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**Message to the participants of the conference
Justice in the Balkans: Equality for Sexual Minorities**

Your conference brings together an impressive number of regional, European and international actors in the field of combating discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

As you know, the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons is one of the priority themes for my work as Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. I have observed that LGBT persons continue to be confronted with discrimination, violence and prejudices in many Council of Europe member states because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as with homophobia and transphobia more generally. In my comprehensive country assessment reports, including the reports on the countries in the Balkans, I have always included sections on the situation of LGBT persons. In many cases the problems I witnessed were related to prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination more generally. For this reason your conference comes timely.

Despite the fact that I can't be with you today, there are two concrete initiatives that I would like to share with you.

Firstly, my Office has recently started a comparative study on the situation concerning homophobia, transphobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in the Council of Europe member states. The study intends to build upon the information collected by the Fundamental Rights Agency for the European Union Member States and will result in one policy-oriented, comparative report covering all 47 Council of Europe member states. All Balkan countries will of course be part of the research. The research will include input from authorities, academics, Ombudspersons and NGOs and in this regard I look forward to the conclusions of your conference. I consider this report, which is expected in autumn 2010, as a tool for my ongoing dialogue with authorities.

A second initiative I would like to bring to your attention is the Issue Paper on Human Rights and Gender Identity which I published recently. It calls on Council of Europe member states to do more to stop discrimination of transgender people. I expect that this important topic will also be addressed by your conference.

I wish you a very successful conference.

Thomas Hammarberg