Concluding address

by Philippe Boillat

Conference on Internet Freedom: A constant factor of Democratic Security in Europe?

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Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues and friends,

I have the privilege of making a few final observations to conclude today's proceedings. A difficult task, since the discussions have been wide-ranging and lively. They have focused on different aspects of the essential question: how can we effectively guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms online in our member States?

Transparency in State policies; content filtering and blocking; hate speech; mass surveillance; the role of private parties online: all are fields involving a risk of fundamental liberties being violated in the digital world.

This conference has provided an opportunity for an initial exchange of views aimed at jointly identifying some methods for implementing the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on Internet freedom. We have seen that many issues remain unresolved. The conference did not set out, let alone claim, to address all of them. It does, however, encourage us to actively pursue the process under way.

The recommendation establishes a reference framework, with indicators, aimed at helping member States evaluate the protection of human rights on the Internet: how are freedom of expression, media freedom, the right to privacy, personal data, the right to an effective remedy and also freedom of assembly and association protected in an online environment?

Today's discussion on how to elaborate the national reports on Internet freedom called for in the recommendation is a first step towards answering this question.

The General Rapporteur of the Conference has just wonderfully summed up the discussions. I will therefore not revert to them.

For my part, I would like to point out, first and foremost, the initiatives already taken by the Council of Europe and the OSCE that contribute to the development of what could be considered as the "ideal Internet". Apart from the important role that civil society actors, academics, researchers, the technical community and businesses can play in supporting State bodies in the drafting of their reports - I will come back to this role later - I would firstly like to remind you of what has already been done in this regard. What contributions have already been made by our institutions and our member States with a view to promoting Internet freedom?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this connection, I would first like to welcome, once again, the fact that one of our member States, Estonia, is already preparing its report on Internet freedom. I am also very pleased to note that other member States are planning, in turn, to draft reports.

I would also remind you that the Venice Commission recognised the added value of this recommendation from the outset. Indeed, the Venice Commission used the indicators identified in the recommendation on Internet freedom when evaluating laws relating to the Internet.

In this respect, I believe it can be said that the level of Internet freedom in a country is an indicator of democracy and of respect for the rule of law and human rights in that country.

With the aim of proactively implementing the recommendation on Internet freedom and of meeting its requirements, the Council of Europe immediately took certain initiatives, which I will briefly mention at this juncture:

- ✓ Firstly, the study on filtering, blocking and take-down of illegal content on the internet across the 47 member States, recently published by the Secretary General.

This study describes and assesses, State by State, the legal framework but also the relevant case-law and practice in the field. I note that the dialogue process for the drafting of the reports has been very well received by our member States, who have had the opportunity to share their opinions and comments on this aspect.

✓ Secondly, the 2016 annual report by the Secretary General on the State of Democracy, Human Rights and Rule of Law in Europe devotes an entire chapter to freedom of expression, with particular attention paid to the Internet aspect of this freedom.

✓ Thirdly, and lastly, initiatives, such as the discussions we have held during today's conference, must be continued. These fora contribute to an open and multistakeholder debate, as a means of exchanging points of view on the best ways to increase the level of transparency online in the member States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that the determination expressed here today will allow the recommendation to be fully implemented in all of our member States as soon as possible.

I would also like to highlight a crucial point: member States should make their reports on Internet freedom available to the public, including the international community.

Fora on Internet governance often remind us that the Internet's future – and in particular the defence of freedoms linked to it – is not a responsibility for the States alone. It is a shared responsibility. It is a common challenge. The digital world is a global one. It is borderless. It requires efforts from all of the interested parties, governments and institutions such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE, but also the private sector, civil society, and technical and academic communities.

The recommendations made by this conference therefore concern all the stakeholders who are encouraged to work towards Internet freedom.

These recommendations have been distributed in the room, so I will not go into details concerning them.

However, I would once again specifically underline the role of online businesses, non-governmental organisations and the technical and academic communities, well represented by our panellists today, and I thank them for this.

- ✓ I encourage them to engage in the process of evaluating Internet freedom in the member States.

- ✓ For an enhanced dialogue, I also encourage them to engage in the dialogue with the Council of Europe, with major Internet companies as well as with governments for an Internet that is safe, an Internet that is secure, an Internet that is open and inclusive; this is a process launched by the Council of Europe during the EuroDIG conferences.

  In addition, the Council of Europe will take the initiative of formulating and determining directions, objectives and arrangements for a multidisciplinary dialogue forum.

  Let us not forget that Internet freedom also entails protecting Internet users and promoting the Internet as a trustworthy space for all.

- ✓ Lastly, I invite all of the stakeholders to include the principles of Internet freedom in their reflections – just as was the case with the Council of Europe Guide to Human Rights for Internet Users – a guide now unanimously recognised as a major reference.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues and friends,

I could not end without saying a heartfelt thank you to the conference's General Rapporteur, Mr Matthias Kettermann, for his pertinent conclusions and, through him – because I cannot mention all of them – our key speakers, our moderators and our rapporteurs. We are extremely grateful for all of your valued contributions.

Allow me also to thank the Estonian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and the German OSCE Chairmanship for co-organising this Conference.

In addition I thank all of you, the participants in this conference, for your attendance and your active participation. Ladies and Gentlemen, your expertise, your ideas and your criticisms will guide our future work and will encourage our member States in the drafting of their reports on transparency. We are grateful to you for this.

Lastly, I express my gratitude to all the staff of the Council of Europe who have contributed to the perfect organisation of this conference, our interpreters, without forgetting the show by the magicians "2.0", who illustrated how far the link between the digital world and our reality is now deep-rooted in society.

I hope that you enjoy the rest of your day and that you get home safely. Thank you for your attention.