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Uniting Europe's distant family

The European Political Community, proposed by Macron in 2022, will meet again on 1 June. How it was formed and what to expect from the summit

The proposal for a European Political Community (EPC), put forth by Emmanuel Macron on 9 May 2022 in Strasbourg, was a response to the geopolitical challenges brought about in Europe following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Launched in Prague on 6 October 2022, the EPC has since gained traction in Europe's capitals. A second Summit is about to take place on 1 June near Chisinau, Moldova. While a consensus on the necessity to advance the initiative has emerged, much remains to be done to delineate the EPC's contours, and to determine its strategic purpose and exact functioning.

The EPC's bumpy road to Chisinau

At first, the French proposal to launch the EPC took most European countries aback. Countries in Eastern Europe, wary of France's ties to Russia and its reluctance to enlarge the EU, initially cast a critical eye on it. Germany, who had hardly been consulted, refrained from commenting. And several countries suspected the initiative to be yet another attempt at disrupting the EU's accession policy.

However, the full-scale war against Ukraine and the new geopolitical realities it imposed called for bolder initiatives that would help unite the European family and its like-minded neighbours. The Council's decision in June 2022 – then under French Presidency – to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status helped to dismiss fears that the EPC would sound the death knell for EU enlargement. The inclusion of the United Kingdom in EPC reflections also contributed to profile the initiative as something clearly distinct from accession policies. It is in this context that the EPC's ambition to organise Europe from a political perspective and with a broader scope than that of the EU eventually gained traction.

The principle of informality and equal

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imperative of security had served as a key rationale for expanding the EPC beyond a value-based community and called for the participation of authoritarian countries such as Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Besides sending a strong signal of geopolitical unity, the Prague Summit laid the foundation of 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 and on a series of issues, as well as to pursue informal side talks such as with Armenia and Azerbaijan or Serbia and Kosovo. This principle of informality and equal footing constitutes to a large extent the added value of the Summit, which ended with identifying a list of seven challenges: energy security, critical infrastructures, cybersecurity, youth, migration, regional cooperation in the Caucasus and Black Sea area, and resilience funding.

What's on the agenda?

The EPC's second Summit will convene 47 State representatives as well as the leaders of the EU institutions. Representing the biggest and highest-level event ever organised in Moldova, the logistical challenge is monumental – but has been taken up enthusiastically. Engaged in an ambitious reform programme under the banner of the 'Agenda 2030', Moldova is striving for EU accession and thus views the Summit as an opportunity to affirm its role as a serious partner and to highlight its contribution to European debates.

EPC Summits are to be held twice a year, alternatively in a country holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU and in a non-EU Member state. Because it takes place in the immediate vicinity of war-torn Ukraine, this year's Chisinau Summit clearly signals the EPC's solidarity and readiness to engage on the most heated fronts.

The high-level discussions, organised in four working streams, will focus on security (e.g. countering hybrid threats and disinformation); energy (e.g. investing in energy infrastructures and pushing for green investments); connectivity (e.g. boosting digital, transport and economic connectivity) and migration (both internal and external). Informal side-talks in mini-lateral formats will keep bilateral disputes on the EPC's radar.

Stumbling stones

To really take off and highlight its added value, the EPC will need to address a series of structural challenges and find a middle ground in the complex constellation of national interests pursued by the 47 participating states. This will be no bed of roses.

The main purpose of the EPC remains blurry. Its ambition to structure Europe from a political perspective rests on partly incongruent bases. On the one hand, the EPC might look like an attempt to bring together the EU's neighbours after a range of discouraging geopolitical developments such as Brexit, the fragmentation of the Eastern Partnership initiative and the failures to 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 through the EPC's support for connectivity, which, after all, has 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 of this agenda – both geographical and thematic.

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At the same time, Europe's leaders have supported the creation of the EPC with a more geopolitical purpose: as an anti-Russian alliance. Through the EPC, they have sought to demonstrate Europe's unity and to reduce the influence of Russia and its satellites in Europe. Minsk and Moscow have been excluded from the start, and the symbolic dimension of the Summits of Prague and Chisinau conveys the emphasis on solidarity with Ukraine. But because it is not only an alliance against Russia, the EPC does also count countries among its participating states which have not severed ties with Moscow, such as Serbia.

The EPC format currently pursues these two agendas – structuring the EU's relations with its neighbours while rallying the European family against Russia. A difficulty for the EPC will be to articulate and balance these objectives adequately. This implies removing another stumbling stone and clarifying whether and to what extent the EPC should be institutionalised, i.e. endowed with a secretariat, separate funding and a certain degree of functional autonomy.

An increasing number of participating states advocate the creation of 'light institutions' and the anchoring of the role, capacities and resources of the EU within the EPC. This development would be key in ensuring the continuity of the EPC's work and would increase its ability to implement projects requiring large investments. But other participating states, including the UK, France and Switzerland, oppose this push for institutionalisation and underline that the added value of the initiative is – after all – its flexibility, informality and commitment to equal-footing status.

Which way forward for the EPC?

In terms of security, the EPC needs to prioritise the enhancement of resilience in the domains of cyber, informational security and strategic communication to counter malicious influence. It could serve as a platform through which states facing similar challenges can pool resources and exchange knowledge. For example, Moldova, Ukraine and others could explore joint projects aimed at combating Russian informational warfare.

Concerning energy security, the EPC format provides an opportunity to more strategically assess the progress made in the fields of joint natural gas procurement; in the diversification of Europe's energy mix away from Russian gas; in the consolidation of Europe's interconnected networks and critical supply chains; and in the advancement of its green transition. To that end, the EPC will need to gain flexible access to EU funds and expertise while also exploring new sources of financing.

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The EPC could also contribute to the modernisation and expansion of transport routes at pan-European level, as well as the enhancement of cross-border infrastructures. This is especially important in the East – given the re-orientation of economic relations towards the West – but it could also benefit North-South integration. On the interpersonal level, the EPC has put on the agenda the gradual reduction of roaming fees for Moldova. A decision regarding this matter could be taken at the Chisinau Summit. Should Moldova reach such an agreement, Ukraine could be the next in line.

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connectivity will probably require some level of institutionalisation and a greater involvement of the EU. However, to maintain its added value, the EPC will need to preserve its flexible pockets of informality, in which the equal-footing status prevails, sensitive side-talks can be pursued, and small groups of participating states can join forces and innovate. As such, the EPC, for instance, could be used as a policy innovation lab to advance pan-European mobility in secondary education and thereby bolster pupils' sense of European unity. Such a flagship initiative would anchor the EPC in the consolidation of European identity.



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