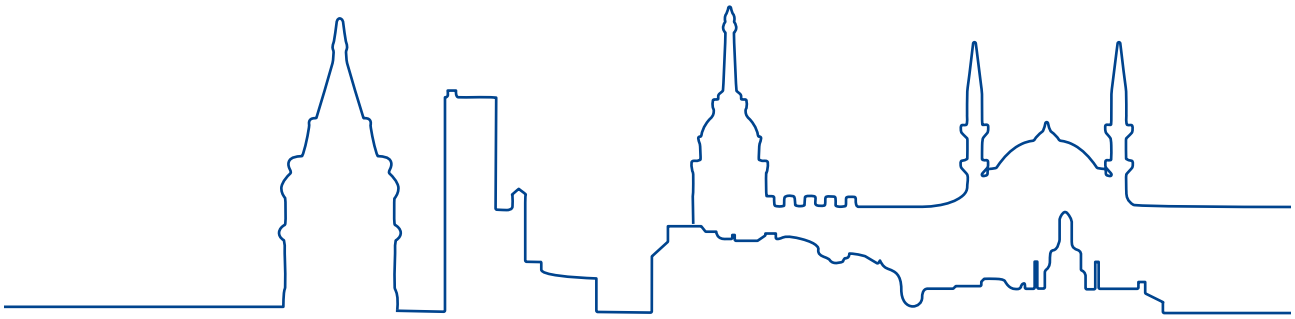


IPC ANALYSIS October 2025

FROM SYMBOLISM TO SUBSTANCE?

NAVIGATING EUROPE THROUGH CRISES AFTER THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY AND EUROPEAN COUNCIL SUMMITS IN COPENHAGEN

Ebru Turhan

Executive Summary

The October 2025 informal European Council meeting and the European Political Community (EPC) Summit took place in Copenhagen amid increasing regional turbulence and global multipolarity. This analysis provides a concise overview of the key conclusions from the two summits and examines how EU leaders can more effectively address various challenges, including the war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, declining EU competitiveness, enlargement, and democratic backsliding within the EU and its neighborhood, in future summits. Recommendations include the light institutionalization of the EPC, adopting unified positions and concrete actions on issues such as the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, ensuring that competitiveness and economic resilience feature more prominently in the agendas of upcoming summits, and integrating "soft" conditionality into the EPC to encourage reform and policy alignment. The EPC's transformation from a symbolic forum into a delivery platform could bolster Europe's role in a multipolar world and support the maintenance of rules-based international relations.

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Introduction

On October 1 and 2, 2025, European leaders convened in Copenhagen for two consecutive meetings, which, although different in composition and scope, were closely intertwined. The informal European Council meeting, held at Christiansborg Palace, brought together the heads of state and government of the EU's 27 member states, along with the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission. The following day, Denmark, as part of its rotating EU Presidency, hosted the seventh meeting of the European Political Community (EPC), which brought together nearly every country on the continent—from the UK to Ukraine, and from Norway to Azerbaijan. The Czech Republic, San Marino, Slovakia, and Turkey were the only members absent from the Copenhagen EPC Summit.

These meetings took place amid profound geopolitical turbulence in the wider European neighborhood and significant shifts in the international order, which is transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar system characterized by uni- and minilateral approaches.[1] The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has persisted, significantly changing Europe's security landscape and requiring the EU to reevaluate its foreign and defense strategies along with its engagement with Eastern neighbors and other key actors. On September 19, 2025, Kaja Kallas, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, underlined that Russia has been becoming more dangerous as three Russian fighter jets reportedly violated Estonian airspace.[2] Likewise, the October 2025 meetings in Copenhagen took place under heightened security measures in response to reports of drone threats. These threats were reportedly linked to Russian-origin technology and hybrid interference efforts targeting Danish airports, which Danish intelligence and European security authorities thoroughly monitored. Meanwhile, the conflict in the Middle East has intensified, with Israel conducting an airstrike in Doha, the Qatari capital, and the humanitarian crisis and famine in Gaza worsening, prompting the European Commission to propose the downgrade of trade ties with Israel and sanction top officials.[3]

Equally worrying is the ongoing erosion of commitment to the rule of law and democratic standards within the EU, highlighting growing challenges to the rules-based order and democratic resilience—topics that were prominent agenda items at the previous EPC Summit in Tirana in May 2025.[4] Democratic backsliding in several member states, coupled with the discernible rise of populist far-right parties in national and European elections, has challenged the Union's credibility as a community of values and the portrayal of the EU as a normative power in international relations. At the same time, non-EU neighboring countries participating in the EPC—including the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova—are advocating for concrete support for their accession to the EU amid the increasing "geopoliticization" of EU enlargement politics.[5]

Against this complex backdrop, the October meetings of the EU served as a critical litmus test of the EU's ability to reconcile its normative commitments with pragmatic interests in a highly complex internal and external environment, where domestic political divides, rule of law challenges, and economic pressures intersect with severe external crises and geopolitical competition.

Danish Presidency at Work: From Ending the Defense Opt-Out to Orchestrating the Copenhagen Summits

Denmark's EU Presidency in 2025 has been strategically structured around a security-centric agenda. This shift was facilitated by Denmark's decision in July 2022 to relinquish its opt-out from EU defense initiatives. Consequently, this decision enabled Denmark's voluntary engagement in various EU defense mechanisms, including the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects, and participation in the European Defense Agency (EDA).[6] This reflected a notable transition from a long-standing period of Danish exceptionalism, indicating Copenhagen's increasing dedication to European security within the context of the evolving geopolitical landscape, a shift largely prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU plays a pivotal role in shaping the Union's political agenda and steering intergovernmental negotiations during key meetings. Presidencies have a structural advantage in influencing policy outcomes with their influence on agenda-setting, agenda-structuring, and agenda-exclusion.[7] The Danish Presidency has two main priorities. Firstly, as part of its "a secure Europe" agenda, it seeks to boost the EU's global influence and role by forming broad partnerships with key non-EU countries, backing Ukraine, Moldova, and Western Balkan countries' merit-based bids to join the EU, and enhancing the EU's economic security by prioritizing critical supply chains and technological security.[8] Secondly, within the framework of its "competitive and green Europe" priority, the Danish Presidency aims to promote the creation of a new Competitiveness Fund as part of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) after 2027 and to support the green transition, which should also enhance EU competitiveness and energy independence from Russia.[9] These priorities reflect both domestic concerns and exhibit a comprehensive understanding of Europe's geopolitical challenges.

In practice, the Danish Presidency has already been highly active in shaping the EU agenda by hosting informal ministerial meetings that set the scene for the October meetings. In July 2025, EU environment and climate ministers met informally in Aalborg, Denmark, under the Danish Presidency to address both environmental urgencies and the acceleration of the green transition. The agenda encompassed preparations for the COP30 scheduled to be held in Brazil, deliberations on the EU's post-2030 climate policy, including the consideration of a potential emissions reduction target for 2040, and advancements toward establishing a global plastics agreement. The meeting aimed to integrate climate neutrality with economic competitiveness and security considerations, emphasizing that postponing the green transition could undermine Europe's economic resilience and its role as a global actor.[10] At the end of August 2025, an informal meeting of EU defense and foreign affairs ministers took place in Copenhagen under the Gymnich format to address multiple, overlapping crises and reflect on the strategic priorities of EU external action. Major topics included the EU's military support to Ukraine, immobilized Russian assets, and the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East. Overall, following the meeting, critical voices highlighted the EU's inconsistency regarding the Middle East, noting that EU calls for pressure on Israel rarely translate into concerted measures.[11]

The European Political Community: Between Aspirations and Delivery

The EPC was launched in 2022 with the aim of encouraging dialogue and cooperation between the EU and key third countries, especially its neighbors. Unlike the formal enlargement procedures or the predominantly supranational institutional framework of the EU, the EPC is deliberately designed to be flexible, intergovernmental, and inclusive, accommodating a broad array of countries with various political systems, normative considerations, and strategic interests. The 6th EPC Summit, held in Tirana in May 2025, preceding the October meeting in Copenhagen, highlighted both the strengths and limitations of the format. Forty-five heads of state and government took part in the summit to discuss Europe's security and resilience, including Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, competitiveness and economic security, as well as mobility challenges.[12]

While the Tirana Summit demonstrated a notable level of unity, with a strong focus on supporting Ukraine and endorsing the formation of a Political Community Coordination Team under the European Council Presidency to improve coordination and follow-up among members, it also revealed growing frustration and critique. As the European Parliament notes, "similarly to previous EPC meetings, no concrete deliverables or joint statements on behalf of all the leaders were published at the end of the summit."[13] Despite engaging dialogue and assertive rhetoric, there were no specific commitments regarding timelines, resource allocation, or reforms related to enlargement, migration, or democratic oversight. Some critics even cautioned that the EPC could devolve into a mere political spectacle due to its unclear institutional framework and lack of accountability, risking it becoming just a talking shop instead of an effective platform for forging unified European responses to the complex challenges of the "polycrisis" era.[14] For example, although mobility, migration, and youth issues were among the roundtable topics, Turkish students and academics remain one of the most affected groups in terms of visa rejections by EU member states, even when their mobilities are supposed to take place as part of EU projects or Erasmus mobility programs. Similarly, although many speeches focused on defending democratic resilience and the rule of law, no enforceable or binding commitments were adopted regarding democratic backsliding in numerous members of the EPC.

Key Takeaways from the Meetings: Progress Made and Enduring Challenges

Building on the outcomes of the Tirana EPC Summit, the informal ministerial meetings on environment, defense, and foreign affairs held over the summer of 2025, and the June 2025 European Council, the Copenhagen gatherings reflected both some progress and persistent challenges. Shaped by the Union's evolving internal dynamics and an increasingly volatile external environment, three overarching themes crystallized from the October informal European Council and EPC Summit, illustrating the dual trajectory of advancement and constraint in the EU's current strategic agenda.

COMPETITIVENESS, REGULATION, AND ECONOMIC SECURITY OF THE EU

At the June 2025 European Council, the heads of state or government emphasized that strengthening EU competitiveness and further integrating the Single Market remained crucial to maintaining the EU's social model, as well as promoting the

EU's role as a global actor. To achieve this, EU leaders called for a simpler, small and medium-sized enterprises (SME)-friendly regulatory framework and urged the European Commission to avoid overregulation. They also emphasized the importance of establishing a fully integrated EU Energy Market before 2030.[15] Along similar lines, at the 25th Franco-German Council of Ministers in August 2025, France and Germany agreed to establish a joint cooperative working process to develop bilateral perspectives and recommendations on reducing regulatory and administrative burdens, as well as sustaining trade and economic security in Europe,[16] amid growing global geopolitical tensions and significant power shifts in the international system. A new study by the Danish government has revealed that prospective EU regulations could impose an additional annual cost of EUR 124 billion on EU businesses and administrations.[17]

Against this backdrop, in October EU leaders were expected to discuss ways to quickly reform EU bureaucracy without undermining environmental and digital ambitions amid transatlantic differences and to offset China's growing economic influence. The October meetings also coincided with the anniversary of the Draghi report, which is being implemented slowly due to a narrow focus on defense competitiveness and the need for numerous reforms to be made at the national level rather than the supranational level. However, the anticipated debates on competitiveness and economic reform during the informal European Council were mostly overshadowed by urgent talks on security and defense following a series of drone threats in Copenhagen and the violation of Estonian airspace by Russian military aircraft just days before the meetings. These incidents underscored the growing sense of vulnerability within the EU and the urgent need to enhance collective defense capabilities and resilience against hybrid threats. As a result, the economic dimension of the informal European Council's agenda was largely overshadowed by discussions emphasizing the enhancement of European collective defense. During the EPC meeting, economic security was explicitly associated with the broader domain of European security and resilience against what was described as "the Russian threat on our continent."[18] European Council President António Costa emphasized the importance of safeguarding European value chains and ensuring access to critical raw materials while also underscoring the significance of addressing migration-related issues.[19]

The limited attention paid to competitiveness during the Copenhagen meetings signals a short-term prioritization of security over economic strategy. While understandable given immediate geopolitical challenges, this imbalance risks delaying essential reforms to boost Europe's innovation capacity, regulatory efficiency, and economic resilience in an increasingly multipolar international order. At forthcoming European Council and EPC summits, EU leaders should recalibrate the Union's agenda by prioritizing competitiveness and economic resilience within the core of Europe's strategic deliberations. This should be pursued in conjunction with discussions on defense and security, effectively translating the objectives outlined in the Draghi Report into tangible and implementable reforms.

EUROPEAN SECURITY, UKRAINE, AND THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN GAZA

Russia's prolonged war of aggression against Ukraine remained the gravitational center of both meetings in October. On September 19, 2025, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented the 19th package of sanctions

against Russia. The measures primarily involved prohibiting the importation of Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG) into European markets, implementing transaction bans on additional Russian banks as well as banks in third countries, establishing new direct export restrictions on items and technologies employed by Russia against Ukraine, and seeking a solution to allocate immobilized Russian assets for financial support of Ukraine's defense.[20] The informal summit of the European Council moved the debate on the ways to allocate immobilized Russian assets for Ukraine's defense and discussed the possibility of imposing further sanctions, especially considering Russia's violation of Estonian airspace in late September 2025. Until the next formal European Council on October 23–24, 2025, EU leaders will elaborate on how to utilize these assets to fund a loan to Ukraine without risking a breach of international law. In a press conference following the informal European Council, President Costa emphasized that the next European Council summit would be "decision time" on how to utilize Russia's sanctioned assets to support Ukraine.[21]

At the informal European Council, EU leaders also reviewed the implementation of the nine defense priority areas identified in March 2025—namely air and missile defense, artillery, drones and counter-drone systems, military mobility, and cyber resilience. In this context, President Costa highlighted that leaders had expressed broad political support for the flagship initiatives proposed by the European Commission and the High Representative, particularly the European Drone Wall and the Eastern Flank Watch, aimed at safeguarding Eastern borders from Russian incursions by also including ground defenses and maritime security.[22] EPC commitments were largely informal: while roundtable discussions elaborated on traditional/hybrid threats, economic security, and migration, no binding defense commitments were made, underscoring the EPC's policy coordination value but also its institutional limits.

During the Copenhagen meetings, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza remained a pressing yet untouched issue, with the EU and its member states facing increasing pressure not only from the international community and public opinion but also from former top officials like Josep Borrell, the previous High Representative, to take more coordinated actions and concrete steps against war crimes in Gaza.[23] Amid growing criticism, the European Commission proposed the suspension of trade concessions with Israel on September 17, 2025, together with targeted sanctions on "extremist ministers" within the Israeli government and violent settlers,[24] marking an effort to bring the Union's external actions in line with its stated principles. The proposal put forth by the Commission must be adopted by a qualified majority by the Council. Additionally, there is currently no consensus within the EU regarding a more stringent stance on Israel, as member states such as Germany and Hungary have yet to decisively support EU sanctions against Israel. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz postponed announcing Germany's stance on EU sanctions at the informal European Council in Copenhagen, citing U.S. President Donald Trump's Gaza ceasefire plan as the reason.[25]

UNEVEN MOMENTUM IN EU ENLARGEMENT

Regarding enlargement, the EPC summits function as a critical evaluation of the EU's strategic commitment to accession, especially for candidate countries such as those in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. The absence of a clear timetable for accession emerged as a primary discussion point at the previous EPC meetings, particularly for Western Balkan countries seeking

more precise timelines. While Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama recently declared Albania's ambition to open the final cluster of negotiation chapters by the end of 2025,[26] Montenegro underlined its goal to join the Union by 2028 during the September 2025 Bled Strategic Forum.[27]

The October 2025 informal European Council and EPC Summit in Copenhagen reaffirmed the Union's strategic commitment to enlargement but exposed a growing asymmetry of political attention between the Eastern (Ukraine and Moldova) and Western Balkan tracks of the process. In the wake of the informal European Council, President Costa underlined that "Ukraine has been delivering on the accession reforms and that it is time for the EU to deliver, as enlargement is a merit-based process."[28] At the EPC plenary, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky explicitly called on EU leaders to open Cluster One of Ukraine's EU accession negotiations, arguing that Ukraine had completed its legislative screening and was ready for the next step.[29] President Costa, Commission President von der Leyen, and High Representative Kaja Kallas met Moldovan President Maia Sandu following Moldova's pro-European election victory and discussed how to accelerate Moldova's accession process, which "the citizens of the Republic of Moldova have voted for."[30] By contrast, Western Balkan leaders, especially those of Albania and Montenegro, used their interventions and side meetings to call for a more credible timeline for integration, emphasizing the countries' strong alignment with the EU *acquis*.[31]

The Future of the European Political Community: Potential Strategies for Reform

The rising multipolarity of the international system, along with a series of seismic geopolitical shocks in the EU's immediate neighborhood, has long underscored the need for EU leaders to adopt a multidimensional and strategically coherent approach to external action. This involves systematically recalibrating enlargement and neighborhood policies to address regional instabilities and strengthen democratic resilience in candidate and partner countries while also utilizing the EPC as a versatile and more adaptable platform for structured dialogue and coordinated responses to regional and global challenges.

To restore the Union's transformative power in its neighborhood, the EPC could operate as a complementary—rather than substitutive—track to accession. Several measures could be implemented to translate the EPC from mere symbolism to real substance. A permanent secretariat could help track progress, monitor pledges, and prepare agendas between the EPC summits.[32] Moreover, the formulation and dissemination of joint statements and conclusions—analogous to those issued by the European Council—may serve to hold participating countries accountable and foster improved policy coordination among EPC member states. Similarly, following the example of other multilateral or intergovernmental organizations and PESCO, mechanisms for funding could be established to encourage project-based collaboration among groups of states. Such funding and project-based collaboration could be operationalized through "soft" conditionality. Calibrated, small-scale incentives—such as regulated access for third countries to EPC projects (for example mobility and research projects,

green transition programs), working groups, and funding, could be allocated on a merit-based, reversible basis and contingent on clear, verifiable progress in domestic democratization. By doing so, the EPC could serve as a complementary framework regarding gradual membership in the EU. The "soft" conditionality approach could initially promote external differentiated integration with the EU—that is, the participation of non-EU countries in selected EU programs, projects, and policies without formal membership—allowing non-EU EPC countries to progressively align with EU norms and regulations. In later stages, it might facilitate internal differentiated integration, enabling those countries that eventually accede to the Union to join EU policy areas at varying speeds depending on their circumstances and readiness.[33]

Through a merit-based, flexible design, the EPC could allow the Union to shift between bilateral engagements, minilateral initiatives involving small groups of like-minded states, traditional multilateral structures such as the United Nations or NATO, and broad forms of rules-based global governance. The EPC's transformation from a symbolic forum into a delivery platform could bolster Europe's role in a multipolar world and support the maintenance of rules-based international relations.

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