

Refugee crisis puts EU's long-term unity in doubt

Europe is in crisis. Millions of migrants have made and continue to make the arduous journey across the Mediterranean or indeed overland through Southeast Europe. The arrivals include asylum seekers, but also economic migrants. Given that Europe already had its challenges, the influx of (mostly male) migrants from Muslim-majority countries in Western Asia and Africa has become a hot topic amongst policy-makers and their respective electorates. In light of Italy's new right-wing government taking a harder stance on rescue ships bringing large numbers of migrants to its ports — which are often the nearest point for those rescued — EU leaders met late last week to reach a consensus on the issue.

The EU leaders' summit came amid a deepening row over migrant arrivals caused by Italy's new government refusing to take in a rescue ship carrying 630 migrants earlier this month. In Germany, where an "open doors" policy has led to the acceptance of some 1 million refugees, the subject has come close to bringing down the coalition government. Chancellor Angela Merkel's interior minister has threatened to order a policy to turn away refugees at Germany's borders, thereby defying EU law, in a debate that has showcased how voters are looking to their national governments and not the union to solve such problems.

A recent poll found that 62 percent of voters in Germany are in favor of turning away undocumented migrants. Within this context, if Merkel cannot make a deal to change the national mood, a breakdown in the coalition would benefit her anti-immigrant opponents in the Alternative for Germany party. Such an outcome in one of Europe's more welcoming and liberal democracies would have huge repercussions for the EU.

Following 10 hours of negotiation, EU leaders emerged from talks with Donald Tusk, the head of the European Council, claiming that the member states had reached an accord on migration. The deal has been questioned for its limited scope, though it does include an agreement that EU countries would take in migrants rescued from the Mediterranean Sea. The whole summit, however, was tainted as Italy threatened to veto the entire text unless other EU states offered to assist with those arriving on its shores. Opposition from Hungary, Poland and

other Central European states to any hint of mandatory action is what forced talks to continue into the early hours.

Though the euro jumped by more than half a percent following the deal, the fact that the bloc failed to agree on specific refugee quotas due to the opposition of increasingly far-right Central European governments means the issue will likely persist and affect the union's long-term unity. Importantly, as the driving force behind the EU, it is not clear whether Merkel has achieved enough with this deal to offset her political battles at home.

The scale of the disagreement cannot be ignored. Merkel herself warned last week that the future of the EU hinged on whether it could agree collectively to overcome the "vital question" of migration. As Western European countries call for tolerance, Hungary's leader Viktor Orban has called for a "strong border" to stop what he called an "invasion" of migrants. Echoing him, Italy's new government has also concerned policy-makers by showing itself to be more sympathetic toward Russia. Given that EU leaders also met to agree wide-ranging economic sanctions against Moscow, the migrant crisis has been a distraction.

To a Russian leadership keen on exacerbating divisions in Europe, the crisis comes at an opportune moment, adding to the strains put on the union by Brexit. In addition, Austria, with its new right-wing coalition and far-right interior minister, has taken up the EU presidency and its young chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, plans to shift Europe to the right on migration. With such reactionary leadership more ideologically aligned with Russia, the principles of the EU risk being eroded further in the Kremlin's favor.

The looming departure of the EU's second-largest economy and its most important diplomatic and UN Security Council partner has not been the focus of the summit. British Prime Minister Theresa May headed to Brussels for a meeting that was once billed as the most critical moment to reach a deal on Brexit. However, owing to the growing threats the union faces on migration from right-wing policymakers, Brexit has barely featured.

Brexit campaigners had warned that, in quitting the EU, the UK had correctly timed its withdrawal from a bloc that is doomed to fail. Though this had seemed improbable to some, in the current context it seems that immigration may be the issue that leads to its collapse. The massive influx of people could very

realistically derail the European dream, exposing the bloc's weaknesses and divisions, leading to voters seeking the help of their sovereign governments and not the EU to solve their problems. In many respects, Brexit was only one symptom of a wider crisis, highlighting the policy implications of maintaining open borders.

As US President Donald Trump prepares to meet Russia's Vladimir Putin, many fear a deal being made between them at NATO's expense. With the EU struggling to save its most precious achievement in the Schengen project, decision-makers in Brussels must call for unity in a continental climate that is growing ever more insecure.

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Source: <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1331401>

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