

European Union summit in Nice increases weight of larger countries

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The conference of European Union heads of government in Nice ended early Monday morning with an "agreement", one and a half days later than planned. The agreement is primarily an expression of the fact, according to all involved, that under no circumstances could the summit be allowed to fail. But none of the disputed questions were really solved.

The aim of the summit had been to increase the EU's capacity to act by carrying through structural reforms and to prepare it to accommodate new members. To this end, the so-called Amsterdam "left-overs"—those questions that could not be resolved at the last EU intergovernmental conference in Amsterdam due to unbridgeable differences—were to be settled. Nice only managed this partially. This is made clear by the fact that the summit decided, at Germany's insistence, to call a further intergovernmental conference for the year 2004, to deal particularly with the delimitation of powers within the EU itself.

The Nice summit reached the following agreement on the disputed questions:

* From 2005, France, Spain, Italy, Great Britain and Germany will forgo their second EU Commissioner. However, each member country, including new members, will continue to have a representative in the Commission—a postponing of plans to reduce the Commission and organise it more effectively. Only when the EU expands from its present 15 member states to 27, will negotiations again take place about a reduction.

* A complicated new formula was agreed to determine the weighting of each country's votes in the Council of Ministers. This will give the larger countries more weight in contrast to the smaller EU member states, but not as much as they had originally desired. The ratio between the highest and lowest votes—at the moment 1:5—will become 1:7 ¼, and not the planned 1:10. Germany did not get any more votes than France, Britain and Italy, despite insisting its larger population should entitle it to more. In future, to pass a resolution under the qualified majority voting procedures it will be necessary to gain 73 percent of the votes in the Council of Ministers as well as the support of countries

representing 62 percent of the EU's total population. This enables the larger countries to block resolutions they do not find acceptable.

* The national right of veto was removed from approximately half of all the areas in which it had previously applied. Decisions will now be made based on qualified majority voting (see above). However, this involves only secondary issues. As far as the key issues that are crucial for the EU's future capacity to act, the unanimity principle still prevails. Britain and Sweden defended their veto in taxation and welfare policies. Germany ensured that the veto on asylum matters would only go when the member states unanimously agree to a common asylum and immigration policy. On structural policy—the distribution of billions in subsidies to the regions—the veto remains until 2007 at the insistence of Spain who is a net recipient. The veto also remains in matters of commercial cultural policy due to French pressure.

All the summit's results must still be ratified by the national parliaments of the member countries, which is anything but certain. Although it cannot block the summit agreements, the European parliament announced its opposition to them. The Italian parliament has said that if the European parliament does reject them, it would also vote against ratifying the agreement.

The most aggressive arguments in Nice took place over the new weighting of the votes in the Council of Ministers, since this concerns real power and influence. There were not only sharp tensions between Germany (which insisted its larger population should be taken into consideration) and France (which was adamant the principle of Franco-German parity had to be preserved), but also between the larger and smaller EU members.

A French proposal, which would have granted the larger states substantially more weight, unleashed a veritable rebellion amongst the smaller countries. The Portuguese government head Antonio Guterres publicly accused the French of an "institutional coup". Luxembourg's premier Claude Juncker said he had never felt the continuous fragility

of Europe as strongly as at this summit.

The German delegation used these moods skilfully for their own interests and portrayed themselves as the representative of the smaller countries. They helped the candidate state Poland to achieve parity with Spain, which has the same sized population, since the French proposal had originally designated fewer votes for Poland. And Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder expressly praised Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, who had stubbornly insisted upon Belgium receiving the same number of votes as the Netherlands, dragging out negotiations until early Monday morning. Although the Netherlands has substantially more inhabitants than Belgium, Verhofstadt justified his demand by pointing out that this also applies to Germany and France; indirectly attacking the French point of view.

Many press comments made France's awkward conduct of the negotiations and the undiplomatic behaviour of President Jacques Chirac, who for a long time has had the nickname "bulldozer", responsible for the fierce arguments in Nice. In reality, far more fundamental questions are involved: France fears a lasting loss of its prominent position in Europe.

The enlargement to the East will inevitably shift the balance of power within the EU. Germany is not only the most populous and economically strongest country, with the expansion to the East, it has also moved geographically into the centre of the EU and the direct vicinity of the prospective eastern members. Paris is over 1,000 kilometres from Berlin, but Warsaw lies only half as far away and Prague only one third so far. Germany already has the strongest economic ties with Eastern Europe.

In Germany, the summit, which has at least made the accession of Poland and the other Eastern European candidates from the year 2003 possible, was largely celebrated as a success. However, as Chancellor Schroeder said, the German government would have "liked more". Schroeder was even praised by the opposition because of his conduct of the negotiations.

Moreover, Schroeder was able to mark a success: The summit decided to remove the veto concerning so-called "flexibility" although this was largely overshadowed by the media circus over vote weighting. "Flexibility" involves the "re-enforced" co-operation of a small set of EU members, a sort of alliance within the alliance. It is considered to be an instrument with which a leading group of EU countries can be established that can push forward the other members. So far such co-operation was only acceptable if no other member raised objections against it.

The German government cannot be so disappointed it was unable to achieve all of its aims in Nice. The resulting weakness of the EU institutions makes it harder for other

countries to bridle Germany's desires when it creates *faits accomplis* with the help of "flexibility" and by using its economic weight.

The Nice summit has made one thing clear: Political events in Europe will be determined increasingly by mutual distrust and spiteful rivalries. The process of European integration under the auspices of the EU is incapable of bringing the European peoples harmoniously together. It moves between the Scylla and Charybdis of the national egoism that has devastated Europe several times already and the authoritarian pro-business Brussels bureaucracy. In both cases, the democratic rights and social interests of the European people are ignored.

There was only one question on which the summit was quickly united—military armament. Already last Friday, the heads of government approved resolutions to strengthen common foreign and security policies, and thus officially agreed to establish the European Rapid Response Force, planned for a long time. This will consist of 60,000 personnel, supplied from the various national armies, and should be operational in the year 2003.

Unexpected difficulties emerged here also, when the British Prime Minister Tony Blair surprisingly insisted on striking long passages from the accompanying text. Blair, along with the French government, had originally initiated the force in 1998 in Saint Malo, but he now feared that it might become too independent of NATO. On this issue, Blair faces substantial pressure from the USA and the Conservative, eurosceptic opposition in Britain.

Blair finally was able to get his way, but diplomats at the summit stressed that this changed nothing in the substance of the resolution. What was previously contained in the public statement is now hidden in its small print. The argument over the strike force's dependency or independence from NATO is still theoretical to a large extent. At this point in time, the European Union troop lacks the technical and logistic prerequisites to be able to act internationally without NATO support. The construction of its own political and military decision-making structure is, however, the first step to establishing an alternative to NATO.



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