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1. Overview

The period under review was dominated by work in five different issue areas: migration; the rights of persons with disabilities; women's rights and gender equality; the situation of human rights defenders; and the safety of journalists and media freedom.

I addressed issues related to migration in my report on Greece, focusing on the reception and integration of migrants. In a letter addressed to the Prime Minister of Croatia, I raised concerns about allegations of collective expulsions. The need to provide clear guarantees against collective expulsions as well as adequate safeguards of the right of every person to seek asylum was also raised in a letter sent to the Presidents of the Congress and the Senate of Spain. In a Human Rights Comment entitled "Open minds are needed to improve the protection of LGBTI asylum seekers in Europe," I described a number of challenges facing LGBTI asylum seekers when seeking protection in Council of Europe member states.

The human rights of persons with disabilities were the focus of my visit to Romania. I raised the shortcomings in the implementation of the relevant legislation, notably the lack of adequate safeguards against involuntary institutionalisation, and the urgency of ensuring that measures taken for the legal representation of persons with disabilities would no longer involve them being deprived of their legal capacity. I also expressed myself twice on the on-going preparation by the Committee on Bioethics (DH-BIO) of a draft Additional Protocol to the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine. Both in a hearing organised by the relevant committees of the Parliamentary Assembly and in my written comments submitted to the DH-BIO in the framework of a consultation procedure, I explained my serious concerns regarding this draft Additional Protocol recommending that the DH-BIO instead focus on alternatives to involuntary measures.

Preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence was my big area of focus in the field of women's rights and gender equality. In a statement published ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women to support the ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention, I stressed that the latter is the most comprehensive and far-reaching international treaty to address violence against women. During my visit to Romania, I welcomed the ratification by this country of the Istanbul Convention and called on officials at the highest political levels to send a strong message that gender-based discrimination is unacceptable.

I continued to devote considerable attention to the situation of human rights defenders. I reacted publicly to several situations where the safety and liberty of human rights defenders were at risk. I intervened as a third party before the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Emin Huseynov v Azerbaijan* relating to the deprivation of nationality of the applicant, a media freedom advocate and human rights defender, who subsequently became stateless. I participated in a side event organised by the Human Rights House Foundation on the margins of a meeting of the Committee of Ministers in order to raise awareness about the situation of human rights defenders in Europe and encourage member states to support their activities. Thanks to the support of the Finnish Chairmanship, my Office organised a round table in Helsinki which gathered human rights defenders from all over Europe to identify and assess current trends and challenges affecting the work of human rights defenders, thus allowing me to gain an accurate understanding of the current situation in order to target my future activities in support of

human rights defenders. I also underlined the crucial role played at national level for the protection of human rights defenders by independent national human rights institutions in a Human Rights Comment published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the “Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions” (the Paris Principles). Paris Principles compliant national human rights institutions are uniquely placed to advance human rights and can act as a bridge between civil society and the authorities.

In the field of freedom of expression and media freedom, in a Human Rights Comment entitled “Misuse of anti-terror legislation threatens freedom of expression” I stressed that the glorification of terrorism is widespread, especially online, and must be combated, but that counter-terrorism legislation may become a dangerous tool when the offences are either not clearly or too widely defined and lead to unnecessary or disproportionate restrictions to the right to freedom of expression. I called on member states to pay attention to existing human rights standards before adopting any new counter-terrorism measures and also urged them to limit the restrictions on freedom of expression to those that are strictly necessary to protect national security and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued. During the period under review, I unfortunately also had to make two statements concerning the murders of two women journalists. In the first one, commemorating the twelfth anniversary of the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, I paid tribute to her remarkable work and highlighted the need to establish the truth regarding her assassination. In the second statement, I called for an urgent and full investigation into the murder of Victoria Marinova which took place in October. I have already underlined that media freedom, and more particularly the safety of journalists are among the priorities of my mandate and I will come back to this subject in my Observations and Reflections at the end of this report.

2. Missions and Visits

Contact mission to Turkey

The Commissioner conducted a contact mission to Turkey from 15 to 19 October, travelling to Istanbul and Ankara. The aim of this visit was to initiate a dialogue with the Turkish authorities and civil society on a number of human rights issues of interest to the Commissioner.

During her visit, the Commissioner held meetings with the President of the Turkish Constitutional Court, Zühtü Arslan; Minister of Justice, Abdülhamit Gül; Head of the Turkish Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Akif Çağatay Kılıç; Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Faruk Kaymakçı; the Chair and members of the Inquiry Commission on the State of Emergency Measures; and representatives of the Directorate General of Migration Management. She also met three ombudspersons, responsible for: human rights; women’s rights; children’s rights; and the public service regime and prisons; as well as the Chair and members of the Board of the Turkish Human Rights and Equality Institution. The Commissioner also held a series of meetings in Istanbul and Ankara with a number of NGOs and civil society representatives.

During the contact mission, the Commissioner announced to the Turkish authorities her intention to conduct a fully-fledged country visit to Turkey in the first half of 2019.

Visit to Romania

The Commissioner carried out a visit to Romania from 12 to 16 November, focusing on the human rights of persons with disabilities and violence against women. The Commissioner also took this opportunity to hold discussions with the authorities on the on-going reform of the judicial system in Romania and on the protection of journalists' rights.

During her visit the Commissioner met with the Prime Minister of Romania, Vasilica-Viorica Dăncilă; the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Teodor-Viorel Meleşcanu; the Minister of Justice, Tudorel Toader; the then Minister of Labour and Social Justice, Lia-Olguța Vasilescu; the First Deputy to the Prosecutor General, Laura Oprean; and officials from the Ministry of Health and representatives of the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption, of the National Authority for Persons with Disabilities, and of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. She also met the Ombudsman and his deputies; the president of the National Council for Combating Discrimination; the president of the Council for the monitoring of the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and representatives of civil society. In addition, the Commissioner travelled to Vâlcea County, where she visited several residential institutions for persons with disabilities, a special school, and a shelter for victims of domestic violence.

Despite the recent improvements to the legal protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, the Commissioner was concerned about the shortcomings in the implementation of the relevant legislation, noting in particular the problems posed by the overlapping mandates of different authorities and monitoring bodies. She also regretted that the legislation still lacked adequate safeguards against involuntary institutionalisation and that endeavours to decrease the number of institutionalised persons were not coupled with suitable efforts to increase their access to community-based services. She further urged the authorities to ensure that measures taken for the legal representation of persons with disabilities would no longer involve their deprivation of legal capacity. Lastly, while noting that small residential units may offer a better alternative to large institutions, the Commissioner highlighted the goal of providing care for children in a family environment.

Concerning violence against women, the Commissioner welcomed the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2016. She emphasised the need to ensure that women's complaints against violence are effectively investigated and to strengthen victim protection. She also called on officials at the highest political levels to send a strong message that gender-based discrimination is unacceptable.

With a view to ensuring better protection of the rights of persons with disabilities and of victims of domestic violence, the Commissioner stressed that it was crucial to fully implement the relevant judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. She also drew attention to the significant role of civil society in the protection of the rights of vulnerable people and urged the authorities to enhance their co-operation with NGOs.

Regarding the reform of the judicial system, the Commissioner underlined the importance of maintaining the independence of the judiciary and urged the authorities to give effect to the recommendations of the Venice Commission and GRECO and to carry out the reform in compliance with Romania's international human rights obligations.

Lastly, the Commissioner called for the protection of journalists' right to confidential sources. Noting that the Romanian authorities have recently asked a journalism organisation to disclose information on the sources of their investigative report on an alleged fraud concerning European funds, or face the threat of a very large fine in case of non-compliance, the Commissioner urged the Romanian authorities to withdraw these measures and to avoid similar cases in the future.

The Commissioner's report on her visit to Romania is forthcoming.

Mission to Warsaw

On 22 November, the Commissioner delivered a keynote speech at the 7th edition of the annual "Warsaw Dialogue for Democracy" conference organised by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In her remarks, the Commissioner emphasised the need to oppose certain negative tendencies observable in a number of European countries, notably the stigmatisation of social groups and professions, as well as the weakening of democratic institutions and civil society freedoms, and reiterated several key messages on protecting and respecting human rights in the digital sphere. During her stay in Poland on 22 and 23 November, the Commissioner also discussed human rights topics, including independence of the judiciary and the situation of civil society, with the Ombudsman, Adam Bodnar; the Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro; the President of the Supreme Court's Criminal Chamber, Stanisław Zabłocki; the Undersecretary of State in the Chancellery of the President of the Republic, Anna Surówka-Pasek; and representatives of civil society and judges' associations.

The speech is available on the Commissioner's website.

3. Reports and continuous dialogue

Letter to the Prime Minister of Croatia

On 5 October, the Commissioner published a letter addressed to the Prime Minister of Croatia in which she raised her concerns about allegations of collective expulsions from Croatia of 2500 migrants since the beginning of 2018 and reported violence and other crimes allegedly committed by law enforcement officers in this context. She called on the Croatian authorities to initiate and carry out prompt, effective and independent investigations into all recorded cases of collective expulsions and of allegations of violence against migrants, as well as other alleged crimes such as theft and to take all necessary measures to end such practices and prevent their recurrence. The Commissioner reiterated that all efforts to manage migration should be made strictly in line with the rule of law and binding international legal principles and urged the authorities to ensure that anyone who intends to make an asylum application has access to a fair and effective procedure.

The letter is available on the Commissioner's website along with the reply from the Croatian Minister of Interior.

Report on Greece

On 6 November, the Commissioner published a report following her visit to Greece from 25 to 29 June, focusing on the reception and integration of migrants, and on the impact of austerity on the rights to health and education.

Noting that commendable efforts were made by Greece's people and authorities to welcome migrants, the Commissioner warned that the reception conditions remain well below acceptable standards, especially on the islands, and urged the authorities to urgently address the poor hygiene conditions, the psychological distress and the uncertainty that are threatening the health of migrants and asylum seekers on the islands. She stressed that they should in particular accelerate transfers to the mainland and improve migrant reception capacities there too, and invited Greece's European partners to demonstrate their solidarity by supporting Greece's efforts to improve reception conditions.

The Commissioner also expressed deep concern about the reported poor shelter conditions, the lack of social support that most unaccompanied migrant children experience in Greece, and the deprivation of liberty of those detained under the "protective custody" regime. She called on the Greek authorities to immediately stop the detention of unaccompanied migrant children and to give migrant children access to inclusive education, so as to increase their chances of integration.

Noting that Greece is becoming a country of destination and is no longer merely a country of transit, the Commissioner underscored the need to invest in integration through a comprehensive and long term policy focused in particular on family reunification, long term residence and citizenship, education, vocational training, language and integration courses, and the fight against racism and discrimination against migrants.

As regards the impact of austerity packages on the human rights of people in Greece, the Commissioner stressed that shortages in staff and equipment and disruptions in the Greek healthcare system coupled with budget cuts in patients' wages and pensions have hampered access to health care. She urged the authorities to increase their efforts to recruit medical staff, remove obstacles to universal medical coverage, and support the mental health sector and the inclusion of persons with disabilities. In the education sector, the Commissioner noted that budget cuts have led to a marked deterioration in pupils' well-being, teachers' working conditions and school equipment, and called on the authorities to lift all barriers to effective access to education, including through targeted policies to include vulnerable children, children with disabilities and Roma children.

The report is available on the Commissioner's website along with the comments of the Greek authorities.

Letter to the Presidents of the Congress and the Senate of Spain on the review of the 2015 Law on Citizens' Safety

On 23 November, the Commissioner published a letter addressed to the Presidents of the Congress and the Senate of Spain about the review of the 2015 Law on Citizens' Safety. While welcoming the resumption of the review process, the Commissioner highlighted her concerns about the reported negative impact the application of this law has had on the enjoyment of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly. She stressed in particular the fact that the broad and imprecise wording of the law gave a wide

margin of discretion to law enforcement forces in interpreting it, thus allowing for potentially disproportionate and arbitrary limitations to the exercise of these rights. She urged the Parliament to ensure that the review of the law eliminates possibilities of disproportionate interferences with the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly.

The Commissioner also referred to the provisions of the law regarding foreigners entering the cities of Ceuta and Melilla and underlined that these failed to provide clear guarantees against *refoulement* and collective expulsions as well as adequate safeguards for the right of every person to seek asylum. She reiterated her previous recommendation that the authorities should provide without delay the border police with clear and mandatory guidance on how to act in compliance with international human rights standards when intercepting migrants at the borders of Ceuta and Melilla.

Letter to the Minister for Children and Young Persons of Scotland on the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Bill

On 20 December, the Commissioner published a letter addressed to Maree Todd MSP, Scottish Minister for Children and Young People, on the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Bill. In light of the fact that Scotland has the lowest age of criminal responsibility in Europe, at 8 years of age, the Commissioner welcomed the Government's intention to raise it. However, the Commissioner urged the Scottish Government to increase the age of criminal responsibility to 14 at least, rather than 12 as currently proposed. This, she indicated, would be an important step in ensuring a child-friendly approach to dealing with children who come into conflict with the law, in line with Council of Europe and UN standards. Additionally, the Commissioner called for very clear safeguards in relation to the recording and disclosure of information about children who come into conflict with the law, which can have serious implications for their future lives. Similarly, provisions in the Bill concerning police powers with regard to children under the age of criminal responsibility should ensure prevention, education and diversion from any procedure that could look like a criminal investigation. In this regard, the Commissioner called for ensuring sufficient guarantees that when children need to be taken to a place of safety, reasonable alternatives to taking them to police stations are available in practice, and that they provide for a child-friendly and non-custodial environment.

The letter is available on the Commissioner's website along with the reply from the Scottish Minister for Children and Young Persons.

Following the Commissioner's letter to the Minister, the Convener of the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee invited the Commissioner to submit further evidence on the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Bill. The Commissioner did so by letter of 10 January 2019, which is also available on the Commissioner's website.

4. Themes

Safety of journalists, freedom of expression and media freedom

On 5 October, the Commissioner had a telephone conversation with the Croatian journalist Domagoj Margetić who had been on hunger strike for more than one month. During this exchange the Commissioner noted Mr Margetić's concerns which prompted him to go on hunger strike, notably the alleged lack of investigation into death threats, attacks against his property and physical attacks against him. The Commissioner invited Mr Margetić to end the hunger strike. Following the aforementioned exchange and his meeting with the Prime Minister of Croatia, on 22 October, Mr Margetić ended his 44 day hunger strike.

On 5 October, the Commissioner made a [statement](#) on the occasion of the twelfth anniversary of the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, renowned for her investigative journalism work exposing human rights abuses in the North Caucasus, in the entrance hall of her apartment building in Moscow. In her statement, the Commissioner paid tribute to the remarkable work of Anna Politkovskaya and highlighted the need to establish the truth about her assassination. Although five people have been tried and jailed for her murder, the masterminds of this crime have not yet been identified. The Commissioner emphasised that the Russian authorities had the duty to pursue the truth and achieve justice for Anna Politkovskaya, which she referred to as “a top political priority” owed first and foremost to her family and the general public, but also to ensure media freedom and the safety of journalists in the country.

On 8 October, the Commissioner published a statement on social media calling on the Bulgarian authorities to urgently and fully investigate the murder of the journalist Victoria Marinova and ensure that those responsible, including the masterminds, are held accountable.

On 29 November, the Commissioner participated in an exchange of views with the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI). After an overview of the first eight months of her mandate, the Commissioner focused on her work concerning human rights defenders, plans to further engage with the topic of artificial intelligence from a human rights perspective, and her work on the safety of journalists and other media actors, notably the fight against impunity. She stressed that persistent impunity has a chilling effect on society as a whole and creates an atmosphere of fear. Possible synergies with the CDMSI were also discussed.

On 4 December, the Commissioner published a Human Rights Comment entitled *Misuse of anti-terror legislation threatens freedom of expression*. While acknowledging that terrorism constitutes a serious threat to human rights and democracy which requests states' action to prevent and effectively sanction terrorist acts, the Commissioner stressed that the misuse of anti-terrorism legislation has become one of the most widespread threats to freedom of expression, including media freedom, in Europe.

Noting that the glorification of terrorism is widespread, especially online, and must be combated, the Commissioner stressed that counter-terrorism legislation may become a dangerous tool when the offences are either not clearly or too widely defined and lead to unnecessary or disproportionate restrictions to the right to freedom of expression. In addition, legislation aimed at countering terrorism and extremist violence is frequently

adopted following accelerated procedures and/or in the direct aftermath of terrorist attacks marked by shock, anxiety, a sense of emergency and of a necessary united front against the threat, leaving little space for thorough and peaceful discussions on the human rights impact and safeguards. This also increases the risks of misuse either for political or for what could be called 'populist' reasons, to send a signal to the population that the authorities are strong on the counterterrorism front and are doing their utmost to prevent terrorist attacks. Finally, by curtailing legitimate political debate, this response plays into the hands of the terrorists by installing an atmosphere of fear among society.

Stressing the need to adopt another approach aimed at protecting freedom of expression, the Commissioner stressed that, before adopting any new counter-terrorism measures, member states should pay attention to existing human rights standards and notably ensure that these measures are compatible with Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantee the right to freedom of expression.

In order to achieve the difficult balance between states' duty to protect society against terrorists and their obligation to uphold human rights in the fight against terrorism, the Commissioner called on member states to formulate the relevant legislation with sufficient precision to enable media actors and others to foresee, to a degree that is reasonable in the circumstances, the consequences which a given action may entail. She underlined that anti-terror legislation should only apply to content or activities which necessarily and directly imply the use or threat of violence with the intention to spread fear and provoke terror, and that any other type of content or activities should be addressed in the context of the duties and responsibilities that the exercise of freedom of expression carries with it, as defined by Article 10 paragraph 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Therefore, the Commissioner urged member states to limit the restrictions on freedom of expression to those that are strictly necessary to protect national security and are proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued. Moreover, the Commissioner stressed that anti-terror and security laws should not unduly interfere with the right of the media to impart information of public interest and the right of people to receive it. Finally, she called on member states to free all persons imprisoned because of the legitimate criticism they have expressed and to clear the criminal records of those who have been convicted for such reports.

Human rights of LGBTI people

On 11 October 2018, the Commissioner published her Human Rights Comment *Open minds are needed to improve the protection of LGBTI asylum seekers in Europe*. The Comment focused on the fact that LGBTI asylum seekers face a number of challenges when seeking protection in Council of Europe member states. At a time when the institution of asylum is under pressure across Europe, LGBTI asylum seekers are particularly at risk of the rolling back of protection. The Commissioner pointed, first of all, to certain interpretations or applications of international standards that prevent LGBTI asylum seekers from getting the protection they need. Additionally, she noted that asylum procedures may be characterised by stereotyping, disbelief or even humiliating tests or questioning, which form barriers to the proper assessment of asylum claims and the identification of specific needs of LGBTI persons. Furthermore, the Commissioner noted the importance of the early identification of vulnerabilities, as well as ensuring safe reception conditions that protect LGBTI persons from violence, trafficking or other physical or psychological abuse.

To overcome these challenges, the Commissioner set out four key steps Council of Europe member states should take: (1) ensuring that their domestic laws explicitly recognise a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics as valid grounds for recognition as a refugee; (2) applying the authoritative guidance by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; (3) ensuring practical guidance and training for all those involved in the asylum procedure, in close co-operation with civil society groups; and (4) looking at the national application of existing tools for assessing the vulnerability of LGBTI asylum seekers, and engaging in further research and exchanges on how to ensure safe reception conditions.

On 26 October, a member of the Office attended the annual conference of the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe) in Brussels. The conference gathered hundreds of LGBTI activists from all over Europe and this year's theme was "Politics for Change". The conference warned about worrying political developments in Europe, including the rise of nationalism and populism, and their impact on equality for LGBTI people.

On 20 November, the Commissioner took part, together with several United Nations Special Rapporteurs, in a video message on the occasion of the Trans Day of Remembrance 2018. Each year, trans people are killed in hate-motivated violent crimes, including in Europe. In the video, the Commissioner called on policy makers to take steps to fulfil their obligations to protect trans people from violence.

Human rights of persons with disabilities

The Commissioner expressed herself on two occasions regarding her concerns about the on-going preparation by the Council of Europe Committee on Bioethics (DH-BIO) of a draft Additional Protocol to the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine "concerning the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of Persons with Mental Disorder with regard to Involuntary Placement and Involuntary Treatment".

On 9 October, the Commissioner delivered a speech at a hearing on protecting the rights of people with psychosocial disabilities with regard to involuntary measures in psychiatry, organised jointly by the PACE Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development and the PACE Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. On 8 November, she submitted her comments on the draft Additional Protocol under a consultation procedure launched by the DH-BIO. Both in her speech and these comments, the Commissioner expressed her opposition to this draft Additional Protocol, owing to three main reasons.

Firstly, the Commissioner considered that the approach behind the draft Additional Protocol was incompatible with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a core global human rights instrument ratified by 46 member states of the Council of Europe, as also stressed by her predecessor, the PACE, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the treaty body established under the Convention), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteurs on the rights of persons with disabilities and on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU.

Secondly, the Commissioner expressed doubts about the potential added value of the draft Additional Protocol and its assumption that the lack of legal safeguards is the main reason behind the human rights violations suffered by persons with psychosocial disabilities. In her opinion, the main causes were the fact that existing safeguards operate within legal systems which are inherently discriminatory against persons with psychosocial disabilities and the lack of alternatives to coercion in existing mental health systems.

Finally, the Commissioner pointed to the insufficient consultation in the drafting process of the most representative pan-European disability rights NGOs, in particular those specialising in the human rights of persons with psychosocial disabilities, and their firm opposition to the draft Additional Protocol.

For these reasons, the Commissioner called on the DH-BIO not to adopt the draft Additional Protocol, recommending that the Committee focus instead on alternatives to involuntary measures.

The texts of the Commissioner's speech at the joint hearing and her comments on the draft Additional Protocol are available on the Commissioner's website.

Women's rights and gender equality

On 22 November, the Commissioner published a statement to support the ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention ("Fulfil the promise of a comprehensive response to violence against women"). She pointed out that all women and girls had the right to live free from violence and that gender-based violence against women was a human rights violation to be combated vigorously. The Istanbul Convention was drawn up with this purpose in mind. It is the most comprehensive and far-reaching international treaty to address violence against women laying out state obligations to prevent violence, protect victims and prosecute the perpetrators. It is very encouraging that 33 countries out of 47 member states of the Council of Europe have already ratified the Istanbul Convention. The aim should be a speedy ratification by all 47 member states of the Council of Europe.

The Commissioner noted that there were growing efforts to sow confusion and spread false narratives about the Istanbul Convention to obstruct its ratification. The protagonists often focus on criticising the concept of "gender" and claim that the use of such a term in the Convention would lead to the "destruction of the family" or the "end of traditional values". The Commissioner stressed that in reality such attacks tended to reject gender equality itself and were aimed at reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women's and men's lives. She highlighted the fact that the term gender in the Istanbul Convention was used to make the point that gender stereotypes about women and men had to be addressed because they played a central part in perpetuating violence against women. The expression "gender-based violence" is used to describe forms of violence that are directed against women because they are women, and/or which affect women disproportionately.

In view of the high number of states which have already accepted to be bound by the Istanbul Convention, the Commissioner said that increasing emphasis needed to be put on its effective implementation. She referred to the findings of the independent expert body (GREVIO) tasked to assess the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and pointed out

that the identified implementation gaps had to be resolved to fulfil the promise of a comprehensive response to violence against women.

National Human Rights Structures

From 1 to 3 October, a member of the Office participated in the conference organised by the European branch of the International Ombudsman Institute (IOI) on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the institution in Brussels. The conference, which was attended by a large number of heads of institutions, was entitled “The Ombudsman in an open and participatory society”. The discussions focused on current challenges for Ombudsman institutions, including access to information and transparency, enabling the participation of citizens, and playing effectively their role as guarantors of states’ international human rights obligations. The conference presented the opportunity for the Council of Europe and the Office of the Commissioner to reaffirm their firm commitment to co-operating with Ombudsman institutions across Europe.

From 24 to 25 October, a member of the Office participated in the annual conference of the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) in Athens. The conference was attended by representatives of 39 European National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), as well as NGOs and international stakeholders. The discussions focused on the role of NHRIs in the face of mounting attacks against democracy, the rule of law and human rights in Europe. Through several working groups, the participants sought to develop a regional Action Plan to implement the NHRIs’ Marrakech Declaration on “Expanding the civic space and promoting and protecting human rights defenders, with a specific focus on women: The role of national human rights institutions”, which was adopted earlier this year.

On 7 November, the Commissioner sent a video message on the occasion of Equinet’s Annual General Meeting 2018. Equinet is the network of European national Equality Bodies, which are mandated to tackle discrimination. In her address, the Commissioner highlighted her own priorities in this field, notably to continue efforts to ensure that the vulnerable or disadvantaged, including women, people with disabilities, migrants and asylum seekers, children, older people, LGBTI people and Roma, are not left behind. The Commissioner also drew to the attention of Equality Bodies the discrimination challenges that are likely to arise in relation to the use of new technologies and artificial intelligence. She stressed the key role that Equality Bodies play to secure equal rights for all, and her commitment to continued close co-operation with them.

On 18 December, the Commissioner published a Human Rights Comment on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the “Principles Relating to the Status of National Institutions”, better known as the Paris Principles. The Commissioner underscored that Paris Principles compliant national human rights institutions (NHRIs) have become recognised actors within the global human rights framework, and noted that several NHRIs have risen to the challenge in the current difficult environment and forcefully defended human rights. She also expressed concern that several NHRIs have suffered actions that undermine their effectiveness and independence over the past few years, including through budget cuts, non-implementation of their recommendations, weakening of their leadership, and verbal attacks by politicians. Emphasising the crucial role of NHRIs in protecting ordinary citizens and human rights defenders, the Commissioner urged states that do not yet have an NHRI to create one, and all others to strengthen their NHRIs and ensure they are fully independent and resourced.

Prisons and conditions of detention

On 6 November, the Commissioner held an exchange of views with the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (the CPT) during its plenary meeting. The Commissioner presented her recent activities to the CPT members and outlined some of the topics to which she is devoting particular attention, including migration, the rights of persons with disabilities, LGBTI rights, the situation of human rights defenders, the influence of new technologies and artificial intelligence on human rights, as well as several others. The exchange of views also allowed the Commissioner to discuss possible co-operation with the CPT on matters of common interest, such as those concerning the detention of migrants, institutions for persons with disabilities and older persons, how to proceed with deinstitutionalisation, etc. There was support for continuing such exchanges in the future.

Independence of the judiciary

On 14 December, the Commissioner issued a statement calling on the President of Hungary to return to the Parliament the legislative package on administrative courts to enable its fully informed review. She expressed concern at the strong powers the reform of the judiciary conferred on the Minister of Justice in the future administrative court system, stressing that this raised issues about the independence of the judiciary. The Commissioner also noted that it was regrettable that the Hungarian Government and the Parliament had not waited for the Venice Commission to issue its Opinion on the legislation.

5. Other meetings

Meeting with the Minister of Justice of Spain, Ms Dolores Delgado, 19 November 2018

On 19 November, the Commissioner met with Ms Dolores Delgado, the Minister of Justice of Spain. The exchange of views focused on actions launched by the Spanish authorities in the areas of gender-based violence, rights of persons with disabilities and transitional justice.

The parliamentary review of the 2015 Law on Citizens' Safety, currently under way, was also discussed, as the Commissioner shared her views on the law's potentially chilling effect on freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly.

Meeting with H.S.H Alois, Hereditary Prince and H.R.H. Sophie, Hereditary Princess of Liechtenstein

On 26 November, the Commissioner met H.S.H Alois, Hereditary Prince of Liechtenstein, and H.R.H. Sophie, Hereditary Princess of Liechtenstein. This meeting, in which the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Liechtenstein also participated, was an occasion to discuss Liechtenstein's support for human rights work within the Council of Europe, the Commissioner's priorities, as well as human rights issues of relevance to Liechtenstein.

Meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Mr Zohrab Mnatsakanyan

The Commissioner and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Mr Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, met in Strasbourg on 20 November prior to the parliamentary elections in Armenia and discussed, among other things, the likelihood of a higher representation of women in public decision-making and the perspectives for adoption of anti-discrimination legislation. The Commissioner further inquired about the circumstances of the cancellation of a recent LGBTI forum in Yerevan, took note of the Minister's views on the prevention of the crime of genocide in connection with the upcoming forum in Yerevan, and offered her full support for the implementation of the new Council of Europe Action Plan for Armenia.

Meeting with the Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Mr Giorgi Gakharia

The Commissioner received the Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia, Mr Giorgi Gakharia, and Deputy Ministers Ms Natia Mezvrishvili and Ms Nino Javakhadze, in Strasbourg on 11 December. The main item of discussion related to the activity of the Human Rights Department set up in January 2018 to streamline the Georgian law enforcement's response to cases involving domestic violence, violence against women, or vulnerable persons. The Commissioner also inquired about the planned police reform, the progress made in the investigation of the abduction of the journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, as well as the situation in the non-government controlled territories.

Meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Mr Timo Soini

On 14 December, the Commissioner met in Helsinki with Mr Timo Soini, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland. The Commissioner welcomed the adoption of the Recommendation on civil society space in Europe under the Finnish Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers and expressed her gratitude for Finland's support to the roundtable on the situation of human rights defenders in Europe that had just concluded in Helsinki. The discussion also focused on certain negative trends affecting the human rights situation in Europe in general, as well as on challenges in monitoring human rights in certain disputed or non-government controlled areas, referred to as 'grey zones'.

6. Human Rights Defenders

During the reference period, the Commissioner continued to devote particular attention to the situation of human rights defenders in Europe.

On 4 October, the Commissioner published written observations submitted to the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Emin Huseynov against Azerbaijan, relating to the deprivation of nationality of the applicant – a media freedom advocate and human rights defender – as a measure of retaliation for his legitimate human rights activity (see section *European Court of Human Rights* below).

The Commissioner reacted publicly in relation to several situations where the safety and liberty of human rights defenders were at risk. On 16 October, she issued a statement via social media (Facebook and Twitter) regarding the abduction and ill-treatment by unidentified armed men of Oleg Kozlovsky, an Amnesty International researcher, which had taken place in Ingushetia, Russian Federation on 6 October. Mr Kozlovsky was taken

to a field, forced to strip naked and beaten; his attackers made death threats against his family and subjected him to mock executions. The Commissioner found that there could be little doubt that this serious crime had been aimed at intimidating human rights defenders. Emphasising that the entrenched climate of impunity for human rights violations in the North Caucasus had a broader negative impact on human rights in the region, and recalling the duty of states to ensure a safe environment for the legitimate activities of human rights defenders, the Commissioner urged the Russian authorities to condemn the attack against Mr Kozlovsky unequivocally, and to carry out a prompt and effective investigation with a view to identifying and holding those responsible to account.

On 20 November, the Commissioner published a statement concerning the arrest of thirteen prominent academics, civil society representatives and human rights defenders in Turkey. In her statement, the Commissioner noted that these arrests had been linked to the case of Osman Kavala, a renowned human rights defender, philanthropist and long-standing partner of the Commissioner's Office, who has been deprived of his liberty by the Turkish authorities since 18 October 2017. Against this background, the Commissioner expressed scepticism about the normalisation process in the country following the lifting of the state of emergency and announced that she would intervene as a third party before the European Court of Human Rights in the pending case of Mehmet Osman Kavala v. Turkey.

On 6 December, the Commissioner issued a statement expressing dismay about the arrest of Lev Ponomarev – a senior figure in the Russian human rights movement – following a decision of a district court of Moscow finding him guilty of breaching the rules governing public events and sentencing him to 25 days of administrative detention. Mr Ponomarev was convicted for disseminating information on Facebook about an unauthorised rally aimed at demonstrating solidarity with certain young activists whom he and others considered to be wrongfully charged under anti-terrorism and anti-extremism legislation. In her statement the Commissioner noted that punishing someone for sharing information on social media about a public event intended to be of a peaceful nature can hardly be justifiable, and urged the Russian authorities to release Mr Ponomarev. Stressing that Mr Ponomarev's 24-day sentence was a stark example of the disproportionate nature of the sanctions foreseen in the legislation governing public events, the Commissioner also recalled that her Office had repeatedly called on the Russian authorities to revise the laws concerned.

The following day (7 December), the Commissioner expressed concern on social media (Twitter) about the administrative detention of a human rights lawyer in Crimea, Emil Kurbedinov, for the alleged dissemination of extremist materials on Facebook. In this regard, the Commissioner referred to her recently published Human Rights Comment analysing how the misuse of anti-terrorism legislation threatened freedom of expression.

On 10 December, the Commissioner was invited by the Minister for Europe and of Foreign Affairs of France to deliver a speech at the opening of an event organised at the Quai d'Orsay on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which brought together several human rights defenders from different countries. In her speech, the Commissioner underlined the essential role of human rights defenders and deplored the multiplication of obstacles which make their work and that of many journalists and civil society organisations more difficult and sometimes even more dangerous. She also called for the promotion of the values of equality, respect, diversity and inclusion in the public debate. At the closing of the event, the Minister for Europe and

Foreign Affairs presented the guidelines of France's new strategy for the protection and promotion of human rights.

Promoting an enabling environment for the work of human rights defenders

The Commissioner continued to pursue efforts towards promoting an enabling environment for the activities of human rights defenders in the Council of Europe area and in raising awareness about their situation. On 24 October, she delivered a keynote speech at a side event, organised by the Human Rights House Foundation on the margins of a regular meeting of the Minister's Deputies at the Council of Europe, in order to brief the Committee of Ministers on the situation of human rights defenders in Europe and encourage member states to support their activities. Ed O'Donovan, a representative of FrontLineDefenders, as well as human rights defenders from Serbia (Milan Antonijević) and Russia (Konstantin Baranov) also participated in the event. Noting that the present year marks the anniversaries of the UN and Council of Europe declarations on human rights defenders, the Commissioner observed that defenders continue to face various forms of reprisals, and that the regulatory space for civil society organisations is being restricted in a growing number of European countries.

The Commissioner referred to certain phenomena with a negative impact on human rights defenders, including judicial harassment in the North Caucasus (Russian Federation) and Azerbaijan, restrictions upon the activities of civil society organisations assisting migrants in Hungary and in the Mediterranean, and the marginalisation of activists defending vulnerable groups, such as LGBTI or Roma communities, in different European countries. Reiterating that states have the paramount role in ensuring the protection of human rights defenders and in promoting an enabling environment for their work, the Commissioner called upon all Council of Europe member states to uphold their commitments in good faith.

On 6 December, the Commissioner delivered a video message on the occasion of Human Rights Day, in which she specifically stressed the duty of states to protect human rights defenders. In her statement, the Commissioner noted a worrying retrogression in the protection of human rights defenders in a growing number of European countries and the presence of a huge gap between international standards protecting human rights defenders and the reality. She also recalled the crucial importance of the work of human rights defenders in democratic societies and the duty of states to support them. The Commissioner called on all Council of Europe member states to recommit to the standards they had agreed on and to create and maintain an environment which is safe and favourable for the activities of human rights defenders.

Members of the Office of the Commissioner also participated actively in various events and consultations with human rights defenders networks and experts, including in a panel discussion at the European Youth Centre on the "shrinking space" for civil society and its impact upon young people and their organisations (Strasbourg, 7 November) and the World Summit on Human Rights Defenders (Paris, 29-31 October).

Round-table with Human Rights Defenders

From 13 to 14 December, the Office of the Commissioner organised a round-table in Helsinki with human rights defenders entitled "Human Rights Defenders in the Council of Europe Area: Current Challenges and Possible Solutions". The event, which took place

thanks to the support of the Finnish chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers and which was opened by the former President of Finland, Ms Tarja Halonen, gathered together a medium-sized and diverse group of some 50 participants, including human rights activists from various European countries. Representatives of international governmental and non-governmental organisations also participated in the event. The round-table sought to identify and assess current threats and challenges affecting the safety and work of human rights defenders and civil society organisations throughout Europe, as well as to explore potential risks and opportunities posed by an evolving digital and technological environment. The meeting also provided human rights defenders from different parts of Europe with an excellent opportunity for networking and interaction with one another and with key international stakeholders and mechanisms supporting their activities. The stimulating and inspiring discussions during the round-table allowed the Commissioner to gain a more accurate understanding of the current situation, which will help her to target her future activities in support of human rights defenders.

7. European Court of Human Rights

Third party intervention before the European Court of Human Rights in case of Emin Huseynov v. Azerbaijan

On 4 October, the Commissioner published her written observations submitted to the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Emin Huseynov against Azerbaijan (application no. 1/16). This case relates to the deprivation of nationality of the applicant, who subsequently became stateless.

In her submission, the Commissioner highlighted the clear pattern of repression in Azerbaijan against those expressing dissent or criticism of the authorities and underscored that deprivation of nationality can also be used as a tool of punishment to silence dissenting and critical voices. The consequences for the enjoyment by these persons of their human rights are even more serious when deprivation of nationality leads to statelessness. In the Commissioner's view, given the very serious impact that statelessness may have on an individual's enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, there should be no deprivation of nationality that leads to statelessness.

The Commissioner's written observations are available on her website.

Seminar on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the New Court

On 26 November, the Commissioner participated in a seminar held on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the single, full-time European Court of Human Rights. In her speech, she stressed that despite remarkable achievements, the Court is facing a number of problems. The trend of selective or non-implementation of Court judgments is one of them. In relation to the Court's workload, the Commissioner underscored that the issue of workload is not only about statistics, or about the need to save an institution flooded with complaints: it is about human beings turning to the Court because they feel unable to find justice at home. According to the Commissioner, the problem is not that people complain, but that they have reasons to do so. She insisted on the need to preserve the Convention system as the home of freedoms, justice and human dignity.

The Commissioner indicated that she intends to devote a significant part of her work to this endeavour by continuing to increase the awareness of national authorities and civil society about the Convention system and helping member states to remedy structural problems that may hinder the protection of human rights, but also by providing the Court with objective and impartial information through third party interventions and developing her contribution to the execution of judgments.

8. Communication and Information work

The main media coverage (measured until 10 December) concerned migration, the report on Greece and freedom of expression. More than 100 news items were published by national and international media outlets.

The Commissioner's work on **migration**-related issues was covered by *AFP, Al Jazeera, ANSA, Askaneews, Citizen Truth, Corriere della Sera, El Pais, Glas Istre, HINA, Il Giornale, Il Messaggero, Il Gazzettino, Il Piccolo, InfoMigrants, Klix.ba, Kurier Online, La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, Libération, Libero Quotidiano, N1 Info, Novi list, Open Democracy, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, RAI News, RFI, RTL, Scienza in Rete, Sir, The New York Times, Times of Malta, and TPI.*

The report on **Greece** received wide media attention both nationally and internationally (*AFP, ORFANSA, Il Messaggero, Boursorama, Challenges.fr, Mediapart, Reuters, Zonebourse, CNN, Deutschlandfunk, Diario Vasco, EFE, DW, NTV, Ethnos, iAposi.gr, Limnos FM, News247.gr, Protothema, Skai, To Vima, EUObserver, Euronews, Greek City times, Greek Reporter, Info Migrants, Kathimerini, Kerdos.gr, Ore 12 Sanita, Pronews.gr, Reader, Palo, Reporter, and The Huffington Post*).

888.hu, ACN, El Nacional, ANSA, SDA/ATS, Córdoba Online, El Periódico Extremadura, El Periódico de Aragón, El Periódico Mediterráneo, Danas, Diari ARA, EFE, La Vanguardia, El diario, El Confidencial, El Español, El Pais, Emerging Europe, Europa Press, El Faro de Ceuta, Hürriyet, Interfax, SwissInfo, Kavkaskij uzel, Las Provincias, Ideal, Hoy, El Norte de Castilla, Diario Montañés, La Rioja Online, El Comercio, El Correo, SUR Online, Oslobođenje, The New York Times, and Times of Malta covered the Commissioner's work on **freedom of expression** and **freedom of assembly**.

The Commissioner's statement on developments affecting the work of human rights defenders and civil society in **Turkey** was covered by *Ahval news, Diken, Euronews, DW, FrontNews, Gazete duvaR, Hürriyet Daily News, Oslobođenje, Sputnik, T24, The Financial times, RFE, and Turan.*

An opinion editorial was published in the *Times of Malta* a year after the murder of **Daphne Caruana Galizia**. In the article, the Commissioner underscored that establishing the truth and learning the right lessons from this horrendous crime must become a top political priority in Malta.

Additional coverage concerned **Armenia** (*Arminfo*), austerity measures (*Huffington Post*), contact mission to Turkey (*Haberler*), speech for the 20th anniversary of the full time Court (*Law Society of Ireland Gazette*), LGBTI people (*InfoMigrants, ANSA, and NBC News*), persons with disabilities (*EFE, El Pais, and La Vanguardia*), antisemitism (*Osservatore*

Romano, and *SDA/ATS*), the report on Estonia (*Emerging Europe*), Russia (*Ukrinform*), the visit to Romania (*Adevarul*, *Agenzia Nova*, *AGERPRESS*, *Antena 3*, *Romania TV*, *Emerging Europe*, and *The Romania Journal*), women's rights (*Times of Malta*), and journalists' safety (*Times of Malta*).

Almost 30 000 unique visitors consulted the Commissioner's website (data retrieved on 5 December). Social media activity continued to increase, in particular on Twitter, with 31 tweets published, leading to a total number of 1.5 million impressions (i.e. the number of times users saw the tweets on Twitter) and an increase of over 2 300 followers.

In a video message addressed to the participants of the **3rd Global Forum Against the Crime of Genocide**, held in Yerevan on 9-11 December, the Commissioner stressed the importance of early action on genocide prevention, obtaining justice for victims and their families, and confronting the past responsibly, in particular through ensuring education free from prejudice.

On 31 October and 2 November, the Commissioner published a statement and a video message on the occasion of the **International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists**, in which she called on political leaders, opinion makers and influencers to make Europe a safe place for journalists by fighting impunity and protecting press freedom.

On 5 November the Commissioner sent a video message to a conference organised to mark the anniversary of the signing of the **European Convention on Human Rights**. The Commissioner underscored that preserving the Convention system is first and foremost a matter for member states, but that it also concerns us all. Everyone can and must do their part to keep the Convention the home of freedoms, justice and human dignity.

In a video message sent to the Human Rights Commission of **Scotland** on 10 December, the Commissioner underscored the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the role of National Human Rights Structures, and the need to surmount the gap between standards and reality when it comes to human rights implementation.

On the occasion of International Human Rights Day, on 10 December, the Commissioner announced a partnership with **Cartooning for Peace**, in particular through her support of a travelling exhibition, which was initially presented at the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs in Paris.

9. Observations and reflections

One of the first public positions that I took as Commissioner for Human Rights was the publication of an opinion editorial on the safety of journalists on the occasion of press freedom day in May 2018. Given that threats to journalists and media actors are common in many European countries, I made the choice to syndicate that article in as many national newspapers as possible. The interest shown by over 20 media outlets in different countries and languages spoke for the urgency to deal with this problem.

In addition to that, I have continued raising this issue in a number of country visits and public statements and I have been in constant contact with journalists' organisations.

Member states have strong safeguards in place to protect journalists. Press freedom is enshrined both in national and international laws, the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights grants the broadest scope of protection to the press, and international organisations have adopted a vast array of standards.

But much remains to be done to translate those standards into reality. Four journalists were murdered in European Union countries in recent times, in Denmark, Malta, the Slovak Republic and Bulgaria. Two of them, Daphne Caruana Galizia and Ján Kuciak, were investigating corruption cases and had reported threats to the police. Since 1992, over 150 journalists have been killed in Europe; that makes one every two months. While some were covering conflicts, the majority were trying to bring criminal activities under public scrutiny. Many of them had solicited police protection, but never received it.

Non-lethal physical violence also remains a widespread threat. As if that were not enough, detention, judicial harassment, intimidations and pressure on sources also oppress journalism in many European countries. This is further compounded by the fact that investigations into murders and crimes against journalists often drag on for years and produce mixed or no results at all. The actual perpetrators may in some cases receive a prison sentence, but those who mastermind such crimes are rarely punished.

This climate of impunity inflicts additional pain on journalists and their families, makes the perpetrators feel beyond accountability, and triggers further attacks against journalists. It also violates well-established human rights obligations. The unambiguous case-law of the European Court of Human Rights requires that states protect journalists' lives. In cases where they fail to uphold this obligation, the Court underscores that states still have the duty to carry out prompt, independent and effective investigations - which should be open to public scrutiny and accessible to the victims' families - aimed at punishing the hitmen and the masterminds of the killings.

The Court spelled out these obligations clearly in three prominent judgments in 2005, 2010 and 2018 in which it found that the authorities of Ukraine, Turkey and the Russian Federation had breached the European Convention on Human Rights by failing to protect the lives and carry out an effective investigation into the murders of journalists Georgiy Gongadze, Hrant Dink and Anna Politkovskaya respectively. These cases are however yet to be fully elucidated.

There is no doubt it is sometimes difficult to find the truth. But it is also true that all too often key decision-makers, the judiciary and the police ignore the obligations that

governments agreed to in joining our Organisation. This long-standing problem is unlikely to be solved now that populists and nationalists are gaining power in many European countries and beyond. Not only do they portray human rights as a nuisance to their political goals, but they also use their position of power to propagate increasingly intimidating and nasty rhetoric against journalists and media in general. This hostile climate only instills distrust towards the press and legitimises attacks against journalists. It therefore comes as no surprise that many journalists in Europe resort to self-censorship, as a Council of Europe survey showed in 2017.

Democracy, human rights and the rule of law cannot flourish in such a hostile environment. When journalists are unsafe, it is not only media freedom which suffers, but also the rights and freedoms of citizens. If journalists can no longer report freely and safely on issues of public interest, it means that citizens' ability to know the truth and hold those in a position of power to account is dramatically reduced. It also means that the sources of reliable information shrink, leaving more room for disinformation and manipulation.

In my role as Commissioner, I intend to devote a great deal of my efforts to helping member states confront these problems with the tools they themselves adopted.

A case in point is the Recommendation on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors that all our member states signed up to in 2016. A strategy to implement this recommendation has been running since March to help states apply the specific measures that it sets forth in the fields of prevention, protection and prosecution, as well as awareness raising and education. The strategy is in its early stages and requires the active participation of all member states.

However, states do not need to wait until the completion of the strategy to adopt protective measures for journalists. They can already replicate experiences taking place in several European countries. In Italy, where many journalists have been killed in the past and many others still face a variety of dangerous threats - including very hostile political rhetoric - the police and the judiciary have been providing life-saving protection measures for several years. Last year, 19 journalists were under 24 hour police escort and more than 160 journalists benefited from other, less restrictive protective measures.

In the Netherlands, the government, the Prosecutor's office, the police and journalists have reached an agreement to strengthen the protection of journalists. In Sweden, the government began an action plan in May to protect free speech which also aims at protecting journalists who are exposed to threats and hatred.

Governments can also support initiatives that journalists' organisations, non-governmental organisations and academia are carrying out. In Turkey, the journalists' union is engaged in providing psychological support to media professionals exposed to physical and verbal violence. In Italy, the NGO Ossigeno per l'informazione has been raising awareness on threats against journalists in the country for years, spotlighting largely unreported cases of attacks.

The tragic sequence of murders of journalists in Europe and the many threats they are facing is a call for action. This situation undercuts press freedom and puts our democracies in danger. European states have the duty and the tools to reverse this trend. They must show more political will and act before it is too late.