

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**Interview of Marija Pejčinović Burić,
Secretary General of the Council of Europe**

with

European Movement Switzerland

Q.1 Following its war of aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the largest member country, was excluded from the Council of Europe. What consequences does this have for the functioning of the organisation and for the cooperation between the remaining 46 member states?

Russia is excluded from membership of the Organisation and from all of our closed Conventions, - those only opened to member states - including the critically important European Convention on Human Rights. Russia does however remain accountable under the Convention for all acts or omissions that it committed up to 16 September 2022. Russia also remains bound under international law to implement fully all the judgments of the Strasbourg Court that arise from before that date. Russia may remain a Party to the open Conventions of the CoE. This has proven useful, for instance, with the Lanzarote Convention against sexual exploitation and abuse of children whose convention committee acted in the context of the Ukrainian children illegally abducted by Russia. Serious and important questions have been put to the Russian authorities which have so far refused to cooperate. The Lanzarote Committee issued a strong [statement](#) deploring the lack of an appropriate response from the Russian Federation and urging it to cooperate fully in conformity with its obligations as a Party to the [Lanzarote Convention](#).

With regard to the budget, our member states have so far made up the shortfall created by Russia's departure. This is quite correct: the Organisation should not be penalised for having done the right thing in excluding Russia.

Q.2 In May 2023, a summit of the Council of Europe's heads of state and government took place in Reykjavik - the fourth in the organisation's 74-year history. Its purpose was to ensure that the Council of Europe meets the current and future challenges and answers to the expectations of future generations. What were the results of this summit?

European leaders at the Reykjavik Summit were clear about the need for the Council of Europe to rise to the challenges and do even more. Our leaders recommitted to the Council of Europe's core values, including the importance of implementing fully the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. We have all heard from time to time criticisms made of the Court and its judgments. The Court however is not a political institution. It exists to deliver justice, and its final judgments must be implemented fully and swiftly, as member states have committed to do. This is essential to the rule of law. So, I am certainly glad that our leaders used our recent Summit as an opportunity to recommit to this.

They also showed unity in their support for Ukraine, notably by creating a Register of Damage that will record all loss and damage caused by the Russian aggression. This will enable compensation further down the line.

Further, the leaders agreed to tackle challenges such as the environment and human rights, and artificial intelligence. So, yes, I am very satisfied with the Summit outcome, and I trust our member states will follow suit and implement its decisions swiftly.

Q.3 Why is the Council of Europe still needed today?

Because without it, the rights and freedoms we enjoy every day would wither – from the right to life to freedom of expression, from the right to our private and family life to freedom of thought, conscience and religion – and association – to name just a few. If I can freely reply to your questions and you can publish them without fear, it is also thanks to the values and standards promoted by the Council of Europe. These are, in turn, essential to our way of life as we have known it in Europe for over 70 years. By contrast, the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine shows dramatically what happens when a country – Russia – disconnects from these values and standards. So, the Council of Europe is still needed. In fact, we would have to create it if it didn't already exist.

Q.4 The Council of Europe is focusing on the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Those are currently under great pressure. How do you assess the situation in Europe?

You are right and I drew direct attention to this in my most recent [annual report](#). Without respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, peace in Europe is put at risk. Democratic backsliding takes many forms; increased violence and intimidation against journalists; legislation and initiatives to constrain civil society activism and freedom of association and assembly; a polarized political environment in which hate speech continues to grow, both online and offline, often targeting women and a range of minorities and vulnerable groups. These and other negative phenomena are all too present in Europe. The answer is clear: apply the Council of Europe's standards – which member states themselves adopted – and show the necessary political will to reverse the trend.

Q.5 Not only are certain developments and trends at national level endangering democracy and human rights in many places, but digitalisation is also bringing new challenges. For example, how can artificial intelligence be compatible with human rights and democracy?

Harnessing the benefits of Artificial Intelligence and mitigating the dangers is a defining challenge of our times. That is why the Council of Europe is working on an international treaty on the design, development and use of AI systems, based on existing human rights and rule of law standards.

Negotiations on its content are already underway. These include our 46 member states, along with our Observer States, Canada, Japan, Mexico, the Holy See and the United States. Plus, Israel, the European Union, the OECD and UNESCO. Several countries from outside Europe that have applied for observer status too. We aim to finalise the treaty by mid-2024. Yes, it is being drafted in Europe, but it is a treaty with the potential to foster cooperation and policymaking on a global scale.

Q.6 Human rights are also constantly being reinterpreted and redefined. While the right to appropriate climate protection measures was not explicitly considered a human right in the past, today more and more people are calling on the judiciary because decision-makers are not doing enough to limit global warming to a level that is as safe as possible – such as the Senior Women for Climate Protection in Switzerland. How do you assess such developments?

September 2023 was the hottest September on record for large parts of Europe – including Switzerland. This is not a coincidence, but the result of human actions. Addressing the “triple planetary crisis” of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss is an existential challenge. Our member states face a choice: either they deal with it by defining the best policies and legal frameworks to address this crisis without delay or the judiciary will step in and do so, as has already happened in national and international courts, including our own Strasbourg Court.

It is time for our political and business leaders to rise to the challenge and lead humanity in a different, purposeful and conscious direction because, if we continue like this, we will sleepwalk into extinction. People are right to demand that action: we must all play our role.

Q.7 Switzerland has been a member of the Council of Europe for 60 years. What concrete contribution has it made?

In 2023, we are indeed marking 60 years since Switzerland's accession to our Organisation. Over those six decades, the country has been a committed and proactive member state, playing its full role in our Committee of Ministers, sending a delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly, and providing a judge at the European Court of Human Rights. Switzerland's contribution has been key to our collective work in protecting the fundamental rights of all Europeans. At the same time, everyone in Switzerland benefits from the rights and freedoms enshrined in our European Convention on Human Rights. I am sure that this relationship will only grow stronger over the years ahead and to the benefit of all.

Q.8 What do you wish for Europe?

Peace.

Q.9 In conclusion, what message would you like to give our readers?

Next year the Council of Europe will celebrate its 75th anniversary. Over all those years we have been building a better Europe. We have created a death penalty-free zone among our member states. The rights of women and children, LGBTI people and national, linguistic and religious minorities are better protected than ever before. Our safety and rights – including our privacy – are respected online to a degree that would not otherwise be the case. These are just a few highlights from the spectrum of ways in which the Council of Europe continues to change lives for the better. None of us should ever take our rights and freedoms for granted. Nurture them, live them, and promote them.