

Militarism and crackdown on refugees dominate EU summit

Peter Schwarz
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The last European Union (EU) summit of the year, which began in Brussels on Thursday, is symptomatic of the state of the bloc. Divided by social and national contradictions and paralysed by political tensions, the 28 heads of government agree on only one thing: a major escalation of militarism.

No other major political project has advanced so quickly over recent months as the European military union. On Monday, the foreign ministers of the 25 participating states gave the go ahead for the first 17 projects under Pesco (Permanent Structured Cooperation). It aims in the long term to make the EU more independent from the United States. Pesco was celebrated at the summit.

EU Council President Donald Tusk described Pesco in his invitation to the summit as the “best example...that despite differences, maintaining unity is possible.” He wrote, “25 EU countries – with the consent of all EU members and within the existing Treaty rules – are launching cooperation in a new field. This example of unity in practice should be an inspiration to all of us, and hopefully a good omen for other important decisions.”

In fact, the summit’s participants are divided on virtually every other issue. This also applies to the second topic on the summit’s agenda: refugee policy.

All EU members are agreed on taking all possible measures to seal off the continent. To this end, over the past two years the EU shut down the Balkan route and entered into a dirty deal with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who in exchange for money ensures that hardly any refugees can reach Greece across the Aegean Sea.

In Libya, Italy and the EU are arming the so-called coast guard and other militias, which forcibly prevent refugees from travelling across the Mediterranean, detain them, torture them, and in some cases sell them as slaves. These forces are recruited from former civil war militias, including Islamists, and smuggler groups.

While this criminal policy remains essentially unchallenged, there are bitter disputes among the EU member states about the acceptance of refugees. In 2015, the EU decided by a majority to distribute some of the refugees who had arrived in Greece and Italy to other European states according to an obligatory quota system. This decision has remained largely unenforced. Eastern European states like Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary have continued to refuse to this day to accept any refugees.

Tusk, who comes from Poland, therefore proposed in a paper for the summit that the quotas be eliminated because they had proven

to be divisive and ineffective. This was met with stiff resistance.

The German government stated that it does not agree with Tusk’s opinion and considers the distribution of refugees to be unavoidable. The deputy president of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, said, “Either we find a European solution for the challenge of immigration, or there will be no solution.” Every single member state has to do its part, he continued.

The parliamentary leaders for the Liberals and Greens in the European parliament contradicted Tusk. “I was totally shocked by Tusk’s paper,” said the Liberal Guy Verhofstadt. And the Greens’ Ska Keller raged, “It is unacceptable that he strengthens the hand of naysayers like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic.”

A further topic for discussion on Thursday evening was foreign policy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron provided an assessment of the implementation of the Minsk peace agreement in Ukraine. The summit subsequently agreed on the extension of sanctions against Russia for six months. In addition, the participants discussed the decision of US President Donald Trump to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

Today, the summit participants will discuss potential reforms of the euro zone. However, no decisions on the highly contentious issue will be made. Berlin is in no position to do this because Germany has only a caretaker government.

The last item on the agenda will be the Brexit talks. After British Prime Minister Theresa May largely accepted the EU’s exit conditions, the EU Commission will recommend initiating the second phase of talks, which will deal with the future relationship between Britain and the EU. No opposition to this is expected from the summit.

But this will by no means resolve these problems. “The conclusion of the first phase of negotiations is moderate progress, since we only have ten months left to determine the transition period and our future relations with the UK,” Tusk stated in his invitation to the summit. “This will be a furious race against time.”

A sense of the disunity, weakness and division of the EU can be gauged by considering those attending the summit. It has more in common with a military hospital than the meeting of a world power’s general staff. Hardly anyone is present who is not under pressure, struggling for their political survival and deeply unpopular in their own country. The Polish and Czech prime ministers have only come to power this week, and the Austrian Prime Minister will leave office next week. The number of

nationalists who view the EU with skepticism or outright opposition is growing.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is the longest-serving European head of government with 12 years in office, and who has long called the shots in the EU due to Germany's economic weight, is currently only a caretaker chancellor and cannot take any major decisions. The government crisis could drag on for months and, should new elections be held, result in Merkel's removal.

Emmanuel Macron, who won the French presidential election early this year with two thirds of the vote, is now only viewed positively by little more than a third of the French people and is continuing to lose support. The Republicans, the strongest opposition bourgeois party, apart from the neofascist National Front, has with the election of Laurent Vauquiez chosen a leader who admires US President Trump and explicitly opposes Macron's goal of a strong EU.

Andrej Babis is attending an EU summit for the first time from the Czech Republic. The right-wing populist billionaire, also referred to as the Czech Trump, was sworn in on Wednesday. He leads a minority government. It is doubtful whether parliament will give him its confidence in January since he faces criminal charges for misappropriating millions in EU funds.

In contrast, this will be the last EU summit for Austria's Christian Kern. Following the Social Democratic defeat in parliamentary elections, a coalition of the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the extreme right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) will take office next week. It is expected that Austria will subsequently cooperate closely with the EU-skeptic Visegrad states: Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki is also new in office. He enjoys the trust, like his predecessor Beata Szydlo, of Jaroslav Kaczynski, the leader of the governing Law and Justice Party (PiS), who pulls the strings behind the scenes. In contrast to Szydlo, Morawiecki is a financial expert and it is hoped he will win back the confidence of international finance capital.

Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, who replaced Matteo Renzi a year ago, has never faced an election. Gentiloni and Renzi's Democrats (PD) are performing poorly in the polls, being placed far behind a right-wing alliance led by Silvio Berlusconi and the Five Star Movement of comedian Beppe Grillo. An EU-skeptic government is expected to seize the reins of power in Rome after parliamentary elections in March.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy is only holding onto power thanks to the support of the Social Democrats. As shown recently in the Catalan referendum, in order to stay in power he is resorting to authoritarian methods of rule that recall the Franco dictatorship.

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras confronts mass opposition in the working class. As he took part in the Brussels summit, a 24-hour general strike occurred in Greece against his government's austerity policies and a new anti-strike law. In Athens alone, police reported that 20,000 people took to the streets.

Tsipras was elected in 2015 by promising to end the EU-dictated austerity measures. As Prime Minister, he intensified austerity

policies with the result that Greek workers have lost up to 40 percent of their income in the past seven years, and the social system has collapsed. 18,000 doctors, and many other people, have left the country.

Contrary to the claims of the bourgeois press, the European Union and its predecessor organisations never embodied the unity of Europe. They were always instruments through which the ruling class pursued its interests both at home and abroad. They enabled the major corporations and banks to organise the continent in their own interests.

But with the increase in social tensions and international conflicts, with the former protecting power of the US in particular, the divisions within the EU that twice transformed Europe into a battlefield during the last century are once again erupting to the surface.

The growth of social inequality, never-ending social cutbacks, labour market reforms and austerity measures have destroyed the trust in the traditional parties and the EU, which bear chief responsibility for this process. Since the social democratic parties, trade unions and petty-bourgeois parties, like the Greens and Syriza, unequivocally support these attacks and the EU, the main beneficiaries of the opposition to date have been right-wing, nationalist and even neofascist parties.

But this will not remain so. The predominant sentiment among workers and young people is left-wing. Many hate the right-wing parties and oppose militarism and capitalism. These sentiments require a political orientation. The answer to the transformation of the EU into a military alliance for waging war around the world, strengthening the repressive state apparatus and organising social cutbacks, is not the return to the nation state. Instead, it must be the united socialist states of Europe.

The European working class must unite and fight for a socialist programme, which connects the opposition against militarism, repression and the rise of the right with the struggle against capitalism. This is the International Committee of the Fourth International's programme and that of its European sections, the Socialist Equality Parties.



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