

# The European Political Community: Time to invest in the power of democracies



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***A values-based European Political Community (EPoC) should clearly and unambiguously state that it expects its members to share a democratic and like-minded character. Rules, principles, and red lines should be established at the beginning and not halfway through the process. One of the greatest tests of the Prague summit will be how leaders navigate this delicate balancing act between the values-based aspirations of the EPoC and the heterogeneity of the group that is attending the summit.***

Despite sparking fierce criticism and suspicion at first, French President Emmanuel Macron's idea to create a European Political Community (EPoC) (<https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/fr/actualites/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-l-occasion-de-la-conference-sur-l-avenir-de-l-europe/>) has since gained momentum. It is

now up to European leaders from EU and non-EU countries to shape and give substance to what could otherwise turn into a massive political failure. This begs the question: what is the European Political Community's added value in today's geopolitical context, and what purpose could – and should – it serve?

### **The power of the EPoC should lie in its democratic and values-based identity**

In her State of the Union address ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech\\_22\\_5493](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493)), Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said “This is the time to invest in the power of democracies”, and that the work “begins with the core group of our like-minded partners”. She unambiguously asserted that Russia’s war on Ukraine is about “autocracy against democracy” and that Europe’s democratic values are at stake.

She was right. The Freedom in the World Report 2022 ([https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW\\_2022\\_PDF\\_Booklet\\_Digital\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf)) shows that democracy has been declining worldwide for the past 16 years, while authoritarian rule has been expanding globally. Russia’s war against Ukraine has added another critical challenge to liberal democracy and accelerated this broader divide.

Yet, the EU remains, at its core, committed to democratic standards: while it faces the rise of illiberalism in some of its member states, the same report demonstrates that it remains the best performing region in the world ([https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW\\_2022\\_PDF\\_Booklet\\_Digital\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf)).

In their efforts to give substance to the EPoC, European leaders should look no further. President von der Leyen provided the right framing for what the European Political Community should be about: a core group of like-minded partners committed to democracy.

What better purpose could there be for this organisation than to commit to protecting and defending democratic values at a time when those are increasingly and globally under siege? And what better purpose than to show that democracies, and like-minded allies, stand united against rising autocracy and Russia’s criminal actions?

In the short-term, this aspiration implies increasing democratic resilience in Europe against Russia’s aggression and jointly confronting the most immediate geo-economic and geopolitical consequences of the war: from food security and rising inflation to soaring energy prices and the need to reduce European’s dependency on Russian fossil fuels, to sanctions coordination, and the reconstruction of Ukraine.

There isn’t a single European-wide forum that horizontally tackles such a diverse range of topical issues that result from today’s context.

But European leaders ought to think also about the long-term purpose of the EPoC

beyond jointly addressing the consequences of the war in Ukraine. Increasing democratic resilience implies addressing the broader global divide between democracies and autocracies, as well as countering the rise of authoritarian powers. This could include tackling foreign interference in elections, disinformation campaigns, or the quieter yet pervasive economic and political meddling of foreign powers in our societies. The EPoC's focus could also be on how European countries can collectively support democratic forces and opposition parties in their midst and in countries of authoritarian rule. Collectively strategizing about how to uphold and restore credibility in the international rules-based order seems like a fitting purpose as well.

### **Why sticking to values is important**

Despite the reaction this might trigger from countries with questionable democratic standards, a values-based EPoC should clearly and unambiguously state its expectations of the democratic and like-minded character and commitment of its members. Rules, principles, and red lines should be established at the beginning and not halfway through the process.

These are important criteria because the EPoC should be about bringing together countries that, in addition to values, share a common understanding of where the threats lie and, by default, a common stance on geopolitical challenges. This is and should remain the distinctive element of the EPoC's identity. After all, it was Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the security context that unfolded that prompted the need for a new political community. Without a clear set of geographic and values-based boundaries, leaders risk turning the EPoC into another big UN-like forum, where the best one can hope for is an outcome based on the lowest common denominator, with little added value or policy consequence.

There is a risk that some countries may want to leave the room when confronted with these criteria. This would send the wrong signal to Putin and his allies amid an escalation of the war in Ukraine. But sooner rather than later, this fundamental question will resurface in the context of EPoC, as it surfaces time and again in other multilateral settings, the EU being the most obvious example.

Indeed, one of the greatest tests of the Prague Summit will be how leaders navigate this delicate balancing act between the values-based aspirations of the EPoC and the heterogeneity of the group that is attending the summit.

In this respect, some degree of differentiation among its members/participants could be allowed. This would imply a fluid system of different layers of involvement and participation with fully functioning democracies – which will be most of the participating members anyway – serving as the driving engine behind EPoC's work and the guarantors of the EPoC's democratic core.

For those countries unwilling to commit to these values, there shouldn't be full membership but ad hoc, topic-based participation. If there is democratic backsliding among EPoC members, then membership should be suspended or withdrawn

([https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/PC%2015 2022\\_0.pdf](https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/PC%2015%202022_0.pdf)). Similarly, ad-hoc participating countries can quickly become EPoC members as soon as they meet the necessary criteria.

Incentives for these types of countries to participate are manifold: opportunities for bilateral diplomacy with several like-minded countries and regional allies, a seat at the table alongside the main European powers, opportunities for political coordination, and, ultimately, collaboration on a range of issues that result from the ongoing war. The incentive would also imply, in the long-term, being a part of a larger political community of values that stands united against authoritarian powers.

Currently, the process of launching an EPoC is being led by EU institutions and the rotating Presidency of the Council. However, this process should be handed over to an organising committee composed of both EU and non-EU countries, which would decide on the EPoC's governance structure, membership/participation criteria and next steps. This committee should be set up at the upcoming Prague summit.

### **Process matters as much as content**

Process matters as much as content and should be equally considered in the upcoming Prague summit if the EPoC is to become a successful endeavour. In that respect, a few considerations stand out:

#### **1. A lack of a final declaration doesn't mean a lack of deliverables**

The lack of an outcome document doesn't mean that a clear set of deliverables shouldn't be expected out of the upcoming Prague Summit. As a result, the summit's agenda should also include discussions on process that could pave the way for answers regarding the purpose of the EPoC, its operational and governing structure as well as membership/participation criteria. European leaders should already commit, in Prague, to the date and location of the next meeting – preferably to take place in a non-EU country. A successful outcome would also include a message of unity in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

#### **2. A flexible, agile structure**

In its inception, the EPoC would benefit from a flexible, agile governing structure that would allow for opt-outs and ad-hoc participation (depending on the topics addressed). To give equal weight and say to both EU and non-EU members, a system of rotating presidencies could be established that would aggregate clusters of countries at a time. The EU trio presidency or UN Security Council model (with equal voting rights) – with core permanent members and rotating non-permanent members – are a few examples of governing solutions to accommodate the diversity and number of countries involved.

The EPoC should meet more than twice a year and allow those who want to pursue a certain particular topic together (based on interest) to do so. It should be a hub where European democracies can come together to discuss issues and challenges as they

arise, but it should aim towards becoming more than a 'talk shop' in the future. What can start as a hub for high-level exchange can turn, over time, into a forum where concrete political commitments are adopted and projects undertaken – be it on issues such as energy, security and defence, climate change, financial stability, or sanctions (if those are compatible with EU law).

### **3. Choices need to be made**

There is one central issue that leaders may need to clarify during the Prague Summit, and that is how much “EU baggage” they want to import into the EPoC. Should the EPoC serve as another vehicle for furthering EU integration of long-standing members, or enlargement to new ones? Should it serve as a forum for debates around the EU’s institutional reform or the Union’s absorption capacity? There are advantages to considering discussing these issues outside the constraints of an EU setting. But there is also a risk that this approach would antagonise or disincentive potential members, such as the UK, who is now seeking assurances that the EPoC will not end up being too EU-dominated. Discussions about the future of the EU should, therefore, be kept separate from the EPoC. Not doing so could undermine its geopolitical reach.

If the EPoC stands a chance of making a difference, choices will have to be made. It simply can’t “be everything for everyone”: from serving as a geopolitical forum for high-level exchange to solving all the EU’s institutional hurdles, to serving as a trampoline for EU aspiring members. It’s up to European leaders to decide what they want it to be and give it strategic direction. A forum where European like-minded democracies come together to collectively think, strategize, and politically coordinate responses to the seemingly insurmountable geopolitical challenges Europe faces today seems the most obvious and timely choice.

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