

“Beyond the horizon: a new era for the rights of the child”

High-level Launching Conference for the new Strategy

Speaking Notes

Mr Tiny Kox

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Excellencies, distinguished guests,

I am sorry not to be able to attend this conference physically. I am now in Poland, close to the Ukrainian border, after having met yesterday in Lviv with representatives of the Ukrainian Parliament, its delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and many others. I am accompanied here by the presidents of the political groups in our assembly to show the Assembly's solidarity with Ukraine.

On 15 March our Assembly adopted unanimously its opinion that Ukraine deserved our unwavering support after Russia's army had crossed Ukrainian borders and started its war of aggression. In the same opinion the Assembly concluded that by crossing these borders Russia did also cross the red line of the Statute of the Council of Europe and therefore should be expelled immediately. This happened only one day later, at the decision of the Committee of Ministers. I am sad that we had to do this, but I am glad that we did dare to do it. This time the Council of Europe's statutory organs acted immediately, in synergy, making clear that membership is not available for those who completely disrespect international law in general and our Statute in particular.

Yesterday, in Lviv, I underlined our Organisation's solidarity with the citizens of Ukraine. A most needed solidarity after six weeks of brutal destruction, killing and injuring thousands and forcing millions of citizens to leave their homes. By now more than 4 million of them are now staying in one of our member States. Half of them are children. Inside Ukraine, also over 2.5 million children are no longer at home but somewhere else in the country, lacking most essential protection and support. Many fled in the direction of Lviv, as we could see yesterday. The fundamental rights these children should be entitled to have evaporated due to the brutality of the Russian

aggression. I call on all member States to do their utmost to restore these fundamental rights of the children of Ukraine as soon as possible.

I hope and know that what is happening now to the children of our member State Ukraine will be in your mind during this conference and will inspire you in your discussions.

May I thank our Italian hosts, the Italian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers and the Italian Department for Family Policies, for having organised this important event, at this so important moment?

The title of this conference - "A new era for the rights of the child" – is ambitious and forward looking, in these most challenging times. Not only because of the horrible consequences for children of the war against Ukraine. Other challenges, such as the consequences of climate change and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, need also to be tackled.

I strongly welcome the adoption of the new Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child for 2022-2027. To put it into practice, I am convinced that parliamentary co-operation is essential and that the Parliamentary Assembly can play a useful role in this context.

PACE members, with their unique dual powers as members of national parliaments and members of a European Parliamentary Assembly, play an important role in :

- advocating for the adoption of new legal standards;
- participating in the drafting of new instruments;
- actively promoting the signature and ratification of Conventions.

The Assembly reports are often at the origin of new international legal standards, such as the Lanzarote Convention to protect children against sexual exploitation and abuse.

To give a few examples of current initiatives related to children's rights, some of our latest reports deal with inaction on climate change as a violation of the rights of the child; with the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on children; and with children's right to be heard.

We are now taking practical steps for integrating child participation into the work of the Assembly.

As another report adopted unanimously asked that the right to a clean and sustainable environment be added as a protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights,

children have also been invited to join the newly established Network of Contact Parliamentarians for a healthy environment.

Of course, we are also now considering the best ways to support the children affected by the war in Ukraine. In this work, we can build on many past reports, including those on children in migration and children in armed conflict. Refugee children from war and conflict zones need global protection for the multiple risks they face during their journey to the host country, such as violence, sexual abuse, human trafficking and exploitation for forced and illegal labour. The Parliamentary Assembly considers that it is an obligation of human rights for these children to receive special protection.

There is a lot of work to be done and I wish you all the best of success in your endeavours.

I hope that a new era for the rights of the child is indeed ahead of us. Our children deserve it – our civilisation needs it.

Thank you.