

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY GENERAL

This report comes out at a time when too many Europeans are angry and afraid.

Angry as they watch democracy chipped away, crisis after crisis, with nothing but contempt for the rule of law and human rights. They are also afraid because they feel left out of the decisions that will shape the future of their continent. And how could it be otherwise, when the rules-based order that emerged after the Second World War is unravelling before our very eyes?

Today, Europe faces a perfect storm – war, shifting geopolitics, democratic backsliding, rising impunity, climate crisis, disinformation, rapid technological change and a retreat from co-operation into nationalism and protectionism. It threatens to undo the peace, stability and hard-won progress the Council of Europe has helped deliver across an entire continent over the past 75 years.

My priorities are clear: standing with Ukraine in its fight for freedom and justice; revitalising our democracies under strain; and keeping our whole European family strong and united.

This is not a time for double standards. Nor can we afford tactics like “foreign influence” laws that divide us. Now, more than ever, we need the Council of Europe to be the lighthouse in the storm – 46 proud member states, equal in their diversity, uniquely positioned to help shape Europe’s future geopolitical and security architecture.

Real security means resilient institutions people can trust, laws that apply equally to everyone and the kind of stability that allows democracy to grow. As the challenges facing our societies evolve, it also means addressing issues including migration, cybersecurity, terrorism, human trafficking and more.

That is only possible when we have democratic security – one built on free and fair elections, independent courts, free media, anti-corruption frameworks, gender equality, diversity, social justice, inclusive civic space and active participation in public life.

Without democratic security, no defence package is big enough, and no army strong enough, to keep us safe.

Europe’s future and values do not stop at our borders. That is why we need to engage more with the Global South, BRICS countries and our partners outside Europe. The Council of Europe was never just about lines on a map. It is about the values we share – human rights, democracy and the rule of law. If Europe wants to matter, it must stand where those values are on the line.

As this report makes clear, these values are under assault.

We see it at the ballot box.

Electoral integrity is weakening in some states due to rushed legal changes and weak campaign finance rules. Disinformation, foreign interference and misuse of public resources are distorting campaigns. Media restrictions, voter intimidation and limits on observers are raising serious concerns about transparency and fairness.

For too many, safety and dignity are still out of reach.

Violence remains widespread – nearly one in three women face partner violence, and one in six experience sexual violence. Anti-rights movements and digital threats are rising, with online hate increasingly targeting women, especially public figures. Peaceful protesters face excessive force, while arbitrary bans continue to silence politically sensitive demonstrations. Anti-migrant, antisemitic and anti-Muslim rhetoric is spreading in a climate of rising geopolitical tensions.

A free society depends on free voices.

Most recently, some have accused Europe of turning its back on free speech. But freedom of expression is a pillar of our democracies, protected every day by the European Court of Human Rights (the Court).

There is no room for complacency. Journalists face threats, harassment and abusive lawsuits, including in established democracies. Public service media are under growing political and financial pressure.

And we must remain vigilant. So-called foreign influence laws are shrinking civic space in several states. Youth disengagement persists, especially among marginalised groups. Young women face added challenges in politics – even as they lead on climate, equality and human rights.

Justice must be independent to be trusted.

Political interference in judicial appointments and governance remains a major threat in several states. Public attacks on judges and blurred lines between accountability and control are eroding trust.

Technology is transforming society and exposing new vulnerabilities.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital health are reshaping care, raising new concerns around autonomy and trust. Cybercrime is surging, with AI-driven threats undermining privacy and democracy. Online abuse targeting children is on the rise, including AI-generated content, yet many states still lack strong child-protection systems.

Building the Europe of tomorrow will not be easy. But we have been there before.

We cannot meet today's challenges with yesterday's playbook. And we must never forget that democracy is our first line of defence.

What Europe needs is a reset: a New Democratic Pact for Europe.

This is our chance to bring the vision of the 10 Reykjavik Principles of Democracy to life and turn them into action.

This new pact calls for confronting democratic backsliding in all its forms and standing firm against polarisation and disinformation, both online and offline. It means addressing urgent challenges like climate change – where it happens and where it hurts. And it hinges on our ability to restore trust in democracy by making it tangible in people's daily lives through participation, accountability and equal access to rights.

Because what is at stake is nothing less than Europe's security, the values we share and our place in the world.



Alain Berset

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