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**Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) joint debate
on the legal and human rights aspects of Russia's aggression against Ukraine**

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

Strasbourg, 26 June 2024

President, thank you,

Honourable members, it's a great pleasure and an honour to be here. Thank you for the trust you have placed in me.

Ukraine and standing up for the human rights of its people is my top priority. And it's for that reason that it was the first country I visited when I took up my mandate in April.

I have five preoccupations right now, which in large part echo the words of the Rapporteurs.

First, we have got to keep the plight of the children who have been relocated to Russia at the very top of our international political agenda, while of course, welcoming all the efforts currently being made at the behest of the Ukrainian authorities.

Second, we must not forget the situation of the people living in the temporarily occupied territories. The human rights situation there is deplorable. It was well captured in a recent United Nations report. We have journalists here today in Strasbourg who have spoken about the plight of journalists in the occupied territories. Let us not forget Crimea, which has been occupied for several years now, and let us not forget the particular situation of the Crimean Tatar people, who were the subject of an important report by my predecessor, Dunja Mijatović.

Third, we need to address the immediate humanitarian needs of Ukraine. These cannot wait for the end of the conflict. So, we need, for instance, to find the resources and capacity to rebuild schools and to provide housing for internally displaced people.

Fourth, as the Rapporteur say, it is important to maintain a strong focus on criminal accountability. I welcome the new indictments by the International Criminal Court.

I also welcome the initiatives to develop a tribunal for the crime of aggression. For me, it is not a matter of what form it takes or where it is housed. My concern is to make sure that it respects human rights, and above all, the rights of victims and witnesses and, I would strongly encourage Ukraine to speedily ratify the Rome Statute of the ICC.

We must all keep an eye on the Register of damages and the future compensation mechanisms to make sure that they are not just about reconstruction, but about delivering victim-centred justice.

Fifth, and finally, I would like to encourage that every effort be made to embed human rights in peace and reconstruction efforts and initiatives. I welcome the outcomes of the recent conferences in Berlin and Lucerne. However, I would welcome a much more specific and explicit reference to human rights systems, institutions, and standards. Indeed, the explicit engagement of these elements will lead to what will prove to be better and more durable outcomes.

Mr President, honourable members, let me conclude by assuring you that I will continue to pay high attention to the human rights of the people of Ukraine.

I look forward to doing so in a very close cooperation with this Assembly.

Thank you.