

Public Presentation on "**Protecting children using the internet**"

Opening Speech by **George DASSIS**, President of the Group II "Employees", EESC

Thank you Janos and I would also like to welcome everybody on behalf of our Committee to this important event! Distinguished panellists, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Protecting children from abuse is a very sensitive and complex matter, both in the real world and over the internet. It is, in fact, a major concern for our society, because it is a fundamental matter of human dignity, notably related to its most vulnerable members – our offspring. Since **YOU** are the specialists on these issues, I will share with you some thoughts simply as a concerned European citizen and parent.

For nearly 20 years we have been experiencing the expansion of the internet in our offices and our homes. Our younger generations are actually being brought up and maturing in parallel with the computer, the internet, the mobile phone and all other products of the on-going technological progress. These relatively recent developments have offered many **opportunities** in terms of better information, improved communication, increased social interaction and business innovation. At the same time, however, they have also created significant social **challenges**.

For example, according to available statistics websites for online **gambling, games and pornographic material** are the most frequently visited ones – by the younger internet users too. There is also increased **addiction** to online games, in particular among adolescents. Even worse, thousands of **images** with sexual content are posted daily on the internet, the worst being those of sexually abused children.

As we all know, the internet does **not know borders** between different countries. But across these borders there are different governments, different cultures, different laws, different educational systems, different police

agencies. Moreover, the **anonymity** offered by the internet is another source of concern. I remember, in fact, a cartoon I saw sometime ago showing two dogs in front of a PC, one of them zealously tapping on its keyboard. When the other one asks, "*what are you doing there? You are a dog, you can't really be replying to our master's e-mails!*", the first one answers "*Yeah, but no one will notice the difference over the internet!*"

To make matters more complex, the internet is not the only modern means of electronic communications which can handily be abused. The ubiquitous **mobile phone**, usually equipped with a powerful camera, is another prominent example. And it is not only adults who use it to transmit offensive pictures or messages - it is also children and adolescents themselves...

The new electronic means of communication, despite their unambiguous advantages, also allow for new ways of malicious behaviour or crime, notably related to children's abuse – and this I consider the worst offence against our dignity. New forms of harassment, such as the so called "cyber-bullying" or criminal acts such as the sexual solicitation of children online (the so called "grooming"), brutally violate any measure of human dignity and personal rights. They not only add to the psychological burden of the victims; they may lead to serious physical abuse, violence and even the loss of innocent young lives...

It is, therefore, no surprise that there is wider, practically global consensus to seriously deal with this issue. Despite this "**in principle agreement**", however, there are still several **concrete** and decisive steps needed to address it: from technical measures to international legal and funding matters, given in particular the cross-border nature of the problems. From our side, we would like to see that the **fight** against any kind of abuse against children is decisively strengthened in both the information society AND the real one - to paraphrase a widely used expression these days. With this in mind, another section of our Committee, dealing with Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship will present tomorrow their opinion on "Protecting Children from Sex Tourism", a closely related subject.

President Tóth correctly pointed out that the opinion we are discussing today calls for a more active **international partnership** approach to ensure knowledge dissemination, expertise exchange, legal and law enforcement co-ordination, as well as funding, within and beyond the EU. I, therefore, believe that this debate is taking place at the right time, at the right place and with the right people.

This is the **right time** because, since the EESC adopted its opinion on the subject, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers have endorsed the Commission's proposals and the new multi-annual EU programme for a Safer Internet is underway. Various initiatives are also in progress at national or international level, involving governments, companies or NGOs. Nevertheless, taking into account the proliferation of efforts in this domain and the current economic difficulties, I would like to draw your attention to two critical points:

- First, it is high time to **avoid reinventing** the wheel, and
- Second, it is necessary to improve not only the effectiveness but also the **efficiency** of these actions.

I am also convinced that this is **the right place** for today's debate: Our Committee has adopted several opinions on the protection of minors, in audiovisual services in the previous decade, in electronic communications and on the internet during the current one. In all these opinions, we systematically advocate the involvement of social and economic partners in the respective EU efforts. And this **IS** the house of the European citizen: We are 344 men and women, from all the 27 Member States, representing businessmen and employees, consumers, environmentalists, farmers or parents – in short, the entire civil society in the EU. For more than **50 years**, our Committee has been a wide consensus-building forum, providing independent opinions to the European decision makers – the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. In this sense, the EESC can be viewed as **THE BRIDGE** between the EU institutions and the organised civil society in Europe.

Finally, from what I can see and as Janos already described, today we have with us **the right kind of people - YOU!** We most certainly welcome representatives from the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the Information and Communication Technology industry and the prominent NGOs in this field. Nevertheless, allow me to highlight the presence of the **financial sector's** representative and the award winning **youths** on today's panels.

As regards the role of the former, it is clear that the fight against illegal and harmful content online cannot succeed without the active participation of payments organisations! If these institutions decisively join their forces with the other actors involved, it will become easier to **uproot a major cause of children's abuse on the internet which is, obviously, that -a lot of- money is made by circulating online child abuse material.**

As regards the two young panellists in today's last session, let me point out that young people, children are **not just the future**, as it is often said; they are **also the present** and they should have a clear saying, in their own language and codes, based on their own experiences and ideas, especially on matters directly affecting them. So, my dear young gentlemen, we are eagerly looking forward to YOUR contribution in this discussion!

Ladies and gentlemen,

With today's event, we -the European Economic and Social Committee- wish to **confirm our commitment** in making the internet a safer place for our children by promoting the international co-operation in this field. I would like to **congratulate** the rapporteur and the TEN Section for organising this useful event and encourage them to continue their work in this domain. I sincerely hope that today's deliberations will also be **valuable to you and your organisations**, and that our co-operation on this very important issue will continue. I will be following the results of this event, and you always can count on **my personal support** in your efforts in this field!

Thank you for your attention.