Honourable High Commissioner for Human Rights, Secretariat, dear delegates and participants,

I am delighted to be able to present the situation of young people as being part of the institution of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria, working in the Child Rights Directorate.

I would like to raise several important issues.

First, I want to speak about the school to work transition of young people in Bulgaria. While it is not necessarily easy for young people to access the labour market, it is particularly difficult for some vulnerable groups – especially migrants. Language barriers and requirements for pre-qualification are among the number of obstacles standing on their way. In general, employers demand the satisfaction of high criteria regarding experience and knowledge acquired, and young people are not always experienced enough to qualify for such positions – especially those who are in further study in fields requiring extensive years of preparation.

The high criteria satisfaction reflects negatively on members of some minority groups who sometimes possess lower education levels and therefore are employed in less paid jobs. Thus, they turn into young workers living in poverty.

The second issue is related to the situation of young care leavers, who live in small family group homes up to the age of 18 and who then find it difficult to transit from education towards finding a job without the adequate amount of preparation. There exists social stigma in regards to the effects of their pre-existing circumstances on their ability to realize their potential successfully later in life.

A third issue concerns young people’s access to justice. Juvenile offenders in Bulgaria, or otherwise called children in conflict with the law, are often penalized for activities that adults do not bear criminal liability for. Such include vagrancy, escape from school, running away from home, etc. Outdated yet still active legislation, delayed reforms, and a lack of coordination between systems are among the most crucial challenges to tackling this problem.

Last in my speech, but not least, I would like to raise the issue of the protection of the rights of young people with disabilities. Their access to adequate rehabilitation or therapy as well as their realization in life tend to be much more difficult as they are more dependent on their parents, caregivers, or guardians. Acts of violence exercised against them may be frequent. Eventually, they face double or multiple discrimination – not only age-related, but also disability-related.

Given all that I mentioned, as a young person, I believe that the way forward is for governments to put young people at the heart of their plans and initiatives. Without political willingness, change is highly unlikely. Discrimination against young people in exercising their human rights would be reduced and hopefully eradicated only when their participation in the development and implementation of policies that affect them is guaranteed and uncompromised.

Thank you for your attention.