Commentary
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US-Russia Summit in Alaska: Can the EU influence the outcome?

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Summary

President Trump and President Putin are due to meet this Friday, 15 August, to discuss ending the war in Ukraine. In light of the EU leaders' statement of 12 August, excluding Hungary, that any deal must respect Ukraine's sovereignty, involve Kyiv and be based on a ceasefire, we asked ELN network members the following questions: 1) What can and should European governments do to ensure that Washington and Russia act upon those principles? 2) How can the EU influence the outcome of the bilateral talks, sustain transatlantic unity, and prepare for different possible outcomes?

The upcoming US-Russia summit in Alaska reflects some painful facts about the EU's real weight in global and even European geopolitics today. While the EU and some of its member states are key to certain dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine war, overall, they remain sidelined in the grand geopolitical constellation of this war. This results not just from the decades-long structural European dependence on the American security umbrella, but also from Brussels's own multiple misplaced polices of recent years that have effectively lowered the EU's leverage even in its immediate neighbourhood.

Given these hard realities, there is little the EU can realistically do right now to ensure that its position really influences the outcome of the bilateral talks in Alaska or any future Russian-American engagement. This is not to say that Trump and Putin will necessarily reach any major agreements that will fundamentally contradict the EU leaders' statement of 12 August. If anything, the forthcoming summit appears unlikely to become a historic game-changer.

> But, importantly, whatever happens in Alaska and later will to a larger extent be shaped by the significance of the US-Russian bilateral relationship to both Washington and Moscow than by the EU's statements and efforts.

The EU's belief that by simply increasing sanctions and other elements of pressure against Russia, it can somehow secure a seat around the table has always looked unfounded and now appears to have been proven empirically wrong. European sanctions certainly bite the Russian economy, but they fail to force Moscow to change behaviour and, more importantly, to increase the EU's own leverage. Nor can the EU's recently unveiled rearmament plans quickly translate into serious political weight.

Yet, the EU can still recover its geopolitical might. For that, it needs to find a down-to-earth way of combining deterrence vis-à-vis Russia with smart diplomacy towards Moscow and Minsk. In other words, the EU needs another "Harmel moment" to lower its geopolitical vulnerabilities and improve its security.

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