

Closing speech of Una Ljiljak at 13th European Forum on the Rights of the Child

Hello everyone, I'm Una, I'm 16 years old and I come from Serbia. I'm a member of the Eurochild Children's Council and my supporting organization is Child Rights Centre. My role at this Forum is giving the closing speech on a behalf of the young participants at this forum. But first I would like to say that this speech wasn't written just from my perspective and my thoughts, it is written from the perspective of many of the children who have participated and their feedback, that was collected over the past 3 days. I could have chosen to write this speech on my own, but instead I preferred to form a team of 5 other young participants from this forum, who helped me collect opinions, feedbacks and thoughts from children at the forum and then to bring them all in into this speech and I would like to thank them so much on their effort and help because it really means a lot to me.

As a representative of all the young participants at this forum, we are all very thankful for this opportunity. So on a behalf of all children here, I would like to share some thoughts from the past few days.

Over 60 children have been involved in the forum and in have participated in all panels and workshops. Some children said that this forum expanded their mindset and that they started thinking from other perspectives. Other children feel proud to be participating in such a big event like this. They gained courage. We also heard from other young participants that they appreciate that the forum was very well organized and things were starting on time, even though there were some technical issues

Children found many of the workshops interesting, especially those that gave children enough space to participate in the way they wanted. We as children would prefer to have more workshops lead by children on the next forum, where we can have more space for discussions, interactions and interesting and varied topics.

Also, over the past few days, we heard some really motivating comments. For example we agree with the Commissioner to create a child friendly language. Another one was from the Vice-President that a child is a child regardless of social status or background, because it means to us that there are adults who are looking at us equally and we all have the same rights.

Lastly, yesterday I heard someone say that it is important that we learn from eachother's mistakes. And even if mistakes are made in putting child participation into practice and bringing adults and children together, this is so much better than not including us, because we can work together to improve. This Forum is an important stepping stone for child participation and we should keep going in the right direction and include more children every year.

Of course, in all things there is always a place for improvement, so to keep us going in the right direction, we as children have some thoughts on that.

As Commissioner Reynders said, we should use more child friendly language at events like this as well as in documents and other things related to us. Also, all adults were children once too and we hope you can support and encourage us by being patient with us at events like this. We need support and understanding from adults to help us express our thoughts and opinions, because that's not always easy for us. We also

had some ideas on how to do that: the first one was to include children in creating guidelines for adult participants, so that adults know how to support children to participate; the second one was to create an anonymous box for the questions and comments.

In addition, we saw across the Forum that children were actively asking questions and making comments which is really positive but we would like to be even more included in the workshops and discussions led by adults, to make sure we have enough of a chance and enough time to say what we want. We also know that sometimes it is easier for children to share their views with other children. So therefore, it would be good to find more ways of creating spaces where children can share their views between each other. We hope you take our feedback on board to help to reach the next stepping stone.

Now that we've shared a bit about our experience as participants with you, I'd like to move on to some of the important issues that children here feel need to be included in the Strategy on the rights of the child.

Throughout the Forum, young people have been talking about what should be prioritized in the Strategy. We've talked about combating violence against children, education, mental health and about the importance of making sure children have access to the services they need. We've also talked about how important is improving access to information that affects our lives, whether that's through overcoming digital inequalities or by ensuring information is more child friendly and accessible.

We talked about the need for a strategy that helps adults to better understand our needs so that they can support us and ensure our rights are protected. We hope that training about children's rights and child participation can be given to adults including decisionmakers, judges, educators and other people getting in contact with children and we hope that children can be actively involved in delivering this.

We need a strategy that is inclusive of all children and that supports children in vulnerable situations and we need a strategy that promotes and supports our right to participate in decisions that affect us. Because nothing that is decided for children should be decided without children. It's time to normalize child participation.

Finally, we'd like to say that cannot change the world with three days, but we can raise important questions, which people can take with them and think about. The change comes from each one of us. Children won't only inherit the future, they will create the future.

So, thank you for this opportunity. We hope that our feedback will empower you and motivate you to keep going like this. Because when it's about child rights I'm always feeling empowered and motivated and I hope you are too, because in the end, if not us then who?