

Dear members of the Synergy Network, dear experts and other participants to this conference, dear organisers,

- **I am honored to give some opening remarks on the topic of today's conference, a topic which concerns some of the most heartbreaking consequences of the war that Russia launched against its neighboring country, and fellow Council of Europe Member, Ukraine.**
- **Please allow me to step back a few weeks in time, to the starting point of the refugee crisis we see today and the Council of Europe's immediate response.**
- **Russia's military attack on Ukraine took most of us, if not all, by surprise. The war conducted by Russia is illegal, and it is particularly brutal in targeting civile infrastructure as well as civilians.**
- **We are witnessing a full-fledged war at our own continent, and on a scale and with a brutality that we have not seen in Europe since the Second World War. The war has altered the security situation in Europe for years, perhaps even decades, to come.**
- **The war is an attack on democracy and on our common European values.**
- **On this background the Committee of Ministers, acting upon recommendation from the Parliamentary Assembly, decided to suspend Russia as a Member of the Council of Europe, the very day after the invasion.**

- **Furthermore, in accordance with the opinion of the Parliamentary Assembly as well as the opinion of the European Court of Human Rights, the Committee of Ministers decided on the 16th March to exclude Russia from the organisation altogether.**
- **It was a *united* Council of Europe that took these unprecedented decisions, and it is a *united* Council of Europe that stands behind Ukraine today. *Your* conference, dear friends, is a result of that unity and solidarity with a Member State and its citizens.**

- **Nearly 3.9 million people have fled the fighting in Ukraine, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Most of them to neighboring countries like Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary and Slovakia. Most of the refugees by far are women and children, some children are even fleeing alone. The governments, civil societies and thousands of volunteers in these countries who day after day continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the refugees, deserve a special praise.**
- **The Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner has conducted a number of visits to bordering countries of Ukraine. In all the countries visited, the risk of trafficking in human beings of women and children was underscored. We can add to that the risk of sexual and other forms of exploitation. The Human Rights Commissioner has called for countries not bordering Ukraine to step up their support.**

- In providing a humanitarian response to the refugee crisis, coordination is key. Coordination between different levels of government, coordination between authorities and civil society, coordination between countries. And coordination starts with exchange of information and knowledge.
- The Council of Europe has a variety of relevant tools that should be made good use of, varying from full-fledged conventions to recommendations, opinions, reports and monitoring mechanisms, tools that you will be exploring more closely this afternoon.
- To the members of the Synergy Network, I would simply like to say: *You* play an important role and *you* can make a difference, together.
- I wish you good luck on your important work this afternoon, tomorrow and the weeks ahead.

Thank you for your attention