

THE EUROPEAN (GEO)POLITICAL COMMUNITY: More Than Meets the Eye?

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The inaugural summit of the European Political Community (EPC) in Prague on 6 October 2022 is seen as an endeavour to keep all Europeans—EU and non-EU members—united against Russia’s revisionist purposes and its aggressive policies. However, the emergence of the EPC once again brings to the fore the never-ending discussions on differentiated integration and a Europe of concentric circles.

European leaders have been quick to couple Russia’s aggression against Ukraine with the ultimate birth of a “**geopolitical European Union**”. The EU’s response to the war has been a success in multiple domains of foreign, security and defence policies. Sanction packages against Russia have been adopted with a remarkable degree of unity, including by Orban’s Hungary, which continues to combine negotiations in Brussels with proximity to Moscow.

Notable advances have also been made in the field of energy, reducing to less than 10% (from over 40%) dependence on Russian gas. Price caps for energy imports, together with major reductions in consumption and expanding gas reserves are bringing together the different components of a future Energy Union.

In the area of security and defence the EU, remaining united behind NATO’s response, has provided weapons to Ukraine. Many member states have significantly increased their defence capabilities, military investment, and resources. And although most of the military equipment going to Ukraine is from the US and the UK, the EU has beefed up Western unity with its offer of membership to Ukraine.

In places like Germany, increased military spending is part of the country’s *Zeitenwende*, or turning point in security and defence matters, following a lengthy record of timid involvement in such areas. Moreover, the EU, making a ground-breaking change in its tradition of not using shared resources to finance military operations abroad, has employed the European Peace Facility instrument as part of its toolbox for providing support to Ukraine.

All these movements signal a U-turn in the characterisation of the EU as a political dwarf, particularly in terms of its role as an international actor. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been considered a watershed in Brussels and many other European capitals, as well as the awakening of a "geopolitical Union", a purpose that Ursula von der Leyen first declared at the beginning of her **Commission** in 2019.

However, there are many *known unknowns* in the future consolidation of a geopolitical Union. Some European capitals hesitate to provide an "all-in support" to Ukraine in case the war of aggression by Russia escalates further and increases the risk of nuclear confrontation. Member states like France and Germany tend to believe that some sort of political agreement with Russia will be necessary, while the Eastern European and Baltics states are convinced that, in the years to come, Moscow will remain an existential threat to their national security. The fracture between the **peace and justice** advocates *vis-à-vis* Russia, is likely to worsen in future EU foreign policy discussions.

Last but not least, the reinforcement of NATO and its role as the most effective security guarantee for Europeans (particularly when Finland and Sweden become full members) might distract attention from strategic autonomy in the areas of security and defence, at least in the eyes of the most Atlanticist EU politicians.

Candidate countries resent the fact that the consolidation of the EPC as a political forum could further distance them from their true objective: becoming full members of the EU and enjoying the benefits of the single market, sitting in EU decision-making bodies, and receiving structural and cohesion funds, among others. They would not like the EPC and enlargement to be conflated into the same process.

So, what if the birth of the geopolitical EU were also to be found elsewhere? The inaugural summit of the European Political Community (**EPoC** or EPC, in English) in Prague on 6 October 2022, as a result of the French initiative first announced by President Macron in his Strasbourg speech of 9 May, and later seconded by German Chancellor Scholz in August, is a right place to look. The EPC brings together 44 European countries, including the 27 EU member states, candidate countries such as the Western Balkans and Turkey, the United Kingdom, and others.

The President of the European Council, **Charles Michel**, referred to the need to build a "geopolitical Community". The EPC is now seen as an endeavour to keep all Europeans—EU and non-EU members—united against Russia's revisionist purposes, its aggressive policies, and imperialist objectives. While the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 inaugurated

a new security architecture in Europe, the EPC can be seen as an effort to bind Europeans together geopolitically in times of increasing great power rivalry.

However, many questions regarding the ambition and purpose of this initiative remain unanswered. First, it is unclear how the EPC will relate to the EU's enlargement policy and how candidate countries will react if this initiative is perceived as a low-key substitute for lack of progress towards membership. The EPC might end up being a first step towards EU membership (a "staged membership" of sorts), but there are several risks associated with this idea.

Candidate countries resent the fact that the consolidation of the EPC as a political forum could further distance them from their true objective: becoming full members of the EU and enjoying the benefits of the single market, sitting in EU decision-making bodies, and receiving structural and cohesion funds, among others. They would not like the EPC and enlargement to be conflated into the same process because they argue that they have been waiting for too long—and engaged in enough substantial reforms of the Copenhagen criteria—for their future to be linked to a nascent but not sufficiently substantial forum. Some also say that Ukraine and Georgia should follow the same process for accession and not benefit from a fast track, despite the current circumstances.

Western Balkan countries, for instance, criticised Macron's statement on the need to reform the enlargement policy before opening the door to North Macedonia and Albania, the countries that have advanced most in the membership process. His words were perceived as an excuse to pursue a more drastic objective: to continue as a Union of 27 in the years to come. The political will for enlargement might be dead, but the reform of the candidate countries is underway, and achievements deserve the full—and not a consolation—prize they argue.

The truth is that EU enlargement suffers from existential fatigue, and it is unclear whether or not national referendums in many member states would provide negative results in the event of a new round of accessions. Juncker's Commission declared that no more enlargement should be envisaged during his term, but many years later, there is still little appetite for further enlargement unless the Union first revises its architecture, institutions, and decision-making processes.

Second, what are the **next steps** of the EPC? Will this body evolve into an informal political forum where only regular summits will be convened? Or, rather, should it count on an institutionalised architecture enabling the performance of duties, as happens with any other intergovernmental organisation? Will the EPC include treaty-based decision-making mechanisms, and what specific agenda and objectives will be pursued? Will there be benefits associated to EPC membership, and will a permanent budget and funding scheme therefore be set up? And will there be sectoral focus areas, such as energy or defence, and how will these relate to EU initiatives in this regard? If the EPC were to include proposals in security and defence, for instance, advances in this area might run against the interest of many member states, including France, in strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy in the short run.

Third, it is unclear how the EPC will relate to other EU institutions. If permanent funding and programmes are to be established, the involvement of the European Commission might be necessary. In turn, this could prove problematic for the UK, which, despite initial hesitation, has shown interest in the EPC. Macron and others are keen to consolidate a platform of collaboration that would heal the wounds of Brexit, but the European Commission's full participation might be problematic for London's commitment to the initiative.

Finally, the emergence of the EPC once again brings to the fore the never-ending discussions on differentiated integration and a Europe of concentric circles. The EU has enlarged at the same time as it has further integrated its different policy domains. But more flexibility in decision-making has become necessary as member states increasingly weaponise their power of veto and the unanimity rule to pursue purely national interests. So far, not much progress has been made in reforming the EU along the lines of differentiated integration, but the EPC is likely to revitalise the idea of concentric outer and inner circles of integration, depending on the willingness and ability of member states to integrate further.

As much as the war in Ukraine has led to sweeping changes being made in EU policies regarding sanctions, energy, and defence, the EPC could well be seen as the geopolitical Union in action. Whether it becomes a trailblazing endeavour in Europe or just hot air remains to be seen.