

The European Political Community

A new anchoring to the European Union

• Introduction

On Europe Day last 9th May, President Macron launched discussions on a “[European Political Community](#)”. This proposal comes in response to the recent applications for EU membership received from Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. This idea resonates with the proposal of a European Confederation put forward by François Mitterrand in 1989, to which the French President referred,

and which Enrico Letta (President of the Jacques Delors Institute) recently [reframed](#)¹. The proposal entails establishing a European political space, beyond the European Union, which may constitute a first step towards membership or, according to a country's preference, an alternative to it. This brief aims to provide a succinct overview of the initiative and to flag the specific questions it raises. ●●●

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POLICY BRIEF
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1 *Una Confederazione europea e il percorso per l'adesione di Kiev*, opinion piece by Enrico Letta in the *Corriere della Sera*, 19/04/22 (in Italian).

I • The new question of enlargement

As a result of the sudden outbreak of war in Ukraine, the question of enlargement has once again become a major political challenge for the European Union. In addition to the political, humanitarian, economic and military support immediately provided by Europeans to Ukrainians, there is the EU membership application submitted right at the start of the conflict by President Zelensky to be considered. The latter wishes his country's application to be fast-tracked and has expressed [his doubts regarding the idea](#) of a political community. Ukraine's potential accession to the EU has received support from the Member States which are traditionally in favour of enlargement, such as Poland, Slovakia, the Baltic States, as well as from the President of the European Commission and from the European Parliament. Georgia and Moldova, which already have association agreements with the EU, as does Ukraine, have followed suit, also submitting their membership applications.

These three applications force the EU-27 to respond in line with the historic circumstances under which they have been submitted. In particular, Europeans now have a moral obligation to set a clear timescale for Ukrainians fighting for the survival of their country. However, this exceptional situation actually means that these new membership applications cannot be processed in the usual way. They come on top of the long-standing applications under consideration from the countries of the Western Balkans and the application from Turkey, which has more or less been in deadlock for many years now.

The terms of the debate must be set down, and all of the different relationships that are already possible with the EU must be acknowledged. Today, options range from a simple rejection of the application (as was the

case for Morocco in 1987) to full membership, which often requires years of preparation², and begins with the status of candidate country being conferred. Other types of relationship with the EU exist between these two options, and are sometimes defined as alternatives to membership: the European Economic Area³, of which Norway and Iceland are members (the latter having submitted then withdrawn an EU membership application due to the 2008 financial crisis); a series of bilateral agreements with Switzerland (which is in particular a member of the Schengen Area); the customs union with Turkey, which is still officially a candidate for membership; association agreements, such as the one in force since 2017 with Ukraine, which include a deep and comprehensive free trade area and an Association Council; and a trade agreement with the United Kingdom, following Brexit.

This range of options is, however, inappropriate in the unprecedented situation caused by the war, which requires a response that is both much more political and swifter. The exceptional and indeed historic situation currently occurring on the European continent calls for the definition of a new membership model that upends the approach adopted until now, which has [already been partly revised recently](#)⁴. In the conventional accession process, the primarily legal and economic approach requires the candidate country to assimilate the *acquis Communautaire* into its national legislation and to bring its economy up to standard with a view to making it viable and able to resist competition on the single market. Over the accession negotiations, completing these steps results in the opening and closure of thematic chapters which make up the future Accession Treaty to be ratified. Naturally, political criteria are included, such as the requirement of being a liberal democracy that respects the rule of law to become a Member State. However, up to now, meeting these criteria has not consti-

2 For countries which joined the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2013, in general the process between submission of the application and accession lasted between 10 and 12 years.

3 To forge stronger ties with the countries of the European Free Trade Association and go beyond the bilateral agreements already in place, Jacques Delors, then President of the European Commission, proposed on 17 January 1989 "a new, more structured partnership with common decision-making and administrative institutions". The resulting European Economic Area (EEA) aimed to extend the four freedoms of movement on the single market (people, goods, services and capital) and the scope of European policies, in particular competition policy.

4 How would the EU accession really improve? Andreas Eisl, Blogpost IJD, 4/03/20.

tuted an initial achievement of belonging to the European family, which may give rise to impatience and frustration in candidate countries and weariness and despondency in public opinion in these countries. Moreover, during previous enlargement operations, the integration of the candidate country's foreign policy into the European policy was not considered a priority, whereas Europe's relationship with the world is becoming key for the continuation of the European project. For example, during the accessions of Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995, how their neutrality would co-exist with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which had just been established under the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, was hardly questioned.

In short and under Maastricht-based terminology, the candidates for previous enlargements were able to be quickly prepared for accession to the second (CFSP) and third (Justice and home affairs) EU pillars but had to wait until they were up to standard to join the first community pillar. This pillar concerned the single market and its related policies, and entailed the assimilation of an incredible volume of *acquis Communautaire*, in addition to the ability to launch economic convergence⁵, as the accession method did not allow for the two stages to be disassociated. Conversely, this disassociation is in practice for States with close ties to the EU within the European Economic Area (EEA): far-reaching integration in the economic component of the EU (single market) but without political and symbolic integration and without taking part in European institutions, as is the case for Norway. The European Union thereby currently has a structured and credible offer for States who wish to take part in economic integration, and are able to, without wanting to subscribe to the European project's political dimension. However, it does not have a tool to satisfy the opposite need: to respond to States expressing the desire to join the political project, without having the short- and medium-term ability to become part of the single market, without endangering their own economy and/or destabilising the single market.

II • Confirming a political anchoring to the EU

The EU membership applications from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia call for efforts to envisage this type of approach in particular, contrary to the one that underpins the EEA. This entails a type of **fast-track accession to the EU's political and institutional dimensions and a very gradual accession to its economic aspect**, depending on reconstruction and the time needed to bring these countries up to standard. This is the very purpose of the discussions launched with regard to a European Political Community.

For this to come into fruition and to enable the EU to find an appropriate response to the current challenges, it is of the utmost importance that lessons are learned from the failure of François Mitterrand's initiative, to which President Macron referred in his address on 9th May. Beyond the issue of including the USSR at the time, the idea of a "European Confederation" fell upon deaf ears in Central Europe because it was perceived –rightly or wrongly– as a less attractive alternative to what these countries actually wanted, namely joining the Community process. This is why the new project must be unambiguously defined as being either an alternative to EU membership, or the first step towards it. The decision between which of these two meanings to give to the project should be made by the candidate countries, not by Member States. In other words, joining this new Community would equate to receiving a guarantee of a "European perspective": **the question of accession would no longer be styled as "if", but rather as "when"**, unless the State in question makes a sovereign decision to abandon the objective of a full-fledged membership. As a result, accession would no longer be monolithic (where States must subscribe to all the dimensions and commitments that define the EU, barring a few transition periods), but instead gradual (States join by completing successive "components" or "packages"). This component approach would make it easier for the leaders of aspiring countries and their public opinion to endorse the EU and result in a better integration of these countries.

⁵ At the time of their accession to the EU, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe ranged between 40.6% (Bulgaria in 2007) and 87.8% (Slovenia in 2004) of the average EU-27 per capita GDP (in PPS). In 2020, i.e. prior to the destruction caused by the war, Ukraine came in at 29.1%.

This means that mutual knowledge and trust can be gradually built up, by overcoming the divide –with distorting, and potentially harmful ramifications– between “members” and “candidates”, often perceived as a negative “teacher-pupil” relationship, the antithesis of a healthy relationship between equal partners.

More fundamentally, the European Political Community (EPC) would foster a feeling of belonging to the same democratic area and sharing the same values and destiny, on both sides. This is expressed in the term “Community”. Proposed by President Macron intentionally on the anniversary date of Robert Schuman’s Declaration, who had introduced it, the use of this word places the new Community squarely in line with European construction and within the EU’s scope, from which it borrows the tools.⁶ Other names remain possible, however, such as the European Confederation or the European Democratic Area, as a counterpart to the European Economic Area. Regardless of the name that will be ultimately selected, the creation of this new group does not in theory require any institutions or specific treaties, but does need a founding summit.

III • In direct contact with the EU’s institutional and civic life

A country’s accession to the Political Community must meet three conditions: the country must be on the European continent, under the same conditions required for the EU, must fully comply with the first of the “Copenhagen Criteria” and **ratify the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union**, which expresses the EU’s common values and is binding for the candidate country. In this way, the accession process would begin with what identifies the EU the most. Participation should entail taking part in the EU’s institutional life and an immersion in civic life. One way of becoming part of the EU’s life would be the regular organisation, during the ordinary meetings of the European Council (four times a year in Brussels) of a **European Political Community summit**, bringing together leaders

of the EU-27 and their counterparts in the countries concerned. Access to the meetings of the European political families, which are often held ahead of summits would also be possible. The political parties from these countries could **join the European political parties**. At the European Parliament, delegations from these countries could sit in plenary sessions as **observers, enjoying the right to speak and to contribute to the work of parliamentary commissions, without voting rights, with the exception of resolutions adopted under the aegis of the EPC**. The relevant configurations of the Council, in particular that of foreign affairs, should also envisage **variable-geometry meetings under the EPC format, according to the “components” that the country in question has completed**.

In short, unlike the neighbourhood policy model (“Everything but the institutions”), the model proposed here would fit in with the principle of “Institutions first” in order to quickly establish the feeling of being part of the European project for aspiring countries and to embody it in a substantial and perceptible way for citizens. This is likely to foster a feeling of belonging to a foundation of common values, as well as a convergence of political practices and strategic visions.

While public opinion in these countries may be proud to see their leaders at the European table, the Political Community must also have **practical meaning for citizens**. Programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Voluntary Service and all programmes that are already accessible to them through the association agreements with the EU should be stepped up to further foster educational, academic, cultural and scientific exchanges, **by contributing to correcting the “member” vs. “candidate” or “neighbour State” divide**.

Following the approach of completing successive steps, this initial entry into the political arena should be followed by **thematic cooperation initiatives in common areas of interest** : energy, infrastructure, health and security. These would be defined and conducted on a ministerial level with the EU Member States wishing to take part,

⁶ The European Political Community should not be confused with two previous projects for European political cooperation proposed in the early 1960s by Christian Fouchet or with the political component of the European Defence Community, a failed initiative from the early 1950s.

in addition to the European policies already rolled out in these areas. Active participation in these cooperation initiatives should be encouraged and used as parameters for accession at a later date. Naturally, so that the cohesion and readability of EU policy is not endangered, the developments of these thematic cooperation initiatives, the integration of the various “components” of the rights and duties of a Member State, should be subject to clear and strict conditionality, and should include **reversibility instruments**, activated in the event of obvious regression or outright non-compliance with the commitments made. One example may be, to join the CFSP, a natural pre-requisite would be to **unreservedly share the common strategic vision and objectives expressed by the EU’s Strategic Compass**.

At the same time as these exchanges and cooperation initiatives, membership applications would have to continue, for areas –particularly all which come under the former “1st pillar” of the EU– in which a gradual and/or fast-tracked accession is not possible, with the possible granting of EU candidate status. Formal accession negotiations could be launched and continue with the Commission according to the process recently adopted and now under way with the countries of the Western Balkans.

IV • Questions raised by the Political Community

Between an illusory and ultimately counter-productive fast-tracked accession process and an interminable procedure with harmful repercussions, the idea of a European Political Community has the merit of quickly anchoring aspiring countries to the EU, in a process of “two-way political socialisation”. Its creation does, however, raise the questions listed hereafter, which should be addressed as quickly as possible.

I DEFENCE

Which security guarantees can the Political Community provide to its members which have not joined NATO? The question is of the utmost importance for the credibility of a Community, which by definition cannot remain indifferent to acts of aggression

against one of its members. Article 47-2 of the TEU, which provides for mutual assistance between Member States, is in principle inoperative outside the EU. The security of these countries could be viewed through formats that do not strictly come under the EU, such as the European Intervention Initiative.

I BORDERS

The risk of a long and imperfectly resolved conflict in Ukraine results in a risk of this country taking part in the EPC with borders that are still disputed. The same risk stands for Moldova (Transnistria) and in Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia), depending on the fate of the regions currently occupied by a Russian military presence. Making the entry of these three countries in the EPC conditional upon the settlement of their border disputes would push the creation of this Community back over a timescale that remains uncertain. However, it is essential that these disputes are well and truly settled prior to full accession to the EU, so as not to repeat the precedent of Cyprus, which is still divided to this day.

I EXIT

Entry into the European Political Community must be reversible according to the development of the country joining it. As the new accession procedure provides for a potential reversibility of the process undertaken if the candidate country no longer meets its new obligations, a country which is in clear breach of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union would be obliged to leave the EPC, according to terms yet to be defined. New assessments of the rule of law conducted by the Commission as part of the European Semester could be used as a basis for compliance with this obligation, with membership of the Community conditional upon it.

I WESTERN BALKANS

Out of the six countries of the Western Balkans, two are in a later stage of the accession negotiations (Serbia and Montenegro) and two should begin negotiations in the near future (Albania and North Macedonia). They would all be called upon to join the Political Community, including the two countries

considered to be potential EU candidates but which do not have this status: Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Their participation in the EPC would anchor them to the EU without prejudice to the granting of candidate country status, which complies with its own conditions.

I UNITED-KINGDOM/TURKEY

The EPC can also associate two powers with the EU, which both have very unique relations and history with it. Firstly, as it does not require membership of the EU but asserts a sharing of values, participation from the post-Brexit United Kingdom could ultimately prove appropriate.

Secondly, while the accession negotiations with Turkey are basically suspended for the long term and seem doomed to deadlock, Turkey's participation in the Political Community could signal a way out for both parties. Ankara's ratification of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights could be used as a bargaining chip in this respect.

• Conclusion

The idea launched on 9th May by Emmanuel Macron is worth considering. This idea of a European Political Community is aimed primarily at Ukraine, which must be assured that it is not an alternative to EU accession, but rather the political support for this necessarily long procedure. Like an engagement period prior to a marriage, entry into this Community would allow the participating country and EU Member States to become familiar with each other on many different levels, which would lead to a gradual rapprochement. Under no circumstances does this deprive Ukraine of potentially achieving EU candidate status.

To allay any doubt regarding the French position, which is reputed to be conventionally reserved when it comes to enlargement, public support from other European leaders is essential. The German Chancellor and the Italian President have already expressed their deep interest. It is also thought that the Benelux countries are in favour.

At the same time, opening accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia following the EU-Western Balkans Conference this coming June would also ensure that the enlargement process is continuing in this region.

Against an extremely changeable and tense geopolitical backdrop, the creation of this Political Community would affirm a European bloc united by the same values and a common destiny. If this is not achieved, the countries which are not EU members are lost in a broader Western bloc which is being reformed by the current war. •

TABLE 1. Per capita GDP, as a percentage of the EU-27 total, in purchasing power standards, at the time of EU accession (date of entry)

Bulgaria (2007)	40,6
Roumania (2007)	44,1
Latvia (2004)	47,4
Lithuania (2004)	50,3
Poland (2004)	51,5
Estonia (2004)	55,9
Slovakia (2004)	58,6
Croatia (2013)	61,2
Hungary (2004)	62,8
Czech Republic (2004)	80,7
Slovenia (2004)	87,8

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