

European Summit Talks Open Today; Focus Is Immigration Control

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Body

The European Union is at an important crossroads, 15 countries looking to enlarge to 25 while transforming its own ponderous procedures, trying to become both efficient and democratic. But the Union's summit meeting here Friday and Saturday will barely make a dent in the organizational problems.

Instead, stung by a political shift to the right in Europe, the leaders have turned this meeting into one dominated by immigration, which was shoved onto the agenda only after the far-right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen did so well in the first round of the French presidential vote in April.

The meeting will also face the now common demonstrations against globalization and Europe's confusion in pressing for open trade while continuing to subsidize its own businesses, including an outdated and wildly expensive system of farm subsidies that takes up 45 percent of the European Union budget.

In fact the host, Jose Maria Aznar, the conservative prime minister of Spain, which is ending its six-month presidency, had to postpone the beginning of the meeting by several hours on Friday to allow his colleagues to arrive. There was a general strike today in Spain, which left few open businesses and no taxis.

The strike was about domestic changes to social security, but it has made the leaders ever more sensitive to the political backlash from voters concerned about their living standards, crime and foreigners.

Immigration as a general issue has been roiling Europe and providing votes for right-wing and populist candidates. It has become a major election issue in Germany, with its stagnant economy, high unemployment and history of generosity to refugees.

In Germany, as in France, Britain and Spain, the issue of immigration has also become associated with a perception of rising crime and has taken on a tinge of terrorism. Muslim immigrants in all four countries have been linked to the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

Urged on by Mr. Aznar and Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, the leaders will debate how to press other countries to stop the flow of illegal immigrants to a Europe grown wealthy and attractive.

Britain has suggested economic sanctions or reductions in aid, but other countries, like France and Sweden, are looking for softer solutions, arguing that punishing poor countries will only generate more illegal migration.

But the leaders are expected to endorse plans to increase the number of border guards and to set a timetable to work out a common asylum policy and rules on how applicants are treated.

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The European Commission, the Union's executive body, estimates that half a million illegal immigrants enter each year, almost as many as the 680,000 legal immigrants. But most of the illegal immigrants are believed to be economic migrants who overstay their visas, not people abusing the asylum process. In fact the number of people seeking asylum in Europe has dropped steadily since the end of wars in the Balkans.

Prime Minister Aznar has rejected allegations that Europe is seeking to seal its borders to anybody from outside, which the candidate countries of Eastern Europe fear also means them. "I have said it clearly and I want to reiterate that debates about a 'Fortress Europe' make no sense," Mr. Aznar said. "Europe is not going to be a fortress, nor do we want it to become one, but it will not either be a chasm where anything can pass through."

But both the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, and its High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers, have warned European leaders not to toy with people's fears.

"There is a kind of public mood which unfortunately is not being addressed by political leaders with sufficient leadership," Ms. Robinson said. Efforts to seal borders must be coupled with clear legal channels for immigration, Mr. Lubbers said.

The leaders are also struggling with Europe's economic downturn and the requirement that all countries balance their budgets by 2004, and keep budget deficits less than 3 percent of gross domestic product in the meantime.

Germany was warned for approaching that ceiling, infuriating Chancellor Gerhard Schroder, who faces a tough election fight. So his government has leaked figures showing that France is coming close to the ceiling now.

Finance ministers are trying to soften the 2004 target, making it subject to "growth remaining in line with forecasts," a Spanish official said, one more example of how reality often undermines European Union commitments.

Similarly, Mr. Schroder has said that unless Europe's agricultural policy is reformed, his country cannot afford to pay farm subsidies that would be due to new, poorer members when they join.

European leaders want to keep new members from getting full benefits right away, but that would only postpone the real problem, which is to change a subsidy system that hugely benefits the 5 percent of European workers who are farmers. The 10 candidate countries will more than double the number of farmers and increase the amount of land under cultivation by 42 percent.

The leaders will also work to resolve another embarrassing problem: The Union wants to have a first real task for its own security and defense program, which is formally separate from NATO.

The current NATO peacekeeping force in Macedonia is only about 800 troops, and the Europeans want to take it over as a European Union project. But they still need the use of the larger group's equipment, and squabbles between Greece and Turkey -- a member of NATO but not of the Union -- has blocked this small effort to project European power.

The leaders will also discuss proposals from the president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, to create an "inner cabinet" to work more efficiently, especially once the Union enlarges. But all such proposals are complicated, touching national interests and even affecting political coalitions within states.

So as usual, major structural change will be put off for another time, awaiting the results of a "convention" talking about a new constitution for the new, larger European Union.

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Photo: Thousands marched in Madrid yesterday in a general strike protesting social security changes on the eve of a European summit meeting in Seville. (Agence France-Presse) Map of Europe highlighting Seville in Spain: Fifteen government leaders are gathering today in Seville.

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