

Merkel seeks to reorganise Europe

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Three weeks before the next EU summit in Bratislava, Slovakia, and following the vote to leave the Union by British voters, Chancellor Angela Merkel has taken the initiative to reorganise the European Union. In so doing, and given the almost insurmountable economic and political differences between the 27 member states, Merkel has placed issues of internal and external rearmament at the centre of her efforts.

Officially, the Slovak government, which holds the EU presidency in the second half of 2016, is responsible for the preparation of the summit due on September 16, which will deal with the consequences of the Brexit vote. Britain has not been invited to this summit, even though it is still a member of the EU and has so far failed to submit an official application for withdrawal.

Merkel has now taken over full responsibility for the preparation of the summit. This week alone she is due to meet 15 of the 27 EU leaders to set out the EU's future course and ensure that Germany dictates the proceedings.

Her series of meetings began on Monday with a meeting with French President Francois Hollande and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi on an aircraft carrier off the Italian island of Ventotene. On Wednesday Merkel then met with the Estonian Premier Taavi Roivas in Tallinn. Roivas is considered to be one of the Baltic leaders with particularly good relations with Germany. On Thursday she spoke with Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and President Milos Zeman in Prague. On Friday she met with Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo and leaders of the other Visegrad countries (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) in Warsaw.

On Friday evening Merkel stayed at Schloss Meseberg, the German government's guesthouse, where she received the heads of government from the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. On Saturday she meets representatives from Slovenia, Bulgaria, Austria and Croatia. Further meetings are planned over the next few days.

The preservation of the European Union, which is in acute danger following the Brexit vote, is of major economic and strategic importance for the ruling class of Germany. Germany sends nearly 60 percent of its total exports to the EU. The single currency provides a relatively low exchange rate, which gives German goods, based on high labour productivity, a competitive advantage in Europe and favours its exports worldwide.

In addition, Germany is trying to use the EU to increase its international political and military clout. The attempts by Germany to dominate Europe's foreign and security policy have repeatedly failed, however, due to growing national egoisms within the EU. Germany's quest for European hegemony has aroused a fierce backlash.

Right-wing, nationalist tendencies are sprouting up across Europe. They have been able to benefit in part from legitimate social fears because social democratic and pseudo-left parties such as Syriza in Greece have supported the austerity measures of the European Union. The Brexit vote, therefore, is less the cause than a symptom of the deep crisis of the EU. It underlines the impossibility of peacefully and democratically uniting Europe on a capitalist basis. In an effort to maintain the EU, Merkel faces not only one, but a whole mesh of unsolvable Gordian knots. The breaking of any of these knots inevitably leads to new conflicts.

In the sphere of fiscal policy, for example, there are serious differences between Germany and some central and northern European countries, on the one hand, and Italy, France and other southern European countries, on the other. In the latter countries, the austerity measures enforced by Brussels and Berlin have led to a complete stalling of their economies. While the German tax authorities have achieved record surpluses due to low interest rates, these countries have failed to alleviate their debt burden despite brutal cost-cutting. Poverty and unemployment have reached record levels. For young people, there is neither work nor future prospects.

In particular, Italy's Renzi has his back to the wall. Some of the country's largest banks face bankruptcy. Should his government collapse, the Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo and other opponents of the EU would probably win a new election.

Opponents of the EU are also on the march in France. The National Front is committed to withdrawal from the EU. Former president Nicolas Sarkozy, who is once again campaigning for the presidency, has called for the termination of the Lisbon Treaty, which he had personally pushed through the French parliament against strong resistance. Even ex-minister for industrial renewal Arnaud Montebourg, who is seeking the candidacy of the Socialist Party, and the chairman of the Left Party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, oppose the EU.

In Eastern Europe, Germany's demand for national quotas

for refugees has triggered fierce conflicts. Twenty-five years after the restoration of capitalism, these countries are characterized by low wages, job insecurity and widespread corruption. The ruling cliques are using the refugee issue, linked to Germany's arrogant leading role in Europe, to divert attention from social tensions.

During her visit to Prague, Merkel faced a chorus of jeers and "Merkel must go" chants by opponents of refugees. Before her arrival in Warsaw, Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski publicly accused Merkel of pursuing a selfish foreign policy. "Often we only see the intention of pursuing their own ends," he told the news agency dpa.

Poland and the Baltic States are also insisting on confrontation with Russia. They are pressing ahead with the military deployment of NATO on the Russian border and reject any relaxation of economic sanctions. For their part, Italy and France, together with a section of German business backed by the Social Democratic Party, want to reduce sanctions against Moscow.

Earlier in the week, Merkel tried to downplay tensions within the EU. "It is a phase of listening, understanding, mutual learning, in order to properly understand and develop the new equilibrium of the EU," she said, urging calm and prudence. "If you do things wrong at the beginning due to not listening carefully, but immediately plunge into activism, then I think you can make a lot of mistakes."

The pose of patient listening, however, conceals a sharp turn to the right. As the EU's economic foundation crumbles and social tensions grow, Merkel is relying on internal and external rearmament as the new axis for European cohesion. She expects that the fear of social uprisings and upheavals will weld together governments if the EU is turned into a police state and military superpower.

This was already clear at the meeting with Hollande and Renzi on Monday. The island of Ventotene was chosen for symbolic reasons. It was the site where politician Altiero Spinelli drafted a pro-European manifesto in a fascist prison in 1943. Even more symbolic, however, was the site chosen for the continuation of the meeting: the aircraft carrier Garibaldi. It is one of the most prized vessels of the Italian Navy and is currently being used to repel refugees in the Mediterranean.

At the press conference, Merkel stressed: "We feel that—faced with Islamist terrorism, in light of the civil war in Syria—we must do more for our internal and external security." Therefore, cooperation between the intelligence services had to be improved, collaboration expanded in defence matters and the Frontex operation extended.

In addition to cooperation on economic recovery, Hollande named the fight against terrorism and joint solutions to the refugee crisis as central tasks of the EU. "Europe must take more responsibility than hitherto for its own defence," he said.

In this regard, it is significant that political circles and the media in Germany have recently adopted a much sharper tone

against Russia. The Bundeswehr leads one of the four battalions stationed by NATO in the Baltics and Poland for deployment against Russia. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who together with the German export industry argues for a combination of military deterrence and dialogue with Russia, has come under fierce attack.

In July, the influential German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) issued a paper under the heading "Alliance solidarity is part of Germany's *raison d'être*," warning against sacrificing "defence preparedness" in favour of dialogue with Russia.

"It would be a foreign policy disaster if German support for Alliance solidarity should decrease or even be turned into an election campaign issue because dialogue with Russia achieved no results," the paper declared. "Many Germans would then demand leniency towards Russia, while Americans, Estonians or Poland might draw opposite conclusions. Political leadership is needed here."

The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) has put together an 87-page dossier under the heading "Possible Surprises," which makes Russia responsible for pretty much everything that could confront the EU and NATO in the near future—including a "shift to the right in Paris ... a multi-faceted campaign to discredit Germany," the blackmail of Serbia, the replacement of the United States as "Iraq's security partner," and "withdrawal from nuclear arms control."

These circles are apparently willing to risk a military conflict with nuclear power Russia in order to defend the EU and Germany's great power aspirations. The escalation of the war in Syria, which also threatens a confrontation between NATO and Russia, must be seen in this context.

The European Union is often equated with "European unity." Merkel's initiative for internal and external militarisation shows that, in reality, it is a hotbed of militarism, state rearmament, national rivalries and xenophobia. Europe can be united only from below, by a socialist movement of the working class, as the United Socialist States of Europe.



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