

New capital for new Council of Europe

(retrouvez Murat Daoudov lors de la conférence-débat que nous organisons le 24 octobre 2009)

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Established in 1949, with a dream to lay down the foundations of a “united Europe,” the Council of Europe lost this initiative to the Brussels-based EEC/EU.

Nowadays the council — of which most people are unaware, despite the fact that it represents “Greater Europe,” from the Atlantic to the Pacific — must reinvent itself to meet the challenges of the 21st century. To do so, it should move its seat to İstanbul

The development of the European Union has for decades overshadowed the Council of Europe (CoE). Traditionally, it was considered that the council would focus on democracy, human rights and the rule of law, while the EU sought economic integration. However, with time Brussels also began to deal with human rights and democracy issues. This has led to the questioning of Strasbourg’s role and future. To justify itself, the latter notes that it covers 47 states in a vast continent stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok. This in fact means that the CoE, which brings together Europe’s EU and non-EU parts, finds its full meaning in the existence of its “non-EU” members. Otherwise, in the light — or in the shadow — of Brussels’ Copenhagen political criteria, what is the reason to maintain an institution promoting the same values if it is not that it shares them with Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, etc.? And if so, there is not much sense in keeping the seat of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

In fact, the dynamics which led to the Strasbourg-based creation of the CoE and those of today differ considerably. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, the council’s borders extended from the Berlin Wall to the Great Wall of China. Its new center of gravity needs to also move east, to the new meeting line between the two main areas of Europe it connects : İstanbul.

Symbol of unity or missed opportunity ?

The Council of Europe emerged after World War II as a hope and promise of “the establishment of a European political authority, with limited functions but real powers” and the first concrete victory of movements for European unity. The choice of its seat perfectly reflected the hopes it cherished : the city of Strasbourg, the apple of discord between France and Germany, was meant to symbolize the end of enmity and the reconciliation between the peoples of Europe. However, euro-enthusiasts were soon disillusioned, as some states were not ready to see a supranational institution with partial transfer of sovereignty. With their opposition, cooperation remained at inter-governmental level and the Consultative Assembly of the CoE (today called the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [PACE]) did not become the “parliament of Europe,” as once dreamed of, but remained a platform for national parliaments.

Later, in 1951, six countries established another mechanism of economic cooperation in Brussels : the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Paradoxically, this economic initiative was the forerunner of a supranational political body of Europe. The European Economic Community, established in 1957 upon the foundations laid by the ECSC, realized the dream of Europe’s founding fathers. In the end, not the CoE but the “common market” won the race for a united Europe.

The growing visibility of Brussels-based institutions and the fact that the EEC/EU encroached gradually on the fields of excellence of the CoE overshadowed the latter. Moreover, the adoption by the EU of symbols used by the CoE (the flag and anthem) add confusion as the institution is often taken for an EU body. Finally, as outlined by Le Soir in 1957, “the enterprise of six has eroded part of the political prestige of the Council of Europe.”

However, the council found its second life with the fall of the Iron Curtain and became the “ticket to Europe” for ex-communist countries. The end of the Cold War gave it the chance to embrace the whole European continent, as once dreamed of by Winston Churchill, who said : “Our objective is not limited to Western Europe... We must aim for not less than the union of the whole Europe.” Yet, the CoE was not the end goal for these new countries — their real aspirations being to join the EU, seen as the final destination of their European future. So when many of them joined it in 2004-2007, inevitably the role of the CoE was again questioned. As a result, the prime minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker, was entrusted to draw a report on the future of relations between the CoE and the EU. In 2006, his report recalled that both were “products of the same idea, the same spirit and the same ambition.”

Four life cycles of the council

The council’s development can be summarized in four phases :

1949-1957 : A period of hopes and enthusiasm, when Strasbourg was seen as the center of a unified Europe [1].

1957-1989 : A period of “unnoticed growth” in the shadow of the rising EEC. It became clear that the “European home” was being built in Brussels.

1989-2009 : The dream of “Greater Europe” revived, but the main role of the CoE was to be the “antechamber of the EU” as it helped Eastern European countries transform before integration into the EU [2].

2009-present : A new period started as the CoE’s “antechamber” role came to an end.

In this new phase, the CoE will have to reaffirm its identity. The EU, growing geographically “within” the council, has almost reached its boundaries and further extension is not foreseeable. This means the CoE will consolidate its capacity as the body representing “Greater Europe.” With the Western Balkans’ EU integration, the enlargement will slow down, if not stop. Look at the EU’s east : neither Russia nor Belarus have an “EU agenda.” The political instability of Ukraine makes it difficult to predict its EU perspective in the near future. The geographical “disconnectedness” and serious territorial disputes of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan do not make them potential candidates. Political instability and territorial issues (with Transnistria) are Moldova’s handicaps.

What about Turkey ? Her case is specific. A member of the CoE since 1949, of NATO since 1952, it joined the “Western family” very early on. But despite its Association Agreement with the EEC since 1963, it has not been able to join the EU. Moreover, the opposition of the French and German political leadership makes its membership process a deal without a clear end.

Council of Europe anew

The CoE must free itself from being in the shadow of Brussels and consolidate itself as a pan-European player. To mark its new era, it should become part of the EU [3] and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Then it should also consider further enlargement into areas covered by two other European actors : Central Asia (through the OSCE) and the Mediterranean (through the Union for the Mediterranean). In this way, the “common democratic standards space” will broaden, simultaneously offering an important channel to the aspirations of those regions for rapprochement with Europe [4]. In the “multiculturalizing” world, the council must affirm its role as the platform where the concepts of democracy and good governance — from the local to the international level — are discussed on a wider scale.

Besides this, achieving greater visibility and engaging public opinion, the CoE must transfer its seat to the new meeting line of Europe. If the imperative 60 years ago was the reconciliation of France and Germany, today’s challenge is to foster dialogue between two parts of the continent and between Europe and its neighboring regions and cultures. Such a move has already been suggested in the past when Mr. Curt

Cristoph von Pfuël, rapporteur of its secretariat-general, suggested in 1957 that, in the event of the Iron Curtain's fall and the enlargement of the council to the east, its seat should move to a new center of gravity, probably to Vienna. In this respect, the choice of the seat of the OSCE in 1995 on the shores of the Danube — rather than on those of the Rhine — perfectly reflected the will to fix it according to the new reality.

Today, there is a city at Europe's new meeting line able to strengthen the symbolic value of the CoE : İstanbul. The city on the Bosphorus presents many advantages. First of all, the center of Greater Europe should be open to all its countries. Nowadays, to go to Strasbourg — the symbol of Europe's unity — Europeans from 12 countries [5] need to obtain a Schengen visa, while citizens of all 46 countries can travel to İstanbul without prior visa formalities [6]. And they can do so easily : While only six international connections to European cities are offered to Strasbourg, 82 CoE cities are connected by air to İstanbul. After all, as Brussels is open to all EU citizens, shouldn't the "capital" of the CoE also have its doors open to all members ?

Two other "border cities" capable of enriching the symbolic value of the council can be mentioned : Kiev and St. Petersburg. All three have the "capital" background in common. İstanbul served as the capital of the Roman, East Roman (Byzantine), Latin and Ottoman empires and was the center of both Orthodox Christendom and the Muslim caliphate. Kiev is the capital of a "border country" seeking its place between the West and the East. St. Petersburg, built by the Europe-oriented Peter the Great, is traditionally called "Russia's window to Europe." However, the accessibility of İstanbul is a clear asset, as both Ukraine and Russia apply a visa regime to many CoE members [7].

The choice of İstanbul will symbolize the multicultural Europe of the 21st century. The year 2010, when the city will be a European Capital of Culture, seems to be a good moment to bring the matter to the table. This century offers a new mission for the CoE. If properly assumed, it will give it a high profile among European and international actors. The council will play the role of a "democratizing soft power" in Central Asia and in the Mediterranean, as it once played in Eastern Europe. Moreover, with 800 million — or more — citizens, it can become a sound voice on the world stage.

Sources

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[1] The establishment of the ECSC in 1951 will be the first sign of the upcoming weakening of this role.

[2] The CoE has already played a similar role in Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 1970s.

[3] The Juncker Report proposed that the EU, once it acquires its legal personality, adheres to the CoE by 2010.

[4] For example, Morocco applied for membership in the EEC in 1963, while Kazakhstan demanded observatory status with PACE in 1999.

[5] Expected to be nine by 2010.

[6] The citizens of several countries require a visa sticker, obtained for a small fee, upon arrival at the Turkish border.

[7] Seven CoE countries' citizens need a visa to enter Ukraine while 39 need one for Russia.