

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: the activities of the Council of Europe (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1989, you became Secretary General of the Council of Europe and, it must be said, in 1989, you had a ringside seat to observe and play an active role in the geopolitical upheavals experienced by our continent. What was your experience of this period? What memories do you have of it? What action did the Council of Europe take in order to find a solution to the new problems which were emerging?

[Catherine Lalumière] That's a lot of questions ... Yes, I was fortunate enough, after a period at the Community and an interlude during which I had no international role but was simply an MP in the French National Assembly, I was fortunate enough to be given another responsibility, this time at the Council of Europe. I must pay tribute to the Council of Europe, which gave me what was undoubtedly my most exciting time at European level. There can be no doubt that this period was extraordinary: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse — which turned out to be very rapid and very peaceful — of all of these regimes which had previously seemed immutable and utterly solid. It was a house of cards which came tumbling down and which very quickly became a building site that required us to roll up our sleeves and take up the tools to build, as quickly as possible, another Europe and other regimes in each of these countries in order to avoid the onset of chaos.

So we experienced both astonishment at the collapse, the collapses which were happening and, at the same time, an awareness that time was marching on and that it was crucial to avoid chaos, to avoid a vacuum. There was a sense of vacuum in these countries. And this Council of Europe, which everyone had more or less forgotten, because — as General de Gaulle said — this Sleeping Beauty on the banks of the Rhine ... One can be kinder, but that was a fairly accurate summary of the Council of Europe's image, for several reasons, of course, but, above all, because of the idea that these values of human rights, of democracy, had become the norm in Western Europe and were no longer a problem. They had become our common heritage and were not really a cause for concern. Which was not true, but it goes some way to explaining the diminished image of the Council of Europe.

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe were faced with the task of rebuilding everything in terms of pluralist democracy, respect for human rights, a spirit of openness, tolerance, and so on. Moreover, these countries themselves very quickly turned to the Council of Europe. So we had the political and moral duty to respond to their entreaties and to offer a helping hand, which is what we tried to do. From 1989 onwards — that coincided with my arrival at the Council of Europe, and, once again, I was fortunate, because it was a superb, superb opportunity which opened up before us. So we tried to make sure that we were up to the task with the resources of the Council of Europe, which were, admittedly, fairly limited, and the task ahead was huge, the things to be done numerous. I stayed for five years, that is the length of the term of office of a Secretary General at the Council of Europe, and I can assure you that I did not get bored. It turned out to be the most thrilling period of my entire professional life, if you consider this kind of job to be a profession.

So we started at the beginning, in other words by establishing contact with the new leaders or with those who had not yet been elected by popular mandate but who had taken the reins of a power which had been completely abandoned by the former leaders. To be honest, I must say that contacts had already been made by my predecessor, Marcelino Oreja, the former Spanish Foreign Minister, who had long understood that the Eastern bloc was not such a 'bloc' as it might seem and that there were cracks. He had had the political intelligence to establish initial contact with these leaders. It was he, for example, who had invited Gorbachev, who had recently become the leader of the Soviet Union; he had invited him to visit the Council of Europe, and he was the first important guest that I received in early July 1989. However, the invitation had been issued by my predecessor.

I welcomed Gorbachev, and it was at that moment, in Strasbourg, that he gave his great address on the common European home. This was before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and things were starting to happen. Only complete short-sightedness could disguise the fact that the conversations with Gorbachev — his address, but also the day he spent in Strasbourg — the conversations with him showed that the world was changing, in any case that the Soviet Union was changing. A few weeks later, I went to Budapest, and I

remember the first meeting with the Communist Foreign Minister of Hungary — in Hungary the regime had already become much more flexible — and Gyula Horn, that was the name of the Minister, was very open with me. He said that he hoped to establish contacts with the Council of Europe, that he hoped to establish closer links with the countries of Western Europe, and so on. And I thought, ‘Well, this is interesting’.

This was the same Gyula Horn who went on to open the border of Hungary, and that was what triggered the fall of the Berlin Wall. So, you see ... We were ... my first contact with Gyula Horn was in July 1989, after the visit by Mr Gorbachev. So the signs were there. Over the summer, with my team from the Council of Europe, we devised a programme that we called — we searched long and hard to find a name for this programme to promote pluralist democracy in these countries which were starting to reconsider their position, and we called this programme Demosthenes. Demosthenes was not a great democrat, but the name sounds a bit like democracy, it was Ancient Greece, the birthplace of democratic ideas, so we went for Demosthenes, we called it Demosthenes.

But this was in August 1989. So you can see that, even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the Council of Europe, we already had a sense that something was going to happen. It should not be forgotten that, in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we were fortunate enough to have MPs from various countries, including Austria and Switzerland, who knew Central Europe very well, who knew the Soviet Union very well, and who said to us: ‘You know, things are happening, things are going to happen, we should be prepared.’ I owe them a great deal, because they made us aware of all that, and, moreover, in 1988, in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where I was a member, I had drawn up a report on the developments taking place in Eastern Europe. I had collected together all of these accounts, all of this analysis, so that, when I took office, I was quite prepared for what was going to happen, and the Council of Europe was also quite prepared thanks to these members who were not French but were from Central Europe. The Austrians, quite obviously. So, in November, I was in Oslo, and I found out that the Wall had come down, and, from that point on, things started to move very quickly. Very quickly, I said: I need to increase the number of these initial contacts. In February — the decision had been taken in January, but it was implemented in February — with the Portuguese Minister who was the Chairman of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe — it works the same way as in the Community, every six months a new country takes over the Presidency and at that time it was Portugal — we decided to tour all the capital cities of Central Europe.

We started with Moscow, we were welcomed by Shevardnadze, and then we went all over, ending up in Berlin. This tour was one of the great moments of my existence, because of the period. It was February 1990, and everything had changed: Czechoslovakia had had its Velvet Revolution, in Romania the Ceauşescu had been assassinated — so it went well in one case, less well in the other — but the domino effect meant that the regimes in virtually all these countries had changed. When we ended up in Berlin ... in Berlin, we were actually received by Hans Modrow, who was the final East German Prime Minister, and it was an absolutely staggering scene. He was still there, he was still the leader, he was still Communist, he had just come back from Moscow, where he had gone to ask for Gorbachev’s help. And Gorbachev said ‘Niet’.

We had Hans Modrow in front of us, in February 1990, and he said to us: ‘You are looking at a man who has lost everything. I have lost my party, the Communist Party is finished. I am going to lose the elections. My country is going to be dissolved and is going to disappear.’ He could see all that was going to happen, he knew everything, and he said: ‘I am experiencing the failure of my life.’ The atmosphere was Shakespearian. Everywhere, we were witnessing absolutely extraordinary events, be it in Poland or elsewhere. One world was coming to an end, another was emerging with more or less confusion, but even in the countries where it was happening gently, the representatives whom we met were asking themselves: ‘But where are we going, what are we going to do, what are the priorities? Help us!’ So I said: ‘The Council of Europe cannot help you economically or financially, that is not possible, but we have expertise in the area of institutions, of democracy, of law. And we shall do all we can.’

That is how we presented our Demosthenes Programme, and then Demosthenes led to other programmes, we multiplied the number of initiatives in the following years. The Council of Europe may be seen as being

on the front line, firstly, because it had been well-positioned there — I am not the only one responsible for that, my predecessors had already prepared the ground; I seized the opportunity, and I worked doubly hard, that is true — but we were also on the front line because one of the first things that these countries had to do was to adopt institutions which complied with our standards. Of course, the implementation of these new rules would take time, the change in mentality would take time, but they had to start at the beginning, and we could help them to start.

So that was how, little by little, links were established with these countries, and then they joined our structures, they became full members. It was Hungary which made the first move and was the first post-Communist country to accede to the Council of Europe — that was in autumn 1990. So things did move quite quickly.

[Étienne Deschamps] What about the CSCE?

[Catherine Lalumière] The CSCE was involved, and it met in Paris from autumn ... it was in autumn 1990 that the CSCE met in Paris, and, I remember, at the time, I moved heaven and earth to ensure the Council of Europe could attend. And that is what happened. The aim of this meeting in Paris was precisely to think about a new architecture for Europe, and I saw the Council of Europe, at the very least, as one of the creators of this architecture. So it was in attendance, with the right to speak — I remember speaking — and it received strong support — now this makes me smile — from President Bush Senior who, hearing about our efforts for democracy, human rights, etc., applauded. Strong support from the United States for the activities of the Council of Europe in this new Europe, in this new European configuration.

But, during this whole period, the CSCE played its role, and I was very keen — the CSCE had the same intention — for it to work in cooperation with the Council of Europe. Council of Europe–CSCE, we had the same goals. The geographical scope of the CSCE was wider than that of the Council of Europe, especially at the time; the scope of its powers was also wider than that of the Council of Europe, as the CSCE was responsible for military and economic issues, which did not fall within the remit of the Council of Europe. So there was no confusion between the two, but, within our field of legal and political powers — powers vis-à-vis the governments — we had more precise instruments — the European Convention on Human Rights and all the Conventions of the Council of Europe — which enabled us to be involved in practical issues with new partner countries, something that the CSCE was not able to do.

So we had fewer partners than the CSCE, a more limited range of powers, but more precise and more ambitious legal and political instruments. So our activities were complementary.