

The Council Of Europe Blunders

by Michael Curtis



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, meets with local residents and veterans at the historical memorial the Malakhov Kurgan in Sevastopol, Crimea.

What do Abkhazia, South Ossetia, North Cyprus, and Crimea have in common? They are all the subjects of territorial changes in Europe which to a large extent have not been fully accepted by the international community as legitimate. The most disputed case is that of Crimea. After the Russian Federation invaded and annexed Crimea in February-March 2014 the actions were denounced by many nations as a violation of international law. The UN General Assembly resolved, by vote of 100-11-58 on March 27, 2014, that states should not recognize or act in any way that might be interpreted as recognition of the

annexation. In addition, the Council of Europe in April 2014 suspended the voting rights of Russia in its Parliamentary Assembly.

It is therefore surprising and disconcerting that the Plenary Assembly of the Council on June 24, 2019 ended the suspension and reintegrated Russia into the organization. The decision can be looked at in two ways. Defenders of the decision argue that Russian citizens can now appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, and that it is good news for Russia's civil society. They, including France and Germany, agreed that all members of the Council should be entitled to participate on an equal basis in the activities of the Council. Russia which supplies 33 million euros (10% of the total) is also helpful to end the financial crisis of the Council which had a deficit of 53 million euros in 2018.

Opponents argue that the decision makes the Council a willing conduit for Russian President Vladimir Putin to spread his influence throughout Europe. The most cutting criticism has come from Garry Kasparov, arguably the greatest chess player in history, and well known human rights advocate. He called the decision a betrayal worse than the appeasement policy of Munich in 1938. He held the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council, PACE, is hopelessly corrupt and was kneeling before Gazprom and Rosneft. Other comments are that the Council is not getting any concessions from Russia in return.

The event focuses attention on a relatively obscure international organization. The Council is a little known body. In a sense its origin can be traced back to speeches by Winston Churchill in March 1943 and September 19, 1946 in Zurich when he called for the enemies of World War II, France and Germany, to constitute the nucleus of a "kind of United States of Europe." This was followed by a meeting in 1948 of European leaders suggesting the creation of a European Assembly to discuss political issues, especially human rights, in the different European countries. On May 5, 1949, the

Council of Europe, not to be confused with the European Union, was created in London by 10 countries, including Italy and Germany. It consists of a Committee of Ministers, foreign affairs ministers, of member countries, and a Parliamentary Assembly. It now has 47 members.

The Council has no binding powers, but issues recommendations. Every two years it decides on the program of activities. For 2017-18 the main priorities of the Council were stated as promoting human rights and dignity, strengthening democratic governance, fostering innovation, promoting participation and diversity.

Concern for human rights covers equality, gender equality, tackling violence against women, opposing racism and intolerance. Dignity concerns promoting human rights especially those of Roma, respect for minorities, regional and minority languages, and the rights of children. Promoting participation and diversity covers education for democratic citizenship.

Emphasis of these factors of human dignity, democratic governance, and diversity, goes back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 which begins with the statement, "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world."

The rapid nature of change in the modern world means adapting the institutions of democracy to the requirements of the 21st century. Participation of citizens is crucial at a time when turnout of voters in general elections is falling, when there is less membership in trade unions and other civil society organizations, and there is increasing populism and xenophobia in parts of Europe, and threats to human rights. The Council promotes observing elections to ensure they are free and fair.

Aware of the discrimination and sexist stereotypes that affect women's education, and participation in the economy and public life, the Council on May 27, 2019 adopted a resolution to prevent and combat sexism, discrimination on sexual orientation and gender identity. Its recommendation on that day stated that gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, and good governance. It held that sexism is a manifestation of historically unequal power in relations between women and men, and ambitiously called for action in various areas, language, communications, internet and social media, workplace, public sector, justice, education, culture, sport, and in the private sphere.

The Council faces serious problems; large number of refugees, and many continuing to arrive, the threat of terrorism, and rise of populism. One success has been playing a part in the call in April 1983 and May 2002, for abolition of capital punishment. There has been no execution in a Council state, except Russia and Belarus, for over twenty years. The Council also engages in joint programs with the EU in human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

The Council also recognized the growth of migration to and within Europe that has led to ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. It is therefore concerned with dealing with the discrimination against the minorities who have often been excluded from employment, education, access to health services, and justice. Minorities are usually underrepresented in European governments and institutions. The most comprehensive text for protecting persons of national minorities is the Convention adopted on November 10, 1994 which entered into force on February 1, 1998.

The minority with which the Council is especially concerned is the Roma, ten million people, the largest minority in Europe, who were persecuted by the Nazis in World War II. The Council presses for equal rights for the Roma, and celebration of Roma

culture.

The Council is now a body of 47 member states and 6 observer states, including the U.S., Israel, and Japan. Employing 2,500 people it is housed in Strasbourg, the border of France with Germany, in a building that can be regarded as symbolic, with its use of glass walls, a metaphor for transparency. It uses a European anthem, an excerpt from the prelude to the Ode to Joy, in Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

With a total budget for 2019 of 437 million euros, it is mainly funded by contributions of member states, based on a formula of population and GDP. Its activities comprise 26 operational programs. About 43% of the budget is devoted to issues of human rights, and 17% to democracy.

The decision on Russia was surprising. The Council in recent years stated that the arrest and prison sentences in Russia of the political opposition activist journalist Alexei Navalny was politically motivated. Among other things he was banned from being a candidate in the 2018 presidential candidate to prevent him opposing Putin. The PACE of the Council also condemned Russia's campaign against the Yukos Oil Company and its owner as a result of political reasons and violation of human rights.

The Communist leader Mao Zedong in 1930 said that a single spark could start a prairie fire. The Council of Europe by its decision on Russia may have lit a flame that should be doused.