



The European Political Community
Geopolitics, civilisation and the French vision
for the future of the European Union

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Table of contents

Key numbers	4
Key findings	5
Introduction	6
Chapter 1. The change in the geopolitical situation caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine	7
1.1. The European Political Community. From Lisbon to Baku	8
1.2. The EPC in the context of strategic autonomy	11
Chapter 2. Geopolitics and civilisation. The EPC as a regional UN or the European dream?	15
Chapter 3. The EPC, Ukraine and the Three Seas Initiative. Lessons for a patchwork alliance. . .	18
Summary	21
How can Europe avoid repeating Mitterrand's mistakes?	21
Warsaw's perspective and recommendations for the EPC	23
Bibliography	25
List of boxes, charts, maps and tables	29

Key numbers

23.5%

EPC economies' share in global GDP

8.7%

share of the world's population that lives in the EPC countries

88.8%

GDP per capita as a percentage of the EU average in the EPC countries that are not EU members

689.5

million people live in the EPC countries

Key findings

- The year 2022 turned European geopolitical order upside down. The Russian invasion of Ukraine shook the foreign policy assumptions of EU countries — but also those of many other countries in Europe and Eurasia.
- The Russian invasion has made space for debate on visions for the future of the EU that would enable it to emerge from this crisis and create new directions for Europe's development. Germany, and Poland have presented their ideas in the debate on the future of the EU — and so has France.
- **The European Political Community (EPC) proposed by France involves the EU's geopolitical and civilisational to 17 other countries in Europe and Eurasia, excluding Russia. The EPC is meant to provide new platforms for cooperation and integration with Europe for Ukraine, Moldova, Turkey, and the countries of the Western Balkans and South Caucasus, among others, and enable better relations between the EU and the western European countries that are not in the EU; that is, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.**
- The EPC need not be a project opposed to a federal vision of Europe, because it is directed outside the EU. If it actually takes shape, it will give France the strength to exercise agency in the EU and have a positive impact on its perception as a creative engine of integration. In its evolution, the EPC could face challenges typical of the patchwork alliances increasingly popular in Europe, such as the Three Seas Initiative. If the EPC does not undermine Europe's transatlantic ties, it could be backed by the countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Scandinavia.
- If the EPC does not become a tool for the rhetorical taming of Russia, it will be able to content itself with the geopolitical role of a "European UN" and cultural radiation to Eurasia, filling the gap left by the Eastern Partnership and accelerating the decomposition of the Commonwealth of Independent States. In this sense, the EPC could implement President François Mitterrand's vision of a European confederation from 1989, with the distinction that that project included Russia.
- The EPC is a French project that, in theory, covers 23.5% of the global economy and almost 9% of the world's population. However, for it to be successful, as assumed by President Macron, it must be supported by actions and be truly backed by the CEE countries, which will provide it with tangible benefits; for example, in terms of knowledge and economic exchange, as well as accelerating the integration of EU candidate countries. The project must not be used to promote protectionism or be used to create several "Europes"; rather, it must actually support European integration.

Introduction

As a result of the pandemic and war in Ukraine, geopolitical factors have started playing an important role in discussions on economics and economic policy. The new world order is being forged at the intersection of geopolitics and the economy; hence analysis of globalisation, trade, foreign investment and economic cooperation between countries must take into account both the economic and geopolitical perspectives. In this context, the evolution of the geopolitical situation in Europe needs to be monitored. One of the proposals that could shape the future of European cooperation is a French project presented in 2022: the European Political Community (EPC). Although the project could breathe new life into European integration, its geopolitical potential has not yet been analysed in depth. In this report, the authors examine the EPC's potential impact on the future of the EU.

France's current attitude towards the future of the EU cannot be understood without returning to the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. In January 2022, many Europeans did not believe in the tragedy that would occur at the gates of the EU the following month. Two weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine, many international relations analysts, as well as pro-Russian publicists, diplomats and informants, maintained that that kind of attack would not take place (Yilmaz, 2022; BBC News, 2022). "It is irrational, the costs would outweigh the benefits," wrote many experts while Russian brigades gathered along Ukraine's borders. These kinds of opinions even appeared on the day of the invasion (Gongloff, 2022). Over the following two weeks, geopolitical cognitive dissonance occurred because — due to Ukraine's heroism, Poland's support for Ukrainians fleeing the war, and declarations by the US — nothing went as planned by the Kremlin.

One year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, support for Kyiv is flowing from Europe, and a different political landscape prevails in EU capitals. Sweden and Finland plan to join NATO, which is consolidating cooperation between its members (NATO, 2022). Ukraine is fighting the aggressor relentlessly. Within a few months, Poland had taken in over a million Ukrainian refugees without having to build large centres for them. Moreover, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, which was meant to enable Moscow to blackmail CEE countries, was seriously damaged. In hindsight, it is now clear that Russian gas was not the only resource following to Berlin and Paris in recent decades. It was accompanied by a stream roubles from corruption and lobbying, which convinced politicians that cooperation with Russia was profitable and safe (Matthews et al., 2021; Arak, Lewicki, 2021). Today, the naive geopolitical attitude towards Russia, which involves viewing it as a reliable partner, is disappearing, and Russian crimes in Ukraine are forcing European politicians to revise their perception of it as a civilised country.

Chapter 1. The change in the geopolitical situation caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is one of the key reasons why Europe's geopolitical priorities need to be reviewed. The temporary decline in trust in Germany is slowing down the current German government's flagship project linked to the structural reform of the EU, towards federalism. This project, included in the coalition agreement signed by the FDP, SPD and the Greens in 2021, assumes efforts to further centralise power in the EU under Germany's leadership (Pollet, Moussu, 2021; Noyan, 2021; Hasselbach, 2022). One of the steps proposed in this spirit is abolishing veto rights in the EU when it comes to foreign policy, among other things (Lemańczyk, 2021). This could be done by unanimously amending the treaties and ratifying them in all the EU member states or based on the passerelle procedure, which also requires unanimity (www1):¹

However, even before the Russian invasion, the countries of Scandinavia and CEE seemed sceptical towards these kinds of ideas, as shown by their joint non-paper summarising the Conference on the Future of Europe, in which their scepticism towards treaty changes can be seen. France is watching. On the one hand, the French realise that European integration is like the bicycle in the famous anecdote by Jacques Delors: if you stop it, it will fall over. On the other hand, differences between Germany and France on issues such as the migration crisis, transatlantic relations and the future of the eurozone have become more pronounced in recent years. Nevertheless, cooperation between Paris and Berlin — as the drivers of the EU — remains exceptional. Its symbol may be the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly established in 2019; joint sessions of both countries' parliaments held in Paris or Berlin every six months.

¹ In May 2023, on Germany's initiative, the Group of Friends to foster Qualified Majority Voting was established. It has been joined by: France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, Slovenia, Luxembourg and Romania. Denmark has announced that it will be an observer, and Ireland is open to reforming the voting system.

Yet at the same time, both capitals seem to approach the future of the EU differently. While Germany continues to communicate its willingness to cooperate with Russia after the war in Ukraine and hopes that the invasion will end soon (Marsh et al., 2022), France is clearly beginning to understand that the situation, involving a weakening — but still aggressive — Russia, could drag on for years. Paris already sees that, during the global period of unrest caused by the Kremlin, countries in Europe and Asia that had previously had strong ties to Russia may be seeking geopolitical alternatives and new solutions in civilisational terms. For this reason, France is now proposing a new type of political and economic unity, not only with big countries such as Turkey and Britain, but also with smaller ones reluctant to place all their international bets on Russia, which intimidates all the weaker countries.

Table 1. Differences in geostrategic vision between France and Germany

Vision	France	Germany
Approach to EU enlargement	No eastward enlargement; instead, the development of the EPC as a method for integration by taking small steps and creating a multi-speed integration mechanism	Eastward enlargement in exchange for abolishing EU countries' veto rights on foreign policy matters and agreeing to change the voting architecture in the EU
Transatlantic relations	Scepticism towards the US and its strong role in Europe, with a central role for Brussels liaising between the US and the EU	Approval of the US role in Europe, with a central role for Berlin liaising between the US and the EU
Approach to the countries in Central and Eastern Europe	Seeing the CEE countries as the precursors of a new type of approach to Russia	Seeing the CEE countries as an obstacle to Germany's return to an alliance with Russia

Source: prepared by PEI.

This is how the European Political Community project is emerging — a new alliance between Europe and Eurasia that bypasses Russia, which has blood on its hands and is geopolitically compromised.

1.1. The European Political Community. From Lisbon to Baku

"This meeting is a way of looking for a new order without Russia," said the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell at the inaugural conference of the European Political Community on October 6, 2022 in Prague. "It doesn't mean that we want to exclude Russia forever, but this Russia – Putin's Russia – has not a seat," he added. Although EU politicians attended the inauguration, the *spiritus movens* of the entire project is French President Emmanuel Macron, who added his vision and ambitions for

the EU to become a geopolitical player as important as the US and China to the "federation or nothing" debate during the Conference on the Future of Europe in May 2022.²

Box 1. The French vision of the European Political Community

Emmanuel Macron, 9 May 2022, Conference on the Future of Europe:

"This new European **organization would allow democratic European nations that subscribe to our shared core values to find a new space for political and security cooperation, cooperation in the energy sector, in transport, investments, infrastructures, the free movement of persons and in particular of our youth.** Joining it would not prejudice future accession to the European Union necessarily, and it would not be closed to those who have left the EU (...). Act decisively. Move swiftly. Dream big. These words are not only the prerogative of China or the United States of America. We are making these ambitions our own" (Macron, 2022).

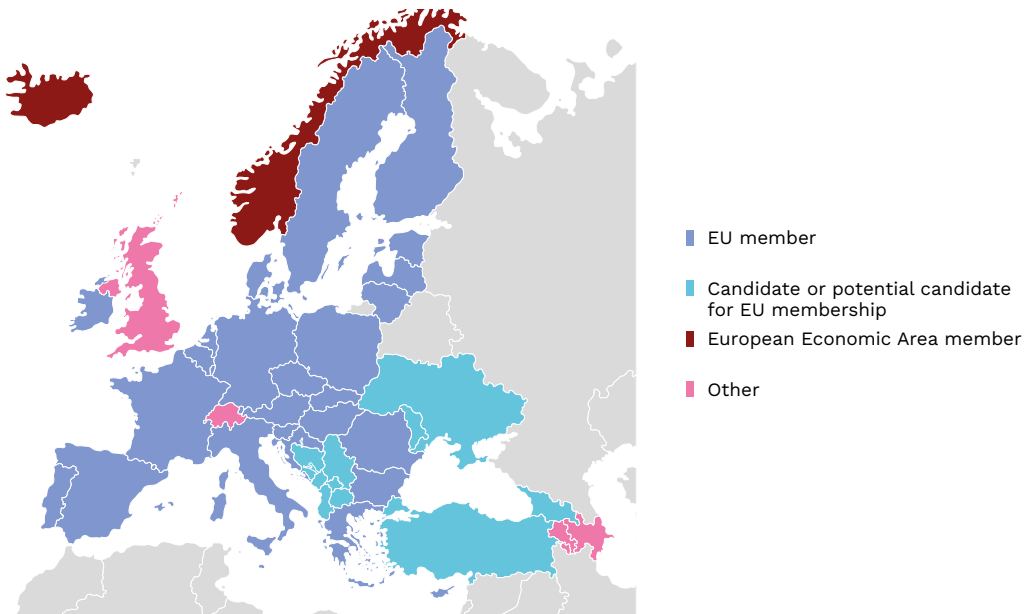
As we can see, the French president considers common democratic values the condition for deeper cooperation — this clearly explains why the initiative is not open to Russia. However, the long-term goal is for Europe to become a geopolitical and civilisational power. To achieve this geopolitical goal, it must have the power to stabilise the geographical environment through economic influence and military potential. The latter had so far been downplayed, but following Russia's invasion of Ukraine it was deemed necessary. However, to achieve the civilisational goal, strong cultural radiation from Europe to surrounding countries is needed and young generations in non-EU countries must be able to experience the European dream. The importance of cultural influence is shown by the rapid, intense Westernisation of Ukraine in recent decades, which now means that its citizens are ready to die for the dream of belonging to the West.

From the perspective of mid-2023, it is clear that the vision of a European Political Community is being met with interest among partners. The first EPC summit, in October 2022, was attended by 44 countries, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and President of the European Council Charles Michel. In addition to the 27 EU member states, representatives of 17 non-EU European and Eurasian countries were present: **Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Iceland, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.** At the second summit, held in Chisinau in mid-2023, 47 countries were represented;

² In this context, it is worth remembering that Macron is a politician who will turn 50 in 2027, when his second term as president of France ends. His stimulation of discussions at both the level of EU and NATO reform may suggest that these project may help him create a profile that will enable him to take up a prominent position in the EU institutions or NATO, or even return for a potential third term in 2032.

six months earlier, Andorra, San Marino and Monaco had joined the club. The meeting, at which joint efforts for peace and security and energy resilience, as well as connectivity and mobility in Europe, were discussed, was also attended by Michel, von der Leyen and President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola.

Map 1. The European Political Community countries: Europe from Lisbon to Baku



Source: prepared by PEI.

The 17 non-EU countries are key to understanding the Community's importance (and, to a lesser extent, the three European micro-states). For them, the EPC could one day become a way to influence Europe — and they are the countries that European powers and the EU itself will try to influence through the EPC as they seek to extend the sphere of European peace far beyond the borders of the EU-27. In troubled times — when images of mass graves, rape and murder known from the Second World War are returning due to Russia — the EPC, as a political community, could provide Europe and its neighbours with security for the future. This conclusion rests on the assumption that the collapse of the security system as a result of Russia's actions is long-lasting and that Europe can fill this vacuum.

What does France gain from the EPC? Firstly, being the EPC's initiator could help Paris regain leadership in Europe. Secondly, it could help it maintain its strategic opposition to EU enlargement in the coming years. Thirdly, France could become the architect of "enlargement without enlargement"; that is,

expanding the EU's sphere of global influence without formally admitting new members. In the era of scepticism towards the federalisation of the EU, more people are coming to believe that France can help Europe become a real geopolitical power — but only with the help of Central Europe, in particular Poland.

Few specifics were agreed on at the inaugural EPC meeting, as well as the next one, which was held in Moldova for symbolic reasons; it is threatened by Russia, for instance on energy issues, which are an urgent matter for the EU due to the war in Ukraine. However, two meetings between the president of France and the president of the European Council and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan were held. Both countries agreed to establish an EU civilian mission on their common border. This could be the start of a greater role for the EU as a mediator in conflicts between non-EU members of the EPC (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2022; www2), as well as the use of this format to reorient these countries towards the West (which the Eastern Partnership, for instance, did not manage to do in a different geo-strategic reality).

With that Russian invasion of Ukraine prompting reflection on more realistic visions of Europe — from Lisbon to Baku, rather than from Lisbon to Vladivostok — this narrowing and specifying of the EU's civilisational and geopolitical ambitions could lead to interest among the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) states — the countries in the east of the EU, located between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas. The French vision does not assume an alliance with Russia at all costs, which would have been deemed harmful by the countries in CEE and the Nordic countries.

Another reason for potential enthusiasm about the EPC in the eastern part of the EU towards the EPC is linked to the fact that many of the TSI countries make up the eastern border of both NATO in the EU, and have long been repeating that the EU should focus on the Eastern Partnership; that is, on bringing the nations that live in Russia's shadow closer to Europe in civilisational terms. The fact that France — which once ignored or even opposed this eastern direction — is now becoming its rational advocate suggests that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to a shift in strategic thinking in western European capitals. The next EPC summits, after the ones held Prague and Chisinau, will take place in Granada, Spain, and the UK, symbolically bringing the east to the west of Europe.

1.2. The EPC in the context of strategic autonomy

The idea of the EPC as a kind of geopolitical-civilisational "EU antechamber" fits into the concept of open strategic autonomy (Molthof, Köbben, 2022), or — in the words of Josep Borrell (2020) — the mission to ensure that the EU has the "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible". Paradoxically, the concept of strategic autonomy and EU security's partial independence from transatlantic relations

began to take shape as a result of Washington's actions. The need for the EU to be responsible for its own defence was raised by US President Donald Trump (Hirschfeld Davis, 2018) and was ultimately taken up by European leaders.

Interestingly, the EPC's name echoes the European Political Community that was meant to be established in 1952, with a defence purpose. Today, amid a growing sense of global instability, the European public is increasingly willing to rethink investment in defence, independence and sovereignty, broadly understood. A good example, in addition to the EPC, is the Sovereignty Fund that is meant to support the EU self-sufficiency in industry and guarantee the uninterrupted availability of the raw commodities, materials and substances needed for development, such as semiconductors (Breton, 2022).

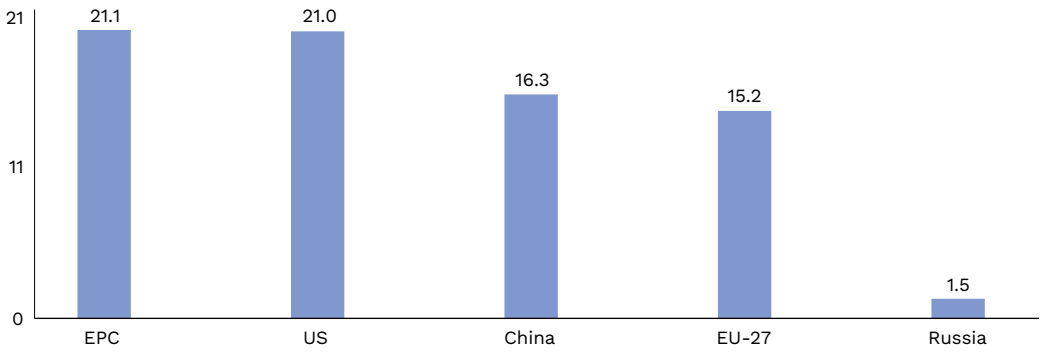
The war in Ukraine constantly reminds Europeans of hard power and the disadvantages of self-sufficiency — machines donated to Ukraine by EU countries rushing along the railway tracks in Przemyśl and planes with military equipment landing at the airport in Rzeszów herald Europeans' awakening from their pacifist slumber. They suggest that the Europe of the future will be a Europe that still desires peace, but is not naive. Future generations of Europeans will no longer be fooled by lies that claim that the gap between the West's democratic values and Russia's autocratic cynicism can be filled with enough gas and oil.

The fact that the EPC project is invigorating for Europe can be seen in the interest and entire spectrum of reactions among European think-tanks (Grajewski, 2022). For example, the European Council on Foreign Relations emphasises that the new format offered by the EPC will help countries with European aspirations resist external pressures and postpone the granting of EU candidate status to countries that are not implementing reforms to a sufficient extent (Dumoulin, 2022). In this sense, the EPC could permanently change the EU's policy concerning future enlargement, as it will offer a wider range of tools and processes for integrating external countries with the EU.

The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) points out that the absence of Russia and Belarus in the initiative means that France understands the challenges for European security correctly, but wonders whether the absence of the key Western player, the US, in the initiative will result in long-term difficulties in building this security (Kozioł, Maślanka, 2022). PISM also notes the clear geopolitical ambitions of Paris, which wants to make Europe a geopolitical power. According to an analyst at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), the French initiative is a problem for Berlin: Germany was inclined to limit the possibility of using the veto in foreign affairs in exchange for allowing eastward enlargement, but France spoiled this strategy with the "French method"; that is, reducing the need for enlargement and offering an alternative method of slow integration through the EPC (Parkes, 2022). In his view, France's method — assuming the establishment of the EPC — is to "invent an attractive container term and fill it up with French interests", such as fear of EU enlargement, protectionism and Anglo-scepticism. At the same time, the DGAP analyst notes that the French idea already has

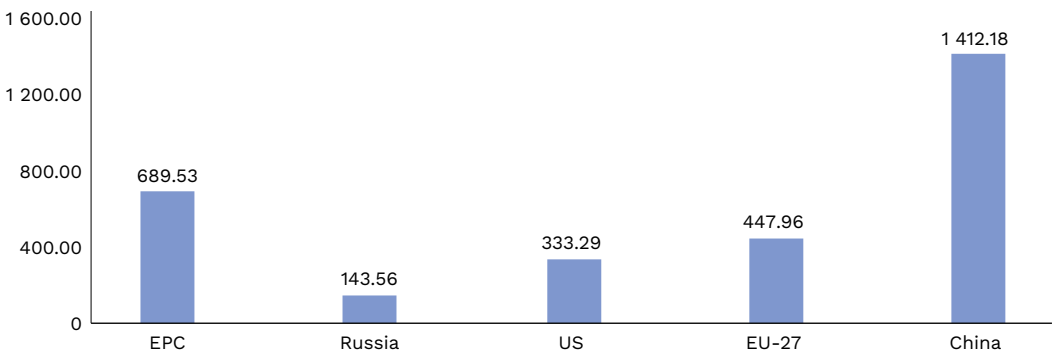
a life of its own and hopes that other countries, including Poland, will help develop the initiative. Brussels think-tank Bruegel is more optimistic: it describes non-EU countries' EPC membership as an "accelerator" of their admission to the EU (Mayer et al., 2022). Understood in this way, the EPC could operate in key geopolitical areas; for example, creating a common pool of resources for energy and defence cooperation among members. This would enable countries — even those that, for various reasons, do not choose to formally join the EU — to integrate with Europe.

Chart 1. EPC countries' total GDP, compared to Russia, the US, the EU and China (trillions of USD at constant 2015 prices)



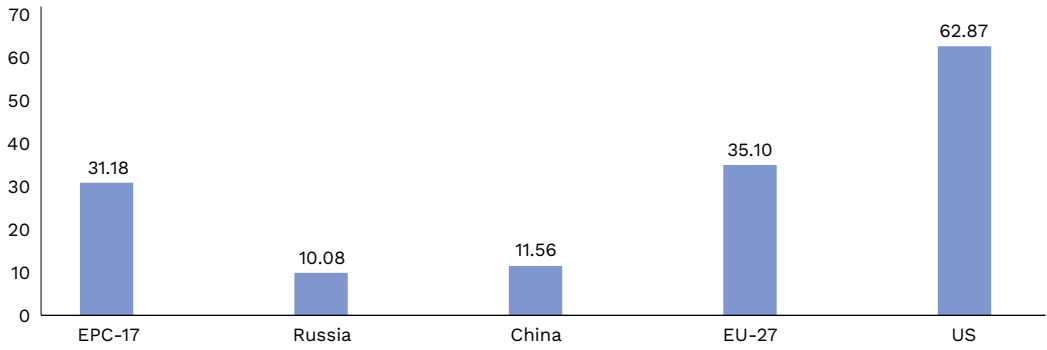
Source: prepared by PEI based on World Bank data.

Chart 2. EPC countries' total population, compared to Russia, the US, the EU and China (million)



Source: prepared by PEI based on World Bank data.

Chart 3. Average GDP per capita in the EPC-17 countries, compared to Russia, the US, the EU and China (thousands of USD at constant 2015 prices)



Source: prepared by PEI based on World Bank data.

UE

Chapter 2. Geopolitics and civilisation.

The EPC as a regional UN or the European dream?

French President Emmanuel Macron emphasises the importance of common fundamental values for potential cooperation with EU countries within the EPC, which points to the initiative's "soft" civilisational component, enabling cultural rapprochement with regions outside the EU. However, the initiative's practical focus is currently primarily on security, infrastructure and stable energy supplies, which points to a "hard" geopolitical component. In the near future, the EPC will have to decide what role it wants to play in the world — and what soft and hard power tools it intends to use. At the moment, the EPC has neither a central secretariat nor a fund for strategic purposes. As such, it is a mainly declarative project. However, assuming that it continues to develop, it can be assumed that over time it will reach the "regional UN" level, as suggested by President of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda (2022). Understood in this way, the EPC could, first of all, create a sphere of geopolitical stability and have a General Assembly with specific rules for approving resolutions. It could also conduct peacekeeping missions made up of troops from member states' armies.

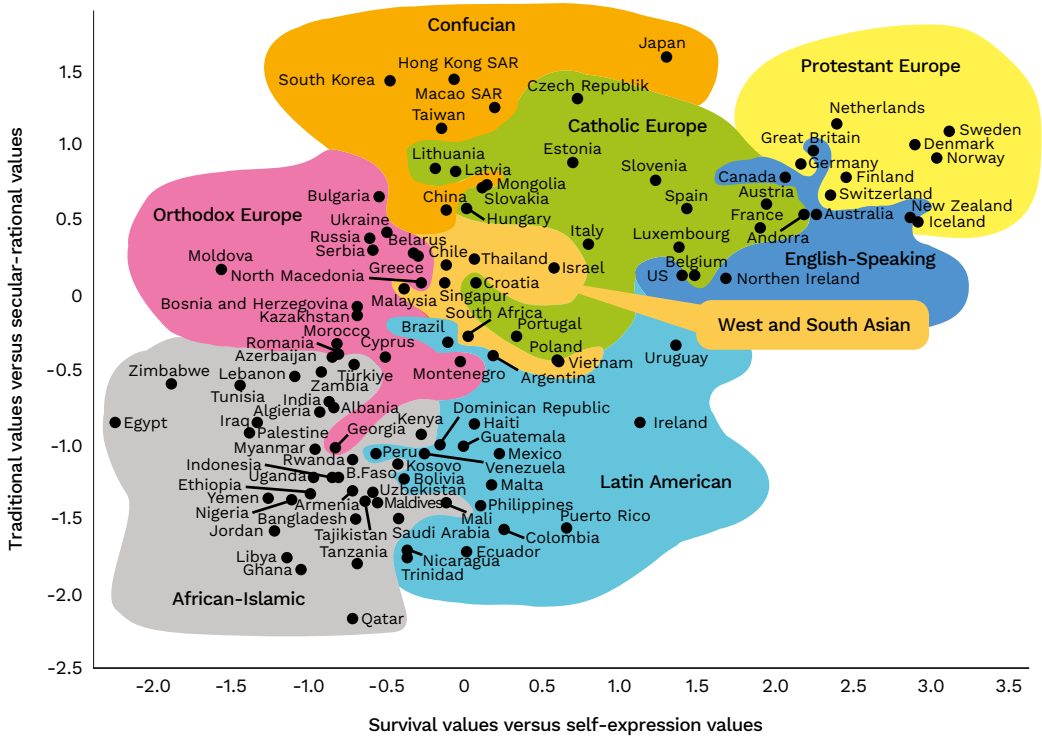
Yet this geopolitical role, based on expanding the sphere of the *Pax Europæana*, does not end there. The EPC could also take on a civilisational role, leading to cultural rapprochement between EU and non-EU countries. Why? If at least some of these countries have an EU membership perspective, the cultural distance between them and the EU needs to be reduced. This will make it possible to integrate the EPC-17 countries' societies with the EU-27 seamlessly in the future.

This is important because — in addition to business, military, energy and economic interests — a minimum level of cultural community will also support a stable life together in the future Europe "enlarged" by the EPC. This aspect of Europeanness, sometimes mentioned by President Macron, has been neglected by some politicians and security analysts in recent decades. Unfortunately, this has led to the Europe's cultural fragmentation and the alienation and segregation of some EU residents along ethnic, cultural, religious and economic lines (Lewicki, 2022). To better control these processes

in the future, efforts to reduce the cultural distance between EPC countries are needed. It will be a much more culturally diverse community than the EU, connecting countries that belong to at least three civilisations: Western, Islamic and Orthodox.

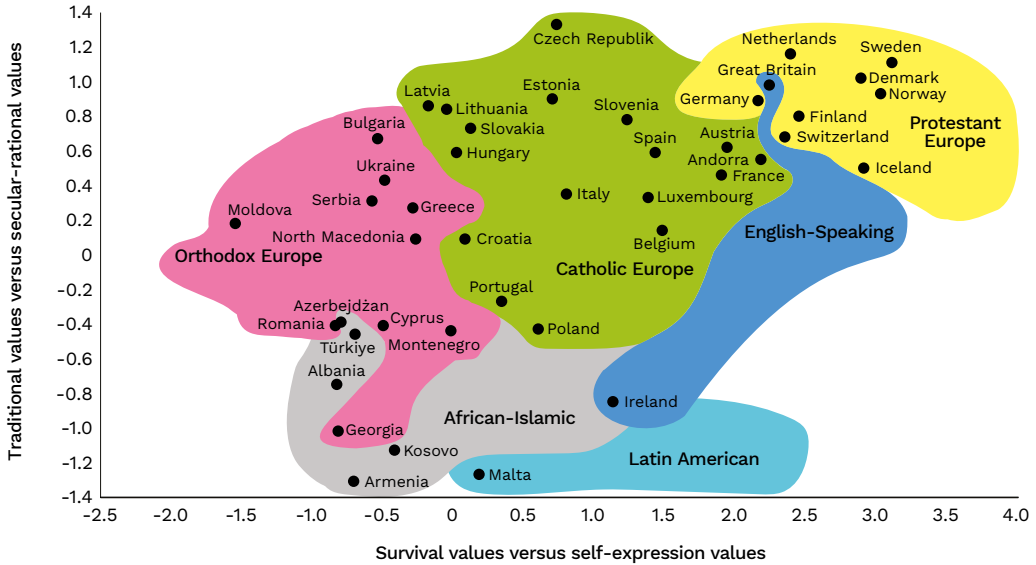
The EU is slowly beginning to realise the importance of cultural proximity when it comes to social cohesion and international peace. This is manifested by the European Values Study (2022), for instance, and the EU institutions' attempt to understand the extent to which comparative cultural research can help politicians make strategic decisions about the future (Scharfbillig, 2022). The EVS research is based on the global World Values Survey (2022), which regularly measures values globally — on the one hand, religious and secular values, and, on the other hand, values based on the primacy of survival and self-fulfilment. These studies reveal individual countries' cultural profiles and global cultural zones, which evolve over time.

Chart 4. Global value map, according to the World Values Survey



Source: prepared by PEI based on: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSNewsShow.jsp?ID=467> [accessed: 10.07.2023].

Chart 5. Value map of the EPC countries



Note: lack of data for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino.

Source: prepared by PEI based on: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSNewsShow.jsp?ID=467> [accessed: 04.07.2023].

If the EPC is meant to be a civilisational community that upholds and promotes specific cultural frameworks, not just an ad hoc geopolitical community, it must invest in soft power in such a way that not only the countries' infrastructure, but also their cultures, have the possibility to converge. In the 21st century, it is clear that culture is also critical infrastructure for Europe's social stability. Of course, it is not a matter of unifying cultures through politics, but about seeking an equilibrium between diversity and unity that can ensure prosperity, stability and peace.

The current situation in Ukraine just how important culture and civilisational affiliation are for global stability. Some Ukrainian elites believe that the country's Westernisation — its transition to the West in terms of identity — was de facto completed after 2014, when Russia took over part of eastern Ukraine. Most of Ukraine's elites then realised that it is impossible for the country to coexist within the Orthodox Russian civilisation while retaining any independence and distinctiveness. The year 2022 confirmed this tragically. As a result, young doctors, bakers, PhD students, teachers, lawyers, poets and computer game creators in Ukraine are now dying with guns in their hands for the promise of the European dream for their children. They are convinced that the European dream — not the *russkiy mir* promoted by Russia — offers ideals worth preserving for future generations.

Chapter 3.

The EPC, Ukraine and the Three Seas Initiative. Lessons for a patchwork alliance

Viewed from the perspective of 2023, it is not known what the European Political Community will become. Among the countries that wish to join the EPC, it raises both hopes and fears, as illustrated by the example of Ukraine. On the one hand, the Ukrainians reject the EPC — if it is understood as an alternative to European integration (Ricard 2022). On the other hand, they would be willing to accept it if it enabled them to join the EU. In the latter sense, the Ukrainians see the EPC as having the potential to deepen logistic, economic and technological cooperation. Thanks to the EPC, they could start harmonising their systems with the EU's, even before they make official commitments to the EU. In this spirit, the Ukrainians informally hope that the EPC could give Kyiv access to more favourable procedures for the transit of goods, to European roaming for mobile phones, and the trans-European transport network, among other things. This would enable it the begin of the process of logistical, technological and industrial convergence with the EU, expanding cooperation to areas consistent with full EU membership in the future. According this vision, the EPC would also help Ukraine increase its energy independence — assuming that, as a project, the EPC will not be distorted during the next twist in the dispute between the French and the Germans or other EPC participants, such as Turkey or Britain.

It seems that a positive scenario for Ukraine is possible, as long as the EPC is not limited to declarations and demonstrates ambitions that go beyond being a platform for the exchange of thoughts, testing ideas, and consultations with non-EU partners. France has the resources to undertake ambitious missions. Historically, it has been a powerful civilisational force. Today, it is capable of increasing its heft in Europe — as long as it does not alienate the other member states with Anglo-scepticism or excessive subordination to Berlin.

Nobody can predict the future, but the EPC's development can be better predicted if we understand the long-term historical processes underway in

Europe (*longue durée*) — that is, as the French thinker Fernand Braudel wrote, those spanning decades or centuries. Today, the EU is subject to long-term processes that can be described as neo-medievalism, which involves the re-emergence of macrostructures and organisational dynamics associated with the Middle Ages, rather than the era of nation states' dominance (Lewicki, 2016). One of the signs of the rise of medievalism in international relations is, as the British political scientist Hedley Bull (1977) wrote, the constant emergence and disappearance of multiple, overlapping networks of power and influence, which clash and absorb each other, creating a new quality. One of the adaptations to this dynamic within the EU are patchwork alliances — undefined alliances between EU countries, which have a specific goal and are triggered by traumatic events (Lewicki, 2021b). Examples of these kinds of alliances include the New Hansa League initiated by the Netherlands established in 2018 after the trauma of Brexit (Lewicki, 2019), and the Three Seas Initiative initiated by Poland and Croatia, established in 2015 after the trauma of Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and, finally, the EPC initiated by France and established after Russia's second invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Although some political scientists have not yet realised it, the patchwork alliances that have emerged over the past decade have many features in common and their development follows somewhat similar dynamics — which is why they also face similar development challenges, to some extent.

This can be seen if we compare the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) and the EPC. The TSI was created as a result of Central Europe's developmental emancipation, and its development accelerated after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014. The EU countries located between the three seas — the Adriatic, the Baltic and the Black Sea — realised then that Russia's pressure on the region would only increase. They also became aware of their shortcomings in terms of infrastructure, which they had been overcoming too slowly. For this reason, a loose coalition of 12 EU countries — Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary — was created and decided to invest politically in increasing the region's energy, infrastructure and digital security more rapidly. Initially, the initiative was criticised by some EU countries as unspecific, unnecessary and unclear, but over time it has gained Brussels' support as beneficial to the entire EU (European Commission, 2018). Incidentally, the EPC is being criticised in a similar way today. However, even though the TSI does not have a secretariat and meets in different countries every year, as a result of cooperation between development banks, it has the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund, an investment tool that helps finance infrastructure projects. Due to the TSI's loose, patchwork nature, it is also attractive to smaller EU countries as an informal platform and a multiplier of their voice in Europe when it comes to infrastructure, energy and communications (Lewicki, 2021a).

The EPC is also a patchwork alliance, established as a result of the trauma of the most recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, to fill the geopolitical vacuum created as Russia continues to weaken and its neighbours grow increasingly wary of it. The EPC will meet in various countries, with an emphasis

on non-EU countries. This is a political opportunity for countries including Moldova, Britain and Turkey to strengthen their ties with the EU. Significantly, at least in terms of declarations, France convinced Brussels to support the EPC initiative right from the start, which means that it did not have to urge it to do so, unlike the TSI.

To begin with, all the EU countries are members of the EPC. Yet over time, countries that actively support the community's development could take over the initiative, while countries that are secretly or openly reluctant to participate will merely observe — or sabotage — its development. This was also the case for the TSI. The first important lesson for the EPC is therefore: just as Hungary weakened its role in the TSI by supporting Russia politically during its invasion of Ukraine, some EPC countries could sabotage the community's development "from the inside" in the name of particular interests. Of course, compared to the TSI, with its regional scope, the EPC appears to have a different scale — even spanning a continent. However, for structural reasons, the EPC will certainly encounter dilemmas that the TSI's leaders also faced, such as: how can financing for EPC initiatives be ensured? Should a special fund be created and, if so, what should its status be? Should the EPC be politically linked to EU resources such as the Sovereignty Fund? Is the EPC supposed to become a formally EU project over time, or should it be consistent with the EU, but remain separate? Moreover, how can support for the EPC among key EU countries be ensured — regardless of changes in government in EU member states?

The answers to these questions may appear in the next few years.

Table 2. Structure of the similarities between the TSI and the EPC

Description / Year of establishment	Three Seas Initiative / 2015	EPC / 2022
Goal-oriented	Infrastructure and security of the eastern part of the EU	Infrastructure, security and civilisational community to the east of the EU
Response to a specific threat	Decline in the eastern EU's security due to Russia's aggressive policy	Decline in the eastern EU's security influenced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine
Initiated by specific EU member states	Poland and Croatia	France
Attractive for small powers, not just medium-sized ones	It enables the aggregation of smaller EU countries' votes towards common goals	It also offers smaller non-EU countries rapprochement with Europe and preferential treatment
Not set in stone	This makes it possible to admit other countries with similarly identified goals, e.g. Finland	This makes it possible to admit new countries and develop a civilisational and geopolitical vision
Decentralisation	There is no secretariat, but there is the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund	No secretariat or fund

Source: prepared by PEI.

Summary

How can Europe avoid repeating Mitterrand's mistakes?

Lessons for the EPC from the collapse of the vision of European Confederation after 1989.

If we believe the declarations, the EPC is an initiative with great economic, geopolitical and civilisational potential. Only the next years will show whether the declarations will translate into reality — that is, whether France will create a coalition of Commissioners and member states actively working together to develop the project. The project could succeed: just as the Three Seas Initiative countries received a geopolitical bonus in February 2022 for their early preparation for Russian blackmail using gas, France could now receive a geopolitical bonus (or, one could say, an early adopter bonus) for quickly recognising the magnitude of the change in geopolitics as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As part of this bonus, others may listen to France more carefully in the coming years when it proposes new defence, infrastructure and institutional solutions for Europe. If we combine this bonus for France with the voices emerging today about the renewal of the Weimar Triangle — in other words, cooperation between Paris, Berlin and Warsaw (Nikel, 2022) — it is possible to imagine a future in which Poland, Germany and TSI countries form the three weights of the European fidget spinner, giving it torque, speed and stability. In the case of Germany's ostensible participation, the main initiative when it comes to creating this format could be taken over by the country behind the project, France.

If it takes real shape, the French could also mean extending European soft power to regions and countries that, although they have been drawn towards Europe, have been suppressed and intimidated by Russia. For example, it is not impossible that Kazakhstan, which will have to diversify the sources of its economic and political stability (Auyezov, 2022), could join the EPC in some form in the future. After the recent threats by Russian politicians, the country now openly fears a Russian invasion (Umarov, 2022) and, as if anticipating them in previous years, it is already opening up to the West in cultural terms; for example by switching to the Latin alphabet (Dzamukashvili, 2021). Of course, geographically Kazakhstan is far from Europe, but Australia is even further away — yet Europe and Australia are both part of Western civilisation today.

Sketching out potential scenarios for the EPC's development, we should also remember that, with Ukraine's Westernisation, the West's cultural radiation in Eurasia will be even stronger. For this reason, the belief that, in the 21st century, Europe should be geopolitically closed should be revised

today. On the contrary: technological progress reduces the importance of geography, traditionally understood, for geopolitical considerations. Tanks matter in kinetic military action, but in times of peace, communication technologies and cultural patterns increasingly matter. Technology, the flow of information, common technological standards, scientific projects and shared digital platforms are becoming the basis for future rapprochement between civilisations and cultures. In an era when African migrants can stay up to date with life in Europe using social media, in the era of global transport and communication, civilisational influence is becoming increasingly deterritorialised. As a result, entire civilisations can be global and dispersed in territorial terms. In this context, it is significant that, in recent decades Russia, has still been a very strong country, but a weakening civilisation (Lewicki, 2023), and that it has been becoming less attractive to its closest neighbours, as shown by the example of Ukraine. This process of weakening and the importance of culture for geopolitical stability have been overlooked by Moscow. The consequences will be deplorable: today, Russia's extreme unattractiveness as a civilisation is creating space for new visions for Eurasian regions' integration with the West.

Finally, it is worth adding that the EPC as a French vision does not seem necessarily opposed to federalism. While federalism or federationism is an inward-looking vision towards deeper EU integration, EPC-based geopolitical Macronism is an outward-looking vision towards neighbouring countries' and more distant neighbours' integration with the EU. If France takes into account Central and Eastern Europe's transatlantic traditions in its plans, many countries in the region could give this vision a conditional *oui*. For this to happen, Paris should take into account the geopolitical sensitivity of the TSI countries and the Nordic countries and their experiences with Russia. If the EPC becomes a tool for halting the EU's development under the guise of attracting its eastern neighbours — so as not to irritate Russia — then the Community will face a spectacular failure. However, if it actually increases Western civilisation's agency beyond Europe's borders, the French project could go down in history as a successful continuation of the European Confederation proposed after 1989 by French President François Mitterrand (Bozo, 2008). This project, which was meant to be a political space east of Europe based on political pluralism and civilisational cooperation, ultimately failed. Researchers claim that it failed due to the excessive ambiguity surrounding the project (Troitiño et al., 2017). According to Mitterrand, this ambiguity and lack of detailed definition were supposed to be a rhetorical advantage, but ultimately turned out to be the greatest disadvantage.

The main reasons for the failure of the vision of a European Confederation in the early 1990s were:

Lack of consensus. Mitterrand's proposal for a European Confederation aimed to establish a political union among European nations, with a centralised government and greater decision-making powers at the European level. However, there was a lack of consensus among member states on the extent of the integration they were willing to pursue, or even on who would be a member.

Opposition from member states. A few member states, especially the United Kingdom, were sceptical of Mitterrand's vision. The British government in particular was opposed to relinquishing national sovereignty and feared the erosion of its own political influence. Today, with the UK outside the EU, the EPC is a certain emanation of an old idea, but covered with many levels of new complexity resulting from European integration. However, it is worth drawing conclusions from London's past opposition and already addressing certain countries' doubts and concerns at the initial stage of the EPC's development.

Economic, not political integration. Mitterrand's proposal coincided with a period of economic challenges and different economic philosophies between member states. The period in which he proposed a European Confederation coincided with a broader shift towards European integration. The focus gradually shifted towards deepening economic integration, culminating in the establishment of the European Union with the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. The EU framework therefore ultimately placed the emphasis on Economic and Monetary Union, rather than on the political integration envisaged by Mitterrand.

Complexities and challenges of implementation. Creating the European Confederation would have required significant institutional and constitutional changes. The process of establishing a centralised government and harmonising policies in different countries with distinct legal systems and political structures proved too complex and difficult. The practical difficulties and potential resistance to these changes made the implementation of Mitterrand's proposals problematic. His vision left the region's leaders unconvinced.

Warsaw's perspective and recommendations for the EPC

Observing the EPC's current development from Warsaw, one may be sceptical. While the project has achieved many things at a prestigious level, in part due to EU leaders' support, it is still in its infancy and critics can rightly say that the EPC means "more rhetoric than action". Moreover, Warsaw naturally has reservations about the project in its current state due to its potential to create a multi-speed EU. Poland has not wanted this so far and does not want it in the future. Paris should therefore think about whether the EPC seeks to replace EU membership for countries such as Ukraine and Moldova — or, on the contrary, to enable them to join it. To gain the support of Poland and other CEE countries within the European Economic Community (EEC), France could, for example, make certain promises regarding key issues and priorities for the region. Potential areas in which these kinds of guarantees or obligations could arise include:

- 1) Economic development and competitiveness, not protectionism.** The French government could declare its support for policies and initiatives that promote economic development, both in the EU and in the EPC. This could include facilitating investment, promoting free trade and supporting partnerships between EPC countries' businesses. It would also be crucial

to ensure fair access to the single market for goods and services and strive for this in the emerging Community.

- 2) Energy security as a pillar of cooperation.** Energy is a key issue for Poland, especially in the context of reducing Poland's and EU's dependence on energy imports from Russia. France could support initiatives that increase CEE's energy security, such as diversifying energy sources and developing the infrastructure of Russia's neighbours, such as Azerbaijan, or EEA countries, such as Norway.
- 3) Cooperation on European security and defence.** From Poland's perspective, France's desire to consider the EPC a platform for building an agreement with Britain on military security issues is also beneficial. France could emphasise its commitment to security and defence cooperation within the EEC. The current reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine points to the United States' key importance for European security, and its absence in the EPC seriously limits the EPC's ability to take action when it comes to European security.
- 4) Structural funds and cohesion policy.** For Poland and other Central European countries, the EPC could serve as a platform to further promote the idea of EU enlargement to include the Western Balkan countries. France could advocate for continued and solid financial support within the framework of Structural Funds and Cohesion Policy, which aim to reduce economic disparities between member states. A commitment to the fair distribution of funds and advocating for investment in less developed regions would demonstrate Paris's commitment to redressing regional inequalities.
- 5) Subsidiarity, national sovereignty and representativeness.** Poland attaches importance to maintaining national sovereignty within the EU (like other CEE countries). France could promise to respect the principle of subsidiarity, ensure that decisions are made at the most appropriate level, and maintain the current balance. This could help alleviate the concerns about the erosion of national sovereignty that can be seen in society in CEE countries today. Ensuring that all the member states, including Poland, have a significant voice and their interests are taken into account would be crucial for the region's support for the EPC. By allaying concerns and formulating priorities that matter to CEE, France could gain Poland's support for the initiative's development, so that it becomes a platform that is alive and has substance.

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List of boxes, charts, maps and tables

LIST OF BOXES

Box 1. The French vision of the European Political Community. 9

LIST OF CHARTS

Chart 1. EPC countries' total GDP, compared to Russia, the US, the EU and China (trillions of USD at constant 2015 prices) 13

Chart 2. EPC countries' total population, compared to Russia, the US, the EU and China (million) 13

Chart 3. Average GDP per capita in the EPC-17 countries, compared to Russia, the US, the EU and China (thousands of USD at constant 2015 prices) 14

Chart 4. Global value map, according to the World Values Survey 16

Chart 5. Value map of the EPC countries 17

LIST OF MAPS

Map 1. The European Political Community countries: Europe from Lisbon to Baku 10

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Differences in geostrategic vision between France and Germany . 8

Table 2. Structure of the similarities between the TSI and the EPC. 20

Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny

Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny to publiczny *think tank* ekonomiczny z historią sięgającą 1928 roku. Jego obszary badawcze to przede wszystkim makroekonomia, energetyka i klimat, handel zagraniczny, foresight gospodarczy, gospodarka cyfrowa i ekonomia behawioralna. Instytut przygotowuje raporty, analizy i rekomendacje dotyczące kluczowych obszarów gospodarki oraz życia społecznego w Polsce, z uwzględnieniem sytuacji międzynarodowej.

