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Your Excellences,

Dear colleagues and friends,

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I am honored to speak in front of you and to represent the Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations for Children - FONPC in this panel. Since our foundation in 1997, we have been dedicated to advancing children's rights in Romania. **FONPC** facilitates dialogue and cooperation to develop, redefine and implement public policies to ensure the well-being of children and young people, using the experience of our 64 member organizations.

I want to quickly acknowledge the associations that helped us write the UPR report, for it has been a collaborative effort. Thank you to youth organizations and informal groups such as Constanta School Students' Association, The Youth Federation of Constanta (FTC), Valcea School Students' Association (AVE), The Romanian Students' Union (USR), Girl Up Romania, Youth for Youth and the Youths Delegate of Romania to the UN which provided their input and expertise on the subjects.


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Let's begin by discussing two major aspects, which, in our opinion, are not treated seriously enough by the Romanian society: sexual abuse and harassment in schools and the status of children human rights defenders. Romania has not received recommendations specifically for these subjects, but it has supported many regarding the improvement of laws on sexual violence in general and on the Istanbul Convention.

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Sexual violence in schools is a topic that is rarely addressed, even if we have hundreds of testimonies collected by Girl Up Romania of children being touched without their consent or having been the target of sexual comments. The perpetrators are oftentimes their teachers or their own peers. But due to the absence of a centralized data network documenting both individual case information and the post-complaint process, we cannot have a clear look on the magnitude of the phenomenon. We have the following example of conflicting statistics: between 2018 and 2021, the Police reported 89 cases¹, The National Agency for the Protection of Children reported 26 cases², the People's Ombudsman reported 12 cases³, while

¹  Statistici Politie.xls

²  Raspuns ANDPDCA.pdf

³  Raspuns AVP.pdf

the Ministry of Education had physical registers until 2020 which made data almost impossible to aggregate.

However, World Vision Romania, our member association which conducted surveys in regards to this specific problem, revealed that one in four children interviewed had been subjected to sexual comments about their body at school⁴.

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Moreover, excessive bureaucracy, unclear accountability structure and splitting the procedure between far too many documents makes it difficult to report the case and reduces its chances of being resolved. The Framework Regulation on the Organisation and Operation of Pre-University Education Units, commonly known as ROFUIP, is the document which provides all the information that must be included in the Rules of Procedure of the schools and contains no information on reporting cases of sexual violence. The information is scattered across two or three other documents.

A recent case illustrating the procedural inconsistency and triviality with which the phenomenon is treated occurred in Constanta. Several children were touched indecently by one of the teachers, the headmistress of the school noticed it on the cameras and reported it to the County School Inspectorate, hoping to receive support. The General School Inspector called the serious acts *a stupid prank*, even though the victims, pupils of the high school, were visibly affected by what had happened to them. The headmistress appealed to the police in the case, but admitted that procedures are not clear enough in such cases and you don't know who you should turn to⁵.

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Children have tried to take the matter into their own hands and initiated a protest in Bucharest, the capital city, to draw attention to their abuse in schools. The crew sent by the Gendarmerie to protect the protesters behaved in a manner contrary to their intended purpose: the actions of the gendarmes disrupted the action as they directed participants onto the pavement shouting over the victims' speeches. When several participants were verbally assaulted by a man in the street, they did not intervene. A representative of Girl Up Romania was called to a private meeting in the School Inspectorate where she was told that “more important than anything is school and children should not protest on a day when there were classes”.

It saddens us to see child advocates are not taken seriously, largely because they are considered too young and unprepared. In our work as youth associations, we interact with

⁴ https://fb.watch/F-Kqtt_LFU/

⁵ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/elevi-dintr-o-comuna-din-constantia-abuzati-sexual-de-profesorul-lor-de-romana-timp-de-mai-multi-ani-4225618>

child activists every day and are aware of the power imbalance between them and different actors - from teachers to authorities.

As adults, we have in mind a stylised version of activists. We imagine them calm, always ready for dialogue and compromise. The moment they protest, the moment they refuse to give up their demands, the moment they rebel against a system that hurts them, adults turn their backs on them. This is illustrative of the backlash students often receive in their advocacy - as highlighted by our colleagues at The Student Association of Constanta who have been denied access to public meetings of the town hall or have been the target of teachers.

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Recommendations on sexual harassment in schools

- Corroborate legislation to form a single document on protection against sexual abuse and harassment in schools;
- The existence of a trauma-informed person on sexual abuse in each school to help victims through the reporting procedure - support person;
- Implement a mechanism for collecting and centralising data on sexual harassment and assault in schools, with the aim of publishing up-to-date statistics on the phenomenon;

Recommendations on Children Human Rights Defenders

- Give children human rights defenders the same protection as whistleblowers, either by integrating them into the Whistleblowers Law from 2004 or by creating a new law based on the Whistleblowers Law;
- Create a protection service for child activists in consultation with civil society and taking into account that young people expose abuses including those carried out by local and national governments. The programme should be developed in such a way that their safety is not compromised when they bring cases to light;
- Create child friendly platforms of interaction with state authorities which should include but are not limited to local children's councils, accessible language adopted in documents and digital channels of communication.

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Thank you for your time!