

**Communication by the President of the Committee of Ministers of the
Council of Europe, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania,**

H.E. Mr. Gabrielius Landsbergis,

to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

2 October 2024, Strasbourg

Mr President of the Parliamentary Assembly,

[Mr Secretary General],

Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I appreciate this opportunity to once again address the distinguished Assembly in my capacity as President of the Committee of Ministers.

I also welcome the new Secretary General Alain Berset and look forward to working with him and his team as current President of the Committee and beyond.

Last time I spoke here, I put a heavy emphasis on **Russia's unprovoked and illegal war of aggression** against Ukraine. The situation has not changed since, unfortunately. Quite the contrary – it keeps deteriorating, in the wake of Russia's constant shelling of Ukrainian cities and other critical civilian infrastructure. Russian bombs kill innocent civilians; Russian troops kill Ukrainian prisoners of war; and Russia as such is progressively implicated in a long list of war crimes, which only grows longer.

Just yesterday, when Ukraine was commemorating the Day of Defenders of Ukraine, Russian forces brutally executed **16 Ukrainian prisoners of war!**

War crimes, **regrettably, are not just a figure of speech**, but a grim reality taking place at the heart of the 21st century Europe.

Soon it is going to be **one thousand days** since Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, has started its full-

scale invasion of Ukraine. One thousand days of terror, which were preceded by almost three thousand days of localized but intense violence in Crimea and the eastern part of Ukraine. All of that is of Russia's own making.

Two weeks ago, I visited Ukraine **for the ninth time** since the full-scale invasion. And yet again, I had to confront the dire consequences of **Russia's ongoing aggression**. Last September, Russia showered more than 1,300 Shahed-type drones on Ukrainian residential buildings, children's hospitals, schools, supermarkets. And it fired almost 1,000 gliding bombs in the last week alone.

As a result, **nearly 80 per cent of Ukraine's power generation capacity has been knocked out**. The prospect of the upcoming winter is distressing. The people of Ukraine will most likely stay without electricity, without heating, and without drinking water.

While millions of Ukrainians fell victim to the **horrors of Holodomor 90 years ago**, their compatriots of today – also counted in millions – will be exposed to **Kholodomor** – a deliberate attempt to make their life unbearable due to winter cold.

On the top, Russia threatens the world **with nuclear arms**. The most recent example was just last week, from the rostrum of the UN General Assembly, with the world just sitting and watching. Is that all we can do – to sit and watch?

The lack of accountability, which promotes the sense of impunity, are the primary reasons that allow Russia to continue its terrible, senseless aggression.

Our red lines and economic curbs have not been enough to constrain Russia. They are working, but not enough. Therefore, it is time to put even more pressure on Russia and ensure its **full accountability** for its crimes. Only this way will we lay the path towards a **just, sustainable and lasting peace for Ukraine**.

I commend the efforts of the Council of Europe to achieve this. Allow me to refer to the Conference of the Ministers of Justice which took place on the 5th of September in Vilnius. This informal conference, titled "Towards Accountability for International Crimes Committed in

Ukraine”, adopted a Declaration calling for an effective **Special Tribunal** for the Crime of Aggression. 42 States have already supported this Declaration.

This is not the only good news. In its meeting in Vienna recently, **the Core Group has reached an agreement on the general concept** of the Special Tribunal. We welcome the Council of Europe’s decision to extend and share its valuable expertise during the drafting of the Statute.

The work of the **Register of Damage** for Ukraine is also progressing well. I am glad to note that the **10,000th claim has been submitted to the Registry** just yesterday. The Presidency continues to advocate all eligible states to join it.

Since the Register is just the initial step towards a comprehensive compensation mechanism, we are pleased that several preparatory meetings on an international instrument to establish a **Claims Commission** for Ukraine have already taken place. We encourage all involved parties to move forward with the setting up of the Claims Commission.

Further steps are urgently needed to protect the **Ukrainian children** against the systematic abuses by war; against unlawful transfer, deportation, and illegal adoption; against indoctrination with Russian propaganda and attempts to erase their ethnic identity.

We commend the Council of Europe’s decision **to become a member of the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children**. I look forward to the Council’s active participation in it.

Distinguished audience,

This Organization has proven to be at the forefront of real action against Russia’s aggression. So let us not relent.

Now, allow me to cover **the main achievements by the Committee of Ministers** since the last part-Session of the Assembly. They complement the priorities of the Lithuanian Presidency and are neatly integrated with them.

In early July, Vilnius hosted a high-level conference on the European **Social Charter**. The members of the conference adopted **Vilnius Declaration**, which reinforces social rights and encourages additional commitments under the Charter. We are pleased to report that already 5 countries at the Conference assumed additional commitments.

The Council of Europe continues to focus on innovative issues. Thus, nine States and the EU signed the Framework Convention on **artificial intelligence**, human rights, democracy and the rule of law on the 5th of September in Vilnius. The “**Vilnius Convention**”, as it will be known henceforth, is the first-ever international legally binding treaty aimed at encouraging the development of AI in line with our values.

As you know, Lithuania attaches high importance **to the freedom of media** and promotes it in various multilateral fora. Informal exchange of views with the partners of the Council of Europe’s **Safety of Journalists Platform** has taken place to discuss the best ways of enabling access to reliable information and countering disinformation, as well as assisting journalists in exile. Issues related to **privacy and media freedoms from a judicial perspective** were discussed at an international conference in Vilnius.

Situation in **Belarus** and its complicity in Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine remains high on our priority list. In particular, **further deteriorating human rights situation and the high numbers of political prisoners in Belarus** requires our immediate attention. These Belarusian citizens – held in appalling conditions, often *incommunicado* – could in fact be called “hostages” of the Lukashenka’s regime.

Belarus also continues to apply **the death penalty** and the scope of its application is expanding. In this context, continuous **support to the Belarusian democratic forces and civil society** and their capacity-building is crucial. By democratic forces and civil society I mean their entire body, including the elements in exile.

The Lithuanian Presidency organized a series of events dedicated to these issues: Exchange of Views on the abolition of death penalty held by the Deputies; a Workshop on Advocacy for the abolition of death penalty for the youth of Belarus, held in Vilnius in May.

Distinguished Members of the Assembly,

It is regrettable that co-operation between **Azerbaijan** and the Council of Europe has reached a stalemate. Last July, the CPT [anti-torture Committee] issued a public statement to address the persistent lack of co-operation by the Azerbaijani authorities. We are concerned about the reported violations of the right to freedom of expression and the imposition of disproportionate criminal sanctions to limit freedom of expression in Azerbaijan.

Many of us also share the concern about the **inclusion of distinguished members of this Assembly in the no-entry list to Azerbaijan** because of their voting positions. As the current Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, we encourage Azerbaijan to respect its obligations as a member State of the Council of Europe in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. We stress the importance of an open and inclusive dialogue to resolve outstanding issues.

We also continue being gravely concerned **with the situation in Georgia**. Several weeks before the elections, the ruling party continues its intimidation campaign against both the political opposition, civil society and population at large. This is not in line with our values. This is not in line with the values of the Council of Europe. I therefore urge Georgian MPs and diplomats present in this very room, to assume their responsibility and make sure that **Georgia is back on the path of democracy**, on the path of rule of law, on the path of Europe.

Colleagues,

On the administrative note, I am pleased to inform that the Committee of Ministers took note of the new **People Strategy** for the period up to 2027. This is important for staff members and member States alike, because it gives direction to the management of staff and its ability to adapt to a changing environment, in order to meet the current and future challenges.

Aligning the Secretariat employment with the Council of Europe membership is one of our Presidency priorities. Therefore, it is positive that the new People Strategy takes into consideration the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and Russia's subsequent expulsion from the Organization.

Our Presidency also attaches great importance to the **inter-institutional dialogue** to ensure the coherence and impact of our messages. Therefore, we immediately replied positively to the idea of convening a Joint Committee meeting during this PACE session. It will take place tomorrow on the topic of "Consequences of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine", a top priority in itself on our respective agendas.

Allow me to conclude by emphasizing that a just, lasting, and sustainable peace, as well as respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, demand our collective effort. Let us show we can deliver.

Thank you.