



CONFERENCE REPORT

14TH EUROPEAN FORUM ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

27-29 SEPTEMBER 2022

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Introduction

On 27, 28, 29 September 2022, the 14th European Forum on the rights of the child took place in hybrid format. This year's theme was "[Bringing Children to the Centre: Empowering, protecting and including children](#)". The Forum aimed to build on progress made since the adoption of the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), a new comprehensive policy framework to ensure the promotion and protection of rights of children.

Moderated by [Adrio Bacchetta](#), the plenary sessions were web-streamed, and while most participants connected remotely, some speakers and participants attended the Forum in-person in Brussels. During the sessions, participants shared comments and asked questions to speakers via chat.

In keeping with the theme of Forum of child participation, forty children took part both remotely and in-person, twelve children spoke at the plenary, while others shared their views during the parallel workshops. These children, from the European Union and beyond, were involved in the preparation and delivery of the Forum and will be involved in follow-up activities. A dedicated [children's page](#) about the Forum was created, with a [child-friendly agenda](#) and [background paper](#) about the Forum available to young participants.

Several civil society organisations, including Eurochild, worked to make meaningful child participation possible at this year's Forum. A child participation team was on hand at all times to ensure the [safety and well-being](#) of the children participating in the Forum, and all participants signed up to a [Code of Conduct](#). In this report, the child participants are only referred to by their first names and the country they come from, to protect their privacy.

Each day of the three-day Forum had a different theme and plenary sessions were followed by three parallel workshops where participants had the opportunity to actively engage in a discussion on issues related to the daily theme. Day one focused on the theme of *Delivering on the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child & Child Participation*. Day two explored the theme of *Children and armed conflicts, including children fleeing Ukraine and prevention from violence*. Finally, on day three discussions centred on the theme *Towards Integrated Child Protection Systems*. The terrible impact on children of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were recurrent themes in discussions across the three days.

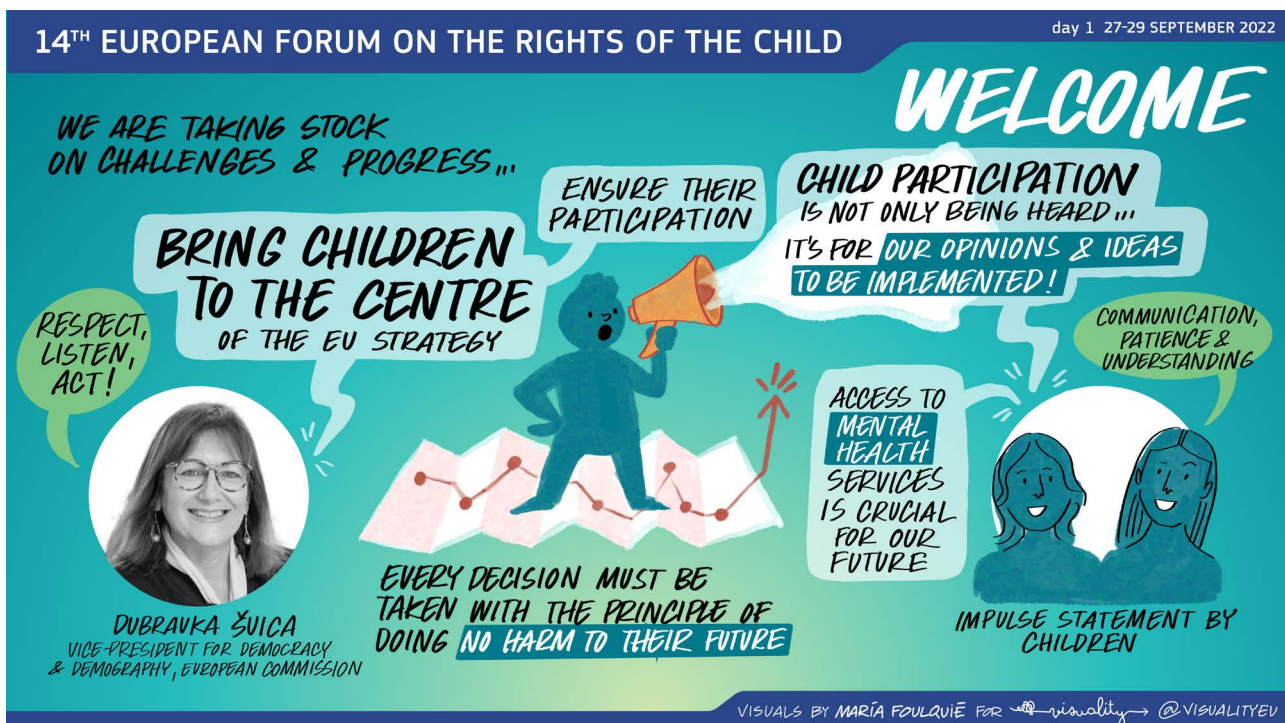
In addition to the forty children already mentioned, over 430 people took part in the Forum. This included participants from the EU institutions and agencies, national authorities and policy makers, children themselves, judicial and child protection practitioners, law enforcement, ombudspersons for children, independent experts, international and non-governmental organisations, and academics.

The Commission would like to warmly thank all the children who spoke at and participated during the Forum. Their strong messages were heard and their honest interventions appreciated.

DAY ONE

Plenary sessions Day One

Delivering on the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child & Child Participation



The first day of the Forum opened with a keynote address by **Dubravka Šuica** (Vice-President for Democracy and Demography of the European Commission). She set the tone for the Forum by stating that the key objective of the event was to bring children to the centre and uphold child rights in all the EU's actions. She repeated the words of President Ursula von der Leyen in her recent State of the Union address, that "every action that our Union takes should be inspired by a simple principle. That we should do no harm to our children's future". **Dubravka Šuica** referenced the particularly challenging circumstances of this year, with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, and the many global conflicts, such as in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Syria, and Yemen.

Many children in Europe are silent victims of violence and threats at home and online. She called for all children to be safely included in digital transition and for the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child

('the Strategy') to be made a reality for millions of children across the world. Central to implementing the Strategy is child participation.

"This is your world now and in the future. It is our duty to protect and include all of you." - **Dubravka Šuica**



Dubravka Šuica then asked some of the child participants what their expectations for the forum were and how it could respond to their needs.

Iva, a fifteen-year-old from Serbia, felt that there is a lack of mechanisms to protect children from violence, and a lack of opportunities for children. The Forum was not only a place to be heard but also to learn about different initiatives in place for children's rights. Children like her, she said, are cornerstones for change. In some countries child participation is rare and done in a tokenistic manner. She hoped the Forum would be a space for children to freely express their views, and for these views not only to be heard but applied.

“Children and adults don't look at the world the same way and children can have different ideas. Adults can be blocked by fear when it comes to change.” - Iva

Elisabet, a fourteen-year-old from Estonia, said that she expected everyone's voices to be heard and to work together to find solutions. She said she was most excited about the workshops, especially those related to mental health. She shared her personal experience of struggling with mental health and first-hand experience trying to access the right supports and services. Speaking of the long waiting lists and processes, she said that one in five children are not getting the help that they need. She spoke of the importance in sensitising parents to be able to see the signs that their children may be struggling and to open a dialogue with their children to support them.

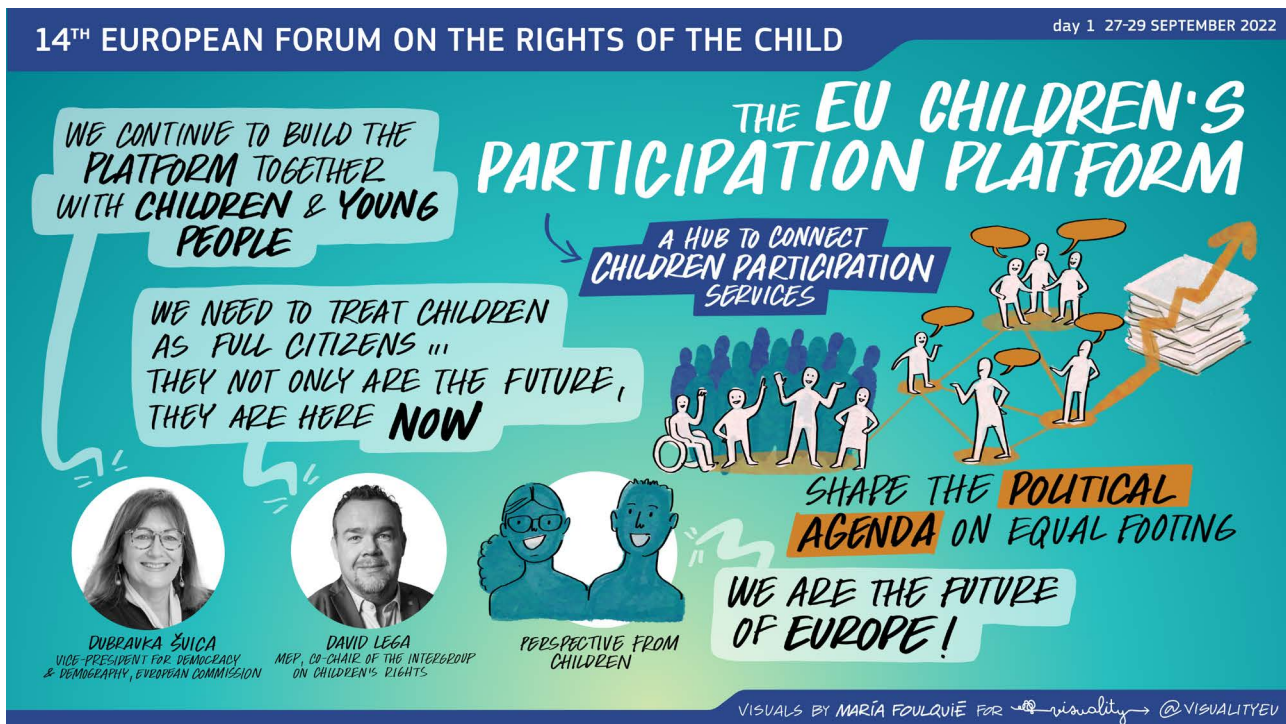
“Children are our future. We are our future.” - Elisabet



Participants were asked by the moderator to describe in three words what it would take to get adults and children to work better together:



Launch of the 'EU Child Participation Platform' – a new way for children to be involved when decisions are made



Dubravka Šuica officially launched the consultation phase of the [EU Child Participation Platform](#) ('the Platform'). She explained how the Platform fits into the Strategy, saying that it is a co-construction process in which children can contribute their ideas and dialogue with stakeholders and each other. The Platform will be a hub to connect the local, regional and national level to bring about meaningful participation of children.

Dubravka Šuica met several young participants at the Conference on the Future of Europe and said that one third of all participants were aged between sixteen to thirty-five years old. She highlighted the importance of intergenerational dialogue and giving a voice to the most disadvantaged in society, such as minorities, people with disabilities, and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

"Today's children are tomorrow's voters and to build resilient societies, we need to start with the youngest generations. We are counting on children, and they can count on our full support all the way." - **Dubravka Šuica**

Camille, a child from France, shared her experience of participating in the Conference on the Future of Europe and national children and youth council organisations. She said that educating children in European affairs will help them feel like citizens, in turn encouraging them to take action. She underlined the importance of accessibility, saying that policies should be accessible to all, for citizens to take informed action.

David Lega (Member of the European Parliament and Co-Chair of the [Intergroup on children's rights](#)) said that today's launch of the Platform was a historic event and that child participation is vital to future success. We often call children future leaders but can be patronising when it comes to actually engaging with them.

"Children are not just as future constituents they are fully fledged citizens." - **David Lega**



Underscoring some of the challenges, he said that too many children are at risk of poverty, there is an erosion of democratic values, and war raging in Europe. He said that it was in our best interests to have children at the centre of the political agenda - *together* with children and not just *for* children.

Charlie, a child from Sweden, has been a member of a student movement for several years working to empower children. He highlighted the importance of student councils, saying that at the national level in Sweden, their inputs are valued and considered, for example by the Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, children are not always taken seriously and have to

fight for a place at the table. Children are experts at being young and know what the issues that concern them are. He said he hopes the Platform will help and that its success will depend on whether adults are prepared to listen and take the concerns more seriously.

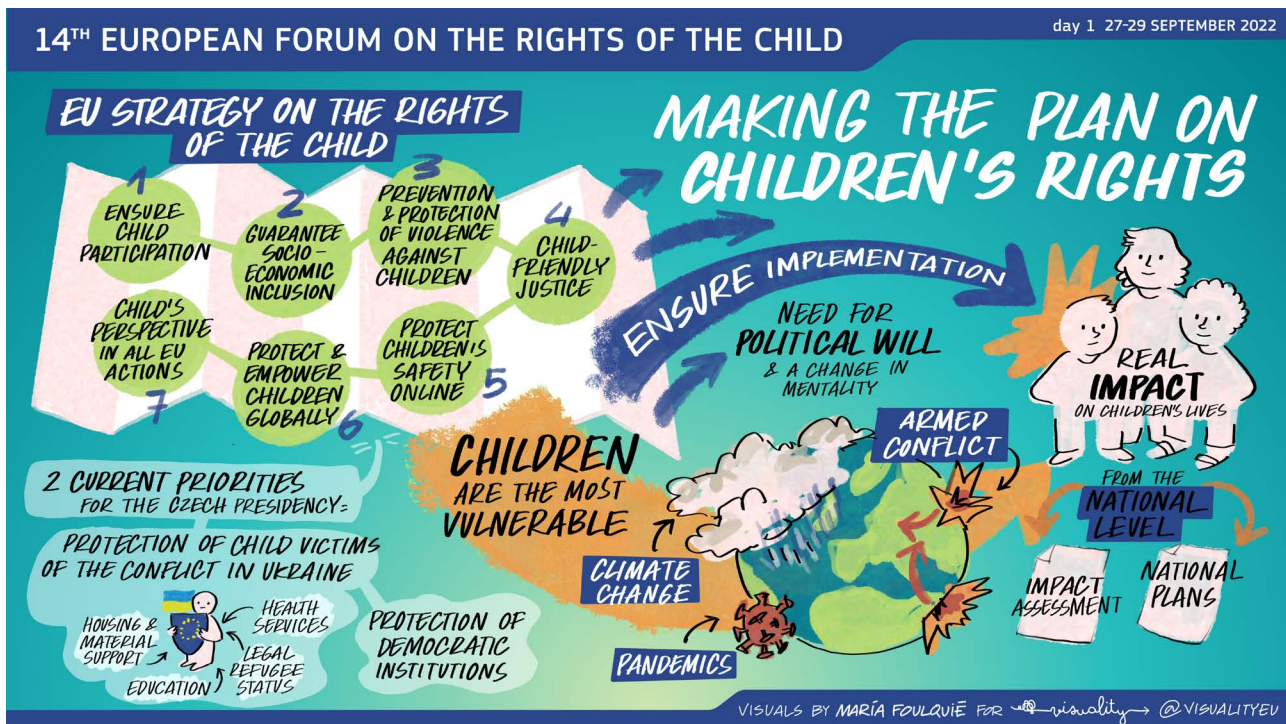


“Children already have a voice - adults just need to listen and deliver.” –

Charlie

Session 1

Delivering together on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (I)



This session was dedicated to the EU Strategy on the Rights of the child, with the speakers examining some of the key deliverables of the Strategy, synergies, and challenges ahead. They touched on some of the concrete achievements, as well as key future priorities, and the importance of close collaboration.

Child Participation Platform are welcome steps in bringing about coordinated, child-centred policies to be translated into concrete actions to uphold the rights of the child.

Key messages:

- Prioritising intergenerational dialogue and giving a voice to the most disadvantaged in society (minorities, people with disabilities, from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, etc.).
- Increasing child participation is vital to develop successful policies on children's rights and translate them into action.
- Synergies and cooperation at international, EU, national, local levels and with civil society are essential to make the rights of the child a reality.
- Political participation of children is vital for thriving societies.
- The EU Strategy on the rights of the child, the European Child Guarantee and the EU

Didier Reynders (Commissioner for [Justice](#), European Commission) recalled that children's rights are human rights. Children themselves must not only be part of the conversation but the central voice in it. Children have specific rights and needs that require special attention. He delved into the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, saying that significant progress has been made across the six thematic areas. On increasing participation of children (Priority 1), the Platform has now been launched, providing a clear roadmap to expand child participation in public life. To improve socio-economic inclusion, health, and education (Priority 2) the European Child Guarantee is designed to ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic of rights like healthcare and education. Over half of the MS have now submitted national plans to implement the Guarantee. With the revision of the Barcelona targets as part of the Strategy, the EU aims to get 50% of children below the age of three in early childhood

education and care. Half of all children worldwide suffer violence each year and preventing violence against children is the third priority of the Strategy.

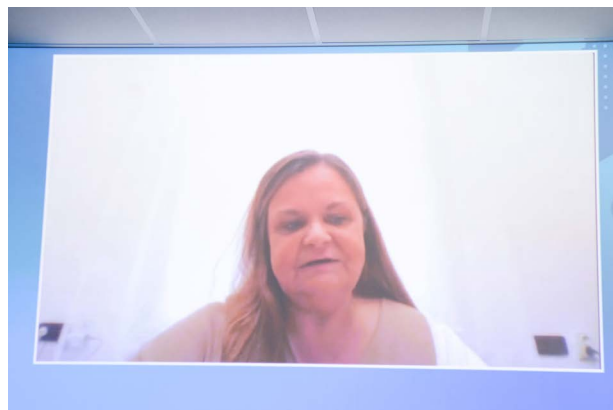
On making justice child-friendly (Priority Four) progress continues in training justice professionals to be more sensitive on child-friendly justice and the EU is working with the Council of Europe to promote international standards on child-friendly justice. On protecting children in the digital world (Priority 5), the Commission proposed a Better internet for kids strategy and has proposed a new [law](#) to combat child sexual abuse and exploitation online. The [Digital Services Act](#) also has stronger provisions on the safety of children. Finally, on Priority 6, children's rights in the world, there are violations on the doorstep of Europe. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has forced millions to flee their homes and half of the 7 million who have left Ukraine are children. With so many children without a school to go to, the future of Ukraine begins in its schools. That is why the EU is dedicating €100 million to help rebuild schools. With so many children suffering around the world because of conflict, climate change, and COVID-19, development and humanitarian funding is going towards protecting children. It will help to build better mechanisms for agencies to exchange to strengthen child protection. The EU network on the rights of the child, brings together stakeholders, policy makers and civil society.



“Member States have unanimously committed to protecting children’s rights and while we can be proud of progress, there is more to be done,”
- **Didier Reynders**

Zuzana Freitas Lopesová (Deputy Minister of [Labour and Social Affairs](#), Czech Republic) said that children's rights are not just a European issue but a global one. The Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union takes the rights of children very seriously and it is one of the top priorities for the presidency. In Czechia, steps are being taken to appoint a Children's Ombudsperson and one of the key priorities will be to responsibly manage the influx of refugees from Ukraine. Many are living in precarious situations, deprived of their homes, many without their families. There are severe risks to the rights of children.

Political participation of children is vital for thriving societies, said Zuzana Freitas Lopesová, and this includes people with disabilities and learning difficulties. We still have a long way to go when it comes to representation, children feel unrepresented and therefore sometimes ignore politics when they feel they are not heard. She stressed that children have a different form of communication, but it is no less valid. It is up to adults to open the conversation and make it more accessible. Political parties are losing members, which leads to voter apathy and threatens resilient societies.



Marija Pejčinović Burić (Secretary General of the [Council of Europe](#)) shared information about the Council of Europe's strong experience in the field of children's rights. The Council of Europe recently launched its fourth [Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(the Rome Strategy\)](#), drawing on the [European Convention on Human Rights](#), the European Social Charter and the Lanzarote Convention. The Council of Europe is working to ensure that its 46 Member States are equipped to uphold the values of human rights, the rule of law and democracy also for children

and continue to defend the rights of children in Europe and emphasised the importance of the [Council of Europe Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child](#) which serves as a strategic platform of intergovernmental cooperation between EU and Council of Europe member states. Such mechanisms are and complemented with the good coordination between the organisations through the respective coordinators allowing for a close cooperation to be in place.



She echoed that children are under a greater threat in crisis and emergency situations and that specific measures are vital to protect them. She underscored the value of multilateralism and common values and praised the productive synergies between the Council of Europe and the EU. She emphasised the excellent opportunities of collaboration in the context EU and Council of Europe Strategies for the Rights of the Child which mutually share a common understanding and common objectives in particular in the areas of participation of children, strengthening integrated systems to protect their rights, as well as justice systems which are accessible to children. Given the rich history of working together, she said, the Council of Europe recognises and supports the objectives of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and there is fertile ground for cooperation. When it comes to children's rights we must not shy from confronting change.

Milan Brglez, (Member of the European Parliament, Vice-Chair of the [Intergroup on children's rights](#)) described the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the EU Child Guarantee as important milestones. The Guarantee is a powerful tool in the fight against child poverty, where one in four children are affected by poverty, and children with migrant backgrounds and children with disabilities are disproportionately affected. The Intergroup's work is based on the [Child Rights Manifesto](#) prepared by a coalition of child-focused organisations working towards the realisation

of the EU's legal and policy commitments to promote and protect children's rights, and obligations set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children are affected by every legislation and policy the EU adopts both in its internal and external dimensions. **Milan Brglez** expressed his view that there should be a single and permanent entity to coordinate EU policy work on children's rights, such as a dedicated child rights unit in the Commission and the EEAS. He said that children's rights cannot continue to be treated as an appendix to the fundamental rights agenda. Nevertheless, the fact that all three European institutions and the Council of Europe were represented at the Forum was a positive step.



Karin Hulshof, (Deputy Executive Director for Partnerships, [UNICEF](#)) commended the EU and its Member States and described them as champions of child rights. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child is a key document, and everyone is looking at Europe as a leader in this area. She also praised the attribution of funding through the Child Guarantee.



Nevertheless, numerous challenges lie ahead, including climate change, conflict disasters, online bullying, exploitation, and abuse of children. Success in tackling these will depend on how to translate ideas into action. To do this, we need to continue to listen to children, as they know what they need. Every country must figure out

how it can get young citizens involved in decision making. On this, she welcomed the launch of the Platform and assured UNICEF's commitment to making it a success.

Child rights need to be mainstreamed in all actions, in all relevant policies, legalisation and funding programmes.

And child rights should be priorities in the debate on climate change, as they will be the most affected, with 90% of children projected to suffer climate related effects. Finally, **Karin Hulshof** urged the EU to strengthen financial monitoring mechanisms that track investments in children's rights through a 'child marker'.

Delivering together on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (II)

The session was focused on showing the synergies between the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. It also highlighted the important role of civil society organisations in contributing to the implementation of the Strategy.

Benoît Van Keirsbilck (Member of the [United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child](#), UNCRC) outlined some of the challenges facing children and stakeholders working to uphold their rights. There are laws and rules in place, but the issue is their daily implementation. There is still a lack of political will and children are not prioritised when policy makers adopt legislation. He pointed to the budgetary evidence, for example the reduction of social benefits which negatively impact children, the lack of financial investment in services for children, and the lack of training for professionals and services related to children. If we want to truly guarantee children's rights, then a child impact assessment should be carried out on each piece of legislation that is being developed. We need to do more awareness raising to change mentalities and strengthen protection of children. The Strategy has a vision and has many concrete elements, now the task is to translate these into action.

Rights Action Group (CRAG)) spoke about the importance of partnerships between international and European civil society groups on child rights inside and outside Europe, saying that close collaboration is vital. Under the French presidency, EU Member States committed themselves through the adoption of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and he hoped the Czech presidency would further this engagement. He applauded the inclusion of children's voices at the Forum. He welcomed the [draft regulation to prevent and combat child sexual abuse online](#) and called on Member States to make combatting child sexual abuse a priority. National action plans are good for setting the level of ambition, but effective implementation of these plans will be key.



Jeroen Uytterschaut, (Representative & Executive Director of [World Vision EU](#), Co-chair of the Children's



On the tragic consequences of the war in Ukraine he noted the need to improve systems for unaccompanied children who are deprived of family care. He called out certain hostile control measures being applied within the EU, such as children being pushed back across borders, detaining them, or denying children access to services and protection.

Globally, conflicts, climate change and economic shocks are pushing children into hunger, creating a lifelong impact on children. Resources must be dramatically increased and funding quickly dispersed.

Marie-Cécile Rouillon, (European Commission's Coordinator for the Rights of the Child, [Fundamental rights policy unit, DG JUST](#)) celebrated the collaborative nature of the Forum and how the [Strategy](#) has inspired the workshops that will take place. She highlighted the importance of the 6 pillars of the Strategy for everyone and the challenges and work ahead that will be discussed in the sessions to come. She welcomed the launch of the Child Participation Platform and emphasised how the next step is for all key players to come together with children; civil society, international

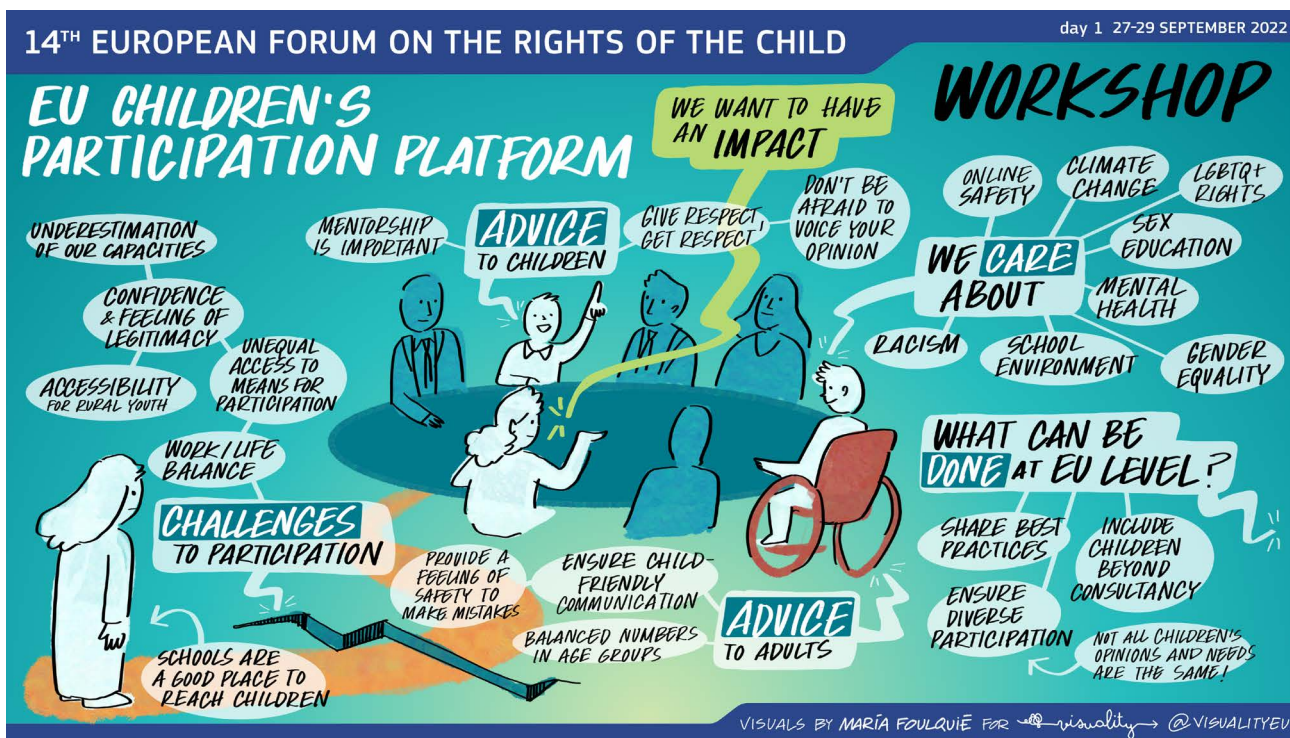
organisations, national authorities. On child poverty, another pillar of the Strategy, Member States are making progress but work remains to be done. The Commission is working hard to have the next meeting of the Child Guarantee Coordinator which will take place in the second half of October.

On the third day of the Forum, it will be discussed what we can do together to again put children in the centre and have child protection systems that are more integrated. Focusing on the external dimensions, she emphasised how children are always the most at risk during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and climate change.

Workshops Day One – Child Participation in practice

Workshop 1

EU Children's Participation platform



The workshop was moderated by **Marie-Cécile Rouillon**, (European Commission's Coordinator for the Rights of the Child, [Fundamental rights policy unit, DG](#)

[JUST](#)) who set the scene for the discussion and gave the floor to children to share their views. The children came from different countries, and some had participated in

the Conference on the future of Europe, while others were from national children or youth organisation.

Key messages

- Importance of adult support to build confidence.
- Inclusivity of diverse voices and backgrounds.
- Ownership of the agenda by children and young people.
- Importance of accessibility - easy to access and easy to understand - so that children feel involved and included.
- Importance of consulting children during the development of the Strategy, but also throughout its implementation.
- Linking in with existing mechanisms and platforms, at national and local levels, and civil society organisations, not always 'starting from scratch'.

On challenges faced by children

Sarah (Ireland) shared that accessibility is an issue for some children, for example those who come from rural areas. She also mentioned the fact that children should not be unduly overburdened, and it is important to keep a work-life balance, between school, family and social life, and participation in youth organisations.

Camille (France) shared that having the confidence to speak to certain 'high level' people can be intimidating, as children often feel that they don't have a legitimate voice. According to her, children should be made to feel comfortable and that there are no 'bad ideas'.

Mnasia (Cyprus) said that many children face challenges in accessing the digital tools and equipment to participate, and that better funding of youth organisations is needed to remedy this.

On encouraging other children to participate, **Charlie** (Sweden) said that mentorship is very important. He also encouraged children to 'set the agenda', since children are the experts on themselves.

Sarah said that children should not be afraid to give their opinions and to "lead the way and others will follow". She stressed the impact of teamwork

and camaraderie among peers.

On the Platform and what can be done at EU level

Participants found that children encounter similar problems across Europe so the Platform can be a place to learn from each other.

For the Platform to work, children should set the agenda. Children should be included in the process of development of projects, from inception to implementation.

Camille stressed the importance of accessibility in all senses of the word - easy to access and easy to understand. If things are presented in a simple and accessible way, it will encourage children to get involved.

The Platform should link in with existing mechanisms and platforms, at national and local levels, as well as with civil society organisations.

On reaching vulnerable or marginalised children

Participants agreed that a diverse panel of experiences and opinions is needed from people from different backgrounds. The best way to reach children in general is through schools or youth organisations, because they are trusted environments, and most children are in school.

Reaching children online is another avenue, but its important to note that different age groups use different platforms. Mnasia also warned that not all children have access to the internet, particularly those who are the most vulnerable. Awareness-raising campaigns in the mainstream media (television, radio, newspapers) are a way to reach a wider audience, and parents should also be targeted in campaigns.

Participation is indeed a challenge in some countries in the EU where child participation is not encouraged at the national level.

Camille said that involving children in democracy comes from education and upbringing from the

earliest age. Topics should be made accessible so that children feel involved and included.

How can adults be allies?

Charlie feels lucky that his opinions are generally respected. Children should be helped and guided as they are still learning. Adults need to learn the skills to communicate with children. Communication with children is less formal and children should be made to feel welcome.

Camille said that her mother's support was instrumental in giving her confidence and that having an adult's support is very helpful. She mentioned mentorship as another example.

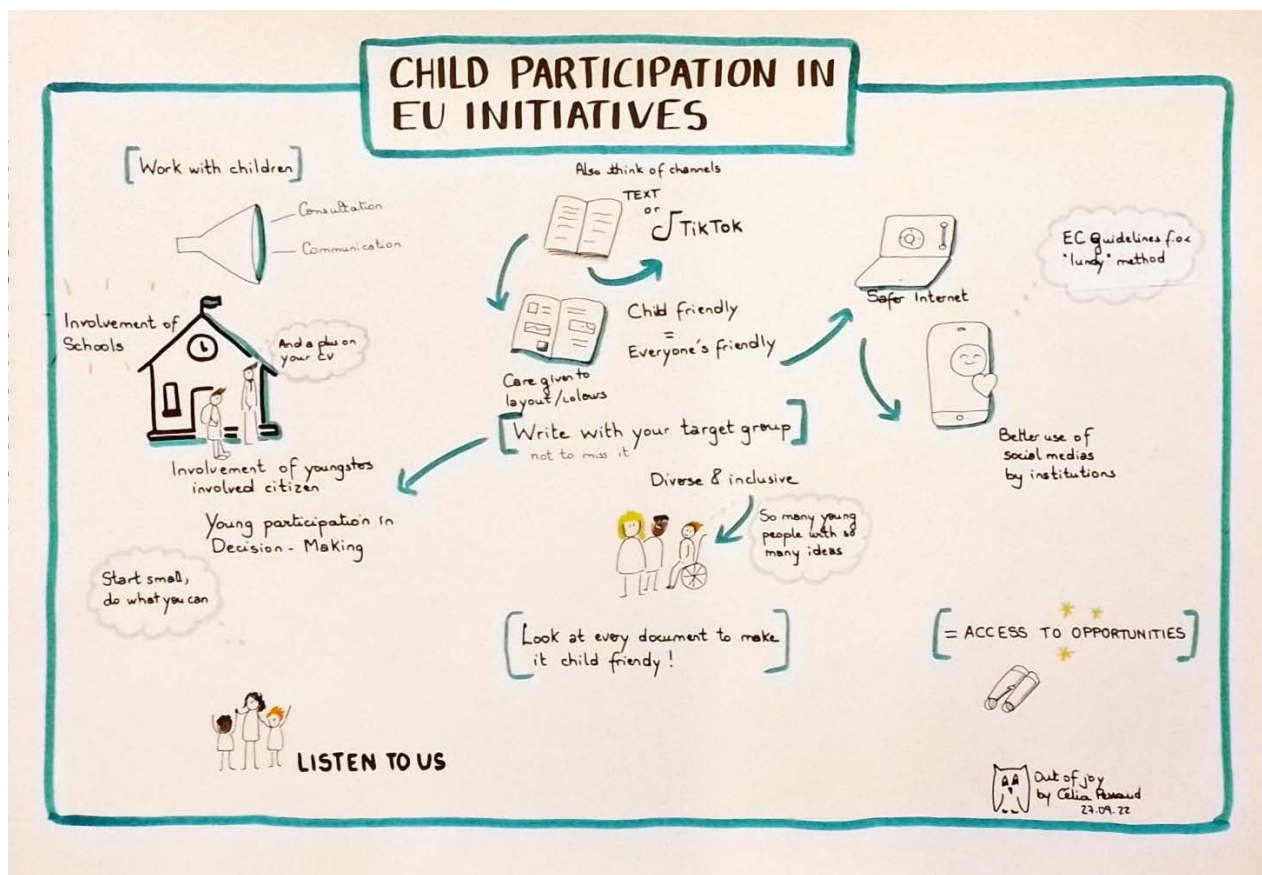
Participants said that they felt more comfortable when surrounded by other child participants, where there is a balance between children and adults and *equality between the age groups*.

On priority topics for children

Topics relating to culture and identity such as gender equality, LGBTIQ+, mental health, climate change, anti-racism, disability, and issues relating to school are of interest to children. Also unaccompanied children and children seeking asylum who are invisible in so many areas of life. Physical accessibility is an issue, and all children should feel welcome, including those with additional needs.



Workshop 2 Child participation in EU initiatives



The workshop was moderated by **June Lowery-Kingston** (Head of unit, Accessibility, Multilingualism and Safer Internet unit, [DG CNECT, European Commission](#)) and the discussion centred on the experiences of children who had participated in two EU initiatives: the guidelines on child-friendly documents and child-friendly meetings; and the consultation on the Better Internet for Kids+ (BIK) strategy.

The European Commission has been working with children on the [Better Internet for Kids+](#) strategy to create a safer and more accessible internet for children. The internet is a fast-paced environment with ever-changing technological innovation and trends, so it is essential to talk to children to see what issues are affecting them. The Better Internet for Kids+ strategy is a good practice example of children participation and the Commission is looking at how it can extend this type of involvement of children across other policy areas.

Key messages

- Communication by children for children is more effective.
- Youth representation and youth voices matter – it is essential to talk to children to see what issues are affecting them.
- Vital to make policies and communication more accessible to children - use simpler words, shorter sentences, and visual elements.
- The Commission should ensure that there is more diversity of perspectives (nationalities, ages, social backgrounds, minorities, and people with disabilities) when children are consulted - avoid drawing from the same pool of children involved in previous initiatives.

Alessia (Ireland with Romanian heritage) worked on a project with [Laura Lundy](#) (Professor of international children's rights at the School of Education at the Queen's University of Belfast) to develop posters to explain digital rights to children. The young participants shared their ideas on how to express ideas visually.

She found it to be a very positive experience and appreciated the fact that the EU was taking on board the ideas of children.

Prachi (Ireland) is a BIK Youth Ambassador and took part in a six-week workshop about internet safety. They developed a series of child-friendly videos on various topics relevant to children. Communication by children for children is more effective. She said that there were many different topics and angles, so it was sometimes difficult to narrow them down and find common experiences between the young participants.

Alex (Ireland) worked on the child-friendly version of the [Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#) adapting the language of the text to make it more accessible to children. He said that using shorter sentences, simpler vocabulary, breaking down long paragraphs and adding visual elements makes it easier to read for children. He said it was a balance to try to simplify complicated terms and concept without being patronising. In fact, many adults also used the child-friendly version of the document. He was very positive about his experience and hoped to see tangible changes in the future.

All the young participants said their experiences of participating in EU projects had been worthwhile experiences, where they learned many things, as well as feeling they were contributing to impactful work for other children and making a difference. They encouraged others to get involved and felt it could open other opportunities for them in the future.

They thought that social media was a good way for the EU to deliver communications in a fun and accessible way, as social media can capture a wide audience.

All the participants had heard about and become involved in the EU initiatives through their schools and said they would not have been aware otherwise.

They warned that there are many other children with interesting ideas and that the Commission should not fall into a system of privilege of always asking the same people who were involved in previous initiatives. They said that many marginalised or less privileged children don't have avenues to voice their opinions and don't even know they exist. For example, this year is the European Year of Youth and there are many interesting initiatives but not a lot of children know about them.



Workshop 3

EU Youth action plan in EU external action



The workshop was moderated by **Ana Torres Fraile** (Head of unit, Youth, Education and Culture unit, [DG INTPA, European Commission](#)) who introduced the topic of children and young people in EU external action. She said that children and young people are a pillar of the work of **Jutta Urpilainen, European Commissioner for International Partnerships**, and the EU is working to promote youth empowerment and participation in partner countries outside the EU.

The [EU Youth Action Plan](#) (YAP) – published days after the workshop took place is a new policy to support young people as agents of change in democratic societies across the world, and to promote intergenerational solidarity.

Key messages

- Recognise the essential work that children and youth activists are doing in their communities, not only to defend their rights but also contributing to more peaceful, equal and democratic societies.
- Importance of building a partnership of equality between children and policy makers. Children not only have the right to participate but policy makers have much to learn from their young counterparts.
- Create an enabling environment for child participation, with child-friendly processes and facilitation.

- Importance of transparency, accountability and feedback to children who participate in initiatives.

Daniel McCormack ([EEAS](#) policy officer International Cooperation) explained that the EU has consulted with 220 different stakeholders, including youth organisations at local and regional level, who themselves conducted consultation processes in their own communities.

The three pillars of the YAP are to engage, empower and connect. Partnerships to engage, by increasing child voices at all levels; empower to fight inequality and provide opportunities and skills; and connect with peers worldwide.

The EU is working to increase child youth participation as there is not currently enough investment in this area. Daniel McCormack talked about the [Your Voice Your Future](#) campaign, a joint initiative of European Commission, African Union and UNICEF where 450,000 children and young people were consulted in Africa and Europe on key issues and 91% said they wanted to be more involved in decision-making. The EU has committed to making youth participation a core element of external policy-making and empower youth in partner countries.

Whytiny, a youth advocate from Kenya, shared her perspective of working for children's rights. She said she was motivated by her experience growing up and seeing friends and peers who had experienced hardship at home. She has seen first-hand the positive impacts of child participation and for her engagement of young people in decision-making is critical to protect children from violence, abuse, and exploitation. Her own experiences of working with a youth council have helped boost her confidence and become fearless in expressing her views. She warned of the risk of adults overpowering children by limiting their speaking time or interrupting them. She also said that it can be a challenge for children to get consent from their parents to participate. Protecting anonymity of children is very important as well.

She made several recommendations, including creating an enabling environment for child- participation with child-friendly processes and facilitation; avoid framing children as vulnerable but rather as rights-holders; provide adequate funding to build organisational capacity; involve civil society to collect feedback from children on how they feel their views have been considered, as they rarely receive feedback after having given their views.

Sharon Twikirize (Child protection specialist from Uganda) presented the '[Joining Forces for Africa](#)' project on child participation. A three-year child protection intervention responding to increased risks of violence against children arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Senegal and Uganda, the project has been implemented in five countries by a consortium of six child-focused international NGOs. The project emphasises meaningful child participation and accountability as crucial to preventing and responding to violence against children.

She shared an example of an activity in Eastern Uganda on harmful practices which involved training for children about their rights and the duty bearers responsible for the different rights. Another activity involved children identifying harmful

practices, the effects of these on children and the duty bearers responsible for ensuring that they are stopped. Children conducted a dialogue with their duty bearers, where they presented a statement highlighting identified harmful practices. They put on theatre plays and performed songs and poems which explained the effects of harmful practices on children.

The project had several positive results, for example the District Education officer committed to follow up on the establishment of a secondary school in a Sub-County. The District Education officers requested the district inspector of schools to conduct monitoring to ensure they have well equipped sanitary rooms to promote proper menstrual management for girls. The Labour Officer committed to follow up with different key child protection actors in the district on child labour. The children involved in the project reported feeling heard and understood and were able to exercise their abilities and talents and engage directly in issues concerning them.

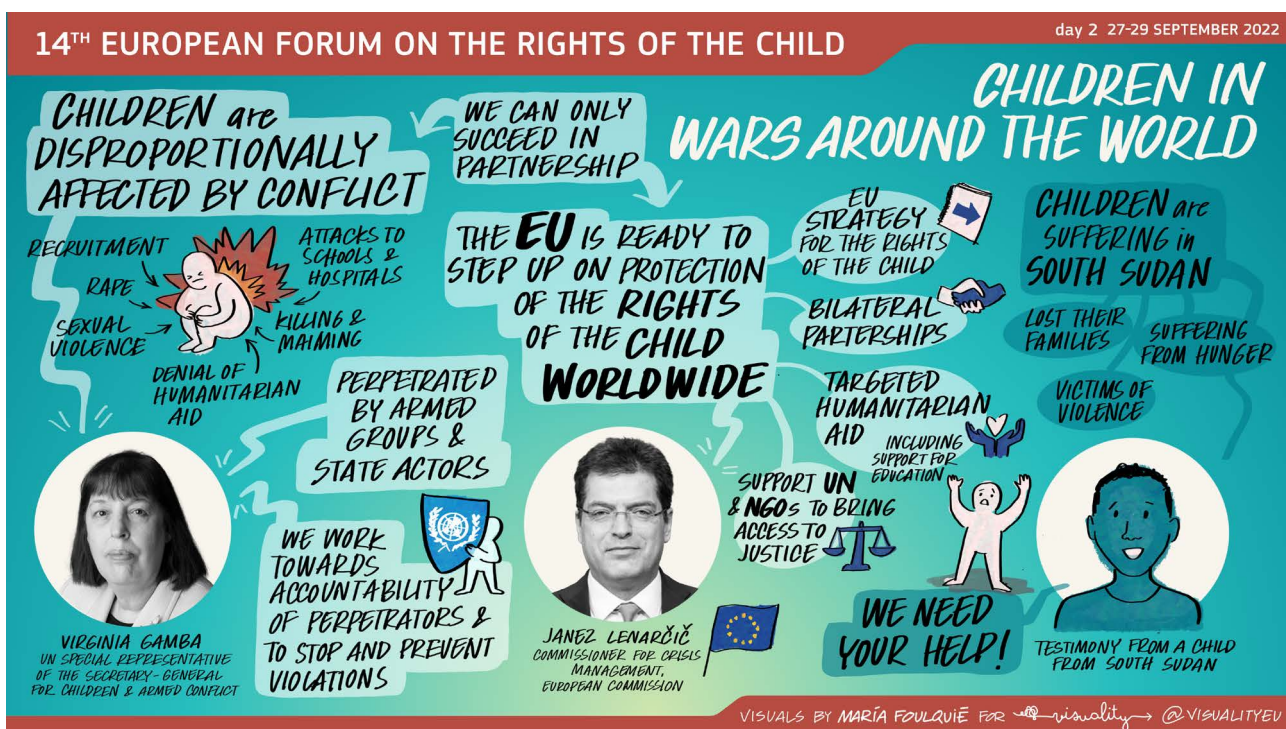
She ended by sharing that Uganda has made great strides in ensuring child participation is embedded in policy and legislation with key provisions in the Children Act, National Child Policy, National Child Participation guidelines and strategy. This provides a basis for children's participation in issues affecting them.

DAY TWO

Plenary sessions Day Two

Children and armed conflicts, including children fleeing Ukraine and prevention from violence

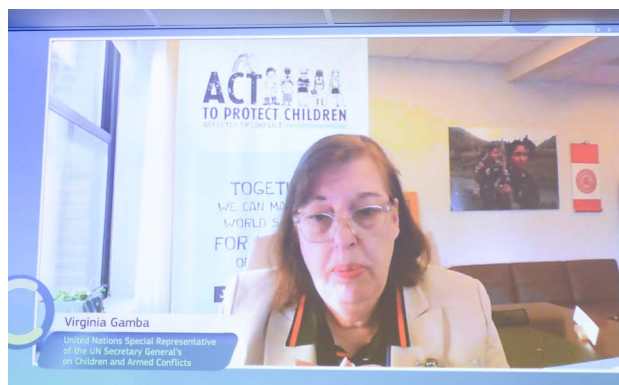
Opening remarks children in armed conflicts globally



The opening session of day two of the Forum was focused on identifying challenges, best practices, and possible ways forward, stressing synergies between actions at global and EU levels. A stirring testimony was given by a child from South Soudan, who shared her experience and perspective. Positive EU actions already undertaken were also touched on.

Virginia Gamba ([United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict](#)) opened the second day of the Forum with an introduction into some key areas of the UN's work on children and armed conflict. She

highlighted that the UN Security Council has adopted 13 specific resolutions on the topic that enumerate [six grave violations](#) and provided the UN with tools to effectively address those grave violations, including the Secretary-General's global annual report on children and armed conflict; the listing of parties to conflict responsible for grave violations; the establishment of country-specific Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms on grave violations; the creation of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict; and the requirement of dialogue with listed parties on the development of concrete and time-bound Action Plans to halt and prevent violations.



The Special Representative flagged that the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict covering 2021 was published two months ago and she outlined some key findings of the report. At least 40 new commitments by parties to conflict such as command orders, roadmaps, mitigation measures during military operations or action plans have been adopted in 2021. For example, in Mali advances were made with the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration and in the Philippines the Armed Forces signed with the UN a Strategic Plan to Prevent and Respond to Grave Child Rights Violations in Situations of Armed Conflict in June 2021.

The Special Representative highlighted that to protect conflict-affected children cooperation and partnerships are essential. She stressed that the EU's presence in all countries in the children and armed conflict agenda and its commitment to human rights, development and peace and security make it a force multiplier for the work of her Office.

Kiden a young girl from South Sudan, with the support of [Save the children](#), shared her views on the challenges faced by children and how the EU and international organisations can better support children. She shared her experiences growing up in South Sudan where the conflict has killed many and left many children homeless and without their family. Children are facing poverty with increasing prices and some children have had to turn to hard labour for survival. Children are being abducted, trafficked, or coerced into associating with armed groups, and face sexual violence.

She shared her own experience of being food insecure and the fact that a school friend was recently shot, making her and her peers constantly afraid that something could happen at any time. Kiden called on

perpetrators to be made accountable and make sure children are protected. Her testimony served as an important reminder of what it is to be a child growing up amid conflict.

Janus Lenarčič ([Commissioner for Crisis Management, European Commission](#)) spoke about the external dimensions of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, saying that it sets out the EU's clear commitment to support children affected by armed conflict. The EU has various instruments in place in humanitarian action, peace and security that contribute to the protection of children in armed conflict. He reiterated the EU's commitment to relentlessly advocate the rights of the child in multilateral fora, as well as bilaterally.

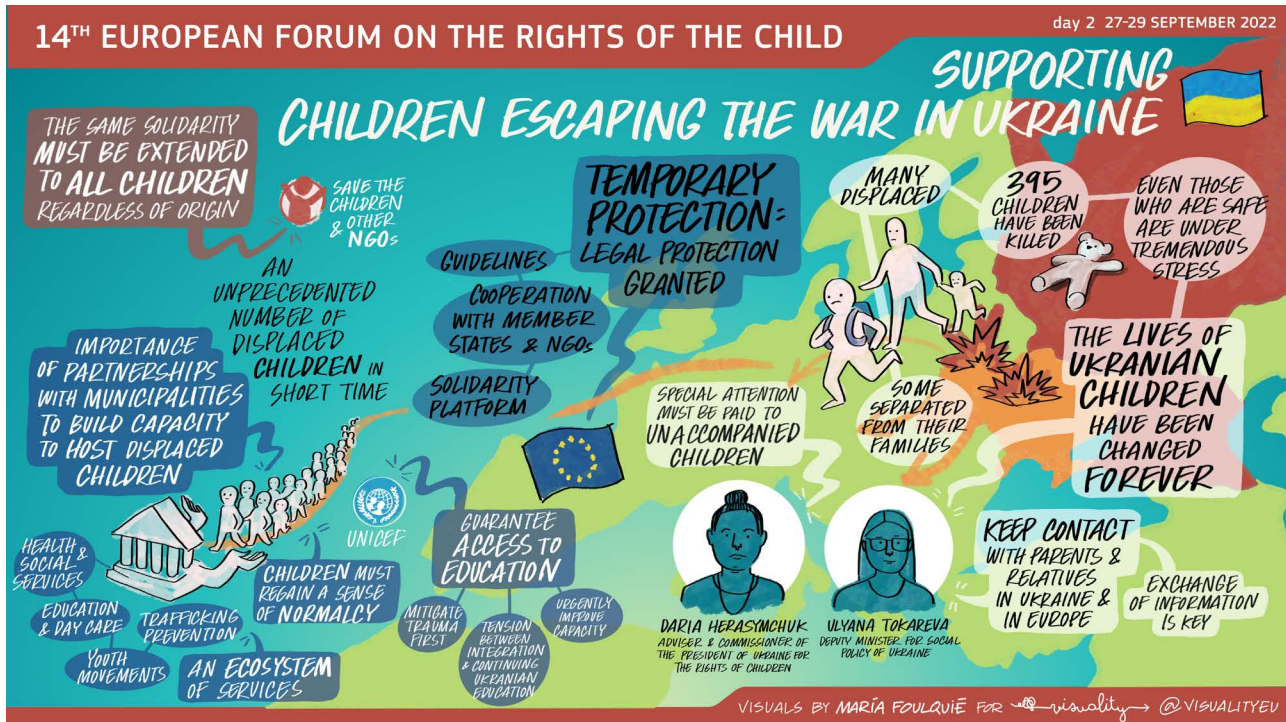


In terms of implementation on the ground, the EU is working with peace actors in support of conflict prevention and providing humanitarian assistance to child protection with €109 million in funding last year, parts of which went to actions targeting children in armed conflict. EU humanitarian action supports child protection interventions, such as identifying vulnerable children and providing psychosocial support. 10% of all humanitarian funding is earmarked for education, including for children affected by armed conflict. The EU also funds reintegration programmes for children previously associated with armed conflicts. Education training and livelihoods play a vital role in these efforts.

Sadly, perpetrators often escape justice. Through funding, the EU supports the UN's monitoring mechanism on grave violations. It also contributes to ensuring justice for children in armed conflicts via a project with Save the Children. Commissioner Lenarčič closed by highlighting the importance of EU Member States, civil society, experts, and children themselves to join forces to protect children.

Session 2

Supporting children fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine



This session focusing on the impact of the war in Ukraine examined some of the challenges in supporting children fleeing the war, identified good practices and ways forward, notably through close cooperation at all levels and with Ukrainian authorities. Access to education was also discussed as an important dimension, as well as child protection challenges.

Key messages

- Cooperation and partnerships are fundamental - importance of EU Member States, the United Nations, civil society, experts, and children themselves joining forces to protect children.
- The EU is committed to relentlessly advocate the rights of the child, in every multilateral forum, as well as bilaterally with countries in which there are armed conflicts.
- Importance of maintaining contact between children and families who remained in Ukraine - exchange of data is key in this regard.
- The EU must extend the solidarity shown to those fleeing Ukraine to all children fleeing conflict across the world and arriving in Europe.

Daria Herasymchuk (Adviser and Commissioner of the [President of Ukraine for the Rights of Children](#)) gave a moving address about the severe conditions faced by many children as a result of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. She said the lives of 7.5 million children have been affected by the conflict, with some children staying at home and others displaced within Ukraine or abroad. She shared the testimony of a young boy called Timothy she had met, whose parents were killed in the conflict and who writes stories in a diary as he doesn't have anyone to tell him stories anymore. Her own daughter now sleeps with her at night as she is traumatised from the conflict.



Children have had to leave their homes without their parents, either with relatives, family acquaintances or unaccompanied. They find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings where people speak a language that they don't understand, and they can't communicate with children their own age. Their parents and guardians are doing their best to earn a living and help their children cope with new routines. They are struggling to adapt and access services, especially those with disabilities, and to keep a connection with their Ukrainian roots. Daria Herasymchuk ended her address with a plea to European children to reach out to Ukrainian children, to include them, to share their culture and way of living and ask them about theirs.

Ulyana Tokareva ([Deputy Minister for Social Policy of Ukraine](#)) is from Mariupol and has been working to support children since 2014. She said that when she talks to her neighbours, she hears about the deaths of children every day and the situation is much worse than reported. She thanked Member States for the support and shelter they have given to the 2.5 million children that have left Ukraine since the invasion by Russia on 24 February 2022. Ukrainian children fleeing the war are dispersed in various countries and 50% are in the EU. She highlighted the issue of children who are accompanied by unofficial guardians and relatives being separated from them as the children are considered unaccompanied minors. She called for a better exchange of information on children who receive temporary guardians upon entering the EU and for a database to be established to record all the children leaving Ukraine and entering the EU. She noted the challenges of children not being registered when crossing the border and therefore not being registered by Ukrainian consulates. Ulyana Tokareva underscored the importance of maintaining contact between children and families who remained in Ukraine and that exchange of data is key in this regard.



Nacira Boulehouat (Head of the Migration Management Coordination Taskforce, [DG HOME, European Commission](#)) expanded on the child protection dimension of EU support to children fleeing the conflict in Ukraine. Temporary protection for children coming from the Ukraine is automatic within the territory of the EU, and this was one of the first actions undertaken by the EU in March following the start of the conflict. The EU is collecting information from Member States on the specific needs and challenges arising from care of children coming from Ukraine and developed policy guidance about supporting the inclusion of Ukrainian children in education. The EU is issued a political declaration reaffirming support to Ukraine and its commitment to the protection of children, with a particular focus on addressing the protection needs of unaccompanied minors.



Philippe Cori (Deputy Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, [UNICEF](#)) talked about the synergies and support between different actors and cooperation on the ground. Following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, there were as many refugees in twenty days as there were after four years of the crisis in Syria crisis. In the EU there are systems in place and partnerships which were able to take action at the national level, for example, Member State ministries of health, the interior, education, social affairs and labour. At the local/municipal level, services have had to adapt to the needs of Ukrainian arrivals and UNICEF has built partnerships with forty municipalities to increase capacity. He mentioned the challenge of vulnerable children and the difficulty in them accessing services. Ukraine has the largest number of institutional care settings for children and some organisations removed these children at the beginning of the conflict without control and standards. Partnerships are needed to trace these children, and linkages between the ministry of social affairs in Ukraine and other Member State ministries are key.



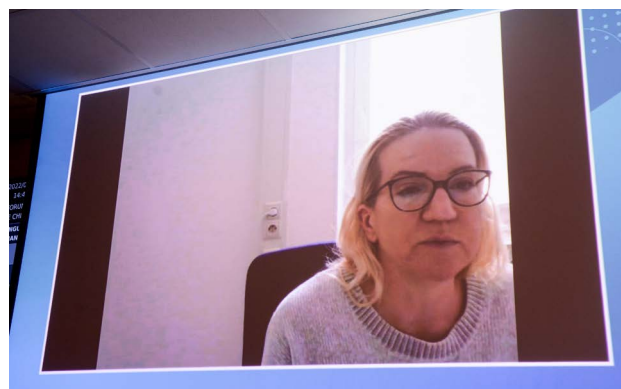
Inger Ashing (Chief Executive Officer, [Save the Children](#)) called for closer and long-term collaboration with affected people, as well as partnerships with the EU and other stakeholders, saying that we should see child protection as an ecosystem. There should be dedicated supports for Ukrainian children, such as access to psychosocial support in schools. Many children are eager to learn but have experienced trauma. Many children coming from Ukraine are continuing to access the Ukrainian curriculum through online education, as well as being registered in local school, helping to maintain connection with their home and identity. Access to education remains a struggle in some EU countries and she urged the EU to strengthen capacity of education systems to receive children from the Ukraine.

Member States have faced challenges in implementing the Temporary Protection Directive. Some children are unable to access child-friendly information and not all children coming from the Ukraine are registered. The Temporary Protection Directive has since been extended to March 2024 and she called on the EU to extend protection measures for as long as hostilities continue in Ukraine. It is pivotal for the EU to increase capacity for registration under the Directive, as many children are unaccounted for and there is a high risk that they are not receiving the protection they need and are entitled to. Finally, she called on the EU to extend the solidarity shown to those fleeing Ukraine to

all children fleeing conflict across the world and arriving in Europe. Repeating the words of Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union speech, she said “Our actions towards Ukrainian refugees must not be an exception. They can be our blueprint for going forward”.



Sarah Tausendfreund (representative of [Ministry of Education in Luxembourg](#)) shared some examples of ongoing work to support children from Ukraine in education. There are currently 1300 registered Ukrainian students and schooling in Luxembourg has been adapted to the needs of Ukrainian children. There are dedicated welcome classes, intercultural mediators, and psychosocial support, as well as support on administrative issues. The Ministry of Education has also employed Ukrainian staff with educational backgrounds to work in schools to bolster support children. Special ‘one-stop welcome desks’ have also been established for newly arrived children and their families can access services.



Workshops Day Two Mental health support & preventing and protecting children from violence

Workshop 1

Children in armed conflict: protection and reintegration



The workshop was moderated by **Felix Rathje** (Human rights policy officer, [European External Action Service](#)) and looked at the issue of children in armed conflicts globally and how to prevent and protect children from violence.

Key messages

- There is a broad range of victimisation when it comes to children affected by armed conflict.
- Importance of community support and buy-in to enable long-term support and reintegration of children associated with armed groups.
- More technical support in financial management and reporting is needed to build the capacity of local organisations so that they can better access funding.
- Funding remains short-term and inadequate, and long-term, contextually adapted programming built on existing community is needed.
- Children should be involved in the design of reintegration programmes and policy development, and there should be open spaces to encourage their participation.

James, a young person from Sierra Leone, shared his childhood experience of being taken from his family by an armed group for a period of two years during the conflict in Sierra Leone. He was handed over to the UN peacekeeping mission at the age of eight. He said that he experienced things that no child should be exposed to, such as being trained in how to use weapons and seeing people being murdered. As a result of this trauma, he experienced depression, ill health, and malnutrition. When he was finally reunited with his parents, he experienced stigma from his association with an armed group, which also affected his ability to complete his education. Eventually receiving the support he needed, he has been able to rebuild his life, graduating from university and now practicing as a health worker with Médecins Sans Frontières.

Juan Sebastián Campo (Coordinator of projects, [Benposta Nación de Muchach@s en el Mundo](mailto:Benposta.Nación.de.Muchach@s.en.el.Mundo), Colombia) presented the situation of children in Colombia where, despite the peace process, there continue to be attacks on schools and hospitals, denial of humanitarian access, displacement of people. Children are recruited or kidnapped by armed groups and used for various purposes such as intelligence gathering, and experience inappropriate situations, violence, and sexual violence. The organisation Benposta Nación de Muchach@s en el Mundo works on reintegration of children who have left the armed forces, as well as prevention. Prevention is key as armed groups prey on vulnerable children who are lacking opportunities and are in precarious situations. The organisation works on a conditioned support model, providing assistance to people who might otherwise turn to the armed forces for financial support. Participation of children, including in the design of reintegration programmes and policy development is very important. He highlighted the importance of community support and buy-in to enable long-term support and reintegration of children associated with armed groups.

Rocco Blume (Head of Policy & Advocacy, [War Child UK](http://www.warchild.org.uk)) brought the perspective of War Child, an international NGO that works, among other things, on the reintegration of conflict-affected children and young people whether they are forcibly or voluntarily recruited. He emphasised that a child can be involved in many ways and exposed to different risks and dangers. For example, girls often receive little or no support, as they are not perceived as being fighters and therefore not considered in need of reintegration.

Speaking about reintegration, it is the process through which children transition back to society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians and are accepted by their families and communities. He mentioned some of the gaps in programmes for

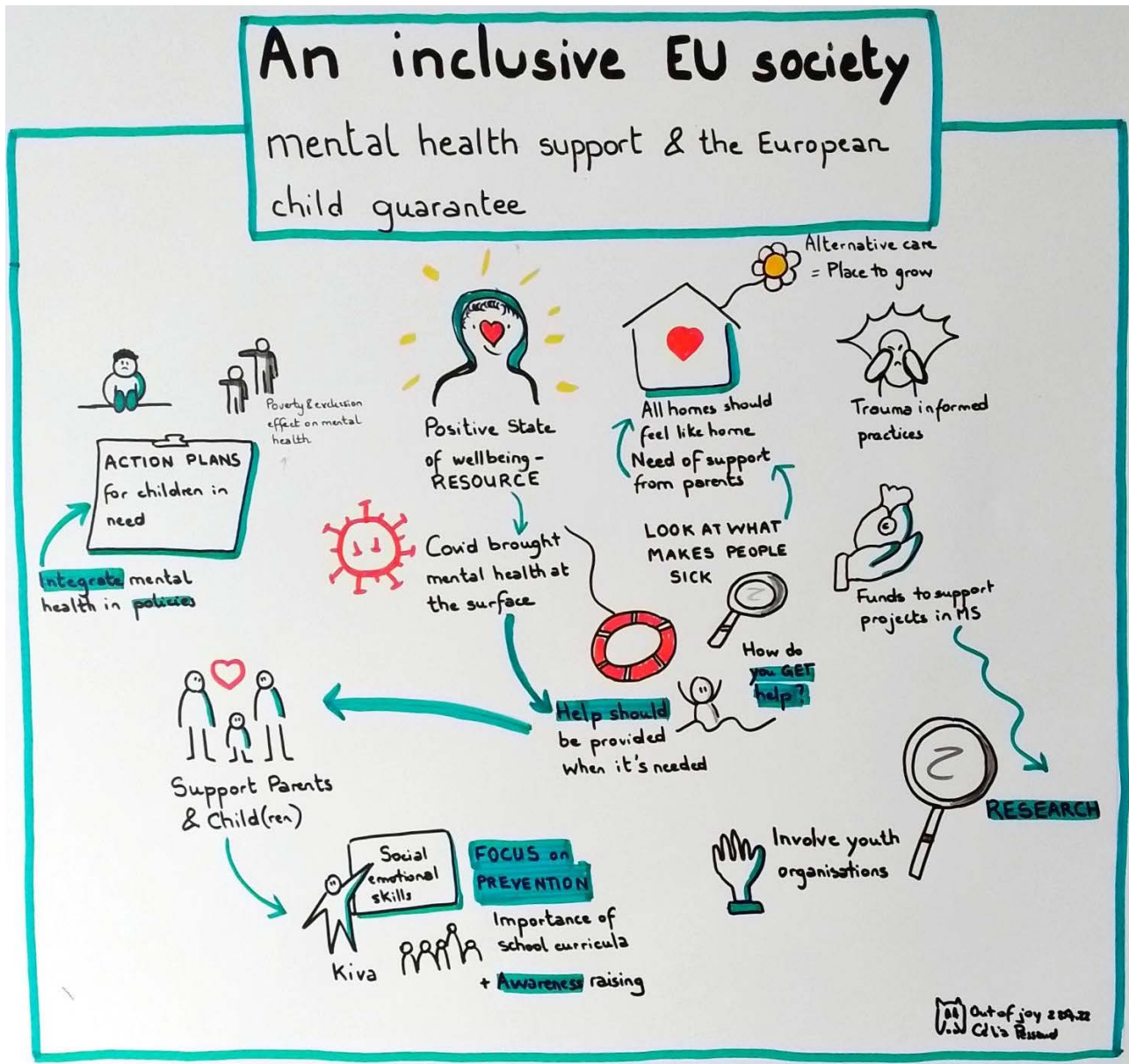
reintegration, such as limited donor funding and that donors often fund programmes that don't take into account the specific context of a region or country. It is also vital that community needs, and capacity are built up, as family and community are central to supporting a child. Communities need to be supported as they are doing much of the work themselves to welcome back children. Finally, funding remains short-term and inadequate. Long-term, contextually adapted programming built on existing community expertise is needed, and here the EU can play an important role.

DG ECHO reiterated its commitment to supporting children affected by conflict and explained that where there is a lower quality in programming, this can be due to reporting gaps and lack of capacity by local organisations. War Child responded by saying that a wider discussion is needed on how we, as international organisations support local partners and that many organisations such as War child are moving away from direct implementation. Benposta Colombia agreed that there are issues when it comes to capacity of local organisations, a need for training in financial management and reporting, and called on donors to provide more technical support in these areas. He highlighted that people on the ground trust local organisations and don't have the same connection with UN agencies and international donors.



Workshop 2

An inclusive EU society: mental health support and the European Child Guarantee



The workshop was moderated by **Stefan Iszkowski** (Policy officer, Social Policies and Child Guarantee unit, [DG EMPL, European Commission](#)) who introduced the [European Child Guarantee](#) ('the Guarantee'). The aim of the Guarantee is to ensure that all children have free access to free early childhood care, to education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal a day, effective access to healthcare, and access to healthy nutrition and housing. The Guarantee was announced by Commission President

Ursula von der Leyen in 2019 and adopted by the Council last June. As part of the Guarantee, Member States are required to prepare action plans describing measures to support and protect children in need in their countries. They are asked to pay special attention to children who experience specific disadvantages, including children in alternative care, children with disabilities, and children with mental health issues. There is no 'one-sized fits all', as each Member State has a different context and different vulnerable

groups. As of 28 September, 15 Member States have submitted action plans.

Key messages

- Need to integrate trauma-informed practices into alternative care to help children to build caring and stable relationships with adults that work with and for them.
- Good mental health for all children and young people in alternative care is a right and child protection services have a duty to uphold this right.
- Important to address underlying factors in workplaces and schools that negatively impact mental health, rather than simply paying for external services.
- Need to address the negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the mental health of children and young people.
- Systematic and meaningful child and youth participation is needed to ensure services that are tailored to the individual needs of each child.



Gabor (Hungary) a young expert working with [SOS Children's Villages](#) presented the project and shared his perspective. Young experts are trained persons who are between eighteen and twenty-five years old and have experienced alternative care giving, i.e., were separated by their families for many reasons. SOS Children's Villages supports children in alternative, institutional care, and children in precarious situations. The two-year EU funded project aims to imbed trauma-informed practices into alternative care settings. Key outputs of the project include a [practical guidance handbook](#), a training manual, e-Learning modules, and a manual on ensuring a culturally sensitive approach in alternative care settings, available in multiple languages. **Gabor** spoke about the need to integrate trauma-informed

practices into the provision of alternative care to enable children to build caring and stable relationships with adults that work *with* and *for* them, thereby ensuring children live in an environment that gives the best chance to develop their best selves. Good mental health for all children and young people in alternative care is a right and child protection services have a duty to uphold this right. Moreover, systematic, and meaningful child-participation is needed to ensure services that are tailored to the individual needs of each child.

Marianne Takki (Health Programme and Chronic Diseases, [DG Sante, European Commission](#)) shared some details of EU actions supporting children and young people experiencing trauma because of the conflict in Ukraine. The EU is funding organisations working on the ground, such as the Red Cross in Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, training first responders to provide psychosocial support to those who have experienced trauma from the conflict. In terms of responding to the mental health needs of young people following the pandemic, the EU has launched projects to support families and children and caregivers. Instead of only concentrating on 'high level actions' it is important to look at approaches that work well with children and young people and link in with community organisations.

Triinu Täht ([Ministry of Social Affairs](#), Estonia) explained that the issue of children's mental health has gained prominence in Estonia in the past decade with the social sector pushing for the issue to be addressed. The COVID-19 pandemic helped bring mental health to the forefront of public debate. She spoke about the importance of promoting positive mental health and self-care, developing community services, expanding and strengthening the role of primary care, and increasing accessibility and quality of mental health services. She also stressed the important role that workplaces and educational settings play on mental health. Health is created where people live, learn and work. Employers and educational settings sometimes focus on paying for external services on mental health rather than examining their own approaches and the factors that negatively impact people's mental health.

Fatima Awil (Advocacy and policy officer, [Mental Health Europe](#)) spoke about the connection between mental health and social factors saying that we need to apply a psychosocial approach to mental health. She talked about the difficult context for many children

who even before the COVID-19 pandemic were at risk of poverty and social inclusion. Children are growing up with ongoing political uncertainty and the climate crisis which is impacting their mental health. Addressing children's mental health is a question of guaranteeing their wellbeing and ensuring that they can realise their full potential. About half of the mental health problems affecting people in their adulthood begin during or before adolescence. In collaboration with a youth task force convened by Mental Health Europe, **Fatima Awil** made recommendations to address the mental health needs of children and young people: focus on prevention, empowerment and engagement of policy makers, and targeted support.



Workshop 3

Prevention of violence in the digital world



The workshop was moderated by **Antonio Labrador Jiménez** (Team Leader for Fight Against Child Sexual Exploitation, Security in the Digital Age unit, DG HOME, European Commission) and examined prevention measures on child sexual abuse and exploitation as an example of violence against children online. The workshop discussed the challenges with the prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation, specifically regarding digital technologies inadvertently facilitating the distribution of child sexual abuse material and the grooming and extortion of children for sexual purposes as well as the solutions and best practices to prevent this form of violence.

Key messages

- Much stronger regulation is needed to protect children from abuse online and prevention is key.

- Prevention is absolutely essential – when child sexual abuse materials are in circulation a child has already been abused.
- Importance of research in understanding the pathways to criminal behaviour by people who view child sexual abuse materials.
- A new proposal for an EU regulation aims to prevent and combat child sexual abuse online - working on prevention, law enforcement and assistance to victims.
- Importance of a coordinated response to avoid creating regulation loopholes which could be exploited by tech companies.

Caterina Molenari (Policy Officer, [DG HOME, European Commission](#)) provided a summary of what the EU is doing for the prevention of child sexual abuse and presented a new legislative initiative, included in the [EU strategy for an effective fight against child sexual abuse](#). The Commission is proposing [new EU legislation to prevent and combat child sexual abuse online](#), which will mobilise national laws, funding, and coordination measures to fight against this heinous crime. When adopted, this would replace the [interim legislation](#) on the topic. The growing phenomenon must be tackled from all angles and according to [Save the Children Finland Survey](#) on children's experiences of sexual harassment and abuse on the internet, 75% of children were asked to share explicit images and 10% children contacted by adults for grooming. Data coming from the US shows an increase in

grooming and coercion of children to share self-generated material which is then shared online.

Europe is currently reliant on the US as there is no centralised data collection on this issue and it is time for the EU to do its part in the global fight against this crime. Building on existing EU legislation, the proposed regulation on preventing and combatting the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children focuses on prevention, facilitation of the work of law enforcement, and providing assistance to victims.

The Regulation provides for the establishment of an EU centre to prevent and combat child sexual abuse, with similar functions to the [US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children \(NCMEC\)](#). This new EU centre will carry out risk assessment; work on detection, including by providing compulsory database of indicators and detection technologies; work on reporting, providing feedback and requesting further information from providers when needed; and removing content, including by providing information and support to victims on the removal of material concerning them.

Leanda Barrington-Leach (Director of International Advocacy and Head of European Affairs, [5rightsfoundation](#)) shared some powerful statistics on young people and their experiences online. According to [research](#) carried out by 5rightsfoundation, the impact of the internet is corrosive and often violent, especially for young women and girls.

The way digital products are designed increases risks for children and parents and children should not be responsible for badly designed digital products. She called for age-appropriate design code based on the rights of the child. Positive innovation should be incentivised rather than punitive measures against tech company for transgressions. She highlighted the importance of taking a united approach, as different approaches could create regulation loopholes that companies will exploit and those that want to comply will find it difficult if they face a highly complex regulatory environment around the world.

Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen (Executive Director, Senior Specialist, [Suojellaan Lapsia](#) (Protect Children), Finland) introduced her organisation which is working to end all forms of sexual violence against children especially online. She said that we need research-

based and holistic methods; to listen and amplify the voices of survivors; work with parents, children, and professionals working with children to educate them on risks; and support victims and their families. Concrete actions must come from duty bearers and more regulation and stronger legislation are needed, as well as transparency by tech companies. The scale of the problem is huge and by the time crimes are uncovered it is too late.

Suojellaan Lapsia is working on offender-based prevention with innovative interventions and research on people who search for and view child sexual abuse material and are actively grooming children online. They have carried out a ground-breaking 'Help us to help you' [ReDirection survey](#) on the dark web to reach individuals searching for child sexual abuse material, using specific flagged acronyms flagged. The survey has gathered over 20,000 answers in twenty languages from individuals and over 340,000 people have visited the surveys but not answered. The survey is helping to expand knowledge and understanding of the pathways to criminal behaviour. The organisation has also developed a redirection self-help programme to help those willing to change their behaviour and to stop consuming child sexual abuse material. There is some hope as many users have said that they really wanted to change. Over 50,000 have visited the programme on the dark and open web.

She highlighted the fact that most offenders in fact groom children on the open web and that 40% of users say they are directly contacting children after viewing child sexual abuse material. The problem is gendered, and girls are at higher risk of become victims of sexual crimes. Much stronger regulation is needed to protect children from abuse online and prevention is key. She concluded with a powerful analogy saying that digital devices are doors to environments: we don't allow children to frequent adult environments such as nightclubs and strip clubs - why would we let them go there in digital environments?

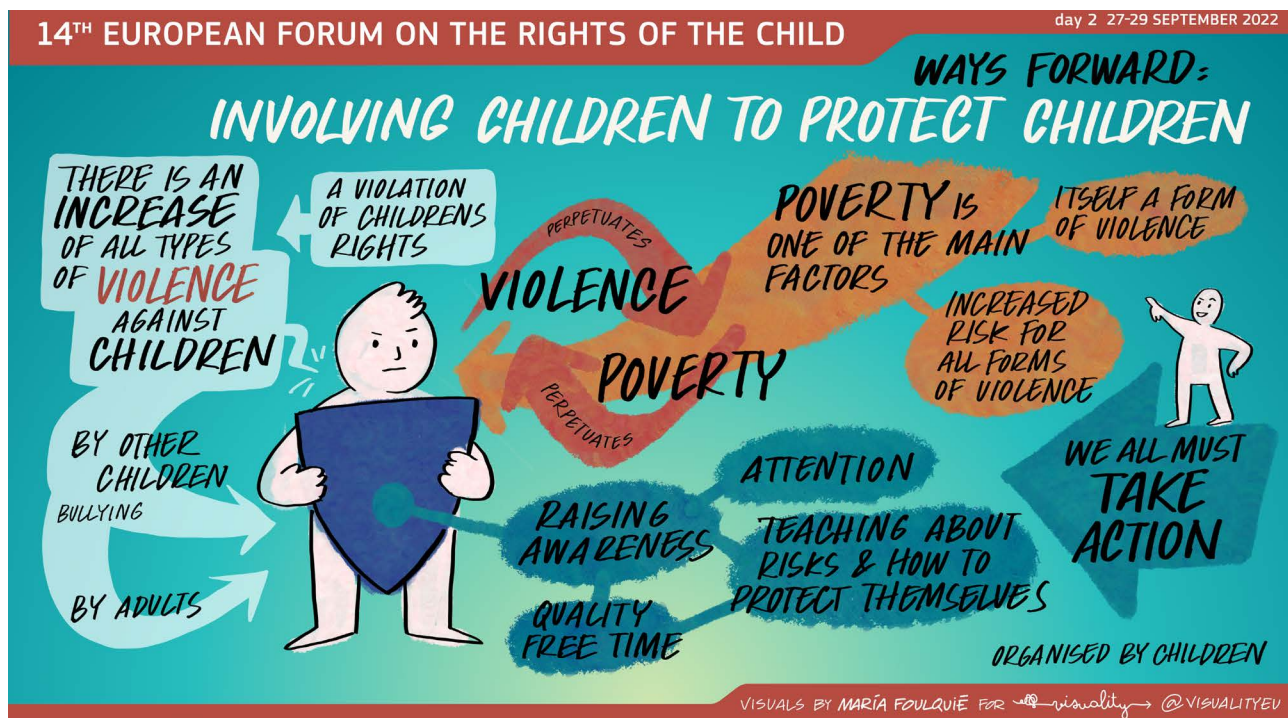
Almudena Lara (Child safety senior manager, [Google](#)) shared some of the actions undertaken by Google to fight against child sexual abuse and exploitation. They work with the NCMEC in the US to detect and report on CSAM. While a crime has already occurred and a child has been abused at this stage, it is nevertheless important to detect, report and remove CSAM, to avoid content

continuing to circulate for many years, revictimizing children. To do this, technology must be developed at scale. Google uses hash matching technology to continue to detect material that is circulating. This technology is now being applied to video, in collaboration with YouTube, which has allowed expansion of system technology to video format. With new content detection, classifier technology and machine learning technology allow us to create models to detect content that is highly likely to be CSAM. Once detected, human viewers will review the material to confirm whether CSAM or not. The NCMEC is where content is reported and 1.2 million reports were filed in 2021, containing over 9.6 million pieces of CSAM content. The problem is vast as technology has enabled this crime to happen at a higher scale, but detection technology is continuously improving.

Collaboration is key, as perpetrators are continuously trying to bypass the system and find loopholes or move across services and platforms trying to find the weakest link. It is important, therefore for institutions, tech companies and NGOs that understand the key threats collaborate with each other. The [Tech Coalition](#) is a leading platform for companies to work together to end online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Google also works on deterring and prevention, working to ensure that digital products are not attractive to abusers, sending a strong signal and calling out criminal activity. Prevention initiatives include working to develop safer and more age-appropriate services and products for children, to minimise the risk of children being abused while using our services.

Child-led session on Ways forward: Child participation to prevent violence



This session was designed and presented by child participants with the support of Eurochild, with a goal of making participants see violence through the eyes of children.

Anna (Greece) is sixteen-years old and a member of Eurochild's Children's Council. She spoke about

how there has been an increase in most forms of violence, and it plays a big part in many children's lives – domestic violence, emotional violence, verbal violence, sexual violence, bullying, cyber bullying, and neglect. Anna participated in training and a children's SOS helpline available throughout Greece and has first-hand experience of children reporting violence.

She witnessed an increase in children reporting being victims of bullying, neglect and abuse.

Rayaa (Ireland) is thirteen-years old and talked about poverty and its impact on children. She shared some salient facts from UNICEF: 1 billion children worldwide are poor, without access to education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation or water; 356 million children are living in extreme poverty; children are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than adults; and children from the poorest households die at twice the rate of their better-off peers. She said there is a strong link between poverty and violence, with poor children at greater risk of protection violations because they often live in insecure environments that expose them to increased risk of physical or sexual violence.

Jakob shared some of his own experiences of violence, saying that many children's experiences of violence is from other children hurting them. This includes bullying, physical, and psychological violence, such as putting other children down. He concluded by encouraging decision-makers to think back to their own childhood experiences, which may help them to see things from a child's perspective.

Mor (Hungary) presented some ideas for combatting violence against children, such as awareness raising campaigns on social media which captures the attention

of young people. He said it was important to involve children and young people in the design of campaigns, including their visual aspects and messages, to make them more relatable to children. On teaching, he said the EU could encourage national governments to include child safety teaching in the curriculum. To bring attention to the issue, children should be given a platform to talk about child safety and their own experiences.

Lana (Croatia) gave some examples of activities for children in Apatia where she is from. There are several dedicated child-friendly spaces for children to avail of, such as a children's beach, a skate park, and a youth centre. She said that with the help of adults we can create an environment where every child feels free to speak up and make suggestions on how to improve their communities.

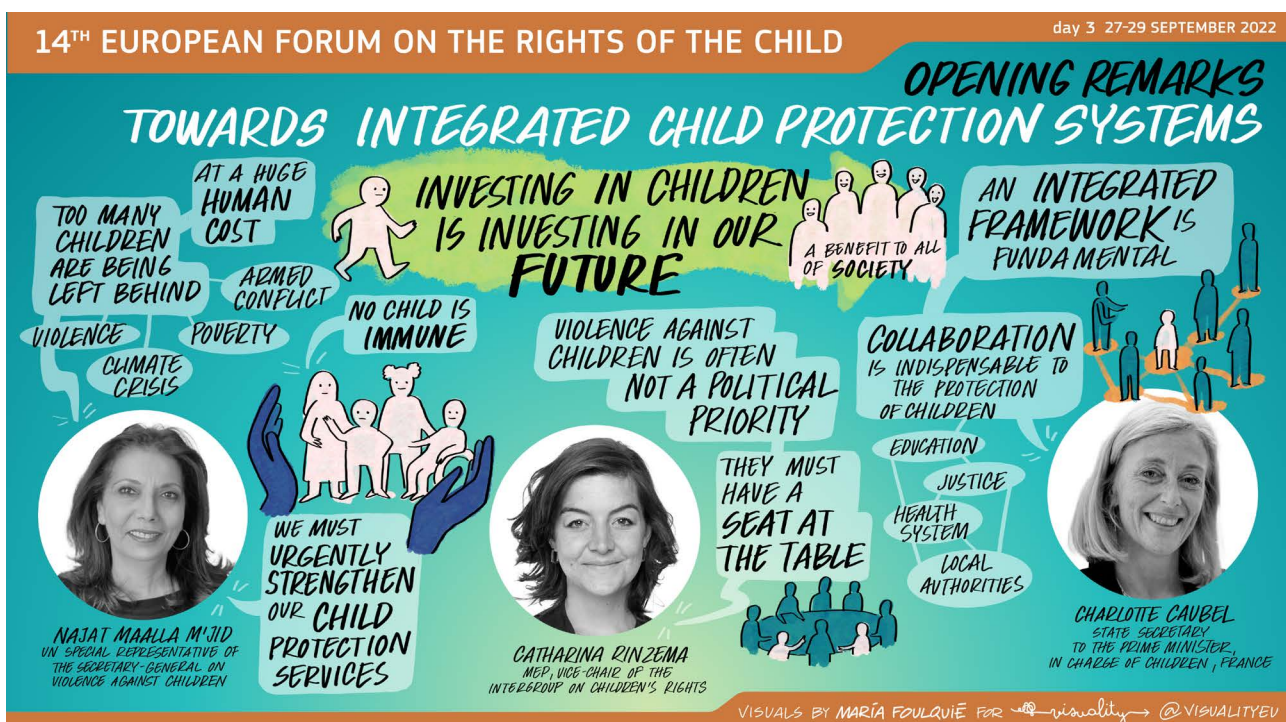
Rayaa closed the session by saying that the children wanted everyone to take away from the session that violence is undeniably harmful, can be inflicted in many ways and cause lasting impacts on the lives of children. No child deserves to suffer violence and adults should prevent this in any way they can. Children want the world to be safer for all children, for every child to be happy. Children, she said, are the key to our generation.

DAY THREE

Plenary sessions Day Three

Towards Integrated Child Protection Systems

Opening

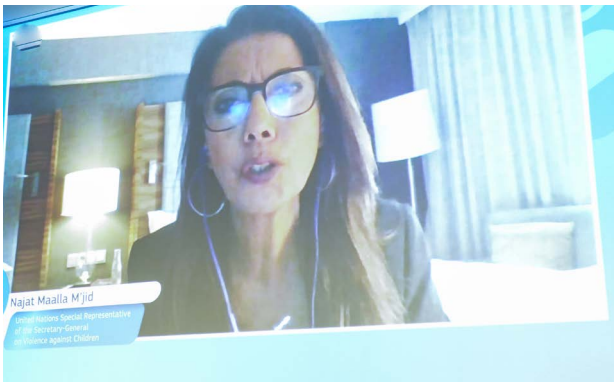


This high-level session launched the consultation for the Commission initiative on Integrated Child Protection Systems, to define the content, scope, and format of this initiative. The session drew on lessons learnt at UN, international and EU level, highlighting why an integrated approach is important, and touching on some of the gaps identified that can be filled by EU action.

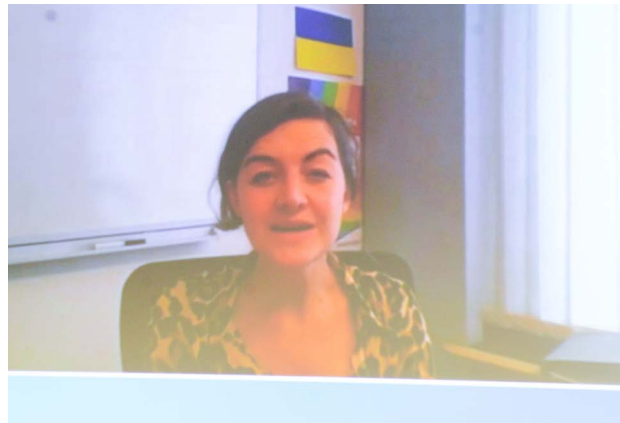
Najat Maalla M'jid ([United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children](#)) opened the third day of the Forum by restating the urgency of establishing integrated child protection systems in the face of the current global challenges. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee are a step in right direction and an opportunity to address the

many challenges faced. Too many children are being left behind and violence is increasing exponentially. Poverty, social exclusion, and violence are rife, and no country is immune, and no child is immune. A child and gender-sensitive approach is needed to ensure that the full chain of services is acting together in an unbroken sequence, providing protection across all areas. The human and economic costs are too high not to. Speaking about the economic benefits of investing in children, she said that negative consequences on children can last a lifetime and that we should not forget that fighting violence against children it is not just a human rights imperative, it makes economic sense. Investing in children also means involving them and children are at the forefront of sustainable change. There are less than eight years to reach

the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), where SDG 16.2 refers to ending the abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children. We must move away from silos and plans and initiatives that are not implemented and invest in integrated systems. Investing in child and gender protection systems should be central to all government plans. If one chain of services fails, the whole system fails.



Catharina Rinzema (Member of the European Parliament, Vice-Chair of the [Intergroup on children's rights](#)) explained the work of the Children's Rights Intergroup, saying that every piece of legislation which comes from the Commission is scrutinized from a children's rights perspective. She shared that the reality is that often violence against children is not a priority for people in power. Children should have a seat at the table when policy is being shaped and she personally invited all the children present at the Forum to come to the European Parliament and the Child Rights Intergroup would welcome them. The Intergroup currently has 130 members and it is her ambition to expand the membership even further. The Intergroup is calling for the full integration of psychosocial and mental health support and services at national and transnational level, and for the Council to adopt conclusions setting out a new mandatory framework for EU institutions and Member States to ensure this implementation. She finished her address by urging all children to contact their leaders and elected representatives and demand a seat at the table.



Charlotte Caubel ([State Secretary to the Prime Minister in charge of children](#), France) shared the French example of how child protection work is being coordinated among the different players involved. The complex set of actors involves different backgrounds and institutions include teachers, doctors, social workers, judges, and law enforcement. Ensuring the protection of children calls for services that fall under the aegis of different ministries among these diverse ministries - justice, education, health, and disability, etc. Cooperation between ministries is vital as they share the common responsibility for upholding children's rights. When a child has been identified as being at risk it is vital that the full range of services can be mobilised. A recent law has been put into place at national level which provides for the establishment of committees at local level for complex child protection cases involving multiple services and authorities. Speaking about the specific needs of vulnerable children, she highlighted the need for specialised training of staff within the health and social services and law enforcement to communicate with children in a child-sensitive manner. She also said that efforts needed to be stepped up to raise awareness among adults, as while everyone agrees that children should be protected, they need to be brought on board when it comes to addressing violence which people too often turn a blind eye to. France will continue to engage with the positive work being done at EU-level and sharing good practices among Member States is key to improving systems.

Session 3

Towards Integrated Child Protection systems



This high-level panel provided an opportunity to share knowledge about the situation of violence against children, looking at is the current situation, identifying the challenges, and sharing some best practices on the topic. The session also helped identify where the EU can provide support to achieve more integrated child protection systems, both at EU and national level.

Key messages

- All children regardless of their status should have access to mainstream national child protection systems and services that respond to their individual needs.
- Underreporting or lack of reporting is due to a lack of protocols to empower professionals and understaffing of the social protection system is also a major factor.
- An integrated child protection system requires comprehensive and sustainable reporting, timely and disaggregated data collection and statistical mechanisms.
- Full integration of psychosocial and mental health support and services at national and transnational level is needed.

- Importance of specialised training of staff within the health and social services and law enforcement on child-sensitive communication.
- Involving children in reviews and reforms can contribute to innovation and trust.

Theoni Koufonikolakou (past-Chair of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), [Deputy Ombudswoman for Children's Rights, Greece](#)) recalled that when referring to an integrated child protection system, recovering and reintegration of the child is also essential. All stages of the protection of children (from identification, intervention, treatment, to reintegration) should be connected through comprehensive legislation, on-going cooperation among professionals, specific protocols and multidisciplinary inclusive assessment on the needs of the child and a system on which the child is present and heard. There is a lack of robust national plans on violence against children, and an absence of provisions to ensure coordination of all state agencies and actors, as well as the inadequacy or complete absence of protocols for prevention, early identification, referral, treatment, follow-up, or the pending issue of a multidisciplinary individualised assessment, which is enshrined in EU

legislation. Underreporting or lack of reporting is due to a lack of training of protocols to professionals, and understaffing of the social protection system are also risk factors. There is a lack of aggregated data and reliable indicators in child protection. Processes which promote the empowerment of children from an early age continue to be rare. The introduction of coherent and age-appropriate curricula in schools, that will teach about children's rights, violence and prevention and mechanisms of remedy and redress are recommended. Initiatives should be sustainable and the budget should be continuous to not remain in one-off projects and pilot schemes. This is exacerbated by temporary contracts of employment of professionals funded by these projects which impede the ability to develop relationships of trust. She criticised the focus on punitive responses to crimes against children rather than investing in treatment for children when abuse is identified and recalled that children should be seen as rights-holders. Lack of coordination between professionals, insufficient support, as well as the judicial processes (such as multiple interviews) cause continuous re-victimization of the child and prevent the healing process.



Ally Dunhill (Head of Advocacy, [Eurochild](#), Co-chair of the Children's Rights Action Group ([CRAG](#))) pointed out that one of the challenges in effective child protection systems is the data gap. Better data means a better understanding of the risks and consequences of violence against children. Conversely, the lack of availability and comparability of data currently limits the ability of child protection systems to respond to the variety of children's needs. One example is data on missing children. The [EU Commission 2013 report](#) is the only EU wide report bringing together data on missing children from all Member States. This report, which formulated recommendations to improve the

quality and comparability of data, is outdated with figures from 10 years ago. In this context, civil society organizations, such as Missing Children Europe, have stepped up to bridge some gap and by collecting data form the 1166 000 hotline. However, while the hotlines are able to provide genuine information about the calls answered, more specific data related to categories, causes and outcomes of children's protection needs are not always collected. In order to develop integrated child protection systems is therefore crucial to improve the collection of data disaggregated by gender, race, disability, sexual orientation etc. This is the only way to ensure policy, practice and services that adequately protect children.

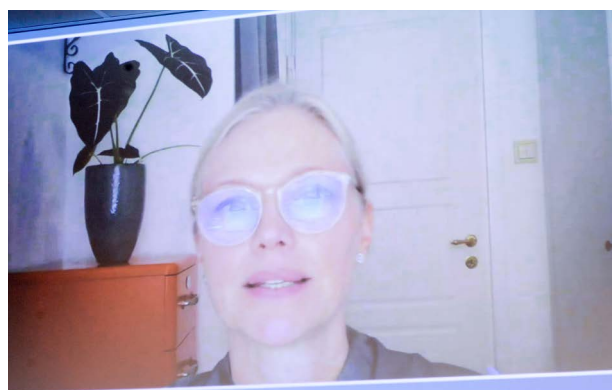


Astrid Podsiadlowski (Head of social rights sector Unit, Equality, Roma and social rights unit, [Fundamental Rights Agency](#)) shared that FRA's research confirms the need for multidisciplinary cooperation. Protocols must be put in place, good practices of cooperation shared (authorities, professionals, support services, NGOs, children), and more training and guidance provided to professionals. She highlighted the need for increased communication between ministries with different areas of competency. Families, children, parents, guardians, and persons of trust need to be consulted and better supported in their role as primary caregivers, as mentioned in the Commission's 2015 [10 Principles for Integrated Child Protection Systems](#). Parents of children of disabilities, need parent support programmes (e.g. respite programmes) or outreach activities to inform them about the available services to access them. Greater coordination is needed so that important actions (for example informing children in a judicial

proceedings) is not just left to parents. According to FRA's recommendation, one single person of trust should be appointed during all judicial proceedings to ensure consistent professional support. FRA published a [mapping on child protection systems](#) in 2015. She said that more must be done to raise awareness among all population groups about the responsibilities towards child protection. More than half of EU Member States have specific reporting obligations addressing civilians, to report cases of child abuse, neglect and/or exploitation.



Olivia Lind Haldorsson (Head of the Children at Risk Unit, [Council of Baltic Sea States Secretariat](#)) shared some positive examples of good practices. Aside from law, policy, governance, accountability, service delivery, adequate resources and the INSPIRE WHO Programme, she said that stakeholders must be willing to constantly question the robustness of systems and willing to engage in internal and external reviews, to adapt systems. Involving a diverse set of actors, including children, in reviews and reform can contribute to innovation and trust. An important aspect of trust is to develop a common language to foster mutual understanding and we shouldn't estimate the power of these efforts as a good practice example. Olivia emphasised the impact of ensuring participation of children and caregivers. Examples to promote progress in our region, include law reform and practical guidelines and tools for participatory case management. Special efforts should be made to define a common language and ensure individual adaptations so that the path towards protection, recovery and justice becomes a joint venture, that everyone understands and signs up to, both at a system level and in individual cases.



Turning to practical approaches, the [Barnahus model](#) is an expression of an integrated system among different types of action that together contribute to ensuring protection, recovery and justice. The Barnahus does not replace an integrated system, it is a practical child friendly, multidisciplinary model dedicated to providing a comprehensive, multidisciplinary response to child victims of violence, including child protection, child friendly justice, mental health and physical health interventions. Seeking to avoid revictimization of children, traumatisation and avoiding multiple interviews, it connects different services and professionals in a very practical way. A key factor in its success is that the model has been adapted to different countries and applied in a variety of ways, and children are at the centre of the process.

She also emphasised that investing in a committed, healthy, and professional workforce is a key good practice example. Good practice includes conducting research into the situation of professionals such as workload, work environment, health and capacity and to use this as a foundation for concrete action to address concerns, rather than making assumptions of what needs to be done. In our work, we also see the enormous impact of exchange, such as joint training, peer dialogue, technical support, and study visits, at national, and importantly, international level.



On sharing best practices, **Theoni Koufonikolakou** complemented what was said by **Olivia Lind Haldorsson** by saying that school can make a difference. Schools that invest in curricula that teach children's rights and human rights promote student communities and child participation. They generally encourage a relationship of trust, particularly those at risk of social exclusion.

Astrid Podsiadlowski expanded on the topic of good practices, stressing the importance of use of child-friendly language, and highlighting the child-friendly version of the Strategy, and the Child Rights Platform. On training and guiding for professionals, she mentioned a [Council of Europe online course](#) on children's rights, and an upcoming training manual on guidance for guardians.

Ally Dunhill (Head of Advocacy, [Eurochild](#), Co-chair of the Children's Rights Action Group ([CRAG](#))) explained that an integrated child protection system requires all actors and systems to work together *for* and *with* children across sectors and services, to form a protective and empowering environment for all children. A key element of such a system is that it must both prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children. Although child protection systems are primarily the responsibility of individual Member States, she said the EU also has a role to play in ensuring systems are based on the needs of all children. Every year an estimated 250 000 children slip through the net of Europe's child protection systems and disappear. In 2021, the 116 000 European hotlines reported that 57% were children who ran away or were pushed out of their home or care. Every one of these missing children points to a gap in the child protection systems. An integrated child protection system requires comprehensive and sustainable reporting, and timely and disaggregated data collection. Unfortunately, there are significant gaps in this area as although Eurostat publishes statistics that include information on factors that increase children's vulnerability for going missing (e.g., social inclusion, migration, etc.), they do not include statistics on children going missing. She underscored the fact that all children regardless of their status should have access to mainstream national child protection systems and services that respond to their individual needs.

Ally Dunhill pointed out that although child protection systems are the primary responsibility of each Member State, the EU has a role to ensure that they are based on the needs of all children and that they empower children. Every year 250 000 children slip through the net of the Europe child protection systems and disappear. In 2021, 116 000 hotlines, reported that 56% of them ran away or were pushed out of the care or home and that children in migration accounted for 6% of all cases (although this figure is expected to be much higher due to a high rate of under-reporting). Every missing child points to a gap in child protection systems. An integrated system requires comprehensive and sustainable reporting, timely and disaggregated data collection and statistical mechanisms. Unfortunately, there are significant gaps in this area. Although Eurostat publishes statistics on children's vulnerability for going missing, they do not have statistics on children going missing.

An integrated and empowering child protection system must put children at the centre of the process, connecting the actors working in collaboration, enabling the coordination of different ways in which children may be involved, including child protection, custody and migration. In line with international legal obligations, all children, regardless of their status should have access to mainstream child protection systems and services that respond to their individual needs. The system must ensure the reporting of violence experienced by children. Each country must have a system in place of reporting and detecting of violence and cross-country cooperation is needed to ensure that no case goes undetected. In addition, all children should have free access to hotlines. The 116 000 hotlines require accessibility and sustainability through funding and capacity building. We need stronger EU coordination and faster response time. For instance, the EU's registration platform for protection beneficiaries is not used to its full potential to help the tracing of unaccompanied children that might go missing. In addition, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has shed light on the lack of harmonisation on guardianship systems among EU Members. We need EU wide research and evidence of good practices, including on guardianships, custody issues and models of adequate treatment of children affected by violence. We need a platform where child protection professionals can learn and exchange with their peers and CSOs. We need to hear the experiences of children and make informed decision on our policies.

Workshops Day Three - Protecting children

Workshop 1

Towards integrated child protection systems - identification, reporting and referral in cases of violence against children

The workshop was moderated by **Marta Tarragona Fenosa** (Legal Officer, Fundamental rights policy unit, [DG JUST, European Commission](#)) and provided a space to share good practice on identification, reporting and referral in cases of violence against children, and highlight some of the challenges in ensuring integrated child protection.

- Importance of guidelines and protocols so that each professional knows their specific role in case of violence against children.
- Importance of being part of networks for information sharing.
- More efforts are needed in prevention activities and awareness raising to ensure faster identification, reporting and referral processes.
- Importance of child-friendly protocols for reporting, legal procedures and examinations.
- The Barnahus model, whereby professionals come to the child rather the other way around, should be adopted as standard practice for providing child victims and witnesses of violence rapid access to justice and care.



Clinical psychologist **Ana Marija Spanic** (Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Centre, Croatia) presented the work of the [Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Centre](#), a health care centre that provides free services to children who have experienced trauma and whose emotional and physical needs are not being met. The centre uses a multidisciplinary approach, where psychologists, psychiatrists, neuro-paediatricians, social workers, social educators, therapists, lawyers, work together. This approach facilitates identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect; assessing the impact of traumatic events and the needs of the child; carrying out risk assessments; crisis management; providing treatment according to the needs of the individual child; and strengthening the support system of the child. The centre also carries out forensic interviewing, when mandated by the courts. When a child is referred to the centre, a multidisciplinary assessment is carried out to establish abuse, and the whole process of identification, reporting to the police and social services, and referral is done through the centre.

Key messages

- A multidisciplinary approach should be formalised as a permanent solution within the child protection system to facilitate in-time reactions and a strong protection network.
- Cooperation among different professionals and stakeholders is essential, including outside the EU with embassies.

The process of complete recovery is not possible without coordination of institutions within the child protection system and cooperation of professionals. This multidisciplinary centre is the only one of its kind in Croatia and many services are not recognised and therefore not funded by the health care system. She called for this approach to be formalised as a permanent solution within the child protection system to facilitate in-time reactions and a strong protection network. More efforts are needed in prevention activities and awareness raising facilitates to ensure faster identification, reporting and referral processes. Special attention should be paid to child sensitive reporting mechanisms.

Foteini Papadatou (Psychologist, [The Smile of the Child](#), Greece) presented the twenty-four-hour nationwide child helpline that provides services to all children in Greece regardless of nationality and background. Through the organisation children are supported to report abuse, they are informed through outreach activities in schools about their rights and can contact the helpline or chat application at any time. Concerned citizens, neighbours, professionals, relatives, etc. can also contact the helpline to report a child in danger. The Smile of the Child runs awareness and prevention campaigns targeting students, parents and guardians, and interventions are carried out by a specialised team of psychologists. They provide knowledge and experience on issues of concern, such as violence and sexual violence against children, trafficking, bullying within school, child disappearances, internet safety and cyberbullying. The organisation also carries out field-based interventions in cases where children are at immediate risk, in cooperation with the Greek public prosecution services and law enforcement. Improvements are needed when it comes to national child-friendly protocols for reporting, legal procedures and examinations; and the provision of safe short-term accommodation where children can be hosted. More specialised training on child-sensitive approaches for professionals is needed throughout all procedures to minimise secondary victimization.

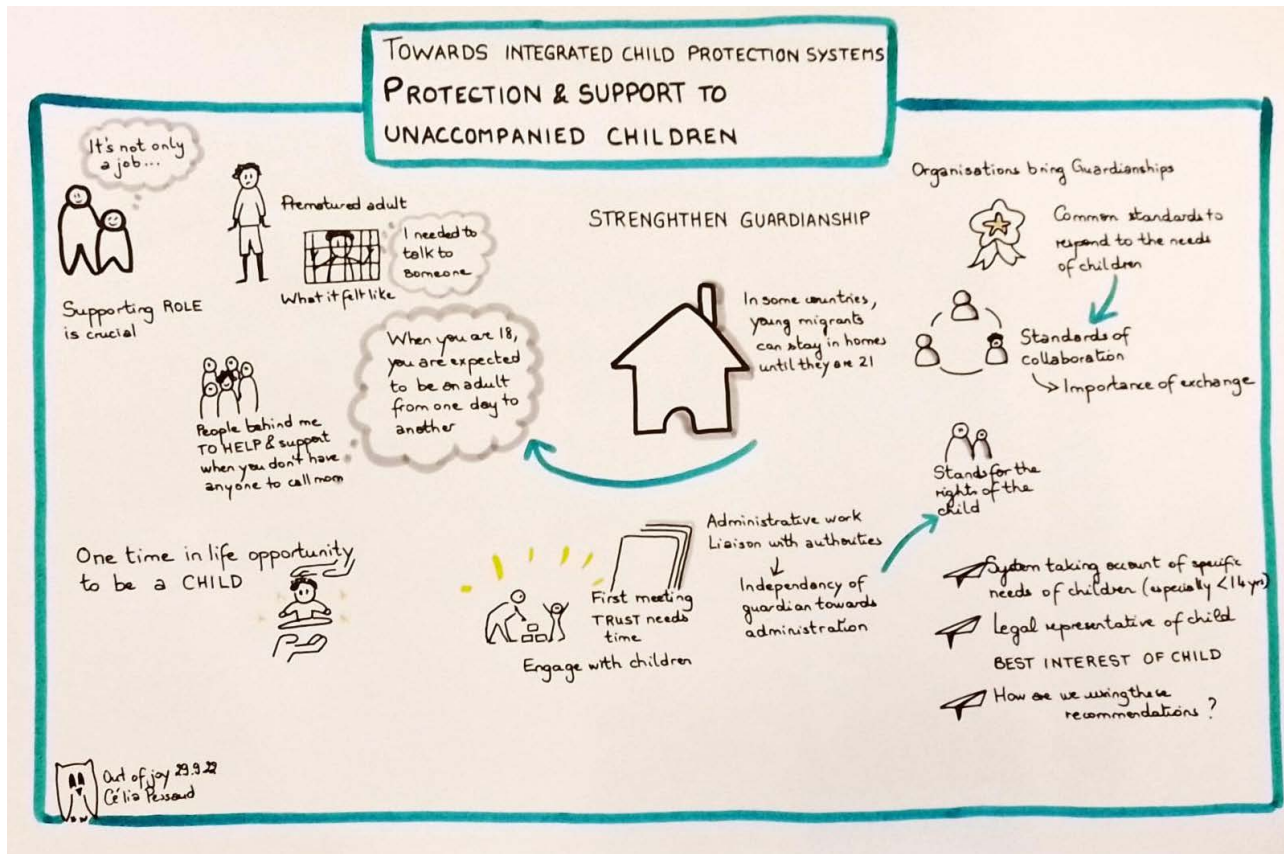
Annika Svensson (Community police officer, Uppsala, Sweden) and **Louise Holm** (Social worker, Uppsala city council, Sweden) jointly presented similar measures in place in Uppsala, Sweden, where the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) has been

incorporated into law since 2020. Any professional working with children (teachers, sports instructors) has a duty to report to social services if there is a suspected case of neglect, abuse, or a child is the victim of criminal activity. When a suspected case has been reported to the police, the [Barnahus model](#) is followed and the child meets with one person. Professionals from other services are in a room next door and can pass on questions to the main contact person interviewing the child. A network of police, social services and NGOs has been established in Uppsala to work together to identify children at risk. Some risks include children from minority groups, children visiting Sweden with adults other than their parents, homeless children, children forced to beg, steal, or handle drugs, children married at a young age or through arranged marriages. Cross-border cases can be particularly challenging because of divergences in national laws, and what are considered issues of concern for follow up. The [Brussels IIb recast](#) should be used to ensure coordination of child protection authorities, in case of cross-border for a child, and the 1996 Hague Convention on child protection in case the child has connections to outside of the EU. The two speakers agreed that what works is visibility, networking, trust (with the help of NGOs), building relationships, and ensuring a holistic view.

During the workshop discussion some resources were shared: one speaker mentioned a [COPE toolkit](#) for working with the police to help protect and safeguard children who are present when their parents are in conflict with the law. [Missing Children Europe](#) has developed an [online course](#) to improve understanding of runaways and equip professionals with the ability to detect and respond to behaviour before a child goes missing and encourage trust between professionals and children upon their return. Another participant shared details of the [GRACE project](#) which aims to equip European law enforcement agencies with advanced analytical and investigative capabilities to respond to the spread of online child sexual exploitation material.

Workshop 2

Towards integrated child protection systems - protection and support to unaccompanied children: the role of guardians



The workshop was moderated by **Isabela Atanasiu** (Policy Officer, Asylum unit, [DG HOME, European Commission](#)) who said that since the 2015 migration crisis, the need to reinforce national guardianship systems in Member States had been identified as area to be strengthened. Guardianship is covered by the [2017 Communication on the Protection of Migrant Children](#). The recent EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child refers to the need to work to reinforce national guardianship systems in Member States, including by continuing to develop [the European Guardianship Network](#). Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has also brought new urgency to the need for qualified and effective guardians to support children travelling unaccompanied to and within the EU.

Key messages

- Termination of the Guardianship mandate at the age of eighteen is problematic as children don't become adults overnight
- and need further support before they become independent adults.
- A key aspect of an effective guardianship is the ability to build trust between the guardian and their guardian. This emotional support and connection are sometimes lacking.
- Access to relevant information and advice should be delivered in an age-appropriate way by guardians.
- Importance of independence of guardians so that they can advocate for their guardian, even if this means going up against their own institutions where needed.
- Helping children reunify with family members abroad is one of the most challenging aspects of guardianship, according to one guardian.
- The European Guardianship Network provides an important EU wide platform for exchange of experience, for working together to identify challenges and find solutions, and for making

contributions to shape EU policy and practice. Sustainability of the guardianship network is an important, and the EU should help ensure proper funding is secured in the long term.

- Adequate guardianship mechanisms should apply to all unaccompanied minors equally, regardless of the country they come from.

David, a young person from Nigeria, shared his personal experience as a former unaccompanied minor. He travelled for nine months across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean to Italy and said he had experiencing insecurity and worry throughout his journey. He lost confidence in himself and did not know who he could trust or whom to turn to. At the most vulnerable time of his life, he was sent to a large reception centre with fifty or so other unaccompanied minors. They were left alone and had to fend for themselves with meals, becoming 'premature adults'. After a few weeks he was moved on to another, smaller reception centre. He said that instead of feeling like home, the children had to adhere to strict rules and timetables and spent many hours of the day locked in their rooms. Because of the situation, he knew of two boys who escaped the centre and were never heard from again. Finally, he was transferred to a care home where he felt settled and was appointed a guardian. His experience of his guardian was that it was just a job for the guardian. He took the requisite administrative steps but did not attempt to forge any emotional connection with David. Luckily, he felt warmth and a connection with the staff working at the care home where he lived and was able to continue his education and earn a scholarship for third level education.



David's powerful testimony underscored the importance of having support at this pivotal age and that every child should have reassurance and support from a family. Childhood years shape the rest of your life. Some of his friends from the care home didn't have the support they needed from their guardians either and while they also wanted to continue their education, without the support they needed, some have ended up in precarious situations. Sadly, the relational aspect is sometimes absent from the guardian system. Guardians should not treat unaccompanied minors as jobs, they should be treated as people. He also highlighted the abrupt interruption of services when children turn eighteen and said the transition from childhood to adulthood is more of a process and access to services should reflect this.

Michael Nahrstedt (Guardian, Magdeburg Youth Welfare Office, Germany) shared his perspective as a guardian and explained the process. His work starts when he is appointed as a guardian and meets his ward. He will introduce himself and try to establish a connection and trust by listening to the child and giving them the opportunity to tell their story, which does not always happen straight away. He tries to be a voice for them, advocating for them to relevant authorities, teachers, social services, and connecting them to appropriate services. He tries to establish what their needs are and improve their access to services. He handles all administrative processes relating to applications to gain asylum and tries to connect with family members in the child's home country, to maintain a connection. This is done via the Red Cross in Germany and the International Committee of the Red Cross abroad. He also works with the relevant embassies to access documentation embassies and helps with the family reunification process. He noted the importance of the independence of guardians, saying that his primary duty is to his ward, and the best interests of the child.

Rebecca O'Donnell (Senior EU Policy Advisor, [European Guardianship Network](#)) presented the European Guardianship Network (EGN) which brings together organisations that deliver guardianship to unaccompanied children in the EU. It also includes governmental partners, international agencies working with unaccompanied minors, UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, and EU agencies such as the Fundamental Rights Agency and the EU Asylum Agency, and the EGN is grateful to benefit from EU co-funding.

The goal of the EGN is to enable members to contribute to the development of safe, effective and consistent ways of delivering high quality, child rights-based, and accessible guardianship services. There are different models of guardianships between and within Member States and many factors at play as to when and how a guardian is appointed. The EGN works together around common standards on guardianship. Importantly these do not impose a uniform model of guardianship but rather indicate guiding principles which we feel the different national guardianship models should and can fulfil. These are based on principles set out by the Fundamental Rights Agency in its guidance on the topic. They are very much in line with the Council of Europe recommendations on guardianship.

She pointed to the importance of integrated child protection systems in this field. National child protection systems are there for all children, regardless of their status, and authorities need to do better in reach out to children often living at the edges of society. A guardian plays a key role in connecting an unaccompanied child to the appropriate actors and facilitating the procedures that the child is involved in. A guardian is there to ensure the best interests of the child are taken into account and the child's views are heard.

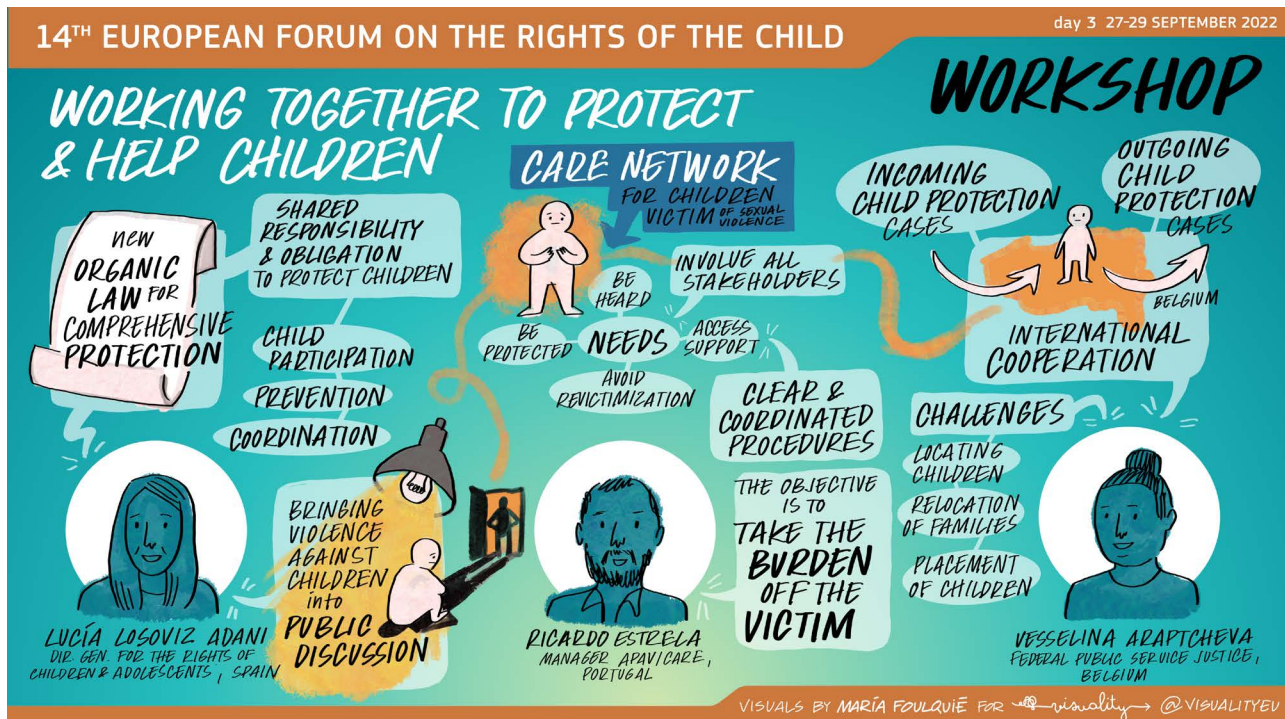
She noted the importance of exchange, translating experience into concrete measures and sharing up-to-date information. One example of EGN work is its working group on cross border cases which typically concern family reunification, relocation, trafficking and disappearances of children. We see that when children move – or are moved - between countries, national child protection systems need to be able to talk to each other, and the EU has an important role in that regard. Another example is the exchange of experience, challenges and practice that occurred immediately on the arrival of children fleeing the war in Ukraine. The EGN also participates in a regional [reference group](#)

that has been established by UNICEF and Child Circle which will look at how to support systems in being more responsive and agile to the challenges faced when children flee war so suddenly. She underscored the importance of avoiding parallel systems applying to children from Ukraine and not others.

Regína Jensdóttir (Head of the Children's Rights Division, [Council of Europe](#)) presented the [Council of Europe Recommendation on effective guardianship for unaccompanied and separated children in the context of migration](#). She said these recommendations are highly needed, as the number of children travelling unaccompanied has dramatically increased with the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Children put into the care of a guardian will have suffered trauma and carry multiple vulnerabilities, due to their young age, and being far from their families and familiar surroundings. This ground-breaking soft law instrument shapes how government systems should be put into place, providing Member States with concrete measures on ensuring an effective guardianship system. These including developing a legal and policy framework and a system of referral to child protection services. According to this legal instrument, a guardian should first and foremost be a person children can trust. Without effective guardianship, children are at risk of being isolated, suffering neglect, falling victim of crimes, including violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation. Guardians should facilitate the child's awareness of their rights and access to them, as well as appropriate services. Access to relevant information and advice should be delivered in an age-appropriate way. She noted the importance of training of guardians in this regard. Access to an independent complaint's mechanism is another important area that guardians should play a role in, helping to empower the child to take on legal procedures and sometimes acting as a legal representative.

Workshop 3

Protection and support to children through coordinated and cooperative procedures



The workshop was moderated by **Marie-Cécile Rouillon** (Commission's Coordinator for the Rights of the Child, Fundamental rights policy unit, [DG JUST, European Commission](#)) and highlighted the challenges in protection and support to children in cases of violence against children. Some examples of good practice were shared, as well as some potential areas for future EU action to support integrated child protection systems.

Key messages

- There are many concrete examples of coordination that can be drawn upon as good practice examples.
- The Spanish example is a legal framework with a comprehensive approach working with different stakeholders each with different competencies, creating a new mechanism for governments.
- Children should be viewed as full citizens and the legal structures should be put in place to reflect this.
- There are challenges when it comes to the cross-border dimensions of child protection.

Lucía Losoviz Adani (Director General for the rights of the child and adolescents, [Ministry of social rights and Agenda 2030, Spain](#)) presented a new law in Spain [on an integrated protection of children on violence against children](#). The law is just the beginning of the path to bringing violence against children out of the shadows and into the public sphere of discussion. Previous laws have focused on recovery and care, while this latest legislation focuses on prevention and awareness raising. It is based on the guiding principles of good treatment, holistic development, and the best interests of the child, with provisions for the creation of a child protective environment at all levels of administration. She noted some improvements in child participation with the creation of a child participation council, and the importance of coordination among the different regions of Spain's decentralised government. This latest law is the opportunity to create new mechanisms of governance and an opportunity to be co-responsible. It is also vital to continue promoting collaboration with civil society, youth and children's councils.

Ricardo Estrela (Manager of Portuguese Safer Internet helpline, [APAV/CARE](#), Portugal) presented the work of the Portuguese Safer Internet helpline and the care network for children who are victims of sexual violence. When children are victims of crime they must be heard by the court and should have access to a safe environment to report the crime. It is important to avoid revictimization/secondary victimisation by institutions or individuals dealing with the victim. They must be protected, immediately removed from the offender, and have access to support in the aftermath of the crime through specialised support. This entails cooperation between all the different entities involved in upholding the rights of the child: the public prosecutor's office, judges, the police, child protection services, victim services, NGOs, and schools. Sharing a good practice example in Portugal, he explained that the statement of future recall, which is the first inquiry and evidence, can be considered during prosecution at a later stage, and is an important mechanism for preventing revictimization and guaranteeing children their right to participate in criminal proceedings. A dedicated victim support officer is appointed before the hearing, in which a relationship of trust can develop between the child and the law enforcement officer. At this stage, the child can give a statement without any constraints and practical information is given, such as who will be present at the hearing and how the proceedings will take place. The child is then referred to a victim support office, once consent has been given, to speed up access and remove the burden from the victim to contact the appropriate service. In Portugal the referral is not done automatically, law enforcement is responsible for this.

Vesselina Araptcheva ([Federal Public Service Justice](#), Directorate-General Legislation and Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, International Cooperation in Civil Matters, Belgium) shared a governmental perspective. The Belgian Central Authority is responsible for matters relating to child protection and its work is underpinned by international law and conventions. She explained that cooperation is in place for *incoming* cases for children in Belgium and Europe, or *outgoing* cases for children abroad. This work therefore falls under two chapters: cooperation with EU Member States, under Brussels IIa/IIb Regulations, and cooperation with non-EU countries that have signed broader cooperation, under the 1996 Hague Convention. In the case of *incoming child protection cases*, a request comes from a Central Authority to

the Belgian Central Authority which is then transmitted by the Belgian Central Authority to Prosecutor's Office (Youth Section) or Child Protection Office. A social team of the local police conducts a house visit, speaks to the child and their family, and checks in with the school and other relevant actors (welfare services, family doctor). The findings are reported to the Prosecutor's Office (Youth Section) or Child Protection Office for potential protective measures.

In the case of *outgoing child protection cases*, a request is made from the Belgian Youth Court/Prosecutor's Office (Youth Section)/Child Protection Office to Belgian Central Authority which is then transmitted to the Central Authority in the relevant country for further handling and reporting. Examples of this might include, checking the situation of child that has relocated to a new country, considering potential protective measures or checking situation of parent/family member being considered by Belgian authority to take care of the child. Some challenges include determining the child's whereabouts in Belgium or in the requested country; repatriating children who have fled from social services/care institutions, especially if the parents are unable or unwilling to retrieve the child: seeking of practical, ad-hoc solutions; and differences in child protection systems.

Haldi Koit (Civil justice unit, DG JUST, European Commission) shared information about Regulation No 2201/2003 known as 'The Brussels IIa Regulation', a single legal instrument aiming to help international couples resolve disputes, involving more than one country, over their divorce and the custody of their children. A [practical handbook](#) on the application of Brussels 2B has been made available on the Justice portal, which includes a good overview of relevant EU case law, tips on what can be requested under the Regulation, and case scenarios to better understand the provisions of the regulation.



CLOSING OF THE FORUM

Bringing Children to the Centre: Delivering together, with and for children

Liam (Scotland) from the Eurochild Children's Council offered some concluding remarks and gave a comprehensive summary of the different themes and sessions that took place over the three days of the Forum. He said that he hadn't known what to expect from the Forum other than hoping that everyone would get the chance to express their opinions and was pleased that this was indeed the case. The highlight of the Forum for him was being given the opportunity to make this speech on behalf of all the children present at the Forum and being given a seat at the table. He felt respected and heard. This feeling was shared by other young participants he spoke to over the three days, who also felt that they had been taken seriously and listened to.



The Forum was officially closed by **Ana Gallego** ([Director General, Directorate General for Justice and Consumers, European Commission](#)) who thanked all the children for their active and engaged participation. For children to be heard was the main objective of the event and she was glad to hear their expectations had been met. Children are the present and the future, she said, and this was amply demonstrated throughout the Forum. Participation contributes to making children safer and responds to their specific needs. She noted the significant contribution of children to the Better Internet for

Kids+ strategy as an example of this. She noted the launch of the Child Participation Platform, describing it as a historic moment and said creating strong and resilient societies will be key in facing the democratic challenges and crisis in participation we are seeing in today's world. She felt encouraged by the good work and strong synergies with the UN, the Council of Europe, Member States, and civil society who are all working on bolstering concrete actions on child participation. There is still much work to be done when it comes to child participation, integrated child protection systems, mental health, and prevention of violence against children. Key to this is adapting the system to children, not the other way around. Finally, she thanked all the speakers and participants, in particular the children who conveyed their thoughts and needs so articulately. Now it is up to us adults to translate these ideas and the trust put into adults into action.

