

# Florent Marciacq and Martin Koopmann

## The European Political Community – an engagement platform for the Weimar Triangle?

**The launch of the European Political Community in 2022 was a response to the historical and geopolitical challenges raised by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the EPC has gained a degree of traction in European capitals, but much remains to be done to tap its potential. Concerted and flexible engagement on the EPC platform by the Weimar Triangle, together with EPC host countries, would be beneficial to both intergovernmental formats. It would contribute to upholding multilateralism in Europe and provide the EPC framework with bolstered strategic guidance.**

The French proposal to institute a European Political Community (EPC) made by Emmanuel Macron in Strasbourg on 9 May 2022 took most European leaders aback. It raised eyebrows in Berlin for want of clarity and prior consultation and fuelled suspicion in Warsaw for fear that the initiative would seek to replace the European Union’s enlargement policy. The EPC, in a nutshell, did not get off to the best start.

Initially envisaged as a values-driven community of “democratic European nations”, the EPC came to fruition as a loose intergovernmental platform in which 40+ European leaders can discuss issues under the guise of informality and engage on an equal footing on matters of national or common interests. Launched in Prague on 6 October 2022, it has gained a degree of traction in European capitals from Reykjavik to Baku and from Oslo to Ankara, primarily as a response to geopolitical challenges. The EPC subsequently convened a summit in Moldova on 1 June 2023, followed by another held in Grenada on 5 October 2023. A fourth meeting will be hosted by the United Kingdom in spring 2024.

While consensus has emerged on the necessity to continue this initiative, much remains to be done to tap its potential, steer its development and embed it in the European political landscape. This will require the proactive and concerted engagement of at least some of the 40+ European states participating in the format, i.e. beyond France and the United Kingdom – a condition that has hardly been met today. Resolute engagement on the EPC platform on the part of the Weimar Triangle, together with EPC host countries, could set the EPC on the right course.

### The Weimar Triangle’s circumspect support for the EPC

The Weimar Triangle has largely been absent from the European agenda in recent years. The differences between France and Germany on the one hand and Poland, which was governed by the Law and Justice party (PiS), on the other precluded any constructive cooperation. Nevertheless, geopolitical challenges in the East, growing international insecurity and attacks against the multilateral order have pushed France, Germany and Poland to advocate together – as declared by the three Foreign Ministers in October 2020 – for a “more solidary, more united and stronger Europe on the international stage”. This need to bolster Weimar cooperation has dramatically intensified with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It reflects the EU’s collective efforts to affirm European unity in support of Kyiv and opposition to Moscow.

It is in this context that the Weimar Triangle has voiced support for political dialogue and cooperation within the EPC. France, Germany and Poland expect the format to contribute to “fostering a wider area of stability and

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economic prosperity and strengthening resilience in Europe”. Its emphasis on consolidating Europe politically in the face of current geopolitical developments is fully in line with the Weimar Triangle’s renewed engagement on European strategic affairs. Substantive shifts in French and German foreign policy approaches towards Russia from 2022 onwards and the change of government in Poland following the 2023 elections facilitated this dynamic. In February 2024, the Triangle declared its goal “to make the European Union more united, stronger and able to respond to today’s security challenges, on a path towards a security and defence union”.

The Weimar Triangle’s support for the EPC comes with two caveats, however: first, the three Foreign Ministers agreed in September 2022 that the EPC should “not generate a substitute to the EU enlargement process”. Poland, and to a lesser extent Germany, have been vocal in opposing any attempt to conflate the EPC with a waiting room for EU accession countries. This risk was contained early on, with Ukraine and Moldova being granted EU candidate status in June 2022 under the French Presidency of the Council. However, only a successful reform of the accession process that enshrines this new momentum in enlargement affairs will keep this fear at bay and allow the Weimar Triangle’s support for the EPC to grow.

The second caveat for the Weimar Triangle is that the EPC should not “double existing institutions, alliances or platforms in Europe”. This is a shared concern as the EPC’s ambition is to build new bridges and strengthen unity on a continent that already hosts a number of initiatives. These need to be taken into account. Most leaders shun the idea of institutionalising the EPC and circumspectly ensure that its work does not encroach on strategic dialogues conducted in other formats, such as NATO.

The Weimar Triangle’s support for the EPC has not translated to date into coordinated engagement on the part of France, Germany and Poland. Diplomatic initiatives have been launched within the EPC, but they have been steered by France and Germany alone – on

the Serbia/Kosovo issue and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Concerted engagement by the Triangle would be ground-breaking, but, above all, it would give the EPC the strategic depth needed to address key challenges facing Europe.

### **Weimar Plus as a strategic backbone?**

Ambitions have been scaled down since Emmanuel Macron’s initial proposal, but they would hit rock bottom if the EPC were to be reduced to a European diplomatic talking shop with no common thread other than protocol. The EPC needs to refine its substantive purpose if it wants to gain in significance and make a difference at all, even as a mere venue for summit diplomacy.

The EPC’s setup, with its large number of participating states and no dedicated institutions monitoring its development, makes it difficult to grow a common vision, nurture a shared understanding of its utility and sustain engagement among all participating states. Stepping up the role of the EU and its institutions within the EPC would potentially help to address some of these issues. However, grafting the EPC onto an ill-designed EU machinery that the member states have called to reform would turn the format into something less flexible and less informal, and would sideline countries in the EPC that have no aspirations to join the EU. It would, furthermore, smother the EPC’s inter-governmental dimension, tame its innovative character and most certainly fail to foster the kind of political and strategic dialogue that Europe needs today. The EU, as a polity, would be ill-advised to hijack the EPC and turn it into a framework for core-periphery relations. Brussels’ attempt to do so in the Western Balkans and the countries of the Eastern Partnership has fallen short of enshrining stability and democracy across the continent.

The Weimar Triangle could offer an alternative path to an EU-run EPC, and would arguably constitute a more appropriate backbone to the initiative. The Triangle’s intergovernmental setup makes it congruent with the EPC’s, as does its underlying ambition to bridge gaps at

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the continental level. In an enlarged EU with 27 member states, consensus on strategic issues can no longer depend solely on the Franco-German couple. This is especially the case as, although Franco-German relations have repeatedly demonstrated their strength as crisis managers for the EU for many years, their weakness in the joint, strategic shaping of Europe's future has been obvious since the 1990s. While more difficult to conduct, coordination in a Weimar Triangle format has a greater power of coalescence – from the West to the East. It paves the way for broader consensus in Europe.

This logic could be used to power up the EPC. At the operational level, a Weimar Triangle working group could be set up to reflect on the development of the initiative, its functioning and expected utility. It could explore the contours of Weimar Triangle coordination within the EPC and, above all, propose common ground for Franco-German-Polish engagement. At the political level, the Weimar Triangle could commit itself, *primus inter pares*, to providing strategic guidance, ensuring basic continuity in the EPC's work and endowing the EPC with at least some rules of participation.

The Weimar Triangle would be well positioned to take on this task, hand in hand with the country hosting the EPC Summit. Cooperation in a flexible Weimar Plus setting within the EPC would be an incentive for other participating states to engage, and for the host country to scale up its priorities. By backing the latter's preparatory work, the Weimar Triangle would also reinforce the EPC's functioning. The Weimar Plus format could be extended in order to associate other participating states demonstrating a strong interest on particular issues (migration, cybersecurity, etc.). At the end of the day, the Weimar Triangle would not be akin to a *directoire*, but would rather endow the EPC with a centre of gravity, coalescing the flexible engagement of other participating states into collective action.

### The benefits of Weimar (Plus) engagement

Participation in the EPC to date has not been premised on any principle, and even the apparent motive of

countering Russia is not shared by all leaders – let alone the priorities the EPC should tackle. Concerted engagement by France, Germany and Poland could bring clarity. Their respective approach to international affairs and European security align with each other on matters that are relevant to the EPC as a whole.

Their engagement could, a minima, focus on reasserting the need for all participating states to comply with the obligations set out in the Charter of the United Nations and the Helsinki Final Act. The EPC's *raison d'être* would accordingly be refined as a framework designed to uphold multilateralism in Europe. Violations of international law and *Machtpolitik* have shattered the international system and undermined rules-based multilateralism to a worrisome degree. The repercussions of this geopolitical shift in world affairs are now hitting the European continent, polarising societies and widening old fractures.

France, Germany and Poland have worked to foster European unity through the Weimar Triangle. Together, they could extend this engagement to the level of the EPC by recalling that European security is indivisible. A joint declaration sponsored by the Weimar Triangle underlining the fact that the security of all EPC participating states is inseparably linked to that of all the others would aggregate support in the EPC. It would also help to keep alive earlier commitments in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe that have been violated in recent years, such as under the Charter of Paris for a New Europe.

Furthermore, the EPC would gain substance by positing as *sine qua non* the principle that states shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any other participating state. This principle of international law has been blatantly violated in recent years by several countries participating in the EPC (Azerbaijan and Serbia in particular). The Weimar Triangle could push to establish this as its keystone, together with the principle of sovereign equality, which remain lacunary today. Certain states in the EPC should not be less equal than others (cf. Kosovo).

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Concerted engagement in a flexible Weimar Plus format on the part of France, Germany and Poland could, furthermore, help the EPC steer its work in a more consistent manner. The United Kingdom's interest in putting migration on the EPC agenda in 2024 is not bad news per se. It adds to the list of priorities already suggested by France in Prague in 2022: boosting resilience in critical infrastructures, promoting energy and connectivity, fostering youth affairs, tackling disinformation, etc. The reinforcement of Europe's supply chain in critical raw materials and the reconstruction of Ukraine could also be major issues. However, in the absence of strategic guidance, the EPC will find it hard to set priorities and work consistently to implement them.

**The EPC as opportunity for the Weimar Triangle**

Concerted engagement by France, Germany and Poland would also benefit the Weimar Triangle. It would bolster the level of strategic dialogue within the trilateral format and boost its leadership in European affairs. More importantly, it would empower the Triangle in relation to other key actors, in Europe and beyond, while rendering the format in its flexible expression (Weimar Plus) attractive to EPC partners. For France, it would be a way to keep promoting the EPC while sharing ownership. For Germany, it would be a mode of engagement that allows Berlin to shape developments in the EPC without being in the driving seat (or taking responsibility for possible failures). For Poland, it would be the recognition that Central Europe is a structuring part of Europe on a par with France or Germany, and it would be an opportunity for the new Polish Government to push for a progressive agenda following the recent elections.

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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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