



Bratislava Summit: Beginning of a process?

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The 27 European Union (EU) member states, excluding the UK, met for the first time in the Slovakian capital Bratislava on 16th September, 2016 to diagnose the current state of the Union and discuss a common future. Prior to this meeting, Italy, Germany and France met in Ventotene, a tiny island off the coast of Naples, on 22nd August to discuss the EU's response to the Brexit vote and prepare the groundwork for the Bratislava Summit. Though the short meeting at the Mediterranean island did not produce any significant outcomes, yet it created hope that a joint concrete message might be delivered which could carve the path for revamping the EU project.

The 'Bratislava Roadmap', as the post-summit document is known, recognises the multiple problems that afflicts the EU, namely migration, terrorism, economic and social insecurity. It also acknowledges the fact that the member states need to unite in order to tackle these challenges. But beyond the rhetoric, the six-page document does not carry an individual action plan to deal with each problem. For instance, on migration and maintenance of external borders, the EU leaders promised 'never to allow' a return to the uncontrolled migration flows of last year and to further bring down irregular migration numbers. Regarding the action necessary to be taken for controlling the 'uncontrolled migration' or how to overcome the disagreements between the EU and Turkey on the deal which they agreed to broker to control migration in Europe, the leaders were silent. Moreover, the track record of the Union on resettling and rehabilitating migrants has not been impressive so far.¹

The path towards broadening the EU consensus in terms of long-term migration policy, including on how to apply the principles of responsibility and solidarity in the future as stated in the Roadmap looks murky as a 'consensus' seems unlikely amongst member states due to the anti-immigration stance adopted by ruling right-wing parties and conservative sections in Hungary, Poland, Denmark, Sweden and Slovakia. Subsequently after the Brexit referendum, it was seen that Hungarians recently voted (however not declared valid because of low voter

turnout) to reject a European Union refugee resettlement plan, whereas Poland accepted less asylum-seekers per capita than almost any other European nation.ⁱⁱ The feeling of repulsion against migrants was manifest in Denmark as well after the right-wing party Danskernes Parti handed 'Asyl-spray cans' to citizens with the aim of protecting them from attacks by migrants.ⁱⁱⁱ In recent times, Slovakian Prime Minister has clearly demonstrated his disfavour of migrants coming and 'changing the character of the country'.^{iv} In the face of differences on how to share the number of migrants between member countries, unresolved issues can only be an obstacle towards realising an agreement on long term migration policy.

Regarding maintenance of external and internal security, the EU leaders recognised that intensified cooperation and information-exchange among security services of the member states were necessary. This again is somehow ironic as 'national security' is most often under the domain of individual member states, which are quite often reluctant to share confidential information with other member states. Unless incremental changes are introduced into the parts of the treaty which deals with national security, information-exchange among security services might be difficult.^v There was no mention of strengthening the counter-terrorism unit that currently has a staff of only 60, clearly insufficient to deal with the threat of terrorism looming large in the EU.^{vi} This is despite the fact that there have been more than 30 terrorist attacks in Europe since the Madrid bombing of 2004. The proposal for establishment of a Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) to allow for advance checks was a welcome move, though. Similarly, Europe needs a broader plan to deal with ingrown radicalism which can be much more dangerous in the long term for the European society.

On economy, the EU leaders pledged to create a promising economic future for all, safeguard the European way of life and provide better opportunities for youth. In accordance with the objective, concrete measures like decision on extension of the European Fund for Strategic Investment and reviewing progress on the different Single Market strategies were taken. A proposal to ensure a robust trade policy that procures the benefits of open markets is to be laid out in the European Council meeting to be held on October 20, 2016 while a programme for fighting youth unemployment in the region is proposed to be laid out in December.

France and Germany produced a joint defence plan in the run-up to the summit, in a sign that the EUs 'big two' wanted to take the lead in rebuilding confidence in the EU following Britain's decision to leave.^{vii} However, there were disagreements over immigration and austerity issues because of which the EU leaders refused to share the stage together. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi refused to stage a press conference with his German and French counterparts as he alleged that the Union had not done enough to help the continent's southern economies. This might be seen as a move by Renzi to assuage Italian sentiments after he suffered an electoral setback in the recent municipal elections which had left him anxious. He faces a tough battle ahead in the parliamentary elections in 2018 amidst the rise of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and the criticism surrounding his economic plans. Meanwhile, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban condemned the EU's migration policy as 'self-destructive and naive'.^{viii} On the other hand, Polish officials said that potential changes to the EU's governing treaties were an option in the future and that they would continue to push back against efforts by the European .

Commission to exert undue pressure on national governments. To this, Donald Tusk issued a 'warning' to the respective governments in Hungary and Poland to keep their 'cultural counter-revolution' in check.^{ix}

The diagnosis of the current situation that the EU is facing today was undoubtedly correct. From observation, it entails that member states need to achieve consensus on more areas of potential cooperation. For that to happen, the EU might require a major reform in the Treaty of Lisbon, or at least some amendments to follow a new course of action that includes better understanding between its member states. This perhaps could demonstrate a more serious commitment to EU citizens in the upcoming months vis-a-vis a vision of an attractive EU they can trust and support.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that Europe, today, is facing an 'existential crisis', as recognised by the EU leadership in the most recent State of the Union Address 2016.^x As such, expecting the leaders to arrive at hasty decisions would only jeopardise the Union's future. From the viewpoint of setting a direction for the next six months, the Bratislava Summit was a step taken in right earnest. But the strategies intended to achieve the particular goals enunciated in the declaration would require consensus, action and follow up in the upcoming months. If Bratislava is 'the beginning of a process', then the coming European Council meetings, one to be held in the beginning of 2017 at Malta followed by another meeting in Rome in March to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, will have to deliver on promises made towards a common future. The EU has to be responsive to the legitimate fear and sense of insecurity among the EU citizens, and must construct plans which are socially inclusive yet integrated with European values and one which centres on the creation of jobs, economic growth and development.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

ⁱ In December 2015, UNHCR had urged European leaders to set up a massive refugee resettlement programme in view of the fact that more than 1 million asylum seekers had arrived in Europe and though EU states had agreed to resettle 22,000 people direct from UN refugee camps, but until December 2015 only about 600 had arrived. ("Migrant Crisis: EU needs massive resettlement programme", *BBC News*, December 18, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-35130213> accessed September 21, 2016). Till May 2016, only 177 Syrian refugees were resettled in EU under deal with Turkey. (Rankin, Jennifer and Patrick Kingsley, "Only 177 Syrian refugees resettled in EU under deal with Turkey", *The Guardian*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/18/europe-relocates-177-syrian-refugees-turkey-eu-deal> accessed September 21, 2016).

ⁱⁱ Broomfield, Matt, "Poland refuses to take a single refugee because of 'security' fears", *The Independent*, May 9, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/poland-refuses-to-take-a-single-refugee-because-of-security-fears-a7020076.html> accessed October 19, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ McGann, Hilary, "Danish political party hands out 'anti-migrant' spray", *CNN*, September 27, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/27/europe/asylum-spray-trnd/> accessed October 19, 2016.

^{iv} Chadwick, Vince, "Robert Fico: Islam has no place in Slovakia", *Politico*, May 26, 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/robert-fico-islam-no-place-news-slovakia-muslim-refugee/> accessed October 19, 2016.

^v France and Britain had specifically stipulated during the negotiations of the Lisbon Treaty, 2009 that the subject of intelligence must not be controlled by the Union. However, a provision in Article 73 of the Treaty had laid down that member states could organize forms of cooperation and coordination between the competent departments of their administrations responsible for safeguarding national security. Nonetheless, national security largely remains the prerogative of individual states.

^{vi} “State of the Union Address 2016: Towards a better Europe – a Europe that protects, empowers and defends”, *Press Release European Commission*, September 14, 2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-3043_en.htm accessed September 20, 2016, p. 6.

^{vii} “EU Bratislava Summit: European Union ready to start Brexit negotiations immediately”, *ABC News*, September 17, 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-17/eu-ready-for-brexite-negotiations-tomorrow/7854366> accessed September 20, 2016.

^{viii} Foster, Peter and James Rothwell, “Bratislava Summit: Europe’s united front proves a fragile facade as leaders refuse to share a stage”, *The Telegraph*, September 16, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/16/eu-bratislava-summit-donald-tusk-calls-for-sober-and-brutally-ho1/> accessed on September 19, 2016.

^{ix} “European leaders in Bratislava avoided all the difficult questions”, *The Economist*, September 17, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21707344-contentious-issues-about-growth-migration-and-european-defence-have-been-postponed-later> accessed September 20, 2016.

^x “State of the Union Address 2016: Towards a better Europe – a Europe that protects, empowers and defends”, *Press Release European Commission*, September 14, 2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-3043_en.htm accessed September 20, 2016.