

# **CHILD RIGHTS IN SERBIA THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE**

**Belgrade, February 2008**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This report was prepared by the coalition of children and youth that was established as part of the Child Rights Center in the second half of 2007. This coalition is made up of 25 children from various youth organizations, as well as representatives of children without parental care, children with disabilities and children that live and work on the street. Our members are students of primary and secondary schools.

After a training that was held for coalition members at the beginning of October 2007, we conducted a large survey among our peers, with a questionnaire that we created ourselves. The survey was conducted in towns and cities throughout Serbia: Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis, Zrenjanin, Sucotica, Vrbas, Novi Becej, Indjija, Zajecar, Knjazevac, Pirot, Aleksinac, Leskovac, Prokuplje, Bela Palanka, Kraljevo, Vrnjacka Banja, Kragujevac, Uzice, Pozega, Novi Pazar, Guca, Gornji Milanovac.

Children from both primary and secondary schools in these towns and cities participated in the survey, as well as some children that do not go to school full time and some that do not go to school at all. Children from various marginalized groups also took part (children without parental care, Roma children, children with disabilities, children that work and live on the street). Children that participated usually filled out the survey at their schools, however, some were surveyed at the institutions where they are accommodated, as well as in youth clubs in these towns and cities. We received a total of 1132 completed questionnaires, out of which 38.3% were completed by boys and 60.4% by girls (1.3% of the children did not disclose their gender). 11.5 % of the surveyed children were representatives of minorities (mostly Roma, Hungarian, Bosniak, Vlachos, and Croats). Children that participated were between 12 and 17 years old, while the average age was 15.

Having in mind that we had only two months to complete the survey and analyze the data, we did not have time for a detailed analysis except for comparing the data based on gender. We would like to present the results obtained from the survey in this report.

## **2. FAMILIARITY WITH THE CHILD RIGHTS CONVENTION**

The first questions in the survey were directed at how much children know about the Convention and who they inform themselves about their rights. The main results obtained were that **41% of children between 12 and 17 years of age can precisely state what the Child Rights Convention is**, while 20% state that they are well informed about child rights.

It is difficult to say whether these are good or bad results in our circumstances. The bottom line is that this is a minority of children in Serbia.

Regarding the manner of obtaining information on child rights, the dominant source is *school*, as a basic source of knowledge for 67% of children. The second most important source is *family*, where 47% of the children learn about their rights. The third most common source of knowledge on child rights is *the media* (38%).

## **3. THE MOST IMPORTANT RIGHTS**

In the questionnaire we compiled a list of 20 most frequently mentioned rights and asked the children to rate their importance on a scale of 1 to 5. Results obtained show a big gap between the opinions of girls and boys.

The 10 most important rights for boys (number in parenthesis is the average mark)

1. **healthcare protection (4.69)**
2. **life and physical safety (4.59)**
3. **protection from human trafficking (4.55)**
4. family life (4.5)
5. protection from narcotics abuse (4.45)
6. protection from physical violence (4.4)
7. protection from sexual violence (4.35)
8. free time (4.34)
9. privacy and protection of intimacy (4.33)
10. protection from psychological violence (4.33)

The list of 10 most important rights for girls looks a bit different:

1. **protection from sexual violence (4.86)**
2. **protection from physical violence (4.85)**
3. **protection from psychological violence (4.83)**
4. protection from human trafficking (4.81)
5. protection from narcotics abuse (4.73)
6. healthcare protection (4.71)
7. life and physical safety (4.7)
8. family life (4.61)

9. privacy and protection of intimacy (4.57)
10. protection from participation in war (4.57)

The *three rights* identified as *least important* among boys and girls are the same, only with differing average marks: **culture and art** (G 3.82, B 3.43), **participation in social decision making** (G 3.92, B 3.72), and freedom of religion (G 3.99, B 3.85).

We notice that girls are very concerned about protection from any kind of violence, for matters of life and health, as well as family and privacy. They are generally more interested in the protection of their rights and they give higher average marks than boys.

Boys are mostly concerned with matters of life and healthcare, while a bit less for protection from violence. It should be pointed out that protection from human trafficking has become very important for boys, which might be a bit surprising, but anyhow it is good that boys are thinking about these issues as well. We think that an intensified campaign of the state, the media and NGO's really had an effect on the knowledge of children about human trafficking.

It is very interesting that one of the girls' top ten rights is protection from participation in war. On the other hand boys are not particularly concerned with that right, but are much more concerned with their free time than girls are.

### **3. PARTICIPATION**

With regard to the question "how many people in your surrounding take into account your opinion", **80% of girls and 74% of boys state that their opinion is always and in a sufficient manner taken into account**. That seems to be a pretty good result. However there is still that fifth that does not feel sufficiently respected.

We wanted to know in which areas it is most important for children for their opinion to be heard. We received the following responses by order of priority:

- 1. Decisions within the family (G 87%, B 73%)**
- 2. Decisions among peers (G 70%, B 57%)**
- 3. Decisions on school matters (G 43%, B 32%)**
4. Decisions on location of living (G 30%, B 28%)
5. Decisions on country (G 8%, B, 17%)
6. Decisions on world matters (G 7%, B, 11%)

When the phrase "social decision making" is mentioned to children, their first association is *peers* (in Serbian society and crowd of friends is described with the same word **društvo**), because that is the social environment outside of family about which children care the most. Children in Serbia do not see any particular interest for themselves in other areas, while the state and global politics concern

them very marginally. Less than a third of minors are interested with deciding on local, national and global topics.

**An important fact is that only a third of boys and less than half of girls surveyed are interested in participating in decisions regarding school.** It seems that the introduction of school parliaments has not achieved satisfactory results in terms of child engagement in school affairs, so we think new ideas should be developed and tested in this area.

## 5. PROTECTORS OF CHILD RIGHTS

In the survey we asked the children whom they turn to for help and support in the protection of their rights, e.g. who the children think best protects their rights.

### 5.1. INDIVIDUALS

For both girls and boys their most important ally is their *mother*, whom 73% of children in Serbia turn to for help and protection of rights. These results are average results of all survey participants, however those results naturally differ for children without parental care, who rely mostly on peers and other grownups. However, results for these children are not fully accurate because only 29 such questionnaires were submitted.

The second most reliable person for most children in Serbia is the *father*, whom 54% of children would turn to. The third pillar of support is *best friend*, whom 37% of children turn to.

30% of children would approach *close family members*, brother or sister. 15% of children would look for assistance from a *psychologist*, and 13% would consult a *teacher they feel close to*. Furthermore, 15% of children would ask assistance from *some other grownup outside school or the family circle*.

### 5.2. INSTITUTIONS

One of the questions in our survey contained a table with a list of 20 most frequently mentioned child rights. The children were supposed to evaluate how much the state, school, parents/guardians and peers protect those rights.

The marks were:

- plus (+) if they are satisfied with results
- zero (0) if they think efforts are insufficient
- minus (-) if they think that the mentioned institution endangers them.

They also had the option to comment on whether a certain right is not under the authority or influence of a certain institution.

#### 5.2.1. Role of the state

On the basis of how much they know about the role of the state, the children think that the state best protects their right of **citizenship** (77% of children gave the state a plus there), **national culture and language** (65%) and **freedom of religion** (60%)

Children criticized the state the most for not fulfilling the obligations of: **protection of life and physical safety** (54% of children gave a zero for this right), **protection from psychological violence** (36%) and **(non)respect of children's opinion** (35%).

As an area in which the state with its conduct particularly endangers child rights, the children most frequently mentioned: **respect of children's opinion** (25% of children gave the state a minus here), **participation of children in social decisions** (20%) and **protection from psychological violence** (17%).

Boys gave the state more than 50% of pluses for 7 rights (out of the 20). On the other hand, girls gave the state more than 50% of pluses for only 3 rights. Girls are more severe critics of the state on many issues than boys.

#### 5.2.2. Role of the school

The school passed with better marks than the state in our survey, girls and boys giving the school more than 50% of pluses for 10 out of 20 rights.

The results show that children most positively mark the school for protecting the following rights: **quality education** (71% of pluses), **national culture and language** (70%) and **freedom of religion** (62%). Children also gave 59% of pluses to the school for *giving information on important topics*.

Children expect the school to do much more in terms of child rights to: **participation in social decisions** (30% of children gave the school a zero), **respect of children's opinion** (29%) and **life and physical safety** (28%).

As areas in which school endangers child rights the most, children identified the following: **free time** (34% minuses for the school), **respect of children's opinion** (20%) and **participation in social decisions** (16%).

#### 5.2.3. Role of parents/guardians

Parents/guardians by far achieved the best marks as protectors of children's rights and received more than 85% pluses for all rights, except for:

- **free time** (71% pluses)
- **right to culture and art** (73%)
- **respect of child opinion** (78%)
- privacy and intimacy (82%)
- information on important issues (84%)

However, it is important to point out that 22% of boys gave parents/guardians a zero or minus for taking into account their opinion, while only 13% of girls stated the same. Furthermore, 23% of boys and only 14% of girls gave parents/guardians a zero or minus for the amount of free time they have at their disposal.

#### 5.2.4. Role of peers

We were also interested to see whether children see their peers as assistance or as a danger to the protection of their rights. It seems that their feelings are very mixed.

Children are mostly very happy with their peers as protectors of rights to: **respect of opinion** (67% pluses), **participation in social decisions** (57%) and **information on important issues** (54%).

It should be pointed out that many understood the term “social decisions” as decision making in the peer group.

Besides that, 54% of boys gave their peers a plus regarding the providing of *protection from physical violence*.

On the other hand, children are most concerned about their peers regarding rights to: **privacy** (24% of children gave their peers a zero or minus), **protection from physical violence** (21% zero or minus) and **respect of opinion** (20%).

Many children were unsatisfied with their peers in terms of *protection from psychological violence* (19% zero or minus), as well as *protection from narcotics* (also 19% zero or minus)

## **6. QUALITY OF LIFE**

Although there are various accurate indicators of the standard of living of the whole population, as well as children, we wanted to ask the children their personal opinion on their standard of living. When asked, only 6% of surveyed children stated that their material status is weak or very bad, 32% of surveyed children identified their standard as medium, while 57% stated it to be very good or excellent. It seems that at the moment **children in Serbia do not consider themselves as poor**. Children from marginalized groups responded with somewhat lower marks for their standard of living. We cannot give precise data due to a small sample, but our impression is that those children consider their standard of living as somewhat better than it objectively is. One of the bigger

surprises of this survey was that **64% of children stated that they are satisfied with the quality and spectrum of knowledge that they acquire in schools**. Since we did not ask sub questions about this, we cannot say whether this is because school is really wonderful or because children do not really expect much from it.

Here we would like to add that, besides all of the obligations that children have in school and out of school, **65% of them thinks that they have enough free time in general**, while 8% of children think that they are too preoccupied.

We asked the children about their personal experience with violence. According to responses (regardless of gender), only 3% of children stated that they had an experience with some form of sexual violence. This data seems very strange, but the problem might be that many children do not know all instances that are considered as sexual violence. Besides, some children might be reluctant to speak about these things with strangers surveying them.

A bit more children stated that they have been victims of physical violence. 9% of girls and 28% of boys admitted to this. Furthermore, 43% of girls and 48% of boys stated that they have been victims of psychological violence and ridiculing at least once.

This data on violence should be interpreted with care and reserve, but it is obvious that many children had bad experiences of this sort, which we think are especially present among peers. In many things peers themselves are the ones that endanger child rights the most.

## 7. VALUES

The children we surveyed were born in Serbia during the 90's, in a period that was particularly difficult for the country. During that time, the values that existed in society and in the state as well as among peers went through big changes. Therefore, we would like to present some results of our previous research on values of high school children and their tolerance towards differences.

### 7.1. HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTER-CULTURALISM

During September and October 2005 a survey was conducted in eight cities in Serbia by DX and the youth networks "Living together" that are made up of youth clubs from those cities. 468 high school students aged 16 and 17 participated. This survey showed that most of the students, at least nominally, recognize the same rights for minorities as for the majority nationality, 63% of boys and 77% of girls.

On the other hand, 21% of girls and 22% of boys agree with the statement that every nation should live on their own in their own country. In other words, **a fifth of teenagers in Serbia support ethnically pure states**. Barely more than half of high school students openly oppose that idea (59% of boys and 57% of girls), which can be a very disturbing fact.

When asked what their opinion of human rights is, 15% of minors said that human rights are fashion of the west, while 44% of them consider that it is not just an imported fashion. Furthermore, 41% of youths of both genders have declared themselves as undecided in this issue, not knowing what exactly to think about the feasibility of the idea of human rights in our society. **Two fifths of high school students do not have a stable opinion on human rights**, which is a conclusion that should capture the interest of human rights activists.

## 7.2. TOLERANCE AND AGGRESSION

In September 2004 DX and the youth networks "Living together" carried out a very interesting survey in seven cities in Serbia about the participation of youth in public protests. 902 children from the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> grade of high school took part.

Among other questions, they were asked what methods they are prepared to use if an important right of theirs was endangered. Boys would take action by informing the media (70%), negotiations (60%) and boycott of classes (45%), while girls would negotiate (78%), write petitions (50%) and take legal action (46%). The least popular activities are threats, collective revenge and hunger strike. Never the less, **collective revenge is approved by every fourth male high school student in Serbia** (23%) and 12% of girls and this is data that should be taken very seriously.

A particular question in this survey asked the opinion of high school students about events in Serbia in March 2004. As revenge for the burning of Serbian churches in Kosovo, protesters in Belgrade and Nis burned mosques in those two cities. About 40% of girls and a mere 24% of boys had a negative opinion about focusing of anger on the mosques. On the other hand 35% of boys and 19% of girls do not see a moral problem in burning down mosques.

In addition, in another survey that we conducted we received a response that 28% of male high school students would physically attack homosexuals. Boys and young men in our society have a tendency for violence towards other individuals and groups, and all interested parties should seriously consider this issue.

## **8. SPECIAL REMARKS**

Although it was not the topic of our research, we encountered a number of impressions that we feel we must mention in this report because of their importance.

### **8.1. ABSENCE OF BOYS FROM SCHOOLS**

While data of the Ministry of Education states that among high school students in Serbia enrolled between 2000 and 2005, 49.5% are males (equal as in the general population), our experience during November and December of 2007 was that only 38.3% of students were male. We reached similar conclusions in our previous surveys as well.

This is one of the problems that we would like to emphasize in this report. An average of one fifth of all students are absent from school each day. Questions that we cannot answer are: **why are boys absent from school in Serbia, where are they when they are absent, what are they doing and who is providing them with attention?**

### **8.8. LEGAL ILLITERACY**

In the analysis of the questionnaires we noticed that participants in the survey are not familiar with the basic terminology that was used. Many legal terms (e.g. citizenship, place of residence, social decision making, protection from participation in armed conflict, best interest of the child, etc.) were very vaguely understood. This is something we noticed with regard to children from 14 to 18 years of age, and especially with regard to those younger than 14. It is particularly interesting that the word "society" among children of that age is usually understood as "peer group", which explains why we frequently received as a response to our only open ended question ("What do you propose as a solution for the improvement of your status in society?"), answers that referred to the improvement of their treatment among peers.

We consider the fact that **our children know very little about law in general** as a serious problem. Therefore, we recommend to all parties concerned to think about introducing some form of basic legal education for minors in Serbia.

## **9. MOST IMPORTANT CONCLUSIONS**

The report on the state of child rights in Serbia prepared by the children's coalition, formed with the assistance of the Child rights Center, Belgrade, is particularly evaluating the state of child rights in the following areas:

- the familiarity of children in Serbia with the CRC and their rights
- the importance of these rights to children
- participation of children in decisions
- the role of the state, school, parents/guardians and peers in the protection of child rights
- quality of living and schooling
- violence and aggression
- the position of children and youth towards human rights

The most important conclusions we reached are:

- One fifth of children in Serbia consider that they know enough about child rights, while two fifths know exactly what the CRC is.
- Children got to know about their rights mostly in school, their families and through the media.
- The most important rights are *health and life for boys*, and *protection from all forms of violence* for girls. Boys and girls alike are very considerate about *protection from human trafficking*. *Privacy and protection from narcotics* are considered especially important rights.
- The least important rights in the children's opinion are *culture and art*, *participation in social decisions* and *freedom of religion*.
- More than half of the children in Serbia state that they have a very good or excellent standard of living.
- Two thirds of children are satisfied with the amount of free time at their disposal.
- Three quarters of children in Serbia are satisfied with respect of their opinion, while one quarter is not, where boys are more dissatisfied than girls.
- It is most important for children want to participate in *family and peer group decisions*.
- About one third of boys and two fifths of girls are interested in participating in decisions regarding school.

- The state is best at protecting those rights that are the least important according to the children.
- More than half of the children are unsatisfied with the results of the state in protection of their physical safety.
- About two thirds of the children are satisfied with the quality of education they have in schools.
- About three fifths of children are satisfied with the role of schools as sources of important information.
- The school and the state were particularly criticized for *disregarding children's opinions*. (Wherein a small proportion of children actually stated this criticism).
- Peers are seen as aids, but also as a serious threat with regard to protection of child rights.
- Children generally experience psychological violence in their environment, while there are frequent instances of physical violence, especially among boys.
- Two fifths of high school students in Serbia do not have an opinion about human rights.
- One fifth of high school students support the idea of a pure ethnic state, while just over one half of them are strongly against it.
- About one quarter of male high school students support collective revenge as a means for problem solving and support physical violence against homosexuals. Girls are more tolerant in those issues.
- In class rooms in Serbia, the ration of students present at any given time is 3:2 in favor of girls.
- Children in Serbia have poor knowledge of basic legal terminology.

## **10. OUR SPECIAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on all of our conclusions from our recent surveys of children and minors in Serbia, we would like to recommend the following:

- 1) The state must do much more in creating the feeling of *physical safety* among children.
- 2) Future child rights protection activities in Serbia must focus on peers and *programs against peer violence*, because peers are regarded as a source of threat and endangerment of child rights.
- 3) Special programs for *reduction of aggression* in communications are necessary for boys in Serbia.
- 4) Fresh and original campaigns and activities for *motivating children to participate in school organization* are necessary. Emphasis should be put on finding ways to reduce student absence from class.
- 5) *Schools should allocate more time for informing children* about matters with relation to them, because children consider schools as an important source of information.
- 6) A new, different and child friendly approach to informing in *human rights education* is necessary, because children still lack knowledge in this field.
- 7) As part of their regular education and training, some form of *basic legal education* should be introduced in schools (getting to know the most important practical legal terminology) so that children would acquire a good basis for understanding their own rights.

## **11. CHILD PROPOSALS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THEIR POSITION IN SOCIETY**

In our final survey we had an open ended question, where children could state their suggestion for the “improvement of your position in society”. As stated, children understood the word “society” primarily as peer group, henceforth many answers were in that context. Here are some typical responses we received to this question:

### **11.1. “SOCIETY” AS THE STATE**

- Change laws and implement existing laws, as well as introduction of new laws that are necessary but do not exist.
- As far as school is concerned, professors of better expertise and a new reformed school program.
- Possibility of traveling without needing visas. The opportunity to learn in various ways, not only through textbooks and taking notes but also via internet, TV and other literature.
- Assistance of teachers for enrolment into high school.
- More common classes, socializing, more excursions.
- More camps for children.
- More youth organizations, various workshops in schools, more sports activities (because we need it).
- More participation in activities of youth organizations.
- I suggest that the work of the parliament have a greater influence on the work of educational institutions.
- That there be a state child parliament in which high school students would participate.
- To be able to vote when 15 years old.
- Reorganizing of education, more police protection.
- Decrease in school obligations, that the state protect some of my rights, such as the prevention of bad influence from the environment (especially peers).

- I personally did not have bad experiences, however I still think that more attention should be given to the protection of children from any form of violence, as well as from human trafficking which is a growing problem in our country.
- That punishment for those that inflict physical, psychological and sexual violence on children be more severe.
- Drug dealers should be put behind bars and the sale of tobacco and alcohol in shops should be reduced.
- Safety on the streets, on sporting events.
- Better conditions for sports: new balls, new auditoriums, cheaper memberships.
- More sports fields, organized free transport to sporting matches.
- Change in state organization and membership of Serbia in the EU.
- I want to live in a different country.

#### 11.1. "SOCIETY" AS PEER GROUP

- I think that we should all get along and everyone should have the right to express their opinion; no one should be the boss and decide on everything.
- My position cannot be improved because of some individuals.
- I would like there to be more respect in my crowd and less bragging.
- To communicate more with people around me, to have more interest in some things...
- In my crowd there is no hierarchy, we all get along great. We do everything together.
- Humaneness, tolerance, honesty.
- People should think about what kind of person I am.
- There is always one person that sticks out in a crowd. I cannot say anything that everyone should think what they want and be friends with whom ever they want. I have three friends that I see every day, which I know love me,

and others will hopefully get to know me better and change their opinion about me!?

THE CHILDREN'S COALITION FOR  
REPORTING ON CHILD RIGHTS IN SERBIA  
CHILDREN'S INFORMATION-CULTURAL CENTER DX  
CHILD RIGHTS CENTER BELGRADE