

**Address by Dr Aleš Musar at conference
»Building a Public Health Innovation Ecosystem in the WHO European Region«**

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In May last year, first lady of Croatia, Sanja Musić Milanović and WHO European region convened a Summit of the Spouses of European Leaders to launch a Network on the prevention of Childhood Obesity. A declaration was adopted, and this Zagreb Declaration includes policy recommendations based on the WHO European Region Obesity Report from 2022. The Summit acted as a catalyst for action. Queen Letizia of Spain who was present announced that Spain will make the problem of childhood obesity one of the priorities during Spain's presidency of the Council of the European Union and this really happened in the second half of 2023.

In my country, Slovenia, an interesting development occurred. As I wanted to be prepared as well as might be for the Summit, I asked experts for advice. You all know that childhood obesity really is a multifaceted issue, so the experts were from various and diverse fields. To get the whole picture I invited all of them to a joint discussion and the response was enthusiastic. It turned out that it was the first time that all the relevant expertise was gathered around one table, the advantage of small countries being that the size of the table still remains manageable. This multidisciplinary group worked so well together that within days of the Zagreb Summit we had a list of recommendations specific to the situation in Slovenia to complement the Zagreb declaration for our purposes. The advisory group continues its work under the auspices of the National Institute for Public Health and the head of the group Mojca Gabrijelčič Blenkuš is here today. A national conference will be held in May to try transforming at least some of the policy recommendations into actual policies.

A lesson here is that creating networks really works, both on the international and national levels. A possible outcome of the Zagreb Summit is also sharing the recommendations, experiences and policies among nations simply to allow ideas to circulate. I see the WHO Regional Office for Europe as both instigator of recommendations, such as with the Position Statement on Making the WHO European Region the Healthiest Online Environment for Children which I wholeheartedly support, and as clearinghouse for sharing good practices between the participating nations.

Let me give you examples relating to the digital environment. Already Zagreb Declaration includes recommendation to "Restrict sales, marketing (including online marketing) and portion sizes of unhealthy foods". In Slovenian recommendations we included a whole section on reducing the pressure of digital environment, basically aiming to balance the presence of children in physical and digital world. We also recommend the legislator to "introduce regulation on reducing advertising high-content sugar, fat and salt products to children in traditional and digital media." and to "Ensure systematic monitoring of limited advertising of HFSS food to children in traditional and digital media, including social networks."

Two important words we used are regulating and monitoring. Indeed, European Union is in the forefront of bridging the gap between technological development and the law which necessarily lags behind. GDPR, Digital Services Act and now development of Artificial Intelligence Act are all groundbreaking on the world scale. As a European I am proud that EU does not shy from regulating what is difficult to regulate and what can be the basis for the

aim to create the Healthiest Online Environment for Children. A common goal of both WHO recommendations to the legislators and of specific practices of individual nations. However, the list of obstacles is long and I believe that we will speak about some of them in this panel.

My son is 23 years old. He is a student and a reasonable young man. He knows on the intellectual level that the world was once less connected, but for him and for more or less everyone under about the age of 30, the experienced reality is that there has always been internet and social media. I remember how appearance of fax machine transformed the speed of doing business, but speaking of that I might as well be speaking that I remember when dinosaurs were roaming the world. Our children were born into a fundamentally different world. We might think about the digital world and the real world as two separate entities, but their reality is that all this really is one world. Let me use a quote from Harry Potter: "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?" "Of course it is happening inside your head, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

Now replace "inside the head" with "in digital world" and you will see what I mean. In short, ladies and gentlemen, we, with few exceptions like Nika, we are all digital dinosaurs. We can regulate the aspects of the physical world which matter to the health, and we can regulate the surface of the digital world. What is going on at the peer-to-peer level is much less manageable and a lot of pressure resulting in unhealthy practices is occurring on that level. We as the immigrants into digital world are handicapped and I believe that only the digital natives, the young persons born into this environment, can be successful in shaping the healthy online environment. We can help setting goals but for the real work we should rely on the young. I am looking at you, Nika, and your generation.