

Excellencies, Esteemed Colleagues, dear Friends,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address at this important Conference and share our experience with the implementation of the Council of Europe HELP courses. My name is Jelena Ristic, attorney-at-law from Skopje, North Macedonia and Vice President of the North Macedonia Bar Association, as well as HELP Info point for North Macedonia and HELP tutor.

First of all, allow me, on behalf of the North Macedonia Bar Association and the Bar President, Mr. Ljubomir Mihajlovski, to express our sincere appreciation for the fruitful cooperation with the Council of Europe HELP Programme. Namely, the HELP courses are very valuable tool for us in terms of providing opportunities for continuous education for Macedonian lawyers.

The cooperation between the North Macedonia Bar Association and the Council of Europe HELP Programme started towards the end of 2018, when the first HELP course was launched for Macedonian lawyers. Namely, we have started the cooperation with launching the Violence against women and domestic violence HELP course. Moreover, this was the first time that an online course of this kind was offered to Macedonian lawyers. Yet, the interest of the lawyers for this first HELP course was great. Namely, the number of the lawyers that registered for the course was double the number of the lawyers foreseen to be registered, so we decided, with the support of the Council of Europe HELP team, to organize another course on Violence against women and domestic violence for the interested lawyers that did not manage to get in the first course.

Since then we have successfully organized 8 HELP courses: 2 courses on Violence against women and domestic violence; 2 courses on Data protection and privacy rights; 1 course on Admissibility criteria in applications submitted to the European Court of Human Rights; 1 course on Women's access to justice; 1 course on Child friendly justice and 1 course on Combatting trafficking in human beings, while a total number of almost 350 lawyers have successfully completed the courses. Several judges have also successfully completed the courses. Namely, since the second Data protection and privacy course was organized in cooperation with the Academy for judges and public prosecutors, a total number of 7 judges have successfully completed this course together with the lawyers.

I would like to emphasize that the health crisis did not interrupt the successful cooperation between the North Macedonia Bar Association and the Council of Europe HELP Programme. On the contrary, with the support of the HELP team, we managed to make necessary adaptations and continued with the organization of the HELP courses for Macedonian lawyers at an even more intense pace. Namely, the last 4 HELP courses were organized and successfully implemented during the health crises in the last couple of months.

Due to the global health crisis, it was not possible any more to have the usual kick-off meetings for official launch of the course, which were a great opportunity for the lawyers to get acquainted in-person with the way of functioning of the courses. However, a very detailed instruction for the lawyers was created with the assistance of the HELP team, in order to serve as a kind of substitute for the kick-off meetings. Namely, the instruction elaborates in details about the process of registration, the dynamics of the course and the manner of functioning, in general, and it showed to be a very efficient way to provide support to the

lawyers in this regard. The registration process for all the courses went very smoothly and so did the rest of the courses.

I would also like to emphasize that in these times of global health crisis, the HELP courses are even more valuable tool in terms of providing opportunities for continuous education for lawyers, having in mind that it is not possible now to organize the traditional in-person trainings. In fact, at the moment, the HELP courses are the only tool in order to provide such opportunities.

Our experience with the organization of the HELP courses shows that joint cooperation is the key to successful implementation. Namely, the national institution, the HELP team and the national tutors need to be in regular communication and coordination in this regard. In this sense, the North Macedonia Bar Association promotes and announces the HELP courses on its website and also notifies the lawyers through email about the opportunity, mobilizes participants and takes care of the organization with the support from the HELP team, who largely contributes to the successful organization and implementation.

The role of the national tutors is also important for a successful course and how the courses are perceived by the lawyers, in general. Namely, the tutors need to be in regular communication with the participants during the entire course, informing them on various course deadlines and all the activities in general, as well as answering timely their questions and encouraging them to successfully complete the course.

We are currently working on the organization of the next HELP course on Introduction to the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. This course will be attended by lawyer trainees. This is the first time that such opportunity will be offered to lawyer trainees. Moreover, the course will also be attended by law students enrolled in the last year of their master studies. Namely, the North Macedonia Bar Association has established cooperation with law faculties throughout the country, in order to include law students in the HELP courses. We firmly believe that providing future lawyers, judges, prosecutors and other protectors of citizens' freedoms and rights with sufficient knowledge on the European Convention on Human Rights is the best investment in ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law in North Macedonia.

I would also like to refer briefly to our future plans. The North Macedonia Bar Association is working intensively on establishing an Education Centre for lawyers, lawyer associates and lawyer trainees, in order to provide systemic solution for education of the members of the North Macedonia Bar Association. In this regard, the continuation of the fruitful cooperation with the Council of Europe HELP Programme will be of a great significance to us. Also, there is a need to expand the pool of trainers since more courses will be implemented.

All in all, I am very happy to say and confirm once again that the HELP courses are very well received among the Macedonian lawyers. The constant increase of the interest in attending the courses is the greatest indicator of how these courses are perceived by the lawyers. Namely, it has become common for us to have twice as many lawyers who applied per course than the number of participants foreseen for the course. Moreover, we constantly receive great feedback from them about the courses they attended, and the average success rate in terms of participants who successfully completed the courses is around 80%.

At the end, I would like to use this opportunity to thank once again to the Council of Europe and the whole HELP team for the constant support we receive in terms of successful implementation of the HELP courses, and thus providing opportunities for education for Macedonian lawyers. We truly appreciate it and we look forward to our further cooperation.

Thank you very much for your attention.