

OPINION

At the Prague Summit, the family photo is the message

The European Political Community could anchor Ukraine and other countries in the European world, on “our side” of the divide with Russia.



The idea of such a pan-European community, first proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron in May | Sean Gallup/Getty Images

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Privacy

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Seven months into Russia's war against Ukraine, deep uncertainties remain as to its outcome. However, one strategic challenge has become unmistakably clear — Russia and Europe are destined to be geopolitical rivals for decades to come.

Step by step, European leaders are all coming to this conclusion, and they will do so again at the summit in Prague on October 6, where barring Russian President Vladimir Putin, nearly all of the Continent's leaders — 27 from the European Union and 17 from outside it — will meet to establish a European Political Community (EPC).

The idea of such a pan-European community, first proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron in May, has been acquiring momentum, yet it simultaneously continues to cause puzzlement. Why, its critics wonder, do we need a new European organization? What is its purpose? What will it do?

But to answer those questions, we must first understand how Russia's war has fundamentally changed the Continent.

So far, Europe's response to the war has included weapons for Ukraine, shelter for millions of war refugees, as well as the imposition of sanctions — but this won't suffice. European leaders need to embark on a second, more strategic path to secure Ukraine's future. They need to engineer a historic reordering of the EU and the Continent, putting in place a new geopolitical arrangement in which Ukraine will be firmly embedded — this is what the EPC could be.

For a long time, Russia and the EU seemed destined to move closer to each other under a common set of rules. For the countries wedged in between – Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Belarus – this meant that life would never be comfortable, but all-out war and hard, binary choices could be skirted.

However, the possibility of an existence “in between” has now gone. A new geopolitical dividing line cuts across our Continent, and the fundamental question is on what side of this line Ukraine and other “in between” countries will find themselves.

To make clear that “they are with us,” last June, the EU opened the door to Ukrainian accession, a momentous and welcome step. And once Ukraine eventually becomes an EU member, the bloc will provide it with the European home it needs. But as Brussels officials privately admit, accession will take time, at least 10 years, maybe more. This is the sobering reality, whether we like it or not, and rather than conceal it, we should confront it and look for solutions.

It is precisely because the EU cannot provide the political home Ukraine needs right now that there exists the need for another and a larger European club, one it *can* immediately join. As Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama recently put it, with considerable pride, “We may not be part of the EU, but we are part of the E.”

The primary purpose of the EPC then is to provide Ukraine – and other countries – with a strategic community and forum that anchors them in the European world, on “our side” of the divide with Russia.

There is a secondary rationale for the EPC as well: With Brexit and Turkey’s stalled accession, a strategically important part of Europe will probably never be in the EU — the same goes for energy and economic power houses Norway and Switzerland. But Russia’s war of aggression shows that both “non-EU Europe” and the EU share certain te

geostrategic interests, even if the bloc's relationship with Turkey and the United Kingdom remains awkward.

How these two parts of Europe best organize themselves to defend these common goals is important, and here too, the EPC can be part of the answer.

Given these goals, there are certain things the community should and shouldn't aspire to — and expectations should be framed accordingly.

First, it's important to remember that this nascent community is not primarily about policy but about *politics* and *polity*. As such, it would be wrong to expect a long list of agreed policy measures from the Prague Summit.

Instead, the key “deliverable” is nothing but the guest list itself, as well as the family photo projecting European unity, and a joint decision to meet again.

Of course, common policy steps to protect our energy infrastructure, for example, are more than welcome, but signaling where Europe's new borders are counts for more right now. Who is present? Who is not? Those are the key questions.

Additionally, summit leaders should meet in Prague as *equals*. The 17 outside the EU don't want to be perceived as second-class countries, “candidates,” “pupils” or “outs.” The EPC should not be set up as a waiting room for EU membership, a new incarnation of the bloc's neighborhood policy or a testing ground for Brussels policymaking.

Instead of acting as its convening power, the EU should only be loosely involved in the EPC, and in a role of facilitator more than a member. Crucially, accession to the EU must move forward at the same time, governed by its own independent criteria and procedures.

Finally, the EPC doesn't need a high degree of institutionalization as other pan-European organizations or the EU itself. Instead, like the G7, it requires summits, red carpets and a working space for leaders at the highest level — this is what guarantees visibility and projects unity.

It may be true that without institutions, there will be little concrete follow-through. But this isn't what the EPC is chiefly meant for. Rather, it must give direction and some shape and body to the new geopolitical order that's being formed on our Continent, something that the EU and NATO are unable to do in the short term.

Ukraine, it's often said, is part of the European family. Family members ought to protect each other. They share food, shelter and confront practical challenges together. But family also defines who we are, where we stand in the world, where our home is and where our most basic loyalties lie. Moreover, family ties are permanent.

This is the message the Prague summit photo will send to Moscow, the rest of the world and not least Europeans: We are family.

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