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**Together for Child Protection in the BSEC Member States:  
the Role of Parliaments and Civil Society Organizations**

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**PANEL REPORT**

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Panel proposed by ChildPact (the Regional Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area: [www.childpact.org](http://www.childpact.org))

**Bucharest, 25 October 2012, 9.30-13.00, Intercontinental Hotel**

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Child rights and protection remain a serious concern in the wider Black Sea area. Comprehensive reforms are required towards building effective child protection systems in the BSEC Member States to prevent child abuse and exploitation and fulfil children's social and economic rights.

Earlier this year the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation (PABSEC) issued Recommendation 127/2012 on Child Protection in the BSEC Member States. Among other things, it recommends governments and parliaments of the BSEC Member States to:

1. encourage and support a **regional civil society coalition** to encourage a credible and consistent voice and partner on child protection issues;
2. create a **regional trust fund for children of the Black Sea Region** to sponsor new initiatives and key innovations in child protection;
3. promote the **formation of a policy institute** or conglomerate of academic institutions to support the methodology and process of nationwide scale-up of social services;
4. **enhance cooperation** in the field of children's rights and child protection, particularly in addressing problems of transnational character.

## EXPECTED PANEL OUTPUTS

Acknowledging the political significance of Recommendation 127/2012, the organisers considered it was important to discuss how the above-mentioned recommendations can be **operationalized** to achieve tangible benefits for children. The following elements for reflection were proposed:

1. ChildPact – the Regional Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area – has been recently established and is currently formed of 8 national networks that represent over +500 local and international NGOs. ChildPact's success in improving children's lives will depend on support from key stakeholders such as governments, regional bodies (like BSEC and PABSEC), the EU and its Member States (in particular those favouring the Black Sea region in their development assistance). **What kind of support can ChildPact expect and what should ChildPact do to ensure such support?**
2. Child protection challenges and child rights violations in the wider Black Sea area require attention. Significant changes are possible in a short-medium term given that experience, lessons and models of services do exist in the region. But to bear fruit they need to be shared: governments need to support each other and learn from each other. A regional fund for children like the one mentioned in the PABSEC 127/2012 Recommendation, funded by voluntary contributions from all BSEC governments and other donors can play a crucial role. **How should such a regional fund look like? What could be the main steps in creating it? Who are the main stake-holders and how should act together?**
3. Civil society organisations and governments have implemented quite a number of pilot service models and projects. Some of them proved to be financially viable and politically desirable. Systemic change is at hand should they be scaled-up, but more research is needed before scale-up is a real option. A policy institute or conglomerate of academic institutions has been recommended to this aim, but **how can this proposal be actually developed? What are some necessary steps and who can co-ordinate such research efforts?**
4. Inter-governmental cooperation, as well as cooperation at civil society level, is fundamental given that many challenges are now regional. **How can such cooperation be enhanced at regional level? What are the main stake-holders to be engaged? What are the resources that are needed?**

## PANEL FORMAT

The panel was conceived as a reflection panel, without formal presentations being required. Key guests had been invited to make short (5-7 minutes) initial statements based on the input presented above. In addition invited participants were encouraged to contribute with questions and comments. In order to ensure the accuracy of the proceedings an external strategy analyst (Anitta Hipper, PhD Candidate at the Freiburg University) has been invited to monitor the dynamic of the discussion and identify key constraints and steps of actions in view of an Action Plan. The panel was moderated by Mirela Oprea, ChildPact Secretary General.

## KEY SPEAKERS (PANELISTS)

1. Zhalya ALIYEVA, President of the PABSEC Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee, Member of the Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan;
2. Namik DOKLE, Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Albania;
3. Aram MANUKYAN, Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia;
4. Elvira KOVACS, Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia;
5. Traian CHEBELEU, Deputy Secretary General, Permanent International Secretariat, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation;

## DEBATES AND INPUTS

The panel **moderator** opened the debate by highlighting some of the challenges of ineffective child protection systems in the wider Black Sea area and the way the recently adopted PABSEC Recommendation 127/2012 responded to these challenges. The moderator underlined the significance of this PABSEC Recommendation as one of the first PABSEC recommendations drafted with the consultation of the civil society organisations. After these introductory remarks the moderator invited the key speakers to share their perspectives on options and opportunities for implementing and operationalizing this important PABSEC Recommendation.

The discussion was opened by **Mrs. Zhalya Aliyeva**, the President of the PABSEC Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee, who underlined the special attention children require from all social and political decision-makers. In her remarks on the PABSEC Recommendation, Mrs. Aliyeva stated that the Black Sea region underwent a series of changes in the last decades and presented two major developments concerning child protection in Azerbaijan. Firstly, she mentioned the creation in 2006 of a Committee which addresses women, family and children issues. Secondly - the Constitutional change in 2009, which stipulated the orphans' rights. According to Mrs. Aliyeva, Azerbaijan has launched along with these legislative initiatives several programmes in order to support the rights of the children in need and invested in the renovation of kindergartens and schools. Although reforms have been initiated, there are several challenges such as the misuse and exploitation of children, which remained however unsatisfactorily tackled.

Mrs. Aliyeva welcomed ChildPact's initiative to call for the implementation of the PABSEC 127/2012 Recommendation as an excellent idea, which needs support. As such, Mrs. Aliyeva declared that she will discuss within the decisional Committee of Education, which will take place in Baku (date 2012) the necessary steps and means in supporting the initiative, as well as forms of inter- and non-governmental cooperation.

As a starting point of action, Mrs. Aliyeva mentioned the need of experience exchange between the BSEC member states, as well as the need to cooperate with Western European countries with similar child protection challenges. An analysis of these experiences could result into an Action Plan and models for implementation, which must be in compliance with the legislative frameworks of each BSEC country. The importance of initiative coordination has been also highlighted and Mrs. Aliyeva

concluded that this meeting should not remain a mere talk-shop as time is a pressing issue. Accordingly, the parties involved in this initiative share responsibility and can play an important role in preventing children from “becoming obliged to punish the society for their missed childhood.”

The domestic political and economic changes throughout the shock of transition have been presented by **Ms. Elvira Kovacs** as one of the main constraints in the implementation of child welfare and protection in the region. The main outcome of social policies translates into incomplete reforms and insufficient implementation due to insufficient funding. The financial crisis has additionally affected the social system in the region and hence more effort is needed in translating the PABSEC Recommendation into action.

The perspective offered on social policies in Serbia revealed the exclusion of rural children from the few existing special schools, as well as the exclusion of the Roma children, despite legislative reforms such as the Serbian educational law on inclusion and Social welfare law (cash assistance to the poor families). The lack of ‘visibility’ of children, particularly from rural areas and Roma is due to the lack of a database across sectors. Hence, there are only estimates on the number of children with special needs, as Serbia lacks a centralized system. In addition to these challenges, Ms. Kovacs pointed the lack of coordination between national and local services on child welfare as only 84 out of 150 governments have been funded based on the Social welfare law. Ms. Kovacs concluded that a successful partnership with all partners in the region is deeply needed. Think-tanks, schools, services, polices, Member of the Parliament (MPs) must continue to raise awareness on children’s special needs. Demand-driven policies and an open communication between international and regional organisations should therefore be favoured and promoted.

**Mr. Aram Manukyan** continued the discussion by putting forward one of the main challenges in the field of child welfare: low implementation of corresponding policies. Mr. Manukyan argued that further challenges are encompassed by the high level of migration and the alarming decrease of the birth rate in the last decades in the region. The importance in tackling child protection through organisations such as World Vision and the regional coalition ChildPact remains therefore essential. Mr. Manukyan expressed his high commitment to ensure all necessary steps in increasing the importance of the child protection on the political agenda.

The gap between rhetorical commitment and rule implementation has been further expressed by **Mr. Namik Dokle**. The case of rule adoption is presented in Albania through laws on child protection and the ratification of all the UN and European Convention legislation. Often, mechanisms are functioning only on paper, in reality Albania has an implementation gap despite all the progress registered at the legislative level. Mr. Namik Dokle presented the cases of two 13 years old girls being abused and revealed the alarming need for action in the protection of children. One of the main challenges is according to Mr. Dokle the identification of constraining factors such as the old mentalities and political indifference, with key players who tend to take a pragmatic approach on these issues as they tend to invest in the present and not in the future. Among identified key players with a high degree of support for child protection, Mr. Dokle mentioned international donors, the Ombudsman and the press.

A perspective on child protection from the BSEC top level has been brought into the discussion by **Mr. Traian Chebeleu**, Ambassador and Deputy Secretary General, Permanent International Secretariat, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. Mr. Traian Chebeleu highlighted the importance of a systematic manner in putting the BSEC recommendation on its political agenda. BSEC’s focus on economic cooperation shall be expanded on child protection as in the case of areas such as education, training and security. Mr. Chebeleu, who played a major role in including child protection in the BSEC economic agenda, argued that the political experience reveals that

implementing the proposals made in the 127/2012 Recommendation might prove difficult but nevertheless possible. With regard to the feasibility of the regional trust fund, Mr. Chebeleu encouraged ChildPact to develop guidelines for sustainable development, specific projects and to present these to BSEC. The success of ChildPact must be further sustained through financial assistance. As possible partners, Ambassador Chebeleu mentioned the European Union and sectoral dialogue partners such as US, Japan and Korea.

The discussion following the guest speakers' inputs has tackled further on the challenges of the implementation of the BSEC recommendation. **Mrs. Mirela Oprea** opened the discussion by emphasizing the need of sharing experience at regional level as to avoid "reinventing the wheel on how we should shape a certain model, when models already exist". Talking about the idea of creating an inter-governmental, regional fund for children, Mrs. Oprea argued that even modest governmental contributions from each of the 12 BSEC MS can increase significantly the level of regional co-operation, with direct and tangible benefits for the child protection systems.

**Mrs. Dana Buzducea**, Vice President of FONPC (the Romanian federation of child protection NGOs) added that children are a core component within economic perspective and ensuring their protection fulfils both normative and pragmatic requirements. Further, Mrs. Buzducea commented on the child protection in a Romanian context marked by high migration towards Western countries with a high rate of abandoned children. From a future perspective, these children must compete with other children, raised in Western societies, which invested in their care and education. According to Mrs. Buzducea, while ChildPact is the expression of a strong cooperation at the NGOs level, the implementations of comprehensive reforms targeting child protection needs political determination and inter-governmental cooperation.

A further valuable intervention has been brought by **Mrs. Mira Antonyan**, ChildPact Vice-President, and President of the Armenian Child Protection Network, who argued that the BSEC member states share common political and economic legacies from their socialist past and the transition years. Further challenges, identified by Mrs. Antonyan related to the mismatch perception of the realities surrounding child protection between political actors and NGOs, the lack of professional human resources and the need to learn from the experiences of each BSEC state in order to win valuable time and resources. This aspect was also highlighted by **Mr. Andy Guth**, child protection expert, who argued that "we have many things in common but we are reluctant to share." Mrs. Antonyan agreed on a previous point made by Ambassador Chebeleu that ChildPact should include ALL BSEC countries (ex. Ukraine, Russia, Turkey) and pointed out the need to raise the priority of child protection among the BSEC and other international bodies. With regards to the Romanian experience in reforming child protection, the use of political conditionality has been according to Mrs. Antonyan an important trigger for reform.

The strong consensus and willingness to embark on a joint initiative to advocate for the implementation of the PABSEC recommendation has been expressed throughout several interventions. Mr. Manukyan argued that the Armenian Embassy supports the projection and will advocate the recommendation at the Foreign Affairs Ministry level.

## **BEYOND INITIAL EXPECTATIONS: A ROADMAP FOR THE BLACK SEA FUND FOR CHILDREN**

A roadmap for creating a Black Sea Regional Fund for Children was outlined by Ambassador Chebeleu and approved by panelists and participants. This roadmap includes the following steps:

- 1.** A political decision will be needed from the Council of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The first step in making the political decision is that a 'champion' BSEC government brings the initiative to the Council. Identifying the 'champion' government is a very important and urgent step and

the identification process could start by sending the panel report to all 12 MFAs, followed by explanatory and exploratory meetings.

2. After a political decision is reached a memorandum of understanding among the 12 BSEC MS (or a smaller number of those who agree to participate to the initiative) needs to be agreed and signed. The MOU would include information relating to the eligible projects, fund replenishing modalities, fund management (ex. steering committee formed by all contributor representatives), etc.
3. The MOU would need to be ratified by parliaments, which may prove to be a long process given that on average a ratification process lasts for 1 year;
4. Start the implementation of the projects and possibly have other donors interested and involved.

A possible way to lead this complex process is to have the support of one BSEC Working Group.

**Mrs. Zhalya Aliyeva** added that in order to convince a 'champion' government to take the initiative, inquiries should be sent to the Parliaments of the BSEC member states. Ensuring the support of the MPs is an important step in order to achieve the ratification and implementation process. In order to support the implementation process, **Mr. Dokle** also highlighted the enriching effects of joint conferences where both NGOs practitioners and MPs could participate. **Professor Holst** argued that the discussion on child protection in the BSEC region should include a public health component in order to obtain a comprehensive perspective upon current challenges. Further, a consortium of universities in the region could provide research analysis on specific child care issues.

## ASSESSMENT OF PANEL ACHIEVEMENTS

Regional child protection challenges and good practices have been presented. The implementation of the PABSEC 127/2012 Recommendation was debated, focusing in particular on the need to create a Black Sea Fund for Children. The valuable synergy between practitioners, MPs from four of the BSEC countries, media representatives and researchers provided a fruitful debate and contributed to outlining a roadmap for future action. Participants agreed that creating the Fund is a very ambitious proposal and many challenges can be expected, but a wide consensus was reached on the need to take action and advocate strongly, in a coordinated and systematic manner, for its establishment and for the implementation of the 127/2012 PABSEC Recommendation as a whole.

## ABOUT CHILDPACT

The convener of this panel was ChildPact, the Regional Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area. Established at the 4th gathering of the Black Sea NGO Forum in 2011, ChildPact is a coalition of coalitions: our members are national networks of child-focused NGOs from 8 countries in the Wider Black Sea Area (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Romania, and Serbia). Our current representational base includes more than 500 NGOs. ChildPact represents the interests of the most vulnerable children in the Wider Black Sea Area in policy debates at national, regional and international levels. Our vision is that: 'Children in the Wider Black Sea Region should have their rights guaranteed and live in a society that not only protects them, but actively supports their development to the highest levels of their potential, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender or social background. The Wider Black Sea Region is to become a prosperous area where children are considered the region's most important resource and development goals aim at creating a better future for them'.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The panel organisers would like to express their gratitude for the tremendous support received from both partners and political actors. The importance of strengthening regional cooperation and drafting political strategies for the protection of children in our region requires immediate action. Our work has just begun and we are looking forward in developing a stronger and more effective cooperation.