



Opening session “Growing with Children's Rights”

Ms Ana Vukadinović

*Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Montenegro,
Committee of Ministers*

It is with great pleasure that I am here with you today in this beautiful city of Dubrovnik, representing the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

As Chair of the Rapporteur Group of the Committee of Ministers for Social and Health Affairs, I have recently taken over the responsibility within the Committee of Ministers to follow and support the Council of Europe's work in the field of children's rights, taking over from my predecessor, Ambassador Anica Djamić, of Croatia and would take the opportunity to thank her for the excellent work that she carried out when at the Council of Europe. I shall try to do justice to the work which she began and which I shall continue, with great pleasure.

Strengthening and protecting the rights of the child has long been a priority for this Organisation. We are all aware of the significant work that has been accomplished over the last years in the framework of the Council of Europe's Programme “Building a Europe for and with children”.

We are also aware of the work that remains to be done. Children's rights remain high on the Council of Europe's agenda and the Committee of Ministers has in these difficult budgetary times allocated the necessary resources to take our work forward, including for the next Children's Rights Strategy for 2016-2019. This was the first step. The next step will be to prepare the Strategy in an inclusive process, together with you, States, international partners and civil society. I can therefore reassure you that there will be a sustainable continuation of your work. Your discussions here over the next two days will help shape the next Council of Europe action in this field. In this context I would highlight the fact that whilst the strengthening and protection of the rights of children is of course an objective in itself, we must bear in mind that many other challenges emerging in our societies can have serious, sometimes devastating effects on children. I think in particular of the effects of the current economic crisis, and the resulting austerity measures; the rise of extremism and discrimination, in particular against Roma, minorities and other vulnerable groups, but also trafficking in human beings or domestic violence. Children too are always among the victims. These bigger challenges must therefore also be addressed, if the rights and freedoms and human dignity of our citizens, of all ages, are to be protected.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you can see from the Update presented today to you, our Strategy has provided an excellent tool in pursuing the important objective of effectively implementing children's rights standards and meeting emerging challenges.

Most importantly is the integrated and holistic approach that the Strategy has taken. Four dimensions are of a particular importance to the Committee of Ministers.

The first is the focus given to ensuring that the work has an impact on the ground. This is what the Council of Europe is all about. Strengthening and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law for the benefit of all our fellow citizens. And the need to do so with regard to Europe's 150 million children is crucial.

This brings me on to my second point, which is the diversity of tools which are used to pursue this aim. We have an exceptionally broad base of pertinent legal instruments, binding and non-binding, which address the concerns, sometimes very serious ones that face us with regard to children. However as we know, legal instruments are of little value if they are not effectively implemented. And in the field of children's rights, we can note with great satisfaction that there is no lack of initiatives and activities to push for such implementation. Here today, we have two such new tools: an assessment tool on the participation of children and a guide for professionals working with children in alternative care.

In this respect, and as the Secretary General has already mentioned, mainstreaming children's rights into the various monitoring bodies is an important element for the Council of Europe. This allows for the identification of lacuna or problems in different countries and pointers as to how to remedy them. This in turn allows for co-operation activities and capacity building initiatives to be focused and of sure added value. In addition there are of course awareness-raising exercises such as the effective and successful Council of Europe ONE in FIVE Campaign, and our consideration of putting in place a sustainable awareness raising events that will be supported by all of you.

Another important aspect in ensuring the protection of the human rights of children is of course to ensure that children themselves are empowered and supported where appropriate. I particularly welcome the fact that a child friendly version of the Lanzarote Convention as well as that of the Guidelines on Child friendly justice are being prepared – these are only a few examples amongst many - of how children themselves can be provided with an understanding of their rights, how to report violations and where to seek help.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have spoken of the need to ensure impact of what we do.

Moving on to my third point, and linked to this essential question, is the particular importance that the work carried out is done so in cooperation and synergy not only with other bodies within the Organisation but also with other international organisations working in the field of children's rights.

The Committee of Ministers therefore welcomes the significant results that have already been achieved in this area. We have witnessed extensive cooperation with the United Nations, for example, through the contribution made by the Council of Europe Policy Guidelines on integrated national strategies for the protection of children from violence, or the response brought to the call of the UNSRSG to support the global progress survey.

With the European Union, again there are a number of examples, but an upcoming one is a Handbook on European children's rights case law being prepared with the Fundamental Rights Agency. This is an example of a concrete, practical and useful initiative, which can advance the broader cause. Here again, our countries will be served with concrete products to help better implement Children's Rights standards.

In addition, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities continue to provide an active contribution. This is essential, given the responsibilities and outreach that each of these bodies enjoy. Examples here are also many - and efforts made in this respect have produced impressive results.

My fourth and final point is that children should be able to grow in an environment that is safe, empowering and respectful of their rights. They are vulnerable and dependent. They should not live in fear. They should be able to express their feelings of joy or of sadness in the knowledge that they will be heard. They should not be victims of any sort of violence or harassment. They should feel secure, protected and happy.

This responsibility in allowing children to be children falls with their parents, their families but also with us, be it governments, elected representatives, NGOs, international organisations, social services, legal systems. For we are the ones who can change the way things are. And have a duty to do so.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To conclude, I should like to thank the Croatian authorities for their hospitality and excellent organisation of this event. In this beautiful city of Dubrovnik, I am confident that this Conference, with the help of the impressive list of participants and speakers, will give rise to interesting and fruitful debates which will help us to shape the next Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child. The Committee of Ministers shall look forward to examining the conclusions of these important discussions. Thank you for your attention.