High-level Launching Conference for the new Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) "*Beyond the horizon: a new era for the rights of the child*"

Organised by: **Council of Europe and the Italian Presidency of the CoE Committee of Ministers**

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High-level plenary session II - Member states and international organisations / INGOs
Rome, 7th of April 2022, 11.30h-13.00h

Introduction

- Welcome and thanks to the Council of Europe and the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers for the invitation.
- FRA is delighted to participate in this High-level Conference and commends the launch of the new Strategy for the Rights of the Child. The Fundamental Rights Agency is pleased to have contributed with evidence-based input and its data to the new Strategy that highlights the Council of Europe's strong commitment to children and their human rights.
- Last year, the EU adopted its first EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. It addresses persisting and emerging challenges and proposes concrete actions to protect, promote and fulfil children's rights in today's ever-changing world. The Council of Europe Strategy for the rights of the child serves the same purpose: that of mobilising all those who have a role to play to effectively promote and protect the rights of the child. Both strategies complement each other, both aim at triggering change, address and find adequate responses to complex and cross-cutting issues that have multiple dimensions. Both strategies have been developed together with children and for children.
- While the new strategy is a great accomplishment, big challenges lay ahead. Especially now, as we all see the terrible consequences that the war in Ukraine is having on children. We need to fulfil our obligations towards children, we need to ensure the respect for international and European human rights law: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Convention on Human Rights, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and other human rights instruments.

Children's rights in times of crisis [situation in Ukraine]

- I could not continue my intervention without referring to the situation in Ukraine. Half of Ukraine's children are displaced. This includes around 2 million children who have crossed into neighbouring countries as refugees and 2.5 million who are now internally displaced inside Ukraine. The impact of this war on children, a war made by adults, is unacceptable. Children are losing their schools, losing their houses, separating from their fathers and starting a new life as refugees.
- Europe needs to pay special attention to Roma seeking sanctuary in the European Union. We, the Agency, are very concerned about allegations of difficulties and possible discrimination at the EU borders. Some people refuse to sleep in the same tents with Roma families or travel in the same vehicles with them. Such incidents should be immediately reported to the authorities or to civil society organisations who can help victims lodge complaints. The Agency recommends that authorities take appropriate action and investigate any such complaints in line with EU law.

- A FRA team has visited all neighbouring countries to see for themselves how EU countries address the fundamental rights challenges of the humanitarian crisis. We have just published a short report that gives an overview of the situation.
- Local authorities informed FRA of positive initiatives, as those in Slovakia, that should be considered by other EU countries. They include informing the government daily of the situation at borders concerning Roma; liaising with relevant civil society organisations; translating key documents and information on trafficking into Romani; providing practical support for transport to accommodation, registration and medical assistance; and placing monitoring teams at border crossing points..
- Supporting all children leaving Ukraine will require extensive transfers across the EU, as well as integration measures and policies at EU, national and local levels. EU countries should start now planning ahead.

Social inclusion and non-discrimination

- The new CoE Strategy as well as the EU Strategy identify social exclusion, child poverty, discrimination and lack of equal access to quality education for all children as main obstacles to ensuring children's access to equal opportunities. We commend the Council of Europe for putting a focus on this.
- Before COVID-19, statistics showed a slow and steady trend of reducing child poverty and social exclusion in Europe. The pandemic has broken this trend and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. Still, one in four children in the European Union live at risk of poverty or social exclusion. However, vulnerable groups of children such as children belonging to national minorities, including Roma and Travellers, face particular difficulties.
- Children from the Roma community face a much higher incidence of poverty. The Fundamental Rights Agency's survey "EU-MIDIS" showed that 80% of the Roma interviewed and their children, are at risk of poverty. In comparison, the EU average was 17%. Poverty can also mean hunger. According to our survey, every third Roma child lives in a household that faced hunger at least once in the previous month. I have seen this poverty myself, during visits to Roma settlements.
- Roma children do not only face poverty, but also discrimination. FRA's Roma and Travellers survey shows that, depending on the Member State, up to 51% of Roma parents say that their children have been verbally harassed at school and almost every third Roma or Traveller interviewed has felt discriminated against when in contact with the school (as parent or student) because they are Roma or Travellers.
- Those results indicate that we, as a European community still have a long way to go to guarantee the effective implementation of all rights for all children and reinforce the need to continue our efforts to improve the situation of children, especially when belonging to a particularly vulnerable group. Both, the EU Strategy and the CoE Strategy on the Rights of the Child will contribute substantively to the achievement of this goal.

Conclusion

- To conclude, let me reassure you that the Agency will continue its efforts to provide evidence-based advice and to facilitate children's meaningful participation in the Agency's activities, be it field research, local action or public events. The Fundamental Rights Agency will continue to support the genuine efforts of the Council of Europe and Member

States and the implementation of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child with research, capacity building, technical assistance, targeted support and evidence-based advice.

- Thank you.