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**POSITION STATEMENT
OF
SOUTHEAST EUROPE CHILDREN'S OMBUDSPERSONS NETWORK
(CRONSEE)**

"Virtual reality - real possibilities, dangers and challenges"

Adopted on the Thematic Meeting of Southeast Europe Children's Ombudspersons Network, 05. 12. 2014. in Belgrade

Ombudspersons for children in Southeast Europe express their deep concern over the increasing violence and abuse of children on the internet space. While ombudspersons recognise and defend the right of all children to freedom of expression, to seek, receive and impart information and ideas and to have access to information and material from a diversity of national and international resources, they stress that often children are exposed to various, often brutal, forms of violence, abuse and exploitation, to the erosion of reputation, violations of human dignity, invasion of privacy and endangering of proper growth and development, and in some cases, of a child's life and health.

Content harmful for children and their development is fully accessible to the child, and the number of available and effective protection measures from such content is inversely proportional to the number of harmful information.

The specificity of the internet space and its increasing availability requests specific measures of protection from abuse. The number of internet users among children constantly increases while the age of children who have free and unlimited access to the internet constantly decreases. Comprehensive measures by which harmful content would be inaccessible to children are not established and developed, and children do not have experience, skills and knowledge to adequately protect their integrity. Information about the risks of uncontrolled and unthinking use of the internet are poorly available to children and adults. The results are increasing number of child victims of internet violence and abuse and its more serious forms.

Children are spending more and more time engaged with virtual activities, while the amount of time spent in other creative activities decreases and diminishes. Parental control on the time spent in internet activities and their quality is poor, or does not exist.

Children and young people often uncritically engage in online communication with people they do not know and they disclose their personal data, as well as their (but also others') personal information which can become the subject of abuse. Online activities of children and young people and information they have published on the internet, mostly remain unknown to their parents or other adults who care for them, but at

the same time accessible to a wide range of people, mostly peers, but also to internet predators. Although virtual, these activities produce real, mostly threatening consequences for children and young people, which again remain unknown to persons who can provide assistance to children. Children and young people in most cases do not speak about, and even less report violence and abuse they suffer through social networks and in the internet space, which empower perpetrators and result in a new cycle of violence, most often in a more serious forms.

Ombudspersons for children in Southeast Europe warn of the increasing risks associated with the movement of children in the internet space and of the inadequate response of society. They remind of the obligations of states and their authorities as prescribed by national legislation, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, The Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, Convention on Cybercrime, Directive 2011/92/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, Recommendation Rec(2006)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on empowering children in the new information and communications environment, the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child and other international documents and international standards.

Ombudspersons for children in Southeast Europe believe that the following measures and recommendations should be endorsed, implemented and supported at regional, national and local levels:

1. Violence and abuse of children in cyberspace is - real. Accordingly, regulations, rules, principles and standards which are applied in the protection of children from violence in "real life", should be applied in the protection of children from violence, abuse and exploitation on the internet, adapted to the specificity of the virtual space.
2. Public authorities should, in cooperation with internet service providers, define strategies and plans for the protection of children from violence, abuse and exploitation on the internet and protect children from harmful content . These documents should show "zero tolerance" towards cyber violence and to precisely define the activities which efficiently and timely prevent /stop any form of violence and abuse of the child in the virtual space, identify and bring the offender to justice, and provide rehabilitation measures for the victim. Strategies and plans should provide for comprehensive measures to protect children from harmful content on the internet that adversely affect growth, development and well-being of children.
3. Public authorities adopt specific provisions, regarding access of children to internet cafés, game rooms and other premises which offer use of internet, in order to protect them from improper use of internet and relevant dangers. Criteria should be established to certify "child friendly" premises, that will meet prescribed requirements, such as proper supervision, special filters, time limits, prohibition of entrance to children of younger ages after midnight, etc.
4. Effective mechanisms should be established and be available to children and adults to report and complain about violations on the internet. Children should have available advisory services which would support them and advise them how to react in case of internet violence or other violation of their rights.
5. Duties placed on public authorities do not diminish parental responsibility to set limits to children in use of the internet and to cautiously observe the quality of internet content their children are engaged in.

6. Public authorities should, with the participation of children and young people, design and implement a public campaign to raise awareness of the public, particularly children and young people, parents and professionals who work with children about the risks of violence on the internet and the measures of protection and self-protection. Campaigns should particularly be aimed at raising awareness of the following:
 - Children and young people should maintain the confidentiality of personal data and other personal information, and publicize on the internet only such information which can not be misused and can not compromise or cripple a child's online reputation and his/her reputation in the community and peer group;
 - Children and young people should promptly report all forms of violence suffered on the Internet and other media, to parents, people they trust, or competent authorities;
 - Everyone has a duty to refrain from participating in activities which promote or constitute violence and exploitation of others through the internet and other media;
 - It is a duty of all to warn competent and other authorities on the existence of internet sites with content harmful to children.
7. Providers of internet and communication services and media should be aware of their important role in promotion and education of children's rights and protection of these rights in IT and media space. They should adjust their business policies with the principle of the child's best interests and put more efforts in prevention of violence against children and their protection of all forms of abuse and neglect.
8. Public authorities should, with the active participation of children and young people, professionals and providers of internet and communication services, develop training programs for children about behavior in the internet space, especially social networks, about the importance of online reputation and the manner of its preservation and protection, and about the protection and self-protection mechanisms. These educational programs should become part of all forms and levels of formal and informal education. Teachers should be trained and supported to discuss with children issues such as use of internet, rules of conduct, improper activities, potential threats and ways of protections.
9. Public authorities should establish regional cooperation in order to timely exchange the information about cases of violence and abuse of children via the internet and about uploading to the Internet content harmful to the welfare of children. They also should establish common activities in prevention and intervention in such cases .
10. Public authorities should encourage and participate in the development of new tools for handling and preserving the privacy of personal data of children and filtering and making unavailable such content which contain harmful information. Those activities should be undertaken with the full participation of children and young people, taking into account the principles of availability to the child of all relevant information, and the respect for the principle of free flow of information.