
EU ASYLUM POLICY: CHANCES FOR COMMON CONSENSUS SEEM SLIM

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A common EU asylum policy before next week's summit? Some say that would require a miracle. German Chancellor Merkel could seek bilateral solutions, but that is no easy task either. Bernd Riegert reports from Brussels.

EU member states have been negotiating a comprehensive reform of the European asylum system as well as ways to secure the bloc's external borders for the last three years. The European Commission has introduced a legislative packet of seven reforms in an attempt to make headway on the topic. The Commission's proposals are aimed at speeding the asylum process, standardizing criteria for granting applicants asylum and making it easier for states to deport migrants back to their countries of origin. Many of the proposals enjoy broad support, yet others remain contentious.

No agreement in sight on Dublin IV

The thorniest sticking point is reform of the so-called Dublin III Regulation. It determines which member states are responsible for which asylum seekers. The European Commission has proposed providing relief to potentially overburdened countries of first entry [] Italy and Greece [] through redistribution. Yet many Central and Eastern European countries are strictly opposed to that concept.

Building a life in Germany despite threat of deportation

European diplomats in Brussels are convinced that if German Chancellor Angela Merkel thinks the argument can be defused before the upcoming EU summit on June 28-29, she is kidding herself. Observers are asking what interest the Polish or Hungarian government could possibly have in helping the chancellor out of her current crisis with truculent coalition partner and Bavarian sister party, the CSU? Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has long maintained that the problems posed by refugees and asylum seekers are Germany's, because Chancellor Merkel is the one who "invited" them to the EU.

Bilateral agreements as a way out?

The only thing the chancellor might be able to do is seek bilateral, rather than European, solutions. Article 36 of the Dublin III Regulation allows agreements between EU member states in order to speed the asylum process and find practical solutions to border problems within the EU. Italy and France, for instance, have had such an agreement for six years. It allows French authorities to send immigrants back to Italy [] that happens to be the immigrant's first country of entry [] only a cursory appraisal of a person's status. The chancellor could choose to use such agreements as a template for her own bilateral negotiations. That approach, however, would be beset with troubles.

Italy

Italy's new populist and far-right governing coalition has already begun to crack down on immigration by turning away life boats operated by refugee aid groups at its maritime borders. After a recent meeting with Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said, "The Dublin system must be overhauled." That means countries of first entry [] Italy [] longer want to be left alone with the problem. Far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini has already called for refugees and asylum seekers to be resettled in other EU countries.

So what could Angela Merkel offer the Italians to entice them to take back refugees stopped at the German border? An appeal for solidarity with the EU's most popular target country [] would bear little fruit. The Italian government will not have forgotten the fact that Angela Merkel refused to support a widely discussed EU quota system to provide relief to Italy and Greece back in 2015.

Austria

Asylum seekers who enter the EU via Italy and attempt to enter Germany will be stuck in Austria [] which lies between the two [] the new, right-wing populist government in Vienna does not form a bilateral agreement. At this point, Austria has shown no inclination to do so. Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz has long been a vehement critic of Angela Merkel's asylum policies. He recently proposed creating an "Axis of the Willing" to seal the EU's exterior borders, keeping migrants from even reaching the continent in the first place. Kurz has also said that asylum procedures would be best conducted outside the EU [] North Africa, or on an isolated island. That idea is supported by Italy. Such asylum centers are also said to be part of German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer's "Migration Master Plan." It will be a difficult task to sculpt all of that into concrete form before the coming summit.

Greece

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras effusively praised Chancellor Merkel for her asylum policies a few days ago. He said he was impressed by the fact that she was trying to solve the problem on a European level. The EU's agreement with Turkey, which has provided great relief to Greece, owes

much to the chancellor's personal engagement. One can suppose Greek enthusiasm for taking back rejected asylum seekers trying to reach Germany via the Balkan route is minimal. And unless those rejected asylum seekers are put on a plane and sent straight back to Greece, it is unlikely that they will ever return anyhow. Such people would have to traverse a number of other states before arriving back in Greece.

Western Balkans

Chancellor Merkel could also negotiate deals with non-EU member states, allowing asylum seekers and immigrants in transit to be returned when denied entry to Germany. From Germany's perspective, returns to a number of states have already worked quite well. Numbers of asylum seekers from Serbia, Kosovo and Albania, for instance, have fallen dramatically of late. Still, it remains to be seen whether these Balkan countries will be willing to take in people from other states. Theoretically, a type of "domino" return system could be possible, extending from Germany, to Austria, to the Balkans and all the way back to Greece.

European solutions a far-off dream

The European Commission's head of immigration, home affairs and citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos, is convinced that a reform of the Dublin system is imperative to finding a European solution. Yet, as long as member states continue to block that, many other aspects of asylum reform will remain out of reach.

Most EU states agree in principle to the expansion of the Eurodac data system to include asylum seekers. Another novelty is set to be the issuance of a complete EU list of countries of safe origin. Chancellor Merkel even envisions an EU asylum authority which would, in time, make its decisions in a transit zone at the EU's external borders.

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