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The European Political Community: a delicate balancing act

Despite three summits and an overall positive reception from its members, the added value of the European Political Community is still in doubt. Calls are multiplying for its nature and purpose to be clarified. More specifically, its positioning in relationship to the European Union is raising questions. In spite of all these uncertainties, continuing down the current path is probably the best option ahead. However, for the EPC this means that it must assume its role as a laboratory of ideas that can help its member states to define a common strategic vision of their future security.

The European Political Community (EPC) started out amid deep suspicion. It was perceived by critics as a sham seeking to delay or even block new accessions to the EU. Its first two successful meetings dispelled many of these doubts, however. The informality of the conference, the decision to drop any final communique and the equality enjoyed by its participants were welcomed by European leaders and made for an auspicious start. Despite this, new questions are now emerging, reinforced by the recent lacklustre Granada Summit. Launched as a Europe-wide coalition in support of Ukraine, the initiative runs the risk of slowly losing momentum if it only sticks to that single objective. The motivation surrounding staunch opposition to Russia's aggression alone cannot be powerful enough to maintain steady momentum, all the more so as EPC members do not share the same positions on sanctions policy against Russia or military assistance to Ukraine. Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of a prolonged Ukrainian conflict will probably put the stamina of the EPC to the test. Constrained by many different views on what its precise future should be, the

new organisation has to perform a delicate balancing act as it confronts difficult challenges relating to three main questions: its current informal nature, its relationship with the EU and its core purpose.

Protecting the EPC's informality and agility

The informality issue is probably not the most difficult challenge facing the EPC. Most leaders who attended the two EPC meetings agree that it should stick to its existing format. They want the organisation to continue to be unconstrained by rules and procedures and to avoid the rigidity of consensus-based decision-making. They also prefer sessions to be kept concise to allow for open exchanges on a limited number of issues and for side meetings to take place on some of the current European crises (such as Cyprus, Kosovo and Nagorno-Karabakh). This is not to say that more formal arrangements – some of which are already under way – cannot shore up the preparation of the meetings. Greater coordination, for instance between the incoming chairs, and more preparatory meetings with the leaders' sherpas could improve the substance of the discussions.

However, the challenge for the EPC will be to remain in a place that is neither a mere high-level Davos-type conference nor a formal European summit in the G20 format. This fine balance may sound irrelevant for those seeking a more operational role for the EPC. That said, the current state of play enjoys consensus among EPC members and makes for an agile institution that fulfils leaders' expectations. Until now, suggestions such as the allocation of a specific budget and the establish-

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ment of a permanent secretariat have been met with scepticism. These proposals imply a gradual institutionalisation of the organisation, which is viewed with suspicion by most members as a strain on its present informality. In addition, such formalisation risks positioning the EPC as a competitor to institutions such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe. It might also stir up unnecessary rivalry with the EU and its own financial programmes. Should the EPC require operational and financial support for individual projects in the future, outsourcing to existing European agencies sounds like a more suitable option.

A partner to but not part of the EU

The issue of a closer relationship between the EPC and the EU is more complex in nature. Somewhat unsettled by the emergence of the EPC and by repeated calls from several members of the new entity not to let the EU weigh too heavily on this new platform, the Brussels institutions are hesitant as to what exactly their role should be.

In a contradictory way, two attitudes have existed side by side since the EPC's inauguration. As the country that initially came up with this concept, France has been eager to dismiss any idea of the EPC as a waiting room or a substitute for EU membership. However, at the same time, proponents of greater involvement on the part of the EPC in the Union's enlargement process have actively promoted the vision of the EPC as a political platform where progressive alignment on the EU's principles and values could lay the groundwork for future accessions. More recently, the Franco-German Group of Twelve proposed considering the EPC as the prefiguration of a possible outer circle attached to an enlarged and more flexible European Union.

This conception of a close partnership directly contradicts the views of those nations that agreed to join the EPC on the assumption that the EU would not interfere at least directly. Should the new organisation appear too EU-centric, it risks losing some of its genuinely committed members, such as the United Kingdom and Switzerland. This could also stir more confusion with a partner like Turkey, whose status as a candidate country remains problematic. As for the candidate countries for EU membership, which enjoy equal status in the EPC as other members, a too close connection to the enlargement process would be considered backtracking. Lastly, an overly close association with the EU and its aspiration to be a community of values as embodied in its Charter of Fundamental Rights would run contrary to the notion of a community of interests to which the EPC tacitly subscribes in its present composition.

All in all, as an open platform for dialogue between all European nations, the EPC will hopefully enhance an atmosphere of cooperation that can only benefit the EU's own enlargement process. For the time being, it should keep its current profile as an autonomous entity bringing together countries from all regions of Europe and with different political backgrounds.

A place for shaping a common European strategic culture

Where does this balancing act leave the EPC's core purpose? Probably where it all started. The EPC was born as a result of the Ukrainian war as a place where all European nations, irrespective of their diverging views regarding this conflict, were invited to come and discuss their common security interests. It was shaped as the natural reunion of the entire European family after the shock of Russia's aggression. The non-invitation to the table of Russia (and Belarus) cannot but emphasise the purpose of the whole initiative.

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Nevertheless, the EPC is not intent on simply responding to the ups and downs of the war in Ukraine. It is committed to engaging in a comprehensive discussion on European security while the stability most European nations experienced in their recent past is being profoundly transformed by the return of war to their continent. This objective entails three implications. The first is that this new organisation must encompass the largest possible geographical scope, which it has indeed managed so far. It must be seen as a “big tent” where all participating nations share an awareness of their common European identity. This also means that all conflicts in Europe must be perceived as being equally important to the preservation of European security, from the protracted crises in Cyprus, Kosovo and Transnistria to ongoing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Last but not least, this necessitates expanding the notion of security to all fields of action, from military to economic matters. With the war in Ukraine, risks of over-dependence have reinforced the need for urgent action to address Europe’s economic security in fields such as trade, food and energy, transport and research on new technologies.

Working on this extensive agenda does not imply that the EPC is competing with all other existing European institutions. What is expected of the EPC is the capacity to define among its member states a common strategic vision of their future security. It should be a laboratory of ideas that can inspire other institutions to establish concrete cooperative partnerships at their own initiative.

If a new European security order is to emerge from the rubble of the Ukrainian war, it will most probably be negotiated in other organisations such as NATO and the OSCE. It could just as well be discussed in an ad hoc format as a new Congress of Vienna for the 21st century and with the indispensable presence of the US. Whatever the setting and the outcome of such discussions, the EPC’s added value will have been to anticipate that

prospect and help Europeans define a clear understanding of their own security interests.

Creating political clout – a possible task for the Weimar Triangle

It goes without saying that keeping the EPC on this delicate track will not be easy. Much will depend upon the goodwill of all participants and, more crucially, on the skills of the successive chairs. As the nation in charge of the summit for the first semester of 2024, the United Kingdom in particular could play an important role in shoring up the EPC, which is gauged in London to be a useful channel for reconnecting with the rest of Europe after Brexit. But it should refrain from making migration the only topic on the agenda of the next summit.

At the same time, other players such as Germany, which has shown little enthusiasm for the EPC to date, must be convinced to invest greater political clout. In their constant dialogue, Germany and France should strive to reach a common understanding of the EPC’s positive contribution. Within the framework of the Weimar Triangle, they should reach out – now that the current elections are over and a pro-European government is moving into office – to Poland, which has indicated a genuine interest in the EPC in the past. From there on, they could seek to mobilise a core group of like-minded countries, dispel some of the recurring misunderstandings over its core purpose and emphasise its unique added value. Nevertheless, for these efforts to succeed, the EPC has to remain the informal and agile organisation it has managed to be so far. This is the condition for this senior-level dialogue to deliver a more strategic Europe at the end of the day.

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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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