



**Address by the Chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe,
Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland,
H.E. Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir
At the 1407 OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna, 19 January 2023**

Thank you, Mr. Chair,

Secretary General,

Excellencies,

It is my honour and pleasure to address you here today on behalf of the Icelandic Presidency of the Council of Europe and to share with you the priorities for our tenure as well as some reflections on the importance of cooperation between our two organizations.

As we all know, we are meeting in dire times. The events of the past year have shaken the European security architecture to its core. And not only that, the Russian Federation's unlawful, unjustified, and unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked a sad watershed in our post-world war history. The entire system of institutions, norms and international law has been upended.

Russia's war so clearly violates everything that our two key European organizations – the OSCE and the Council of Europe – stand for, and the fundamental principles and commitments upon which they were founded.

While Council of Europe was established to defend the individual human rights of the citizens of its Member States, a somewhat idealistic aim, the OSCE rather focuses on the overwhelming common interest of peaceful nations to adhere to international law and certain universal principles.

Of course, now, the fundamental tenets of these two institutions are being violated by Russia.

Russia's war in Ukraine has brought to light how important it is to stand united in our fight for a just and fair international order, where democracy, human rights and the rule of law prevail.

For us, whether we are politicians or career diplomats, our jobs are serious and our duties cannot be taken lightly.

Although it is purely a matter of coincidence that Iceland now chairs the Council of Europe, we approach our role with a deep sense of humility and purpose.

There is more than a fleeting chance that these years will prove to be a critical juncture in history. I hope these times will however prove to mankind that a system based on the peaceful coexistence of states within a framework of international law and rules is indeed worth fighting for. That for all its drawbacks, it is vastly and completely superior to any other method of resolving disputes between states.

Here, our two organizations – the Council of Europe and the OSCE – have important, and complementary, roles to play.

So, although it may sound trite, I want to remind us, as I so often remind myself, that the Council of Europe and OSCE exist to serve a high and noble purpose.

This purpose was very clear in the eyes and minds of those who first lay the groundwork for the post-World war international order, but as we have become habituated to the enormous benefits of this ingenious system, it is clear that the risk of complacency also grows.

Another risk is one that is common to all institutions and systems as they grow and mature; namely, that they turn myopic and begin to view the world not through the prism of their higher purpose, but through the lens of the institutions themselves.

So, these times are indeed serious, and our work does matter.

With a war in Europe, and the democratic backsliding which preceded it, it is clear that at no time before has it been as important that the OSCE and the Council of Europe reinforce each other's work in helping to safeguard democratic institutions, the rule of law and human rights on our continent.

Sustained dialogue between the OSCE and the Council of Europe is an essential element of this, and I hope today's exchange will contribute to that.

Now let me turn to formally presenting our priorities.

During these current critical times, **Iceland's main priority during our Presidency is a strong focus on the Council's core values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.**

At this time, we must focus intently on our fundamental principles and the framework that has kept us together. In a time of democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism, democracy cannot be considered in isolation from the rule of law and human rights. None of our rights can be taken for granted and it seems that there is dire need to advocate strongly for our fundamental norms.

It is a sad fact that there is a reason to worry about apathy in the general population toward the importance of these fundamental values. If this trend continues, and the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law lose their relevance, it will only be a matter of time until they are lost.

In this regard, the importance of fundamental individual rights; such as the freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and the right to privacy, must be particularly defended.

We are at a critical juncture. As States we have a choice, and for Iceland, that choice is clear.

We must put human rights, democracy and rule of law front and center, and throughout our presidency Iceland will do just that.

Second, Iceland is steadfast in its commitment to equality and the protection of the hard-earned progress in protecting the human rights of women and girls around the world.

While important gains have been made in the fight against gender-based violence over decades of activism, new forms of violence have emerged, including in the digital sphere. It is crucial to recognize that online behavior can become violence, and we must ensure that human rights are protected online, as well as offline.

This will be one of our focus areas during our Presidency, and we will also be emphasizing the role of men and boys in fighting gender discrimination.

Let me also stress that Iceland is strongly committed to promoting and protecting the rights of LGBTQI individuals and to create a safe, inclusive, and enabling environment for the promotion of human rights and equality for all.

How can a society be considered to be free if people do not have the freedom to love?

Iceland will proudly host the 10th IDAHOT+ Forum in Reykjavik in May, bringing together governments, activists, civil society, and other stakeholders to assess the progress of LGBTQI rights in Europe.

Third: The Icelandic Presidency prioritizes the environment.

The negative effects of environmental and climate change on the enjoyment of human rights around the world are increasingly evident.

Through Iceland's presidency we highlight the interrelationship between human rights and the environment.

Fourth: We place a strong emphasis on the rights of children and youth.

Every child has the right to grow to adulthood in health, peace and dignity and it is imperative for all States to ensure the rights of children. They are our future.

During our presidency, Iceland promotes child-centered policy making through integrating services and protection systems for children.

An early model of this approach is the Icelandic Barnahús – or Children's house – a child-friendly, interdisciplinary, and multiagency response center for child sexual abuse.

Its unique approach brings together all relevant services under one roof, to avoid re-victimization of the child during investigation and court proceedings and to provide every child with a coordinated and effective response.

Finally, during our Presidency, Iceland has been trusted **with hosting the Council of Europe's fourth Summit** since the organization was founded 74 years ago.

The Summit is a critical opportunity for leaders of all the 46 Member States to convene and “unite around our values” and ensure that the organization is fit to meet current and future challenges.

Invitations to the Summit have been sent to leaders of Council of Europe Member States and Observer States as well as leaders of international organizations, including the Secretary General of OSCE and the Chair of the OSCE Permanent Council. We look forward to welcoming you to Reykjavík in May.

Iceland will strive over the next few months, together with all the Member States, to ensure that the fourth Summit of the Council of Europe delivers on the expectations of the Council's many stakeholders.

This includes young people, with whom we are committed to actively consulting throughout our Presidency to ensure that their voices are heard in the lead-up to the Summit.

Ultimately, we want to deliver a substantive and concise outcome document, focused on the most pressing issues facing the Council of Europe, most notably accountability and justice for Ukraine, but also further lay the groundwork for the relevance of the organization in a changing political landscape.

Mr. Chair,

I thank you again for this opportunity to address the Permanent Council, and hope that we can count on the valuable cooperation with the OSCE during our Presidency and in the lead up to the Reykjavík Summit.

Now, I look forward to hearing your feedback and remarks.