

**Closing Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at “Lost in Migration III” co-organised by the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, and Missing Children Europe, 22 February 2019**

**Distinguished guests,**

**Dear friends,**

**Let me begin by thanking all of you, for your work during the panel discussions, the workshops, and also, the networking events.**

**I augur that the visibility we have created over the past days, and during the previous editions of this conference, will not be lost.**

**Let me quote one of the participants during yesterday’s panel discussions, who said that “refugees aren’t often given a space where they can speak about their sufferings, and affect policies and decisions. This is why today’s space, at this conference, is so important for us.”**

**I hope that our efforts will be further intensified by creating a network amongst all of us, to continue to provide the necessary space for those unaccompanied migrant young people, who have bravely shared their horrendous experiences of precarity, abuse, and persecution which they have endured.**

**Another comment which will always be at the forefront of my thoughts was shared yesterday, when one of the panelists said that a parent would only put their children in the boat when they think that water is safer than land.**

**We must continue to strengthen this network, so that such narratives will be a powerful way of influencing and transforming our European communities.**

**The importance of this visibility can also be a guide to other unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, who are considering migration in the future.**

**I also hope that this conference will provoke the necessary response from the relevant authorities, to ensure that migrating children are given the much-needed protection.**

**The recommendations of the previous editions of this conference, and this year's conference, have provided sufficient recommendations and guidelines to put the relevant policies and safeguards in place, to provide the protection that each and every child, whoever they might be and wherever they might come from, rightfully deserve.**

**I believe that we have a golden opportunity during this year, when we will be commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of**

**the Child, to highlight the importance of safeguarding and empowering all of our children, in particular, vulnerable children, including those in migration.**

**After all, safeguarding and empowering children is our global commitment, to ensure that their intrinsic dignity is upheld.**

**Furthermore, this conference has once again pinpointed the lacunae in our current systems, including a lack of training and coordination, at national and cross-border levels, which are still preventing the necessary holistic progress, to create a safe environment for migrating children.**

**I am deeply troubled with what I have heard, during the opening panel, when Federico Soda, in his role as Director of the IOM Coordination Office for the Mediterranean, said that we have a “shrinking protection space” for children in migration.**

**To address this situation, we must support those politicians who share our values.**

**Knowing that we are passing through very challenging times, in the political life of our European Union, and with the upcoming European Parliamentary elections, we must, as civil society, also support those politicians who share our values to be brave, to uphold child protection, including the protection of migrating children.**

**I have first hand experience, during my former life as a politician, of how difficult it can be to stand for these values, which might not be popular, including the issue we are discussing.**

**I can identify with Hilde Vautmans, who very strongly and courageously showed her determination at this particular time, when she needs popularity to be successful during the European elections, to stand firmly for her values.**

**As civil society, we must lobby with the candidates in our respective countries, and give our support to those of them who are working to ensure that each and every child can enjoy her or his rightful dignity.**

**In this way, we will be investing in a European Parliament which can deliver the meaningful reform of our child protection systems.**

**As civil society across Europe we must be strong advocates, and the pillars of strength on which a more hopeful future for unaccompanied migrant children can be built.**

**Unfortunately, our legal frameworks are not adequately providing systematic child protection, and in the process, the contravention of the Human Rights for countless children is continuing.**

**These contraventions are evidence of systematic failures, which do not provide the standards of care that the international community is duty bound to provide.**

**Let me also take this opportunity to mention the concerns, raised by many participants during this conference, about the increase in populist rhetoric which we are experiencing both in Europe, and in other parts of the world.**

**We are being bombarded with hate speech, exclusionary tactics, and, as a result, we are witnessing an escalation of social tensions.**

**Our precious dialogues for peace, for solidarity, and for respectful friendship-building are being attacked.**

**We cannot be complacent in the face of such challenges, because the normalisation of fear and hatred can only be addressed when we are brave, and speak out, to push for action.**

**Therefore, we must continue to create safe spaces, like this conference and others, where human rights are valued as central to our aspirations, and where the truth can be shared freely.**

**We must support each other, as civil society across Europe.**

**We be there for each other, in solidarity.**

**We must continue to endeavour, in synergy and solidarity, so as to ensure that the unfortunate missing generation of migrant children, who have been exposed to the promises of our democratic way of life but were not given the proper protection on our soils, does not grow bigger.**

**In this context, the participation of children and young people who have first-hand experiences of migration continues to be essential, to give a more accurate perspective of what it means to be a migrating child, attempting to enter Europe, so as to address the gaps in our protection systems.**

**Let me remind you of what one young refugee from Syria said, yesterday, that “most of the decisions being made are affecting young people, yet we don’t see young people participating in these decisions. If young people do not participate, then people will make assumptions and have misconceptions about our situations. Talking to people about your first-hand experience makes a difference.”**

**We need to continue to intensify our endeavours for child and youth participation. This is the next level that I believe we need to achieve in Europe.**

**Child and youth participation must become part-and-parcel of our structures of democratic participation, for the benefit of all the children of Europe and the world.**

**On concluding, I augur that the outcomes of our workshops, and the recommendations that we have generated, will be further developed and more widely disseminated.**

**I am truly proud of what we have achieved, however, we cannot afford to sit on our laurels. We must keep working together, to give migrant children the dignity they so rightly deserve.**