

Presentation by Mr Rigoni, Lisbon conference

Dear Mr President, Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

Today is an important day for me and for our Committee.

Today is the result of almost twenty years' work of the Parliamentary Assembly on diaspora issues.

The Parliamentary Assembly, and our Committee in particular, has been dealing with diasporas settled in Europe since 1999, when it adopted Recommendation 1410 (1999) on links between Europeans living abroad and their countries of origin. In 2004 another report on this subject was prepared by Ms Busic from Croatia.

In 2009, the Assembly adopted Resolution 1696(2009) and Recommendation 1890(2009) on Engaging European diasporas: the need for governmental and intergovernmental responses. This report was prepared by Ukrainian parliamentarian Ms Oksana Bilozir. In its recommendation, the Committee of Ministers was invited, and I quote, "to give further consideration to the establishment, under the auspices of the Council of Europe, of a Council of Europeans abroad, a body representing European diasporas at the pan-European level, which could organise a forum of Europeans abroad at regular intervals."

In these documents the Assembly underlined the need for greater political participation of migrants, which would enhance their capacity to promote and transfer democratic values. The PACE also called on its member states to elaborate migration policies which promote an institutional role for diasporas.

Further, PACE started looking into more detailed instruments to ensure better involvement of diasporas in a renewed political debate on developing national policies promoting diasporas' participation in political life, as well as their role in democratic change.

Subsequently, I worked on a report on "Democratic participation for migrant diasporas" and in 2015, the Assembly adopted Resolution 2043 (2015) calling for the establishment of a Parliamentary Network for Diaspora Policies.

That was two years ago. Since then, the idea has been supported by my colleague Mr Pierre-Yves Le Borgn', in his report on educational and cultural networks of communities living abroad and the Assembly's Resolution 2124 (2016), and by the Sub-Committee on relations with non-European countries of origin and transit of the Committee on Migration, which I have the honour to chair. This sub-committee has considered the establishment of the network as its priority task and organised several preparatory conferences on the subject.

It is not by chance that the launching conference takes place in Portugal. In March 2015, the Portuguese Parliament hosted a conference on "North-South Migration Dialogue", where the concept of the network was first announced. So we are very grateful to the Portuguese Parliament for their consistent support and we thank Portugal for being a host country of the network.

I will now present the concept behind the idea of the network, as well as its main purpose and proposed activities.

From the Italian experience, I know very well that diaspora communities represent a cultural, economic, and political bridge between the country of residence and the country of origin.

In the last two decades, diasporas have become one of the driving forces in bringing democratic experience to their countries of origin. In particular, diaspora organisations have been very active in establishing and developing civil society in many Central and Eastern European countries.

In recent years, diaspora communities have started to play a more active role in defining the policies of both their countries of origin and their countries of residence. The rapid increase in working migrants, the desire of migrants to return to their home countries at retirement and the wish of many migrants to be take on a more active role in the political life of their host countries, as well as in their countries of origin, represent new challenges in many policy sectors.

This topic has thus become a priority issue on the international agenda. In June 2013, I was invited to represent the Assembly at the Inter-Ministerial Dialogue on Diaspora launched by the International Organisation on Migration. It was the first global meeting gathering ministers responsible for diaspora matters. At this conference I had many inspiring exchanges. We parliamentarians have an important role to play in shaping the policies in relation to diaspora in our countries, so at that time I thought it would be very enriching to have a platform for the exchange of ideas and experiences on diaspora-related issues between parliamentarians and with diaspora associations.

The proposed PACE network constitutes the next step, from a broadly-defined policy on institutionalised political dialogue about diasporas, towards the creation of a mechanism to address concrete issues related to inclusive societies together with diasporas.

The network will focus mainly on work with members of parliaments, diaspora associations, state institutions from the countries of origin and host countries of migrants, aiming at building inclusive societies by introducing and implementing national diaspora policies. It will indeed provide a rare opportunity to bring together associations and parliamentarians from countries of origin and host countries. Diasporas have an increasing influence on the economic, political and cultural development of countries of origin. At the same time, its diaspora can facilitate the process of building an inclusive society in the host country. The network will enable this to happen in a more structured and coordinated way.

The European Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies will be empowered to promote policy and legislative reforms with respect to diasporas' role in both societies.

Thus, the added value of the network will be to generate enhanced dialogue and consultations between all the stakeholders involved on and to the mutual benefit of diasporas, countries of origin and settlement, as well as peer to peer inter-parliamentary dialogue.

Members of the network will be invited to participate in annual forums, during which they will raise and discuss questions related to the existing possibilities for integration of diasporas in host societies and for maintaining links with the country of origin.

In between annual forums, network meetings could be organised in different countries at the invitation of national parliaments, and will be focused on specific subjects, such as improving democratic participation of diasporas in Europe; the introduction of policies to facilitate diaspora members' involvement in political life; and promoting the activities of diaspora associations.

We are also planning to organise two inter-parliamentary conferences on "Platforms for cooperation in integration policies: the role of diaspora associations and the development of synergies with public authorities" and on "The role of education in integrating migrants and maintaining cultural links with countries of origin through language teaching" in cooperation with other Council of Europe directorates.

To strengthen dialogue between members of the network and diaspora associations, two regional seminars could be organised in cooperation with national parliaments, with the participation of countries of origin and diaspora associations.

The network could also set up a European Diaspora Prize, to be awarded on the occasion of each annual forum to an exemplary diaspora association.

The functioning of the network will be ensured by the Secretariat of the PACE Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons in cooperation with the PACE Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, in collaboration with other Council of Europe bodies, such as the North-South Centre, the Youth Department of the Council of Europe, the Directorate General of Democracy and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

The main partners in the implementation of the activities of the network will be the parliaments and governments of the Council of Europe Member States, the parliaments of non-European countries of

origin and transit, and migrants' diaspora associations. International organisations such as the IOM, as well as the European Parliament, and others who work with and promote similar values will be also invited to cooperate.

The involvement of several foundations to support certain activities of the project is also planned. Their contribution to economic cooperation and development and general cooperation with diaspora would be a great asset in the long term.

At the end of this launching conference we will propose the adoption of a declaration announcing the launching of the network and constituting the list of its members, which will then be opened for new participants. I would also like to suggest that the day of adoption of the declaration should become European Day of Diasporas, which could thus be celebrated all over Europe in the future.

Finally, I would like to thank all of you for your enthusiastic response and for your participation in this conference and to call on you to join the European Network on Diaspora policies as active members.

Today, it is very important to show our unity and our belief in a great Europe and its values. We should not build walls between our countries, but construct bridges to bring us together.

This Network aims to be such a bridge between continents, states, different societies, cultures and ideas!

Thank you for your attention!