FEPS post summit briefing: European Council, 19 – 20 October 2017

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The European Council that took place last week has been largely dominated – as it has often been the case in the last couple of years – by the question of migration. At this fall's summit heads of state and government also discussed Brexit, the Catalan crisis, taxation, trade as well as the institutional future of the EU and most notably the question of deepening the Eurozone. This short briefing will analyze the Council conclusions which focused on digital economy, migration, defense cooperation and the frayed relations with Turkey.

Digital Economy
The Council conclusions read that European leaders are "ready to do what it takes for Europe to go digital". Nevertheless, progress on implementing the broader digital policy package has been slow. While the Council emphasizes the need to strengthen cybersecurity and combat online crime and terrorism, EU leaders pay relatively little attention to how digitalization impacts standard forms of employment. But new forms of unprotected labor are emerging quickly, notably in the digital domain. While EU leaders acknowledge that "there is a need to invest in digital skills, to empower and enable all Europeans", the social dimension of crowd work is not being adequately addressed. No mention of eroding social standards, unclear contracts and non-compliance with labor law standards across countries.

While the Digital Single Market has a strong potential for boosting economic growth across Europe via job creation and social innovation, the rapid development of online platforms for sharing services and managing work poses new policy challenges. In its report "Work in the European Gig Economy" (forthcoming, November 2017), the Foundation for European Progressive Studies together with UNI-Europa and the University of Hertfordshire specifically addresses the question how digitalization impacts employment in Europe. 'Old' and 'new' forms of work increasingly overlap as labour markets rapidly evolve in the digital age. Since this has left many workers unprotected, the report clearly identifies the need for more stringent regulations in order to reap the benefits of digital technologies.

The report also serves as background information for our one-day conference ['Crowd Working in the European Gig Economy – Implications for Public Policy'](#) on 28 November 2017 in Brussels. We will welcome speakers and panellists from academia, policy makers, trade unionists and crowd workers on the ground, to encourage the discussion and exchange of ideas between different actors either shaping or participating in the gig economy. We will also discuss the results of the research, working conditions in the online economy and positive alternatives to shape our future world of work.

Migration
In spite of the still looming contrasts between member states on key questions such as the interpretation of the very principle of solidarity and the ways in which to ensure a fair sharing of responsibilities, and in spite of the fact that more and more governments and political parties are convinced that elections cannot be won by advocating an open and inclusive approach to migrants, the Council tackled these questions in a much broader and comprehensive way than it previously did. Questions addressed ranged from the "full

control of the external borders" to the various Mediterranean routes (Western, Central and Eastern), from the cooperation with key transit countries – Turkey and Libya – to the need to address the root causes of migration, from the fight of smugglers and traffickers networks to the support to be given to IOM and UNHCR efforts to improve reception conditions in the transit countries. The European Council's conclusions also include calls to get back to Schengen, complete the reform of the Common European Asylum System, and provide adequate financial support to the above-listed measures and goals.

It is undeniable that the European Union has taken steps forward to tackle migration flows. But at the same time every single one of the instruments and policies listed in the four pages dedicated to migration aims above all at curbing the numbers of migrants and at increasing return procedures. A goal towards which there seems to be increasing convergence in Europe. However, it is questionable that managing migration flows can be limited to the goal of keeping people out or in transit countries.

No mention was made of the relocation scheme, which came to an end on September 26, with the disappointing result of less than 30,000 persons relocated out of the 160,000 originally foreseen. In a disheartening step backwards, the proposal for new "resettlement schemes" is now accompanied by the word "voluntary" (the news that the Commission would no longer focus on relocation and would rather switch to voluntary resettlement was first announced on September 27), exposing the fact that the European Union has eventually yielded to the uncompromising refusal of the Visegrad countries to offer protection to asylum seekers.

Security and Defense

Following up on previous statements, the Council also centred on the area of **defence**, with an important mention that it 'will revert to the issue in December 2017 and assess the progress achieved'.

Touching upon the latest stage of developments in this domain, a strong focus of the conclusions was mainly on two key items:

- First, the plans for Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), provided in the Lisbon Treaty, which as noted in a previous briefing has the potential of becoming a game changer in European security. Here, the Council encourages those Member States in a position to do so to 'swiftly notify the Council and the High Representative of their intentions to participate in PESCO', with a view of launching PESCO by 'the end of the year;
- Secondly, the Council also encourages Member States to work more actively on European Defence Fund, by developing 'flexible and sound financing mechanisms within [it]', in order to 'allow for joint procurement of capabilities and/or their joint maintenance and as a way of improving access to cutting-edge capabilities.'

It is crucial to note how important it is to move quickly on all aspects of the external security as this has been on the agenda since December 2016, in order not to lose the precious, positive momentum that exists. It is equally essential to underscore the importance of not diminishing the level of ambition behind this agenda, in light of recent electoral results in various EU member states.

External relations

Focusing on **external relations**, three extremely important issues were discussed: Turkey, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Iran, reflecting the breadth of challenges the EU is dealing with at the moment.

First, Turkey's relations with the EU were the primary topic of discussions. The extremely short reference to these discussions, with the one line simply mentioning that "The European Council held a debate on relations with Turkey" does not do justice to how problematic the country's domestic situation is widely viewed by EU leaders across Europe, especially since the failed coup attempt in July last year and the Turkish constitutional referendum earlier this year. It rather reveals that there was no agreement on substantive measures. The European Commission is now being unofficially tasked with looking into whether accession funding 'could be focused on the development of rule of law', as certain leaders mentioned in their press remarks following the meeting.

Regarding DPRK and Iran, the decisions taken (EU autonomous sanctions towards DPRK) and the statement made (vis-à-vis the Iran Nuclear Deal) by the Foreign Affairs Council of 16 October 2017 were re-affirmed by the European Council. In both cases, it is clear that all 28 members states stood united in their approach, adding gravitas to the response and credibility of the EU. Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative has been rightfully vocal on both these items, especially defending the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme, especially since the erratic decision of US President Donald Trump not to certify it, taken on October 13th.