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Oral reply to written questions

Latvian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

Statement by Inga BĒRZIŅA, Minister for Environmental Protection and Regional Development on behalf of the Latvian Presidency of the Committee of Ministers
Wednesday 25th October 2023

Harald Sonderegger (Austria, EPP/CCE)

Dear Minister,

My question concerns the follow-up to the decisions taken by the Heads of State and Government at the Reykjavik Summit. Indeed, last May, the European leaders agreed to continue to enhance the effectiveness of the supervision of the execution of the Court's judgments. The Congress will develop specific actions and a cooperation with relevant bodies of the Council of Europe in order to contribute to the continued effectiveness of the system of the European Convention on Human Rights.

We are convinced that a lot can be achieved at local and regional levels including on execution of judgements, which is also part of the rule of law.

And we are convinced that we should begin by ensuring that local and regional authorities are also aware of their responsibilities in this respect.

Madam Minister, what are your views on these new developments in the Congress work and how do you intend to support our work in this area?

Gudrun MOSLER-TOERNSTROEM (Austria, SOC/G/PD)

Minister,

Within the Council of Europe, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities was a forerunner on the implementation of human rights at local and regional level. A lot remains to be done, both from the point of view of awareness-raising, and also in taking concrete actions to empower local and regional representatives and to make them more proactive in delivering on human rights in their communities. The dramatic situations we are currently facing in certain parts of Europe show that democracy and human rights are not granted despite constant efforts, and that it is important to anchor democratic values and human rights more firmly at grassroots level, to ensure that these fundamental principles form part of the education of every individual, every young person, every community...

Minister, do you agree that if the Heads of State and Government entrust a body such as the Congress with an additional mission to better contribute to the fundamental values of the Council of Europe, this body should be given the capacity and appropriate means to carry out this mission, which is not the case at present?

Andrew BOFF (United Kingdom, ECR)

According to your priorities, during its Presidency, Latvia intends to implement the decisions of the 4th Summit in Reykjavik and work to make the Council of Europe more impactful, efficient, responsive and resilient. We at the Congress believe that this necessarily passes through strengthening action at local level and giving a stronger role to the Congress. What will the Latvian Presidency do to contribute to increase the impact, efficiency and responsiveness of the Council of Europe at local level?

Bernd Voehringer (Germany, EPP/CCE)

Madam Minister, the dramatic exodus of the almost entire population of Karabakh following the military operation carried out by Azerbaijan in September has shocked us all and has brought again to light this conflict that has been frozen for 30 years between two Council of Europe member states. How do you see the role of this Organization in the resolution of this conflict? What contribution can the Council of Europe make to a lasting peaceful solution?

Thibault Guignard (France, EPP/CCE)

In the current budgetary discussions, the Congress has asked for additional resources on its statutory activities in order to be able to maintain them at the required satisfactory level and develop new Human Rights activities following the Reykjavik Summit. The reform of the Council of Europe will increase the Congress' capacity to implement cooperation projects in the field but does not solve the understaffing in the Congress' statutory activities. On the contrary, cooperation activities are mostly built on the Congress' monitoring and election observation recommendations and if these would have to be decreased because of lack of resources, the cooperation projects would lose of their political impact and relevance. Can the current Presidency of the Committee of Ministers support the Congress in this claim?

Mélanie LEPOULTIER (France, ILDG)

As Congress co-rapporteur on local and regional media I was glad to see that freedom of expression and safety of journalists are a priority of the Latvian Presidency. I also had the pleasure to contribute to the conference on the topic, organised by the Presidency in Riga a few weeks ago, where we concluded that quality journalism is indispensable to uphold democracy and that we need to create an environment in which can journalists work safely.

What role do you see for local and regional authorities in this context and, in your view, what should the Council of Europe do to better protect and promote local and regional journalism? As we will discuss the subject of local media as watchdogs of democracy immediately after this debate, I would be most interested in hearing the views of the Latvian Presidency on this.

David Eray (Switzerland, EPP/CCE)

Madam Minister,

I am Minister for the Environment in the canton of Jura in Switzerland, and I would like to know how the Committee of Ministers intends to act quickly on the environmental concern and urgency that we are all facing. Last summer sadly illustrated once again that it is cities and regions that are on the front line of natural disasters caused by climate change.

The Congress made a proposal to the Committee of Ministers just over a year ago to draw up an additional protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

The purpose of this protocol would be to commit the States to making local elected representatives more aware of their responsibilities in environmental matters within the scope of their powers and resources, and to ensuring that consultation mechanisms are put in place on this major issue.

Madam Minister, our proposal, which has the advantage of being preventive rather than repressive in nature, of raising awareness among local authorities so as to put them in a better position to act quickly, which does not rule out other proposals for texts that could be more repressive, and which would finally enable the Council of Europe to demonstrate a relatively rapid capacity to react, nevertheless seems to generate very little enthusiasm, judging by the Committee of Ministers' recent response to our recommendation. I confess that I do not understand why our proposal would slow down or stand in the way of a reaction that is so necessary and so urgent today.

Can you explain why the Committee of Ministers seems reluctant to go ahead with such an additional protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government?

Cemal Baş (Türkiye, EPP/CCE)

Madam Minister,

As the Congress Spokesperson on Environment and Climate Change, I kindly ask whether the EU Blue deal can also motivate our work as the Council of Europe to focus our attention also to our water and coastal lines, which very much concerns local authorities as well.

Vladimir Prebilih (Slovenia, SOC/G/PD)

The Council of Europe and its Congress have responded with unwavering solidarity and support to Ukraine in this terrible war of aggression by the Russian Federation. Ukrainian cities and regions have demonstrated incredible resilience and remain committed to European values and to the European Charter of Local Self-Government. We know that the process of recovery and reconstruction will be a long one and the integration of local and regional authorities in this process is essential.

Madam Minister, how do you envisage the role of the Council of Europe in normalising the relations with currently occupied territories, in order to protect the right of civilians and facilitate their access to accountability and compensation mechanisms?

Oksana DERKACH (Ukraine, EPP/CCE)

Given the estimated 55 EUR billion environmental damage caused by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, what support or resources on European level might be provided to local and regional authorities in Ukraine to address this matter effectively?

Frantisek Brezo (Youth Delegate, Slovakia)

The Council of Europe and the Committee of Ministers have a long-standing and important record in protecting human rights and democracy. I would like to draw a link between the topics of the digital agenda of the Council of Europe, safety of journalism and the freedom of expression, which are considered as priorities by the Latvian Presidency.

How is the Latvian Presidency contributing to protecting and promoting the work of journalists, in particular those working for local and regional media, while they face several attacks from

some public actors, combined with the growing pressure created by the increase of fake news and propaganda in a constantly digitalising environment?

Despoina Panteli (Youth Delegate, Greece)

Given the role of the CoE in protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law at all times, including during conflicts, humanitarian and environmental crises, what is the goal of the Latvian presidency in involving the regions and the municipalities in the management of the increasing migration influxes that occur because of conflicts and climate change?

Also, given the increasing risk of polarization in local communities regarding this issue, with some citizens being skeptical towards migrants and refugees, does the Latvian presidency have any proposal on possible measures on how to address that on the regional level?