

THE MIGRATION FOLLY OF MELONI AND THE EU

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The asylum seekers processing centre that the Italian government has recently opened in Albania is economically costly, legally controversial, ineffective, and doubtful in terms of results. Nevertheless, not only does Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni intend to forge ahead with the project, but most EU member states are watching attentively in the hope that this might be a model to follow. Why is there so much interest in this strategy when it already seems doomed to failure?



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First it was the United Kingdom of former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak with its asylum seekers detention centre in Rwanda. Next, Georgia Meloni's Italy established a similar centre in Albania. Seventeen European states have also entered the fray, calling for "innovative" solutions and a "paradigm shift" in migration and asylum policy. A few days ago, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, followed suit when she suggested that "return hubs" should be set up outside the European Union. Why is there so much support for centres that are doomed to failure?

Cost is the first folly. According to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, the hub in Albania costs 297 euros per day for each asylum seeker or, in other words, almost ten times more than if reception were done in Italy, where it would cost 35 euros. It is estimated that the Albanian centre will require an investment of 800 million euros over the next five years. The figures for the British centre in Rwanda were also astronomical: more than 370 million pounds to construct it, and 20,000 pounds for each person deported. All in all, the **BBC** calculated that deportation would increase the overall cost by 63,000 pounds per person.

The second problem is the legal matter. A special immigration court in Rome recently ordered the **immediate return to Italy of twelve people** detained in the Albanian centre because they are from countries (Egypt and Bangladesh) which, according to the EU Court of Justice, are unsafe for returnees. In practice, this means that the fast-track asylum and deportation procedures that Italy intends to implement in Albania cannot be applied. In Great Britain, the Supreme Court also blocked deportation to the Rwanda centre. In November 2023, it unanimously ruled that the policy was unlawful because "genuine refugees" faced a real risk of ill-treatment if they were returned to their countries of origin.

The third stumbling block is effectiveness. Although these centres are presented as a means of reducing irregular migration, the numbers could not be flimsier, as Meloni's first attempt shows. From an initial group of 85 people, only sixteen could be deported to Albania. According to the agreement between Italy and Albania, the speeded-up border procedures can only be applied to non-vulnerable single men coming from safe countries. However, most of the people trying to get to Italy are minors, women, families, or vulnerable individuals. While Meloni's grand scheme was being put into action for only sixteen people (but, in the end, twelve because two were found to be minors and another two vulnerable), more than a thousand people landed on the island of Lampedusa. The numbers speak for themselves.

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The fourth drawback is that of the final results. Once in Albania with their asylum applications processed, what was supposed to happen to all the people who are not finally recognised as refugees? The proposal envisages nothing more than deportation, and the Italian authorities are responsible for this. Yet it is known that, in the European Union, most people who receive an expulsion order (70-80%) are not deported in the end. The explanation basically lies with the resistance of the countries of origin and transit. Let us not forget –though the EU often does– that return is not possible without the express agreement, case by case, by the governments of these countries. Normally, they are ill-disposed to accept returnees as the political cost is not exactly insignificant.

To return to the initial question: if what is being proposed is expensive, unlawful, inefficient, and likely to come to nought, why are these centres apparently becoming the new leitmotif of European migration policies? The answer is that the aims are different from those being expressed in public. With regard to the countries of origin, these policies are supposed to act as a deterrent to new departures. The logic is this: if they know they will not be welcome, that they will be deported, and eventually refouled, what incentive would they have to come to Europe? Beyond the issue of whether this argument bears scrutiny in situations where emigration is the only option, this type of policy has neighbouring countries competing over which has the toughest policies and, accordingly, is not among the preferred destinations. It is just one more element of discord in a European Union which, without shared migration policies, will not, in fact, exist.

Behind closed doors, these policies represent an attempt to challenge the present legal framework. The discussion is no longer between the far right and the other political forces. Among parties, the differences over immigration are increasingly negligible. The big dispute now is between politics and rule of law. And this raises inevitable questions. Will rule of law be strong enough to put an end to the follies of politics? Or is this a matter of hobbling rule of law, looking for loopholes, discrediting courts of justice, and calling for changes in the law that will affect *them* first but which, at the end of the day, will affect *all* of us?