

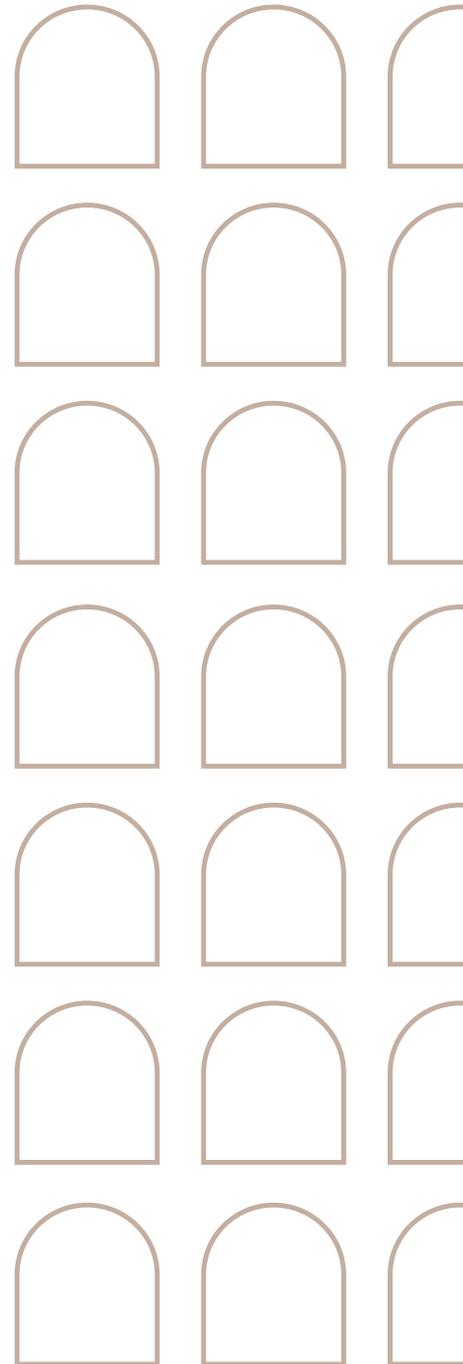
STG Policy Papers

POLICY BRIEF

THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY: A FORUM IN SEARCH OF A ROLE

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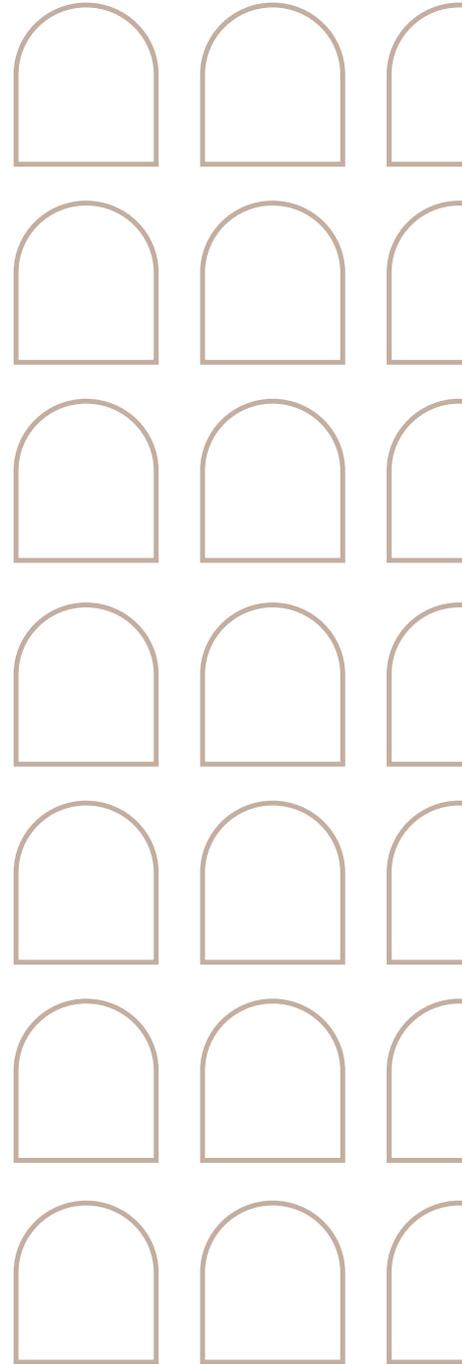


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has spurred an intense debate on the future of the European security order and on the EU's eastward enlargement. Following President Macron's proposal to launch a new format for political and security cooperation in Europe in May 2022, the first Summit of the EPC took place in Prague in October and sent a strong message of European unity in the face of Russia's aggression. However, as the 47 European leaders of the EPC prepare to gather for the second Summit in Moldova on 1 June 2023, the format still lacks a clear sense of purpose. This policy brief argues that the EPC could fulfil multiple roles, depending on convergence among its member states and on the scope for delivering added value compared to other European organisations. First, while clearly separate from the EU enlargement process, the EPC could complement it by fostering political engagement with EU aspirant members. Second, the EPC could evolve into an inclusive forum for security dialogue, building confidence among its members and helping prevent or manage crises. Third, the EPC could perform as a hub for differentiated cooperation, with groups of member states working together on security issues as well as on a broader agenda, such as education and connectivity. Flexibility is and should remain a strength of this format, but the sustainability of the EPC will depend on what it is able to deliver.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The upcoming summit of the European Political Community (EPC) in Chisinau, on 1 June, takes place one year after [President Macron outlined his idea to establish the new pan-European forum](#) in front of the European Parliament, on 9 May 2022. Less than five months on, [the first EPC Summit](#) was held in Prague in October 2022, gathering 44 European countries. Established to embody a firm, common response to Russia's aggression of Ukraine and to help re-think the European political and security architecture, the very creation of the EPC forum marked a significant innovation. However, as the 47 European leaders of the EPC prepare to gather in Moldova in a few weeks' time, the format still lacks a clear sense of purpose.

This policy brief reviews the evolution of the EPC and explores its prospects at a time of turmoil in European geopolitics. The purpose is to assess what role the EPC could play to advance dialogue, political convergence, security and concrete policy initiatives across the continent. Furthermore, the paper considers the challenges that the new EPC format faces. The principal question is whether and in what ways the EPC can deliver added value to its members and contribute to cooperation and stability across Europe. This brief builds on a number of interviews conducted with officials and experts from France, Germany, Poland, and Moldova.¹

2. THE EARLY STEPS: AN INITIATIVE WITH FEW BACKERS

The creation of the EPC prompted contrasting reactions. Some welcomed the initiative by President Macron as an opportunity to strengthen the alignment of all the European countries that oppose Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Others were sceptical, suspecting France of promoting a generic agenda of pan-continental dialogue that would sideline prospects for European Union (EU) enlargement in Eastern Europe.

2.1 Responding to the new geopolitical reality: the French initiative

The war in Ukraine and the consequent re-opening of the debate on EU enlargement set the stage for President Macron's proposal in May 2022 to "[organise Europe from a political perspective and with a broader scope than that of the European Union](#)", by establishing the European Political Community. Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought large-scale war back to Europe and shattered the European security architecture. The war raised the question of how Europe could re-structure its continental order. Within two weeks from the outbreak of the war, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia applied for EU membership, opening a new chapter in the prolonged and often [controversial debate on the EU's eastward expansion](#). Their requests compounded pressure to define a strategic approach to enlargement and to provide strong political support to Ukraine and the other Eastern neighbours.

President Macron's initiative matched a broader pattern of 'voluntarist' leadership efforts that France has often performed on the European stage. Paris would launch broad strategic ideas with scarce details on their implementation and specific end goals, while pragmatically adjusting these initiatives to evolving circumstances². This 'experimentalist' approach can help break new ground, but it can also generate hesitancy or even opposition from EU partners suspicious of France dressing its own national priorities in European clothes.

The aim to forge a framework for European cooperation that extends beyond the EU has deep roots in French strategic thinking. In sketching out his proposal for a new European forum, Emmanuel Macron explicitly referred to [François Mitterrand's 1989 idea to pursue a 'European Confederation'](#). Part of the French establishment still views Mitterrand's proposal as "a missed opportunity to pacify the European continent"³ following the collapse of the Soviet Union, by integrating Russia in shared structures of governance. However,

1 These interviews were conducted by the author between February and April 2023. For privacy reasons, the interviewees will remain anonymous. The author is grateful to the officials and experts who have generously shared their views and experience over the course of the preparation of this policy brief.

2 Interview with an expert from a German think tank, 13 February 2023.

3 Interview with a researcher from a French institute, 6 February 2023.

at the end of the Cold War, Central and Eastern European states felt that Mitterrand's idea risked charting an alternative course to that of EU and NATO enlargement, and as a result, rejected it. Dispelling concerns that Macron's EPC proposal aimed to side-line EU enlargement was therefore essential for France to prevent its EU partners from dismissing the proposal outright.

2.2 The many shades of scepticism surrounding the EPC

The EPC got off to a difficult start. Macron's initiative took most European capitals by surprise. Lack of prior consultations on the proposal, including with Berlin, did not help win support. As a result, French diplomacy engaged in course correction, reaching out to partners to gather political feedback on the proposal and to ensure that they would endorse the initiative.

German officials wondered how the envisaged forum would fit the existing multilateral architecture in Europe. Berlin needed reassurance that the resources that Germany would put into the new framework would be commensurate to its added value.⁴ In addition to taking a cautious and pragmatic approach to the creation of additional formats in Europe, some in Germany also questioned how the French initiative would relate to the EU's enlargement process. At the same time, the German government took over three months to openly back Ukraine's candidate status request, which only happened when [Chancellor Scholz visited Kyiv](#) just before the June European Council, alongside President Macron, then Italian Prime Minister Draghi, and Romanian President Iohannis. Ultimately, Germany viewed the EPC as a French idea and did not feel it had ownership over the proposal.⁵ However, Berlin calculated that it could not afford to ignore the initiative, as that would put additional strain on the already [complicated relations between the two countries](#).⁶

Poland did not embrace the idea with great enthusiasm either. [Warsaw was concerned](#) with the potential implications of the proposal for Eastern Europe and for the enlargement agenda of the EU. More importantly, facing the need to counter Russia's aggression and support Ukraine, Poland was uncomfortable with the prospect of creating a forum that would not include the US and Canada.⁷ Various EU members from Central and Eastern Europe shared these concerns. The same reservations informed Ukraine's wary initial reaction to the EPC proposal, with Kyiv focused on achieving EU candidate status.

However, [the historic decision of the European Council in June 2022](#) to grant EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and, in perspective, to Georgia, [marked a breakthrough](#), assuaging fears that the EPC could challenge or delay EU enlargement and unlocking political support for the initiative. The decision of the United Kingdom to join the EPC was another important factor that added political momentum to the proposal. Many capitals could see the added value of a format that included London after the trauma of Brexit, at a time when the whole of Europe was confronting the threat of war. A window of opportunity therefore opened in the summer of 2022 to move speedily towards the launch of the EPC at the Prague Summit in October 2022.

3. WHAT IS THE EPC FOR?

The very fact that [the first EPC Summit gathered 44 European countries](#) was a success. However, the Prague Summit did not deliver a clear sense of purpose for the new format. Eight months on, the role that the EPC is to play remains subject to debate. In European capitals, views diverge on how the EPC relates to the EU's enlargement process, on how it can contribute to strengthening European security, and on whether it can pave the way to some form of differentiated cooperation in Europe. At the same time, the search for a core mission may not be the most useful way to

4 Interview with a German government official, 2 March 2023.

5 Interview with an expert from a German think tank, 3 March 2023.

6 Interview with an expert from a French think tank, 16 February 2023.

7 Interview with an expert from a Polish think tank, 21 February 2023.

define the role of the platform. The EPC could fulfil multiple roles at once, depending on convergence among its member states and on its scope for delivering added value compared to other European organisations.

3.1 The EPC and the EU enlargement process: parallel tracks, a steppingstone, or a safety net?

The June 2022 European Council decision to grant candidate status to Eastern European applicants reassured sceptics that the EPC would not become a substitute for the EU enlargement process.⁸ There is now consensus among European countries that the EPC and EU enlargement follow separate tracks, each driven by distinct goals and each based on different parameters. However, this is not the only way to look at [the links between the EPC and EU enlargement](#). The fact that the two processes follow parallel tracks does not necessarily mean that they are disconnected.

While being neither a competitor nor a prelude to EU enlargement, the EPC can assist and complement this process. It can play a significant role in strengthening mutual understanding between the EU member states and the European states beyond the EU, enabling socialisation and community building, including at the level of heads of state and government. Moreover, the EPC can deepen political dialogue and advance sectoral policy cooperation between its members. Thus, the EPC could better equip candidate countries to participate in certain EU policies. This would be consistent with the prospect of reforming the enlargement process and introducing a [form of staged accession](#) for candidate countries.

Even if detached from the enlargement policy by design, the EPC could also perform as a safety net, and provide a space for dialogue and cooperation in case the accession process ran into complications. Despite the European Council's unanimous decision in June 2022, differences among national capitals persist

on the timeframe for EU enlargement, on the capacity of candidate countries to adopt the required reforms, and on the capacity of the EU to absorb new member states. Experience, including the drawn-out and contested process of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, shows that mutual pledges are not sufficient. Besides, Russia's aggression has made the integration of Ukraine and of the entire region into the EU even more urgent, but also more challenging.⁹ The prospect of fast-track accession, while legally possible, is all but certain to run into political obstacles within both the EU and the candidate countries.¹⁰ The significant difficulties that the next phase of EU enlargement may encounter suggest that the EPC could be instrumental as an additional layer of political fabric connecting EU member states and candidate countries.¹¹

3.2 The EPC and the future of the European security order

The EPC was initially conceived of as a community of democracies; it aimed to bring together European states that shared common values on an equal footing.¹² Nevertheless, as Russia's aggression directly or indirectly threatened all countries in Europe, geopolitical considerations prevailed, resulting in the involvement of as wide a range of countries as possible. The success of the Prague meeting largely rested on its symbolic value, sending a strong message of unity in condemnation of Russia's war in Ukraine. The political aim of the EPC was clearly to isolate Russia and Belarus, the aggressor and its aide. For that reason, no European leader could afford to be absent from the summit.¹³

Eight months on, the potential role of the EPC in strengthening security and stability in Europe can be framed in three main ways. First, the format can continue to offer a platform for pan-European consultation on dealing with Russia's aggression, and for the eventual aftermath of the Ukraine war. The EPC would help to preserve a common front, address (and

8 Interviews with French government officials, 29 March 2023 and 3 March 2023.

9 Interview with an expert from a French think tank, 16 February 2023.

10 Interview with a French government official, 3 March 2023.

11 Interview with an expert from a Polish think tank, 27 February 2023.

12 Interviews with a French government official, 3 March 2023, and an expert from a French think tank, 6 March 2023.

13 Interviews with an expert from a French think tank, 17 February 2023, and a German government official, 2 March 2023.

paper over) political differences, and shape a common European narrative against Russia's war.

Second, the EPC could be seen as a venue for strategic dialogue on Europe's political and security agenda beyond the current war. In this capacity, the EPC would promote exchanges but not deliver binding decisions. Some in France maintain that, over the long-term, the EPC could also be instrumental to structuring relations with a post-war and post-imperialist Russia.¹⁴ This perspective would open the issue of the interconnection of the EPC with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), especially considering that this organisation is largely gridlocked due to Russia's destructive actions.

Third, the forum could play a useful role in discussions over contentious security matters and in promoting de-confliction among its members. An early test was [the quadrilateral meeting](#) that took place at the margins of the Prague Summit involving the Prime Minister of Armenia and the President of Azerbaijan, together with the French President and the President of the European Council, which helped to create the necessary conditions to deploy a civilian EU mission in Armenia on the border with Azerbaijan. An informal meeting between the leaders of Armenia and Turkey in Prague provided further evidence of the potential of the EPC as a venue for discreet top-level encounters that contribute to confidence building. Given its wide membership, the EPC has the potential to achieve political progress on sensitive issues by convening the right actors in small formats.¹⁵

3.3 The EPC as a platform for differentiated cooperation

Besides contributing to strategic dialogue among European leaders, the EPC might play a useful role in fostering sectoral cooperation between EU and non-EU countries. [Providing](#)

[tangible deliverables](#) will be one of the principal criteria in assessing the added value of the EPC and in determining its sustainability.

The EPC is of course not the only framework through which cooperation takes place between EU member states and their partners in Europe. However, due to its pan-European scope, it can provide a suitable venue for undertaking various initiatives in areas of shared interest, bridging different sub-regional projects.¹⁶ In defining the areas and modalities of cooperation, one of the main questions is whether these initiatives would necessarily involve all members, or whether priority would be given to so-called differentiated cooperation among sub-sets of members.¹⁷ Preliminary exchanges among EPC members suggest that cooperation will likely take place within groups or coalitions of states at variable geometry.

As to the concrete policy areas where cooperation could be advanced, some observers and officials consider the security field a priority, while respecting the prerogatives of NATO. Cyber security could be an area where joint efforts would deliver added value, such as by organising joint exercises.¹⁸ Some believe that cooperation could also be fostered in the defence industrial sector.¹⁹ Others deem the security field to be too sensitive to spur cooperation under the EPC framework, and point to the potential for joint work in the fields of energy, connectivity, climate change, the digital and green transitions, and telecommunication networks (namely, the abolition of roaming charges).²⁰ Infrastructure development projects and strengthening the security of critical infrastructure could be suitable priorities for cooperative action too. Whatever the policy focus, the implementation of common projects would depend on funding, management, and expertise, all of which points to the question of the institutional capacity of the EPC.

14 Interview with a French government official, 9 March 2023.

15 Interview with a German government official, 2 March 2023.

16 Interview with an expert from a Moldovan think tank, 28 March 2023.

17 Interview with a French government official, 3 March 2023.

18 Interview with a French government official, 29 March 2023.

19 Interview with an expert from a Polish think tank, 27 February 2023.

20 Interview with a German government official, 2 March 2023.

4. OPEN QUESTIONS AND POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Ultimately, 'the EPC will be what it will deliver'.²¹ At present, there is no masterplan guiding the evolution of the EPC, with a fair amount of brinkmanship having shaped developments so far.²² The key question is whether the EPC will remain a platform for exchange and deliberation, or whether it should acquire a policy role and deliver concrete results.

4.1 Flexibility as a strength?

The EPC is today an informal intergovernmental forum, which puts its participants on an equal footing irrespective of their membership to the EU and NATO. All the participants seem to appreciate the opportunity to meet face to face, organise bilateral meetings on the margins, and engage in strategic exchanges on issues of common concern.

The EPC has no secretariat, no institutional framework, and no decision-making mechanism. EPC summits do not produce political declarations or conclusions. The presidency rotates among member countries, alternating between EU members and non-members alike. The country holding the presidency proposes the agenda of the summits. Nothing is set in stone, neither membership (with current discussions on potentially expanding membership to non-European EU neighbours), nor the pace of the meetings (which, some argue, should be reduced from two to one per year)²³. Flexibility is what distinguishes the EPC from other formats and, according to many participants, this feature should be safeguarded.²⁴ In short, the EPC would replicate some of the working methods of other informal gatherings such as the G7 and the G20.²⁵

While highly valued by participants, however, it is doubtful that flexible agendas and informal proceedings offer a viable basis to generate concrete deliverables.²⁶ Priorities

on the agenda for the forthcoming Chisinau Summit include the need to strengthen the fight against cyber threats, and expanding education programmes. However, if the EPC truly hopes to have any impact on these issues, then it needs to develop the capacity for policy coordination and implementation.

4.2 What role, if any, is there for the EU and its institutions?

The EU is one of the parties involved in the EPC but does not play a leading role therein. Part of the attraction of the project for non-EU countries, such as the UK, Switzerland, and Turkey, stems precisely from the fact that EU institutions are present but are not central.²⁷ At a technical level, however, if and when participating countries decide that the EPC should undertake policy initiatives, the engagement, resources, and expertise of EU institutions would be of great help.

Mobilising funding from European financial institutions, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB), to support projects is one of the options currently being discussed by EPC members.²⁸ An alternative or complementary option could be the creation of ad hoc intergovernmental funds. Extending the application of EU programmes, such as Erasmus, to non-EU members of the EPC, would of course require EU institutions and funding to play a leading role. Another case in point would be the contribution that the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) could bring to joint cybersecurity exercises under the EPC framework.

4.3 Challenges to EPC sustainability

Looking ahead, the central challenge for the EPC is sustainability. The political context of European unity in the face of Russia's aggression in Ukraine was central to the success of the Prague Summit. That said, the legitimacy of the EPC cannot flow indefinitely

21 Interview with an expert from a French think tank, 6 March 2023.

22 Interview with a German government official, 2 March 2023.

23 Interview with a German government official, 31 March 2023.

24 Interviews with an expert from a Moldovan think tank, 28 March 2023, and a German government official, 31 March 2023.

25 Interview with a German government official, 31 March 2023.

26 Interview with an expert from a French think tank, 6 March 2023.

27 Interview with an expert from a French think tank, 17 February 2023.

28 Interviews with a researcher from a French institute, 6 February 2023, and a French government official, 29 March 2023.

from the circumstances created by the war. The EPC will need to find roles that it can fulfil in ways that meet the interests of its members. Demonstrating and sustaining the added value of the format, however, requires tackling various challenges. First, the diversity of members makes it harder to identify common priorities.²⁹ Lack of leadership is another risk that could affect the EPC. France has sought to relinquish the leading role that it played in 2022 as Paris does not want the EPC to be perceived as a French product. Nevertheless, most of the other participants are less invested in the future of the EPC and seem comfortable to simply re-enact the Prague Summit.³⁰ Finally, the articulation of the EPC's mandate with that of existing organisations in Europe, such as the EU, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and NATO needs to be defined to foster possible cooperation with these bodies, while excluding duplication.

5. CONCLUSIONS: THE WAY TO CHISINAU

Like the first Summit in Prague, the forthcoming meeting in Chisinau bears considerable political and symbolic significance. The meeting of 47 leaders will once again display European unity in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and will send a strong message of solidarity to Moldova - a country vulnerable to the threats stemming from Russia. However, the Chisinau Summit also sets a demanding test for the EPC. The format cannot thrive if it does not deliver added value to its members. The challenge is to define a clear sense of purpose for the EPC so that the forum can find its proper place in the European institutional landscape and contribute to the construction of a new, pan-European cooperative and security architecture.

The EPC can grow in two non-mutually exclusive directions. Primarily established in response to the pressing need to cope with war in Europe, the EPC may continue to evolve as a venue for strategic dialogue and political crisis management, contributing to convergence among its members, and strengthening stability in Europe. The EPC would thereby play a role in creating a more coordinated Europe, reinforcing the continent's resilience against Russia's attempts to divide it. From this perspective, the EPC would focus on cooperation in the field of energy security, the fight against cybercrime, and the protection of critical infrastructure. On the second path, these activities could contribute to the evolution of the EPC into a platform for differentiated cooperation among its member states, which may work together in fields beyond the security dimension, such as in education, mobility, connectivity, and innovation.

29 Interview with a German government official, 2 March 2023.

30 Interviews with a French expert, 23 February 2023, and an expert from a German think tank, 3 March 2023.

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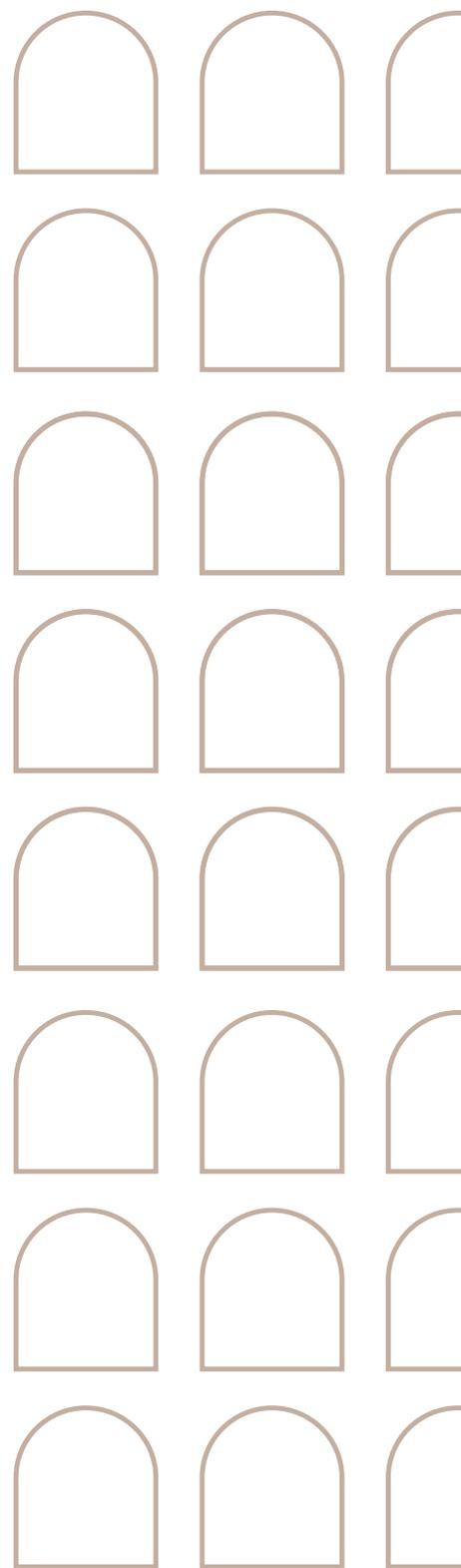
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