

# The European Political Community: A step toward differentiated integration in Europe?

*The first meeting of the European Political Community – a new initiative incorporating both EU and non-EU states – will be held later today in Prague. Ahead of the meeting, **Stefan Gänzle, Tobias Hofelich** and **Uwe Wunderlich** examine what the new community might mean for cooperation across Europe.*

European integration is a dynamic and flexible process. While most of the focus has been on the EU, it is by no means restricted to it. Indeed, it is helpful to understand the EU as a set of very specific institutional ties. There exists considerable diversity here with some states being part of some institutional arrangements but not others.

Differentiated integration has become a core feature of the European Union since the 1990s, both *internally* and *externally*.

*Internally*, it was the Treaty of Maastricht, coming into force in 1993, which allowed Denmark and the United Kingdom, for example, to dissociate themselves from the Economic and Monetary Union and – in the case of Denmark – membership of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Crucially, the door to deeper integration remains open: in light of the threat Russia poses to European security in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine, the Danish electorate decided to rejoin the Common Foreign and Security Policy in May this year.

*Externally*, the EU has become quite flexible in terms of embracing non-members, such as Norway, Liechtenstein, and Iceland, to become part of the single market and/or the Schengen regulatory scheme. In other words, European integration can best be described as a complex system of concentric circles. The core club is composed of tightly integrated EU members, surrounded by other states who have negotiated opt-outs from specific policy areas. The outer circles include countries willing to join the core club as well as states with specific arrangements and various neighbourhood agreements involving European and non-European countries.

## **The European Political Community**

European integration has always been a flexible, dynamic and open-ended process. During a meeting of the heads of state of the European Community in December 1989, then French President François Mitterrand proposed the formation of a 'European Confederation'. This was the first attempt at sketching a 'consistent' EC/EU-centred project of external differentiation encompassing most countries of the European continent after the end of the Cold War.

In May this year, French President Emmanuel Macron, supported by Olaf Scholz, built on this idea by proposing the establishment of a European Political Community (EPC). Once again, Europe is experiencing systemic shockwaves that necessitate a reordering of institutional relations. The EPC, in a nutshell, seeks to create a club of European states that are, in principle, committed to democratic values – even though these norms are being challenged by some members, like Hungary and Poland, and recent political turns, such as those in Sweden and Italy.

By carefully avoiding the impression that the EPC may be perceived as an alternative to accession, the initiative serves as a twofold stepping-stone by allowing countries such as those in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova to complement their ambitions for accession while allowing others, in particular the United Kingdom and Switzerland, to redraw their relationships with their EU neighbours at a time when they have been loosening their ties with the EU.

The EPC proposal, very much driven by the upheavals caused by Brexit, the global pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the associated economic crises, may therefore emerge as a framework for political, economic and security cooperation, linking EU and non-EU European states.

### **Differences between the EPC and the European Confederation**

It is important to distinguish the current EPC proposal from Mitterrand's earlier proposal for a confederation, despite the links between the two ideas. First, while there are some parallels, Europe faces a very different set of challenges compared to 1989. The confederation project put forth by Mitterrand was primarily aimed at supporting Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union. In contrast, current relations with Russia are

tense and the EPC is, partly at least, designed as a response to Russian belligerence. Hence, Russian participation is not foreseen.

Second, the European Confederation proposed the gradual integration of Central and East European countries starting with policy areas that have been perceived as unproblematic, such as research and higher education. The EPC is much more broadly conceived and does not aim to integrate participants with the EU core. Furthermore, the EPC will also need to be synchronised with a well-established policy of enlargement and accession.

It remains to be seen what form, if any, the EPC will actually take. EU accession countries are worried that the EPC will emerge as a 'holding space' for them, effectively preventing full EU membership. Others, such as the UK government, are suspicious of any institutional developments that would tie them closer to their neighbours. Given the considerable diversity of interests involved, with 44 countries taking part, ranging from EU members and accession countries to Turkey and Britain, there is a real possibility the proposal will falter or be significantly watered down.

That is to say, the summit may emerge as a talking shop: no declarations will be issued, and no money will be on offer. However, given the host of common challenges faced by European leaders, an informal summit structure may add value to the European institutional infrastructure, facilitating exchange and, in the best case, leading to coordinated policy responses. Regardless of the outcome of the Prague meeting, the EPC has the potential to become a much-needed institutional layer for European integration, normalising differentiated integration.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Union](#)*

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