

THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

SIXTY-FOURTH SESSION

SPECIAL POLITICAL COMMITTEE

AGENDA ITEM 35: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION

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STATEMENT

by

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PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE

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Mr. Chairman,

Since this is the first time that my delegation takes the floor in this Committee at the session, I would like to express my heartfelt congratulations on your assumption of the office of the Chairman and to wish you every success in guiding our deliberations. My congratulations and best wishes go equally to the distinguished Vice-Chairmen and the Rapporteur and my delegation pledges its full support to the efforts of the Bureau.

The delegation of Serbia did not participate in the discussion on the questions relating to information for quite some time. For me personally, taking the floor today is really an emotional experience. Last time I worked in a mission to the UN was in the 80's and I was a diplomat of Yugoslavia, assigned primarily to the Special Political Committee and I even chaired it during the 38th session in 1983. Yugoslavia was also a member of the Committee on Information and I took an active part in its work. We fought for a new information and communications order then. That concept now is but a vignette in the preamble of the annual resolution on information. Times change.

As events turned out, I subsequently spent 14 years working as a UN staff member in the Department of Public Information, almost all of it in the field. This gives me, I believe, some basis to claim a certain familiarity with the issues we are discussing. Also, as a former insider, I have a fairly good idea of the work of the Department and I am really glad to see that it is currently working diligently with a revived esprit de corps under the devoted and intelligent leadership of its distinguished Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Kiyotaka Akasaka.

The report of the Secretary-General shows how much the Department has done in the first half of this year to highlight the current key issues, such as climate change, impact of the economic and financial crisis on development, Millennium Development Goals, influenza outbreak, issues of peace and security and human rights issues. Be it through its strategic communications services, the news services or its outreach and knowledge-sharing services, the list of activities is impressive and I would like to congratulate the DPI and Mr. Akasaka on these achievements.

What is clearly visible in the report is the large amount of activities performed by the UN Information Centres, and I am going to speak in some detail about the questions related to information centres as an important subject, central to the Department's efforts to familiarize our world with the activities conducted within and by the United Nations and rally the support of world's peoples for them, an important mission by any measure.

I deeply believe in the importance and value of information centres. I was a Director of one of them, in New Delhi, for nine years. In this position, I witnessed, in the first half of this decade, what I considered, and still do, a considerable damage done to the United Nations. It was the ill-thought, haphazard closure of most of information centres in Europe. I know that this issue should primarily be raised by the representatives of those countries where it happened, but I am not sure that it will, since the whole thing went under the cloak of rationalization and it was accepted by the membership as such. It was done due to certain, shall we call it, exigencies of the time that I will forever suspect had nothing to do with true interests of the United Nations. And it also had nothing to do with rationalization, because the practically overnight closure of such well-established centres as London, Paris, Bonn, Lisbon, Rome, Athens and a number of others created such monumental expenses and loss of UN property that it would have been much cheaper to let them continue to exist. That was a public knowledge within the DPI, some people even raised it in internal debates, but the whole thing was never fully publicized.

What I also never understood was how the Member States where those centres were accepted their closure without a murmur. To have a UN information centre within a country is like having a UN embassy, a sign of distinction. Those centres had tradition, they served as hubs of UN-related activities in the country for decades. How come the countries wanted to be represented at the UN, but suddenly did not want UN presence in their countries? Was that a sign of a lack of support for what UN stands for? I still have no answer to these questions.

What I believe motivated other regions to accept it, all the while insisting on opening more centres in their regions, was to a large extent a theory, an incorrect one in my view, that centres are important for developing countries and not for developed ones. They are important for both, but for slightly different reasons. In developing countries, they are assisting in fulfilling the special needs and requirements of developing countries in the field of information and communications technology for the effective flow of information in and from them, in addition to enhancing the public image of the UN and disseminating UN messages to local populations. In developed countries there is no need for assistance in information and communications technology, but the task of enhancing the public image of the UN and spreading its messages is even more important. Developed countries are large contributors and large donors and their support for the Organization is vital. Besides, past experience shows that, in general, there were no significant problems for the support to the UN and its activities by developing countries, but there were such problems occasionally in developed countries. That is why UNICs, the centres of pro-UN activities are as important in developed as in developing countries.

To make the wrong decision more palatable, the doctrine of "hubs" was offered. Most of Europe was to be covered from one centre only, the one in Brussels. There were even assurances that it will be a more effective and efficient solution than having national centres. This, of course, is an illusion. Without continuous presence in the country, there is no efficient information work; otherwise, the needs of all the world could be covered from the UN Headquarters only. I will not

elaborate, but every UNIC director, past or present, will tell you about a bevy of necessary activities that you can carry out only if you are on the spot. Besides, it stands to elementary reason that because of the large linguistic and cultural differences, Europe can not efficiently be covered from any one European centre.

I harbour a dream that one fine day the wrong decision will be reversed. Of course, the wishes of countries in which centres were closed are paramount. Yet I somehow believe that at least some of them accepted the closure only because it was presented to them as absolute necessity, cost-cutting argument included. Let me deal with that argument in closing.

I know from experience that there is a solution for not increasing costs of maintaining a network of information centres, and most probably even reducing them. The key words in that are system-wide coherence and pooling resources. Centres are capable of fulfilling the information needs of all the agencies of the UN system present in the country, not only of the UN Secretariat, and they routinely do so. In this situation, there is no justification for separate information officers of the agencies. Instead, a part of the costs of maintaining them should go towards the costs of maintaining a UNIC. With all the agencies chipping in, even if a slight strengthening of a UNIC is needed, it would still be a much more cost-efficient solution. And it would send an excellent message about the system-wide cooperation. Of course, the assistance of the host country is always most welcome, and, in some cases necessary.

In the meantime, let me congratulate the capable UNIC directors, like the one in Mexico I happen to know personally and many others, as well as capable national information officers, for their excellent work. Like in all human endeavours, not all UNIC directors are equal, so the importance of a proper choice by the DPI is very important. And finally, a UNIC headed by a resident coordinator is neither fish nor fowl, because it is a rare RC that can afford a meaningful time for running a UNIC the way UNIC should be run.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.