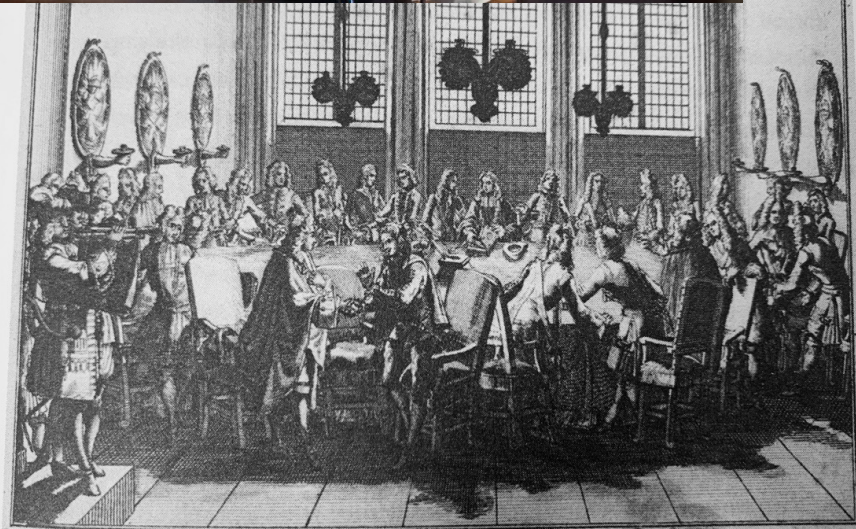

Bringing the greater
European family together
New perspectives on
the European Political
Community

Hans Kribbe,
Sébastien Lumet and
Luuk van Middelaar

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Negotiations between Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev and Armenia's prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, with French president Emmanuel Macron and European Council president Charles Michel



Engraving on the Treaty of Utrecht, 1714, by Peter Schenk II



The Czech host, Prime-Minister Petr Fiala, greeting Prime-Minister Liz Truss

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Contents

- I Introduction**
- II Origins: a response to the war**
 - A new continental dividing line
 - Early doubts and a quest for agency
- III Europe without bureaucracy**
 - Forum of equals
 - Community of interests
 - Meeting place for leaders
- IV The way ahead**
 - Achieving concrete results
 - Driving it all forward
 - Conclusion: after the war

Notes

Image credits

Acknowledgements

About the authors

About the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics

I Introduction

Set against the violence and horror of Russia's assault on Ukraine, the emergence of the European Political Community may seem a sideshow. Unlike its well-established sisters NATO and the EU, the 2022 newcomer has not issued a single statement, let alone financed weapons or been of any other practical help to the people of Ukraine.

Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss the incipient pan-European institution as an irrelevance. Among other things, the new club offers a visible European home to Ukraine, making clear the country belongs to the greater European family. It provides full, equal and easily accessible membership of a community of states that shares significant territorial and security interests. In contrast to joining the EU, there are no boxes to tick, no milestones, no conditions to fulfil.

The conflict in Ukraine, more broadly, has led to a heightened awareness of history across the continent. War and peace, friend and foe, the Wheel of History spinning out of control – long forgotten categories have reimposed themselves on the present. A new and sharper experience of geographic space has also emerged, along with the conviction that this is 'a European war', altering the continent in a way no other single event has done since 1989.

Although the Western effort, led by the United States and NATO, to help Ukraine withstand Russia's assault has made this a 'trans-Atlantic moment', this essay will focus on the perhaps more intriguing continental dimension of the collective response. Forced to reappraise the order that keeps it together, 'Europe' seems to have unearthed an older incarnation of itself. It is taking on the ancient diplomatic mantle of a polity of sovereign states governed by informal summitry, norms of equality and the importance of trust. The emergence of the European Political Community – after a French proposal in May 2022 followed by a first summit in Prague in October – is the most concrete manifestation of this rediscovery.

With more than forty presidents and prime ministers preparing to travel to Chisinau, Moldova, for the EPC's second summit, to be held on 1 June 2023, this first publication by the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics assesses the body's nature, purpose and possible future. We argue that the European Political Community, which sceptics regard as a mere talking shop, represents a fitting and timely response to the demise of Europe's post-Cold War order.

The new club enables its members to come together and strategize as sovereign states in ways not dissimilar to what those states did in 1989 and 1945, or in 1815 and even in 1648, when hard questions about war, peace and order demanded novel answers. Confronting the very same questions in the present, Europe is reaching back to its past, to the methods and often forgotten diplomatic practices that once gave birth to the modern state system itself.

This endeavour to revert to its origins and to re-invent, or at least re-adjust, European state order in turn explains three essential features of the EPC. First, its apparent disregard for concrete ‘deliverables’ or official communiqués. For as long as necessary, the continent’s leaders must be able to meet in informal and unscripted settings. Second, the body’s endeavours, even if half-hearted at times, to keep a certain distance from the European Union. Third, its unrepentant focus on shared security interests rather than shared values. These features, too easily qualified as shortcomings or weaknesses, are in fact the young community’s main strengths. Only at a later stage, so this essay argues, should institutionalization be attempted. If indeed it should be attempted at all.

II Origins: a response to the war

A new continental dividing line

Until the invasion of Ukraine, the prevailing opinion was that Russia’s relationship with most other European states, while increasingly conflictual, could still be grounded in a *modus vivendi*. A minimal set of basic norms and shared practices would allow for cooperation and significant economic integration. For the countries sandwiched between Russia and the EU – such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – it meant life was never entirely comfortable, but binary choices could at least be avoided.

The possibility of that existence ‘in between’ is vanishing. A new, sharper geopolitical dividing line is being carved across the continent. The conceptual and strategic space for grey zones is shrinking. Finland and Sweden’s bids to join NATO, after decades of military non-alignment, are testament to this. Ukraine, once a *de facto* buffer state, is now a frontline state, fighting to regain its territory and expel Russia from within its borders. On the other side of the

divide lies Russia and whichever countries choose to align with it, notably Lukashenko's Belarus. The crucial question, of course, is where precisely the boundaries will be drawn. Who belongs to 'Them'? Who belongs to 'Us'? And might European states such as Serbia and Turkey nevertheless be tempted by the option of occupying some middle ground?

The European Union, while unquestionably part of the answer to the continent's many new strategic challenges, is not suited to the task of drawing the greater European family together in response to the Russian onslaught. In June 2022, in an effort to make clear that 'they are with us', the EU opened the door to Ukraine's accession and signalled the same to Moldova, while indicating to Georgia it has a prospect of membership. But as Brussels officials privately admit, the road to the EU, governed by strict and burdensome legal and administrative criteria, is long and takes time, whereas the need to anchor these and other states in a new European and non-Russian home is immediate.

Moreover, a significant number of European states have no intention of joining the EU. Energy and economic powerhouses Norway and Switzerland are two. Turkey's accession bid has stalled. Then there is the UK. That such strategically important states are not part of the Union makes it evident that EU membership, whether actual or prospective, does not define Europe. Here lies the *raison d'être* of the European Political Community. It offers precisely the sort of arrangement the continent currently requires: pan-European, flexible, informal, and egalitarian and intimate in spirit.

Early doubts and a quest for agency

This outcome may not be exactly what French president Macron had in mind when he first launched the idea of a pan-continental gathering called the 'European Political Community', ten weeks into the war and to a tepid reception.¹

Many questions arose as to how this new body should operate. And yet, the dramatic change in Europe's geostrategic situation inexorably pushed leaders towards recognizing its potential.

Immediately after Macron's proposal, two powerful and legitimate strands of criticism and debate emerged.² First of all, the EPC was seen as a distraction

or, worse, a trap. A distraction, because the continent does not suffer from a lack of institutional forums, such as the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and the Vienna-based Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with their 46 and 57 members respectively. A trap, as initially the proposal looked like a ploy to scupper the EU membership bid of Ukraine and others by creating a new waiting room or permanent second-tier membership. The force of this critique has since weakened, not least because the European Council granted Ukraine EU candidacy status in June 2022. That EPC membership exists in parallel to, and not instead of, EU membership has been a crucial clarification.

The second strand is not criticism but rather an appeal for more ambition and a greater capacity to act. The EPC, on this view, is a welcome means to advance the continent's security, but its success will need to be judged, ultimately, on whether it generates concrete policies and actions. To arrive at such 'deliverables', the EPC will need to be buttressed with institutions and decision-making procedures. Without them it will have little practical efficacy.

The debate on the EPC's agency and its working practices continues. Numerous organizational questions remain unanswered, while opinions within and among Europe's capitals diverge. Nevertheless, 44 heads of state and government from across the continent responded positively to the invitation and gathered on 6 October 2022, in Prague Castle, for the EPC's founding summit. There was effectively only one agenda item: did the leaders agree the new forum was useful? Their decision to meet once every six months means the answer was resoundingly affirmative.

Why the enthusiasm, one might ask, given that no single policy decision or statement was forthcoming? For one, there is more to a summit than meets the bureaucratic eye. Symbols count too. The family photo of 44 European leaders – the presidents of Russia and Belarus notable by their absence – provided at least one precious and very concrete message, relayed by the media to the public at home and abroad.

Leaders also seem to have appreciated the time the Czech host had reserved for get-togethers in the plenary's margins, which enabled the patching up of rows and mediation in more serious conflicts. Macron and European Council president Charles Michel took aside the warring leaders from Azerbaijan and Armenia, producing another memorable image of the Prague

summit. British prime minister Truss used the opportunity to end her very public spat with the French president, demonstratively calling him ‘a friend’ following their bilateral meeting. President Erdogan and Greek prime minister Mitsotakis indirectly traded angry barbs in their respective post-dinner press conferences, but at least both leaders had been in the same room again. It was progress of sorts.

The informal nature of the EPC, a body apparently unable to muster a single agreed statement, will assuredly be portrayed as a shortcoming – another sign of the all-too-familiar European disunity. And, clearly, in terms of measurable output, the EPC has nothing yet to show. However, we suggest there is another standard of success against which the new forum needs to be measured: rather than formulating new *policy*, it performs a more elemental role of rekindling a sense of European *polity*.

III Europe without bureaucracy

For the states of Europe to rediscover their shared existence and security, for them to give a new shape to their membership of a diverse but centuries-old and tightly knit European family, they must hark back to ancient political forms. In doing so, they inevitably need to put aside certain cherished post-1945 categories and criteria, along with the institutions and practices that sustain and uphold them. The latter will undoubtedly retain and quite possibly increase their importance in the future. However, it is only by peeling back certain bureaucratic layers that the bedrock and original ties and bonds from which those institutions originate once again come into view.

The EPC is a highly political attempt to put those rudimentary inter-state ties to use in the current context. It does so by drawing on principles of diplomacy that allow it to function as a forum of equals (outside the EU’s orbit), a community of interests (at some distance from the Council of Europe) and an informal meeting place for leaders (without bureaucracy).

Forum of equals

If the EPC’s chief objective is to provide a new framework for inter-state collaboration in Europe, leaders’ reluctance to involve the EU more closely is entirely reasonable. A sense of polity is more likely to emerge when states

are, formally speaking, equal and sovereign, and not encumbered by existing club ties and practices separating members from non-members.³ Carving out a strong role for EU institutions at the heart of this initiative would inevitably underscore divisive ‘in-out’ distinctions.

EU leaders grasped this at their June summit in 2022, when they decided to sever the EPC from the EU’s accession policy and membership prospects. Ukraine (as well as Poland and the Baltic states) vehemently opposed any such links. Moreover, using the EPC as a platform for advancing EU accession would inevitably have imported the feelings of frustration, humiliation and bitterness that have become endemic in EU accession talks. It was the dual decision by EU leaders to cut these links, while simultaneously granting Ukraine candidacy status – an implicit quid pro quo – that cleared the path for the first Prague summit.⁴

EU leaders also rejected proposals to turn the EPC into an extension of the bloc’s neighbourhood policy, which offers non-EU states conditional access to selected programmes and policies. The very concept of ‘neighbourhood’ at the heart of this policy – a zone orbiting the continent’s core – is inimical to the goal of reconstituting a pan-European space of belonging and equality. Any attempts to use the EPC to promote ‘sectoral integration’ with the EU single market risk incurring the same built-in defect. Although some non-EU states would like concrete benefits, these policies remain rooted in notions of conditionality, leaving some states to act as gatekeepers while others bang on the gate.

This political dynamic between ‘ins’ and ‘outs’ has soured and eroded diplomatic relations between EU countries and non-EU states, whose strategic importance has been growing post-*Zeitenwende*. For years, Turkey has bitterly complained about the EU’s lack of respect. It is a sentiment that extends beyond the personal gripes of the country’s long-time leader and cuts across Turkey’s political classes. It has made strategic collaboration harder. In the Western Balkans, disillusionment with the EU’s legalistic accession procedures is widespread. Brexit has opened wounds on both sides of the Channel that are yet to heal.

The UK’s decision to participate in the EPC was confirmed a week before the first summit, offering a clear signal that it would not be an EU-centred forum. Too many EU flags at Prague Castle and the prime minister might have

walked out. London had to accept the name 'Political Community', to which it would have preferred the more modest sounding 'European Political Forum', but it recognized itself in the vision of the EPC as a club whose members are 'just states', equal under God so to speak. It is this which makes the EPC so timely and valuable. As Albanian prime minister Edi Rama once captured its rationale, 'We may not be part of the EU, but we are part of the E.'

Still, for the EPC as a stand-alone club of sovereign states to keep the EU at a suitable distance is tricky. EU politicians of several generations have subscribed to the notion that the EU is Europe, and vice versa. They habitually place the EU institutions squarely at the continent's heart. Even French president Macron found it difficult to resist the gravitational pull of this image. Of all times and places, he chose to launch his proposal for a European Political Community on 9 May 2022, Europe Day, to the assembled European Parliament in Strasbourg – hardly the sovereign, continental audience his message needed to target. Ambiguities have since persisted. Invitations to the October summit were sent jointly by Czech prime minister Petr Fiala and European Council president Michel. On the list of invitees for the Chisinau summit is European Parliament president Roberta Metsola. These contradictions seem innocuous enough. However, if not kept in check, they will erode the EPC's *raison d'être*.

Community of interests

The participation of almost all European states also throws light on what ties this community together. In advance of the Prague summit, the all-consuming question was not 'What is on the agenda?', it was 'Who is coming?', or 'What are the criteria of admission?' At the launch of a new institution or international partnership, the guestlist often says more about its purpose and nature than any formal declaration.

The decision to invite Turkey's Erdogan – once Greek and Cypriot hesitations were overcome in the summer of 2022 – revealed what leaders are attempting to achieve. In the context of Putin's war of aggression, it is tempting to frame the initiative as a community of democracies, based on liberal values, human rights and the rule of law. However, Turkey's presence – and even more that of Azerbaijan – indicates this is not what the protagonists envision. Instead, the EPC forms a broad community of *interests*, bound together by the threat the war poses to their joint security. Although it was never explicitly stated

at Prague, and some continue to speak of the EPC as a values-based body, geostrategic imperatives inevitably lead to this outcome. Russia was not invited, not because it is an illiberal autocracy but because it is a geopolitical rival waging a war on the continent. As with NATO, Turkey is in, not because it is a democracy but because it is an important strategic partner.

Since the start of the war, the need to work with illiberal states or hybrid regimes has imposed itself. Doing deals with strongmen remains anathema, but necessity pushes moral reservations aside, as in the case of energy security where Azerbaijan is an important ally. Turkey is capable of projecting power far into the Middle East and North Africa. As a Black Sea neighbour to Ukraine and Russia it keeps lines open to both, allowing Ankara to broker an important grain deal. For these geographic reasons alone, keeping Turkey close is a strategic no-brainer for many European states.

How European democracies should approach building and sustaining ties with autocratic or hybrid states, whether in Europe or further afield in Africa and elsewhere, is a question of increasing strategic importance. The EPC is an effort to facilitate part of an answer by devising a 'diplomacy of necessity' that is better adapted to times of turbulence and increasing multipolarity.⁵

This has implications for the topics on the agenda. For decades, themes around democracy, human rights and the rule of law played a leading part in Europe's foreign policy. From the EPC agenda, however, they are notably absent. It forms a marked contrast with the Council of Europe, the Strasbourg-based, pan-European body founded in 1949 for the post-war era which, somewhat bemused by the EPC's emergence, hosted its first leaders' summit in 18 years in Reykjavik in May 2023, two weeks ahead of Chisinau.⁶ Evidently, Europe's leaders do not view the new EPC format as a place for scrutinizing each other's track record on the rule of law. Instead, here they focus squarely on areas such as security, integrating energy networks, pooling the expertise and capacity needed for fending off cyberattacks and strengthening strategic resilience. These are issues for which mutually beneficial deals can be made, regardless of the parties' values.

Adherence to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity constitutes at least one shared value for EPC members (one not shared by Putin's Russia). This type of value, however, is more 'Westphalian' in nature than 'Strasbourgian', being linked more to the post-1648 European state system

than to the post-1949 protection of individual rights and freedoms. The fact that the three micro-states Andorra, Monaco and San Marino have been added to the Chisinau guestlist (bringing the EPC's membership to 47), underscores the point and testifies to the other members' respect for their sovereignty.

The interest-driven character of the European Political Community is not only inclusive (across value divides) but also exclusive (on geographic grounds). For instance, the Czech suggestion of inviting Israel was quietly dropped, nor has the possibility of the United States joining been seriously contemplated, notwithstanding its crucial role in Europe's security architecture. The Italian idea of inviting states from North Africa has not yet been pursued and is perhaps best taken up on an ad hoc basis in the future. The core membership needs to be established and endowed with a sense of community before G20-style 'wild cards' are issued.

Meeting place for leaders

As a forum of equals debating strategic interests, it was clear from the start that the European Political Community would be led by national leaders. Collaboration starts with building trust, by recognizing the political importance of personal ties and creating the conditions for these to develop.

If something like a club or community is to be built, a light and informal structure is an asset. Frank conversations between heads of state or government are valuable in and of themselves. Adding layers of formalities with official communiqués would destroy what makes them useful. For instance, in Prague it would have been difficult for EPC leaders – with Ukraine, Poland and Estonia at one end and Turkey, Serbia and Hungary at the other – to agree on language condemning Russia's aggression. However, the obligatory family photo sent an effective message of continental unity to the Kremlin and the world.

In this respect, the EPC is comparable to the G7, which emerged in response to the 1970s oil crisis and has continued to function sans secretariat or formal treaties, retaining much of its original informal character. G7 leaders enjoy the summits for precisely their confidential, 'fireside chat' aspect.

The EPC is also reminiscent of the founding years of the EU's summit body. In the early 1970s, when presidents and prime ministers wanted to get involved and personally steer the strategic decisions taken in Brussels, they set up a regular, six-monthly meeting called the 'European Council'. These summits rapidly grew into an indispensable driving force and source of authority within the bloc. Despite having evolved into an institutionalized, treaty-based part of the EU's polity, they have retained some of the informality of a meeting place.

These precedents elucidate two points. First, whether a social practice should be considered an 'institution' is not a matter of all or nothing, but of degree. Second and relatedly, institutions can grow and consolidate over time. Institutionalization is a process. The G7 is still not highly formalized, but its hallmark feature – informal discussion among leaders – has been replicated at ministerial level, giving the grouping a more solid administrative and bureaucratic footing.

So by meeting in Prague *and* deciding to reconvene, leaders have already turned the European Political Community into an institution in a very basic sense. They confirmed the body's name, gave it regularity and assigned a series of alternating EU and non-EU venues (Prague, Chisinau, Granada, London), with the EU hosts determined by the bloc's rotating Council presidency. The frequency of meetings, for now twice a year, may change, perhaps reduce when the war ends (as some have suggested), although in the future some members may call for extra, ad hoc meetings when faced with a new Europe-wide crisis.

Other practices have emerged as well. As for Prague, the preparations for Chisinau have been light on detail and highly informal, leaving plenty of discretion for leaders to steer the summit in whichever directions they see fit. Several broad themes have been agreed. Energy and security are widely considered to be the most important. Diplomatic legwork is being undertaken – just as for the G7 and EU summits – by the leaders' diplomatic advisors or 'sherpas', an influential informal network that meets once or twice between summits. Organizational continuity is further provided by the cooperation of three successive summit presidencies.

A basic scenario for the summit day itself consists of a plenary opening and closing session, roundtable discussions within smaller groups of leaders and plenty of time for bilaterals. In Prague, roundtables – which allow for less

scripted discussions in relatively small groups – were held on peace and security as well as on energy, climate and the economy, with two co-chairs reporting back to the plenary. In terms of outcome at the end of the day, leaders report individually to the press, without a joint communiqué.

Characteristically, while preparations and the day's default agenda are quietly taking shape, what is lacking is any form of centralized follow-up or task allocation. After the summit, everybody just goes home.

IV The way ahead

Achieving concrete results

Europe needs new forms of collective agency. Calamities that call for concrete and urgent action abound, from Russia's war against Ukraine to the need to beef up Europe's energy security and to deal with migratory pressures from Africa and the Middle East. However, without first renewing trust and a sense of common purpose, getting things done together will remain a struggle.

Here Europe's leaders have to face an important trade-off between policy and polity. To agree policies and 'deliverables', the EPC needs institutionalization. But this will inevitably lead to irreconcilable disagreements and blockages, undermining the renewed sense of polity and unity that Europe also seeks. There is no easy means of squaring the circle. The best way forward is to give the EPC time to consolidate at the leaders' level and then incrementally to build or involve structures that might serve to instil greater agency to this pan-European community. Even if no such structures emerge over time, the body will retain its other major functions.

For one thing, the EPC can already be a hub and catalyst for collective action. To make this visible, however, the spotlight must shift from the plenary to the summit's margins, where individual protagonists have greater leeway to act. Getting 47 heads of state and government physically into the same building for a day in itself helps facilitate such side-bargaining, in the same way that 'Davos' acts as an engine for dealmaking between business leaders attending the Alpine economic forum.

Indeed, what emerges from the EPC plenary may be little more than a family photo, a prevailing 'mood' or consensus on umbrella goals such as enhancing energy security and resilience. Still, such consensus can be turned into action by using the occasion to agree joint projects at the bilateral or mini-lateral level, including between the EU27 on the one hand and one or several non-EU states on the other. EPC summits can be an important spur to finalizing such initiatives and projects. Attracting hundreds, if not thousands of journalists, they also offer a powerful communications platform, generating pressure to announce 'results'. This dynamic can be exploited.

Although in Prague bilateral encounters were mostly improvised at short notice, upcoming gatherings are now in everybody's diaries, which means more side-deals and agreements can be prepared for inking at the summit. In Chisinau there will be a new meeting between Azerbaijan's president Aliyev and Armenia's prime minister Pashinyan on peace and stability in the Caucasus, for which German chancellor Scholz will join his EU colleagues Macron and Michel. The latter has already expressed his intention to repeat this gathering in the margins of the EPC's Granada summit in October, suggesting process and continuity.⁷

The Chisinau meeting will most likely offer other, more concrete results such as an extension of the EU-Western Balkans roaming declaration to Moldova, or further announcements relating to a Franco-Slovenian project to help Western Balkans countries increase their cyber capacity.

Greater agency for the EPC could also be derived from the clout of international financial institutions. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the London-based multilateral bank, has a pan-European vocation without being an EU body, just like the EPC itself. The EBRD has shown interest in playing a supportive role. Understandably however, it would want not just to pick up the bill that others write but to be part of the decision-making process, if only to avoid existing projects being merely relabelled 'EPC' for funding purposes. The EU's own European Investment Bank (EIB) could also take up a role, as could the Council of Europe's smaller development bank, although the latter might be a less comfortable fit.

Finally, the EU institutions are already involved in the EPC, being inside the room, albeit in a relatively inconspicuous manner. Although both EU presidents are invited (as they are to the G7), in line with the EPC's nature it

is European Council president Michel rather than Commission president Von der Leyen – the summit chair rather than the bureaucracy’s political chief – who has seized the most active role. High Representative Borrell, a member of Michel’s delegation during the first summit, will attend Chisinau in his own capacity, whereas the Moldovan presidency of the EPC has in turn drawn on the General Secretariat of the EU Council to facilitate important on-site security and protocol support.

Proposals to expand the role of the EU institutions further remain sensitive and should, for now, be treated with caution. The EPC can be an ‘EU-facilitated’ body (it currently needs such discreet assistance) but not an ‘EU-centred’ body (an outcome that would kill it). It is a fine line to tread.

Driving it all forward

Without institutions, who will drive the EPC forward? Ultimately it is the heads of state or government themselves who must pick up the baton. They must see the need and feel the desire to keep Europe’s new club of equals alive.

So far, the will to do so appears strong. As its initiator, France’s prestige rides on the EPC’s success, even if it seems to have decided to let the body develop organically, suppressing any ‘parental’ instinct to steer it in one way or another. Early sceptic Germany has come around to the idea, provided the new community retains its informal framing, whereas for the UK the EPC is a chance gift, a timely means of rebuilding relations with the EU.⁸ The Netherlands and Albania have responded enthusiastically to the first summit, their prime ministers even penning a joint op-ed on its eve.⁹ Leaders of Norway, Switzerland and other non-EU states appreciate being able to meet with many European and EU colleagues on a single day.

Potential chairs after the 2024 London summit have already begun their initial preparations, projecting the body’s existence further into the future. Perhaps not everyone at this stage knows how to best use the EPC. Its smaller members may find hosting a large summit challenging, if only at the level of protocol and logistics. Reassuringly for them, as greater importance is assigned to bilateral deal-making in the summit’s margins, hosts should not be expected to negotiate major diplomatic breakthroughs.

One strategic risk the body faces is the possibility that sluggish progress in EU accession talks will cause a backlash. As the EU will need to decide whether to open accession negotiations with Ukraine later this year, such disappointment is a real possibility. It may revive notions of the EPC as a permanent but second-best alternative to EU membership.

Leaders are not in the business of institution building for its own sake. Ultimately, the political will to sustain the new community will depend on continued instability emanating from Russia and other parts of the world. Recent years have seen no shortage of security threats and crises affecting the continent's strategic interests, and the risk of further destabilizing shocks occurring in the near future is high. This suggests that the need for a pan-European body aimed at bolstering the continent's resilience could well be more permanent. However, should this not be the case, there is little to stop leaders from deciding to reduce or end the meetings altogether. The EPC does not have to exist for fifty years or more for it to play an important role in securing Europe's future at the present time.

Conclusion: beyond the war

Although international institutions often outlive the historical circumstances for which they were designed, looser groupings of states fall apart more easily.

To get a sense of possible outcomes, it is worth taking a longer view. As this paper argues, the seemingly puzzling emergence of the European Political Community should be interpreted as the awakening of Europe's old, slumbering state system. A system, layered beneath the continent's post-1945 and post-1989 institutions, invisibly connecting its constituent elements – the states of Europe – in an historical and territorial sense. We tend to forget these older substrata, overlain as they are – at least most of the time – by successful modern institutions and interstate arrangements. But when the continent's geostrategic condition shifts fundamentally, which it last did with the fall of the Berlin Wall, they make themselves manifest.¹⁰

The current war notwithstanding, the European state system has undeniably endured far more convulsive periods of turmoil and destruction. These were often followed by ambitious attempts to engineer a new balance of power or design a new peace architecture. Some of these institutions have disappeared (the post-Napoleonic Congress system or the 1919 League of Nations), but

many of those founded after 1945 and 1989 continue. As things look today, the Ukraine war may not end up in the same league of epoch-making events. And yet it is of major pan-European significance, asking not for a full re-invention of the continent's order but for its re-adjustment.

The OSCE, the club of states headquartered in Vienna that grew out of the Cold War moment of 'détente' epitomized by the Helsinki Agreements (1975), presents an insightful parallel. Both the United States and Russia remain among the OSCE's 57 members. It is the last continental organization to which Moscow belongs. However, with the war, the 'from Lisbon to Vladivostok' security architecture it spawned has lost most of its meaning. The EPC could be seen as the natural complement or even successor to the OSCE, as a body designed to respond to the 'post-Helsinki' era.

It is possible that the European Political Community may eventually become a fitting forum in which to improve relations with the Russian Federation, and even foster peace. This would require Russia to re-accept the fundamentals of Europe's state system, which is not a current prospect. For now, the EPC is above all structured around Russia as its enemy and foil. Unlike the 1815 Vienna Congress, it is not a body where all sides meet after a period of war. However, by its sheer existence, the European Political Community reminds Europeans of an older, often forgotten art of diplomacy and statecraft, which may one day have to be mobilized to bring about, if not a peace, at least an end to the war.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Macron, '[Discours du Président de la République à l'occasion de la Conférence sur l'avenir de l'Europe](#)', à Strasbourg le 9 mai 2022. Three weeks earlier, in the [Corriere della Sera](#), Italy's former prime minister Enrico Letta had suggested establishing a 'European confederation'. In a [speech to the EU Economic and Social Committee](#) on 18 May 2022, European Council president Charles Michel called for 'the creation of a European geopolitical community'.
2. Important analyses appeared in the run-up to the first EPC summit in Prague. The most elaborate proposals for institutionalizing the forum, in particular as facilitator for EU enlargement, were put forward in September 2022 by Franz C. Mayer, Jean Pisani-Ferry, Daniela Schwarzer and Shahin Vallée, '[Enlarging and deepening: giving substance to the European Political Community](#)', Bruegel (Brussels). For an excellent overview of the early state of play see Charles Grant, '[Macron is serious about the "European Political Community"](#)', Centre for European Reform (London), August 2022. Thu Nguyen, in '[European Political Community: From family photo to "strategic intimacy"](#)', Jacques Delors Centre (Berlin), persuasively explores, a month after Prague, various possible models for the EPC's further development.
3. In the [words of the upcoming host](#), Moldova's president Maia Sandu, 'The EPC Summit is an exceptional platform that provides small and large countries, both within and outside the EU, with an equal voice during discussions. This makes it an unparalleled forum.'
4. European Council, '[Conclusions of the European Council meeting \(23 and 24 June 2022\)](#)'. EU leaders spoke of 'a European political community' as a 'platform for political coordination for European countries across the continent' that 'will not replace existing EU policies and instruments, notably enlargement'.
5. For the dynamics and dilemmas of this type of diplomacy, see Hans Kribbe, *The Strongmen. European Encounters with Sovereign Power*, Agenda Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2020.
6. The idea of organizing a Council of Europe leaders' summit, only the fourth in its history, emerged as early as March 2022, around the time of the Russian Federation's simultaneous expulsion and withdrawal from the body, so before the EPC proposal. (See Andrew Forde, 'Political salvation of Europe's human rights' system. The case for a Fourth Council of Europe Summit', *ECHR BLOG*, 21 March 2022.) However, the decision itself was not taken until 7 November, unmistakably under pressure from the EPC's successful October summit. In the words of a diplomat, 'The holding of the first meeting of the EPC caught us a bit off guard'. The president of the body's Parliamentary Assembly, Tiny Kox, reassured his colleagues on 14 October in Strasbourg that 'there is no confrontation', since the defence of fundamental rights, the Council of Europe's specific responsibility, is 'not part of the new EPC's scope of action'. (Quotes taken from Véronique Leblanc, 'Launch of European Political Community makes fourth Council of Europe Summit urgent', *Agence Europe*, 14 October 2022.) In terms of membership, now that Andorra, Monaco and San Marino have joined the EPC, the two institutions have an almost identical set of members. The exception is Kosovo, which is part of the EPC and not (yet) of the Council of Europe.
7. European Council, '[Press statement on Armenia and Azerbaijan, 8 May 2023](#)'.
8. In its [2023 Integrated Review Refresh](#), the UK Government acknowledges the EPC as 'a notable and welcome new forum for continent-wide cooperation'.
9. Edi Rama and Mark Rutte, '[Albanian and Dutch PMs: The European Political Community is a good idea](#)', *POLITICO Europe*, 5 October 2022.
10. An outstanding recent study in the vast literature on the European state system since early modern times is Stella Ghervas, *Conquering Peace. From the Enlightenment to the European Union*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2021. For the specificity of the EU in this respect, as a response to both the post-1945 era (the Community) and the continent's post-1989 situation (the Union), see Luuk van Middelaar, *The Passage to Europe*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven 2014, in particular the Prologue and chapters 4 and 6.

Image credits

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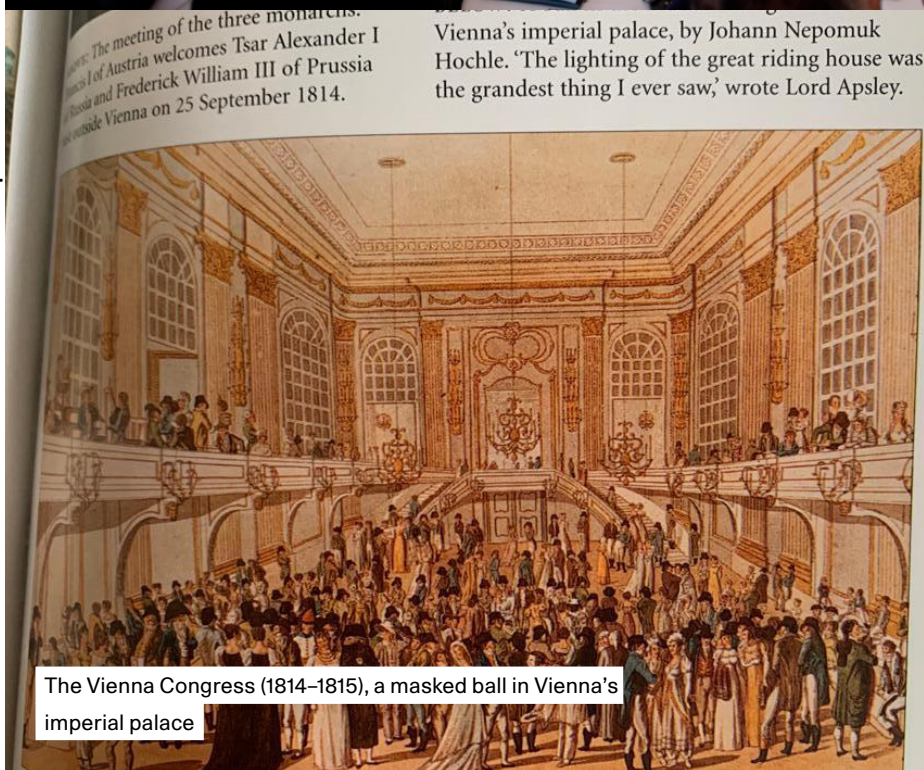
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The Brussels Institute for Geopolitics, established in 2022 as a non-profit association, aims to foster a more robust strategic culture in the European Union. Its conviction is that to thrive in an era of great power rivalry, the EU has two urgent tasks: to appraise its policies through the lens of geostrategy and to examine critically and renew its own discourse and self-understandings. The Institute's mission is to act as catalyst and hub for the exchange of ideas connecting the spheres of politics, business, academia, culture and media.

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Prague summit, plenary session



The Vienna Congress (1814–1815), a masked ball in Vienna's imperial palace

The meeting of the three monarchs. Emperor Francis I of Austria welcomes Tsar Alexander I of Russia and Frederick William III of Prussia in the ballroom of the imperial palace in Vienna on 25 September 1814.

Vienna's imperial palace, by Johann Nepomuk Hochle. 'The lighting of the great riding house was the grandest thing I ever saw,' wrote Lord Apsley.



Concluding press conference by French president Macron, Czech prime minister Fiala and Moldova's president Sandu, as respectively initiator, first host and incoming second host of the EPC summit



Concluding press conference by Turkish president Erdogan



Edi Rama, Prime-Minister of Albania, talking to the press



Backstage media presence during the EPC summit



The Prague 'family photo'

