

COMMENTARY: EUROPEAN COUNCIL

Our experts react to the EU Council Meeting 2019 (December 13)



Christian Kvorning Lassen | An Underwhelming EUCO Redeemed by 2050 Climate Neutrality Pledge

The 12-13th December EUCO was largely defined by the climate neutrality pledge for 2050 by all Member States sans Poland, even though the lack of heightened 2030 ambitions and strategy mars the overall impression as this is direly needed to achieve the net-zero objective. However, the MFF is in a state of disarray with the upcoming Croatian Presidency leaving little grounds for optimism. Corollary to this, the Conference on the Future of Europe, slated for 2020-2022, still looks largely conceptual and will require the Croatian Presidency to drive the process – an important task resting on a shaky foundation barring immediate progress. EU Enlargement was not on the agenda despite having first been torpedoed by France and subsequently inundated with several non-paper reform proposals, leaving the Western Balkans stranded in an untenable limbo. While WTO paralysis was acknowledged, permanent solutions are not expected to be found for the foreseeable future, despite it being fertile ground for EU (and transatlantic) engagement.

Criticism aside, this EUCO was redeemed through the important climate neutrality pledge. While lack of heightened ambitions and tangible actions in other areas are lamentable, today marked a direly needed victory for the climate.

Vít Havelka | MFF Negotiations in Disarray

The December European Council discussed the latest Finnish proposal of the upcoming MFF 2021-2027, not being able to reach any agreement. The draft was predominantly criticized by the “Friends of Cohesion” group that aims at maximizing allocations into Cohesion Policy. In this respect the Finnish document was perceived as a setback from the original Commission’s proposal. The only tangible result of the yesterday meeting was an agreement on climate neutrality as the one of the priorities of the future MFF.

Overall, the negotiations are in disarray and will very likely slip into the second half of 2020 as the Croatian Presidency is not expected to bring any breakthrough proposal. We might witness similar situation to the Constitutional Treaty negotiations, when the final wording was agreed during the German presidency. This will however leave very little time to implement fully the new MFF as it will enter in force at the beginning of 2021.

Kateřina Davidová | EU resumes its climate leadership by approving climate neutrality goal

After months of uncertainty and a nail-biting sequence of negotiations, the European Council endorsed the objective of achieving a climate-neutral EU by 2050 (with the exception of Poland, which did not commit to the goal at this time, but which is expected to do so at the Council meeting in June 2020). Agreeing to the climate neutrality is a significant step forward, which will help put climate change into the centre of all future EU policies and investments. It is clear that the issue of financing the transition to net-zero emissions economy will play a key role in the negotiations of the upcoming months, with focus now moving to the announced Just Transition Mechanism, which should help those countries and regions that will find it the most costly to reduce their emissions. The Council’s endorsement of the climate neutrality goal has also opened door to the renegotiation of EU’s 2030 emissions target, which is currently at 40% (compared to 1990 levels) and which needs to be updated to 65 %, should the EU stand a chance of achieving the net-zero objective.

Louis Cox-Brusseu | External Relations and Security – Shying Away from Controversy

This meeting of the EU’s leaders came at an auspicious time in European external relations. With the recent NATO summit on 3-4 November in London addressing the issues of the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, internal dissent over NATO unity and tensions with Turkey, and the 9th November Normandy format meeting on Ukraine, this EUCO meeting came at an opportune time for European leaders to consider and consolidate their position on security and defence issues. By and large, the Council conclusions reflected cautious commitment to a continuation of existing mechanisms, with little in the way of new developments. Regarding EU-Russia relations, European sanctions on Russia were renewed for a further six months, and the minimal progress made under the Normandy format talks recognised by both Macron and Merkel. With continued divisions in the Franco-German relationship over European security policy, and an emergent diplomatic fracas between Germany and Russia over

the alleged murder of a Georgian citizen in Berlin, it was perhaps unrealistic to expect much in the way of progressive policy declarations on Russia from this Council meeting. Insofar as the Turkish issue is concerned, however, the Council took a more stringent line, with support for Greece and Cyprus over their ongoing disputes with Turkey concerning the delimitation of maritime jurisdictions, and particularly strong condemnation of Turkey's illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is, however, particularly noticeable that Turkey's operation in north-eastern Syria did not receive attention.

Against a backdrop of great potential change on the Eastern Neighbourhood with the conflict in Ukraine, the looming advent of Brexit and ongoing tensions with Turkey, it is perhaps disappointing that this European Council did not make more strident, progressive commitments to dealing with future issues; it is not, however, entirely surprising, given the uncertain future the EU faces in the next five years.

Louis Cox-Brusseau | Brexit – A Bitter Pill to Swallow

Many in the UK may have expected Thursday's general election to return a close final result, with some even expecting or hoping for a hung parliament akin to the 2017 election. The reality was very different. The Conservative Party under Boris Johnson won its greatest victory since the days of Margaret Thatcher, with a majority of just under 80 seats – a historic outcome that has already been hailed in British media as an ironclad mandate from the electorate to deliver Brexit.

Whether or not the result ought to be interpreted on a single-issue basis, the European Council meeting took a largely pragmatic response to the election's outcome: it can now be said with certainty that the United Kingdom will depart the European Union on 31st January 2020, and above all the leaders of the European Union welcome the clarity and certainty such a result provides, ending three years of chaos, uncertainty and often frustrating negotiations. Continuing the (mostly) close cohesion that has characterised the European response to Brexit, the Council welcomed the Commission's decision to reappoint Michel Barnier as Brexit negotiator, to move toward a clear and ratified trade deal during 2020, with the stated intention of maintaining "as close as possible" a future relationship with the UK at all levels.