



The second phase of preparations for the Rome Treaty anniversary: Analysing Donald Tusk's letter and EU Malta Summit 2017

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The preparation for the Rome Summit, which is to be held on March 25, 2017 started with the Bratislava Summit held on September 16, 2016, which recognised the multiple problems that afflicts the EU, namely migration, terrorism, economic and social insecurity. However, no individual action plans to tackle these problems specifically were announced.¹ Considering that Bratislava was the 'beginning of a process' promising steps like no return to uncontrolled migration flows, developing a long-term migration policy and strengthening external and internal security, the Rome Summit is an apt occasion to deliver on these promises and assess the achievements made in the last six months. This would help the EU citizens to understand the tangible results, if any, delivered by the EU during this time.

The recent letter by European Council President Donald Tusk to the European Union (EU) heads of state on the future of the EU released on January 31, 2017 and the Malta Summit held soon after that on February 3, 2017 is the second phase of preparation of the Rome Treaty anniversary. The title of Tusk's speech "United we stand, divided we fall" encompasses the challenges that the EU is currently facing and the approach that the members, minus the United Kingdom, must adopt in the light of changed circumstances.

As evident from the title, the most important aspect of Donald Tusk's speech was the emphasis laid on the significance of securing unity of EU members to ensure lasting peace in times of "dangerous" challenges. These challenges have been more precarious "than ever before in the time since the signature of the Treaty of Rome".² By accentuating the value of unity, the President of the Council sought to recall the two basic truths which helped the European leaders to consign the memories of a divided Europe into oblivion. These truths also signifying the purpose of a united Europe are namely to avoid another historical catastrophe and to remember

that the “times of European unity” had been the “best times” in the centuries-long European history.³ Tusk also sought to reemphasise the importance of these essential truths in the upcoming Rome Summit.

In his letter, Donald Tusk clearly delineated the “dangerous challenges” into external and internal. The external challenges were namely, “assertive China”, “Russia’s aggressive policy towards Ukraine and its neighbours”, anarchy in the Middle East and Africa. Along with radical Islamism, Tusk underscored the “worrying declarations” of the Trump administration, which has seemingly questioned the last 70 years of American foreign policy. Among the internal challenges, the rise of anti-EU, nationalist and increasingly xenophobic sentiment has steered centrifugal tendencies setting about a menacing trend due to over emphasis on ideology and institutions. Tusk went on further to enlighten the leaders of the 27 EU heads of government that in these times of uncertainty, the requirements for building up a stable union are “courage, determination and political solidarity of Europeans”.

The cost of integration is sometimes realised only when time and again the hazards of disintegration are brought to light. Tusk sought to take on this vital aspect and addressed the heads of state on the cost of disintegration of the EU which according to him, would lead to real and factual dependence on the great powers like the US, Russia and China. Unity of the members is the only way to ensure independence, he stressed.

In his concluding remarks, the President of the Council recorded the need for “assertive and spectacular” steps that would help to raise the level of integration among EU members. The strengthening of EU external borders, coordination of services to check terrorist activities, increase in defence spending, bolstering collective foreign policy of the EU as well as synchronizing individual member states’ foreign policies and focussing on investment, social inclusion, growth and employment were indicated to be imperative for tackling external and internal challenges of the EU. While pointing to the necessity of reviving the Transatlantic bond, Tusk also mentioned about Europe’s role in international trade and the need for free and fair trade based on rule of law.

Donald Tusk’s short and open letter to the 27 EU heads of state on the eve of the Malta Summit touched basically upon the factor of indispensability of unity to stand together amidst the changes in the geopolitical environment. These changes, as Tusk and other leaders perceive, are threatening to the entity and integrity of the EU. The letter was solemn and introspective as it took into account the EU struggles over migration, fallout of Brexit and changes in the US administration.

Britain was not mentioned in the letter for the obvious reason that it voted to leave the EU on a referendum held on June 23, 2016. Any summit which proposes to discuss the future of the EU is likely to be held without the UK’s participation, as it hopes to trigger Article 50, which formally starts the two-year exit process, by the end of March 2017. The British Prime Minister Theresa May was invited to join the celebrations on 25 March, but she has declined the invitation, citing Britain sees no point being in a summit where the direction of the future of the bloc is likely to be the main agenda.⁴ It would be purposeful to remember that May had attended her

first European Council meeting in October 2016 where her 'five minutes' message of setting out Britain's future without the EU was met with silence by the EU leaders.⁵ Earlier, the PM had not been invited to be a part of the Bratislava Summit held on September 16, 2016.⁶

Soon after Donald Tusk's remarks in Tallinn, Estonia, the Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat hosted the Malta Summit on February 3, 2017, chaired by European Council President Donald Tusk. Leaders of 28 EU countries, including Britain, gathered in Malta to discuss how to check the migrants flow into Europe and the implications of U.S. President Donald Trump's inauguration for Europe. The highlight of the Summit was that the EU leaders unanimously approved a migrant plan which seeks cooperation with Libya, aimed at preventing migrants from leaving African soil, while improving the conditions in camps housing migrants in Libya.⁷ Leaders decided to send some 200 million Euros to the Libyan government as a part of this strategy. They also pledged to help with protecting its southern border.⁸ The plan also sought to boost training and equipment to Libya's struggling coastguard and get more involved with neighbouring nations, including Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, to contain the flows.⁹

Meanwhile, the migrant plan was criticized by aid groups like 'Doctors without Borders' who pointed out that Libya was not a safe place and blocking people in the country or returning them to Libya made a mockery of the EU's so-called fundamental values of human dignity and rule of law.¹⁰ Others cautioned that the deal could result in women and children being subjected to inhumane conditions and left vulnerable to rape, assault and forced labour in their home countries.

Encompassing the criticisms, it can also be said that the Italy-Libya deal for the most part ignores the larger conflict in Libya and the importance of addressing it. The aid offered as an incentive is only miniscule compared to the profundity of anarchy and chaos in Libya created due to civil war, in turn leading to political instability. This, however, can be seen only as a temporary solution to the migrant crisis which has taken a serious turn and deserves larger international attention.

On the discussion relating mostly to the new administration in the US, the European leaders like French President Francois Hollande, Austrian chancellor Christian Kern and the European commission President Jean-Claude Juncker disapproved Donald Trump's views on internal affairs of Europe, his remarks on NATO's 'obsolescence' and his ban on Muslim travellers from 7 Muslim-majority countries.¹¹ The British Prime Minister Theresa May sought to reassure European anxieties about Trump's policies and urged Europe to work "patiently and constructively" with the U.S. She also stated that confrontation and division would only play into the hands of those who seek to do Europe harm.¹² On this, the EU leaders commented that Europe did not need advice on Trump or foreign policy and was quite capable of looking after itself. This indicated that they were openly dismissive about May trying to act as a bridge between Trump and the EU.¹³ In 2017, the changed geopolitical circumstances have thus made the leaders more sceptical about their Transatlantic future and have induced the leaders to arrive at a migrant deal with another neighbouring country, apart from Turkey.¹⁴

In the second half of the summit, the leaders set out to prepare for the upcoming 60th anniversary of the Rome treaties on 25th March, 2017. The Rome summit is likely to be seen as an opportunity to retrospect EU's actions and achievements and relaunch the European political process. It will also enable the members to renew their commitment for a better Union. What however limits the scope of the summit is the likelihood of providing no detailed policy prescriptions, but only general declarations.¹⁵

While commemorating the 60 years of the Treaty of Rome in March, the EU leaders should fathom the need for reform or at least introduce some amendments in the Treaty of Lisbon to make way for better understanding among member states. This would safeguard the long term interests of the EU and help to dismiss the 'centrifugal tendencies' which Donald Tusk spoke about in his letter.¹⁶

The need for clarity and urgency as regards unity amongst member states was also emphasised in the State of the Union Address delivered by Jean Claude Juncker on September 14, 2016. Taking into account that the EU has taken very limited action to paint a common picture, it can come up with a revamped vision that the people within can understand providing them with a sense of security. Reviving the aspirations to raise European integration, as Tusk pointed out, would require restoring the sense of external and internal security as well as promoting socio-economic welfare of the citizens. Towards that end, the Rome Summit can be more than just a retrospective summit involving only announcement of general declarations.

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

Endnotes

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¹² Op. Cit. No. 7

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The EU concluded a similar migrant deal with Turkey in March 2016.

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