



CEPS EXPLAINER

WILL THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY ACTUALLY BE USEFUL?

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SUMMARY

On 6 October 2022 there will be an inaugural EU meeting at summit level, with the EU's close neighbours also invited, to debate security and stability as part of a budding European Political Community (EPC), as proposed by President Macron with support from President Michel. However, the future functions of the EPC have only been sketched in very preliminary and summary terms, which this CEPS Explainer seeks to explore in more detail. We identify several categories: foreign policy and strategic security, and EU internal policies, consisting of energy security and climate change, economic cooperation and mobility.

While foreign policy and security issues are obviously prioritised in official statements, so far in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, there are serious limitations over how effective this is likely to be (almost all of the EU's most powerful allies are outside Europe). The other suggested functions link closely to the EU's competences and resources, and these do offer scope for more solid and consensual cooperation.

Overall, the EPC's organisation and functions should be designed with all these possibilities in mind, especially serving to complement and not displace the EU's enlargement processes.



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President Macron's [proposal for a European Political Community \(EPC\)](#) will now be debated over what it should be and what it might do.

With the Czech Presidency of the Council and the President of the European Council having sent out invitations for an initial summit meeting on 6 October, all parties will be considering how to respond. France has been collecting responses to a written consultation, whose results are not publicly known.

The purpose of this Explainer is to explore the question in a systematic manner and ponder several analytically quite different functions for the EPC, whose whole could be greater than the sum of its parts.

WHAT'S ALREADY BEEN SAID ON THE EPC

Official texts thus far on the EPC consist of speeches by Presidents [Macron](#) and [Michel](#) in May 2022, a [working paper](#) by France, the [conclusions](#) of the European Council in June, and a further [speech](#) by Macron on 1 September.

President Macron began in his 9 May speech with a call for an EPC that would permit 'our democratic European nations' to find 'a new space for political cooperation, security and cooperation in the fields of energy, transport, investment, infrastructures the movement of people and in particular our youth'. He framed his proposal with a reference to President Mitterrand's 1989 idea of creating a European confederation, which was 'too early', but 'posed the right question' – namely the search for a more inclusive European political format beyond the EU.

President Michel offered further details in his speech of 18 May 2022. On membership he suggested: '*from Reykjavik to Baku or Yerevan, from Oslo to Ankara*', thus implicitly including all membership applicants, the European Economic Area (EEA) states, Turkey and other active participants in the Eastern Partnership¹.

Foreign policy would be the 'major area', while there would also be '*socio-economic programmes which do not require regulatory alignment. For example, Erasmus, Horizon research and development, and transport and energy infrastructure*'. Institutionally, Michel envisages that beyond the head of state or government level, there would be a more systematic expansion of the current practice where the foreign ministers of non-EU states occasionally join EU Foreign Affairs Council meetings. Other Council configurations could follow the same example.

¹ However this seems to exclude the micro-states - Andorra, Monaco and San Marino - whose sovereign status sees them as full member states of the Council of Europe and OSCE, with the Holy See (Vatican) also member of the OSCE.

France followed up with more detail in a paper submitted to the EU just before the June 2022 European Council meeting. The list of topics was somewhat expanded beyond Macron's 9 May speech, with foreign and security policy in first place, followed by climate change, energy and other raw material supplies, food security, infrastructures and their connections, mobility, migration, organised crime, and relations with other geopolitical actors².

The European Council of 23-24 June concluded with only summary language – *'the aim is to offer a platform for political coordination for European countries across the continent. It could concern all European countries with whom we have close relations'*. It would *'address issues of common interest so as to strengthen the security stability and prosperity of the European continent'* and *'it will not replace existing EU policies and instruments, notably enlargement...'*

Macron made further comments in his 1 September speech to his *corps diplomatique*, raising further questions. In spite of the statements that the EPC would not be an alternative to enlargement, Macron made explicit remarks about the need to stop the EU's indefinite enlargement. He further stated that the EPC process should be essentially inter-governmental and that the EU institutions should not be at the heart of the project or its structure. However, this seems difficult to reconcile with his list of topics to be treated.

WHO WILL BE INVITED TO JOIN?

The Czech Presidency and the President of the European Council will jointly chair a first assembly of willing participants on 6 October. The invitation list includes the whole of Europe *sans* Russia and Belarus. This would mean the EU27 and all membership applicants, the four EFTA states, plus Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey is also invited, notwithstanding reserves expressed by Greece and Cyprus, and even Israel is set to be a part of the discussions.

Then there would be the UK, whose governments have had a long record of skepticism towards European institutional initiatives, and Liz Truss, the new prime minister, has already made remarks along these lines. In short, from the British perspective, the Council of Europe, OSCE, NATO and OECD are enough, with no need for another entirely new organisation. But the UK will still probably accept the invitation, without enthusiasm, to see what happens and just to make sure that they're at least in the room.

² Text on file with the author but not publicly distributed.

FUNDAMENTALLY, THE EPC SEES THE CRYSTALISATION OF A 'WIDER EUROPE' CONCEPT (A TERM USED IN THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS), INVOLVING ALL OF EUROPE THAT IS IN THE EU, OR AIMING TO JOIN, OR OPEN TO COOPERATION WITH IT – UP TO 44 STATES IN ALL.

Fundamentally, the EPC sees the crystallisation of a 'wider Europe' concept (a term used in the European Council conclusions), involving all of Europe that is in the EU, or aiming to join, or open to cooperation with it – up to 44 states in all. It opens the prospect of a wide range of activity within the EPC (or the 'wider Europe') format.

While Russia and Belarus are obviously excluded, the door should be left open for

them, taking a long-term perspective. A post-Putin Russia could head off in any direction, between a renewed liberal democratic turn to an even more radically fascist state.

EU membership for Russia is in no-one's scenarios, but it could be a different matter for the EPC at some stage in the future. Yes, the inclusion of a Russia more committed to European values is right now completely hypothetical, but certainly viewed as something that would eventually, one day, be desirable.

HOW COULD THE EPC FUNCTION INSTITUTIONALLY?

While President Macron initially spoke about summit meetings once or twice a year, Charles Michel has plausibly suggested a more rounded and complete structure, with meetings with the EU Councils in their various formations according to the topic to be discussed. The Council currently meets in 10 formations, with nine sectoral Councils plus General Affairs³. The normal institutional hierarchy sees several levels of activity: summit, ministers, senior officials, and technical experts.

The model being adopted for the inaugural meeting on 6 October is understood to be in the form of a plenary session with leaders only and then four parallel break-out sessions on security and stability in Europe, energy, the economy, and mobility.

The most plausible working model would be for back-to-back meetings, where sessions of the Councils of the EU and their subordinate bodies would follow on with extended dialogue in EPC format. Maximum participation would be for all 44 states but there could be some flexibility, with absences allowed, especially among EU Member States, for

³ 1. General Affairs, 2. Foreign Affairs, 3. Economic and Financial Affairs, 4. Justice and Home Affairs; 5. Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs, 6. Competitiveness (Internal Market, Industry, Research and Space), 7. Transport, Telecommunications and Energy 8. Agriculture and Fisheries, 9. Environment, 10. Education, Youth, Culture and Sport.

example for technical sessions consisting of Commission interventions to explain various regulatory initiatives.

Since the chief function of the EPC seems intended to be foreign and security policy, convening and organising meeting agendas would fall best to the European External Action Service (EEAS). At the same time, many sectoral policy items would correlate strongly to Commission competences. The dual role of the High Representative and Commission Vice-President could enable overall coordination with the EPC to function smoothly.

However, as remarked above, President Macron in his speech to his *corps diplomatique* takes a surprising stance on questions over the role of the EU institutions.

WHAT THE EPC WON'T BE

It has been explicitly stated that the EPC would not be an alternative to enlargement, or duplicate the Council of Europe, OSCE, or NATO.

The EU membership applicant states were quick to suspect that an unspoken objective would indeed be for the EPC to serve as an alternative to enlargement, to the point that official statements from the EU have been quick to affirm that this isn't so. These suspicions were provoked by some of Macron's wording on 9 May to the effect that Ukraine's possible accession to the EU would take '*decades*' (in the plural) and that something sooner was needed.

For these suspicions to be fully set aside, the applicants would want to see (as a separate initiative) improvements to the existing enlargement process, with 2020's modest revision not going far enough to deliver results in the Western Balkans.

Macron's speech referred to European democracies and democratic values, which raises the Council of Europe question, especially since Russia's departure may allow it more room for a new and more active phase of activity. The very nature of the EPC means that political issues will always be key to its agenda. This prompts the idea that the EPC should develop cooperative relations with the Council of Europe on matters of democracy and human rights.

The OSCE, on the other hand, finds itself largely paralysed by Russia. Security dialogue and cooperation under the EPC may well deal with topics or activities which a well-functioning OSCE should be handling, but currently cannot.

The [Union for the Mediterranean \(UfM\)](#) should also be mentioned, not least because of a remarkable coincidence. Both the UfM and EPC were personally launched by French presidents (Nicolas Sarkozy in the first case) without apparent prior consultation or

negotiation with the EU or Member States, with both initiatives addressing relations with neighbouring regions.

The UfM, however, beyond a few projects, is widely considered not to have matured into delivering significant added value on top of the [Barcelona process](#) and [southern neighbourhood policy](#). Should this be a warning for the EPC?

The big difference here is that the EPC region sees very real and very deep integration processes, which – while incomplete – contrast with the difficulty in developing comparable momentum in the south. The EPC's possible agenda is thus much more promising.

THE EPC'S POSSIBLE SECTORAL FUNCTIONS

1. EXTERNAL - FOREIGN POLICY AND STRATEGIC SECURITY

Russia's war against Ukraine was the trigger for the EPC proposal. The EU has invited close neighbours to align on its foreign policy positions for many years now. To a large degree this has been a rather bureaucratic process, inviting alignment on statements that have no immediate operational content. More concretely, there has been a fairly extensive process of incorporating contingents from neighbouring countries into EU military missions.

The EPC would lift the process up to the head of state or government level for strategic dialogue on foreign and security policy, centered on pan-European security and strategic diplomacy. Apart from the ongoing war, this could cover the EU's relations with the rest of Europe, as well as with the US, Japan, China, India, the Gulf states, Africa, Latin America and the G20 process.

Indeed, many non-EU EPC members would appreciate the possibility to engage in this top-level political debate, complementing the necessary – but much more technical – consultations between the EU, EEA members and accession applicants regarding their alignment to EU law.

That said, there should be no illusion over the difficulty of achieving consensus on key foreign policy issues, as illustrated today by the positions taken by Hungary, Serbia and Turkey over Russia's war.

This is illustrated by the varying degrees of alignment seen by the non-EU states within the wider Europe on sanctions adopted by the EU. Research on a decade of sanctions regimes, numbering no less than 35, shows quite varied levels of alignment.

While the keenest accession candidates show very high levels of alignment (nearly 100 %), the record of EEA states is in the 80-89 % range, with Serbia at a much lower level of 62 % and Turkey at only 20 %. The three eastern European associate states saw only mediocre results. As of today, Ukraine would align much more strongly, maybe even wholly, while Moldova and Georgia have their own reasons to be more reserved.

THE ISSUE FOR THE EPC IS WHETHER IT WILL RESULT IN AN EFFECTIVE UPGRADE OF FOREIGN POLICY ALIGNMENT BY THE EU'S NEIGHBOURS. WOULD THERE BE NEW MOMENTUM OR WOULD THE PROCESS RESEMBLE MINI VERSIONS OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, WITH MANY SPEECHES AND STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT BY MANY BUT FAR FROM ALL?

The EU's sanctions on Russia saw alignment by North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania and Bosnia from the Western Balkans, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway from the EFTA states, and Ukraine. Notable absentees were Serbia, Kosovo, Switzerland, Turkey, Moldova and Georgia.

The issue for the EPC is whether it will result in an effective upgrade of foreign policy alignment by the EU's neighbours. Would there be new momentum or would the process resemble mini versions of the UN General Assembly, with many speeches and statements of support by many but far from all? Indeed, a specific question is whether the EPC would meet annually just before the UN General Assembly to maximise common positions.

Overall, on sanctions and other strategic issues of global significance, the EPC format is hardly going to be crucial, given the many small states amongst its potential membership that carry little weight, and the exclusion of heavyweight non-European G7 members and other important liberal democracies, such as South Korea and Australia.

2. DOMAINS OF PAN-EUROPEAN RELEVANCE

The headings announced for the breakout sessions during the 6 October summit are very summary – security and stability, energy, the economy and mobility – but it is not yet clear what the content is likely to be. Below are some plausible headings with explanations, and it remains to be seen whether these will be accommodated in due course.

a. Democracy and political cooperation

The key criterion for membership is meant to be respect for basic democratic principles. The EPC can hardly ignore the major debates that will be permanently ongoing on the state of European democracy and human rights, with new issues and tendencies constantly arising.

But as mentioned, this is the core competence of the Council of Europe, whose membership will be virtually the same as the EPC's, given Belarus and Russia's exclusion from both. The resolution of this competence puzzle could be worked out with a cooperation agreement between Strasbourg and the EPC. The EPC could refer selected issues to the Council of Europe, and occasionally invite its representatives to EPC meetings as special guests.

b. Transport, energy infrastructures and climate action

Pan-European physical transport infrastructures, including the [Trans-European Transport Networks \(TEN-T\)](#) for road, rail and waterborne traffic, are long established domains of cooperation.

More recently, the need for physical energy networks for oil, gas and future hydrogen pipelines, energy storage and electricity connections has become a matter of strategic security. Beyond physical infrastructure regulatory emergencies could also unexpectedly occur, such as the current need to urgently reform electricity pricing.

All accession applicant states are full members of the [Energy Community](#), but this is mainly concerned with a long-haul programme of compliance with the EU's energy *acquis*. The current build-up of cross-border energy network connections between the EU and non-EU states, including for electricity and gas ([Entso-e](#) and [Entsog](#)), calls for a relevant forum for policy dialogue and deliberation.

The EPC could usefully deliberate over climate policies and the modalities for non-EU states to converge on the EU's [Green Deal](#). It will take years for the EU's own climate policies to mature and even longer for most accession applicants to become fully compliant. Sessions at EPC level could, for example, serve to prepare for the major annual COP meetings.

A further dimension here is the EU's '[Global Gateway](#)' connectivity agenda, whose geographic footprint may run not only across the states of the wider Europe but far beyond Europe's frontiers as well.

c. Dialogue over complex regulatory policies

EU accession or EEA membership entails strict compliance with EU regulatory market policies. However, several of these policies are in a state of flux and are undergoing complex adaption to new technologies and regulatory methods. Some demand the highest standards of administrative and technical capacities, which take years to build up.

Dialogue is already conducted on a bilateral basis with many partners, but there would be advantages for doing this – at least in part – amongst all EPC participants.

The multilateral level of EPC activity, compared to the numerous bilaterals, also corresponds to an important political principle of limiting the ‘hub-and-spoke’ format, which naturally tends to be hegemonic.

Examples include the digital domain, with the regulation of the big network services and cyber security, and financial services for complex financial instruments. In these fields, the non-EU EPC states need to keep up-to-date with all ongoing regulatory changes, even if it may be years before the accession applicants finally implement them.

Routine, but very complex and constantly evolving, are technical barriers to trade, both for industrial products where the pan-European agencies [CEN](#), [CENELEC](#) and [ETSI](#) have major roles in setting around 25 000 standards, as well as food safety standards that are subject to hundreds of EU regulations. The technical agencies have their established practices for engaging with both EU and non-EU states. However, the EU has the leading responsibility for policy development in these domains, which basically apply to the whole EPC area. Occasional policy level dialogue at the EPC level could thus also be useful.

d. Human capital building

The speeches made by Presidents Macron and Michel have stressed the need to address youth at the EPC level. The most developed instrument for this is by far the Erasmus programme. All EPC states already participate in Erasmus, while ongoing experiences and assessments of the programme’s optimal effectiveness warrant deliberation at EPC level.

Similarly, the Horizon Europe programme is already open and operational for all EPC states to varying degrees, and warrants organised policy dialogue among all participating EPC states.

e. Civilian crisis management

While the EU’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been impressive, the rollout of measures at the pan-European level could have profited from a more structured system at the EPC level, sharing the distribution of vaccines and the widest application of the European digital certificate of vaccination.

Europe’s biggest refugee crises have built up since 2015, with the huge flow of up to two million refugees coming above all from Syria to Europe. The Syrian crisis was followed by continued migrant flows from the southern Mediterranean and, in 2022, from Ukraine. This has posed not only huge practical humanitarian issues but also the need to rethink asylum and migrations policies that are relevant to the whole of Europe.

Climate-related emergencies have also been growing in intensity. The need to pool firefighting services across national borders has become painfully evident. There could

well be worse to come, for example in the event of major flooding of the Danube basin hitting both EU and accession applicant states.

The EU has been active in developing civil crisis management capacities but the ongoing agenda could doubtless profit from organised cooperation at the EPC level in actual and anticipatory responses.

Europol is the EU's agency for combatting international crime. It has operational agreements with all the non-EU participants in the EPC, which could be the format for dialogue over political priorities in this field.

CONCLUSIONS

The EU and its close neighbours are not starting from zero in many of the domains discussed, with numerous existing formats for cooperation and dialogue. The question is whether these efforts could deliver greater benefits from a more organised and consistent structure at the EPC level.

While the first priority will obviously be foreign policy and strategic security, activity in this field will face serious limitations. The EPC will include many neighbouring states with little political weight, while excluding almost all the non-EU heavyweight partners in the G7 and other major non-European liberal democracies. On top of this, it is already visible in the case of Russia's war that some EPC members hold very divergent positions to the majority opinion (Hungary, Serbia and Turkey).

The several internal topics discussed here, which would rely heavily on the EU's resources and competences, should lend themselves to greater consensus, and become over time solid and significant fields for cooperation for the fledging EPC.

The relationship between the EU institutions and the proposed EPC is already being debated. It is understood that the EPC should be kept separate from the EU but this should not be taken to the point of dogma that would cripple the EPC's functionality.

The reality is that all topics considered potentially relevant for the EPC are subject to EU competences at least to some degree, and generally with decision-making powers and financial resources that the EPC will never match. The politically sensitive point that the EPC should not become an alternative to EU accession has been understood, but so also should be the potential complementary nature between the two.

Institutionally, there is little difficulty in identifying how policy collaboration between the EU and its neighbours – both accession applicants and non-applicants – can be organised through the EPC, mainly through back-to-back meetings between the EU and non-Member States at the levels of sectoral Councils and their subordinate bodies.

The key final question is whether a deliberate EPC, or 'wider Europe' level of organisation could deliver real benefits in terms of consolidating and strengthening Europe's political values and economic structures in the face of external threats, notably those coming from Russia.

The answer can only be found in trying, but the potential for success can already be identified.

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