

De Gaulle's Vision of Europe and the Problems of the Contemporary Balkans

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“...Europe’s inability to plan its own affairs with long-term vision.” Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (1998)

In America, it is not only politicians but members of many other professions who in their public utterances quote the Founding Fathers of the United States. This, of course, is often demagoguery and patriotic posturing but Americans genuinely admire the political wisdom of the leaders of the American Revolution and consider it relevant for dealing with contemporary issues. As they should. The Founding Fathers fought a victorious war of independence against a world power, Great Britain, created the first large self-governing republic in history, and framed a constitution which is still the supreme law of the land.

The European Union has many eminent fathers too, and indeed grandfathers, great grandfathers and so on, but they are rarely mentioned in contemporary discourse, while their attempts to give the European idea a deeper meaning – that is, to found European unity not only on common economic and security interests but on the sense of common history and culture, religion and civilization – are all but completely forgotten.

However, I will dare to disregard this tradition of ignorance and indifference to those who tried to look deeper into Europe’s past and further into its future and invoke for a brief moment the ghost of one great European. I hope that he can provide us with much-needed advice about that only seemingly strange part of our old continent which almost everyone in the world calls the Balkans but some much more correctly the South-Eastern Europe. That sage is General Charles de Gaulle, wartime leader of the Free French Forces and president of France from 1959 until 1969.[1]

I

De Gaulle was a great modernizer who gave women the right to vote and French colonies the right to independence, secured and stabilized economic growth and made the French franc strong, and built many new universities and hospitals. Yet he had a very strong sense of the importance of history and tradition, and while contributing much to European integration, always advanced the interests and increased the prestige of France.

One of his major accomplishments was reconciliation between France and Germany. He cultivated a personal friendship with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, a Rheinland federalist who was mistrustful of Prussia and deeply committed to Germany’s friendship with France. Adenauer would turn out to be a perfect counterpart to the French president.

Characteristically, de Gaulle spoke of modern France and modern Germany as direct continuations of medieval Gallic and Teutonic kingdoms and underlined that they had been complementary in those distant times. These historical heartlands of Europe should now come closer, he argued, while somewhat unrealistically hoping that France would be the preeminent partner and Paris the center of the relationship.

For de Gaulle, Prussian militarism and what he called “Germanism” were the main causes of Europe’s misfortunes. Indeed, in less than a century, Germans had attacked France three times, the fighting was always on French soil, and the French sustained enormous casualties. Yet in the spirit of heroic and generous chivalry, which was an integral part of much of what he said and did, he praised the courage of German soldiers who had fought against his fellow Frenchmen, adding that they deserved admiration even though their goals were wrong. And during a state visit to West Germany he shouted to the cheering crowd that Germans were a great nation. In general, he never insulted or spoke disparagingly of any nation, nor did he show disrespect for leaders even when they were dictators or relations between their countries and France were strained.

One of de Gaulle’s boldest and oft-quoted historical anticipations, made in November 1959, was of a future Europe extending “from the Atlantic to the Urals.” He had set upon this mental journey through time at the height of the Cold War and it made him many enemies in Washington. But the Americans were unjust to their ally who, at the time, was vigorously building a French nuclear deterrent (which the French press called “force de frappe” – literally, strike force – although de Gaulle had non-threateningly named it “force de dissuasion”) and would firmly stand by President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. De Gaulle was simply a wise optimist regarding developments inside the Soviet Union. He believed, as it turned out rightly, that with improvement in the standard of living and ever larger number of university graduates, the Soviet people would demand more freedoms, and their critical spirit would increase. As a result, the party would be compelled to give up its monopoly of power and a much less rigid and hostile government would replace it. Once the inflexible communist régimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe melted away, Western Europe led by France, de Gaulle believed, should quickly expand its political, economic and cultural influence and reintegrate the continent. De Gaulle never explicitly mentioned the Balkans but it was obvious that he included them in his Europe of the future.

De Gaulle never questioned that Russians were a European nation – as they, of course, regarded themselves at that time and still do today. He even said that Russians were a Western nation since he considered the whole of Europe as Western. For him, and this was not unusual at that time, only non-white, non-Christian, Asian countries belonged to the East. Indeed, he predicted the economic and military rise of China and concluded that this was one more reason why Europe and Russia needed each other.

It is truly remarkable that this man, who was born in the nineteenth century, brought up a conservative Catholic, and received a very nationalistic military education, had views about Russia which were more enlightened and liberal than those of many Western politicians today. Sadly, many contemporary Western intellectuals are no less prejudiced and malevolent. They engage in pseudo-scientific analyses of Russian national character in order to reveal its supposedly un-European or even anti-European essence. And then there are the perilous charlatans who prophesy clashes of civilizations and portray the Eastern Orthodox civilization (Russia being its flagship) as both inferior to Western civilization and a threat to it.

When, in February 1966, de Gaulle withdrew France from NATO's integrated structure, he was saying no to the alliance as an organization dominated by Washington but yes to the alliance as a treaty between France and America as equals. He was certain that NATO would disappear as soon as the Soviet Union ceased to be a threat and Europeans no longer feared the Warsaw Pact's armored divisions and Moscow's nuclear arsenal. After putting an end to their alliance with America and taking their defense completely into their own hands, he hoped that Europeans would begin to act in concert. At the same time, they would preserve their sovereignty and their national armies, for only soldiers who were motivated by patriotism, de Gaulle firmly believed, could be first-rate fighters. This post-Cold War post-NATO Europe should then use its considerable powers – political, economic and military, cultural and moral – in order to resist and challenge, both inside Europe and globally, the hegemony of the Western superpower.

De Gaulle had criticized NATO not only because of the United States' domination of the organization, but also because NATO lacked spiritual values. So, presumably, he would have wanted Europe's independent defense to be infused with such values. Most certainly this Europe of the future that he envisaged would not be completely preoccupied with its security but would devote much of its energy to larger global issues.

De Gaulle, of course, imagined that France would lead the way – be the first to exit NATO, advance new political ideas and proposals, and direct European political life. No wonder many European politicians thought that de Gaulle was a Frenchman first and a European only second. Accusations of nationalism, indeed of chauvinism, were not rare, especially in America and Britain but also from the French left. And not a few pointed out that his ambitions were unrealistic – France simply lacked the economic and military power for such leadership. Furthermore, the country was somewhat suspect as a democracy, having been in recent history afflicted by long periods of instability and occasionally threatened by dictatorship, both from the nationalist right and from the communist left. Then there were the still fresh memories of France's humiliating defeat in June 1940 at the hands of Nazi Germany and of shameful collaboration during the occupation which followed – at the beginning this was so widespread that France seemed to have allied itself with the Third Reich. Further still, French troops had committed crimes in colonial wars but hardly any perpetrators had been brought to justice. Last but certainly not least, while French culture was vibrant and intellectually stimulating, it did not enjoy its previous worldwide prestige, and the French language, alas, was not any more the required medium of international intellectual and diplomatic discourse.

Inter-war French-Yugoslav relations were not inspiring either. Paris and Belgrade officially cherished the memories of comradeship-in-arms between France and Serbia during the First World War and considered themselves devoted to the same ideas and principles for the preservation of European peace. Economic cooperation with France, however, did not much benefit Yugoslavia and perhaps even hindered its industrial growth, while the military equipment Yugoslavia purchased from France was often obsolete. King Aleksandar I of Yugoslavia was murdered in October 1934 in Marseilles at the beginning of his state visit to France – the assassination having been organized by Croatian fascists aided by Mussolini's Italy. French authorities, however, halted the investigation in order not to alienate Italy, which they, with characteristic shortsightedness, hoped to win over as an ally against Nazi Germany.

In spite of the very great shortcomings and failings of France, many of which de Gaulle seemed privately to be aware of, de Gaulle's nationalism had attractive features. He envisioned a France as preordained for great and humane deeds. And he not only claimed that France had for several centuries done for mankind more than any other country, but was sincerely committed to ensuring that it should continue doing so. In his view Paris had every right to consider itself the heart of Europe but France also had the duty to promote liberty, culture and civilization, and in general be magnanimous, lofty and courageous.

To many, of course, this all sounded romantic and naïve, indeed self-important and pompous. Since de Gaulle's death in 1970 until today, France has proved itself to be a (mostly) stable democracy with a (reasonably) successful economy - but it has never come even close to the political "grandeur" that de Gaulle thought was her calling and her entitlement. Nor does it show any sign of embracing such noble ideals in the future. Nevertheless, de Gaulle was a visionary: Europe must free itself from the hegemony of its trans-Atlantic ally; Europe should be much more than the continent envisaged by its planners, economists and administrators, competent and well-intentioned though they mostly are; and the new Europe will only be built on the solid foundation of the nation state.

De Gaulle's French nationalism can be partly justified. For one must ask in connection with a possible leader of post-war Europe: If not France, who? Germany with its monstrous recent history obviously did not qualify, nor did Russia with its one-party dictatorship and distant position. Italy was burdened with a fascist past, politically unstable and simply not strong enough. Spain was an underdeveloped tyranny. And so on. There was, of course, one very strong candidate - Great Britain. It had much to be proud of for its conduct during the Second World War, its parliamentary government was one of Europe's most admired, and it was peacefully giving independence to India. In spite of mounting economic difficulties, it was an industrial power and possessed considerable military force including nuclear weapons. And its language (admittedly, largely because of American worldwide influence) was quickly spreading. Yet after the war was over, it quickly lost interest in the "continent", let alone any thought of leading it, and concentrated on cultivating its "special relationship" with the United States. It was content to be what it always was - an island off the coast of Europe. When Britain finally understood that it should join the European Economic Community, de Gaulle vetoed its application, first in 1963 and then in 1967, partly because he saw Britain as an American Trojan horse.

III

On the 17th of February 2008, the parliament of Kosovo, Serbia's province under United Nations administration, adopted its resolution declaring independence. President Nicolas Sarkozy was the first European head of state to recognize Kosovo as a sovereign country, writing a formal letter to its president, Fatmir Sejdiu. Full diplomatic relations were soon established. Kosovo's independence was primarily the work of the United States, which has lobbied ever since, in all parts of the globe, for its international recognition, and in general plays a crucial role in Kosovo's internal and external affairs. Significantly and amusingly, there is a four-meter-tall bronze statue of President Clinton on Bill Clinton Boulevard in the center of Kosovo's capital, Prishtina.

Main arguments in favor of Kosovo's independence as well as those against it are well known so there is no need to repeat them. I should perhaps add that worldwide the majority of scholars of international law - nevermind the unclear, contradictory but basically pro-Albanian decision of the International Court of Justice in the Hague on the 22nd of July 2010

- seem to agree that Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo is inviolable. But what would be de Gaulle's contribution to the debate?

A firm believer in state sovereignty, he would definitely have opposed Sarkozy's recognition and would have been deeply disappointed that France follows American lead in European affairs, especially in such vital and sensitive matters as border changes. Moreover, it would have been of importance to him that Serbia had been an ally of France in two world wars and that a noticeable section of Serbia's political and cultural elite cherished friendship with France and would only be too happy to support its leading role in Europe. His profound sense of history, tradition and religion would have made it easy for him to understand why a province where Serbia's medieval civilization had reached its peak and where there were religious, cultural and historical monuments of highest significance and greatest beauty, meant so much to the Serbs. Indeed, he would probably have seen Kosovo as important for the identity of Europe, with its deep Christian roots and largely Christian culture.

His considerable gift in distinguishing enduring from ephemeral phenomena would have led him to realize that Serbs would never forget Kosovo and that the Kosovo problem could not be lastingly resolved with pressures and threats on Serbia by Western powers. De Gaulle would have recognized that the lasting solution to the Kosovo conflict could only be reached through a genuine compromise between the Serbian and the Albanian side and that this should have been the goal of French and European policy. Nor would de Gaulle have made such a radical move as to recognize the independence of a part of an Orthodox Slavic state against the firm and vocal opposition of Russia, itself an Orthodox Slavic country, with which he was planning to build new Europe.

De Gaulle could not have failed to see that in the future an independent Kosovo would be America's satellite and obedient ally in its pursuit of imperialistic policies, if necessary even against Europe. And he could easily have imagined a future conflict between France and America in which Serbia would take the French side while, of course, Kosovo would not under any circumstances. Nor would he have imagined Kosovo Albanians' Muslim religion and civilization to have little relevance. He would have recognized Islam in Kosovo as a force that would move Kosovo Albanians closer to the Muslim world and in particular to Turkey with which they share a common history they are proud of. And as far as the West pressuring Serbia to recognize Kosovo in order to gain material benefits from Europe - this de Gaulle would simply have found repugnant.

IV

There has been an obvious improvement in the relations between Serbia and Croatia since the days of Milošević and Tudjman, and presidents Boris Tadić and Ivo Josipović claim to have established a personal friendship. But much trade and many educational and cultural contacts take place without the support of the Serbian and Croatian governments. At the same time, in both countries, many laws, regulations and established ways of doing (and not doing) things pose obstacles to such exchanges. Clearly, progress could be much faster and encompass many more areas. De Gaulle's policies towards Germany and also Adenauer's towards France could provide some guidance.

Old de Gaulle and a very old Adenauer were quick to grasp that close relations are crucial for France and Germany and for Europe; much younger Serbian and Croatian politicians should finally see that the same is true for their countries and for the Balkans. There is in my view a profound lack of understanding both in Belgrade and Zagreb of the enormous

gains which a close collaboration between the two countries could bring them in the areas of security, political stability, democratic development, and general prosperity. Indeed, by working together they could exert great influence not only on regional affairs but even on European ones.

Like the reconciliation between post-war France and Germany, the one between post-war Serbia and Croatia should not be guided only by pragmatic concerns or based solely on economic interests. It should have a moral foundation and be turned towards both the past and the future. Is this asking too much? Well, no one should expect a Croatian president to show understanding for the attempts by Croatian Serbs in the early 1990s to secede parts of Croatian territory. But perhaps he could follow de Gaulle's example when he acknowledged the bravery of Germans who had waged war against France and do the same for at least some Serbs who rebelled against Tudjman's repressive régime. The Croatian president could also publicly express understanding for some of the Serbs' motives, especially those rooted in Serbs' truly tragic fate during the Second World under the rule of Croatian fascists.

The Serbian president should also take a leaf out of de Gaulle's book and strive towards similar generous objectivity. Yes, it was a crime to expel the Serbian population during Operation "Storm" by Croatian forces in the summer of 1995 and this indeed should never be forgotten – as president Tadić recently said. But he should also have acknowledged that most Croatian soldiers did not commit any crimes, not a few showed considerable courage and all believed, rightly or wrongly, that they were fighting a just war to liberate occupied parts of their country.

Modern France and Germany have their origins in medieval principalities and kingdoms and so do modern Serbia and Croatia. If de Gaulle thought it relevant to speak, among other things, of wars in the early Middle Ages in which the ancestors of contemporary Frenchmen and Germans had fought together, should the Serbian and Croatian leaders not at least underline the examples of cooperation between these two nations from the more recent past? Strange though it may sound after the terrible events of the 1990s, there was through history, and especially in the nineteenth and twentieth century, much more cooperation than conflict between the Serbs and the Croats – much, much more than between the French and the Germans. To give just one among many examples, numerous distinguished Croatian artists have for long periods of time lived and worked in Belgrade.

I envisage the future of Serbian-Croatian relations as based on stable, enduring institutions and practices: frequent meetings and consultations between governments, regular visits by parliamentary delegations, a permanent body which encourages and supervises close partnership in areas of security and defense, a well-funded chamber which initiates and stimulates trade and economic cooperation, completely open markets for each others' products, common scientific projects and artistic festivals, cooperation among universities, including regular exchange of professors and students and especially in the realms of language, literature and history. And, needless to say, all this with full respect for state sovereignty and the rights of Serbian and Croatian minorities.

And what about de Gaulle's vision of Europe and today's Bosnia and Herzegovina? This may seem a silly or extremely difficult question but is neither.

De Gaulle would most certainly not have been surprised by the creation of new national states in Europe after the end of the Cold War. And while he believed in European cooperation, he was very much opposed to all and any attempts to create supranational

identities or unions. His view that national feeling or indeed nationalism is the most powerful force in politics and history seemed conservative, indeed reactionary, to many in his time, but for better or worse it has largely been proven as correct by subsequent history, and is definitely true today. The only exception, alas, is not some modern or post-modern liberal and enlightened supranational identity but profoundly backward-looking radical Islam which indeed often transgresses the borders of Muslim states and unites Muslims of different nationalities. And let me add that de Gaulle was skeptical about Islam and democracy and about states uniting Muslims and Christians.

Arguably, Belgium is the West European country which today has problems most similar to those of Bosnia. De Gaulle knew Belgium well and predicted that it would ultimately disintegrate into Flemish and Walloon parts and that the latter would join France (rather than become a new state Wallonia). He considered Belgium an artificial association imposed by the British and its unity preserved by outside forces. But he did not publicly advocate the disintegration of Belgium nor did he, needless to say, ever think of changing its borders by military force.

So draw your own conclusions on what would be de Gaulle's views on Bosnia.

*

De Gaulle was a great man and what once used to be called a hero in history. But his attempts to restore French national grandeur had elements of *manie de grandeur* and many of his ideas, plans and proposals are now obsolete – some were anachronistic even in his days. But I think that sometimes even the mistakes of an exceptional statesman can be more inspiring than the successes of small politicians.

Today's European politics are characterized by a lack of vision both for Europe's future and for its global role. This, of course, is a cliché but I am proud to repeat it. However, many say that this is how it should be and that European politicians are right when they are concentrating on immediate problems, on the here and now, rather than on what is remote in space and time. While I disagree, I can see that there are strong arguments for a politics free of any ideology and skeptical towards grand ideas and overambitious plans. What truly worries me is that behind contemporary European pragmatism and intelligent doubt there lies a fear that the future will inevitably bring a decrease in Europe's global relevance so it is better not to think about it. I am no less concerned that European politicians might feel it is better not to have a vision since it always demands struggle, effort, even sacrifices. We Europeans seem to have become worshipers of the easy and comfortable life.

It is sometimes admitted even by de Gaulle's opponents that one of his achievements was that he "deridiculised" France. Do we not need such a cure for Europe now? And I do not mean only the follies of today's leaders. After all, was not European policy towards the wars (and peaces) of Yugoslavia's disintegration in so many ways absurd and pathetic?

During the Cold War, fear of the great military power of the Soviet Bloc was the main reason why Europeans wanted an alliance with the United States. But no such threat exists today and Europe does not need a protector anymore. Indeed, much of the world sees America as the greatest menace to peace. Europe should abandon the American-dominated NATO and free itself in general from the overwhelming influence of the United States. Both are dangerous to European security because they involve Europe directly or indirectly in conflict with many countries in the world. Further, Europe's independence from America is a

necessary prerequisite for it to achieve global moral authority and influence. For as long as it is led and dominated by the only superpower with a gigantic military budget, much of the world will see European global policies as a neo-imperialist conspiracy of old imperial powers.

And imagine what de Gaulle would have to say of the career of Javier Solana. After being an utterly pro-American warmongering Secretary General of NATO, he became in 1999 Europe's High Representative for Foreign Policy and stayed in that job for a decade, maintaining Europe's tight bonds to the United States.

Perhaps a truly independent Europe could help America too, encouraging it to abandon its militarism and so-called "diplomacy backed by force", its obsession with developing new military technologies and its unceasing strengthening and multiplication of intelligence agencies. And maybe such a Europe might tie Britain closer to itself, or assist Russia in developing democratic institutions for the Russian people would have no more reason to fear European democratic initiatives suspecting that they were a part of an American-led plot to make Russia weaker.

The world needs a free and noble Europe, aware of its former glory and greatness, proud of its culture and humanism, ready to accept risks and challenges rather than just be worried about its safety and stability. And can the problems of South-Eastern Europe, incorrectly called the Balkans, ever be truly resolved without such a Europe?

A lecture delivered at the Symposium "Stabilization and Progress in the Western Balkans," September 17-19, 2010, University Basel, Switzerland.

Notes

[1] My views on De Gaulle were influenced by the following books: Fransoa Morijak, De Gol, s francuskog prevela Zorica Hadži-Vidojković, Gutenbergova galaksija, Beograd 1996; C. L. Sulzberger, The Last of the Giants, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1970; Charles de Gaulle, Memoiren der Hoffnung: Die Wiedergeburt, 1958-1962, aus dem Französischen übertragen von Hermann Kusterer, Molden, Wien 1971; André Malraux, Hrastovi koje obaraju..., prevela Alka Škiljan, Naprijed, Zagreb 1971; Jean Lacouture, De Gaulle: The Rebel, 1890-1944, translated from the French by Patrick O'Brian, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1990; Jean Lacouture, De Gaulle: The Ruler, 1945-1970, translated from the French by Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1992.

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