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The European Political Community: A Polish perspective

Europejska Wspólnota Polityczna: polska perspektywa

Abstract: This article seeks to investigate the birth and evolution of the European Political Community – a pan-European multilateral coordination format that has emerged at the initiative of France and in reaction to the Russian full-scale military aggression in Ukraine. The analysis draws on official speeches, think-tank briefs, and the Author’s participatory observation conducted during international expert meetings held in early 2023. It is argued that the EPC is still a “moving target” in the early stage of development, where both its objectives and structure are not yet fully defined. From a Polish perspective, it has so far sent a key strategic message to Russia and can serve as a vehicle to re-engage with the United Kingdom or Turkey. But it should not be used as yet another ENP-style waiting room for candidates seeking EU membership.

Keywords: European Political Community, France, Poland, European Union, enlargement, summit

Streszczenie: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza narodzin i ewolucji Europejskiej Wspólnoty Politycznej – paneuropejskiego formatu wielostronnej koordynacji, powstałego z inicjatywy Francji i w reakcji na pełnoskalową agresję militarną Rosji na Ukrainę. Badanie oparto na oficjalnych wystąpieniach, materiałach ośrodków analitycznych oraz obserwacji uczestniczącej Autorki, przeprowadzonej podczas międzynarodowych spotkań eksperckich w pierwszych miesiącach 2023 roku. W tekście dowodzi się, że EWP pozostaje „ruchoмым celem” na wczesnym etapie rozwoju, gdzie zarówno cele, jak i struktura nie zostały jeszcze dookreślone. Z polskiej perspektywy, inicjatywa umożliwiła wysłanie kluczowego sygnału strategicznego pod adresem Rosji oraz może stanowić narzędzie ponownego zaangażowania Wielkiej Brytanii czy Turcji. Nie powinna być jednak wykorzystywana jako poczekalnia dla kandydatów do członkostwa w UE, na wzór Europejskiej Polityki Sąsiedztwa.

Słowa kluczowe: Europejska Wspólnota Polityczna, Francja, Polska, Unia Europejska, rozszerzenie, szczyt

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Introduction

The European Political Community (EPC) emerged in 2022 – under the initiative of France and in reaction to the Russian Federation’s full-scale military invasion of Ukraine – as a pan-European multilateral coordination format of more than forty European states. Initially, the proposal met with harsh criticism, voiced especially by Poland and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) more broadly. Their main concern was that Emmanuel Macron’s initiative was nothing more than old French wine in new bottles, namely François Mitterrand’s “European Confederation” version 2.0. While this new vision of a “wider Europe” excluded Russia (contrary to its 1989 predecessor), the CEEs reacted with similar distrust: it looked like a loose format designed as an alternative to the new enlargement wave, the latter resulting from a major geopolitical shift, be it the attack on Ukraine (2022) or the collapse of the Soviet Union (1989). Whereas the 1991 conference in Prague resulted in complete failure and buried Mitterrand’s confederation, the 2022 Prague summit successfully inaugurated a format that has a chance to live, even if a year after its official launch it still generates more questions than answers¹.

Against this background, the article seeks to shed light on the birth of, evolution, and prospects for the EPC, as seen from a Polish perspective. The analysis is based on official speeches, think-tank policy briefs, and the Author’s own observations. Between March and May 2023, the Author participated in various international expert meetings (co-organized, inter alia, by the Centre for European Policy Studies, Euro Créative, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Open Society Foundations, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), and Stiftung Genshagen). Insights from these events were crucial for the present analysis, although, following the Chatham House rule, ideas and opinions cannot be attributed to any individual. The Author wishes to express her gratitude to all participants for sharing their expertise. Of course, the interpretation and conclusions contained in this article reflect solely the views of the Author.

1 The article was finalized on 5 October 2023.

1. The French initiative: off to a bumpy start?

During his speech delivered on Europe Day, 9 May 2022, and aimed at concluding the Conference on the Future of Europe, President of France Emmanuel Macron made a proposal – unrelated to the output of the Conference – to establish a “European political community”. This initiative was “unexpected”, according to the Polish diplomatic sources. It was framed in terms of the “geopolitical emergency of re-designing the European Union’s relationship with its neighbourhood”² as a result of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. But it was also interpreted as “coming in response to the recent applications for EU membership received from Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova”³. President Macron himself made a direct reference to the words of Robert Schumann on 9 May 1950: “the world peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it”⁴. The Russian invasion of February 2022 required such creativity and the EPC was meant to provide a solution. Emmanuel Macron introduced the initiative – during the French presidency in the Council of the EU and in the run-up to the French parliamentary elections – by underlining that “we must not fear differentiation, or avant-gardes”, as “they have always been fruitful for the European project” and are “a prerequisite for effectiveness and ambition”. Whereas “we feel in our heart that Ukraine (...) is already today a member of our Europe”, “we all know perfectly well that the [accession] process would in reality take several years, and most likely several decades”⁵. Thus, reflection on how to organize unity in Europe was urgently needed and the EPC – “this new European organization, would allow democratic European nations that subscribe to our shared core values to find a new space for political and security cooperation”⁶. Meanwhile, joining the EPC “would not prejudice future accession to

2 F.C. Mayer et al., *Enlarging and deepening: Giving substance to the European Political Community*, Bruegel, “Policy Contribution”, September 2022, p. 1, <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/enlarging-and-deepening-giving-substance-european-political-community> [7.05.2023].

3 T. Chopin, L. Macek, S. Maillard, *The European Political Community. A new anchoring to the European Union*, Institut Jacques Delors, “Policy Brief”, 31 May 2022, p. 1, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/la-communaute-politique-europeenne/> [7.05.2023].

4 Quoted in: Élysée, *Address by the President of the Republic at the Conference on the Future of Europe*, 9 May 2022, <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-19590-en.pdf> [7.05.2023].

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

the European Union necessarily, and it would not be closed to those who have left the EU”⁷.

These vague yet loaded remarks sparked confusion, not only across Europe but even in Paris. Due to these immediate negative reactions, especially from Central Europe, but also Germany, the French government was soon briefing that the EPC was in no way meant to replace enlargement. This was echoed by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, who – on 18 May 2022 – spoke of a “European geopolitical community” that “extends from Reykjavik to Baku or Yerevan, from Oslo to Ankara” and was not “a new excuse for procrastination” but will be “particularly useful (...) for those who aspire to join us”⁸. Still, within weeks after President Macron’s speech, rival visions of what the EPC could become were pushed by French officials. One was about supporting candidate countries, by offering them extra ties to the EU during their long years in the waiting room, while potentially involving EU institutions. The other one was purely inter-governmental and aimed at involving the United Kingdom (UK) and other non-accession countries, mainly on security issues⁹.

Notwithstanding the differences in substance, was there an overarching rationale for the initiative, from the French perspective? The answer to this question is not clear either. On one hand, with Ukraine’s application for EU membership, submitted under extraordinary and historic circumstances, a new membership model was considered necessary. Whereas only very gradual economic integration was deemed possible, a fast-track political integration seemed indispensable and this was where the EPC provided solutions. Unlike the neighbourhood policy model of “everything but the institutions”, the EPC would fit in with the principle of “institutions first” in order to quickly provide a sense of belonging, and on an equal footing¹⁰. Such an understand-

7 Ibid.

8 European Council, *Speech by President Charles Michel at the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/18/discours-du-president-charles-michel-lors-de-la-session-pleniere-du-comite-economique-et-social-europeen/> [7.05.2023].

9 C. Grant, *Macron is serious about the European Political Community*, “Insight. Centre for European Reform”, 1 August 2022, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/macron-serious-about-european-political-community> [7.05.2023].

10 T. Chopin, L. Macek, S. Maillard, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

ing of the EPC would focus primarily on Ukraine and aim to foster political support for the accession process, which, from the French perspective, is bound to be a very long procedure. This line of thinking was later developed by Brussels and Berlin-based think tanks that proposed to design the EPC as an accelerator mechanism for accession, accompanied by “a more formal structure relying on EU institutions”¹¹.

But Emmanuel Macron’s address to his *corps diplomatique*, made on 1 September 2022, framed the EPC process as essentially intergovernmental, to the surprise of some¹². According to the President, “we must partner very closely with all these states, in a very intergovernmental manner, to build close strategic convergence on key issues” (notably climate change, energy supplies, foreign and security policy, food security, as well as “cultural projects”) and this should “put an end to the grumbles of non-recognition with regard to many of these states and governments”¹³. Meanwhile, France “hopes for a configuration as wide and inclusive as possible, in which EU institutions are not central to the project nor what structures it”¹⁴. But given the list of topics to be addressed, it is difficult to see how concrete progress could be achieved if the process is based exclusively on biannual summits of heads of state or government, with no permanent structures to implement their decisions and no formalized coordination with EU institutions.

Perhaps more importantly, this speech did little to convince sceptical Central Europeans that the EPC was not about hampering enlargement. In principle, Poland and other CEE member states of the EU should have been reassured by the conclusions of the European Council of June 2022. First, the European Council decided to grant the status of candidate country to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, while expressing its unequivocal commitment to the membership perspective of the Western Balkans and calling for acceleration of

11 F.C. Mayer et al., op. cit., p. 3.

12 M. Emerson, *Will the European Political Community actually be useful?*, CEPS Explainer. Centre for European Policy Studies, 29 September 2022, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/will-the-european-political-community-actually-be-useful/> [7.05.2023].

13 Élysée, *Speech by the President of the French Republic at the conference of ambassadors*, 1 September 2022, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2022/09/01/speech-by-the-president-of-the-french-republic-at-the-conference-of-ambassadors-1> [7.05.2023].

14 Ibid.

the accession process. Second, it was stated that “a European political community” was to offer “a platform for political coordination for European countries across the continent” with the aim to “foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest”, but this framework “will not replace existing EU policies and instruments, notably enlargement, and will fully respect the European Union’s decision-making autonomy”¹⁵. It is thus clear that the EPC cannot formally replace enlargement, but can it be used to obstruct the process and slow it down? Macron’s words about the EPC helping to “end the assumption of infinite expansion by the EU”¹⁶ have certainly failed to foster trust and commitment in Central Europe for this new initiative.

From the Polish perspective, the EPC proposal raised more questions and concerns than it provided answers and opportunities. The Polish government accepted the initiative in principle and saw some benefits, notably in terms of building an understanding with the UK on military security, and with Norway and Azerbaijan on energy issues. However, the key concern was that the initiative could be used to freeze or slow down the enlargement process rather than facilitating or accelerating it. Decisions taken by the June 2022 European Council did not dispel these doubts. There was a widely shared perception, both in Poland and CEE more broadly, and across the political spectrum, that the EPC aimed at creating an eternal waiting room, while giving the candidates the illusion of being included on an equal footing in a high-level diplomatic talk shop that was in fact designed as a low-key substitute for lack of progress towards membership. The Polish understanding was that the EPC constituted yet another attempt to foster relations with the EU’s neighbours based on the *status quo* rather than on a credible enlargement policy, towards which France remained sceptical¹⁷. Accordingly, the EPC was not an adequate and resolved response to the aggression of the Russian Federation but rather more of the same – *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*, as

15 European Council, *European Council meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions*, Brussels, 24 June 2022 (OR. en), EUCO 24/22 CO EUR 21 CONCL 5, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf> [7.05.2023].

16 *Speech by the President of the French Republic at the conference of ambassadors*, op. cit.

17 A. Kozioł, Ł. Maślanka, *European Political Community meets for the first time*, “Spotlight. The Polish Institute of International Affairs”, 7 October 2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/european-political-community-meets-for-the-first-time> [9.05.2022].

the French themselves would say. It looked like an ENP-bis formula¹⁸ that did not prejudge accession (a curious parallel with Romano Prodi's speech of 2002 about the EU's proximity policy!¹⁹), while once again putting apples and oranges in one basket. As such, the EPC seemed to aim at counter-balancing or watering down the accession promise for Ukraine and Moldova, while leaving them in yet another grey zone between EU/ NATO and an increasingly aggressive Russia. Furthermore, from the Polish perspective, Russian military aggression in 2008, 2014, and 2022 made clear that grey zones only emboldened and incited Russia to intervene. Thus, only fast-track acceptance of the willing Eastern European countries to the EU and NATO, together with a credible deterrence and containment strategy backed by adequate capabilities, could stop Russia and bring peace and stability back to Europe²⁰. Yet, at first, the EPC appeared to be heading in the opposite direction; however, as time has passed since the original proposal, can we see any shifts that align the EPC more with the Polish perspective?

2. The first summit in Prague: all of Europe united against Russia, and what next?

According to the President of the European Council, speaking ahead of the first EPC summit in Prague on 6 October 2022, "the fact that [all] the 44 countries which were invited decided to participate is a first positive signal"²¹. Indeed, the first notable achievement of the summit was simply that it happened²². And it took place with the participation of 27 EU members and 17 non-EU European states, including the

18 For a comprehensive analysis of various preferences and interests around the construction and evolution of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) see: A.K. Cianciara, *The politics of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, London–New York 2020.

19 R. Prodi, *A wider Europe – Aproximity policy as the key to stability*, SPEECH/02/619, Brussels, 5–6 December 2002, <https://ec.europa.eu/dorie/fileDownload.do?docId=255969&cardId=255969> [9.05.2022].

20 J. Szymanek, *Europejska Wspólnota Polityczna*, "Infos BAS (Biuro Analiz Sejmowych)", 9 March 2023, no. 3(305), <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/publikacjaBAS.xsp?documentId=82311BED456D419C125896A0040F3AC&lang=PL> [9.05.2022].

21 European Council, *Remarks by President Charles Michel ahead of the first European Political Community Meeting*, 6 October 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/06/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-ahead-of-the-first-european-political-community-meeting/> [10.05.2023].

22 M. Pierini, *Five takeaways from the European Political Community Summit*, Carnegie Europe, 18 October 2022, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/88189> [10.05.2023].

initially reticent United Kingdom and Turkey as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan. Whereas no official statement was issued after the meeting, it nevertheless constituted a powerful message of unity addressed to Russia and its junior partner in crime – Belarus. The summit “confirmed that Russia was in complete isolation”, according to the Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki²³. Even states with close relations with Russia – Hungary, Serbia, or Turkey – showed up in Prague. But beyond strategic communication, which should not be underestimated of course, it was not entirely clear what the objectives and results of the summit were and how the way forward was framed.

This informal intergovernmental gathering somehow mirrored the European Council in its early days, albeit on a continental scale, where heads of state or government could exchange freely, with the aim of identifying common solutions to common challenges. Another visible sign of informality and flexibility was the absence of a chair, whereas the two roundtables – on peace and security and on energy, climate, and economy – were each co-facilitated by two states, one from the EU and one non-EU state. The summit featured bilateral meetings, notably between Sweden and Turkey on Sweden’s NATO accession, or between France and the UK on migration. There were also two quadrilateral meetings envisaged: one with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as the President of France and the President of the European Council; the other with the Presidents of Serbia and Kosovo as well as the President of France and the German Chancellor. Whereas the first meeting concerned the delimitation of the common border and resulted in some notable success, the second was cancelled and replaced by two separate trilateral meetings attended by the Franco-German duo²⁴.

Participants agreed on work “paths” or priority lines of cooperation, including protection of critical infrastructure, fighting cyber-attacks, regional cooperation and security in the Black, Baltic, and North Seas

23 Quoted in: A. Brzozowski, *For the European Political Community, meeting is the message*, EURACTIV, 7 October 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/for-the-european-political-community-meeting-is-the-message/> [11.05.2023].

24 European Parliamentary Research Service, *Outcome of the European Political Community and European Council meetings in Prague on 6-7 October 2022*, 11 October 2022, <https://epthinktank.eu/2022/10/11/outcome-of-the-european-political-community-and-european-council-meetings-in-prague-on-6-7-october-2022/> [11.05.2023].

as well as energy strategy to bring energy prices down, in coordination with non-EU energy producers such as Azerbaijan and Norway. It was announced that EPC meetings would be held bi-annually at the level of heads of state or government. A list of future hosts was established featuring Moldova and Spain in 2023, and the UK in 2024. The logic behind this selection was to alternate between EU and non-EU states on the one hand, and to link the EU host to the Council presidency on the other.

Still, after the Prague summit, many questions remained wide open, especially regarding funding or the institutionalization of the initiative if it were to go beyond “an opinion exchange forum”²⁵. A decision-making capacity of 44 or 47 (as invited to the 2nd summit in Chisinau) participating states is low. The key advantage, as advocated by the French initiators, is supposedly to get out of the asymmetric accession logic and to place all participants on an equal footing. But again, equality is questionable when some participants are heavily dependent on others for key resources – military, financial and humanitarian aid – that determine their very existence.

Crucially, the EPC was launched before it acquired a clear purpose, agenda, or structure. It emerged as an “EU-centric” framework, with representatives of EU institutions being present in Prague, but at the same time kept at arm’s length so as not to estrange the UK. It only seems natural that EPC membership should be conditional on geopolitical alignment and commitment to democracy and the rule of law, but having Turkey, Azerbaijan, Serbia, or Hungary onboard means that the lowest common denominator is placed pretty low. Rather, Prague was about “get-together-diplomacy”²⁶ aimed at fostering more policy convergence in the security realm and improving foreign and security cooperation on the European continent. The challenge of building “a platform that combines political dialogue with policymaking”²⁷ was not addressed.

25 A. Koziół, Ł. Maślanka, op. cit.

26 M. Pierini, op. cit.

27 J. Pisani-Ferry, D. Schwarzer, *How to build the European Political Community*, Opinion. Project Syndicate, 3 October 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/european-political-community-epc-prague-summit-by-jean-pisani-ferry-and-daniela-schwarzer-2022-10> [11.05.2023].

It seems that between May and October 2022, the idea moved towards a model less focused on enlargement, or its alternatives, and more towards strategic cooperation²⁸. Despite the EPC being triggered by membership applications from Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and ideas being voiced about framing the EPC as a facilitator for enlargement, this is not a likely scenario for the future of the EPC due to numerous objections from various sides. Rather, a de-coupling from enlargement has been underway, although this does not mean that some kind of re-coupling, whether in terms of facilitating or hampering accession, could not take place in the future. This is why Polish officials and analysts continuously stressed, also after the Prague summit, that the decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova should not be watered down by other cooperation formats, and the EPC should not become a pretext for delaying the start of accession negotiations.

But should the EPC become a European security forum seeking to build “strategic intimacy”, in the words of Emmanuel Macron, this may also be a cause for concern from the Polish perspective. Poland sees NATO and strong US engagement in Europe as the only credible guarantee of security on the continent – directed against Russia’s aggressive and revisionist policies. The US is seen in Poland as the indispensable partner, whereas various proposals from France or Germany, regarding new security structures without US participation, are treated with marked suspicion. Thus, the ideas of the European Security Council, proposed in 2018 by Germany and France²⁹, or a new security framework as voiced by Emmanuel Macron in January 2022, on the eve of the Russian invasion (“we need to build it between us, Europeans, share it with our allies in NATO, and propose it for negotiation to Russia”³⁰) received a frosty response in Poland. Whereas Europe must assume its responsibilities in security and defence, there

28 T. Nguyen, *European Political Community. From family photo to ‘strategic intimacy’*, Hertie School Jacques Delors Centre, “Policy Brief”, 8 November 2022, p. 3, <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/european-political-community> [11.05.2023].

29 M. Kaim, R. Kempin, *A European Security Council. Added value for EU foreign and security policy?*, SWP Comment, 4 January 2019, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/a-european-security-council> [12.05.2023].

30 *Macron floats EU security pact with Russia, risking Western split over Ukraine*, Financial Times, 20 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/odb12864-a154-4607-a0e8-c9722e956424> [12.05.2023].

has been considerable distrust in Poland, especially under the Law and Justice government, with regard to France seeking to exclude the US and appease Russia. The EPC was seen as old wine in new French bottles. Therefore, Poland adopted a wait-and-see approach before the 2nd EPC summit in Chisinau, which was understood as a turning point at which the initiative would either fly or die.

3. The second summit in Chisinau: how concrete can it get?

The debate leading up to the summit in Chisinau on 1 June 2023 revealed that little progress had been achieved since the Prague inauguration. The EPC is still somewhere between a continental strategic exchange forum, an “innovation policy lab”, or a “speed-dating” opportunity for European leaders on the one hand, and an ambition to deliver concrete outcomes in the field of security, energy, and connectivity on the other. Undoubtedly, this results from significant variation in the preferences coming from participating countries and voiced by expert circles. The first line of thinking that emerged from the pre-Chisinau debate concerned the undeniable merit in periodically bringing European leaders together in a forum that does not comprise Russia. In particular, such a high-level meeting in Moldova, so close to Ukraine and the Russia-controlled separatist region of Transnistria, constituted a powerful message in itself. The continuous vagueness of the process, including a lack of formal declarations, allowed states such as the UK and Turkey to be brought to the table. In contrast, pushing for concrete and binding commitments, especially at this early stage of the initiative’s development, could in turn alienate some partners and reduce participation, whereas participation constituted both the crucial added value of the format and the essence of its strength in response to Russian aggression. Socialization and networking at the highest political level could bring important even long-term results while fostering reflection on the “new Europe” under these rapidly changing geopolitical circumstances.

The second line of thinking focused on concrete projects and deliverables while calling for more EPC ambition and greater capacity to act. But to follow up on commitments and policies, the EPC would need institutionalization, which may lead to disagreements and block-

ages, undermining the renewed sense of unity that Europe seeks. Institutionalization entails opening a Pandora's box with questions regarding funding and governance, including the competencies of EU institutions. Meanwhile, as the experience of the Poland-led regional Three Seas cooperation has shown, the execution of infrastructure or energy projects requires an institutional structure beyond loose bi-annual summitry. Some concrete results of the Chisinau summit were expected, of course. For example, the summit saw an extension of the EU-Western Balkans roaming declaration to Moldova, and announcements regarding the Franco-Slovenian project to help Western Balkans increase their cyber capacity. However, rather than formulating new policies, the EPC could also focus on rekindling a sense of European polity, based on shared security interests rather than shared values, which is what the EU has so far neglected³¹.

The debate on how to make the EPC a catalyst to expedite EU enlargement and revitalize the neighbourhood policies has continued in the run-up to the 2nd summit in Chisinau³². Intense work on new enlargement modalities has indeed been taking place in the capitals of EU member states, including Warsaw, Prague, and Berlin. Yet keeping enlargement off the EPC agenda helps to maintain the pressure on the EU member states and institutions to deliver on their commitments to candidate countries. The EPC could then focus on finding common ground with all European states while keeping (some of them) from (fully) falling into Russia's orbit³³. This common ground should be articulated at some point – a joint vision at the strategic level, outlining a broad European position on continental security, was perceived as necessary by many experts from the “wider Europe”. From the Ukrainian perspective, EU membership is an obvious priority, but not an urgent one. What matters most is weapons, NATO's security guarantees,

31 H. Kribbe, S. Lumet, L. van Middelaar, *Bringing the greater European family together. New perspectives on the European Political Community*, Brussels Institute of Geopolitics, May 2023, <https://big-europe.eu/publication/bringing-the-greater-european-family-together> [26.05.2023].

32 L. Plesca, *Assessing the implications for Moldova in hosting the European Political Community Summit*, GMF Insights, 18 May 2023, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/assessing-implications-moldova-hosting-european-political-community-summit> [25.05.2023].

33 S. Greene, E. Lucas, N. Tenzer, *The road to Chişinău. How the European Political Community can – and cannot – address the wider continent's conundrums*, CEPA, 23 May 2023, p. 15, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/the-road-to-chisinau-the-european-political-community/> [25.05.2023].

sanctions, and financial support. Clearly, no stability and investment are possible as long as there is an ongoing war and no credible guarantees in place that would prevent future aggression.

Whereas security was framed as the number one EPC priority for Ukraine, for Moldova, it was diplomatic support and connectivity. Organization of the 2nd EPC summit in Chisinau with 47 state delegations at the highest political level was undoubtedly the greatest diplomatic event in this vulnerable country's history. The pro-European government of Moldova, acting under severe Russian pressure, hoped to use this opportunity to firmly anchor the country in Europe while bringing tangible results to the citizens³⁴. According to President Maia Sandu, Moldova's primary objective was to become a full member of the EU by 2030, with the accession talks beginning no later than in early 2024³⁵.

As for Poland, it contributed to the summit by co-facilitating a roundtable on security together with the UK, while shaping the debate on cybersecurity, nuclear security, hybrid attacks, and protection of the most vulnerable groups of civilians during armed conflicts. Experts stressed that the summit also provided an opportunity for Poland to seek further comprehensive financial and political support from European partners for the Moldovan reforms. At the same time, Poland indicated that formal dialogue on the next steps of countries aspiring to membership can only be effective in the EU forum as part of an enlargement policy³⁶.

4. Prospects: all eyes on the United Kingdom?

● The third EPC summit took place on 5 October 2023 in Spain, on the eve of the informal European Council that was to discuss en-

34 N. Popescu, Keynote speech *European Political Community Summit: Key topic and expectations*, High-level Conference, IPRE & CEPS, Chisinau, 25 May 2023 [attended by the Author].

35 *Moldovans are Europeans – President Sandu's message which she'll carry from a Chisinau rally to the European Political Community Summit*, 22 May 2023, <https://www.epcsummit2023.md/moldovans-are-europeans-president-sandus-message-which-shell-carry-chisinau-rally-european> [26.05.2023].

36 J. Pieńkowski, *Strengthening State Security a Challenge for the Pro-European Moldovan Government*, "PISM Bulletin" 2023, no. 53(2172), <https://pism.pl/publications/strengthening-state-security-a-challenge-for-the-pro-european-moldovan-government> [24.05.2023].

largement and the necessary EU reform. One way or the other, enlargement remains central to the EPC. However, expectations regarding the Granada summit and the Spanish EPC presidency were quite limited. This is in contrast to the fourth summit planned for early 2024 in the United Kingdom. In fact, this former EU member has been hijacking the EPC show for quite some time now. Many of the initiatives voiced in Prague were announced jointly by France and the UK. According to some analysts, the EPC initiative is really more about the West than the East. It is about re-engaging the UK in the new geopolitical context and in a manner that is acceptable post-Brexit. The joint leaders' declaration from 10 March 2023, announced during the first meeting of the French President and British Prime Minister in five years, was quite telling in this respect. In this document France and the UK underlined the importance of the EPC, which should "serve as the high-level vehicle required to deepen the strategic dialogue between all its members and boost European-wide practical cooperation"³⁷. The EPC should play a key role in promoting a collective approach in the field of energy, infrastructure, connectivity, cybersecurity, countering disinformation, as well as migration, the latter being especially relevant to the UK. The UK's Integrated Review Refresh, from March 2023, mentioned EPC as a "notable and welcome new forum for continent-wide cooperation"³⁸, which was a break from the previous approach to European security: either NATO or bilateral partnerships.

Certainly, the UK-hosted summit and the EPC presidency would be of great importance, firstly because the United Kingdom is the key non-EU European power, secondly, because it has regained trust and credibility post-Brexit thanks to its resolute support for Ukraine, and thirdly, due to its transatlantic credentials, UK's engagement may help alleviate CEE fears of the EPC being a French Trojan horse to implement European strategic autonomy from the US³⁹. But ultimately the fate of the EPC would depend on whether and how successive presi-

37 Prime Minister's Office, *UK-France Joint Leaders' Declaration*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration> [12.05.2023].

38 S. Greene, E. Lucas, N. Tenzer, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

39 M. Droin, I. Toygür, *The Chisinau Summit: A Litmus Test for Moldova and the EPC*, CSIS Comment, 26 May 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chisinau-summit-litmus-test-moldova-and-epc> [28.05.2023].

dencies and other key European actors make use of it to further their own agendas. For instance, Poland does not seem to consider the EPC as an important tool to increase convergence on major issues dividing the continent: it was not mentioned in foreign affairs minister Zbigniew Rau's annual "exposé" in the Sejm in April 2023, nor was it discussed at the PISM Strategic Ark – a major event in global strategizing, organized by the Polish Institute of International Affairs in May 2023. A big question mark remains over the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the EU and the EPC in late 2024.

Finally, in terms of avenues for further and more theory-driven research, it will certainly be useful to look into emerging patterns of institutionalization over the next summits and presidencies. Existing literature⁴⁰ shows that institutionalization is a major factor that predicts whether an international format is bound to fly, merely survive, or ultimately die.

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⁴⁰ M. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, *What kills international organizations? When and why international organizations terminate*, "European Journal of International Relations" 2021, vol. 27, no. 1, DOI: 10.1177/1354066120932976.

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