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Thessaloniki EuroPride 2024 Human Rights Conference

Speech by Michael O'Flaherty

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Dear friends,

It's a great pleasure to be here. I want to thank you for the invitation.

At the end of today, I'm left both proud and anxious.

I am proud from all the stories of courage, of tenacity, of integrity, of persistence that I have heard over the last 24 hours. But I am also very concerned, by so much of what you have told me in our meetings.

It is not just today. I have been Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner for eleven weeks now, and I'm struck and startled by the number of challenges, problems and issues that have already been brought to my attention.

Already in my election campaign, in front of a group of politicians, I was challenged on how to define a woman. And then when I gave an answer that was clearly unsatisfactory, I was shouted over: "define a woman!". And when I still didn't give the answer the person wanted, I was heckled for the rest of my intervention.

On the same day, I heard a politician say that "we must fight hard and stand up for the rights of the LGB community". Entire categories of people are wiped away in that vicious abbreviation of the acronym.

In office, I have had to deal with the many cases of gender identity denial that we are seeing persistently in so many places at the moment and with the consequences of gender identity denial in terms of violence, sometimes even leading to death. Being here in Thessaloniki, I have to acknowledge the fact that there was a violent attack just last March outside our venue for today's conference.

I have had to look at and engage directly with the adoption of so-called foreign funding laws in far too many countries; an issue directly specific to the LGBTI communities, because as they have told me so often, they are the first organisations that the state comes after once the laws have been adopted.

I have watched, as has already been mentioned, the contagion of hate speech and disinformation that we're seeing everywhere right now, including, as I heard this morning, in some cases, equating homosexuality with paedophilia.

In some places - and this is very closely intertwined with what I just mentioned - we see efforts by some people in the socio-political context to instrumentalise the LGBTI communities. They instrumentalise human beings in the interest of strange political agendas.

Friends,

We find ourselves at a deeply worrying and dangerous moment.

What can we do? There are many proposals and ideas on the action we need to take. I will very briefly suggest just five.

First, we need to be angry, or as Stéphane Hessel, the French intellectual, put it: "Indignez-vous". We have to get indignant! This is not a moment for courteous and polite discourse. There is far too much at stake and already too much lost.

Second, we have to channel that anger, that indignation, through the range of tools in our toolbox. I consider that one of the most important of these tools is the body of regional and international human rights law and its protection systems and institutions.

Human rights approaches to tackling these issues can and do make a difference. It is because we make our claims as human rights law that they are about rights, and not just favours.

When we make our claims as a matter of human rights, we also have to engage with every dimension of humanity. It's not just about standing up for free speech and free movement. It's also for instance about tackling poverty. Human rights require us to take that holistic approach.

Third, we have to evidence our claims and provide the data as the basis for what we're demanding in our societies. It is in this spirit that I so greatly welcome the continued work of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency which issued the third of its periodical reports, which has been a game changer in the European Union. We have nothing equivalent for all the Council of Europe member states, and my hope is that this gap will soon be filled. Regardless of whether the EU or the Council of Europe gathers the data, we need data gathered also at the national level. As they say, if we can't measure it, we can't fix it.

Fourth, and indeed, you know this so well, but it has to be said: progress is not linear. We have seen shocking backsliding in recent times. This backsliding is not a series of accidents in different places, but there are clear elements of joined up and very well-resourced strategies.

We can push back. We can be just as smart.

In this context, regional strategies have a very important role. For instance, the EU LGBTIQ Equality Strategy did make a difference - it had impact -by changing the focus of attention. That is why I urge the EU, the new Commission, the new Parliament, the other EU actors, to make sure that there is a second strategy so that we can build on the first one and do a still better job. The EU strategy must not be a one-off experiment. I also welcome the fact that there is now a commitment in the Council of Europe context to develop an analogous strategy and I very much look forward to supporting that development.

Fifth, and finally, I would urge us all to be hopeful. Despite all the knocks, despite all the pushes, despite the backsliding, we can build a better future. We have the evidence base. I would just refer to so many stories in this room. I don't know many of you, but I do know that many of you have stories of progress in your own lives, achievements that you have seen in your own personal experience and that of your communities.

I have evidence also in my own story. I come from Ireland. For the first half of my life, I lived under the shadow of the criminal law. And in the second half of my life, just five years ago, in the same country, I was able to marry my partner. That is a basis for my hope.

Thank you.