

The EU summit : is it to be a multi-speed union?

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If a multi-speed EU is what in fact does emerge over the next 15 to 20 years, then the blockages against Turkey, emanating most notably from France, could also become irrelevant over time.

There are three perspectives from which we can look at the results of the latest EU summit in Brussels. The first is from the perspective of Europhiles and Eurocrats. The second is from that of Eurosceptics and hardcore realists. The third is from the perspective of Eurohopeful Turkey.

Judging by commentary in Europe after the summit, the first group, lead by Chancellor Merkel, is pleased that a fiasco was averted despite the hitherto unseen acrimony and bellicosity that surfaced this time, mostly due to Poland.

"We have achieved what we set out to do," Chancellor Merkel declared after the marathon summit which at times appeared on the brink of collapse. "This shows that Europe came together at the end" she added without going into the specifics of just how painful this "coming together in the end" was achieved.

But the appearance of an "unanimous decision" on what will replace the failed "EU constitution" was nevertheless preserved, and this is ultimately what Europhiles and Eurocrats aim at for the sake of preserving the image of "union."

Idea of 'Federal Europe' fading

Looked at from the perspective of Eurosceptics and hardcore realists, on the other hand, the picture does not appear so rosy. For one thing the summit highlighted just how remote a notion the idea of a "Federal Europe" is for the foreseeable future.

The details have featured in the press for days so there is little point in going into them here. But it has become apparent from what came out of the summit that more sovereignty is something that some members are simply not prepared to transfer to Brussels.

These members in effect secured an opt-out clause that will conceivably also enable them to reclaim some sovereignty they have already transferred, if the need arises for the sake of what is considered to be in the national interest.

This makes it even more difficult for the EU to come up with a common foreign and defense policy stance, something that it has been trying to formulate for nearly two decades with little progress.

The breakup of Yugoslavia and the U.S. invasion of Iraq were two occasions when the deep divisions that still exist in Europe on this score emerged and there is nothing to suggest that the same will not emerge in the face of other such international crisis.

Then there was the concession to France which blocked any reference to 'free and undistorted competition' in the EU, a fact that not only alarmed European free traders but also showed that protectionism as a final recourse is something that some in Europe are not prepared to give up.

As for the Netherlands, it got its assurance that the national parliaments will not be overridden by a pan-European parliament vested with great powers. The Netherlands also obtained further concessions on being able to block new members, even if there is a majority in favor of these members, by means of going

to the European court if necessary.

Ghosts of the past

The worst thing to surface from this summit, however, was the Polish performance which proved that for all the high and mighty talk of Europe having “buried its ugly past,” the ghosts of that past are nevertheless hovering near the surface and can be resurrected in unexpected ways to reinforce positions pertaining to today’s world.

The acrimony between Poland and Germany at this summit left many wondering what other things new EU members may drag to the surface in the future, if and when things do not go according to their liking.

Finally, this summit failed to lift the specter of “referenda” with many in Britain this time - no doubt to be followed by others depending on how the negotiating of the new agreement goes - maintaining that the people should have the final say on whatever document emerges from this new exercise.

The third perspective we mentioned above was that of Euro hopeful Turkey. As far as Turkey is concerned the Brussels summit represents a mixed bag. There is the bad, as embodied in the efforts of members such as the Netherlands and France which want to determine the borders of Europe and halt enlargement beyond these borders in order to block countries like Turkey out.

Then there were the members who want more “deepening” and less “broadening” of the EU. But this is where there could be a positive perspective for Turkey in the sense that the Brussels summit highlighted the limits of more deepening, which could shift the argument in the future in favor of more broadening.

The impression that many commentators got from this summit was that the first step towards the multi-speed EU that some are so against in Europe may have been taken. If true, this will mean a Union that is “a la carte” to an extent, and which provides different options for different needs due to domestic circumstances.

If the EU should indeed move in this direction over the next 15 to 20 years, then a union will emerge that Ankara can interact with on different levels and different ways depending on the different groupings that emerge within it.

If a multi-speed EU is what in fact does emerge, then the blockages against Turkey, emanating most notably from France, could also become irrelevant over time.

The gist of all this is that just as there is uncertainty as to what direction Turkey will take over the next 15 - 20 years, so there is uncertainty from today’s perspective about just what kind of a shape the EU will take during the same period.

Put another way, Turkey and the EU are not standing still today in an unchanging manner where things remain constant. Therefore it seems best for both sides to keep their options open - unless they have a set agenda as France appears to have - rather than engage in “futuresology” which falls just short of “soothsaying” about things that may or may not happen further down the road.

Sources

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