

Philipp BRUGNER, Martin FLEISCHER – 18 October 2022

The European Political Community: Some Post-Meeting Thoughts

Not least because of the changed security situation caused by the Ukraine war, there is a growing necessity for the EU to forge new partnerships with its European neighbours that are positively aligned, pragmatic and flexible. The first meeting of the European Political Community held on October 6 provided the opportunity for a large and diverse group of immediate and more distant neighbours to test the potential of this new framework without strict protocol and structural constraints.

At a crucial geopolitical moment for the continent and only five months after the public presentation of the idea during the preceding French Presidency of the European Council, the Czech Republic sent invitation letters for the inaugural meeting of the European Political Community (EPC) to 44 heads of state. Interestingly, this milestone meeting coincided with the 70th anniversary of the first initiative to create a type of EPC: Back then, the six EU Member States had envisaged complementing their existing Community for Coal and Steel with a European Defence Community, a move not all of the six national assemblies in 1952 seemed finally comfortable with. Today, two noteworthy initiatives crafted by the two largest EU countries preceded the meeting at Prague Castle on October 6:¹

The German initiative for a common Security and Defence Policy

As has become painfully obvious for the EU in the meantime, the identification of strategic rivals and the positioning of an appropriate security towards them has received too little attention in the past. The strategy paper “Strategic Compass for Security and Defence”, that was adopted by all Member States this spring, goes back to a proposal of the German Council Presidency in 2020 and aims at rapidly catching up on this topic as it formulates goals, instruments and projects for a common security and defence policy for all Member States. The Strategic

Compass is based on four areas: crisis management, resilience, capabilities, and the concept of multilateral and bilateral partnerships to achieve common goals. In terms of these partnerships, not only specific cooperation with neighbouring countries in the areas of hybrid threats, disinformation and cyber security is clearly anticipated, but a more general emphasis on commonly shared values and interests as the basis for tailored partnerships with countries outside the EU.

The French initiative for a European Political Community

Neighbourly relations between the EU and the countries to the East and South-East have particularly suffered in the past. EU accession processes that turn into never-ending stories have degraded potential EU membership countries to the level of supplicants. As a logical consequence, the passion for the pan-European idea risks being undermined with potential strategic partners drifting into alternative spheres of influence. This challenge is particularly evident in the Western Balkans where all six countries are interested in EU membership in principle, but are also a relevant factor for the EU’s Eastern partners. Ultimately, the EU risks losing its influence in regions that are important in geostrategic and security terms.

The idea of an EPC was first presented to the broader public by President Emanuel Macron in a speech to the European Parliament on May 9, Europe Day. According to Macron’s words, the EPC should be a new overarching umbrella to gather all those partners concerned with the European project and EU enlargement and that it would permit democratic European nations to find a new space for cooperation in various fields. The intention was clearly to take on board enlargement-sceptical existing EU Members, potential members, but also partner states that do

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not aspire to membership. Observers also read Macron's proposal as a reference to Mitterrand's idea of creating a European confederation by exploring a more inclusive European political format beyond the EU expressed in 1989².

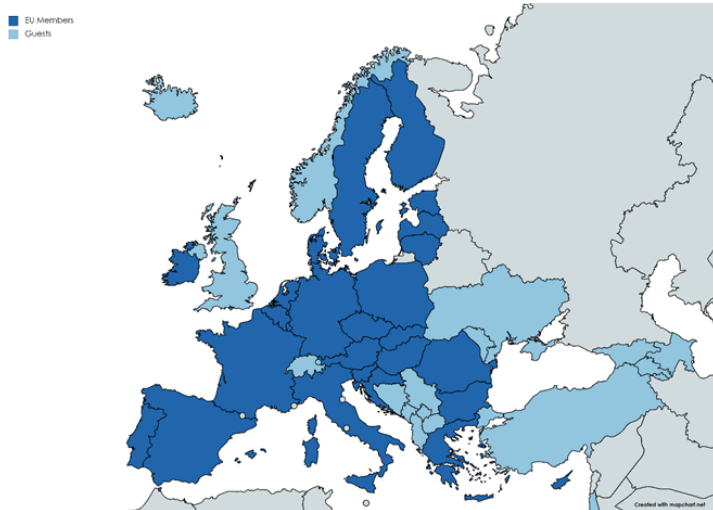


Fig 1: The 44 attending countries at the first meeting of the EPC

Was the first EPC meeting a success?

If the EU has sometimes been criticised for hesitancy and lack of pragmatism, the guest list for the first EPC meeting alone was a strong and bold sign of confidence: Invitations were sent to the heads of government of the EU Members, the six Western Balkan countries, the five neighbours of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the four EFTA Members, as well as the UK, Turkey, and Israel. Take for example the UK that challenges the Brexit withdrawal agreement with its Northern Ireland Protocol Bill and whose new Prime Minister was very quick to dismiss outright the idea of an EPC. Or Turkey, which must have made it very difficult for Greece to accept its attendance amid its recurring war games and threats in the Aegean and which offers a safe harbour for Russian oligarchs' yachts. Or Armenia, a member of the Russia-led Eurasian military alliance CSTO. Or Azerbaijan with its clear deficits in the rule of law and its renewed appetite for military engagement with its neighbour Armenia.

In this regard and given the sheer number of invited heads of government and their heterogeneity, the full attendance of all 44 countries in this first EPC meeting can be seen as a big success. While the protocol rightfully abstained from outputs that are often taken as indicators for the effectiveness of a meeting, like formal decisions or a joint communiqué, there

were clear hints that heads of government were making good use of this new format and warming up to its further potential: The meeting allowed for dozens of bilateral and group meetings, some of which would have required the time and visibility of state visits. A laudable example were the meetings between Armenia and Azerbaijan, facilitated by Michel and Macron. The UK Prime Minister Liz Truss not only attended but indicated UK's interest in hosting the 4th EPC meeting in 2024, a remarkable turnaround from the initial cold reaction to the EPC. To dismiss the meeting as a mere «talk shop», as some observers did, seems to disregard the urgency and importance of several topics that affect all 44 countries, including but not limited to security and energy. But the people steering the EPC are of course confronted with the questions as to how far such a diverse group of countries can walk together with the burden of outliers for probably every single topic, and as to which governance format would best suit the realisation of the EPC's objectives once they are set.

The further course of the EPC: Pragmatic Cooperation versus a «Europe à la Carte»

While the EPC is meant to be a platform where all members meet as equals, it will be up to the EU to set its further course. In this regard, it has a wealth of experience in various forms of cooperation with its neighbours: For instance, the European Economic Area (EEA) extends the Single Market to three EFTA countries. With the six Western Balkan partners, it progressively concluded bilateral Free Trade Agreements. Under its Eastern Partnership, it cooperates with its five Eastern partners (Belarus suspended its partnership in June 2021) in the areas of governance, economic development, connectivity, energy and environment, as well as mobility, education/youth and research.

Which form of cooperation would be suitable for all 44 countries that met on October 6? All 17 non-EU Members have common interests with the EU for sure, but with a common denominator that is difficult to frame. A radically pragmatic way would be to offer each EPC partner country the 33 thematic chapters of the official EU accession process for a flexible cooperation. In contrast to the accession process, where all 33 chapters must be successfully implemented by the membership candidate, the EPC partner country would be given full flexibility to decide which chap-

ters are deemed interesting to open a strategic partnership with the EU.

complexity for single countries in favour of more flexibility, to allow for cherry-picking to serve their own interests. Challenging these recalcitrant states definitely does not come from offering a menu of policies to choose from. At the same time, this constellation precludes harnessing a multi-speed Europe for other countries that definitely aspire to a smooth integration into the bloc, but only at a different pace. At the end of the day, differentiated integration is nothing other than a toolbox for accommodating diversity in the continent, both within the EU integration processes with diverse candidates and in partnership with countries that prefer to stay outside.

The course of further developments will certainly require a more precise «mission statement» than the very careful descriptions of the EPC delivered by French President Macron or President of the Council Michel. The EPC's substitution for the EU enlargement policy is obviously a hot potato. Macron offered an interesting contribution when addressing his diplomatic corps on September 1: While the EPC was commonly understood to be no replacement for the EU accession process, Macron now spoke about the need to stop the EU's indefinite enlargement.

Some Thoughts on the Governance

When defining the right governance, the big question again will be the role of the EU within the EPC. Its main initiator Macron advocated for an inter-governmental set-up with no EU institutions at its driving seat.

On the other hand, the Council's ten sub-groups (nine topical and one general affairs grouping) could perfectly cater for a structured meeting framework along ten dossiers (foreign affairs, economic and financial affairs, energy, environment etc.) between EU leaders and those of the other invited EPC members. Invited EPC members outside of the council could meet with their EU counterparts, both back-to-back to regular council meetings (four times per year) and to council sub-groups meetings dedicated to a specific topic.

Notwithstanding the explicit statements from official sources that the EPC neither substitutes EU enlargement, nor resembles the roles of the Council of Europe, the OSCE or NATO, building thematic bridges to these institutions will automatically happen due to the thematic overlap. The Council of Europe, with its emphasis on human rights, democracy and the



Fig 2: The 33 negotiating chapters for EU accession (Source: European Commission)

One challenge for achieving such fully flexible and pragmatic cooperation would be to balance the give and takes with each partner. The failed seven years of negotiations for the Institutional Agreement (InstA) to replace the 120 bilateral agreements currently in force between Switzerland and the EU, offer an interesting reference case.

Moreover, the EU has never intended to offer a „Europe à la carte“, which would allow for a differentiated integration of Member States whereby an EU country would regain full authority to decide which EU laws and policies it wants to obey and which not. Against this background, the term is used in a negative sense by supporters of the current EU integration approach that follows an “all-in” principle: All EU jurisdiction, including the EU treaties, regulations, directives and decisions, in any policy field, is to be translated into national law by EU Member States. In theory, this should guarantee that all EU Member States are up to the same speed in their integration into the bloc and that EU law is universally applicable across the entire union.

Once the door is opened for differentiated integration (also known as “multi-speed Europe”), more EU-sceptical countries would probably try to use it to their own advantage by changing differentiated integration, which certainly bears the potential to reduce

rule of law, from a current point of view, appears as an obvious partner to the EPC, which, based on jointly shared European values, will try to hold together this large-scale state network. But also with the OSCE, whose purpose and dysfunctionality have been criticised not least since the Russian war against Ukraine (Ukraine is a member of OSCE and Russia still is too, although voices are calling for its suspension), thematically common ground is likely to be found (security dialogue for a wider Europe).

It is noteworthy that the question of co-ownership or shared ownership has not entered the debate yet. Since the recent recalibration of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy which was initiated following the results (not) achieved under the preceding "EaP: 20 deliverables for 2020"³ work plan from 2017 until 2020, it will have become clear to EU authorities that co-ownership is more than a fashionable buzzword, but a concrete means to a desired end. In terms of the EaP policy and the EPC as discussed, this desired end is a policy-initiative equally governed by all parties involved, which jointly agree on a common agenda and share full accountability for the delivery or non-delivery of results to society.

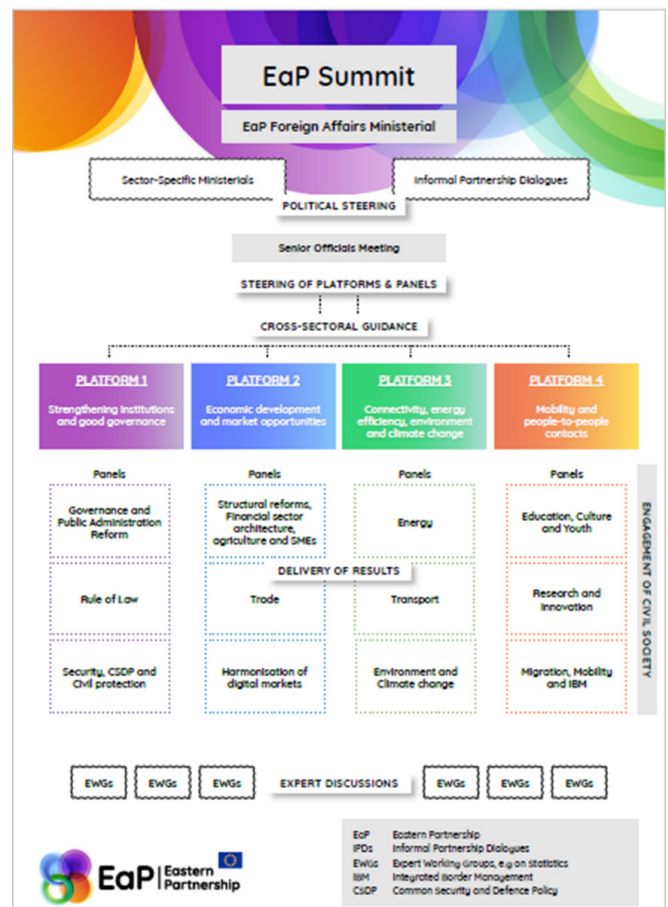


Fig 3: The set-up of the Eastern Partnership (Source: European Commission)

It remains to be seen what shape the Macron-driven idea of a European Political Community will eventually take in the face of all the political realities of EU Member States, EU enlargement candidates and European countries by geography (the European continent). It is the responsibility of all parties involved to prioritise the search for common ground over the status quo of political relations, regardless whether they are affected by sovereignty conflicts (Greece and Cyprus vs. Turkey; Armenia vs. Azerbaijan), political disagreements (Serbia vs. Kosovo) or high levels of frustration (EU accession processes of the six Western Balkan countries). Lastly, the EPC's foundational spirit must be rooted in the new geopolitical context after February 24, by cutting a clear and decisive line between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. The EPC is just at its early stage. Thus, the October 6 meeting does not automatically equate to participation in future meetings. Whoever takes the serious decision to become an established part of this new club must not only show commitment and engagement, but also choose its place on either side of this line.

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