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‘The Changing Geopolitical Environment for Europe and the Potential of a “Triangle Vision”’

(Sources: Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard, ‘The Spectre of a Multipolar Europe’, ECFR Paper, London 2010; Zbigniew Brzezinski, ‘Strategic Vision. America and the Crisis of Global Power’, New York 2012; Richard Youngs, ‘Europe’s Decline and Fall: The Struggle Against Global Irrelevance’, London 2010 etc)

1. From a Unipolar to a Multipolar Europe

Despite a growing pluralism of perspectives, the dominant school in the study of International Relations or World Politics is still “Neo-Realism”, a systemic theory which perceives the world as an arena of great powers competing for influence in a mostly zero-sum battle often compared to a billiard game. Though sometimes simplistic and reductionist, the theory dominates debates about international politics without being mentioned, e.g. when we talk about “the rise of China”, “the decline of the US” or about “a multipolar world order”. Yet, what have the schools’ exponents to say about the future of the European project and what advice do they give as for a new geostrategic formula securing Europe’s place in the international system? Finally, what implications can we draw from this for the work of the Council of Europe?

The general analysis of the power shifts going on in the international arena in the last decade is quite well known: the unipolar moment of the US is coming to an end due to overstretch, domestic weakness and the rise of new powers. With China, India, Brazil and other new powers on the rise, a multipolar world dominated by not one but at least a few dozen power centers is becoming a reality. The immediate consequences are also obvious: growing competition and thus insecurity, less order and a declining influence of the West on world affairs in general. What does that imply for Europe’s place in the world?

In an influential 2010 study, experts of the European Council on Foreign Relations speak about the “waning of Europe’s multipolar moment” (with Europe narrowly understood as the EU). The EU, they say, is occupying a rather fragile position in this changed global arena, not able to use the long shadow of a supportive US due to the latter’s decline on the one hand, but also not able to transform itself into one of the new power center’s because of “dysfunctional institutions” and an ongoing crisis on the other. At the same time, Europe (understood in a broader geographic sense) is becoming more plural as a geopolitical sub-arena, with Russia and Turkey increasingly emerging as different poles. Thus, the continental order in Europe is reminiscent of the global trend with all its implications: competition, insecurity and a waning influence of Brussels and the EU’s members on European affairs.

2. The “Triangle” – What a Renewed European Project Could Look Like

The strategic answer of “Neo-Realists” to the current power shifts in Europe and elsewhere is that in order to stay competitive and exert influence, one has to look for new partners and alliances able to satisfy strategic interests and cope with multipolarity.

For the EU and its members two proposals are worth mentioning, one outlined by the authors of the above-mentioned ECFR study, another by Zbigniew Brzezinski, a renowned Polish-American strategic thinker and former US National Security Advisor. Both proposals have one central piece of advice in common: that in order to revive the European project at a time of global multipolarity, the EU should reach out to Turkey and Russia to form a close strategic triangle able to counter the offense of rising competitors such as China or India. Whereas the ECFR study speaks about a “concert of projects” and the substitution of the “defensive OSCE-approach” with a “new European security treaty” between the EU, Russia and Turkey, Brzezinski is even going further. He is suggesting to build “a larger West”, meaning a “geopolitical community of interest” between the US, Europe (including Turkey) and Russia tied to each other by “binding institutional ties”.

What are the strategic benefits of such a triangle for the European project? By offering Russia and Turkey a stake in a common order, the EU would be able to avoid being pushed to the global periphery and could establish itself as a key security actor. Additionally, a close alliance with both Ankara and Moscow would open solutions to most of the neighborhood questions (Ukraine, Kosovo etc.) and wider European conflicts, as well as allow Brussels to reach out via its new allies to neighboring regions such as Central Asia and the Middle East. Finally, the integration of fast-growing and modernising Russia and Turkey could give a post-growth EU a new economic stimulus. More specifically, an inclusion of currently alienated Turkey and an encouragement of its ambition to be a regional power could “strengthen Ankara’s European identity” while allowing the EU to secure its strategic interests in the Middle East. Russian elites, Brzezinski argues, will soon recognize that they can find a “secure geopolitical future as well as a self-satisfying modern and democratic identity” only in a close connection with Europe. While its own capabilities does not allow it to be a global power pole of its own, its recognition and inclusion as a European power would allow Moscow to satisfy much of its ambitions without alienating its neighbours.

Of course, to a high degree these “triangle scenarios” are more speculative and visionary than they are a reflection of today’s reality. And the authors do mention the many obstacles and contradictions (democracy and human rights records; nationalist foreign policies; own integration projects; imperial and anti-EU sentiments etc.) which seem to render the implementation of this idea impossible for the near future. Nevertheless, it lies in the nature of grand strategic visions that they force us to think in long terms and not to take the *status quo* for granted. In this perspective and according to Neo-Realist thinking, Russia and Turkey seem to be tough “bedfellows” for the moment, but there might be no or only even more problematic alternatives.

3. The CoE's Role

The CoE is hardly mentioned in the context of these geostrategic visions not least for the fact that it lacks the so called "hard security dimension". Yet, the Council is an integral part of the European project and it can contribute to its revival and play an even more relevant role in the future.

A. Leadership and Strategy

There is a growing consensus among experts that the crisis of the European project is as much due to the EU's current economic malaise as to its lack of "grand strategy" and therefore direction. According to Richard Youngs, the EU is "defensively clinging to its own model of integration as a means to promoting international influence". This inward-looking tendency is preventing it from "pushing for more holistic and comprehensive solutions to global stability and uncertainty". Therefore, all institutions making the European project, such as the CoE, should force themselves to think beyond the day and invent a new vision for the common project which can be attractive to others. The CoE can become a platform for generating and discussing such visions based on the commonality of values.

B. Network Diplomacy

A geostrategic project with a revived pan-European formula can only work if all actors involved develop a sense of ownership for it. It will not be possible to materialise on a "Brussels only" basis. In order to build a close network with both Russia and Turkey, already existing connections provided by different organisations should be made use of. The CoE, as the only European organisation already including Russia and Turkey, offers its strong networks with politicians, bureaucrats, civil society organisations and other actors in non-EU countries and thus can facilitate the European revival project.

C. No Compromise on Values

It is obvious that the CoE cannot push towards a new strategic pan-European formula without Russia and Turkey fully accepting and implementing its values at this time. The project should therefore be seen as work in progress with roll-backs and disappointments to be expected, especially because both countries are still in an ongoing process of political and economic transformation. However, there should be a reconfirmed agreement inside the CoE that the creation of a pan-European space of common values is the main and indisputable goal of the organisation. Any compromise on the CoE's values would only undermine its credibility. Rather, a revived pan-European formula and integration into the European project should be seen as an incentive to both Russia and Turkey to comply with the Council's agenda.