
VERSAILLES: A SUMMIT TO RESTORE FAITH IN EUROPE

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The heads of state of Germany, Italy, Spain and France will meet on Monday (6 March) at the Palace of Versailles in an attempt to restore their citizens faith in the EU. EURACTIV France reports.

President François Hollande chose the Palace of Versailles, a symbol of Frances former glory, to host the three other heads of state of the eurozones biggest countries. The summit will be short but ambitious.

According to a source close to the French president, Angela Merkel, Meriano Rajoy, the President of the Italian Council of Ministers Paolo Gentiloni and Hollande himself hope for nothing less than to relaunch the political dynamic to re-establish faith in Europe.

Ahead of the European summits of 9-10 March, then 25 March in Italy, this is a considerable task.

How can these leaders transmit a positive message to EU citizens when the Union is the subject of such widespread mistrust, with regard to its disappointing economic record chaotic handling of the migration crisis?

France thinks it has the answer. We need to make the most of the dynamic generated by the removal of the United Kingdom, which has acted as a brake, said one advisor.

Britain has for years held back progress on important EU integration projects, like the European Defence Union or a European army. The dossier has leapt forward in the last eight months, with Donald Trumps hesitations over NATO providing extra impetus.

According to the agenda, the leaders will also discuss the Rome declaration, which the EU-27 are due to deliver at the end of March, as well as the blocs relations with president Trump and the migration crisis.

Commission pushes for stronger defence, trade and border powers after Brexit

The European Commission has said it could accept reduced responsibility for some policy areas, but only in return for greatly strengthened powers over defence, border control, migration, counter-terrorism and trade.

But the main topic of conversation will be Brexit and how to manage it.

The four-country bloc has already decided which of the five scenarios put forward by the European Commission last week in its White Paper on the future of the EU it would prefer. Their preference

would be option three: a multi-speed Europe. France and Germany have already spoken out in favour of this option and Italy and Spain are expected to follow suit.

Under this model, the EU would abandon its aim of ever closer union for every member state in favour of differentiated integration. In other words, a multi-speed Europe.

While this may appear to be a sign of progress since Brexit – the UK was thoroughly against the idea – the four countries concerned may still have a hard time making the other 23 member states swallow the pill.

Visegrád Group spells out its vision of EU's future

The leaders of the Visegrád Group (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) adopted yesterday (2 March) a joint statement on their input to the Rome Declaration, which will be adopted at the summit in the Italian capital on 25 March.

This scenario has the advantage of not requiring treaty change. So any talk of ambition is mitigated.

And the message of unity the four countries hope to convey is already highly questionable. The countries of the Visegrad group (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) have already voiced their opposition, even if they already opt out of many EU projects.

Other more recent members of the EU are also sceptical of the possibility of a multi-speed Europe.

Bulgarian MEP compares two-speed EU to apartheid

Bulgarian MEP Peter Kouroumbashev (S&D) has compared ideas for a two- or multi- speed EU, advocated by the European Commission, to apartheid, arguing that such projects would ultimately destroy the Union.

For some countries, the need to respect public opinion provides a convenient pretext for inaction.

The four heads of state at Monday's summit will have to walk a fine line to try and make the EU more attractive: while firm decisions are needed, they cannot appear too prescriptive or eager to impose their will on the other member states.

The proclamation of faith in the EU, which will be made in four languages in the palace of the Sun God Louis XIV, God's self-proclaimed representative on earth, is symbolically very important. At the very least it will be an opportunity for cool-headed statesmanship, to contrast with Donald Trump's Twitter presidency.

Kaynak/Source: