

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Council of Europe: time for Pan-European consolidation

by
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In the near future, the main challenges for the Council of Europe will be to achieve perfect interaction with the EU and to deepen pan-European cooperation. Curiously enough, a concomitance of factors means that process will have to be led by its 'non-EU' wing. The election of Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu as president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which follows the nomination of Thorbjørn Jagland as secretary-general of the council, opens a page of new opportunities.

In the coming two years, three key decision making bodies of the Council of Europe (CoE) will be headed by "non-European Union" Europeans: the Norwegian secretary-general, the Turkish Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) president and the Committee of Ministers' chairmanships consecutively assumed by Switzerland, Macedonia, Turkey and Ukraine. What does this mean for Europe?

The future of the Council of Europe and, in particular, its correlation with the overshadowing European Union have been broadly debated in its cliques and political circles in the past decade. Rejecting despair, the council strives to stir itself up and reaffirms its particular position as a genuinely pan-European organization. The issue is, however, far from being a matter of mere institutional coexistence between Strasbourg and Brussels; the very articulation between the "Greater Europe," represented by the council, and the "Small Europe," united by the EU, is at stake. Since in office, new Secretary-General Thorbjørn Jagland has come to grips with the question of interaction with the EU. Yet the new



quest should extend beyond the issue of avoiding duplication and overlaps in policies; the CoE should aim to be more than a mere "standards institute," but instead become a continent-wide political forum for more challenging projects. The new leadership conjuncture in the CoE offers the opportunity to set priorities from a broader pan-European point of view, bringing to the table issues that matter to all of Europe.

Certainly, it is up to the "non-EU" wing to seize this historic opportunity of taking the helm at a critical time and to shape accordingly the priorities of their leaderships. Both the CoE and the EU have gone through a shaky period of institutional tumult and uncertainty. Finally, however, the Lisbon Treaty comforted Brussels while Strasbourg elected its high-profile secretary-general. Now it is time for business. Here we could list some challenges that would be applicable to all Europeans, summarized in two main topics: strengthening intra-European harmony and fostering the international "rayonnement" of Europe.

Deepening Greater Europe

The foremost step would be to foster the process of EU's adhering to the European Convention on Human Rights and, as further step, joining the CoE as its 48th member. Such a development will strengthen the "EU component" of the CoE and increase its political weight. The two actors shall also share what they have built up the best. According to Terry Davis, the former secretary-general of the CoE, the EU works to achieve better living standards for its citizens, while the council cares for their quality of life. Mutual enrichment will be a clear win-win game for both. Thus, while the EU adopts the Strasbourg acquis in the field of human rights and democracy, its own standards could go far beyond its enlargement. The CoE could act as a privileged channel for spreading the EU's consumer protection, health, food safety and environmental standards, adopting these in its conventions.

Another challenging project would be the gradual creation of a “visa-free Europe.” This is not a completely utopian goal as Europe isn’t at an astronomic distance from that ideal. Between the CoE’s 47 member states, there already exist several visa-free spaces, such as the EU-EEA-EFTA-Western Balkans area which includes some 38 countries. Turkey allows all CoE countries’ citizens to travel freely within its borders, while only few of them need a visa for Ukraine. And even Russia, which remains Europe’s most “closed” country, has been bargaining with the EU on the mutual softening of visa regimes for a while. With a pan-European commitment, these policies could be interconnected. After all, Europe must deal with something people can dream of.

Extending the outreach

Another role for the CoE would be to increase its worldwide impact, actively spreading its acquis across the Afro-Eurasian mainland. Several priorities and target areas can be outlined.

In this respect, cooperation with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is paramount. The fact that the CoE and the OIC, the second largest organization in the world after the United Nations (57 states), don’t enjoy observer status with each other reflects their mutual lack of awareness. Because of this, when the OIC wishes to build closer relations with Europe and to tackle the issue of Islamophobia, it “naturally” envisages opening its representative’s office in Brussels, even though, the council has more to share with the OIC than the EU does. Not only because intercultural dialogue and anti-discrimination are more the core business of the council, but also because of its dual advantage of experience and of the applicability of its solutions. Both the CoE and the OIC are international organizations and the Islamic world is not ready for the EU-style supra-national approach. Moreover, the council’s decades-long experience in inter-parliamentary cooperation is more along the lines of what the OIC needs to adopt, establishing its own parliamentary assembly. It is also time for the OIC to promote its own “CoE-like” charter on local self-government and the Organization of Islamic Capitals and Cities (OICC), its affiliate body, could also evolve into an assembly similar to the CoE’s Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. Here Turkey’s role as a bridge is crucial. A member of both groups since their foundation, today her representatives chair PACE and hold the position of secretary-general of the OIC.

Another challenge for the CoE would be to discuss its further enlargement. In the east, Kazakhstan has enjoyed observer status at PACE since 1999 and such debate on the country, which is the chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010, is symbolically important. In the south, Morocco, which since the 1960s has cherished dreams of European integration, has recently joined the CoE’s North-South Center.

Inside and outside Europe, the CoE must fully assume “goal-setting” and “soft power” roles. It should dare to constantly push for deeper integration throughout the continent, to broaden the common space of democratic standards and to influence positive change in the Afro-Eurasian region. Of course, such an ambitious agenda requires a proactive and strategic-thinking mindset from the leadership. In this respect, the Norwegian-Turkish tandem is well-appointed. Both countries show deep-rooted commitment to the organization that they have supported since its foundation and their political classes have the courage to assume international responsibilities.

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Op-Ed

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