
BAVARIA HIJACKS EU MIGRATION TALKS

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German domestic politics has taken over the EU migration agenda, as select leaders meet for a special summit on Sunday (24 June).

The EU needs to stop asylum seekers moving around inside Europe, from frontline places like Greece or Italy to wealthier regions like Bavaria, in southern Germany, according to Sunday's declaration, leaked to press on Thursday.

People trapped on the Aquarius went to Spain after Italy said no (Photo: SOS Mediterranee)

"There is no right to freely choose the member state in which asylum is sought," the four-page text said.

"We see a great need to significantly reduce secondary movements," it said.

The summit, called by commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, comes in reaction to an ultimatum by Bavarian president and German interior minister Horst Seehofer.

German chancellor Angela Merkel has two weeks to get an EU deal on stopping migrants or he will stop them at the Bavarian border himself, Seehofer has said in a rebellion that could unravel her coalition government.

His threat came in the run-up to Bavarian elections in October, where Seehofer, who has also campaigned by meeting Austrian and Italian populists, will try to retain his seat against party rivals.

It also came amid the lowest numbers of migrant arrivals (just 40,000 or so in the EU this year), exposing the purely political nature of his motives.

The Austrian, Bulgarian, Dutch, French, Greek, Italian, and Spanish leaders are to agree Sunday's statement with Merkel, before the 28 EU heads meet in Brussels next week to discuss the issues.

The EU should create a "flexible joint take-back mechanism close to the internal borders", with ID checks at bus stations, train stops, and airports to turn more people back to where they first entered Europe, the draft declaration said.

Several member states, including Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, and Sweden are already doing that.

But "unilateral and uncoordinated measures would not only be less effective, but would also

jeopardise European integration and the achievements of Schengen," the draft text added, referring to the Schengen treaty, which governs EU free movement.

The declaration, which has no legal status, could help Merkel and Seehofer to make peace without losing face, German pundits have said.

Pandora's Box

But Sunday's talks could also kick open wider still the Pandora's Box of immigration.

Italy showed no sign of agreeing to bottleneck migrants on its side of the German border ahead of the meeting.

"If anyone in the EU thinks Italy should keep being a landing point and refugee camp, they have misunderstood," its far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini said.

Italy might withhold funding to the EU budget if he did not get his way, he said.

"The air in Europe is changing and we are optimistic," Salvini added, after meeting Austria's far-right vice-chancellor, Heinz Christian Strache, this week.

Sunday's talks will see French president Emmanuel Macron meet the Italian prime minister after Macron said Italy's recent decision to turn back a migrant boat was "nauseating" and after Italy in turn called him a "hypocrite".

It will also see Italy meet Spain after Madrid took in the rejected boat, the Aquarius, but with little thanks from Rome.

"Spain has opened its ports, France did too. In Spain they celebrated, fine. But we could not celebrate every six hours," Italy's deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, another populist, said.

Orban bloc

Even if they all make nice, that still leaves the anti-migrant bloc in central Europe left to tackle.

The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia have boycotted EU migrant-sharing.

Merkel plans to meet Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban in Berlin on 5 July, but the so-called Visegrad bloc might take offence at being left out of Sunday's summit.

"There's no question that after Sunday we would dictate to other member states the line that should be taken" on migration, Juncker said on Thursday, in a nod to sensitivities.

The mini-summit was not about Germany, but about wider European security, Austrian leader Sebastian Kurz also said at a meeting in Linz, Austria, with Bavarian politicians.

"The summit on Sunday is not about German politics. It's about the solution to an immigration question that's long overdue," he said.

"We cannot wait until we have a catastrophe like the one in 2015," he added.

But Markus Soeder, the Bavarian prime minister, gloated that his and Seehofer's party, the right-wing CSU, had pushed Merkel to take EU action.

"Without the clear position of Bavaria, Berlin would not move as fast as now," he said in Linz.

'They need care'

More than one million people came to Europe in 2015, at the height of the crisis, setting the scene for this week's drama.

The nasty atmosphere despite the reduced number of migrants coming to Europe this year showed the politicians' true colours, the UN refugee agency, the UNHCR, said on Monday.

"We do not have a crisis of numbers. We continue to have a crisis of political will," its chief, Sophie Magennis, said.

Women and children on the rejected boat, the Aquarius, had to wait days at sea before Spain took them in.

Italy did take in others, including one boat with 519 people to Sicily this week, despite Salvini's rants, but the new government in Rome has slowed down rescue operations, forcing people to wait longer before they get proper care, the UNHCR said.

"They [the 519 people] are in terrible condition, not only medical condition, but [also] psychological condition, and they really need urgent medical care and psychological care," UNHCR spokesman Marco Rotunno told the Reuters news agency.

Kaynak/Source: