

# EU summit lines up against Russia

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17 December 2016

On Thursday, the 28 leaders of the European Union gathered in Brussels at their final summit of the year. The EU is in deep crisis. Following the British decision to leave the EU, the election of Donald Trump as US president, and the rise of right-wing nationalist forces in many European countries, it is paralyzed and divided.

The member states are hopelessly divided over many issues--the distribution of refugee quotas, the attitude towards Turkey, the austerity policy dictated by Berlin and Brussels, the creation of a European army, the response to incoming President Trump, and, above all, the stance towards Russia.

In addition, the leaders of the larger member states, who have thus far set the course in the EU, have been weakened by internal political crises.

Britain is on its way out of the EU and its government is arguing over what Brexit means. French President Francois Hollande leaves office in May. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi resigned last week and his successor, Paolo Gentiloni, is at best a transitional figure. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy rests on an uncertain majority. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is seeking her fourth term in office next year, confronts growing resistance both within her own Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and within its coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Shortly before the summit, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker described the situation in the EU with the words: "This time we are dealing with a multiple crisis. It is burning all over, not just in Europe. But wherever there is fire outside Europe, the conflagration moves toward Europe."

For these reasons, the summit was to be limited to a few hours on Thursday. To avoid intensifying the crisis, the discussion was supposed to avoid controversial issues. Over dinner, the participants planned to discuss preparations for the Brexit

negotiations in the absence of British Prime Minister Theresa May.

But things turned out differently. Council President Donald Tusk decided "spontaneously" to invite a Syrian anti-Assad activist--something unprecedented in the history of the EU--and the summit was extended by hours. Brita Hagi Hasan, introduced as the "mayor of Aleppo," described the situation in the east of the city in dramatic terms. Speaking to the assembled heads of government, he claimed 50,000 civilians were "soon to be massacred."

Hasan is one of those Syrian "oppositionists" who travel round the world promoting imperialist military intervention and are dragged into the limelight for that purpose. He has met several times with the French foreign minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, most recently at the end of November.

During the summer, he attended a meeting in Paris together with Maryam Rajavi of the Iranian People's Mujahedin and Michel Kilo, another Syrian regime opponent, who three years ago called for an American military strike against Syria. The People's Mujahedin are fighting the regime in Tehran from abroad and have been listed by the EU up to 2009 as a terrorist organization.

Tusk, Hollande and Merkel used Hasan's appearance to call for the fractious EU members to unite on an anti-Russian line. While in US ruling circles there is fierce struggle over relations with Russia, the EU is siding with that wing which is pushing for a confrontation with Russia. Merkel and Hollande fear that the new president, Donald Trump, is moving closer to Moscow at the expense of the Europe, and that the EU, and possibly NATO as well, could break apart as a result.

In an editorial just before the summit, the *Financial Times* wrote: "Europe's diplomats are at a loss over how to prepare for his [Trump's] incoming administration.... With any US pivot on Russia policy,

the bloc's hard-won consensus on how to respond to Moscow could change, tipping the balance between the EU's hawks and doves."

The European leaders did not waste any words talking about Mosul or Yemen, where they, the US and Washington's regional allies are bombing civilians as ruthlessly as the Russians and the Syrian army in Aleppo. But they shed buckets of crocodile tears over the fate of the civilian population of Aleppo--and this on the day when the fighting there had stopped.

Chancellor Merkel said the report delivered by Hasan was "very depressing." She accused Russia and Iran of responsibility for crimes against the civilian population in Aleppo and demanded that they be punished. She accused the United Nations Security Council of "failure."

British Prime Minister Theresa May spoke in identical terms. "We must ensure that those who are responsible for these atrocities will be held accountable," she said.

President Hollande said the EU's *raison d'être* was in question if it could "not even unite on something as basic" as "condemning the massacres that are being initiated by the Syrian regime and its supporters."

The cynicism of this feigned indignation was underscored by the fact that just hours before, Merkel's government had begun the first mass deportations to Afghanistan. This initiates a process that will result in forcibly ejecting up to 12,500 refugees from Germany and sending them back to a country reduced to rubble by war and civil war.

Based on the surge of emotions that was staged with Hasan's appearance, the summit agreed a number of controversial decisions either directed against Russia, providing for an accelerated military buildup, or serving to repel refugees.

The summit decided that despite billions in losses for various European countries, the sanctions against Russia for the Ukraine conflict should be extended until at least July 31 of next year. The day before the summit, the Slovak prime minister and current EU council president, Robert Fico, had described the sanctions as nonsense.

At the same time, the summit paved the way for the ratification of the partnership agreement with Ukraine, whose rejection by then-Ukrainian President Yanukovich had led to the 2014 putsch. This past

spring, the agreement was blocked by Dutch voters, who rejected it in a referendum. The summit adopted a legally binding supplementary declaration allowing Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte to submit it again to parliament. All other EU countries have already ratified it.

The summit also agreed on closer military cooperation. It ratified the construction of a centre for the planning of civil and military missions. The British government, which previously blocked all moves toward a European army, dropped its resistance.

The summit also welcomed the Commission's plans for a multi-billion-euro fund to finance military research. Decisions about it are to be made in the first half of next year.

While the summit huffed and puffed about the misery in Aleppo, Merkel, Hollande, Gentiloni and Rajoy met with the president of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, and other African leaders to persuade them to halt the flow of refugees and keep them in camps, in return for large sums of money.

Officially, this project is called "Migration Partnership." For the sum of 100 million euros, half of which will come from Germany, camps are to be built along the escape routes where up to 60,000 people can be detained.

Berlin also prevailed at the summit when it came to dealing with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The German government refuses to cool relations with Ankara as a result of Erdogan's authoritarian methods of rule because it fears a failure of the refugee deal the EU struck with Ankara to prevent refugees travelling on to Europe.

Now the EU has taken a step toward Erdogan by holding out the prospect of a refugee summit in the spring of 2017, with the participation of Commission President Juncker and EU President Tusk.



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