

Workshop on human rights of members of the armed forces

Closing remarks, Kristīne Līcis

I am very grateful to the organisers and participants for the interesting and informative event that provided an opportunity to discuss in depth the issue of the human rights of members of the armed forces, from the perspectives of both European standards and State practice.

As underlined at the opening of the workshop, the situation has generally improved since the adoption of the Committee of Ministers Recommendation (2010) 4, but full implementation of the Recommendation requires also a change in the mentality and in the approach to the rights of the members of the armed forces who were described as “workers in uniform” during today’s workshop.

The first session gave an overview of the recent State practice regarding the protection and respect for human rights of the armed forces personnel. The second session provided a welcome opportunity for members of the CDDH to learn more about the practical work that is done by the Council of Europe and the strategic triangle of standard-setting, monitoring, and cooperation. It was particularly useful to hear directly from those who are involved in this work, and to better understand how the Council of Europe can assist member States in meeting the standards that are commonly set at European level.

The following 6 issues could be identified as areas of particular importance:

1. The need to ensure non-discrimination and equality; the member States should pay particular attention to the situation of women and ethnic and national minorities in the armed forces, as well as to issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation
2. The civil and political rights must be ensured, including the freedom of speech where the wide use of social media has added a new and important element from the perspective of the armed forces;
3. The freedom of association, in particular the freedom to form and join trade unions are still limited; the member States should bear in mind that any restriction placed on the right of military personnel have to meet certain criteria, including a demonstrated military necessity and a non-discriminatory and proportionate character;
4. The need to make every effort to give its full effect to the right to the conscientious objection;
5. To ensure that members of armed forces have access to mechanisms that promote and enforce compliance with human rights in the armed forces, which includes ombuds institutions and national human rights institutions. Specifically, the protection of whistleblowers was mentioned.
Also, in this regard, particular tribute should be paid to Ukrainian Parliamentary Commissioner for Human rights (Ombudsman) and their work to ensure protection and respect of human rights of members of the armed forces.
6. To achieve improvements, strengthening human rights education and knowledge of related standards within the armed forces is key, and ensuring that members of the armed forces must be informed and receive training to heighten their awareness of their human rights as “workers in uniform”. In this regard, the HELP course on human rights in the armed forces should be highlighted, as well as examples of innovative

approaches by the Government of Armenia, including the creation of an app and short videos.

Finally, it must be underlined that ensuring that members of the armed forces see that they and their rights are respected contribute to maintaining confidence in and cohesion within the institution they serve. Also, this is the way to ensure that the military, as an institution, is truly accountable and that the people it is build to serve and protect continue to trust it. This is also the way how the member States can embody the principles and values that are at the core of the Council of Europe.