

Navigating the European Political Community's Uncertain Future

Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine brought a geopolitical earthquake to Europe. On the one hand, it revived the EU's enlargement policy, but on the other, it pushed the EU member states to promulgate fresh political projects fitting their national interests. One such project is the European Political Community (EPC), masterminded by French President Emmanuel Macron and backed (at least for now) by the EU institutions and the member states.

In his [address](#) to the European Parliament on 9 May 2022, Macron stated that the EPC would encompass “democratic European nations that subscribe to our shared core values” and would aim at promoting political and security cooperation among its members, focusing on energy, transport, investments, infrastructure, and the free movement of people, with a particular emphasis on youth.

However, when the EPC's inaugural summit was held in Prague in October 2022, gathering the leaders of 44 countries and the heads of the EU in-

stitutions, not all participants stood out with their democratic credentials. Many European leaders with grave problems of human rights or those be-friending Russia were present. In fact, from the outset, the EPC demonstrated that “realpolitik and “get-together-diplomacy” took precedence over economic topics and European values and [principles](#).”

In fact, from the outset, the EPC demonstrated that “realpolitik and “get-together-diplomacy” took precedence over economic topics and European values and principles.”

Two years after its conception, the EPC looks like a club of highly heterogeneous countries that can be clustered into three groups: (1) 27 EU member states, (2) European states not willing to join the EU (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Azerbaijan, Armenia), including the one whose accession prospects are frozen (Türkiye), or who



VANO CHKHIKVADZE
Contributor

Vano Chkhikvadze is an EU Integration Programme Manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), specializing in EU-Georgian relations and advancing projects for Georgia's European integration. With a background as a country analyst for the European Stability Initiative and prior roles at the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia, he has extensive experience in monitoring EU program implementation in various areas. Vano Chkhikvadze also oversees EU projects related to regional cooperation. He holds a Master's Degree from the College of Europe in European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies and another from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Policy Analysis.



have left the EU (UK) and (3) those European states which are keen on joining the EU (Eastern Partnership Trio and Western Balkans). This diversity brings to the table a number of opposing viewpoints on almost all issues, ranging from the EU and NATO enlargement to relations with Russia and support for Ukraine.

The idea of the European political community is not new, as many other European leaders, from Christian Fouchet to Enrico Letta to Francois Mitterrand, have proposed similar concepts before. Mitterrand's European Confederation tabled in 1989, a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, never took off. Like the EPC, that project's first conference was also held in Prague in 1991, and it also focused on energy, transportation, telecommunication, and freedom of movement. However, the project did not succeed because of the unwillingness of the European states to cooperate with Russia in the early 1990s. As Macron explained, the inclusion of Russia "was swiftly deemed unacceptable for the states that had just freed themselves from the yoke of the Soviet Union."

France and Europe seem to have learned a lesson. Today, there is no place for Russia in the EPC. As the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell [put](#) it at the first EPC summit: "This meeting is a way of looking for a new order without Russia. It does not mean that we want to exclude Russia forever, but this Russia – Putin's Russia – has no seat."

Results, Fractures, and New Horizons

The October 2022 EPC summit was dominated by the issue of the long-running Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At that Summit, the EU decided to send the non-armed, non-executive civilian European Union Mission to Armenia (EUMA) to monitor and report on the security situation of the Armenian side of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. This was and by far remains one of the main achievements of the EPC.

The EPC was also relatively successful in address-

ing concrete cybersecurity issues, ensuring that the EPC participating countries were granted access to the European Cybersecurity Competence Centre, the EU's executive agency based in Bucharest, Romania, and tasked with funding and coordinating cybersecurity research projects. The EPC also tried to put youth policy at the core of its discussions, extending the "DiscoverEU" project to participants.

Another achievement of the EPC is that the UK returned to the European policy agenda-setting and even decided to host the Spring 2024 summit. This allows Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to focus on immigration, something he unsuccessfully attempted during the Granada Summit of October 2023. That the EPC is not at the top of British foreign policy priorities is evident in the fact that as of mid-February 2024, neither the exact date nor location of the Summit has been made public.

The creation of the EPC did send a clear message to Russia and Belarus that totalitarian states are not welcome in the grand European setting.

The creation of the EPC did send a clear message to Russia and Belarus that totalitarian states are not welcome in the grand European setting. The invitation of Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to the Granada Summit was also a political statement. However, Macron's idea of bringing together only the "democratic European nations" did not materialize as quite a few pro-Russian and non-democratic European leaders attended the EPC summits. Macron's "value-based" approach has been replaced by the alternative approach of the European Council President, Charles Michel, according to whom the EPC should be a European geopolitical [community](#) "extending from Reykjavik to Baku or Yerevan, from Oslo to Ankara."

The main attractiveness of the EPC is its high-level, inclusive, and flexible format.

The main attractiveness of the EPC is its high-level, inclusive, and flexible format. So far, it remains a platform where all leaders of the European continent are equal. There is no need to negotiate the joint statement at the end of the Summit or assess the progress on the previously agreed action items, as was the case with the OSCE, which eventually rendered its Summits and Ministerials dysfunctional and symbolic. Bi-annual summits alternating between EU and non-EU countries also ensure a high interest in participation. Obviously, as time proceeds, increasing overlaps with the Council of Europe and OSCE Ministerials or European Council meetings will inevitably raise questions about the necessity of such intensive bi-annual gatherings; however, the fact that gatherings of all-of-Europe Heads of States are still relatively rare, could save the EPC's attractiveness.

The EPC has no institutional architecture, which could be its blessing and curse, depending on how events unfold. Without a secretariat and a dedicated budget, it can only mobilize funds through bilateral efforts or existing financial instruments available to the EU. More Europe-wide institutions, like the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) or the Three Seas Initiative Investment [Fund](#), could also be referred to, if need be. However, if the EPC only remains a talking shop that survives from summit to summit, a gradual loss of interest from the European leaders will be inevitable.

The last two summits provided a preview of such potential erosion. First, the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, boycotted the second and third EPC summits after clashing with the Greek Prime Minister at the margins of the first meeting.

Later on, Erdoğan was followed by the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, who boycotted the EPC Granada Summit because of the pro-Armenian [statement](#) made by then-French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna and the subsequent [delivery](#) of defensive military equipment to Armenia.

It is no secret that the EPC is looked at cautiously by the South-Eastern and Eastern European states, which are in an enlargement queue. They fear that EPC could have a hidden agenda – providing an alternative platform to EU membership – a common trait of all previous European Confederation ideas. Because of this, the Presidents of Moldova and Ukraine pushed the enlargement issue high up on the agenda of the second EPC Summit held in Moldova in June 2023. Also, the EPC got initial lukewarm support from Berlin, citing the lack of consultation. The [research](#) by Teona Giuashvili for the European University Institute showed that “Germany viewed the EPC as a French idea and did not feel it had ownership over the proposal,” while Poland had concerns about EPC overshadowing the enlargement process and omitting the USA from the security-related discussions.

How to Make EPC More Valuable?

Having relevant high-level officials dealing with the issues that the EPC discusses could be valuable and increase the summits' efficiency. For instance, European security discussions in the EPC would greatly benefit from the presence of the NATO Secretary General or even the OSCE leadership, as long as the leadership still exists, risking Russian veto on the renewal of the mandates. Similarly, the directors of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) could contribute to more meaningful debates on migration.

Considering the diversity of interests of the EPC participating states, it would be efficient if the-

matic working groups were established to promote dialogue on the selected topics. This was also tried in 1989 by Mitterrand.

In addition, increasing the number of non-European participants when the issues relevant to them are discussed could be helpful. When discussing energy security, finding a place for oil-rich Central Asian and North African countries would make sense.

The EPC could borrow some features from the French [non-paper](#) of November 2019 on reforming the European Union accession process. The EPC can consider extending some of the EU's digital agenda to members who are ready for that. This might include reducing roaming tariffs or getting access to the Digital Europe Program, which brings digital technology to businesses, citizens, and public administration. The EPC can also gradually involve the participants in the EU's LIFE (L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement) program that aims to contribute to implementing, updating, and developing EU environmental and climate policy. The EPC members might also get involved in the EU's Creative Europe program, which supports the cultural and creative sectors.

Depending on the ambition, the EPC can help some participating states strengthen their democratic credentials. In this regard, the EU candidate countries can participate in the [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#) and utilize its tool, the [EU Fundamental Rights Information System](#). Another area of cooperation could involve extending the EU Rule of Law Toolbox and the EU Justice [Scoreboard](#) to the EU candidate countries. This could help the interested countries assess and improve their justice systems by relying on objective, reliable, and comparable data.

Depending on the ambition, the EPC can help some participating states strengthen their democratic credentials.

Another field of policy cooperation is migration. The EPC participant countries can develop and promote circular migration schemes and invest in migration and development, especially in non-EU/EEA countries with high ratios of migrants and remittances.

Also, to define the meaning of the EPC and strengthen its ownership, it would be wise to ask the participant countries to table fresh proposals and review them. The EPC will soon undergo a severe first stress test as its fifth Summit is expected to take place in Hungary, which will hold the rotating EU presidency in the second half of 2024. It remains to be seen whether the European leaders will agree to visit Orbán in Budapest and whether they will manage to persuade Hungarian authorities to agree to hold the summit elsewhere. In any case, asking for fresh ideas that could fill the agenda of the EPC can be helpful. In 2009-2010, the OSCE tried to gather the visions of European security architecture from all participating states in what was called the Corfu Process. While the discussions did not end in a decision, quite an impressive collection of thoughts was gathered and stockpiled, which could be used in the future when a more conducive security environment emerges.

A Look from Tbilisi

Until now, Georgia has been using the EPC to advocate for its national interests, particularly mobilizing support for the EU candidate status. At the October 2023 EPC Granada Summit, two months before the Commission's recommendation, the Prime Minister of Georgia tried to [persuade](#) the EU member states "not to mistreat Georgia." The Georgian leadership also used the EPC to mingle with the European leaders even though chilly relations with the EU and Ukraine did not provide many important photo opportunities.

As the EPC matures into a semi-institutionalized format and becomes an integral part of European

high-level diplomatic (and even security) architecture, Tbilisi should think more about its contribution to the EPC format and the benefits it could yield for Georgia. In the EPC, Georgia could focus on regional conflicts, high-level diplomacy, and connectivity. But for this, Georgia should offer to hold the 2025 EPC summit in Tbilisi or Batumi. By then, the elections and the traditional post-election crisis should be over, and whoever is in the government could use the 2025 Summit to position Georgia in a new light.

By Spring 2025, Georgia will have either opened the accession negotiations or come close to opening them. This period will also be essential in securing the EU skeptics' support for advancing Georgia further on the European track.

Georgia can play a serious role in the EU's drive to decrease the dependence on Russian hydrocarbons. As the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen [put](#) it: "Since the beginning of Russia's war, we have decided to turn our back on Russian fossil fuels and to diversify towards reliable energy partners." The EU also aspires to develop energy infrastructure links with the South Caucasus and Central Asia further. In December 2022, backed by the European Commission, Romania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Hungary signed the strategic partnership agreement that envisages the construction of an undersea electricity cable. Georgia could bring more topics of connectivity between the EU and Central Asia to the EPC discussions.

Georgia could also contribute to a dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EPC summits were used as venues for Pashinyan and Aliyev to meet and talk about future plans. Tbilisi could bring this issue back to the table and boost its role as a regional peacemaker. Moreover, Georgia could use the EPC to bring to the European agenda the issues of occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions.

Ensuring greater engagement of the EU in the conflict resolution process will be essential for the eventual conflict transformation, and there could be no bigger stage for flagging this topic than the EPC.

Georgia could use the EPC to bring to the European agenda the issues of occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions.

Finally, Georgia must also make it clear, together with Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkan states, that the EPC is not a substitute for European integration but a bonus format that gives an opportunity for the pan-European leadership to gather in one room and talk about the common plans and the issues that divide them. Finding such a room in Tbilisi or Batumi in 2025 would greatly benefit Georgia and the wider region ■