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COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Permanent Council of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation
in Europe (OSCE)**

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

Vienna, 10 June 2021

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Mesdames et Messieurs les Ambassadeurs,

Mesdames et Messieurs,

C'est avec grand plaisir que je m'adresse à vous aujourd'hui, et de pouvoir le faire en personne au fur et à mesure que les restrictions liées au COVID se relâchent.

La dernière fois que je me suis adressée à vous il y a six mois, par connexion vidéo, j'ai été claire sur l'importance que j'attache à la relation entre l'OSCE et le Conseil de l'Europe - et sur mon engagement à la renforcer.

Depuis lors, la communication et le travail entre nous n'ont pas manqué.

Au cours de ces dernières semaines, j'ai tenu une vidéoconférence avec votre Secrétaire général ;

J'ai rencontré la présidente en exercice, la ministre des Affaires étrangères Madame Linde, lors de sa visite à Strasbourg, son programme ayant permis un échange de vues avec notre propre Comité des ministres ;

De plus, notre Groupe de coordination conjoint a tenu sa 33ème réunion, mettant un accent particulier sur les droits des minorités nationales et la promotion de la tolérance et de la non-discrimination.

Nos organisations travaillent ensemble à différents niveaux.

But the Coordination Group is the engine room of co-operation, and it does important work across four clearly defined topics.

Enlarging its scope formally may be difficult.

But as I said to your Secretary General in our April meeting and again earlier today, I am very open to practical ways of developing our policy relationship by other means.

One option might be to restart the practice of regular "2+2" meetings between both Secretaries General and Chairpersons in office, and organise similar meetings between senior officials.

Another could be the OSCE's more regular participation in the Council of Europe's intergovernmental bodies.

But I am equally interested in other, more informal means of increased co-operation.

The reason that this might be possible is that our relationship is such a natural fit.

This is amply demonstrated by the topic that your Chairperson has selected for June.

“Conflict prevention, conflict resolution and OSCE tools”.

The Council of Europe is not a security organisation.

Our job is to protect and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

And to harness the power of common legal standards to achieve this.

The starting point for this is of course the European Convention on Human Rights.

Ratified by all of our 47 member states, it is designed to ensure that the fundamental rights that belong to every individual prevent the arbitrary use of state power.

There is no question about our intention to ensure that these standards replace conflict with
co-operation.

After all, the Organisation was founded in the aftermath of two devastating world wars;

On the promise of “never again”;

And, as our Statute says, in the quest for closer unity as a means to pursue peace through justice and international co-operation.

Today we understand this as democratic security.

And the aim of achieving it remains threaded throughout our work.

The Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe, discussed at last month's Hamburg Ministerial Session, is testament to that.

Among its priorities and concrete deliverables, the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights is central.

The Framework says plainly that States Parties must secure its enjoyment for everyone within their jurisdiction:

Including those in parts of the continent affected by confrontation and unresolved conflicts.

And we work towards full access for our monitoring mechanisms and institutions to conflict-affected territories and people.

We also strive to build trust between the parties.

Our programme of confidence-building measures promotes common standards, best practice and non-political dialogue between civil society, experts and professionals.

The problems and solutions vary depending on the specific circumstances.

But these confidence-building measures are designed variously to empower women, ensure drug-prevention, allow contact between health professionals, conserve architectural heritage and archive materials, facilitate dialogue between journalists and support education.

Indeed, particular attention is paid to youth, and young people from all areas of Europe touched by conflict participate in the Council of Europe's Youth Peace Camps.

Certainly, there remains plenty of work to do.

We are currently engaged in a dialogue to develop a set of confidence-building measures between Armenia and Azerbaijan, following the most recent conflict in and around Nagorno Karabakh.

And confidence-building measures are in place for Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria.

Their success relies upon the authorities' commitment.

And they are aware that the Council of Europe fully and firmly supports the independence and territorial integrity of its member states within their internationally recognised borders.

But the investment of this time and effort is worth the reward.

Access and contact of this kind can only help to ensure that people's fundamental rights are respected and that trust is laid as a foundation on which lasting peace can be built.

There are other priorities laid out in the Strategic Framework that can be viewed through the lens of conflict resolution and prevention in their broader sense.

Take for example the need to protect vulnerable groups including national minorities.

Over recent years they have suffered from an increase in attacks – hate speech and physical violence alike.

And during the COVID-19 pandemic, Roma, Travellers, and others have sometimes been scapegoats for the troubles that wider society has faced.

Similarly, women continue to suffer from violence in their own homes.

During recent lockdowns, many have been physically trapped with their abusers, and exposed to harm.

It is telling, but tragic, that during this time the number of calls for help fell, while the number of incidents went up.

The Council of Europe is helping member states to respond to these evolving challenges.

For example, our Committee of Ministers has recently adopted guidelines on upholding equality and protecting against discrimination and hate during the pandemic and in any similar future crises.

In the case of national minorities and minority language speakers, we have treaties designed to ensure the protection of their rights in all circumstances.

And it is for member states to put these to good use.

When it comes to domestic violence, we have ensured that member states have had the opportunity to share the solutions that they have put in place in recent months.

And some of these have been innovative, far-reaching and effective.

But of course all of this also points to the importance of our Istanbul Convention.

Described by the UN as “gold standard”, its purpose is to prevent violence, to protect women who are victims, and to support the prosecution of perpetrators.

Where it is in force, it works.

But misconceptions and false narratives have been deployed against it in recent years.

This has caused reluctance to ratify among some governments, and even the decision by one to leave.

It is women who lose from this, short and simple, and it must be stopped.

The correct response to recent troubles is to expand the circle of those committed to the Istanbul Convention.

I am therefore doubly determined to develop and promote the honest and positive narrative that will establish the facts and ensure its success.

That narrative will rest on three facts.

The Istanbul Convention sets standards that are significantly higher than national laws in many countries.

It provides a unique, independent and international monitoring mechanism to evaluate implementation at the national level and to support compliance;

And that it is only by joining this treaty that a country can benefit from its provisions and seek co-operation from other state parties in bringing to justice the perpetrators of crimes against women.

You can expect to hear more from me about this in the months ahead.

Whether we speak of conflict across borders, against minorities, or in the home, it destroys lives, undermines rights, and threatens the cohesion of our democracies.

It is our duty to defuse that bomb.

In speaking about these problems, it is striking that they pre-date the current public health pandemic;

But also that each has worsened during it.

The same is true for many of the other topics covered in the Strategic Framework:

Among them are the fights against poverty and inequality, racism, xenophobia and discrimination;

The need to combat corruption, money laundering and cybercrime;

And the growing and evolving problem posed by human trafficking;

My latest annual report *A Democratic Renewal for Europe* addresses this theme directly.

Published last month, it identifies an alarming degree of democratic backsliding in much of Europe, pre-dating COVID-19, but often exacerbated by it.

Democracies need efficient, impartial and independent judiciaries.

But in recent years there has been an increase in attempts to exert political influence over judicial appointments.

Steps have been taken to weaken judges' tenure and to empower the executive to replace court presidents.

And the impact of coronavirus is leading to an anticipated backlog in cases and delays to judicial appointments.

Freedom of expression is also under strain.

Smear campaigns, wrongful imprisonment and acts of violence against journalists have risen in number.

Traditional media outlets are struggling to compete against digital platforms and fact-checking and quality journalism are suffering as disinformation becomes commonplace.

And the public health crisis has magnified these problems, with a sharp rise in attacks, censorship and reprisals for questioning government policies.

Meanwhile freedom of assembly and association are also in decline.

For some years the space for civil society has been shrinking in parts of our continent, with peaceful public events treated as dangerous.

Restrictive legislation has been introduced, and other laws misused, to reduce the opportunity for civic activism and legitimate protest.

Here too the public health crisis has accelerated the trend as freedoms have been further curtailed.

The Strategic Framework prioritises action to address these problems.

But my annual report also urges member states to act now, of their own accord, using the tools that the Council of Europe has already put at their disposal.

They should adhere to the guidance that COVID-related restrictions must be necessary, proportionate and limited in duration:

So, as the situation improves, these should be removed.

They should return to fundamental democratic principles, embracing the Organisation's acquis.

This starts with the European Convention on Human Rights which should be properly implemented and the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights which must be executed fully and swiftly by every national authority.

And they should embrace multilateralism and democratic culture.

This means recognising diversity as a strength, ensuring civic space at the national level and turning to international co-operation, proactively, as a means for protecting people's fundamental rights.

This is ambitious, but it is certainly within member states' capacity to deliver.

After all, it is not a revolution but a return to commitments that have already been made in the spirit that was originally intended.

And I am greatly encouraged by the decision at last month's Ministerial Session to instruct the Ministers' Deputies to provide follow-up to my report.

That Session also endorsed further progress towards new instruments that will address the human rights implications of Artificial Intelligence and the degradation of our environment.

These are important and work is underway.

This combination of long-standing issues, new challenges, and a public health crisis places additional pressure on national governments and international organisations alike.

But it also reminds us that cross-border problems can only be solved by effective multilateral action.

The Council of Europe and the OSCE share that understanding, and a determination to make progress.

I am confident that we will do so, standing shoulder to shoulder.

Thank you and I look forward to your thoughts and questions.