Official report of debates

Debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee

Ms Nicole TRISSE (France, ALDE, Rapporteure): Thank you Madam President.
Madam Secretary General,
Dear colleagues,

Allow me first of all to congratulate you, Madam Secretary General of the Council of Europe, on your new functions. I was able to appreciate, during your campaign, the extent of your qualities and I have no doubt that you will be a worthy successor of Catherine Lalumières, whom you view as your logical predecessor.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am doubly pleased to be here today. And I take this opportunity to thank, in passing, the ALDE group, who supported my nomination.

Doubly happy, because, for the first time, I am presenting the activity report of our Bureau, which I have been a part of for two years now. And I know how important this exercise of transparency is for the Parliamentary Assembly.

I am also very honoured to speak here today because my country currently holds the presidency of the Committee of Ministers.

Of the four Bureau activity reports presented each year, the fall session is usually one of the least detailed. The reason is that the Bureau meets only once between June and October.

However, the June session was intense in events and emotions, and I'm going to talk about the latest advances in our organization since this last session.

Our Bureau met on September 3rd in Bern. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our President, Ms Liliane Maury-Pasquier, for having the great idea of meeting at their Parliament rather than in Paris. It was an excellent initiative, and a very thorough meeting, given the themes addressed.

Formally, in Berne, the Bureau took a stand on four specific issues, which deserve a particular mention today:

- First of all, the dissolution of the Free Democrats group, in accordance with the new regulatory requirements adopted in spring for the formation of political groups. This dissolution took effect on June 30th. As you know, now, to form a political group, you need at least 28 members from eight different delegations. As for the group of Free Democrats, they were 22 members from six delegations. These representatives, our colleagues from the former Free Democrats, are therefore not registered. And you must know that, at present, we have more than 120 non registered members in this Parliamentary Assembly, which is an unprecedented figure.

In this report:
1. Speeches in English, French, German and Italian are reported in full in English.
2. Speeches in other languages are summarised from the interpretation and indicated by *.
3. Speeches in German and Italian are available in full on the Assembly's website.
4. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1081 not later than 24 hours after the report has been published.
- The second point is the declassification of the activity report on the monitoring of the conclusions and recommendations of the Independent Investigation Group on presumptions of corruption in the Parliamentary Assembly, which was set up in 2017 following allegations of corruption concerning members and former members of PACE. This document is online on the PACE web page and I invite you to consult it. For your information, in the light of this inquiry, it should be noted that the Settlement Commission ruled on the case of eight members and 17 former members of the Assembly, who were mentioned in the group’s report. The Commission has worked very hard ever since to avoid such situations in the future.

- Third point, the formalization of the three nominations for the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize. As you know, this important distinction rewards outstanding actions from civil society in the defence of human rights in Europe and beyond. The 2019 prize will be awarded at the end of this ceremony to its winner. I believe we can only welcome collectively the impact of this event, which was established by President Jean-Claude Mignon, and which keeps its full meaning today within our Assembly.

- Finally, the withdrawal of the invitation of the former Ukrainian parliamentary authorities to observe the early parliamentary elections in July. On this last point, it should be mentioned that the decision not to allow the visit of an electoral observing mission only concerned the members of our Parliamentary Assembly. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, for its part, was able to visit Ukraine and observed the satisfactory progress of the latest election.

It is regrettable that the PACE has not been able to exercise its expertise in this area, even though it has been supporting Ukraine for a long time on its path to democracy, and our Assembly has given its undeniable support to the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine, within its internationally recognized borders. As you said yourself, Madam President, in your introductory remarks, several of our resolutions have unequivocally condemned the military aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, which is, it is true, a clear violation of international law. And that is why I deeply regret the decision of this new Ukrainian delegation, for PACE not to present its credentials at this October session.

The position of the Ukrainian authorities obviously followed the intense debates of our Assembly last June, on the return of the delegation of the Russian Federation to the Parliament. I will not repeat the debate today. I will merely observe that, following the difficult but courageous decisions that our Assembly had to take at the last summer session, positive developments have taken place.

In June, although many colleagues wanted to be constructive in their position, there were nonetheless fears about the consequences of this expression of goodwill. From this point of view, the last two months have brought a rather encouraging response, in my opinion.

On the initiative of the French presidency and our Bureau, the work to formalize the joint procedure for the bodies of the Council of Europe regarding the Member States that do not respect their obligations has begun. A first document was submitted for consultation in July and will be discussed this week by the Joint Committee. The Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers wants the procedure to be defined by January 2020, which underlines an obvious desire to reach a rapid conclusion. I have no doubt that the discussions in which we will participate will be rich and fruitful. In any case, it is necessary not to fall back into situations similar to those we have recently experienced.

At the same time, while some had their doubts, the Russian Federation has begun to pay its Member State contributions, which will allow us to move away from the spectre of a serious financial crisis in the Council of Europe. Which will finally be able to devote itself to the missions of serving our fellow citizens and their fundamental rights.

Similarly, in the field of Russian-Ukrainian litigation, progress has also been made. On September 7th, some 70 prisoners were exchanged between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Among them, was Oleg Sentsov and the 24 Ukrainian sailors detained since the incidents in the Straits of Kerch, for which we all collectively protested. Both the Ukrainian President and the Russian President described this event as a "first step". How can we therefore not experience certain hope, given this beginning of a return to dialogue?

And then, as a concrete consequence of the return of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe, our colleague Frank Schwabe, who is preparing a report on the restoration of human rights and the rule of law in the North Caucasus region, very recently was able to make an information visit to Moscow and Grozny, from the 18th to the 20th of September, I believe. On this occasion, he met with representatives of the authorities of both localities, as well as representatives of civil society.
For my part, true to the optimism that characterizes me, I want to believe that a new dynamic has begun. Moreover, a new meeting of heads of state in the "Normandy" format now seems possible, which reinforces this feeling of progress even more.

Of course, other gestures and advances are still needed. The Council of Europe's bodies, especially the Human Rights Defender, must be able to fully work in Russia. Similarly, the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights must be fully applied.

For all that, let us measure the progress made since the beginning of this year. As we celebrate this week the 70th anniversary of the Council of Europe, the European family, as we say - even if there are still differences and disagreements - still stands together, in a way very few of us would have expected last January. Certainly, there are still challenges to overcome, obstacles to overcome. But, with goodwill, I am certain that we can achieve this collectively.

In any case, all these elements, combined with the taking of office of a new Secretary General and the joint celebration of the founding act of the Council of Europe, make me believe in a better future for our Organization and for our Assembly.

Thank you for your attention.