sexual violence, and the justice system thereof, in order to validate and verify good practices in State parties. During the session it was also suggested that ombudspersons play a stronger part in representing children's views and governments' actions on the ground in this particular area.

34. A stronger co-operation between NGOs, professionals working in direct contact with child-victims, and of course children themselves, should therefore be promoted and enhanced. In this respect,

a short presentation of the Children's House model, which is based on an interdisciplinary and multi-agency approach to guarantee the child's best interest during investigative procedures, was a clear example of how all actors involved in child protection can work together in a child-friendly environment, thereby ensuring better protection for children.

Seventh thematic session: The UN Study on Violence against Children +10: progress and challenges in Europe

35. The Council of Europe has acted as the regional driver in the implementation of the recommendations of the UN Secretary General's 2006 Study on Violence against Children, as reflected by the numerous legal standards on this issue, by the activities of its monitoring mechanisms, awareness-raising campaigns, and initiatives. The consecutive strategies on the rights of the child have consistently aimed at eliminating violence against children. The implementation of the 2016-2021 Strategy enables the Council of Europe to make a decisive contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and to its specific target 16.2, which calls for the elimination of all forms of violence against children by 2030.

36. The session provided a platform for policy makers, practitioners and young delegates to share their views, reflect and discuss the opportunities generated at global level and the concrete ways on how Europe can use these to effectively address all forms of violence against all children. Several relevant initiatives were presented. The High Time to End Violence against Children of the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children offers one platform for governments, organisations, institutions, children and adults to express commitment to children's freedom from violence and support initiatives to prevent and respond to violence. The Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, and the commitment of pathfinder countries which commit to be leaders in ending violence against children, and delivering UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 16.2 and related targets, was also introduced.

37. Speakers and participants highlighted a number of possible actions to be driven by the Council of Europe under the strategy towards the delivery of SDG 16.2. These included the need to support member States in developing integrated national strategies to protect children from violence, and increasing participation of children in civil and administrative proceedings. It was also stressed the importance to identify key policy interventions which could be used as indicators of progress to achieve target 16.2 in Europe. These policy interventions could be developed through the work of relevant policy-making bodies, such as the CAHENF or other relevant committees and could cover such issues as banning violence, mapping progress with respect to the elimination of corporal punishment, promoting effective national integrated strategies, data collection mechanisms, safe and child sensitive counselling and reporting mechanisms, etc. Assisting in the collection of data and information needed to review progress made by countries in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, through the work of its relevant monitoring bodies, such as the Lanzarote Committee on sexual abuse and exploitation, GRETA on trafficking, GREVIO on gender-based violence, was also suggested. Facilitating children and young people's participation and leadership in the global efforts through the Council of Europe youth sector was considered useful.

Eighth thematic session: Public spending and the rights of the child: child budgeting

38. The best legal standards and policies cannot achieve much if there are not the necessary funding attributed to their implementation. Participants of the session discussed the three elements of child budgeting: (1) visibility, i.e. providing transparency on what is spent on children; (2) sufficiency, i.e. ensuring that adequate public spending is available for the realisation of children's rights; and (3)

participation, i.e. ensuring that children have the opportunity to influence public spending on matters affecting them.

39. The session started with a presentation of the forthcoming General Comment No. 19 (2016) by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on Public Spending and the Rights of the Child, which makes recommendations for making children's rights visible throughout the budgeting process. The General Comment states that making children's rights a visible priority in national and subnational budgets is not only a prerequisite for their realisation, but also has positive impacts on future economic growth, sustainable development and social cohesion. The General Comment identifies States' obligations and presents recommendations on how to guarantee effective, efficient, equitable, transparent and sustainable public revenue and spending related to the rights of the child. The sufficiency of public spending on the realisation of children's rights is a key concern of the European Social Charter, as the second presentation pointed out. It was stressed in particular that public spending on children as a priority is not to be relegated under the pretext of the economic crisis. The European Committee of Social Rights held, in its recent Contribution on Economic Insecurity and Children's Rights⁴ that children are more susceptible to bearing the burden of the economic crisis and austerity measures and therefore require heightened protection in this regard. The need for, and the benefits of, children's participation in decisions about public spending, was highlighted by the representative of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, who drew on examples from children's budgeting in Wales and a video summarising children's own views about public spending.⁵ Discussions ensued in three parallel working groups and a walking plenary, where participants could directly share their own experiences and good practices with public spending on the rights of the child.

Ninth thematic session: Non-discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) young people

40. LGBTI children and young people face many human rights violations arising from discrimination on the basis of their actual or perceived sexuality, gender identity or sex characteristics. The discrimination they face is often overlooked in law and policy development. As a result, there are knowledge and policy gaps in this area, while homophobic and transphobic bullying is widespread and often leads to dramatic events, including suicide. The session addressed some of these issues and policy gaps, and looked at good practices from member States.

41. In the panel discussion, speakers for the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the Council of Europe outlined the limited data and policy examples available on LGBTI children and young people, and highlighted recent research by the FRA on transgender and intersex children. The main outcomes of the study that was undertaken as a background document for the session were presented, stressing the need for further research, inclusive policy development, and direct access of LGBTI children and young people to adequate welfare services, while emphasising the opportunities available to make progress in the area. A young person from the Netherlands shared his experiences as a volunteer for two youth-driven initiatives for LGBTI youth: Young and Out, an online community platform for and run by LGBTI teenagers, and 'Gay-straight alliances', which address bullying and discrimination in secondary schools. He urged governments to create and support similar initiatives across Europe. More good practices from member States came from the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs. Research data from Norway shows that LGBTI children seek support from children's services more often than their peers. In the Pink Competency Child Welfare project, the government agency works with civil society to train staff members of children's welfare services on how to best respond to the needs of LGBTI children.

⁴ Adopted during the ECSR session in Strasbourg on 26-28 January 2016.

⁵ See www.childrightsconnect.org/govtspendingsurvey.

42. In conclusion of the session, the panellists stressed that governments should develop clear child welfare and support services which are inclusive of LGBTI children and seek collaboration with young people and civil society in this process. Panellists also stressed the need for greater data collection and the need for states to develop specific practice and policy responses to support the human rights of transgender and intersex children and young people. Homophobic and transphobic bullying, particularly in education settings, should be addressed both by providing teachers and managers with appropriate tools, and by empowering and involving LGBTI young people themselves in these processes.

Side events

43. Two side events were organised at the conference. A side event prepared by the Bulgarian authorities brought together key actors from government and civil society to discuss how to implement a national Strategy for the Rights of the Child based on the Council of Europe Strategy. A second side event presented the Handbook on European law relating to the rights of the child developed by the Council of Europe and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. The Handbook is designed for professionals working with children including lawyers, judges, public prosecutors, child protection authorities, and other practitioners and organisations responsible for ensuring the legal protection of the rights of the child. It explains key jurisprudence, summarising major case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, the European Court of Human Rights and the decisions of the European Committee of Social Rights.

Conclusions

44. The final plenary session of the conference was largely shaped by the young delegates, who shared their views on the thematic sessions of the second conference-day. Apart from their specific views on the discussed topics, which are reflected above and which will also be published in a separate report, one key message united all young delegates. They appreciated the fact that they were actively involved in the discussions of the conference and felt that for future conferences, more children should contribute. They convincingly pointed out that children and young people not only have the right to be heard on all matters affecting them, but also that through their experience as children, they can assist in finding more sustainable and suitable solutions.

45. The conference was officially closed by Ms Eva Zhecheva, Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection of Bulgaria, and Mr Gianluca Esposito, Head of the Human Dignity and Equality Department of the Council of Europe. Ms Eva Zhecheva recalled that protecting children's rights requires a multidisciplinary approach. This is why the preparations for the conference in Bulgaria involved all relevant institutions and NGOs, as well as children. Furthermore, she stressed that the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child is an expression of Europe's shared values. The large participation in the conference demonstrates Europe's strong will to work together. The goal for the next six years is to implement the "Sofia Strategy" in an environment of co-operation and partnership.

46. In his conclusions, Mr Esposito welcomed the sense of community felt at the conference, noting the community of children and young people as ambassadors of their own rights, the community of political leaders, experts and policy makers committing to the Council of Europe Strategy, and the virtual community generated through the conference's outreach through social media. Mr Esposito valued the clarity and precision of the children and young people conclusions and encouraged policy makers to act upon them. He warmly thanked the Bulgarian authorities for their hosting and the outstanding organisation of the conference.