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In an atmosphere of anti-war protests throughout the world and of bitter political rhetoric in the United Nations Security Council, the 15 European Union leaders summoned last week in Brussels in a final attempt to come out with a unified position on the Iraqi crisis. Acknowledging the moods of the voters in their respective countries, Europe's top officials chiseled a new joint declaration with which they reaffirmed the French and German stance for continuation of the U.N. inspections. However, the declaration was a clear sign that Europe's patience is running out. Stating that "inspections cannot continue forever" and Saddam Hussein must "cooperate immediately", the EU nations left no doubt that on the issue of Iraq's disarmament they share the US position.

Yet, the summit of the top 15 posed the question of the actual intentions of the top European powers and particularly of France and Germany. It is also doubtful whether the new declaration is a sign of real unity in Europe, with most former communist countries lining up with the United States. One thing remains clear, though. France has no intention whatsoever to take into consideration the opinion of the small in Europe. French President, Jacques Chirac, seemingly angered by the defiant stand of the former Soviet bloc Central and East European countries, sharply advised them to shut up if they want to retain their chances to join the EU. He warned that some of the 10 candidates, especially the poorest, such as Bulgaria and Romania, "could hardly find a better way" of reducing their chances for membership by speaking against France. The emboldened French position led to criticism on the part of Poland and the Czech

Republic. However, other small European countries, such as the temporary Security Council member Bulgaria which up to last week was a staunch supporter of the American cause, decided to keep quiet, with Bulgarian politicians suggesting that the country abstain in the case of a new Security Council resolution on war against Iraq.

The up-to-now firm British stance seems to have slightly changed. Facing isolation in Europe and criticism at home, the British government has become more susceptible to the idea of giving weapons inspectors more time. In a BBC radio interview, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said that the British government will “listen carefully” to the public opinion in the country. British officials undoubtedly would prefer to have the support of their citizens rather than not in the case of war. Yet, Great Britain remains the staunchest supporter of the American cause, with the country considering submitting a new Security Council resolution declaring that Iraq is in material breach.

In spite of the declaration, the European Union continues to be polarized. On the one hand, the Great Britain, Spain and Italy actively support the Bush administration view. On the other, a group of allegedly pacifist countries led by France, Germany, Belgium and Luxemburg want to avoid war as long as possible. Other European countries appear to be split between those two positions with Sweden, Finland and Austria belonging to the peace camp, while Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal backing the US line against Saddam Hussein.

This European situation of buying time is particularly beneficial to Russia. A former benefactor of Saddam Hussein, Russia enjoys good relations with Iraq. Maintaining contacts with the Iraqi government is vital to Russian oil companies which have multibillion-dollar contracts to develop Iraqi oil fields. Moreover, the temporary Middle East crisis keeps oil prices high, which pushes the Russian economy ahead. Therefore, Mr. Putin’s quiet stand somewhere

between the French animosity towards the American Middle Eastern policy and the US urge for war is a wise way to preserve Russia's position in Iraq and in Europe, as well as to retain good relations with the United States.