



Doc. 12127

23 January 2010

Parliamentary questions to the Chairperson-in-office of the Committee of Ministers

Parliamentary questions

1. Question from Ms Deborah BERGAMINI, Italy, EPP/CD

The Council of Europe's European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity (North-South Centre) is celebrating its 20th anniversary between November 2009 and May 2010, the period during which Switzerland holds the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. One of the Centre's main objectives is to promote dialogue and co-operation between Europe and its neighbouring regions, on the basis of the Council of Europe's fundamental values. To this end, it carries out its activities in the context of major political processes such as the Joint Europe/Africa Strategy and the Union for the Mediterranean, and is developing close co-operation and complementarity with initiatives such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

How does Switzerland, which holds the Chairmanship of the Council of Europe, plan to get involved in the North-South Centre's 20th anniversary? Does it, as a member of the North-South Centre and as one of the countries most actively involved in the Alliance of Civilizations, plan to take advantage of its Chairmanship to give greater political support to the Centre?

2. Question from Ms Maria Manuela MELO, Portugal, SOC

The Council of Europe's North-South Centre, which is currently celebrating its 20th anniversary, enjoyed great political success in 2009 as it opened up for the first time to non-European countries, with Cape Verde requesting accession. This was the first time that a country of sub-Saharan Africa had entered into a structured relationship with the Council of Europe, and its request for accession followed the accession, in July 2009, of Morocco, a country occupying a strategic position on the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

These developments, which make their own contribution to the promotion of the Council of Europe's values to other continents, reinforce the long tradition of human rights dialogue between the Council of Europe and the states and regions on Europe's borders. They open the way for practical co-operation in the fields of education, youth and intercultural dialogue, thus enhancing the role that the Council of Europe can play in the strategic rapprochement between the countries concerned and the European Union.

Mrs de Melo asks the Committee of Ministers:

What is the position of Switzerland, as a member State of the North-South Centre and as the current holder of the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, on these developments and their potential impact on the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law beyond the continent of Europe?

Joint reply by Ms Micheline Calmy-Rey, on behalf of the Committee of Ministers:

Allow me first to congratulate you on your election to the Chair of the North-South Centre's Executive Council last March.



The Swiss Chairmanship is aware of the fact that the North-South Centre is celebrating its 20th anniversary between November 2009 and May 2010, and is pleased that this coincides with its chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

The Swiss Chairmanship was closely involved in the 1988 European campaign on North-South interdependence and solidarity, which led to the setting-up of the North-South Centre in 1989. Switzerland joined the Centre in 1991, and so was among the countries which confirmed its continuation in 1993. Through Mr Claude Frey, a former member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Switzerland chaired the Executive Council from 2004 to 2009.

In keeping with the priorities set by its Chair, Switzerland attaches great importance to promoting human rights and democracy both within Europe and internationally. It has been closely following the Centre's dialogue with southern Mediterranean and African countries, and was represented at the 2009 Lisbon Forum on "creating a culture of human rights through education". It welcomes the high level of attention given by the Centre to promoting women's rights, especially in the Euro-Mediterranean context.

The Swiss Chairmanship also welcomes the development of working relations between the North-South Centre and the European Union, and between the Centre and the UN Alliance of Civilizations. The International Organisation of La Francophonie, whose 26th ministerial conference is to be hosted by Switzerland in 2010, is another potential partner.

The Swiss Chairmanship will be following with interest the Committee of Ministers' work on the follow-up to Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1893 on the future of the North-South Centre, which proposes the adoption of a new statutory resolution for the Centre by the end of 2010. In this respect, I congratulate Mrs de Melo for the role that she played as Rapporteur for the opinion of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education on this recommendation.

The Swiss Chairmanship notes with interest the recent adhesions to the North-South Centre. It hopes they will open the door for the promotion of the values of the Council of Europe on the European continent and beyond, in particular in the field of intercultural dialogue.

3. Question from Mr Akaki MINASHVILI, Georgia, ALDE

The Russian military aggression against Georgia in August 2008 aiming at redrawing the borders of a sovereign country and conducting ethnic cleansing, as well as ongoing occupation of the Georgian territories, has been and remains a serious challenge to the common European values which the Council of Europe stands to uphold. On 11 February 2009 the Committee of Ministers' Deputies adopted the decision, which was confirmed on 12 May 2009 in Madrid during the ministerial session, to invite the Secretary General to submit on a regular basis two reports: one on the human rights situation in the areas affected by the conflict in Georgia, and the other on activities for the promotion of Council of Europe values and standards. Unfortunately, none of the abovementioned reports have been produced yet in 2010.

What are the plans of the Swiss chairmanship to ensure the effective implementation of the said decisions? How does it plan to react on the findings mentioned in the documents produced during the previous 3 reporting rounds by the Secretary General?

Reply by Ms Micheline Calmy-Rey, on behalf of the Committee of Ministers:

As indicated in the written communication on the activities of the Committee of Ministers presented to your Assembly during the current session, the Secretary General, in application of the decisions of 11 February 2009, presented a third quarterly report early in November 2009, covering the period from July to September 2009, on the human rights situation in the areas affected by the conflict. On the same occasion, he also presented an updated report on activities for the promotion of Council of Europe values and standards since the conflict.

On the basis of these documents and of a report presented by the former Slovenian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers on the Organisation's activities, a discussion on the direction to give to these continuing activities took place at the handover meeting of the Chairmanship of the Committee, on 18 November 2009. On that occasion, the Secretary General announced his intention of proposing a new approach with a view to enhancing these activities. This subject will be considered again in the near future in the light of the proposals to be made by the Secretary General. It will be for the Committee of Ministers as a whole to decide what action to take on these proposals.

Where the role of the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers is concerned, I personally went to Georgia on 16 and 17 January this year in order to address with the Georgian authorities various questions relating to the activities of the Council of Europe following the conflict of August 2008. I emphasised in this context the valuable contribution that our Organisation can make in guaranteeing and promoting human rights in the areas affected by the conflict. This will remain a particular focal point for us over the months ahead.

We look forward to the suggestions that the Secretary General will submit to us and which we will discuss within the Committee. I would also like to recall the support of the Committee and my own personal support for the Human Rights Commissioner's activities on the ground, which are of great importance in this regard.