

Bratislava Summit: the future of the European project without the UK looks bleak

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*The informal gathering of the 27 EU leaders, excluding the United Kingdom, in Slovakia's capital Bratislava aimed to set an agenda to help the bloc regain the trust of European voters, damaged by the outcome of the UK's June referendum as well as by the Union's inability to confront its many deepening crises. **Dalibor Rohac** outlines its hidden meaning.*



The meeting was meant to show a united front in the face of common challenges. The effect was far from convincing given the [refusal](#) of Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to appear at the initially scheduled joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande. "I'm not one of those who [will] tell people after a summit that everything will be all right and that the roses are going to flourish," Renzi said.

He is right to be disappointed. The summit's [conclusions](#) are heavy with aspirational declarations but light on specifics. This might come as a disappointment to those who argued that Brexit could provide an impetus for the EU's much-needed reforms, which were supposedly held back by the UK's uncomfortable position of never having been fully committed to the European project. More likely, the absence of the UK's pragmatic, down-to-earth voice is already making compromises within the EU more difficult.

Obviously, the refugee crisis was high on the summit's agenda. Yet besides affirming their willingness to assist Bulgaria with the protection of its border with Turkey, the 27 leaders did little besides stressing their commitment to the EU's agreement with Turkey reached earlier this year. That deal, however, [might already be crumbling](#), as refugee flows through the Eastern Mediterranean have intensified dramatically in recent weeks.



The Bratislava Roadmap expresses the intention to "broaden consensus on long-term migration policy," which is necessary to preserve Schengen into the future. But the sad reality is that there is no consensus – in fact, member states are way apart, as the upcoming referendum in Hungary illustrates. Even if the idea of mandatory resettlement

quotas, a major point of contention between the 'old' and 'new' Europe, is dropped, the bloc will not be anywhere closer to a common asylum policy.

A lot of attention in the document is spent, and rightly so, on issues of internal and external security and defence. Yet according to Walter Russell Mead at *The American Interest*, this mostly reflects the fact that, following the Brexit referendum, France has become the preeminent military power within the EU. An emphasis on military capacity plays to France's strengths relative to Germany's, and might herald a period of more assertive French leadership in the bloc on a whole range of issues. That is hardly good news for the EU's reformist, lean government-friendly North.

More importantly, without the UK's military, the EU's common defence will always be something of a paper tiger. Should the EU take on a more assertive role, it will be necessary to work with the British anyway. But that has been made more complicated by the fact that the UK is on its way out of the bloc.

Nowhere was the absence of the UK's pragmatic, pro-market voice more evident than in the discussion of economic questions in the *Roadmap*. I [have argued](#) elsewhere that sluggish economic performance gives fuel to populism on both left and right. It is, therefore, a matter of urgency that the EU become a vehicle for economic dynamism, not a drag on it. Unfortunately, the document gives little indication that the EU will go above and beyond business as usual

Europe needs to do better. It needs an aggressive strategy to dismantle the existing regulatory barriers that are still dividing markets between the member states. It needs to review existing EU regulations, especially where they are hampering the innovation and growth of new industries. To survive, the Eurozone needs a sustainable model for fiscal governance, involving either some degree of federalization or binding fiscal rules. On all of these issues, *the Bratislava Roadmap* remains silent.

This is not a coincidence. In the past, it was the UK that was behind many of the EU's liberalizing reforms, including the Single European Act. Without its presence at the table, the Nordic and Baltic states are already fighting an increasingly uphill battle against the forces of the status quo. The lack of any mention of TTIP is telling too, especially in light of the flak which the negotiations have taken in recent months. Instead, Europeans are only offered a largely meaningless promise of a "robust trade policy that reaps the benefits of open markets while taking into account concerns of citizens".

If the meeting in Bratislava gives us any indication of the future of the European project without the UK, it is not an encouraging one. The bloc faces an assortment of urgent crises, solutions to which will require leadership, imagination, and strategic thinking. Last Friday, we saw evidence of neither.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Brexit blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Image [credit](#) (Public domain).

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