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The Next Stage in European Integration ?**

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Armenia and the EU : Challenges and Opportunities for Both Parts

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The title of the session, « What is next ? Challenges and Opportunities for Eastern Partnership » invites us to suggest and discuss some ideas about a possible future of the relationship between the European Union and the eastern countries involved in this partnership. Several speakers, during the conference, have insisted on the point that European integration is not only about strengthening political and economic ties, but that it is also about embracing values. We have heard, from representatives of the countries involved in the Eastern Partnership, how deeply they consider themselves as Europeans, sharing common values with the member states of the EU.

I would like to start from that standpoint and to try to illustrate it mixing to kinds of considerations, based on the observation of the current political situation in Europe on the one hand, and drawn from my experience as specialist of the history of cultures in Europe and in the Near East, particularly in the Caucasus region, on the other hand.

I am not representative of a country or of any international organization, I am not a political leader. The ideas I shall develop are thus my own, resulting from my background and my experience, and could not be interpreted as expressing the views of a country or of an organization.

The first idea I want to stress here is that developing the Eastern Partnership does not depend on the eastern countries only ; it requires from the EU to have a clear idea of its project, a clear vision of the future. In other words, if countries like Armenia and the other states involved in the Eastern Partnership keep telling that they are Europeans because they share the same values as Europe, it becomes quite important for the member states of the EU

and the EU itself to also have a clear idea of these famous values and to be conscious of them. And it can not be only words.

That also implies that all countries of the EU agree to play according to the common rules of the game. And this is not always the case.

Indeed, if we look at some recent events in the agenda of the EU, what do we notice ?

We notice that, during the last years, at several occasions, political leaders or the people themselves refused proposals of reforms of the European system. Let us remind here, for instance that :

- Denmark rejected the Maastricht treaty in June 1992, before approving it in May 1993 after some changes had been brought into the treaty ;
- Denmark refused to enter the Euro zone in September 2000 ;
- Ireland refused the Nice treaty in June 2001, before approving it in October 2002, again after some changes had been brought to the text ;
- France and the Netherlands voted against the project of a European Constitution in May and June 2005 ;
- Ireland voted against the Lisbon treaty, before recently agreeing to it ;
- Tchequia, or at least its president, have long been reluctant to sign the Lisbon treaty.

There are many other examples of doubts and hesitations expressed by the member countries when new reforms are proposed to the EU system. All these examples are of course natural reactions of countries which are not ready to submit themselves to severe reforms before having seriously thought about them. We can and must understand these reactions, even more because they are the result of history, and I shall be back on this later on.

But these examples can also be seen as the first signs of a deeper and larger mood of scepticism spreading in many countries of the EU. There are other signs of that kind :

- when the financial and economic crisis broke out in 2009, there were people, and even political leaders, who criticized the Euro, blaming the European currency for weakening the European economies (not « economy » !) ;
- as a result of this crisis, it has become a natural attitude of European governments to defend jobs and industries in the country, rather than looking for solutions at an European scale. To give one example : in my own country, Belgium, an important car factory will most probably be shut down, although the car production is cheaper and more efficient in that factory than in the home country of the car company (Opel, Germany) or in other factories of the same group (General Motors).

The Opel story shows how national interests can be placed first before general interests in times of economic crisis. The question then is : how can an international, multi-governmental project like the EU project be favoured in such circumstances ? The European project has always been faced with the defence of national interests, which is a quite normal phenomenon in an Europe made out of nation-states. We should never forget that the concept of nation-state, an invention of the 19th century romanticism, is at the core of the European identity, and fundamentally distinguish Europe from the other parts of the world, and we should not forget neither that Europe, the EU, is not and will never be a nation-state. This is why Europe is and will remain a challenge for quite a time ahead.

When the situation becomes difficult, as it is today, the national answer always seems the most appropriate to tackle the challenges, as such answer fits in more adequately with local and immediate needs. And it is particularly interesting to observe that the member states of the EU prefer national answers rather than European ones, while countries who are not members of the EU but would like to become ones, like the countries involved in the Eastern Partnership, precisely look to Europe and expect from it the answers they need to their problems. It seems to me that the expectations and sometimes the enthusiasms of the partner countries should remind the member states that European answers have to be given the priority, especially when times are more difficult. In other words, while many Europeans think that nations are the right answer to difficult challenges and Europe the right answer to easy ones, one lesson we can learn from the partner countries is that Europe is the right answer to difficult challenges. We need Europe not to organize what is easy to be organized, but we need Europe to solve what nations can't solve.

Let's go a little bit further in the reflection.

It is very common for national political leaders to blame Europe for not being democratic enough, and to blame « Brussels » for being the cause and source of all problems encountered in their countries, because, according to these leaders, Brussels is a place where decisions are taken by closed circles of experts lacking contacts with the real life of the citizens. When something goes wrong, it is always Brussels' fault. I am myself Belgian, born and raised in Brussels, and I must confess that I would sometimes prefer my city to be less famous than it is !

The truth is that European institutions, although they are not perfect yet, are democratic ones, composed of representatives elected by the citizens. Most if not all of the partners countries had to fight, until recently, for the defence of their freedom and the implementation of a democratic regime. Isn't it a little bit paradoxical that the EU asks from the partner countries to improve democracy in order to fit the Copenhagen criteria, while national leaders are allowed to pretend that the European institutions are not democratic enough ?

Democracy is at the core of our values. What is at stake with the European project is democracy, human rights and peace. Both parts, EU and partner countries, can learn from each other in this respect.

But, in my view, that have to go a little bit further than that. If democracy, human rights and peace are enough to define the European values, one could conclude that the United States are a European country as well ! If not, then we must be able to point out what distinguish Europe from the other parts of the world which share the same basic values.

And the answer to that question is our history : we must be able to find in our history what makes it possible for us to unite. And this brings me to my second consideration.

A second consideration I would like to put forward is that many decisions in Europe are shortsighted. I do not want to blame politicians for this, for I think that it has become more and more difficult to run public affairs in such a complex world as ours. The world is global, everything changes very rapidly, and we are all the time running after time, trying to face emergencies. We have the nose right on the problems, and we lack distance, we are often too

close to the problems for a proper view. Vision of the future precisely needs to take distance, and distance can be gained from the study of history.

What is it then that unites so many countries in this strange ensemble called « Europe » ? The source of our possible union lies in what we have all been through in centuries and in our ability to turn our experiences, good and bad ones, into lessons and to draw from these lessons practical solutions for the construction of the future, a future which would preserve and defend democracy, peace and human rights.

Experiences, lessons and solutions of Europeans all go back to the original combination of three heritages : the Greek, Roman and Christian heritages. The Hellenic civilisation developed the activity of reason and placed man at the centre of this activity ; it developed tools to allow reason to extend to all aspects of individual and social life. So appeared philosophy, ethics and logics, dialectics and aesthetics ; so emerged the first attempts to implement a political regime where collective and individual rights are protected from tyranny and dictatorship ; so also art became the perfect expression of the ability of man to represent beauty and harmony. The Roman civilisation developed these Hellenic findings, adding to them the practical sense of the Romans : Roman law, public state, commerce, taxation, roads, as well as imperial ideology, were tools which Rome prepared and made adaptable to all nations. Christianity then, spreading through all Europe, did not only bring monotheism and the idea of the superior value of the human person and of the family, but did also disseminate all over the continent the fruits of the Hellenic and Roman civilisations.

Other cultures have also influenced the development of the European identity, but none has had the same basic role than the unique combination of the Hellenic, Roman and Christian heritages. It is that combination which is at the source of the European identity, and of the values we are so often invoking.

As a matter of fact, all the countries involved in the Eastern Partnership share these same heritages with the member states of the EU, be it with local variations and other influences, as it is already the case among the EU. What they have in common with the EU is not just democracy, peace and human rights, but precisely why and how, and through which hardships, they came to this triptych of modernity.

One author once said that « Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it » (George Santayana, in *Life of Reason, Reason in Common Sense*). A better understanding of where we come from should help us to better envision our future together. This is especially important regarding the partner countries, because most of the citizens of the current EU have almost no knowledge about which these countries are, I mean how much they are European, how much they belong to the same vision of the society and of the human rights, and therefore how much they deserve to be as close as possible to Europe, if not members of the EU, which is my personal wish. If EU citizens were asked today to give their opinion about a new enlargement, I am convinced that a vast majority of them would be against such a move, for two main reasons, one of them being that they do not consider these partner countries as European enough, and they do so because they do not know the history of these countries. And this is particularly true for a country like Armenia, which shares with Europe a lot of historical features and many values, but is today, due to history, separated from Europe. Europe is absolutely not prepared, intellectually and institutionally, to deal with countries and recognize them as Europeans if they have no common border with the current EU. EU and partner countries have something to develop together in that regard, in

order to enhance a better understanding of each other history and identity, and a sense of a common destiny.

The second reason why EU citizens would be against a new enlargement, and this allows me to turn back to my previous point on the nation-states, is that they want to protect their privileges and are not keen on sharing these with too many people. In my opinion, Europe is about sharing wealth and privileges, and not about protecting them for ourselves. This is why national answers could not be the right ones, because they always protect national interests against other nations' interests, instead of sharing them. This should be accurately observed by partner countries, and it should bring them to realize that they should not evolve as to develop into nation-states. I think that such temptation exists in at least some of these countries. A nation-state is based on a very simple belief: one territory, one people, one language, one religion, one culture, make one nation-state. This very simple idea, which seems so attractive simply because it is easy to understand, has led to the worst conflicts of the last two centuries. Once again: « Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it ».

History of European integration shows how difficult it is for nation-states to accept to abandon some of their competencies and to delegate them to a supranational level. If partner-countries develop to nation-states on their own, they will not make the European process easier, on the contrary.

I have no ready-to-be-implemented solutions to answer all these questions. But I would certainly give the priority to one idea: invest on the young people. They are the future; we can prepare it, but it is they who will have to develop it, to live with it and to pass it on to the next generations.

Education is the best investment you can make on the young people. There have been students attending the conference, and some of them have asked questions. I found it just great. They should have been given the floor also, to tell us what they expect us to do for them.

Let me drop some ideas.

Let's promote, but I mean seriously and really promote mobility of students. Most of the partner countries already belong to the Bologna process, which tries to create what is called an European Higher Education Area. I still do not understand how it came that the Bologna process has not been proposed by the EU, but has been proposed and implemented as an inter-governmental initiative. It is better than nothing, but that will never lead us to an integrated European Higher Education Area within which mobility of students could really be promoted.

Let's promote the teaching of the history of Europe, but not the way it is done today in most schools or universities: national history first, and eventually history of the technical construction of the EU system. But not one single word about the possible future members of the EU. History teaches us that mutual knowledge and mutual understanding are the best tools to promote peace. If peace is at the core of our values, then let's do it.

Let's decide to transfer to the European level some of the competencies of the states regarding education. I know that that will be extremely difficult, because education is also

the best tool used by countries to promote national identity. But I am convinced that Europe has to take more initiatives and more responsibilities in the field of education.

Let's open a new chapter in the Eastern Partnership, a chapter on education. Up to now, education come second after membership : you have to be a member of the EU before discussing issues related to education. I suggest exactly the opposite : to discuss first issues related to education in order to base the future membership on mutual knowledge and understanding.

What history teaches us, is that overcoming the nation-state dimension will be the most difficult challenge both for the EU and for the partner countries altogether, and this is why EU and partner countries should face it together, learning from eachother. The challenge might then be turned into an opportunity.