

Welcoming speech

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Dear Minister,

Dear Ambassador Kuneva,

Dear Judge Eicke,

Dear members and partners of the Council of Europe HELP Network,

Dear participants,

I am very pleased to be able to see and greet many of you *in person* this morning.

Of course, I am also welcoming everyone who is following the conference online.

Meeting again in this familiar format, in this room is a very enjoyable experience compared to the last two years, when strict Covid restrictions were in place.

Sadly, **Europe is again in crisis.**

A crisis of a different nature, caused by the aggression of the Russian Federation against **Ukraine**, that has been lasting for more than 4 long months –

Causing immense suffering in Ukraine –

And with repercussions on all our continent and globally.

Our organisation, the Council of Europe, reacted strongly to this new reality.

At the **political** level, notably with the rapid cessation of the membership of the Russian Federation.

In terms of our **activities** too, by which we are providing all the immediate **support** to our member State, Ukraine, in the framework of our mandate. This includes HELP, of course.

You will hear more about this in a specific session on Ukraine today.

Also more broadly, we are not short of **challenges**.

The Rule of Law, notably judicial independence, and human rights, including civil and political rights as well as social rights, continue to be under strain in a number of our member states.

To face these - and other societal challenges - our Organisation and its 46 member states have the force of the **European Convention on Human Rights system**, the more than **220 Conventions** and the accumulated confidence of the **dialogue** and **cooperation programmes** jointly implemented with all our member states and beyond, in our neighbourhood. Our HELP Programme is proof of it.

The **HELP Programme started in 2004, eighteen years ago. In most of our member states, it would reach the age of majority.**

In the course of these years, HELP has achieved a lot, as Eva Pastrana, the Head of our Justice and Human Rights Training Division, and her team will present later today.

In the last decade there have been **two accelerating factors**.

The **first** and most relevant one has been the **support from the EU** since 2015 until these days.

From then, almost all HELP courses developed cover not only the Council of Europe legal framework but also the one from the EU, including the case-law from the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice of the EU.

The EU continues to be our most important financial and institutional partner and I would like to warmly thank you, Ambassador Kuneva, for it.

Another accelerating factor has been **digitalisation**.

Our real world is more and more digital, and Covid simply accelerated the upskill of us all in new technologies, so that we could still keep our human connections and continue our learning, also **judicial learning**.

This resulted in thousands of legal professionals - not the least - enrolling and completing HELP courses hosted in the Council of Europe e-learning platform.

EU Justice Commissioner Reynders himself praised how this milestone is supporting the goals of the **European Judicial Training Strategy**, not the least due to Italian legal professionals' enthusiasm taking HELP courses.

Since the 2021 edition of the HELP Network Conference, we have added new courses to our catalogue on crucial topics:

- Trafficking in Human Beings for the purpose of **Labour Exploitation**,
- **Violence against Women for Law Enforcement**,
- **Cybercrime** and
- **Human Rights in the Armed Forces**.

Key HELP courses were also updated like the one on **Asylum** and Human Rights - jointly with UNHCR - and the one on the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities**.

All of them will be presented during these two days.

Related to **Rule of Law and Judiciary Independence**, I would like to highlight the fact that the HELP course on **Ethics for Judges, Prosecutors and Lawyers** has been followed by hundreds.

Rule of law has been one of the three areas of work of the CoE since 1950.

And the EU has become active in this field for the last twenty years, with four pillars covered by the EU Rule of Law Mechanism, namely: justice system, anti-corruption framework, media pluralism, and other institutional issues related to checks and balances.

Many HELP courses are relevant in this regard. Apart from the one on Ethics, the courses on **Judicial Reasoning and Human Rights**, on **Access to Justice for Women**, on **Freedom of Expression** and the one on **Protection of Journalists** are relevant. Another course on **Corruption Prevention**, developed by the Economic Crime Division and HELP is also available. Two new very challenging HELP courses are under preparation: the **Interplay between the ECHR and the EU Charter** and the course on **Quality of Justice: the work of CEPEJ**.

The **HELP Network**, made up by the **Institutions you represent**, its courses, and its methodology -contextualising courses at national level - are contributing to greater unity through a more harmonious application of common norms and values. We cannot forget that the **implementation of Human Rights standards happens at home**, not in Strasbourg.

In this regard, I want to congratulate the **efforts of all your justice institutions and Bar Councils**.

And of course, I count on your further engagement.

We are all aware of the success of HELP. But this does not come from nowhere; our HELP team is exposed to a heavy workload. While HELP grew by more than 15,000 new users since last time we met, the team has shrunk - as previous HELP projects in areas such as migration, Environment, Business or Radicalisation Prevention have ended without being renewed.

I would like to thank Eva and her team for their dedicated work.

But I also would like to ask you, particularly to the HELP focal and info points, to take on further responsibilities in **your roles as HELP Ambassadors in your countries**.

Your community is HELP's real strength, so please continue –

- **promoting** the Council of Europe norms, values and principles;
- encouraging your **justice institutions** to include HELP courses in their training programmes, particularly in initial training as reaching legal professionals in the beginning of their careers is crucial;
- encouraging also **universities and particularly Law Faculties** with which you have links to use HELP courses (for example on the ECHR).

I am deeply convinced that this is in their own interest, because HELP course are of the highest quality, prepared by the best experts, adapted to the national context – and they are free!

By making HELP live, you are contributing to strengthening a **human rights culture**, that needs to be nurtured permanently for current or future legal professionals – because education, including legal training, is a life-long journey.

I would like to **thank** you for that and to assure you that the **HELP team will always support** you in your efforts.

Our **joint commitment** for HELP is a fantastic investment to defend democratic values, strengthen rule of law and protect human rights.

We look forward to continuing this work **together**.

I wish you a very fruitful conference.