

Communication by Thorbjørn Jagland on the progress of the Council of Europe reform (Strasbourg, 11 April 2011)

Caption: On 11 April 2011, at the second part of the 2011 Ordinary Session of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland highlights the new political challenges facing the Council of Europe and emphasises the need to complete the reform of the organisation.

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Communication by Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe on the occasion of the second part of the 2011 Ordinary Session of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly

(Strasbourg, 11 April 2011)

Mr President, distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

In my speech in January I promised to keep the Assembly regularly informed on the progress of the Council of Europe reform.

But before I do so, I should like to recall what I have been saying from the outset; that this is not an administrative reform, it is a political one.

The objective is to enable the Council of Europe to make a difference when it comes to the real challenges Europe faces today. And there are many.

The world is changing rapidly – some of these changes have taken place since you last met in January - and Europe is changing with it. Some of these changes are coming from outside, some are internal, but they all require a Council of Europe response.

And this response is there. It is more rapid, more focused and more concrete than has been the case before – also thanks to the changes which have been brought about by the reform so far.

Look at our action in the Mediterranean.

In the recent weeks, we have all witnessed a historic change taking place in Europe's immediate neighbourhood.

What is remarkable about these developments is that people have taken, and continue to take, to the streets of Tunis and Cairo and other cities across the region to demand the same values and freedoms which form the cornerstone of our societies.

For all of us this is not only a source of great hope and pride, but also a source of humility and great respect. And an opportunity for Europe which we should not miss. The Council of Europe has its own responsibility in that respect. We have already taken this responsibility.

And we have done it with a great deal of humility and respect. We must acknowledge – and pay tribute to – the fact that what has happened was spontaneous and home-grown.

When building new relations between Europe and this region we must remember that our purpose can only be to support the free will of the people.

In the past, the attitude has far too often been to protect our own interests at the expense of universal values. As the American satirist Tom Lehrer once said :

"They've got to be protected,
All their rights respected,
'Till somebody we like can be elected."

Our reaction has been immediate, pertinent and aimed at producing concrete results on the ground. Therefore, Foreign Minister Davutoglu and I went to Tunis to offer our expertise in making a new electoral code and writing a new constitution.

As a consequence, the Venice Commission is working with the Tunisian authorities. The Venice Commission is also working in Morocco, and we are in contact with the Egyptian authorities.

Another priority and another example of being politically relevant has been to respond to the

humanitarian consequences of the situation, especially the most dramatic one which is still unfolding in Libya. On this, I am in continued contact with the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon as well as with other key international partners.

The Committee of Ministers has already discussed my proposals on the action to be taken in respect of the possible massive arrival of asylum seekers and migrants in our member States.

These proposals are aimed to help our member States to deal with this situation in strict compliance with Council of Europe standards.

Needless to say, these activities will be implemented in close co-operation with our international partners and are to be seen as complementary to the outstanding work of other international organisations.

A more detailed document outlining these proposals is under preparation and will be presented to our governments next week.

While our attention is at this moment focused towards the Mediterranean, we should bear in mind that we also have neighbours in the East, in Central Asia.

It is against this background that I have prepared a detailed proposal for the Council Neighbourhood policy, which will be discussed at the Ministerial meeting in Istanbul next month.

The objectives of the policy are to facilitate democratic political transition.

Secondly, to promote good governance in the countries in our neighbourhood.

And finally, to reinforce Council of Europe regional action in combating trans-border and global threats such as trafficking in human beings, cybercrime, organised crime and terrorism.

The Parliamentary Assembly should play a prominent role in this respect, notably through the Partnership for Democracy as well as your involvement in election observation.

But changes are not only taking place in our neighbourhood. Europe too, is changing, and there are challenges which clearly require our vigilance and action. And again, it is about being relevant.

In recent months political leaders, including Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Cameron and President Sarkozy, have said that multiculturalism has failed.

Does this mean that these leaders are against cultural diversity? Surely not.

Being against cultural and religious diversity means that somebody has to leave our continent. This is not a responsible demand and even less so a feasible perspective.

Our leaders are well aware that people of many different cultural backgrounds live in close proximity in Europe, that they will continue to do so, and that this can be a source of strength and prosperity.

European societies are culturally diverse. They have always been, and it is to this that Europe owes many of its greatest achievements.

But there is a growing feeling - reflected in the statements of Merkel, Cameron and Sarkozy – that something has gone wrong; a realisation that traditional policies have not worked.

Instead, we are seeing the emergence of so-called parallel societies. People are living next to each other in our societies, but not living together.

Unfortunately, minorities are still being marginalised and stigmatised, such as the Roma. Even before the current refugee crisis, xenophobic parties have been on the rise in several countries.

I would like to maintain that xenophobic forces are the ones that are living in the most isolated reality. They constitute parallel societies.

But we have also seen the emergence of home-grown Islamist terrorism rooted in religious extremism that are also forming parallel societies. These extremes are feeding each other.

All this goes against our fundamental rights and values. It is not helping our societies to prosper, and potentially poses a threat to our stability and security.

This is why last year I asked the Group of Eminent Persons, chaired by Joschka Fischer, to assess the situation from a pan-European perspective.

Their mandate has not been to "shame and blame" individual member States, but to make constructive proposals to help our societies grow together on the basis of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

We need to appreciate diversity, but also to focus more on what holds us together.

I expect the report of the Eminent Persons to give us important indications about how we can find a common ground and how all of us can contribute to responsible political leadership. This is how we can be relevant.

And now, against the background of the ongoing political developments, I should like to quickly update you on the progress of the reform itself.

First of all, I must stress the critical importance of the reform of the European Court of Human Rights. This is a make-or-break point in the whole process.

It is absolutely essential that we bring about changes allowing the Court to function without the backlog we are facing today. This is not only indispensable for the authority and sustainability of the Court, but for the credibility of the Council of Europe and for the survival of the system which has helped to uphold human rights and democratic stability in Europe for more than six decades.

The conference next week in Izmir is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. We need concrete results and I am confident that we shall be able to do so.

In parallel, the second stage of the reform is in full swing. It is aimed at concentrating our resources on programmes and activities which can have a stronger impact.

As part of this process we have to rationalize the intergovernmental committees. We have, all in all, 60 of them. I doubt that what has been built up over the past 60 years is the best machinery to face the realities of the 21st Century.

I have now forwarded a two-year budget to the Committee of Ministers. This proposal is the starting point for concentrating the resources on the main issues. Some programmes are being sunset to make way for new priorities.

The main priorities are: combating new threats such as trafficking in human beings, terrorism, cybercrime, internet security and money laundering.

And indeed, we must combat corruption, which has become a cancer threatening democracy in many of our member States. We also need to do more in the field of migration and for Roma.

And it has always been my belief that the Council of Europe must be the pioneering organisation against domestic violence. Every day, seven women in Europe are beaten to death! Many more are hurt, physically and psychologically and marked for life.

This is why the adoption of the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is a historic opportunity. We now have an international instrument allowing

us to make a difference.

The Convention will be opened for signature in Istanbul and I expect you to call on your government to be among the first to sign it.

This is another example where you, as the Assembly, and the rest of the Council of Europe, must work as a team. And the same is true for the reform itself.

I have always said that a strong Council of Europe needs a strong Assembly. And vice versa.

This is why I expect you to work hard for the reform. Not only the reform of the Assembly, but for the reform of the Council of Europe as a whole – because a politically relevant, effective and influential Council of Europe is a condition to your own relevance and influence.

It is against this background that I use every opportunity to consult and to listen to the Assembly, not only during the part sessions, but also on the occasion of the meetings of the Bureau, the Standing Committee and other Assembly bodies.

Let me also inform you that I am following up an initiative from this Assembly to establish an annual Strasbourg Forum for Democracy.

This will be a partnership with the city of Strasbourg, the regional authorities of Alsace and the French government. It gives us an opportunity to interact more closely with all the NGOs and to highlight the challenges which our democracies are facing today.

A Davos for economy is convened every winter, and the Council of Europe should take a lead in convening a Strasbourg for Democracy every summer.

Dear friends,

Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese philosopher once said that "if you do not change direction, you may end up where you're heading".

The Council of Europe was heading for more and more irrelevance.

We had to change direction. We are now heading for more relevance with lesser activities, but with far more real action.

Mr President, dear friends,

The Council of Europe was created to rebuild Europe. To create a community based on universal values. Our achievements have been great, but history has no end. Let us join forces to find a consensus on how to live together in the future and to halt the polarizing development we are now witnessing.

Thank you.