

Disputed policies on migrants are the top threat to EU unity



This June 12, 2018 photo released Wednesday, June 13, 2018 by French NGO “SOS Mediterranee” shows migrants being transferred from the Aquarius ship to Italian Coast Guard boats, in the Mediterranean Sea. Italy dispatched two ships Tuesday to help take 629 migrants stuck off its shores on the days-long voyage to Spain in what is forecast to be bad weather, after the new populist government refused them safe port in a dramatic bid to force Europe to share the burden of unrelenting arrivals. (Kenny Karpov/SOS Mediterranee via AP)

Forget Brexit or a looming trans-Atlantic trade war. The diplomatic spat this week between Italy, Malta and France over who should take responsibility for more than 600 people rescued at sea shows that the biggest challenge Europe faces today is migration.

It’s not about the hundreds of thousands of people who arrived across the Mediterranean in recent years — many in perilous sea crossings like those aboard the rescue ship Aquarius — seeking better or safer lives. Turkey has welcomed more. Tiny Lebanon and struggling Jordan handle almost two million refugees between them.

The crisis threatening the very existence of the European Union is the enemy within: the inability of the 28 states that make up the world’s biggest trading bloc to manage those migrant arrivals collectively.

Asylum reform is stranded on the rocks of national interests. The questions of who should take responsibility for those arriving — and whether there should be a quota system for European countries to share refugees — are fiercely disputed.

Long-suffering EU nations like Italy and Greece, where most sea migrants enter, feel abandoned by other EU nations.

In response, some European countries have deployed troops, erected border fences or temporarily reintroduced ID checks, undermining Europe’s wide-

ranging passport-free travel area. Others have welcomed the migrants in.

Those acting alone have mostly angered their neighbors by passing the problem on. Mutual trust between nations in the bloc has evaporated.

Anti-migrant parties have exploited the chaos, winning votes as they foment fear of foreigners.

“As long as we keep refusing the idea that we have a collective problem that can only be tackled with collective solutions — as long as we don’t see that — we will not find a solution,” European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans warned. “We will fail collectively.”

EU nations are now flirting with that collective failure, struggling to reform the bloc’s asylum rules known as the Dublin Regulation. It’s a pillar of Europe’s passport-free travel area. Failure to fix Dublin could sound the death knell for check-free travel and easy cross-border business across Europe — the two crowning achievements of the bloc.

For two years, EU governments have battled without success to fix Dublin’s biggest contradiction: that migrants must seek protection in the first European country they arrive in. With most migrants entering the Europe via Turkey or Libya, that chiefly means Mediterranean countries like Greece and Italy.

That rule was part of this week’s dispute over the *Aquarius*, a rescue ship carrying 629 people including pregnant women and children who were saved off the Libyan coast.

Italy, which controls Mediterranean rescue operations, halted the in-bound ship, claiming that the small EU island of Malta was closer and should take responsibility.

French President Emmanuel Macron waded in, accusing Italy of cynical, irresponsible behavior. The new populist government in Rome found this hard to swallow, given that French border police have been routinely blocking thousands of migrants who try to leave Italy, upholding the EU’s flawed asylum rules.

Spain’s new center-left government came to the rescue, offering the boat safe harbor in Valencia.

“This is not something that Malta, Italy, Greece or Spain should be left alone to deal with. Countries not in the Mediterranean cannot try to use geography to exonerate themselves from responsibility,” Roberta Metsola, a leading EU lawmaker on migration, told The Associated Press.

So sensitive is the topic that the EU’s Bulgarian presidency has spent months supervising closed-door lower-level talks to find a compromise — but the problem is eminently political, not technical.

Hungary and Poland have refused to take in refugees, and other nations barely contributed in the EU’s earlier failed attempt to share the refugee burden.

The problem has put strong domestic political pressure on German Chancellor Angela Merkel — who in 2015 refused to close Germany’s door to migrants, many fleeing conflict in Syria and Iraq. Interior Minister Horst Seehofer now wants to turn away refugees registered elsewhere.

Austria and Denmark, meanwhile, are championing the idea of setting up migrant camps outside western Europe, in the neighboring Balkans. Elizabeth Collett, the director of Migration Policy Institute Europe, says such plans are a sign of desperate times.

“These ideas ... look good on paper, but it has been hard to identify a non-EU country willing to be a ‘vassal state’ in this way, or design a system that would actually function,” she said. “What has changed now is the amount of political desperation involved in pursuing these ideas. Countries are willing to put more on the table — that is, pay third countries more — and are less concerned about how well they function.”

EU leaders had ordered a solution to be found by this month. With none in sight, Merkel and her colleagues are forced to grasp the migration nettle again at their June 28-29 summit. A new populist government from Italy in their midst — one whose interior minister has vowed to deport tens of thousands of migrants as soon as he can — will make any compromise on migration even more difficult.

“Europe can be the example to everyone on this issue but we have to see real political will to move away from fiery rhetoric to taking tough decisions,” Metsola said. “The ball is in the (leaders’) court now. The world is watching.”

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