

**14<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting**  
**EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement**  
**Matosinhos, 24 November 2021**

**Welcome address by Mr. Matjaž GRUDEN,**  
**Director of Democratic Participation, Council of Europe**

Your Excellency Mr Eduardo Cabrita, Minister of Home Affairs of Portugal, Honourable Ministers, Honourable State Authorities, Honourable Municipal Authorities of Matosinhos,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, members of national delegations and invited International Organisations,

On behalf of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Ms Marija Pejčinović-Burić, I express my heartfelt congratulations to the Portuguese authorities for having hosted this 14<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting of the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA), for the second time in a row, following the 13<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting in 2016 in Lisbon. This demonstrates a steadfast dedication of the authorities of Portugal to the multilateral cooperation aiming at prevention of and protection against risks and better preparation for disasters.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

Years 2020 and 2021 have been like no others in the living memory:

- Covid-19 pandemic, a health emergency comparable only with the Spanish Flu, has been ravaging the planet for the last two years killing millions around the world, including hundreds of thousands in Europe.

Other disasters did not pause on account of the pandemic:

- In the devastating floods in Germany in July 2021, 184 people have lost their lives and entire communities have been destroyed. The number of victims of this flood disaster exceeds that of all previous inland floods in Germany since 1900 combined.
- Belgium was also affected by these floods and the number of victims there was 31.
- Greece, long accustomed to fires, experienced in August 2021 an unprecedented heatwave with temperatures reaching 47°C. Heat and drought created perfect conditions for the worst fires in Greece since 2007. 125,000 hectares of forests and significant number of building were lost to fire.
- In the last two years, earthquakes in Greece and Croatia claimed numerous lives and caused significant material damage.

- Taiga fires in Yakutia destroyed during this summer 170 thousand square kilometers of forest. This was a third successive summer of devastating taiga fires in Siberia.

Such phenomena, occurring increasingly throughout the world, remind us of the need for preparation, planning, good logistics and infrastructure to limit the risk of hazards turning into disasters and to rebuild better to limit the scope for disasters to recur.

The twelve Scientific Centres actively cooperating within the EUR-OPA Major Hazards Network provide a platform for practical co-operation in the field of protection against major natural, technological and biological hazards and strengthening resilience in the face of disasters.

Important advances were made in the years 2020-2021:

The European Centre for New Technologies of Risk Management (ECNTRM) in Moscow has been working on developing technology for detecting and analyzing rapidly socially significant events in social networks to allow the relevant authorities and services to make timely and effective decisions on preventing the development of an emergency or eliminating its consequences.

The European Centre on Vulnerability of Industrial and Lifelines Systems in North Macedonia together with the European Centre on Prevention and Forecasting of Earthquakes in Athens have been working on a pre-earthquake vulnerability assessment of significant buildings in the Old Town of Skopje. The methodology can be applied to a large set of buildings; the project's outputs provide decisionmakers with a ranking of identified vulnerable buildings.

The Euro-Mediterranean Centre on Insular Coastal Dynamics based in Malta in partnership with the Strasbourg-based European Centre on Geomorphological Hazards developed a sound methodology for the assessment of risks related to coastal hazards. The objective is to provide national authorities responsible for planning and civil protection with a well-defined methodology for risk mapping via a stepped approach of hazard susceptibility, vulnerability and risk assessment. Moreover, by the end of this year coastal hazard risk maps for selected areas of Malta and France, that may be used by coastal administrators and planners for effective coastal zone management, will be produced.

Time at my disposal does not allow me to give you more examples, but even this sample is evidence enough how varied, specific and relevant projects carried with in the Network of Specialised centres are.

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The Council of Europe, as you all well know, is an organisation focused on the protection of Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law. We do not lose sight of the most vulnerable people and we know well that disasters affect them more than other groups and create or increase inequalities within our societies.

Since 2010, the Agreement has followed the guidelines contained in the Resolution on ethical values and resilience to disasters, that was adopted at the Ministerial Meeting held in St. Petersburg that year.

In 2011, the Committee of Permanent Correspondents adopted a Resolution on *Ethical Principles relating to Disaster Risk Reduction and contributing to people's resilience to Disasters* which provided a conceptual platform to expand its work on vulnerable groups.

One of these principles is the Principle of Non-discrimination that is to be applied to people with disabilities. This group of citizens is confronted with a number of difficulties regarding disaster risk reduction. They may have problems in obtaining the correct information on prevention or even in receiving alerts in the case of emergency situations. There may be

physical barriers to enter or leave a building or emergency services may not be prepared to efficiently handle people with some disabilities.

In 2016, the Committee of Permanent Correspondents adopted thus a *Resolution on the Inclusion of Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in disaster preparedness and response*.

The Committee of Permanent Correspondents continued this reflection in the past year drafting two new recommendations that respond to issues connected with the Covid-19 pandemic. You will be invited to discuss them today during the session devoted to the **Inclusion of vulnerable groups in preparing for and responding to disasters**.

The first of these recommendations is on “Enabling and protecting persons with disabilities before, during and after public health emergencies resulting from viral or other pathogenic pandemics” and the other addresses “Inclusion of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in public health emergencies resulting from viral or other pathogenic pandemics”.

Both of these recommendations constitute specific fleshing out of the EUR-OPA's *Ethical Principles relating to Disaster Risk Reduction* and more broadly to the Council of Europe focus on Democratic participation.

Your undertakings, together with the recent adoption by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) of resolutions and recommendations on the environment and climate change, constitute significant contributions of the Council of Europe to reducing disaster risk and setting standards for all its member States.

I would also like to recall the initiatives undertaken under the successive Presidencies of the Committee of Ministers of Georgia, Greece, and Germany on the human rights implications of environmental problems. Indeed, the European Court of Human Rights is dealing with increasing case-law dealing with environmental matters.

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Dear Ministers,

we are committed to follow the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. Building on the core values of the Council of Europe's mission, the **Medium-Term Plan for 2021-2025** promotes a human rights-based and community-led approach ensuring that the most vulnerable groups are not left behind when it comes to disasters. The principal goal is to

make, by 2025, significant quantifiable progress to meet the seven global measurable targets set by the Sendai Framework. The work developed by the Partial Agreement will make a useful contribution to the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Fighting against environmental degradation and climate change is one of the priorities of the Strategic Framework of our Organisation for the next quadrennium work programme. We are eager to listen your guidance and priorities to provide responses based on the values of the Council of Europe: democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

I would like to close my speech by thanking Minister Eduardo Cabrita for hosting this Ministerial Meeting, and the Ministers and Representatives of the Member States of the partial Agreement for their highly appreciated participation. I wish you good deliberations and I am looking forward to continued collaboration of the Members of the EUR-OPA Major Hazards Agreement. The Agreement will continue to promote undertakings to ensure better prevention of and protection against risks and preparation in the event of major natural or technological disasters, thus building more resilient societies.

Thank you all very much and I wish you all success in your endeavours.