

'Beyond enlargement': European Political Community and enlargement policy reform

The European Political Community (EPC) is a new 'platform for political coordination' (European Council) initially proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron. The Presidents of the European Council, Charles Michel, and European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, have both also supported such a proposal. The inaugural meeting of the EPC was held in Prague on 6 October. The 'EU+ summit' was hosted by the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU and attended by 43 national delegations from the EU-27, Western Balkans and other countries, including the United Kingdom, Ukraine and Turkey. According to Charles Michel, the EPC aims to go 'beyond enlargement' and will steer political dialogue and coordination, mainly on security issues, with like-minded countries, those that have an ambition to join the EU and those that do not. The EPC can be seen in the light of the ambition for a 'geopolitical Commission' that 'stabilises its neighbourhood, accelerates enlargement and champions multilateralism'.

Background: Initial proposal

President Macron presented the concept of the EPC in his [speech](#) to the European Parliament at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe on 9 May 2022 in Strasbourg. He situated his proposal within the 'new geopolitical context' created by the war in Ukraine and unachieved EU enlargement in the Balkans, the emergence of new candidate countries, and in direct lineage to the [European Confederation](#) proposal presented in 1989 by his predecessor François Mitterrand. According to Macron, Mitterrand's proposal, sometimes labelled a 'failure of a grand design' ([Bozo](#)), nevertheless raised the right question, which remains relevant today: how can we organise Europe from a political perspective and with a broader scope than that of the European Union? Macron's proposal therefore resonates with the historical moment of the 1989 reunification of Europe, as well as the geopolitical ambition of the EU to safeguard [peace and democracy](#) in its neighbourhood, where several violent conflicts are brewing, such as war in [Ukraine](#), and civil war in [Syria](#) and in [Libya](#). The war in Ukraine dominated the first EPC summit in Prague on 6 October. According to the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), the EPC could also [facilitate](#) political dialogue with the United Kingdom.

'Beyond enlargement'

On 18 May 2022, European Council President Charles Michel followed up with a [proposal](#) for a 'geopolitical community'. Michel developed the relationship between such a community and reformed enlargement policy, stressing that a geopolitical community lies 'beyond enlargement'. To achieve European unity, the EU needs to reform its enlargement policy, which would consist of 'gradual, phased integration, even while the accession process is ongoing'. This ambition was also endorsed by the June 2022 European Council conclusions, which stated that 'building on the revised methodology, the European Council invites the Commission, the High Representative and the Council to further advance the gradual integration between the European Union and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner'. The [European Council](#) also noted that the EPC and enlargement are 'two separate discussions that should be handled as such' and that 'such a framework [EPC] will not replace existing EU policies and instruments, notably enlargement'. This clarification addressed the sensitivities expressed by new acceding countries ([Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia](#)) and the six countries of the [Western Balkans](#).

In her [State of the Union](#) (SOTEU) address in September 2022, Ursula von der Leyen confirmed that the EPC should not replace enlargement but is a step to reach countries 'beyond the accession process'. Von der Leyen said: 'I want the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to know: You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you! We have also seen that there is a need to reach out to the countries of Europe – beyond the accession process. This is why I support the call for a European Political Community.'



Reforming enlargement policy

A discussion on EU enlargement reform to overcome deadlock in the ongoing accession negotiations in the Western Balkans has resurfaced in recent months since the bid by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to join the EU. In May 2022, when Charles Michel first [advanced](#) his ideas on the EPC, he also called for a rethink of the accession process, suggesting to make it faster, and for 'gradual, phased integration' of countries aspiring to membership. In practice, this would mean more 'tangible benefits' for candidate countries during the accession period, instead of withholding rewards until they join the EU. This proposal of gradual or staged EU accession is in line with the [French non-paper](#) on enlargement policy reform, published in 2019, and expert proposals such as those by former European Commission Director for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy [Pierre Mirel](#) and by [Milena Lazarevic](#). As noted by Mirel, this gradual or staged approach would develop further the [enlargement policy reform](#) adopted in February 2020: 'The first stage would be the implementation of the association agreements and some symbolic reforms, for example the electoral law in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The candidate country would then receive a fraction of the structural funds, but more than it would have received from the IPA. [...] The second step would be the integration of the country into the Internal Market. [...] Once the Commission confirms that the criteria for membership are met, a final stage would be opened where the candidate would have the rights of membership, except for the right of veto and without a Commissioner.' A similar position on 'staged accession' was [presented](#) by Michael Emerson and CEPS in October 2021.

Mirel and other experts, such as [Dušan Reljić](#) from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, are of the view that access to more EU funds would be in line with the EU's ambition of strategic autonomy. Furthermore, access to the European single market will result in mutually beneficial trade relations between the EU-27 and accession countries. In 2021, the annual [trade surplus](#) of the EU-27 with the six Western Balkan countries was €8.7 billion (Eurostat, 2022), which is approximately equal to the [EU Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](#), adopted in October 2021 (€9 billion in EU grant funding for seven years through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, [IPA II and IPA III](#)). In 2021, the EU-27 trade surplus was [highest](#) with Serbia (€4.5 billion), followed by Albania (€1.6 billion), Kosovo (€1.3 billion), Bosnia and Herzegovina (€1.0 billion) and Montenegro (€0.8 billion). In the words of EU Enlargement Commissioner [Oliver Várhelyi](#), the key to 'long-term peace and stability' is closing the 'enormous gap in terms of economic development' between Balkan states and EU members, and EU funds could be additional tools to achieve this objective. However, as is clear from the Commission's annual [reports](#), none of the region's six states has a functioning market economy strong enough to allow for membership of the bloc; the gradual approach would remedy this weakness and could be beneficial to both the region and the EU.

Role of the European Parliament

The EP [supports](#) the political dialogue with accession and neighbourhood countries; under [Article 49](#) TEU, the EP must consent to any accession to the EU. In November 2016, it [called](#) for a 'temporary freeze' of accession talks with Turkey. The EP's budgetary powers give it direct influence over the amounts allocated to tools such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance. It also [supports](#) the inter-party dialogue in several Western Balkan countries, and holds annual summits with their parliamentary speakers. The EP holds annual meetings with speakers of the Western Balkan parliaments and regular political dialogue, including with parliamentary speakers, with new accession countries, such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. On 22 November, the EP [debated](#) a [report](#) on the new EU strategy for enlargement.

On 1 April 2022, Parliament's President Roberta Metsola visited Ukraine and gave a [speech](#) to the Ukrainian Parliament, expressing her support for the Ukrainian people and the European ambition of the country. On 23 June, she [attended](#) the annual EU-Western Balkans leaders' summit in Brussels. On 14 September, in the context of the SOTEU, the President expressed her support for the EPC and further political dialogue within this framework, and for the enlargement policy and stabilisation of the EU neighbourhood. President Metsola [took part](#) only in the European Council meeting in Prague the day following the EPC summit. On 11 November, President Metsola delivered a [speech](#) to the Parliament of Moldova, stressing that Moldova's place is in Europe and that the European Parliament will do everything necessary to support the country's path of accession to the European Union.