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Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Minutes

Public hearing on “Child abuse in Europe: addressing, compensation and prevention”, held in Strasbourg, on Tuesday, 11 October 2022

In the framework of the report currently in preparation on “Child abuse in Europe: addressing, compensation and prevention” by **Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez** (Switzerland, SOC), the Committee **held** a public hearing with the participation of:

- ✓ **Mr Guido Fluri**, NGO “Justice Initiative”
- ✓ **two child abuse survivors**
 - Ms Sirmanca Beladi (Romania), accompanied by Ms Gabriela Lupea, NGO representative
 - Mr Karl Hauke (Germany)

Ms Olena Khomenko (Ukraine, EC/DA), second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee, opened the hearing and introduced the guest speakers. She then gave the floor to the rapporteur for a brief introduction.

Mr Fridez welcomed **Mr Fluri** and his team, who had been very successful in Switzerland and even obtained an apology from the government for the violence perpetrated against children. He hoped that this hearing would have an impact on the whole of Europe by encouraging discussion, facilitating rebuilding and the provision of compensation for survivors, and creating tools to make sure that this abuse could never happen again. He briefly presented his introductory memorandum, which listed all of the stages in the process that Council of Europe member States should go through in seeking to establish facts objectively, make the necessary amends by providing appropriate support to victims and compensating them, and put in place the legislative, social, and administrative conditions necessary to prevent such behaviour in future as far as possible.

Mr Fluri thanked **Mr Fridez** for his involvement. It had not always been the case that victims were listened to or that what had happened to them was taken seriously. For a long time, their voices had not been heard. Switzerland had not been a paragon of humane treatment for a very long time. Tens of thousands of children and adults had suffered abuse in the country until 1981. Some children in care had been exploited as cheap labour, while others had been abused in strictly run public and religious centres. Young women had been put under heavy psychological pressure and forced to undergo abortions or sterilisation or to put one or more children up for adoption. Some people had been subjected to drug trials against their will or without their knowledge.

Other countries had similarly dark pasts. Victims everywhere were now left with nothing: scarred by their experiences, deeply ashamed of the abuse they had suffered and often living in poverty and solitude due to their past. Action needed to be taken to put right the injustices caused by this abuse. Switzerland had officially acknowledged the abuse as a state and as a society. There were monuments to it all over the country and the history of the abuse was taught in schools. “Solidarity contributions” had been paid to 12 000 victims for the injustices they suffered.

Mr Fluri cited the case of the “Children of Creuse (a French administrative district)” in France – Congolese children who had been forcibly taken and sent to Belgium – and that of the institutions housing children born out of wedlock in Ireland and many other countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. He called upon the Council of Europe and the member States to:

1. carry out an independent and complete scientific investigation into violations of children’s rights and promote public debate about these matters;
2. recognise officially the suffering and injustice caused to children (sexual, physical and psychological violence);

¹ The minutes were approved and declassified by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development at its meeting on 2 December 2022.

3. make provision for a form of compensation;
4. step up efforts to prevent abuse and ill treatment.

Ms Beladi read out her speech. She was 37 and was single-handedly raising her two children, who were her pride and joy and her reason for living. In 1988, at the age of three, she had been placed in a public institution for physically and intellectually disabled children because of her frail constitution. This institution, called Cighid, housed about 100 children and was like a death camp. She still had nightmares about it. 138 children died there in the space of two years. She was often told by her daughter that she had been crying in her sleep and begging not to be hit any more. Thanks to a German journalist, images of the centre had moved the world following Ceaușescu's execution.

This experience had ruined her life. Her husband had left her after she attempted suicide. She had recently found out that the doctor who had worked at the centre was still practising and felt no guilt or remorse.

Mr Hauke shared his story of ill treatment during his childhood at the hands of a priest. During the sexual abuse he suffered for five years between the ages of 11 and 16, his abuser had kept telling him that "God gives a gift with what is painful" and that the pain would help him to become a better person. **Mr Hauke** had later made suicide attempts and undergone 15 months of psychiatric treatment.

It was believed that there were about 3 600 victims of abuse committed by clergymen in Germany and about 300 000 victims in France. This huge difference was due to the cover-up tactics used by the Church in the German investigation. **Mr Hauke** hoped that the Council of Europe would help to draw society's attention to the issue and raise awareness of all forms of sexual abuse of children so that society could make a concerted response by providing the help victims expected and reduce the dangers faced by children.

The victims received loud applause at the end of the speeches.

Ms Khomenko promised them that the Committee would provide support.

Mr van Pareren thanked the speakers for sharing their experiences and **Mr Fluri** for his commitment. He wondered what the situation was like elsewhere in Europe.

Mr Krauthammer ("Justice Initiative") mentioned his organisation's website, which outlined situations outside Switzerland. He proposed that historical research be carried out. Each country was battling with its own history.

Mr Davies thanked the victims for telling their stories. He proposed that the rapporteur discuss penalties and the prosecution of the perpetrators, and mentioned a Welsh NGO called "The ROOTS Foundation" which supported children in care, who generally ended up in poverty. The sexual abstinence of priests drove them to commit crimes and the Church needed to have a debate about this.

Mr Moutquin also thanked the victims and congratulated them on finding the strength to share their experiences. He also thanked the interpreters, who had done their job successfully in harrowing circumstances. Belgium's colonial past was "appalling". He asked **Mr Fluri** whether it might be possible to set up a fund to provide compensation from churches, whose liability was in issue.

Mr Fluri explained that this was now a political matter. Cases were often too old for the courts to intervene due to limitation periods and the difficulty of gathering evidence. The Vatican appeared willing to co-operate. A case reporting mechanism was needed. With regard to colonial history, he noted that dark-skinned children had been penalised twice. The historical dimension was absolutely central.

Mr Hauke said that the sharing of lived experiences was absolutely vital. This was the first step in the process. Without that, victims could not find peace.

Mr Tahiri, from the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo*, spoke of the war in his country. He picked up on the point that **Mr Fluri** had made about evidence and stressed the need for legislation and adequate financial resources.

In conclusion, **Mr Fridez** said that applause was very rare during Assembly meetings. This had been a deeply moving hearing. He promised the victims that this report would be prepared with real feeling. Forgiveness was given too readily to perpetrators of violence. There should be no limitation period for these crimes. For the purposes of preparing this report, he wished to make a study visit to a Council of Europe member State, either Romania or another country.

The Committee **authorised** the rapporteur to make a fact-finding visit to a member State to be selected in due course.

An exhibition entitled “Shame – European Stories” was presented in the Palais de l’Europe. Inaugurated by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, it told the stories of 60 women and men from all over Europe who had suffered abuse.

Presence

Ms Jorida Tabaku	Albania / <i>Albanie</i>	Zz...
M. Pere López	Andorra / <i>Andorre</i>	Mme Mònica Bonell
Mr Armen Gevorgyan	Armenia / <i>Arménie</i>	Mr Eduard Aghajanyan
Mr Franz Leonhard Essl	Austria / <i>Autriche</i>	Mr Michel Reimon
Mr Stefan Schennach	Austria / <i>Autriche</i>	Ms Doris Bures
Ms Nigar Arpadarai	Azerbaijan / <i>Azerbaïdjan</i>	Ms Parvin Karimzada
Ms Sevinj Fataliyeva	Azerbaijan / <i>Azerbaïdjan</i>	Ms Konul Nurullayeva
Mr Bob De Brabandere	Belgium / <i>Belgique</i>	Ms Els Van Hoof
M. Simon Moutquin	Belgium / <i>Belgique</i>	Mme Latifa Gahouchi
Ms Snježana Novaković Bursać	Bosnia and Herzegovina / <i>Bosnie-Herzégovine</i>	Mr Amir Fazlić
Mr Hamid Hamid	Bulgaria / <i>Bulgarie</i>	Mr Stanislav Anastassov
Zz...	Bulgaria / <i>Bulgarie</i>	Zz...
Ms Zdravka Bušić	Croatia / <i>Croatie</i>	Ms Ivana Kekin
Ms Christiana Erotokritou	Cyprus / <i>Chypre</i>	Mr Constantinos Efstathiou
Ms Klára Dostálová	Czech Republic / <i>République tchèque</i>	Mr Aleš Juchelka
Ms Michaela Šebelová	Czech Republic / <i>République tchèque</i>	Mr Miroslav Adámek
Ms Katarina Ammitzbøll	Denmark / <i>Danemark</i>	Mr Kim Valentin
Mr Urmas Reitelmann	Estonia / <i>Estonie</i>	Ms Maria Jufereva-Skuratovski
Ms Minna Reijonen	Finland / <i>Finlande</i>	Ms Tarja Filatov
Mme Isabelle Santiago	France	Mme Liliana Tanguy
M. Philippe Vigier	France	Mme Nathalie Serre
M. Alain Milon	France	M. Christian Klinger
Mme Anne Stambach-Terreoir	France	Mme Mireille Clapot
Ms Mariam Lashkhi	Georgia / <i>Géorgie</i>	Mr Levan Ioseliani
Ms Heike Engelhardt	Germany / <i>Allemagne</i>	Ms Franziska Kersten
Mr Andrej Hunko	Germany / <i>Allemagne</i>	Ms Catarina dos Santos-Wintz
Mr Christian Petry	Germany / <i>Allemagne</i>	Ms Martina Stamm-Fibich
Mr Harald Weyel	Germany / <i>Allemagne</i>	Ms Katrin Staffler
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Ms Nina Kasimati	Greece / <i>Grèce</i>	Ms Foteini Pipili
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Ms Boglárka Illés	Hungary / <i>Hongrie</i>	Mme Zita Gurmai
Mr Bjarni Jónsson	Iceland / <i>Islande</i>	Ms Jódís Skúladóttir
Mr Joseph O'Reilly	Ireland / <i>Irlande</i>	Ms Lynn Boylan
Mr Fabio Di Micco	Italy / <i>Italie</i>	Mr Gianluca Perilli
Mr Emilio Floris	Italy / <i>Italie</i>	Ms Maria Rizzotti
Mr Gaspare Antonio Marinello	Italy / <i>Italie</i>	Ms Barbara Guidolin
Mr Gianfranco Rufa	Italy / <i>Italie</i>	Mr Manuel Vescovi

Mr Uldis Budriķis	Latvia / <i>Lettonie</i>	Mr Edgars Tavors
Ms Franziska Hoop	Liechtenstein	Mr Peter Frick
Mr Kęstutis Masiulis	Lithuania / <i>Lituanie</i>	Mr Gintautas Paluckas
M. Max Hengel	Luxembourg	M. Paul Galles
Ms Romilda Baldacchino Zarb	Malta / <i>Malte</i>	Mr Joseph Beppe Fenech Adami
Mr Ion Groza	Republic of Moldova / <i>République de Moldova</i>	Ms Reghina Ȃpostolova
M. José Badia	Monaco	Mme Béatrice Fresko-Rolfo
Mr Miloš Konatar	Montenegro / <i>Monténégro</i>	Zz...
Ms Reina De Bruijn-Wezeman	Netherlands / <i>Pays-Bas</i>	Mr Bob Van Pareren
Ms Ria Oomen-Ruijten	Netherlands / <i>Pays-Bas</i>	Ms Agnes Mulder
Ms Artina Qazimi	North Macedonia / <i>Macédoine du Nord</i>	Mr Vlado Misajlovski
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Ms Marica Montemaggi	San Marino / <i>Saint-Marin</i>	Mr Marco Nicolini
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Ms Tatjana Pašić	Serbia / <i>Serbie</i>	Ms Jelena Milošević
Mme Anna Záborská	Slovak Republic / <i>République slovaque</i>	Mr Juraj Šeliga
Mr Dean Premik	Slovenia / <i>Slovénie</i>	Ms Iva Dimic
Ms María Fernández	Spain / <i>Espagne</i>	Ms Susana Sumelzo
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Ms Carmen Leyte	Spain / <i>Espagne</i>	Mr Salvador Vidal
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Mr / M. Pascal Krauthammer, NGO / ONG "Justice Initiative"

Ms / Mme Gabriela Lupea, NGO representative / représentante ONG

Ms / Mme Sirmanca Beladi

Mr / M. Karl Hauke

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