

Virtues and Limitations of the European Political Community after the Granada Summit

by Luca Cinciripini

The third meeting of the European Political Community (EPC) in Granada on 5 October¹ gave mixed indications as to its solidity and ability to establish itself within the framework of the European security architecture.²

The EPC was initiated with the express purpose of filling the political and institutional vacuum created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the heart of the previously existing European security architecture. This had long been articulated and somewhat institutionalised around a series of organisations and partnerships such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe or the NATO-Russia

Council; such a setup, however, was fundamentally undermined by Moscow's violation of international law. Against this backdrop, the EPC was launched as an attempt to recreate a multilateral forum capable of gathering together a variety of actors very different from each other but eager to play a central role in the European strategic security discourse.

After the first two summits (in October 2022 in the Czech Republic and in June 2023 in Moldova) had yielded some initial results, the expectations for the meeting in Spain were rather high, especially on the security side. However, the limits of the initiative, in formal and political terms, became much more evident at the Granada summit. At the Granada summit, where involvement of external partners in key neighbourhood areas was limited, the focus of discussions was mostly on migration, and increased overlap with formal EU fora emerged as an obstacle. After a promising start, the outcomes

¹ European Council, *Meeting of the European Political Community*, 5 October 2023, <https://europa.eu/!7ywQhY>.

² Clea Caulcutt, Nicholas Vinocur and Sarah Anne Aarup, "Shambles in Granada: Megagathering of European Leaders Ends with a Whimper", in *PoliticoEU*, 5 October 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=3672678>.

of the Granada summit thus call for a reconsideration of the EPC format.

A promising start

The Granada Summit came on the back of the encouraging success of the first two EPC meetings. Established as a political response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the suggestion of French President Emmanuel Macron,³ the EPC took its first steps as a multilateral diplomatic forum aimed at promoting political dialogue and cooperation on the European continent.⁴ The first meeting, which was held in Prague in October 2022, achieved important practical results, in particular an EU-led civilian mission to Armenia and Azerbaijan to monitor the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, which later led to the creation of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA). But the results achieved at the political level were even more significant: the inclusion of 47 European countries in the new structure, with the sole exception of Russia and Belarus, sent a clear signal of political unity against the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁵ The

EPC thus seemed to be the first step towards a profound restructuring of the European security architecture in preparation for the aftermath of the war against Ukraine.⁶ The second major achievement was the strategic rapprochement between the EU and the United Kingdom (UK).⁷ The newfound dialogue after the tensions arising from the Brexit agreements is a key building block for European cooperation especially in security and defence matters, as the UK's commitment to join the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) also shows.⁸ In addition to relaunching relations with EU institutions, there was also a strengthening of bilateral relations between the UK and individual member states, starting with France, with which dialogue on migration was intensified within the framework of the Calais Group. Besides migration, the relationship with the UK can be strategic for EU member states in energy matters as well, as demonstrated

³ France, *Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, at the Closing of the Conference on the Future of Europe*, Strasbourg, 9 May 2022, <https://uk.ambafrance.org/President-Macron-explains-proposal-for-a-European-political-community>.

⁴ Alexander Stubb, "The Case for a Confederal Europe", in *ECFR View from the Council*, 21 June 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-case-for-a-confederal-europe>; Arnault Barichella, Xavier Prats-Monné and Jerome Vignon, *A European Political Community for a Geopolitical Era*, Paris, Institut Jacques Delors & Sciences Po, 24 May 2023, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/a-european-political-community-for-a-geopolitical-era>.

⁵ Richard Whitman, "The European Political

Community: A Diplomatic Davos in the Making?", in *UK in a Changing Europe Commentaries*, 4 October 2023, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/?p=54463>.

⁶ Matteo Bonomi and Nicoletta Pirozzi, "Allargamento, vicinato e Comunità Politica Europea", in *Focus Euroatlantico*, No. 3 (September 2023), p. 64-74, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17457>.

⁷ Thu Nguyen, "European Political Community: From Family Photo to 'Strategic Intimacy'", in *Jacques Delors Centre Policy Briefs*, 8 November 2022, <https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/european-political-community>.

⁸ Peter Jurkovic, "The European Political Community", in *UK in a Changing Europe Explainers*, 5 October 2023, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/?p=53393>; Pepijn Bergsen, Richard G. Whitman and Alice Billon-Galland, "UK-Europe Relations Finally Head in the Right Direction", in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 24 January 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/31047>.



by the resumption of cooperation with the UK in the framework of the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC), which already includes EU states and Norway and aims to develop renewable energy.

The second summit, held in Moldova in June 2023, continued along the same lines, although it was more focused on security aspects in a broad sense, including energy and infrastructure. The summit served to reiterate the political and material support for Ukraine, including the decision to proceed with a contribution of 87 million euro to non-military logistical aid from the European Peace Facility, as well as the establishment of a civilian mission in Chişinău.

In both meetings, the topic of security was therefore prominent, and the opportunity to hold bilateral meetings on the sidelines of official summits could be used to include those countries that would be otherwise excluded from the European security debate. Although initially welcomed with some favour by EU institutions, the EPC instead aroused more perplexity in some of the partner countries that were supposed to be part of it, albeit with different motivations. The German leadership was irked at not having been consulted beforehand by French President Macron, while Eastern countries viewed the project as a potentially permanent slowdown in the enlargement process and a possible source of contrast with NATO. Despite these uncertainties, however, due to its focus on strategic cooperation and security, and thanks to its informal structure, the EPC seemed to be off to a promising start.

A disappointing present, a future in the balance

As mentioned, however, the recent Granada summit marked instead an abrupt halt to the future development of the EPC. The lack of concrete results, evidenced by the absence of a final communiqué and press conference, highlights the main limitations that may jeopardise the future of the EPC.⁹ This latches on to the debate that has existed since the early days of the Community, that is, whether it should be an informal forum for multilateral strategic dialogue primarily aimed at furthering Russia's isolation, or rather a body with clear and defined political objectives. Both solutions present difficulties and obstacles.¹⁰ In the former case, there is a risk of an excess of vagueness that can quickly make the interest fade away once the war against Ukraine is over. This format would also be structurally dependent on the participation of leaders from key neighbouring countries in the meetings, as demonstrated by the absences of Erdoğan and İlham Aliyev in Granada while the Armenian crisis was raging on.¹¹ The second, more

⁹ Jason C. Moyer and Masa Ocvirk, "The Third European Political Community Summit and the Four Rings of European Integration", in *Wilson Center Articles*, 6 October 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/third-european-political-community-summit-and-four-rings-european-integration>.

¹⁰ Mathieu Droin and Ilke Toygür, "The Granada Summit of the European Political Community: Ambition or Oblivion?", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 4 October 2023, <https://www.csis.org/node/107525>.

¹¹ Alice Tidey and Aida Sanchez, "Blow to European Leaders' Summit as Azerbaijan, Turkey are No-shows", in *Euronews*, 5 October 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/05/blow-to->

'political' model inevitably calls into question the EPC's ties with the EU. A greater and formalised definition of the deliverables in the hands of the EPC would lead to an inevitable involvement of the EU.

An EPC that no longer simply acts as a forum for dialogue may create a conflict of competences with Brussels in those matters that are already strictly regulated at the EU level. This overlap may create tensions and misunderstandings with regard to the role of key EPC countries such as the UK.¹² Already in the early days of the project, friction was reported between the then UK Prime Minister Liz Truss and other European leaders over the choice of name and symbols, with the British government being wary of explicit references to the EU.¹³ Ultimately, clarifying the relationship between the EPC and the EU also serves to dispel ambiguities about the enlargement process. The initial coldness with which the EPC was received by the countries interested in EU membership signals the fear that the initiative could be perceived as an attempt to indefinitely postpone their EU accession.

Light institutionalisation for greater coherence

The EPC stems from the urgent need to rethink foreign and security policy

europaen-leaders-summit-as-azerbaijan-turkey-are-no-shows.

¹² Luigi Scazzieri, "Can the European Political Community Be a Bridge between the UK and the EU?", in *CER Policy Briefs*, 28 April 2023, <https://www.cer.eu/node/10365>.

¹³ Mujtaba Rahman, "The European Political Community Is a Big Deal – for EU-UK Relations", in *PoliticoEU*, 5 October 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2248892>.

coordination in Europe in the political and institutional vacuum created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with a view to reorganising the European security architecture once the war in Ukraine is over. It can offer a valuable venue to address security crises and launch new initiatives including countries usually on the margins of such initiatives.¹⁴ Above all, the Community seems to take due account of the fact that Europe and the EU do not coincide and are not superimposable in any context. The inclusion of a much larger group of states in the EPC may potentially contribute to bridging this gap in strategic outlooks, broadening the horizon of the European security debate. To overcome the current limitations of the Community, however, managing the participation of all the relevant stakeholders, as well as developing a format that allows flexibility and informality but within a more precise framework for cooperation, will be key.

Increased participation should certainly be encouraged, but taking into consideration that in addition to EU member states, at least three groups of countries stand out, each of them bearing specific necessities. First, it is pivotal that candidate countries to EU membership are involved in the Community but not frustrated by the perception that the ultimate goal of the EPC is to indefinitely postpone their

¹⁴ Camille Grand, "No Procedures, No Problem: The European Political Community as a Platform for Security Dialogue", in *ECFR Policy Alerts*, 4 October 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/no-procedures-no-problem-the-european-political-community-as-a-platform-for-security-dialogue>.

accession process. Should this happen, it could have profound consequences not only on the future of the EPC but on the whole enlargement process. Second, the EPC provides a venue for the consolidation of a renewed partnership with the UK outside the EU's formal remit, to stimulate cooperation at the bilateral level on a broad range of topics, especially in light of the next meeting that will be hosted by the UK in 2024. With a view to maintaining renewed ties with London, the EPC could facilitate not only bilateral meetings between top political figures, but also the equally crucial collateral and preparatory diplomatic activities. Finally, the EPC should try to engage those countries that are currently beyond its current framework, such as MENA countries. Even if they are outside the European geographical space, and are not candidate states, they are key interlocutors for strategic and security reasons. As the recent escalation between Israel and Hamas and the political turmoil in Maghreb show, the region continues to generate significant challenges to European security. The absence of a strategic dialogue with these countries in the framework of the EPC may significantly hamper its capacity to address the whole range of European countries' security concerns.

As far as the EPC's institutionalisation is concerned, high levels of informality and flexibility surely provide an advantage, especially as far as British involvement is concerned, but they also have limitations that became evident at the Granada summit. The lack of clear objectives, which is also the result of a plurality of interests and perspectives,

makes it complex to evaluate the effectiveness of the EPC and may perpetuate a situation where the EPC is associated solely to the contingencies of the current international scenario, thus posing substantial questions about its future once the war is over. For the future, it seems extremely difficult to envisage a high degree of institutionalisation of the Community, as this would alienate a substantial number of countries and increase the overlap with the existing European institutional network. Nonetheless, the EPC must outline clear and defined political objectives, evolving from a talking shop to an incubator of concrete projects involving both EU and non-EU countries in areas such as hybrid threats or fostering societal resilience in the Eastern neighbourhood, as well as promoting an enlarged European diplomatic culture. The summit in Granada for example was used as a platform, from the EU side, to announce the launch of a training programme on cybersecurity aimed at extra-EU EPC member states.¹⁵ To facilitate the process of pinpointing the scope of action of the EPC, a number of instruments may be adopted, starting with a clear agenda-setting process to ensure clarity as to what each summit aims to achieve. In this sense, a light institutionalisation process may be instrumental in improving the coordination between meetings, ensuring logical coherence between the summits and relieving the host country of the task of taking on the content and political aspects alone. Coordination and dialogue

¹⁵ Luigi Scazzieri, "Can the European Political Community Survive?", in *CER Insights*, 17 October 2023, <https://www.cer.eu/node/10603>.



between the previous, current and next presidencies in the preparation of the agenda of each summit, as well as more regular meetings between government advisers and officials in between summits, could be beneficial. All these actions may help define the identity of the EPC more unambiguously, providing it with a future beyond the current international scenario.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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