

COMMENTARY: EUROPEAN COUNCIL

Our experts react to the EU Council Meeting 2019 (October 17-18)



Christian Kvorning Lassen & Zuzana Stuchlíková | Beyond Brexit, the EU face several challenges long neglected due to Brexit and unreconciled internal divisions

Intense Brexit talks that concluded just before the start of October Summit allowed for a twist some would not expect few weeks ago – Brexit, for once, did not dominate the agenda. Leaders endorsed the latest deal without major obstacles during Thursday afternoon, clearing the way for more controversial topics, which, unfortunately, once again highlighted internal divisions within the EU. Failure to agree on opening accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia during the evening session leaves the Enlargement agenda and the Western Balkan countries in an unjustifiable limbo after years of painstaking reforms. Coupled with the fact that little progress was made on the MFF as well as the crucial climate change agenda, the latter due to Polish, Hungarian and Czech obstruction, an uncomfortable truth has become apparent – Brexit, stealing so much spotlight in the past years, is far from EU's largest problem.

Katerina Davidova | EUCO October 2019: Just Transition Fund in the spotlight

This European Council focused mostly on the international aspect of climate action, as well as the financial aspect of achieving EU's own climate targets, which will be closely linked to the next EU budget. No progress has been made on the Union's climate neutrality target by 2050, as three of the V4 countries (Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary) continue to block it. The spotlight has thus shifted towards the financial measures that could help these (and other emission-heavy) countries transition towards net-zero economy. Most notably, the newly proposed Just Transition Fund came into spotlight. While this might be an important bargaining chip to get the three remaining laggards on board, it is crucial that the new funding only becomes available to countries that commit to ambitious and concrete decarbonisation strategies, which the three V4 outliers have not done yet. The discussion on this will resume again at the European Council meeting in December this year.

Martin Michelot | Brexit – “Why the European Parliament may be a BREXIT spoiler”

If there is one thing that the EU doesn't like, it certainly is quick decision-making. Some MEPs, faced with the news of the new BREXIT deal, were already downplaying expectations that the EP would give its green light to the deal before the fatidic date of the Halloween, both in terms of calendar - linked to the plenary sessions in Strasbourg - and also to the need for MEPs to get a proper assessment of the deal. Will the parties that stand to lose the most MEPs (Renew Europe) or whose members support a second referendum want to play a political role and upset the whole process? Is this the direction of history at a time where the EP is playing an increasingly political role? Don't expect BREXIT to breeze through the EP, even if the mood in Brussels remains overwhelmingly geared towards being able to move forward with other issues. This may be the last opportunity - before the MFF debate - for this EP to play a decisive political role, and the volatility that we have seen around Commissioner's auditions could well be amplified when BREXIT is on the table again.

Louis Cox-Brusseau | Brexit: Not A Done Deal – Yet

Despite the jubilant tone from some quarters in British and European media, the deal agreed on Thursday between the European Union and United Kingdom does not overcome all of the significant barriers to actually enacting the UK's departure from the EU. With a deal agreed upon between Boris Johnson and the EU leaders, Brexit may finally seem closer than ever before. The reality, however, is that the deal – uncomfortably similar to the one Theresa May failed to pass through the UK Parliament in her time as Prime Minister – is still very unpopular in many quarters. The deal represents a significant climb-down from the UK's previous negotiating position, and could – if it is passed – lead to future moves toward Scottish and Irish independence, and ultimately the dissolution of the United Kingdom. With the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) refusing to back the deal in the UK Parliament on Saturday at the time of writing, Johnson will need the backing of Labour MPs to pass the deal; it is rumoured that many Labour rebels will indeed vote for the deal. With inside sources now claiming Saturday's

vote will be decided by an incredibly close margin – potentially in the low single-digits – the ball is back in the British court.

Louis Cox-Brusseau | Turkey: Sowing the Seeds for Future Disaster

The European Union response to the Turkish offensive into northeastern Syria was characterised by rhetoric, not hard action, with European leaders strongly condemning Turkey's 'Operation Peace Spring'. Many EU Member States went on to immediately and formally end arms export licensing to Turkey. However, the lack of a unified common arms embargo on Turkey from the EU side betrays serious internal divisions over the three problems 'Operation Peace Spring' has created for the EU. Firstly, a humanitarian crisis has rapidly developed, as Turkey's military action has a clear ethnic dimension in its targeting of Kurdish ethnic minorities and the Syrian Defence Forces who have cooperated with the Kurdish PKK. Secondly, the instability in northeastern Syria caused by the US withdrawal and Turkish action sows the seeds for a dramatic loss of security and stability in a region where ISIS/Da'esh has previously flourished. Islamic terrorism could easily return to the region, with huge ramifications for European security in years to come. Lastly, the threat made by President Erdoğan to release three million Syrian refugees into Europe if the EU continues to condemn the Turkish action is significant and highlights a crucial weakness in the EU: its inability to deal with another migration crisis potentially far greater than that of 2015. As of Thursday evening, the US and Turkey have reached an agreement that a five-day cessation in hostilities will take place allowing civilians to flee the designated 30km 'safe zone' Operation Peace Spring proposes to create. Whilst the EU leaders will wish to see this as a success, there will still be increased refugee flows into Europe as a result of this crisis whether or not further fighting takes place, and there are now real strains apparent in the EU-Turkey relationship that must be overcome. And crucially, the revival of ISIS/Da'esh in northeastern Syria is now a real possibility that European security agencies must prepare for.

Jana Juzová | EU Enlargement: Final blow to EU's credibility in the Western Balkans

After the General Affairs Council's inability to reach an agreement on the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania on Tuesday, hopes were high before the European Council meeting and some believed president Macron's position might be changed in the end under the pressure from other EU leaders. However, the countries opposing the accession talks with the two countries, headed by France, managed to block the agreement. Especially in the case of North Macedonia, blocking of the accession talks has been the final blow to EU's credibility in the region and the entire EU policy towards Western Balkans. While the EU leaders repeatedly stress the necessity of a real commitment to reforms by the Western Balkan political elites, North Macedonia has gone above and beyond to deliver on EU's expectations, most visibly by reaching a solution to the decades-long dispute with Greece including a change of the country's name. Still, the EU has utterly failed in delivering on its end, setting a very dangerous and potentially destabilizing precedent for the entire region that there are no guarantees in the enlargement policy or reliability on the side of the EU.