



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Despite the risks, the Italian-Albanian model for accepting migrants has a chance of becoming the new European standard



Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's short vacation in Albania last summer was marked by an unusual gesture. She paid the bill of €80 instead of a group of Italian tourists who ran away from the restaurant after dinner.

The Prime Minister was furious at the behaviour of her fellow citizens. She called them "idiots", and after regaining composure, she declared that "Italians respect the rules and pay their debts".

It is probable that she made a deal with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama at a casual meeting last June while on vacation: Albania would accept a large number of migrants who wish to go from Africa to Italy via the Mediterranean.

This deal was announced by the 2 prime ministers last week, igniting a new discussion among Europeans about the treatment of hundreds of thousands of migrants from Asia and Africa seeking refuge in Western Europe.

With this arrangement with Albania, PM Meloni reinvigorated her policy of preventing illegal immigration, for which she obtained a mandate a year ago.

The move followed after several failures to deter thousands of African migrants from entering the country illegally, including a failed arrangement with Tunisia to keep many African migrants at its border.

Nearly 150,000 migrants have reached Italy's shores since the beginning of the year, almost twice as many as in the same period in 2022. The lack of capacity to care for them causes frequent humanitarian crises, which is why the government in Rome has been a target of international humanitarian organisations and the opposition.

Extraterritorial model

Albania was happy to meet its close partner from the other side of the Adriatic Sea. "If Italy calls Albania, it is there", said PM Edi Rama after concluding the agreement in Rome. He

recalled that Italy accepted thousands of his fellow citizens who fled Albania 3 decades ago from chaotic protests and that it was time to repay the debt.

The Italian-Albanian deal will have to wait for the green light from both state parliaments. However, it is almost definite that reception centres for migrants heading to Italy will start operating in 2 places on the Albanian coast next spring.

Migrants will arrive in the camps in Albania. Initially, about 3,000, and 36,000, in its full annual capacity. Italian authorities in the Mediterranean will meet them.

The extraterritoriality of the camps in Albania is reflected in the fact that the Italian government will bear their costs. Their officials will manage administrative tasks related to asylum requests. Albanian authorities will monitor the security of the reception centres.

Changed circumstances

The model is not new. It is similar to the UK-Rwanda deal, and according to it, migrants would wait for the end of the asylum procedure in a third country. But it is the first that has prospects of being applied in one EU member country and one on the periphery of the 27-member bloc, and at the same time, a country that is a candidate for EU membership.

That is why its actors point out that it is a "European model", defending themselves against criticism from Europe that it is about isolation, bypassing EU rules regarding the treatment of migrants, and even their discrimination.

Only 5 years ago, Albanian Prime Minister Rama was a great opponent of such a solution. "Albania is not a place where you can dump desperate people like toxic waste that nobody wants," Rama said in 2018.

However, the circumstances have changed in

the meantime, and obviously, the policy of the Albanian Prime Minister, who has been searching for a faster way for his country to join the EU after NATO membership since 2009.

On this path, Italy is an ally of Albania and the entire Balkan region, where it invests substantially and is one of the leading trade partners.

Criticism regarding the Italian-Albanian agreement comes mostly from humanitarian activists. Amnesty International treats it as "illegal" as it allegedly circumvents national jurisdiction in the asylum procedure, thus harming the interests of asylum seekers.

The opposition in Italy talks about the construction of "Guantanamo in Albania", but behind their humanitarian concern is a political sting towards the ruling bloc, as it is moving towards consolidating its policy of preventing illegal immigration.

Support from Germany

The Italian-Albanian precedent received strong support because, just a few hours later, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz agreed on stricter measures towards migrants with the state leadership, including a faster asylum procedure, lower social benefits for asylum seekers and more money for local communities.

Even more significantly, Chancellor Scholz left in circulation plans for Germany, as the most attractive destination for migrants from Africa and Asia, to follow the path of Italy and move part of the asylum seekers to a third country until the procedure is completed.

Italy's agreement with Albania resulted from the EU's long-standing inability to tailor a unified and efficient system for the reception of refugees and asylum seekers. In fact, since the large wave of migrants in 2015 and 2016, the EU has been looking for an effective solution since the previous shared system collapsed before the first wave of refugees.

Giorgia Meloni's government was the first in the EU to take a step towards designing a new European framework for the reception of refugees, but in accordance with the policy of her coalition - more rigid and aimed at discouraging thousands of migrants from coming to the EU.

Along with the many political risks it takes, the moves of the Italian and Albanian governments were prompted by the escalation in the Middle East and intra-European confrontations over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This means that compared to a few months ago the Italian-Albanian project has far greater odds of becoming widely accepted.

Criticisms that it is not "harmonised with the EU standards" and that it "attacks European solidarity" will not be able to match its effectiveness and, at the same time, the promotion of partnership between EU members and those who want to become one.