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DIRECTORATE-GENERAL JUSTICE and CONSUMERS
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Unit C.2: Fundamental rights policy

MINUTES

Second Meeting of the EU Network for Children's Rights 16 March 2023 Albert Borschette Conference Centre, 36 Rue Froissart, 1040, Brussels

I. SUMMARY

On 16 March 2023, DG Justice and Consumers (DG JUST) held the second meeting of the EU Network for Children's Rights. Its objective was to provide an update on what has been done since the first meeting in March 2022 to implement the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. It was chaired by Marie-Cécile Rouillon, the Commission Coordinator for the rights of the child, DG JUST.C2.

In the morning, discussions focused on two key deliverables of the EU Strategy on the rights of the child. After main developments were presented in a plenary session, the Commission, European Parliament, Member States, international and civil society organisations exchanged views on obstacles and best practices in break-out sessions on the following initiatives:

- the co-creation process of the **EU Children's participation platform (CPP)** was presented by DG JUST, SOS children's villages International and Save the children, with good practices presented by the European Network for Young Advisors (ENYA) and Bremore Educate Together Secondary School; the Commission stressed that joint efforts are required together with the European Parliament, Member States, international and civil society organisations to [onboard](#) child participation mechanisms across the EU.
- the preparation of an initiative on **integrated child protection systems (ICPS)** was presented by DG JUST, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) and DG REFORM, with presentations in breakout sessions on the Barnahus model in Slovenia, on the Spanish organic law on violence, and by Missing Children Europe. The Commission underlined that this initiative will aim at offering practical support to Member States, connecting the dots at EU, national, local level, to better respond to children's needs from prevention to protection. This initiative will build on existing support, FRA mapping and a thorough external consultation, including the [view of children](#) through the new CPP.

In the afternoon, **Sweden, Spain and Belgium**, presented their priorities relating to children's rights for their Presidencies. The Commission Coordinator for the rights of the child presented the **implementation of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child**. **Croatia** showed how it implemented its national plan for children's rights. **UNICEF** and the **Council of Europe** updated on close synergies with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. Participants updated on key developments and **best practices** at national level and in their organisations, and discussed the **future work of the Network**.

Participants included delegates from **21 Member States** (BE, BG, CZ, DE, EE, IE, GR, ES, FI, FR, HR, CY, MT, NL, AT, PT, RO, SI, SK, SE, DK) and **one EEA EFTA country** (NO). The **European Parliament** (the Intragroup on children's rights and the Children's rights Coordinator's secretariat), **UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, the Council of Europe and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)**

attended the meeting, as well as the following **civil society organisations**: CBSS, ENOC, 5rights Foundation, Alliance for Childhood European Network, CFJ Network, Child Circle, Child Fund Alliance, COFACE, COPE, Defence for Children, Eurochild, European Guardianship Network, Hopes and Homes for Children, Missing Children Europe, PICUM, Plan International, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, Terre des Hommes, World Vision EU, and BREMORE School. The Commission was represented by DG JUST and DG REFORM.

II. EU CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION PLATFORM (CPP)

1. State of play of the EU Children Participation Platform

DG JUST (Marta Kuljon) together with SOS children's Villages and Save the Children presented [the EU Children's Participation Platform \(CPP\)](#). The platform is one of the key deliverables of the [Strategy on the rights of the child](#). The aim of the platform is to promote and improve meaningful, inclusive and safe participation of children in political and democratic life at local, national and EU level and to involve and engage children in decision-making processes. The CPP is funded by DG JUST through an open tender procedure and managed by ICF together with the following organisations/experts: Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, Risk and Policy Analysts (RPA), Prof. Laura Lundy, and Prof. Cath Larkins.

The CPP will organise consultations with children on policy and legal documents, conduct studies and research, produce information in child friendly and accessible formats. Some other activities will include offline and online meetings and capacity building on child participation.

The set-up of the platform is under way. The call for expression of interest was sent to more than 300 organisations at the end of February. A children's panel and Advisory Board met already twice. Organisation of the first round of consultations (on the integrated child protection systems to be launched in June). The first meeting of the General Assembly is planned for 26 and 27 June. The membership is opened to all EU Member States. Currently, child empowerment officers, who are responsible for some activities with children are present in 14 Member States: BG, FR, IT, NL, ES, HR, DE, LV, PT, SE, DK, HU, LT, and RO, while membership is open to all Member States. In addition, CPP provides the following opportunities: 1) amplifying ongoing child participation efforts at national/local level; 2) increasing children and national mechanisms' engagement on EU policy matters; 3) mobilising a network on continuously identifying opportunities to reach out to wider networks; 4) exchanging with other mechanism across the EU; 5) building capacity of existing child participation mechanisms; 6) contributing to mainstreaming child participation in national policymaking; 7) having access to resources and information about child participation in MS and at EU level. Ultimately, empowering children to become changemakers and fulfilling their rights.

2. Discussions in breakout sessions

Suzanne Garcia Imbernon, ENYA General Coordinator, presented the **European Network of Young Advisors (ENYA)**, launched by the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) and co-financed by the EU. It involves children and young people in ENOC's policy work to give them the opportunity to be heard at a European level. Each participating member nominates a coordinator. Yearly training sessions are provided (this year in collaboration with Eurochild), as well as support. Every year a different topic is addressed at national/regional

level (within ENOC participating members) by a group of young people between the ages of 13 and 17, representing a country or a region. Young people put forward a number of rights-based recommendations, which are discussed at the annual ENYA Forum to incorporate the ideas and experiences of the young people in the policy work carried out by ENOC. ENYA identified the following challenges: 1) providing children with age-appropriate information on the topic discussed; 2) keeping young people motivated particularly because of their busy schedules; 3) ensuring equal representation of young people; 4) providing the appropriate environment and support to those children and young people who may be less articulate; 5) providing the participants with feedback once the project has come to an end.

Kathy Jones, the principal of **Bremore Secondary School** presented how the school involves children in making documents child friendly. Their first experience was when Professor Laura Lundy (Queen's University Belfast), contacted the school to help the European Commission on making the 2021 EU Strategy on the rights of the child age-appropriate for children. As the process went on, children began to understand it and felt like they have a voice and are able to share their ideas to improve the document. Much recognition was given to the students who participated (e.g. name at the back of their book, letter from the European Commission thanking them). Another project was assigned to them, European Better internet for kids' strategy. The school then applied for a national funding for continuing their activities with children. These meet SDG number four – “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. It covers child and adult education, skills, and gender disparity. The school in particular meets goals [4.1](#), [4.4](#), [4.5](#), [4.6](#), [4.7](#), [4.a](#), and [4.c](#). Kathy Jones also emphasised the strong collaboration the school had with Eurochild.

Participants and Member States shared good practices and national examples on child participation.

III. INTEGRATED CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS INITIATIVE (ICPS)

1. Presentation of the preparation of the ICPS initiative

DG JUST, Rights of the child Team (Marta Tarragona Fenosa) emphasised that this key initiative under the EU Strategy on the rights of the child was supported by the [Council Conclusions 1004/22 on the EU Strategy on the rights of the child \(9 June 2022\)](#). The initiative on integrated child protection systems will be presented at the beginning of 2024. The consultation was launched during the European Forum on the rights of the child and will take place internally, and externally (EU Network for children's rights, [open public consultation, call for evidence](#)). FRA will update its [mapping of child protection systems in EU MS. Children will also be consulted](#) on the initiative, under the new CPP. Children need to be protected from violence and other adverse situations all throughout the system. Violence has various root causes and consequences that tend to co-occur, can be national or cross-border. Different actors and parts of the system often act in parallel and not in a coordinated way. Child protection systems should be resilient and respond in an integrated/coordinated and multidisciplinary way to the varied situations children can encounter. In addition, it is necessary to pull together existing tools at EU level (legislation, policy, funding, soft measures) to make systems stronger and integrated. *[links updated after the meeting]*

EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (Astrid Podsiadlowski, Head of Social Rights Sector) presented the objectives of the input of FRA to the development of the Commission's initiative on the integrated child protection systems:

1. to map legislation, policies, and programmes on child protection systems in 27 EU Member States.
2. to identify challenges and gaps which hinder the process towards integrated child protection systems.
3. to identify promising practices (for example on interagency and multidisciplinary cooperation and coordination which facilitate integrated child protection systems).
4. To develop and carry out technical assistance activities at EU and national levels upon request – also at regional level.
5. To communicate the findings and raise awareness on the need for integrated child protection systems in which children are given the chance to participate and express their views in a meaningful way.
6. To provide evidence-based advice to EU institutions, agencies, and Member States, as well as international organisations.

Additionally, FRA emphasised that inter-agency cooperation at national level and EU-level cooperation between national child protection systems are particularly important areas for the development towards integrated child protection systems – with a big focus on education and child protection. FRA mentioned the web-publication of the analysis based on the mapping of national child protection systems at the end of 2023, and the comparative report to be published early 2024.

DG REFORM – Governance and public administration Unit (Sébastien Renaud, Deputy Head of Unit) shared the experience of supporting the development of the Barnahus model, starting in Slovenia in 2021. DG REFORM is helping other EU countries to implement this initiative in Finland, Spain, Ireland and soon Croatia. This model aims at having an adapted judicial process for child victims of sexual abuse. Barnahus is a house adapted to children victims of sexual abuse where they receive support from trained professional (e.g. medical incl. psychologists, judicial, police, social workers), and where children only tell their story once to avoid re-victimisation. The Barnahus model makes it easier for such children to overcome their trauma. The Barnahus offers a strong platform to help improve the quality of public administration and solve issues with larger and multi-disciplinary team, centralisation of data knowledge and inter-ministerial coordination. It provides a practical solution and a place where better coordination can take place. It can also be used as a place to train stakeholders, such as the police and judicial authorities. While being one part of a much broader integrated child protection system, this model can offer inspirational multidisciplinary working methods. *[update after the meeting: a [2024 Flagship Technical support Project](#) includes the objective to promote integrated child protection systems, with a deadline by 31 October 2023]*

2. Discussions on ICPS in breakout sessions

Introduced by presentation on best practices, interactive discussions focused on challenges, obstacles and way forward. Discussions were held under Chatham house rules.

Presentations

Spain presented its organic law for the comprehensive protection of children against violence, as one of the first country in the world to adopt legislation of this type in 2021. It notably responded to a recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child to Spain since 2010 and of a Subcommittee of the Parliament in 2014 to implement such a law. There was also a non-legislative proposal in 2017. Such a law fulfills SDG 16. The challenge is to implement all the mechanisms that the law has introduced to prevent violence, also given complex decentralised competences. Spain stressed the importance to change the social view on child violence, as a social issue for all different stakeholders, as the responsibility of the society as a whole to work together and reject any form of violence against children and adolescents. This paradigm shift includes the whole cycle of child protection (from prevention to support) to create a child protective environment and promote good treatment, also including child participation and the gender dimension.

Some Member States presented the implementation of Barnahus model, as an example of child protection systems (that are broader than Barnahus):

- **Slovenia**: This led the establishment of a public institutions, of an interagency team of experts, as well as interaction and connection with other Member States. Lessons learnt include the importance of clarifying the role of each agency/expert, identifying what is needed in the legislation. Training is not enough, and an intersectional cooperation is important;
- **Estonia** started the process in 2017, with pilot projects; Since 2016, the child protection act has entrusted all institutions, preparing for the 2nd stage of the reform to implement all services responsible for child protection. Legal changes in 2022 included the obligation to set up a national assurance board;
- **Sweden** mentioned that in 2021 children witnessing crime are also included in Barnahus (broader than child sexual abuse).

The **Council of Europe** referred to the Barnahus as a success story, which can be considered in a broader context (the CoE Steering Committee will review the Barnahus implementation).

Member States flagged the following challenges:

- complex child protection systems fragmented between different ministries and level of competences (e.g. social care, medical, police, justice systems), with sometimes different views (e.g. children in migration from the asylum or child-protection angles);
- the complexity of the systems doesn't respond to children's needs;
- issues of data protection, and adaptation of the regulation to integrated child protection challenges (e.g. sharing data across services);
- issue of deinstitutionalisation and challenge to reform family foster care (especially for unaccompanied children or children with disabilities)

and identified the following ways-forward:

- sharing examples of good practices, given national specificities (e.g. centres on child sexual abuse, deinstitutionalisation policies, etc.)
- establishing a possible handbook on systemic changes;
- providing funding at regional level as well;
- setting up a coordinated approach, especially in the absence of any umbrella organisation; preparing the ground and having all actors onboard, with a common mindset;
- providing training on interdisciplinary working methods;
- working on family support programmes;
- some MS referred to the preparation of forthcoming national child protection law, or new integrated child protection initiatives.

EP, CSOs and international organisations stressed the following challenges:

- Children are victims of child protection gaps, especially with specific vulnerabilities;
- Impact of the COVID-19 on violence (some inquiring on the existence of research on the impact on child protection services);
- increasing capacities to prevent and fight violence;
- lack of contact points for referrals
- difficulty to recruit child protection professionals, issue of working conditions (e.g. staff being at risk of violence, in need of psychological support too);
- long waiting lists for child protection (for months, as reported to ombudspersons);
- issue of data protection and sharing data on across agencies (data protection being often used as a barrier to share information)
- cross-border issues (e.g. sharing confidential information, court cases involving different countries with different safeguards, avoiding duplicating child investigative interviews in cross-border court cases, children in migration);

and identified the following **ways forward**:

- having systems adapted to the needs of children and not the other way around, need resilient and inclusive child protection systems;
- preventing/addressing the underlying factors leading to violence against children;
- involving the family and society at large (e.g. family support); Preventing family separation;
- understanding the continuum of care (from prevention to support), where the EU can support (using the EU policies, funds and laws in different ways, eg ESF, European Child Guarantee, training professionals, supporting measures, etc.);
- Investing in child protection systems, and quality alternative care;
- Supporting the workforce (EU could invest in training workers, or create guidance)
- Improving data collection (e.g. on children in institutions deprived of parental care);
- monitoring waiting lists for child protection within Member States;
- having one referral person for each case;
- supporting an integrated approach (e.g. Barnahus) at decentralised level as well;
- consulting and empowering children, providing child-friendly information (including legal information);
- sharing best practices, building a common international platform;
- covering the issue of corporal punishment.

IV. PRESIDENCIES OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU

1. Swedish Presidency

Sweden presented the priorities of its Presidency with regards to the rights of the child. A first ministerial meeting concerning the situation in Ukraine has taken place, as well as discussions with Ukrainian authorities, as supporting vulnerable children and temporary displaced children as a result of the war is one of the top priorities. This presidency will work on better integration of the rights of the child in European policies. A conference will focus on social inclusion and adequate housing in Stockholm on 4 April. The conference will cover several aspects, one of them being the rights of the child and guarantee – adequate housing, child disabilities, and gender-based violence will be highlighted in such conference. A [high-level meeting](#) will take place in June focusing on the protection of Ukrainian children and on the support to the Ukrainian child protection system. Child participation is among the Swedish Presidency priorities, with a dedicated FREMP meeting in June. *[updated after the meeting]*

2. Next Presidencies: Spain and Belgium

The **Spanish** representation stated that it is preparing two events during its Presidency, which is in the second semester of 2023. The first one aims at promoting children participation (during the last weekend of September), including activities and meeting with children. The second one will be the meeting of the European Child Guarantee Coordinators on 3 November, focusing on how to implement the National Action Plans, and identify what challenges are to come, with a broader focus on child protection.

The **Belgian** presidency (first half of 2024) has three relevant priorities: 1) inclusion of children and young people, and inclusive societies, 2) youth work, 3) inclusivity, in the sense of child friendly cities. The Belgian representation also pointed out that it will evaluate international and European policy agendas on children's rights and youth policies and will organise an expert seminar in January 2024 in this theme, in order to foster participation and dialogue.

V. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EU STRATEGY ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

1. Update by DG JUST on the implementation of the EU Strategy

Marie-Cécile Rouillon (Commission Coordinator for the rights of the child, DG JUST) presented the key milestones already achieved in the implementation the EU Strategy on the rights of the child and next steps, welcoming the adoption of [the Council conclusions](#) in June 2022. In addition to the on-going implementation of the **EU Children's Participation Platform** (pillar 1) and of preparation of the **Integrated child protection systems initiative** (pillar 5), as detailed above, she also flagged:

- under pillar 2 (socio-economic inclusion and access to health): 19 national plans have been submitted for the implementation of the **European Child Guarantee** (all MS are called to submit their); the Commission will present an [Comprehensive approach to mental health](#) with a strong focus on children *[presented in June 2023]*.

- Under pillar 4 on child-friendly justice: in August 2022, new rules ([Brussels IIb Regulation](#)) entered into force to better protect children in cross-border custody cases. The Commission proposed a Regulation to support the **mutual recognition of parenthood** between Member States in December 2022. The Commission also works in close synergies with the **Council of Europe**, with financial support, to strengthen the implementation of their [Guidelines on Child-friendly justice](#).
- Under pillar 5 on Child rights in the digital environment: in May 2022 the Commission proposed a **Regulation on preventing and combating child sexual abuse**. The Commission also adopted the '**Better Internet for Kids Strategy**', closely involving children in its preparation to protect, empower and respect children online. The **Digital Services Act** also includes stronger provisions on child online safety.
- Under pillar Global dimension of the strategy: The Commission presented in September 2022 the Youth Action Plan in EU external actions, fostering child and youth participation globally. In line with a zero tolerance approach against child, in 2022, the Commission presented the [Decent Work Communication](#) and proposed a [Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence](#) which will help fight child labour.

Marie-Cécile Rouillon also stressed that child protection is central in the EU support to people fleeing the Russian war of aggression against **Ukraine**. Unaccompanied and separated children, as well as children from institutions in Ukraine require specific attention on the EU territory, given their increased vulnerability. Marie-Cecile also flagged at the importance of Member States receiving children to include them in the school system and allow them to have access to mental health support. On 2 February 2023, President Von der Leyen announced at the EU Ukraine summit a € 10 million package to support Ukraine in building a new childcare strategy. In March 2023, President von der Leyen also announced the [establishment of the International Centre for the Prosecution of Crimes of Aggression against Ukraine](#). In light of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, children facing armed conflicts must be protected; protecting children in other emergency situations must also be key.

2. Member States updates

Croatian national plan for children's rights (2022-2024): The Croatian Representation presented the national plan for the rights of children, which was created based on a public consultation. Its foundations include the EU Strategy on the rights of the child, under a multisectorial comprehensive approach. The goals of such a plan are the following: combating discrimination and social exclusion (with an emphasis on mental health); protecting against violence in all forms; child participation; child friendly justice; protection in the digital environment. The challenges of the implementation the temporary directive were also pointed out, with measure taken to access healthcare, education, and child-friendly justice; and the difficulty of monitoring people fleeing the Ukraine that were staying in private accommodation.

ES referred to child participation in different consultation and stated that it is setting up a National Council with children; under the European Child Guarantee national plan, 11% of ESF will be invested to tackle child poverty. ES referred to a national plan on child obesity and to a strategy to eradicate violence; It is also working closely with DG REFORM and the CoE

to create the Barnahus model. A new project will promote digital competences for vulnerable group with regions.

AT established an agency for child protection in order to strengthen children's lives in general. There are also changes being made in the national criminal law.

IE has written to EU child guarantee national coordinators to invite to a series of events in April in cooperation with the Commission.

NL is organising a first children's dialogue in April to discuss the conclusions of the UNCRC. Invited experts and organisations so that they can talk with them, and the idea is to have this organised annually.

SI is member of the CP4Europe project on child participation (by the CoE with EU funding) including many focused groups such as unaccompanied children and children in care, and is preparing national guidelines on child participation with the CoE.

EE stated that on 1 April, the victim support act will come into force. With regards to child protection, there are currently amendments on alternative care. It is currently being discussed how to improve the child protection system, notably with local governments.

DE mentioned the continuous work on enshrining children's rights in the German constitution. A child rights brochure is developed with children. Basic child allowance is being introduced to make it easier for children to obtain benefits. A National Action Plan is also being developed for child participation.

BE stressed that the national commission on children's rights has prepared the national action plan and has initiated child friendly concluding observations, which was created by young people (14-17 years old) in French and Dutch, and went to the UNCRC to present it. BE is also working on the actualisation of national indicators.

3. Update by other participants

UNICEF congratulated the Commission for the achievements and close cooperation. The initiative on Integrated Child Protection Systems is a key priority to strengthen MS child protection systems, which will also leverage UNICEF work. Child poverty is another priority (as shown in the recent Save the Children's report), the implementation of the European Child Guarantee should be accelerated. UNICEF will engage with MS on concrete actions.

With regards to mental health, UNICEF welcomes the Commission's initiative planned for adoption in June. UNICEF advocates for children and youth's mental health, and released a [report in 2021](#) with very alarming data as suicidal rates continuously grew. This is the second most common death of teenagers in Europe. UNICEF hope that the initiative of the Commission will shed light on this problem, and that national mental health strategies will be created. Child Sexual Abuse is another top priority, in order to stike a delicate balance, the best interest of the child, the right of privacy and protection of children must prevail.

CoE stressed the close synergies. CoE created a mapping study focused on access to quality mental health. On child participation, CP4Europe (in CZ, IC, FI, PT, SI) demonstrates a successful cooperation with the Commission and synergies are being explored with the CPP.

Furthermore, there is a big focus on Ukraine, especially on human trafficking and prevention of violence. A mapping study on Barnahus will be launched in September. Additionally, the CoE is working on a recommendation on children in parental separation proceedings.

PICUM is working on the transition to adulthood and looking for good practices and highlighted some challenges on transnational procedures (e.g. for an integrated protection of undocumented children and for children victims of trafficking in human beings).

Child Circle referred to transnational procedures for child protection against trafficking.

EGN flagged the challenges related to children in migration and unaccompanied minors raising challenges across the EU, and call to extend good practices for UA children to other nationalities; and referred to their on-going work with FRA, EUAA, COM, CoE.

TDH welcomed the impressive work of the Commission, and asked about the intentions on mainstreaming guidance, calling to strengthen the UN-EU Cooperation.

VI. ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON THE FUTURE WORK OF THE NETWORK AND CLOSING

Participants discussed some key objectives: raising awareness; support the implementation of the EU Strategy; exchanging good practices; boost the sharing of information; suggested different types of activities.

The General Assembly of the EU Children's participation platform will take place on the 26 and 27 of June, of which the programme is currently being developed. Children will participate in this meeting, and Member States invited.

The Commission requested the MS to send their updates of national development by mid-April and mentioned that the next EU Network meeting will take place in Autumn.

Of all that was discussed, Members showed particular interest in: exchange on national level coordination and rights of the child strategies and monitoring; child participation and consultation; and taking concrete action on Ukraine.