

## Election-Watch.EU Child Protection Policy

### 1. Election-Watch.EU Core Statement

Election-Watch.EU (EW) is an independent, non-partisan civil society organisation, registered in Austria, with the overall objective to enhance citizen-based election observation and electoral assistance expertise with partners throughout all EU Member States and beyond. EW provides information and organises activities aimed at assessing and strengthening European parliament elections and the electoral processes in EU Member States.

Through recommendations and advocacy, EW contributes to the improvement of European and members states' electoral systems and processes, and more broadly to the strengthening of democratic political practice. With a mission to enhance the integrity, inclusivity, transparency, and equality of electoral processes, EW focuses on strengthening democracy and advancing fundamental European values.

EW is a leader in European election observation and advocacy. EW's associated experts and observers are professionals, with significant experience in international election observation missions gained with the EU and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Most of the experts have received training under the EU's Election Observation and Democratic Support (EODS) technical project, bringing expertise in European and international electoral standards, democratisation, capacity-building, and technical assistance.

EW is a member of the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) and is a signatory to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and is committed to its Code of Conduct. EW's goal is to work for the strengthening of democracy across Europe by promoting the values of integrity, inclusivity, and transparency of the electoral processes, guarantee impartiality and accountability, and monitor those in compliance with international obligations and commitments.

While EW activities target mainly adults in its mission to improve electoral processes and election observation across Europe, EW also believe that child protection is crucial to ensuring that children and young people under the age of 18 have the rights, information and space in which they can express their views and communicate effectively with other children and adults on matters of electoral rights, citizen participation and engagement. Children can only become empowered first-time voters and active citizens of the EU and be able to improve their lives and that of their families and communities if they are safeguarded from abuse, discrimination and harm of any kind, be it physical, sexual, emotional or neglect, both offline and online.

This policy applies to all EW staff, board members, experts, consultants, volunteers, and partners engaged in EW activities involving children or young people, whether online or offline.

EW would like to acknowledge the following organisations as material was drawn from their Child Protection Policies: EuroChild, European Youth Forum, the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), UNICEF, and ChildNet.

## **2. Purpose of the Child Protection Policy**

EW's activities at times focus on first-time voters or young voters in different EU Member States. This also involves engaging children and young people of 15-18 years of age, and informing them about their suffrage rights, mainly during the European Parliament elections. During the course of conducting its activities, EW staff and experts work directly with young people and/or first-time voters on information and advocacy campaigns, might target communication activities and publications to young adults below 18 years of age, or involve them in events, forums, workshops, seminars or focus groups. The scope of activities that EW provides to young adults, ranges from online campaigns and publications, consultation meetings or discussions, as well as webinars and trainings on electoral rights of marginalised groups, rights of mobile EU citizens and election observation. In such instances, EW would take the utmost care to guarantee that all staff, experts, partners and volunteers, associated with EW act in the children's best interest and subscribe to the principles of doing no harm. EW commits to the following when conducting its activities:

- To provide for the safety and well-being of children involved in various events and activities of the organisation, related to election rights of EU citizens and the observation of elections throughout the European Union's Member States.
- To create safe environments and raise awareness for the importance of protection of all children from any harm in all settings, situations and circumstances, pertaining to the activities, organised by the association related to election observation and electoral rights.
- To include safeguards when implementing activities for or involving children in events or activities to make sure to fully respect their rights and the pursuit of their best interest.
- To prevent and minimise the risk of any potential harm or abuse that may be caused to children.
- To offer guidance to all members of the team, partners, experts, volunteers and anyone associated with the association and ensure that all are committed to the principles and objectives of this Child Protection Policy and apply it during events and activities that involve children and adolescents.

### 3. Description and definitions

Following its high standards on integrity and respect for human rights, inclusion and rights of marginalised groups in the electoral process, as well as its firm conviction that election observers are human rights defenders, EW adopts the following definitions that will guide the Child Protection Policy of the association.

EW endorses the definition, stipulated in the article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, wherein **“a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”** Furthermore, the EW, in its values and principles supports the spirit of the Preamble that “the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideas proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, equality and solidarity.” Child safeguarding is key in ensuring that young people have the rights, information and space in which they can express their views and communicate freely with other young people and adults safe from any abuse, discrimination or harm, be it physical, sexual, emotional or neglect.

**Child abuse:** Any form of physical, emotional, or sexual harm inflicted on a child, including neglect, both appearing offline or online. According to the World Health Organisation, “child abuse” constitutes ‘all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power’.

**Cyberbullying:** Can take place on social media, via messaging apps or in other online environments. It is a repeated behaviour that aims to scare, anger, belittle, shame or humiliate those targeted by spreading lies or posting embarrassing photos on social media, by sending hurtful messages or threats or impersonation.

**Child’s best interest:** mean that all actions taken will prioritise the welfare of the child, and that children have the right to their health, safety, dignity, well-being, and best interests are considered top priority. The principle of the child’s best interest also focuses on the right to their development and the provision of a safeguarded space where they can experiment, take part and achieve their full potential; and that they can feel safe and respected, listened to and to be entitled to their views and encouraged to take part in decisions that affect them, including voting and suffrage rights.

**Zero-tolerance to harm:** EW endorses a zero-tolerance policy against any child abuse, exploitation or any harm and works to minimise any risks implicated by EW's work and activities.

**GDPR and child protection:** EW realises that children and young people are more at risk in terms of privacy and protecting their personal data. Such risks will be mitigated and due care will be taken by staff and experts when organising events or activities involving children to ensure that proper consent forms are utilised for participation, engagement or any image/video sharing, as well as that appropriate information is shared with children and young people pertaining to privacy and confidentiality and the storage of their personal data in the EW's archive. Personal data of children and young people will be collected and processed only where strictly necessary, on a clear legal basis, and in line with the principles of data minimisation, purpose limitation, and informed consent under the GDPR.

**Child safeguarding:** Child safeguarding means to take appropriate measures to ensure that staff, experts, any third parties, partners, volunteers, operations, projects and programmes do no harm to children and promote their best interest. This means that children are not exposed to the risk of harm and abuse and that any concerns about children's safety are reported via an internal mechanism and then to the responsible authorities. Child safeguarding includes both preventive actions, such as training, regular updates, awareness and proper recruitment, to minimise the risks of harm occurring, and responsive actions to ensure that incidents which may happen are appropriately handled.

#### 4. Safeguarding and prevention measures

EW commits to safeguarding and prevention measures to protect children and young people that potentially will be involved in the activities or events of the association with the aim to protect the children, communicate clearly the expected conduct and the rules on behaviour to ensure safety and protection.

- **Staff training:** All staff, partners, experts, consultants, volunteers, and third parties involved will be informed about the Child Protection Policy principles and rules. Staff and experts directly involved with working with children and young people will undergo training on child protection issues.
- **Safe recruitment practices:** EW will implement the necessary background checks for all personnel and partners working with children, part of the labour and consultancy contracts.
- **Raise awareness and communicate expectations:** EW will duly inform all personnel, experts, consultants, partners of its rules of conduct and expectations for a duty of

care and zero tolerance to any harm to children and young adults. The association will also develop comprehensive internal documents and training. Such expectations will also be communicated prior to any specific activities or events, involving children and young people. EW would encourage staff, volunteers, partners, and experts to duly report any concerns and suspected abuse.

- **Prevention and early warning:** EW commits to have a reliable internal reporting line of any concerns or any incidents. There will be two focal points to receive respective alerts via a specifically created email account and will take measures to communicate the mechanism for reporting and take steps to ensure anonymity where possible. The two focal points are the Election-Watch.EU Chairperson and the NEEDS EU Inclusion Officer. Together with the EW Advisory Board they will have the duty to report and discuss any following measures and referring to the relevant authorities.
- **Online safety and social media privacy:** Due to the nature of activities, EW will take special care in ensuring online safety of children and young people engaged in its project and programme activities. EW team will always inform young people of their rights and any risks involved in online events and workshops. EW will make sure that children and young people always take part in online forums well informed and protected, that their private data is not shared and proper parental consent and young people consent is solicited where necessary. No photos or video footage are to be used or distributed without proper consent and in taking stock of all potential implications for young people. EW is committed to providing safe space online, with proper facilitation and communication of standards and rules related to child protection and in enforcing all principles of non-discrimination, tolerance and respect. In addition, all information about children and young people that can be used to identify location or put someone at risk must not be used in any form of communication or shared among event or activities' participants. All data about children's lives, images or any other information are to be kept in secure files with limited access. This also includes images of children and young people. Images are to be used only upon consent and in a respectful way, in line with relevant national and EU legislation.
- **Participation of children in events:** When children or young people are invited to take part in EW's events, this would be always accompanied by the appropriate and accessible information about their rights to express their views and their right to protection, the scope and essence of the event and its possible impact. Organisers must always seek parental approval in writing (a sample form is part of EW's internal policy). Children must never be accommodated alone in a room of adults or in online chat rooms. All children or young people are to be accompanied by a parent or guardian and to be under special care and all participants are to be duly informed about the principles and rules of child safeguarding.

## 5. Reporting Procedures

EW follows a clear reporting mechanism for any concerns, suspected instances of abuse or any incidents. A specially allocated email account (office@election-watch.eu) is in place, with access by two focal points within the EW's team (Chairperson and NEEDS EU Inclusion Officer) and with a possibility to report anonymously.

Where an incident or suspicion indicates a potential criminal offence or serious risk to a child, EW will report the matter without delay to the competent national authorities in accordance with applicable law.

## 6. Monitoring and Review

EW commits to regularly review and update the Child Protection Policy and offer trainings to the staff. Updates should happen at least once every three to five years or when any need arises based on the association's activities.

The EW will monitor the implementation of the policy through regular assessments and feedback from staff and volunteers. Where activities involve children or young people, EW will ensure that informed consent is obtained from parents or legal guardians, and where appropriate from the child concerned, using a standard consent form.

Project staff and partners are responsible for ensuring that the appropriate consent forms are completed and securely stored prior to the participation of children or young people in any activity.

The consent form template is maintained as an internal annex to this policy and applied in accordance with GDPR and applicable national law.



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