
The Bratislava Summit and the Blue Danube – or thinking about Europe’s future

Karel de Gucht | President of the Institute for European Studies and former EU Commissioner for Trade

In mid-September, the 27 EU Heads of State and Government gathered on the banks of the ‘bright-blue’ Danube, a lifeline that connects several European countries, that brings together European brothers and sisters.

In a way, the EU is like *The Blue Danube*: a generous basin of possibilities. But like every river, the EU also has its twists and turns, its kinks and, sadly, a tributary, which has been the first to decide to break off and flow away from the main stream: the UK.

The informal summit of EU Heads of State and Government in **Bratislava** (Slovakia) was meant to **discuss a future course of action, post-Brexit**. It did seem strange getting together without one family member. One would have expected the meeting to have been dominated by a ‘let’s stick together’ mentality, and to stimulate a renewed sense of solidarity. One would have also expected the meeting to stay away from throwing anger at the absentee, who was not even invited. But Bratislava was not that kind of meeting. Besides the now customary family portrait on the banks of the Danube, there were no clear signs of solidarity, vision or forgiveness towards the UK. Unfortunately, Bratislava seemed like a cut and paste exercise. So what was to be expected?

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German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** was in a subdued state, still recovering from the blows the CDU –her party– had just received during the recent state elections. For his part, the Italian Prime Minister, **Matteo Renzi**, seemed rather feisty, perhaps more so after than during the meeting. He even gave the press a symbolic middle finger by not RSVP-ing to the traditional press conference. He was clearly not happy. There is still no solution in sight regarding how to address the ongoing refugee and migration crisis, which is having a particularly pervasive impact on his own country. Perhaps he was also frustrated that his anti-austerity movement had to remain undercover during a meeting in which financial and euro-zone matters were not on the order of the day. The upcoming vote on constitutional reform in Italy must have definitely weighed on him. He was perhaps expecting ambitious results, and instead got a cruise on the Danube. Beautiful as it is, the Danube was not the reason Renzi went to Bratislava. On a slightly lighter note, the Belgian Prime Minister, the optimist **Charles Michel**, called the **Bratislava summit a *décl*ic, an epiphany**, a realisation that something ought to be done about the EU. So far so good, but what is it exactly that should be done?

This is probably not the time for big declarations or changes, especially if they involve treaty reform. The negotiation and approval of the Lisbon Treaty took no less than a decade. If the EU were to open the **Pandora's box of treaty reform** in the current political climate, it may well fall apart. Any attempt at treaty reform would likely strengthen the forces of re-nationalisation, a return to a Europe of individual systems and rules –the homelands of Charles De Gaulle–. This is arguably of no interest to most European citizens, who may not want to be burdened with all the nit-picking and administration associated with a constant renegotiation of the rule of the road. How about we just try to do what we do best? How about just focusing on strengthening the foundations of our Union instead of trying to either re-design them or remove them?

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Some Member States seem to be calling for taking European integration to new heights. What's with all this talk about an **EU defence union**, an EU army or an EU military headquarters? Can the EU really deliver on that front? These are ideas that have been around for long, and tend to resurface every once in a while. I have, throughout my entire political career, seen countless proposals on European defence, only to see them vetoed and shelved time and time again. **Guy Verhofstadt**, Belgium's hitherto Prime Minister, devoted great efforts to try and get a European military command and defence union off the ground in 2003, at the height of transatlantic divisions over the Iraq War. It did not work then. Instead, we got a number of European battle groups. These standby battalions, provided by different member states on a rotational basis, are ready to be deployed at short notice. But they have never been used. There is just no consensus on this, not least given national disagreements about the need –or direction– of a truly common European foreign and security policy. Germany and France need to get on the same page. Perhaps the new joint Franco-German paper calling for greater military cooperation can be a start. We will see what the upcoming European Council in December brings, but I fear these good intentions may face the same outcome as similar initiatives in the past.

Others are suggesting that the EU should become a mere collection of individual states, grouped into separate compartments according to their desired level of integration. The idea is that those who favour greater integration should march ahead by forming a 'core group' around European Monetary Union and Schengen, and even build a European defence union; while those who remain sceptical about 'ever closer union' should fall back on an 'outer ring' of sorts. The UK would belong to the latter group. This would create a 'Europe à la carte' or, rather, a sort of **European buffet**, whereby States could fill their dishes to the brim, choosing what to eat *à volonté* and discarding what they do not like. Not only does this run counter to the principles of European integration, it is also **unrealistic**.

In the run up to the Bratislava summit, Commission President **Jean Claude Juncker** made his usual crusade through the remaining 27 Member States with a clear mission: gathering support for his so-called 29 areas of interest. The results speak for themselves: Juncker came back with the support of only half the bloc, and only for three issues: the

internal market, the fight against terrorism and the digital economy.¹ Three out of 29! Conclusion: **there is not even a core group of countries who wish to integrate further**, let alone even agree on how to go about it. There is no such thing as a 'core group' today. Even Commission President Juncker **acknowledged** as much in his 2016 State of the Union speech before the European Parliament, when he said: "Never before have I seen so little common ground between our member states".

Allowing Member States to cherry pick certain policies, rights and obligations is not what the EU needs, or stands for. A mentality check is needed, so let us stop with the big proposals and empty promises, and focus on **delivering** results that our citizens can recognise and feel.

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First, **let us do something to stimulate investment**.

Commission President Juncker had a plan: to invest €300 billion in the European economy. Two years later we stand at €100 billion. If this plan is to succeed the EU must think long term, not least because big investments are always about the long term. The EU must think like a company, and not put all the weight at once on the national budgets. It must give the Member States enough space to invest while at the same time making sure they don't jeopardise their structural savings.

Secondly, the EU must do something about the so-called '**Posting Directive**', which has led to many cases of abuse, especially in the construction sector. For instance, a largely Eastern European company subcontracted by a Belgian construction company only has to pay the minimum wage. For Belgium this is unfair competition –and it is–. For the Eastern European Member States, this is about retaining their competitive advantage, which is understandable. Belgian Commissioner **Marianne Thyssen**, who is in charge of this difficult dossier, has proposed that an Eastern European worker be paid the same as a Belgian worker. An ideal solution indeed, but perfection is not of this world. If the EU could simply agree on a same amount for social security to be paid here, that would already be a significant step forward in terms of tackling social-security fraud.

Last but not least, the EU must do something about the current **migration crisis**. The European Commission distribution plan to share out 160,000 refugees across all the EU Member States has failed. Despite the plan having been (admirably) approved by a majority in the Council of Ministers, obliging Member States to implement it, it is not happening. It works on paper but not on the ground. Let's face it: Eastern European Member States do not want refugees, and certainly not those of Muslim origin. They will keep on vetoing initiatives and gain an even bigger following. So why not reverse the roles and reimburse the efforts of those Member States that do take up their responsibilities? The Commission could, for instance, use European funds to give these countries €25.000 per recognised refugee.

¹ Valentina Pop & Drew Hinshaw (2016), 'After Brexit Vote, EU Leaders Struggle to Paper Over Divisions', *The Wall Street Journal*, 14/IX/2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/after-brexit-eu-leaders-struggle-to-paper-over-divisions-1473861879>.

Instead of singing the praises of integration in new and challenging policy fields, the EU should focus on consolidating and strengthening those policy fields in which it does best. Instead of embracing grandstanding and empty proposals, the EU should focus on the daily problems of its citizens, and delivering tangible results. And instead of blaming the European Commission or Brussels for their sins, the Member States should work with the Commission to fix the foundations of the EU: to do that, they could well take a page out of Commissioner **Margrethe Vestager's** daring book of tricks. Apple can testify to it.

So, my dear Heads of States and Government, you may well sail the ship of fortune on Strauss's *The Blue Danube*, but do make sure this is not *The Last Waltz*.