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Letter from Minister Frattini: «Italy's decision to leave Durban II in defence of freedom of expression»

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by Franco Frattini

The confrontation that Piero Fassino is calling for in Parliament—a confrontation, what's more, that he has known about since Friday—will take place this Wednesday, and will also be an excellent opportunity for the government to explain in detail its decision to abandon the preparatory sessions for the Durban II Conference to be held in Geneva from 20 to 24 April next. The first Conference of Durban in 2001, although conceived by the UN as a peace laboratory, failed to achieve a clear assertion of the democratic principles of peace and tolerance. Alongside a correct denouncement of colonialism, as will be recalled, not a single word was said about the victims of the many acts of genocide bloodying the world. On the contrary, Israel was branded a “racist country” and Judaism negated as a cultural and religious dimension coincident with the existence of Israel as a nation-state: to the point of defining Zionism as a form of racism and islamo-phobia.

At a distance of several years, this second round convened by the UN and planned for 20-24 April 2009 in Geneva is approaching under a leaden sky, and for at least two reasons. First, the text is permeated with an anti-Semitic rhetoric that the Italian government deems unacceptable and contrary to the most elementary democratic European and Western values and threatening to our civilization. A second essential reason for our government's decision lies in the fact—which Fassino seems to be unaware of—that the document being prepared in Geneva calls into question another key principle in our democratic civilization, and that is freedom of expression. This latter being one of the fundamental civil and moral rights of a Europe yearning for a future of freedom and peace after our fore-fathers had defeated Nazism and were preparing, for the second time, to combat the terrible totalitarian machine: this time Communism. We cannot negotiate respect for religious tolerance and the right to beliefs and worship by calling into question the very foundation of our collective life: freedom. Freedom comes first and is the matrix and guarantor of religious pluralism. I say this with the awareness of having contributed, three years ago, to navigating the ship of the European Commission past the reef of the terrible polemic that arose with the “Danish vignettes”. The risk at the time was the right to criticise and satirise (attributing, of course, all the responsibility and sensitivity associated with them to the authors) being silenced by the incendiary demonstrations that erupted in the service of Islamic radicalism in many public places around the world. The documents that we would be preparing to approve in Geneva would therefore also sanction the end of freedom of expression. Now, as then, we do not agree, and have let that be known on many occasions, public and institutional alike.

What we have decided, not only the United States and Canada have also decided, as well as the public opinion of European countries that have been battling with this decision for over a year now, which in Holland, Belgium and France has occupied both the institutional and political agenda. We have not forgotten that freedom of expression is the very root of the democratic acquis of the greatest of multilateral organisations, the United Nations, and we can surely not accept the negation in Geneva of what unites us in New York.

The Italian government's decision is therefore one motivated by a sense of responsibility to multilateralism, which, in order to be effective, must, first and foremost, be founded on respect for the fundamental rights of the individual and tolerance. In addition, it is motivated by a sense of responsibility to Europe, which is an example of these values and must be an active promoter of them. We hope that our decision contributes to intensifying the efforts of our European partners and the other nations party to the Geneva conference to radically modify the current text.

Italy will continue to monitor developments from the outside to help in formulating a common European position that reflects the principles we believe in, and that does not simply become a lowest common denominator. We shall be ready to reconsider our decision once the text is modified in a manner corresponding with these principles.

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