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Reaching the heights for the rights of the child

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President Plevneliev, President Coleiro Preca, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today to launch the new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child. I am pleased to see that children's rights can attract so many high level participants.

The new strategy, also known as the Sofia strategy, focuses on key issues for the protection of children's rights, namely equal opportunities for all children, participation, ensuring a life free from violence, access to child-friendly justice, and the rights of children in the new digital environment.

I have grappled with these challenges in my country work, where I frequently focus on children's rights. It was a topic in five out of the nine reports I published in 2015 following country visits (Bulgaria, France, Norway, Serbia and Slovakia).

I have also seen how each of the major crises facing Europe, including the economic crisis, the crisis in Ukraine and the refugee crisis, have had a major impact on children.

Let me start with the refugee crisis: we have all seen dreadful images of children on boats in the Mediterranean or sleeping rough on their way to Northern Europe. We have recently heard from Europol that around 10 000 unaccompanied migrant children are estimated to be missing after arriving in Europe. Some of them disappear because they want to continue their journey and look for their families or relatives; others may fall into the hands of traffickers and be exploited. This situation highlights a number of gaps in the legislation and policies of member states that need to be filled:

Firstly, there is an urgent need to provide protection to refugee children on the move, notably shelter, food, health care; and to protect these children from violence and re-victimisation.

Access to asylum procedures for children must be improved: children need to be recognised as full subjects of asylum and other migration procedures; there is a need to train staff of migration and asylum administrations.

It is necessary to provide more support to the work of child rights ombudspersons and other independent human rights institutions involved in protecting children's rights.

Guardianship and other protection and support systems for unaccompanied minors must be strengthened; age-assessment procedures must be more respectful of human rights.

One of my biggest concerns is detention. Children should never be placed in detention on grounds of their or their parents' migratory status: I am worried that, in the context of the new EU-Turkey deal, the detention of migrants will become the norm, including for children. This is a trend that we must oppose.

Statelessness: a large number of refugee children, especially Syrians, born on the way to countries of refuge face a high risk of becoming stateless. Measures should be taken in the country of refuge or those of transit to prevent statelessness among these children.

The next stage for refugee children is integration in the countries of asylum: this issue is going to be a major challenge for member states in the near future. One key tool for promoting effective integration is education. Migrant and refugee children need to have access to quality education on an equal footing with all other children. Inclusive education should be urgently promoted to support integration of foreign children and also enhance the capacity of non-migrant children to live in and cope with an increasingly diverse society.

Since 2012 I have insisted on the need to end school segregation of entire groups of children, in particular children of Roma origin and children with disabilities, and promote their inclusion in mainstream education. The importance of developing truly inclusive education systems is even more urgent now that many refugee children are going to enter these systems. I have seen that segregated education is a persistent problem all over Europe: in Western Europe, in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Western Balkans. However, separate or special does not mean equal. All children should be learning in the same classes.

Another issue of deep concern to me is the persisting high rates of institutionalisation of children in several member states, on grounds of a disability, lack of parental care, socio-economic background and even ethnic origin in some cases. Growing up in an institution is not in a child's best interests; it condemns children to a life of segregation, marginalisation from society and stigmatisation. Moreover, it prevents them from acquiring early on the life skills that one develops through contact with others, be it at school or any other daily life situations. I have dealt with this issue in several of my country visits and ensuing reports, including during my visit to Bulgaria in early 2015.

Here I found out that, despite policies aimed at limiting the institutionalisation of children, too many children with disabilities, children deprived of parental care and Roma children are still placed in institutions. Their parents are still too often told that it is in the best interests of the child. In Bulgaria, like in many other countries, evidence shows that the primary reason for admission to institutions is poverty. I was also concerned to learn that Roma children are much more vulnerable to separation from their parents and ensuing institutionalisation than other children.

I welcome the fact that the Bulgarian authorities closed down, two months ago, the last of the large institutions for children with disabilities where so many children's human rights have been violated. I strongly encourage the authorities to continue to effectively implement their national strategy for deinstitutionalisation while, at the same time, stepping up efforts to avoid the risk of re-institutionalisation of children in smaller residential settings, notably by strengthening the child protection system and reinforcing support to families.

Now, let me highlight an issue with which I started my mandate in 2012: the impact of the economic crisis and austerity measures on human rights, and in particular on the rights of children. My reports on Portugal, Spain, Estonia and the Netherlands were partly devoted to this topic. More recently, I raised this issue in Cyprus, during a visit which took place in December 2015: According to a UNICEF Report of 2014, the child poverty rate in the country increased from 14% in 2008 to almost 17% in 2012, placing Cypriot children among the most severely materially deprived in Europe. In Spain, the rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion is one in three children, and child poverty continues to increase. In Portugal, a 2015 report by Caritas indicates that about 25% of children are at risk of poverty and social exclusion and that public expenditure to support families with children has decreased by 30% since the beginning of austerity measures.

Clearly, child poverty will have huge negative long-term effects on both children and broader societies. It affects children's health, including mental health, educational attainments and their life chances overall. This issue deserves serious attention by governments. They cannot only rely on economic recovery to remedy child poverty. There is a need for proactive policies addressing child poverty, and children in general. Education systems have also suffered from severe budgetary cuts, which can but

have very negative effects in the long-term. The setting up of inclusive educational systems, to which all children can have equal access, also requires stronger and better resourced policies.

Finally, let me say a few words about Ukraine, which is increasingly forgotten in the context of the migration crisis. I was in Ukraine just two weeks ago, including in Donetsk, where the conflict has had a huge impact on children. 580 000 children live in non-government controlled areas, close to the front line. Of these children, 200 000 need psychosocial support. I met with a psychologist who told me that post-traumatic stress disorders and sleep disturbances were very frequent among them.

More than 215 000 children have been displaced in 2015 to other parts of the country. The government has adopted an Action Plan to address the needs of IDPs and volunteers have been mobilised and are providing huge support to internally displaced persons. However, there is a lack of funds for integration programmes for internally displaced persons in the current context of economic crisis.

In 2015, more than 20 children were killed and 40 were injured, half of them by mines and unexploded ordnance. There is a clear need for education on mine dangers on all sides. However, at the time being decision-makers in Donetsk are not in favour of international actors such as UNICEF and Save the Children running mine awareness campaigns in schools. Therefore, I encouraged my interlocutors in Donetsk to correct this situation and ensure that the relevant organisations are supported in their efforts to reach out to all children, so as to reduce the risks of them being killed or injured by mines and unexploded ordnance of war.

I will continue to devote particular attention to these and other child rights challenges.

I encourage all of you to support, in your respective capacities, the implementation of the new strategy for the rights of the child.

I wish you a fruitful conference.