



GLOBAL  
EUROPE



# The Potential Implications of a Proposed European Political Community (EPC)

*By Alexander Conway | October 2022*

## Introduction

The informal European Council to be held in Prague on 6-7 October 2022 will mark the first substantial discussion of a proposed “European Political Community” (EPC) between EU heads of state and government and those from invited representatives from Europe and third [countries](#) outside the Union (including the United Kingdom). At the core of this meeting lies a discussion about the future form and remit of the EU’s geopolitical influence and engagement with its neighbours beyond any proposed enlargement.

This discussion comes at a time where war has returned to the European continent in Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan are in conflict with one another, and amid rising economic and political tensions between the United States and China. These challenges form the background against which the EPC debate is taking place, yet the exact purpose, vision, and scope of a new forum remain undecided. However, it is oriented around bringing together like-minded countries in Europe in order to address complex problems which emerge from a new geopolitical reality.

The challenges facing the establishment of a new institutional entity are myriad and prompt a series of questions. For example: where will it sit in the existing multilateral, UN, and EU frameworks, who will the members be, what are the entry criteria, what topics will it address, how will the EPC be run, staffed, and financed, and what might an EPC mean for potential EU institutional or treaty reform?

This paper first traces the origins of the EPC as a concept up until its present incarnation and assesses its supposed purpose. This is followed by an exploration of the potential political, economic, and institutional implications which the EPC may have. The paper concludes with points for further consideration by Ireland, and a summary of Member State positions on the establishment, scope, and purpose of an EPC.

## The Origins of a European Political Community:

The notion of a European Political Community was first put forward by French President François Mitterrand in 1989 in the context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of communist regimes across central and eastern Europe. [President Mitterrand’s vision of a nominal European confederation had three aims:](#)

- to incorporate Russia into a European political order and enable further reform;
- to cooperate with countries from central and eastern Europe while not integrating them into the existing European institutions;
- and establish concentric circles of integration on political cooperation in Western Europe, economic engagement in a Single Market with Western, Central and Eastern Europe, and security cooperation with Russia.

This proposal was quickly dismissed as unacceptable by many newly liberated countries as an inferior form of EU membership or even as a vehicle for French political ambitions. However, the core question Mitterrand posed remains at the heart of the EPC proposal: how to politically organise Europe beyond the scope of the European Union? Is it for this reason that UK Prime Minister Liz Truss

has suggested that the name be changed to European Political Forum to avoid reference to the historical EPCs of 1989 and 1953?

### The Current Proposals:

The present understanding of the proposed European (geo)political community, derives from an idea initially espoused by [French President Emmanuel Macron](#) and subsequently elaborated upon by [European Council President Charles Michel](#). In his address in Strasbourg on 9 May 2022, President Macron called for the establishment of a new European organisation which would enable democratic European nations to cooperate on eight policy issues: political, security, energy, transport, investment, infrastructure, population movement, and youth policies. He stressed that membership of this organisation would not prejudice any future aspirations to join the EU, to address the concerns of those worried that this EPC was merely a diminished alternative to enlargement, and also left the door open to UK membership. An important note of President Macron's address was the emphasis placed on bringing together countries with shared democratic values and of ensuring that the strength and ambition of further integration remained intact.

President Michel's speech on 18 May 2022 emphasised the need for a European geopolitical community, with greater emphasis on a security and defence concept than that idea outlined by President Macron. He also gave greater detail on how such an organisation would function, wherein heads of state or government would meet biannually, and the relevant ministers of participating states would be invited to join European Council meetings on a regular basis. This proposal by President Michel is much closer to the notion of a two-speed or differentiated integration vision of Europe, where there are degrees of greater or lesser integration with consequent privileges and obligations.

Out of these speeches, the initial definition which will form the basis of discussions between heads of government in Prague will be based on the the European Council Conclusions following the 23-24 June 2022 summit, which sketched out an initial definition of the EPC which would "offer a platform for political coordination for European countries across the continent. It could concern all European countries with whom we have close relations."<sup>1</sup> Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, the United Kingdom, Moldova, Georgia, Turkey, Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, [were all invited by European Council President Charles Michel](#) to attend the meeting on 6 October in Prague. [However, it has also been mooted that Israel will participate in the EPC meeting, despite not being on President Michel's invitation list, and it is unclear whether the Ukrainian Government will attend according to the Czech Government.](#)

### Geopolitical Context

It is critical to position the proposed EPC against the current international backdrop. Resurgent geopolitical competition poses a considerable challenge to the European Union, and new tools and ways of working are needed to assert European interests and influence both within its immediate neighbourhood, and further afield. The transformative capacity of EU membership and the assumption that all European countries want to necessarily join has been challenged by Brexit and by the recognition that the enlargement process has stalled in recent years. Tensions in a newly emerging international

---

<sup>1</sup> [2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#) p.1

security situation between the United States and China have heightened global tensions over critical raw materials, technologies, and economic models. The disruption of crucial supply-chains, first by COVID-19, and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has triggered a gradual shift away from globally open markets to more protectionist policies. Blockages of “soft” power channels at international organisations and multilateral fora like the WTO and UN have undermined global cooperation and shown the importance of “hard” economic and military power.

It seems like the EPC is designed to fill this void, by convening countries around Europe, both those within the EU, and outside of it, to discuss and collectively address critical energy, security, infrastructural, and migratory challenges facing them. It also aims to provide a fresh impetus to demonstrate the appeal and potential of bringing together like-minded democratic partners in the face of diminishing support for democracy and the rise of autocratic and authoritarian regimes in Europe and around the world. It is in this context that the EPC is proposed to assert shared European interests and values on an increasingly conflicted and uncertain global order.

## Potential Political, Economic, and Institutional Implications of an EPC

### Political Implications

The concerns raised by Central and Eastern European countries in 1989 remain salient in certain national capitals, particularly the notion that this EPC would become an inferior alternative to EU accession and a sort of “Hotel California” for aspirant countries like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and in the Western Balkans. The war in Ukraine has reinvigorated the prospect of EU enlargement, following the successful applications for candidacy status by Ukraine and Moldova in 2022 given the extraordinary circumstances of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. However, the considerable political and economic support offered to Ukraine by the European Union and its Member States has raised the point that the traditional accession process is perhaps no longer fit for purpose. In addition, the political challenge of Ukraine or Moldova “jumping the queue” ahead of other candidates like Albania, North Macedonia, or Turkey could prove very difficult alongside the multiplicity of association agreements, customs arrangements, and bilateral treaties which make up the EU’s relations with its immediate neighbourhood. In this context, the EPC aims to provide a new forum free of the existing political, economic, and institutional legacies to discuss critical security and political challenges of common concern.

Another challenge is how exactly membership of the EPC will be determined. Who would decide, would the EPC be an EU-led initiative, and if so, how would this affect the supposed parity of esteem between EU and non-EU representatives? What are the entry criteria to join or participate in the EPC? Will it be limited solely to liberal democracies? Would that mean the exclusion of Turkey or other illiberal democracies? While the UK have agreed to participate, given the current cool relations between London and Brussels will this engagement continue in future?

The initial efforts on this front seem to be based on geographical affinity, so those countries which could be credibly considered “European”, which seems to follow a Gaullist consensus of the Atlantic to the Urals. This understanding however is tempered by a vision of the EPC by certain experts [as a forum which brings together democracies which are opposed to authoritarian regimes](#) such as Russia



or Belarus. The issue of active ongoing conflicts and clashes between some of those invited, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Serbia and Kosovo, Turkey and Israel, to name a few, also poses a challenge for securing sufficient political cohesion.

### Economic Implications

An important question is how the EPC would be financed, would be dependent on donations from its members? How would an EPC be staffed and organised, would it have a secretariat, and if so, would this be formed of seconded civil servants, or else especially recruited administrators and officials? If the EPC is reliant on its members for funding and staff, would this undermine the credibility or impartiality of the organisation? If the EPC were to make decisions which have significant economic implications, such as investment into energy infrastructure, how would these interact with existing EU regulations on state aid policies? Would they fall under existing EU policies such as the important projects of common European interest (IPCEIs), or would they exist beyond the aegis and oversight of European authorities? Who would be responsible for auditing the management and expenditure for any projects which come out of EPC decisions?

### Institutional Implications

The potential institutional implications of the establishment of a European Political Community organisation are not inconsiderable. Would the set-up of an EPC require treaty reform, for example if there was to be a move towards qualified majority voting (QMV) in foreign policy? How would smaller Member States, wary of being outvoted, address the potential loss of their veto? Would there be possible trade-offs involved? Such as moving towards QMV in other sensitive areas, like taxation? Would the establishment of an EPC be a precursor to a European constitutional convention? Would non-EU members require changing their own respective constitutions to be bound by any decision made by the EPC? In terms of the actual functioning and form of the EPC, what will its rules and regulations actually be? Will decisions be made or enforced by absolute majority, qualified majority, or else unanimity? Will it be based on an intergovernmental treaty or else be entirely informal?

### Origins of the Term “European Political Community”

While the prospect of a European Political Community (EPC) seems relatively undefined and vague at present and faces serious challenges forging consensus amongst over 40 heads of state and government with varying interests and concerns, it is an ambitious prospect which may reinvigorate European discussion over strategy and security. The meeting in Prague Castle on 6 October 2022 may seem overly ambitious, but it is [not the first time a “European Political Community” has been convened](#). On 23 July 1953, the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg met together and began the process of drafting a treaty for a proposed European Political Community along clear federalist lines. While the original initiative ultimately fizzled away by 1954, it did lay the foundations for the establishment of the European Economic Community, and ultimately the European Union, in 1957.

### Conclusion

An assessment of the positions of the 27 EU Member States suggests that the majority of Member States, especially Central and Eastern European countries, agree that a proposed European Politi-

cal Community should not become a lesser version of EU membership. However, several Member States, notably including Austria and the Netherlands, see an EPC acting as a sort of stepping-stone to EU accession, a forum where prospective members could develop closer economic and political ties towards eventual EU accession. Enlargement is broadly supported across the existing 27 Member States, at least for Ukraine and Moldova, while there are some political tensions regarding North Macedonian accession with Bulgaria, and political reform and stability concerns in the Western Balkans.

There is a relative lack of clarity on what precise topics the EPC should discuss, but there is a seeming consensus that security, energy, and migration management should all feature on any prospective agenda. There is a relatively clear East-West divide, where Western European countries are more interested in broader questions of strategic security, and favour the inclusion of strategic security actors around Europe like the UK, as well as Azerbaijan, Israel, and Turkey. The inclusion of Turkey is a sensitive issue for Greece and Cyprus who both have territorial disputes with Ankara. Central and Eastern European countries are more interested in issues of energy security, which the Nordics share through including Norway. Poland and the Baltics prioritise the importance of deterring and managing relations with Russia, while Mediterranean EU Member States are likely to prioritise migration management and relations with North African partners

The eventual form and function of a nascent European Political Community will be the crucial questions at the forthcoming meeting of heads of state and government in Prague. Is the EPC to be a forum for political dialogue, a means to promote European values, an (unlikely) antechamber for eventual EU membership, a council which addresses European security concerns, or something else? How successful a forum the EPC proves to be will determine its ultimate longevity and efficacy.

The Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) is Ireland's leading international affairs think tank. Founded in 1991, its mission is to foster and shape political, policy and public discourse in order to broaden awareness of international and European issues in Ireland and contribute to more informed strategic decisions by political, business and civil society leaders.

The IIEA is independent of government and all political parties and is a not-for profit organisation with charitable status. In January 2021, the Global Go To Think Tank Index ranked the IIEA as Ireland's top think tank.

© Institute of International and European Affairs, October 2022

Creative Commons License

This is a human-readable summary of (and not a substitute for) the license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike-4.0-International/> (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

You are free to:

- Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt - remix, transform, and build upon the material
- The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

**Attribution** — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

**NonCommercial** — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

**ShareAlike** — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

**No additional restrictions** — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union



**The Institute of International and European Affairs,**

8 North Great Georges Street, Dublin 1, Ireland

T: +353-1-8746756 F: +353-1-8786880

E: [reception@iiea.com](mailto:reception@iiea.com) W: [www.iiea.com](http://www.iiea.com)