

**78<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly**

**Sixth Committee**

**Agenda item 83: The rule of law at the national and international levels**

**Statement by Austria as coordinator of the**

**Group of Friends of the Rule of Law**

**delivered by**

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**New York, 16 October 2023**

Mr. Chair,

I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Group of Friends of the Rule of Law. It consists of 52 members from all regional groups. It was formed just before this topic was included in the agenda of the General Assembly.

Since then our discussions on this topic have been guided by the yearly report of the Secretary-General on “Strengthening and coordinating United Nations rule of law activities”. The latest report contained in document A/78/184 saw a “global decline in the rule of law and a backsliding of democracy and women’s rights”. This is particularly worrying because the rule of law forms the basis for multilateral cooperation and political dialogue. In this regard, we welcome the Secretary-General’s launch of the **New Vision for the rule of law**. It builds upon the declaration of the 2012 high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the rule of law at the national and international levels and is firmly grounded in the Charter of the UN. We fully agree that justice systems must put people at the center to address their needs and the rule of law is a key enabler of just, peaceful and inclusive societies with strong institutions and sustainable development.

An important component in this regard is **equal access to justice for all**. It is also underscored as a sub target of SDG16. Access to justice can be hindered due to lack of awareness of the existence of certain services but also due to geographical realities. New technologies can remedy this situation. Therefore, today’s topic “**Using technology to advance access to justice**” is timely and appropriate. Key components of access to justice such as the right to legal aid or legal empowerment can be strengthened through means of technology. Digitalization can make legal services more accessible and affordable. At the same time, it must be ensured that human rights, including the right to a fair trial and data privacy are not jeopardized by the use of technology. Also, the challenges such as the digital divide, particularly for women and girls and people living in poverty, and risks associated with the use of AI must be addressed to enhance access to justice while safeguarding individuals’ rights.

Let us look at some examples of how technology is already advancing access to justice:

**E-Filing and E-Court systems** allow parties to file cases and submit documents online. This reduces the need for physical visits to the courthouse, making processes more efficient and accessible to individuals who may have transportation or mobility challenges. Remote access to court records, but also virtual courtrooms – as experienced during COVID-19 pandemic – are further options in this regard. Remote E-Hearing systems, for example for witnesses, can make physical presence in courts in certain cases redundant.

**Mobile apps, legal aid chatbots** and **virtual assistance** can not only reduce the inhibition threshold for victims to get in touch with legal experts but also meet communication preferences of younger generations. This includes the dissemination of information via mobile apps. Answers to common legal questions and information on court procedures can be made available easily. Marginalized groups can also be made aware of their fundamental rights and the possibilities of the legal systems and get crucial support online.

Certain low-value civil cases or small claims disputes could be settled via **online dispute resolution**. It can provide services such as direct party-to-party settlement negotiations without necessarily filing a formal complaint. When litigants successfully resolve their dispute, standard settlement agreement forms can be generated and automatically filed with the court. It is an effective and cost-efficient way to resolve disputes online.

It is indisputable that **AI** offers many possibilities to enhance access to justice. This includes language translation tools to provide real-time translations during multilingual proceedings or machine learning which can make predictions by evaluating case files. Equally, the use of AI in judiciaries is a good example of how certain new technologies need proper control and accountability in order to be advantageous.

In conclusion, technology can be a powerful tool to make justice more accessible to all. It can make judiciaries more inclusive and efficient, as long as it puts the needs of people at the center and delivers fair outcomes for them. Provided that challenges are sufficiently addressed, technology such as digitalization and AI will help with implementing SDG16 and achieving just and inclusive societies.

Dear colleagues,

The Group of Friends will continue to stress the importance of the rule of law and its principles. This includes equal application of laws as well as equal protection under the law, including through fair and accessible trials. These are fundamental needs especially for the vulnerable – this is a matter of human dignity. We will continue to promote accessibility to justice – including through new technologies - while safeguarding human rights and data privacy.

Thank you.