Debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee

Dame Cheryl GILLAN (United Kingdom, EC, Spokesperson for the group): Madame President, dear Colleagues,

Thank you Madame presidente. First of all I would like to extend warm words of welcome to our Secretary General and wish her well in her new role. And can I also thank Ms Nicole TRISSE for her excellent report and wish her and the French Delegation good luck with this important week ahead of us.

I have been following developments carefully. The European Conservatives have strongly opposed the changes in our Rules of Procedure in order to take the sanction system out of it. We were repeatedly reassured that swift action would be taken and a joint sanction system with the Committee of Ministers would replace it and would even strengthen the hand of the Assembly. This was based on the Helsinki Ministerial Declaration. Now that PACE has de facto given up its powers, the Committee of Ministers appears not to have made much progress and is still talking about principles. Even the mechanism to start or stop a procedure has not been agreed. Clearly such a procedure cannot be handled by consensus in the Committee of Ministers as such a procedure would result in handing insurance to serial offenders preventing the Council of Europe from imposing any sanctions upon a transgressing country and potentially allowing even the gravest Human Rights violations to go unpunished.

Since that crucial vote in June we have seen in some of our Member States freedom of assembly being denied, and lengthy prison sentences for those who democratically try to oppose their government. I need to say no more.

Almost to the day 70 years ago Sir Winston Churchill spoke the following words in front of our predecessors:

“Great is the danger which now threatens us, but great also is our strength and there is no reason for us not to succeed in achieving our goal and laying the foundation of a united Europe. A Europe whose moral design will win the respect and acknowledgement of all humanity, and whose physical strength will be such that no person will dare to disturb it as it marches peacefully towards the future.”

With so much ongoing disrespect for the Rule of Law and the denial of basic Human Rights in some of our Member States, can we honestly say that this Parliamentary Assembly is still the moral compass of a united Europe? Do we still show the same sense of resolve? The European Conservatives say we must be that moral compass and we must maintain our steadfast resolve.
Mr. Churchill spoke about a united Europe and I would like to use this opportunity, as a proud member of the British Parliament, to briefly elaborate on the situation in the United Kingdom as I know this generates great interest and curiosity. The United Kingdom Government supports the idea of a united Europe which is however not the same as a United States of Europe. We are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe. We are also not leaving the Council of Europe which has in fact become even more important to us. We would wish in the EC to see the Council of Europe grow in strength and continue to send its strong message on the Rule of Law and the unacceptability of the violation of Human Rights.

The United Kingdom, which has remained steadfast to the rule of law for 800 years, remains firm in that commitment, and of course our Parliament is now sitting.

My country and the European Union face challenging months ahead but we remain a firm friend to all our neighbours as exemplified in the wider Europe represented here in the Council of Europe.

We remain true to Churchill’s vision and are committed to keep Europe united around the values that bind us. We strongly hope that you will all stay committed alongside all of us.

Thank you.