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**Exchange of views between the Commissioner for Human Rights and the  
PACE Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination**

**Speech by Michael O'Flaherty**

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Chairperson, esteemed members of the Committee,

Thank you very much for this opportunity to exchange views.

Cooperation between this Committee and the Commissioner must be very intense because your work is about core human rights issues, and you are addressing some of the most critical concerns.

Dear members of the Committee, I want to take the opportunity this morning to indicate to you my four priorities as I start this position.

The first one is to work towards embedding human rights into the heart of the major developments and challenges of our day. I can think of no greater challenge for human rights in Europe than Russia's aggression against Ukraine. That is why, in a few days, I will go to Kyiv where I will meet with authorities and with civil society to gain a better understanding and to see how I can best support the people of Ukraine.

Allow me to name a few other great challenges.

One of these is the situation of women in our societies. Women represent just over half of the population of our planet but there are grave issues about their human rights situation, as also shown in your work. I will outline three dimensions of my commitment to make advancements on this point:

The first is standing up for the human rights of women. I will carry on in the spirit of my predecessor.

Second, combating violence against women. I will be a strong promoter of the Istanbul convention, of its ratification and implementation.

And third, I want to make sure to have a gendered perspective in everything I do as a Commissioner for Human Rights. I commit, with my Office, to acknowledge the different experience of women and men so that the engagement is appropriate for all.

Another major issue is the contagion of disinformation in our societies and of the related hate. Among the groups that are most preoccupying me right now, there is the hatred directed against Jews and against Muslims in our societies.

And yet another is the climate crisis and how we can ensure a human rights approach to it, not only in the context of the important decision of the European Court of Human Rights last week, in the case of

Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland, but also by making sure that the green transition is a just transition.

My second category of priorities is around forgotten people. I believe the Commissioner for Human Rights is very well positioned to and has a duty to seek out and stand up for people who are forgotten, those pushed to the margins of our societies.

That is why my first public engagement last week was with the Roma community, and I will pay high attention to standing up for the human rights of Roma, across Council of Europe member states.

Another such group is persons with disabilities. I will join you in promoting appropriate deinstitutionalisation and the inclusion in the community of persons with disabilities, in full respect of their rights.

One further group of forgotten people is older people. Again, I think in particular about older people living in institutions. On this point, an important issue must be the human rights lessons drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic – including the extent to which older people were abandoned in the context of pandemic response, and how that must never happen again.

The third of my four priorities, and again it echoes an important focus of your work, is standing up for human rights defenders. I will continue the work of my predecessor. The Commissioner must be a strong partner of human rights defenders. They are the glue connecting the human rights protection system. There isn't a single good human rights idea that did not originate in civil society. Human rights defenders are the champions of that proud record.

My fourth priority is a continuation of something very special to the Commissioner's office, and that is a quality of nimbleness, flexibility, and rapid response. We must have a capacity in the Council of Europe to react immediately to crisis wherever it emerges. The Commissioner's mandate was designed to play an important part in that aspect. I will accompany people where they are in real time on real issues.

Further, it is essential to understand the mandate of the Commissioner as one of complementarity and cooperation, both in their external and internal dimensions.

First, the external. It will be essential to work closely with the United Nations, the OSCE, and with other important parts of the human rights machinery. We need to work together towards our shared goals.

Secondly, there is also a very important internal dimension. The Commissioner must work closely with the institutions of the Council of Europe including, especially, the Parliamentary Assembly. I will look for ways to enhance, deepen and enrich the cooperation with you. I met with the President of PACE yesterday. We discussed how I can be more present in the Assembly, and I look forward to having regular exchanges, both to share with you my own findings and to learn from you.

Let me conclude by stressing what an extraordinary, unique resource the Parliamentary Assembly is – coming from right across every corner of the Council of Europe area, four times a year, with the *on the street feel* of what happens everywhere, in all the diversity of political views, and creating, as a result, an extraordinarily rich focal point for an understanding of the issues in Europe and the best way to engage them. I intend to fully draw on this knowledge and experience.

Chairperson and members, thank you again for your attention, and I welcome any questions you might have.