

# COMMENTARY: EUROPEAN COUNCIL

Our experts react to the EU Council Meeting 2019 (June 21-22)



## **Christian Kvorning Lassen | Disinformation and Hybrid Threats – No signs of policy catching up with technological giants and development**

The conclusions regarding disinformation and hybrid threats were expectedly vague, indicative of a lack of in-depth understanding of the issue, especially of online platforms and their stake in it. Thus, it is evident from the conclusions that the EU is still relying on agencies and member states to “raise awareness, increase preparedness and strengthen resilience” in a regulatory vacuum devoid of political understanding and will to tackle the root causes, incentives and tools for disinformation/hybrid threats. While it is correct that the development of AI and data-gathering techniques require continuous assessment, it also requires immediate actions in terms of powerful regulatory framework. As long as tech-giants continue acting with impunity with regards to democratic integrity, paying only lip service to legitimate democratic concerns expressed by both member states and the wider EU, it is incongruous to expect them to self-regulate or that member states individually can wield the political clout needed to make these companies and their associate technologies and data work *for* democracy and citizens.

## **Katerina Davidova | Climate Change – Unprecedented support for net-zero emissions thwarted by only four member states**

The hopes were high prior to the Council meeting on Thursday 20 June. Twenty-two states have openly backed the goal of climate neutrality by 2050, including the most important one – Germany. However, after a lengthy discussion on the precise wording of the conclusion, the unanimous decision was blocked by the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Estonia.

In the end, the commitment to net-zero by 2050 was dropped from the text and replaced by a vague reference to “climate neutral EU in line with the Paris Agreement”. To underline the fact that the net-zero target has gained so much support in the recent weeks, the leaders at least included a mention in the footnotes saying that “for a large majority of member states, climate neutrality must be achieved by 2050”.

This, however, puts the four central and eastern European countries in a bad light. Despite all being net receivers of EU funds, they reneged on their shared responsibility and caved in to their national industry interests, significantly undermining the position of the EU as a global climate leader.

The only positive takeaway from this European Council is the fact that the Visegrad Four group split up, with Slovakia leaving the common V4 position for the first time in what can signal a less coordinated V4 approach in the future.

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## **Jana Juzova | Enlargement – declaratory support but deeds lacking**

Despite high expectations in the past months, the European Council meeting did not bring any breakthrough except another pledge to further enlargement, with the EU Member States still keeping the Western Balkans waiting. At the European Council session, enlargement was not even on the agenda and the topic was discussed only at the preceding General Affairs Council meeting on 18 June in Luxembourg.

The GAC reaffirmed what had already been stated in the Commission’s progress reports released in May, stressed the need for more efforts in substantive reforms, especially in the area of rule of law, and the European values, which the candidate countries need to truly align with.

While no agreement on the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia had been reached, the discussion brought at least one tangible result - the Council set October 2019 as the latest date for the final decision on this matter. The EU will thus keep both countries on their toes for a bit longer. However, October still represents a reasonable time frame and if a fair decision is reached by then, the EU could avoid further political destabilization in the region.

The conclusions state, “committing to core European values is a choice”. Nevertheless, committing to European perspective for the region is one too - one which has already been made. It is now time for the EU Member States to deliver on their own promises and commitments. Whether they will be able to do so even in the face of difficult and possibly unpopular decisions or they will prefer to maintain the current standstill and avoidance remains to be seen in October.

## **Vit Havelka | European Council meeting – Nothing new regarding the post-2020 MFF**

Apart from nominations for the top EU positions, leaders of the European Union discussed yesterday the post-2020 MFF package, whose final version they hope to enact in Autumn 2019.

Expectations for a major breakthrough were low, and subsequently confirmed by the concluding Leaders' declaration. The heads of state only asserted that the work done under the Romanian presidency is appreciated, the upcoming Finnish presidency should further develop the negotiating box, and that the next discussion on this topic will be held during the regular October European Council meeting.

That said, we haven't moved any further since the last EC gathering. It is yet to be seen whether the EU will manage to finalize the work on the MFF by the end of this year as the Union will surely be occupied with other important dossiers such as constitution of the new Commission and the Brexit turmoil.

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## **Louis Cox-Brusseau | External Relations – Softening Rhetoric toward Russia**

These European Council conclusions provided little in the way of new policy indicators regarding external relations, maintaining normative stances on critical issues facing the Union without committing to dramatic course changes. The EU leaders unanimously agreed to extend current economic sanctions on Russia by a further six months, condemning Russia's continued violation of the Minsk accords and raising the possibility of non-recognition of Russian passports issued in separatist regions, with further options mooted should the situation in eastern Ukraine not improve. However, whilst the Council welcomed the announcement of criminal charges to be brought against four individuals over the downing of Flight MH17 in 2014, and expressed concern over the ongoing captivity of Ukrainian sailors in Russia in relation to the Sea of Azov incident, it is evident that the Council's conclusions were notably less critical of Russia than previous conclusions, and indeed far less critical than the condemnation of Turkey at this Council; it may be surmised that the Council's rhetoric toward Russia could move in future toward encouraging further EU-Russia dialogue – presumably hoping to attain greater coherence with international law from the Russian side – and away from blanket condemnation and enhanced punitive measures.

Concerns over illegal drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea by Turkey incited particularly strongly worded condemnation from the Council, which reiterated its support for Cyprus in this matter and raised the possibility of 'targeted measures' to curb Turkey's illegal activities, potentially raising the spectre of trade preference reconsiderations. Celebrating existing strategic partnerships – notably the EU-Africa partnership and the Eastern Partnership – filled the rest of this Council, followed by a rededication to positive relations and support for Moldova in light of its recent transfer of power and a renewed commitment to improving the EU-Morocco relationship.