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BLOOD, TOIL, TEARS AND SWEAT: THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY'S SUMMIT IN THE UK

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EPC OBSERVATORY ANALYSIS

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The European Political Community (EPC) meets on 18 July for the fourth time. Hosted by the UK at Blenheim Palace, the birthplace of Winston Churchill, echoes of his 'blood, toil, tears and sweat' speech in May 1940 cannot be ignored. Facing an existential battle on the continent, Keir Starmer, the UK's freshly elected prime minister, will have a baptism of fire at the first major international gathering he'll host.

Due to the EPC's origins and aims – namely to show a united front against Russia and provide a forum for strategic intimacy amongst leaders of 47 European countries (plus the EU) on equal footing – the format is a high-stakes gamble in diplomacy.

The previous underwhelming summit in Spain was boycotted by Türkiye's strongman Erdoğan and his Azeri counterpart Aliyev, and even the photo-op was mishandled. The UK must get this summit right to keep the EPC on track.

Opportunities

This EPC summit, which follows on from leaders' meetings in the context of the G7, the Peace Conference in Switzerland, the European Council, and the NATO Washington Summit, presents a chance to prolong the international chorus in support of Ukraine. Having committed to the agreed agenda for the EPC summit, the new UK leader has the unique opportunity to use the platform to channel his inner Churchill. He should seize it to deliver the most evocative of rebukes of Russia's unjustified war of aggression, and indeed a vision for a peaceful and secure continent.

While keeping its informal nature, there is consensus across participants that the EPC must go beyond support for Ukraine. It must harness the interest of leaders to tackle other strategic issues with a pan-European dimension, subsequently brought forward by relevant ministries and international bodies.

Two examples from previous EPC summits point the way. One is the UK's efforts to expand partnerships on trafficking in human beings, with its eight-point plan agreed with Italy, the Netherlands, France, Albania, and the European Commission. Another is France's initiative to relaunch energy cooperation with Spain and Portugal, leading to establishment of the H2MED project for an undersea hydrogen pipeline.

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Following past practice, the UK will host three roundtable discussions for which leaders can sign up: on boosting energy connectivity, managing migration, and tackling foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). As part of our EPC Observatory, we have co-organised preparatory meetings with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), as well as an event with the UK Mission to the EU. Our meetings with FCDO brought key government representatives (sherpas and diplomats) and policy experts together to gather ideas, opinions and expectations. The meetings resulted in guiding questions for the roundtable discussions at the upcoming summit

This track 1.5 diplomatic process involving non-officials is a welcome innovation for the under-institutionalised EPC and worth replicating by future presidency-holders. It could serve not only as a helpful instrument for preparing upcoming summits but also as a *trait d'union* amongst them.

While the verdict is still out on this *modus operandi*, the appetite to use the EPC to explore avenues for plurilateral cooperation is clear. It must be tapped by EPC countries to set in motion initiatives on these topics. Minilaterals on the sidelines could facilitate peace dialogues, discuss people-to-people mobility or exchange lessons learned about emerging and disruptive technologies. In this context, the addition of the UK to the Weimar triangle's cooperation on defence and military support for Ukraine would pack the kind of punch that the Kremlin would take seriously.

Potential pitfalls

Although opportunities abound to transform this informal leaders' meeting into a leaders' ideas lab, it will take hard work to shift currently misaligned stars.

Pending the outcome of the general election and anointment of a new prime minister, the FCDO was bound to follow pre-election guidance. It has thus been in more of a listening and gathering mode than actively crafting the message coming out of Blenheim Palace. The summit is already a challenging logistical endeavour, with the fear that it will again be underwhelming for the lack of any clear and concrete initiatives.

France, which has been leading the EPC from behind since its inception, has also just experienced a snap parliamentary election. With gains on both the far-right and the far-left, and his own party badly wounded, President Macron's vision for continental security and stability may be weakened by an uneasy co-habitation with inward-looking parties.

This summit is the last chance before the next host, Hungary, led by Putin's acolyte Viktor Orbán, takes the wind out of the EPC's pro-Ukraine sails this upcoming autumn. Any talk about 'defending and securing democracy' – the UK's label for the roundtable on FIMI – is likely to be left by the wayside as well.

Further down the line, the next rumoured host, Albania, would likely continue Budapest's attempt to use the EPC to give political impetus to EU enlargement towards Western Balkan countries that have been in the waiting room for far too long.

Finally, since participation partly defines the message of the EPC, President Erdoğan's third strike of absenteeism would cast a shadow over the UK summit and the pretence of convening all of Europe except a hell-bent Russia and its Belarusian accomplice.

So, what to do?

The EPC's value is *hors question*. But its purpose must be actively sought. In this sense, the Franco-British engine of pan-European cooperation must take ownership of the EPC and set the foundations for its sustainability moving forward.

In the absence of a final communiqué, sherpas and special envoys should coordinate on prime ministerial/presidential statements, emphasising the importance of the EPC in this grave hour for Europe. They must also put forward concrete initiatives on which (combinations of) leaders would like to take forward pan-European cooperation.