

# A EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY?

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*The European Political Community (EPC) launch in Prague on 6 October was relatively quiet amid doubts about what shape the project would take. Its overriding goal would be “stabilizing the European,” French President Emmanuel Macron said on a trip to Moldova in June. The French view has been that there is an urgent need for security and geopolitical challenges to be addressed in a broader format than the EU. Security is high on the EU agenda. The Russian war in Ukraine has brought to light the weakness of Europe’s security and defense structure and has underscored the need to modify the EU’s relationship with its neighbors. Criticisms include that the EU should step up to its geopolitical responsibility in the neighborhood.*

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**T**he European Political Community (EPC) launch in Prague on 6 October was relatively quiet amid doubts about what shape the project would take. Its overriding goal would be “stabilizing the European,” French President Emmanuel Macron said on a trip to Moldova in June. The French view has been that there is an urgent need for security and geopolitical challenges to be addressed in a broader format than the EU.

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The EU is struggling with security and defense issues. The Union wants to be able to protect its citizens and contribute to international peace and security. The Strategic Compass adopted in March is not a grand strategy like the 2016 Global Strategy. It is not meant to replace the Global Strategy and could perhaps best be called a politico-military strategy. It can be seen as a part strategy, part action plan, and should provide direction for the EU’s efforts in security and defense until 2030. Work on the Compass was initiated well before the Russian aggression toward Ukraine in February. It has been claimed that the Compass was not sufficiently adjusted to respond to reality.

The mutual defense clause (Art. 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union) does not make the EU a defense union. The clause is not living up to the expectations of some of the Member States. “Non-NATO members Sweden and Finland are counting on the European Union’s mutual defense clause in the event of a military attack,” Sweden’s Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said in March after the Russian aggression towards Ukraine. Ahead of a summit of EU leaders in Versailles in March, non-aligned Sweden, and Finland sent a joint letter to “remind the other Member States of the EU’s declaration of solidarity in the Lisbon Treaty.” A couple of months later, both Finland and Sweden handed in their formal requests to join NATO. The mutual defense clause lacks an organization and a structure to back it up. The exact nature and scope of the EU’s military solidarity remain vague.

President Macron first presented the idea of a European Political Community to the European Parliament in May 2022 but did not spell out the details. Some in Paris allegedly saw the EPC as an alternative to enlargement, while others thought it could be complementary. The EPC could be seen as bringing EU candidate countries into the European family, while negotiations on full membership drag on for years. Macron’s words on 9 May were ambiguous: “joining [the EPC] would not

prejudge future accession to the European Union, necessarily.” One of the rationales for the proposal was that the EU’s neighborhood policy – a framework designed to deepen ties with the EU’s eastern and southern neighbors – is primarily perceived to have failed. It had not turned the neighbors into the ‘ring of friends’ that then Commission President Romano Prodi had called for in 2002.

France followed up Macron’s presentation in a paper submitted to the EU ahead of the June 2022 European Council meeting. The list of topics was somewhat longer than in Macron’s 9 May speech, with foreign and security policy at the top, followed by climate change, energy, food security, infrastructure, mobility, migration, organized crime, and relations with other geopolitical actors.

The EU leaders gave the green light to the idea of a European Political Community in June. The stated aim of the project was to provide a policy coordination platform for European countries across the continent and “[i]t could concern all European countries” with whom the EU “ha[s] close relations.” The aim was to foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest to strengthen the European continent’s security, stability, and prosperity. It was stated that the EPC should offer a political coordination platform for European countries across the continent.

The launch of the European Political Community can be seen as resting on a broad conception of security. Both energy and migration featured prominently on the agenda of the 6 October summit. The inaugural meeting was in the form of a plenary session and four break-out sessions on peace and security, the economic situation, energy and climate, and migration and mobility. There was no formal written outcome of the meeting.

Alongside the 27 EU Member States, several countries at various stages of EU accession were invited: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Türkiye, and Ukraine. States that have aspirations to join the EU were also included: Georgia and Kosovo. There was talk before the meeting of inviting Israel, but in the end, there was no Israeli attendance.

Close EU allies Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and the microstate of Liechtenstein were invited, alongside Armenia and Azerbaijan. The UK was also invited. Former UK Prime Minister Liz Truss said in May that she prefers to “build on structures that we already have that work successfully, whether the G7 or NATO”. But Truss changed her mind and attended the EPC meeting. It is said that UK officials were persuaded by the inclusion of migration and energy policy on the meeting’s agenda

and by assurances that the EU will not be actively involved. Truss even offered to host the next meeting in the UK. The UK is understood to have wanted the name changed to European Political Forum, although this did not happen.

The Presidents of the European Council and European Commission were also invited. It is noteworthy that in her State of the Union speech in September 2022, Commission President Ursula van der Leyen endorsed “a European Political Community”, without going into specifics. van der Leyen did not have a role at the EPC meeting in Prague, in line with the intergovernmental character of the summit.

The 44 leaders attended on “an equal footing” to discuss how best to strengthen the “security, stability and prosperity of Europe as a whole,” the European Council’s invitation letter to the EU27 stated.

The next meeting will be hosted by Moldova. Spain and the UK have volunteered to host subsequent meetings. One question mark is how a loosely knit group with no organisation or secretariat, meeting twice a year, can contribute. Peer pressure and policy convergence could be the answers. Even these are challenging goals, but they may be attainable. In addition there might deliverables in the form of bilateral activities, such as the agreement by the UK and France to hold a meeting at a later date – the first in five years – and the meeting between Armenia and Azerbaijan held in the margins of the Prague summit. For the time being, making the EPC a quasi-extension of the EU is not on the cards. The functioning working mode of the EPC comes through as solidly intergovernmental. The achievement of gathering the 44 leaders in Prague on 6 October can already be seen as a success in itself, but the crucial litmus test will be the follow-up meeting in Moldova. Time will tell whether the EPC will become a mere footnote in history – much like French President François Mitterrand’s call for the creation of a European confederation, including Russia, a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall.