



EU-27 in Bratislava: The Launch of Informal Consultations on the Future of the Union

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka, Jolanta Szymańska

The informal meeting of 27 EU heads of state and government in Bratislava was a sign of the political willingness in the EU to remove it from the impasse created by the Brexit referendum. At the meeting, the leaders presented a “roadmap” of measures to adapt the EU to the new political situation. Although proposals to set up “permanent structured cooperation” in security and defence matters still carry the risk of differentiated integration, after the meeting in Bratislava, such an outcome seems less likely than previously predicted.

A meeting of 27 heads of state and government in Bratislava this past week has initiated a period of political reflection on the future of the Union after Brexit. Holding the meeting without the UK’s participation—although it is still a full member of the EU—meant that it was informal, despite being organised by the European Council secretariat and the Slovak presidency of the EU Council. The aim was to discuss the changes needed to restore public confidence in the EU and to place them into sequence. The talks were devoted to three main areas: migration, security, and economic and social development. Visibly, the EU leaders focused on proposals that unite them and put aside controversial issues. The proclaimed Bratislava “roadmap” then is fairly general, leaves open many questions and does not fully satisfy the expectations of all of the Member States.

Full Control over EU External Borders. Restoring control over irregular migration was the main priority of the Bratislava meeting. The heads of state and government announced the further implementation of existing measures and proposed new ones. Before the end of 2016, the European Border and Coast Guard, which received final approval on 14 September, should be fully operational. The Entry-Exit System for the registration of travel documents and biometrics of non-EU citizens who are admitted for a short stay in the Schengen area should also be completed swiftly. The European Commission’s idea to establish the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) has been given the green light. ETIAS would enable authorities to check whether visa-exempt third-country nationals traveling in the Schengen Zone pose a security or overstay risk. During the meeting, the leaders also declared their full commitment to implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement of March 2016. That deal has been questioned lately by some sceptical Member States because it contains a visa liberalisation clause for Turkish passport holders. The leaders also voiced full support for the countries of the Western Balkans and EU states most affected by the emergency of mass migration. The EU offered immediate financial aid (starting with €108 million and up to €160 million) and technical assistance to strengthen the protection of Bulgaria’s border with Turkey. In parallel with strengthening its borders, the EU wants to continue the dialogue and cooperation with countries of origin to prevent irregular migration and ensure effective returns. It aims to develop agreements with African countries similar to the one with Turkey that enable the repatriation of undocumented immigrants in Europe to these countries. The plans also include the launch of the European External Investment Plan, presented first by EC President Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the Union address. The project, modelled on the so-called Juncker plan, would support private investment in the EU neighbourhood, thus aiming to boost nearby economies and reduce poverty in these countries of origin.

The controversial mechanism for the distribution of refugees among the Member States was avoided in Bratislava. In a separate joint statement, the Visegrad countries proposed the concept of “flexible solidarity” in which they would support frontline countries in other ways than by accepting refugees. However, the precise form of this proposal was

not specified in the V4 statement. The Bratislava “roadmap” contained merely a general declaration about the will of the EU to work further to reach compromise on the division of the responsibilities of the states in relation to migration policy.

The Fight against Terrorism and Strengthening Defence Cooperation. The EU internal security priority of the meeting was the fight against terrorism. The 27 discussed strengthening the exchange of intelligence data between their security services. This direction is consistent with the EC draft project presented before Bratislava that proposes setting up a centralised platform for sharing information from anti-terrorism or other security institutions with law enforcement. The Member States also committed themselves to strengthen their efforts to prevent radicalisation. The Bratislava “roadmap” also foresees the establishment of the European Solidarity Corps, outlined by Juncker in his State of the Union. The Corps would allow young Europeans to volunteer to help in crisis situations, such as those involving refugees/migration or natural disasters. The Corps could include as many as 100,000 people by 2020. The EC is expected to present concrete proposals on this issue by December.

The leaders at the meeting also declared their willingness to strengthen the EU’s common security and defence policy. They discussed Franco-German proposals for closer coordination of Member State defence efforts under the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty through so-called permanent structured cooperation. The proposals return to the idea of operationalising EU combat groups for military intervention in crisis situations, the establishment of a single headquarters for them and pooling of defence capabilities to improve the efficiency of EU civilian and military missions. The proposals also foresee the establishment of a European fund to support research and innovation in defence. Yet, they postponed concrete decisions on these specific plans to the European Council meeting in December. And last, the leaders committed to the rapid implementation of an EU-NATO joint declaration to strengthen cooperation between the organisations.

Poland’s security interest in this area is that future developments in structured defence cooperation will be associated with an increase in defence spending and will not result in institutional competition—especially for financing—with NATO. There is a risk that the pooling of defence spending without actually increasing the overall level might encourage Member States who are net contributors to the EU budget but do not meet their financial obligations under NATO to maintain this state of affairs. It is also worth noting that British defence minister Michael Fallon, in commenting on the Bratislava meeting, said that the UK is opposed to the EU building military capabilities that would duplicate those found in NATO. As long as the United Kingdom remains an EU member, it has the ability to block these projects.

Omitted Issues and Prospects. Some of the leaders in Bratislava also expressed reservations about the results of the informal summit. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi was dissatisfied and said too little attention was paid to concrete steps aimed at stopping irregular migration or to restoring economic growth, especially in the southern Member States. He reiterated his critique of German austerity policy. The Bratislava “roadmap” also did not contain proposals for EU institutional reform proposed by the Visegrad Group, which called for strengthening national parliaments by equipping them with a “red card” to veto EU legislative proposals. That would require treaty changes, which, given the current political situation in the EU, is not supported by the majority of Member States. However, the EU’s emphasis on measures related to migration and intended to contain the crisis at the gates of Europe can be regarded as a friendly gesture towards the V4 countries and a willingness to alleviate political conflicts in this area. If the Visegrad proposals for “flexible solidarity,” in particular its call for support for southern Member States, are turned into concrete measures, that might mark a new phase in the EU’s anti-crisis strategy.

The Bratislava meeting is the start of a difficult road in EU changes after the British referendum. European leaders have already announced further informal meetings in the EU-27 format. If the UK finally triggers the withdrawal procedure provided for in Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, consultations among the EU-27 are likely to form a permanent element of political coordination on European integration, especially with regard to future relations between the EU and the United Kingdom.