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ILGA-Europe Annual Conference

Transcript of the speech by Michael O'Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Good morning, it is a very great pleasure for me to be here with you. Thank you for the welcome and the introduction. Thank you for the amazing sessions we have been participating in already this morning.

Before I begin, I would like to offer a dedication to Ymania Brown of TGEU. I met Ymania just twice, once in her office in Berlin and then in Malta, just a few months ago. At that event, the IDAHOT+ Forum in Malta, she was easily the most impressive speaker of the day. I will never forget her, one of the most powerful, compelling, kind people I have come across. I want to acknowledge her for everything she has given to all of us.

The first time I ever attended an ILGA-Europe annual conference was in 2007 and it was here in Vilnius. I came here to present the recently completed Yogyakarta Principles on the application of international human rights law regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.

What I remember from the day was how different it was to how we are experiencing this conference this year. We met at a small hotel downtown, a quiet, small hotel. There was a way smaller group of people in the room than is here today. There was an air of tension. The city had refused to allow a flag-raising ceremony. There were worries about a bomb, which transpired not to be as serious as it sounded. There was a sense of oppression. But side by side with the sense of oppression, I also distinctly remember a very strong sense of hope, of hopefulness in the room. A sense from the participants back then, and I'm sure some of you were there, a sense that progress was possible, it would be linear, and it would be unassailable.

Now in almost 20 years since Vilnius, much has changed. There has undoubtedly been much achievement. I come from Ireland, and I never cease to be astonished at how much my country has changed, and I frankly could not have believed in that possibility of change back 20 years ago.

Then just look at what was achieved or pulled off in 2025. Those videos at the beginning of the session today reminded us of many achievements. I have my own very short list to add.

- I think of the fact that there was the adoption of the new EU strategy.

- I think of the Council of Europe adopting its Committee of Ministers Recommendation on equal rights for intersex persons.
- I think of the important precedent achieved in the European Court of Human Rights in the Swiss case, Semenya.
- I think of course of the adoption of the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive.

But enough of achievement, because I agree with the panellists just now, and I agree with the opening remarks earlier this morning, that the situation in the present day is nothing short of dire. I would like to suggest to you five interplaying elements that are helping create this awful situation in which we find ourselves.

The first of the five is of course the increasingly loud, assured, and successful identity politics. A politics that repudiates universal human dignity, that invests in the othering of groups who are then targeted with hate. Here I think especially of trans and intersex people and the deplorable attacks to which they are subject.

The second phenomenon is the increasingly fertile soil for populism in our general populations. Here I see how genuine problems of inequality and a real sense of powerlessness are cynically instrumentalised.

Third, I acknowledge the enormous role in spreading anti-democratic and anti-human rights messages of social media platforms, that are AI-empowered and inadequately policed.

The fourth phenomenon is the insidious role played by certain billionaires intent on social engineering, as well as the role of certain states, above all Russia.

The fifth and the final phenomenon is the one that perhaps worries me most of all, and that is the weakening of the political middle ground. The increasing willingness of politicians and leaders of the centre to yield to the populists, to make unacceptable compromise. The Irish poet William Butler Yeats, in a poem of his, wrote of how the centre cannot hold, things fall apart. It's my worry right now that the centre is showing great signs of weakness.

My friends, LGBTI people – you don't need me to tell you this – face a perfect storm. With efforts to unravel progress and achievement, the putting of lives in danger, the destruction of civil society. In this moment, it is clear for me that we all must be fiercely determined. Now it is not for me to say how you should be determined; I have no right whatsoever to give you any such guidance. But what I can do is tell you how I intend to be determined.

I would like to use the remaining few moments of this intervention to pledge, or to reassure you of my pledge, on ten things.

The first of my ten renewed pledges is that I will never cease to stand with you and for you in all your diversity, with full respect for the intersectionality of your identities and lives.

Second, in order to achieve that, I will never cease to listen to you, to find every opportunity to sit down and hear what you want to tell me, the stories that I need to know.

Third, in working with you, I pledge to use my full toolbox: diplomatic tools, my advocacy voice, my legal engagement.

Fourth, in terms of what I will actually do, I will challenge repressive law and practice wherever I see it within the Council of Europe member states.

Fifth, I will stand up especially for human rights defenders and for their civil society organisations.

Sixth, in light of the grave funding challenges that most of your organisations face today, I will advocate for you with funders and donors.

Seventh, I will challenge the current efforts to weaken the international human rights protection system and then insist that it does its job for you. I would encourage you all, with me, to look very carefully at discussion, right now, around the future of the European Convention on Human Rights, an essential tool in the fight for human rights.

Eighth, and turning to the world of politics, I will persistently call for strong, clear, and principled leadership against fear and hate.

Ninth, across our societies, I will continue to promote a culture of human rights, a culture that celebrates human dignity and that cherishes us in all our diversity.

Tenth, and finally, I will never lose hope.

For me, hope is a duty. It is a conviction that we must never stop struggling to achieve the vision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a vision of a world where everyone is free and equal in dignity and in rights.

Thank you.