

**Address by David Oddsson
Foreign Minister of Iceland**

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Mr. Chairman

Allow me to thank the Polish presidency for providing the venue for the Third Summit of the Council of Europe, the excellent organization and warm hospitality.

Mr. Chairman

European unity can only be achieved by the pursuit of the fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Their denial led to last century's divisions and tragedies in the Continent. Today we are meeting in a country which suffered heavily from the assault on these values, and which in later years was in the forefront of re-establishing them.

With its distinguished history, unique experience and continent-wide membership, the Council of Europe is in an exceptional position to promote and protect these principles and help ensure freedom and prosperity.

Work is in progress in the United Nations to bring about much needed reform of that organisation so that it can effectively counter threats to global security. Europe is as sensitive as the rest of the world to terrorism, tyranny, organised crime, poverty, and disease. The Council can make a vital contribution to reducing the danger from these threats.

Proposals to create a new Human Rights Council within the United Nations, following growing criticism of present arrangements, highlight the strength of the Council of Europe human rights institutions. The powerful mechanism of the European Court of Human Rights is particularly to be admired. The Court provides impartial decisions on whether states are upholding their obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights. The contrast with the approach and activities of the UN Commission on Human Rights could not be greater.

The European Court of Human Rights is thus an institution to be cherished. It is at the centre of the Council of Europe. The Court, however, faces a crisis due to a growing backlog of cases, which will eventually undermine it and threaten the credibility of the Council. The resolution of this crisis is the most important immediate task.

As regards the long-term effectiveness of the Court, Iceland favours establishing a panel of eminent persons to consider the issue. A guiding principle should be that the Court should pay careful attention to the selection of cases. It needs to avoid straying into becoming a court of final appeal for all civil cases between citizens and their states. It should concentrate on cases involving breaches of fundamental human rights.

Member states can also do their part. Applications can be reduced with domestic remedies such as increased awareness by domestic courts of the case law of the Human Rights Court and adequate training in Convention standards as listed in the Action Plan.

The three new Conventions now opened for signature address some of the most urgent and serious challenges to our societies. I am particularly pleased to note that the Convention on the prevention of terrorism takes full account of standards for safeguarding human rights and democracy in its application.

The Council of Europe must, Mr. Chairman, continue to focus on its core mission to ensure the respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Other activities are secondary and only justified if they clearly support the core mission. Iceland strongly supports current proposals for continued reform of the Council's organisational structures to meet the realities and priorities of today.

Mr. Chairman

The Council of Europe was established as the Continent emerged from the ruins of the Second World War. During the Cold War it was active in the defense of freedom. Since then it has made a critical contribution to European security by assisting the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to consolidate democracy. Its mandate remains clear. I am convinced that the Council will continue to be a powerful guardian of democratic security and a force for unity in Europe.

Thank you Mr. Chairman

17. maí 2005