



57th CEB Joint Meeting

**Remarks by Bjørn Berge,
Deputy Secretary General
of the Council of Europe**

Reykjavík, 7 June 2024

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Minister of Finance of Iceland,

Governor of the Council of Europe Development Bank,

President of the Governing Board,

President of the Administrative Council,

Members of the Administrative Council and Governing Board,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first of all thank you, Governor, for the very nice ceremony last night and again congratulate SzkoUA, Poland, on winning this year's CEB Award.

It is indeed a great pleasure to be here in Reykjavík for this Joint Meeting.

Not only because of Iceland's distinguished record as a founding member and steadfast supporter of the Bank, but also, because this country, and this city, have made your mark in the saga of the Council of Europe, central to the current priorities of our Organisation.

Just over a year ago, European leaders gathered here for our Summit of Heads of State and Government.

They came together because they felt a need to unite around our values and in support for Ukraine.

But also because of the danger posed by the worrying backsliding of democracy that is present in many parts of Europe –

Fuelled by the return of radical populism and anti-rights movements, as well as a continuous flow of disinformation, fake news and lies – and which reveals itself in political polarisation, the curtailment of civil society and legitimate protest – and restrictions in freedom of expression including the free media, with intimidating violence and even the murder of journalists.

At the Summit, specific measures designed to counter that democratic backsliding were adopted.

That has provided the Council of Europe with a new and focused impetus - and a clear understanding that progress requires all parts of our Organisation to work together, each playing its specific part.

Here I want to underline that we are proud of the fact and highly appreciative that the Council of Europe has – like many significant international organisations – a financial branch, which is very efficient in helping support the Council of Europe values and to fulfil its objectives and mandate.

Today, I want to briefly outline some areas in which this is the case, and where the Council of Europe Development Bank has indeed a crucial role.

First, our support for Ukraine.

This is the Council of Europe's number one priority.

Following on from our joint Action Plan on Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction, the Reykjavík Declaration endorsed the plan to create a Register of Damage that would record the loss and harm being inflicted by Russia in its appalling war of aggression, and act as the first and necessary step towards a compensation mechanism, that will be central to ensuring accountability.

The Register is, as you know, now fully operational, with offices in Kyiv and The Hague, and receiving thousands of submissions.

Similarly, the Reykjavík Declaration urged action to support Ukrainian children, and we have responded with a Contact Group on the Children of Ukraine that is co-ordinating policy and best practice among our member states to identify and support Ukrainian children living throughout the continent –

And now most recently we also established a special Focal Point on Ukrainian Children, in the Secretariat.

We are also working to help national authorities meet the physical and psychological needs of millions of the Ukrainian refugees seeking safety.

Here, the Bank is also very active, providing direct financial support to a number of these host countries, approving two loans at a total value of 200 million euros last year –

As well as millions of euros in grants –

All of which has been made possible by Ukraine becoming the Bank's newest member.

Another very important area of our work is the environment.

Here too, the Reykjavík Declaration recognised the need for further initiatives, given the triple planetary crisis caused by pollution, climate change, and the loss of biodiversity.

And we have a long history of action in this area, including judgments from the Court –

Our conventions on landscape and on the conservation of wildlife and natural habitats – and our European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement Partial Agreement – that goes hand-in-hand with the Bank's Disaster Risk Management approach, which is even more important given the gathering impact of climate change, and that you will discuss later this morning.

Certainly, I can only commend the Bank's decision to approve a total of 500-million-euro in loans to Türkiye in support of health projects – including the construction of emergency hospitals – in the wake of the recent, devastating earthquakes there.

I had the chance to see some of the extraordinary destruction during a visit to the Gaziantep region last year, and I very much hope that the global community can actively support Türkiye in the enormous task of rebuilding and reconstruction. But it is very good that our Bank has taken this important step.

It is also good to note that there is a proposal on the Administrative Council's agenda to provide funds for Iceland, given the impact of the recent volcanic eruptions here on specific communities.

However, we need to move forward with further work on the environment.

A strategy and action plan are on the way –

And the Council of Europe is looking at possible new tools – and we are now awaiting the feasibility study by our experts. I will not speculate on what will be the final recommendation, but I am sure it will help us take new and additional steps in this crucial area.

It is good to see the way in which the Bank has also given high priority to this issue – with climate action as one of its cross-cutting themes, reflected in its investment priorities – and shown by the fact that almost 80% of the projects that were approved last year contributed to meeting the specific UN Sustainable Development Goals on Climate Action and Sustainable Cities.

This leads to my last point.

The Council of Europe has long worked towards helping meet all the Sustainable Development Goals, because we recognise the value of working together with other international organisations, in meeting some of the fundamental challenges facing the global community today.

The Reykjavík Declaration pressed this point.

The key elements of our neighbourhood policy are important here.

And we are now building even closer working relations with the UN, the EU, the OSCE as well as other regional organisations.

Just as the Bank has been working over recent months to strengthen its co-operation with 10 other multilateral development banks to boost joint action in key areas, and tackle urgent development challenges.

Dear friends,

With its triple A ratings, its increased investment, and rising profits, the Council of Europe Bank is, in many ways, going from strength to strength –

Which is a credit to the Governor and those who work in the Bank, and the Council of Europe member states that stand behind it.

Its impact is decisive and crucial at a period of political and social strain in many parts of our continent.

So, in the months and years ahead, I can only look forward to further enhancing the contacts and co-operation between the Bank and other parts of the Council of Europe, as we work together to meet the priorities set out here in Reykjavík last year –

To help reinforce the democratic foundations of our continent.

Thank you for your attention.