

Merkel refugee plan upsets many

German Chancellor Angela Merkel came to Brussels armed with a fresh demand that eastern European Union countries accept refugees and ended up sparking criticism from western allies in the bloc.

At her first EU summit since striking a German coalition agreement, Merkel touted the idea of tying generous regional-development aid for nations such as Poland to their willingness to help house migrants from the Middle East and Africa.

The proposal from the biggest contributor to the EU budget managed to rile easterners and prompted warnings from Luxembourg and Austria about a backlash against Europe. Even the commission, the EU's executive body, was wary, seeing it as widening the existing rift between east and west.

"If we link the funds to migration questions, then we'll be punished afterward — not the governments, but the people," Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel told reporters Friday in Brussels. "It can be an option, but in my opinion not the best option because then the one who has a problem is the citizen, not the government."

The dust-up among the EU's core members highlights the still-open political wounds from the 2015-16 refugee crisis, which marked the biggest wave of migrants in Europe since the end of World War II and stoked populist forces across the bloc. An EU accord with Turkey in March 2016 helped reduce the flood of arrivals while leaving national governments struggling to reach a deal on how to share the burden of settling the migrants.

A day after she told German parliament that "solidarity isn't a one-way street," Merkel told reporters after the meeting that the linkage between development aid and assistance for asylum seekers doesn't need to be punitive. Additional funds could simply be allocated to countries with greater financial obligations for refugees.

"It doesn't have to be a negative correlation — it can also be positive," Merkel said after the meeting.

But not everyone was convinced. “Solidarity is much more than sheltering refugees,” Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz told reporters earlier in the Belgian capital. “Our goal has to be to stop people at the external border and not always to talk about the distribution.”

These criticisms are on top of entrenched opposition in Poland and Hungary to any EU-mandated requirements on sheltering refugees and feed into the start of a yearlong battle among national governments over the bloc’s budget after Brexit.

France is open to different types of condition attached to aid for EU members, according to a government official, who said that the French priority is to avoid any kind of “fiscal or social dumping” and to ensure respect for the rule of law.

Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis too said he has “no problem” over tying EU spending to respect for rule of law, adding: “I only have a problem with migration quotas.”

Source: http://www.sentinelsource.com/news/national_world/merkel-refugee-plan-upsets-many/article_e6fc3135-f409-522d-8dfe-81ea185b2dc1.html

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