

## Hans Dietmar Schweisgut **Weathering the geopolitical storm – what future for the EPC?**

**After initial doubts concerning the motivation behind President Emmanuel Macron’s surprise initiative, most European leaders became supportive of the EPC. This has also been the case with Austria, which warmed up to the EPC after it had become clear that it was not designed to be an alternative to the EU’s enlargement process. The level of attendance and the opportunity for bilateral diplomacy at the first summit in Prague made it a success, one that, however, proved hard to repeat on a semi-annual basis. It is difficult to see what role the EPC could play once Russia’s war of aggression comes to an end. A loose format will continue to have some merit, but if success is measured in terms of concrete outcomes, a more focused agenda and a minimum of institutional infrastructure will be needed.**

The EPC was a proposal without prior consultation or any real preparatory work. Its benefit was to draw attention to the need for a pan-European response to Russia’s war of aggression, demonstrating strong support for Ukraine and highlighting the need for a strategic approach to European security issues, which in the foreseeable future would have to be defined no longer with, but against, Russia.

Lack of prior consultation meant that the EPC was initially seen as a purely French initiative, and doubts were immediately raised about its motivation. Its lack of a clear definition and purpose raised suspicions both within and outside the European Union. Furthermore, the association with François Mitterrand’s 1989 proposal to create a European Confederation, which would have included Russia and was at the time widely seen as an

attempt to prevent EU and NATO enlargement, only added to the confusion. Another of the EPC’s shortcomings was the fact that it had not been coordinated with Germany or with partners in Central and Eastern Europe, although on the surface it would have been hard not to agree with Macron’s question: “how can we organise Europe from a political perspective and with a broader scope than that of the European Union?”

Initially, Macron envisaged an organisation of democratic European nations subscribing to core values, providing a new framework for political and security cooperation. With the inclusion of countries such as Turkey and Azerbaijan, the community of democratic values has to be seen rather as a community of shared interests, but even the initial common link – strong opposition to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine – is not shared by all in the same way, as is clearly shown by the lack of unanimous backing for sanctions against Russia. Meanwhile, the EPC has gained traction and broad support, but questions still remain regarding its institutionalisation and future place in a European security architecture.

### **After three summits: mixed interim results**

After its initial cool reception, Macron’s repeated emphasis that the EPC was no substitute for enlargement, which France started to support more convincingly, the initiative gained momentum. Its first summit in Prague was seen as a success, partly because of its broad attendance, which included then British Prime Minister Liz Truss and Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but also because of its perceived usefulness as a venue for dealing with bilateral and regional security

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issues (Azerbaijan – Armenia, Serbia – Kosovo). This success proved to be temporary, however, as it was unable to prevent increasing tensions between Serbia and Kosovo as well as Azerbaijan's military takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh.

While the second meeting in Chisinau was symbolically important, showing strong support for Moldova against the backdrop of its exposed location and Russia's hybrid threats and attacks, no further progress on regional security issues was achieved. The leaders of Turkey and Azerbaijan did not attend the most recent summit in Granada, and no meeting between the representatives of Serbia and Kosovo took place, thereby undermining the EPC's ambition to be a forum for security cooperation and crisis diplomacy.

Of course, the main emphasis from the outset has been on security in the wider sense of the term, leading to a fairly broad agenda. Cooperation in the energy sector, climate policy, transport and infrastructure, migration, cyber security and the fight against disinformation largely remains the common framework. This makes sense, but there is a risk of adding to the agenda in successive meetings, thus reinforcing the impression that the EPC is a high-level talking shop rather than focused on a limited number of concrete issues.

The lack of an institutional support structure makes the outcome and therefore the perceived success and added value of the EPC largely dependent on the convening country. This worked well in Prague for the aforementioned reasons, and also in Chisinau. It was less effective at the last summit in Granada in the light of the absence of certain key players (such as Turkish President Erdoğan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev), a lack of unity and disputes over the agenda, which even made it impossible to hold a press conference at the end of the meeting.

### Does the EPC have a future?

Given the lack of an institutional structure, the future of the EPC will depend to a great extent on the importance attached to it by its hosts, in particular the UK,

where the next summit will take place in spring 2024. Having the UK as a supportive key player in the EPC has been one of the major advantages of the new format after Brexit. As divisions in Granada showed, however, there is a risk that the agenda of the summit in the UK might be largely defined by the domestic policy debate and its strong focus on the controversial issue of migration.

This demonstrates one of the weaknesses of the informal summit structure. While it makes sense to alternate hosts between EU member states and non-member states, and although it seems logical for the EU member state holding the rotating presidency of the Council to assume this role, this might not always lead to strong ownership against the backdrop of a busy EU agenda and competing priorities. This is part of the dilemma of having the EU and its institutions closely associated with and taking part in the EPC, but distancing themselves from agenda-setting and implementation. At the same time, it is important that the issues of EU enlargement and security cooperation within the EPC remain separate.

The extension of EU candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and the recent opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova have changed the dynamic of the process. Supporting membership talks through the EPC by facilitating agreement on security-related issues, which are essential for the EU's cohesion, could still be relevant given the likely duration of the enlargement process. However, this role would need to be more clearly defined in addition to the interests and contributions of Turkey, the UK and the countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

As mentioned above, the implicit shift from a community of European values to one of shared interests was necessary in order to have all 47 European states – minus Russia and Belarus – at the table, including, of course, Turkey. President Erdoğan, however, did not attend the last two meetings, and while he opposes Russia's war of aggression, Turkey is not party to the EU's sanctions. This raises the question of how strong a

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community the EPC can be if it is not firmly rooted in common values.

### The role of the EPC – views from Vienna

The main advantages of the EPC remain its inclusiveness, the informality of its meetings at the highest level on the basis of equality and its focus on fresh ideas and impulses. Moreover, it goes beyond the EU's more rigid sectoral and functional approach “to find a new space for political and security cooperation, cooperation in the energy sector, in transport, investments, infrastructures, the free movement of persons and in particular of our youth”, as originally foreseen by President Macron. Preserving this loose structure and informality entails the risk, however, that the agenda becomes either increasingly broad or, on the contrary, narrows down to reflect the domestic priorities of the presidency/host. Agreeing on a clear focus and an agenda set by groups of incoming presidencies might reduce this risk, coupled with a stronger role for the European Commission, controversial as this might appear at the moment.

Where does Austria come into the picture? Vienna initially adopted a cautious position regarding the EPC. Its main concern was to ensure that the accession process for the Western Balkans would not be further delayed or diluted by a new structure of differentiated integration. Once it became clear that the intention was not to replace or alter the enlargement agenda, Austria became more supportive. It has favoured an informal intergovernmental format that does not overlap with the mandate of existing organisations, in particular the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which is based in Vienna. From an Austrian perspective, the main advantage of the EPC is the fact that it provides an informal framework for an open exchange of views on security-related issues at the level of heads of state and government.

To strengthen and streamline the EPC's governing structure, regional formats, in particular a Weimar plus framework that could involve Austria, could play a more active role in defining the agenda and the scope of the

EPC's future work, including its role in support for the accession process, which remains a common priority. While the opportunity for informal discussions and the exchange of ideas at the highest level fills a gap and already constitutes an important added value in its own right, it is doubtful that this alone could justify bi-annual meetings. It is obvious that the success and sustainability of the EPC will increasingly be measured by its capacity to deliver concrete outcomes. To achieve this, some kind of institutional infrastructure and closer links to EU institutions appear unavoidable.

### An asset at a time of tremendous geopolitical uncertainties

Finally, it is key to consider the EPC's future beyond Russia's current war of aggression against Ukraine. How would it fit into a post-war European security architecture? While there is currently no competition with existing pan-European institutions such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE, this could change after the war in Ukraine is over. It seems difficult to conceive of an operative security role for the EPC in the post-war phase, in particular because of the absence of the US in this setting without which no post-war settlement seems possible. On the other hand, strong US support for Ukraine and European defence in a reinforced NATO is not guaranteed after this year's presidential elections. Even a loosely structured pan-European forum that is still struggling to find a role is therefore an asset in view of tremendous geopolitical uncertainties.

## Paper Series

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#### The series

Launched in 2022 following a proposal made by French President Emmanuel Macron, the European Political Community (EPC) brings together over 40 countries across the continent. A response to the security challenge posed by Russia's war against Ukraine, it seeks to reinforce Europe's resilience, prosperity and geostrategic clout. Three summits have been held so far in an attempt to advance concrete projects and intergovernmental cooperation. However, the initiative is still perceived differently in European capitals and much remains to be done to exploit its full potential. This series of publications, piloted by the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe and the Genshagen Foundation, gathers views from Paris, Berlin, Warsaw and Vienna on the EPC's capabilities and limitations and discusses its development.

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