



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The EU-Tunisia deal on migrants - a test for a new restrictive European policy



Even though not the first of its kind, the EU-Tunisia deal to control illegal immigration confirms Europe's shift in migrant policy and heralds a prolonged period of tighter borders. Tunisia is the first North African country with which the EU made an agreement regarding control of migration from Central Africa, accompanied by significant financial support for the Tunisian authorities.

Put simply, Europe pays Tunisia to be a kind of pre-border zone of its own, aimed at discouraging illegal migrants from crossing to the European side of the Mediterranean and particularly getting rid of their smugglers. Tunisia has become a frequent route for migrants from the sub-Saharan region to Europe.

Since the beginning of the year, their number has increased by nearly 300% compared to 2022, which the EU Border Agency Frontex interprets as a significant change in the movement patterns of migrants.

The EU has been trying to prevent new waves, particularly new routes used by tens of thousands of illegal migrants, but in doing so, it is applying new, harsher policies.

Putting the new EU migration policy into action

They are part of a package of reforms to the current shared asylum system, which has not recovered from the collapse during the great migrant wave of 2015 and 2016. The changes were approved last April by the European Parliament and are far less liberal than before.

Practically, with these measures, the EU has "legalised" the restrictive national policies from the period of the great migrant wave so that the procedures for obtaining asylum became stricter and faster. The measures for the migrant retention have been expanded, and higher quotas for the return of migrants from national borders have been approved.

European leaders are convinced that a large influx of migrants represents an economic,

political, and even security risk, with which some non-European countries want to exert pressure and influence the EU.

The arrangement with Tunisia is a consequence of all these shifts in the EU migration policy and seems like a model that the Europeans will use in other cases if it proves to be effective.

Italy leads the EU in North Africa

Italy has been leading the EU in making a deal with Tunisia because it is most affected by the redirection of migrant corridors through Tunisia.

Around 75,000 illegal migrants from Africa have tried to reach European shores via Tunisia, and the vast majority headed for Italy since the beginning of the year.

Italy is now facing a more sizeable influx of illegal migrants than Greece, as the first European stop for hundreds of thousands of migrants for years.

For Italy's right-wing Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, curbing the wave of illegal migrants is one of her priorities, and she takes on the leadership role within the EU in implementing new restrictive policies, which she demonstrated in the case of Tunisia, as the first significant step.

Her goal is for Tunisia to obtain the status of a safe third country for migrants, which would facilitate the return of rejected asylum seekers to its territory, which is also one of the measures in the new European asylum policy.

Expectations are that the next similar agreement between the EU and countries in North Africa will be with Egypt. According to Prime Minister Meloni, the deal with Tunisia is a "model for new relations with North African countries".

Good experience of

arrangements with Turkey

The Tunisian arrangement based on the principle of "money for border control" was modelled on the deal the EU has had with Turkey since 2016. This agreement was a negative precedent for many when Europeans were still convinced that their shared asylum system could work.

However, it has shown complete effectiveness in reducing the number of illegal migrants from Syria, from close to 900,000 in 2015 to around 30,000 two years later, to approximately 12,000 last year.

Similar effects are expected from the agreement with Tunisia, to which the EU promised a long-term favourable loan of about \$1 billion in return, of which \$118 million has been allocated for strengthening border controls, preventing smuggling and returning migrants. President Kais Saied reluctantly accepted the arrangement because his economy was in trouble and required an urgent and significant impulse to start recovering. The national debt is about 80% of GDP, unemployment is high (about 16%), and inflation is approximately 10%.

Last year, Tunisia secured a macroeconomic support package of about \$2 billion from the IMF, but conditional on the transformation of numerous state-owned enterprises monopolising large parts of the national economy. Italian Prime Minister Meloni is now getting involved on the side of Tunisia's interests and is putting pressure on the IMF to ease the conditions for obtaining a loan.

EU leaders resistant to criticism

Critics of the EU's new approach to solving the migrant crisis almost exclusively emphasise the humanitarian aspect as its biggest shortcoming and search for different solutions. But they don't offer any.

Much of the criticism is aimed at the authoritarianism of the authorities in Tunisia,

leading to assumptions that President Kais Saied will misuse European money to strengthen his security services to repress the opposition.

Also, international human rights organisations warn of the terrible conditions that migrants face while being held at the Tunisian border, and particularly of the treatment from the local population, which is often racist.

European leaders are not as sensitive to such criticism today as their predecessors were during the great migrant wave of 2015 and 2016. In the case of Tunisia, they demonstrate a new, pragmatic approach to curbing illegal immigration, which previously proved to be effective, although questionable from the point of view of European values of humanity and solidarity.