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Madam President, thank you very much. Honourable members of the Assembly, it's a great pleasure to be back with you in this capacity to present you with my annual report.

The document has been tabled for your attention and under those circumstances I will just headline a small number of issues by way of my introduction.

I constructed my work last year and indeed this year around my four stated priority areas. These have been the same since I took up the position and they will continue to be the four primary clusters around which I do all of my work.

The first of these is standing up for the human rights of the people of Ukraine. This is and will remain my top priority.

The focus of my attention in delivering on this priority in 2025 was a focus on embedding attention to humans and to their human rights within the various paths to peace. I felt early last year that we were talking about property and land and minerals and transactions but not enough about people and it was important to correct that.

In mid last year I delivered a memorandum to the Government of Ukraine laying out ten areas to which attention should be paid in order to put humans in the heart of all discussions towards peace and I'm glad that I received the support of the Government of Ukraine and indeed of many other member states in this regard. I brought my work on this matter to an expert meeting on human rights and peace which I convened in Warsaw late last year and I am continuing with colleagues from other organisations to find ways to promote the issues.

Myself, going forward into 2026, I will focus in particular within the 10 subject areas of the memorandum on the matter of displaced people, both those internally displaced in Ukraine and those who are having refugee status in neighbouring states.

I will also, of course, never forget the human rights of the people, the plight of the people in the lands temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation.

The second of my four priorities has to do with seeking to embed visibility of the human and respect for human rights at the heart of the great issues that confront our societies. I have focused on four in the past year and they're all obviously enormous.

The first is in general migration. Migratory flows, migratory policy and seeking to ensure that the human, human well-being, human dignity delivered through human rights again is to the forefront. The main focus of my attention in that regard has been through drawing attention to the human rights risks associated with the multiple forms of the externalisation of migratory activity or the management of migratory activity, seeking to get third states to undertake responsibilities on the part of a destination state.

The second of the enormous areas that I've been engaging, in the last year, in this context, is the taming of artificial intelligence. My particular focus has been and continues to be on a human centred oversight of AI and this is all the more urgent and compelling in a context of a tendency towards deregulation which is getting far too much attention in inappropriate ways. We need to tame this technology to deliver on its extraordinary potential for good but left uncontrolled and in the hands of Silicon Valley is very worrying indeed.

The third of the four subject areas of embedding human rights in the great issues of the day has to do with human rights and the triple planetary crisis and in particular the degradation of the environment. I have chosen to deliver my own engagement with this vital issue through promotion of the relevant judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and ensuring that these judgments such as the so-called Swiss case are not seen as speaking exclusively to one member state but have very important systemic messages right across the Council of Europe.

The fourth and final of the great issues within which we have to embed respect for the human and dignity and therefore human rights is in tackling the growing inequality in our societies. The issues are so vast that I have decided to narrow in on one specific sub-component and that is the sub-component of child poverty, the eradication of child poverty in our member states, a topic which has received my attention on a number of country visits and which will result in a report of mine with all the appropriate recommendations coming up in the next year if not towards the end of this year.

The third of my four priority areas is quite different to that of putting human rights at the heart of the great issues, it is making sure attention is paid to forgotten people.

In our societies, the people most pushed to the margins, and as you've heard me say before, I think working for the most forgotten people in our societies is very specifically a task for the Commissioner and so for the past two years my focus in terms of delivering on this dimension is standing up for the human rights of Roma and travellers, 12 million people across our member states suffering an astonishing degree and array of human rights deprivation, violation, targeted by hate. You are all very familiar with the appalling situation.

What have I done? I have conducted five country visits to look at the issue of standing up for the human rights of Roma, I have published a book called *The Unheard 12 Million*, it is a different kind of a document, it is not a report, it is not written in the third person, it is full of stories, the stories I was told by Roma and traveller people as I journeyed across Europe and it is retelling to you and to readers what they told me in the hope that we will wake up to

their situation. It's accompanied again in the hope that this will alert us, it's accompanied by powerful photography, everywhere I went I had professional photographers with me.

Of course, the Roma is not the only subject of my attention in the context of standing up for forgotten people, another preoccupation of mine in terms of people most at the edges, most easily overlooked, is the people in occupied territories.

I've mentioned the people in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and I refer you to a recent United Nations report that spells out in horrific detail the atrocities to which these people are subject every single day, we must never allow them to be forgotten. But there are other occupied territories. In the last few days I visited the occupation line in order better understand South Ossetia as well of course as Abkhazia, two other occupied territories on Council of Europe geography, the people of which must never be forgotten.

And going forward, the next major attention of mine in terms of forgotten people will be very specifically older people in institutional care across our member states.

They again are deserving of our particular attention and focus and I hope to bring some value there.

The fourth and final area of my thematic preoccupation in this mandate is standing up for supporting the human rights of, the safety of, the lives of human rights defenders.

The scale and the breadth of attack on human rights defenders in particular and civil society in general is quite startling and it is to be found in multiple countries. It has turned out in reality to be a major part of my work.

Honourable members of this assembly, there has been one other issue that is not in my list of priorities but forced itself to the forefront of my attention. It required that I paid close attention. That is the defence of the Convention system, a matter I know that you are looking at and I welcome the statement that you issued on this matter yesterday.

The process is well underway in preparation of the Chişinău declaration. My views are well known, I've made them repeatedly in various appropriate fora. I recognise that negotiation of a text is almost complete and all I would ask now is that member states and all of us would be incredibly alert to four concerns in the last stages towards Chişinău and in the subsequent phases.

First, we must affirm and reaffirm and repeatedly stand for the independence of the European Court of Human Rights and other courts that adjudicate human rights.

Secondly, we must be no less assiduous in standing up for the universality of human rights. Everybody, regardless of who they are, be they migrant or be they millionaire, I do not care, by virtue of humanity, each of them has their human rights. That is universality. We must hold dear to this fundamental principle of the system.

Third, we must be very careful not to instrumentalise the European Convention on Human Rights for purposes that have nothing to do with the European Convention. We do damage to the Convention and we do not solve the problem we're purporting to solve.

And fourth and finally, I will simply say: beware of unintended consequences of what we do today. Things that I freely admit nobody is planning but which nevertheless may come about through carelessness.

I would like to take a moment now if I may to say a word on how I make choices in the work I do. I have been asked by a number of you in recent times why I do this, why I do that, and I think it is appropriate and respectful for me to lay out to you some indicators.

The first indicator is that I have a vast mandate. I am mandated, and I am not complaining about the mandate, to engage on supporting the delivery of every human right in every member state.

In its wisdom, the Council of Europe has given me extremely modest resources to deliver on this mandate. My staff is excellent, but it is tiny. And that means that I must constantly make enormously consequential choices. I cannot do all the things that need to be done, all the things I want to do. I must choose and I am well aware that for every choice to do something, I am choosing not to do something else. Therefore, certain principles have to be very much at play as I make my choices. Here are the core elements of those principles (beyond legality and mandate, obviously).

The first is cooperation. The second is complementarity. The third is identifying my own unique added value in any engagement. And the fourth is remembering and drawing the consequences from the fact that I work within a community of human rights actors. Who are that community? Well, to take one example, very important members are national human rights institutions. And increasingly, where there is a strong national human rights institution, I take a back seat, and I instead work with or help enable and empower the NHRI to do the job. This, by the way, is an incarnation of the principle of subsidiarity.

Second, civil society and NGOs. They are not just there to be protected. They are on the front line of standing up for human rights. And sometimes, frankly, they will do it better than me.

Third, we have the international and the regional organisations, the United Nations, the OSCE, the other entities that are also playing a role with regard to which and with whom I should be complementary.

And finally, there is the family of the Council of Europe itself. There is you, the Parliamentary Assembly. There is the treaty oversight bodies, the Venice Commission, and others. And sometimes you will do it better than me. Sometimes, I will do it better than you. Venice Commission, let's say, will do it better than all of us.

I hope this helps you to understand the very difficult context and the criteria according to which I make my choices.

To conclude my opening remarks, which have been rather lengthy, and I apologise, I consider, and as you will see from the forward to the annual report, that this is a very fragile moment for the honouring of human dignity within our societies.

We see more wars than we have in decades, scales of abuse that are astonishingly dark and grim. We see in many places a weakening of legal commitment to human rights. We see a weakening of multilateral systems more generally. We see, as I mentioned, assaults on civil society and on the rule of law itself. And all of this in the context of a broader world crisis, sometimes called the polycrisis. And increasingly, within this context of crisis, we are talking not of a changing era, but a change of era.

We are leaving an era. We are passing into a new one. And we do not know yet what that new one will look like.

We do not know if we will successfully carry our corpus of international law, of international institutions, and of human rights law into that new era. It is not automatic that it will survive. We have to be extraordinarily vigilant.

I want to assure you, by way of wrapping up this introduction to our exchange, that I look forward to continuing to work very closely with you, as we together figure out the ways to make sure that this great achievement, sometimes called modernity's great achievement - human rights - is carried safely into whatever new era we are entering into.

I thank you.