

Conflicts over refugee policy dominate EU summit

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The last European Union (EU) summit of the year, which began on Thursday afternoon in Brussels and concludes Friday, has been dominated by sharp conflicts. As European governments move rapidly to the right, unbridgeable conflicting interests are threatening to tear the EU apart.

As in recent months, refugee policy has been the main issue at this week's summit. European governments have responded to the influx of a million refugees from the war zones in Syria, Afghanistan and other countries by stoking nationalism and militarism.

Borders have been re-established within the Schengen zone to repel refugees and force them into neighbouring states. The conflicts over refugee quotas and the sealing of borders have poisoned the climate between EU members. Faced with mounting social tensions, security forces are being significantly strengthened, particularly in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks. France, Britain and Germany are now participating in the bombardment of Syria.

Once again Germany is deploying its economic and political weight as it did in the Greek crisis, when the issue was the imposition of austerity measures, to enforce its will on the other European states.

Berlin's insistence that other states commit to taking in fixed quotas of refugees has met with fierce resistance from Hungary, Poland and other Eastern European states, triggering anti-German sentiments.

Of the 160,000 refugees in Greece and Italy whom the EU agreed in September to distribute among its members, only 208 have begun their journey thus far. Hungary and Slovakia have filed complaints against the agreement at the European Court of Justice.

The EU is now responding by hermetically sealing its external borders. "Our goal is clear: we must regain control over our external borders to stem migratory

flows and to preserve Schengen," read the invitation from EU Council President Donald Tusk to the summit.

One way this will be achieved is through close collaboration with the Turkish government, which is being paid \$3 billion to act as a border guard and carry out the EU's dirty work. An agreement related to this was reached at a meeting on November 29.

Prior to yesterday's summit, eleven EU member states met with their Turkish colleague Ahmet Davutoglu to review the progress of the agreement.

Due to the Turkish government's measures, the number of refugees fleeing across the Aegean Sea to Greece has dropped from 7,000 a day in September and October to 2,000 a day this week.

The brutal methods being used by Turkish authorities in this were revealed in a report released by Amnesty International on Wednesday entitled "Europe's Gatekeeper".

Among other things, the human rights organisation accused the Turkish government of sending refugees back to Iraq and Syria where they are threatened with persecution, torture and death. They were held for two months in EU-funded camps, cut off from all contact with their surroundings, until they "voluntarily" signed a statement agreeing to be sent back.

In order to conceal the brutal character of its agreement with Turkey, the EU has committed to take in a small number of the over 2 million refugees currently in the country. Austrian Chancellor Werner Feymann spoke of between 40,000 and 50,000. However, there remain no concrete agreements. Since several countries are rejecting all refugees, a "club of the willing" has been formed which, according to EU insiders, only Austria and Germany have joined.

Another means by which the EU intends to seal its external borders is through the expansion of the border

protection agency Frontex into an independent border police which can operate on the borders of a state against its will. A proposal to this end was circulated by the EU Commission on Tuesday.

The German government is the driving force behind this initiative. It is threatening to provoke a dispute similar to that over refugee quotas. Poland, Greece, Spain and other countries consider the dispatch of border police against their will as an attack on their national sovereignty. Some described it as an “invasion clause”.

Council President Tusk spoke of “painful measures.” “If we reject the Commission’s proposals, we must find other means. But they will unfortunately be just as painful,” he warned.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel also had to admit that the issue of a border police raised “very fundamental questions about national sovereignty.” Despite this, she is determined to stick to the plan. However, the current summit is only set to recognise it. The EU parliament and each member state would then decide upon it within three to six months.

The German government will put them under pressure on this issue. Austrian Chancellor Feymann, who is working closely with Berlin on the matter, warned that a country could lose EU funding if it “backed away from the fair distribution of refugees.”

A series of other questions over which deep divisions exist were discussed at the summit. One such issue is the conditions put forward by British Prime Minister David Cameron as a prerequisite for the country to remain in the EU. There are deep differences over Cameron’s suggestion that citizens of other EU states should only be entitled to social welfare benefits after residing in a country for four years.

By contrast, there was broad agreement on the extension of sanctions against Russia for an additional six months, and the expansion of the security agencies in the name of the war on terror. Europe’s antiterrorism agencies are to collaborate more closely, create their own database and cooperate closely with US intelligence.



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