

Divisions erupt at post-Brexit Bratislava summit as EU calls for military-police build-up

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Amid escalating tensions inside the European Union (EU) and between the EU and the United States, the heads of the 27 EU member states, minus Britain, met for their first post-Brexit summit in the Slovak capital, Bratislava.

The summit reaffirmed proposals by top EU, German, and French officials to react to Britain's exit from the EU by reorganizing the union as a military alliance with broad police powers at home. Beyond the broad lines of this reactionary program outlined in the so-called "Bratislava declaration" issued by the European Council, however, the remaining EU countries failed to agree on any concrete proposals. Explosive conflicts erupted over the economic crisis in Europe and the millions of refugees fleeing wars in the Middle East and Africa.

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the leader of the euro zone's third-largest economy, refused to join the final press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande. Only weeks ago, Renzi stood together with Merkel and Hollande on an aircraft carrier off the Italian island of Ventotene to call for EU unity after Brexit and revive longstanding plans, blocked until now by Britain with the support of the United States, to turn the EU into a military alliance. Yesterday, however, he attacked the summit and openly stated his disagreement with German and French policies.

"I cannot take part in a joint press conference with Merkel and Hollande if I don't share their conclusions on economy and migration," Renzi told reporters after the meeting in the Bratislava Castle. He added, "It's not a controversy, Italy doesn't see it in the same way as the others."

Renzi, whose government is deeply unpopular due to its austerity measures, lashed out in particular at Berlin for demanding harsh spending cuts in response to Italy's banking crisis. "In the same way countries must respect rules on deficit, they also have to respect other rules, like on the trade surplus," Renzi said. "And there are some countries who don't respect them; the main one is

Germany."

Hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing across the Mediterranean have arrived in Italy and Greece, which have demanded that other EU countries take in or help fund the accommodation of refugees. Renzi attacked the summit for failing to produce any meaningful agreement on this issue.

"Describing today's document on migrants as a step forward requires an imagination [worthy of] word jugglers," he declared. "The usual things were said again."

Hungary's anti-immigrant premier, Viktor Orban, who has built a fence on the Hungarian border in a reactionary attempt to keep out all refugees, publicly attacked EU quotas requiring Hungary to take in migrants.

"During my conversation with Martin Schultz, the president of the European parliament, I asked him to show respect for the Hungarian people," Orban said. "I asked him to stop using their law-creating tricks, deceiving the sovereign decisions and the will of the national states."

Effectively acknowledging the deep divisions inside the EU, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker declared that it would have been "inappropriate" to issue written conclusions after the summit.

As the Bratislava summit made clear, the UK's vote to leave the union reflected divisions and conflicts that extend throughout Europe and threaten to bring down the total dissolution of the European Union. Since its formation in 1992, a year after the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, the EU has aligned itself with US-led wars, implemented pro-business restructuring measures and carried out attacks on workers' living standards. Especially since the outbreak of the 2008 economic crisis and the 2011 wars in Libya and Syria, however, these class and international conflicts have undermined attempts to fashion common EU policies.

In response to the Brexit vote, which was organized amid deepening misgivings in the British ruling class over a German-led EU, Germany and France are moving ahead

with attempts to unify the EU as a military alliance that Britain had previously blocked, at Washington's request.

European-American tensions are also erupting to the surface, after EU powers called for an end to trade talks with the United States and imposed a €13 billion fine on Apple, the largest US corporation, for not paying taxes in Ireland. Yesterday, as EU heads of state met in Bratislava, US authorities imposed a \$14 billion fine on Germany's leading bank, Deutsche Bank, on fraud charges related to US mortgage-backed securities in the lead-up to the 2008 Wall Street crash. Deutsche Bank responded by vowing to fight the fine.

"Deutsche Bank has no intent to settle these potential civil claims anywhere near the number cited," the bank said in a statement. "The negotiations are only just beginning. The bank expects that they will lead to an outcome similar to those of peer banks which have settled at materially lower amounts."

Financial disputes are becoming intertwined with strategic conflicts between Washington and the EU over European attempts to formulate military policy independently of the United States. In the lead-up to the summit, Paris and especially Berlin led a reactionary push for military build up, austerity, and authoritarian forms of rule exemplified by the ongoing state of emergency in France.

A six-page proposal, drafted by German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen and her French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian, was leaked to the press. "It is high time to reinforce our solidarity and European defense capabilities in order to more effectively protect our borders and EU citizens," it declared. "Given that the United Kingdom has decided to leave the EU, we will now have to act with [the remaining] 27 member states." It called for a sharp expansion of military spending to develop aerial refueling capacities, satellite surveillance, cyber warfare, and drones.

At their joint press conference yesterday in Bratislava, Merkel and Hollande confirmed that post-Brexit internal and external rearmament were the center of discussions at the summit. Themes discussed included "security, migration and border protection," Merkel said. EU leaders also agreed to reduce flows of refugees and on "more cooperation on security," she added.

Hollande stressed the main message from Bratislava was the need to "secure control of the EU's external borders."

The bullet points in the brief "Bratislava declaration" issued by the European Council give a glimpse of the reactionary plans being worked out by EU leaders. The section titled "Migration and external borders" calls for strengthening Fortress Europe, denying the right of asylum to refugees fleeing war, and for mass deportations of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. The paper

demanded that the EU "Never allow a return to uncontrolled flows [of refugees] of last year and further bring down the number of irregular migrants. Ensure full control of our external borders."

On "internal security," it envisages the building of an integrated EU police state, modelled on the policies of the American ruling class implemented under cover of the "war on terror" after the September 11 attacks. It calls for "Intensified cooperation and information-exchange among security services of the Member States" and the "adoption of the necessary measures to ensure that all persons, including nationals from EU Member States, crossing the Union's external borders will be checked against the relevant databases, which must be interconnected."

It also demands "concrete measures" to prepare to defend Europe's geopolitical and economic interests militarily against its rivals. "In a challenging geopolitical environment," the "December European Council [should] decide on a concrete implementation plan on security and defence," declares the paper.

This echoes European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the European Union address Wednesday. "Soft power is not enough in our increasingly dangerous neighbourhood," he said, stressing that Europe can "no longer afford to piggy-back on the military might" of the United States and should "take responsibility for protecting our interests."

These proposals underscore the falseness and hypocrisy of the EU's claims to represent freedom, peace, and civilization against the anti-immigrant chauvinism and nationalism of British political parties that campaigned for Brexit. As the EU seeks to convert itself into a military and police regime pursuing a reactionary anti-immigrant policy, the only constituency for peace and democratic rights to be found on either side of the English Channel is the working class.



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