



CommHR(2025)22

“Presentation of first annual activity report”
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
Spring plenary session

Speech by Michael O’Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Strasbourg, 7 April 2025

Mr. President, distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly, I thank you for the invitation to join you for the presentation of my first annual report, which covers the period 2024. The document is divided in three sections.

The first is a set of my own personal observations on the situation as I saw it last year. Second, there's a very detailed description of the full range of my activities during the year. And third, in the exceptional situation of 2024, there's an annex setting out the work in the first three months of last year by my predecessor, Dunja Mijatović.

I would like to make some brief opening remarks before receiving your questions. Let me begin by sharing with you what we all are so deeply aware of, that we live in very troubling times and that from the point of view of human rights, things are getting worse.

Just to take the contemporary reality, we see in the last months a weakening of the centre ground in terms of standing up for human rights, a willingness of the centre ground of our politics increasingly to walk away from human rights commitments.

Secondly, we see in this year a return to some form of great power politics, whereby the great issues that impact our wellbeing are not being debated, discussed, decided in the multilateral spaces, but rather in other contexts without the protections of the systems, the laws, the treaties and the standards.

And all of this is taking place in the context of the new pandemic, the pandemic of disinformation.

In this very troubling time, all the great actors of state and society have a responsibility to engage to the fullest.

I consider that parliaments have an absolutely crucial role. I deeply appreciate the work of the Parliamentary Assembly. I have had the great privilege and pleasure of working closely with you since I was elected.

I have seen the importance and impact of your work. I urge you to persist, to become even more focused, even more rigorous in standing up for human rights

Two suggestions this afternoon Regarding your national parliaments.

The first is that to the extent your parliaments do not do so, I would encourage you to work with them, so that there is systematic compliance testing of new law against the standards of the European Convention on Human Rights. And for Parliaments of EU member states, also against the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Secondly, I would encourage you to seek to strengthen the engagement with issues of human rights in your parliamentary committee systems.

In terms of my own actions, I will play my part to the best of my ability to realise the fullness of my mandate. I am working with four clear priorities.

Let me mention them to you and indicate what their implementation looked like in practice in the past year.

First, there is the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. My top priority was and is to engage the human rights dimensions. I have visited Ukraine three times since the conflict began, twice as Commissioner. And it was indeed my first visit this time last year. I have raised and engaged with many issues since then.

Right now, my preoccupation is with embedding attention to human rights within the pathway towards peace, whatever that will look like. It is not by any means a given. And drawing on my entire lifetime of experience, working in conflict and post-conflict settings, I appreciate that a peace will only engage and work and persist if it is strongly based on human rights.

Before turning from Ukraine, allow me to express my outrage about the missile attack on Friday against the city of Kryvyi Rih. I express my deep solidarity with those impacted by that horrendous act of aggression.

The second of my four priorities is to seek to work with you to embed human rights at the heart of our engagement with the great issues of our societies.

Let me pick just one example to illustrate my work. That is around the context of the management of migration. And in particular, in the past year, the phenomenon of the increasing securitisation of borders, which in turn is raising multiple human rights concerns such as respect for the right to apply for asylum and the honouring of the principle of non-refoulement.

I have addressed at least seven countries since April of last year. Greece, Cyprus, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, the United Kingdom.

Moving on to the third of my four priorities, it is rather different to the previous one.

It is not about the great issues, it is about the forgotten issues, the forgotten people. Seeking out those most on the periphery of our societies and working in support of their human rights. And the group that has seized my attention in my first year has been the Roma and Traveller community, some 12 million people across our member states. I have visited Roma and Traveller communities in Slovakia, Greece, Finland, Ireland. Last Friday, I visited the Roma Documentation Centre in Heidelberg, Germany. In coming weeks, I will visit North Macedonia.

The outputs of these visits and my work is in the form of memoranda directed to the countries I visit. And I will issue in the last quarter of this year, specifically on the topic of the empowerment of Roma women as catalysts of change.

The fourth and the final of my priorities is standing up for human rights defenders.

Civil society in general and human rights defenders in particular are the lifeblood of our societies. They are the beating heart of the respect for principles of human rights, democracy and rule of law. And they are under extraordinary pressure in far too many places.

That is the basis on which I have had numerous engagements with human rights defenders in the field, as well as here in Strasbourg. My current preoccupations in this context take at least three forms.

The first is the contagion of foreign funding laws, discriminatory foreign funding laws.

A relatively more recent existence of what I might call lobbying and influence laws, which are discriminatory in design and in practice.

And third, the policing of protest.

In the context of these and other issues, I have engaged in or with eight countries: Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina regarding Republika Srpska, Georgia, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Türkiye. And I am looking with some concern right now at the situation in Germany.

Let me add in the context of human rights defenders, that I am very worried about the extent to which members of the LGBTI community and groups defending them are coming under extraordinary dangerous threat in multiple countries. That has already been the basis of my engagement regarding Georgia and Hungary and indeed other countries in the upcoming period.

Mr. President, distinguished members, allow me to conclude there and await your questions, assuring you of my ongoing very close cooperation with you and your committees as we undertake our shared important work.

Thank you."