

**High-level conference on Human Rights
and Protection of the Environment**

Strasbourg, 27 February 2020

**Speech by Mr Rik Daems,
President of the Parliamentary Assembly**

Minister,

Secretary General,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Belgian writer Willem Elsschot once said that dreams and reality are separated by laws and practical problems. Now, if our common dream is to link Environment to Human Rights, maybe the reality should be sought somewhere within the Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Indeed, if Article 2 of the Convention guarantees “the right to life”, should it not also guarantee the right “to live in a liveable environment”? It seems logical to me.

Dreams and reality are separated by laws and practical problems.

Laws are made and changed by Parliaments and practical problems, those are the daily business for Governments.

One could naively ask oneself: “Why didn’t we do it yet?”.

If I may be very straightforward, if extremism and populism, and other “-isms” have grounds to grow today, perhaps it is because we did not deliver. At least, because we - the political world, I mean, Governments and Parliaments, - did not deliver enough, and certainly not when required.

Now we see people in the streets, screaming out where’s the content to our action, or to paraphrase bluntly, “where is the beef to our action?”. And they are right. Where is it?

Therefore, Mr President of the Conference, Madam Secretary General, Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We, the Parliament Assembly, welcome this conference, and congratulate the Georgian Presidency for organising it, because for us, this might be the kick-start for practical work to change our reality. And

maybe to try to grasp that dream and turn it into reality linking it to Article 2 of the Convention? This is what I think we should do in the long term, because I do know that we cannot achieve this in one week.

I am not saying that we have not done anything so far, because I know that the Committee of Ministers started working on a Recommendation on Environment and Human Rights. And the Assembly, indeed, addressed the issue many times: already in 2009, we adopted a Recommendation to the Committee of Ministers to launch work on a Protocol on Environment and Human Rights.

Even more, we adopted a similar Recommendation back in 2003 and in 1999. Twenty years ago.

Indeed, all of us are making an effort. But it is not enough, and it is not timely enough. That is the brutal reality.

If we want to be practical on this issue, why don't we look at the dream and the reality from the angle of changes to Article 2 of the Convention?

In my view, the immediate step before a Protocol is drafted could be the opening of a Convention linking Environment and Human Rights which will set up some common standards.

An even earlier step could be a Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the same issue.

And the step before that – the very first one that would kick-off the process - could be the Ministerial Session in May 2020.

If we follow this plan, Mr President, the Ministerial Session to be organised by the Georgian Presidency would kick-off the process which will eventually allow us to transform our dream into reality, by outlining the different phases of our future work, including the adoption of a Recommendation, the negotiation of a Convention, and, possibly, as the final outcome, the drafting of a Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights.

You know that I support the idea of the “trialogue” with the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary

General of the Council of Europe working together. Indeed, I attach great importance to doing things together.

We have got valuable expertise in Parliaments and the Parliamentary Assembly, and on the intergovernmental side you have got equally valuable expertise in Governments and in the Committee of Ministers. Moreover, we invited Mr Timmermans, the Green Deal champion of the European Union, to contribute to our work, and I hope that he can come in April, or a future date, to share with us some of the valuable expertise of the European Union.

Let me end by outlining a possible timetable:

The launch of the process could be Georgia's legacy.

The Greek Presidency could complete the drafting of a Recommendation.

The German Presidency could, hopefully, complete the work on a draft Convention.

And then, we can see what we need to change in the European Convention on Human Rights through a protocol.

Personally, I believe that a Protocol is needed, but we will see.

This would give us a roadmap – a timetable for delivering concrete results for the people who are shouting “Where’s the content, where is the beef?”. Well, let us deliver, and let us deliver together.

Allow me to end my speech with a quote by Paul-Henri Spaak, who was the first elected President of the Parliamentary Assembly. He said: “If we have to choose between a perfect world and a better world, we should choose the better world because the perfect world does not exist, and the better world is the one that we build ourselves.”. So, let us do this together.

Thank you very much.