

EU's migration proposals draw anger on left and leave questions unanswered

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One Dutch MEP compared the plans to the far right while Von der Leyen's party called them 'a good starting point'

The EU home affairs commissioner, Ylva Johansson, hopes migration will become just another "normal policy area", even "boring".

Since more than 1 million refugees arrived in Europe in 2015, migration has been neither "boring" nor easy for the bloc. Leaders have flung accusations at each other, exposing painful divisions. In 2015, Italy's then prime minister [told his fellow leaders they were "time wasters"](#), who didn't deserve to call themselves Europeans. Central European countries accused their neighbours of trying to "blackmail" them.

The [latest proposals](#) are intended to fix a system senior EU officials admit is broken. The Moria camp that sheltered asylum seekers in squalid conditions before it [burned to the ground](#) was described as "a stark reminder" that the old system no longer works, by the European commission president, Ursula von der Leyen.

While not the "entirely new architecture" billed, the new proposals mark a break with the past. The EU executive has abandoned the idea of mandatory refugee quotas that proved so toxic in 2015, but insists countries cannot do nothing. Governments that refuse refugees and asylum seekers can instead opt to return people denied asylum to their country of origin, an idea described as "return sponsorship".

For the left and some liberals, this compromise is evidence of an authoritarian drift. "The far right has captured EU migration policy," said Dutch liberal MEP Sophie in't Veld, although she also praised the commission for its attempt to end years of deadlock, adding that "failure is not an option".

The European People's party - the centre-right group of Von der Leyen - described the plans as "a good starting point".

Governments on both sides of the asylum debate are holding fire as they digest the plans spread over five draft regulations and other official texts

Viktor Orbán's chief spokesperson did not reveal if the Hungarian government was ready to be a "return sponsor" - brokering deals with Middle Eastern and African countries to take back their nationals - in a statement that put more stress in discouraging migrants to leave their homelands in the first place. However one of Orbán's MEPs, Balázs Hidvéghi, told BBC Radio 4 that "we are ready to take part in what is called return sponsorship".

If true, that could be a significant step. But Orbán's government is likely to object to the idea that

any migrant not returned to their country of origin after eight months would come to live in the EU member state that had taken charge of their return.

On the other side of the migration divide, Italy's prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, described the plans as an "important step towards a truly EU migration policy", but cautioned that "assurance on returns and relocation is needed".

Italy could have problems, as the controversial rule that countries of arrival take default responsibility for migrants is largely intact – although there would be more scope for other EU member states to take over.

And there are many open questions. The EU executive wants a monitoring mechanism to investigate [widely reported illegal pushbacks of asylum seekers at Europe's borders](#). But that system would be set up by EU member states, namely, the same countries accused of perpetrating violent abuses.

Brussels also wants all new arrivals in the EU to undergo health and security screening at the border within five days – an exacting demand on frontline states, such as Italy and Greece with notoriously slow processes, at a time when the EU migration budget has been slashed. Legislators fear the model will simply be creating "more Morias" with people stuck in closed camps in southern [Europe](#).

"This pact risks making the model of Greek hotspots a blueprint for all border countries in the EU," said Erik Marquardt, a German Green MEP, who has been in Lesbos since the Moria fire.

These troubling questions and many more are meant to be resolved in nine months: the commission has called on EU ministers and MEPs to agree the legislation by June 2021. If the timing sounds like a tall order, the retreat on refugee quotas may unlock a compromise. But the EU migration debate is unlikely to become "boring" any time soon.

Jennifer Rankin

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