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Italy, Albania, asylum and 'European values'

The Italy-Albania migration agreement shows how the EU benefits from keeping candidate countries outside the union, where its laws don't apply

In 2018, the prime minister of Albania, Edi Rama, said his country would never allow European Union refugee camps to be built on its territory. Rama ventured that doing so would mean 'dumping desperate people somewhere like toxic waste that no one wants'. The premier was adamant. In an interview with the *Bild* tabloid in Germany, he called the idea 'dangerous' and said it would 'turn Albania into a breakwater for Europe's refugees'.

Five years on, Rama has done a *volte-face*. Albania is now set to become the first non-EU country to deal on behalf of an EU member state with people fetching up at its borders.

Human rights concerns

On 6 November, the Albanian prime minister signed an agreement with his far-right Italian counterpart, Giorgia Meloni, which will allow Italy to send up to 36 000 of those it rescues in the Mediterranean to centres on the north-western Albanian coast. Women, children and individuals deemed 'vulnerable' would be exempt and processed in Italy. The male-only facilities in Albania will be under Italian jurisdiction and paid for entirely by Rome.

Two facilities are planned, with different purposes. The serene Albanian port town of Shengjin will host a reception-and-screening centre, while a detention centre will be built at an abandoned military base in Gjader. The Italian government's press office said the facilities would 'expedite the processing of asylum applications [and] potential repatriation'. The announcement provoked an outcry from various quarters in Albania and Italy. Two Italian politicians compared the planned centres to Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, where the United States has held suspected Islamist 'terrorists' indefinitely since the aftermath of 'September 11'.

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The critics contend that the plan will permit Italy to circumvent the EU Dublin Regulation, which determines the member state responsible for assessing an application for international protection. According to the convention, the first country in which an asylum-seeker arrives is responsible for processing their case. The plan has raised other concerns, too: segregating adult men could amount to family separation, a policy roundly criticised by human rights groups, which may even breach international law.

A similar proposal in the United Kingdom would have seen 'illegal' asylum-seekers, crossing the English Channel to Britain in small boats, deported to Rwanda for processing and possible resettlement. Under parliamentary scrutiny last year, the now dismissed home secretary, Suella Braverman, was unable to tell an MP how such asylum-seekers could arrive in the country legally.

On 15 November, the 'Rwanda scheme' was itself declared unlawful by the UK Supreme Court. The court ruled unanimously that asylum-seekers sent to Rwanda would be 'at real risk of ill treatment' if deported to the war-wracked homelands they had fled. Since it was announced in April 2022, the scheme has prompted much controversy in Britain. In June last year, the first scheduled flight to Rwanda was cancelled shortly before take-off, after a last-minute ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

In response, there has been intense discussion on the political right about the UK potentially exiting the European Convention on Human Rights, subscribed to by all 46 Council of Europe members — thereby leaving it in the company of Russia and Belarus. The Supreme Court though called in aid numerous international treaties ratified by the UK, along with domestic statutes which give them effect.

Doing the West's dirty work

At the heart of these plans for Rwanda and Albania is the notion that maritime rescue plus offshore processing would deter those thinking of making their way across the Mediterranean and the English Channel. But some experts claim the contrary — the opening of offshore processing centres by Australia in 2012 was followed by a notable increase in the number of irregular boat crossings.

The Albania plan has also been criticised for its lack of transparency.

There was no public discussion or political consultation prior to the Rama-Meloni announcement. Rama is believed to have agreed to the offshoring scheme after hosting Meloni in Albania in mid-August. 'Giorgia had talked to me about this before the summer; then we talked on 15 August, when she came to Albania', he said. 'We have had other requests from different countries, but we could not say no to Italy.' This is part of a pattern of the prime minister making decisions unilaterally, outside of any national security framework or public deliberation.

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Indeed, this is not the first time the Albanian government has agreed to accept what the West does not want. In 2013, the US administration managed to get Albania to accept the relocation from Iraq of some 2 800 members of a violent Iranian opposition cult, the *Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK)*.

The MEK agreed not to participate in any political activities while in Albania. But it broke that promise, primarily through online propaganda and cyberattacks against the Iranian regime, prompting paralysing cyberattacks in return. Rama acted unilaterally then, too, suspending diplomatic ties with Iran and giving Tehran's diplomats just 24 hours to leave Tirana.

About 17 years ago, Albania accepted former inmates from Guantánamo. More recently, as the US withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban retook power, Albania took in hundreds of Afghan refugees. Most were relocated to Shengjin — the home of the planned Italian-run reception-and-screening centre.

Some Albanians have couched support for the plan with Italy in terms of recent history. Albania took in hundreds of thousands of refugees from Kosovo during the 1998-99 war, as Kosovar Albanians fled the 'ethnic cleansing' pursued by the then Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milošević. In the spring of 1997, Albania had itself faced massive domestic disorder, the failure of a pyramid scheme precipitating a refugee crisis: in less than one week, 10 619 Albanians crossed the Adriatic to the Italian city of Puglia.

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Some Albanians have seen the acceptance of Italy's unwanted arrivals in these terms as a demonstration of gratitude, a display of national character and – as an EU candidate country – a reflection of 'European values' of solidarity. But this begs the question: how would offshore

processing of asylum-seekers manifest the 'European values' of a member state such as Italy?

Behind the pretty rhetoric of solidarity and mutuality lies a less flattering picture. Balkan states such as Albania continue to be treated by the EU as 'other' and backward. The EU extracts their best and brightest young people, along with their cheap labour. That leaves corrupt, poor states led by compromised and hence easily manipulated leaders, willing to do anything to enhance their power and prestige on the world stage.

Brussels thus benefits from keeping EU candidate countries such as Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia outside the union, where they are useful as migrant warehouses and labour plantations, while EU asylum and labour laws do not apply. As the European commissioner for home affairs, Ylva Johansson, said last week of Italy's offshoring plan, 'EU law is not applicable outside EU territory.'

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