EU summit fails to elect top officials

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A special summit of the European Union called to decide on the leading positions in the EU for the coming years ended without a solution on Wednesday night. European Council President Herman van Rompuy had travelled to European capitals during the past six weeks to put together a comprehensive proposal, but he was unable to present a list on which all the 28 heads of state and government could agree. Now another special summit is to be held on August 30 to decide on the leadership posts.

The filling of EU leadership posts has always been a source of fierce haggling due to the conflicting claims of member countries and party political groups. This time an agreement is even more difficult because the national interests of the member countries are increasingly drifting apart. There are profound differences, particularly on foreign and economic policy.

The failure of the summit is a result of the growing and ultimately irreconcilable national conflicts within Europe, which put the very existence of the EU into question. In particular, the exit of Britain from the EU appears increasingly likely. Just before the summit, British Prime Minister David Cameron reshuffled his cabinet and filled it with a number of EU-sceptical ministers.

Three weeks ago, and for the first time in EU history, the heads of state and government selected the powerful president of the European Commission in a disputed vote. British Prime Minister David Cameron and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban voted against the former Luxembourg prime minister and long-time chairman of the euro group, Jean-Claude Juncker.

On Tuesday this week, Juncker was confirmed by the European Parliament as Commission president. In his speech to the deputies, he made it abundantly clear that he favours a greater role for the EU and especially its core, the Eurogroup. “We need an economic government, and we will achieve that,” he explained. He also called for a formidable figure to occupy the post of head of the EU’s foreign policy.

Both aims are fiercely rejected by Britain. The British government fears that more economic powers for Brussels will harm the financial centre of London, which is one of the least regulated in the world. It is also insisting on the independence of British foreign policy.

Juncker courted in particular the support of Germany. He gave part of his speech in German, “in the language of the world champion,” as he said. He also praised former German chancellor Helmut Kohl (1982-1998) as “the greatest European I had the good fortune to meet.”

He left no doubt that he will continue the EU’s pro-business policies. He paid lip service to combatting unemployment, but wants to do this by increasing “competitiveness”, by “a broad-based reform agenda” and by the “stimulation of private investment”—all code words for massive attacks on the working class.

The established bourgeois parties—from the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, the Social Democrats and the Greens to the European Left—praised Juncker’s election as a triumph of democracy because for the first time the winning lead candidate in the European election has been nominated president of the Commission. In fact, Juncker’s policy on behalf of the continent’s most powerful business interests will exacerbate the social as well as the national tensions in Europe.

This is already visible in the dispute over the selection of the future foreign policy chief of the EU. When the office was created five years ago the post was filled by the unknown and inexperienced Briton Catherine Ashton. The appointment of this weak figure was aimed at ensuring that control over foreign policy remains in the domain of nation states. Juncker’s demand for a stronger EU chief diplomat has now triggered fierce conflicts and was a major factor in the

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failure of the summit on Wednesday.

Italian President Matteo Renzi is determined to fill the post with his foreign minister Federica Mogherini. This proposal met with strong resistance from Eastern Europe, who regard Mogherini as too conciliatory to Russia. Italy is opposed to the EU's economic sanctions against Russia and also supports the construction of the South Stream pipeline, with which Russia could deliver gas directly to Europe, bypassing Ukraine.

For the opposite reason a number of Western European governments reject the Bulgarian EU Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva and the Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski as candidates for the post. The latter is considered to be an ardent foe of Russia with close links to neoconservative circles in Washington.

There is also fierce controversy over who should succeed Herman van Rompuy and fill the post of president of the Council. A favourite is the Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt. Her appointment would meet the demands of the Social Democrats for a leading post after the presidency of the Commission has gone to the Christian Democrat Juncker. The French Socialist Party government, however, has expressed objections to Thorning-Schmidt because Denmark is not a member of the Eurozone.

Behind this lies a more fundamental conflict. Germany, France and Italy all backed Juncker's election as president of the Commission, but favour different financial and economic policies. Germany insists on compliance with the strict savings targets of the Stability Pact, while France and Italy support a looser interpretation of the pact to allow financial leeway for so-called labour market reforms. The former German government led by Gerhard Schröder had also failed to meet the EU's budgetary requirements when it introduced the Hartz laws 10 years ago.

This conflict finds its most concentrated form in the struggle over who should head the various EU commissions. Formally, President Juncker is responsible for allocating the areas of responsibility to the candidates appointed by national governments. But there is a fierce struggle going on behind the scenes. France is insisting on filling the post of the commissioner responsible for economic growth, while Britain is demanding an important economic post as compensation for its defeat in the election of the Commission president.

Berlin has made clear that it will not give Juncker any further room for manoeuvre. Chancellor Merkel brusquely rejected his wish that several candidates are proposed, including a number of female ones, so he can chose amongst them. Merkel declared she would renominate Germany's existing commissioner Günther Oettinger, saying, "the case is closed. I will not put forward any more candidates."

As long as the top posts of foreign policy chief and president of the Council remain unfilled the work of the future commission is blocked. Juncker cannot allocate departments without making an agreement on who fills the top jobs even more difficult. The new Commission is supposed to start its work on November 1.

On one question the feuding leaders were agreed on Wednesday: They decided to strengthen sanctions against Russia. In future not only individuals will be hit by sanctions, but businesses as well.

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