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The European Political Community from Paris to Chisinau an idea taking shape?

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Summary

- The European Political Community (EPC), an idea put forward by President Macron of France, echoing a similar proposal made by former Italian PM Enrico Letta, was launched and gained traction in response to the challenge posed by Russia's war against Ukraine.
- The imperative of focusing on security and forming a common front against Russian aggression served as a key rationale for expanding the EPC beyond a value-based community of like-minded democratic states.
- The first EPC Summit was held in Prague in October 2022. A successful gathering of 44 states, including countries with still-strong ties to Russia, it gave the sense that a common pan-European front was gradually forming against Moscow. Seven priority areas were identified: energy security, critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, youth, migration, regional cooperation in the Caucasus and Black Sea area, and resilience funding.
- The second Summit took place on 1st June 2023 near Chisinau, the capital of the Republic of Moldova, a small landlocked state in Eastern Europe which only recently achieved candidate status for EU accession. The Summit was a strong signal of support for Moldova's efforts to consolidate its escape from Russia's stranglehold, but also for its neighbour, embattled Ukraine.
- Discussions in Chisinau addressed energy security, transport networks and connectivity, cybersecurity and the integrity of critical infrastructure. Strategic

cooperation was another prominent topic. Leaders reiterated the importance of restoring peace by providing increased military support to Ukraine, but also combating hybrid threats in Moldova through the recently launched EU Partnership Mission (EUPAM).

- At present, the EPC format seems to be pursuing two separate agendas: structuring the EU's relations with its neighbours, and rallying the European family against Russia. Articulating and balancing these objectives properly will not be easy, and would seem to require the removal of stumbling blocks and a clarification of the level of institutionalisation at which the EPC would be required to operate.
- Thus, as the EPC Summit moves next to Spain and then to the United Kingdom, there is still no comprehensive consensus as to what the overall purpose of the EPC is, and whether and to what extent it should be institutionalised, which is to say endowed with a secretariat, separate funding and a certain degree of functional autonomy. A number of influential countries, including France and the U.K., see the EPC's greatest advantage as residing in its informality and lack of institutionalisation.
- However, it could be argued that for the EPC's strategic engagement in security, energy and connectivity to be successful, some level of institutionalisation and greater involvement by the EU will be required. At the same time, for the EPC to maintain its added value, it will need to preserve significant pockets of informality and flexibility of process.

THE PROPOSAL FOR a European Political Community (EPC) made by Emmanuel Macron on 9th May 2022 in Strasbourg was a response to the historic geopolitical challenges posed for Europe by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Launched in Prague on 6th October 2022, the EPC has since gained traction in Europe's capitals. A second Summit took place in Moldova on 1st June 2023. While a consensus has emerged on the need to continue and upgrade the initiative, much remains to be done to delineate its contours, flesh out its strategic purpose and agree on the mechanics of its workings.

Takeaways from the EPC's bumpy road to Chisinau

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The French proposal to launch the EPC, at first, took most European countries aback. While it echoed former Italian PM Enrico Letta's call to establish a European Confederation, it was at the same time reminiscent of the stillborn eponymous project launched by François Mitterrand and Vaclav Havel in 1989-1991. The Conference on the Future of Europe had just ended, and the idea was on thin ice, when it started circulating in European capitals, with a French non-paper in June 2022. Countries in Eastern Europe, wary of France's ties to Russia and its traditional reluctance towards EU enlargement, initially cast a critical eye on it; Germany, which had hardly been consulted, refrained from commenting; and several countries suspected the French initiative to be a yet another attempt at slowing down or disrupting the EU's accession policy.

However, the full-scale war in Ukraine imposed new geopolitical realities on Europe and, after the March 2022 Versailles Summit, at which EU leaders declared their determination to rise to the challenge of Russian aggression, the need for bolder initiatives, driven by creative strategic thinking that would seek to unite the European family and its like-minded members, became more apparent. The Council's decision, under the French Presidency, to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status in June 2022 helped dismiss fears that the EPC would sound the death knell for EU enlargement. The inclusion of the United Kingdom in EPC deliberations also helped to show the new initiative as clearly distinct from the EU's enlargement policy. And it is in that context that the EPC's ambition to coordinate policy-making in Europe from a political perspective, and with a scope broader than that of the European Union, eventually gained traction.

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The first Summit of the EPC took place in Prague on 6th October 2022, with 44 participating states. The initial plan to convene only democratic European nations that subscribed to shared core values had to be diluted to allow the participation of leaders with questionable or non-existent democratic credentials, such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey or İlham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. It was therefore Charles Michel's vision of a geopolitical community extending from Reykjavik to Baku that prevailed at the Prague Summit: the imperatives of security and forming a common front against Russian aggression served as a key rationale for expanding the EPC beyond a value-based community.

Besides sending a strong signal of geopolitical unity, the Prague Summit also laid the foundations for the EPC as an intergovernmental, non-specialised forum governed by the principle of sovereign equality. It allowed representatives from EU and non-EU states to hold frank discussions on an equal footing on a series of issues, and to mediate informal side-talks, with Armenia and Azerbaijan or Serbia and Kosovo. This informality

and participation on an equal-footing constituted much of the value-added of the Prague Summit, which ended without a final leaders' statement. Instead, a list of seven challenges were identified: energy security, critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, youth, migration, regional cooperation in the Caucasus and Black Sea area, and resilience funding.

Stability, connectivity and security: the Summit of Chisinau

Moldova is striving fervently towards EU accession and viewed the Chisinau summit as an opportunity to affirm its role as a serious European partner and as a contributor to European debates on strategic challenges facing the continent.

The second EPC Summit took place on 1st June 2023 in the Castle of Mimi, near Chisinau. It convened 45 State representatives as well as the leaders of EU institutions. With so many delegations visiting Moldova on this occasion, it was both the largest and the highest-level event ever organized in the small landlocked country. The logistical challenge was monumental, but it was taken up enthusiastically by the Moldovan authorities, with the assistance of a number of European partners. Engaged in an ambitious reform programme under the "Agenda 2030" banner, Moldova is striving fervently towards EU accession and viewed the Chisinau summit as an opportunity to affirm its role as a serious European partner and as a contributor to European debates on strategic challenges facing the continent.

Because it took place in the immediate vicinity of war-torn Ukraine, in a country that has recurrently faced hybrid threats from Russia, the Chisinau summit was uncontestably an occasion to signal the EPC's solidarity and readiness to engage on the most heated fronts, in defiance of Russia's multi-vector aggressions.

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The high-level discussions, which were organized into four working streams, focused on security (e.g. countering hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns), energy (e.g. investing in energy infrastructure, advancing energy solidarity, building energy supply security and pushing for green energy investments), connectivity (e.g. boosting P2P, digital, transport and economic connectivity, cutting roaming fees) and migration (both internal and external).

As they did in Prague, France and Germany held informal side-talks with Armenia and Azerbaijan to encourage cooperation and regional security. They also brought Kosovo and Serbia together around the same table in an effort to de-escalate the serious crisis that was simmering in the Western Balkans during the Summit. However, instead of putting pressure on Serbia's autocratic regime, they chose to threaten Kosovo and once more turned a blind eye to Serbia's use of belligerent rhetoric, ongoing efforts to destabilise the Western Balkans, failure to align with EU foreign policy and strong affinities with Russia.

The highlight of the gathering was the attendance of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The Ukrainian President advocated for a resolution to the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova, the prolonged conflict which poses a threat to the Odesa region in South-Western Ukraine and is a source of significant military insecurity for Moldova. However, the Transnistrian conflict is not necessarily seen as an obstacle to Moldova's European integration. During the Summit, Josep Borrell clearly stated that Moldova could, like Cyprus, join the EU despite "having a territorial problem", to use the exact words he used to the Press upon arriving in Moldova.

The discussions also addressed energy security and connectivity within the context of the broader perspective of national sovereignty and economic security, particularly in

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light of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine. The consolidation of pan-European energy networks and improved transport connectivity were seen as potential solutions to the negative consequences that war has had for the energy security of the continent. The Chisinau summit touched upon topics such as energy integration within the EU, including the Mediterranean Hydrogen Pipeline (H2Med) from Portugal and Spain to France, as well as the improvement of transport routes to Eastern Europe. Furthermore, there was a renewed interest in cooperation to address cybersecurity and ensure the integrity of critical infrastructure, including nuclear security, for functional and safe connectivity, which can serve governments, industries and citizens.

On the sidelines of the Chisinau Summit, there were calls to expedite the enlargement process for both the Western Balkans and the new candidate states in Eastern Europe, namely Ukraine and Moldova. Georgia was encouraged by European Council President Charles Michel to demonstrate progress and move forward with its own accession process.

Strategic cooperation across the European continent was a prominent topic of discussion among the leaders. They reiterated the importance of restoring peace by providing increased military support to Ukraine and combating hybrid threats. Moldova was recognized as a clear beneficiary of the EU's support in countering malign external influences through the newly launched civilian EU Partnership Mission (EUPAM).

Overall, the leaders acknowledged the value of the European Political Community as a platform for facilitating dialogue and finding joint solutions to common issues affecting pan-European stability. The underlying message from the leaders at the Chisinau Summit emphasised the unity of European nations through dialogue and collective action against geopolitical challenges, and stronger integration in Europe.

Stumbling blocks from the Castle of Mimi to the Alhambra and beyond

The third EPC Summit will take place in Granada, Spain, on 5th October 2023. While the prospect of a Mediterranean state hosting the Summit is undoubtedly promising, Madrid has as yet hardly begun its preparations. It is thus unclear which direction Spain may want to steer the initiative towards, not to mention the fact that there may be a new government in place after the national elections planned for 23rd July. The subsequent Summits will be hosted, first, by the United Kingdom, which has expressed a strong interest in the initiative, and, in theory, by Hungary, by virtue of its Presidency of the Council in 2024. The prospect of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán hosting the fifth Summit of the EPC despite his ties to Moscow raises eyebrows.

But to really take off and affirm its value as a diplomatic forum, the EPC will need to address a series of more structural challenges and find the middle ground in the complex constellation of national interests pursued by the 45 participating states. That will be no bed of roses. No comprehensive consensus has emerged to date as to the overall purpose of the EPC, and whether it should be institutionalised (i.e. endowed with a secretariat, separate funding and a certain degree of functional autonomy).

The purpose of the initiative remains unclear. The EPC might look like an attempt to bring the EU's neighbours together after a number of negative geopolitical developments such as Brexit, the fragmentation of the Eastern Partnership (with the

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granting of an EU membership perspective to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) and the failure to make progress on the Western Balkans' accession front. While the EU as an entity does not play a formal role in the forum, its presence can be felt throughout the EPC's agenda and communication work.

This is particularly the case in the EPC's support for connectivity, which has after all been the keyword of the Berlin Process in the Western Balkans for years and a priority around which the EU has sought to organise its relationship with its neighbourhoods. The EPC could be seen as an extension – both geographical and thematic – of this agenda. While keeping the accession policy alive and revising the process to allow for more differentiation and multi-level integration, the EU could be tempted to use the EPC as a political outer circle for its neighbourhoods, even though previous attempts to organise its neighbourhoods along those lines have not proved successful.

At the same time, some European leaders have supported the creation of the EPC with a more geopolitical purpose and an anti-Russian alliance goal in mind. Through the EPC, they have sought to demonstrate Europe's unity and to reduce the influence of Russia and its satellites in our continent. Minsk and Moscow have been excluded from the start, for good reasons, and the symbolism of holding the Summits in Prague and Chisinau conveys the emphasis on solidarity with Ukraine. This geopolitical purpose has shaped the EPC's agenda in its security dimension, and could potentially also steer European efforts at reconstructing Ukraine in the future. But because it cannot be seen unequivocally as an alliance against Russia, the EPC also counts among its participating states countries which have anything but severed their ties with Moscow. This applies first and foremost to Serbia, but Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia also maintain meaningful ties with Russia.

The EPC format currently pursues both agendas: structuring the EU's relations with its neighbours and rallying the European family against Russia. One difficulty facing the EPC will be articulating and balancing these objectives in a proper way. This implies removing stumbling blocks and clarifying the level of institutionalisation on the basis of which the EPC would be required to operate. An increasing number of participating states are advocating the creation of light institutions linked to the EU. This development would be key to ensuring the continuity of the EPC's work and increasing its ability to implement projects requiring large investments, especially in the field of connectivity. However, other participating states, including the UK, France and Switzerland, are opposing this push towards institutionalisation and arguing that the initiative's advantages lie in its flexibility, intergovernmentality, informality and commitment to equal-footing status.

What course to set for the EPC?

The EPC format could potentially be used to advance both small-scale and larger initiatives. While security, energy and connectivity will remain high on the agenda, other areas of cooperation could also be explored. The informal side-talks which have taken place on the Summits' margins and sought to deal with bilateral disputes in Europe have quickly become an essential component of the EPC's work. This dimension needs to be sustained and could be extended to cover more bilateral or regional disputes. Moreover, especially in disputes between an EU member state and a candidate state, injecting a measure of intergovernmentalism into the dispute

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Regarding security, the EPC needs to prioritise the enhancement of resilience in the domains of cyber and informational security, as well as strategic communication to counter malicious influence. The EPC could serve as a platform within which states facing similar challenges could join forces, pool resources and exchange knowledge. For example, Moldova, Ukraine and others could explore joint projects aimed at combating Russian informational warfare. The EPC could also give resonance to the work the EU's civilian mission launched in April 2023 to help Moldova build its resilience.

Regarding energy security, the EPC format provides an opportunity to assess more strategically the progress made at the continental level in the fields of joint natural gas procurement and critical raw materials supply; the diversification of Europe's energy mix away from Russian gas; the consolidation of Europe's interconnected networks and critical supply chain; and the advancement of Europe's green and materials transition. To that end, the EPC will need to gain flexible access to EU funds and expertise and explore new sources of financing.

The EPC could also contribute to the push for the modernisation and expansion of pan-European transport routes, and the enhancement of cross-border infrastructure. It is especially important in the East, given the re-orientation of economic relations towards the West, but it could also benefit North-South integration.

All in all, a greater strategic engagement in security, energy and connectivity on the part of the EPC will probably require some level of institutionalisation and more involvement on the part of the EU. However, to maintain its added value, the EPC will need to preserve flexible pockets of informality in which an equal-footing status prevails, sensitive side-talks can be pursued, and small groups of participating states can join forces and innovate. For instance, the EPC could be used by some as an innovation policy lab to advance pan-European mobility in secondary education and thereby bolster pupils' sense of pan-European unity. A flagship initiative relating to the connectivity of schools and pupils would anchor the EPC to the process of consolidating the European identity.