

# European Political Community: A New Strategic Framework on the Horizon?

**Ferenc Németh**

Research Fellow, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs;  
PhD Student, Corvinus University of Budapest

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**Abstract:** Although an ambitious initiative, the European Political Community (EPC) has left experts wondering as to what it will entail in practice. Its greatest advantage (and disadvantage) is that it can still become anything countries happen to agree on: an inter-governmental, non-institutionalized platform, where leaders can discuss strategic questions of the continent without visible commitments, written statements, or pressure to deliver results. When it comes to the enlargement of the Western Balkans and the Associated Trio, the EPC is unlikely to speed up the process or deliver tangible steps forward. Its added value for the (potential) candidate countries remains that they are also included in the debates concerning European questions of strategic importance.

**Keywords:** European Political Community, EU, enlargement policy, Western Balkans.

## French ambitions, multifaceted challenges, and the war in Ukraine: the birth of the European Political Community

Although the idea of the European Political Community (EPC) first appeared in May 2022, its roots can be traced back earlier (European Parliament Multimedia Centre, 2022). The past decade has been marred

by a series of external and internal crises in the EU (the migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic), which have urged the EU to undergo a serious face-lift. A comprehensive reform with the aim of creating a more resilient and self-reliant EU, to become the major and credible political actor that its economic size would imply. At the same time, debates on how the EU as an institution must work more effectively and whether it is the capitals or the supranational institutions that have the final word in decision-making have been shaping EU politics in recent years. Clearly, the EU is at a crossroads: finding a common voice on any issue is as difficult as it can get, which hinders the community's prospects of becoming a credible and proactive member of the international community.

This political and institutional climate resulted in an EU-wide and multi-level consultation in 2021, in the form of the Conference on the Future of Europe (Juzová, Marciacq, and Schlie, 2021). At the end of the Conference in May 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron not only outlined the success of the year-long period, he also announced his vision of the future of the continent itself, now known as the EPC. Although it was presented in vague terms and without substantial detail, the EPC soon became the most discussed concept concerning the future of the European continent.

The psyche of the French views on European politics shaped the initial concept of the EPC without a doubt. Macron had already called for a comprehensive EU reform in 2019, as well as for having the relationship between the EU and its direct neighbourhood rethought (and possibly reorganized). Moreover, ever since entering office, Macron has tried to be the driving force behind the potential EU reforms; thus, the core idea of a more independent Europe (as foreseen by the EPC) is not new in French political circles. The departure of the United Kingdom from the EU, the Trump administration's stance on the NATO/EU, as well as China's ever-growing presence (and influence) both globally and in Europe had initiated the concept of strategic autonomy, predating the EPC.

In addition to the multi-dimensional (internal and external) challenges, major shifts in European politics and the French President's ambitions to take the leading role within the EU also paved the way for the grand idea of the EPC. Brexit in 2020 and Chancellor Angela Merkel's departure

from power in 2021 created a serious power vacuum within the EU. Although the rivalry between Germany and France over the unofficial title of the “leader of the EU” was visible even during the Merkel era, the leadership change in Berlin presented a prime opportunity for Paris to take the driver’s seat in reframing the initiatives about the future of the EU to its own liking (Cohen, 2022).

Although the arrival of the EPC to the centre stage of European politics in 2022 can be explained by the EU’s own (lack of) political developments and struggles, the greatest push was certainly Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. The war in Ukraine that started in February 2022 has not only been a major geopolitical shift for Europe, it has also accelerated idea(s) about the future of the continent. The EPC, subsequently, became one of the biggest beneficiaries of the need for the EU to respond reasonably to the changing security and political environment of Europe.

## **From Ukraine to Prague and Chişinău**

The war in Ukraine crystallized the initial French idea by May 2022. In a sense, Ukraine shaped the basis for renewed conversations about the future of the continent in a major way. As in recent years the EU lacked mutually acceptable, tangible goals that could serve as a common denominator for all nations involved, Ukraine has also changed this trajectory. The actors represented within the EPC (including all EU member states, the UK, potential and candidate countries, and the representatives of EU institutions) have condemned Russia’s aggression in Ukraine on various multinational platforms for the sake of European security and peace. Capitalizing on this seemingly unanimous and never-seen-before understanding regarding the importance of stability, the idea of the EPC was born.

The kick-off meeting of the EPC, held on 6 October, 2022 in Prague, resulted in mixed reactions. Some considered it a success, as there had been no real expectations towards the conference. In addition, the fact that 44 state leaders and EU top officials would come to the Czech capital just a few months after the idea of the EPC had been announced was noteworthy. The participation of the UK (*The UK has been given an opportunity to help shape the future of the European Political Community*

– *it should take it*, 2022), which had seemed reluctant about the platform at first, was also hailed as a French success, as Macron wanted to bring London closer to the continent once again (Droin and Martinez, 2022).

The first meeting also established how European leaders wish to label their cooperation under the EPC. The countries would be part of “a community of shared principles, values and cooperation in various fields”, which first and foremost includes security and the reduction of Europe’s vulnerabilities and exposure to malicious influences. It also became clear that solidarity with Ukraine (and in parallel, the condemnation of Russia’s actions in Ukraine) would serve as the glue that keeps this politically heterogeneous group of 40+ states together.

Hailed as a success by its ability to bring various leaders (including hostile parties) together, there has also been much criticism projected towards the EPC after the Prague Summit. These remarks mainly concern the initiative’s lack of clear focus and structure (its non-institutionalized nature), and the means through which its objectives (i.e. peace and security) would be achievable (Droin and Martinez, 2022). Moreover, the missed opportunity of having synergies with the already existing European and regional institutions (such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the EU) has led experts to believe that the EPC would be just another platform yet again.

The greatest benefit of the EPC, however, comes from its greatest weakness, its flexibility. At the current stage, the initiative, kept as an inter-governmental, elite-led political forum, could serve as a place where the most pressing permanent or ad-hoc issues could be discussed behind closed doors, without outside pressure to deliver solutions. The lack of a fixed focus gives the EPC larger space to operate in to map out the future trajectories of Europe.

Despite its flaws concerning the substantive parts of the initiative, the kick-off meeting in Prague was a political success. The months leading up to the next gathering in the capital of Moldova, however, passed by without any major development about the EPC. The second summit, to be held on 1 June in Chişinău, defines the EPC as a “platform for political coordination among European countries” to discuss topics including peace and security, energy resilience and climate actions (European Political Community, 2022). It is doubtful that the meeting will create a clearer

understanding of how the objectives of the EPC will be carried out in practice; rather, issues of great importance for the entire continent are expected to be centre stage once again. Finally, it is also yet to be seen how cooperation among more than forty states under the EPC umbrella will hold up after the war in Ukraine ends. Questions concerning Russia's place in Europe and regional structures (such as the EPC or OSCE) remain open.

## **EU enlargement meets the European Political Community**

The Prague Summit of the EPC has left many questions open; one of these is its connection to EU enlargement policy (Pierini, 2022). Although all countries with a “European perspective” (the Western Balkans, Türkiye, and the Associated Trio) were present, little attention was paid to their respective paths to the EU. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has made the leading powers of Europe (France, in particular) realize that their approach to neighbourhood (and possibly enlargement) policy must be rethought. Hence, how can the EPC's vision for the Western Balkans and the EU accession process of the region be assessed?

Since the EPC can be considered a “love child” of France, the standpoints of Paris on future EU enlargement must not be overlooked. The French veto that blocked opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019, its overall reluctance over the Western Balkans' preparedness in key areas (including rule of law, the fight against corruption and organized crime, and the high level of asylum seekers from the region) and its long-standing stance on Kosovo's visa liberalization has made France a difficult but dominant actor in enlargement policy. The French President, having been an open sceptic concerning EU enlargement for years, as well as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have acknowledged the need to “re-design the European Union' relationship with its neighbourhood”; however, a comprehensive EU (institutional) reform must be a prerequisite to that (Mayer, Pisani-Ferry, Schwarzer, and Vallée, 2022). Knowing the context of France's standpoint and actions, the EPC has understandably raised many eyebrows in the Western Balkan states.

The approach of the EPC (and France) towards (potential) candidate countries has gone through a major change since its announcement in May 2022. In the first few weeks, the EPC had a closer connection to EU enlargement policy: the concept itself resembled the French idea of concentric circles, with the EU being in the centre, with a possibility for non-EU states to gain access to certain fields and deepen their institutional relations with the EU prior to or without gaining membership status. Starting from June 2022, however, the emphasis has been placed on strategic cooperation among states (no matter their status with or relations to the EU), and less attention has been paid to enlargement as such (Nguyen, 2022).

There seems to be an agreement that the EPC and the EU enlargement policy do not go hand in hand; rather, they are two separate processes without any (in)direct impact on each other. Charles Michel, President of the European Council, has even stated that the EPC “aims to go beyond enlargement and will steer political dialogue and coordination, mainly on security issues, with like-minded countries, those that have an ambition to join the EU and those that do not” (European Parliament Think Tank, 2022). Consequently, there seems to be a consensus among EU institutions and leading member states (including France and Germany) that participation in the EPC will not result in direct, enlargement-related benefits for the countries that wish to join the EU in the foreseeable future. In this case, however, what is the added value of the EPC to the countries of the Western Balkans?

The Western Balkans met the original idea of the EPC with a high degree of suspicion. Their EU integration path has been challenging enough with new rules, benchmarks, and even methodology thrown into the field; hence, there was a lingering fear that the EPC would attach additional criteria to their accession process or, as a worst-case scenario, it would side-line EU enlargement policy for good. It was, furthermore, perceived as yet another waiting room for candidate countries, only with dubious rewards that might come as a compensatory reward instead of a clear commitment to fully integrating these group of countries into the EU (Droin and Martinez, 2022). The months that followed the announcement of the EPC could therefore be described as the Western Balkans taking on a “wait-and-see attitude” in hopes of a clearer picture as to what the initiative can bring to the table (Marciacq, 2022).

The fact that the EPC will formally have nothing to do with EU enlargement policy is a mixed development for all (potential) candidate countries. On the brighter side, there will not be new conditions set under the framework of the EPC; on the other hand, the initiative will not reenergize the enlargement process or make it slightly easier for countries to get closer to certain EU structures (General Secretariat of the Council 2022). This also implies that the EPC is unlikely to speed up or change the overall course of the EU enlargement policy, let alone the stances of certain sceptical EU member states on the (geopolitical) importance of enlargement for the Western Balkans. The region is stuck with stagnation in terms of the enlargement process, dubious signals from EU member states about their willingness to have the Western Balkans as full-fledged members, as well as plans of “staged integration” and “phase-ins”.

In light of no tangible progress in the Western Balkans’ EU bid, what is the added value of the EPC to the region? The EPC has promised permanent and direct dialogue between participating (European) states, including the ones that have been waiting for EU membership for years; this embodies great potential for the region (Navracsics, 2022). Topics of strategic importance for the entire continent will be discussed with the involvement of the Western Balkan states; and it is high time to have their voices heard at the table and be part of the conversation that, as part of Europe, impacts the Western Balkans just as much as it does EU member states. In addition, judging by the example of Armenia and Azerbaijan at the Prague Summit, meetings could potentially enable countries with complicated relations (i.e. Serbia and Kosovo; North Macedonia and Bulgaria) to have an additional platform where their relations and path toward normalisation could be discussed (Brzozowski, 2022).

## Conclusions

The EPC as an initiative still leaves a lot to be desired, and it remains unknown whether it will be remembered in a few years’ time. Given its vague substance, it is highly unlikely that this idea could turn into a new European strategic framework. On the other side, its greatest advantage

is its flexibility: an ad-hoc high-level, inter-governmental forum open to all European countries to discuss the most pressing or strategic issues of the continent. Although there are still doubts regarding the durability of the platform and whether it will be able to pass the test of time, especially after the war in Ukraine ends, having an inter-governmental platform about strategic questions that encompasses the Western Balkans is an added value for both Europe and the countries of the region.

The greatest advantage of the EPC for the Western Balkans is its inclusivity: an inter-governmental platform where leaders can meet and possibly discuss regional affairs without any significant pressure and mingle with EU leaders. Discussing issues of strategic importance for the entire continent is also key to the Western Balkans, especially given their geopolitical situation. The EPC should nevertheless work on raising awareness of the Western Balkans' geopolitical importance and the added value of having the region incorporated into the EU.

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