

The EPC and the Future of the European Order

On 18 July 2024, the newly elected British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, hosted 46 European leaders at the majestic Blenheim Palace, the birthplace of Winston Churchill, for the fourth summit of the European Political Community (EPC). The European leaders' commitment to [stand](#) with Ukraine was at the heart of the gathering. As part of their continuing support for Kyiv, the Heads of State and Government discussed how to assist Ukraine in meeting its energy needs ahead of winter following Russia's brutal bombing campaign targeting energy infrastructure and the necessity to tighten the enforcement of the energy sanctions imposed on Russia. Prime Minister Starmer stressed that "Europe's security starts in Ukraine." On the summit's sidelines, Ukrainian President Zelensky signed agreements on security cooperation and long-term support with the Czech Prime Minister, Fiala, and the Slovenian Prime Minister, Golob. For the first time, NATO, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Council of Europe were invited to attend an EPC summit.

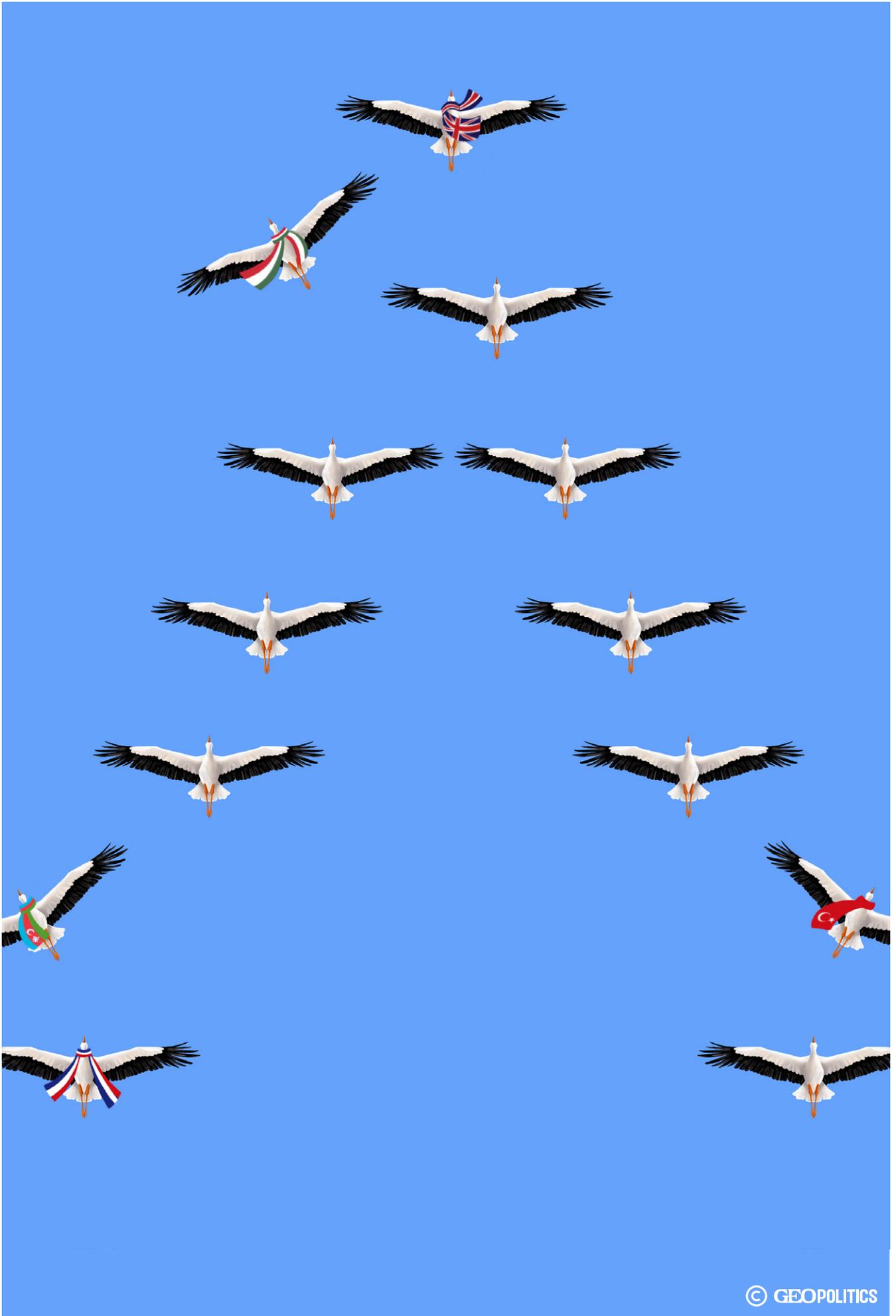
Following Labour's landslide victory in the national elections on 4 July, the Blenheim EPC summit proved well-timed for the new British government. For one, it presented a high-profile platform for the government to reiterate its drive to "reset relations with Europe as a reliable partner, a dependable ally and a good neighbor," in the [words](#) of Foreign Secretary Lammy. For another, Prime Minister Starmer [maintained](#) that the meeting left European partners "with a sense of renewed confidence in their relationship with the UK." In short, the summit helped set the stage for a new phase in the UK's partnership with the rest of Europe, which is expected to lead to an EU-UK summit, the first after Brexit, and to a wide-ranging security pact between the two sides.

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Despite the message of unity sent by the leaders gathered at Blenheim Palace, the summit took place at a critical time for the continent. Russia is piling up pressure on Ukraine, recent elections have weakened key governments within the EU, and the outcome of the presidential elections in the US could carry far-reaching consequences for transatlantic affairs and Europe's security and defense, in particular. Europe is simultaneously facing a security crisis, a crisis of values, and a credibility crisis. In many ways, the EPC was set up precisely to help Europe deal with unprecedented challenges. So far, its impact has been underwhelming.

A Mixed Record

In the two years since its launch, the EPC has shown its potential for helping participating countries coalesce around shared goals. The success of the first EPC summit in Prague in October 2022 rested on its symbolic value, as it displayed unity in the face of Russia's war in Ukraine and demonstrated the willingness to foster strategic convergence among European countries. Informal, unscripted meetings took place at the summit's margins - a quadrilateral meeting involving the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, France, and the European Council, and an informal dialogue between the leaders of Armenia and Türkiye. These side meetings suggested that the EPC could provide a valuable platform for de-confliction and confidence-building among its members. The inclusiveness of the summit, where all participants, whether part of the EU or not, were placed on an equal footing, was also seen as a plus.

The second summit in Moldova in June 2023 sent a strong message of support and solidarity to Ukraine and to the host country, which is highly exposed to Russia's hybrid campaigns. The Moldovan leadership leveraged the summit to gain diplomatic dividends, project their European aspirations, and informally advance the country's

European integration, using bilateral exchanges with EU leaders to press this message. Thematic discussions at the summit addressed joint efforts for peace and security, energy resilience, and connectivity and mobility in Europe. As at the Prague summit, the second EPC gathering managed to convene political dialogues between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Serbia and Kosovo.

The third EPC summit in Granada in October 2023 was overshadowed by the resumption of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh a few weeks before the gathering and by an escalation of tensions between Serbia and Kosovo. The decision of Azerbaijan's President Aliyev to cancel his participation at the last minute and the choice of Turkish President Erdoğan not to take part in the summit after skipping the meeting in Moldova was a setback for the EPC's convening power. Thematic discussions were organized around policy areas such as digitalization, energy, environment and a green transition, and multilateralism and geostrategy. However, no meeting addressed regional disputes between Armenia-Azerbaijan and Kosovo-Serbia, weakening the case for the EPC as a confidence-building venue. Furthermore, disagreement between Spain and the UK over including migration in the agenda [added](#) to a sense of disappointment.

Strengths and Weaknesses of a Format in the Making

Launched as part of Europe's collective response to Russia's war against Ukraine, the EPC got off to a difficult start. Even if French President Macron's innovative proposal for a new European political forum surmounted initially skeptical reactions and gained momentum, the EPC's deliverables remain ephemeral, and its added value debated.

The EPC has been framed as a unique opportunity for wide-ranging debates among European leaders around topical issues on the continental agenda - the Ukraine war and its implications being, of

course, at the center of the proceedings. There is value in the process of [“deliberation taking precedence over decision-making”](#) on more specific policy issues. Still, there are doubts that informal discussions constitute a strong enough foundation to ensure the sustainability of the new format. Proposals have been put forward to harness the EPC to deliver more concrete policy outcomes and [enhance](#) sectoral integration among participating countries, but there is limited progress in this direction.

The distinctive features of the EPC are both an asset and a liability. For some [authors](#), “informal summitry, norms of equality, and the importance of trust” are the real strengths of the EPC. According to the current practice, the host countries, which alternate between EU members and non-members, take organizational responsibility and shape the summits’ agendas, reflecting their priorities. The agility of agenda-setting is appreciated since it allows for adapting the proceedings to a rapidly changing reality. However, a minimum degree of institutionalization could help host countries with summit preparations since not all have the same resources to provide continuity to the proceedings and enable the EPC to take charge of concrete dossiers if and when tasked. Additionally, mainly delegating agenda-setting to the host countries makes it vulnerable to being instrumentalized for narrow national purposes. From this standpoint, the fifth EPC summit, which will take place in Budapest next November, will be an essential test of the EPC’s resilience to Hungary’s Prime Minister Orbán’s illiberal agenda.

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Besides the risk of instrumentalization, there is a question of commitment. The EPC depends on the participants’ goodwill and engagement. Not

everyone is equally motivated. If the UK, Norway, Switzerland, and others see value in participating in the forum, this is not true for Türkiye. President Erdoğan’s no-show at three EPC summits out of four, save the inaugural Prague meeting, casts a shadow over the EPC’s role as a pan-European platform, barring Russia and Belarus. If the EPC aspires to advance strategic dialogue at the continental level, Türkiye is one of the central actors. On balance, however, the EPC seems to have generated more political interest among non-EU states, which either hosted the summit or valued the opportunity to engage with their EU partners in an informal context than among EU members, except France.

This finding raises the question of the deficit of ownership and leadership that the EPC has suffered since its successful launch in Prague. France’s President Macron can take credit for proposing the EPC in the first place and has a high stake in its sustainability. The French leader has sought to keep some distance from the new format to avoid the EPC from being perceived as a French project. Still, Paris has delivered political support to the forum throughout successive summits. With political turbulence engulfing France following the recent snap parliamentary elections, there is a question of whether or not the French government will have the space to focus on the EPC file. A connected question is if, after the Blenheim Summit and as part of its *rapprochement* to Europe, the UK could take a more significant stake in the future of the EPC, leading perhaps to [Franco-British cooperation](#) in bringing the format forward.

Defining the Role

In the EPC’s short history, questions of form have often prevailed over issues of substance. This was understandable while the new platform took shape, but it cannot last indefinitely. Form and substance cannot be disconnected and must come

together in the debate about the EPC's role in Europe's crowded institutional landscape. Since the first summit in Prague, the EPC has been searching for a clear purpose — a role. Two years and four summits later, its mission and focus are still vague.

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To put it differently, this is a matter of the EPC's comparative advantage. Given the broader strategic context and the experience of the EPC so far, it appears that the unique selling point of this platform is contributing to the redefinition of the European security order during and after the Ukraine war. In doing so, the EPC can play a complementary role to those of the EU and NATO as a forum for pan-European consultation on how to deal with Russia's aggression. The EPC can bring added value by fostering convergence and addressing differences among the wider community of European countries.

As such, the EPC would favor the emergence of a common strategic culture, or '[strategic intimacy](#),' rallying European leaders around a joint assessment of the threats and challenges they face. Due to the prevalence of geopolitical considerations, the EPC is supposed to be, at its core, a 'community of shared interests.' Yet, even the homogeneity of interests is in question, considering, for example, the open cleavages between Hungary and the other EU member states on the issue of Ukraine.

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Despite these tensions, the EPC could focus on creating a shared sense of belonging and purpose among those opposed to Russia's aggression and aspiring to create conditions for security and stability in Europe. That means that the EPC should continue to focus on the other conflicts affecting peace on the continent, even if the last two summits made no progress on this agenda. The violence in Nagorno-Karabakh and Northern Kosovo in 2023 exposed the volatility of respective regions. However, the countries participating in the EPC should, at a minimum, share a commitment to [non-aggression](#) and respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The EPC can also offer a suitable platform for discussing the larger security agenda in response to hybrid challenges, including cyber and disinformation, to share threat assessments and best practices in preparing for and responding to these threats. Discussing the challenges of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) at the Blenheim Summit offered a good starting point. Flexible networks could be developed between experts from participating countries, which would complement cooperation in the context of the EU and NATO partnerships with several European countries. This agenda would also accompany the ongoing debate within the EU on developing a civil crisis preparedness strategy, drawing on the experiences of Finland and Sweden.

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an overwhelming consensus that the EPC is not and should not be a substitute for EU enlargement and that the two processes follow separate tracks. However, the EPC could serve as an ‘[accelerator](#)’ for those countries seeking to join the EU and sustain ‘structured cooperation’ with those not aspiring to do so. The Franco-German group of experts on EU institutional reform [identified](#) the EPC as an important venue of ‘external differentiation’ for political cooperation. The EPC could also act as a [safety net](#) and provide a space for dialogue and cooperation in case the accession process runs into complications.

The Way Forward

While not delivering significant results, the Blenheim Summit in the UK provided a much-needed injection of political confidence in the future of the EPC as a pan-European forum for strategic debates. It remains to be seen whether or not this will be enough for the EPC to [navigate](#) “a pe-

riod of deep anxiety and uncertainty” in Europe, as Commission President von der Leyen recently described it. Becoming a vector of the broader *rapprochement* between the UK and the rest of Europe, alongside the deepening of the EU-UK partnership, would add a critical dimension to future EPC proceedings.

Beyond specific agendas, the EPC’s structural and political problems have to be addressed. Without greater ownership by participating countries and more sustained leadership, the same features that allowed the forum to emerge – its informality and flexibility – might determine its hollowing out. There is no prospect at this stage for the EPC to emerge as a new security actor within the larger European security architecture. However, EPC can deliver added value as a platform that creates political conditions for convergence, confidence-building, and further cooperation among its members. This would be a worthy output for a process that needs more direction ■