

EU could 'scrap refugee quota scheme'

European council president Donald Tusk to tell EU summit that mandatory quotas have been 'divisive and ineffective'



Syrian migrants wear life-jackets before boarding a dinghy to cross the Aegean Sea to the Greek island of Lesbos from the Ayvacik coast in Canakkale in 2016. Photograph: Bulent Kilic/AFP/Getty Images

The EU could scrap a divisive scheme that compels member states to accept quotas of refugees, one of the bloc's most senior leaders will say this week.

The president of the European council, Donald Tusk, will tell EU leaders at a summit on Thursday that mandatory quotas have been divisive and ineffective, in a clear sign that he is ready to abandon the policy that has created bitter splits across the continent.

Tusk will set a six-month deadline for EU leaders to reach unanimous agreement on reforms to the European asylum system, but will propose alternatives if there is no consensus.

"If there is no solution ... including on the issue of mandatory quotas, the president of the European council will present a way forward," states a draft letter from Tusk to national capitals, seen by the Guardian.

In effect this means scrapping mandatory quotas, because Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic are fiercely opposed to the idea of dispersing refugees around the bloc based on a formula drawn up in Brussels. Tusk is likely to face opposition, however, from other EU bodies, including the European commission.

EU leaders introduced compulsory quotas in 2015 at the height of the migration crisis, as thousands of people arrived daily on Europe's shores, many of whom were refugees from Syria, Iraq and Eritrea. Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and the Czech Republic voted against the move, but the policy was forced through by a majority vote.

Hungary and Poland have defied the rest of the EU by not taking a single refugee under the scheme, which aimed to relocate about 120,000 refugees, mainly Syrians. The Czech republic has taken in only 12. All three countries were referred to the European court of justice last week for failing to implement the policy, the usual procedure for flouting EU rules.

Despite the backlash against the emergency scheme, the European commission proposed making quotas a permanent feature of EU law in 2016. Under its proposal, countries that refuse to take part in a "corrective allocation mechanism" to take the pressure off member states bearing the brunt would have to pay a "solidarity contribution" of €250,000 (£220,000) per asylum seeker.

The idea has been stalled for months, as home affairs ministers who make the law have been unable to agree on it. Any move to drop the plan is likely to upset Italy and Greece, countries that have urged the rest of the EU to help them cope with large numbers of refugees and migrants in recent years. Germany and Sweden, backed by the European commission, are also likely to contest any plan deemed to reduce the help offered by other member states.

One EU diplomat said some member states were surprised by Tusk's letter "because it doesn't seem to be in sync" with work undertaken by home affairs ministers working on the file.



European Council President Tusk receives honorary doctorate in Hungary on 8 December 2017 Photograph: Tamas Soki/EPA

Tusk, a former prime minister of Poland, thinks mandatory quotas have been a gift to hardliners, such as the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, who has seized on migration as part of his wider Stop Brussels campaign. Eurosceptics in Poland, such as the Law and Justice leader Jarosław Kaczyński, whose party won an election victory over Tusk's centre-right group in October 2015, have also criticised the policy.

Tusk's scepticism about the prospect of consensus has been evident for months. He said in October that mandatory quotas had put members states in almost permanent conflict.

Tusk will call on EU governments to take charge, rather than leaving Brussels to set the pace in managing refugee policy.

"Only member states are able to tackle the migration crisis effectively," Tusk's letter says. "The EU's role is to offer its full support in all possible ways to help member states handle the migration crisis. But the EU has neither the capacity nor legal possibilities to replace member states."

He will also urge EU leaders to spend more on schemes aimed at keeping refugees and would-be migrants outside Europe, such as €3bn for Syrian refugees in Turkey and the €1.9bn EU Africa trust fund.

The EU will confront an earlier promise to give Turkey's government a further €3bn to help Syrian refugees in early 2018, which could lead to a repeat of EU institutions asking governments to find more cash.

The EU has improvised such schemes in response to crises, but Tusk wants more funds available from the new seven-year budget covering the period from 2021, which will come up for discussion next year.

He is calling for "stable and long-term financing mechanisms, in place of the existing ad hoc pledging on a much larger scale", but has stopped short of putting a price tag on future migration policy.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/11/eu-may-scrap-refugee-quota-scheme-donald-tusk>

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