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## **BELL TOLLS FOR EU ASYLUM REFORMS**

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The possibility of the next European Commission withdrawing its 2016 proposals to overhaul the EU's asylum laws should not be dismissed.

But even if doesn't, the future European Parliament is not bound to stick to the positions formulated under the previous set of MEPs.

These options play into the broader aspirations of populist and anti-migrant politics in Hungary and elsewhere.

After three years of dithering between 'solidarity' and 'responsibility', such stalling tactics are common currency among people in Brussels seeking to kill off EU law.

Meanwhile, there is zero chance that a deal will be struck on the asylum package before the European elections in May.

The final push was at the EU summit in December, where heads of state and government from the 28 member states made a weak appeal for the EU rotating presidency to wrap up the reforms "as soon as possible".

The current Romanian EU presidency has made some efforts, on smaller files dealing with fingerprinting migrants and setting up the EU's asylum support agency.

But any real discussions on the package won't happen until after the summer break, and when the next European Commission takes up its role in November.

### **Toxic politics**

The momentum for internal asylum reform is now lost.

Since the European Commission first rolled out its asylum reform package in the summer of 2016, successive EU presidencies have failed to reach an agreement on the most contentious aspects.

The Romanian EU presidency had inherited an nearly impossible task after the EU shifted attention towards north Africa, towards shoring up borders, and floating stillborn ideas on disembarkation by Mediterranean coastal states.

At the heart of the problem is the toxic politics on Dublin. The regulation determines who is responsible for asylum-seeker applications - but ground to a halt when more than one million arrived in Germany, many from Syria.

The commission wanted Dublin to better distribute asylum seekers in times of crisis, making it necessary for EU states to host them.

In November 2017, the European parliament agreed.

The assembly had also reinforced the commission's proposal to automate the distribution of arriving asylum seekers and punish any dissenting member state with EU funding cuts.

Swedish liberal MEP Cecilia Wikstrom, who had steered the file through the parliament, had claimed victory.

To her surprise, the centre-right EPP, the socialists S&D, the liberal ALDE, Greens and the far-left GUE had all supported the reform. She called it a historic victory and a first for a European Parliament.

"A reformed asylum system based on solidarity is completely within reach and fully possible," she had boasted in 2017.

Dublin had obtained a two-thirds majority parliament support, representing more than 220 political parties from the European Union. In contrast, 28 ministers from the EU member states could not come up with a unified position.

The bitterness of another plan in 2015 on relocating asylum seekers, from hotspots in Greece and Italy across the EU, remained entrenched in the capitals. Budapest, Prague, Warsaw and others balked.

The disputes continued at the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg, where the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland faced the European commission over the issue.

By late 2017, EU council president Donald Tusk described the asylum quotas under the commission's Dublin reform as "unacceptable", "highly-divisive", and "ineffective".

And by 2018, Italy - under its far-right deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini - would close off ports to migrants rescued at sea.

Soon afterwards, the Italian-led EU naval operation Sophia would itself halt rescues.

### **'Unfinished business'**

An ill-fated strategy was then devised to get all EU states to agree on Dublin reforms by balancing concepts like solidarity and responsibility.

It ended in repeated stalemates by exasperated presidencies.

In February, the Romanian EU presidency told member states that "there was no realistic prospect of making any major progress on the Dublin reform in the short term."

The ball will now bounce back to the European Parliament. Dublin, as part of the bigger asylum package, will fall into the "unfinished business rule".

It means the new European parliament president and the political group leaders, in the so-called conference of presidents, will determine what do next after conferring with the civil liberties committee (LIBE).

Speculation is meanwhile rising that the populist and far-right political MEPs will gain more seats at the May elections. Simultaneously, the mainstream centre-right EPP and socialist S&D will shed seats and influence.

The composition of the conference of presidents now hangs in the balance, as does LIBE.

LIBE's current chair is a UK MEP, whose own fate remains unclear given the debacle over Brexit.

But ultimately, it will be their decision to either kill off Dublin reforms, finalise the first reading, or send it back to the committee level.

Wikstrom will also be gone, following a conflict with her own party over her board membership of two companies.

As for the next conference of presidents killing off the asylum package as a whole, Wikstrom was sceptical.

"I don't believe that is a scenario that will materialise," she said.

Rather, her big concern is if the five European political groups will stick together on the agreed compromise.

"I would have loved to have opened and conducted the trilogue negotiations until the very end," she said, adding she now intends to take a long summer break before looking for a new job.

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Kaynak/Source: