

LIVING COMPASS

TRAINING COURSE WITH MULTIPLIERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Keynote Speech by Ms Krista Oinonen
Chairperson of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Human Rights
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Dear young participants,

It is a great pleasure to address you today at this important training event, "Living Compass". As young people committed to human rights, you represent the future, the next generation of advocates and defenders who will carry forward the legacy of dignity, equality, and justice.

I am excited to share with you **the role of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Human Rights** and why it is so crucial in shaping human rights standards in Europe.

The Steering Committee for Human Rights, or CDDH as we are known, is at the heart of the Council of Europe's mission to uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Since its establishment in 1976, the Committee has played a pivotal role in developing, refining, and promoting human rights standards.

For those who may not know, the CDDH is **the main intergovernmental committee** in the Council of Europe. One of our main areas of work is the system of the European Convention on Human Rights. This means that we are constantly studying the functioning of this system in practice, from the way in which it is implemented by the member States, through to the effectiveness of the Court's fundamental structures and procedures, as defined in the Convention itself, to member State's execution of the Court's judgments and its supervision by the Committee of Ministers.

This is important work. The European Convention on Human Rights has quite rightly been described as a "constitutional instrument of European public order". It has been integrated into the domestic legal systems of all Council of Europe member States, usually at constitutional level.

Its minimum standards, as developed through the Court's case law, provide a foundation for all of the Council of Europe's standard-setting work. This covers areas from bioethics to policing, the prevention of violence against women to measures against trafficking in human beings, and detention conditions to data protection.

As well as working on the system of the Convention, the CDDH also works on developing **responses to new and emerging human rights challenges**. As you would expect, this work covers a wide and constantly changing range of issues.

Through the Convention and its case law, **we have worked and set standards**, for example, on the human rights of older persons, and on the human rights of members of the armed forces; the fight against terrorism, and access to official documents; human rights and business, and human rights in culturally diverse societies; discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, and female genital mutilation.

But the importance of our work does not stop at drafting standards or guidelines. Over the years, the CDDH has ensured that **human rights evolve with the changing realities of our world**. Today, we are focused on some of the most pressing human rights challenges of our time:

The fight against impunity, which has become an even more urgent issue since Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine.

Human rights and artificial intelligence. The Council of Europe has recently adopted the first international treaty to ensure that artificial intelligence systems are regulated in accordance with international standards on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The CDDH will supplement this ground-breaking treaty by preparing a Handbook on human rights and artificial intelligence – once again, based primarily on an articulation of standards from the European Convention.

Human rights and the environment. Our focus is on whether the Council of Europe should adopt a binding legal instrument to protect the right to a healthy environment, and whether that could or should be done through an additional protocol to the Convention. In April, the Court issued rulings in three cases concerning the effects of climate change, which have profoundly changed our understanding of how the Convention can deal with environmental matters. This shows the continuing importance of the Council of Europe, and of the European Convention, which the Court interprets as a “living instrument”, ensuring its relevance in changing times.

Our work in the CDDH helps to lay the foundation upon which European societies are built. This is not the work of one individual or one institution, but **the collective effort of countries, civil society, and individuals like you**. We often consult with human rights experts, activists, and organizations, ensuring that our work is informed by a diverse range of voices. The values and standards we set today are not static; they must be constantly revisited, reviewed, and strengthened to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Young people like yourselves are key to this work. You are the ones who will take up these evolving standards and push them further, ensuring they remain dynamic and relevant to the world of tomorrow.

One of the most fundamental aspects of human rights is their **universality**. Human rights are not privileges granted by Governments, nor are they specific to any one culture, nation, or group of people. They are inherent to every human being, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, or any other status. This principle of universality is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and forms the bedrock of the Council of Europe’s human rights framework.

Universality is crucial because it guarantees that these rights are **inalienable and apply equally to all**. In a world that is increasingly interconnected and diverse, the notion that human rights are universal ensures that no one is left behind. Whether in times of peace or crisis, in the digital age or in times of war, the universality of human rights acts as **a moral and legal compass for societies to follow**.

However, while **the concept of universality is clear, its application is continuously challenged**, whether by political regimes, cultural relativism, or economic interests. Some argue that human rights should be interpreted differently depending on local traditions or values. While cultural diversity is important, it cannot justify violations of fundamental rights. Universality means that there are **certain minimum standards** – such as the right to life, freedom from torture, and equality before the law – that must be upheld for all, irrespective of local circumstances.

The challenge lies in ensuring that these universal rights are respected and adapted to **different contexts without diluting their core essence**. It is not always easy, but the universality of human rights remains vital for protecting human dignity across borders and for fostering a shared commitment to justice, equality, and freedom for all people.

Defending universality means standing firm in the belief that no matter where a person is from or what their circumstances are, their rights remain the same. Without this foundational principle, human rights lose their essence and risk becoming arbitrary or conditional, which is why **safeguarding universality is one of the most crucial tasks for us today**.

As Chairperson of the CDDH, I encounter several challenges to the universality of human rights. One of the most pressing is **the rise of nationalism and populism in some member States**, where human rights are seen as incompatible with national values. This is sometimes presented as a choice – in reality, a false choice – between a certain idea of national identity and the universal, fundamental values of human rights.

In truth, human rights as protected and promoted by the Council of Europe are **safeguards of national identity**. The freedoms of religion, expression, and association, along with minority rights, are essential for the manifestation and maintenance of identity, and they are safeguarded by the Council of Europe conventions and oversight bodies. But they are protected without discrimination, for everyone and for all different groups in society. They are not protected only for a dominant group, no matter how numerous or long-established it may be.

Another challenge is **the growing trend of authoritarianism**, where Governments increasingly restrict freedoms in the name of national security or stability. This erodes the protection of human rights and undermines the universality principle, particularly in areas like freedom of expression, the right to protest, and media freedom. It erodes the very possibility of democracy, which cannot flourish if people are unable freely to speak and organize amongst themselves.

There are **global challenges such as climate change, migration, hybrid warfare in the form of disinformation campaigns, and the rise of digital surveillance**. These issues often have cross-border impacts, and States sometimes prioritize national interests over global human rights obligations. In the digital realm, for example, protecting privacy and free speech while combating misinformation and online harm is a delicate balance, but one that must be rooted in universal human rights principles.

Another pressing challenge is **the widening inequality exacerbated by economic crises, conflicts**, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Vulnerable groups – such as minorities and the marginalised – often face disproportionate hardships, and States sometimes prioritize economic recovery or national security over human rights protections. The climate crisis has emerged as a human rights issue, threatening livelihoods, access to resources, and even the right to life, particularly in ecologically vulnerable regions.

However, these challenges also present **opportunities** for strengthening human rights protections. Digital technology, despite its risks, offers new avenues for advocacy and engagement. Human rights defenders and civil society organizations are leveraging social media, data, and digital platforms to raise awareness, mobilize communities, and hold governments accountable. This new digital frontier provides innovative tools for human rights education, monitoring, and action.

Another significant opportunity lies in the growing global recognition of the intersection between **human rights and environmental protection**. The emerging discourse on the right to a healthy environment has gained traction, with more States and international organizations acknowledging the inextricable link between environmental sustainability and human rights. This momentum provides a unique opportunity to push for stronger legal frameworks that protect both people and the planet.

The increasing focus on **corporate responsibility** offers another avenue for human rights advancement. With the rise of global supply chains and the power of multinational corporations, there is greater pressure on companies to adhere to human rights standards. New initiatives around business and human rights, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, encourage the private sector to become a partner in human rights protection.

In response to these challenges and opportunities, the CDDH continues to work diligently to update human rights standards and develop new frameworks that address emerging issues, ensuring that human rights remain relevant and robust in an ever-evolving world.

If we look at a more global level, one of the risks to the universality of human rights today is **the emergence of a "two-track" system** – what some describe as "our" and "their" human rights. This divide is increasingly evident in global forums like the United Nations, where negotiations on critical issues such as business and human rights, or the right to development, reveal growing fractures between different regions and blocs of States.

A striking example is the ongoing negotiations on a **legally binding instrument on business and human rights**. While many countries from the Global South are actively participating in these negotiations, aiming to ensure corporate accountability and human rights protection, Western States, including the EU, have remained on the sidelines. This divergence risks creating parallel systems of human rights accountability - where one group of States moves forward with frameworks that may not be adopted by others, undermining global coherence in human rights protections.

Similarly, the longstanding debate over **the right to development** reveals a deep divide between the Global North and South. For many developing countries, the right to development is seen as fundamental, a means to address global inequalities and ensure access to resources, technology, and opportunities for all people. Yet, some wealthier nations are reluctant to embrace this right in the same way, often viewing it as a challenge to their economic or environmental interests. This has created tensions that weaken the universality of human rights, fostering a perception that the Global North is more concerned with civil and political rights, while the Global South emphasizes economic, social, and developmental rights.

If these divisions continue to deepen, we risk eroding the very foundation of human rights as universal and indivisible. **The fragmentation of human rights** into different tracks – one focused on traditional civil and political rights, and another on emerging issues like corporate accountability and the right to development – would weaken the global human rights system. This division could lead to a world where different regions adhere to different sets of rights, eroding the principle that all human rights apply equally to all people, everywhere.

This would be a huge setback. The fall of the Berlin Wall 35 years ago and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union provided the opportunity to turn the **Council of Europe into a continent-wide community of values**, stretching from Iceland to Vladivostok. The same core standards, instruments, and mechanisms operated to protect the rights and freedoms of 800 million Europeans. All European States could come together to seek common solutions to common problems, based on common principles.

Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine and its resulting expulsion from the Council of Europe have put an end to that vision. Russia's position has now shifted from a pretended commitment to European democratic values, to contemptuous rejection of those values. A large part of continental Europe is now ruled by an openly autocratic regime that seeks actively to undermine democracy in Council of Europe member States, and the unity between them.

That is not to say that without Russia, there is now perfect agreement between Council of Europe member States on all issues.

As Chairperson of the CDDH, I have observed **a range of responses** from member States when it comes to adopting new responsibilities, particularly in areas related to emerging standards such as those surrounding artificial intelligence (AI), or in executing judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

Regarding emerging standards, such as **the new Framework Convention on AI**, member States are generally aware of the importance of addressing the ethical, legal, and human rights implications of new technologies. However, responses vary. Some States are proactive, recognizing the potential risks AI poses to privacy, discrimination, and democratic processes, and they are eager to establish regulatory frameworks. Others are more hesitant, often due to economic interests, the complexity of regulating fast-evolving technologies, or concerns over how to balance innovation with human rights protection. There is a clear need for capacity-building and guidance to ensure that States are equipped to meet these new challenges effectively. The CDDH will respond to this need by preparing a Handbook on human rights and artificial intelligence

When it comes to **executing judgments of the Court**, compliance can also be mixed. Many States demonstrate a strong commitment to the Court's rulings, executing them in good faith and making necessary legislative or policy changes. Yet, there are instances where execution is delayed or resisted, especially in politically sensitive cases. This can be due to internal political dynamics, financial constraints, or disagreements with the Court's findings. In such situations, peer pressure, support from the Council of Europe, and continued dialogue are critical to ensuring that member States uphold their obligations under the Convention.

Overall, while there are challenges, I would say that the majority of member States remain committed to upholding human rights standards, even as new responsibilities and emerging issues complicate the landscape.

The role of the CDDH, along with other international bodies, is to **bridge these gaps**, fostering dialogue and encouraging cooperation between States to maintain the universality of human rights. We must ensure that human rights do not become subject to regional or ideological divides, but instead remain a shared global commitment, applicable to all. By promoting constructive engagement on contentious issues like business and human rights, and by advocating for a balanced approach that integrates civil, political, economic, and developmental rights, we can work to prevent the fragmentation of the global human rights system.

The effectiveness of the **human rights protection system** is undoubtedly challenged when duty bearers – whether they are governments, institutions, or private actors – resist their responsibilities. However, the system remains robust in several ways.

Firstly, **the strength of the system lies in its legal frameworks**, such as the European Convention on Human Rights, which provide binding obligations on States. Even when resistance occurs, States are still accountable under these frameworks, with mechanisms like the European Court of Human Rights ensuring that violations can be addressed. The rulings of the Court, though sometimes met with resistance, carry significant moral weight, and over time, they have proven effective in pushing States to comply, even when they are reluctant.

Secondly, **the role of civil society and human rights defenders** is critical in holding duty bearers to account. Grassroots activism, combined with international pressure, often helps overcome resistance by keeping human rights violations in the public eye and demanding accountability.

However, persistent resistance does strain the system, which is why **strengthening international cooperation and dialogue is crucial**. When duty bearers fail, multilateral efforts and peer pressure from other States, combined with the influence of non-governmental organizations and international institutions, can often create the necessary pressure for change.

Ultimately, while resistance from duty bearers is a challenge, the human rights system's structure, alongside the vigilance of national courts, civil society, and international bodies, ensures that **there are still powerful tools to protect human rights and push for compliance**.

Civil society plays an indispensable role in strengthening human rights protection, particularly in the face of state reluctance. Civil society organizations (CSOs), activists, and human rights defenders act as the bridge between people and Governments, providing critical oversight, advocating for accountability, and giving a voice to persons in marginalized and vulnerable positions. They serve as watchdogs, ensuring that human rights standards are respected and that States fulfill their obligations.

The CDDH has long recognized **the importance of civil society** in promoting human rights. Our work has consistently emphasized the need to engage with CSOs as partners in shaping human rights policies and monitoring state compliance. In this regard, the 2018 Recommendation by the Committee of Ministers on the need for protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe was a landmark step. This recommendation calls on member States to create an enabling environment where civil society can operate freely and without fear of intimidation or reprisals. It stresses the importance of safeguarding the independence and functioning of CSOs, which is crucial for their role in holding governments accountable.

In the face of state reluctance, **civil society can press for the implementation of human rights obligations**, including judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. They can also raise awareness about new challenges – such as those posed by digital technologies or environmental rights – ensuring that human rights frameworks evolve with the times. The CDDH supports this by providing platforms for dialogue between civil society and state actors, ensuring that civil society's contributions are heard and valued in the decision-making process.

Ultimately, civil society serves as **a powerful counterbalance** when States fail to uphold their human rights responsibilities. By partnering with intergovernmental bodies like the CDDH, civil society can amplify its efforts to ensure that human rights are protected and promoted across Europe, even in the face of resistance.

I recognize that **reconciling cultural differences with the concept of universal human rights** is a complex but essential task. The key lies in striking a balance between respecting cultural diversity and ensuring that human rights are protected for all, regardless of cultural context.

Cultural traditions and practices are vital components of identity and social cohesion, and they should be respected. However, they **cannot be used to justify violations of human rights**, such as discrimination, inequality, or violence. **Universal human rights represent minimum standards** that safeguard human dignity, ensuring that no one is subjected to harm or exclusion based on cultural norms.

To achieve reconciliation, **dialogue is essential**. We need to engage with local communities, Governments, and civil society to understand cultural perspectives while firmly advocating for the core principles of human rights. The CDDH plays an important role in fostering these dialogues, helping States navigate the complexities of cultural context while adhering to their international human rights obligations.

Additionally, **education and awareness-raising are crucial**. By promoting human rights as values that enhance and complement cultural diversity, rather than undermine it, we can encourage broader acceptance and understanding. Human rights should be seen not as external impositions, but as **universal safeguards** that allow people in every culture to live with dignity and equality.

In the end, **reconciliation requires collaboration**, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to ensuring that cultural practices evolve in ways that are compatible with the rights and freedoms with which every human being is born.

In closing, I want to repeat that our work would not be possible without the commitment of people like you – people who are passionate about building a better, fairer world. Human rights are not just abstract ideals. Human rights are, in the end, about people and their daily lives. About you, me, and every person who wants to live with dignity and freedom.

We need young people like you – who bring fresh ideas, new energy, and innovative solutions to the table. As you embark on your journey through the "Living Compass" program, I encourage you to engage fully with the concepts of human rights, to challenge them, to question them, and most importantly, to uphold them.

Thank you.

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