

THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Strategic thinking or misleading hope?

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The launch of the European Political Community (EPC) has taken the Western Balkans aback. Yet the need for political engagement on strategic issues that are not limited to EU accession is more pressing than ever.



Overly marketed, the EPC risks propagating delusive expectations among would-be Member states. Before the next meeting takes place in Chisinau, the Western Balkans need to gain clarity on the EPC's purpose, design and functioning, as well as the role the EU is to play therein.



Rather than turning into one more big forum dedicated to intergovernmental cooperation, the EPC could become a political framework in which alliances are being forged across continental Europe by progressive governments seeking to bolster European integration. Their engagement in policy fields that are neglected by the EU, such as European civic education and youth mobility, could make a difference.

Contents

THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: STRATEGIC THINKING OR MISLEADING HOPE?	5
LOW TIDE ON THE ACCESSION FRONT, GOOD SWELL FOR EXTERNAL DIFFERENTIATION	6
PROMISES AND HURDLES ON THE SURFACE	8
PITFALLS LIE IN DEEP WATERS	9
MAKING YOUNG CITIZENS COUNT!	11
CONCLUSION	13

THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: STRATEGIC THINKING OR MISLEADING HOPE?

The war taking place in Ukraine is imposing new geopolitical realities on the continent. Its massive, cross-cutting repercussions are reinforcing, rather than fracturing, the polycrisis in which the EU has been caught since the late 2000s. Europeans' illusions that hard security challenges can be offset by soft power and market integration alone have been shattered. So has the EU's sense of purpose and the geography of enlargement. All of the regions in Europe, including the Western Balkans, have been affected.¹ Russia's aggression against a close neighbor of the EU, now a candidate for EU accession, has ended the EU's age of innocence.² With this *Zeitenwende* has come a pressing need for bolder strategic thinking.

The proposal for a European Political Community (EPC), put forth by Emmanuel Macron on 9 May 2022 in Strasbourg, has been put forward to raise up to this unprecedented challenge. It builds on Enrico Letta's call to establish a European Confederation,³ and echoes the visionary, albeit stillborn, eponymous project launched by François Mitterrand and Vaclav Havel in 1989-1991. François Mitterrand used to say that geopolitics in Europe will require a "*théorie des ensembles*" [set theory], but its contours have so far failed to materialize.

The current EPC initiative has taken the Western Balkans aback. Its announcement has raised eyebrows, and only Kosovo and Albania have published a non-paper on the topic. Overall, in the region, a wait-and-see attitude prevails, while a more proactive engagement of progressive forces in this area will be key to shaping developments that will matter to Western Balkan societies. Certainly, the

lack of clarity in the EPC proposal does not help societies navigating already turbulent waters, but it opens space for creative thinking. In this sense, gauging the potential benefits of the EPC for the Western Balkans may not be as important as understanding what the EPC is, what it should be and what it could achieve. Rather than taking it for granted, progressive forces in the Western Balkans should problematize it and claim ownership over the process. This has not been the case so far.

The first meeting of the EPC took place in Prague on 6 October 2022, with 44 participating states and no participation from civil society. Notwithstanding, the State representatives who attended the meeting identified a list of seven challenges that Europe's resilience and strategic autonomy reportedly hinge on: energy security, critical infrastructures, cybersecurity, youth, migration, regional cooperation in the Caucasus and Black Sea area, and resilience funding. The Prague meeting created space for frank discussions on the highest level, e.g., on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh or the dispute between Belgrade and Prishtina, but it concluded without many concrete achievements and no joint conclusions.⁴

Overly marketed in the past months, the EPC meeting has raised a series of questions about its purpose, design, and functioning, which the participating states will have to address before the next conference takes place in Chisinau, in the first semester of 2023. What is the exact problem the EPC intends to solve? What kind of Community, if any, does it seek to establish, and on which basis? How does the EPC intersect with accession policy in general, and the EU's plans to "further advance the gradual integration" between the European Union and the Western Balkans in particular? What can progressive forces expect from it?

¹ Savoye V., Vračić, A. & I. Armakolas (eds.). 2022. The Russian invasion of Ukraine: What are the consequences for Southeast Europe? Political Trends & Dynamics. Briefing Vol. 1/2022

² Lehne, S. 2020. How the EU can survive in a geopolitical age. Carnegie Europe.

³ Letta, E. 25 April 2022. A European Confederation: a common political platform for peace. The Progressive Post.

⁴ Parkes, R. & M. Nič. 26.10.2022. Analysis of the European Political Community Misses the Point. *DGAP Online Commentary*. Koziot A. & L. Maslanka. European Political Community Meets for the First Time. PISM spotlight 128/22.

While acknowledging the need for developing a strategic reflection on issues relevant to the whole continent, this article points to the limitations underpinning the initiative in its current form. It argues that the EPC lacks strategic clarity and therefore risks reinforcing existing vulnerabilities, especially in the Western Balkans. To be useful, the EPC should refrain from raising delusive expectations in countries aspiring to join the EU. It should resist the drive to accentuate intergovernmental dynamics in European politics and their emphasis on security, and instead focus on squaring the deepening vs. widening circle of European integration and forging strong pro-European alliances

between progressive forces on the continent. These alliances will be the strategic factor around which the continent can, ultimately, be structured politically. Rather than being one more big forum for cooperation among vastly different countries, the EPC should strive to become a political bridgehead of the European project, so that a new generation of European citizens sharing the same federalist, democratic culture grows up within it.

LOW TIDE ON THE ACCESSION FRONT, GOOD SWELL FOR EXTERNAL DIFFERENTIATION

The idea of the EPC, launched by Emmanuel Macron without much prior consultation, follows up on the Versailles Declaration of March 2022, in which the EU Heads of State and Governments pledged to “further strengthen our bonds and deepen our partnership to support Ukraine in pursuing its European path.”⁵ But rather than building on the accession policy *stricto sensu*, the EPC established itself on a higher ground with the purpose of “organizing Europe from a political perspective and with a broader scope than that of the European Union.”⁶ This higher level of action, which the EPC prescribes, is a troubling reflection of a flawed, moribund accession policy, the duration of which “does not today offer the necessary political framework to respond to the urgent historical and geopolitical needs” arising from the war.⁷

Lengthiness and unpredictability have indeed undermined accession policy for two decades now, and understandably, the application of the EU-Western Balkan accession template to the new Eastern European candidate countries raised concerns that frustrations might now spread beyond the Western Balkans.⁸ It is France and the member states’ own

doubts about accession policy, its effectiveness, credibility, and desirability, that urged them to set up “a new space” for cooperation, where political impetus would be intensified and a “sense of community” regained.⁹ Interestingly, the genesis of the EPC is somewhat reminiscent of that of the Berlin Process in 2014, a German-led intergovernmental initiative aimed at fostering “additional real progress.”¹⁰ Would the Berlin Process – and for that matter the EPC – have been launched if accession policy, in its current form, had not proven dysfunctional?

This question points to the relationship between the EPC and accession policy. The European Confederation proposed by Mitterrand in 1989 also failed because countries in Central Europe perceived it as alternative to membership in the European Community.¹¹ To avoid this pitfall, the initiators of the EPC have all stressed insistently and on every occasion that the initiative is no substitute for accession. On the contrary, it shall contribute to

⁵ Conclusions of the informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government gathering in Versailles. 11 March 2022.

⁶ Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe. 9 May 2022.

⁷ French non-paper on the European political community. n.d.

⁸ Brändle M. 27 June 2022. The Western Balkans’ warning sign to Ukraine. *International Politics and Society*.

⁹ Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe. 9 May 2022.

¹⁰ Marciacq, F. 2017. *The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty*. Sarajevo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

¹¹ Musitelli J. 2011. *François Mitterrand : Architecte de la Grande Europe : le projet de Confédération européenne (1989-1991)*. *Revue internationale et stratégique*. 2011/2, no. 82, pp. 18-28 ; Dumas R. Un projet mort-né : la Confédération européenne. In: *Politique étrangère*, n°3 - 2001 – 66th year. pp. 687-703.

“anchoring the Western Balkans in Europe”¹² and to strengthening their “links with EU member states prior to accession.”¹³ The EPC framework, in that sense, shall be complementary to the accession policy – just like the Berlin Process. It shall pave the way for more extensive political cooperation, “participation in certain EU policies, including, where appropriate, through gradual integration into the EU internal market.”¹⁴

These objectives are laudable.¹⁵ They resonate with the new trajectory set by the revised Accession Methodology adopted by the Council in March 2020, in particular its call for stronger political steering and closer integration steps (phasing-in).¹⁶ They also resonate with proposals coming from the Western Balkans, which outline how the New Methodology could be best implemented, e.g. through a staged accession model¹⁷ and/or integration into the EU internal market.¹⁸ While the EPC does not intend to replace accession policy, its objectives and scope of action do overlap with it. With the EPC and these other initiatives, it is the path to EU membership and very notion of (all-in/all-out) accession that are mutating. Their mushrooming today is indicative of the decay of EU accession policy as we know it.

Understandably, full membership in the EU will remain an important goal. But these initiatives signal that full membership for aspiring countries in the Western Balkans has lost much of its clout. The accession process barely shines as a guiding star anymore. Unless the Copenhagen criteria are revised, it can only be a long-term, uncertain goal, which the member states themselves will continue to steer and slow down for questionable and nationalistic reasons. The Copenhagen dogma and the intergovernmental logic that has prevailed since the Lisbon Treaty make shortcuts to full membership quite difficult. So, the EPC does offer a space in-between, where relations between the EU and some of its member states on the one hand and non-EU states on the other can be intensified. But in so doing, the strategic difference between accession policy and the EPC is dwindling – for better or for worse.

¹² Chopin T., Macek M. & Maillard S. 18 May 2022. *The European political community. New connection to the European Union*. Paris: Institut Jacques Delors.

¹³ French non-paper on the European political community. n.d.

¹⁴ French non-paper on the European political community. n.d.

¹⁵ Lazarević, M. 20 May 2022. “Communauté Politique Européenne” : How can a 30-year-old idea help European integration? CEP Blog.

¹⁶ European Commission. 5 February 2020. Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans.

¹⁷ Emerson M. Lazarević, M., Blockmans S. & S. Subotić. 2021. A Template for Staged Accession to the EU. European Policy Centre (CEP) and Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS).

¹⁸ ESI Report. 13 July 2022. The Balkan turtle race – A warning for Ukraine.

PROMISES AND HURDLES ON THE SURFACE

A challenge for the EPC will be to demonstrate the value-added of pan-European cooperation in the seven issue areas identified in Prague, while acknowledging that the participating states, in the Western Balkans and elsewhere, have considerably varying interests, priorities, and political agendas. To be meaningful, the EPC will need to become something more than a mere forum used by governments to arrange a series of bilateral meetings and take family photos.¹⁹ The first EPC meeting is a very modest step in this direction.

In principle, the ambition of the EPC is set on the continental level. The goals of the EPC extend to strengthening “the political, economic, cultural and security links” *on the continent*; “contributing together to the security, stability and prosperity of our continent”; and thus setting up the first “non-specialized European forum bringing together all the members of the European family on an equal footing and in a spirit of unity of our continent.”²⁰ But in practice, this noble ambition raises questions related to the criteria for participation in the EPC. If the EPC strives to become more than a biannual occasion to hold bilateral meetings, what is the connection bringing together its participants and giving the EPC some form of identity/agency? The EU, Council of Europe, and OSCE are all built on certain principles; the G7 and G20 on economic weight, etc.

The first meeting of 6 October, with its 44 participating states and without any final declaration, leaves this question open. French President Macron’s initial plan to only convene “democratic European nations that subscribe to our shared core values”²¹ has been dropped, as authoritarian leaders, e.g., from Azerbaijan or Turkey, joined the EPC family meeting. The Macronian vision of a value-based EPC has been buried, and it was Belgian President Charles Michel’s vision of a “geopolitical community that extends from Reykjavik to Baku or Yerevan, from Oslo to Ankara”²² that prevailed in Prague on 6 October.

This all-inclusive, value-lite, and wannabe geopolitical EPC comes at a cost. The EPC established in Prague is not made up of like-minded states and it is therefore difficult to read the EPC’s underlying geostrategic purpose. Serbia has been pursuing a foreign policy that remains friendly towards Moscow, despite the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It is an observer of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Armenia also had little choice but to join the CSTO at its establishment in 2002 and the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014. As for Turkey, it has followed its own foreign policy course for years now, much to the EU’s despair, and seizes any opportunity to bolster its emerging power diplomacy, especially ahead of the 2023 Presidential elections. Progressive forces from the Western Balkans are therefore entitled to doubt that the EPC will be used to strengthen European democratic principles in their country, while autocratic governments vying for influence will be more readily tempted to engage.

Speaking of a geopolitical community of European states bound by a certain kind of like-mindedness, today, might be premature at best. It creates expectations about a community of interest that is frankly deceptive, while opening avenues for nationalistic or autocratic states to instrumentalize the initiative for their own national purposes. To avoid the EPC becoming an intergovernmental tournament with leaders vying for relative influence and for reducing their country’s own vulnerability at the expenses of others, it is imperative, in the months to come, to clarify and define what the EPC is, whether it can have more substance than a forum, and what its participating states shall have in common. For the Western Balkans, this clarification is essential to understand what to expect from the EPC, how much diplomatic capital to invest in it, and how it relates to accession policy.

¹⁹ Mayer F. Et al. September 2022. Enlarging and deepening: giving substance to the European Political Community. *Bruegel Policy Brief*.

²⁰ French non-paper on the European political community. n.d.

²¹ Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe. 9 May 2022.

²² Speech by President Charles Michel at the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee. 18 May 2022.

PITFALLS LIE IN DEEP WATERS

The type of political structuring advanced by the EPC for the continent should draw the attention of progressive forces in the Western Balkans and elsewhere. Current plans provide that the EPC will be granted a light legal structure, “while respecting the decision-making autonomy of the European Union and of each of the States that make up this Community.”²³ The Prague meeting did make a point of establishing the EPC on a strongly intergovernmental basis. There was no EU flag, and the Presidents of the European Commission and European Council did not take the lead in any matter. The EU in its Community dimension was not to be seen. For those countries of the Western Balkans driven by the spirit and letter of the EU accession policy, this display of sheer intergovernmentalism might have come as a surprise. Their accession process has already been strained by rising intergovernmentalism in the EU, and the EPC may expose them to even more national interests and blockages imposed on them. In its current form, the EPC does not bode well for Community-minded countries from the Western Balkans.

Fortunately or not, eventual access to EU funds will be key if the EPC’s ambition is to wield some sort of influence. This points to the role the EU and its member states will eventually play in the EPC. While formally respecting the principle of sovereign equality, the EPC will find it hard to keep the EU at bay. EPC activities will most probably have to be funded from the EU budget, at least partially; conditions will be set out, in terms of good governance, democratic participation etc., and implementation will have to be monitored. An ambitious EPC will have to invite the EU as Community of value and supranational administration to act as *primus inter pares* or gravity center. For the Western Balkans, this might sound falsely reassuring. The EU has played this role for two decades now, with mixed results on the ground and little credibility as far as EU accession is concerned. It also played a similar role in the East, through the Eastern partnership, with limited success. The EU’s temptation to establish itself within the EPC as normative core seeking to organize its relationship with countries at its periphery carries the massive risk of repeating previous failures at a broader continental scale.

The vulnerabilities the EPC creates are different, but they are known. In a predominantly intergovernmental process, little room is left to societal actors and civil society organizations. How then can the EPC achieve its goal of fostering a sense of common European belonging when governmental elites (36 men and 8 women in Prague) have control over the whole initiative? Apparently, the EPC did not draw from lessons of flawed civil society participation. It should engage with citizens from the whole continent and could thereby soften its core-periphery bias.

Such political structuring could also go hand in hand with a shift towards more transactionalism (securing Western Balkans leaders’ loyalty at the periphery), more instrumentalism (monetizing their support or pushing for controversial deals), and more pragmatism. This shift could arguably reinforce the EU’s geopolitical clout, but it would be at odds with the ethical foundations on which the EU has been built and contradict the ideals held by most progressive forces in Europe.

It is, finally, a risky bet. The formalization of core-periphery relations within the EPC, which could emerge if the EU and its member states take over the role of *primus inter pares*, will require the EU core to act as clearly identifiable core, since narratives legitimizing hierarchies would otherwise be exposed to internal contestation and external influences. In the EU, the lack of cohesion among members states on critical issues does not augur well for the stability of the system. Dissensions will be cracks into which geopolitical rivals will rush.

CAN A NEW COURSE BE SET?

These hurdles on the surface and pitfalls in deep waters should not lead to the conclusion that the EU needs to throw out the EPC baby with the bathwater. The swell of external differentiation, which is building up with the various initiatives (EPC, staged accession etc.), creates room on the pan-European level for enlarging the European construction while contributing to its deepening. But sailing in heavy geopolitical weather will require to set a course, and not merely create a framework hallowing the EU’s intergovernmental *primus inter pares* status. What could this course be?

²³ French non-paper on the European political community. n.d.

Over the last twenty years, the Union has deepened significantly, especially in the economic and monetary areas, as well as environment, defense, health, etc. This deepening has been fueled by the crises that the EU has overcome, and has been accompanied by successive enlargements in 2004, 2007, and 2013. But this deepening of the Union has not been uniform. It has contributed to the consolidation of the Europe of the markets (with increasingly advanced supranational elements) and of the Europe of the regulators (with a continuous expansion of the *acquis*). This emphasis on the deepening of these two Europes, and the trust placed in the neo-functional approach (what the EU does is more important than what it is), has long neglected the *political* vocation of European integration.

The reaction to the focus on market and regulations has led to a growing disaffection of European citizens with the European construction process, quite predictably in light of the work of John Dewey²⁴ or Jürgen Habermas,²⁵. It has also led to a rise in populism, contestation of the role of experts, a resurgence of nationalism, and, more generally, a crisis of European social democracies. Vaclav Havel, in a historic speech to the European Parliament in 2000, shared his fear that “the spiritual, historic, political and civilizing aspects of Europe might be hijacked by questions of a technical, economic, financial or administrative nature which risked upsetting the public.”²⁶

This integration in the areas of markets and the *acquis* has brought much to Europe, but the real deepening, today more than in 1989, lies in these integration logics aiming to endow Europe with a political soul and Europeans with an active awareness of their current or future EU citizenship. This is where Europe has made the least progress, and this is the course the EU could set for the EPC: helping a properly European political order emerge in Europe, animated by a supranational conception of European democracy, and inhabited by European citizens who see themselves first and foremost as Europeans. Nurturing a sense of European belonging that unites current and future citizens of the EU is the prolongation of the European construction in its noblest form, and is a geostrategic investment too.

²⁴ See the debate between Lippmann and Dewey a century ago. It predicted that the Fabric of Consent by liberal elites making informed decisions without much participation of the public would eventually backfire and nourish populism. Dewey J. 1927. *Public and its problems*. New York, H. Holt; Dewey J. 1916. *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York : Macmillan.

²⁵ See Habermas’ argument about the erosion of democratic legitimacy in Europe as a result of globalisation and over-reliance on market integration. Habermas J. 2000. *Après l’État-nation*. Paris : Fayard.

²⁶ Address by Mr. Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, at the European Parliament. 16 February 2000.

MAKING YOUNG CITIZENS COUNT!

To do this, first, it would be important to envision the EPC as a contribution to the deepening of the construction of Europe in a key area in which the EU is struggling: the development of a European *demos*. The EPC must serve as a sort of cradle for a new generation of European citizens, who should be brought up as such through practical projects in the EU, the Western Balkans, and beyond. European citizenship education, which has been pushed to the bottom of the EU's priorities, should be the cornerstone of the EPC and its Archimedean lever towards the creation of a citizens' Europe.

The EPC in its current form offers opportunities to engage in this direction. It identifies youth as one of its priorities – a topic that EU accession process tends to neglect. Progressive forces in the Western Balkans could use it to advance an ambitious agenda against the peripheralization of their societies and consolidation of autocratic, ethno-nationalist governments. Kosovo's non-paper already identified youth and education as a key priority in its approach to the EPC. But progressive forces from the Western Balkans could envision the topic as a bridgehead for the rejuvenation of Europeanism and European federalism as ideology. The EPC, which remains more flexible at this point, offers more room for maneuvering than the EU, which maintains a strong dichotomy between members and non-members.

Progressive forces from the Western Balkans could come to see the EPC as a framework in which alliances can be crafted with at least some participating states from the EU and the region. In this framework, they could together engage in federalizing their educational systems to some degree. The countries rallying behind this ideal would accept that the teaching of democratic citizenship, of European history, culture, ethics, and languages should become an integral part of their national educational program. This is currently not the case in the EU or the Western Balkans. For example, in 11 member states, learning a second language at secondary level is not compulsory.²⁷ Similarly, there are wide differences in citizenship education within the EU,²⁸ and a strong prevalence of strictly national conceptions of citizenship, while the topic is fully neglected in the Western Balkans for want of membership. European ethics, culture, and history, which are essential to the emergence of

a citizen's conscience, are not given much importance compared to scientific and technological education. The ambition of those progressive countries willing to engage on this topic within the EPC could therefore be to support schools (and teachers, who will have to be trained accordingly) in their mission to train future European citizens. To do this, national prerogatives would have to be challenged. This would be more easily done in an EPC context, on the mini-lateral level, than in the EU or by the EU (due to major internal disagreements among the member states). Cooperation in the field could build on the bases laid down by the Council of Europe (Charter on Education for Citizenship of 2010) or the EU (European Pillar of Social Rights of 2017) and be backed by new arrangements adopted in the EPC framework.

A gradual federalization of education policy would require convergence on curricula, but also, and above all, progress in constitutionalizing European democracy. This is the second objective which progressive forces from the Western Balkans could pursue within the EPC, even though most participating states might prefer backing the idea of a geopolitical, intergovernmental forum driven by interests alone. The EU and the Council of Europe offer a formidable starting point, with their respective commitments to the promotion of the rule of law and the respect of fundamental rights (Article 7, charters, and conventions, etc.). Legally binding mechanisms exist in these areas, which the European Courts implement extensively, and some member states of the EU and countries from the Western Balkans do not hide their willingness to extend them. But the consolidation of European democracy is not limited to the promotion of the rule of law and the respect of fundamental rights. It requires a constitutionalizing of democratic principles at the European supranational level, an extension of the jurisdiction of the courts in this field, the transnationalisation of European election, and the subordination of participating states to higher constitutional principles. This constitutionalization of European democracy (for which the primary law of the EU does not provide a definition) would endow European citizens with new rights and duties, but above all, it would contribute to the emergence of European democratic culture, which should be relayed by the school systems in the EPC members that choose to engage the most.

²⁷ European Commission. 2017. Eurydice report: Foreign languages at school in Europe.

²⁸ European Commission. 2017. Eurydice Report: Citizenship education at school in Europe.

To build this new generation of Europeans, it would be important to render the experience of European citizenship education tangible, by putting forward mobility as a political program at an age when the identities of the citizens are forged, i.e., before 18. Exchange programs within the EPC could allow children and teenagers to experience European mobility in a systematized, recurrent, and increasingly profound way. These programs exist today in the form of voluntary programmes (Erasmus +, Franco-German Youth Office, etc.), while others target university students only, whose identities, in most parts, are already formed. Educational stays abroad should become part of pupils' and teenagers' most basic curriculum.

The Western Balkans have experience in this area, with their intra-regional *Super School* program, run by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office. The programme could be extended within the EPC on a pan-European level. Between the ages of 10 and 18, all students should be encouraged, each year, to live for a few days, then a few weeks and eventually a few months in a country of the EPC other than their own. This initiating experience, with the resulting exchanges and friendships, would profoundly mark the identity of new generations and broaden their horizon as current and future EU citizens. The creation by some members of the EPC of a mini-lateral pan-European civic or military service, compulsory or as an alternative to the national service, would make it possible to further strengthen the mobility of young people and to foster this sense of loyalty, which is necessary at a time of debate on matters of strategic autonomy.

CONCLUSION

In the coming half-year, a second meeting of the EPC will be organised in Chisinau. The need to clarify the purpose, design, and functioning of this new initiative will grow accordingly. While the participating states might be tempted to keep the predominantly intergovernmental format that characterised the summit in Prague, the EPC's ability to deliver as an initiative will hinge on the role the EU should play therein. But replicating within the EPC, i.e. on a larger scale, what the EU has previously sought to achieve in relation to its neighbourhoods will arguably nourish misplaced hopes. Placing the EU in the centre for the EPC, as a core entrusted with the transformation of a

periphery, has only yielded very limited results so far. Rather than choosing between an intergovernmental format that expands further the might of national states in European politics on the one hand, and an EU-centric format that posits, by definition, the EU as wiser polity in relation to its peripheries on the other, the EPC could be a framework in which new alliances are being forged, and a new core can emerge in the European project, that is not reducible to EU membership - a core in which younger generations in some EU and non-states would choose to grow as European citizens.

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The launch of the EPC sheds light on the very limitations of the EU accession policy. Unless the Copenhagen criteria are revised, the European perspectives of the Western Balkans will remain distant, at best, and contingent on Member states' variegated interests. For the EU to regain credibility in the Western Balkans, the accession policy will need to be rejuvenated. The EPC contributes to this transformation of European integration processes by offering a more political mode of engagement on strategic issues.



The intergovernmental nature of the EPC is both a strength and a weakness. It could create room for intensified coordination among participating states on issues for which more political engagement is needed, including accession to the EU. But this intergovernmentalism, which further empowers national states, should build on a common political vision of European integration. Otherwise, the EPC runs the risk of further fragmenting the European project. The Western Balkans should advocate the inclusion of civil society actors in the work of the EPC to make sure that the ideals of European integration are taken into account in participating states' deliberations.



Progressive actors in Europe should join forces within the EPC and engage in deepening the construction of Europe in a key area in which the EU is struggling: the development of a European demos. The EPC offers a framework in which these forces can establish a sort of cradle for a new generation of European citizens, who should be brought up as such through practical projects. European citizenship education, which has been pushed to the bottom of the EU's priorities, should be the cornerstone of progressive forces' engagement within the EPC and its Archimedean lever towards the creation of a citizens' Europe.

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