

Brexit vote heightens tensions in Europe

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Last week's vote by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union has sharply intensified national antagonisms in Europe.

The withdrawal of the second-largest economy from the 28-member EU would dramatically increase the economic weight of Germany inside the union. Following Britain's withdrawal, Germany's share of EU gross domestic product would rise from just over a fifth to almost one quarter. These statistics only partially reflect German predominance.

Particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, Germany has sought political and economic supremacy in Europe. Both the austerity diktats imposed on Greece, Portugal and Spain, as well as the plans to extend the EU into a political and military world power, have been pushed most aggressively by Berlin.

The strategy paper presented by the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini at Wednesday's EU Summit, which calls for the transformation of the EU into a military power, was elaborated in close agreement with the German defence ministry. And the book *Power in the Middle* by Berlin political scientist Herfried Münkler, which calls for Germany to assume the role of a "hegemon" and "task master" in Europe, has met with widespread approval by the German establishment parties and media.

Germany's reaction to the Brexit vote takes place in context of its drive for hegemony in Europe. Before the vote, there had been little support in the German elites for a British exit. They feared a victory for the "Leave" camp would strengthen forces throughout Europe that oppose Germany's hegemonic aspirations from a right-wing nationalist standpoint. And they regarded Britain as an important economic partner and reliable ally when it came to imposing strict budgetary discipline and neo-liberal economic policies in Brussels.

However, following the referendum, the German position changed abruptly. Now, Berlin is pushing for

the quickest possible exit, rejecting any concessions to London and all speculation that the result could be reversed.

There are several reasons for this. One is the fear that long drawn-out exit negotiations and concessions to Britain could strengthen centrifugal forces in the EU. For example, news weekly *Der Spiegel*, which had previously argued strongly against a Brexit, warned that the British example could be copied if the EU acted too leniently towards London.

Above all, Berlin seized on the prospect of a British exit as an opportunity to press ahead with policies that the UK had opposed. This is especially the case for the development of a foreign and military policy independent of the US. The British government has consistently opposed German efforts to counter US foreign policy—as in the 2003 Iraq war—or to create a European army in parallel with NATO.

The result of the Brexit referendum had hardly been announced when German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier invited representatives of the six EU founding nations to Berlin to discuss further proceedings. Chancellor Angela Merkel met with President François Hollande to strengthen the Franco-German axis. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who faces nationalist pressure from the Five Star Movement and the Northern League, was also invited to the meeting in an effort to prevent Italy from drifting away.

The three government heads agreed to a series of measures to keep the EU together. The first order of business was "domestic and foreign security," i.e., the arming of the state apparatus against domestic unrest and of the military for new war missions.

What they meant by these terms can be seen in the joint paper, entitled "A strong Europe in an uncertain world," in which the foreign ministers of Germany and France, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Jean-Marc Ayrault, summarise their conclusions from the Brexit

referendum.

The paper defines the European Union as a “security union”, which “strives for a common security and defence policy,” and praises “Germany and France for campaigning for a Europe that acts with unity and self-awareness on an international level.” According to the paper, the EU should be developed “step by step into an independent and global actor.”

As regions in which “Europe” intervenes politically and militarily, Steinmeier and Ayrault name Ukraine, the Middle East and Africa, among others. Centralised EU institutions should be created in order to “more effectively plan and implement civilian and military operations.”

The meeting in Berlin unleashed panic in Eastern Europe. In Prague, a parallel meeting of the Visegrad states (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) took place. The Polish foreign minister invited representatives of ten EU members—including Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Austria, Spain and Britain—to Warsaw.

Above all, the Polish government vehemently rejects the Steinmeier-Ayrault paper. Instead of a “stronger Europe,” it proposes a redrafting of the EU treaties to devolve power to the national states. The ultra-nationalist Polish government feels threatened both by Berlin and Russia, and regards the US-dominated NATO as the guarantor of Polish independence.

On Thursday, the pro-government newspaper *Gazeta Polska* appeared with the headline, “Will there be a Fourth Reich?” together with a Swastika on the front page. The article accuses Germany and France of a pro-Russian orientation, and declares, “The political monsters have not died with Nazism and communism—the totalitarian vision of super states returns right before our eyes.” On the inside pages, a long article warns against a “Europe ruled from Berlin.”

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto attacked “Brussels’ immigration policy” and declared, “Europeans want to decide for themselves about their lives and their futures, and do not want to accept that decisions regarding the future of Europe are made by bureaucrats somewhere in Brussels in private and behind closed doors.”

In France, too, voices opposing German supremacy in Europe are being raised, and not just from the extreme

right-wing National Front, whose leader Marine Le Pen is demanding France’s exit from the EU, but from the ranks of the conservative Republicans and pseudo-left.

For example, Henri Guaino, a close confidante of former President Nicolas Sarkozy, told the daily *Le Figaro*, “If the response to Brexit is an even more German Europe, then we are driving into a brick wall.” Sarkozy himself and former premier François Fillon, a possible candidate in the upcoming presidential elections, advocate a “Europe of the nations”—a weakening of the EU in favour of the national states.

Former Economics Minister Arnaud Montebourg, who is regarded as a “left” in the Socialist Party, and the leader of the French Left Party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, are also sounding increasingly nationalist and anti-German tones.

The European consequences of a Brexit are only beginning to emerge. On the one hand, there is the drive by Germany to unite Europe under its hegemony, which will be accompanied with violent attacks on working people, increased state repression and militarism. On the other, there is a poisonous nationalism in both a far-right and pseudo-left form, which divides the working class and bolsters xenophobia.

For the European working class neither the one nor the other offer a way forward. Once again, it becomes clear that Europe cannot be united on a capitalist basis. Only a movement by the working class, unified on the program of the United Socialist States of Europe, can prevent the continent descending once again into the horrors of the twentieth century: world war and fascism.



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