



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Štefan Füle

Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy

The world we seek: the rights and freedoms of children

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High Level Conference on Justice for Children in Europe and Central Asia
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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the High Level Conference on Justice for Children, jointly organised by the European Union and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). It is part of our continued support to neighbouring and enlargement countries in establishing and reforming their juvenile justice systems. And it is also a reflection of the fact that we care for our children, in fact for all the children.

Before taking stock of the current state of play and what needs to be done in the future, let me underline my strong commitment to implementing the European Union's policy on the promotion and protection of children's rights. This calls for a reinforced cooperation with national authorities and civil society so that we can ensure that children are treated as fully fledged members of society.

There are still many challenges regarding the rights of the Child and Juvenile Justice within the EU. In fact, the EU itself has adopted several pieces of legislation relevant to children in justice in recent years, for example the directive on sexual abuse and exploitation, the anti-trafficking directive, and we intend to propose a new measure on suspects/ defendants.

The participation of enlargement countries in this conference is very relevant, because the topic of today's conference is a priority area for the EU in the accession process. Indeed, the EU 'acquis' on children's rights and child protection is not limited to chapter 23 – Judiciary and fundamental rights. No less than 17 other 'acquis' chapters contain legal instruments that have important provisions on children's rights and protection.

Despite some progress, there is still scope for considerable improvement when it comes to children's rights. I am thinking in particular about the need to overcome institutionalisation of children and to promote preventive mechanisms in support of families.

And our concerns don't just end there. Let me mention six other important areas that need to be addressed:

- lack of prioritising children's rights in criminal proceedings;
- lack of adapted facilities corresponding to specific needs of juveniles in detention;
- insufficient free legal aid for juveniles;
- repressive responses to juvenile offending;
- lack of effective alternatives for detention and hence an over-use of detention; and
- lack of specific measures for child victims, leading to unnecessary trauma and re-victimisation.

This is why it is so important that neighbouring and enlargement countries not only adhere to international human rights standards, but they must also ensure the effective implementation of recently adopted criminal justice legislation, which in some countries is very progressive.

Support for justice reform is one of the core pillars of European Union external action. It aims at:

- ensuring judicial independence, impartiality and integrity;
- increasing the performance, efficiency, accountability and transparency of the justice sector;
- improving access to justice for the poorest and the most vulnerable; and
- improving detention conditions and introducing alternatives to imprisonment.

Successful justice reform initiatives are those built on national priorities, enjoying full political commitment and national ownership, as well as reinforced partnerships between civil society and state decision makers.

I would like to remind you about the on-going support that the European Commission is providing in the neighbourhood and enlargement countries:

In the neighbourhood countries, the Commission is supporting juvenile justice reform within the rule of law agenda, in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia through financial and technical assistance provided by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument.

In the enlargement countries, the Commission has been providing support through the Instrument for Pre Accession Assistance to strengthen child protection measures in general and to support assistance for child victims (e.g. in Croatia in context of child sexual abuse) and juvenile justice systems in particular (e.g. in Kosovo, Montenegro, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey). Support for civil society working in the area of child protection has also been provided.

Enlargement countries are gradually aligning their legislation with the EU 'acquis'. The Commission is monitoring this process intensively, including when it comes to the rights of the child in the different chapters. On this point I would like to underline that data collection is an important part of that monitoring work. The European Commission supports enlargement and neighbourhood countries to strengthen their statistical capacity so that reliable data is available to support modern policy making.

We remain committed to supporting projects and policies that enhance child protection systems and strengthen the rights of children, including as victims or in the context of criminal proceedings.

Recognising that juvenile justice reform is a key entry-point for the promotion and protection of children's rights, EU support to date in advancing the juvenile justice reform agenda has focused on two areas:

First, law reform for the promotion and protection of children's rights, in particular by:

- Encouraging and supporting the enactment and review of national legislation to ensure its compatibility with relevant international standards on the rights of the child, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and
- Enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies for investigations into the violation of children's rights and the development of child friendly procedures in pre-trial and court proceedings.

Second, combating and discouraging violations of children's rights, in particular by:

- Prohibiting violations of the children's rights and ill-treatment of children, in law, including criminal law, and ending impunity for violations of children's rights; and
- Taking effective legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures to prevent violations of children's rights under the jurisdiction of the State and combat impunity for such violations.

We do not work alone. UNICEF is one of our traditional partners whose vital work in the field is advancing the children's rights agenda in line with international standards and best practices. I am particularly proud of the cooperation that we have established with UNICEF to face the consequences of the Syrian crisis. When I was in Jordan recently, I went to the Zaatari refugees' camp and inaugurated a school run by UNICEF and funded by the European Commission. Through this concrete cooperation, we are giving children living in camps a semblance of normal life and the opportunity to acquire knowledge for rebuilding their lives.

Through innovative approaches, research, know-how and constant involvement, UNICEF has greatly contributed in advising countries on how to reform their juvenile justice systems based on modern legislation, policies and operations.

Today we have the opportunity to discuss our achievements, but also what remains to be done and how, so that children can enjoy their rights and freedoms and states can properly respond to their demands and expectations.

That is the world we seek. It is in our mutual interest and it is our common goal. The children deserve nothing less.