

GRECO 5th Evaluation Round - Launching event, 20 March 2017

Address by Mr Michele Nicoletti, PACE rapporteur on Corruption as governance regime: a barrier to institutional efficiency and progress

I would like to thank Mr Mrčela (President of GRECO) for involving the Parliamentary Assembly and for inviting me to this launching initiative. In the preparation of my report on “Corruption as governance regime: a barrier to institutional efficiency and progress”, co-operation with GRECO is of the greatest importance.

The report, which I plan to present at the June part-session of the Assembly, attempts to identify the main challenges in fighting corruption in different social, economic and cultural environments, with a specific focus on the relationship between political corruption and democracy.

The aim of the report is to analyse how corruption can affect democracy in different areas: both in those countries where corruption is just a “pathology” of the social system, and in countries where, on the contrary, corruption is something “physiological”. This means that in these latter contexts corruption plays a functional role in the society. In both cases we consider corruption as something absolutely not acceptable and a major threat for democracy. Still, in order to be effective, anti-corruption strategies cannot ignore the cultural background, that is different traditions and customs, and the differences in the establishment of the modern State and the rule of law in a heterogeneous Europe.

The underlining assumption is that the problem of corruption in some Eastern and Central European countries cannot simply be solved by applying anti-corruption policies and structures that work in Western, and especially Nordic countries, which traditionally come at the top of various anti-corruption ratings.

I have identified 3 case studies: Ukraine, which I visited in January 2016; The Netherlands, which I visited in November, and Spain where I had some fruitful discussions two weeks ago in Madrid.

After having considered these three different contexts, I will analyse anticorruption strategies at three levels: a) legislation; b) education; c) institutions. Specific attention will be paid to anticorruption authorities and their mandates. I will also look into new forms and areas of corruption, for instance the management of migration centres and environmental crimes.

My belief is that we need a stronger dialogue between civil society, local and national and international institutions to step up the fight against old and new forms of corruption. That is why I suggest that the Council of Europe could consider setting up an anti-corruption network of policy-makers, scholars, students, intellectuals, NGOs and human rights defenders to mobilise all actors in this fight, hopefully with the support of voluntary contributions by member States and by the European Union.

Similar networks are already active and effective in the human rights field, for instance in combating violence against women and protecting children rights. It is high time to bring some attention to the field of the rule of law, of which the fight against corruption is an essential cornerstone.

Coming to GRECO 5th Evaluation round, please let me stress the importance of compliance. The development of democracy in Europe over the past decades has not automatically suppressed corruption and the recommendations issued by international and European bodies, such as GRECO and the OECD, need to be fully implemented, especially at the highest political levels.

It was disappointing to note that progress made by member States in implementing GRECO's 4th Evaluation round recommendations as regards the prevention of corruption in respect of members of parliament, judges and prosecutors, has been generally slower than in previous evaluation rounds. It seems that the closer we move to the central institutions, the more reluctant member States are to open up and co-operate with GRECO.

I very much hope that we will be able to reverse this trend with the 5th Evaluation round, targeting the very heart of the State, its top executive functions and law enforcement agencies. Ministers, deputy Ministers, State Secretaries, members of a private office and senior political officials must set the tone for the rest of the administration, the private sector and each and every citizen, by whom they will be held accountable.

Opinion polls show that political institutions are largely perceived as lacking integrity. We know that concerns around parties' and elected politicians' integrity, corruption, lack of accountability for policy failure, elitism, all create a profound disconnect from the popular base.

OECD and Transparency International data also show a strong correlation between corruption and social exclusion and the links between populism, socio-economic malaise and the anti-corruption agenda. Populist leaders exploit the disenchantment of the people with the "corrupt system" and present themselves as the "only solution" but often fail to address the problem and can also significantly increase it.

Government leaders and central institutions need to get serious about breaking the vicious cycle between corruption and social inequality and confront entrenched interests so that they can deliver on their central promises.

At the same time, if we want that Europe continues to be perceived as a symbol of hope, rule of law and dignity, European institutions, including the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly, have the duty to strengthen their transparency and accountability and to stand for these values on the side of citizens for a more authentic democracy.

I thank GRECO for supporting all our member States in this endeavour.

Thank you.