

**Rome High-level Launching Conference for the
Launching of the new Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2022 – 2027
Beyond the Horizon: A New Era for the Rights of the Child**

Intervention by Dunja Mijatović

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Plenary Session I, 09:45 – 10:15

Your excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Co-panelists, dear Chair, dear children present here today,

I first want to thank the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers and the Council of Europe Children's Rights Division for the organisation of this timely conference and congratulate them on the adoption of a strategy that is of vital importance for human rights in Europe.

When the title 'Beyond the Horizon – A New Era for the Rights of the Child' was chosen, it was surely not foreseen that Europe would be thrown back into an era of brutal war, in which children are killed, injured, starved, displaced, abducted – and fundamentally traumatised.

After many years, we once again have 'war children' in Europe, children who have suffered and seen the worst - and believe me, from my own experience, I know that war is the worst. Children from many different cities in the former Yugoslavia suffered unimaginably and have grown up with deep scars. Knowing what is happening in Ukraine now, we all need to immediately prepare to address the needs of millions of traumatised children who require the coordinated engagement from everyone present here today and beyond – and this is on top of the already existing mental health crisis for children in Europe. For the children of Ukraine, we cannot wait to set mechanisms in motion step by step, we must act now. I just returned from missions to several countries bordering Ukraine where I saw, with my teams, the first people fleeing the war, among them many children. And I saw already the deep traumatisation.

But let me come to the new strategy of the Council of Europe for the rights of the child, which is launched today. I welcome this strategy as it is firmly anchored in international human rights standards and obligations. This is important because I still too often see the attitude that human rights are for

adults and children's rights are for children. We must always remember that children are full human rights holders, and on top of that, they enjoy special protections and rights as children.

To ensure that children, all children irrespective of their background, status, or individual characteristics, receive the protection and support they need to enjoy equal access to rights, we need a comprehensive approach to children's rights. The strategy achieves that, focusing on the specific needs of particularly vulnerable children while at the same time avoiding silo approaches that miss the interdependence of existing challenges for children, such as those related to mounting child poverty and marginalisation, longstanding deficiencies in education and health systems, the lack of attention to children with disabilities, and many others.

Importantly, I applaud that the strategy was developed in consultation with children, which is extremely important, and their representatives. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the right of children to express their views freely in all matters that affect them and to have those views be given due weight. We have too often a patronising approach to children, this has to change.

Whether we are discussing the impacts of wars or pandemics, economic recovery plans, rising food and energy prices, or mental health systems, children are affected. In fact, they are often disproportionately affected. This means that they must be granted an effective opportunity to be heard and to actually influence relevant decision-making processes. As I have pointed out [before](#), it is time to move away from symbolic approaches to child participation and to systematically give children a voice through open and inclusive consultations, close collaboration in setting agendas and identifying priorities, and through promoting the effective democratic participation of children, including by lowering the voting age. This is a topic that I will continue following as Commissioner for Human Rights.

In line with my broad human rights mandate, I will support the implementation of the Council of Europe strategy through my continued monitoring work in relation to all six priorities, drawing the attention of member states to the shortcomings I find. I will continue calling on them to prioritise the rights of children and youth because this is essential for them to exercise and enjoy their human rights today and because it is an investment in our future societies.

I thank you for your attention and I wish us all a productive and rewarding two days.