

Résumé

Weimar Plus Online Discussion

30 March 2023

What Should the European Political Community Seek to Achieve?

Perspectives from Paris, Berlin, Warsaw and Vienna

The launch of the European Political Community (EPC) is a response to the historic challenges brought about by Russia's war in Ukraine. Its ambition, beyond the signal it sends to Moscow, is to reinforce Europe's political structuring through concrete projects and intergovernmental cooperation. At its first meeting, which took place in Prague on 6 October 2022, a list of six priorities was identified. These range from energy security to youth, migration and regional cooperation. Much remains to be clarified, though, before the 47 participating states convene for a second meeting in Chisinau in June 2023.

The Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe, the Paris-based do tank Euro Créative and the Genshagen Foundation invited parti-

cipants to take part in the Weimar Plus Online Discussion entitled **What Should the European Political Community Seek to Achieve?** on 30 March 2023 to address questions concerning the EPC's added value, format and concrete intentions. **Hugues Moret**, Special Envoy for the European Political Community at the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, **Agnieszka Cianciara**, Associate Professor at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, **Stefan Lehne**, Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe, **Barbara Lippert**, Director of Research at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), and **Lukáš Macek**, Head of the Centre Grande Europe and Research Fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute, provided insights from an Austrian, French, German and Polish perspective.

Keynote: The idea behind the EPC

In his introductory keynote, Hugues Moret referred to the EPC's role as a platform that mirrors

Europe's need to stand together in the context of global crises and that functions as a format for rebuilding stability and re-establishing links across the continent. He identified four main challenges that the EPC faces with regard to security, energy and resilience, as well as culture and values. Its informal structure, which assembles the participating countries' heads of state and government without an institutional framework, aims to enable conversations on an equal footing. Building upon the first meeting in Prague, which he deemed to have been a success due to its high number of 44 participating states and the free and unfiltered discussions that were held, the next EPC summit will take place in Moldova. Providing political reassurances and concrete benefits should be on the agenda at the meeting.

Perspectives on the EPC from Berlin, Warsaw, Vienna and Paris

Following up on these introductory remarks, Barbara Lippert, Agnieszka Cianciara, Stefan Lehne and Lukáš Macek shed light on the perspectives of the respective EU capitals regarding the EPC. Even though the German Government was sceptical at the beginning and has questioned the merit of the EPC, support for the format has increased recently. Barbara Lippert outlined Germany's appreciation of the EPC's potential as an informal, geopolitical platform that, on the one hand, poses a united front against Russia and, on the other, exemplifies a bridge to the United Kingdom. Poland, for its part, has a number of questions and concerns about the EPC. As Agnieszka Cianciara emphasised, Eastern European countries and the Western Balkans feel like they are being put in an eternal "waiting room" instead of advancing the accession process and that the (South-)Eastern European countries are rather being kept out of the Union. Stefan Lehne argued that the EPC should remain separate from the enlargement process and the Eastern Partnership. Instead, he mentioned the opportunity to invite also non-European partners to further summits if the topics might be relevant for a broader audience.

Moreover, Austria values the informal structure of the platform and sees no need for institutionalisation. Lukáš Macek concluded the round of initial remarks by referring to two risks with which the EPC is confronted. First, he shared the point of view that countries seeking integration perceive the EPC as consolation prize. Second, the EPC, which is based on the intergovernmental principle, might appear as an alternative to the community idea. From a French perspective, the platform should, in particular, engage Ukraine and offer a platform for close exchange when integration is not (yet) possible.

Should the EPC remain a purely intergovernmental format, or could some form of institutionalisation become necessary? How is it different from existing formats like the OSCE or the Council of Europe?

According to Lukáš Macek, how the EPC should be structured depends mostly on its own ambition. Whereas the goal of showing unity beyond the European Union can only be achieved through an intergovernmental format, realising concrete projects would require further institutionalisation including a permanent secretary, a ministerial platform and also engagement on the part of civil society. Agnieszka Cianciara emphasised this perspective by mentioning the Three Seas Initiative launched by Poland and Croatia. This programme also started as a presidential summit and needed increased cooperation such as at the ministerial level when it proceeded to engage in more in-depth work on joint projects. Particularly in the case of progressive institutionalisation, overlaps with already existing organisations could arise.

Could the EPC become a catalyst of Europeanisation across the continent?

Barbara Lippert noted that the term Europeanisation has always been connected with the EU's

process of promulgating its values beyond its borders to potential accession candidates. In the context of the EPC, Europeanisation must be understood in a different way. According to Lippert, the EPC has four main functions. It is a messaging tool that sends a clear signal to Russia and Belarus and fosters European unity. It encourages socialisation by enabling the participating countries to generate new ideas for approaching current challenges. Beyond that, priority and agenda-setting as well as stock-taking and co-ordination are among the EPC's functions.

Does the EPC pose a threat to accession prospects?

Instead of delaying or hindering the accession process, Stefan Lehne claimed that the EPC could give rise to political impetus. The EPC should not be regarded as a substitute to enlargement, but as a forum for dialogue. Furthermore, the dynamics of enlargement are currently dominated by different issues, primarily the war in Ukraine. Lukáš Macek shared this opinion and pointed out that this narrow perspective is not helpful for (potential) candidates. Every framework that reduces the gap between EU member states and candidates and creates greater familiarity and connectivity should be perceived as an opportunity for Eastern and South-East European countries. They should use the EPC to lobby for enlargement and get in touch with EU leaders. Agnieszka Cianciara took a different stance and stated that the scepticism among candidate countries was well founded. From a Central and Eastern European perspective, especially for Ukraine, the EPC does not seem to differentiate between countries at completely different stages,

the ones aspiring to EU integration and others denying it. Regardless of the efforts that have been taken to make a step towards membership, the new initiative appears like a setback. Barbara Lippert sympathised with both sides and outlined the EPC's potential as a tool for advancing the interests of the Western Balkans, whereas the format might seem like a distraction from the major road to Brussels from a Ukrainian perspective.

Which ideas could be developed within the framework of the EPC?

Barbara Lippert highlighted the EPC's role as a stage for informal dialogue and foregrounded the importance of "keeping the show running" and fostering the exchange between the participating states. Lukáš Macek drew attention to education and the need to invest in young people. He suggested that a European University be founded in order to bring together students from various countries. Agnieszka Cianciara said that it was important to take the unintended consequences of the EPC into account and called for the concerns of decision-makers to be taken seriously. Both Stefan Lehne and Hugues Moret saw the necessity to take a further step towards Moldova, which will be the host of the next EPC summit. Stefan Lehne stressed the importance of the signal sent to Moldova and made the case for upgrading the Energy Council and increasing EU funds for countries suffering the most from the energy crisis. Furthermore, Hugues Moret enumerated decreased roaming fees for the EU's neighbourhood as another future project of the EPC.

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