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INTEGRATION AND DEMOCRACY

Euro-Atlantic Café: New geopolitical challenges or business as usual ?

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“The United States is, by far, the world’s most powerful nation. This does not mean that the United States can - or has an interest to - solve the problems of the world” - writes George Friedman, founder and CEO of Stratfor in his recent Net Assessment of the World, at Stratfor’s homepage.

We are living in an unstable world. The illusions of economic prosperity and long-term political stability at the end of Cold War have vanished by now. The European Union is struggling with an economic, a political and an identity crisis. The consequences of the financial turmoil in 2008 are still visible, especially in the high unemployment rates of the South. Faith in the European cooperation, and in a common future are challenged not only by extremists, but by some conservative political forces as well. The EU risks becoming an old-men’s club of grey bureaucrats when it cannot find a project which could generate some enthusiasm and a clear perspective. In the meanwhile, the notion of the nation state is on the rise again, although its economic chances in a globalized world are rather limited. Failures will be compensated by aggressive rhetoric and looking for scapegoats inside and outside the national borders.

Beyond its serious internal problems, Europe is facing an external threat: Russia is back on the agenda. After years of a somewhat reserved but functioning coexistence - especially due to a flourishing business relationship between Germany and Russia - , the first cracks appeared in 2008, with the invasion of Georgia. Few noticed, even fewer protested. The real crisis bears the name of the Ukraine.

Ukraine has become a symbol of many things. A country of 45 million, unable to really profit from its independence since 1991, has become a symbol of bad governance, where democracy meant the power struggle among oligarchs, business went hand in hand with corruption and with a civil society seriously underdeveloped. Ukraine has been a grey zone between those fortunate new EU-member states which joined the EU in 2004 and Russia, itself too big to be incorporated into a European institution (other than the Council of Europe) but for years too weak to become a core itself. It is a legitimate question to ask whether the political strategists in Europe and in the US had

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any idea about how long a grey zone could exist and what the price is when somebody tries to fill the gap.

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It is highly likely that the Ukraine will become another frozen conflict - the Minsk agreement has just reduced the intensity of the warfare, it did not stop the bloodshed. And above all, it has not restored the sovereignty of the country. It shows that Europe still does not have the necessary strength, dedication nor the instruments to bring peace into its direct neighborhood. On the contrary of what one may think, the emergence of a threatening Russia has not unified, but it may - on the long run - even fragment the EU, as various member states take a different approach on sanctions. The events in the Ukraine are a sign of Russia's falling back to the times of geopolitical dominance, and a warning for the US that it was too early to leave Europe to the Europeans.

Yet an unsolved Ukrainian crisis is serving neither the interests of Russia, nor that of Europe and the US. Russia has been weakened by the economic sanctions and by the low oil and gas prices, and lost a lot of credibility. It is unlikely that Russian troops - irregular or regular forces - would push towards the West, and threaten the Baltic states or even Romania on the south. However, Vladimir Putin's politics is highly unpredictable, and the "border countries" are desperately seeking reassurances that in case of a conflict, NATO troops will come to their defense. Historical evidence is however weak, memories of the western powers sacrificing Czechoslovakia and part of Poland to Nazi Germany are still vivid. What is NATO currently capable of and who will risk a potential war with Russia for defending Riga or Tallinn, cities probably unheard for many Americans?

If we move further to the West, the Ukrainian crisis is falling into oblivion. There are other, pressing issues: refugee crisis, migration, cultural integration challenges and a potential threat of radical Islamic terrorism. If we complain that the EU is struggling with integration, let's just turn our eyes to North Africa and the Middle East: a number of countries are literally falling into pieces in front of our eyes. Syria, Iraq, Libya are virtually failed states, with governments unable to exert control over the entire territory, and state institutions, like the military unable keep order. Robert Kaplan from Stratfor wrote a few weeks ago in Foreign Policy that it was time to return to the old tool of imperialism and reinstate stability - democratization may wait a little. Will the US return to the 19th century's instruments, as Vladimir Putin did, to solve the problems of the 21st century? And where could/should Europe stand? Can the EU have any alternative approach to those

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conflicts just a few hundred miles away from its own shores, on the other side of the Mediterranean? Will the crises in North-Africa bring the US and Russia closer, finding a common line in conflict management and burying their differences over the Ukraine?

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Meanwhile the group of some of the fastest developing countries, the BRICS (Brasilia, Russia, India, China and South Africa) have remained united and not condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine, backing Russia against the Western isolation and openly questioning the Western-dominated post-Cold War world order. These countries, with a considerable growth potential and a cooperative attitude towards each other, may well become the participants of some of the main conflicts of the 21st century. Is Europe and the US ready to respond to a potential Chinese aggression on Russia or capable of settling an Indian-Chinese dispute? As the closest Asian allies of Europe and the US - Japan and South-Korea - are also falling behind other, emerging world powers, who will fill the gap? And as confidence in international organizations - UN, NATO, the whole Bretton Woods structure - fades, do we see any new structures emerging, being capable of dealing at least with some of the conflicts in the world?

In our 3rd Euro-Atlantic Cafe we will speak about the problems of a growing instability in Europe and its Eastern and Mediterranean neighborhood. How does the conflict in the Ukraine reshape the relationship of the US and the EU with Russia? What could Russia's options and interests be? A legitimate question to ask is whether the conflict with Russia could actually pose a danger for the EU, causing a fragmentation, or just economic difficulties. We would also like to address the concerns of the Central European countries: as many times in their history, they are caught up facing a difficult dilemma between realpolitik (pragmatic economic interest + gas dependence on Russia,) or a foreign policy based on democratic values and principles. What is smart diplomacy for Hungary in the present situation?

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