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COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Online Meeting of the
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Permanent
Council**

**Marija Pejčinović Burić,
Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

10 December 2020

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Monsieur le Président, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur Hasani,

Mesdames et Messieurs les Ambassadeurs,

Mesdames et Messieurs,

C'est un honneur pour moi de m'adresser au Conseil permanent en cette Journée internationale des droits de l'homme.

Le thème de cette année est « Reconstruire en mieux ».

2020 aura été, en effet, une année bien difficile pour l'Europe et pour l'ensemble du monde.

Les individus tout comme les sociétés dans leur ensemble ont été durement éprouvés par la COVID-19 et il est normal que des organisations comme le Conseil de l'Europe et l'OSCE fassent ce qui est en leur pouvoir pour aider les États membres à répondre à cette crise de santé publique d'une manière à la fois efficace et respectueuse de nos valeurs.

Human rights, democracy and the rule of law - and the security of Europe as a whole:

These things must not be undermined by the necessary response of governments to the current pandemic.

Rather, they should be inherent to the solutions that are applied.

This has been the approach taken by the Council of Europe over the course of recent months, and reaffirmed by the Athens Declaration of the Chairmanship of the

Committee of Ministers, which received strong support from the great majority of our member states at the Ministerial Session last month.

In April, I provided all 47 national authorities with a toolkit document confirming that the European Convention on Human Rights must apply to any COVID-related steps they take.

These include declaring states of emergency and carrying out emergency measures:

Each of which must be necessary, proportionate and limited in duration.

I also gave an early warning about the increased risk of domestic violence.

It was clear that many women would be confined with their abusers in light of necessary lockdown measures and there is now evidence that this did indeed lead to a higher level of incidents.

The Council of Europe has provided the means by which authorities can share best practice in addressing this.

And some authorities have taken positive and innovative steps, from which we can all learn.

In this context, the decision by the French Permanent Representation here in Vienna to display the 16 Days of Violence against Women exhibition on the fence of its Embassy building is particularly poignant.

Its subject matter relates to the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and I commend the decision to draw further public attention to a problem that persists in every society.

Similarly, and throughout the pandemic period, all parts of the Council of Europe have worked to address the challenges that have emerged.

Our Directorates General for Democracy and for Human Rights and Legal Affairs;

The Commissioner for Human Rights, the Venice Commission, and the European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines and HealthCare.

The Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and the Conference of INGOS.

And the Council of Europe Development Bank too.

All of them have worked to ensure that the common standards outlined in the European Convention and the European Social Charter have been maintained.

This has involved addressing issues as diverse as access to health care and education, the privacy and data protection implications of electronic tracing apps, and the prevention of discrimination against minorities and the protection of refugees and migrants' rights.

The crisis is of course far from over.

Much of Europe is still in the midst of a second wave of infections, and the longer-term economic impact is yet to be felt – as are its social consequences.

So, more issues will emerge and we will be ready to play our part in addressing them.

This is also true of the European Court of Human Rights.

Ultimately, it is for the Court to judge whether there has been a violation of the European Convention.

And COVID-related cases have already been received – concerning the right of assembly, for example.

This is important and right.

Because national security and public safety can only be truly protected in a democracy that fully respects the rule of law.

Taken together, all of this shows the Council of Europe's capacity to lead in a manner that is both responsive and responsible;

That has involved standard-setting and compliance;

And which demonstrates the central importance of multilateralism in dealing with unprecedented cross-border threats.

I know that a belief in this approach – that governments can co-operate to achieve better outcomes – is shared by our two organisations.

A year ago, I spoke in your Permanent Council about our common values and about my intention to further strengthen relations between our organisations and with international organisations more generally.

So that we can work more closely, in complement, and without duplication.

This aspiration features in my new Strategic Framework for the Council of Europe, which I proposed to our Committee of Ministers in recent weeks.

And it is firmly rooted in the good co-operation that already exists between us.

This is true of our parliamentary assemblies.

And, crucially, the Council of Europe – OSCE Co-ordination Mechanism, which is firmly established, important and strong.

Despite the pandemic, its regular meetings took place in May and November of this year.

And through these, further progress is made on a wide range of issues of common concern – and, of course, on our four priority areas for enhanced co-operation.

The first of these is the fight against terrorism.

This is particularly poignant given the recent attacks in France and Austria, the host states for our respective organisations.

There is no doubt about our solidarity with the governments and people of both these countries.

Nor our shared commitment to do all that we can within the scope of our mandates to prevent further incidents.

For the Council of Europe's part, our current Counter-terrorism Strategy adopts a multi-faceted approach, built around prevention, prosecution and protection.

But the challenge presented by terrorism is ever-evolving and we should always be open to new ways of addressing it.

Indeed, we should also always be open to new and additional ways of working together in this fast-changing world.

The UN Secretary General has called for greater co-operation between international organisations as a means to strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of the global response to the coronavirus.

I agree with that sentiment.

But I hope that this kind of approach might be an example rather than a bespoke design.

When organisations like ours share values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law;

When they share a strategic outlook: stability and security on our continent;

When they share a deep, long-standing and trusting relationship, underpinned by clear, distinct but mutually-reinforcing mandates;

Well, then there is every reason to co-operate more widely in the interests of the citizens we serve.

Whether we speak about COVID-19, or Strategic Development Goals, or an international concern that is not yet known, there should be no false ceilings placed on the capacity of our organisations to work together.

The prize is an efficient international system in which multilateral organisations are not only seen to work effectively, but seen to work effectively together.

This can only bolster trust in multilateralism at a time when it is under attack from some quarters, but is clearly needed more than ever.

From the Council of Europe's perspective, there is a great deal of work to be getting on with.

Last month we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Alongside the European Social Charter, this transformative treaty is the basis of human rights law in Europe today.

Every one of our 47 member states have ratified the European Charter, which protects more than 830 million Europeans, all of whom have the ultimate right of direct appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

Over these past seven decades, this legally-binding Convention – this living instrument – has been applied to the ever-evolving conditions of the complex modern societies in which we live.

This is important, it is right, and it continues.

Take the growing and harmful phenomenon of hate speech online.

Judgments from the European Court of Human Rights this year have confirmed not only that this can amount to a breach of human rights but that governments can therefore be obliged to act and to offer legal remedy.

On Artificial Intelligence, there is no doubt about the growing importance of this technology to the ways in which our societies operate including, for example, our election systems.

That's why we are undertaking a range of work in this area, notably our examination of the potential elements of a legal framework for the development, design and application of AI.

And on the environment, the increased pressure on our ecosystems, and our heightened awareness of its impact on human rights have acted as a spur to further action on our part.

On this, a non-binding legal instrument is under development and intended for adoption next year.

It will build on previous, environment-related conventions and case law from the Court, which covers everything from airport noise levels, to industrial pollution, to town planning issues.

Clearly, each of these topics has security implications, and I would certainly value your thoughts on them and any other matter that you wish to raise today.

More generally, may I say that, looking from the outside in, the OSCE's Albanian Chairmanship has clearly been successful.

Notwithstanding the challenges that your organisation has faced, I was pleased to hear about the progress that your ministerial session made last week across a number of important issues;

And I extend my congratulations to those who have been appointed to the top four positions in the organisation.

I look forward to working with your new Secretary General, Helga Schmid and warmly welcome to their posts ODIHR Director, the Honourable Matteo Mecacci; High Commissioner for National Minorities, Ambassador Kairat Abdrakhmanov; and Representative on the Freedom of the Media, Secretary of State Maria Teresa Ribeiro.

Similarly, I look forward to working with the incoming Chairmanships-in-Office of Sweden, Poland and North Macedonia over the course of the next few years.

We all hope that these will be happier times for Europe and the world and provide an opportunity to rebound stronger and more united than ever.