19th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Sport. Safe Sport

By Emily Karakoleva

No child or young athlete should ever have to choose between speaking up and staying in the sport they love.

Yet, when a young person does not know who to turn to, does not trust that they will be heard, or fears the consequences of reporting something, even the strongest safeguarding policies mean very little.

And this is what we need to remember when discussing safe sport: the real measure of success is not whether safeguards exist on paper, but whether children and young people actually feel safe.

At the Youth Event held in May, young people came together to develop concrete recommendations on how to make sport safer, more inclusive, and more responsive to their experiences.

We welcome the fact that many of these recommendations are already reflected in the draft Resolution. But what matters now is ensuring that these commitments translate into practice.

First, safeguarding must become a normal part of everyday sport.

This means clear codes of conduct, trained coaches and volunteers, and accessible, independent reporting mechanisms that children and young people understand and trust.

We must also recognise the impact of excessive pressure and power imbalances between young athletes and those in positions of authority. These can contribute to body-image concerns, substance use, self-harm, and mental health difficulties.

Safeguarding must therefore go beyond responding to abuse. It should also address psychological pressure, discrimination, overtraining, and the everyday environments in which children and young people train and compete.

At the European level, practical tools such as a common Safe Sport Starter Kit, a platform for sharing good practices, and mentorship between countries could help turn these commitments into reality.

But there is one message I particularly want to emphasise: the participation of children and young people must not end with this Ministerial Conference or the adoption of the Resolution.

Children and young people are the direct beneficiaries of these policies, but they are also the ones experiencing their implementation firsthand.

They know whether reporting mechanisms are accessible, whether they feel safe approaching a coach, and whether the measures we discuss here actually work in practice.

That is why we are calling for a continued, structured consultation process with children and young people.

This means regular, age-appropriate opportunities to provide feedback, participate in safeguarding discussions, and contribute to monitoring the implementation of the Resolution.

And importantly, there should be mechanisms to demonstrate how their feedback is reflected in actual decisions.

Because meaningful participation should not end once young people have shared their recommendations. It should continue throughout the implementation and evaluation of the policies that affect them.

So my call to action is simple: make continued consultation with children and young people an integral part of the follow-up to this Resolution.

Ultimately, the success of our commitments will not be measured only by the policies we adopt, but by whether children and young people actually feel safer in sport.

If we want sport policies to work for children and young people, we need to keep working with them.

Thank you.