



EUROPEAN UNION

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EU Statement on “Children and armed conflicts”

The European Union and its Member States commend the Belgian FSC Chair for putting this equally grave and important topic on today’s agenda. We thank all the speakers for their insightful presentations.

Mr. Chair, despite global commitments and efforts, children around the world continue to suffer from the consequences of conflicts. The European Union has made the prevention and elimination of grave violations against children affected by armed conflicts as well as their effective reintegration a priority, as recalled in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child adopted last year. We have been and continue to promote respective efforts, both in international fora and bilaterally. We strongly support the mandate and the work of the UN Special Representative for the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflicts as well as the work of UNICEF and many NGO’s active in this field.

Children are protected under international humanitarian and human rights law. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, States must “*respect and ensure respect for rules of international humanitarian law applicable to them in armed conflicts which are relevant to the child*”. This Convention, as well as its first Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts, have been ratified also by the Russian Federation. Moreover, UNSCR 1261 (1999) identified six grave violations regarding children and armed conflicts: killing and maiming of children; recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups; sexual violence against children; attacks against schools or hospitals; abduction of children; and denial of humanitarian access for children.

Until recently, our actions and efforts in this regard focused mostly on other geographical regions than the OSCE area. The protection of children in armed conflicts is a global challenge where we must not relax our efforts. However, our continent has

again become a place of unspeakable suffering for many civilians and children in particular.

We are horrified by the impact on children of Russia's premeditated and brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. Children have been killed and maimed, schools and hospitals have been attacked in blatant violation of international law. According to the Office of Ukraine's Prosecutor General, 383 children have been killed and more than 749 children injured since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. In Bucha alone, 31 children under the age of 18 were killed and 19 wounded, according to local authorities.

Both expert missions under the Moscow Mechanism established that the war in Ukraine has had a profound impact on the lives and well-being of children. As a result of the Russian aggression, children are at particular risk of denial of humanitarian access, abduction, trafficking, forced deportations and illegal adoption, sexual abuse and exploitation and separation from their families. We are very concerned about the reports of forcible deportation, including of children, to Russia since the invasion. Children in Ukraine also suffer, because of the disruption, caused by the war waged by Russia, of certain vital services such as food, water and electricity supply, the provision of health care or education. Schools across Ukraine have been hit by heavy artillery, air strikes and other explosive weapons, and used for military purposes. 2,400 schools across the country have been reportedly damaged, including 269 that were completely destroyed. Sadly 49% of schools in Ukraine were not able to open on 1 September for the new school year.

According to UNICEF, two million Ukrainian children have fled the country in search of a safe shelter. 2.5 million children have been displaced within the country. Those fleeing violence are at significant risk of family separation, abuse, sexual exploitation and trafficking.

The EU and its Member States are providing shelter, as well as humanitarian, medical and financial aid to the people who have fled Russia's war, as well as access to education for the refugee children. The EU Member States, in cooperation with UNHCR, UNICEF and other relevant bodies, also ensure that a prompt and concrete response to the needs of children and their families are provided for, with special attention to unaccompanied children. Unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable and their immediate needs and safety must be prioritised.

Mr. Chair, we urge Russia to end its violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, as well as its grave violations against children in Ukraine immediately. Russia must stop the senseless bloodshed and withdraw all its troops and equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders. This would be a prerequisite for protection of children of Ukraine, for ensuring their rights, their safety and well-being.

Mr. Chair, in response to the guiding questions formulated in your concept note for this security dialogue, we believe that one of the ways to raise awareness on the issue of children suffering from the conflicts is to continue to do what we are doing today, i.e. have regular exchanges on this important topic here within the FSC as well as in other appropriate OSCE fora.

Thank you!

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, ALBANIA*, UKRAINE and REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, the EFTA countries NORWAY, ICELAND and LIECHTENSTEIN, members of the European Economic Area, as well ANDORRA and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.

* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.