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## The European Political Community – a wildcard for a transition period

**The jury is still out on the EPC. Its origins lie in geopolitics as much as in integration policy. Its purpose is not clear, its record is mixed at best, and its future depends on how much political commitment EU actors invest in the project. It is a wildcard or flexible reserve for a transition period. As long as the EPC does no harm – to other institutions and political processes, namely EU enlargement – and as long as invited heads of state and government attend the summits, it is a unique opportunity to meet informally on an equal footing and sort out issues that concern the emerging security order in a Europe of confrontation. Therefore, and considering France’s stakes in the EPC, Germany should play a constructive role in this format.**

What is the European Political Community (EPC) and what is its political value? It is still easier to say what the EPC is not than what it is and what it is for. However, after three summits in Prague, Chisinau and Granada, some clarifications can be made. The EPC does not harm the EU and its aspirations to extend the zone of peace and stability to Wider Europe. There is no urgent need to press for decisions on the future of the EPC, either as a talking shop or as a fully-fledged institution. It is quite plausible that the new kid on the block will be a flexible reserve in the current period of transition of the European order rather than a component of this new order. The EPC in its current form reflects a general trend in international politics that favours informalisation and high-level diplomacy over the creation of solid institutions with proper membership and decision-making rules. Germany should follow the EPC experiment closely and take a constructive approach to unleashing its diplomatic potential.

### The EPC today – portrait of a young venue

The EPC is best understood as a case of summit diplomacy, characterised by informality, free, open and direct exchanges between equals, a more or less exclusive multilateralism and, above all, as an example of conspicuous governance. This means that the performative act is the most important one in that leaders publicly show that they govern. They make the summit an end in itself that will be remembered as the family photo taken in the beautiful surroundings of Prague Castle or the Alhambra. In this respect, criticising the EPC’s lack of agency does not hit the mark. The EPC is a get-together of European countries with whom the EU has “close relations” or that wish to have relations with the EU. There is also a seat at the table for the three presidents of the EU – the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament – so that two supranational institutions are present in an otherwise strictly inter-governmental setting. What brings them together is the condemnation of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. The EPC was born out of war and is the EU’s response to the collapse of a cooperative European security order. The 27 EU leaders agreed in June 2022 that the EPC should “address issues of common interest so as to strengthen security, stability and prosperity of the European continent”. The 47 participating countries from Reykjavik to Baku uphold the principles of the UN Charter, which – in the absence of an explicit normative framework for the EPC – is their common denominator. However, Azerbaijan’s military intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh shows how fragile the commitment to the principles of non-aggression and stability is among the participants. The EPC is not a community of values. Azerbaijan and Turkey are states under authoritarian

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rule (neither of which were represented in Granada). Other countries such as Hungary and Serbia display significant shortcomings with regard to democracy and the rule of law. Qualifying for participation is not very demanding.

The suspicion, both inside and outside the EU, that the EPC is merely a repeat of the Fouchet Plans and Mitterrand's idea of a European Confederation, or just another French move to create a placeholder or substitute to EU membership, has been silenced for the time being. Those who want to join the EU take their chances. Hosting the summit in Chisinau put Moldova on the political map and it received a show of support for its EU candidacy and solidarity against Russian hybrid interventions. President Zelensky made a stopover in Granada to appeal not only to the 27 EU countries to unite so that “we win in Ukraine”. Western Balkan leaders are quite relaxed because the EU increased the frequency of its bi- and multilateral meetings with the six countries apart from the EPC (see the Berlin process and EU-Western Balkan summits) and with Serbia and Kosovo in terms of mediation and crisis management. All agree that the EPC is not about integration, but is a “platform for political coordination” and a show of unity against Russia's aggression.

### Form follows function and events set the agenda

The EPC's place in the overall institutional and political landscape is uncertain. It is experimental in the sense that form follows function. For example, most participants now see it as a venue for multilateral exchanges, unilateral crisis talks and crisis management. There is little appetite to institutionalise the EPC. It could be seen as a temporary substitute for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which will be paralysed as long as Russia seeks military confrontation and does not enter into talks to end its military aggression. However, after that, duplication with the institutionally much stronger OSCE would become too obvious and the added value of the EPC questionable.

The agenda is set not only by the host governments, but mostly by current events, good or bad. In the absence of

both a mission statement and written conclusions, and even – as in Granada – without a final press conference, this is a very haphazard and unstructured process. So far, a number of focuses have emerged that cover both high and low politics, if that distinction still makes sense: peace and security, energy resilience, climate policy, interconnectivity and migration. France and the UK want to complement and strengthen joint efforts at EPC level that serve “collective resilience” in energy, infrastructure, connectivity, cybersecurity and countering disinformation. President Macron mentioned several issues at the closing press conference in Prague: the protection of critical infrastructure; the fight against cybercrime and disinformation; regional projects in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and the Caucasus; a resilience fund for Ukraine; and common policies for young people. Many of these issues are also regularly addressed in the Eastern Partnership platforms and in the EU's bilateral association relations. Redundancies can be tolerated as long as they strengthen rather than hinder policy implementation. It can, however, not be assumed that the EPC could make any contribution other than to give impetus to projects, organise political will and secure additional funding from participating countries. For any operational matters, the EPC countries will have to rely on EU institutions or individual EPC countries.

When it comes to the EPC's original core business – security and stability in Europe – the record is mixed at best. While there have been efforts to bring conflicting parties together, the EPC failed to do so in Granada, whether it was the armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the displacement of people in Nagorno-Karabakh or the attack by a Serb in northern Kosovo that fuelled tensions and violence. Addressing specific crisis situations in Europe and bringing together coalitions of countries that help mediate and mitigate these conflicts is the minimum that should be expected from the EPC. Nor have we heard any meaningful exchanges on the broader issues of the future European security order, not to mention initiatives that could become a precursor for talks to end the war and give security guarantees to Ukraine in a new overall settlement. A more structured approach to summit preparation is compatible with non-institutionalisation.

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Governments should ensure the handover from one host country to the next and be responsible for a public follow-up to the meeting. The March 2024 summit will be the next test case. The UK is a political heavyweight, especially on security issues. It is an outsider to the EU and its Prime Minister wants to seize the opportunity for the UK's comeback on the European stage. Prime Minister Sunak plans to put illegal migration – a divisive issue inside the EU – at the top of the agenda.

### Germany gives EPC a chance

The German Government was slow to warm to the EPC project. Reservations were mainly due to the EPC's lack of substance, the context of enlargement and the timing. When Berlin realised that a number of non-EU countries were not so negative and showed interest in the originally French proposal, the German Government was more open to give it a try. The European Council's formula in June 2022 – such a framework would not replace existing EU policies and instruments, notably enlargement – reflects this position. The government does not see the future of the EPC as a new level of decision-making. That might differ from French ambitions. Since the summitry is “Chefsache” and thus falls within the remit of the Federal Chancellery, the Federal Foreign Office, which shows limited ambition to improve the EPC and is quite satisfied with its loose character, is not part of the equation. Unlike France, Germany has no EPC special representative or contact point. The Federal Chancellor actively uses – together with President Macron – the setting for mediation between conflicting parties in the South Caucasus and the Western Balkans. The German Government did not officially endorse the recommendations of the Franco-German expert group on reform and EU enlargement. Its proposal to transform the EPC into a second outer tier of the EU with stronger institutional ties and the Commission as a key coordinator seems to go quite beyond what Berlin currently has in mind.

Other features of the EPC are particularly interesting from Berlin's point of view. The involvement of the UK, the informality of the talks and meetings, especially with the leaders of smaller and medium-sized coun-

tries, with whom Germany wants to intensify relations and cooperation or rebuild trust after what is now recognised as a failed Russia and Eastern policy. Germany was receptive to non-EU participants who appreciated that the EPC was an opportunity to meet on an equal footing, in marked contrast to the extremely asymmetrical relationship in the context of accession negotiations. The EPC can therefore help to ease relations between the EU and candidates for accession.

### An inclusive multilateral geopolitical forum

The EPC gives the EU a foretaste of what running a Wider Europe might mean in the future. The EU is Europe's dominant organisation and its economic and political centre of gravity. All 20 non-EU countries (with the exception of the UK, Armenia and Azerbaijan) that participate in the EPC are associated with the EU, including ten (potential) candidates for membership. Given the EU's weakness as a security actor, it should first of all increase its capacities with respect to its Common Security and Defence Policy and its collective weight inside NATO and also the OSCE. When it comes to quality of democracy and the resilience of European societies, the EU should also step up its commitment to the work of the Council of Europe. The EPC is certainly not an umbrella for these organisations and other multilateral formats in the Wider Europe. However, as a comparatively agile format, it might temporarily fill a gap in European diplomacy as an inclusive multilateral geopolitical forum. It is a wildcard in a transition period and could function as a flexible reserve. Its record so far is not impressive: it is still far from providing ideas for the newly emerging security architecture in Europe or easing bilateral conflicts. Granada was almost a failure. Berlin and Paris, perhaps together with Warsaw, should signal that they expect the UK Government to prepare an agenda for the next summit in March 2024 that centres around the goals set by the European Council in June and echoed at EPC's first meeting in October 2022 in order to “strengthen the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent”.

## Paper Series

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#### The series

Launched in 2022 following a proposal made by French President Emmanuel Macron, the European Political Community (EPC) brings together over 40 countries across the continent. A response to the security challenge posed by Russia's war against Ukraine, it seeks to reinforce Europe's resilience, prosperity and geostrategic clout. Three summits have been held so far in an attempt to advance concrete projects and intergovernmental cooperation. However, the initiative is still perceived differently in European capitals and much remains to be done to exploit its full potential. This series of publications, piloted by the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe and the Genshagen Foundation, gathers views from Paris, Berlin, Warsaw and Vienna on the EPC's capabilities and limitations and discusses its development.

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