



Summit dinner: Important starters before the main course on migration

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Migration is the main course on the menu for tonight's EU Summit dinner. This short paper respectfully offers the Heads of State three starters to stimulate their appetite and thoughts before the serious discussions begin.

Was relocation a failure?

In 2015, the Council adopted two conclusions to relocate a total of 160,000 persons arriving in the frontline states of Greece and Italy during the period April 2015 to September 2017. Not everyone was eligible for relocation; only nationals from countries with an overall EU recognition rate for protection higher than 75% could apply for relocation. The eligible nationalities have changed somewhat over the period, but most eligible people were from either Syria or Eritrea.

From the onset of the relocation scheme, headlines characterised the scheme as a failure, citing low numbers of people being relocated. Indeed, by November 2017, only around 31,500 individuals had been transferred from Greece (21,500) and Italy (10,000) to other EU countries, with another 4,000 applications pending. This sum was a far cry from 160,000. However, in judging the success of this programme, it would be wrong to start from the initially envisaged 160,000 relocations.

The realities on the ground quickly overtook any reasoning behind the figure of 160,000. In the autumn of 2015, Dublin rules were suspended, making the number of people arriving in Greece irrelevant from the point of view of the relocation scheme. In addition, and maybe for this reason, the number of Syrians arriving in Italy dropped markedly from 2014 to 2015. This was followed by the closing of the Balkan route and the subsequent EU-Turkey deal reached in March 2016. The one-for-one principle, whereby people crossing the Aegean from Turkey to Greece would be sent back in return for direct resettlement from Turkey, also reduced the relevance of the headline number.

Compared to the number of refugees relocating themselves during the crisis and the number of arrivals in Italy in the past few years, the relocation scheme looks unimportant. However, it

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was never designed to handle a crisis of the magnitude experienced, nor to deal with a large number of people who were not eligible for protection. In ‘normal’ migration years, 25,000 relocations (approximately the number relocated in the last year of the programme) would be sufficient to make a difference.

The Dublin reform as proposed by the European Commission would not have helped Italy

Even if the EU had achieved the ‘full’ internal solidarity and implemented the proposed recast of the Dublin Directive – Dublin IV – would it actually have helped to alleviate the burden in the external EU member states, particularly in Italy? The short answer is: “not much”. The scheme proposed by the European Commission defines a ‘reference key’ for distribution of asylum seekers among EU countries that is based on 50% of the share of total GDP and 50% of the population size. If the number of asylum seekers entering a country exceeds 150% of the number determined under the reference key, a mechanism for relocation of asylum seekers to other EU countries kicks in. Given that Italy is one of the largest EU countries in terms of population and GDP, the suggested relocation mechanism would not have led to any corrective relocations of asylum seekers from Italy to other EU member states even during the period of peak arrivals in 2014-early 2017 (see [a related earlier contribution](#)).

Such low potential of the EU relocation scheme appears confusing given the sound pledges of more support to Italy to manage the inflow of irregular migrants. The discrepancy comes from the fact that while most discussions revolve around burden-sharing for protecting refugees, the vast majority of those arriving to Italy are economic migrants and thus would not fall under any of the ‘solidarity’-quota mechanisms currently on the table. Among those who arrived in Italy from January 2015 to August 2017, only slightly more than 20% (75,000) were from countries eligible for relocation – mainly Eritrea and Syria (Frontex). These numbers are in line with the results of [IOM surveys](#) conducted among transit migrants currently in Libya: among those aiming to reach the EU, 85% report ‘economic motives’ to be the main reason for migration.

Managing migration along the Mediterranean – a long-term approach

The future is likely to see increased, not less, migratory pressure from Africa towards Italy and Spain. The past two years of discussion about the Dublin regulation and symbolic solidarity has drained energy from the debate on how to engage with African countries and prevent the drowning of thousands of people in the Mediterranean every year. The Commission has launched Migration Partnerships with the tools available to it. Unfortunately, legal migration and in particular migration for the purpose of work is not among its available tools, since access to member states’ labour markets for third-country nationals is a clear national competence. This is unlikely to change in the near future, but it is time for the heads of states to consider how legal migration for the purpose of work can meaningfully contribute to curbing irregular migration across the Mediterranean. Opening up legal pathways into EU labour markets to those migrants who are currently risking their lives would be an important step towards genuine partnerships with African countries and could help the EU to sign functioning

readmission agreements with these partner countries. This in turn would curb the incentive to migrate to the EU irregularly.

Such a work-permit scheme can be combined with investment in on-site training facilities in African partner countries, which would facilitate the transfer of skills to local labour markets. In order to prevent brain drain, there may be a case for making work permits temporary, in order to ensure that the skills and savings are recycled back to countries of origin (see also [here](#)).