

Deep divisions dominate European Union summit

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The 25 leaders of the nations currently comprising the European Union met in Brussels last Thursday and Friday to discuss its expansion. The summit was characterised by profound differences over the function and future of the EU.

Should the current process of extension continue into Eastern Europe and southwards towards the Mediterranean, allowing the geographical expansion of the EU into nothing more than a huge trading block? Or was it not wiser to concentrate European energies on creating a powerful political power, one able to wield real influence on the world stage and in particular demonstrate a larger degree of political and military independence from America? These were the central issues under discussion at the Brussels summit. In the words of the commissioner responsible for EU expansion, Olli Rehn, what was now required was a “new consensus” on the future course of the European Union.

The initial euphoria that prevailed in European capitals over expansion into Eastern Europe has given way to disillusionment. In 2004 the existing 15-state EU opened its doors to admit an additional 10 states from central and eastern Europe. At the start of January next year this round of expansion will conclude with the entry of two more states—Romania and Bulgaria.

While certain European countries have been able to profit economically from eastward expansion—in particular Germany, with its large economy located in the heart of Europe—the political and economic situation in many eastern European countries remains highly unstable. In the words of the British pro-business *Economist* magazine, “To many Eurocrats, 2006 was eastern Europe’s year of living dangerously: there were riots in Budapest, scary populists joined governments in Poland and Slovakia and there is no government at all in the Czech Republic.” Further expansion of the EU, the *Economist* writes, “could produce foreign policy horrors in the eastern Mediterranean or in the western Balkans.”

So far EU leaders have shown little compunction about accepting new member states where political instability, corruption, criminal practices, and discrimination against minorities are rife. But in Brussels existing member states raised their doubts about further expansion. The two states to be admitted in January—Romania and Bulgaria—are two of the poorest on the continent and will inevitably draw heavily from EU subsidies at the expense of many other “older” European nations, which will lose out on financial support.

According to *L’Express*, “The entry into the EU of Romania and Bulgaria is posing more questions than it is bringing cause for celebration.” The paper continues, “The Bulgarian and Romanian profiles are not good,” and then goes on to list the points in which both countries fail to measure up to EU criteria: “Corruption, the struggle against organised crime, the functioning of the justice systems, food safety, and border control.” Not noted by the paper is the current collapse of the liberal-conservative government in Romania, which will precipitate fresh elections expected to produce a new and unexpected coalition of forces.

At the same time, political instability in the east and the growing

influence of ultra-nationalist forces opposed to a broader Europe are creating more and more obstacles for any coherent administration and foreign policy on the part of Brussels. Germany’s *Süddeutsche Zeitung* points to the “political unrest in Eastern Europe” and the fact that “every few months the European Union is blocked by one of the new changes of government in Warsaw. On one occasion it is to do with getting more money from Brussels, another time about value added tax, and currently over the new (EU) agreement with Russia. Member states possess too much power to extort.”

The role of “would-be bride” at the EU meeting in Brussels was assumed by Turkey—omnipresent in the minds of those present but largely ignored at the summit itself. Turkey’s own ambitions to join the EU were given an abrupt rebuff in the days preceding the summit when a majority of EU countries demanded major concessions over the issue of Cyprus as a precondition for further negotiations over Turkish entry. The summit participants then formally ratified the pre-summit decision.

The issue of Turkish membership most clearly exposes the political fault-lines running through the EU. Turkey became an associate member of the European Economic Market (forerunner of the EU) in 1963 and first applied for full membership in the EU in 1987. After long delays, negotiations for Turkish membership were renewed in 2005 on the basis of Turkey complying with a long list of EU demands. The latest decision by the EU, which calls for Turkey to open its ports and airports for traffic to Cyprus, represents another blow to Turkish membership.

While much debate has centred on the issue of Cyprus, the island is just one factor in the EU debate on Turkish-European relations. In May 2004, the European Union decided to accept Cyprus as a full member state based on a referendum supported only by the Greek Cypriot segment of the population, i.e., the southern half of the island.

Ankara only recognises the “Turkish Republic of North Cyprus,” and although Turkey and Turkish Cypriots accepted a UN plan in 2005 aimed at reunification of the island, the Greek Cypriot leadership in the south of Cyprus called for a “no” vote. Since then the EU has effectively backed the line of the Greek Cypriot government in Cyprus against Turkey and has repeatedly presented new hurdles for Turkish membership of the EU.

In the run-up to the Brussels summit, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan sought to make some concessions to Europe over Cyprus, but his overture was opposed by a number of EU states led by Greece and supported by the Netherlands, France and Austria. Another group of countries, including Sweden and Italy and led by Great Britain, sought to facilitate Turkey’s accession to the EU. In the event, the decision by Germany to back the first group of countries was decisive in putting back Turkey’s aspirations to EU membership to 2009.

Although the latest public discussion of Turkish-EU relations has been dominated by the Cyprus issue and Turkey’s record on human rights, Turkish admission to the EU has split European political opinion across both political and national lines. Those in favour of Turkish EU membership, such as the German Social Democratic Party and sections of

the Christian Democratic Party, argue that it is essential to integrate Turkey into Europe—thereby establishing a European bridgehead to the Middle East and ending the monopoly of US influence in the region.

At the same time, conservative and nationalist forces in a number of European countries oppose Turkish entry on the basis of the predominant Muslim character of the country. Leading politicians in Germany's conservative Christian Social Union, for example, regard any full acceptance of Turkey by the EU as a threat to "Western Christian civilisation"—a standpoint shared by right-wing politicians in many countries, and supported by the current Pope.

Others base their arguments on the pocketbook, pointing out that Turkish accession would mean the economic and social integration of one of the poorest and most populous countries in the Western Hemisphere. A politician such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair is quite prepared to tolerate anti-Muslim campaigns in his own country, but is also one of the most passionate advocates of Turkish membership, which he, along with his masters in Washington, regards as a move that would weaken the European Union politically.

Drawing attention to attempts by Turkey to rally US support for its campaign to join the EU—in 2005 Erdogan rang US State Secretary Condoleezza Rice and asked her to put pressure on the EU to accept Turkish admission—journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft addressed the role of the British prime minister in Monday's *Guardian*.

"As usual Blair takes the American line, arguing for Turkish admission on strategic grounds: it 'has an importance not just in respect to Turkey but with wider relationships between the west and the Muslim world' . . . another way of putting it is that Europe is being asked to make a huge sacrifice to gratify American strategic interests." Wheatcroft then goes on to quote European commissioner Chris Patten's sarcastic comment that it "is very good of the Americans to keep offering Turkey admission to the EU, but this is a question on which Europeans might want to have some say themselves."

At the end of the Brussels summit Blair continued his propaganda campaign for Turkish entry by flying directly to Ankara to express his solidarity with the Turkish prime minister. A day before, Erdogan had strongly criticised the decision taken by the Brussels summit to put off any further substantial negotiations to 2009. Erdogan has already been subject to considerable criticism for his initial concessions on the issue of Cyprus one week ago and is under strong domestic pressure from nationalist forces and the influential Turkish military to take a tougher, more nationalist stance.

Tony Blair's advocacy of Washington's interests with regard to the future of the EU is not new. It is no secret that the Bush administration is eager to infiltrate the EU with states over which it exercises considerable influence, and which can in turn form a bridgehead for US interests against Russia. It therefore came as no surprise when in Brussels the Polish prime minister, Lech Kaczynski, who maintains close links with the US administration, spoke out in favour of future EU membership for states such as Georgia and the Ukraine, which border Russia and have recently undergone the US-sponsored "Rose" and "Orange" revolutions, respectively.

Confronted with a quagmire of economic and political problems arising from the geographical expansion of its territory, EU leaders in Brussels also faced another urgent social and political problem. Against a background of growing social polarisation in the heartland countries of the EU, social and political opposition has been growing rapidly in recent years to the political project of the European Union.

Such opposition was most clearly expressed in the massive rejection by voters in France and the Netherlands in 2005 to the planned draft for a European constitution. Opposition to the European constitution was based on mass disaffection with the neo-liberal orientation of the EU, and similar forms of opposition arose in the course of mass demonstrations at

the start of this year against the EU's so-called Bolkenstein Directive, which represents a further massive attack of the wages and jobs of millions of Europeans.

Bearing in mind the list of problems and conflict areas confronting the EU leaders the actual results of the Brussels summit were meagre, and the *finale communiqué* (final agreement) suitably vague. Predictably, the assembled states were able to agree on a raft of measures to intensify regulations imposed on immigrants attempting to seek refuge in Europe.

Three smaller countries—Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg—had sought to make any further admission of members dependent on a reform of the European constitution. Bearing in mind that the EU lacks a viable constitution—due to popular opposition!—other EU member states were not prepared to support the Belgium resolution. A letter was produced at the fringes of the conference, drawn up by Luxembourg and Spain (two countries that have accepted the constitution), inviting other EU states to a meeting next January to Madrid aimed at reviving the campaign for a constitution.

A major impetus for the future work of the European Union is expected from the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, who takes over the rotating chair of the EU in January for six months. Merkel has already made clear that a renewed campaign for an EU constitution will be a central theme of her presidency. Germany has already undertaken talks with the two succeeding nations in the EU chair to assure German domination in the EU for the next year and a half.

But despite the declarations of intent from Berlin the latest Brussels summit only served to reveal how deeply divisions run in Europe—in particular between leading European nations such as Germany, Britain and France (where decisive presidential elections are due in the spring). Following the political debacle for the US administration in Iraq, there has recently been a chorus of voices in the European media and political circles pleading for Europe to come forward and play a much more powerful political and military role on the world stage.

In fact, far from being able to develop an independent European foreign policy, the Brussels summit exposed the profound differences between capitalist member states and the growing social divide in Europe as a whole. As the process of enlargement proceeds, and antagonisms with America increase, Europe is saddled with centrifugal forces that could blow it apart.



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