

Presentation of the Annual activity report 2018

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Speech by Dunja MIJATOVIĆ,
Council of Europe Commission for Human Rights

Madam President,
Excellencies,
distinguished parliamentarians,
ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to have this unique opportunity to present my first annual activity report. You have all received the report, so I will not repeat what is in it; I would rather focus on my general assessment of the human rights situation in Europe and the way forward. What I would like to stress today is the purpose of the report, the results that we aim to achieve and, ultimately, what we make of such reporting.

Annual reports are much more than statutory obligations; they provide a snapshot of the human rights situation in Europe. The picture that has come out in the first year of my work as Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights is a mixed and complex one. We recognise all the extraordinary results and improvements that have happened over the past decades in our societies, but it is almost impossible not to notice the sharp decline in human rights compliance all around Europe.

Long-standing problems have continued to affect the human rights of large strata of society in Europe. Violence against women and gender inequality remain a pervasive human rights violation in many countries.

Hate incidents have continued to scar the lives of Jews, Muslims, Roma, foreigners and LGBTI communities. Inadequate national and European responses to migration have transformed an issue that in my view is quite manageable into a tragedy with no end in sight. Human rights defenders and journalists continue to face reprisals, physical attacks, ill treatment, abduction and killing. As we speak, the toxic, nationalistic, irresponsible and cynical discourse and rhetoric performed by many prominent political leaders in Europe is affecting the fragile fabric of our human rights system. Arguably the most worrying trend that I have observed is that many governments and parliaments are departing from agreed human rights standards and going down a nationalistic route, not only in words, but in deeds. It is a very dangerous path – one that we need to reverse.

Allow me to make a personal comment. I grew up in a country that no longer exists, mainly because of nationalism. I saw the brutality and bloodshed of nationalism, the division it sows and the subtle ways in which it seduces with false promises. Nationalism brings only

destruction – history has taught us that, but it seems that we have not learned it well. We must not fall prey to it, or we are no longer Europe. We must stand up and act to defend the values and principles of equality, respect, diversity and inclusiveness that define our Organisation. These principles seem to be losing ground across our member States, but I remain optimistic about the future of Europe.

There are three main reasons. First, I have established constructive dialogue with a majority of national authorities. During my country visits, I could access places of human rights relevance, I received information that I requested, and I was able to meet key decision makers. Is that enough? No.

Another source of optimism – I would like to emphasise this – is that in all the countries I visit, I meet NGOs, journalists, human rights defenders and activists who together form strong national human rights structures and who keep the torch of human rights burning, despite the grave dangers they face. I salute them.

A third reason is youth. On several occasions over the past year, my office and I have met many young people. Some felt excluded from the system of human rights protection. Others expressed dissatisfaction with the way we reached out to them – or rather, did not. But all those we have met ask for more, not less, human rights, and we listen to them.

You as parliamentarians have a crucial role in answering these demands. You can ensure that your countries' laws and policies hold true to the values of our Organisation. You can bring closer to people the vision, wisdom and courage of the founding fathers of the Council of Europe, who 70 years ago put aside their grievances and together started building a future of peace, co-operation and mutual understanding, determined to uphold the principles enshrined in human rights provisions. You can protect freedom from oppression, dialogue from fanaticism and pluralism from totalitarianism. In other words, you can, and you should, protect Europe from nationalism.

My role is to help you achieve that goal. I take this role very seriously, as both an honour and a huge responsibility, but I need your help. I need you and your governments alike to implement my recommendations more seriously and constructively. I need you to engage with your national human rights structures, NGOs and human rights defenders in a positive way, without obstructing their work.

Human rights, democracy and the rule of law are sailing troubled waters. We know what happens when they begin to fade and when they disappear. Our mission to uphold them will not be a sprint but, rather, a marathon. We will need patience, commitment, courage and dialogue. I want to stress that we will not always agree. The position of the Commissioner is clear: it is based on the mandate and human rights protection. At the same time, even when we disagree, I am convinced that if we keep using all those standards as our compass and if we hold true to the principles, values and standards that define our Organisation, we can together come out of this tempest stronger.

I am ready to answer any questions.