



**Children with a parent in conflict with the law:
What are their best interests? How can they be met?**

Friday 20 May 2016

Stara gradska vijećnica, Zagreb, Croatia

Ombudsman for Children, Croatia and Children of Prisoners Europe

Conference Outcome Report

Children with a parent in conflict with the law: What are their best interests? How can they be met?

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE), 2016

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Introduction

This report presents the outcomes and summary of proceedings of an International Conference on Children Whose Parents Are in Conflict with the Law, organised jointly by the Ombudsman for Children, Croatia and the network Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) and held at the Stara gradska vijećnica, Zagreb on 20 May 2016. This report is presented in two parts. The first introductory part presents the key messages developed during the Conference based on delegate presentations and relevant discussions and their related considerations for action, while the second part presents a more detailed summary of the proceedings. Links to conference presentations, speakers' biographies and poster presentations can be found on page 2.

The Conference, attended by 200 delegates from 22 different countries, was organised as a high-level forum of international and European policymakers, European Parliament members, judges, police and prison personnel, child welfare agencies, child psychologists and civil society organisations with the purpose of better defining children's best interests when a parent is in conflict with the law, whether imprisoned, arrested or on trial, and seeking to ensure that these interests are met through the development of integrated support initiatives for children based on good practice. Today, approximately 1 million children in the European Union are estimated to have a parent in conflict with the law on a given day each year; some 4,500 children are affected by this situation in Croatia alone. The host country of the annual COPE Conference is determined on a rotating basis. Apart from celebrating the Croatian Ombudsman for Children's ten year contribution to working systematically for children of prisoners, and their contribution to including children of prisoners in the 2016-2021 Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child, a main impetus for holding the COPE conference in Croatia in 2016 was Croatia's plans to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure (OP3 CRC). This mechanism will allow children or their representatives to report child rights violations, including rights violations concerning children of prisoners, to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in cases where the national legal system fails to provide remedy for these violations.

The Conference emphasised the challenges in considering and identifying the best interests of children. The best interests of any child are individual, and their prescription tailor-made based on each child's specific and individual needs, not "one size fits all". They need to be defined for each child, highlighting the child's role in determining what these interests are. The Conference also underscored the challenges of ensuring that children are aware of their rights and of determining how they should be applied with respect to children affected

by parental incarceration. Underpinning discussions of the rights of the child are the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, as well as the ten principles promoted at the Ninth European Forum on the Rights of the Child (see page 8). Children of prisoners require a multi-agency approach. The COPE network and its members and partners across the various sectors and agencies represented at the Conference are promoting a transformative agenda with children of prisoners at its core—enhancing their social, psychological and economic well-being while ensuring child protection, minimising violence and formulating sustainable policies for integrated support mechanisms; putting children first to develop a cross-sectoral child-centred approach. This transformative agenda, driven by the premise that the issue of parental incarceration is above all a public health issue, supports the implementation of developing standards on the rights of children of incarcerated parents by showcasing replicable good practice. In March 2014, Italian NGO Bambinisenzasbarre, a member of the COPE network, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Justice and the National Ombudsman for Childhood and Adolescence, aimed at the recognition and fulfilment of the rights of children of incarcerated parents. The Conference highlighted the Italian Memorandum of Understanding as an example of good practice, establishing clear protocols and obligations for the police, prison and justice departments that recognise and uphold the rights of the child while working within a framework that holds the best interests of each child paramount. In addition to developing an Implementation Guide to assist Member States and other countries in replicating the Memorandum of Understanding—currently underway in the Netherlands and Croatia—, there is an imperative need to develop child protection toolkits for those working on behalf of children of prisoners: professionals in justice, health and social sectors, prison staff, police, schools, NGOs, child rights advocates and parents’ associations. Children need protection, from the media, in schools, within the hostile prison environment, from discrimination by society at large. In a consensus shared by all Conference delegates, a major challenge to protecting children affected by parental imprisonment is the paucity of scientific data: there is an imperative need for integrated data collection schemes.

The conference was chaired by Nancy Loucks OBE, CEO of Families Outside, Scotland.

Children First: Developing a Child-Centred, Multi-Agency Approach

Key conference outcomes:

1. The best interests of the child need to be tailor-made, based on each child's specific and individual needs, not "one size fits all".
2. Whilst the experience of having a parent in prison may be relatively short-lived for the child, the potential impact is life-long and should therefore be viewed as a public health issue above anything else.
3. There is an imperative need for integrated data collection schemes. One of the biggest challenges to us being able to effectively protect those children affected is knowing who and where they are through accurate data collection.
4. The media has an obligation to raise awareness without stigmatising children of prisoners further.
5. The child has what should be an inviolable right to privacy, and the media can play a key role in respecting this right, through more sensitive and responsible reporting of crime stories.
6. The family is the most effective resettlement agency for prisoners. The long-term benefits of supporting children with a parent in prison is shown to be linked to a reduction in reoffending, improved mental health and better outcomes for both the child and the prisoner.
7. Schools are a "game-changer": "Will it be yet another arena for stigmatisation and discrimination or will the school be a champion for such children?" Is there scope for nationwide guidance to schools on the specificities and support needed for children of parents in prison?
8. Croatia has made tremendous progress on the issue of children of prisoners over the past ten years. If other EU countries were to act with similar levels of awareness and expertise, this would represent a great step forward.

Presentations

The best interests of the child

Alain Bouregba, co-founder, Children of Prisoners Europe

Ivana Milas Klarić, Ombudswoman for Children, Croatia, welcomed delegates and speakers to the Old Town Hall and to Zagreb, giving the floor to Alain Bouregba, co-founder and former president of the COPE network. Raising important ethical questions about discussing the best interests of the child, Alain Bouregba's opening speech asked, "What gives us the right to talk about children and to determine their best interests?" and reflected on the ethical, semantic and ontological principles associated with the word "interest". Children are not possessions, neither of their parents nor of the state. He emphasised that the best interests of the child need to be defined for each individual child, highlighting the child's role in determining what these interests are. [Full text here](#) (French only).

Ensuring the rights of children of prisoners: Child rights versus security

Youth Participation: Croatian National Debate Team

Debating helps build tolerance and understanding, and helps young people explore issues that they may not otherwise come across. The Croatian National Debate Team, made up of six school students, international debating champions in the category "English as a foreign language", weighed the importance of child rights against the interest of security in the context of imprisoning parents. Underlining the impact of the loss of parental contact on a child's well-being and development, the side advocating child rights as paramount emphasised the societal benefits of promoting the child-parent bond during a parent's imprisonment and the evidence of reduced recidivism rates and transgenerational offending: "A parent, as the most important actor in their child's life, is crucial for the child's sense of self."

The opposing side, defending the interest of security, underlined the trauma associated with having a parent who is in conflict with the law, and the state's obligation to protect the child from that trauma, to protect the child from their parent. The state's role is first and foremost in delivering punishments to offenders and protecting the wider civil society. They emphasised the need for the law to treat all offenders equally. Both sides were congratulated throughout the course of the conference, for their talented debating skills and insightful arguments.

UNCRC and the best interests of the child whose parent is in conflict with the law

Renate Winter, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Judge Renate Winter, representing the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), began her keynote emphasising the complexity associated with considering the best interests of children with a parent in conflict with the law. She highlighted the very real stigma children of prisoners face and challenged all in the room to acknowledge and by implication to overcome their own prejudices. Underlining the individuality of cases where parents are sentenced, she noted that global solutions, while interesting, may not always be helpful for those directly affected by the system. Given that no single document can define the best interests of the child, Ms Winter called on the judiciary to consider each case separately by respecting the child's right to speak their own mind and be listened to. Referring to UNCRC Article 6 (right to life and development), she reiterated the need for child protection to take precedence and for prisons to modify their visits and search procedures in order to uphold this right. Prison officers must be very well trained in order to avoid humiliation or degradation of a child visiting their parent. A question from the room invited delegates to reflect upon the challenging situation of children with a parent on death row.

The European Commission perspective on children of prisoners

Margaret Tuite, European Commission Coordinator on the Rights of the Child

Margaret Tuite, European Commission Coordinator on the Rights of the Child, opened her keynote speech by underlining the fact that children may face multiple vulnerabilities and emphasised the Commission's role in breaking the cycle of disadvantage; every child being a rights holder deserving protection and support. The Commission recognises that a child with a parent in prison is in a situation of vulnerability and that special efforts may be needed to mitigate that vulnerability and ensure that the child's rights are respected. In June 2015, the European Commission tabled a reflection paper on integrated child protection systems, including ten principles to be promoted at the Ninth European Forum on the Rights of the Child:

1. Every child is recognised, respected and protected as a rights holder, with non-negotiable rights to protection.
2. No child is discriminated against.
3. Child protection systems include prevention measures.

4. Families are supported in their role as primary caregiver.
5. Societies are aware and supportive of the child's right to freedom from all forms of violence.
6. Child protection systems ensure adequate care.
7. Child protection systems have transnational and cross-border mechanisms in place.
8. The child has support and protection.
9. Training on identification of risks is delivered to a wide range of people working for and with children (including all teachers, health sector professionals, social workers, etc).
10. There are safe, well-publicised, confidential and accessible reporting mechanisms in place.

Referring to the new Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2016-2021, which recognises children of imprisoned parents as a vulnerable group, Ms Tuite stressed the gaps in provisions for children of prisoners in maintaining direct contact with their parents. Expressing her support for the comprehensiveness and accessibility of the 2014 Italian Memorandum of Understanding on children with imprisoned parents (MoU) signed by the Italian Minister for Justice, the Ombudsman for Childhood and Adolescence and COPE member Bambinisenzasbarre, Ms Tuite underlined the importance of schools in supporting children with a parent in conflict with the law. School can be a game-changer: “Will it be yet another arena for stigmatisation and discrimination or will the school be a champion for such children?” Is there scope for nationwide guidance to schools on the specificities and support needed for children of parents in prison? Ms Tuite called for a toolkit to be available to all those who work for and with children of prisoners, whether professionals in justice or social sectors, police, school staff, NGOs, child rights advocates, Ombudspersons, prison staff, prison inspectorates or parents' associations. COPE is planning to publish a guidance document to accompany the Memorandum of Understanding, feeding back on the first two years of implementation in Italy and on the impact of the document. [Full text here.](#)

Message from Italian Justice Minister, Andrea Orlando

Following Margaret Tuite's speech, COPE President Lucy Gampell delivered a message from Italian Justice Minister Andrea Orlando, on the importance of Bambinisenzasbarre's work and the Memorandum of Understanding ([full text here](#)). Mr Orlando confirmed that Italy, “through the National Prison Administration and Bambinisenzasbarre now undertakes continuous monitoring under the Protocol and the results are more than

satisfactory. Over the past two years, new visits rooms and spaces for children have been set up in 95 per cent of Italian prisons.” More precisely, the Memorandum has led to the creation of new children’s play areas and outdoor green spaces, additional Sunday visits, improved booking arrangements and better communication between prisoners and their children. The Minister stated that the Memorandum of Understanding is due to be renewed and that the Justice Ministry’s attention on children would be consolidated.

Children of prisoners in the National Preventive Mechanism

Lora Vidović, Ombudswoman for Croatia

Speaking about the National Preventive Mechanism against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Lora Vidović, Ombudswoman for Croatia, stressed the need for cross-sectoral cooperation throughout the process. Focusing on collaboration with NGOs and independent experts to protect society’s most vulnerable and promote human rights and freedoms, she underlined the contextual differences between children in conflict with the law, children separated from an imprisoned parent and children living with a parent in prison, deeming all three categories as being worthy of equal rights and opportunities. Ms Vidović focused on the adequacy of children’s visits to their parent in prison, the imposed clearance or approval of children prior to visits, waiting conditions and facilities for children, the distance between a child’s home and the prison, ways in which imprisoned parents can keep in touch with their children inside and outside of prison, and parenting programmes for parents in prison. According to Committee for the Prevention of Torture standards, upheld by the National Preventive Mechanism, any ante- and post-natal care provided in prison must be equivalent to the care available in the outside community. Crèche facilities should be available to allow women prisoners to participate in work and other activities. Ms Vidović described the women’s penitentiary in Požega, with its department for mothers with small children, and underlined the difficulty of there being only one penitentiary for women in Croatia, meaning that it can be difficult for children to visit if they don’t live with their mothers in the prison. She highlighted Article 111 of the Execution of Prison Sentence Act (Zakon o Izvršavanju Kazne Zatvora, ZIKZ):

Protection of maternity

Article 111

(1) Pregnant women and mothers who have delivered a child during the execution of prison sentence shall be ensured a complete medical protection related to pregnancy,

childbirth and maternity.

(2) Pregnant women shall be accommodated in the Maternity Ward six weeks before due date, and can be accommodated even before subject to doctor's proposal. After that she will be sent to the Mother and Child Ward, in which she shall stay, as a rule, until child's third birthday.

(3) If pregnant women serves a prison sentence in prison or jail where no Maternity Ward exists, she shall be transferred to a prison or jail where such Ward exists or, subject to doctor's proposal, to the nearest medical institution.

(4) Delivery by a pregnant inmate shall be carried out in a specialized health care institution.

(5) A child shall remain with the mother upon her request and on the basis of the decision of a social welfare center until his or her third birthday, following which the social care center shall undertake the necessary measures for the accommodation of the child. The equipment as well as the professional care and health care for the child shall be provided by prisons and jails. The supervision of the exercise of the parental right shall be carried out by the Ministry of Labor and Social Care. Authorized persons of the social care centers shall have to visit the prison or jail once in three months, and even more frequently if necessary, for the purpose of supervision of mother, and they shall have to undertake the appropriate measures if necessary.

(6) Pregnant inmates as well as the mother and the child shall have the right to weekly visits by the members of their families.

(7) The tasks which a pregnant inmate or an inmate which has just delivered a child, or an inmate whose is staying with her until child's third birthday, shall be determined by a medical doctor.

(8) During the stay of a child with his or her mother in a prison or jail, the prison or jail shall ensure that the child attends a pre-school institution outside of the prison or jail.

Recognising the rights of children in the European Parliament

Tonino Picula, Croatian Member of the European Parliament

Drawing on the explicit recognition of children with imprisoned parents in the 2014 European Parliament resolution on the 25th anniversary of the UN Convention on

the Rights of the Child, Tonino Picula, Croatian Member of the European Parliament addressed delegates on recognising the rights of children of imprisoned parents at the European level. Article 13 of the UN Resolution:

13. Calls on the Commission to assess the impact of detention policies and criminal justice systems on children; points out that across the EU children's rights are directly affected in the case of children living in detention facilities with their parents; underlines the fact that an estimated 800 000 children in the EU are separated from an imprisoned parent each year, which impacts on the rights of children in multiple ways;

Given that all 28 EU Member States have ratified the UNCRC, and praising the new Intergroup on children's rights of the European Parliament, Mr Picula invites the European Commission to assess child rights implementation in relation to children of imprisoned parents, encouraging delegates to petition the Commission to look into the issue (noting the 1 million signatures required by the Lisbon Treaty). Mr Picula welcomed the issue and offered to help COPE organise a European Parliament debate on the topic.

**Beyond blaming and shaming: Parenting support as a key to a healthier society
Valentina Otmačić, Head of UNICEF, Office for Croatia**

Introducing the Croatian national strategy on the rights of the child, Valentina Otmačić spoke about the importance of parenting support and UNICEF's involvement in equipping prisons and making them more child-friendly. She put forward several key considerations for improvement on the national level. Highlighting the importance of including parents and children in the planning process, Ms Otmačić stressed the need to increase the quality and availability of parenting support services in the community, to train professionals and pay particular attention to parents of children in vulnerable situations, to conduct systematic monitoring of support programmes and to strengthen intersectoral cooperation.

Parents in prison: What support does the child need?

Bruna Profaca, Ph.D. Child Protection Center of Zagreb

Maintaining the child-parent bond and quality childcare are important protective factors for the child. Bruna Profaca, Ph.D Clinical psychologist at the Child Protection Center of Zagreb spoke about the importance of listening to the child's own views when working with traumatized children. Noting the particular importance of supporting parents to in turn support children, Ms Profaca stressed the complexities of child trauma and

children with a parent in conflict with the law. Weighing up relevant risk factors and protective factors, support mechanisms must be catered to the individual child. Children of imprisoned parents are not a homogenous group, despite common needs and shared risks. Building upon the previous comments of Ms Tuite of the European Commission about the importance of schools in child protection and support, Ms Profaca emphasised the importance of schools treating children first and foremost as children, regardless of the actions of their parents.

Media and children of prisoners

Igor Kanižaj, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb

Prison attracts media interest, often with negative bias. Children with imprisoned parents are often construed by the media as the collateral victims of the crimes of their parents, with the media accusing the offender of being a “bad” parent. Igor Kanižaj of the University of Zagreb underlined a media disregard for the right to privacy of the child and the danger of the public perceptions created by mass media. While the media can be useful in raising awareness on the issue of children of parents in conflict with the law, Mr Kanižaj stressed the importance of respecting human rights and ensuring legal and ethical protection. He noted the media’s tendency to focus on the person in a sensationalised fashion, rather than on the issue at hand and the potential solution. Guidelines are needed to raise awareness among the media on how to educate the public and encourage the active cooperation of stakeholders while protecting the identity of the child. Mr Kanižaj encouraged the building of partnerships with media organisations and journalist associations.

Showcasing good practice

Panel discussion

MA#ME study findings - working toward sustainability

Ivana Zanze, RODA, Croatia - www.roda.hr

As part of the first afternoon panel, Ivana Zanze of Croatian organisation RODA showcased their good practice working with imprisoned mothers at Požega Penitentiary. Good practice implemented in the MA#ME project includes training for prison staff, a reading programme for parents in prison, a handbook entitled “Child of a prison as a notice for changing practice”, creative workshops with parents and children and the co-financing of visits to support mothers in financial difficulties. According to RODA, over 50 per cent of imprisoned mothers do not receive visits from their children. Concluding observations from the MA#ME study included: the need for analysis and research; raising public awareness; inclusion of other civil society organisations; building the capacity of institutions; innovating entrepreneurial solutions; need for systematic, scientific data; continued partnerships with the EU in compliance with EU regulations; importance of collaboration with the Ombudsman for Children and the prison system to ensure child rights.

Improving Parental Competencies of Young Prisoners

Jurica Pačelat, Status M, Croatia – www.status-m.hr

The work of Status M focuses on improving the parenting skills of young prisoners through their “Be a Man” club, supporting young fathers in their role in the family and in the community. Their slogan, “Be a man, change the world”, sums up their transformative approach towards accepting and working with gender roles and behaviour, in order to promote the parenting skills of young men in correctional institutions, centred around “positive masculinity” and breaking down stereotypes. Status M’s work is based around “Manual M”, which aims to promote gender equality and healthy lifestyles among young men by addressing the social constructions of masculinity as a strategy for building important life skills in young men as they emerge into young adulthood. Participation in the Status M programme is recognised by the Ministry of Justice as a corrective educational measure.

Integrated family support programme

Andy Keen-Downs and Katherine Copperthwaite, Pact, UK - www.prisonadvice.org.uk

Chief Executive Andy Keen-Downs focused on the work of England and Wales charity and COPE member Pact and their work on supporting families and carers in the

community when a family member is imprisoned; their one-to-one support in prisons to improve “social inclusion” outcomes on release; the group model support in the first three months following release; their family literacy projects; baby groups and early parenting projects. Describing family as being the most effective resettlement agency for prisoners, Mr Keen-Downs underlined the investment in family ties as being a vital factor in reducing reoffending rates, reducing self-harm and suicide, improving prisoner behaviour and relationships between prisoners and prison officers. Katherine Copperthwaite presented Pact’s young person’s charter, Hear Our Voice, which is used in advocacy and awareness-raising work as well as youth engagement and support sessions. Pact’s current plans include training in police academies and schools: Pact will soon deliver training on children with imprisoned parents to 100 schools in the London area. The training raises awareness on familial imprisonment and advises how best to identify, engage with and respond to the needs of children affected. Promoting a positive school environment, the training also aims to reduce the stigma associated with the imprisonment of a family member.

Where we are - what are the next steps?

Panel discussion

Panel chair: Rachel Brett

Anita Matijević, General Police Directorate: Reducing violence during arrest

Ljubica Pezo Štirmer, County Court of Zagreb: Considering children during sentencing

Renata Šoher, Prison System Directorate, Ministry of Justice: Developing child focus in prisons

Attila Juhász, Council of Penological Co-operation: Council of Europe perspective on children of prisoners

Anita Matijević, General Police Directorate: Reducing violence during arrest

“Police officers have enormous responsibility”, Anita Matijević of the Croatian General Police Directorate described the arrest of a parent as a critical moment for the child’s capacity to cope with the situation. Aware of the impact police work can have on a child’s psyche, Croatian police officers are trained to ask appropriate questions and be respectful of the child, treating him or her professionally with a view to avoiding degrading or diminishing treatment of the parent in the presence of the child. Emphasis is placed on good planning and tactical thinking: children are never left alone when a parent is arrested and police officers provide support and information. There are child-friendly waiting rooms at police stations if ever a child is required to come to the station with the officer to await their guardian or support services.

Ljubica Pezo Štirmer, County Court of Zagreb: Considering children during sentencing

In Croatia, guidelines are followed by all judges to guarantee that a standardised procedure is followed and that all offenders are treated equally before the law. Judges will recommend that the prison chosen is the closest possible prison to the offender’s home. Court decisions take young children into account, particularly if the offender is the primary carer. Some sentences may be delayed by a year if the pregnancy is high risk. Social welfare authorities are responsible for finding carers for children if the family cannot accommodate the child or he or she is not eligible to live in prison with his or her mother.

Renata Šoher, Prison System Directorate, Ministry of Justice: Developing child focus in prisons

Renate Šoher lauded the positive achievements of the Croatian prison system, in particular since 2001. Since that year, children have had the right to one weekly prison

visit plus extra holidays visits. She underlined the successes of the new programme “The prisoner as a parent”, which lots of prisoners have been choosing to sign up to, even those without young children themselves. Staff involvement has also boosted the results of the programme, breaking down traditional barriers in the system. The Ministry’s plans for the future include multiplying and expanding on good practice and adopting a multidisciplinary approach. She noted the need for solid legal context to support good practice already in place.

Attila Juhász, Council of Penological Co-operation: Council of Europe perspective on children of prisoners

Attila Juhász noted the efforts of the Council of Europe to include child rights in their various strategies, particularly the most recent Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2016-2021, which makes explicit reference to children with imprisoned parents as a vulnerable group. He also referenced the 2015 Council of Europe 20th Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services (CDPPS) and the well-received workshops run by Lucy Gampell, COPE President and Claudia Vogg, COPE staff. Lucy Gampell was invited to give a keynote at the 21st CDPPS conference in Zaandam in June 2016. Prison must prepare prisoners for society, and society must be prepared to include prisoners upon release. Prisons are therefore responsible for parenting support and should look to COPE for best practice examples.

Panel conclusions: Rachel Brett

Thanking the participants for their insights into the good practice coming out of Croatia, panel chair Rachel Brett highlighted three recent cases where the European Court of Human Rights found the rights stipulated in Article 3 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights to have been violated at the moment of arrest of three parents in Bulgaria. While it is interesting to learn that in Croatia a mother’s sentence will be postponed or an alternative measure found if the mother gives birth during the sentence, Rachel Brett stressed the frustration that this does not apply to mothers of small children born before the sentence. She also underlined one of the conclusions from the EU FP7 “Coping” project that a feature critical to a child’s well-being is the relationship between the prisoner and the carer, and the responsibility of the carer to ensure the possibility of maintaining the bond by accompanying the child to see their imprisoned parent, emphasising the need for social welfare to support this and step in if it fails to happen. All of the day’s presentations demonstrated the need for a child-focused, multiagency approach to support children with imprisoned parents.

Closing remarks

Maja Gabelica Šupljika, Deputy Ombudswoman for Children

To close the conference, Maja Gabelica Šupljika, Deputy Ombudswoman for Children, emphasised how far Croatia and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children had come in the last ten years, since 2006 when they received funding to participate in a Children of Prisoners Europe (then EUROCHIPS) conference on the issue in Paris. Reiterating the words of Alain Bouregba in the opening remarks, Maja Gabelica Šupljika stressed the fact that when it comes to defining the children's best interests we can not pertain to know everything; each child's needs are different and support must be tailor-made. We must consider what we do know, what we have and how we can share this knowledge in order to best support the children with whom we work.

Lucy Gampell, President, Children of Prisoners Europe

With a vote of thanks to Maja Gabelica Šupljika, Ivana Milas Klarić and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, Croatia for a superb conference, Lucy Gampell (COPE President) closed the proceedings.

Background

Ombudsman for Children, Croatia

The experience, work and initiatives of the Ombudsman for Children, Croatia regarding raising public awareness and encouraging professionals within the prison system to improve the rights of the children to maintain contacts with their parents and to strengthen and maintain bonds between child and parent in prison, began ten years ago. In 2006, the Ombudsman for Children, Croatia first began working with the Children of Prisoners Europe network (then EUROCHIPS), with the latter's recognition of the Ombudsman's efforts, often lauded as an example of good practice at the international level.

Children of Prisoners Europe

Children of Prisoners Europe (formerly Eurochips) is a Europe-wide network that encourages innovative perspectives and practice to ensure that the rights of children with parents who are in conflict with the law are fully respected and that action is taken to secure their well-being and healthy development. With the longstanding support of the Bernard van Leer foundation and with support from the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program of the European Union, the network is a membership-based organisation of 82 members and affiliates, made up of non-governmental organisations and individuals from across Europe and further afield, linked by a staff team based at its Paris headquarters. Raising awareness among child-related agencies, prison services, and policymakers to the specific needs of children of prisoners and promoting initiatives that take these needs into account, the organisation seeks to:

Expand programmes that support the child-parent relationship and help minimise violence for children with an imprisoned parent; Introduce the child's perspective through the criminal justice process, from arrest to resettlement; foster cross-sectional collaboration among public and private agencies involved in supporting and making decisions about children of prisoners; obtain better information and greater visibility for children of prisoners and influence policy on their behalf; promote the exchange of initiatives, expertise, and good practice for children with imprisoned parents; and, enhance the competence of professionals within the field.

Children of Prisoners Europe annual conference and network meeting

Each year, the Children of Prisoners Europe network co-organises an international conference, hosted by one of its network members. Previous conferences have focused on child participation, child rights, parenting from prison, listening to the child, telling the truth to the child. The goal of these international conferences is one of exchange: to compare national challenges and concerns and share good practice.



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