
POTENTIAL EU-ALBANIA ASYLUM DEAL COULD HELP KEEP GERMANY'S ANGELA MERKEL IN POWER

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Albania may be set to serve as a temporary reception country for asylum-seekers headed for the European Union. Indeed, European Council President Donald Tusk and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz recently suggested establishing reception centers within Europe, albeit outside of EU territory.

Austria's government spokesman Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal told DW that talks about such centers are, in fact, underway with Albania and other countries. But Endrri Fuga, who advises Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and heads the government's communications department, denied any such negotiations were taking place. Albania's opposition, meanwhile, alleges the government wants to open reception centers in the hope that it will speed up the country's EU accession process.

The status quo

Currently, asylum-seekers are still migrating along the so-called Balkan route towards the EU. Nowadays, however, most try to reach the bloc via the Adriatic Sea, although Italy, Malta and Greece have grown reluctant to take in large number of asylum-seekers. And EU members, including Germany, are keen to see rejected asylum-seekers swiftly repatriated. So, where does Albania come into the picture?

What speaks for Albania

Albania is situated along the Balkan migration route and on the Mediterranean, where most asylum-seekers arrive. The port of Durrës has the capacity to register and house large numbers of individuals who attempt to cross the sea and are then escorted to Albania by ships from Frontex, the EU's border agency. Once in Albania, individuals who are not entitled to asylum could be repatriated, while those in need and those likely to be granted asylum would then be distributed throughout the EU.

The country has several advantages from an EU perspective. It is not a member of the bloc, meaning Schengen rules guaranteeing open borders do not apply. And similarly, Albania is not a party to the EU's Dublin agreement that sets guidelines for the asylum process. It is, however, a NATO member, and a NATO anti-terror center is currently being set up there. Moreover, northern

Albania is very mountainous, and thus a natural frontier to EU territory.

Is Albania ready?

Albania has ample experience in housing and caring for refugees. It took in up to 1 million Kosovars in 1998 and 1999 during the Balkan wars. And following the influx of refugees into Europe in 2015, Albania significantly increased its capacity to take in migrants. Yet so far, those reception centers remain largely unused. Albanian media have reported that only several thousand asylum-seekers are presently housed in the country.

Neven Crvenkovic, The UN refugee agency's (UNHCR) spokesman for southeastern Europe, confirmed that since 2017 Albania has doubled its capacity to house and process asylum-seekers. As an EU hopeful, Albania already meets many of the bloc's humanitarian standards. Indeed, the UNHCR reports that Albania treats asylum-seeker well.

Albanian Interior Minister Fatmir Xhafaj is presently touring European capitals for bilateral meetings on, among other things, the question of migration. On Thursday, Xhafaj was in Berlin for talks.

How would Merkel profit from the deal?

At his last meeting with Austrian Chancellor Kurz, German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said he supports the idea of reception centers outside of EU territory. However, Germany's government spokesman Steffen Seibert refrained from commenting on the matter in light of Sunday's EU summit in Brussels.

A possible deal with Albania could help ease tensions between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Seehofer. It would meet the interior minister's demand that asylum applications could be filed outside the EU, yet they would remain under EU oversight. His conservative party could capitalize on such a deal in Bavaria's upcoming state elections, where it is trying to fend off the insurgent far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). And Germany's coalition government would regain stability.

Albania, too, would benefit from such a deal. By opening EU reception centers, it could curry favor with the bloc's more conservative forces, who are skeptical of initiating EU accession talks with the country.

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