



The European Political Community: **PUTTING POLITICS FIRST?**



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has upended the political constellation of the wider Europe. The aspirations for an "overlapping periphery" and "buffer zones" have been replaced with the reality of a "reterritorialization" of the European space intended to take place around a bold proposition for the newly-established European Political Community. The upcoming Summit in Chisinau, Moldova on June 1st should be used to set the tone of what this new body should achieve and what it cannot.

The European Political Community (EPC) was launched in Prague on October 6th of 2022 in the presence of 44 European heads of state and government, including all 27 Member States of the EU, as well as governments of neighbouring European countries, most notably the United Kingdom, Ukraine and Turkey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Denmark and the other 43 invited Member States should concentrate on a handful workable objectives and a longer-term vision for the EPC. This includes:

- **Institutions:** Envisage the EPC as a waiting room for future EU enlargements and not a substitute. This would include organizing intermediate decision-making formats on the way to full accession within this platform
- **Power:** Use the EPC as a platform for high-level political interaction and alliance-building. The meeting of 44 European states should be a living statement to the steadfast opposition to Russian aggression
- **Norms:** The EPC should spur and encourage the emergence of a Track II process to reimagine, at the level of intellectual and citizen activism, the political map of the wider Europe in bolder and normatively meaningful ways.

The initiative came in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its stated aim was to address the shortcomings of the European institutional architecture. While the project is a direct emanation of the French government, its objectives, perspectives and potential as an intergovernmental forum for political and strategic discussions about the future of Europe remain unexplored. The gathering has already planned three future summits (in Chişinău, Moldova; Granada, Spain and the United Kingdom) but it is as yet unclear if and how the new format can contribute to the wider European security architecture in light of the war, ongoing NATO enlargement to Finland and Sweden and the EU's opt-out referendum in Denmark.

ABOUT EPC

The European Political Community is a platform for political coordination between European countries across the continent.

The EPC aims to:

- foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest
- strengthen the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent

The platform does not replace any existing organisation, structure or process, nor does it aim to create a new one at this stage.

This brief aims to spell out three questions surrounding the evolution of the EPC across three key dimensions that concern its possible institutional, policy and power-related contribution to the wider European constellation.

1) The Institutional Puzzle

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the principal European Union policies devoted to the European neighbourhood were in a profound crisis. The EU enlargement policy, culminating with the accession of ten Central and Eastern European states in 2004-2007 was arguably one of the most successful foreign policies ever devised by the EU. It was premised on the assumption that strict conditions about EU membership would drive the wholesale domestic transformation of countries wishing to enter the Union.

After this "big bang" round, however, it became apparent that the enlargement policy had started to run its course. Candidate countries in the Western Balkans and Turkey were further behind in their accession journey and the EU started to send mixed signals about the credibility of its promise of eventual accession, making them lose trust and interest in the process. Meanwhile, the EU devised successions and variations of its European Neighbourhood Policy. The policy, devised in the early 2000s, was in the words of then European Commission President Romano Prodi aimed at offering "more than a partnership and less than membership" to the ring of neighbours from Belarus in the North-East to Morocco in the South-West. Neighbours, according to the Commission, should get access to "everything but institutions". Over the years, the EU devised additional frameworks, primarily to address regional specificities: the Union for the Mediterranean (also French-sponsored) largely replaced the dormant Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy tried to address the lags in reform in Eastern Europe, both at a bilateral and regional levels.

After a slow start, the ENP itself went through a restructuring promising increased support under the heading of the 3Ms (money, market and mobility), in the understanding that the most attractive prize for neighbouring countries was the free movement of people and labour as well as access to the huge EU internal market. However, this rapid succession of policy changes also highlights the inadequacy of the offers being made and the dissatisfaction of the neighbouring countries with regard to those offers. The policies clearly aimed to provide a framework for enhanced cooperation but never achieved their goal of providing an alternative to full membership. On the contrary, they established the principle (at the time dominant also in European intellectual discourse) of a buffer zone between the EU and non-EU countries: the main intuition being that countries and regions would not necessarily have to choose their alliances but be able to float in a hybrid zone of autonomy and collaboration.

The successive Russian invasions in Georgia (2008), Crimea and Donbass (2014) and then finally in the 2022 war in Ukraine made apparent that this institutional and indeed conceptual set-up is untenable. On the one hand, the limited advances of neighbouring countries have achieved little with respect to their integration into the EU and have not provided sufficient incentives for domestic reforms. On the other hand, these relatively timid initiatives have not changed Russia's posture, which has always been to regard the region as its near abroad or sphere of interest, which led it to launch the first assault on Ukraine in 2014 in the aftermath of a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement that Ukraine signed with the European Union.

2) Enter the European Political Community

The war has resulted in a number of hitherto unthinkable institutional consequences for the wider European power constellation, from the Finnish and Swedish NATO-application to Denmark's opt-out referendum. It also paved the way for an accelerated procedure regarding the applications of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia for EU membership. This development, clearly spurred by a political and emotional reaction to Russia's invasion, immediately raised a number of questions inside the EU. To start with, the decision sparked reflection regarding the length of the process: the experience so far suggests that fulfilling the criteria for membership requires countries to spend at least a decade negotiating with Brussels. Tellingly, in the aftermath of the decision regarding the granting of candidate status to Ukraine, French officials hinted that Kyiv would not become a member before 2035. Similarly, the process of accession raises questions in relation to long-standing candidates in the Balkans and Turkey, whose own accession negotiations have lost impetus in recent years.

Above all, the enlargement dynamic spurred on by the war led to a re-examination of the EU enlargement process resulting in it being no longer considered as a purely technocratic exercise of regulatory approximation but one in which the political and even symbolic component becomes central. The gap between the rigor and rigidity of

the technocratic exercise and the political significance of the membership signal has become untenably wide in recent years. This has led some scholars to envisage a staggered enlargement process where acceding countries would become full EU members gradually, starting with the blocks or clusters of chapters where they have completed accession negotiations.¹ This, however, made apparent the need to fill the years in the lead-up to accession with a meaningful proposition that could contribute to ensuring that the candidate countries in particular are able to maintain momentum and domestic support for the process.

The European Political Community seems to fit in this context. While at the time of writing it remains an empty shell as regards its policy contribution and ultimate objectives, it is self-evident that its initial and more prominent *raison d'être* concerns the phase leading up to the point at which the EU enlargement process enters the realm of realistic possibility. The initiative aims to fill the political vacuum that an excessively technocratic process has created. The war has shattered the implicit notion of an "overlapping neighbourhood" between the European Union and Russia, where a mutually rewarding cooperation could be envisaged. Having 44 Heads of State and Government meet in Prague during the largest territorial conflict on European soil was a statement of alliance, solidarity and for some (e.g. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) open defiance of Russia. The European Political Community summit unwittingly but firmly stated that there is no space for ambiguity and win-win solutions; it is a binary and normative statement: either in or out.

3) Politics first, but for what purpose

The next necessary and urgent question is to understand what this political platform and profile can be used for. This concerns first the questions of ownership and organization. While the biannual summits are being planned on a rotating basis, the project and its priorities (including in the countries lined up to host the Summit) are for the time being stewarded by France. According to internal briefings with the author, a related question that has arisen is the matter of the creation of a secretariat. This level of centralization in Paris has

arguably helped give the project the political profile that it has acquired so far but it also risks stifling it. The start of the EPC in this respect is reminiscent of the Union of the Mediterranean, which was similarly born out of a French initiative, although it has now lain dormant for several years. Similarly, France is traditionally known to harbour sceptical views on the EU enlargement process leading it in 2005 to insert a constitutional clause requiring a popular referendum to approve future accessions. It is therefore not unreasonable for some neighbouring countries to suspect that the EPC is construed as a substitute for future enlargement. In order to escape this twin risk, it is crucial that the ownership and political impetus of the process rest with the other Member States preparing and hosting the subsequent summits.

The focus of policy planners in Paris and elsewhere has been placed, understandably, on delivering a number of concrete achievements that could give greater visibility to the EPC and its proposition.

One notable proposition focuses on the need to embed the institutional process leading to a “staggered enlargement” process into the EPC, thereby making the latter the forum in which an enlarging European Council could meet and deliberate, in various sectoral formations also including candidate countries that have met the EU’s criteria.² Ideally certain votes could be taken by “rough consensus,” a formula used for technical deliberations that could bypass the unanimity that has plagued European decision-making.³ One could foresee “flagship” projects being launched around issues such as the energy policy, migration and foreign policy that would give strategic significance to the EPC’s broad membership. Finally, there is the legal personality of the EPC which could be envisaged as a mixed agreement between the EU, its Member States and the 17 non-EU participants.

More broadly, the EPC should constitute an opportunity for reimagining the wider European power constellation, although this exercise would have to overcome the spurious notions that animated the EU’s various neighbourhood policies to deliver real ownership and participation for both non-EU governments and their citizens. A parallel “Track II” process could be initiated at the non-governmental level to give conceptual and normative form to a new idea of Europe that the EPC is meant to inspire. Not an ‘imperial’ one of overlapping peripheries and allegiances at the periphery, but a ‘post imperial’⁴ one, where Europe is once again a territorially delimited space, where the ins and the outs are clearly determined. This “reterritorialization” of Europe, where identity and belonging are once again tied to a rather modern (as opposed to post-modern) notion of space, would not necessarily breed new policies but would herald the most significant conceptual and strategic shift since the end of the Cold War—an outcome only proportional to the extraordinary shock that Europe and Europeans have experienced since Russia’s invasion.

NOTES

- 1 Michael Emerson and Steven Blockmans: “Next Steps for EU Enlargement –Forwards or Backwards?” CEPS Guest Report, November 2022
- 2 Alexander Stubb: “The case for a confederal Europe” European Council on Foreign Relations, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-case-for-a-confederal-europe/>
- 3 Stefan Maier, Jean Pisani Ferry, Daniela Schwarzer, Shain Vallee: “Enlarging and deepening: giving substance to the European Political Community” Bruegel Policy Brief 22 September 2022.
- 4 See also Timothy Garton Ash: “Postimperial Empire: How the War in Ukraine Is Transforming Europe” Foreign Affairs, May/June 2023

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