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| **Stocktaking of the Finnish Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (21 November 2018 – 17 May 2019)** |

**Introduction**

The Finnish Presidency of the Committee of Ministers began at a period when the Council of Europe was in deep political, economic and institutional crisis. Hence, from the beginning of the Presidency, Finland focused a great deal of effort on building confidence and cooperation between different stakeholders, in particular the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly, in order to find solutions to the Organisation’s crisis.

The human rights protection that the Council of Europe and its instruments offer are crucial for all the   
830 million people in its 47 member States, in particular as regards the European Court of Human Rights. The Organisation is an important guarantor of the rule-based multilateral order at the pan-European level. The Finnish Presidency made the assessment that addressing the Organisation’s crisis was necessary in order to maintain a strong and effective Council of Europe that is able to secure human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe, also for the future.

The Chairman of the Committee of Ministers initiated an enhanced dialogue between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly in January 2019. In this context, the Committee of Ministers’ Bureau and the Parliamentary Assembly’s Presidential Committee held informal discussions with a view to building cooperation and finding a way forward in addressing common problems. After the enhanced dialogue was initiated, four meetings took place (in Strasbourg, Paris and Helsinki) in this composition over the course of Spring 2019. The Chair consulted with all member States in Strasbourg to coordinate elements for these discussions. In addition, there were meetings between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly in the Joint Committee.

The process was beneficial in identifying common questions and possible solutions to them. In particular,the question of a common procedure to respond to situations where a member State violates obligations and principles was discussed so that the Organisation could respond jointly, with one voice, in situations of future non-compliance.

A great deal of effort was directed at finding common ground for possible solutions of the Council of Europe’s political, economic and institutional crisis. At the same time, the Finnish Presidency had a very active Presidency programme. In addition to Mr Timo Soini, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the Committee of Ministers, Mr Sauli Niinistö, President of the Republic, also addressed the Parliamentary Assembly.

The priorities of the Finnish Presidency were the following:

1. **Strengthening the system of human rights and the rule of law in Europe**
2. **Support for equality and women’s rights**
3. **Openness and inclusion — as well as a focus on young people and the prevention of radicalisation.**
4. **Strengthening the system of human rights and the rule of law in Europe**

The main goal of the Finnish Presidency was to further strengthen the crucial work of the Council of Europe in advancing human rights, democracy and the rule of law. During the Presidency, Finland had the pleasure of celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Council of Europe, the 60th anniversary of the European Court of Human Rights and the 20th anniversary of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. Furthermore, the Finnish Presidency coincided with the 20th anniversary of the Single Court of the European Court of Human Rights, on which occasion the Presidency arranged a conference in cooperation with the European Court of Human Rights and the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) on   
26 November 2018.

On 13-14 December 2018, the Office of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights organised a round table on the topic of human rights defenders’ current challenges, as well as a networking event for human rights defenders and local human rights NGOs. These meetings in Helsinki brought together human rights defenders from several parts of Europe.

A Conference on the Protection of the Rule of Law in Europe was held in Tampere on 5 February 2019. Recommendations formulated by young participants stressed, among other issues, that the rule of law must be based on human rights and feature climate change as a challenge. The recommendations were presented to the representatives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice.

While upholding the European human rights and the rule of law system during turbulent times, there is also a need to react to changes and new challenges arising in Europe and beyond. With constant digital developments and increased use of artificial intelligence (AI), there was a need to discuss the relevance of the current mechanisms for protecting human rights. The High-level Conference on Impacts of Artificial Intelligence Development on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law was held on   
26-27 February 2019 in Helsinki, as one of the main events of the Presidency. The objective was to engage in a multi-stakeholder dialogue on how to address AI development to maximise benefits for society and minimise risks. The conference discussed broader implications of AI for the values of democratic societies, including equality. The conference conclusions underlined ensuring AI’s safe development and that a joint, timely response will be required. The Council of Europe should monitor the impact of AI on the collective foundations of democratic societies, continue to identify possible gaps in applicability and enforceability of existing regulatory frameworks, and on this basis, assess the need for further measures to ensure human rights compliant design, development and deployment of AI.

The Expert Meeting of the Education Policy Advisers Network (EPAN) on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights was held on 16-17 April 2019 in Helsinki with a focus on implementing the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competencies for Democratic Culture (RFCDC). The RFCDC has grown to become a key tool in promoting human rights and democracy through education. Finland stressed that violent extremism and radicalisation can be prevented by education.

A High-Level Conference on Responses to Prison Overcrowding was held in Strasbourg on   
24-25 April 2019. As an outcome of the Conference, the reduction of overcrowding was considered a mutual responsibility for all the stakeholders in the criminal justice chain. The cooperation between the Council of Europe and the European Union should be continued.

1. **Support for equality and women’s rights**

Equality and women’s rights as well as the promotion of the Istanbul Convention were highlighted during the Finnish Presidency. The Expert Meeting on the Implementation of Roma Integration Strategies and the International Roma Women’s Conference were held on 25-27 March 2019. The Conference aimed to raise awareness of the obstacles that Roma[[1]](#footnote-1) women face while accessing their rights.

Other events carried out concerning the second priority of the Presidency were conferences on gender stereotypes and sexual violence. On 28-29 March 2019, an Expert Conference on Tackling Gender Stereotypes and Sexism was organised. Furthermore, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Recommendation on Preventing and Combating Sexism on 28 March 2019. The outcome of the conference underlined the importance of taking new and efficient measures for the elimination of harmful gender stereotypes and sexism.

The Expert Conference on Sexual Violence against Women and Children in Sports was held on   
29-30 April 2019. Objectives of the conference were to inspire people to scale up measures to tackle sexual violence against women and children in sports and to support capacity building to fight this kind of sexual violence.

1. **Openness and inclusion — as well as a focus on young people and the prevention of radicalisation**

Under the third priority, a meeting of the Governmental LGBTI Focal Points Network was organised in Helsinki on 22 November 2018. The Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity was discussed. A CDDH workshop on the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe was held in Strasbourg on 29 November 2018. The workshop aimed to reaffirm the commitment of the Council of Europe and other partners to protect European civil society space. The Recommendation on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe was adopted the day before, on 28 November 2018. Enhancing the role of civil society had a high importance during the Finnish Presidency. In addition, Poland organised a Conference on the Role and Position of NGOs in the Council of Europe in Warsaw on 22 March 2019.

On 20-22 February 2019, a Seminar on Education and Training Pathways of Youth Workers was held to contribute to the implementation of the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on youth work, adopted in May 2017. At the end of the seminar, the 3rd European Youth Work Convention in 2020 was announced.

During the second 2019 part-session of the Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg, a side-event on the theme of sign language rights was organised to support the rights of persons with disabilities. The event concentrated on the launching of Ms Eeva Tupi’s study on sign language rights. At the beginning of the side-event, Finnish sign language rap artist Signmark performed in front of the Parliamentary Assembly in the Hemicycle.

To promote the entry into force of the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents, the Presidency, together with the CDDH, organised a side-event to the 1339th meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies on 6 March 2019. The Convention is the first legally binding Council of Europe instrument to recognise a general right of access to documents held by public authorities.

**Other issues**

In February 2019, Finland made a voluntary contribution of approximately €570,000 to support the Council of Europe’s Action Plan for Ukraine 2018-2021.

A side-event was organised at the Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in collaboration with the Parliamentary Assembly and the International Parliamentary Union in New York in March 2019 on the theme of sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians and contributing to the #NotInMyParliament campaign.

A Consultation on the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was held on 26-27 March 2019 to contribute to enhanced implementation of Cultural Routes’ activities in line with the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the Faro Convention of the Council of Europe. The recommendations of the consultation are to be published by the Routes 4U-programme.

Finland also offered a rich [cultural programme](https://www.strasbourg.eu/documents/976405/1620399/Programme+pr%C3%A9sidence+finlandaise+novembre+2018+%C3%A0+mai+2019.pdf/71c94adf-49eb-7fb3-4a0d-3684ed81aa23) during its Council of Europe Presidency including, among others, music, cinema, literature and photography. Cellist Seeli Toivio opened the cultural programme with her concert in Strasbourg Cathedral; kantele player Ida Elina and deaf rap artist Signmark gave their concerts in Strasbourg during the Presidency. The Finnish movie week presented Finnish cinema from different decades. Finland was also invited as a guest country to the Strasbourg Christmas Market in 2018.

**Appendix**

**CALENDAR OF MAIN EVENTS DURING THE FINNISH PRESIDENCY**

1. **Handing over the Presidency from Croatia to Finland**

**21 November 2018, Strasbourg**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs

1. Roundtable of the European Governmental LGBTI Focal Points Network

21–22 November 2018, Tallinn, Helsinki

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry of Justice

together with the Government of Estonia

1. **PACE Standing Committee**

**22‒23 November 2018, Helsinki**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Parliament of Finland

1. The 20 years of the Single Court of the European Court of Human Rights

26 November 2018, Strasbourg

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs

1. CDDH Workshop on the Protection and Promotion of the Civil Society Space in Europe

29 November 2018, Strasbourg

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs

1. Human Rights Defenders in the Council of Europe area – current challenges and possible solutions, Round table organised by the Office of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

13‒14 December 2018, Helsinki

1. **First 2019 Part-Session of the Parliamentary Assembly**

**21–25 January 2019, Strasbourg**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Parliament of Finland

**and event to mark the 20th anniversary of the Commissioner for Human Rights**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs

1. Conference Protecting Common European Standards on the Rule of Law

5 February 2019, Tampere

Responsible Finnish Authority: University of Tampere, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Prime Minister’s Office

1. Education and Training Pathways of Youth Workers

20‒22 February 2019, Helsinki

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry of Education and Culture

1. **High-Level Expert Conference on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights and the Rule of Law**

**26–27 February 2019, Helsinki**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice (advisory role: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment)

1. **Meeting of the Bureau of the Congress**

**1 March 2019, Helsinki**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, Ministry of Finance

1. Expert Meeting on the Implementation of Roma Integration Strategies and the International Roma Women’s Conference

25‒27 March 2019, Espoo

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry for Foreign Affairs

1. Expert Conference on Tackling Gender Stereotypes and Sexism

28‒29 March 2019, Helsinki

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

1. **First 2019 Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities**

**2‒4 April 2019, Strasbourg**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities

1. **Second 2019 Part-Session of the Parliamentary Assembly**

**8-12 April 2019, Strasbourg**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Parliament of Finland

**and a side event on 10th April 2019 to launch a study on sign language, with a music performance by rap artist Signmark**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs

1. Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights, Plenary Meeting of EPAN

16‒17 April 2019, Helsinki

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Ministry of Justice

1. High-Level Conference on Responses to Prison Overcrowding

24‒25 April 2019, Strasbourg

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry of Justice

1. Expert Conference on Sexual Violence against Women and Children in Sports

29-30 April 2019, Helsinki

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry of Education and Culture

1. **129th Session of the Committee of Ministers**

**16‒17 May 2019, Helsinki**

Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs

**Other events organised during our presidency:**

- UN – Council of Europe dialogue: Freedom of Expression and New Technology 7 February 2019 Strasbourg.  Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

- Side event at the UN Commission of the Status of Women. March 2019, New York. Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

- Towards a broader view of language education: the CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors. 1 March 2019, Helsinki. Responsible Finnish Authority: Finnish National Agency for Education.

- Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Strengthening regional development through cultural tourism. 26-27 March 2019, Finland. Responsible Finnish Authority: Ministry of Education and Culture together with the European Institute of Cultural Routes.

1. The term “Roma and Travellers” is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “*Gens du voyage*”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)