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A Europe Free from Gender-Based Violence: From Commitment to Action

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A high-level conference on the elimination of gender-based violence financed by Norway Grants and organized by Open Society Fund Prague in co-operation with the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the Council of Europe.

OPENING STATEMENT

Minister, ladies and gentlemen,

The most dangerous threat to human dignity hides in **human beings' capacity to tolerate violence**. Violence **generates violence**. **Witnessing violence** leaves psychological scars that are often more painful and difficult to overcome than the physical ones. The Istanbul Convention is for **zero tolerance** for violence against women and domestic violence. The Istanbul Convention is for A Europe Free from Gender-Based Violence.

Not only does violence have **physical and psychological consequences**; also the **long-term economic cost** of a victim, or her children, being absent from work, school – dropping out, becoming excluded, are immense – they are far too important to be excluded from the **political priorities**.

I am therefore delighted to be present at this conference on behalf of the Council of Europe. Because, for the Council of Europe, combating violence against women is a political priority.

The Council of Europe has been reporting on its member states' response to preventing and combating violence against women since 2005 based on the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on the protection of women against violence, which was adopted by the in 2002. In 2013, the fourth round of monitoring the implementation of this recommendation was completed and it provides a numerical overview of progress taken by member states in a number of areas such as legislation and policies, support services and protection, awareness, education and training, to mention a few.

I would like to highlight a few results of this reporting. First, the **positive ones**. **Responding to violence against women and domestic violence by adopting a national policy has increased in the member states**. This is important, as the **national action plans** have become key instruments for comprehensive and coordinated implementation of policies. Dear Minister, I would like to acknowledge here the efforts of the Czech authorities in preparing such action plan for 2015-2018.

Second positive result, **more forms of violence against women, including forced marriage and stalking, are being criminalised**. Third, member states have also increased efforts to **train professionals** who deal with women victims of violence and the role of education in preventing violence against women is also increasingly recognised. All these are important positive steps in waving the safety net and building blocks necessary for Europe Free from Gender-Based Violence.

However, the data from this 2013 reporting also points to a number of **challenges**. Despite the increased focus on a gender understanding of violence against women, **only physical violence has been criminalised by 46 of the 47 member states**; other forms, including rape and sexual violence, are not yet universally criminalised. The **provision of support services** is still insufficient, and in about third of member states the number of shelter beds specifically for women and children victims of domestic violence is very low compared to the recommended standards.

This of type data is extremely important for the governments, parliaments and other stakeholders and decision-makers to see **where the gaps and challenges** are in the area of violence against women and where the human and financial resources - which unfortunately have become scarce in recent years - should be allocated as a matter of priority.

Minister, Ladies and gentlemen,

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is Europe's most significant contribution to mitigating this human rights violation affecting millions of women. The Convention, also known as the Istanbul Convention, is the **first of its kind in Europe and the most far-reaching** one worldwide. It opened for signature only three years ago and has already been signed by 19 states and ratified by 18.¹ The strong support given to this treaty by European governments and parliaments enabled the convention to enter into force in August 2014 and become legally binding on its Parties.

I hope that the recent initiatives taken by the Czech government, in particular the national action plan on domestic and gender-based violence and the decision to host this conference in Prague, will spark further action on the part of the Czech government to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention in the near future.

We all know that it takes time for international human rights standards to be turned into robust national legislation and changes on the ground – this does not happen overnight. The Istanbul Convention has not been around for long enough to say exactly how big its influence is, but the amount of **changes in law and policy and the number of public debates** it has generated at national level since its opening for signature three years ago is impressive. Gender Based Violence is no more a taboo – the Istanbul Convention is already changing attitudes and mind-sets.

¹ Albania, Andorra, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, Monaco, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey.

While the speakers during the next session will provide you with a detailed account of this ground-breaking treaty and its significance in Europe and at global level, allow me to mention a few characteristics of this Convention, for which it has been praised.

First, the Istanbul Convention is a comprehensive treaty. It is a blueprint for any national set of policies to ensure that women and girls are safe and free from violence.

- It is at the same time a **human rights treaty, a criminal law treaty and a pragmatic tool for greater gender equality**. It is a tool made to be used and applied.
- It introduces a **holistic approach** to combating violence against women. Preventing violence, protecting its victims and prosecuting the perpetrators are the cornerstones of the convention. In addition to these 3 “Ps”, it asks states parties to ensure that all measures are adopted and implemented in a co-ordinated way forming **comprehensive policies** that involve all necessary agencies and institutions, governmental and non-governmental organisations at all levels of society.
- Furthermore, while we often refer to physical and sexual violence when addressing gender-based violence, the Convention recognises the many manifestations violence against women takes and **criminalises a comprehensive list of offences**, including physical and sexual violence, stalking, sexual harassment, not only in the workplace but outside it too, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, forced abortion and forced sterilisation.

Second, to make sure that the Istanbul Convention will not end up being nothing but an empty promise – yet another treaty - but that its requirements will be vigorously implemented by states parties, a monitoring mechanism has been set up. It consists of two pillars: an independent expert body, Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence GREVIO, and a political body, the Committee of Parties, composed of the government representatives from the Parties to the Convention. The Committee of the Parties held its very first meeting on 4 May 2015 in Strasbourg. At this meeting, the Committee adopted its rules of procedure, elected its chair and vice-chairs and proceeded with the election of the first ten members of GREVIO.² These “guardians” of the Convention will hold their first meeting in September and the real work will begin.

The aim of these monitoring mechanisms is not to criticise, to point a finger. Quite the contrary. They are there to identify challenges faced by states parties in applying this tool and thus allow us to better focus our support to in overcoming them.

² List of GREVIO members : [Feride Acar](#) (Turkish), [Biljana Brankovic](#) (Serbian), [Francoise Brié](#) (French), [Helena Maria Carvalho Martins Leitao](#) (Portuguese), [Gemma Gallego](#) (Spanish), [Simona Lanzoni](#) (Italian), [Rosa Logar](#) (Austrian), [Iris Luarasi](#) (Albanian), [Marceline Naudi](#) (Maltese), [Vesna Ratkovic](#) (Montenegrin).

Minister, Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the aims of this conference is to converge the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey on violence against women with the available data and standards provided by the Council of Europe.

On the one hand, the FRA survey - which you will hear more of soon - has provided us with **robust data on the prevalence of gender-based violence in European Union** and on the other hand, we have the **legally binding standards of the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention** to remedy the situation and help the women and their children to overcome the experience of gender-based violence.

Let's use this conference as an opportunity to build our capacity to help victims recover and rebuild their lives, to bring perpetrators to justice, but most important of all, to not fail victims by making sure our promises are kept. It is our duty to speak out – to speak out for those who cannot.