

Summary of the Online Event
“SG for StronG: What is the role of the Secretary General and civil society”
with three candidates to the post of Secretary General of the Council of Europe

27 May 2024, 3pm-4:30pm

with

Alain Berset, President of Switzerland (2018, 2023)

Didier Reynders, European Commissioner for Justice (2019-2024)

Indrek Saar, leader of the Social Democratic Party of Estonia (2019-2022)

Moderator: **Olga Sadovskaya**, member of the Executive Committee at OMCT - World Organisation Against Torture/ member of the Standing Committee of the CoE's Conference of INGOs

The candidates had been asked by the organisers before the event to provide written input on a number of questions. Their replies are available [here](#).

I. Questions by the organisers and the candidates' replies

a) What part of your life experience would help you serve as the Secretary General of the CoE?

Alain Berset: Recalling his 20 years of political experience at both domestic and international levels, Alain Berset mentions his work on matters such as health, social and familial policy, gender equalities, culture and anti-discrimination. He has been in charge for the domestic implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Switzerland. He believes that the Reykjavík Principles are strong elements to work with for the next five years, but acknowledges that it will be a hard task to implement them and that a strong engagement at the highest level is needed.

Didier Reynders: Didier Reynders mentions his extensive knowledge of the work of the CoE that he has gained throughout his involvement with the Committee of Ministers for 8 years; he also presided the Committee in 2014-2015. Besides, he highlights his role as the European Commissioner for Justice. Through this role, he has worked in collaboration with the Venice Commission, GRECO and the ECtHR. He recalls difficult times around the Crimea's annexation and the Mammadov case brought to the ECtHR. He believes he has been dedicated to democracy, the rule of law, human rights and collaboration with NGOs both at his positions in the government of Belgium and in the European Commission.

Indrek Saar: Indrek Saar mentions his ten years of experience as a PACE member, his work as the representative of the Estonian government in the Committee of Ministers and his role of Co-Rapporteur for Serbia, which have given him extensive knowledge of how the CoE ticks. His objective as the SG would be to make the two statutory bodies find common positions through their complementarity. He has been active for many years as a member of civil society, which was his originating point to enter politics.

b) What is the future of the CoE for the next five years, and what will be your role as the Secretary General?

Didier Reynders: He underlines the importance of the SG in better organizing the work between various bodies of the CoE (Committee of Ministers, Parliamentary Assembly, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, NGOs) and keeping this four-avenue dialogue alive. He wishes to give more visibility to the CoE by placing all its components under the same logo. To him, the role of SG should be used to get closer to the member states, local associations, civil society, and to play a more political role in the open political debate.

Indrek Saar: In the next five years, Indrek Saar wants Ukraine and Europe to overcome the war of aggression and re-construct a young democratic country. One of his main ambitions is to keep all 46 member states in the CoE. To prevent democratic backsliding, he underlines the relevance of achieving the implementation of ECtHR judgements and keeping an eye on social and democratic rights.

Alain Berset: He names visibility as a core goal the CoE should aim to achieve in order to differentiate itself from the EU. This is done through political influence and a stronger protection of the CoE values. To do so, he divides his approach in three steps: 1) the collaboration with all the institutions and the civil society; 2) a stronger transparency and political presence of the Committee of Ministers; 3) the revival of democracy built around local participation, humanistic values and the rule of law.

c) The Council of Europe is built on ideas and rules. Should the CoE remain a club of like-minded states and expel those who do not share the ideas of democracy and human rights? What attitude should be adopted towards states who do not respect the rules of the CoE or do not follow ECtHR judgements?

Indrek Saar: He firmly believes the CoE should to keep all the states in the organisation, as long as possible. To do so, the SG needs to play a pro-active role in the execution of ECtHR judgements and to help provide space for a dialogue inside the organisation. He underlines the importance of determining what the red lines are and of having a discussion about deterrence. Furthermore, he believes a clear message should be sent to every country that any type of aggression against another country of the CoE will be followed by exclusion from the CoE from Day One.

Alain Berset: He insists on the idea that the CoE is not a club of like-minded states, due to the history of the organisation. Nevertheless, all the member states commit to the Convention and its values. He does not turn a blind eye to the divergent forces that are at play on the continent and recalls the importance of sending a strong message about the principles of the CoE. Regarding the implementation of ECtHR judgements, he believes the lack of implementation should be dealt with, otherwise the foundations of the CoE would become unstable. To do so, a network at the highest level in member states should be involved, and both formal and informal dialogue should take place.

Didier Reynders: After having mentioned the origins of the CoE and the importance for the member states to stick together, he admits there are certain limitations to this and uses Russia's military aggression as an example for the latter. There should be a unity against impunity and violation of human rights. Regarding the implementation of the ECtHR judgements, he underlines that if the CoE

lacks political influence, it has no power over the correct implementation of those decisions. Building visibility and influence is a shared task between the Committee of Ministers, the Assembly and the SG. The SG shall be able to reach the highest levels of the states to deepen this collaboration – and he mentions his dialogue with President Aliyev as an example.

II. Questions by the audience and the candidates' replies

d) **What priority should be given to further introduction of the youth perspective and their participation in all the Council of Europe's three pillars?**

Alain Berset: He believes it is important to find convergence in order to achieve the revival of democracy. In order to do so, youth has a role to play. The SG shall work closely with the member states in order to touch upon youth issues. He underlines the importance for multilateral institutions, such as the CoE, to make stronger efforts in order to grow closer to the populations they wish to reach.

Indrek Saar: Naming substance as the core way to achieve the youth participation, he believes that topics of higher interest for the next generations should remain at the top of the CoE's agenda. Such topics include environmental questions, AI, social and economic rights. Effective participation of young people in designing policy can only be achieved by raising issues that are relevant to them. He wishes to elaborate something inspired by the practices of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which uses the expertise of youth delegates.

Didier Reynders: He also mentions the importance of raising issues, which young people are concerned about, such as climate, new technologies, discriminations, LGBTQ+ rights and women's rights. It is essential to him to reach out to young people in the member states, in schools or universities, in order to have a better impact. The SG shall consult youth by using the languages of the member states and not only sticking to the two official languages of the CoE. He mentions collaboration with local authorities and NGOs, as well as ministers in charge of education, as tools to better include youth in policy-making.

e) **During one of the recent sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), there was a question on poverty raised, including the burden of unpaid work that disproportionality impacts women. It is likely that this problem is one of the obstacles to reaching the UN SDGs. What is your attitude regarding this problem, and how should the CoE address the question of equality in the face of the crisis of implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the issue of unpaid work?**

Alain Berset: After having re-called that he has been present at the CSW session in New York for last 12 years, he underlines the importance for the CoE to work on two points:

- The convergence against divergent forces: he believes that the Istanbul Convention is an instrument of primary importance that gives more resources and elements to combat violence against women and girls. He himself was in charge of implementing the convention in Switzerland. A dialogue needs to happen with the states who expressed their willingness to leave this convention.

- More should be done in the organisation itself: following up to what António Guterres has done within the UN, Alain Berset aims at gender equality within the CoE, too.

Indrek Saar: After having reminded of that there is still a long way to go to reach equality even in the wealthiest countries, he states that the rumours spread by some political actors about the Istanbul Convention have to be fought against. He also wishes to bring more men into the discussion, stating that equality cannot be an issue discussed by women only. He re-calls his visit to the Status of Women Committee meeting as the representative of Estonia, where the only men were the EU Ambassador and himself.

Didier Reynders: Firstly, he believes an example should be shown to do more for gender equality in the CoE. Stemming from his own experience in the European Commission where gender equality is almost reached in the services, he warns that this can only be done with own initiatives. Such initiatives include going to schools and universities to provide opportunities for girls and women to work in the CoE system. Secondly, efforts shall be made to make professional and private life more compatible. Thirdly, he wants the work to be done regarding equality through social rights in all the member states. Lastly, notwithstanding differences of opinions regarding family law in the member states, he underlines the necessity for the criminal nature of violence against women to be never questioned: if there is violence applied, it is a crime, and this must be made clear everywhere.

- f) **There is an interlink between human rights, the destruction of the environment happening in the CoE states, the rule of law and responsibilities of the states. If you are elected, how can you prepare the CoE to become an active actor in protecting the environment, fighting injustice in cases concerning the environment and limiting companies that are driven by economic and not environmental profits?**

Indrek Saar: The SG should make sure that environmental rights remain high on the agenda. Due to the local effects of human rights challenges regarding the environment, Indrek Saar thinks it is important that consultations with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and youth would remain as practical as possible. Principles should be agreed on at the CoE level and should always put forward the idea that a right to a clean and healthy environment is a basic human right.

Alain Berset: After having mentioned the Reykjavík Principles and the importance of remaining active when it comes to environmental issues, Alain Berset draws attention to the Reykjavík process that directly touches upon the fight against pollution, the fight for biodiversity and the work to tackle climate change. He draws a very clear link between the protection of environment, human rights and migration, issues that must be at the core of the CoE reflections. He mentions the recent ECtHR case *Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland* as an invitation to search for new solutions and bring back long-term actions.

Didier Reynders: Stressing the urgency of environmental issue, he mentions his involvement in institutions that have fought against climate change, using the Green Deal discussions and the execution of the Paris Agreement as examples. Due to the young generation's interest in climate change, he believes there needs to be collaboration with the youth to work on a new framework.

Leaning upon the parallel work of the EU and the CoE on such issues as AI, he believes a similar method can be applied to due diligence. This would force all the economic actors to take human rights and environmental harm risks into account when making decisions.

- g) There is an increasing number of attacks on human rights defenders in CoE member states and other countries. Yet, there is no regional mechanism in place to protect those who fight for human rights and do a lot of work to bring the attention of the CoE to certain issues. What would you envision to improve protection of human rights across the CoE, and what would be your steps to protect the lives of human rights defenders?**

Didier Reynders: The CoE should be closer to human rights defenders in the members states. He thinks it is important to have a clear mandate that includes the protection of human right defenders and to take actions in this regard, along with the authorities of the countries and the judiciary. He stresses the importance to provide funding for human rights defenders, be it by the CoE or in partnership with other actors. He mentions the EU programme supporting civil society, which has funds of over 1.5 billion euros. Talking about the need to react against violence and alarming new legislation acts, he speaks of Georgia and expresses the importance of going to the member states. He wishes to build a platform to raise alert on the situation of human rights defenders inspired by the existing one for journalists.

Alain Berset: He thinks that human rights defenders have to be made visible in the political field. Their presence must be wanted for democracy to prevail. Concerns regarding the protection of human rights defenders, such as the new legislation in Georgia, must be brought up to the highest level. He stresses the need to maintain direct contact to ensure the effectiveness of the CoE and the importance of a political approach.

Indrek Saar: After having mentioned the importance of finding better funding for human rights defenders, he stresses the need to be more demanding of the member states. What happens on their soil is first and foremost their responsibility, and they need to create an environment where human rights defenders are protected. He also mentions the situation in Georgia as an example for the importance of closely working with the government to guarantee that they obey the rules they have committed to.

- h) How do you see the role of civil society within the CoE, and what will you do to promote the engagement between the official structures of the CoE, yourself and civil society?**

Alain Berset: Speaking of direct democracy in Switzerland where laws can be challenged by a referendum, Alain Berset explains that no stable result can be achieved without the integration of civil society at all the stages of the process and asks civil society to be ready to reinforce this participation. He assures that working with civil society is part of his political DNA. He stresses once again the importance of transparency and of building dialogue through formal and informal contacts.

Didier Reynders: To him, promoting the engagement of civil society is done at 3 fundamental levels: 1) being more present locally by working with civil society in the member states; 2) a four-avenue dialogue has to be enforced in the CoE itself; 3) reinforcing the contacts between the Conference of INGOs and other organisations, such as the UN, the European Union or the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. If elected, Didier Reynders wants to work in collaboration with CINGO to define clear

axis of development for the years to come, also as part of the preparations for the 50th anniversary of the Conference in 2027.

Indrek Saar: He firmly believes civil society is an unlimited source for good ideas and feedbacks. However, Indrek Saar stresses the fact that collaboration with civil society has to be done in a genuine way. The CoE has to accept civil society as a real partner and understand the limits of their resources to define what can reasonably be expected of them. He thinks it is important to keep the dialogue smooth and natural and takes the Estonian government's transparency as an example of it.

III. Concluding question and statements

i) **If you are elected as Secretary General, what will be the first country you will visit, and why?**

Indrek Saar: He says he will be visiting Ukraine first. However, there are also other countries that have been expecting a visit by the SG, which we have talked about a lot today.

Alain Berset: After having reminded of that the situation in Europe is always in the flux, he names Ukraine as the first country he will visit, as the implementation of concrete actions is needed in this case.

Didier Reynders: He will first visit Strasbourg to meet the teams of the CoE. Then he will go to Ukraine and has already visited Kyiv three times since 2012. He stresses that Georgia also needs a strong presence of the SG.

j) **Concluding statements**

Alain Berset: To act forcefully and make progress on the values and principles that guide us, we need an intention, and we need intensity. Intensity is the means to make sure that intentions are not just blank words but they lead to concrete results. He believes there should be a strong collaboration between the bodies of the CoE, experience at the highest level of international politics and a strong and vibrant network.

Didier Reynders: He refers to what he has previously said, which is the importance of political visibility, the four-avenue dialogue, a clear message from the CoE and proximity to the citizens by using their national languages. On Ukraine, he stresses the importance of bringing perpetrators to justice and the role that the CoE can play in the formation of a special tribunal and in helping deported children. Frozen assets have to be used to give compensation to the victims. If elected, he will keep trying to work with the democratic forces in Belarus and, if possible, in Russia, including civil society.

Indrek Saar: The CoE has proven that in the darkest moments, it remains an organisation that can stick to its principles and act according to them. He believes this gives a mission and opportunity to the CoE that can also take unexpected initiatives. Most importantly, he addresses the audience with the words that they should never lose faith in the idea that democracy can prevail.