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## EPC Summit: From Empty Chairs to the War in Israel

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## About the authors



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## EPC: Expectations and the “Empty Chair” Crisis

The evolution of the European Political Community Summit (EPC)-related ambitions of the EU, from [Prague](#) to [Moldova](#) and now [Granada](#) (Alhambra), has demonstrated rather limited results. This could be attributed to the absence of clearly defined goals within the EPC, hindering any substantial advancement. However, this informal intergovernmental platform continues to fulfill its primary objective of fostering dialogue among more than 40 European countries, irrespective of their EU membership status. As an EU initiative, the EPC remains committed to bringing together foreign leaders with connections to the EU, allowing for discussions on various policies and collective problem-solving.

On the menu for EPC-Granada on 5th October 2023 was a variety of themes: connectivity, security, enlargement, migration, Russia and Ukraine, as well as the most contentious element, namely a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The expectations stayed realistic ahead of the Summit, despite hopes mounting for an improved negotiation environment concerning stability, peace, and connectivity across the South Caucasus.

The EU's efforts to instill cooperation and coordination within the EPC's functioning are ongoing, albeit with varying degrees of success. Notably, less-liberal countries like Türkiye and Azerbaijan are among the first countries that defied the comprehensive nature of the EPC, which aims to include all European nations except Russia and its closest ally, Belarus. The “no-show” decision by Türkiye and Azerbaijan appears to have been preemptively coordinated, but the decision by French foreign minister to visit Yerevan only one day ahead of the EPC summit, and promising arms-exports to Armenia, equally appears to have caused mistrust and an EPC “empty chair crisis”.

The Azerbaijani side argues that the fault squarely rests with France, since Paris rejected the request by Azerbaijan to include Türkiye at the negotiation table. In addition, they argue that France's harsh rhetoric in Yerevan days ahead of the summit, as well as defence-discussions, had a very negative impact on the negotiation environment.

The Armenian side argues that the fault lay with Azerbaijan, who is accused of stalling the negotiation process and having insincere motivations. In addition, it is important to remember that France – contrary to some accounts – had already been accepted at the negotiation table (since EPC Prague) while Türkiye's inclusion was a new element.

After the postponement of a scheduled summer-meeting between Armenian, Azerbaijani and EU officials in Brussels, the expectation was that the leaders would meet in Granada to smooth out lost momentum and continue the negotiations. Those expectations never materialized as two of the EPC's leading Muslim leaders chose to reverse-symbolically opt out of Alhambra.

## The Outcome

As an informal intergovernmental platform, the EPC operates with very limited resources but strives to achieve significant outcomes. Its practical value lies in its ability to reinforce existing agreements and highlight emerging issues that require collective attention.

In the realm of security, a crucial domain of the EPC's political discourse, the EU has reaffirmed its unwavering military and financial support for Ukraine. European Council President Charles Michel announced a substantial commitment, which includes the previous allocation of [82 billion euros](#) to Ukraine, with additional financial assistance in the pipeline. Furthermore, EU officials have signaled the formulation of a new set of sanctions, including a ban on diamond imports, targeting alternative revenue sources in the Russian budget. The EU, through the EPC, is actively countering Russian sanctions circumvention through third countries. The EPC summit has also served to promote the [10-point Peace Formula](#) designed by Ukraine to stop Russia's aggression. This approach mobilizes international support to prevent future escalations, particularly concerning food, energy, and nuclear disaster prevention, and endeavors to facilitate the peaceful territorial reintegration of Ukraine.

Energy connectivity stands out as a critical domain in the context of EPC discussions. The proposal to enhance energy cooperation through investments in energy efficiency and infrastructure development represents a strategic move to safeguard energy sovereignty against potential threats like energy blackmailing.

Charles Michael's recommendation of increasing renewable energy consumption, sourced from both the North and South via the [North Sea Energy Cooperation](#) and the [Trans-Balkan Electricity Corridor](#), underlines that the EPC is being utilized to bring the collective attention to the need for diversification and resilience in the energy supply chain. The EU has also reiterated that four other EPC countries—Moldova, Norway, Serbia, and Ukraine—have joined the EU Energy Platform for joint gas and hydrogen purchases, labeling this development as a ["success"](#). As Russia is anticipated to reemploy its energy tactics this winter, both targeting Ukraine and undermining the stability of the EU, the discussions within the EPC in Granada have gained more relevance than during the [EPC summit past June](#).

Following the EPC summit with non-EU member states, talks within the European Council on migration reform have revealed persisting divisions between [Poland and Hungary](#), on one hand, and the rest of the EU, on the other. Earlier, during the EPC meeting, Charles Michael had already initiated discussions on migration, signaling the complexities of managing this issue within the EU framework. [He urged EPC participants](#) to broaden cooperation on migration beyond the EU. Proposed strategies included dismantling smuggling networks through enhanced intergovernmental interventionism within law enforcement agencies. This highlights the ongoing challenges faced by the EU in addressing migration issues and the need for collaborative efforts both within and outside the EU framework. This also indirectly emphasizes the need for efficient implementation of visa facilitation and liberalization mechanisms established by the EU with the majority of EPC states. The debate within the EPC context on migration appears deliberate, focusing on achieving a delicate balance between maximizing legal migration opportunities and countering irregular migration. Such strategic pan-European discussions align with the EU's objectives of ensuring both the stability of its borders and its internal public order.

On the subject of migration, it is also crucial to note that 'refugee-status', 'asylum seeking', 'development aid' and 'informal migration' were all topics which were discussed by specific EPC-participating-countries, especially in the context of the on-going mass exodus of cultural-Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. Based on informal interviews held by the ENC with delegations during the Summit, it is clear that this migratory emergency is being highly politicized, as France and Armenia wish for cultural-Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh to stay in Armenia and return to Nagorno-Karabakh in the immediate future, whereas Azerbaijan



fears that returning cultural-Armenians to Azerbaijani territories could re-instigate “separatist tendencies”.

The highly polemic topic surrounds the question of whether cultural Armenians residing inside Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh were forcefully pushed out of the territory, which would amount to ethnic cleansing, or whether they left willingly. The Azerbaijani side argues that no force was used against cultural Armenians residing inside of Nagorno-Karabakh, a claim which they back up with a recent UN report, which suggests that no documentation nor testaments of violence against civilians leaving Nagorno-Karabakh were found, despite “the suffering the experience must have caused”. The Armenian side argues that the threat of violence, notably as a result of well-documented hate speech, was enough to pressure over 100,000 people to leave Azerbaijan and seek refuge in Armenia.

This is further complicated by narratives on both sides about previous historical accounts of ethnic cleansing, by both Armenia and Azerbaijan, during the 1990s, as well as the right of return of Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities living inside each country’s boundaries pre-dating 1992. What is clear from this complex juridical, historical, and geo-political battle of documentation and narratives is that the new situation of over 100,000 cultural Armenians fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh is likely to be heavily politicized by all sides involved. For example, what will happen this winter when thousands of recently re-settled cultural Armenians (from Nagorno Karabakh now residing in Armenia) need housing, aid, and subsistence? Will some of these groups try to leave Armenia, legally through UNHCR’s Yerevan office or illegally by crossing into Georgia and Turkiye, and attempt to obtain asylum inside the European Union? Or will already-promised Franco-EU aid packages suffice and allow them to stay inside Armenia until they return to Azerbaijani Nagorno Karabakh?

Another important result of the Granada Summit also appears to have been the EU and France’s willingness to extend expertise, training, and funding to third-party non-EU countries in their collective fight against cyber and disinformation. On this subject, the French President Macron specifically noted during the EPC Press Conference that the EU, with French support, would allocate expertise and personnel for countries that face high levels of disinformation and cyber threat emanating principally from Russia. Based on informal conversations, this could include permanent staff support and training in non-EU capitals, as well as boosted cyber-components in EU delegations and missions abroad.

[As with the EPC summit in Moldova](#), EU officials emphasized the topic of enlargement during the recent summit in Granada. Although Charles Michel overlooked this subject in [his remarks](#), it was discussed during the summit with a specific focus on Ukraine's candidacy and the potential opening of accession negotiations. [Spanish authorities](#) have confirmed that the efforts from the EU Council will be continued, with the decision contingent on the progress made by Kyiv. The prospects of the other candidate states were not emphasized. Only when responding to journalists' questions in Granada, the EU's chief diplomat, Josep Borrell, expressed cautious optimism regarding Georgia's compliance with EU conditions for the candidacy status. The absence of enlargement as a prominent topic at the EPC in Granada indicates that the EU is compartmentalizing its dialogue with neighbors. Enlargement is kept separate from issues that align with the interests of the majority of EPC participants.

## What next?

The lifespan and future development of the EPC hinges on the EU's continued interest and its ability to maintain reputational attractiveness, compelling political elites across the continent to engage. However, the “Empty Chair crisis” at the Granada summit involving Türkiye and Azerbaijan highlights that the mere association with the EU does not render the EPC indispensable. It is clear that a regional stakeholder like Türkiye is a necessary component of any future solution, despite not necessarily having to be part of the EU negotiations led by Charles Michel. Türkiye is a resource-poor country, which necessitates both EU trade and connectivity as a natural pillar of its own success. It's therefore key that the EU, with Germany and France in the lead, take a more proactive position to convince Ankara and dialogue with it about constructive peace in the South Caucasus. Stabilization and sustainable peace between Armenian and Azerbaijan intrinsically benefits both the EU and Türkiye, since they remain the major stakeholders who will profit from trans-Caspian connectivity; a scenario which will only be made possible if European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), European Investment Bank (EIB) and EU private sector investors believe that the threat-risk of investment in digital, hard, and soft connectivity and infrastructure is guaranteed by security-driven stability, regional peace and a signed agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.



The logical follow-up to this question will take place in end-October in Brussels at the Global Gateway Forum, in which all EU countries will be present, as well as non-EU countries including Türkiye, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Despite Azerbaijani President Aliyev's willingness to move the next EU negotiations to Georgia, it should nonetheless be remembered that the Global Gateway Forum will bring together both private sector investors, international financial institutions, all relevant EU, and non-EU countries, including all Central Asian Republics, while being hosted by European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen and the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell. The Forum, which will take place on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of October was initially scheduled as a natural follow-up to the EPC. Rising threats of sanctions on Azerbaijan, and Aliyev's desire to move the negotiations to Tbilisi, are amongst the unpredictable questions which continue to cast doubt over any constructive resumption of EU negotiations.

From a security perspective, the EPC represents a significant opportunity for geopolitical influence, fostering informal socialization among leaders from over 40 countries and EU institutions. It is important to recognize that this heightened engagement doesn't dissolve the complexities arising from diverse national foreign policy agendas, some of which clash, especially concerning border disputes. However, the EPC serves to soften the sharp edges of these conflicts and ease tensions through open dialogue and massive external exposure to the issues. By showcasing diplomatic efforts to address inter-state frictions, such as in the Armenia-Azerbaijan disputes, the EPC could increasingly contribute to conflict mitigation resting on negotiations. In this context, the geopolitical platform of the EPC could effectively extend the EU's peace-making agenda across the continent, aligning with Charles Michael's vision of using the EPC to "[defuse conflicts](#)." Its function as a mechanism to address conflicts may become crucial in countries where conventional EU integration methods lack the necessary influence to shape elite behavior towards cooperation rather than hostility. The EPC, therefore, can gradually turn into a tool for promoting dialogue and cooperation in proximal regions where tensions persist.

The recent escalation in the military actions involving Hamas terrorist groups against Israel underscores the need for the EU to explore the possibility of expanding the EPC to include other like-minded allies from the EU's southern neighborhood and across Central Asia. The developments in Israel raise urgent security concerns, emphasizing the necessity for the EU to consider an expanded version of the EPC, termed EPC+, during the upcoming EPC summit in the UK.