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Addressing sexual violence against children: stepping up action and co-operation in Europe

Reply to Recommendation[1]: Recommendation 2175 (2020)
Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has carefully examined Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2175 (2020) "Addressing sexual violence against children: stepping up action and co-operation in Europe" which it forwarded to the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF) and to the Committee of the Parties ("the Lanzarote Committee") to the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, "Lanzarote Convention"), for information and possible comments.

2. The Committee of Ministers welcomes the Assembly's call to step up action and co-operation in addressing sexual violence against children in Europe and confirms its own commitment to this crucial issue, and in particular to the important work carried out by both the Lanzarote Committee and the CDENF. It would also draw attention to the focus on sexual violence against children in the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021), as well as the promotion of an integrated approach to protection from all forms of violence.

3. The Committee of Ministers underlines that, in its monitoring capacity, the Lanzarote Committee chooses themes which address the most important and pressing needs in the fight against child sexual exploitation and abuse and has also adopted several opinions and declarations to guide the responses of Parties to emerging challenges. For example, in April, the Chairperson and the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee adopted a statement on stepping up protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Committee asked its members to provide information on the way they handled the public health crisis with regards to sexual violence against children.

4. The CDENF, for its part, is tasked with continuing to promote the implementation of global and Council of Europe standards and obligations on the protection of children from violence in member States. This is being undertaken notably through the development of non-binding instruments on systems for professionals to report violence against children and on measures and interventions aimed at preventing peer violence and sexual abusive behaviour by children.

5. The activities of these two committees are fully in line with, and bring a valuable contribution to, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Target 16.2 to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

6. In response to paragraphs 5.1 and 5.2 of the recommendation, the Committee of Ministers informs the Assembly that Ireland deposited its instrument of ratification on 21 December 2020 and as of 1 April 2021 the Lanzarote Convention will have been ratified by all member States. Welcoming the accession of Tunisia to the Lanzarote Convention on 1 February 2020, the Committee of Ministers encourages the observer States to the Council of Europe, as well as other non-member States, to consider acceding to this important convention. Already today, a few non-member States are showing a keen interest in the Lanzarote Convention as a

1. Adopted at the 1393rd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (20 January 2021).

benchmark for developing legislation and policy to strengthen the protection of children from sexual violence. In light of the deplorable increase in domestic violence and violence against women and children, a cause for growing concern, the Committee of Ministers underlines the importance of both the Lanzarote Convention and the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention").

7. As regards paragraph 5.3 and 5.4, the Committee of Ministers acknowledges the importance of campaigns and awareness-raising, exchanging information, experience and good practices to improve States' capacity to prevent and combat sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children. In this context, it continues to support the further development of the "Start to Talk" campaign to prevent child sexual abuse in sport and the design and promotion of Council of Europe materials on addressing sexual violence against children. It also draws attention to a number of materials recently developed with this aim, including "Learn about your rights in the digital environment" which is a child-friendly version of the "Council of Europe Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment" (cf. Committee of Ministers' Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7), which will soon be available in 14 languages. Based on the Guidelines, an implementation handbook for policymakers has also been developed and launched on 10 December 2020. Another booklet for teenagers entitled "So this is sexual abuse?", based on the Lanzarote Convention, has also been published and will soon be available in 12 languages. A storybook and a video "Kiko and the Manymes" was launched in November to help parents and caregivers to prevent online sexual exploitation and abuse of children aged four to seven.

8. The Committee of Ministers furthermore welcomes the increased development by the Children's Rights Division of focused, flexible and responsive co-operation projects to support Council of Europe member States in implementing applicable global and European standards protecting children from violence. Multilateral projects have also been developed to strengthen States' action in order to fight online child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. All these projects have facilitated the ratification and implementation of the Lanzarote Convention. They have harmonised legislation, improved practical implementation of common standards through training, capacity building and the promotion of good practices such as the children's house model (*Barnahus*) aimed at supporting child victims of violence.

9. The Committee of Ministers continues to support the "European Day for the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse" which it launched in 2015. In this respect, on the occasion of the 6th European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse on 18 November 2020, a joint statement was made by the Greek Alternate Minister for Foreign Affairs, Miltiadis Varvitsiotis, outgoing Chair of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers; the German Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Heiko Maas, the incoming Chair of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers; the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Marija Pejčinović Burić, and the President of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, Rik Daems. On the same occasion, a further joint declaration focusing on the theme of this year's edition "The risks children run when they produce sexually explicit images and/or videos of themselves" was elaborated by six Council of member States, and supported by the 41 other member States.

10. Finally, in response to paragraph 5.5, the Committee of Ministers stresses the importance of co-operation with other international organisations. It takes note with interest of the call for the creation of an observer seat for a Council of Europe representative on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It underlines the already close co-operation between both the CDENF and the Lanzarote Committee on the one hand and, the other hand, the UNCRC and other UN bodies and mandates, in particular the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children and the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children. This co-operation contributes to promoting the effective implementation of applicable Council of Europe standards and obligations and of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children. Bearing in mind the importance of the continuous support by the Council of Europe to the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the UNCRC could consider becoming an observer to both the CDENF and the Lanzarote Committee, while it could also invite the Council of Europe to regular exchanges of views.

11. As regards co-operation with the European Union, the Committee of Ministers notes that the European Commission has recently adopted a strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse including a number of important initiatives that would benefit from strengthened co-operation with the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe would welcome early consultations between the two organisations on any new initiatives, thereby ensuring the best possible outcomes of mutually supportive actions in the fight against child sexual exploitation and abuse. The Committee of Ministers further notes that one of the objectives of the Council (Foreign Affairs) of the European Union, as adopted on 13 July 2020 in its Conclusions on EU

priorities for co-operation with the Council of Europe 2020-2022, is: “Concluding EU’s accession to the Lanzarote Convention on protecting children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse”. Furthermore, the Commission is in the process of preparing (by 2021) an EU strategy on the rights of the child to which the Council of Europe Secretariat has contributed with a view to ensuring complementarity bearing in mind the ongoing preparation of the new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022 to 2027). Both strategies are expected to place combatting violence against children high on their agendas thus also providing a new opportunity to progress jointly towards target 16.2 of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda.