



## European Council Summit: Much Ado About Nothing?

“GOOD MORNING, EUROPE!” MP CALL SERIES

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Featuring Dr. Rosa Balfour, Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund Europe Program

Following the June European Council summit, Mercator European Dialogue members discussed the implications of the Conclusions and the role of national politics on European outcomes.

### What do the conclusions say?

The European Council adopted conclusions across policy areas, including migration, security and defence, jobs, growth and competitiveness, innovation and digital, and several less pressing issues. First and foremost at the summit however was the migration debate, spurred on by intense domestic pressure in both Italy and Germany to reach an agreement on the processing and sharing of asylum seekers.

**Read:** [European Council Conclusions, 28 June](#)

### What deal was reached on migration?

Joining the call was GMF senior fellow Rosa Balfour, who highlighted the key issues in the conclusions and discussed how migration took over the agenda for the summit. Balfour first noted that the importance of migration on the agenda belies the fact that **irregular migration has not been in crisis for some time, and has in fact been decreasing sharply in the last year (see graph)**. The impetus for this focus comes largely from Italy, as interior minister Matteo Salvini (leader of Lega) has made the issue the centerpiece of his party's platform and agenda.

The details of the agreement include the **creation of 'disembarkation platforms' to be created in cooperation with relevant third countries**, though the actual states that would agree to these remains highly speculative. It also deliberately noted that the creation of any such centers would also need the cooperation of the UN Refugee Agency and the International Organization for Migration.

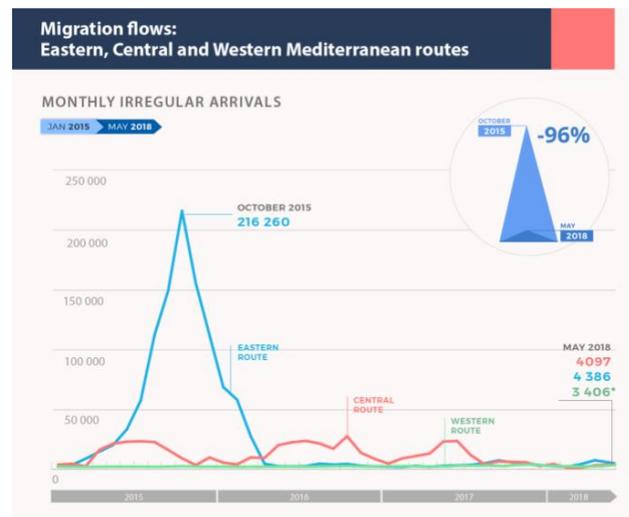
Within the EU, the conclusions describe the voluntary creation of **'controlled centres' to be established in willing member states** where an individual can be rapidly distinguished as either an irregular migrant, who would then be returned, or an asylum seeker who would be processed as such within the context of the Geneva Convention. Finally, the second key element of the deal makes

clear that this new system would be **without prejudice to the Dublin Regulation on migration**.

**Read:**

[The Guardian on the dynamics of the migration deal](#)

[European Council on Refugees and Exiles on responses to the agreement](#)



### Problems with the Agreement

A Belgian MP noted that the disembarkation platforms are voluntary, and asked if there was any political willingness of third party states to host such centers. Balfour commented that while Niger has been tapped as a potential host, there is overall a **very low willingness to host such a center**. Indeed, Tunisia, Libya, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Montenegro have all registered their refusal to be a platform host.

Furthermore, Balfour spoke about how there are important issues to be resolved before these platforms can move beyond their 'embryonic stage'. First and foremost, **there are serious issues to be addressed in regards to international law**. Though the conclusions do note that they must fully respect international law, there are **problems related to how asylum seekers can be distinguished from irregular migrants**, and the role that push factors play in driving refugees. Primarily, many asylum seekers are fleeing natural disasters, meaning they are not technically covered by the Geneva Convention.

**Read:**

[Balkan Insight on states resisting disembarkation platforms](#)

[EUobserver on possible UN assistance in implementing details of the migration agreement](#)

### What about Germany?

Also discussed on the sidelines of the summit was the Germany govt crisis and Angela Merkel's seemingly weakened position, with Balfour noting how unusual it was for Germany to be among the weaker powers at the European Council. This is attributed to the **acute government crisis in Germany that has only recently subsided with an unstable understanding** having been reached between Interior Minister and leader of the conservative CSU party and its sister party the CDU, led by Merkel.

Jan Techau, Europe Program Director at the German Marshall Fund, explained the deep roots of **the political crisis as having stemmed from the 'electoral strategy' adopted by the CSU** as it approaches the Bavarian regional election in October. Facing threats from the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) on the right, **Seehofer and other CSU leaders sought to be extremely tough on migration in order to co-opt the AfD position.** The CDU and CSU came to an agreement in support of the European Council conclusions; since the agreement, Merkel has also won the agreement of the SPD, clearing a final hurdle in the crisis.

While the roller-coaster of the crisis may have ended for now, Techau noted how seriously shaken the political scene in Germany was. **A Hungarian MP asked about the state of trust between the CDU and CSU**, and how this moment could affect Merkel's succession. Techau answered that the trust level between the two parties was at a historic low, and **that it was as if the lights had been turned on in a dark room, and suddenly everyone could see where all the others stood.** Now knowing where the players in the various parties stand, this will have serious effects in how the relationship between the two parties will proceed. As regards succession, Techau spoke on how the combination of a deeply shaken core alliance along with a weakened SPD coalition partner has largely taken Merkel's succession out of her hands. **Though, as of now there is no one in any party that can successfully lead a 'palace revolt' against Merkel.**

**Read:**

[Deutsche Welle on the CDU-CSU agreement on migration](#)

[Bloomberg on the SPD's acceptance of the migration deal](#)

### Defense and Security at the Summit

Though migration dominated the debates at the summit, other important conclusions were reached, particularly on the future of European defence and security.

Balfour acknowledged that **discussions on the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) remained smooth and constructive**, though stopping short of initiating any new measures. The conclusions welcomed progress on military mobility efforts and steps towards improving the civilian capabilities of the Common Security and Defence Policy.

Present throughout the discussions on defence was **the role of EU-NATO cooperation**, particularly on how new initiatives taken within the Common Foreign and Security Policy can enhance the European pillar of the transatlantic alliance. It was specifically **suggested that a new joint EU-NATO declaration be drafted to create a tangible action plan.**

**Read:** [Euractiv on the development of EU defence and security policy during the summit](#)

### READINGS FROM OUR NETWORK

[GMF on "Crisis-Ridden EU Summit Fudges Could Become a Trojan Horse"](#)

[GMF on "Twilight for Merkel?"](#)

[Connecting Europe and EPC expert Janis Emmanouilidis on "Time to move up a gear: the results of an insufficient summit"](#)