

SARKOZY COMMITTED IN GEORGIA THE SIN OF VOLUNTARISM

Interview with Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier

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QUESTION 1 - When Nicolas Sarkozy was elected President of France, he had promised to speak « a language of truth with Putin ». At the time, Moscow had discreetly vowed concern about a possible russophobia from the new President. But soon, the Russian government has ensured that the Franco-Russian relations were as good as during the Chirac era. More recently, the activism of President Sarkozy to reach agreement on a cease-fire in Georgia was applauded. But it is now criticized for having not specifically forced Russian troops to leave Georgian soil (which includes Abkhazia and South Ossetia despite their secession that Tbilisi denounced as illegal).

Has President Sarkozy gone too fast? Or does this result from a clear objective which is always to give priority to the strategic interests of the European Union with Russia? In this case, do you think the term "realpolitik" would be appropriate?

If we are to believe public rumor fuelled by complacent anecdotes, the French president would have ended the Russo-Georgian war after having a man-to-man talk. Remember first that Dmitri Medvedev unilaterally announced a ceasefire before Nicolas Sarkozy landed at the Moscow airport on August 12. Since then, the Russian president said his French counterpart did nothing that would have stopped the fighting. Duly noted.

After these negotiations, many observers have highlighted the weaknesses and vagueness of the Sarkozy-Medvedev agreements. The text contains no reference to the territorial integrity of Georgia and gives to Russia « additional security measures » without geographical accuracy. Furthermore, it sets no specific timetable for the withdrawal of Russian troops. In short, these agreements are the pride of the Russians, which was loudly commended for having imposed the exit of the war phase of the conflict.

Therefore, should we determine that the French president has gone too fast? Promptness is a virtue but it requires a clear understanding of the issues, political dynamics comprehensive report of forces and an overall picture. It is now clear that there has been no return to the status quo on the ground: Russian troops have continued to increase after the agreement of August 12, Moscow recognized the independence of the separatist regions (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and more than doubled its military presence in the two territories, a few dozen kilometers from Tbilisi and from the energy corridor that guarantees Western free access to resources of the Caspian Sea (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline).

The facts speak for themselves. Certainly, Nicolas Sarkozy has committed the sin of voluntarism by thinking that movement and friendship displayed with his Russian counterpart (while Vladimir

Putin remains the real power) would overcome the constraint of the situation. Significantly, the justification after the event for this policy is to explain that the situation could deteriorate further - Vladimir Putin would have had the intention to hang the Georgian president - and it no longer refers explicitly to the content of the agreements. It's a bit quicker and more elusive. This conflict cannot be put in brackets and it will weigh on future events. At the roots, nothing is resolved and there are fears that the Russian leaders feel encouraged.

Hence I do not think the French president had in mind a clear perception of the interests of the European Union in this crisis, only because the Union as such has not positively defined its interests in the East yet. We know that the various EU member states have different perceptions of Russia and that they could not even agree to truly define a common policy against it, the renegotiation of the EU-Russia partnership is a journey full of pitfalls. At least, the EU must maintain a firm line on the issue of Georgia and deny what has been done in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I am inclined to see in the politics of Nicolas Sarkozy with the Russians an old French tropism partly inherited from the Franco-Soviet rapprochement outlined in 1966 by De Gaulle. It must also be understood that Russia is a projection screen: when talking about the eternal Russia, it implicitly refers to the eternal France, the two powers are supposedly doomed to an everlasting covenant. This is self-portrait.

In this case, can we speak of « realpolitik »? The term creates more problems than it solves. Apprehended in its essence, Politics aims to ensure consistent internal and external security of the supported community. This original activity, i.e. inherent to the human condition, is based on the analysis of risks and threats, on the identification of the potential enemy and ultimately on the investigation of reality. Any policy is based on the realities of realpolitik and speaking in this sense is a truism. The question is whether this term did not become the mask of a short-sighted cynicism, or even a kind of nihilism.

Some followers proclaimed the « realpolitik » has also an abbreviated perception of reality and they think that putting forward « interests » would suffice to define a policy. Thus they reduce international politics as a form of Newtonian physics, yet ignoring the metaphysical and the God of Newton. This seems especially simplistic. The notion of « interest » can not be defined unambiguously and interests put forward by state leaders by changing the perceptions of actors and contexts. In the end, this term has come to designate any cause of action and therefore has little explanatory value. Finally, any great policy requires meta-political foundations and it cannot be reduced to a simple calculation of material forces.

In the case of Russia, it would be wrong to overlook the nature of the regime, the modes of operation of the "Putin system" and their external extensions. This would be committing the sin of irrealism. Some clichés on the Russian soul, Slavic-Orthodox identity and Dostoevsky can not replace the lack of substantive analysis of the trends at work in Russia. The "geopolitical embarrassment" of Russia is poised to become a security issue. Note that this is much better accepted in Europe since the Russo-Georgian war. The speech of the "common European house" was overtaken by events and the anti-Western stances of Russian leaders eventually produce a backlash. The image of Russia has been devastated.

QUESTION 2 - Soon, France should fully re-integrate NATO to the great satisfaction of Washington that hopes it sounds the definitive break with the « national independence » of General de Gaulle. But such a satisfaction was not shared by all American analysts who fear that President Sarkozy will accept a full ticket for NATO in exchange for very demanding conditions. President Sarkozy also could trigger more problems than benefits in opposing the installation of missile shields in Poland and the Czech Republic or by advocating a moderate approach with Russia.

Has France a final stance on these issues or does it still doubt the posture to adopt? Does this lack of clarity stem from a willingness to pose Europe as an equal of the United States or from a typical French bid for « sacro-saint » independence?

The complete comeback of France into the military structures of NATO seems to be accepted and not subject to stringent conditions. Indeed, this decision is part of a continuum with a sharp acceleration during "Chirac years" (1995-2007), the rhetoric of "Europe-power" has often masked the strategic and military realities. If there is failure, it is in the rhetoric and mental realities. The "cognitive dissonance", i.e. discrepancy between the facts (the strong commitment of France to NATO) and representations (a "non-aligned" speech), are being reduced. This is indeed good.

The analysis that led the French political and military authorities to fully re-integrate NATO is in part as follows: France has no influence at the height of its financial and military investment in the Atlantic structures. Like any other member country of NATO, France has the ambition to increase its influence through the framework of power-sharing tools. This is quite normal and legitimate. Broadly speaking, I think that France marks his membership to the Western world and contributes to greater understanding of its foreign policy.

The question of Russia has been previously discussed and France will plead the same ideas within NATO as within the EU. In those two instances, with broad intersections and in an alliance with the Americans, that the Europeans are trying to define their Russian policy, note the weight and the role of Germany on this issue. More than Paris it is Berlin that shows strong reserve, however not outright rejection, on the candidacies of Georgia and Ukraine. That the Allies discuss all these very strategic issues is quite normal. NATO is not and has never been the Warsaw Pact and the strength of the Alliance lies in the voluntary commitment of each member country. The stance is defined in common and then member countries align themselves with the Alliance's stance. Let's trust in the virtues of Atlantic multilateralism.

As for the deployment of missile shields in Central Europe (Poland and Czech Republic), the decision primarily belongs to the concerned countries and to their bilateral ties with the United States. It is true that during the EU-Russia summit in Nice on 14 November 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy had questioned the merits of such a deployment. To Dmitri Medvedev's great satisfaction. On the sidelines of the G-20 meeting in Washington, he recalled the day after the sovereign right of the two countries to carry out such a deployment. To Dmitri Medvedev's great displeasure. Remember that the NATO member countries unanimously supported the deployment of missile shields in Europe, as a contribution to the posture of defense and deterrence. Those are the fundamentals. Note that the Russian leadership will be able to appreciate the limitations of the goodwill of France. The indefinite postponement of a summit of security in the OSCE area, a Russian idea briefly supported by France, on that same 14 November 2008, played in the same direction.

Finally, the guiding line of the French foreign policy is quite clear on the international level: reforming the transatlantic alliance and strengthening the EU, the two objectives are interrelated and not mutually exclusive if one stops thinking in terms of « NATO only » or « Europe only ». It is true that some initiatives blur the picture. In addition to the propensity of France to pose as a great power on behalf of Europe, one can see a one man's factor (the « hyper presidency »).

QUESTION 3 - The economic crisis appears even more serious threat to Russia and its partners such as Iran and Venezuela. The barrel of crude dropped since summer 2008 from \$ 160 to \$ 40. Some analysts predict a very difficult year 2009 for the Putin-Medvedev tandem arguing that the growth of Russia was due to the sale price of energy and the employment of nearly 50% of the population by the state or indirectly through consortia such as Gazprom.

While Moscow and Kiev oppose anew on gas prices, should one fear a latent energy dispute between Russia and the European Union? In this difficult context and given the growing dependence of Russian growth on western economies, should the European Union take advantage of it to better speak about thorny issues such as human rights or the independence of neighbouring countries (Georgia and Ukraine in particular)?

The global energy conflict is latent and Russia will do everything to prevent the emergence of a European common energy policy: strengthening bilateral ties with major energy groups in France, Germany and Italy, backed by their governments; promotion of the *South Stream* against the *Nabucco*; pre-emption of the resources of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; controlling access to the Caspian Sea (this is one of the reasons for the Russian-Georgian war). More generally, Russia refuses to ratify the Treaty on the Energy Charter and plans to reinforce its monopolistic groups (Gazprom and Transneft), power tools and coercion in Europe and in the field of strategic relations. Russian leaders are not only thirsty-petrodollars businessmen and they think in terms of power, however confusing "bigness" and "greatness."

Basically, this position calls into question the rationale for a EU-Russia partnership. Conceived and designed in the early 1990s, this partnership was based on the vision of a post-Soviet Russia reduced to a mere suburb energy, subject to the advice and liberalization policies of the EU. The paradigm of "transition" does not reflect the realities and the Russian leadership no longer refers to the European / Western pattern. They swing between the « Russian specificity » and the « Chinese way », the idea being to combine strict political control with selective opening to global economy.

Here are the limitations and illusions of "soft power" claimed by some Europeans. How to build a partnership that is anything other than language games, without trust and shared values? Interest alone is enough for trade but it cannot go beyond the market's logic. And yet. Investment security requires a minimum of trust, respect for law and stability of the rules. Greedy circles of power and their patrimonial regime (control and distribution of pensions based on patronage) do not play in this regard.

The financial crisis, especially acute in the Russian case, update the fragility of « the economy of pipes » and the limits of « BRIC » (Brazil-Russia-India-China). Vladimir Putin was the kingpin of a Russia's « emerging power » in a « multipolar world », able to convert the redistribution of flows into power. Actually, Russia is a « low power » in the grip of a serious demographic and health crash. Currency generated by exports of commodities have been only partially invested in the production: Russia exports oil, raw materials ... and weapons. The crisis is now a revealing agent

and it is obvious that Russia has not escaped the effects of the « Dutch disease » (effects of pension, inflation and corruption). The refinancing of monopolistic groups that are heavily indebted to Western banks dipped into the foreign exchange reserves. As for the production of hydrocarbons, it shrank for lack of investment. All this could endanger the « Putin system » and the domestic political unanimity. In short, one cannot see things as one did in 2000.

What extensions one can give to this renewed political situation? Those who called for compromise with Russia, because of its renewed power, must now explain that one needs to accommodate with Russia because of its internal weaknesses. One faces what Karl Popper called a no-falsifiable theory. In my opinion, it does not mean « taking advantage » from a situation fraught with uncertainty but to hold firm on the basics that we own. Reaffirming our trust in the virtues of constitutional-pluralism, the rule of law, freedom and competition, both politically and economically. Remembering that any policy implies a certain idea of Mankind and his relation to the Cosmos. One cannot compromise on these lines of division and seek to build a partnership based on mercantile interests. If convergence does not go beyond the simple interest, it is only trade relations, more or less regulated, and ad hoc cooperation on key strategic issues (the struggle against proliferation and terrorism). No need to tell stories and yield to lyricism.

Meanwhile, the desire to defend and promote our political, economic and social ways of organizing Europe, Eurasia and its hinterland in the world, requires that we welcome the countries that want our partnership. Of course we think first and foremost to Georgia and Ukraine. These are countries of « in-between » that turn away from Moscow's authoritarian heritage and seek to resolve their political problems in the context of open and competitive systems. In fine, what do we want? That these countries resigned themselves to belong to a Russian sphere of influence? That Vladimir Putin and his supporters make an illusory and dangerous conclusion that would say that a form of post-Soviet Russian-centered Union - based on a mix of indirect control, pressure and threat, even brutal military interventions in the « near abroad » - is possible?

Stop projecting our desires and our categories on Russia; let us see things as they are and act accordingly. The consolidation of the European Union is not compatible with the soft acceptance of new forms of limited sovereignty in Europe and on its eastern confines. Privileging our bilateral relations with Russia at the expense of the security interests of the nations of Central and Eastern Europe would prohibit the EU to live its « common destiny ».

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