

# German-Polish conflict dominates EU summit

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The European Union summit that began on Thursday, June 21, in Brussels is supposed to crown German's six-month EU presidency. In months of detailed work, Berlin has worked on the various member states in an effort to prepare a treaty that will fill the gap left by the rejection of the European Constitution in referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005.

It is still a completely open question whether there will be agreement over a new draft treaty. Experts assume the summit will extend into the early hours of Saturday morning, and the result will only be certain after a long all-night session.

The summit threatens to fail in particular due to the resistance of the Polish government. President Lech Kaczynski and his twin brother Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski refuse categorically to accept the relative weighting of each country's vote when taking majority decisions as laid down in the original draft constitution.

This parameter, which the German government wants included in the new treaty, is based on the principle of the "double majority." For a resolution to pass in the Council of Ministers, at least 55 percent of the states with 65 percent of the EU population have to agree. Poland, on the other hand, is demanding that the weight of the vote is computed according to the square root of the total population. In this way, the influence of the largest states would be reduced and that of the smaller states increased.

Other states—such as Spain and Luxembourg—are threatening a veto if Poland's demand is accepted. The German EU presidency has so far refused to accept the Polish proposal.

However, the distribution of votes is not the only disputed question at the summit. According to government circles, there are some 15 unsettled questions altogether.

The British will not accept the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights being declared binding on all member states and that EU law would have precedence over British law. In addition, London wants the authority of a future EU foreign minister to be limited as far as possible. Holland is seeking greater veto rights, and the Czech Republic is the only country that supports the Polish demand to alter the relative voting weights.

If the summit fails, it will probably represent the last attempt for a long time to give the EU in its present form more unanimity and force in foreign policy matters. Then, old plans regarding a "core Europe" would be unrolled again.

A failure would lead "inevitably to a two-speed Europe," Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker threatened on the eve of the summit. Juncker is often regarded as the spokesperson for the common interests of Germany, France and the Benelux countries.

But many politicians in these countries would not view such a

development as an inconvenience, since a "core Europe" would make it substantially easier to act as opposed to the cumbersome 27 states of the European Union. Within the framework of the EU there are already numerous initiatives in which only a "core" of countries participates—such as the common currency, the Schengen agreement abolishing internal border controls and the Prüm treaty concerning common databases for crime prevention.

If this development continues, the consequence would be a drifting apart of the EU, the prevalence of national egotisms and the development of new power blocs all over the old continent. "Europe will unite more closely in the centre and erode at the edges," forecast the German parliamentarian Elmar Brok of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

If the German government succeeds in its plans, this would also substantially change the EU. Large parts of the EU constitution, which encountered massive rejection in the European population, would then become accomplished fact. The role of the great powers—in particular Germany, but also France, Italy and Britain—would be substantially strengthened. They would be able to implement their will by majority decisions and to carry out a substantially more aggressive foreign policy. That does not exclude new conflicts breaking out in Europe, but would inevitably tend in this direction.

Above all, the German government is pushing for a rapid tempo. If it comes to an agreement in Brussels, the new treaty should be decided by a diplomatic conference and come into force in two years.

A comment that appeared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* makes clear why Berlin is in such a hurry. "The cold war...is over," writes Stefan Ulrich. "The times are changing. America the protective power even needs help, Russia is stretching out a threatening hand, world powers are developing in China and India, Iran is building the A-bomb, the Middle East is in flames, the climate is warming. Time is running out for the European states if they want to shape the globe and preserve their model of civilisation. Only together can they sustain their position—and they can't wait until the Kaczynski brothers understand this."

To "shape the globe" and "preserve their model of civilisation" are classic euphemisms for imperialist aims. The issues today are access to markets and raw materials, the defence of one's own economic and political influence against China, India and the US. The weight of any individual European country is no longer sufficient; hence, the German effort to establish an EU that is more capable of acting decisively, in which Germany plays the prominent role as the most densely populated and economically strongest country.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has come up with a relative simple concept in order to ensure that the failed European constitution becomes a reality. As much as possible of the substance is to be preserved, while the outward manifestations, such as a common flag, an EU anthem, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the term “constitution” are to be dropped.

Renouncing such symbolic accessories should then assist those governments that either did not ratify the old constitution or, where a referendum failed, signed up to the new treaty without a plebiscite. In the recent election campaign, the incoming French president Nicolas Sarkozy had already promised that he would agree to a new, slimmer version of the constitution without a popular vote. However, he now faces some difficulties, because he failed to gain the necessary two-thirds majority in the National Assembly elections.

In addition, forsaking the external characteristics of a constitution should pacify those who—like the British and Dutch governments—fear the EU would curtail the national sovereignty of its member states too much.

The institutional regulations contained in the old constitutional treaty—rules concerning the size and function of the EU Commission, Council and parliament, as well as the voting modalities—have been transferred unchanged into the new draft. In Germany’s view, they form the core of the EU treaty, since they regulate the balance of power within the European Union.

Until now, the rules apply that were decided seven years ago in Nice, when the EU had only about half as many members as today. They only permit reaching majority decisions in a few questions; in all other matters, each of the 27 member states has a right of veto.

Moreover, the relative voting weights are distributed quite arbitrarily. Despite the different sizes of their populations, Germany, France, Britain and Italy each have 29 votes; Poland and Spain, which have less than half as many inhabitants as Germany, each have 27. This regulation came about because the then-French President Jacques Chirac had threatened to scupper the summit if France did not receive parity of votes with Germany.

The new regulations would distribute the votes according to the number of inhabitants. At the same time, the number of topics on which a majority decision can be reached would be expanded. The interests of the smaller countries would be ensured by the “double majority” rule, which makes it possible for an alliance of smaller states to prevent majority resolutions being passed by just a few large states.

Even if one takes this into consideration, the new regulations substantially change the relative voting weights. The voting weight of Germany as the largest EU country will double compared to the Nice treaty to 16 percent, while Poland’s remains about the same with 8 percent. Small states with fewer than 1 million inhabitants will hardly count at all.

The Polish government has been up in arms about this regulation for weeks. It openly accuses the German government of seeking supremacy over Europe.

Mariusz Muszynski, responsible in the Polish foreign ministry for German-Polish cooperation, told *Der Spiegel* that the German EU presidency “is expending most of its energy on enlarging its

own sphere of influence in the EU, instead of dealing with problems of substance.” The Germans want “more power in the EU Council at any price,” he said.

Mud slinging has raged for weeks in the media of both countries. While on the Polish side, all the nationalist stops have been pulled out and anti-German resentments are being openly encouraged, on the German side, Poland is accused of obstruction and ingratitude.

*Der Spiegel*, Germany’s most widely read newsweekly, appeared on Monday with a front page showing the Kaczynski twins riding merrily atop an anguished Angela Merkel. The headline: “The unloved neighbours—how Poland is annoying Europe.” The caricature is a reply to a frontispiece of the Polish magazine *Wprost* from 2003, which showed CDU politician Erika Steinbach, who also heads the “Bund der Vertriebenen” (Federation of Expellees, claiming to represent Germans who were forced out of areas of eastern and central Europe following World War Two), in Nazi uniform riding atop the then-German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder.

Both sides of this campaign are reactionary.

The Kaczynskis represent a form of Polish nationalism that unites diseased anticommunism with Catholic bigotry. They speak for those sections of the middle classes who hated the Stalinist regime above all because it stood in the way of their own enrichment. Now, they fear being ground up between Germany on the one side and Russia on the other. They hang on the coattails of the US, support the Iraq war and offer Poland as a launching pad for America’s anti-missile defence rockets—while simultaneously being the largest recipient of EU subsidies.

The Merkel government embodies the great power ambitions of a united Germany that is again thrusting onto the world stage. In the days before the summit, Berlin put the Polish government under massive pressure. In close coordination with the German chancellor, several European heads of government visited the Kaczynski brothers, seeking to get them to give ground through a mixture of pressure and blandishments. Merkel herself welcomed the Polish president to Meseberg in Brandenburg last Saturday.

The aggressive conflict between Germany and Poland is an expression of the impossibility of uniting Europe on a capitalist basis. The narrow-minded Polish nationalism and German great-power ambitions are two sides of the same coin of mounting national egotism. The progressive development of Europe is possible only through a movement from below: through the building of the United Socialist States of Europe.



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