The Council of Europe Visible and Invisible : Politics of Image

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1. Crisis of Visibility

The question of the image of an institution comes up in general in times of crisis. This is obviously the case with the Council of Europe today: the present interrogation on the absence of a clear public image reflects the difficult questions the organisation has to face.

In fact, we could identify retrospectively a series of crises of a quite different nature the Council of Europe has gone through :

- An early deception by the European project and the beginning of European integration that will lead to the creation of the European Union (EU). The importance of the pioneer of the European idea will be undermined in the competition with the expanding EU and the other European institutions (OSCE, WEU, OCDE).
- After the first wave of enlargement that rapidly doubled the membership of the Council forced the institution to change its orientation and identity.
- After the compromise of the admission of Croatia and Russia in 1996 perceived as a shift from noble values to a certain Realpolitik (it provoked the resignation of the deputy secretary general Leuprecht).
- In the context of liberal consensus of globalisation and the general cutting of budgets.

The question of visibility has been posed by the second summit of Strasbourg 1997 coinciding with a profound interrogation on the nature and perspectives of the institution. The so called committee of Wise persons, designed at the occasion to reflect on the identity of the Council[1] and its perspectives for future development seems to be a compromise, a way to hide the complete incapacity of the institution to take its own destiny in charge. In fact, no single person I talked to, gave a positive opinion about the Wise persons and some were overtly laughing at the mention of it. Even thinking of the Council as one single institution seems to be an approximation. One of the civil servants I interviewed said it was like a mosaic : were you to look at it from a distance it seems one whole, were you getting nearer, you see but different pieces.

The internal divisions are first of all due to structural reasons. The Committee of Ministers, analogous to the executive in nation-states, is a siege of power, but also of diplomacy, i.e. compromise and secret. The Assembly which imitates the legislative, but has quite limited powers, tends to a more open, political engagement as the deputies have the interest to work for their public image. The Court of Human Rights functions quite independently of these two. The administration has no political role and is in principle supposed to execute orders of

the CM, but in fact the civil servants are the only persons who stay at Strasbourg all the time, know well the files and finally can influence the process. The Secretary General is meant to represent the unity of the institution has in fact no political means to impose anything on it - elected by the Assembly among its members, being a participant at the committee of ministers, nominating the civil servants he/she depends entirely on personal qualities to effectuate the job. Thus Lalumiere is considered to be a strong SG even by those who disliked her. Given the consensual type of management of the institution, non regulated by explicit norms, the only legitimate centre of power at the Council is personal charisma in Weber's sense. But the principle of election of the SG makes the appearance of charismatic leaders improbable as he/she has to be selected among the Assembly members and being an assembly member is not good for national political career, so first rang politicians tend to avoid it.

An illustration of this "decentered" situation was given to me by a head of directorate : there is a debate going on whether to create a new international magazine of intellectual reflection. Ten years ago the SG would have taken the initiative to create it or not, then be judged by the governments according to the results. Today there is a tendency for the ambassadors to interfere with everything instead of concentrating on the important political issues. The main reason for that is the multiplication of ambassadors after the rapid enlargement 1990-1996 : "occupations" have to be found for more ambassadors, so that everyone has the chair for something. Thus parallel to the rapporteur group, sub-groups have been created, groups "ad hoc", etc. In fact most of the time and energy of the Council now is occupied by supplying documents to all these groups and coordinating their work, instead of dealing with real problems.

This lack of a unique centre of legitimate power accounts for a constant process of "segmentation" : new projects produce new departments that have the tendency to become spatially independent (as the Youth Centre) and then completely separate (as the project on the Cultural Roads of Europe or Pharmacopea). I could actually witness such a process, when three persons from the Directorate of Communication created a new press service that is supposed to work for the deputies during the sessions at the Clerk of the Assembly. These are three relatively young and ambitious persons with few chances to go up in grade the normal way because of the quota principle (as they come from old over represented member countries). On the level of content, creating a new service seems to have been the only way to resolve the conflict of interests : the Assembly aspires at political action, openness and public effect, the Committee of Ministers insists on a more "diplomatic" style of work behind closed doors. In the absence of a consensual centre of power and common rules of the game - just like it is with the Nuer - the conflict is settled by segmentation.

Obviously this phenomenon accounts for the constant increase and dispersing of activities. The consequence : the Council does more and more with less and less funds and no one can change this. SG Tarchys himself is said to have built his campaign on the idea of reducing and centring of activities, but after some time got discouraged and started to say that life is done of everything and they should pursue all of their projects.

Let us add to this the cocktail of backgrounds and political styles introduced into the institution by the quota principle, as well as the specific norms of cultural correctness. This accounts for a situation where every department works in a different way and according to different criteria[2] set up by its boss or predominant employee group.

A certain generation gap can be identified dividing the employees in the Council into what I will call "enthusiasts" and "resigned". The first trying to change things, the second being either satisfied or deceived by the present situation; an interviewee defined the difference with respect to 89 saying that the borderline separates those come in before and after. Curiously enough the majority of the East-Europeans I met fall into the second category even if they are young and recently nominated. It seems that the enormous differences in living standards offered to employees of the Council and to people doing equivalent jobs back home makes them feel obliged, fearful and docile. The Westerners, having often few chances to rise in position because of the quotas for new member-countries and being condemned to a small claustrophobic world of limited careers, feel much more radical.

In a paradoxical way, one of the problems of the Council is the institution's proper past. Being the pioneer of the European integration process, they have been overtaken by the economic union which became the centre of the European project, but they do not wish to cede their place and to become an auxiliary instrument for the integration of peripheral countries to the centre. Thus constant resentment is to be felt: "They are stealing our ideas", "our annual budget is the one of the European commission for 14 hours", "they are pragmatic, we are concerned with values", etc. It is not clearly stated whether the project of the European Union and the Council of Europe is the same using different forms of action or whether they are really two distinct projects for the continent. In fact, the identifications of the Council of Europe are never opposed to those of the EU except for the formal exclusion of the economy : "we are not economic". This has a certain leftist tinge in certain interviews : we do not do economics, we are occupied with loftier matters. By the way, the leftist (sometimes anti-American) identity of the Council of Europe has been often underlined. East-Europeans (playing as a rule the game of anti-communism in order to be recruited) have often been shocked by that aspect. For instance before the enlargement the Council of Europe adopted each year a slogan. As East-Europeans said this made them think of communism, "slogans" were replaced by a "motto" (e.g.; of the 50th anniversary). Let us mention that the common symbolism (flag, anthem), the location in Strasbourg and the common building[3] contributes to the mess but the Council is not so eager to sort out things : the identification to a structure of the EU attracts much greater interest to it.

We should also mention the strong instrumentalization of the Council by the states of the periphery seeing it as a somewhat boring ritual stop on the way towards European money. This problematic situation has already existed with Greece and Turkey ; with the newcomers from the East and especially from former USSR it has become dramatic. Instead of sharing the "values" of the Council, politicians use its image to legitimate their positions at home profiting from the confusion of symbolism and institutional relations mentioned above. Thus the Council is extremely important before joining it, then it disappears from the public scene

and even becomes a nuisance, as it creates problems with human rights, the abolition of death penalty, etc.

A last contradiction in the representations concerns the status of the civil servants themselves : on the one hand they are doing things that usually concern NGOs (youth, rights of minorities, etc.), on the other they have an extremely advantageous position (big salaries, tax reductions, etc.) which are normally linked to diplomates. Hence the clash between the NGO-rhetoric and the sumptuous governmental practices.

The meeting of the rapporteur group (GR-I) on communication from the 07.07.98 was an occasion for me to witness the basic conflict of the institution expressed through different views on the politics of the image. The president of GR-I, the ambassador of Cyprus Mrs. Petrides and her team had been trying to change the rule of the game in the direction of more openness of the Council to the citizens: among other things, it was suggested that the chairperson of the CM (designed on a rotation principle) should be authorised to give information about the debates at this body - being the centre of power in the Council - if he or she considers it necessary. This would, in principle, make it possible to overcome its consensual way of proceeding and permit the Council to use its main arm, public communication. As expected, the representative of Turkey expressed herself against the proposition, as this country is one of the champions of human rights trials and does not have any interest to get into the open[4]. As a result the question was postponed for consultations and informal discussion. Such infinite postponement is obviously a typical way of proceeding in the CM (nevertheless, Mrs. Petrides said, the decision will be taken against the will of the Turkish delegation, as according to the practice of the CM only one divergent opinion can be ignored). It seems to me that the future of the Council is largely dependent on the outcome of this apparently insignificant matter as all the main dilemmas of its identity are in it: open versus closed, political versus diplomatic, having its own role versus being purely intergovernmental, citizen oriented versus being an expert body.

2. Spontaneous Communication : Wandering Metaphors

Here are some of the recurrent metaphors erring through the Council. I will mention only those I have heard several times from independent sources and that do not belong to the normal figures of speech.

The metaphor of the Council of Europe as a club of civilized countries that has been shaken by the upheavals in the East is extremely widespread. Sometimes this is a nostalgic reference, but very rarely. The sense of the metaphor seems clear: before 89, the existence of the Council was somewhat useless. It is now that the real work is to be done. The unexpected change of 89 is represented as panic, "some people thought the ceiling would fall on their heads". From the calm and coziness of a family the Council was suddenly plunged into a barbarous reality, in a political jungle. D.H. remarked that the very style of work before in the Council was much more familiar and patriarchal : they called each other by first name, no decision could be taken without the sanction of superiors. After 89 everything changed :

much more people work now in the house, and there are much less links between them ; on the other side this privileges freedom and initiative (the speaker is a typical "enthusiast").

A static view of the Council might be also expressed in other terms. It would be seen as the temple of democracy, as a spiritual organisation, the conscience of Europe (motto for the 50th anniversary). In this perspective the Council is above concrete reality and temporary preoccupations ; human rights are eternal and unchangeable, values are taken outside history and geography. Nevertheless, no one would ever mention religion; even moral standards that are difficult to explain without reference to Christian tradition as the abolition of death are without one single exception answered in the following way : "Well, I personally think that it is wrong to kill human beings". Thus, tabooing religion is the domain where the Institutionally Correct is the strongest.

The functionalist approach to the Council is most often evoked in reference to Eastern Europe. In the perspective of enlargement the Council of Europe is seen as a passport for Europe, it is the antechamber (or waiting room) for the EU. This is a "realistic" metaphor used most often to explain how things really are. Some are quite explicit as one German Referent saying that the Council of Europe is not the back door for Europe as they say, but the front door and this, according to him, is being clearly said to the candidates for the Union. Others, like president Kwasniewski at the Strasbourg meeting would affirm that the Council of Europe is not a waiting room, it has a value of its own, nevertheless the metaphoric core functions in the same way.

The visions as to the future of the organisation are essentially of two kinds. On the one hand those converging around the degeneration of the Council into an "agency specialised in human rights" as an official from the Clerk ironically expressed himself, an unpolitical institution dealing with "technical questions". Such minimalistic visions of the Council of Europe identify the institution through its only certain distinctive feature: the defence of human rights. On the other hand, there is the maximalist image of the Council as a political organisation, a forum, a front, a watchdog, etc. This comes up more often at the Assembly that has, by the way, adopted the idea of being a political institution in an official document.

A very particular variant of the political (that is: taking sides) vision is the already mentioned "they take us for a leftist or even communist organisation" coming up in interviews with people coming from post-communist countries. Some seem to be quite amazed by this. In one case the explanation was, that the Council of Europe has been created in the 49, in the years of the welfare state and according to "communist" principles (civil servants, social privileges etc.) Now times have changed and the Council is somewhat inadequate (e.g. with respect to the OSCE, that has temporary contracts and detachments, not life long contracts).

3. Voluntary Communication : Inventing Unity

The Council of Europe does not seem to be aware of the heterogeneity of its identity and self-representation. The architectural metaphor of the building itself representing a boat ("We are

all in one boat") seems to express the overall idea of unity, of fluidity, the absence of angles. A film of presentation made some years ago played on the metaphor of symphony[5], showing an orchestra learning to play together and finally acquiring perfect harmony. This consensual symbolism is readily presented by the guides to tourists (an important side of the activity of the Council of Europe is to be a sort of factory for welcoming, informing and photographing the incessant flow of tourists).

Given the limited funds (10 centimes per citizen of the member countries) communication has to be targeted on the so-called "multipliers of opinion" : deputies, journalists, NGOs, etc. Therefrom the central dilemma : is the Council of Europe an expert body distributing information for specialists or is it open to the general population? Is it technical or political? Is it strictly intergovernmental or does it aspire to a role for itself? The "resigned" would chose the first options, the "enthusiasts" - the second. As I mentioned above, the social ethos of the civil servants greatly influences the choice and thus the very crucial question concerning the future of the Council.

Here are the problems of communication that came up most often in the interviews :
- The fact that the Council of Europe is relatively unknown and often mixed up with other institutions.
- The overabundance of activities that do not permit to centre the image.
Problems identified only by the "enthusiasts" would be that :
- The Council of Europe is too closed, too secret and thus has no impact of the public opinion.
- It is too passive, too prudent, not political enough.

As for the "resigned" the problems are rather
- Too little money for too much work.
- The wicked journalists not willing to cover the Council of Europe's activities.
- Or simply : there are no real problems. This position develops ideologies to legitimate the present situation like "you do not speak of trains that come on time", or the Council of Europe is intergovernmental, is technical, is diplomatic, it should not be too visible.

The communication directorate is not independent. Being at the service of others it reflects through its activities the general divergences of the Council of Europe. The structure is not clear and often the civil servants themselves cannot explain the organigram. The procedure is the following. A group of ambassadors, under the mandate of the Council of Ministers, designs the objectives (e.g. a committee of six decide how to celebrate the 50th anniversary "of the creation of the Council of Europe and its recreation in 89" under the presidency of the Hungarian representative). The axes are given to the Directorate of Communication that designs a strategy by working with external experts (e.g. the 10 biggest advertising companies are appealed to in order to design the "motto" of the anniversary[6]). The projects are submitted to the rapporteur group on communication chaired by the ambassador of Cyprus, that presents them to the CM. The latter normally cuts funding, then sends it back under the form of "big axes".

The result of this diplomatic filter is that every imaginable symbolic dimension is reduced. The politics of communication is the one of the smallest common denominator - exactly as it is the case with political action itself. Each time an expert will suggest an animal, a colour, an idiom, some delegation will react saying that in their culture this is perceived in a bad way. Europe has been perceived as Christian at least since Novalis, nevertheless such reference is banned from the Council of Europe: an excellent illustration is the so called Meditation Room where no single symbol of a given tradition could be seen, the wall represents something like amoebas or molecules. I was not surprised not to see anyone go meditate there. In fact, cultural references are strangely absent, even if the building is decorated by the gifts of the different member countries as tradition oriented statues and pictures. Intellectual debates are much rarer than one could expect.

In fact the main metaphors of communication are youth on one hand, nature on the other. So to say the body is privileged over the spirit.

Youth can be used as an empty, and therefore consensual symbol, for the young person has no past that could enter into conflicts with the past of others ; children have no political positions, they do not defend interests, they will never betray us in contradicting the metaphor we put them into. Youth rimes with peace, future, innocence. At the centre the Council of Europe's hall in June 1998 there was a collection of children's drawings disposed in the form of a dove.[7] In fact, the biggest mass in the history of the Council of Europe, the 50th anniversary (10 years after the fall of the wall) is planned be celebrated by an Assembly of youth, where every country is supposed to bring a number of youngsters equal to the number of its deputies. An overview of printed materials and propaganda leaflets shows that childish paintings and cartoons are massively used; feast and popular music is preferred to serious discussion or high culture.

The natural metaphor - animals, plants, the "terroire", health etc., that should be preserved - are the other figure of empty consensus. You cannot represent the continent in a consensual geographic chart (no chart is accepted by all the member countries![8]), but you can show mountains, menaced species and beautiful scenery that we all can project ourselves upon. NGOs are also often used as metaphor, rather than partners. It might seem that they contradict the above statement that the Council of Europe privileges metaphors that are on the side of the "body", not of the "spirit", as such organisations are supposed to defend positions and values. In fact, it is the arbitrary choice that makes the difference as the Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation and the NGOs have only an ornamental role. Where are the criteria to work with some NGOs, not with others? There could be no answer to that, as an NGO represents but its members. These organisations have become a metaphor for "civil society" especially during the fall of communism when they were used by western partners including the Council of Europe as a substitute of democratic governmental bodies. The NGOs themselves profit from the situation as the Council of Europe is a perfect partner for fund raising at the EU and elsewhere.

A feeling of anonymity traverses the presentations of the Council. The clearest example of this tendency seems to be their last film called "Palace Steps", where the camera traverses

empty, ghost-like halls, that get gradually filled by the favourite metaphoric substance, children. As a comparison, earlier presentation films show personalities like Gorbachev or Walensa, officials of the Council, activities, debates, historical references. The new picture seems to reflect perfectly the new situation the Council has entered into since 89: an anonymous space for diplomacy, a no-man's land that no one anymore controls.

Notes

1 One of the ideas in the air : to give more importance to the Congress of Local Authorities ; so to say to bet on the regions against the states. This idea of the Wise Persons is not popular in the Council, as the activities of the latter are mainly intergovernmental, i.e. centred on states.

2 Because of this, an evaluation system is being developed for personnel, but again, at least two systems were running parallel in June 1998.

3 In 1998 the European Parliament will move into a new building near by. The symbols of the Council of Europe have been in fact adopted by the European common market.

4 We could also see here an element of a traditional confrontation between national lobbies, Mrs. Petrides being Greek-speaking.

5 Making us think of the XIX century "concert of nations".

6 The dilemma in June was to chose between the Council of Europe as "conscience" or as "heart" of Europe. The final decision goes back to the CM to be discussed at "A" level meeting and adopted by consensus. One can imagine that only an absolute cliche can make its way through such a procedure.

7 I cannot but thing of the cultural politics of Liudmila Jivkova, daughter of the General secretary of the Bulgarian communist party, at end of the 70s : in trying to reform Stalinism without hurting the Stalinists, to orient Bulgaria more to the West without confronting the USSR, she and her circle made use of the same youth-peace-and-future rhetoric.

8 Most often because of names : Kief or Kiev, Republic of Macedonia or FYROM, etc.