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Bratislava Summit at 27: Making the EU great again?

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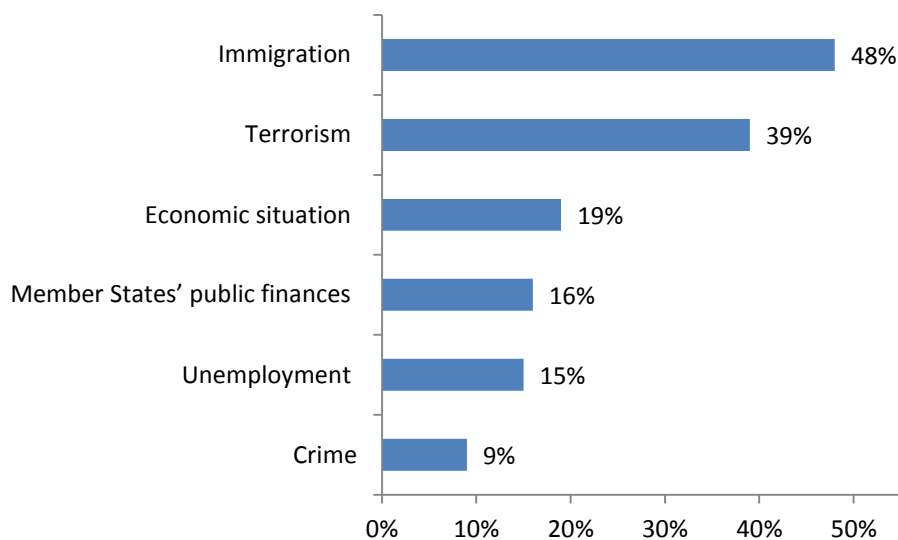


On 29 June 2016, the Heads of State or Government met informally without the UK to discuss the political and practical implications of Brexit. They expressed their determination to remain united and announced the start of a “political reflection to give an impulse to further reforms (...) and to the development of the EU with 27 Member States”. The real starting point of this reflection process is the informal meeting of the leaders of the EU-27 in Bratislava on 16 September. Which topics are likely to be on the agenda? What are the main dividing lines? And what can we expect from this ‘non-summit’?

1 Three core challenges

The [agenda](#) for the informal meeting is not very revealing. It includes two unspecified working sessions, the usual ‘family photo’, an ‘informal lunch’, and a press conference. The meeting is not supposed to be about the future relation with the UK, but about the lessons that the EU-27 should draw from the British referendum. The overarching question is thus how the EU can better live up to the expectations of its citizens and address the challenges of the 21st century.

What citizens view as the most important issues facing the EU



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 85, May 2016 (shows average percent for EU-28)

A review of member state discussions preparing the Bratislava meeting and public opinion polls (see figure above) points towards three core challenges:

1. Migration is certainly one of the key challenges the EU had to cope with and will continue to face in the near future. Immigration is the most pressing issue for the EU in the eyes of European citizens. Meanwhile, the freedom of movement is the second most valued achievement of European integration after peace between the member states.
2. The link between internal and external security is another joint priority. A focal area is counter-terrorism due to the recent attacks in several EU member states. Eurobarometer polls show that the share of European considering terrorism one of the two most important topics facing the EU rose from 25 % to 39 % between November 2015 and May 2016.
3. The economy is the third most important EU topic in the eyes of the citizens. This includes concerns about the member states' public finances as well as unemployment. A central question is how Europe can contribute to fostering growth and lowering unemployment, particularly among the young.

2 Three fundamental divides

In a joint [statement](#) of July 2016, the leaders of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia (the Visegrad countries) stressed that the EU should refrain “from wasting energy on proposals that divide Member States”. However, there are at least three partly overlapping divides that are not easily circumvented.

The first and most basic one is the divide between more or less Europe. It traditionally runs between integrationists and moderate Eurosceptics or Eurorealists. In a common [statement](#) of 25 June 2016 the foreign ministers of the EU’s founding members underlined their adherence to the principle of an “ever closer Union”. Meanwhile, several Central and Eastern European member states prefer flexible integration and a repatriation of powers to the national level. In a joint statement after the British referendum, the Visegrad Four underlined the need to take the EU “back to basics”, by limiting the role of the EU institutions to their mandates and strengthening the voice of national parliaments. They are joined by Nordic countries such as Denmark or Sweden, which are traditionally sceptical of ‘more Europe’.

The second divide can be seen as one between order and openness concerning migration. This rift currently runs between East and West. The Visegrad countries have advocated a ‘Fortress Europe’ model with tough external border control and an externalisation of migration management. They have rejected refugee relocation mechanisms or any other form of binding solidarity mechanisms. The more ‘open’ camp is led by Germany, but also includes Sweden, Italy and Greece, all of which have welcomed disproportionate numbers of migrants since 2014. Their more welcoming stance has been accompanied by calls for more intra-European solidarity. This divide was salient at the preparatory meeting for the Bratislava meeting between Chancellor Merkel and the leaders of the Visegrad countries on 26 August 2016. The latter reiterated their rejection of mandatory migrant quotas while Merkel held onto her position and [stated](#): “we will continue to discuss this issue”.

The third divide has often been referred to as the ‘austerity vs. growth’ debate. In reality, the divide is rather about the right path towards growth. Do we have to reduce public debt first to bring back growth or should we spend and invest more now? Here, the rift runs between North and South as well as between the political left and right. The Greek government has invited the leaders of France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, and Malta to an informal meeting in Athens on 9 September, and thus one week ahead of the Bratislava meeting. The aim is to address issues of common concern and to forge an ‘Alliance of Europe’s South’ to push for a pro-growth agenda. On the other side of the divide are Germany, the Nordic and the Baltic countries. They tend to view structural reforms and fiscal discipline as prerequisites for sustainable growth.

3 Electoral stakes could deepen divides

These divides may become even more difficult to bridge in light of upcoming national elections and referenda. In October 2016, Hungary will hold a referendum on mandatory migrant quotas, which is likely to lead to their rejection. Meanwhile, Austria will re-run the presidential election and right-wing candidate Hofer from the Europhobe Freedom Party is going head-to-head with Green Party candidate Van der Bellen. Italian Prime Minister Renzi had originally tied his political future to a constitutional referendum in October 2016 and is coming under intense pressure by the Eurosceptic Five Star Movement. In December 2016, Spain could hold its third general election in a year. The conservative Popular Party would, once more, face its left-wing Eurosceptic opponent Unidos Podemos and with it harsh criticism of what is seen as an EU-imposed austerity course.

The electoral stakes are potentially even higher in 2017. Dutch Prime Minister Rutte will go into a general election in March 2017, in which the right-wing Europhobe Party for Freedom is likely to become the strongest force. French President Hollande faces a presidential election in spring 2017, in which the Europhobe Front National might beat the Socialist Party in the first round. Meanwhile, the pressure on Germany's ruling coalition by the right-wing Eurosceptic party Alternative for Germany is mounting. The latter could become the third strongest party in the autumn 2017 general election. These 2017 elections are likely to take place against the backdrop of difficult and protracted negotiations on the EU's future relationship with the UK, which Eurosceptics and Europhobes across the continent will be watching closely.

4 Bratislava to set agenda and show unity

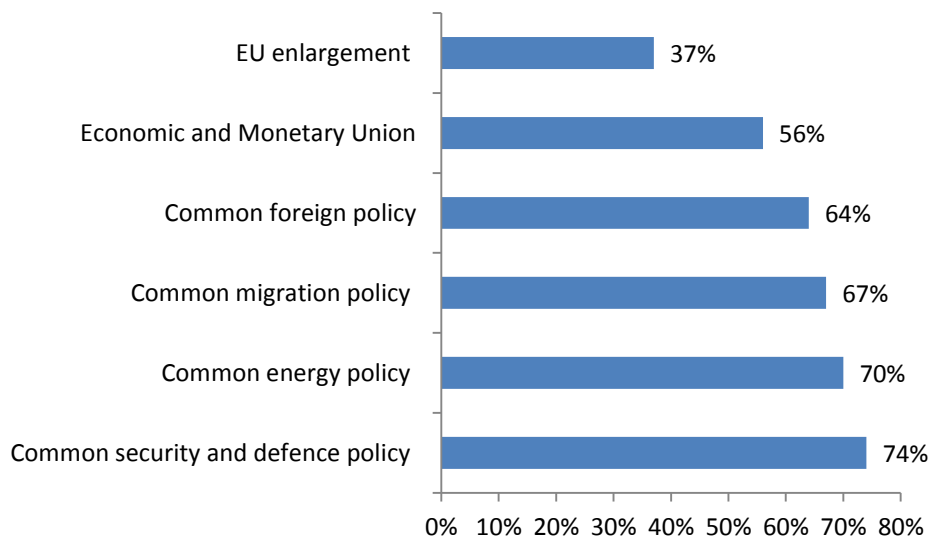
In light of these divides and electoral constraints, one should not expect any far-reaching or visionary changes from the Bratislava meeting. Chancellor Merkel has already lowered expectations by [announcing](#) that this will not be a 'decision-making summit' but an 'agenda-setting summit'. This exercise will focus on the coming six months. The aim is to present more concrete deliverables at the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome on 25 March 2017.

The EU-27 will also want to display unity in Bratislava. Controversial topics such as the relocation of migrants will thus be kept off the agenda. Another topic that is unlikely to be discussed is the future of the Eurozone. While highly relevant for the Eurozone-19, this topic could trigger a debate on the development of a two-speed Europe, which many non-Eurozone EU members reject out of fear of being left in the slow (and potentially less powerful) lane. Unity could also be displayed by brushing over some of the existing divides. An example would be the formula that we do not need more or less Europe (divide 1 above), but rather a better Europe.

5 Tangible initiatives and better communication

A symbolic display of unity will not be enough to regain the trust of the citizens in the European project. To prevent a domino effect from the British referendum, the EU should seize this opportunity to bring some concrete initiatives on the way in areas where there is room for compromise and where the citizens expect the EU to deliver. One such initiative could be the extension of the Erasmus programme to include apprenticeship. The idea of an 'Erasmus Pro' has already been discussed at the Franco-Italo-German Summit in Ventotene on 22 August 2016 and could add real value for young Europeans (detailed policy proposal [here](#)).

Public support for key European policies



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 85, May 2016 (shows average percent for EU-28)

A second example is the further development of the EU's security and defence policy. With one veto player less, the EU-27 could, for instance, pave the way for the creation of an integrated civil-military EU headquarters in Brussels. After all, Eurobarometer polls show that public support for a common EU security and defence policy is high (see figure above) and that approval has consistently been above 70 % since the early 2000s.

Finally, the September meeting would be a good opportunity to address the issue of communication about the EU. The member states tend to blame Brussels for their failure to overcome divisions or to empower the EU institutions to effectively address common challenges. The response to the refugee crisis has been a clear example in this regard. If anything, the Bratislava meeting should yield a gentleman's agreement on the avoidance of scapegoating the EU for national or intergovernmental failures.