



THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY: INFORMALITY AS A KEY TO SUCCESS

ABSTRACT

The EPC has been established to create 'strategic intimacy' among European countries, at a time when Russian aggression against Ukraine demanded a show of unity and geopolitical resolve. Its lack of standing structures, institutions, budget and even final declarations should be taken as added value and not as a liability. Indeed, the EPC should not be considered as a loose replica of the EU, or as a waiting room for EU aspiring members. Any comparison with the EU fails to capture the real added value of the EPC – an informal format allowing European leaders to freely discuss open issues at 'minilateral' level on the sidelines of the event, without the pressure of political consensus. While European leaders should resist the calls to institutionalise the EPC, they should also be aware of the risk of increasing fatigue, if this format fails to deliver tangible results in the long run. In order for the EPC not to become just a big photo opportunity for the whole European continent, organising host countries (which rotate on a six-month basis on the EU/non-EU country principle) should spend their political capital to keep the EPC a valid geopolitical institution with its distinctive features.



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Introduction

The European Political Community (EPC) has now arrived at its third meeting while its main features, scope, tasks and goals remain elusive. French President Emmanuel Macron first launched the idea of the EPC in Strasbourg on 9 May 2022, stressing the necessity for ‘a new European organisation that would allow democratic European nations that subscribe to our shared core values to find a new space for cooperation in politics, security, energy, transport, investment, infrastructure and the movement of people’. He was revamping an idea first floated, although unsuccessfully, by his late predecessor François Mitterrand in 1989 as a post-Cold War forum that could convene European Economic Community members, Russia, and Central and Eastern European countries; as well as the proposal to establish a ‘European Confederation’ by former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta.¹ The idea for an EPC also builds on several calls for a ‘geopolitical Union’, voiced by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in 2019, and for a ‘geopolitical community’ expressed in 2022 by European Council President Charles Michel. Macron himself had already launched the idea of a ‘European Security Council’ with the UK. Such proposals, from the most undefined to the more structured ones, all pointed in one direction: the current European Union format might not be enough to express and project Europe’s geopolitical potential both at its borders and beyond.



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Russian aggression against Ukraine has somehow acted as a catalyst for the search for the geopolitical soul of Europe. Swiftly granting the candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and (conditionally) Georgia was, in part, a reaction to the challenge posed by Russia. The current dynamics of EU enlargement, and the very distant prospect of actual membership, however, barely compare to the short-term design of a strong continent showing unity and encompassing former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus facing an existential threat from Russia. While the commitment to have countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia (as well as Bosnia-Herzegovina, which benefitted from the contingency), as future EU member states has strong geopolitical flavour, it lacks short-term effect. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to think that the EU would accept new member states with open territorial issues, as is the case for the three former Soviet republics, let alone one with an ongoing conflict with no foreseeable end in sight.

EPC and EU

The relationship between the EPC and the EU has often been raised in the ongoing debate on this new framework. Although an overlap between the two entities is not desirable, the European Union is an important structural element of the European continent and any reflections on the EPC should consider the desirable degree of this de facto connection. Taking into account that the EU is a regional player – with its own strategic compass, areas of exclusive competence and directives with binding effect on the member states – that will consequently move within the EPC in accordance with its own obligations. Having said that, two opposing views on the relationship between the EPC and the EU have emerged: on the one hand, there are those who believe that the EPC offers the opportunity for greater coordination to pursue common strategic objectives on different levels.

On the other hand, there are those who highlight the risk to replicate the centre-periphery dynamics typical of the relationship between candidate countries and EU member states, thus undermining the EPC's founding principle of equity.²



Focusing on the EPC only through the enlargement prism would be reductive and limit its scope: the EPC has not been launched as an alternative to enlargement.



This latter aspect is linked to the major question of the relation between the EPC and the European enlargement process. The fact that the EPC has basically been brought to life by France, usually a lukewarm supporter of enlargement, led many to assume that by putting together EU members and aspiring members (the six Western Balkan countries, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Turkey) the Community would function as a 'consolation prize' or a 'waiting room' for accession, a tool to engage these ten countries while their membership prospect lingers in uncertainty. On the opposite side of this spectrum, there are those who consider the EPC an instrument to further align the aspiring members to EU policies and summitries, in a sort of training for membership, an idea which has also been somehow suggested by the Franco-German proposal on the EU institutional reform, which put the EPC as the outer ring in a process of staged accession.³ Also the discussion within the Western Balkan countries seems to oscillate between those who fear that the demands from WB6 may be kept off the EPC's political agenda, and those who support the EPC as an area where candidate countries can make their voices heard on essential issues such as energy, security and risks related to destabilisation factors within the area.

Both approaches rely too much on the above-mentioned perceived overlapping between the EPC and the EU: while aspiring and candidate countries might strongly benefit from political and policy proximity with the EU member states, there are other existing formats and structures where such exchanges happen, like the EU-Western Balkans Summits,⁴ the Berlin Process,⁵ the Ionian-Adriatic Initiative⁶ and the Central European Initiative.⁷ Focusing on the EPC only through the enlargement prism would therefore be reductive and limit its scope: as it has been stated by President Macron, the EPC has not been launched as an alternative to enlargement or strictly as a 'training centre' for the future members. While the presidents of the Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament take part in the EPC meetings, it would be counterproductive for the future of this format to 'anchor' itself to the structures, institutions and policies of the EU. As the existence and functioning of other pan-European organisations – such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE – show, Europe's political space is not confined to the EU. The inclusion of countries with no evident interest in joining the EU – like Norway, Iceland and Azerbaijan – or whose path towards accession has reached a dead-end, like Turkey, shows that any reference to enlargement should be decoupled from the works of the EPC. Moreover, a disconnection from the European framework would allow the EPC to slip into the gaps left by the EU's sphere of action, while counterbalancing the weight of the EU member states within EPC. Finally, the EPC could be seen as 'an open window bringing in some fresh air in the existing continental institutions' such as the OSCE or the Council of Europe, which were created in the 20th century to meet the needs of that particular historical period: a new format such as the EPC, which is a product of its time, could more easily respond to the current challenges and mutated scenarios.⁸

Membership

The idea behind the convening of the EPC, as launched by the French government, was to show European unity and geopolitical resolve against the Russian aggression of Ukraine and Moscow's threats towards the West; hence there was a need to include as many participants as possible. At the first EPC summit in Prague in October 2022, 44 heads of state and government attended, 47 took part in the second summit in Chişinău in June 2023 and 45 in Granada last October. The gatherings are open to all European states, with the exclusion of Russia and Belarus, and it is up to each government to decide whether to participate or not. Therefore, there are no evident membership criteria, apart from the geographical one. The introduction of loose democratic criteria, modelled, for instance, on the Copenhagen ones, might hinder EPC's emerging role as an informal forum to discuss open issues, as was the case for the talks between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan on the sidelines of the Chişinău summit. A set of strict criteria based on democracy, rule of law and civic freedoms might lead to the exclusion of several European countries (as would be the case for Azerbaijan, Turkey or even for an EU member state like Hungary or a candidate country like Serbia): considering that the primary goal of the EPC was to show unity against Russia, creating areas of exclusion would not be instrumental to that. The proposal to establish as membership criteria the respect of international law and the implicit pact of non-aggression among the participants could be a good starting point, but it risks being compromised by existing frictions between participants.⁹

Furthermore, keeping within the EPC countries whose support to Ukraine has been rather ambiguous (as in the case of Serbia, Hungary, Turkey and Georgia) might send a strong

signal vis-à-vis Moscow. A loose concept of membership would also allow the United Kingdom to improve its post-Brexit relationship with the EU and strengthen the alignment with one of the most engaged security actors in Europe. Similarly, keeping Turkey within the EPC's setting could prove beneficial to European efforts in policy areas such as energy, security and migration.

It seems clear that the first real challenge for the EPC will be to successfully develop strategic thinking that will allow it to hold together and coordinate such a large number of countries which do not share the same values in terms of democracy and civil rights, and which have different degrees of relationship among themselves – as it includes countries that used to share the same discussion table within the EU institutions, countries that have decided to leave the EU institutions, countries aspiring to sit at the EU round table and countries that have never shown such interest.

Structure and functioning

The EPC members, especially those belonging to the EU, should resist – at least for the time being – the urge to institutionalise such a geopolitical intuition, as its true added value might actually reside in its informal nature. The lack of any fixed structure, either a secretariat or a secretary-general, and a quite general programme revolving around a plenary session and ensuing thematic clusters (peace and security, energy resilience and connectivity and mobility) provides its participants with enough flexibility and freedom to engage in high-level networking and with an opportunity for a range of bilateral and 'minilateral' exchanges – a feature that, in the end, might represent the true value of this format. It has already been the case with the EPC meetings in the Czech Republic and

Moldova, which provided a venue for talks between the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, facilitated by French President Macron, European Council President Michel and (in Chişinău) German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Similarly, in Moldova: Kosovo and Serbia leader, Vjosa Osmani and Aleksandar Vučić, met with Macron, Scholz and EU High Representative Josep Borrell in an attempt to revitalise the dialogue for the normalisation between Pristina and Belgrade. Even the lack of a final communiqué might be considered an asset, rather than a liability: the EPC brings together 47 countries with different sensibilities and stances on several issues, and putting together a document adopted by consensus could become a time-consuming exercise for sherpas and leaders which would anyway risk to produce a watered-down declaration with no symbolic meaning. At the same time, the demand for greater transparency and accountability could be fulfilled by providing a space for dedicated discussions within the national parliaments before or after the EPC meetings. Another possible solution could be to establish, before each EPC meeting, a sort of shared hierarchy of priorities and objectives to achieve. This would also help to lighten the burden of organising the summits and setting discussion priorities, which to date falls exclusively on the host country, with the risk that the EPC discussion would be overshadowed by the national political agenda.

On budgetary terms, the lack of a secretariat or standing structure make the existence of any resources pooled from the participants or a budget redundant, leaving the organising country with the expenses for the holding of the six-monthly meeting. As it was for the communiqué, the lack of dedicated resources might preserve the flexibility and adaptability of the EPC.

The future of the EPC

As emerged from the meetings in the Czech Republic, Moldova and Spain, the EPC is gradually emerging as a G7/G20 kind of format, a 'European diplomatic Davos' focused mostly on 'political speed-dating' rather than procedures, policy and declarations. The added value of the EPC in the quite crowded stage of European regional organisations is therefore its informality, its lack of standing structures and the freedom that allows its participants to meet more frequently than it would have been the case – this is especially true for non-EU and non-NATO countries – and discuss relevant issues. The risk, however, is that this format might run into fatigue, especially if the discussions held on its sidelines do not bring any tangible result and if showing support to Ukraine should remain the only political glue for the event. Signs of apathy were already palpable in Granada, with Azerbaijan not showing up to voice its disagreement with the decision not to include Turkey (also not present at the meeting apparently because of President Erdoğan being sick) in the format discussing the crisis with Armenia. And Kosovo President Osmani refusing to meet her Serbian counterpart citing the need to impose sanctions on Belgrade for its alleged role in the attack in northern Kosovo on 24 September 2023. The absence of the Azerbaijani president in Granada had an even greater weight due to the meeting of high-level officials from Armenia and Azerbaijan at the Tbilisi Silk Road Forum, hosted in Georgia on 26 and 27 October 2023.¹⁰ Although the meeting was purely economic, Georgia's proposal to mediate the talks led to a feeling of missed opportunity.

The EPC should be taken for what it is: an informal forum for leaders. It is a venue in which non-EU and non-NATO Europeans can come and talk as equals to their counterparts about shared challenges, not judged by the

number of pre-accession chapters or reforms that they have fulfilled. A high-level gathering without talking points or final communiqué to negotiate, hence with less political posturing. The relevant criteria to appraise its appeal is the turnout of leaders, who keep showing up (except for the Azerbaijani and Turkish absences mentioned before). Given the absence of a secretariat, the main task of keeping the idea behind the EPC a valid and long-lasting one falls upon the countries organising the meeting on a six-monthly basis. Net of the risk of a prevalence of the single national agenda, the rotation among the holders of the EU Presidency (up to now, the Czech Republic and Spain) and non-EU members (Moldova and, next spring, the UK) as hosts of the EPC summits gives these countries the responsibility to keep the format interesting for its participants and fruitful

in terms of deliverables. The next summit in London in March 2024 might represent a test for the EPC, with seemingly significant ambition from the current British government for the ‘comeback’ of the United Kingdom on the European scene. Although informality remains an asset for the EPC, the lack of clarity can be a weakness. It is not necessarily a choice between full institutionalisation or keeping a talking shop, but rather somewhere in between, together with an agreed short set of basic guidelines and overarching objectives to guide its future summits. The question is whether the EPC is able to differentiate itself from the several existing regional initiatives, focusing on its strengths and helping its participants to juggle the emerging challenges. Otherwise, the risk is to deplete its own *raison d’être*, once the emergency scenario that led to its creation is surpassed.

Endnotes

- 1 Letta, E. (2022) “A European Confederation: a common political platform for peace”, *The Progressive Post*, 25 April.
- 2 The different points of view arose during the fifth edition of the conference series “What is progressive?” organised by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Italy, Fondation Jean Jaurès and Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI ETS) in Villa Vigoni, on 12-14 October 2023.
- 3 The Group of Twelve (2023), *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century*. Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, Paris-Berlin, 18 September.
- 4 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/12/06/>.
- 5 <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/about-berlin-process>.
- 6 <https://www.aii-ps.org/>.
- 7 <https://www.cei.int/>.
- 8 This aspect has emerged during the abovementioned conference “What is progressive?”
- 9 The proposal was made during the “What is progressive? The European Political Community from Prague to Granada” conference.
- 10 <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Georgia/Tbilisi-Silk-Road-Forum-si-incontrano-Armenia-e-Azerbaijan-227873>.

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BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA
HOW TO BUILD A VIABLE ROAD TO EU MEMBERSHIP

ABSTRACT

Since its beginning with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2005, Bosnia-Herzegovina's EU path has been marred by the country's unwillingness to gather the necessary political consensus to adopt the reforms needed to improve its functionality, its rule of law and its democratic standard. This feature has proved itself true throughout Balkan EU journey. The limits of conditionality have been overcome by Brussels' and the member states' several decisions to lower the bar and allow Sarajevo to go further. The 2022 decision by the Commission and the Council to grant BH the candidate status stems from almost purely geopolitical considerations, rather than from the effort of Bosnian institutions to reform. The same will most likely be true when, in March 2024, the Commission might recommend the Council for the opening of accession negotiations.

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POLICY BRIEF
August 2023

FEPS FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

MONTENEGRO'S POLITICAL TRANSITION
FROM DJUKANOVIĆ TO WHERE?

ABSTRACT

Since 2020, Montenegro has been marred by strong political turbulence, whose main driver has been the gradual loss of power by long-time former President Milo Đukanović and his party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which have been in power since the country introduced multipartism in 1991. Đukanović's hold on power guaranteed Montenegro's hold on Western values and Euro-Atlantic institutions, building on a strong Montenegrin national identity and decoupling from Serbia. At the same time, Montenegro became a classic case of 'hybridocracy', with a strong degree of state capture, corruption and political control of media and judiciary. Years of political tensions, due mostly to the attempts by DPS to marginalise the Serb minority in the country and to the strongly felt grievances against the preceded authoritarian rule by Đukanović, resulted in the ousting of DPS from power following the parliamentary elections in 2020, when a loose coalition of pro-Serb and civic forces – whose only common denominator was the removal of the ruling party from power – managed to form a short-lived government. Notwithstanding the ensuing instability and the persistence of the divide between pro-Serb forces and the advocates of a strong Montenegrin identity, the presidential elections in March-April 2023 saw the final demise of Đukanović with the election of Jakov Milatović as president. His recently born 'Europe Now!' Movement managed to combine pro-Serb feelings with calls for economic development, with a populist twist. Parliamentary elections in June of the same year resulted in Europe Now! gaining the most votes, although not enough to form a government alone, with DPS managing to keep a fair share of support. As Montenegro embarks on the difficult process of forming a coalition government, its commitment to Euro-Atlantic values might be put to the test.

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POLICY BRIEF
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IS A NEW PATH TO ENLARGEMENT POSSIBLE?
A LOOK AT THE PROPOSALS FOR STAGED ACCESSION

ABSTRACT

This policy brief analyses the most relevant proposals – developed both within the European institutions and by independent research centres – on the staged accession methodology for the EU enlargement process toward the Western Balkans.

It also includes a summary of the discussion held at the network meeting of Friends of the Western Balkans in June 2023, putting together the different positions emerged, the uncertainties declared, and the new proposals developed during the discussion. Finally, the policy brief highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, indicating which aspects can be improved.

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POLICY BRIEF
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FEPS FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

EMBRACING THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES' EU ACCESSION AT PRESENT
A VITAL QUESTION MARK FOR THE EU

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the challenges and geopolitical shifts impacting the European Union (EU) enlargement process for the Western Balkan (WB) region. Concerns over democratic institutions and reluctance of some EU member countries have significantly slowed down the enlargement process. To overcome obstacles, the EU has been pushing in the region both the reforms needed but also the idea of reaching regional integration as a way to enhance welfare, growth, and stability. However, these strategies have not yet yielded the desired results.

The outbreak of Covid-19, geopolitical tensions, and an increasingly confrontational global environment might well compel the EU to reassess its regional engagement and provide a credible enlargement path for the WB. Yet, reforms are not only needed in the WB, but also in the EU to make its decision-making process more efficient. Notwithstanding current obstacles, the shifting global order and the influence of external actors in the region make the WB inclusion within the EU of vital importance for the European security and stability at large.

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FORGING EUROPE'S LEADERSHIP
GLOBAL TRENDS, RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AND THE RISK OF A REGRESSIVE WORLD