

1. WHAT THE EPOC IS AND IS NOT

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What the EPoC is **and** is not

COMMENTARY | BY GEORGE PAGOULATOS *

Forty-four **European** leaders, all the current **and** candidate EU member-states, the whole of geographical Europe **and** its neighborhood to the east, as far as Armenia **and** Azerbaijan. The **European** Political Community (EPoC) Summit was an important event, at the level of symbolism if nothing else. **And** beyond that?

President Emmanuel Macron's initiative seeks to consolidate the EU's position as the political **and** normative center of historical **and** geographical Europe. A similar structure **for** a **European** Confederation was proposed by President Francois Mitterrand on 31/12/1989, but the idea didn't fly beyond 1991. Three decades later, France remains unwilling to accept enlargements that weaken the cohesion **and** political core of the EU, while keen to avoid the reputational cost of being seen to block new members. Even Germany, a long-time supporter of eastern enlargement, acknowledges that there's a problem. In his "Future of Europe" speech from Prague, Chancellor Olaf Scholz described a future EU of 36 member-states, but not without prior reform of both the institutions **and** the unanimity rule.

There they are: two fundamental **European** deadlocks. Enlargement (the Western Balkans followed by Ukraine-Moldova) is coming up against internal resistance, though no one is willing to table their objections openly. **And** there is still insufficient support in the **European** Council **for** a revision of the Treaties or transition to qualified majority voting. Both enlargement **and** institutional reform require unanimity, which does not exist. Given these two key **European** deadlocks – deepening **and** enlargement – the EPoC represents a way out **and** forward.

The EPoC seeks a framework **for** strengthening ties with the Western Balkans **and** the countries in the EU's Eastern neighborhood, with an eye on reducing "third country" influence (meaning China, Russia **and** Turkey). Needless to say, however, if



Participants pose **for** the family photo during the meeting of the **European** Political Community in Prague, on October 6. The first meeting of the EPoC brought together leaders from across the continent, including non-EU member countries with the aim of fostering political dialogue **and** cooperation.

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the candidate countries perceive the EPoC as a substitute **for** full integration, they will refuse to participate. This is also why the EPoC could serve as an EU antechamber, allowing **for** the staged accession of candidate countries, which could become increasingly involved in supranational governance structures in specific areas of cooperation. Like the Schengen area, which is open to non-EU countries as well as member-states. Such a prospect would strengthen the EU, squaring the circle of its contentious enlargement process.

What else is the EPoC? A framework **for** structured dialogue on **pan-European** challenges the EU cannot tackle on its own: security, infrastructure, energy, migration.

There are converging interests here that could lead to mutually beneficial collective initiatives.

The test **for** the EPoC will be whether it can take at least some binding decisions; if it doesn't, it could end up being nothing more than one more high-level talking shop. With a global multilateral system paralyzed by Russia's toxic presence on the UN Security Council, a multilateral **pan-European** framework is imperative. Russia **and** Belarus were not invited to Prague: **Eu-**ropean unity cannot be devoid of at least minimum principles, **and** the EU has always been a peace project.

Above all, the EPoC is a framework allowing the EU to reconnect with the United Kingdom, with which Europe (**and** France) have historically steered a parallel course; when the shrillest version of hard Brexit has softened, they will need each other again.

The EPoC, finally, is also a framework to keep Turkey connected to the EU. Turkey's EU accession prospect is clinically dead, a revamped customs union is insufficiently incentivizing, **and** Turkey isn't as interested in the

EU as it was during the first Erdogan period. But the responsibility lies with the EU (**and** Greece) to devise a framework **for** the EU-Turkey relationship that isn't purely transactional, as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan would prefer, but structured **and** based on rules (with consequences **for** breaking those rules) **and** incentives that will encourage Turkey to embrace it.

A framework that includes both engagement where possible, **and** containment where necessary. Some are ambitiously calling it a "new Helsinki," but the difficulties are clear, especially with an Erdogan who now seems unhinged, having adopted the language of an aggressor. But any initiative that engages Turkey in a rules-based structured relationship with the EU is likely to be in both Europe's **and** Greece's best interest.

* George Pagoulatos is a professor at the Athens University of Economics & Business, a visiting professor at the College of Europe, **and** director general of the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP).