

COMMENTARY: EUROPEAN COUNCIL

Experts from EUROPEUM react to the European Council Meeting 2018



Martin Michelot | The calm before the storm?

The European Council, for which stakes were high regarding at least the conclusions of BREXIT talks, ended without excessive controversy or confrontation and with soft conclusions, either regarding the ever-so-hot migration dossier or the provocative Italian budget. Neither Chancellor Merkel or President Macron, or any other leaders, made remarks worthy of notice, and the show was visibly ran by Chancellor Kurz; who seemed at least satisfied with the progress made on migratory issues and internal security. On the latter topic, the EU has set itself a more ambitious agenda regarding protection against cross-domain coercion by foreign actors, by adopting a well-structured language that will require heavy follow-up and coordination, asking for measures to be taken in the current legislature. This certainly confirms the role the EU can play in protect both its citizens and its interests.

While this calm is good on the surface, it seems that EU leaders decided to somehow kick the can down the road on BREXIT and the budgetary issues. Theresa May will return home with still no progress on the Irish border and with an uncertain plan to get an extension of the transition period; Giuseppe Conte will return with the

semblance of a victory on the budget, perhaps further emboldening Italy in its anti-European path. With no interim November summit in sight, we can expect a flurry of intergovernmental talks to take place before the December council in order to smooth out all differences, at the risk of otherwise running into a tense holiday period.

Vít Havelka | No Progress in Brexit Talks

European leaders convened yesterday for another round of Brexit negotiations. Statements of high level politicians did not give many reasons for optimism as the positions of the United Kingdom and the EU on the backstop provision remain far away from each other. No side is either willing to or capable of making concessions.

Brexit Outcome Depends on the UK's Domestic Politics

The European Union remains united in its stance, requesting the UK to accept a backstop as agreed in December 2017. The EU seems resolved to keep its demands, leaving only two options for the UK government. Either it consents to the EU's proposals, or it will crash out of the EU without a deal. In the upcoming weeks, much will depend on the Prime Minister May's ability to rally MPs behind her vision of Brexit. If things get out of her hands, the risk of a no-deal scenario will significantly increase.

Risk of No-Deal Scenario Remains Low

Having said this, it is still unlikely that the United Kingdom would leave the EU without a deal. The negotiations can continue until the end of November/December. There is also the historical experience with the last-hour debates regarding Greek debts. EU leaders usually achieve agreements at the latest possible time after all night-long negotiations. To paraphrase Donald Tusk: it always seems impossible until it is done.

Christian Kvorning Lassen | No tangible progress on establishing an essential framework for tackling migration

Despite migration being the top agenda for today's EUCO meeting, no tangible progress was made in terms of establishing a long-term sustainable framework for tackling migratory pressure. The list of inadequacies on numerous key issues remains high; quotas and processing centers outside the EU were lacking from today's conclusions; reform of the Dublin Agreement, essential for a functioning Common European Asylum System, was only indirectly mentioned in an 'encouragement' of the Austrian Presidency to continue its hitherto unambitious work on the agenda; and the emphasis on band-aid solutions and lip service to combatting people-smuggling networks rather than tackling root causes continues unabated.

Without a strong framework, the EU remains unprepared for future migratory pressure. Given the newfound Czech and Polish resistance towards strengthening FRONTEX due to the supposed inefficiency of its mission (and the fallacious argument that it may take away from structural funds), despite having clamored for years about the need for strengthening EU's external borders, it is evident that petty obstacles remain towards even fledgling initiatives needed to create a robust foundation for tackling migration. This EUCO meeting reaffirms most of all

that the Council remains impotent in large part due to the schism between populists, who capitalize on crisis, and those who want to tackle the issues.

Alexandr Lagazzi | External Relations to Africa – Leading by example

Following up on EC President Juncker's speech, the European Council confirmed the EU's eagerness to act in terms of external relations towards Africa. Opting to 'take our cooperation to a new level', the heads of state and government convened the Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs. Such an EU approach, outlined already in the External Investment Plan, builds also upon the G20-Africa Partnership, and aims to be supportive of the UN SDGs whilst tackling common issues such as climate change and migration.

There, the EU stressed the need for a leading-by-example approach. And again, the recipient of this call was rather straightforward – China stands out among the other players in the region that are challenging investment opportunities, with a growing number of FDI recipients whilst diversifying its sectors of investment (including non-resource). Moreover, at the last Forum on China-Africa Cooperation last month, Beijing pledged figures of up to \$60 billion of commercial loans to Africa (outpacing US lending and investments).

The EU thus, aiming to leverage around €40 billion of investments by 2020 through the European Fund for Sustainable Development, still remains the world's (and Africa's) biggest provider of development assistance (with 57 % of provided global assistance in 2017), and underlines the need to complement traditional ways of assisting with innovative tools and sources of finance. Thus, as EC President rightfully criticized, such plan(s) should not be dubbed as a Marshall Plan for Africa, as it indirectly implies that not much has yet been done: even if that might seem plausible – especially compared by the eagerness of other players in the region – it truly downplays the work done since Valletta. Overall, there was acknowledgment at the Summit that the increasing investment interest in Africa will benefit the continent, and as it will also strengthen the bargaining power of local governments, the EU's leading by example approach hopes to set the dialogue on the right path.

Kateřina Davidová | European Council Meeting Reaction on Climate

The recent publication of the major IPCC report on keeping global warming at 1,5°C has clearly left its mark on the EU's political leaders. They acknowledged at the European Council the urgency to act and the need to raise ambitions in order to reach this target and avoid the most devastating impacts of climate change.

In practical terms, this means that the EU needs to significantly raise its greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets by 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2040. The joint understanding of this problem by all the heads of government of the Member States, as expressed today, is just the first step on this road.

At the COP24 in December, it will be necessary for the EU to act as a leader and motivate the rest of the world to step up their climate ambitions as well. As the IPCC report shows, the stakes of failing to reach the 1,5°C target (let alone 2°C) are too high.