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Victims of their own success

How Europe's populists fail to implement their own solutions on migration

The refugee crisis is back. Not in numbers, which are the lowest they have been in years, but in the form of a political spectacle launched by Europe's populists. Italy's new far-right Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, Austria's ever more conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Germany's stubborn Interior Minister Horst Seehofer recently formed a self-proclaimed 'axis' against irregular migration. Yet although they share the common goal to secure their borders, their interests actually clash, as no one wants to accept migrants returned from the other.

After a tense European Council summit on 28 June 2018 and an unprecedented coalition crisis in Germany over the issue, migration hardliners slowly realise that EU-wide cooperation is the only way forward. Nevertheless, they struggle to engage in old-fashioned multilateralism based on a real willingness to compromise.

Europe's political hostage-takers

The new crisis started just over a week after Matteo Salvini became Italy's new Interior Minister back in June, when he refused to allow a search and rescue ship carrying 629 refugees to dock at the closest port in Italy. After Malta also refused to accept the vessel, Spain finally allowed the ship to sail to Valencia. This was the first of what would become a series of similar incidents in which Salvini forced the support of other EU member states bilaterally.

But these case by case negotiations are in no way sustainable, as they rely on the humanitarian goodwill of a few member states rather than clear and consistent procedures. Disembarkation has been possible for all of those rescued so far, but it is only a matter of time until this strategy fails. In fact, Italy already threatened to suspend the 'official' EU-run maritime Operation Sophia.

The emphasis on

Meanwhile in Germany, Interior Minister

voluntarism reflects a certain schizophrenia present among EU leaders, and exacerbated by populists, that common problems can be solved even if no one is compelled to feel responsible.

Horst Seehofer sparked a crisis within the governing coalition by insisting on one of 63 points in a proposed 'masterplan on migration' that Chancellor Angela Merkel disagreed with: refusing entry to asylum seekers directly at the German border who have already been registered in another EU member state. While Merkel wanted a European solution, Seehofer did not believe that could be achieved, despite the very low number of asylum seekers actually affected by such a policy.

Seehofer steadily increased the pressure on Merkel, who raised the issue with fellow European leaders – first at an informal 'mini-summit' hosted by the European Commission and then at a full European Council summit almost a week later. Merkel left the summit with some concessions by other member states, but Seehofer was not satisfied. With the prospect of Merkel dismissing him from his post as interior minister as a result of the impasse, Seehofer preferred to resign beforehand, but fellow party officials convinced him to negotiate a compromise instead.

The result of the negotiations is essentially a fast-track version of existing Dublin procedures for asylum seekers entering Germany along its border with Austria. Those already registered in another member state would be returned within 48 hours on the basis of bilateral agreements which Germany seeks to conclude in the coming weeks.

The big question is whether other states will actually agree to this – particularly governments seeking to reduce immigration themselves. In fact, Austrian Chancellor Kurz already signalled reluctance to the idea, while Italian Interior Minister Salvini said that Italy would not accept a single migrant before the EU's external borders are protected. The actual impact of the self-induced political theatrics is therefore more than questionable.

EU Summit of delusions

The European Council summit itself was a roller coaster of its own, with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte blocking unrelated non-controversial decisions until he was satisfied with the points on migration. The Council conclusions emphasise security and control, and explicitly state a determination to prevent a repeat of the situation in 2015. While most of the points reiterate or slightly expand previously agreed measures, two are more ambitious: the creation of regional disembarkation platforms in third countries outside the EU and

controlled processing centres within the union.

The first proposal is reminiscent of Australia's asylum processing centres on remote Pacific islands, which essentially keep asylum seekers in long-term detention with no real chance of being relocated to the mainland. The European Council conclusions do not go into detail about how such centres should operate and where they should be located (which is a key challenge), but call on the Council of the EU and Commission to further explore this concept. Every time the idea has been floated in the past, the practical complexity and legal difficulties surrounding it effectively prevented its implementation. This time will probably be no different.

The second proposal to establish controlled (in other words closed) centres inside the EU appears to be similar to existing hotspots in Greece and Italy, but on a broader scale. Such centres would even relocate successful asylum applicants to other member states – in theory. Yet unlike the automatic 'fairness mechanism' proposed by the European Commission in 2016, which would mandate the relocation of asylum applicants from overburdened EU member states, the relocations in the new proposal would be conducted on an entirely voluntary basis. In fact, hosting the centres would itself be voluntary.

Paradox of the populists

The emphasis on voluntarism reflects a certain schizophrenia present among EU leaders, and exacerbated by populists, that common problems can be solved even if no one is compelled to feel responsible. This reliance on voluntary action denies the reality of migration-related efforts in recent years, namely that unless governments are forced to act in solidarity with others, they will usually avoid to.

As the recent meetings between Salvini, Kurz and Seehofer have shown, without further coordination and relocation of refugees, they are likely to fail. In this regard, Europe's populists are victims of their own success.

As is typical of European Council summits, leaders went home portraying the conclusions as diplomatic achievements to their respective national audiences. Not surprisingly, some of the strongest reactions came from Central Europe, where Prime Minister Viktor Orbán framed the results as a stunning victory. The main criterion of success was the rejection of a mandatory relocation quota. At the same time, Hungary emphasised its region's political clout, claiming that the change in European migration policy was due to the combined efforts of all Visegrád states. Yet this trend has moved well beyond Poland, the Czech Republic and

Slovakia. Similar voices were heard in Bulgaria and Romania.

In Austria, which branded its current EU Presidency 'A Europe that protects', Chancellor Kurz praised the summit as a turning point in which it became clear that strengthening the external borders – not relocation – is of utmost priority. Spain, France and the Nordic countries also fundamentally supported the outcome. Interestingly, Italy was more sceptical in its assessment. Although Prime Minister Conte immediately claimed that Italy is no longer alone, Interior Minister Salvini openly distrusted the outcome.

These reactions point yet again to the schizophrenia of EU migration policy. Although there is not much left of a truly European solution to irregular migration, member states call precisely that lack of EU-mandated solidarity a success. Populists have essentially turned externalisation and non-compulsion into the guiding principles of a European response. But they are now in an unfamiliar dilemma. Now, it is upon them to prove that their solutions will be successful.

As the recent meetings between Salvini, Kurz and Seehofer have shown, without further coordination and relocation of refugees, they are likely to fail. In this regard, Europe's populists are victims of their own success. They seem to be learning the hard way that compromise and multilateralism are necessary. Perhaps eventually, they will realise that Europe can only manage migration sustainably by reforming the Dublin system, rather than ignoring it.



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