
SEEHOFER TELLS MERKEL, ITALY AND GREECE TO SOLVE MIGRATION ROW

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06.07.2018

EU Observer (5 July 2018)

German interior minister Horst Seehofer defused tensions with Austria on Thursday (5 July) but increased political pressure on his boss, chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as on Italy and Greece, to find a way how Germany can reject asylum seekers without closing its border with Austria.

"There will be no measures taken by Germany at the expense of Austria," Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz said after meeting Seehofer in Vienna.

Under a plan agreed on Monday between Merkel's centre-right CDU party and Seehofer's CSU, its Bavarian conservative sister party, asylum seekers would be sent back to the EU country where they were first registered, or to Austria.

Kurz had warned that in reaction, Austria would consider closing its own border with Italy and Slovenia in order to prevent migrants from coming in.

This, Vienna had warned, would lead to a "domino effect" of closing borders and imperil the free-movement Schengen area.

But Seehofer assured Kurz that Austria would have to take no specific measures, and that it would be up to Italy and Greece, where three-quarters of asylum seekers come from, to take them back.

The Bavarian politician has been trying for almost a month to impose his plan on Merkel, who first refused to unilaterally reject asylum seekers. She advocated instead a "European solution" to be agreed with other member states, who would accept taking refugees from Germany.

At a EU summit last week, she managed to receive promises of 12 to 14 bilateral agreements, including with Austria.

But so far, Seehofer pointed out, "only two countries so far confirmed to the [German] chancellor that they are ready to talk about it", namely Spain and Greece.

He said that Germany would continue to reach agreements with other countries, in particular with Italy and Greece.

"It will be difficult talks", he warned, while leaving the hard work to Merkel.

"When we are talking about a European dimension, it's always a matter for the heads of government," he insisted, sending back to Merkel the expression she used to block her minister's initial plan.

Meanwhile Seehofer will hold talks next week with his Austrian and Italian colleagues, Herbert Kickl from the far-right FPÖ party and Matteo Salvini from the far-right League.

The aim of the meeting will be to discuss measures to close the central Mediterranean route, in order to stop migrants and asylum seekers reaching Italy and then moving to other EU countries.

"So much has happened during past few days. Much more than during the past few years," Kurz said, referring to last week's decision at the EU summit to strengthen EU borders and set up migrant centres outside the EU.

Internal borders or external borders

Speaking earlier to a group of Brussels journalists, Kurz insisted that "there can be a Europe without internal borders only if there are functioning external borders."

"This means more people working for Frontex [the EU border agency] at Schengen borders, also at the borders of the continent," he said, adding that Frontex should also "be active in third countries and elsewhere".

"The process of rethinking has come underway," he said about last week's summit, noting that "for years, we argued about distribution of refugees, now for the first time we focus on protection of external borders."

"This is a positive turn of events," he added. "We have to make sure these new ideas will be implemented."

Austria's focus on external borders is part of a wider plan, as the country took over the EU presidency last Sunday.

According to a document circulated to other member states, and revealed by the French daily Le Monde on Thursday, Kurz's government has proposed discussing a new "protection system" under which no asylum request would be filed on European soil.

Current asylum rules date back from pre-globalisation days, Austrian foreign minister Karin Kneissl argued.

"We feel that instruments don't meet anymore exigences of today," she told journalists in Vienna. "Instead of making people cross the Mediterranean, let's move authorities to people, not people to authorities."

According to Le Monde, the Austrian proposal was not well received by other member states.

But under its EU presidency, Austria wants to make progress on the reform on the Dublin asylum system, and has insisted that a more global, tougher approach was needed.

Also talking to journalists on Thursday, Kurz's deputy, far-right leader Heinz-Christian Strache

noted that on migration policies, "for 13 years, we were told we were on the wrong lines, now that's not the case."

In Berlin, where she is under Seehofer's domestic pressure, Merkel also had a sense of difficulties she faces to find a European solution.

After a meeting in Merkel's office, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban insisted that closing the borders was crucial to find a solution on migration. Orban told Merkel during a disputatious joint press conference that "We have to be humane without creating a pull-factor."

"The perception [of the situation] is very different between Hungary and Germany," Merkel admitted.

Kaynak/Source: