For the past 30 years the Council of Europe has worked to outlaw the death penalty in Europe. In the last ten years no executions have taken place in any of our 47 member countries*. The death penalty has been legally abolished in most of these countries but we still need to consolidate abolition in Europe and achieve abolition worldwide.

The right to life and the prohibition of torture, degrading and inhuman treatment lies at the heart of the European Convention of Human Rights. This Convention, drawn up by the Council of Europe and adopted in 1950, lays out the fundamental principles that guarantee human rights for the 800 million inhabitants of our 47 member states. A ban on the death penalty in peacetime is provided by Protocol N° 6 of the Convention – and so far all countries but one have signed and ratified it. Protocol N° 13 extends that ban to all circumstances – including times of war. This protocol still needs to be ratified by eight member states.

The death penalty is a very emotive issue. It touches some of our deepest instincts, including ideas of revenge, honour, hatred, and fear. When we hear of a particularly vicious crime or are close to the victim of a brutal act, we naturally have intense reactions, which could include wanting to see the perpetrator put to death. Many people across the continent still feel that the death penalty would be an acceptable response to particularly barbarous acts, and there are of course some countries in the world where the death penalty still exists.

Such legally sanctioned killing is as inhumane as the acts it seeks to redress. Victims of crime need support and justice, but there are many reasons why the death penalty is not consistent with justice and other key values of our societies. We should work to keep Europe a death penalty free zone.

*List of member states: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Libya, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

Death is not justice
It might seem paradoxical that someone who has raped and murdered has the right to live when their victims have suffered so cruelly. Yet killing by the State – which is in effect what the death penalty is – does not defend the victim's rights either. Killing the criminal is simply another crime – and it cannot right a past wrong or ease any of the pain the victim experienced. It does not restore a victim to life – but rather extends a cycle of violence and brutality. Human rights abuses should not be met with another human rights abuse.

Abolishing the death penalty does not mean being soft on crime – people who commit terrible crimes should be punished severely and learn that their behaviour is unacceptable.