

Opening remarks

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Presidency of the Committee of Ministers

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honored to address you today at the request of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

First of all, let me congratulate you for the **20th anniversary of the HELP Program**. 20 years of the program evidences its maturity, solid experience and continued relevance for the legal community across Europe and beyond. It has successfully equipped the judiciary and other legal professionals with tools on the most relevant and new human rights issues in the European legal environment.

I stand here today from the academic community because HELP program is about learning. The Program in my own country Lithuania has been used by almost **1000 users** on the e-learning platform benefiting from HELP courses, **including tutored ones. Translation of over a dozen of courses** to Lithuanian language made the tools accessible to broader audiences. The **National Courts Administration and the Bar Association** have been active partners in the program.

I am proud to note that Lithuanian members have not only benefited from the program, but also **contributed to its development throughout the years with their ideas**, for instance: a) expansion of the program to other users beyond the judiciary, including for academic institutions; or b) expansion of training events beyond one country to benefit from the exchange of experiences from different countries on the same issues we face.

In the human rights field, we all contribute in our own ways. **The HELP program has contributed with learning tools, networking and methodologies on application of human rights standards in a timely, accessible and sustainable manner.**

We are all living now through a very challenging period when we need to be united and stand together to defend our European values, with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in its third year already.

We sometimes take human rights for granted. But in these turbulent times more than ever we need to once again **remind ourselves that human rights exist only as long as we believe in them, protect and fight for them.** I know what it means, as both my parents' families were deported to Siberia during the Soviet era.

The HELP Program is supporting European legal professionals with knowledge that builds up their capacity to resist any attacks on our values and to defend in legal terms our rights and our freedoms.

Allow me to present the **Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers priorities relevant for today's context. The first priority is to help Ukraine defend itself against Russia's brutal war of aggression.**

Lithuania is one of the world's leading nations in terms of the 2% of GDP allocated to supporting Ukraine - through military, financial and humanitarian assistance.

I very much welcome the fact that one of the thematic debates of the conference today will be dedicated to the **HELP Program's efforts to support Ukraine**, to strengthen its democratic institutions, in the framework of the Council of Europe's Action Plan "Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction".

Lithuanian Presidency actively supports the Council of Europe's **actions aimed at ensuring accountability for international crimes**, in particular: further steps towards a comprehensive compensation mechanism linked to the Register of Damage, and the use of the Council of Europe expertise for the establishment of a Special International Tribunal for the crime of aggression as well.

In this respect, the **HELP courses on the international cooperation in criminal matters, on the prohibition of ill-treatment and** the newly developed course **on international humanitarian law and human rights** will be of great assistance to legal professionals dealing with the crime of aggression.

On **4-5 September**, our capital city Vilnius will host **the Informal Conference of Ministers of Justice “Towards Accountability for International Crimes Committed in Ukraine”**.

As part of the first priority, the Presidency is also very concerned about the protection of rights, safety, and well-being of the children of Ukraine, and also the safe **return of Ukrainian children unlawfully deported by Russia**.

Here again, I would like to highlight the HELP Program’s new initiative, to elaborate a special course on the deportation of children during the armed conflicts and we are looking forward to its presentation at the conference to be organised at the concluding phase of Lithuanian Presidency in November.

I would like to echo the words of Mr Gabrielius Landsbergis, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania and President of the Committee of Ministers, that **Lithuania will continue to support Ukraine and its people as long as it takes**.

Secondly, the Lithuanian Presidency will ensure **continuity with previous presidencies**, giving prime importance to the **consistent implementation of the Reykjavik Summit decisions**, the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, and the further strengthening of the Organisation to meet the current and future

challenges, while celebrating the **75th anniversary of the Council of Europe**.

The efforts to increase the transparency of the Committee of Ministers' work and to strengthen the co-ordination and synergy between the Council of Europe bodies will also continue.

Among the other priorities, which are not less important, are the reinforcement of social rights; the promotion of gender equality and women's rights; the promotion of freedom of expression and the safety of journalists; the fight against disinformation, hate speech and distortion of history. In times of raising intolerance in Europe, HELP course on hate speech and hate crime is more than relevant. We only need to use and promote it.

The Lithuanian Presidency is equally determined to promote **the fight against corruption and promote good governance**. This issue was discussed in Vilnius this June, at the International Anti-corruption Conference and international conference dedicated to the multi-level governance.

Special focus of the Presidency is on addressing the **digital dimension of freedoms, including artificial intelligence and human rights**. Lithuania is proud to serve as a host to the opening for signature of the Framework Convention on **Artificial Intelligence** and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law in Vilnius during the Informal Conference of the Ministers of Justice this autumn. Here again, I commend the **HELP program for the**

timely development of a new course on the human rights implications linked to the increased use of artificial intelligence and other cyber tools.

Ladies and gentlemen, today's **Conference in an opportunity not only to take stock of the experiences of the program so far, but it is important to dwell on the future.** I personally look very much forward to further expansion of the program to the Academia, to Universities, to young people who will be future legal professionals, those who will believe, protect and fight for human rights.

On-line education and micro-credential courses are increasingly used by universities and training institutions. The example of Ukraine has shown that even during the war time people are eager to continue their professional training using HELP platform.

In this context I would like to encourage you to consider any new initiatives for **boosting and expanding HELP at universities in Europe.**

The HELP courses combined with networking have been already and might be very instrumental in the future in promoting the Council of Europe's legal instruments and, in general, human rights and democracy beyond the European borders. It deserves overall support at all decision-making levels, including necessary funds to enlarge its possibilities and improve its functioning. **Education is a soft power of democracy. Let's support it and engage.**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the HELP team for their dedicated work and all of you for your support and contributions to the success of this Program.

I wish you a very productive Conference, inspiration from each other's activities and an ambitious plan for the future!