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Can the European Political Community be a bridge between the UK and the EU?

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This policy brief is the first of a three paper CER/KAS project, “Shared Values, Common Challenges - UK European Security Co-operation after the War in Ukraine.” This paper focuses on the European Political Community, while the other two will focus on defence capabilities and China policy respectively.

- ★ The European Political Community (EPC) is Europe’s newest political forum. The EPC is the brainchild of French President Emmanuel Macron. Its inaugural summit was held in Prague in October 2022. Leaders from 43 EU and non-EU European countries met in a show of continental unity to discuss the challenges stemming from Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.
- ★ The Prague summit showcased the EPC’s potential as a platform for dialogue between a large and diverse group of European leaders, and as a means of fostering closer UK-EU ties. The EPC could help rebuild trust after the acrimony of the Brexit years, promote closer dialogue and help the EU and the UK discuss and address shared challenges.
- ★ Preparations are currently underway for the next EPC summit in Moldova in June. Following that there will be a summit in Spain in October and one in the UK in the first half of 2024. However, the EPC’s longer-term future and its ability to bring the EU and the UK together are still unclear. All EPC members agree that it can be useful as a forum for informal discussions on common challenges between a broad group of European leaders. The question is whether the EPC can become more than that, and serve as a platform for pan-European co-operation and co-ordination.
- ★ The main risk to the EPC’s success, including its ability to facilitate UK-EU co-operation, is that leaders will lose interest in the EPC, causing it to sputter out. That would be particularly likely if the EU institutions became closely involved in the EPC, as that would scare the current British government off. A separate risk is that the EPC comes to be seen as an alternative to enlargement, as that would irk many eastern EU states and candidate countries.
- ★ The EPC would be strengthened if it becomes more than a talking shop and serves as an ‘incubator’ for concrete projects. Projects would be run by participating states and not the EPC itself, as it has no resources of its own do so, and there is very limited willingness among EPC members to give it its own staff or budget. Moreover, given the diverse interests of the EPC members, it could be challenging to get agreement on common projects.
- ★ In the medium-term, the EPC’s role in UK-EU relations will depend on the state of bilateral ties. If the UK and EU concluded a formal foreign policy co-operation agreement, the UK might be less willing to invest in the EPC, as its added value as a platform for co-operation might be lowered. However, the EPC could still be valuable for both the EU and the UK to discuss common challenges with a broader group of European countries, and as a back-up plan for maintaining political ties and dialogue in case relations worsened.

The European Political Community (EPC) is the latest addition to Europe's crowded institutional landscape, joining the EU, NATO, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The EPC was born in October 2022 in Prague. Forty-three leaders from across the European continent took part in the EPC's inaugural meeting. Participants included heads of state or government from the 27 EU member-states (aside from Denmark, whose prime minister did not attend because of domestic political reasons), the UK, all current EU membership candidates (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Ukraine and Turkey), the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein), plus Armenia and Azerbaijan. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel also participated.

This policy brief, the first in the CER-KAS series "Shared Values, Common Challenges - UK-European Security Co-operation after the War in Ukraine", assesses the EPC's potential to foster closer UK-EU ties. Can the EPC create new channels of communication and lead to closer relations? Can it function as a forum to address shared challenges? What kind of structure should the EPC have to be as effective as possible as a forum for co-operation? And what are the main barriers to the EPC's success as a

UK-EU bridge? The brief concludes that the EPC can help rebuild trust between the UK and the EU, promote closer dialogue and serve as a forum for Europe and the UK to discuss shared challenges, particularly relating to security, and potentially serve as an incubator for concrete co-operation projects. However, much depends on the EPC's evolution, which will be influenced by many factors other than UK-EU relations.

The EPC's origins

The EPC is the brainchild of French President Emmanuel Macron, who launched the idea in May 2022, in a speech to the European Parliament. Macron called for a new organisation in which "democratic European nations" could "find a new space for political and security co-operation, co-operation in the energy sector, in transport, investments, infrastructures, the free movement of persons and in particular of our youth".¹

“Macron thought the EPC could help strengthen ties between the EU and neighbours not interested in accession.”

Macron's proposal harked back to an idea for a 'European confederation' put forward by French President Francois Mitterrand after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Like Macron, Mitterrand envisaged a broader European space in which EU members and their neighbours could work together – although Macron's EPC excluded Russia, unlike Mitterrand's confederation. Indeed, the trigger for Macron's proposal was Vladimir Putin's large-scale assault on Ukraine in February, which prompted Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to apply for EU membership. Macron thought that all three were decades away from meeting the economic and political conditions for EU membership. In his view, the fact that accession would be slow only increased the urgency of making the candidates feel that they belonged in the broader community of European democracies. Macron emphasised that the EPC was intended to advance the

candidate countries' integration with Europe. But he also thought the EPC could help strengthen ties between the EU and neighbours that were not interested in accession, particularly the UK.

Macron's grand but vague idea was received with much scepticism. Germany was irked at not having been consulted on the initiative. Others, particularly among eastern member-states and EU accession candidates, viewed the EPC with suspicion, thinking that it was yet another French initiative intended to distract from the enlargement process. The UK was also sceptical initially, struggling to see the EPC's added value over existing formats such as NATO or the G7. Nevertheless, after French assurances that the EPC was not designed to undermine enlargement, EU leaders endorsed the idea in late June, when they agreed to set up a "platform for political coordination for European countries" to address common issues and "strengthen the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent".² The UK's then prime minister, Liz Truss, eventually agreed to attend the EPC meeting in Prague, hoping that London would have a chance to shape its direction.

The summit in Prague, organised by the Czech authorities during the country's rotating presidency of the EU, had two objectives: fostering political dialogue and co-operation to address shared challenges; and strengthening "the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent".³ The inaugural meeting of the EPC showcased the forum's potential. Over the course of two days, a large and diverse group of European leaders discussed shared

1: Emmanuel Macron, 'Speech at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe', May 9th 2022.

2: European Council, 'Conclusions 23-24 June', June 24th 2022.

3: European Council, 'Meeting of the European Political Community, 6 October 2022', October 6th 2022.

challenges, focusing on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the energy crisis and the global economy. While they did not issue a joint statement, the meeting still projected an image of continental unity against Russia's invasion.

The inaugural meeting of the EPC provided ample opportunities for bilateral meetings. Leaders appreciated the opportunity to meet their peers, as well as the summit's informal nature, including the lack of a final *communiqué* (which would have been time consuming to negotiate). For EU leaders, the summit was an opportunity to engage with a broader range of partners than usual. For the UK, the meeting provided a platform to re-engage with its European allies, helping to rebuild trust and re-energise co-operation after a period of tense relations, especially with France. Macron and Truss released a joint statement at the summit, pledging to

advance bilateral co-operation in a range of areas like energy and illegal migration, and agreed to convene a bilateral summit for the first time in five years.⁴

The EPC meeting also led to some progress in solving entrenched diplomatic disputes. There was a meeting between the leaders of Turkey and Armenia, and European Council President Charles Michel helped broker an agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabagh.

In Prague, leaders agreed to hold at least three more summits. These will take place twice a year, with the hosting alternating between an EU member-state and a non-member. The second meeting will be held in Moldova in June, the third in Spain in October and the fourth in the UK in the first half of 2024.

The future of the EPC

The EPC has the potential to play an important role in European politics. It can serve as a forum where EU leaders and their non-EU neighbours meet to discuss shared challenges in an informal setting. The EPC can also help strengthen ties between Europe and the UK, helping to restore trust after the acrimony of the Brexit years and facilitating discussions on how to tackle shared security challenges. The subjects covered could range from countering cyber threats and protecting critical infrastructure, to promoting energy security, securing stocks of critical materials and supporting Ukraine's reconstruction.

“There is broad agreement among EPC members that it should remain a light and informal forum like the G7.”

The EPC's ability to foster closer EU-UK relations depends in large part on its future evolution. This will only partly hinge on UK-EU relations, and will also have to reflect the views of the other EPC members. Will the EPC remain a loose high-level forum for national leaders, without a secretariat and a budget, and therefore have very limited ability to follow up on any decisions and implement any co-operation projects? Or will the EPC become more institutionalised, perhaps gaining a secretariat, a budget, and becoming more involved in concrete projects? To go beyond exchanging ideas, leaders will have to agree on common positions and potentially also projects. Another question relates to how closely involved the EU institutions will be in running the EPC.

The EPC's members broadly agree that its format is valuable and unique. In the EPC all leaders are on an equal

footing, which is not the case in formats that involve the EU and accession countries, for example. The EPC's informal nature, including the lack of a strict agenda, leaves ample time for unscripted informal exchanges between leaders, some of whom might not otherwise meet.

There is broad agreement among EPC members that it should remain a light and informal forum like the G7 or the G20. There is little appetite to institutionalise the EPC further by giving it a budget or a secretariat – not only because of its financial implications, but also because some countries (like the UK) fear that might lead to the EPC taking on a life of its own, or to it being run by the European Commission. EPC members also agree that its agenda should be flexible. In the near term, the focus of discussions will inevitably be on forging a common response to the war in Ukraine and its consequences, but eventually discussions could focus on longer-term challenges.

EPC members differ in how invested they are in the EPC and how rosy they think its future is. France is the strongest supporter of the EPC and thinks that it can be an important element of Europe's political architecture. Paris thinks that the EPC is not only a useful forum for dialogue, but that it could give rise to projects between groups of EPC members, for example on improving energy infrastructure in Europe. The enlargement dimension of the EPC also remains important to France. Paris thinks the EPC can buttress the EU enlargement process, which it thinks will necessarily be slow, by fostering closer political ties and spurring economic integration between the EU and the candidate countries in parallel to the accession process.

Of the larger EU states, Italy is also particularly keen to explore the EPC's potential to foster concrete co-

⁴: UK-France Joint Statement, October 6th 2022.

operation, whereas Germany, Poland and the European Commission are more sceptical. Berlin appears to have little desire to take on a leading role in shaping the EPC. Germany thinks that the EPC should remain a loose informal forum in which leaders can meet. The German government would welcome any concrete co-operation projects that emerged from EPC summits, but thinks that they could not be formally branded as EPC projects. Poland would welcome common projects if they added value, but unlike Germany is potentially open to them being presented as EPC endeavours. Of the non-EU members, Moldova is very positive about the EPC, and Turkey is also interested, seeing it as a way to bypass the toxic relationship with the EU. Conversely, most of the other EU membership candidates still have lingering

fears that the EPC could be a distraction from the accession process.

The UK has become a leading proponent of the EPC. London is invested in the EPC's success, perhaps more so than most EU members. The British insisted on hosting the EPC's fourth summit and are now keen on making the most of the EPC, to explore its potential to build channels of communication with European allies and to serve as a forum to address shared challenges. The networking opportunities that the EPC summits offer are particularly important to the UK now that British leaders and officials no longer attend EU summits or their preparatory meetings.

Maximising the EPC's potential

For the EPC to contribute further to fostering better EU-UK co-operation, it needs to establish itself firmly as a forum for European leaders to come together to discuss common challenges, co-ordinate their positions and formulate common responses. All the EPC's members need to perceive it as a joint project, with each having shared ownership of it.

“The EPC's chances of longevity would be strengthened if it became more than just a talking shop for leaders.”

For the non-EU members of the EPC, including the UK, one of the big selling points of the format is that it is a forum of equals and that the European institutions do not have a major role in it beyond providing some organisational support. The fact that the EPC comes without the political baggage of direct UK-EU engagement is one of its key advantages in the eyes of the current British government. If the EU institutions to become more involved in the EPC, eurosceptics within the Conservative party could argue that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was trying to dilute Brexit, making it politically difficult for him to engage with the EPC (though the same might not be true of a Labour government).

That risk, however, seems to be manageable. EU members of the EPC generally do not want the EU institutions to be more involved, and neither do the institutions themselves. The EU and the member-states are wary about the Union's decision-making autonomy and do not want the EPC to touch on EU competences.

A bigger risk is that the EPC comes to be perceived as a deliberate effort to create a second-rate alternative to EU membership, as that would annoy many eastern EU countries and candidate countries. Finally, some of

the EU's neighbours, like Turkey or Azerbaijan, may lose interest in the EPC if it stops being an inclusive forum focused on addressing shared challenges, and starts to ask difficult questions about whether they subscribe to shared values.

Perhaps the main risk facing the EPC, however, is that some leaders may lose interest and eventually stop attending summits, leading the EPC to lose much of its appeal and eventually fade away. The risk of the EPC losing its shine could be especially acute once the war in Ukraine ends, unless it manages to establish itself firmly as an essential forum before then. The absence of a secretariat or a budget also means that smaller EPC members may struggle to organise summits, and that larger members will have to help if they want to ensure the EPC's success.

The EPC's chances of longevity would be strengthened if it became more than just a talking shop for leaders. Its format could conceivably be expanded so that ministers or senior officials from EPC members could meet in their own summits. The EPC could also serve as an 'incubator' to launch specific co-operation projects. Any projects that emerged from the EPC would probably not be branded as EPC projects. Projects could not be run by the EPC itself, as it has no financial resources or staff of its own to do so. And given the very large number of EPC members and their diverse interests, it would be difficult to get agreement of all members. Projects would necessarily be decided on and implemented by groups of EPC members.

Any EPC-born projects involving the UK and EU countries could not touch on EU competences. At the same time, it would not make sense for projects to duplicate NATO efforts or existing bilateral and mini-lateral forms of security co-operation. That leaves the security of the EU's eastern neighbours as the most promising area for projects involving the UK and the EU. For example, some NATO members, including the UK, and non-NATO EPC

members might agree to work together to counter hybrid threats from Russia and to foster societal resilience by exchanging information and best practices.

Looking beyond the UK-EU dimension, energy security could be a promising area for the EPC to incubate projects. Groups of EPC members might agree to work together to strengthen their energy supply and electricity interconnections, or to exchange information on supplies

of critical materials needed for green technologies. The EU institutions could be involved, or even take the lead, particularly in the case of projects between the candidates, or those involving some EU members and candidate countries. Such multi-national projects would help the EU stabilise its neighbours and complement the enlargement process. They could benefit from EU funding, with candidates being given more access to EU funds to strengthen their energy security.⁵

Conclusions

The EPC has the potential to be an important new feature of Europe's political landscape, and to play an important role in fostering closer dialogue and co-operation between the EU and the UK. For that to happen the EPC needs to remain an inclusive, informal and institutionally light forum in which all its members come together as equals. The EU should maintain an arms-length relationship with the EPC, or it will be perceived as dominated by the Union – which would drive away the UK.

The EPC would be stronger if it did more than bringing leaders together. Ideally the EPC would lead to concrete co-operation projects between members, even if these may not necessarily be branded as EPC projects. The EPC could also lead to more intense dialogue between members if its format expanded beyond leaders' summits to include meetings between ministers or senior officials.

In the medium and long term, the EPC's potential to foster closer UK-EU ties will depend on the broader state of the bilateral relationship. If direct UK-EU co-operation

deepens significantly, for example through the conclusion of a formal foreign and security policy co-operation agreement, both sides may see less need to invest political capital in the EPC, as it may then be harder to see its value as an additional co-operation platform. But even if that happened, the EPC could still offer a valuable format to discuss common challenges with a broader group of European countries, and a useful platform to maintain political ties and dialogue if the broader UK-EU relationship worsened.

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5: Milica Delevic, 'Friends with benefits: How the European Political Community can further European integration', European Council on Foreign Relations, December 16th 2022.