



The Road to Chişinău

How the European Political Community
Can — and Cannot — Address the Wider
Continent's Conundrums

By Sam Greene, Edward Lucas, and Nicolas Tenzer

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Executive Summary

- The European Political Community (EPC) — heading into its second summit this June in Chişinău — can help resolve urgent problems in “wider” Europe¹ that cannot be solved by the European Union (EU) or NATO alone, such as
 - securing energy infrastructure;
 - investing in a green transition; and
 - defending Europe’s digital spaces.
- The EPC should create a robust but flexible organizational structure, allowing both for “variable geometry” and consistent attention to resource-intensive policy initiatives.
- While working alongside the EU, the EPC should remain organizationally and politically separate from EU institutions to maximize its agility, inclusivity, and efficacy.
- Leaders must draw a clear line between the EPC and the question of EU enlargement to ensure that no one is tempted to see the EPC as a substitute for genuine EU integration.
- Proponents of the EPC should understand that their mission — a continent-wide community of shared interests and values — is achievable only if and when Russia loses its war in Ukraine.

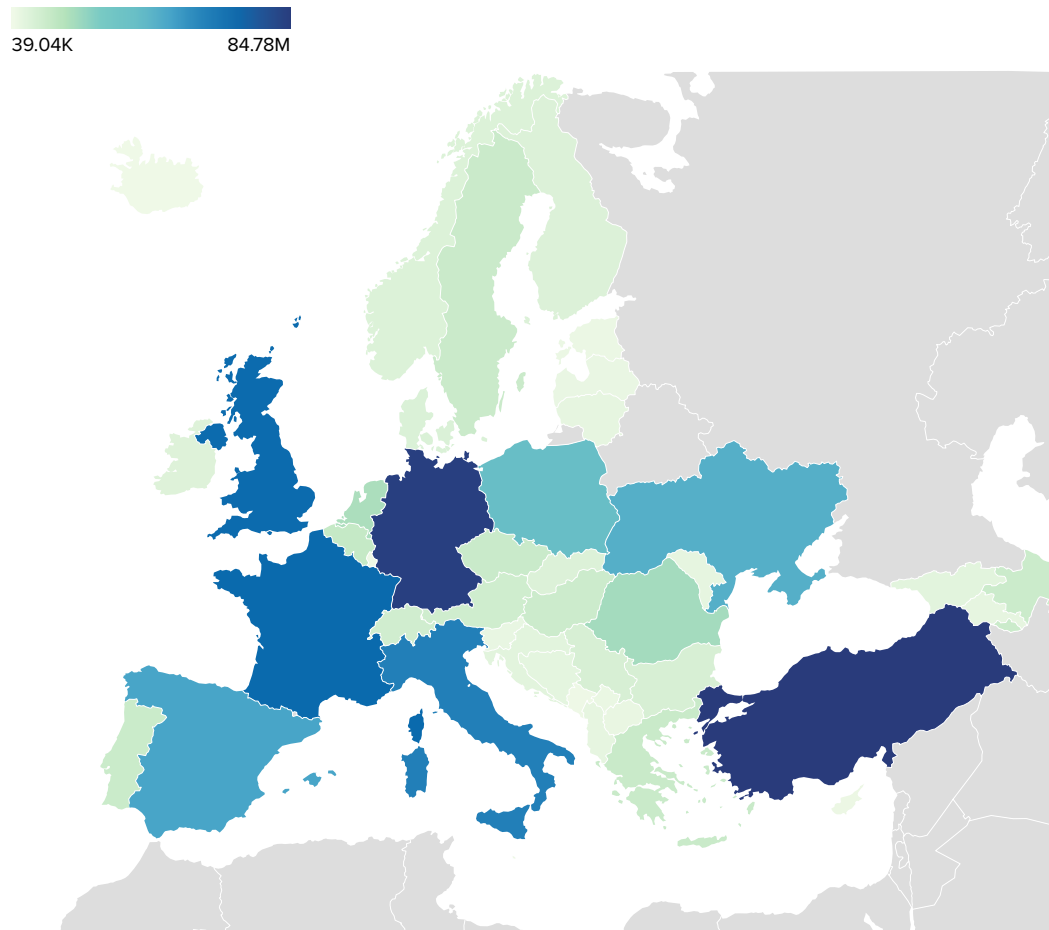
Introduction: From Strasbourg to Prague

In an address to the European Parliament on May 9, 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the European Political Community as “a new European organization” that would allow countries “that subscribe to our shared core values to find a new space for ... cooperation” on politics, security, energy, infrastructure, investment, and migration. Macron was quick to add that membership in the EPC “would not prejudice future accession to the European Union,” but noted that the organization could serve as at least a temporary stand-in for EU integration, a process that could take years or decades.² Initial reaction to the proposal reflected this ambiguity. Enlargement skeptics saw the EPC as an alternative to EU accession,³ whereas fans saw it as an enhanced waiting room. Moldovan President Maia Sandu, for example, argued that participation in the EPC would “support and accelerate” Moldova’s EU accession process.⁴ Macron further stated that the EPC should be seen as neither a waiting room for full membership, nor a permanent alternative to it.

Even as misgivings festered on Europe’s eastern flank, however, new opportunities arose to the west. By the first EPC summit — attended by 44 countries on October 6, 2022, in Prague — hopes were rising that it could revitalize links between Brussels and London, underlined by the presence of then-Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (UK) Liz Truss, a hardline Brexiteer.⁵ This marked a change from the British position that European foreign and defense policy should be solved in NATO or bilaterally. The EPC’s intergovernmental framework provided useful flexibility in resolving the cross-channel impasse, and British enthusiasm for the organization has continued under Truss’s successor, Rishi Sunak. The UK’s Integrated Review Refresh, released in March 2023, refers to the EPC as a “notable and welcome new forum for continent-wide cooperation,” and the UK has already agreed to host the fourth EPC summit at the beginning of 2024.⁶

The EPC thus assembled in Prague Castle with a mission to “foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest” and “strengthen the security, stability, and prosperity of the European continent.”⁷ Leaders confirmed that the EPC would be an “informal platform” and hence “not ... a substitute for EU policies, in particular enlargement.”⁸ The summit also fostered some dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan, mediated by Macron and European Council President Charles Michel. In the final accounting, however, it made only one substantive commitment: to meet in 2023 in Moldova.

Figure 1. Population of EPC Countries



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: "Population, total," The World Bank, accessed April 17, 2022.

Two related debates have continued in the months after Prague:

- Should the EPC serve as a platform primarily for helping the European Union manage relations with its broader neighborhood, whether that be the UK or Ukraine, or look beyond the EU agenda and address continent-wide challenges where the EU itself is insufficient?
- How closely should the EPC rely on EU institutions? Should its members create a new intergovernmental secretariat?



Photo: President of Moldova, Maia Sandu, at the first European Political Community meeting on October 6, 2022 in the Czech Republic. Credit: European Union, <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/permalink/p146000>.

As the EPC heads toward its second summit in Chişinău, neither controversy is close to resolution. As part of the Center for European Policy Analysis’s broader efforts to strengthen transatlantic resilience and coordination, this policy brief

- investigates the current structure of the EPC;
- outlines which issues are best suited for the EPC format; and
- proposes recommendations for EPC leaders ahead of the upcoming summit in Chişinău and beyond.

The brief relies upon existing literature about the EPC, documentation from the most recent summit, and interviews with leaders and experts in European capitals.

Agenda: From Prague to Chişinău

From its inception, policymakers' and advisers' perspectives on the EPC have fallen into two camps. Some have seen the format as a means to solve the problems of the EU, and thus for the EU itself to succeed where its existing formats and institutions have been foundering. Others have seen it as a format for European states to work, perhaps (but not necessarily) alongside the EU, on continent-wide problems that fall outside the EU's scope and mandate.

The EU's institutions themselves, unsurprisingly, fall into the first camp. Speaking only nine days after Macron launched the EPC in Strasbourg, Michel gave an address to the European Council's European Economic and Social Committee zeroing in on enlargement. The EU, he said, "must make the enlargement process more effective and more dynamic," but also move beyond seeing enlargement as an "all or nothing" proposition.⁹ In short, Michel told his colleagues, the EU needed a format that would accommodate its political commitment to Ukraine and Moldova, while recognizing the difficulty of integrating them into the single market and avoiding the disenchantment that protracted, and often fruitless, accession negotiations had engendered in the Western Balkans.

Michel's thinking built on an unofficial document circulated in 2019 by Paris, which had suggested allowing the Western Balkan countries to negotiate their way into the EU piecemeal, enabling them to earn — via demonstrable reforms — compartmentalized access to European markets and institutions, while enshrining the reversibility of access as a means of ensuring long-term compliance (read, to prevent the emergence of another Hungary).¹⁰ The EPC, Michel, and Macron agreed, could provide just such a format.

After the Prague summit, additional ideas emerged about how the EPC could help the EU solve its own problems. Looking outward, while the EPC could not and should not become a substitute for accession, an influential paper from Bruegel argued that "the EPC could start as a soft law agreement between states and the EU" in areas where formal legal relationships — such as those bound up in enlargement — were either temporarily or permanently unavailable (or, in the case of the British relationship with Europe, politically undesirable).¹¹ Looking inward, the German Council on Foreign Relations argued that the EPC could help overcome the growing toxicity in the Franco-German bilateral relationship by allowing member states and their non-EU friends to create ad hoc policy coalitions outside of the usual Brussels formats.¹²

Others, however, argued that the EPC's key strength is in its ability to transcend the EU itself, and to project a broader vision of Europe in which the EU is important, and

Table 1. Multilateral Membership of Countries in the European Political Community (EPC)

Countries	NATO	EU	EU Candidate Countries	EU Customs Union	Eurozone	Three Seas Initiative
Albania	x		x			
Armenia						
Austria		x		x	x	x
Azerbaijan						
Belgium	x	x		x	x	
Bosnia and Herzegovina			x			
Bulgaria	x	x		x		x
Croatia	x	x		x	x	x
Cyprus	x	x		x	x	
Czech Republic	x	x		x		x
Denmark	x	x		x		
Estonia	x	x		x	x	x
Finland		x		x	x	
France	x	x		x	x	
Georgia						
Germany	x	x		x	x	
Greece	x	x		x	x	
Hungary	x	x		x		x
Iceland	x					
Ireland		x		x	x	
Italy	x	x		x	x	
Kosovo						
Latvia	x	x		x	x	x
Liechtenstein						
Lithuania	x	x		x	x	x
Luxembourg	x	x		x	x	
Malta		x		x	x	

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Countries	NATO	EU	EU Candidate Countries	EU Customs Union	Eurozone	Three Seas Initiative
Moldova			x			
Montenegro	x		x			
Netherlands	x	x		x	x	
North Macedonia	x		x			
Norway	x					
Poland	x	x		x		x
Portugal	x	x		x	x	x
Romania	x	x		x		x
Serbia						
Slovakia	x	x		x	x	x
Slovenia	x	x		x	x	x
Spain	x	x		x	x	
Sweden		x		x		
Switzerland						
The United Kingdom	x					
Turkey	x		x			
Ukraine			x			

Table: Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) • Source: Wdcf, The Emir, NikNaks93, "Supranational European Bodies," Wikimedia Commons, March 5, 2023.

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perhaps dominant, but not alone. From this perspective, the EPC is seen to reflect a certain frustration on the part of Macron and other European leaders. This chafes against the strictures of EU consensus-based decision-making in general and in particular the European Commission's long-standing allergy to "variable geometry." This might allow a more limited consensus to emerge among like-minded groups of states, whether those states happen to be in the EU or not.¹³ And where local politics make dealing directly with the EU difficult (such as in post-Brexit Britain or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey) or preclude dialogue with NATO (as in Aleksandar Vučić's Serbia) the EPC can provide an inclusive format within which to address pressing strategic problems.¹⁴ In some ways, the geographic contours of the EPC mirror those of the Council of Europe, with the EPC as the governmental counterpart of its Parliamentary Assembly (PACE).

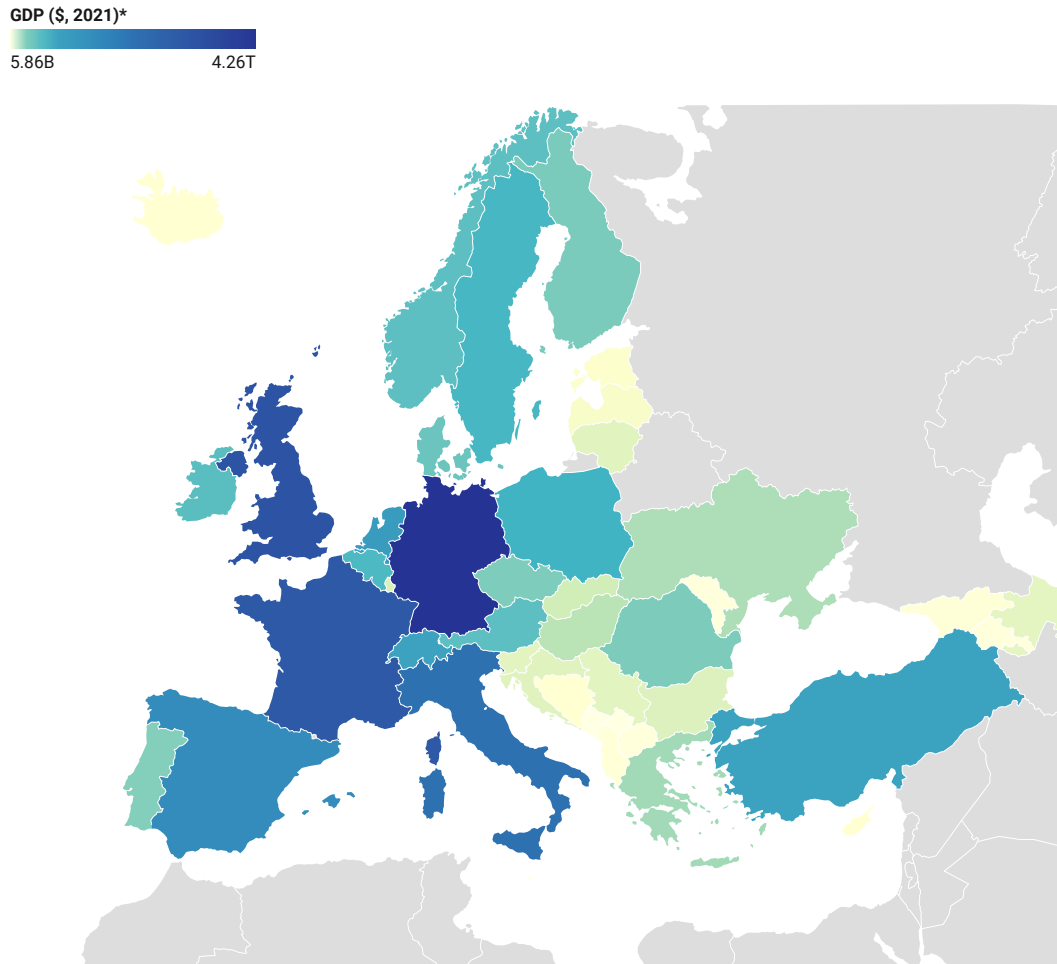
This latter perspective at least partially divorces the EPC's agenda from that of the EU. Freed of the necessity to unblock Brussels' internal and external bottlenecks, the EPC could pursue a more expansive agenda. Suitable topics might include:

- the green transition;
- the security of Europe's energy supply routes; and
- the flow of refugees.

Such problems necessarily stretch beyond the EU's borders. They cannot be resolved without deep coordination with countries that either will never join the EU, or that might not do so soon. The EPC might also provide a way for a broader Europe to produce and project solidarity where the EU itself stumbles, whether with respect to Ukraine or the "middle ground" countries of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

It is in this direction of expansive, continent-wide policy thinking that the Moldovan government, as hosts of the EPC's second summit, have sought to focus their colleagues' attention. Moldova — as both a candidate for EU accession and a country effectively under attack from Russia — sits at the confluence of many of the problems the EPC needs to address. On the one hand, Moldova (like Ukraine) cannot afford to wait until it is an EU member to get the support it needs for its military, economic, and societal security: The Chişinău authorities need help now. On the other, Sandu and her government are acutely aware that the short-term decisions made now on regulation, infrastructure, and governance will play a critical role in the speed and smoothness of Moldova's EU accession.

Figure 2. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Countries in the EPC



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: “GDP (current US\$),” The World Bank, accessed April 17, 2022.

As a result, Chişinău has begun to outline an EPC agenda that focuses on exactly these confluences:

- Outlining an integrated approach to energy infrastructure and interconnectedness
- Setting standards and facilitating investment and technology transfer to ensure the new energy infrastructure is not only secure but green
- Securing Moldova’s and other countries’ digital spaces, currently under attack from Russia, compatibly with the trajectory of European digital regulation



Photo: LNG Pipeline in Lithuania. Credit: @MinEnergyLT via Twitter. <https://twitter.com/MinEnergyLT/status/1527537099678810113/photo/1>.

Each of these policy areas is ideally suited to the EPC: They all intimately bind countries in Europe's east with those in Europe's west; require continent-wide discussion and coordination; cannot be solved by the EU alone; and, while they overlap with the enlargement process, require more urgent action than EU enlargement can accommodate. Effectively addressing those challenges, however, will require much more concerted efforts than the EPC has demonstrated thus far. In particular, they require the EPC to deal with the unsolved question of its institutional structure and resources.

Structure: Beyond Chişinău

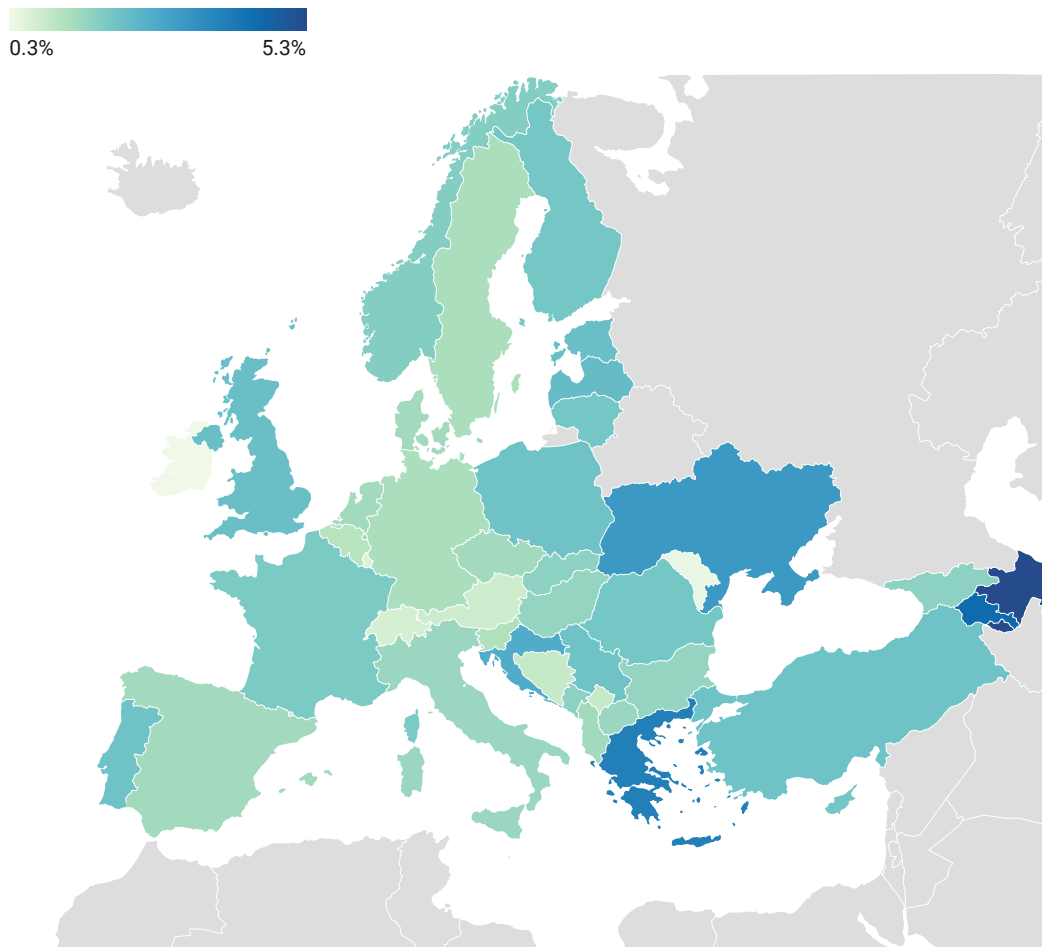
So far, the EPC has failed to foster Macron’s “strategic intimacy.” Instead, it has delivered geopolitical “speed dating,” a convenient and worthwhile platform for fairly free-flowing meetings between heads of state and government who might have little opportunity to meet otherwise. As a “community of communities,” the EPC convenes a heterogeneous group of EU members, European Free Trade Area participants, Eastern Partnership countries, and some (but not all) European members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Despite talks of a community of democracies, the inclusion of countries like Azerbaijan and Turkey sets a low bar.

In Prague, participants and observers praised the EPC’s ad hoc, small-group meeting formats, which allowed the summit to address the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the dispute among Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus, as well as to host coordination meetings among northern European countries with an eye to energy security and the NATO accession of Finland and Sweden. Only because the EPC has remained un-institutionalized — and thus lacks the capacity to issue a formal communiqué — could this diverse group agree to a condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The initial choice of non-institutionalization allows variable geometries (and geographies) according to the subject matter, with coalitions evolving to deal with questions that might not affect all members in equal measure. Thus, while the EPC’s membership broadly repeats that of the Council of Europe, the decision to remain a “meeting of governments” rather than a formal assembly has been deliberate. But to move from crisis response to long-term strategic engagement — particularly on issues such as energy and infrastructure that require planning, monitoring, and financial investment — the EPC will require structure.

The nature of this depends largely on the desired agenda. If the EPC is seen broadly as another arrow in the EU’s quiver, then the EPC secretariat becomes either an office somewhere in the Brussels bureaucracy or a function of the rotating EU presidency. While this would strengthen the EPC’s ability for long-term strategic engagement, it would likely discourage non-EU member countries from meaningfully participating in the organization. Indeed, having started as a project of the French EU presidency before being handed off to the Czechs, this appeared to be the most likely route for the EPC. But the decision after Prague to hand it off to the Moldovans — and the announcement that after Moldova, and then Spain, the EPC would go to the UK — makes any formal structural tie to the EU increasingly unlikely, even if Michel’s staff has remained closely involved in shepherding the process along. If only by default,

Figure 3. Military Spending as a Percentage of GDP in EPC Countries



Map: Center for European Policy Analysis • Source: “Military Expenditure (% of GDP),” The World Bank, accessed April 17, 2022.

then, the EPC appears to be headed toward its more expansive, more ambitious, and less EU-centric option.

Creating a permanent, stand-alone EPC secretariat, however, has its own drawbacks. Whatever their mandate, formal organizational structures tend to abhor the kind of variable geometry that has made the EPC successful to date.



Photo: Emmanuel Macron (President of France) and Charles Michel (President of the European Council) at the Meeting of the European Political Community, October 2022. Credit: European Union <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/permalink/p145964>.

We, therefore, make the following recommendations:

1. EPC members should consider creating a hybrid structure combining a small permanent secretariat charged mostly with logistical and communications functions, with a staggered, rotating co-presidency responsible for agenda setting. To help provide continuity, avoid being held hostage to the whims of political outliers, and prevent the EU from dominating the forum, this co-presidency could be held concurrently by two member states, with hosts serving staggered one-year terms, but rotating every six months. The Czech Republic and Moldova would hold the co-presidency up until the June summit when the Czech Republic would be replaced by Spain; at the Spanish summit, Moldova would be replaced by the UK; and so on. This would ensure that non-EU countries continue their willingness to take part in, and strengthen, the EPC.¹⁵

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Further enshrining flexibility, we suggest standing project-oriented “sub-secretariats,” in which coalitions of willing member states would come together to pursue concrete policy goals. Taking the emerging agenda for Chişinău as a starting point, one could envision a sub-secretariat to coordinate cross-border investment and security vis-à-vis European energy infrastructure, another on Europe’s green transition, and a third on digitization and interoperability of systems and regulation. Absent a substantial agenda and decisions taken in this format, the EPC risks suffering the same fate as the Union for the Mediterranean. Unless the heads of state and government continue to take a genuine interest, after the first few meetings it will become just a foreign ministers’ summit.

2. Whatever structure emerges, the EPC should hold itself and its members to one strict rule: Don’t talk about enlargement. Despite some candidate countries’ interest in leveraging the EPC to further EU accession, using the EPC as a means to get non-EU members “early” access to EU markets or institutions increases the temptation both for the Commission and for member-state governments to see the EPC as a substitute for accession. This boosts the risk that the EPC could devolve into what many aspiring EU members have feared from the start: a permanent waiting room. Keeping enlargement firmly off the EPC agenda thus helps maintain the pressure on the EU to make good on its commitments to candidate countries, whether to Ukraine and Moldova or to the Western Balkans. Moreover, separating the EPC from the enlargement debate helps the EPC itself elide the questions of democratic governance that have given the EU very real misgivings about the membership trajectory of countries like Georgia or Serbia. With that question safely parked in Brussels, the EPC can focus on finding common ground with all European states that haven’t wholly thrown in their lot with Moscow — and thus with keeping Europe’s own “middle ground” states from falling into Russia’s orbit.
3. The EPC’s proponents should understand the degree to which its future is tied to the outcome of the war in Ukraine. An incomplete victory for Ukraine — which would inherently mean a form of victory for the Kremlin — would fracture the EPC and contribute to the fracturing of Europe as a whole. A victory for Russia would destabilize all European countries, but particularly those that, left outside the protective umbrellas of the EU and NATO, are most vulnerable. Destabilization on Europe’s periphery, in turn, would harden borders, heighten tensions, and encourage everyone to look inward. A victory for Ukraine, by contrast, would herald a future of rapprochement, common cause, and, eventually, greater democracy. It could have a positive effect on those EPC countries whose governments have continued to look toward Moscow. The EPC can play a role in bringing that victory about, but without that victory, the EPC’s goals cannot be achieved.

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Endnotes

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