

## Foreword

*“Human rights must be the first of our priorities”*

The Parliamentary Assembly’s annual report on human rights and democracy in Europe, produced for the first time this year, showcases all of the Council of Europe’s political and legal instruments and mechanisms.

By focusing on our core activities, we are underlining our Organisation’s leading role as the forum for democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Europe as a whole.

We can never take these, our basic common values, for granted. Their protection and promotion will always be “work-in-progress,” requiring constant vigilance and determination, which is why the Council of Europe and its mission remain as vitally important today as they ever were.

We must make active concern for democracy and human rights part of people’s daily lives, reminding them of what is at stake ; and we parliamentarians must urge our governments to take these issues much more seriously, both at home and abroad.

Our report must become an essential reference on the state of democracy and human rights in Europe. In particular, I strongly encourage all our national parliaments to deal with human rights on a more regular basis and to hold debates on this report, which I hope will also be an inspiration to schools, universities, NGOs, journalists and others.

We do not act in isolation , we depend also on our mutual interaction with outside partners. For the Assembly, first and foremost amongst these are national parliaments, with whom our links are especially close thanks to our members’ double mandate. In addition, our relations with civil society are of vital importance : by working together, we bring enormous added value to one another’s activities.

As our report on secret detentions and extraordinary renditions makes clear, even our oldest member states are not immune from criticism. Along with the fight against international terrorism, we must step up our efforts throughout Europe to combat a number of growing threats including racism, xenophobia and discrimination against minorities, poverty and social exclusion, trafficking in human beings and domestic violence. Inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue must become one of our most powerful tools to promote mutual tolerance and understanding.

This publication is the result of a day-long, high-level political debate in the Assembly, bringing together for the first time the heads of all the Council of Europe mechanisms, along with those of some of our most important international partners.

The Council of Europe has unique experience and expertise in democracy and human rights. Through our annual report, we intend to give greater political profile and impact to our Organisation's activities, exhorting our member states to honour their democratic duties.

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*President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*