

February 2010

Statement from the presidium of the Christian Council of Sweden at the end of the Swedish chairmanship of the European Union

Sweden's six month presidency of the European Union is over. The work of the Swedish government is being evaluated, in the media and politically, both nationally and at the European level.

During the presidency the Christian Council of Sweden, in which the churches co-operate, chose to focus on a few particularly important issues. These are our reflections at the end of the Swedish presidency.

Climate issues

We look positively upon the government's obvious efforts to make the process successful and to reach a responsible and fair agreement both in terms of the goals for emissions and the economic support that poorer countries will need to be able to contribute to reductions in emissions. We share the government's disappointment over the inability to reach a binding agreement in Copenhagen. However, we are not going to give up – the churches have a long term commitment to striving towards a sustainable lifestyle. The Swedish government must, also after the end of the presidency, work for an EU that takes the lead in seeking a new and internationally binding climate agreement.

Migration and trafficking

The transparency with which the Swedish government managed the process of forming The Stockholm Programme is much appreciated by the churches. The draft presented by the Swedish presidency included a number of positive elements, but after the draft had been processed by other member countries, many of those elements were gone. The programme as a whole has now become much too focused on control, security and fighting terrorism. It has not become the ambitious and forward-looking programme we were hoping for.

Former EU programmes in this area (such as The Hague and Helsinki Programmes) have talked about Europe's "inhabitants" and their rights. The Stockholm programme has changed this and talks about Europe's "citizens" instead. We see this as a very unfortunate narrowing, which excludes many people in Europe today.

We welcome the suggestion to open a support office in Malta's capital Valletta. Nothing has been said about what focus the office will have in its work and that is of course of major importance.

It is positive that the EU member states want to extend their cooperation in order to fight serious cross-border crimes as trafficking. The concept of "trafficking" will be widened and will include more cases than today. In addition, the EU has agreed on an action plan for measures to make cooperation in the fight against trafficking with countries outside the EU more efficient. In conclusion; some steps forward were taken but more emphasis needs to be placed on work to end the trade in human beings, which degrades and destroys so many people's lives. Cooperation must also be developed together with churches and other parts of civil society that have many international contacts.

EU enlargement

In general, the churches welcome an enlarged EU, to promote diversity, justice and peace in Europe. In this perspective a Turkish future membership, among others, is of importance. Some expect the churches to be negative towards a Turkish EU membership, due to its Islamic culture and religion. But the doubts and questions put by the churches towards Turkish membership are not specifically "religious", on the contrary we see great values in the dialogue between religions that Turkish EU membership could lead to. The changes required in Turkey concern a strengthening of democracy and human rights. Genuine freedom of religion and putting an end to the persecution of the Christian minority in Turkey are important components that need to be strengthened.

In the Balkans there are countries that also form significant parts of Europe that cannot be disregarded. Cancelling the visa obligatory for citizens from several Balkan countries is a signal of great importance in this context. Stronger efforts are needed on the part of the EU in order to move forward on membership negotiations with for example Serbia and Bosnia/Herzegovina. The EU should also show more openness towards and interest in the largest country of Europe, Russia.

Arms trade

Unfortunately, the Swedish government considered themselves unable during the presidency to be proactive concerning the Arms Trade Treaty – the proposal to form cogent rules concerning the international arms trade – since they as EU president needed to synchronize the positions of the EU member countries. Sweden voted, together with 152 other states, among them all the EU member states, in favour of a resolution creating a negotiation process for the Arms Trade Treaty, which of course is positive.

When the Christian Council, together with representatives of the Conference of European Churches and the COMECE (the Roman Catholic Church within the EU countries) called upon the EU minister Cecilia Malmström on the 30th of September, the minister was asked what the government could do to support President Obama's bold goal of a nuclear weapons free world. After this visit, minister Malmström in a letter has pointed out what Sweden and the EU have done to support global disarmament and to control the international arms trade. Those efforts are positive, but we would have liked to see a clear and official EU response supporting President Obama's zero goal, as a result of the Swedish presidency.

The future dialogue

In conclusion: The churches and other faith communities have views and opinions concerning a broad range of societal issues and resources that can provide a very positive contribution to building our common society. Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty, now ratified by all EU member states, stipulates that the EU shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches and other faith communities. We therefore look forward to a continuing dialogue with the Swedish government.

The presidium of the Christian Council of Sweden

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