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EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW
(VENICE COMMISSION)

In co-operation with

OSCE/ODIHR

and

**THE PRESIDENCY OF IRELAND OF THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

International round table

**CIVIL SOCIETY:
EMPOWERMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

**Council of Europe, Strasbourg
Tuesday, 13 September 2022**

(Hybrid format)

OPENING ADDRESS

**by
Mr Tiny KOX
President of the Parliamentary Assembly
of the Council of Europe**

OPENING ADDRESS

Madame Secretary General,

Madame President of the Venice Commission,

Madame Human Rights' Commissioner,

Director Mecacci and Director O'Flaherty,

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this important roundtable, which I regard as a clear sign of further deepening of the already excellent co-operation between the Venice Commission and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Moreover, it is a particular pleasure for me to be here when we discuss the role of civil society in modern Europe, - a topic that is without a doubt relevant and timely. It touches the core of the Council of Europe's values, but also addresses the challenges that Europe now faces.

As you know, the Assembly stressed in many of its reports, resolutions and recommendations the importance of civil society for the development and realisation of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. I also wish to praise the important work of the Venice Commission on this subject, which we, in the PACE, consistently aim to support and promote through the means available to us.

Civil society contributes to strengthening the core values of the Council of Europe by promoting public awareness and participation in public life, securing the transparency and accountability of public authorities, and contributing to the cultural life and social well-being of democratic societies. The Assembly repeatedly paid tribute to different NGOs, but specially to the work of the human rights defenders whose activities have often been not just important but also dangerous due to the actions and restrictions imposed by the governments.

In recent years, the Assembly started to note more and more frequently with considerable concern that, in many of the Council of Europe member States, the space for civil society has been shrinking, especially in respect of NGOs working in the area of human rights (including minority and migrants' rights. LGBTI rights etc.). This has been mainly due to restrictive laws and regulations concerning registration requirements or funding, administrative harassment, smear campaigns against certain groups and threats or intimidation against NGO leaders and activists. The implications of these actions are quite worrying as they result in growing xenophobia, racism, intolerance etc., drive populist and anti-democratic agenda, but also hinder the dialogue and establish barriers between the civil society and public authorities. We have all witnessed how the implementation of the "foreign agents' law" and the "law on undesirable organisations" in the Russian Federation led to the closure of dozens of domestic NGOs that received foreign funding and termination of operations of the major international and foreign donor organisations that supported the activities of Russian NGOs, which effectively made such dialogue impossible. I have no doubt that this was among the factors that made the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine possible as the important mechanisms of citizens' control have been suppressed in Russia.

Clearly, we need to draw lessons from this sad situation and this is why the Assembly very much welcomes the initiative to carry out a reflection process (a part of which is the today's roundtable) on how to improve and strengthen participation of civil society organisations in public life, and in particular in law-making procedures and in the work of independent institutions, how to remove existing barriers and develop meaningful incentives for both civil society and public institutions to

work together. Of course, we are particularly interested in how the parliamentary process can be opened up and how MPs can be better accessible for dialogue with the NGOs, while ensuring that no illicit methods or bribery is used.

Therefore, we will follow with great interest the discussions today and will, of course, be ready to support the practical implementation of the ideas and proposals expressed in this roundtable, which will create additional opportunities for further develop our collaboration with the Venice Commission. .