

'EU/Council of Europe: Petty rivalries to overcome' from the Europe Daily Bulletin (20 May 2005)

Caption: Following the Third Council of Europe Summit, held in Warsaw on 16 and 17 May 2005, Ferdinando Riccardi, Editor-in-Chief and leader writer for the Europe Daily Bulletin, backs the opinion of Jean-Claude Juncker, Luxembourg Prime Minister and President-in-Office of the Council of the European Union, regarding the absurd rivalry between the Council of Europe and the European Union and the need for a redefinition of the principles for permanent cooperation between the two organisations.

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A LOOK BEHIND THE NEWS

EU/Council of Europe: Petty rivalries to overcome

by Ferdinando Riccardi

Operation Juncker. *The decision made by the Warsaw Summit to entrust Jean-Claude Juncker with a special mission to look into relations between the European Union and the Council of Europe genuinely took several readers by surprise. I'm not talking about the ones who get the Council of Europe, this oldest of organisations, mixed up with the European Council, an EU institution which brings together the Heads of State and Government (a common mistake, even among high-level figures and well-known journalists); no, I'm talking about readers of Agence Europe, who know their European institutions and organisations, but who may not have been aware of growing tension and misunderstandings. It was not by accident that our bulletin devoted nearly four pages to the Warsaw Summit of the Council of Europe and its results: this Summit laid the foundation for some much-needed clarification, putting an end to duplication of work and rivalries. The Warsaw Summit redefined the tasks and priorities of the Council of Europe and launched Operation Juncker, which will give the man himself nine to twelve months to set out the priorities for permanent cooperation and common activities to be developed between the EU and the Council of Europe. So what's the situation?*

The situation as seen by the President of the Assembly. *To describe it, I thought I would avoid all risk of being accused of subjectivity by using a unimpeachable source: the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, René van der Linden, who spoke before the French Senate's foreign affairs delegation on 30 March. First of all, he pointed out that the Council of Europe connects 800 million citizens, 46 States and 630 national members of parliament and that it is made up of "unique mechanisms" such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Commission for Democracy through Law (otherwise known as the Venice Commission), the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, the Group of States against Corruption, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, and many others. These bodies exist and "there is no point trying to reinvent them". In his view, the multiplication (by the EU) of European bodies raises serious questions, "particularly due to the lack of genuine political and democratic control as well as budgetary and financial control". The European Union should, he continues, use "the unique forum offered by the Council of Europe" in all cases where appropriate bodies already exist. The Council of Europe should be seen as the "unique forum" for the promotion of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and for the fight against violence (particularly domestic violence and the trafficking in human beings) and as the "number one framework" to define legal standards in terms of democracy, human rights and the primacy of law. Mr van der Linden stressed that the "Copenhagen criteria" decided upon by the EU to assess the accession candidates "are none other than the standards laid down and implemented by the Council of Europe". He pulled no punches when he said that it was "unacceptable for the European institutions to seek to take on jobs that are already being carried out by the Council of Europe, highly efficiently and with a very limited budget". Council of Europe figures "should be compared to the EU budget, especially when the latter creates duplicate bodies which are inefficient and badly supervised".*

Ridiculous comparisons, but "petty rivalries". *The language of the Warsaw Summit, unsurprisingly, was more moderate. It is clear that the EU has immeasurably superior scope for action and decision than the Council of Europe: the EU's budget pays for common policies; if one country is not toeing the democracy and human rights line, it may not join; sanitary, environmental, social and other norms are binding. In a word: the EU decides; it goes further than simply making recommendations. Some comparisons do not hold water. But at the same time, it is possible that various initiatives or bodies duplicate work. Jean-Claude Juncker spoke in Warsaw about "petty rivalries" and the need to "set their houses in order". He also referred to the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe): according to Mr van der Linden, it ought to think seriously about merging with the Council of Europe. The new definition of the tasks of the Council of Europe, agreed in Warsaw, is highly significant: its essential mission remains the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, but on top of these come the safety of the citizens (especially the fight against corruption and terrorism) and social cohesion (via fair access to social rights and declaring war on exclusion).*

All that remains to be done now is to wait for the Juncker report to know more about future cooperation.
(F.R.)