



## **XVI International Likhachov Scientific Conference**

**May 19-21, 2016 St Peterburg**

### **Contemporary Global Challenges and National Interests**

Within the global context of contemporary challenges and national interests which constitute the theme of our conference, I will endeavour making some comparisons between two countries, which for sure do not stand amongst the most influential in the world but do play a far from negligible role from an international point of view.

Making such comparisons supposes, as we do at GIPRI Foundation, that national interests still exist today, contrary to a mainstream trend which prevails in the West on the subject.

So, let me say a few words about Switzerland and Belgium, two countries rather familiar to me as I live in the former and come from the latter. Two small West-European states, both highly economically developed, which respectively host the European United Nations Headquarter and the European Union. Both with multiple national languages. Both heirs, in their modern form, of the Congress of Vienna. Which both took their time and made some detours after the said Congress to eventually settle, in 1830, as a constitutional kingdom in the case of Belgium and, in 1848, as a confederation in Switzerland. I will refrain myself from going backwards to their respective older history except for pointing out that if everybody knows William Tell, his apple and the crossbow, mythical symbols of the Swiss independence, very few, besides the Belgians, remember Julius Caesar Commentarii's paragraph in which he proclaimed the Belgians to be the bravest of all Gallic peoples! *Fortissimi sunt Belgae!*

Today, contemporary challenges in Europe and in the world are daily discussed in the European institutions in Brussels and the international ones in Geneva. Belgium as well as Switzerland are however also facing big challenges for themselves. Not least, the exponential migratory flux in Europe since a year. With exacerbation of some far-right nationalist reactions, like in the rest of Europe.

There are some parallels indeed between the two countries in question. But also many deep differences in their way trying to safeguard national interests and coping with contemporary global challenges.

Belgium was one of the six countries that founded the Common Market. Sixty years later it is still member of the European Union, and, moreover, takes part in the Euro zone. Swiss constant policy in these fields has been radically different. No question indeed for Switzerland, for decades, to envisage joining the European Union, even less the Euro zone, with Swiss franc as national currency, one of the five most important currencies in the world, in spite of a population less than 10 millions people who lived in a tiny 40 000 km<sup>2</sup> territory, without natural resources, a great part of it uninhabitable because of arid inhospitable mountains.

Does geography have notable influence on the functioning of states? Developing kind of temptation to retreat into national self-interest in the mountains versus openness in the plain? It was until recently easier to invade plains than mountains. Nowadays, InfoWar, monetary flux, instant and virtual communications do not care a bit to topography. But some schemes may remain present in the minds.

## 2. *(New)*

My comparison would be somehow hurried should I limit it to oppose a country which chose, as fundamental ways of defense of its interests, total integration into European Union and Euro zone and another one which repetitively refuses to do so for decades. It has indeed also to be taken into account the fact that Switzerland is fully surrounded by countries which at the same time are its main customers and all members of the European Union. Which made it unavoidable for Switzerland to adopt most of Brussels directives. Up to now, through bilateral negotiations having becoming more and more compulsory over the years. Together with additional limitations, for the Swiss federal government, linked to the semi-direct democracy system allowing the people to launch, at any time (after gathering of a minimum of 100 000 signatures), a popular « initiative » leading to votes at national level, quite often on themes hostile to the European Union.

The Swiss neutrality must of course also be highlighted. This is part of its historical identity. As well as the huge cohesion of the Swiss State, which calls for recognition as an independant state as from August 1st 1291, with the oath of the three core cantons.

Switzerland is so the most ancient state in West-Europe with more than 700 years of continuous slowly growing development, from 3 to 26 cantons today. Belgium, on its part, emerged only as a state in 1830, after centuries of belonging to various European empires and is suffering from deep antagonism between linguistic communities, which results in a quite precarious situation for the state which however resists all ominous context so far. Particularly, a period of 541 days without any government during a major political crisis in 2010-2011 !

In a globalized world dominated by a crypto empire constituted by financial, industrial and cultural networks, physically embedded within the territories of the most developed countries – as outlined by Gabriel Galice, President of GIPRI under the designation « networks and territories »<sup>1</sup>-, can still people efficiently communicate and/or influence their governments ? Rarely (seldom ?) in an institutional way as in Switzerland. In conflictual ways, of course, in demonstrations and strikes. But for what kind of results in front of governments linked by regional and international treaties and under pression from the above-mentioned transnational oligarchies ?

A century and half ago, John Stuart Mill wrote: « *If we ask ourselves on what causes and conditions good government in all its senses, from the humblest to the most exalted, depends, we find that the principal of them, the one which transcends all others, is the qualities of the human beings composing the society over which the government is exercised.* » (*Considerations on Representative Government, Londres, 1861*)<sup>2</sup>. Is this statement still valid today ? There is no doubt about it. These qualities can even more than ever be expressed via Internet, blogs and social networks. But paradoxally they seem hardly reach, be absorbed and even less integrated by most governments increasingly cut from their population. There is a new situation characterized by a shift of the political life from the classical structures of parties, trade unions, institutions towards the expression of ideas through Internet, twitter, blogs and son on. These tools do offer extended means of expression and individual communications but probably lack the structures of the former traditional channels to insure effective transmission of ideas to rulers.

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Galice : « *Du Peuple-Nation- essai sur le milieu national de peuples d'Europe* », Mario Mella Edition, 2002, in particular : « *La Belgique, modèle ou repoussoir européen ?* », pp. 245 to 268

<sup>2</sup> Peter Berkowitz ' *exergue* of his book *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, Princeton University Press, 1999.

The contrast is obvious (blatant ?) between the gap splitting up those who govern and the governed in some (most) West- European and the cohesion around subjects of key national interest in the country which organises the present conference.

In conclusion, despite small territories and population, notwithstanding limited political power to face global contemporary challenges, both Belgium and Switzerland played, play and will continue to play strategic roles in the future. This is not only the result of their political and cultural specificities but also rest upon their specific position within the said new « territories and networks » world system. Bigger political powers definitely need such places of neutrality, relative quietness and/or openness to meet and negotiate.

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