

**Statement by Mr Anders Samuelsen,  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Denmark  
and Chairman of the Committee of Ministers,  
to the Parliamentary Assembly**

Strasbourg, 23 January 2018

Mr President,  
Mr Secretary General,  
Dear Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

I am very happy to address you, the Assembly, for the first time in my capacity as Chairman of the Committee of Ministers.

I have been in Strasbourg many times as a member of the “other” parliament – the European Parliament.

But this is a first for me and it is also a first for you, Mr President. I would like to begin by offering you my warmest congratulations on your election.

Rest assured that the Danish Chairmanship intends to work closely with both yourself and the Secretary General at a time when our Organisation is facing several major challenges – all at the same time.

In November last year, my colleague, Ms Ulla Tørnæs, Minister for Development Co-operation, presented your Standing Committee with the priorities of the Danish Chairmanship.

Today, I will inform you about some important aspects regarding these priorities and to brief you on the work done by the Committee of Ministers since your last session.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I will begin with the main priority of the Danish Chairmanship: Continued reform of the European human rights system.

During the current reform process, much has been achieved on the road to a more balanced, focused and effective human rights system. We are on the right track. Taking steps in the right direction. But we are obviously still not there.

Rather than close our eyes to the problems, we need to engage in a constructive, open and honest dialogue on how to deal with them.

Our focus is to ensure that reforms already agreed are put into effect. This requires, among other things, that all member states ratify Protocol 15 as agreed in Brighton.

We also want to explore new tools on how to ensure a closer dialogue between the European and national level on how to apply and develop the Human Rights Convention. An important platform for such dialogue is the Parliamentary Assembly.

Making it easier for Member States to intervene in cases before the Court – and argue their case – will be a specific priority for us. We see this as an important tool for enhancing a constructive dialogue on the interpretation of the convention.

At the High- Level Expert Conference in Denmark in November we had a very constructive discussion which we look forward to continuing. In April we will host a ministerial conference in Copenhagen with the ambition of adopting a political declaration that will contribute to a better and more effective European human rights system.

In addition to our main priority, we have four other topics on our Chairmanship agenda.

Firstly the priority on equal opportunities. The new gender equality strategy of the Council of Europe will be launched at a conference in Denmark in May 2018. Furthermore, we will - in cooperation with you - organise a conference focusing on good practices and inclusive policies on private and family life for same-sex couples.

Secondly the priority on people with disabilities. With the conclusions reached at the seminar on awareness raising on the rights of persons with disabilities held in Copenhagen in December

2017, steps have been taken to break down the barriers of prejudice and to change attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

Thirdly the priority on children and youth in democracy. It is important to involve children and young people in democracy. At a seminar in Copenhagen on 23 and 24 April 2018 we wish to support the Council of Europe's efforts to strengthen democratic competencies such as mutual understanding, reflection, and critical thinking.

And lastly, the fight against torture is a key priority for Denmark. It is very important for us to promote this further. Torture is often committed in the early stages of police custody and pre-trial detention. We will host a conference on this issue on 22-23 March 2018 in Copenhagen. The aim will be to share and develop best practices.

Dear members of the parliament,

I know our Chairmanship comes in time where the Council of Europe is challenged. I am referring to the participation of the Russian delegation in your work. The Committee of Ministers and I as Chairman are following very closely the ongoing dialogue between your Assembly and the Russian authorities.

As chairmain I have worked to create awareness-raising on the situation. Yesterday in Brussels, I raised the issue to the attention of my colleagues in the Foreign Affairs Council.

It was an important step to set up an ad hoc committee on "the role and mission of the Parliamentary Assembly" following up on the Nicoletti-report calling for a Council of Europe Summit.

On 13 December 2017, the Ministers' Deputies held a constructive exchange of views with Mr Nicoletti in his capacity as rapporteur for this report.

I note with interest the meeting which the Assembly's Presidential Committee held on 14 December in Paris with Russian MPs. I sincerely hope that all the efforts made to reconcile the different viewpoints will produce tangible results.

Finally, on this point, I hope that the Russian Federation will now execute its commitments to the Council of Europe by starting to pay its obligatory contribution to our budget.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since your last session, the Committee of Ministers has taken a number of decisions concerning the situation in various member States. Among these, I would like to mention the decision adopted in connection with Mr Ilgar Mammadov's case against Azerbaijan.

Last month, the Committee of Ministers launched infringement proceedings against Azerbaijan due to the authorities' continuing refusal to ensure Mr Mammadov's immediate and unconditional release.

The Parliamentary Assembly will be kept informed about any developments in this case given your particular interest in Mr Mammadov's welfare.

With regard to the Ukraine, the Committee of Ministers has adopted a series of decisions in which it encouraged the authorities to continue the process of reform so as to ensure that Ukraine's domestic law and practice were fully compliant with Council of Europe standards. I hope the current discussions on a new Action Plan will be completed soon.

The Committee has likewise underlined the particular importance of fundamental freedoms in Ukraine such as freedom of expression, media freedom and freedom of association and assembly, as well as the rights of all persons belonging to national minorities.

In this context, the situation in Crimea and eastern Ukraine cannot be ignored. The Committee of Ministers, for its part, has repeatedly spoken out in support of the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders.

Of course, Turkey's recent decision to end its status as major contributor has made the Organisation's financial situation even more complicated. The Committee of Ministers is currently working to minimise this impact as much as possible.

The Committee will soon discuss more long-term measures and will adjust the Programme and Budget for 2018-2019 accordingly.

At its December session, the Venice Commission adopted two opinions on judicial reform in Poland. It is very important that the Commission's recommendations are implemented, and the Council of Europe will be able to provide any assistance which the Polish authorities might feel is necessary.

Outside its current geographical area, the Council of Europe intends to pursue co-operation with Belarus. It is worth noting, however, that the country's integration into the Council of Europe has to be based on our values and principles.

While the Council of Europe has played a key role in abolishing the death penalty in Europe, we also have a duty to take action to ensure that this inhuman punishment is abolished wherever it still exists in the world.

That brings me to a more general issue, ladies and gentlemen.

In two years time the Council of Europe will celebrate its 70 years anniversary. This sets a milestone for our cooperation in the European family.

It will be a historic opportunity to have a general and comprehensive discussion about the future Council of Europe and the priorities of the organisation.

The overall goal for this discussion must be to aim for a better and even more effective Council of Europe. This process is already in place with the ongoing reforms initiated by the Secretary General, but it is no time to stop.

I therefore hope that as many of your Foreign Ministers as possible will attend the ministerial meeting in Elsinore at Hamlet's Castle Kronborg, on the 17. – 18. May, where we expect to have a thematic discussion on the future Council of Europe.

In short: The Council of Europe. To be or not to be – that is the question.

Thank you for your attention.