

**Statement by H.E. Edgars Rinkēvičs,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia
as Chair of the Committee of Ministers
at the Third-Part Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of
Europe
Strasbourg, 20 June 2023**

Dear President,

Distinguished Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

It is an honour to address you today as Chairman of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

I appreciate the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the Parliamentary Assembly. A few weeks ago in Riga, I addressed the Standing Committee of PACE. I am here today to share with you **the main priorities of our work ahead.**

Le Conseil de l'Europe a été fondé pour protéger la démocratie, les droits de l'Homme et l'État de droit en Europe. Depuis près de soixante-quinze ans, le Conseil de l'Europe assure les standards dans le domaine des droits de l'Homme. Cette Organisation a contribué à l'ordre fondé sur des règles.

[The Council of Europe was founded to protect democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Europe. For almost seventy-five years, Council of Europe has been a standard setter in the field of human rights. It has greatly contributed to the rules-based order.]

La démocratie et les droits de l'Homme restent le fondement de la liberté et de la paix en Europe. Ils ne doivent jamais être pris pour acquis.

The ongoing aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine threatens the rules-based order and undermines democratic values. We condemn Russia's aggression and stand in full solidarity with Ukraine.

The Summit of the Council of Europe in Reykjavik was an important milestone for this Organization at a critical time. I commend Iceland for an outstanding organization of the Summit.

The main result of the Summit was strong European unity in responding to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The European leaders committed to protect the standards and values of this organization.

The work of the Latvian Presidency will be guided by the decisions taken at the Summit. We will advance their implementation in consultation with various stakeholders of the Council of Europe. We count on good cooperation with PACE in this process, and welcome your input today.

The Latvian Presidency is already working on the Summit decision **implementation plan**. We aim to have the plan confirmed by the next Committee of Ministers meeting on the 28th of June.

Distinguished members of PACE!

Ukraine must receive all the support it needs.

The Member States of the Council of Europe have reaffirmed an unwavering support to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

We call on the Russian Federation to comply with its international obligations and withdraw its forces from Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

Russia must bear full legal and financial responsibility for its aggression and violations of international law.

Attacks against civilian population and critical infrastructure are deplorable. The destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam in the Kherson region of Ukraine is another example of Russia's brutality. The President of PACE, the Secretary-General and I have jointly condemned this horrific act.

I welcome the first practical step towards a future international compensation mechanism taken by this Organization. Latvia is proud to be among the founding members of **the Register of Damage**.

As Presidency, we invite all member States of the Council of Europe and beyond to join this initiative. During our Presidency, we will advance its operational launch. The first meeting of participants of the Register of Damage at the end of June must address the practical steps going forward.

We should continue the implementation of already existing initiatives in support of Ukraine. The Action Plan on Resilience, Recovery, and Rebuilding of Ukraine being one of these. Latvia recently provided a financial contribution to this action plan.

Distinguished delegates!

We must spare no efforts to ensure comprehensive accountability for the crimes committed by Russia. I refer to state responsibility and individual liability for serious international crimes. I invite you to share views on how to advance it.

International efforts must continue to establish a special tribunal for the crime of aggression. In Latvia's view, the creation of an ad hoc international tribunal under the auspices of the United Nations would provide the strongest international legitimacy. The Council of Europe should contribute to this process with its expertise.

The Reykjavik Summit has tasked us to act on the issue of forcible transfer of Ukrainian children. More needs to be done to investigate these unlawful practices by Russia, and to ensure children's return home.

In September, we will organize an Informal Conference of European Justice Ministers to provide a platform for discussion on how to advance Russia's accountability, as well as the issue of reuniting Ukrainian children with their families.

Another area of my concern is possible participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes in the Olympic Games. It is unacceptable as long as Russia's brutal war in Ukraine continues. I encourage PACE to continue discussions on the matter.

Distinguished members of PACE!

The Latvian Presidency will diligently work towards advancing the **national priorities**. Please let me highlight them.

Firstly, strengthening democracy and the rule of law, including promotion of the execution of European Court of Human Rights judgments.

The Court's judgments must be implemented. Also by the Russian Federation. It is vital for ensuring effectiveness of the supervision system, which is one of the Council of Europe's unique features.

As the Presidency, we will advance a dialogue-based monitoring process over the execution of the judgments. We will aim at strengthening greater cooperation among States themselves and with experts from the Council of Europe.

Domestic capacities for the rapid execution of the Court's judgments need to be further strengthened. To this aim, the Latvian Presidency will explore the role of national courts in the execution of Court's rulings.

We will devote particular importance to the rule of law through a more effective functioning of justice system. The resilience of the Ukrainian judicial system at the time of war and post-war reconstruction will be amongst the topics of the Justice Ministers' conference in September.

The Presidency will address the crucial role of education and youth in promoting democracy and the rule of law at the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education in September.

Secondly, promotion of freedom of expression, safety of journalists and the digital agenda of the Council of Europe.

Protection of fundamental freedoms has always been amongst the priorities of this Organization.

As Presidency, we are committed to promote the freedom of speech, protection of journalists and media professionals, including during conflicts and wartime.

To this aim, we are organizing an International Conference on Freedom of Expression and the Safety of Journalists, which will take place in Riga in October. Before the Conference, a new Council of Europe campaign on the safety of journalists will be launched. Latvia has just provided a financial contribution to the Campaign.

The Latvian Presidency is committed to contribute to the work of the Council of Europe in the area of artificial intelligence. Being it amongst our national priorities, we support the ongoing work on the new framework convention.

Thirdly, advancement of reforms of the Council of Europe.

The current geopolitical situation provides an opportunity for changes within the Council of Europe as an organization. The outcome of the Summit has given us policy direction in this regard.

The Latvian Presidency will focus on increasing the transparency, visibility, and efficiency of the work of the Committee of Ministers. The civil society and youth must be involved in the policy discussion processes.

I also wish to address the issue of Russian staff. The situation when individuals with Russian citizenship - single or double - continue to hold positions within the Council of Europe is deeply concerning. It is a significant lapse in judgment. Russian citizens should not be employed within this organization from neither a political, nor a moral perspective. As Presidency, we intend to take a strong stance in this matter.

Avant de conclure, je voudrais exprimer ma gratitude pour tout le travail accompli par l'Assemblée parlementaire. Vos points de vue divergents et votre expertise sont nécessaires pour que cette Organisation soit en mesure de répondre aux défis actuels et futurs.

[Before I conclude, I would like to express my gratitude to the work done by the Parliamentary Assembly. Your divergent views and expertise is necessary for this Organization to be able to respond to current and future challenges.]

I wish you fruitful debates at this session.

Now I am looking forward to exchange of views with you.

Thank you.