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Activities of the President of the Parliamentary Assembly between the first and the second part of the 2018 Ordinary Session

Communication
President of the Assembly

1. Visits and meetings

1.1. President's activities between 22 January and 11 March 2018

1.1.1. Assembly's 2018 first part-session (Strasbourg, 22-26 January 2018)

Since my election as President of the Assembly, on 22 January 2018, I held a number of institutional meetings, including with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the Deputy Secretary General as well as the Chairman of the Committee of Ministers.

In front of the grave challenges the Council of Europe, including the Assembly, is facing, it is important to recall the political mission of the Council of Europe and to seek a common and unifying agenda so as to fulfill our core mandate – protecting individual rights and freedoms. From my meetings, I could clearly see that the leadership of the Council of Europe shares this approach. Therefore, the Assembly should work in close co-ordination and co-operation with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the Deputy Secretary General and the Chairman of the Committee of Ministers, so as to overcome – together – the difficulties we are facing.

On 23 January 2018, I received Her Royal Highness The Crown Princess of Denmark. I praised Her Royal Highness's commitment to the cause of human rights, in particular, as regards gender equality and combating domestic violence and violence against women. In this context, we discussed the idea of creating an Academic Network to promote the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention).

On 24 January 2018, I met Mr Serzh Sargsyan, President of Armenia. I praised President Sargsyan for the steady progress Armenia is making in consolidating its democratic institutions and implementing post-accession commitments and obligations to the Council of Europe. The recent constitutional reform, carried out in close co-operation with the Venice commission, is a clear sign of progress in this respect, as well as a good example of fruitful co-operation with the Council of Europe. In this context, I stressed the importance of ensuring a smooth and democratic transition to a new parliamentary political system as well as the need to continue an open and inclusive dialogue between all domestic political forces on major reforms and priority societal issues. Furthermore, I encouraged Armenia to maintain the current reform dynamic, focusing in particular on the judiciary, the fight against corruption, as well as non-discrimination. Turning to the peaceful settlement of the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, while emphasising that the Council of Europe had no mandate to deal with this issue, I offered our political support to the work of the Co-chairs of the Minsk Group and the efforts of the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict that continues to divide these two member States of the Council of Europe.

Also, on 24 January 2018, I met Mr Lars Løkke Rasmussen, Prime Minister of Denmark. We discussed the co-operation between Denmark and the Council of Europe, in particular within the framework of the Danish Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. We also looked at ways to overcome the current challenges the Council of Europe is facing, as well as the idea of a 4th Summit of Council of Europe Heads of State and Government. It was encouraging to hear the Prime Minister's strong political support to the unity of the Council of Europe.

On 25 January 2018, I met Mr Alexander Van der Bellen, President of Austria. While discussing the current challenges the Organisation is facing, it was important to hear President Van der Bellen's support for the Council of Europe's and the Assembly's efforts to overcome these. We also spoke about the future of the European architecture, against the background of the political challenges the European Union is facing, including in relation with BREXIT and the migration and refugee crisis. In this context, we discussed the need to preserve a strong and tolerant, fence-free Europe, united in its diversity, mentioning in particular border co-operation between Austria and Italy in Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol region as a European example of good practice.

In addition to official meetings with the Assembly's guests, I held a series of bilateral meetings with the Chairpersons of national delegations to the Assembly as well as the representatives of the Russian Parliament attending the meeting of the Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau on The role and mission of the Parliamentary Assembly. I would like to emphasise in particular my meeting with the Chairperson of the Turkish delegation to the Assembly, which was an opportunity to discuss the consequences of Turkey's decision to discontinue the status of major contributor to the Council of Europe budget, as well as issues in relation to the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament scheduled to be held in Ankara.

1.1.2. Exchange of views with the Committee of Ministers (Strasbourg, 31 January 2018)

On 31 January 2018, I held an exchange of views with the Ministers' Deputies, focusing on the results of the Assembly's 2018 first part-session. In particular, I informed the Ministers' Deputies of the mandate and working methods of the Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau on The role and mission of the Parliamentary Assembly.

1.1.3. Participation in the Global Parliamentary Network meeting of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Paris, 8 February 2018)

At the invitation of the Secretary General of the OECD, I participated, on 8 February 2018, in the OECD Global Parliamentary Network meeting. On the sidelines of this event, I held bilateral meetings with Mr Angel Gurría, Secretary General of the OECD, and with other OECD officials. With the OECD Secretary General, I stressed the fundamental role played by parliaments in turning the voices of voters into legislation, underlining that the Assembly, through its national delegations, offers an excellent forum for disseminating OECD work to more than 835 million Europeans. We also spoke about the OECD field co-operation with member States, highlighting the OECD LEED Trento Centre for Local Development as a good practice example (Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED).

Finally, we exchanged views on the idea of the creation of international academic networks to support Council of Europe conventions, in particular, in the field of combating corruption, expressing hope that the OECD, with its longstanding experience in this area, could be associated to this project.

1.1.4. Other political issues

I spoke over the phone with Mr Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey. We discussed the consequences, for the Assembly, of Turkey's decision to discontinue the status of major contributor to the Council of Europe budget, as well as the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments.

15 February 2018 was the deadline for receiving written contributions from national delegations and political groups regarding the issues that the Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau on The role and mission of the Parliamentary Assembly should focus on. Many contributions have been received and a consolidated document incorporating all contributions has been prepared for the Ad Hoc Committee's meeting on 16 March 2018.

Following receipt of the invitation to observe the early presidential election in Azerbaijan (11 April 2018), I conducted a written consultation with members of the Bureau. The Bureau decided to set up a cross-party Ad hoc Committee composed of 33 members and authorised a pre-electoral mission to take place at least one month ahead of the elections.

1.2. President's activities between 11 March and 20 April 2018

1.2.1. Parliamentary Assembly meetings in Paris (Presidential Committee, Bureau, Standing Committee) (16-18 March 2018)

The meetings of the Bureau and Standing Committee were an opportunity to address a number of issues, including the financial consequences of Turkey's decision to discontinue its status as major contributor to the Council of Europe budget. As an immediate reaction to this unprecedented reduction of its budget, the Assembly decided to end payment out of its budget for Turkish interpretation in plenary and in committee meetings. The Turkish parliamentary delegation may however choose to return to the practice prior to 2016 and continue to benefit from interpretation in Turkish as long as the cost is borne by the Turkish Parliament.

Addressing the wider issue of the current budgetary situation within the Council of Europe, the Assembly adopted a recommendation to the Committee of Ministers, which contains some proposals emphasizing the need to ensure unconditional respect by all member States of their legal and financial obligations as well as the role of the Committee of Ministers in this respect.

Furthermore, the Standing Committee held an exchange of views with the President of the European Court of Human Rights. This was an opportunity to receive an update on the current situation of the Court, the effects of the various reform measures recently implemented as well as to look into the future of the reform process. In this context, the Standing Committee adopted a statement on the Draft Copenhagen Declaration prepared for the High Level Meeting on the "Continued Reform of the European Human Rights Convention System – Better Balance, Improved Protection" containing the Assembly's comments on this text.

Finally, the meeting of the Bureau was an opportunity to discuss the situation with the preparation of the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments (Ankara, 13-14 September 2018) and to agree on the modalities of sending out invitation letters to the Conference.

1.2.2. Meetings in Strasbourg and participation in the 34th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Strasbourg, 27-28 March 2018)

At the invitation of the President of the Congress, I addressed the 34th Session of the Congress. In my address, I highlighted the valuable role of local and regional representatives in two areas: in welcoming and integrating migrants and refugees, and in fighting corruption. Furthermore, I praised the Congress' efforts to strengthen civic participation at local level, which contributes to strengthening democracy at all levels.

In the margins of the Congress' plenary, I held a number of bilateral meetings, including with Mr Antoni Martí, Prime Minister of Andorra, the Chair of the Ministers' Deputies, as well as the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary of the Council of Europe, in which the budgetary situation of the Council of Europe, relations with the Russian Federation and the progress of the work of the Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau on 'The role and mission of the Parliamentary Assembly', were raised. I also met with the Directors General of DGI and DGII and among other issues discussed the idea of setting up European academic networks for the main Council of Europe Conventions, including the Istanbul Convention and the Conventions against corruption.

1.2.3. 2018 Congress Ethics and Governance, organised by the University of Cergy-Pontoise in co-operation with the OECD (Paris, 29 March 2018)

At the invitation of the OECD and of the Law Faculty of Cergy-Pontoise University (France), I participated in the 4th European Symposium on Ethics and Governance. I stressed that politicians must spare no efforts to eradicate corruption from our political systems, and develop a 'morality of governance' that merits the respect of our citizens. I recalled that the Council of Europe has developed legal instruments and policy guidelines – a normative framework for the member States – but also monitors and supports their implementation, thanks to its monitoring body, GRECO. In this context, I referred to the idea of setting up an academic network to support the Council of Europe Conventions against corruption, in co-operation with the OECD.

1.2.4. Working visit to Albania and participation in the Balkans Conference "Towards the EU Balkan summit" (Albania, 4 April 2018)

On 4 April 2018, I paid a working visit to Tirana, Albania. During the visit, I participated in the Conference on the Balkans entitled "Towards the EU Balkan Summit" organised by the Party of European Socialists and Democrats, as well as held some bilateral meetings.

The theme of the conference was “How the civil society and the economic sector can contribute to the accession process?” In my statement I recalled that the countries of Western Balkans were for many years already members of the Council of Europe. I stressed that integration of the Western Balkans in the European Union was supported by the Council of Europe as a factor of stability in the region, as well as a mechanism to strengthen pluralism, justice and the rule of law in the region. Considering that one of the biggest threats for Europe nowadays is division, I insisted on the need to defend and promote the idea of European unity. Finally, I emphasized that the Council of Europe expressed its support to the EU enlargement process through co-operation with the governments of the countries concerned but also with the civil society in order to contribute to building a European civil society.

In the margins of the Conference, I held some bilateral meetings, in particular with the Prime Minister of Albania, Mr Edi Rama. We exchanged ideas on the situation in Albania with specific references to the reform of the judiciary system and the fight against corruption, the relations between majority and opposition and the relations of Albania with its neighbouring countries. I supported the idea of a stronger European integration of the Western Balkans and the importance of the Berlin process for Albanian citizens. Furthermore, I underlined the essential importance of the stability in the Balkans area.

1.2.5. Participation in the High Level Conference on “Continued Reform of the European Human Rights Convention System – Better Balance, Improved Protection” (Copenhagen, 12-13 April 2018)

At the invitation of Mr Søren Pape Poulsen, Minister of Justice of Denmark, I participated in the High Level Conference on the “Continued Reform of the European Human Rights Convention System – Better Balance, Improved Protection”.

In my address, I stressed that as a constitutional instrument of the European public order, the Convention provides a solid legal foundation for European unity and called for reaffirming the Court’s authority as an independent decision-maker on all matters of interpretation and application of rights, while emphasizing the States’ obligation to implement the Convention at domestic level and unconditionally execute the Court’s judgments.

Furthermore, I stressed the need for the reform process to be open and inclusive and to take into account the perspectives of all Convention actors, including the Secretary General, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Commissioner for Human Rights and NGOs.

In the margins of the Conference, I held formal and informal exchanges, including with Mr Abdulhamit Gül, Minister of Justice of Turkey, representatives of the Danish authorities, as well as Council of Europe officials dealing with human rights issues and the reform of the Court.

2. Speeches

– Speech delivered at the opening of the first part of the 2018 Ordinary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 22 January 2018)

– Speech delivered at the ceremony of Honorary Associate Members of the Parliamentary Assembly in honour of Mr Jean-Claude Mignon, Mr Alan Meale, Mr Khalid Mahmood, Mr Geraint Davies, Ms Josette Durrieu, Mr Yves Pozzo di Borgo, Mr André Schneider, Mr René Rouquet, Mr Denis Jaquat, Mr Klaas de Vries (Strasbourg, 22 January 2018)

– Speech delivered at the reception offered by the Mayor of the City of Strasbourg (Strasbourg, 24 January 2018)

– Speech delivered at the ceremony to mark the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the Victims of the Holocaust (Strasbourg, 25 January, 2018)

– Exchange of views with the Ministers’ Deputies (Strasbourg, 31 January 2018)

– Opening speech of the meeting of the Standing Committee (Paris, 16 March 2018)

– Welcome remarks for Mr Guido Raimondi, President of the European Court of Human Rights (Paris, 16 March 2018)

– Speech delivered at the 34th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Strasbourg, 27 March 2018)

– Statement at the 2018 Congress Ethics and Governance (Paris, 29 March 2018)

– Statement at the Balkans Conference “Towards the EU Balkan summit” (Albania, 4 April 2018)

– Introductory remarks at the Copenhagen Conference “Continued Reform of the European Human Rights Convention System – Better Balance, Improved Protection” (Copenhagen, Denmark, 12 April 2018)

3. Press releases

– Michele Nicoletti from Italy elected new PACE President (22 January 2018)

– OECD Secretary General and PACE President decide to step up co-operation (8 February 2018)

– PACE President condemns murder of investigative journalist in the Slovak Republic (26 February 2018)

– PACE President remembers the victims of terrorism (11 March 2018)

– PACE can almost be defined as 'the Parliamentary Assembly of Human Rights', says its President (16 March 2018)

– PACE President condemns terrorist attacks in Trèbes (23 March 2018)

– Michele Nicoletti: ‘Preserving European unity: a shared objective’ (27 March 2018)

– Michele Nicoletti: ‘We must develop a morality of governance’ (29 March 2018)

– Michele Nicoletti: ‘The Convention provides a solid legal foundation for European unity’ (12 April 2018)

4. Personalities met

4.1. First part of the 2018 Ordinary session (Strasbourg, 22-26 January 2018)

– Mr Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe

– Ms Gabriela Battaini-Dragoni, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe

– HRH The Crown Princess of Denmark

– Messrs Andrew, Matthew and Paul Caruana Galizia, sons of the assassinated Maltese journalist, Ms Daphne Caruana Galizia

– Mr Anders Samuelsen, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers

– Mr Serzh Sargsyan, President of Armenia

– Mr Lars Løkke Rasmussen, Prime Minister of Denmark

– Mr Alexander Van der Bellen, Federal President of Austria

– Mr Sergey Antufiev, Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States

– Ms Arpine Hovhannisyan, Chairperson of the Armenian delegation

– Mr Piotr Tolstoy, Member of the State Duma, and Mr Konstantin Kosachev, Member of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation

– Mr Akif Kiliç, Chairperson of the Turkish delegation

– Mr Ervin Bushati, Chairperson and members of the Albanian delegation

– Mr Marian Lupu, Chairperson of the Moldovan delegation, and Ambassador Corina Călugăru, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Moldova to the Council of Europe

– Mr Filippo Lombardi, Chairperson of the Swiss delegation

– Ms Ioanneta Kavvadia, Chairperson of the Greek delegation

– Mr Andreas Nick, Chaiperson of the German delegation, and Mr Frank Schwabe, Vice-Chairperson

– Ms Tamar Chugoshvili, Chairperson and members of the Georgian delegation

4.2. Global Parliamentary Network meeting of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Paris, 8 February 2018)

– Mr Alessandro Busacca, Italian Ambassador to International organisations in Paris

– Mr Angel Gurría, Secretary General, OECD, with the participation of Ms Isabelle Chatry, Senior Policy analyst, OECD

– Mr Nicola Bonucci, Director for Legal Affairs and coordinator for accession, OECD, with the participation of Mr Greg Medcraft, Director, Directorate for Financial and Enterprise Affairs, Mr Janos Bertok, Head of Public Sector Integrity Division, Public Governance Directorate and Ms Mary Crane, Policy Advisor, Sherpa Office and Global Governance Unit, Secretariat General

4.3. Meetings in Strasbourg (27-28 March 2018)

– Ambassador Arnold de Fine Skibsted, Chairman of the Ministers' Deputies,

– Mr Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe

– Ms Ana Luis, President of CALRE (Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies)

– Ms Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

– Ms Snežana Samardžić-Marković, Director General, Directorate General of Democracy

– Mr Antoni Martí, Prime Minister of Andorra

– Mr Christos Giakoumopoulos, Director General, Directorate General Human Rights and Rule of Law

4.4. 2018 European Congress Ethics and Governance (Paris, 29 March 2018)

– Ms Roxana Family, Chair of Law and Business Ethics, Executive Vice-President for International Development, University of Cergy-Pontoise

– Mr Nicola Bonucci, Director of Legal Affairs, OECD

4.5. Working visit to Albania and participation in the Balkans Conference "Towards the EU Balkan summit" (Albania, 4 April 2018)

– Mr Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania

– Mr Sergei Stanishev, President of Party of European Socialists and Democrats

– Mr Knut Fleckenstein, MEP, rapporteur on the 2016 European Commission report on Albania

– Mr Aleksandar Andrija Pejovic, President of the Commission for international cooperation, European and Euro-Atlantic integration, Parliament of Montenegro

4.6. Participation in the High Level Conference on "Continued Reform of the European Human Rights Convention System – Better Balance, Improved Protection" (Copenhagen, 12-13 April 2018)

– Mr Søren Pape Poulsen, Minister of Justice, Denmark

– Mr Abdulhamit Gül, Minister of Justice, Turkey

– Ambassador Tobias Elling Rehfeld, Under-Secretary for Legal Affairs in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Denmark