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# The beginning of the European Political Community

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# Executive summary

The European Political Community (EPoC) idea was floated by President Macron back in May to encourage dialogue and cooperation among like-minded EU and non-EU countries on matters of common interest. It will be formally launched in early October in the margins of the next informal European Council, organised by the Czech EU Presidency. With the meeting just around the corner, the EU is under growing pressure to give some substance to Macron's bold initiative. For the EPoC to set in motion a positive dynamic for the Union in the unfolding *Zeitenwende*, participating governments and leaders must take their preparations for the summit seriously.

More practically, Prague should have bilateral consultations with the different invitees and collect ideas about a few topics for exchange at the summit. The agenda of this initial EPoC meeting should only include a limited number of substantive issues that reflect common concerns in the new geopolitical context transformed by Russia's war in Ukraine.

To be sure, the details of the EPoC's operational and governing structure will depend on the level of ambition that the initial participants will choose for the initiative. As they mull over the purpose and added value of the EPoC to international diplomacy, they should consider that establishing a community for dialogue and coordination among partners who might have diverging views and interests but also share security and economic concerns is in itself a valuable rationale for the initiative.

Yet, the EPoC should certainly aspire to become more than 'simply' a geopolitical forum for high-level dialogue. Current and potential new members in the future should aim to work in small or broad formations to align positions, devise initiatives and implement projects in response to challenges that demand joint international action, like the energy crisis, the looming

global recession and growing inequality, climate change, shifting demographics, and destabilising technological trends.

To be able to make the most of the initiative, EU leaders should not turn geography or democratic credentials into exclusion criteria for participants. If the EPoC is framed in terms of geopolitical interests in a new security context, all the countries who are expected to join, as well as others, are important allies for the EU – irrespective of whether they are strictly 'European' or democratic by whatever standards. A more legitimate and effective approach would be for the EU to rhetorically decouple its efforts to contain authoritarian Russia and rethink Europe's role in the new global order from its desire to defend democracy and serve justice. Otherwise, the EU risks looking hypocritical.

As European leaders reflect on the goal for the EPoC, they should not use the initiative as an excuse not to deal with internal EU reform or deliver on enlargement. Mustering the courage to embark on a European Convention that might lead to Treaty change would not only help the cause of the EU-hopeful countries – especially if it deals with the Union's absorption capacity, unanimity principle and lack of democratic *acquis* – it would also strengthen the credibility of the EU's efforts to encourage political coordination beyond its borders.

Finally, while the EPoC can benefit its aspiring neighbours via socialization, building familiarity and mutual trust, and involvement in projects that might come about, the EU should keep enlargement-related issues separate. With the caveat that, of course, nothing stops the Balkan countries, together with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, from using their leverage in the EPoC format to negotiate in the margins of this and future EPoC meetings their progress in the accession process.

# A new bold idea is born

French President Emmanuel Macron always seems to have an avant-garde proposal up his sleeve for dealing with big institutional challenges in the EU. For example, in 2017, in response to the long-standing crisis of EU democratic legitimacy, he advanced the idea of holding “democratic conventions”<sup>1</sup> across the member states to identify European citizens’ priorities, concerns and proposals for the Union’s future. In 2019, he sought to ‘rescue’ the lethargic EU enlargement policy towards the Balkans with a “renewed approach” to the accession methodology.<sup>2</sup> More recently, in May this year, as the war in Ukraine was starting to test Western unity, he suggested creating a platform for coordination among European countries, now coined the European Political Community (EPoC).<sup>3</sup>

All these initiatives were half-baked and ruffled some feathers. But that is not necessarily a bad thing. Being a transformational leader, especially in the current age of disruption and uncertainty, means that decision-making must sometimes be quick rather than perfect. In this sense, showing initiative tops sitting on the side-lines, throwing one’s hands up or letting others decide for you. After all, Macron’s detail-light idea of democratic conventions ‘fathered’ the European Citizens’ Consultations process (2018) and the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-22).<sup>4</sup> Likewise, his under-developed proposal to reform enlargement policy inspired the European Commission’s 2020 new

approach. In both cases, the EU moved forward thanks to Macron’s initiative. Will he strike again with this latest EPoC idea? Can it set into motion a positive dynamic for the EU in the unfolding *Zeitenwende*?

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## Can the EPoC set into motion a positive dynamic for the EU in the unfolding *Zeitenwende*?

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The proposal certainly has not gone unnoticed. European Council President Charles Michel picked it up at the June Council summit, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen endorsed it in her latest State of the Union address.<sup>6</sup> The Czech EU Presidency is now planning to launch the EPoC at the informal European leaders’ summit this October in Prague. And while the concept is still too vague to foretell the EPoC’s merits, the lack of specifics is also an invitation to mould the initiative in Europe’s interest. How can this bold idea become the right initiative for the EU in this new era? Three considerations about the EPoC’s purpose, the Union’s internal problems and the initiative’s link with enlargement policy stand out.

# Value-based versus interest-based

EU leaders should carefully weigh up if it is worth insisting that the EPoC should be a forum for European democratic nations only. If geography is an exclusion criterion, it becomes debatable whether countries like Israel, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan should make the cut. In a similar vein, if the ratings of various democratic indices offer any guidance, the participation of almost half of the rumoured invitees<sup>7</sup> (including Balkan neighbours and some member states) can raise eyebrows. The fuzzy geographic boundary between Europe and Asia, as well as the blurry distinction between democracies and non-democracies risk making the EU look hypocritical.

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**The EU should rhetorically decouple its efforts to contain authoritarian Russia or rethink Europe’s role in the new global order from its desire to defend democracy and serve justice.**

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A more honest – and therefore more legitimate and effective – approach would be for the EU to rhetorically decouple its efforts to contain authoritarian Russia or rethink Europe’s role in the new global order from its desire to defend democracy and serve justice. If the EPoC is framed in terms of geopolitical interests in a novel security context, all the countries which are expected to join the initiative (as well as others) are important allies for the EU, irrespective of whether they are strictly ‘European’ or democratic by whatever standards. It would be counterproductive to set up an ‘anti-Putin club’ – if that was the intention

– by pretending that the members all have similar characteristics which, in fact, they lack.

The EPoC should not just be an anti-Putin club. The EU should be prescient about how its present decisions to restore peace on the continent will affect its position vis-à-vis Russia (and not Putin) in the long term. Will isolation still be the best strategy in the future? Should the EU expand the scope of its geopolitical partnerships *against* someone (i.e., Putin) or *in support of* something (e.g., furthering common interests and/or goals)? The potential EPoC members are like-minded with regard to a host of other key issues that go beyond high-minded values and an aversion to Putin. Thus, establishing a community for dialogue and coordination among partners with certain joint economic and security interests stands out as a more valuable rationale.

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### **Should the EU expand the scope of its geopolitical partnerships *against* someone (i.e., Putin) or *in support of* something (e.g., furthering common interests and/or goals)?**

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There is no shortage of topics in the new era on which exchanges in a multilateral forum could focus. From the energy crisis to the “long and ugly global recession in 2022 and 2023”<sup>8</sup> and the looming climate emergency, the leaders would have a wide range of common and serious concerns to discuss. Not all countries see eye to eye on these issues and attempting to reconcile their different and opposing positions would be futile. However, allowing such a heterogenous group to sit down and discuss their joint challenges could make constructive outcomes more probable.

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### **Allowing such a heterogenous group to sit down and discuss their joint challenges could make constructive outcomes more probable.**

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A result of such exchanges could be the formation of coalitions of willing and interested parties taking forward specific initiatives. Consequently, the EPoC would become more than ‘simply’ a geopolitical forum for high-level dialogue. Either way, the EPoC should begin from the smallest common denominator – if that is all that is possible at present – and look into building a more substantial purpose from that (e.g., coordinating positions and implementing common projects in response to contemporary issues of concern). In the process, it should also be careful not to duplicate efforts undertaken by similar initiatives (e.g., the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe). The way in which the EPoC can

add value to international diplomacy should be an item on the agenda of the upcoming Prague summit.

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### **Less is more in substantive terms at this stage, especially since the summit will also have to find time to discuss how the EPoC will run its affairs thereafter.**

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For its first meeting in October, given that the initiative is still missing an organisational structure – no matter how loose – it should be up to the hosting Czech Presidency to identify a few substantial points for discussion. To that end, Prague should probably have bilateral consultations with the different invitees and collect ideas about the topics closest to the participants’ hearts. Based on this input, the organisers should select a few issues which are either common to most or representative of several of the different interests present – or both. While there are plenty of important subjects that could be discussed (all together or in clusters, based on interest), the agenda of the initial meeting should not be overloaded. Less is more in substantive terms at this stage, especially since the summit will also have to find time to discuss how the EPoC will run its affairs thereafter.

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### **To ensure the sustainability of the EPoC, at least a lean organisational framework should be put in place during the Prague summit.**

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Will the organisers of the next meeting be chosen from among the EPoC members every time they assemble, ensuring that everyone gets their turn? Or will a more predictable system be put in place to know in advance what will happen and when? How loose or fixed will the EPoC’s organisational structure be? Will it have a (rotating) secretariat and presidency? Or will participants choose a more flexible approach? Much will depend on the level of ambition that the initial participants will choose for the initiative.

However, to ensure the sustainability of the EPoC, at least a lean organisational framework should be put in place during the Prague summit. Other countries should also be invited to join in the future (e.g., states from Africa and Latin America, and India), and relevant organisations (e.g., the International Monetary Fund, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) should at least be asked to contribute at future meetings, depending on the agenda items. Along with a limited number of issues of substance, the agenda of the summit in Prague should include items related to the organisation and mandate of the EPoC.

# Political community-building starts at home

If the EPoC is part of a conscious and much-needed effort to rethink the EU's foreign policy in a new geopolitical context resulting from Russia's war in Ukraine<sup>9</sup>, then European leaders should remember that "foreign policy begins at home".<sup>10</sup> Can the EU inspire others to buy into its global community-building project when its own Union of 27 member states often struggles to agree on joint action? The cracks in European cooperation that have surfaced more recently with regards to the sanctions against Russia or the energy crisis are only the latest in a long series of divisions that have plagued the EU in the poly-crisis of yesteryear (i.e., the eurozone, migration, COVID-19). From this perspective, the Union's experience suggests that similar frictions will also beset the EPoC.

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## European leaders should remember that "foreign policy begins at home"

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Given the diversity of the participating countries and their multitude of interests, the EPoC's main ambition should not be decision-making. Offering a platform for leaders to exchange (diverging) views, learn about each other's reasonings, and possibly coordinate positions is already a worthwhile – and more realistic – goal for the EPoC. But if it does manage to create synergies among its members, whether in small or broad formations, to align positions, devise initiatives and implement projects in reaction to common problems that require joint international action (e.g., energy sustainability, global recession and inequality, climate change, shifting demographics, destabilising technological trends), then the wider world would become a better place.

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## Why would a political community be possible outside the framework of the EU when it has proven to be a pipedream within?

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And why would a political community be possible outside the framework of the EU when it has proven to be a pipedream within? The further pooling of sovereignty among member states continues to sit uncomfortably with most European governments, even when deepening political integration emerges as the obvious coping mechanism in the age of permacrisis.<sup>11</sup> Take the member states' reactions to the final report of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which calls for fundamental EU reform,

including potential Treaty change. The European Parliament and Commission are already on board for a Convention, with plans to discuss major policy innovations and more effective governance structures for the EU at this watershed moment.<sup>12</sup> But some member states still hesitate.

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## The EU's efforts to foster political coordination across Europe via the EPoC would become a more credible endeavour if the Union can prove that it masters such coordination internally.

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If the national governments were to muster the will and courage to engage in an ambitious EU political reform process (e.g., pooling sovereignty on foreign policy and defence), they would demonstrate trust in the potential of political cooperation. The EU's efforts to foster political coordination across Europe via the EPoC would become a more credible endeavour if the Union can prove that it masters such coordination internally.

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## Lofty talk about wide-reaching democratic communities should not divert the EU's attention from the urgent task of putting its own 'house' in order and abandoning the politics of double standards.

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Finally, the EPoC cannot claim to bring together "friends in every single democratic nation on this globe"<sup>13</sup> any more than the EU can still assert itself as a Union of liberal democracies.<sup>14</sup> As several member states grapple with the dangers and temptations of strongman rule, the EU is short on effective responses. Even the Union's interpretation and implementation of its sacred democratic values have started to bend to its own or its members' interests. Examples of EU policies where utilitarianism has trumped democracy range from migration and enlargement to climate and energy.<sup>15</sup> Such criticism does not only beg for rhetorical modesty in how the EU speaks and relates to the rest of the world. It also serves as a stark reminder that any lofty talk about wide-reaching democratic communities should not divert the EU's attention from the urgent task of putting its own 'house' in order and abandoning the politics of double standards.

# The unresolved but separate EU enlargement business

The EPoC should also not become an excuse for the EU not to deliver on its enlargement promise to the Balkan countries and the new eastern candidates. Macron's elusive proposal has fed suspicion that it is a stalling tactic or even a permanent alternative to EU membership. European leaders are keen to emphasise that the EPoC is not a second-class ticket to EU entry, but their reassurances ring hollow to many aspirants.<sup>16</sup>

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Indeed, the process of bringing aspiring countries into the Union's fold takes time and does not always deliver the expected results. As such, the EPoC could provide the space for the Union to constructively engage the candidates (alongside other countries) in discussions or even projects of common interest while the latter wait and labour on their respective accession paths. This strategy would strengthen the EU's political space and benefit its neighbours (via e.g., socialisation, building familiarity and mutual trust, and boosting engagement – depending on what is initiated in the EPoC context). This should be the aim of the EPoC vis-à-vis the enlargement countries. This also means that European governments should resist the temptation to offset any familiar delays in the accession process with shows of progress under the EPoC format. Doing so would hurt our EU-hopeful neighbours but, in the long run, would likely hurt the Union more.

The EPoC would not be the first intergovernmental cooperation that European governments initiate to try to revitalise ties with prospective members. The Berlin Process for the Balkan countries, for example, was intended to serve a similar purpose, but failed. Of course, 24 February brought about a new reality in which previously unthinkable developments have become possible. But while remaining hopeful for the future, thinking that no amount of parallel, diplomatic endeavours will ever fix enlargement is also reasonable.

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**Doing away with the unanimity requirement on enlargement could help if the EU was up for reform.**

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The real problem with enlargement policy is the member states' waning commitment to seeing new countries join the Union.<sup>17</sup> Getting EU governments to stick to the agreed standards and procedures once the aspirants have met the set conditions is arguably the first step towards completing enlargement. In that respect, doing away with the unanimity requirement on enlargement could help if the EU was up for reform.

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**A Convention should be used to discuss equipping the EU with a democratic *acquis*.**

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Another priority is finding solutions to the thorny challenges in the candidate countries, like democratic backsliding, unresolved statehood and bilateral issues, and post-war reconciliation or reconstruction. And the EU should prepare its absorption capacity (which also requires institutional reform)<sup>18</sup> to ensure that any new accession continues to align with a further 'deepening' of integration. In this regard, a Convention should be used to discuss equipping the EU with a democratic *acquis*: a body of common rights and obligations in the field of democracy binding all EU countries. What better way to keep member states in line with their democratic commitments and reassure existing EU countries of potential new entrants?

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**EU should not hide behind the EPoC proposal, nor run away from its systemic problems in the enlargement dossier.**

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If the EU is serious about the European perspective of the countries now queuing at its doors, it should not hide behind the EPoC proposal, nor run away from its systemic problems in the enlargement dossier. The EPoC might help the candidate countries regarding whatever issue is discussed, but it should not distract the EU from its unfinished business with the aspirants. For this reason, enlargement-related issues should not be part of the EPoC's agenda or mandate. They should be kept separate.<sup>19</sup>

Having said that, nothing stops the Balkan countries, together with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, from using their leverage in the EPoC format to negotiate with EU member states their progress in

the accession process in the margins of the Prague summit and future EPoC meetings. If President Macron is keen on seeing the EPoC blossom – and he likely is – the enlargement countries might get somewhere with some behind-closed-doors diplomacy. Didn't exceptional times call for exceptional measures?

**Enlargement-related issues should not be part of the EPoC's agenda or mandate. They should be kept separate. Nothing stops the Balkan countries, together with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, from using their leverage in the EPoC format to negotiate with EU member states their progress in the accession process in the margins of the Prague summit and future EPoC meetings.**

## CHECKLIST FOR PARTICIPATING GOVERNMENTS AND LEADERS IN PREPARATION FOR THE UPCOMING PRAGUE SUMMIT

### ... for the CZECH PRESIDENCY:

Collect participants' topic preferences

Draft summit agenda



#### THE DOs,

- Few substantive issues
- EPoC's organisation and mandate



#### THE DON'Ts,

- Enlargement issues
- Democracy issues

### ... for the EU MEMBER STATES:



- Innovative thinking
- Cooperative mood
- Pragmatic approach



- Principled hypocrisy

Keep EU reform at the forefront, e.g.:

- Democratic acquis
- Absorption capacity
- Unanimity > qualified majority voting

Confront EU enlargement problems outside EPoC

### ... for the ENLARGEMENT COUNTRIES:

Use behind-closed-doors diplomacy in the EPoC format to secure progress in EU accession processes.



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- <sup>1</sup> Macron, Emmanuel, [Speech](#) from the Pnyx, Athens, 7 September 2017; Macron, Emmanuel, [“Initiative pour l’Europe”](#), Sorbonne, Paris, 26 September 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> Stratulat, Corina and Milena Lazarevic (2019), [“Letter to Macron: Details matter for enlargement reform”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- <sup>3</sup> Macron, Emmanuel, [Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the closing ceremony of the Conference of the Future of Europe](#), European Parliament, 10 May 2022.
- <sup>4</sup> See Stratulat, Corina and Paul Butcher (2018), [The European Citizens’ Consultations: Evaluation Report](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre; Stratulat, Corina; Janis A. Emmanouilidis; Johannes Greubel; Theodora Famprikezi; Georg E. Riekes; Perle Petit; and Dominik Hierlemann (2022), [“Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- <sup>5</sup> Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (2020), [“Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans”](#), COM(2020) 57 final.
- <sup>6</sup> See *POLITICO Europe*, [“As it happened: European Council summit”](#), 23 June 2022; European Policy Centre (2022), [“Von der Leyen makes big promises, but will they be enough?”](#), Brussels.
- <sup>7</sup> The list apparently includes the six Western Balkans countries, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, the UK, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Israel.
- <sup>8</sup> Gautam, Vanya, [“Long & Ugly Global Recession in 2022 and 2023: Warns Economist Who Predicted the 2008 Financial Crisis”](#), *Indiatimes*, 22 September 2022.
- <sup>9</sup> “Stratulat et al. (2022)”, European Policy Centre (2022), *op. cit.*
- <sup>10</sup> Haas, Richard N. (2013), *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America’s House in Order*, Basic Books.
- <sup>11</sup> Zuleeg, Fabian; Janis A. Emmanouilidis; and Ricardo Borges de Castro (2021), [“Europe in the age of permacrisis”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- <sup>12</sup> European Parliament (2022), [Motion for a resolution on the call for a Convention for the revision of the Treaties, 2022/2705\(RSP\)](#); “Stratulat et al. (2022)”, European Policy Centre (2022), *op. cit.*
- <sup>13</sup> von der Leyen, Ursula, [2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen](#), European Parliament, 14 September 2022.
- <sup>14</sup> See Pappas, Takis, [“Europe was once a club of liberal democracies. Not any longer!”](#), *Takis S Pappas*, 25 October 2021.
- <sup>15</sup> Stratulat, Corina (2022), [“War has returned to Europe: Three reasons why the EU did not see it coming”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- <sup>16</sup> See *TRT World*, [“What is the ‘European Geopolitical Community?’”](#), 19 May 2022.
- <sup>17</sup> Balfour, Rosa and Corina Stratulat (2015), [“EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- <sup>18</sup> Noyan, Oliver, [“Germany pushes to tie enlargement and EU reform”](#), *EURACTIV*, 22 June 2022.
- <sup>19</sup> See also Mucznik, Marta (2022), [“The \(geo\)political community and enlargement reform: Two important but separate discussions”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.





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