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Can the EU still wrest the Balkans from their blighted history?

It is perhaps necessary, first of all, to recall why the name "Western Balkans" is still used to describe this peninsula in south-eastern Europe, why this imprecise geographical concept is preferred to any other name. To answer this question is to recognise from the outset the difficult fate suffered by this part of Europe: if we prefer to speak of the Balkans, it is quite simply because only geography is stable in this region.

THE BALKANS: A GEOGRAPHICAL CONCEPT THAT CONCEALS A TRAGIC HISTORY

To quote Chancellor Bismarck, "*the Balkans have always produced more 'history' than they could manage*". Geographical unity is contrasted with a disjointed and often tragic history, a state, ethnic and religious fragmentation which later gave rise to the term '*balkanisation*', synonymous with a powder keg or, at best, crumbling or mosaic. And this in a country of mountains, as the name '*Balkans*' indicates, where movement was for a long time very difficult and where the central power, when it existed, was easily challenged. Let us always remember that Edmond About, in his satirical novel of the same name, calls his Greek brigand Hadji Stavros: the "*King of the Mountains*", because he who holds the mountain is king...

In the Balkans, borders, regimes, dynasties, alliances and even the names of states are constantly changing. Three main religions and three alphabets co-exist. The region has been plagued for centuries by opposing external influences and all the neighbouring powers have

in turn clashed with its mountains, sometimes successfully, but never for long. These include Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia (from the now defunct Yugoslavia), Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, southern Romania, formerly known as Wallachia, and Thrace and the Istanbul area, which are still part of Turkey.

However, since joining the European Union, Croatia and Slovenia, which historically repelled the Ottomans and escaped their occupation, have refused to accept the name "*Balkans*", which Bulgaria and Romania no longer wish to use either. It is clear that today, Balkans or not, the region wants to be European. But will all these countries, having barely regained their sovereignty, easily accept Community rules which by definition imply limits to national sovereignty? Will the Community model suit them? After centuries of dependence, will they be able to tolerate a new form of federalism? And finally, can the European Union overcome the Balkan curse?

AN EVENTFUL HISTORY OF INSTABILITY AND DEPENDENCY

The whole of the Balkans, with the exception of Montenegro, was colonised by the Ottoman Turks between the 14th and 16th centuries. From the 19th century onwards a slow emancipation from the Turkish yoke began, from which Greece, then Serbia to a lesser extent, was the first to benefit, but without being able to avoid war. This gradual emancipation resulted in a new dispersal which, after the First World War, led to new groupings considered artificial by some and, once again, to

fragmentation after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the wars which followed the collapse of Yugoslavia, which still does not seem to satisfy the interested parties and does not ensure stability.

One remembers the "*sick man of Europe*", a derogatory appellation coined by Nicholas I to describe the decadent and repressive Ottoman Empire of the last Sultans and, more particularly, of Abd-UI-Hamid. It was easy to attribute this poor state of affairs to the Sultan's maladministration. And so, from 1875 onwards, a series of crises were to upset the map of the Balkans, not only because the Austrians and Russians wanted to reach the shores of the Aegean and Constantinople. It was the Bulgarians who started to get restless. Their tax revolts were brutally suppressed by the Turks. The Europeans were indignant. Serbia, supported by Russia, coveted Bosnia-Herzegovina, which Austria-Hungary wanted to annex to its empire. In the meantime, Serbia and Montenegro declared war on the Sultan, who responded with the most ferocious repression in Bulgaria and a brutal and victorious war against the Serbs, who called on the European powers to help them.

The Germans wanted to tear the Ottoman Empire apart and destroy it, but neither the English nor the Austrians wanted new Slavic players in the region, while the Slavophiles, nationalists and Orthodox Russians dreamed of being given a mandate over the Balkans. The tsar then decided to go to war, counting on the neutrality of the European powers. Fate favoured him and he arrived at the gates of Constantinople, but his rather rapid victory worried the other powers, which turned from neutral to hostile. Russia had to stop its momentum there. The Treaty of San Stefano put an end to the Balkan war that lasted from 1877 to 1878 and which resulted in the independence of Romania, Serbia and Montenegro. A greater Bulgaria was created, but it remained a vassal of the Sultan, whilst Albania remained totally isolated.

However, the other European powers did not see it that way, and Russia had to negotiate

and accede to its demands at the Congress of Berlin. Greater Bulgaria was divided into two principalities: Bulgaria itself became more or less independent and Rumelia, a vassal of the Sultan, was given a Christian governor. Austria-Hungary obtained the provisional administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a province with a Serbian population of over 40%. Greece took over Thessaly. Russia seized Bessarabia. The integrity of the Ottoman Empire had been preserved, but the principle of nationalities had not been respected and nothing was resolved.

On 24 July 1908, using the humiliations suffered by the Sultan as a pretext, the "*Young Turks*" took power in Istanbul, but they were unable to halt the decline of the empire. In the same year, Austria-Hungary officially annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in an attempt to prevent a hypothetical uprising of its Slavic minorities. Bulgaria took advantage of the situation to proclaim its complete independence and its sovereign, Prince Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, became king under the name of Ferdinand I of Bulgaria. These unilateral violations of the Berlin Treaty displeased Serbia, which now witnessed the fading of the prospect of enlargement leading to the greater Serbia that it had always hoped for; it also annoyed Russia, which had not obtained the concessions on the straits that it had expected in exchange for its support for the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Balkans, the playground of the great European powers, was to suffer two more wars in 1912 and 1913, which were to be called "Balkan Wars" that ultimately led to the Great War.

THE RUN-UP TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In the First Balkan War, Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece shared out the remaining Ottoman territories in the peninsula, with the exception of part of Albania, which had become independent in 1913 (thanks to Austro-Hungarian and German support), and Eastern Thrace around the straits and Constantinople. Bulgaria bore the

brunt of the war effort against the Ottomans, while Serbia occupied Bulgarian-speaking Macedonia. In the Second Balkan War, Bulgaria, which tried to take Bulgarian-speaking Macedonia from the Serbs, was attacked and defeated by its previous allies, joined by the Turks (who retook Thrace around Edirne) and Romania (which annexed South Dobruja). The assassination of the Archduke of Austria in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist triggered the Great War.

During the First World War, Serbia, an ally of the Triple Entente (United Kingdom, France and Russia), was joined by Albania, Montenegro, Romania and Greece, while the Central Empires (Germany and Austria-Hungary) joined forces with the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. A game of alliances that allowed Bulgaria to expand the territories it claimed in Macedonia and Dobruja, to the detriment of Serbia, Greece and Romania, but in 1918 it had to give everything back and even lost some of the border districts it had previously possessed to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and, above all, Western Thrace and its Aegean coastline to Greece.

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was formed in 1918-1919 from Serbia, Montenegro and territories populated by Slovenes, Croats, Serbs and Bosnians taken from Austria-Hungary. In 1929, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was similar to the much hoped-for Greater Serbia. In 1934, Yugoslavia concluded a '*Balkan Pact*' with Greece, Romania and Turkey. But the period of calm was short-lived.

THE AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II

In 1939, Italy invaded Albania. Then Italy attacked Greece in October 1940, but was driven back into Albania. Yugoslavia, invaded by Nazi Germany in April 1941, was again dismembered. Slovenia was divided between Italy (which also annexed Dalmatia, Montenegro and Kosovo) and Germany. Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina became a satellite state of Germany, while Horthy's Hungary annexed Vojvodina

west of the Tisza. Bulgaria seized the opportunity to take over northern Macedonia, while Serbia itself was occupied and administered by the Wehrmacht. Vojvodina east of the Tisza became German territory. Two antagonistic resistance movements emerged: the monarchist Chetniks, loyal to the Yugoslav government in exile in London, and the communist Partisans, led by Tito, the future dictator.

Greece was invaded by the Germans, who reluctantly came to help the Italians. Bulgaria, once again allied with Germany, expanded into the territories it had claimed, i.e. ex-Yugoslav Macedonia, Greek Thrace and Southern Dobruja. From autumn 1943, taking advantage of the Italian withdrawal, the resistance movements liberated Greece and Yugoslavia. In August 1944, the reversal of the Romanian front forced the Wehrmacht to evacuate the Balkans and Greece.

At the end of the war, the partition plan between the Allies, negotiated in Teheran in 1943, in Moscow in 1944 and in Yalta in 1945, was implemented. Despite the destabilisation orchestrated by the communists, Greece remained in the British and then American orbit after a disastrous civil war. In Yugoslavia - reconstituted and enlarged - Tito won over the Chetniks, but he soon distanced himself from the USSR and held the Yugoslav federation in an iron grip until 1980. The same situation was repeated in Albania with Enver Hoxha until 1985. In Bulgaria and Romania, the communists, although initially in a minority, managed to impose their dictatorships. Ceausescu's lasted until 1989.

At the end of the war, in 1946, Yugoslavia, enlarged by the territories ceded by Italy, became a federal republic made up of six republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia, which then had the borders that we know today, if we disregard the problem posed by Kosovo. Greece was enlarged by the Dodecanese, ceded by Italy.

During the Cold War, from 1949 to 1989, the peninsula was divided into three zones that did

not communicate with each other: Bulgaria and Romania, which were part of the Soviet bloc (Warsaw Pact and Comecon); Greece and Turkey, which were part of the Western bloc (NATO); and finally, Yugoslavia and Albania, which were communist but claimed to be non-aligned, despite the Albanian government's strong sympathies for Mao's China.

In Greece, the colonels' dictatorship lasted from 1967 to 1974. The whole of the peninsula suffered authoritarian regimes which left lasting legacies.

THE END OF YUGOSLAVIA

With the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Yugoslav communists felt compelled to abandon communism as a system and doctrine, and embraced liberalism and nationalism. However, the communists retained power while introducing multiparty and parliamentary democracy. Belgrade's idea was to keep the Yugoslav federation under its aegis, but between 1991 and 1996 the wars to break up Yugoslavia led to the independence in 1992 of Slovenia and Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Northern Macedonia.

THE BONE OF CONTENTION IN KOSOVO

What remained of Yugoslavia became an 'association' of Serbia and Montenegro in 2003. In 2004, Slovenia joined the European Union. Serbia and Montenegro split amicably in 2006. In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU. Kosovo (an autonomous region of Serbia with a Muslim Albanian majority but populated by Orthodox Serbs) declared its independence in 2008, which was recognised neither by Serbia nor by half the international community. Croatia was admitted to the European Union in 2013 and to the Schengen area in 2022, while an Austrian veto has prevented the enlargement of this area to include Romania and Bulgaria.

The question of Kosovo has led to a form of blackmail that exasperates Serbia, since the European Union implies that Serbia can only become a member if it acknowledges Kosovo, which is impossible for Serbia because Kosovo is a historic Serbian province, Kosovo's independence was the result of a *coup de force* and Serbian minorities are mistreated there.

THE NAME OF MACEDONIA: A SETTLED DISPUTE

In addition to a number of territorial disputes that would be tedious to list here, a name dispute plagued relations between Greece, North Macedonia and the European Union for many years. Greece did not want to let Macedonia use its name because the rest of the province is Greek, and because there was no agreement on the name of the former Yugoslav Republic, Macedonia could not apply. Finally a compromise was reached and Macedonia is now called "*North Macedonia*".

THE RETURN OF THE BALKANS TO EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN MODEL

Despite all the difficulties handed down by history, everyone agrees on the need for the Balkans to return to Europe and to the Western clan. However, there is a persistent concern and the question is: what is the right European model to propose to those who want to join without being fully up to the level required to apply, or to those who want to join but limit their participation to certain political aspects of the Community project?

The [European Political Community](#) (EPC) project seems particularly well adapted to this objective and that, in addition to the Balkans, Ukraine and even the United Kingdom could find an interest in it. At a time when the Western model is under attack from all sides, the Ukrainian crisis, like that of the Balkans, offers us the opportunity to reunite the West around a political project that is more flexible than "*Brussels federalism*". This project

would give priority to politics over economics. From this, it follows that the concept of "sectoral federalism" could be adapted to the Balkans, which are still very far from Community requirements.

As far as the Western Balkans are concerned, it has to be admitted that the problem of integration remains. If we look at the conclusions of the [December 2022 Summit](#), no real progress has been made in terms of these countries' applications (Kosovo apart, which has not been recognised by all EU member states). It is true that the six Western Balkan countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Northern Macedonia and Kosovo), which are not members of the Union, are not all at the same stage in the [integration progress](#). Four are officially recognised as candidates: Northern Macedonia (since 2005), Montenegro, Serbia (since 2012) and Albania (since 2014). Bosnia and Herzegovina applied in 2016 and was granted candidate status in December 2022. Kosovo applied on 15 December 2022.

The war in Ukraine has led several EU member states to insist on speeding up enlargement in the Balkans. At a meeting of South East European countries in Thessaloniki on 10 June 2022, the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriákos Mitsotákis, proposed the integration of the Western Balkan states by 2033. Other member states have concluded that the highly tense international situation and its consequences for Europe and the West in general should lead the European Union to a purely political approach to enlargement, i.e. a strategic calculation that prefers political alliance to economic integration.

Among these countries is Austria, which is advocating early accession for the Balkans calling on its European partners to send "*clear signals*", especially to Northern Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, stressing that "*Russia's great destabilising potential not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the South East*" is too great a threat to be left unaddressed.

AN IMPROBABLE RAPID ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

But there are some major obstacles facing the integration of the Western Balkans. Although it is easy to agree on a mutual strategic interest between the two sides, Balkan integration started badly and the unique and painful example of Romania and Bulgaria, which have remained under Commission surveillance since their entry in 2007, haunts everyone.

In addition, recurrent border tensions between the populations of the former Yugoslavia have increased in intensity. Finally, the divisions between the member states on this issue are slowing down the process, not to mention the outright obstruction by Bulgaria of the opening of accession negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania. Sofia is demanding that North Macedonia include the protection of the Bulgarian minority in its constitution.

The issue of ethnic and religious minorities troubles the entire Western Balkans and the EU does not seem to be willing to face this problem, which has already led to much bloodshed over the centuries. While the Balkans have always produced far more history than they could handle, their neighbours have learned the hard way that it is risky to take on the management of it themselves. This is compounded by an economic situation that is far removed from EU standards. This is why the immediate integration of the Western Balkans into the Union does not seem possible, even though time is running out. In the region, competing powers such as China, Russia and Turkey (Europe's "*sick man*" has become the "*dangerous man*"), Saudi Arabia and Qatar are on the lookout and are extending their influence by all possible, even the most unethical means. The situation has reverted back to that of the early 20th century, but with more players in the game.

It is in this context that, keen to respond to this urgency without hastening the enlargement process, France put forward on 9 May 2022 the project for a European Political Community, validated by the Member States at the European Council. This is a project that aims to strengthen the links between the European Union and those who share its values without being members.

Initially, the proposal was addressed to Ukraine which, in the wake of the Russian aggression, applied to join the European Union "*in the near future*", to quote its President Volodymyr Zelensky. Thus, Ukraine announced to the world that it was choosing the European rather than the post-Soviet model put forward by Putin. It must be admitted that the accession process will probably take several decades. An organisation that would allow democratic European nations adhering to the values of the Union to find a new space for political cooperation in the fields of security, energy, transport, investment, infrastructure and perhaps the free movement of people would undoubtedly be an original solution. In the face of the denigration of the Western model and the all-out attack on the democratic ideal by authoritarian regimes, the objective is to consolidate our European political unity.

As in the case of the Western Balkans, it is impossible in the short term to envisage [Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova's accession](#) (two countries that applied for membership on 3 March 2022, after Kyiv). However, the European Union must move closer to the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe as soon as possible so as to remove them from Moscow's sphere of influence and authoritarian tendencies. The EPC would thus strengthen ties between countries that share the same values, without them necessarily having to go through a European integration process that is known to be cumbersome, complex and sometimes even vexatious.

We need to change our approach. Of course, the European Union is still based on the two essential

freedoms: political and entrepreneurial. A country wishing to join must first integrate the *acquis communautaire* - the Union's laws - into its national legislation and then ensure that its economy is competitive with those of the Member States it joins, otherwise it will be adversely affected by free trade. This takes time, which we do not have in times of war. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have usually taken between ten and twelve years to join the European Union. That is too long.

THE SOLUTION OF THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY

In 1989, when the communist regimes in the East collapsed, the question arose as to whether to adopt the Commission's technical and factual approach or the political approach to welcoming countries that were regaining their sovereignty. It is not certain that we always made the right choice. However, Helmut Kohl showed us the way when he declared that one East German mark was worth one Deutschmark. That said it all. Now we have to choose the political option, and the EPC can be the vehicle of choice.

Some will say that there is a risk of differentiation, or even discrimination, between European countries, but time should be allowed to pass and with the offer to guarantee a European perspective to our neighbours. The EPC will offer those countries that wish to do so European integration that will take place first and foremost at political level. At present, economic and legal criteria are the main obstacles.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE SERVES AS A CATALYST

By invading Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Vladimir Putin is trying to claw back territory that would allow Russia to become the empire of yesteryear, but he also aims to weaken the neighbouring territories by directly targeting the European Union, whose democratic values openly threaten his model of governance. However he was not

counting on the reaction of the West this time around, which was guilty yesterday, in 2014, of having allowed the invasion of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts and the annexation of Crimea to go ahead unchallenged.

Vladimir Putin has thus awakened the West and the democracies, which had allowed themselves to be lulled to sleep by so many untruths which sought to legitimise the oft-repeated argument that Russia wanted to control these territories so as to ensure its security. In fact, the master of the Kremlin, without ever daring to admit it, is more afraid of the spread of the Union's democratic values than of NATO's forces, because NATO never imagined attacking what is left of the Soviet empire.

In the aftermath of February 24, 2022, the values of the West have led to the rise of a true nation defended by astonishingly courageous fighters. Ukraine has already won the war of images and values; no doubt it will also win tomorrow the war of control of its own country thanks to the formidable contributions of military equipment from the United States and the European Union.

Tomorrow, which everyone hopes will be soon, this country will have to be rebuilt, economically and socially. It will be necessary to "anchor" these territories to the European Union to ensure their development, to secure the European Union and to send a few strong messages to autocratic regimes around the world. Is the EPC the "*right model*" to structure such a development? This concept, which François Mitterrand spoke of as early as 1989, when the USSR was beginning to disintegrate, was not favoured by the Member States of the time, since they preferred the Neighbourhood Policy, the Trade Agreements, and even the accession procedure itself and its long and necessary process of appropriating the "*acquis communautaire*".

Now, the war in Ukraine, in the very centre of Europe, is forcing us to imagine another resolutely political approach. Germany, via the [Prague Speech of Chancellor Scholz on 29 August 2022](#),

fully supports this, thereby responding to [President Macron's speech in Strasbourg on 9 May 2022](#). The EPC is more than necessary: it is urgent. We must start with politics, not economics.

ENABLING THE EUROPEAN UNION TO ASSERT ITSELF AS A PLAYER

It is said that the Union is an economic giant but remains a political dwarf, but it must assert itself as a fully-fledged political entity with the objective of assuming its strategic autonomy in terms of defence and security as well as energy sovereignty. The Germans want to turn this concept into a reality. It must be developed together, firstly in respect of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and then by creating a European defence centre that will be a pillar of NATO. Finally, let us opt for an energy sovereignty based on the complementarity of national energy mixes in which nuclear energy will finally and without hesitation be given its rightful place alongside renewable energies.

This Political Community must include [article 42.7 TFEU](#) providing aid and assistance to any member state by all means in their power in the event of one of them being aggressed, which implies a policy of solidarity identical to that of NATO's Article 5. Europe needs this development to make safe all of its members, just as the Balkans need to be reassured about their future. A future that will be written within the Union, as clearly promised at the Tirana Summit on 6 December 2022. At this summit, the President of the Commission and the President of the European Council announced that young people from these regions will be able to study in European universities, a real hope for the future of the new generation.

The EPC should not be a waiting room without a future. It should offer commitment and ensure the granting of a real status of belonging to a Community of values. Then there will always be time to become either a full member of the Union or a member of the second circle. We are sure that our British friends, awakened from their foolish

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post-Brexit dreams, will look with interest at this new approach. And it is probably no coincidence that the next meeting on the EPC is scheduled to take place in London in March 2024. Ukrainian patriotism is waking up old Europe. Will it be strong enough to give substance to a European patriotism that will in turn give rise to a "geopolitical union"? That depends on us. This would not be the smallest paradox of these dark times ... and we owe it to Vladimir Putin. By wanting to resurrect the Soviet empire, he has at the same time transformed Ukraine into a real nation, revived NATO and given Europe a political dimension. He will certainly go down in history.

SECTORAL FEDERALISM IS NECESSARY TO MAINTAIN EUROPE'S PLACE IN THE WORLD ORDER

However, this geopolitical dimension of Europe in the new world order, made of increasingly brutal power relations, must lead to two major changes:

firstly, the abolition of the unanimity rule to be replaced by a qualified relative majority in foreign policy; secondly, the acquisition of the pro-active attitude that befits great powers, which the United States wields so well, recalling the analysis that Alexis de Tocqueville made more than a century ago when he praised the ability of the Americans to learn very quickly from their mistakes. But America is a federal state, you may say. So let's think "sectoral federalism" to give Europe its rightful place in this new world order.

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