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Old wine in new bottles? The Polish perspective on the EPC

The EPC remains a moving target when it comes to purpose, structure and outcomes. Its fate depends on the commitment of participating states to make it an important tool of increasing convergence and fostering cooperation on major issues dividing the continent. Poland's position has so far been a cautious one, with the EPC mainly being seen as an instrument for diluting Ukraine's EU accession. However, there is some hope for reinvigorating the Weimar format after the Polish parliamentary elections of October 2023, provided that France and Germany involve Warsaw on an equal footing.

To what extent is the French initiative that is the European Political Community (EPC) an adequate response to the security challenges currently facing Europe? More than a year since its official launch in Prague, a common sense of purpose and a functional framework for cooperation are not yet in place. What is the Polish perspective on this, and can we expect greater commitment from Warsaw in the future?

Talking together or acting together?

The EPC was intended to provide a solution to the historic security challenge posed by Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Emmanuel Macron proposed this idea on 9 May 2022 while quoting Robert Schuman's famous words from 1950: "World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it." From the outset, the main goal of the EPC was to demonstrate unity vis-à-vis Russia while encouraging the widest possible participation by European countries and holding a strategic dialogue about Europe's security

among equals. More than a year since the format's launch in Prague, however, it is far from clear whether the EPC is a sufficiently creative and adequate response to the multiple threats Europe is now facing.

The EPC's limited potential was exposed during the third summit in Granada, Spain, in October 2023 amidst criticism of its loose format, unclear purpose and poor outcomes. Beyond the routine show of unity and support for Ukraine, leaders failed to make progress on resolving regional crises in the Caucasus and the Western Balkans. Azerbaijani and Turkish leaders skipped the summit altogether (with the Turkish President being absent for the second time), whereas the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo did show up but refused to meet. Spain and the UK argued over the official agenda, which left no room for a general discussion of migration. The UK thus held a sideline meeting with the leaders of Italy, the Netherlands, France and Albania, who agreed to address the growing issue of irregular migration together. The group issued a statement after the meeting, whereas a press conference for the EPC was cancelled by the Spanish presidency.

Can we expect concrete results from the EPC or is it just an informal forum where leaders merely talk to each other in the (vague) hope of reaching some strategic convergence in the (unspecified) future? Given the scope of this exercise in international summitry, the results appear scarce so far. The Chisinau summit saw an extension of the EU-Western Balkans roaming declaration to Moldova. In Granada, stronger cooperation between EPC countries in the field of cybersecurity was agreed and more EU humanitarian aid to Armenia was announced, although one might wonder whether the EPC

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format was necessary for this. Lack of progress in dealing with regional crises may also produce counter-effects as Europe loses credibility when partners drop out.

Indeed, even talking cannot be taken for granted. Officially, challenges were discussed in Granada in three clusters: digitalisation; energy, environment and the green transition; multilateralism and geostrategy. With growing tensions across wider Europe and beyond, however, the commitment of all participants to constructive talks at the next summit seems uncertain. The UK as a host will certainly remain committed – contrary to Spain, although this is not a given for others.

Poland: caution and limited expectations

Poland's approach to the EPC has been characterised by caution and limited expectations as to what the format could achieve. Initially, the idea was seen as old French wine in new bottles, where the purpose of the EPC was to obstruct Ukraine's accession to the EU. The conclusions of the June 2022 European Council, featuring the official recognition of candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova, and a declaration that the EPC was not an alternative to enlargement, have only partially reassured Warsaw. Statements made by President Macron about enlargement taking “most likely several decades” (May 2022) and the EPC helping to “end the assumption of infinite expansion by the EU” (September 2022) were not helpful in fostering Poland's trust and commitment.

The Polish government accepted the initiative in principle, however, and saw some benefits in terms of engaging the UK on military security, or Norway and Azerbaijan on energy. Bringing the UK back to continent-wide cooperation, beyond NATO and bilateral partnerships, clearly constitutes welcome progress post-Brexit. Crucially, the Prague summit “confirmed that Russia was in complete isolation”, in the words of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. For Poland, it

was essential that Europe remained united vis-à-vis Russia and in support of Ukraine. Indeed, this seemed the only common ground among leaders in Granada.

There has been a widely shared perception in Poland that the EPC aimed to create another waiting room while giving the candidates the illusion of being included on an equal footing in a high-level diplomatic talking shop that was in fact designed as a low-key consolation prize for lack of progress towards EU membership. Thus the EPC was not viewed as an adequate response to Russia's aggression, but rather more of the same – plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose, as the French would say. It seemed like a European Neighbourhood Policy 2.0 formula that did not prejudge accession, while again putting apples and oranges in one basket. This is why Polish officials and analysts repeatedly underlined that the decision to grant candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova should not be watered down by other cooperation formats and that the EPC should not be a pretext for delaying the start of accession negotiations.

It should be noted that Polish officials and analysts have been wary of the policy shift on EU enlargement as declared by their French counterparts. As a result, Poland adopted a wait-and-see approach. The government engaged in the Chisinau summit as it opened the door to seeking greater financial and political support for Moldovan reforms from European partners. It also co-facilitated a security roundtable together with the UK. However, Poland underlined that formal dialogue on the next steps of countries aspiring to membership can only be effective in the EU forum as part of enlargement policy.

Where is the “moving target” headed?

The decision-making capacity of almost 50 countries is necessarily low. The EPC has so far remained a largely informal platform, with no budget or secretariat to ensure continuity and follow-up between summits.

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The organisation of the summits has relied on the host countries, with little involvement from EU institutions. Nevertheless, some structure is needed if the format is to move beyond loose biannual summitry and towards delivering more concrete results. As a leader of the regional Three Seas Initiative, Poland is well aware of this dilemma. Indeed, effective execution of regional infrastructure and energy projects requires an institutional framework that goes beyond ad hoc commitments of presidential summitry.

In 2022, President Macron voiced a long list of issues to be addressed by the EPC, including climate change, energy supplies, foreign and security policy, food security and various “cultural projects”. Despite this, it is difficult to see how progress could be achieved if this process is based exclusively on leaders’ meetings with no permanent structures to implement their decisions and no formalised coordination with EU institutions.

However, informality also remains an asset for the EPC, both from the Polish perspective and for a number of non-EU partners. Even a rigid six-month timeline poses some questions. It might be advisable to have a summit when there is a sufficient number of issues to be addressed and tangible results to be delivered. In the long run, holding a summit for the sake of holding a summit could adversely affect the credibility of the EPC and Europe as a whole. Similarly, a sense of clarity regarding the overarching objectives and a shared ambition for the format would be welcome, but this might also have an adverse impact on the participation of some partners.

Limited commitment from a number of participants was an issue from the start, and dropping out of summits will most likely continue. A great deal depends on the UK’s approach and to what extent it would be willing to use the EPC as a key instrument for multi-lateral re-engagement with the continent. As for the Franco-German expert group’s idea to label the EPC as an outer circle of yet another vision of Europe’s

concentric circles, it remains unclear whether the UK would see itself as part of a construct in which it is expected to hover around the core of EU integration. For Poland, the idea of associated membership poses a challenge that the current candidates would be easily, and perhaps permanently, relegated to this first outer tier when the enlargement process is blocked by a lack of internal agreement on EU reform.

“Weimar Plus”: squaring the Triangle

As outlined above, Poland is not a big fan of the EPC. To date, Polish decision-makers have not seen the EPC as an important tool for increasing convergence on major issues dividing the continent. The EPC was not mentioned in the annual “exposé” by Foreign Affairs Minister Zbigniew Rau in the Sejm in April 2023 nor was it discussed at the Polish Institute of International Affairs’ Strategic Ark – a major event in global strategising, which took place in May 2023. It remains unclear whether this could change after the October 2023 parliamentary elections and under a new liberal and pro-European coalition government. A great deal of continuity should be expected as regards security and EU enlargement.

As for the Weimar Triangle, it has often proved its limited functionality, even under staunchly pro-European governments in Warsaw. It remains to be seen whether France and Germany would be eager to involve Poland on an equal footing in the strategic dialogue on the future of the EU and the European future of Ukraine, including its post-war reconstruction. One way to make credible progress would be to build on the “Weimar Plus” tradition and expand the triangle into a square by involving Ukraine.

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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