

EU Establishment Appeases Italy & Other Anti-migrant Govts in Bid to Salvage Bloc's Survival

by Finian Cunningham via jan - RT *Saturday, Jun 30 2018, 6:04am*

international / prose / post

Despite dire predictions of a European Union meltdown, the leaders' summit this week appeared to succeed in delivering a compromise agreement on dealing with the troublesome refugee issue for which America should take full responsibility due to its disastrous string of Middle East and North African wars, which have displaced tens of millions of innocent citizens that would otherwise have remained in their home nations.

Beneath the "everyone's a winner" smiles, however, the upshot was undoubtedly a victory for Italy and other governments that have been pushing the EU to take a harder line on the question of refugees.

French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel hailed a "European solution." European Council President Donald Tusk, who chaired the two-day summit in Brussels, also welcomed the apparent accord reached.

One suspects that the real concern for Macron, Merkel and Tusk was that the summit did not erupt into full-blown conflict between member states. Ahead of the meeting, Merkel had warned that it was "make or break" for the EU's survival to find a solution. It wasn't clear if the eurosceptic governments would even engage in dialogue, thereby bringing the 28-member bloc into disarray.

Merkel was also facing a political crisis at home if the EU did not come up with some kind of working arrangement over immigration. Her coalition partner, the Bavarian-based Christian Social Union, was threatening to collapse the Berlin government if Merkel could not get other EU members to formulate a common approach.

So, in the end, after all-night "virulent discussions," why the EU leaders are hailing a "compromise" and "European cooperation" is really a sense of relief that the bloc has managed to hold together - for now.

The text of the summit's accord is vague. It remains to see how - or if - its aspirations will be implemented. In which case, the simmering tensions and rifts between EU members will boil up again.

The salient outcome is the EU has shifted to accommodate the demands made by Italy and other anti-immigrant governments in Austria and the Visegrad Four of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia. This was not a "compromise," as the EU leaders trumpeted. Rather, it was a climbdown by the Brussels establishment and pro-EU governments to placate the eurosceptics.

Italy's newcomer Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte had forewarned that his country would veto any joint statement that did not address its demands. His threat seemed to work in forcing France and Germany in particular to concede.

The EU has agreed to set up "disembarkation platforms" in third-party countries in areas like North

Africa in order to process asylum seekers before they reach European territory. That is something Italy and Austria have been strongly advocating.

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said of the EU endorsing that idea: “We have long been calling for these protection areas, safe zones, landing centers, however, one wants to call them, outside of Europe — this idea has now prevailed.”

There also is a new concept of setting up “controlled centers” for refugees in EU countries which will be the financial responsibility of Brussels. Italy has complained that as a frontline state for taking in refugees it has incurred a heavy financial burden on its national economy.

As Conte happily said following the agreement: “It was a long negotiation but from today Italy is no longer alone.”

In principle, from now on refugees who land on Italian soil, or Spanish or Greek soil, will be viewed as arriving on EU territory, and will be processed with a collective responsibility to accommodate - if their application for asylum is accepted.

A major concession to Austria and the Visegrad Group is that this week’s EU agreement accepts their insistence of not taking in any refugees on a quota basis. The signed statement acknowledges that sharing of refugee numbers should be done on a “voluntary basis.” That means countries are permitted to refuse to accept immigrants. Only last week, France’s Macron was calling for EU funding cuts to be imposed as penalties on such countries.

The upshot of the summit is that the EU has given member states more authority in tightening border controls over migration, while providing more centralized recognition and funding for grievances expressed by Italy and other frontline states that they are carrying an unfair burden.

It will be testing, however, if the so-called latest solution is workable. The proposed setting up of processing centers in North Africa is touted as “breaking the human traffickers’ business model” by serving as a deterrent to would-be migrants. The concept is likely to provoke legal and moral problems for the EU, as it appears to violate international laws on asylum. It also has an invidious image problem of resembling “concentration camps.”

How will the voluntary resettling of refugees within the EU work in practice? If the burden-sharing is not seen to be fair by Italy, Greece and Spain, then one can expect the tensions with France, Germany and other inland states to rebound. And how will Merkel’s fractious CSU coalition partner react? It’s squaring a circle.

For now though, the eurosceptic governments appear to have won the argument over the migration problem. The “open-door” policy championed previously by Germany’s Merkel seems obsolete.

The palpable relief among EU leaders stems not from a compromise being found, but rather that a terminal meltdown of the bloc was averted. That may turn out to be merely a postponement of fatal tensions.

The issue of irregular immigration is only one issue inciting divisions and tensions in the bloc. It appears to be a lightning rod for other causes of disaffection among EU citizens. Official figures show that numbers of refugees coming into Europe have actually plummeted in the last two years compared with the peak witnessed in 2015. There is a sense that the issue is being used by eurosceptic parties as a vehicle for galvanizing dissent towards the EU administration’s status quo.

The perceived undermining of national sovereignty by a German-Franco dominated Brussels was a major impetus for Britain's Brexit. Similar grievances over sovereignty are found in other EU states and regions.

There is also the resentment over the EU's neoliberal economic policies. The strict limits on fiscal freedom within countries - perceived as being dictated by Germany - are seen as imposing oppressive austerity measures on the wider public. The adherence to public-spending limits and national debt moratoriums is one of the main reasons why Italians voted in the "alternative" eurosceptic parties of the Five Star Movement and the League.

Another popular cause for discontent is the servility of the EU to the US-led NATO military alliance, as well as the hostility displayed towards Russia from self-defeating economic sanctions hitting European businesses and jobs. Some parties in EU member states have tapped into the public disaffection towards the EU's irrational deference to Washington's warmongering. Italy and others have called for the end to sanctions on Moscow and a move towards proper normalization of ties between Europe and Russia.

In other words, the seeming last-ditch accord among EU leaders this week over immigration was a desperate bid to close rifts threatening to rupture the bloc. The EU establishment blinked to appease eurosceptic discontent. But the "solution" may turn out to be merely papering over the cracks and fissures threatening the bloc.

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