



THE POLITICS OF TIME

BY P. MARKOVIC

Petar Markovic, a member of our GEM community in the final stage of his PhD studies, attended the [TT27 Leadership Academy](#) in Brussels, the new flagship programme of the European Commission's European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC), from 9 to 12 October 2018. In the run up to the EU summit that will be organized in Sibiu, Romania in May 2019, this in-house think tank of the Commission set out to build up a dynamic network of handpicked young think tankers, researchers and other change-makers in order to develop and deepen the goals and priorities expressed by EC President Juncker in his 2018 State of the European Union address earlier this year. In the brief reflection about the importance of the temporal dimension of politics below, Petar picks one session from the busy Academy [agenda](#) – on strategic foresight – and explains why it is important for the EU and its scholars today.

The EPSC Leadership Academy was one of the most intensive and enriching workshops I have attended. In a single week, the network of 27 socially-engaged researchers, each invited to represent one respective post-Brexit member state, met to learn from and discuss about EU politics with some of its most influential decision-makers. The invitation came as a very welcome recognition of my activist approach to the research of citizenship and democracy in Europe, but it is also a compliment to the orientation of the GEM PhD School to foster such research. I could recount our tête-à-tête with Martin Selmayr, the secretary-general of the Commission, or Michel Barnier, the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, or any of the commissioners and other senior staff we encountered. However, given the character of this publication as well as the seriousness of the issues that the EU faces, I would rather share some thoughts sparked by a workshop on strategic foresight led by the EPSC's very own Ricardo and Ruby. In two hours and with the aid of some very inciting preparatory reading on the future of work, they interactively introduced us to the exciting and promising methods of unveiling the futures of Europe. Rather than forecasting, which entails predictions and the fiction of *ceteris paribus*, foresight embraces uncertainty – the key unsettling feature of our acceleratingly changing reality – and enables policy-makers to hypothesize plausible

future scenarios based on current tendencies. At the same time, the [techniques of strategic foresight](#) eschew our cognitive bias towards the familiar or our normative bias towards the ideologically desirable. Why is this exercise in dislocation from our present standpoint and projection into the optimal future crucially important for all concerned with the preservation of the Union? I briefly offer three arguments related to the political use of time: present, past and future.

Present

When it comes to the EU, both the academia and practitioners too often suffer from '[presentism](#)' and '[short-termism](#)'. Their horizon of vision and action spans only as far as the length of their research funding in the first, or the length of their mandate in the second case. In European politics, this pressure has been aggravated by the advent of the poly-crisis and right-wing populism. Pressured by the former, the incumbents in member states now seem only capable of re-acting rather than systematically assessing their short-term actions against well thought-through long-term goals. Increasingly loosing pace with the latter, they too give priority to short-term national interests over investing more time to find durable common solutions in policy areas that cover increasingly transnational issues such as asylum, labour, energy, or defence.

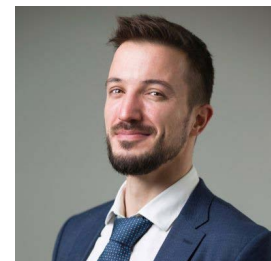


TT27 Workshop, 9 Oct 2018

Past

The retreat of liberal-democracy and internationalism is not without precedent. One of the forgotten lessons from such an episode in 1930s is that volatile times are a breeding ground for the rise and use of political myths as reservoirs of meaning for increasingly disoriented constituencies [Cassirer, 1961]. Take, for example, the tale of the return to the pre-EU golden age of the British Commonwealth in the case of Brexit. Consider the plethora of anti-immigrant and illiberal narratives on the European East whose national elites are self-fashioned as the *Antemurale Christianitis* – 'traditional' Europe's bulwark against either foreign incomers from the South or supposedly foreign values from Brussels. All of these are instances of the national past being used to politically capitalize on the growing dissatisfaction with the status quo, mobilise the disgruntled citizen and legitimize a democratically questionable rule. This resurgence of the past makes politics atemporal because it situates the stakes in an eternal struggle of us and them. In national arenas, the EU policies and values are being 'othered' at the time when its own founding myth, that of a peace project, is losing gravitational pull with time. That is why a decisive turn to the future is necessary.

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Future

Despite the frequent portrayal of the EU as an overpowered Leviathan by its opponents, the playing field in the competition for the appropriation of the past and present is tilted to the advantage of the national political actors whose political systems and particularities, histories and languages, their citizens readily understand. Therefore, rather than just competing with member states over whether we live in the best of times or the worst of times, the EU should distinguish itself as the only actor capable of looking beyond our time. It should look to the future and fully embrace its overarching role of the 'guardian of the long term'. Its legitimacy would be bolstered by a new source found in the mediating role between 27 voices, directing them according to an envisioned concerted impact of their actions today on the continent tomorrow. Should strategic foresight assume a more prominent role in the nuts and bolts of Brussels decision-making, the Union has a real chance to frame itself as the polity responsible for sustainable integration in all areas that transcend borders and responsible not only to a particular electorate but all European citizens including future generations.

Our political thinking is often reduced to geopolitics, to the quest for solutions in the spatial terms of distributing sovereignty, power and money between the Union and its member states. Let's unlock the potential of what may be called 'chronopolitics'. The nation-state will still derive its *raison d'être* from the past; its politicians will likely remain trapped in the present; Europe could sustain itself by boldly venturing into the future.



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