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From:	Presidency
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Presidency conclusions from the conference "How to Ensure the Resilience of our Societies in a Changing European Landscape – the Interaction between Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights"

Delegations will find attached Presidency conclusions from the conference on 10-11 September 2019, with a view to the **General Affairs Council** meeting of 16 September and the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting of 7 October 2019.

Encl.: PRESIDENCY CONCLUSIONS FROM THE CONFERENCE

How to Ensure the Resilience of our Societies in a Changing European Landscape – the Interaction between Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights

Conference by the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the EU held in Helsinki, Finland on 10 and 11 September 2019

PRESIDENCY CONCLUSIONS FROM THE CONFERENCE

1. Democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are essential building blocks of our societies and the very foundation of the European project. Anchored in our constitutional traditions, the EU Treaties and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as in the international obligations common to us, they should be the things that unite us. In a constantly changing political and societal landscape, these values and principles should not be taken for granted.
2. Democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights have a high symbolic value and practical importance. Expressed in legal norms they are crucial for the proper functioning of our societies and the policies of the Union. The respect for these values and principles reinforces the credibility and unity of the Union and the trust between the Member States' authorities, and influences directly the operating environment of companies and the daily lives of citizens. Furthermore, these three values and principles are a precondition for sound public finances. Our common values are also the bedrock of resilience. Shortcomings in this area make our societies and the Union more vulnerable both internally and externally.
3. **Democracy** entails the right of individuals to participate in and influence the development of society, with free and fair elections at its core. Without an active turnout in elections and proper mechanisms for participation, the essence of democracy can be lost. Democracy is at risk from threats such as disinformation, facilitated by technological developments. We must counter disinformation by building up democratic resilience, protecting democratic institutions, civic education and media pluralism, as well as by ensuring that objective and reliable information is available for all. Countering disinformation must not endanger the freedoms and rights of citizens.
4. **Rule of law** is the cornerstone of all democratic societies. A proper system of checks and balances maintains the separation of powers, ensures accountability and enhances resilience. In order to maintain trust in public institutions, the

principles of legality, legal certainty, prohibition of arbitrariness of the executive powers, judicial independence, impartiality, and equality before the law need to be respected. The role of national and European courts is crucial for ensuring effective judicial protection.

5. **Fundamental rights** are universal and inalienable. They can only be ensured in a democratic society that respects the rule of law. By promoting and protecting equal rights and the right to participate for all, we can create inclusive and resilient societies where everyone's voice is heard. The participation of youth in public life merits special attention. When developing new tools – including online platforms – to strengthen participation and consultation, accessibility is of paramount importance. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights is at the core of fundamental rights protection in the EU. In 2019, the Charter celebrates its 10th anniversary as a legally binding instrument. Yet more needs to be done to enhance its implementation, particularly at the national level.
6. Democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are interlinked, interdependent and mutually reinforcing. One cannot exist without the others. They should be promoted in a horizontal, integrated and comprehensive manner. Different tools should be further developed in order to prevent possible deficits and tackle current and emerging challenges. A proactive and interdisciplinary approach is needed, based on objective and verifiable data. In order to make these values and principles more visible and enhance accountability, transparency and access to information need to be ensured. Communication should be open, active and clear.
7. The efforts by Member States and their authorities at national, regional and local level, as well as by Union institutions and agencies, in particular the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, are key. The work of and cooperation between national and European courts should not be undermined. National Human Rights Institutions, equality bodies, ombudsman institutions, professional and other networks, civil society, academia, citizens and media also play a crucial role. They should be more closely involved in order to create a Union of values for all. Cooperation with regional and international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations human rights mechanisms, should be fostered in order to generate further synergies.
8. The protection of citizens and their freedoms and the building of a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe are among the priorities of the Strategic Agenda 2019–2024. The agenda emphasises democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. When fostering our common values, we are protecting the foundations of our societies and of European integration – peace, security, stability and prosperity. At the same time, we are contributing to a more resilient and sustainable Union for present and future generations and ensuring that no one is left behind.