
FATE OF EU REFUGEE DEAL HANGS IN THE BALANCE

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This week the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper) in the EU meets to run through a packed agenda covering topics that could be as diverse as fisheries, defence and trade relations.

This may look like a routine meeting. But in fact this one is unusual and the stakes are high.

On the agenda, by chance on the UN's World Refugee Day, is the Union resettlement framework, a real attempt to bring some coherence and strategy to one part of the wide-ranging migration agenda that confronts the EU.

It is easy to say that the migration crisis has no answers. That isn't true.

Europe's choice is between unplanned, reactive, fragmented, ineffective migration policy and planned, regulated, documented movements of people. The resettlement framework is part of that latter course.

If ambassadors agree the text of the framework, this would lay the foundations for an ambitious, humanitarian and sustainable deal for some of the world's vulnerable refugees – all the more important given that the US is in headlong retreat from its historic leadership role in this area.

If the text cannot be agreed then the whole proposal may fall through, and the refugees who could benefit will remain in limbo.

Only human

They wouldn't be human if they weren't tempted to take to the sea for dangerous journeys to Europe.

Some of the ambassadors will support the draft text on the table. There are four good reasons why the rest should go for it.

First, the need for a new start is indisputable. Today, there are approximately 1.2 million refugees in the world who have been identified by the UN as in need of resettlement.

These are people whose basic needs, such as medical treatment, cannot be met in their current circumstances, and they therefore need to be transferred to another country that agrees to admit

them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement.

At the International Rescue Committee we know only too well just how critical a role resettlement can play, given 40 years of work resettling refugees to start a new life in the US.

The historic commitment of the US to offer haven for people fleeing for their lives has been good for refugees and good for the US – from Einstein to Madeleine Albright to Sergei Brin.

Second, ambassadors should agree this text because the lack of an EU-wide safe and legal route to protection through resettlement has long been the missing piece in the EU's migration management efforts, and there is good evidence of how to make resettlement work well.

The US has had their resettlement scheme for decades. Europe currently has 22 percent of global GDP, yet hosts just 12 percent of the world's refugees.

The International Rescue Committee calculates that a fair and reasonable number for a resettlement target for the EU would be 108,000 refugees per year.

Timing is right

Third, the timing is right. There's a window of opportunity, globally and within the EU. In September this year, countries' resettlement policies will be in the spotlight, as the UN meets to agree a new Global Compact on refugees.

It will be vital that all contributors to the Global Compact, including the EU, can point to their own efforts to share responsibility for solving this global challenge.

Within the EU, there is momentum in the current negotiations on the proposed Union Resettlement Framework. Member states have their own political and foreign policy objectives, and the political difficulties in reaching agreement on migration are plain for all to see in the stalemate around the reform of the Dublin regulation and the wider Common European Asylum System.

But in this one vital area, there is a glimmer of light. We understand that the EU commission and presidency are working intensely to balance member states' objectives and concerns with a framework that secures resettlement as a tool for protecting the most vulnerable - and for once a solution could be within reach.

Fourth and finally, surprising as this might sound to some, there's even a chance that putting a resettlement framework in place might prove popular.

Last year, in a campaign run by the International Rescue Committee and Ben & Jerry's, more than 50,000 people called on the EU to stand together with refugees and give refugees this safe route to rebuild their lives in Europe.

More broadly, according to the Eurobarometer survey, more than two thirds of people in the EU support a well-managed migration and asylum policy, which resettlement must sit within. It's vital that EU leaders meet these legitimate public expectations.

The EU's efforts to manage migration are firmly back in the media spotlight after the Aquarius debacle last week. Thanks to the leadership of Spain's new prime minister, Pedro Sanchez, the

passengers on board that ship have at last found safety.

But the lives of many thousands of others still hang in the balance □ and today's meeting could make the difference.

Germany and France have declared a wide range of joint efforts to inject vigour into their vision of the European Union ahead of an EU summit of leaders next week.

On Tuesday (19 June), the two issued a Meseberg Declaration that calls for changes on security, migration, taxation, the banking union, the eurozone budget, for fewer European commissioners, among other measures.

With Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel facing a rebellion in her coalition at home over asylum, the declaration is part of her larger bid to reach consensus ahead of the summit and stave off internal political threats to unseat her.

This includes meeting French president Emmanuel Macron at a government residence outside Berlin and issuing a declaration that also takes on board some of his ambitions on the eurozone budget.

They want the new budget, designed for its 19 member states, to launch in 2021, to include creating a parallel budget.

It also means turning Europe's bailout fund, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), into a European monetary fund where struggling EU states can obtain loans.

"We are working to make sure that the eurozone budget will be used to strengthen investment, also with the aim of strengthening convergence within the eurozone," said Merkel.

New 'EU Security Council'?

Other novelties include creating an "EU Security Council" and to start using majority voting among EU states to crack deadlocks in areas of foreign policy.

The announcement follows a separate agreement, also signed Tuesday, for France to take the lead on building next generation combat fighters with Germany.

On migration, the two are pursuing previously stated demands to create tougher policing of the EU's external border in what appears to be, in part, a reference to an European Commission plan to finance a corps of 10,000 border guards.

But they also reference the EU-Turkey statement, which cut the number of mainly Syrian refugees from travelling to the Greek islands, as an example of "cooperation and partnership" that could inspire other deals "to avoid departures to Europe".

They warn that unilateral moves by EU states to tackle migration flows could also threaten the Schengen passport-free travel area and end up increasing migration into Europe.

"Unilateral, uncoordinated action will split Europe, divide its peoples and put Schengen at risk," says the declaration.

Instead they push for a coordinated European approach, one that has so far proven elusive given the overall fallout of the Dublin asylum reforms and flat-out rejection by Hungary and others to accept relocated asylum seekers.

The two EU leaders also agree to work for the European commission to have less commissioners than there are Member States □ as foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty, and to put in place transnational lists for European elections as of 2024.

Kaynak/Source: