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Growing divisions, war threats loom over EU summit in Rome

By Alex Lantier

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On Saturday, European Union (EU) heads of state met in Rome, celebrating 60 years of the 1957 Treaty of Rome that founded the European Economic Community, in an exercise designed to highlight the continuing unity of continental Europe despite Britain's vote to leave the EU last June.

In the event, the summit highlighted instead the growing international conflicts and class tensions that are tearing the EU apart. The 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome could very well be its last. Amid growing concerns that France could elect a neo-fascist president in May and then leave both the EU and the euro currency, leading European officials of all political stripes pointed to the rising danger of war and collapse of Europe. Nonetheless, none of the EU leaders can formulate a clear plan to avoid plunging into the abyss.

Thousands of Italian troops put central Rome on lock-down over the weekend amid official fears of mass protests against the EU, whose austerity policies have devastated Italy. Moreover, differences between EU, Polish, and Greek officials forced EU officials to water down the final communiqué, to avoid the humiliation of having it repudiated by EU member states.

Poland's far-right Law and Justice (PiS) government opposed references to the formation of a "two-speed Europe," split between wealthier countries and a periphery of southern or eastern states. The EU has threatened to suspend Poland's EU voting rights over the PiS' attempts to

emasculate the judiciary, amid a bitter struggle for influence between Berlin, London and Washington in Poland. The PiS apparently feared calls for a “two-speed” EU would be used to marginalize it.

The Coalition of the Radical Left (“Syriza”) government in Greece briefly demanded that the draft communiqué contain provisions on social rights and on handing back power to national parliaments. This was apparently a temporary tactic by Syriza, which faces strikes of port and public sector workers against it in Greece, as well as EU threats to withhold loans to Greece unless it accelerates its austerity measures against the population.

In the event, the communiqué that was adopted epitomized the EU’s response to Brexit: the EU is trying to survive as a coalition of nationalist, anti-immigrant regimes held together by aspirations to become an aggressive military bloc rivaling the United States.

On military policy, it called for a “stronger Europe,” “creating a more competitive and integrated defence industry” and “strengthening [the EU’s] common security and defence.” It also called for continuing EU anti-immigrant policies—which have seen thousands drown in the Mediterranean, as millions flee imperialist wars in Africa and the Middle East—so that EU “external borders are secured, with an efficient, responsible and sustainable migration policy.”

Perhaps most significantly, the EU signaled that it would move away from trying to secure unanimous agreement on policy among EU member states. While the formal endorsement of a “two-speed Europe” arrangement was eliminated at Poland’s insistence, it was replaced with a vague proposal to “act together, at different paces and intensity where necessary, while moving in the same direction.”

However euphemistically formulated, the adoption of a “two-speed” Europe policy marks a major step in the disintegration of the EU, with vast and unforeseeable implications.

The limited post-World War II integration of capitalist Europe was the European bourgeoisie’s response to fascism and two world wars that had claimed tens of millions of lives, leveled much of the continent, and discredited capitalism in Europe. Prosperity from increased trade within Europe was intended to fend off the political challenge posed in the working class by communism, exemplified in the continued existence of the USSR. At the same time, the bourgeoisie saw the pursuit of a united European policy, financed with US aid, as critical to avoiding new wars in Europe.

The preamble to the 1957 Treaty of Rome signed by Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg reflects this long-abandoned strategy. Calling for “ever closer union among the peoples of Europe,” it pledges to ensure the “economic and social progress ... by common action to eliminate the barriers which divide Europe” and “the constant improvement of the living and working conditions” of European people.

Since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the EU’s establishment in 1992 in the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has repudiated these conceptions. The NATO wars in the Balkans in the 1990s and above all the latest war drive against Russia, after the announcement of German re-

militarization in 2014, went hand with accelerating austerity measures targeting basic social rights won by the working class in previous decades of struggle.

These took the sharpest form in Western Europe with EU austerity measures imposed after the 2008 Wall Street crash that devastated Greece and led to threats to expel Greece from the euro zone.

Deep political shocks are exposing the underlying bankruptcy of the EU and the unviability of attempts to unify Europe on a capitalist basis. With Brexit and the coming to power in Washington of the Trump administration, which has denounced the EU as a tool of German domination, the crisis of the EU has reached a new level of intensity. Even those sections of the European still defending the EU now aim to divide Europe in order to sideline, or even expel from the EU, those European countries that they see as an obstacle to their plans for war and austerity.

Significantly, while figures from all sides are warning of war, no one is trying to articulate a policy to maintain European unity and halt the rapid drive towards war. Instead, the gloomiest predictions prevail. Last week, pro-EU French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron predicted an era of war and pledged to bring back the draft in France, before enthusiastically endorsing a “two-speed Europe” proposal and declaring his alignment on Berlin.

Several EU heads of state met prior to the summit with Pope Francis, who declared that Europe faces a “vacuum of values. ... When a body loses its sense of direction and is no longer able to look ahead, it experiences a regression and, in the long run, risks dying.”

Prior to the summit, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker gave an interview to the *Financial Times* of London to denounce the Trump administration and warn of war in the Balkans. He called Trump’s support for Brexit and Trump’s calls for other countries to leave the EU in order to escape German domination “annoying” and “surprising.”

“I told the [US] vice-president [Mike Pence], ‘Do not say that, do not invite others to leave, because if the European Union collapses, you will have a new war in the western Balkans,’” Juncker said. He added that the prospect of EU membership was one of the few elements preventing a new war in the Balkans: “If we leave them alone—Bosnia Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, Macedonia, Albania, all those countries—we will have war again.”

In the UK, leading pro-EU Conservative Michael Heseltine issued a denunciation of Brexit, warning that it would only pave the way for German domination of Europe.

Heseltine said, “Our ability to speak for the Commonwealth within Europe has come to an end. The Americans will shift their focus of interest to Germany. And if I can put it to you, for someone like myself, it was in 1933, the year of my birth, that Hitler was democratically elected in Germany. He unleashed the most horrendous war. This country played a unique role in securing his defeat. So Germany lost the war. We’ve just handed them the opportunity to win the peace. I find that quite unacceptable.”

The UK Independence Party asked if Heseltine had “lost his marbles” and called his statements extraordinary. “If I was German I would be deeply offended,” a UKIP official said. “I never realised the purpose of Britain’s membership of the EU was to stop German domination of Europe.”