Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Resolution 1587 (2007)**[1]

# Situation of children living in post-conflict zones in the Balkans

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly considers that the situation of children living in post-conflict zones in the Balkans has to be seen in the light of:

1.1. children's right to survival and development, which is not limited to purely physical and material aspects;

1.2. the principle of children's best interests, on which any action on their behalf must be based;

1.3. the principle of non-discrimination; and

1.4. the principle of children's participation, namely their right to express their own opinions freely, and to have those opinions given due weight, in accordance with their age and maturity.

2. The Assembly refers in particular to its Recommendation 1561 (2002), on social measures for children of war in South-Eastern Europe and the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers' response on 23 June 2003. It also draws attention to the most recent resolutions adopted by the Committee of Ministers which set out its conclusions on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ETS No. 157), in particular its resolution on the situation in Kosovo.

3. It notes that the political, social and economic situation in the Balkans is still a cause for concern, while humanitarian aid, which had allowed great progress to be made, is now being reduced. Infant mortality rates, which are particularly revealing health indicators, are very high in certain parts of the Balkans. Some of the countries of the region are still among the poorest in Europe and often have large numbers of young people, who face the greatest risk of living below the poverty line. Ethnic divisions have by no means disappeared and systematic exclusion of, and discrimination against, minorities continue to exist.

4. There are still gaps in implementation of the legal reforms concerning the rights and welfare of children. More efforts are needed to bring national laws into accordance with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which also implies the use of good evaluation mechanisms. It is important to set up independent child rights monitoring and claim procedures and establish the post of special children's ombudsman.

5. In recent years the fight against terrorism has intensified, unfortunately to the detriment of the fight against organised crime; trafficking in human beings and in drugs are on the increase and are seriously affecting this part of Europe.

6. The Balkan states must develop closer cross-border co-operation to trace children who have disappeared and help with their reintegration into their home environment; this also requires that special attention be given to a comprehensive approach at local, regional and cross-border level.

7. The Assembly notes that children from minority or socially-excluded groups, such as Roma, Egyptians and Ashkali, as well as displaced children in particular, are victims of trafficking, prostitution or forced labour, or are forced into begging. One consequence of family poverty is an increase in the number of children living in institutions, where again a large number come from minorities.

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1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 23 November 2007 (see Doc. 11353, report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mrs Ohlsson).

8. It also appears that children from minorities are very often excluded from the school system, or even deprived of all education, because of the state of poverty of their families, inadequate mastery of the majority's language and discrimination or harassment at school.

9. The Assembly agrees that the healing and reintegration needs of children are central when developing peace-building programmes following conflicts or periods of political disorder. This involves family reunification, improving existing child-care systems, ensuring regular monitoring of children's physical and mental health, guaranteeing schooling and/or vocational training, as well as psychosocial support and community-based reintegration. Such programmes must take account of children's best interests and aspirations, and be long term.

10. In countries emerging from conflict, school curricula often reflect or even reinforce the oppositions that gave rise to hostilities and the conflicts of the past. The Assembly considers it essential that schools promote peace and reconciliation and invites the countries concerned to:

10.1. incorporate peace education, tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution into primary and secondary school curricula and organise teacher training in conflict prevention and education for peace;

10.2. ensure that all children receive free pre-school and primary education;

10.3. ensure that children from minorities and displaced children are admitted to normal education systems and provided with special assistance, and ban the practice of directing them automatically into so-called special classes;

10.4. prohibit schools from operating on an ethnic basis;

10.5. provide teachers with training on children's rights and make them more aware of cultural diversity as a way of changing attitudes by removing stereotypes and prejudices;

10.6. train nursery assistants and teachers from minority groups.

11. The Assembly invites all the countries concerned in the region to impose a legal ban on all forms of violence against children, including corporal punishment within and outside the family, in schools, in the penal system, institutions and other child-care settings, to make infringements of children's rights such as their sale, forced labour, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse criminal offences under their domestic law and to enforce these laws vigorously and effectively. Crimes committed against children must not remain unpunished, even when committed in periods of conflict and political disorder.

12. It urges the countries concerned to sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197), adopted in May 2005, without further delay.

13. It invites the countries of the region to combat poverty and social exclusion, especially through long-term family policies that focus on children and help families to care for them, by providing, in particular, appropriate social benefits and other services such as training in parenting and the necessary skills for everyday life and giving children access to social and health services.

14. It also stresses that children should only be placed in institutions as a last resort and that alternative approaches such as placement with foster families or adoption are preferable. Children living in institutions are entitled to exercise all their rights and must be able to complain to a mediator or ombudsperson if those rights are violated in the institution.

15. Finally, the Assembly emphasises that children are also agents for change and should be given the necessary conditions and tools to help establish democracy and peace by:

15.1. encouraging them to take part in decision making (for example in school councils, youth parliaments, children's municipal councils, children's governments and the ombudsman's office);

15.2. developing the ability of children and young persons to express their opinions (in debating societies, municipal planning and developing processes, Internet forums, etc.);

15.3. informing them through media designed for them and with them.