

27th meeting of the Network of Contact Parliamentarians to stop sexual violence against children

Theme: "Sexual violence against children in the digital environment and other challenges"

Florence (Italy), 1 December 2016

Presentation by Johan van den Hout, Congress Spokesperson on Children

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to take part in this last meeting of the Network of Contact Parliamentarians, in my capacity as Congress Spokesperson on Children.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities that I represent has done an important work in raising awareness and taking steps to prevent sexual violence against children at local and regional levels in the 47 countries that are part of the Council of Europe.

We believe that local and regional governments, as public authorities closest to the citizens, are the first witnesses of crimes of sexual violence against children committed inside their own communities. They have a key responsibility in safeguarding and promoting children's welfare.

This includes providing services to help victims of such crimes as well as putting in place awareness-raising and prevention measures. Local and regional levels can develop community-based strategies and actions to deal with and prevent cases of sexual violence in an environment that is becoming increasingly digitalised.

Before presenting the experience acquired by the Congress as well as that of the local and regional authorities in the fight against sexual violence in the digital environment, I would like to give you a short overview of the work that the Congress has done as part of its contribution to the ONE in FIVE Campaign.

In September 2012, the Congress devised a Pact of Towns and Regions to Stop Sexual Violence against Children which comprises policies and initiatives to guide local and regional authorities in their fight against sexual abuse and violence.

The Pact proposes a four-pronged approach of Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Participation – the four "P"s- to be adopted by the local and regional authorities in their efforts to combat sexual violence.

A toolkit, that includes the Pact, exists today in 37 languages. An online platform has been set up on a dedicated webpage of the Congress website where the cities and regions can sign up for the Pact and share good practice examples.

In order to raise awareness of the existence of such a Pact, a campaign was launched in 2013 with the aim of collecting as many signatures as possible. As part of this campaign; I carried out raising-visibility visits in 6 countries that were the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands.

Today more than 60 cities, regions and associations have adhered to the Pact. It is a real pleasure to see that the work on the Campaign has been successful. With this in mind, I would like to thank the members of the Parliamentary Assembly Network of Contact Parliamentarians, who have always been very active in promoting the Pact in the towns and regions in their countries. Without our joint efforts these results would not have been achieved.

When it comes to sexual violence against children in the digital environment, the main role of our local and regional authorities is to raise awareness and to inform the relevant stakeholders directly concerned by this issue. (1st P" – Prevention").

Providing training for parents, caregivers, teachers and professionals is indeed a crucial first step in order to be able to monitor children's access to the Internet.

The city of Liverpool provides a good example in this regard. The Liverpool Safeguarding Children Board has put together a list of useful addresses where parents and caregivers can seek advice on how to deal with an environment that is increasingly digitalised. In 2014, it has also produced a leaflet to provide information to parents and caregivers on child sexual exploitation. It answers questions such as what they should be aware of, how it can start, how technology is used to "groom" children.

Secondly, we can raise awareness and teach children and parents about what is sexual violence on the Internet, what are the risks involved online and what are the ways of reporting illegal behaviour online. To do this, we must produce child-friendly documents that all children are able to understand, including those with disabilities or from an immigrant background.

To prevent sexual abuse of children online, the teachers must also understand the online environment and have the capacity to identify early signals of abuse. They should be able to advise, guide, empower and support children as well as young people. Here I can give you an example from the Brno City Municipality, whose division of social legal protection of children regularly provides lectures for representatives of schools and counselling offices.

We believe that local and regional authorities should cooperate with schools, NGO's and media in their efforts to carry out awareness-raising campaigns, offer trainings and provide support for child victims of violence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Although the One in Five Campaign itself ended last year, I am very happy to announce you that the Congress is ready to pursue its efforts on promoting the Campaign and the Pact.

This year we took part in the events organised on the occasion of the [European Day on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse](#) that takes place on 18 November. For this year's edition, our Congress President, Mrs Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, issued a statement calling local and regional authorities to take part actively in this Day and to decide on the initiatives they can take to fight against these crimes. Five members of our Congress also issued statements on this topic addressing the public in their own language:

Since 2015 we have decided to organise a biannual seminar for national associations of local and regional authorities to explore how the Associations can cooperate in order to continue raising awareness among European cities and regions on this subject and encourage them to sign the Congress Pact. The second of these meetings will be held in Serbia next year.

Thank you for your attention.