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Pressure to resolve migration crisis could tear EU apart

Officials say Berlin and Brussels' plan for obligatory sharing of refugees will trigger heated rows between governments

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Wed 20 Jan 2016 13.48 GMT

Berlin and Brussels are pushing for a major overhaul of European asylum policies as the answer to the EU's unprecedented migration crisis, presaging bitter battles between national governments that threaten to tear the EU apart.

A package of interlinked proposals from the European commission to be unveiled within weeks will call for permanent obligatory sharing of refugees across the EU as a result of scrapping rules stipulating that asylum seekers have to lodge their claims in the first member country they enter.

The rules, known as the Dublin regulation and dating from the 1990s, are widely viewed as dysfunctional and were abandoned by Angela Merkel last September when she promised Syrians asylum in Germany regardless of where they entered the EU.

The commission announced before Christmas that it would table a revision of the Dublin rules in March. In order to do away with them, there has to be agreement on how to share the refugees pouring into southern frontline states such as Greece and Italy. This issue is toxic and has already caused the biggest east-west split in the EU since the former Soviet bloc countries joined more than a decade ago.

EU officials and diplomats say the March proposals will trigger heated rows between national governments.

"The system does not work any more. It was not designed for what we have right now, hundreds of thousands of refugees," said an ambassador to the EU. "We need new rules. We need a new Dublin agreement. Relocation [refugee quotas] should be part of the package. But the debate will be very difficult."

A government minister from a southern European country that strongly supports Merkel's drive applauded the commission moves and argued that the only feasible response was to "Europeanise" asylum policies. Quotas, he said, "should be permanent. We need European rules".

Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands are pushing for quick agreement by the summer on a new system of commission-proposed EU border guards empowered to overrule national governments in an emergency and take control of a country's borders. This is also highly contested because it impinges on the sovereign rights of countries to be in charge of their territory.

Because Greece is the main point of entry for asylum seekers from the Middle East via Turkey, the border guards proposal is mainly aimed at Athens, which is the butt of much criticism.

"Berlin is really furious with Greece," said a senior figure in Merkel's Christian Democratic Union party. "If Greece does not accept the border guards, it will have to leave Schengen," he said in reference to Europe's 26-country passport-free travel zone whose survival is at stake as national border controls are re-erected from Sweden to Slovenia.

Acting in concert, Merkel and Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European commission, are warning that unless they get their way, not only Schengen could collapse, but Europe's single market would be imperilled, raising questions about the purpose of the single currency.

Those resisting the pressure from Berlin and Brussels view such alarmism as scare tactics aimed at forcing the opposition to yield. But of the 1.1 million asylum seekers who entered the EU last year, about 90% have ended up in only three countries: Germany, Sweden and Austria.



The migration crisis, if not dealt with, threatens to damage the political legacies of Angela Merkel and Jean-Claude Juncker. Photograph: Fabrizio Bensch/Reuters

Sweden, traditionally the most generous in Europe on asylum, has said it cannot cope and has introduced stringent border controls. Austria said on Wednesday it was suspending Schengen. German officials say the migration crisis is the biggest issue the country has faced since reunification in 1990.

But resistance to the German drive is strong, not only in eastern Europe, which wants nothing to do with refugee quotas, but also in France and even among some of Berlin's nominal allies.

German, Austrian and Slovenian officials met last week to coordinate migration policy, with Berlin and Vienna pressing the Slovenians to be allowed to deploy their own police on the Slovenian-Croatian border, in effect an external Schengen border and the refugees' gateway to Germany. Slovenia said no, highlighting the reservations about surrendering border controls to EU agencies.

Before any of the new policies can be agreed, Merkel and others desperately need a breathing space, a slowdown in the numbers of asylum seekers reaching Europe to assuage the domestic political pressure on leaders everywhere.

They identify the key to this in Turkey which, under a deal forged in October, would be paid €3bn (£2.3bn) to stop refugees crossing to Greece.

"All our efforts are aimed at stemming the flow from Turkey and thinking about what to do if the flow is not stemmed," said Mark Rutte, the Dutch prime minister. The Netherlands has just assumed the six-month rotating presidency of the EU. If the numbers came down close to zero, Germany and its allies on the issue would then volunteer to take unspecified numbers of asylum seekers directly from Turkey, he said.

Were Merkel and Juncker to win the day, the outcome by next summer would be joined-up European policies, the birth of a common EU asylum regime. But the policy proposals supposed to unite the EU in a shared purpose are having the opposite effect, sowing division and recrimination between national governments and a good deal of schadenfreude over Merkel's dilemmas.

The evidence so far does not point to a breakthrough. The east Europeans fundamentally reject all notions of importing west European multiculturalism to their societies via migration. Agreement last October to share 160,000 asylum seekers across the EU from Greece and Italy has resulted to date in just over 300 being redistributed. An earlier agreement to resettle 22,000 directly from the Middle East is going nowhere.

Slovenia's rejection of German and Austrian police support shows that national governments are keen to see EU police agencies in other countries, but not in their own. The pact with Turkey is not delivering the required results and EU governments are still unable to agree on how to fund the €3bn bill.

And what of Britain? The proposed timetable for the asylum policy overhaul also complicates David Cameron's bid to secure a new European deal keeping the UK in the EU as a result of a referendum, probably by early summer. This is less because of the numbers involved, which are small, than because of the toxicity of the migration issue and its centrality to the referendum campaign.



Austrian workers construct a fence at a border crossing between Austria and Slovenia. Photograph: Joe Klamar/AFP/Getty

Britain is not part of Schengen and takes no part in EU asylum policy making except where it suits. It chooses to take part in the Dublin regime because that allows the UK to deport asylum seekers to the first EU country they entered. Scrapping the Dublin regulation, however, means Britain would no longer be able to do that, while the European battle over the impact of ending the policy will get properly under way in the middle of the EU referendum campaign.

While the question of whether Britain stays in the EU or not is a massive issue for the rest of Europe, for Merkel and Juncker it is secondary to the destructive dynamic supplied by the migration crisis and the damage it could do to their own political fortunes and legacies.

Juncker made that clear on Wednesday when he called for an extra EU summit in February on migration policy because he feared Europe's preoccupation with answering the British question was taking up too much of EU leaders' time.

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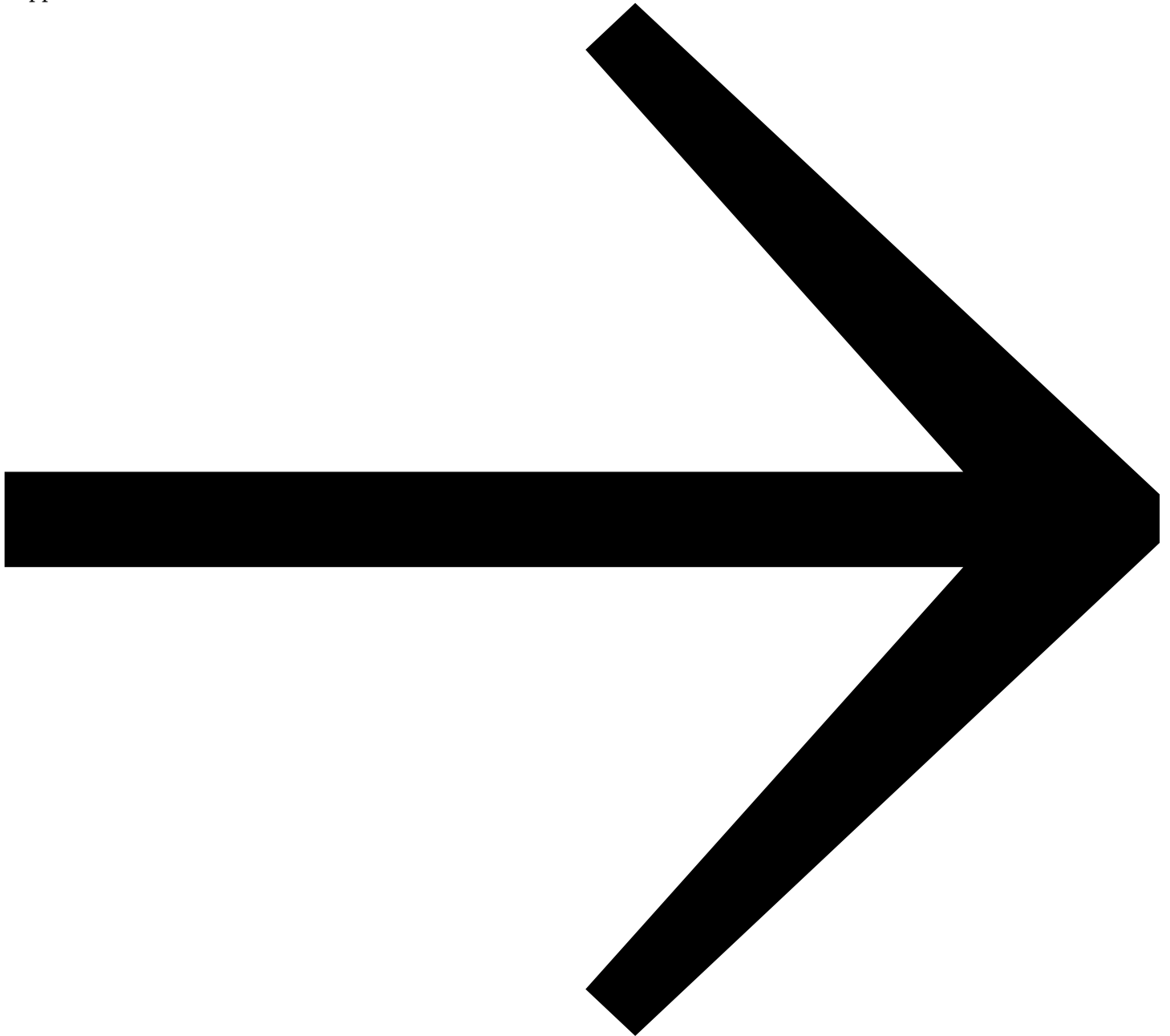
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