



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Address by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iceland, H.E. Þórdís Kolbrún R. Gylfadóttir

As delivered by Ambassador Michael Carpenter
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 19, 2023

Minister Gylfadóttir, welcome to the Permanent Council and congratulations on assuming the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

Today we meet against the backdrop of Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine – a barbaric campaign that threatens the safety and security of every country in the OSCE region and throws into stark relief the importance of cooperation between the OSCE and the Council of Europe, including through our respective parliamentary bodies. This is indeed the time for all of us to “unite around our values,” and we warmly welcome the Committee of Ministers' adoption in December of a €50 million euro “Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction” Action Plan for Ukraine for the period from 2023-2026.

We also welcome Iceland's decision to use its Presidency to address democratic backsliding and creeping authoritarianism across Europe and Eurasia. This is timely as we can all see in autocratic Russia's dangerous behavior how internal repression and external aggression are inextricably linked. We also, in my view, have a historic opening ahead of us since Russia's war and its alignment with autocracies like Iran, Syria, and North Korea demonstrate just how weak these regimes really are, delivering neither stability nor security nor prosperity for their citizens. Anyone who thought that autocracies were somehow inexorably on the rise in this third decade of the 21st century has to face the evidence to the contrary. We therefore look forward to supporting your efforts to engage governmental and civil society actors in addressing both the challenges but also frankly the opportunities related to the full enjoyment of human rights across Europe and Eurasia.

We continue to welcome the regular meetings of the *OSCE-CoE Coordination Group* and the joint reports of *OSCE-CoE Focal Points*, which ensure both organizations contribute to the fullest extent possible to protect the human rights of national minorities, promote tolerance and non-discrimination, and combat terrorism and trafficking in human beings.

Your decision to prioritize environmental degradation is also timely and much appreciated. The World Wildlife Fund recently estimated that, as a direct result of Russia's war, approximately 6 million Ukrainian civilians have either limited or no access to clean water, and more than 280,000 hectares of forests have been destroyed. According to the *Audit Chamber of Ukraine*,

the damage to Ukraine's environment from Russia's war exceeded \$37 billion in 2022 alone. Today, as we speak, Russia's unconscionable acts continue and the list of horrors only grows.

We appreciate your special focus on promoting the individual human rights of members of vulnerable and marginalized populations, including women, youth, ethnic, racial, and religious minority and ethnic groups, persons with disabilities and LGBTQI+ persons, as well as your efforts to ensure their political representation. These groups are particularly impacted by war and violence. We welcome your plan to support follow-up activities to the Council of Europe's "Democracy Here. Democracy Now" youth political participation campaign in 2022.

We applaud the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) presentation of its Václav Havel Human Rights Prize in October to imprisoned Russian political activist Vladimir Kara-Murza for his outstanding actions in defense of human rights. Vladimir has been sitting in a decrepit prison cell since April 2022, with no end in sight, simply for saying the same things we say here in the Permanent Council every week: that Russia's war against Ukraine is a tragedy and a violation of our most fundamental principles. We also appreciate the Council of Europe's establishment in November of a Contact Group on Cooperation with Belarusian Democratic Forces and Civil Society. Both actions demonstrate the Council of Europe's vital support for civil society as well as human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy, and the rule of law.

Minister, thank you again for your remarks here today. The United States fully supports your work in the months ahead. We wish you every success as you strive to advance your ambitious agenda and prepare to host the Fourth Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik this May.

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