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Information Documents

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¹ This document has been classified restricted at the date of issue; it will be declassified in accordance with Resolution Res(2001)6 on access to CoE documents.

Working visit to Stockholm, 21 February

On 21 February, I made a working visit to Stockholm, during which I met the Prime Minister, Mr Stefan Löfven, and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ms Margot Wallström. The focus of our discussions was on the current challenges facing our Organisation, and I took the opportunity to thank both for the strong political and financial support that Sweden continues to provide to our Organisation.

High Level Conference: Governing the Game Changer – Implications of artificial intelligence development on human rights, democracy and the rule of law, Helsinki, 26 February

Yesterday morning in Helsinki I opened our High-Level Conference “Governing the Game Changer – Impacts of artificial intelligence development on human rights, democracy and the rule of law”, together with the Chair of the Committee of Ministers and co-organiser of the Conference, the Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Timo Soini, and the French Minister of Justice, Ms Nicole Belloubet.

The Council of Europe has a unique capacity to develop the standards that will maximise benefits of AI for society and minimise risks to human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

This work cannot be carried out in isolation and I am pleased that the Conference brought together a range of experts from different sectors. There was a high level of participation, with more than 500 experts and participants.

The Conference is ongoing as I speak – and its conclusions will feed into our current and future work in this field.

Meeting with Ms Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine, 27 February

Earlier this morning I met Ms Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine. We had an exchange of views on the current situation in Ukraine, and on Ukraine’s co-operation with the Council of Europe including on the Action Plan 2018-2021.

Later today, you will also have the opportunity to have an exchange with her.

Ethics Officer

At the Ministers’ Deputies meeting on 12 December, I informed you that the establishment of an Ethics Officer was under consideration. This is in line with previous recommendations by the internal and external auditors and the Oversight Advisory Committee.

I am pleased to announce that we have identified an internal candidate, Mr Gianluca Esposito, who will take on this role in addition to his current duties as Executive Secretary of GRECO.

Among other things the Ethic Officer's role will be to alert the Secretary General to emerging ethics issues which could have an adverse impact on the Organisation's proper functioning or reputation and to provide advice on the appropriate response. He will also act as a focal point for ethics related questions by staff members and people participating in the Council's activities.

Together with other services such as the Directorate of Internal Oversight, the Directorate of Legal Advice and Public International Law and the Directorate General of Administration, the Ethics Officer will contribute to the review of internal rules and procedures concerning ethics related matters and provide input as regards the development of the Organisation's ethics framework and ethics training and awareness raising measures.

In the exercise of his functions the Ethics Officer shall directly report to me and the Deputy Secretary General. This appointment will be for a trial period of one year, with a possibility of renewal.

Contingency Plan

Following on from the informal consultations we had earlier this year, we have issued the contingency plan document on Monday. It will first be examined by the Budget Committee at an extraordinary meeting next week convened for this purpose and then in the GR-PBA.

A tentative calendar is also included for the next steps to translate the plan into concrete measures. You will see that I intend to come back to you in April/May with more detail in terms of the specific activities which will be affected.

I invite you to consider the document carefully and reflect on the impact that the implementation of the contingency plan will have on the Council of Europe and the scope of its work.

Europe is still facing many challenges where the Council of Europe can and does make a difference.

In this context and in the light of what some Ambassadors said during the informal consultations, we have included a couple of scenarios in the document should member states wish to preserve the role of the Council of Europe and prevent the deep cuts to the Programme and Budget pending a solution to the crisis. The amounts are relatively modest and I hope that your governments will look at this in a favourable light.

Of course, the contingency plan does not absolve the Russian Federation of its financial obligations to this Organisation. It has a considerable debt that must be paid.

I will continue to work with the Finnish Chairmanship, member states and the Parliamentary Assembly with a view to reaching a solution to this situation.

Lastly, a word on the precautionary measures concerning staff which have meanwhile been in place for over 18 months.

These measures include notably limiting the duration of fixed term contracts to six months, freezing internal promotions and external recruitments. While being necessary as an immediate reaction to mitigate a difficult budgetary situation, these measures will no longer be necessary as we go forward with the contingency planning. I therefore intend to lift the precautionary measures as widely as possible in the near future.

World Congress against the Death Penalty

As you probably know, today is the World Congress against the Death Penalty. We have co-organised this event and I am releasing a video statement today against the death penalty worldwide. Our particular concern is of course the European continent and Belarus, which we hope one day will introduce a moratorium as a first step.

Turkey

My last point is on Turkey.

As the Turkish Ambassador reminded us here two weeks ago, I condemned very strongly the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016. I travelled to Ankara in its aftermath to offer Turkey the Council of Europe's support at what was a difficult time. I said very clearly that governments should be replaced by means of the ballot box and not at the barrel of a gun. I also said that the Turkish authorities had the right to bring to justice the perpetrators of the attempted coup.

However, on several occasions I have added that, in my view, the net has been cast too widely.

Relating to these events, there are cases pending both at the domestic level and here in our Court and I will not comment on them. I have always been very careful not to interfere in judicial proceedings or prejudge any court decisions related to these cases.

The point that I want to make today is related to the indictment issued recently by a public prosecutor against 16 persons, including Osman Kavala and Hakan Altınay, accusing them of attempting to overthrow the Government and organising and financing the 2013 Gezi events. An aggravated life sentence is requested against these 16 people.

I have been informed of the indictment only through media reports.

Why do I have concerns about this case in particular? Because when the Gezi events took place, there was violence from both the police side and by the protesters and I travelled to Ankara for an important meeting with President Erdoğan where we discussed this. I offered Council of Europe expertise on the policing of street protests and provided the authorities with a paper summarising the Court's detailed case-law on how to handle protests. This was taken into account in the form of circulars to the police forces. At the time, nobody had told me that the protests were illegal. Or that they were criminalised.

I understand from media reports about the indictment that having given support to the organisation of these protests or having financed them may now be punished by an aggravated life sentence.

I hope that the domestic court applies the European Convention on Human Rights which has legal precedence – in conformity with the Turkish Constitution – and sends the indictment back to the public prosecutor.

An aggravated life sentence for financing or organising street protests would be an unprecedented, brutal punishment and would constitute, in my view, a serious blow to the ECHR and our standards.