

European interview

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The Return of the Borders

Interview with Michel Foucher, geographer and diplomat

THE RETURN OF THE BORDERS IN A NEIGHBOURHOOD IN CRISIS ...

1. Many countries in Eastern Europe, with Ukraine on the front line, find themselves in a pivot situation, caught between Russia and the European Union. To what extent has the Neighbourhood Policy played a stabilising role in this?

Tension on the Baltic-Black Sea isthmus is of a secular nature (rivalry between Sweden and Russia – Charles XII against Peter the Great if you like, as well as the historic play off between the German city States). This tension now finds its origins in two modern sources: on the one hand it has been rekindled by the Eastern Partnership, which was of Polish-Swedish inspiration, the strategic aim of which was to create a glacis between Central Europe and Russia with the dual accession by Ukraine to NATO and the EU; on the other it is linked to the extremely broad interpretation of the border in Russian geopolitical representations – the “thick” border – since the coveted zone of influence is so great that even the Russian State itself is challenged by its immensity. Given the history and the power relations in these areas, Ukraine’s rapprochement with the European Union should have gone together with commitment by the West to a status of strategic neutrality. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who in *“The Grand Chessboard”* suggested Western establishment in Ukraine would be a strong sign of Russia ceasing to be an empire and of it becoming a Nation-State like any other, is now suggesting a Finnish solution. Negotiators in Brussels neglected Ukraine’s dual neighbourhood. The annexation of Crimea and the

start of a further, almost frozen conflict in Eastern Ukraine that has paid no heed to international law and European order, has been a windfall for Poland. It has finally achieved American reassurance, the aim of which is not so much to strengthen its protection, but to guarantee the continuation of an offensive “eastern policy” towards Ukraine and Belarus, according to the old rationale of the “cordon sanitaire”. It is still important for the European Union to draw up a “Russian policy”, based on legitimate interests (not all of them are) for both sides. At the same time Russia intends that Finland remain neutral and is placing pressure on Sweden, which in reality is extremely close to NATO and the USA, which in turn have outsourced their responsibility to it for the security of the Baltic Sea. Poland’s “eastern policy” introduced in 1994 according the German Ostpolitik model towards Europe’s neighbourhood, converges with Sweden’s wish to contain Russia (in the Baltic countries and in the Baltic). Swede Carl Bildt and Pole Aleksander Kwasniewski¹ worked a great deal on this. Long-term geopolitical continuity is striking in this part of the continent.

2. You talk of a return of the borders, of which we are finally becoming aware. What can be said of borders that are not really the result of a State construction, but rather more maintained due to the interests of external actors, in frozen conflicts like in Transnistria for example?

The Russian-Soviet time-tested practice of the “frozen conflict”, which comprises awakening and supporting micro-secession on dubious grounds, is a legacy of the old policy of nationalities, of “divide and reign” on the peripheries of the empire. Semi-

1. An interview with the author at the Global Forum of Baku, April 2015.

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State status is granted by the protecting power to minority ethnolinguistic regions, which entails the formation of artificial boundaries, on which effective police and customs controls are undertaken on improvised checkpoints. Hence the capacity this policy has to cause damage is real, from Moldova to Azerbaijan. A right to scrutinize is exercised over the geopolitical orientations of the States in question: preventing Georgia's entry into NATO, idem for Ukraine; preventing all types of rapprochement between Moldova and Romania; maintaining control over Armenia, which provides military bases to the Russians on the borders of Turkey, a NATO country and close to the Middle-Eastern theatre; influencing Baku's options, Turkey's historic ally. Seen from Moscow the regions extending from the western shores of the Black Sea to those of the Caspian Sea comprise one single theatre: the Middle East is also seen as the near abroad.

3. You quote Vaclav Havel when in 2005 he called for a clear definition of the borders between the European Union and Russia. Which criteria would you put forward to do this?

The criteria vary according to the geographic areas in question. With the Russian Federation it is firstly geo-strategical, which means that this has to be taken on board when thinking about the future of Belarus and Ukraine. This dimension is established by the membership of the States bordering Russia and members of the European Union of the Atlantic Alliance (Baltic countries, Poland, Romania). The question involves establishing two areas of military presence and Russia is seeking its own glacis (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Southern Caucasus). In the south and south-east the criterion is that of the effective management of migratory flows (and on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, their co-management with the countries of origin). As for relations with Turkey, this might be imagined according to a principle of differentiation: economic opening via customs union, selective upkeep of visas, as long as a visa free system exists between Turkey and the countries of the Maghreb, Mashreq and even Somalia, with no participation in the decision making process in an ad hoc format of Associate State (or privileged partnership).

4. Europe is tied to NATO as far as its defence is concerned, whilst being isolated as it faces Russia in terms of the race for influence. For a long time Europe's power seemed to function according to its soft power but national initiatives seem to be marking a turning point with the return of hard power. Have we reached a key moment from this point of view?

In a context of Cold War the European Union was never designed and built to be a geopolitical, strategic power, but as a community of law based on values, thereby leaving it up to the big American ally to watch over its interests, during the Cold War, then during the ensuing period of calm and now a period of turbulence. Belonging to NATO has enabled it to exorcise the bitter memories of several of Germany's neighbours. It is a facilitating third party. The economy (the leading market in the world) and the euro (the second reserve currency) alone provide the European Union with world power. But Europeans have not yet understood that for the other players on the world's economic chess board, economic and financial power is a means to geopolitical power: there would be no American hegemony without the dollar and the processing of big data, there would be no Russian projection without the control of the pipelines, no rise of Chinese power without technological pillaging and trade surpluses that offer Beijing's diplomacy the financial resources for its influence. In the strategic and geopolitical area the European Union is deliberately a non-power. It will not suffice to install external border controls to reverse this trend. A precise diagnosis of the world has to be made, where powers comprise individual States and not regional blocks. Without the convergence of some of the "heavyweights" in the European Union, we shall no longer influence the challenge being made to the geopolitical order that emerged after 1945, the departure from which is being forced by half of the British population on the other (by just 3%) and on their allies. In the work that now lies ahead to redesign Europe, we also have to think on a world scale (therefore not just on the scale of the European Union, or of the continent and its peripheries) and coordinate diplomatic and strategic action so that Europeans become a centre of power in a polycentric world. By doing this Europe

will become a balanced, respected power, which would be a step forward in comparison with the traditional Westphalian notion of a simple balance of power that is associated with a combination of values (like the USA and Canada) and interests (like everywhere, most often in an exclusive manner).

... BUT ALSO WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION ITSELF

5. The question of the refugee crisis seems to be crystallising the link between the EU's external policy and its internal security. In terms of the form and substance of negotiations what is your view of the March agreement with Turkey?

The agreement signed in March was bilateral out of a German concern to contain flows that the generosity of the German Chancellor and part of German society (a society shaped by millions of refugees since 1945 and 1989) but also Syriza's (in office in Greece) ideology of openness, had promoted. Undoubtedly there was no other solution due to the difference in view amongst the Member States which have refused redistribution according to quota. It seems to have been effective since there has been a notable reduction in migratory pressure dropping from 7,000 illegal entries per day in September 2015 to 45 at present². In all in the first six months of 2016 around 150,000 departures (Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis) were noted. There are about 8,000 people left on the Greek Islands and fewer than 500 returns have taken place towards Turkey under this "one for one" mechanism, which does not work well because of the shortfalls of the Greek State, of its reticence to deem Turkey a safe country and the slowness of the establishment of EASO experts³. The paradox is that as the final borders of the European Union are no longer taboo the Turkish government is asserting itself to challenge all of the limits that might exclude it: *"Europe is the most democratic, most stable, most prosperous of continents. This is why joining the EU is our goal in spite of its problems. We want to become a full member. We will not be a burden to Europe,"* declared Mevlut Cavusoglu, the Turkish

Foreign Affairs Minister. *"In fact what we want is a clear decision on the part of the European Union"*⁴. The criteria for the liberalisation of the visa regime⁵ in favour of Turkey have not yet been met (cooperation with Europol, definition of terrorism, data protection, fight to counter corruption).

6. The Schengen system suspends border controls. At the same time the Dublin system focuses on State borders, thereby forcing the countries of first entry to shoulder responsibility for most of the migratory policy. Is this not a contradiction to a certain degree?

The system of free movement, otherwise known as Schengen, was introduced on the request of German hauliers to reduce waiting times on the borders as their lorries travelled towards the ports of Benelux. Free movement has become one of the most popular acquis of European integration, since former front lines have become harmless crossing points. The simultaneous task of the concerted strengthening of the external borders is not complete, due to a naïve interpretation of the state of the world and because of a continuous enlargement programme which modified the Schengen area's external limits eight times in a row. Necessary investments were not made, whilst in 2015 the external borders were crossed legally by more than 233 million non-EU citizens and by 400 million Union citizens, with Frontex detecting at least 1.8 million illegal entries. The Greek-Turkish border is the most difficult one there is to monitor, due to its geographical shape and the territorial disputes with Turkey. The effectiveness of operation Sophia (EUNAVFOR MED) off the Libyan coast has been undermined because the smugglers are dispatching the migrants directly into the patrol area, abandoning their poor passengers, as they recover their boats with the complicity of the Libyan coastguards. Nearly 60 000 arrivals were recorded in Italy (from the Sahel and East Africa). In all, 430, 000 asylum requests have been made since January 2016 in the EU (78% in Germany, 10% in France and Italy, 5% in Austria).

². *Le Monde*, 4th July 2016.

³. European Asylum Support Office.

⁴. *Le Monde*, 4th July 2016.

⁵. Only Ukraine, Georgia and Kosovo are concerned, ie 127 million inhabitants.

7. The refugee crisis has exacerbated deep political divides in Central and Eastern Europe and also between the Franco-German couple. Likewise a great deal has been said about divergence northern and southern Europe in debate over the economic crisis. What should we think of these internal divisions within Europe? Does Europe, as a geographic body, really exist?

The common correlation between the word "Europe" and the idea of unity which, as a result, invalidates any notion of "disunity" in the event of discord, reminds us that for centuries the continent was defined and experienced as "Christianity". The demand for unity came in response to the Schisms (in 1054 with the Orthodox, then Luther and Calvin). The wish for union on the part of the Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches has been the driving force behind the Vatican's diplomacy in the face of the rising demographic and proselytizing power of Islam. The continent's entire history is based on dialectic between attempts to unify (imperial or hegemonic) and specific assertions of national fragments of major multinational entities⁶. The continent is therefore different from other historic areas due to the depth of difference between its populations who live in very close proximity to one another, but who share a common cultural foundation, the source of which is Christianity. It is friction that led to European civilisation, since this had led to progress and exchange. Although, according to Umberto Eco, the language of Europe is translation – Europeans move forward when they behave like border dwellers, open to exchange. This is the beauty of Erasmus and free movement. If the differences – between economic models, ability to reform, the nature of the State – which have now become apparent, shock us – it also shows the extent to which European integration now believes that it is a major process of homogenisation and even standardisation – the Single Market oblige, a regional version of brutal globalisation, contrary to its founding diversity. If we deny this, we have not understood that people also seek comfort in their

identity and the security of the "*patria chica*" – the nation – and the economic advantages of opening in a "*patria grande*" – an organised group of nations, if we take up the distinction made by Simon Bolivar, as he pondered the unity of Iberian Latin America and when independence movements were dividing it. Hence the word Europe is a floating name in quest of realities on which to base itself: euro zone, European Union, European Economic Area⁷, nations of the continent under the Council of Europe, an old civilisation? All of this, all at once. A more rigorous naming of areas and scales of reference would be helpful.

8. We are witnessing the rise of regionalism in Europe, of which Scotland appears to be the best example. Isn't this an in depth challenge to the foundation of the original European pact?

Geopolitical configurations are not historically established for the long term. Six of the ten States that joined the EU in 2004 did not exist as such in 1989. The same applies to the five Balkan States that now want to join. No one in the West objected to the dissociation of the former States – it was quite the contrary. As a reminder Belgium was born of the secession of the Netherlands in 1830, Greece of the Ottoman Empire in 1821, which then led to other emancipations, Norway and Sweden in 1905, Ireland from the UK in 1921, Iceland from Denmark in 1944, before the most recent period of national assertion, as of 1990-1991. The general trend on the continent is toward the fragmentation of empires. Separatism drives the fragmentation of political areas. The term is used by central powers against a periphery or a minority. It especially designates projects of secession, the means to gain independence. Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's First Minister sought the approval of the President of the European Commission in July 2016 in the wake of the British referendum: one photo is enough to assert this new prospect. A population which stands as a nation intends to have the attributes of State sovereignty in a favourable geopolitical situation (especially if the main powers are encouraging this to serve their

6. Michel Foucher, *Fragments d'Europe*, Fayard, 1998.

7. Thierry Chopin and Jean-François Jamet, "After the British referendum: redefining relations between the two Europes" *European Issue*, no. 399, Robert Schuman Foundation, July 2016.

own interests). This renewed trend is not new since it is driven by "region-nations" which believe that are being unfairly treated by the "centre", notably from the fiscal, but also symbolic points of view; this is nearly always so in the wealthiest regions. And this is what shocks, the challenge made to solidarity and equalisation between territories, one of the basics of European solidarity. At the same time the claim to "*patria chica*" is made complete – and is compensated for – by an immediate wish to be part of the European Union (Scottish and Catalan arguments), a kind of benevolent empire (*patria grande*), which is expected to compensate the risks of division and isolation. There is no European jurisprudence on this issue. The subject was first addressed in 1996 at the French Senate regarding the compatibility of the secessionist project of the Northern League in Italy with European law⁸. The government's response indicated that "*community law is neutral, in the sense that it does not encourage, nor does it oppose any change to a territory, whether*

this is in terms of an extension (example of the German reunification of 1990) or the reduction of a geographical field of application (a State can decide to leave the Union and a region that has become independent can only re-integrate the after the negotiation of a new membership treaty)."

Michel Foucher

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⁸. Written question no. 17671 by Xavier de Villepin (French living outside of France - UMP) published in Senate's JO 26/09/1996 - page 2451. Answer given by the European Affairs Minister published in the Senate's JO of 02/01/1997 - page 24 (C. Colonna).