

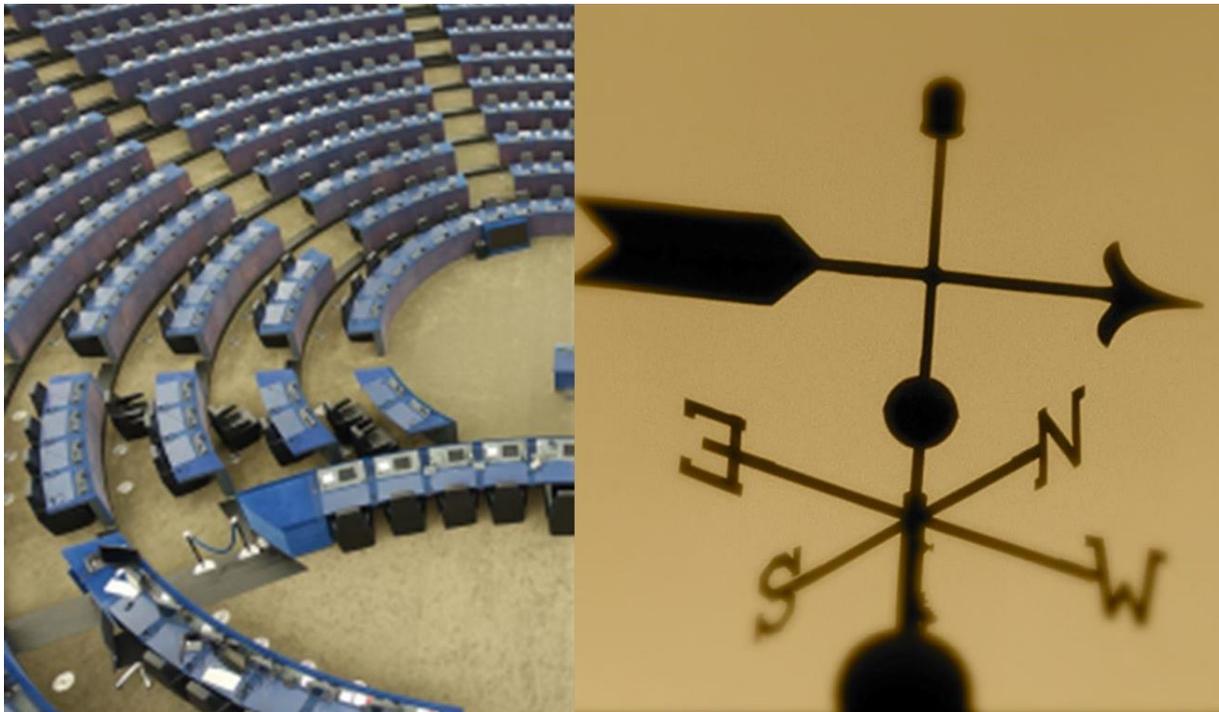
POLICY BRIEF 25.04.2019

EP 2014-19: Key Votes

Emergency Relocation Mechanism

Lucas Rasche

Policy Fellow, Jacques Delors Institute Berlin



The 'Key Votes' series dissects some of the most salient European Parliament (EP) votes in 2014-19. It analyses relevant political and geographic cleavages and fleshes out French and German specificities. This issue reviews a vote on one of the most controversial topics in the 2014-19 legislature: the EP vote of 17 September 2015 establishing an emergency relocation scheme for 120.000 asylum seekers from Italy and Greece. The vote illustrates a geographic rift between Eastern and Western/Southern EU countries about adequate solidarity measures in response to the 'migration crisis', which continue to hamper negotiations on the reform the Common European Asylum System.

1 Responding to the migration crisis

The arrival of more than one million asylum seekers in 2015 forced EU institutions to develop new instruments for the management of migratory flows. For the first time, the European Commission [suggested](#) using the legal provision enshrined in Article 78(3) TFEU, which allows the Council – after consulting the European Parliament (EP) – to take ‘provisional measures’ if one or more member states are ‘confronted by an emergency situation characterised by a sudden inflow of nationals of third countries’.

Commission proposals for two subsequent relocation schemes led to the establishment of an emergency mechanism for 160.000 asylum seekers to be transferred from Italy and Greece to other EU member states. The mechanism was established under the consultation procedure, which grants the EP the right to reject or approve a proposal and to make amendments but does not oblige the Council to take into account its position.

This policy brief will focus on the second Commission proposal to establish a relocation scheme for 120.000 asylum seekers to be transferred from Italy, Greece and Hungary to other member states. The proposal, put forward on 9 September 2015, sparked much controversy among EU countries as it included a mandatory relocation quota that assigned each member state an obligatory share of asylum seekers to relocate. Given that [58% of Europeans](#) considered ‘immigration’ to be the EU’s most important issue at the time, the debate about a potential relocation mechanism marked an opportunity for political parties to capitalise on public concerns.

The EP adopted a resolution allowing it to proceed under the fast-track procedure only one day after the Commission proposal. Less than two weeks later, on 17 September 2015, the EP voted in favour of the Commission proposal with 372 to 124 votes (54 abstentions). In its [legislative resolution](#), the EP refrained from making amendments to the proposal. Instead it stressed both ‘the exceptional situation of urgency and the need to address the situation with no further delay’. After Hungary resigned from being among the beneficiary countries of the mechanism, the Council adopted a decision through qualified majority on 22 September 2015.

The emergency relocation mechanism at a glance

- **27/05/2015:** The Commission proposes the first emergency relocation scheme for 40.000 asylum seekers to be transferred from Italy and Greece
- **09/09/2015:** The EP votes in favour of the first emergency relocation scheme with 498 to 158 votes (37 abstentions)
- **09/09/2015:** Commission President Juncker proposes a second emergency relocation scheme for an additional 120.000 asylum seekers from Italy, Greece and Hungary
- **14/09/2015:** The extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council unanimously adopts the first relocation mechanism
- **17/09/2015:** The EP votes in favour of the second emergency relocation scheme with 372 to 124 votes (54 abstentions)
- **22/09/2015:** The Council adopts – through qualified majority – the decision establishing the second relocation mechanism
- Member states pledged to relocate **63.302** asylum seekers from Greece and **34.953** from Italy
- The mechanism applies to all asylum seekers who arrived in Italy or Greece after 15 April 2015 and who come from countries with an EU average asylum recognition rate of at least 75% (in 2015 this mostly concerned **Syrian, Eritrean** and **Iraqi** nationals)

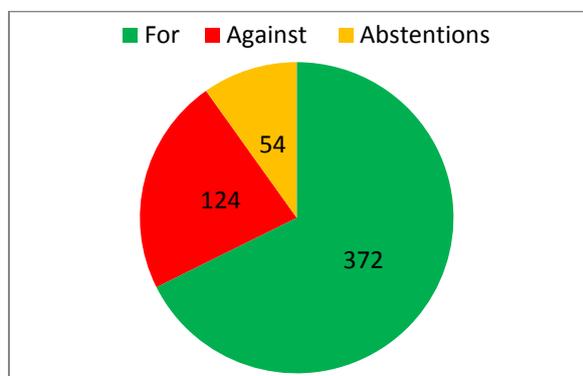
The EP vote from 17 September 2015 illustrates two major dividing lines that continue to hamper negotiations on the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS):

1. The vote demonstrates a geographic rift among EU member states concerning adequate solidarity measures for the management of increasing asylum applications. A bloc of mostly Eastern European countries prefers limiting EU interference. Southern and Western EU member states, instead, advocate a common European solution to mitigate the disproportionate allocation of responsibilities for registering and processing asylum applications.
2. It further illustrates a traditional divide between parties located at the centre-left and left-wing of the political spectrum and those on the right. This division finds expression in the preference for nativist policies among European right-wing parties and the humanitarian narrative employed by liberal and left-leaning parties. Centre-right parties have struggled to position themselves in between these two poles.

2 Geographic and ideological cleavages

The legislative resolution was passed with a majority formed by GUE-NGL, Greens-EFA, S&D, ALDE and the EPP.¹ It was adopted with a 68% majority, while 23% voted against the resolution and 10% abstained (see figure 1). A closer look at the voting behaviour reveals that support for the resolution varied substantially among MEPs from different EU countries. In fact the vote displayed a geographic cleavage between Eastern EU countries on the one side, and Western, Southern and Northern member states on the other side.

Figure 1: The outcome of the vote



Source: VoteWatch Europe (numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

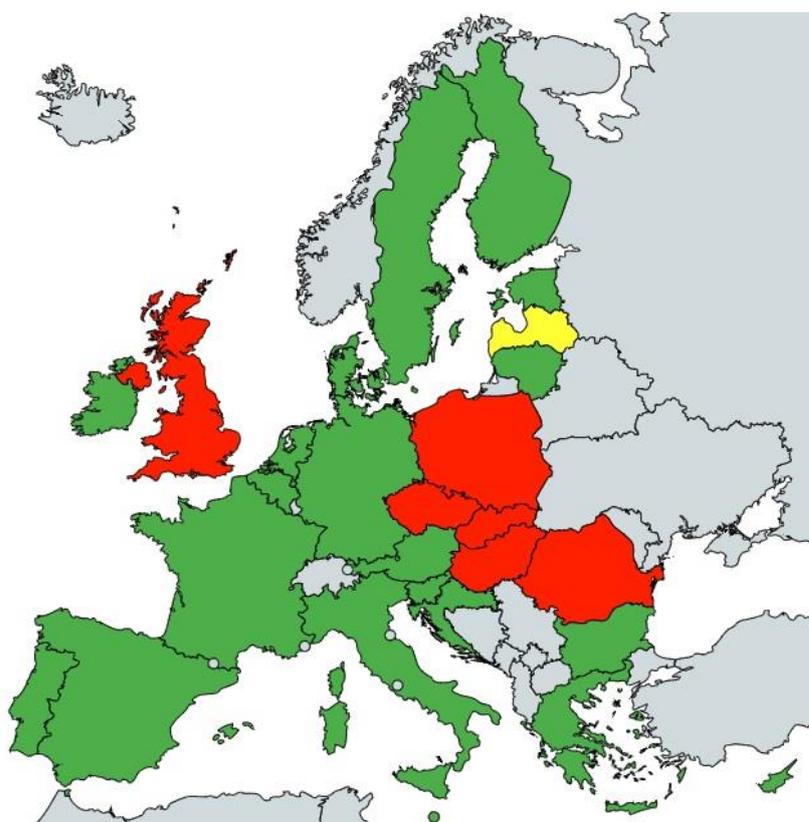
While there was a majority for the vote in most EU member states, MEPs from the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the United Kingdom voted predominantly against establishing a second relocation scheme (see figure 2). This bloc of mostly Eastern European countries rallied around their resistance against a mandatory relocation quota, which would oblige member states to relocate a certain share of asylum seekers. Governments from Eastern EU member states considered the proposed relocation mechanism as an illegitimate interference in their national sovereignty and spurred [anti-immigrant sentiments](#) or portrayed

¹ For better readability, we use acronyms when referring to the EP's political groups: European People's Party (EPP), Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE), European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL), Greens – European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), Non-Inscrits (NI).

the majority of Muslim asylum seekers as a threat to society. Slovakia and Hungary, which like Romania and the Czech Republic voted against the relocation scheme in the Council, even [turned to the Court of Justice of the European Union](#), but were unsuccessful in attempting to annul the Council decision.

Northern, Western and Southern member states, which received [more asylum applications](#) during the so-called ‘migration crisis’ than their Eastern neighbours, supported the idea distribute asylum seekers more evenly among EU countries. Their position was expressed by Manfred Weber who, speaking for the EPP group in the plenary session on 17 September 2015, demanded a ‘sign of solidarity’ to make clear that ‘EU institutions can deliver a common answer’.

Figure 2: Map of vote outcome by EU member states

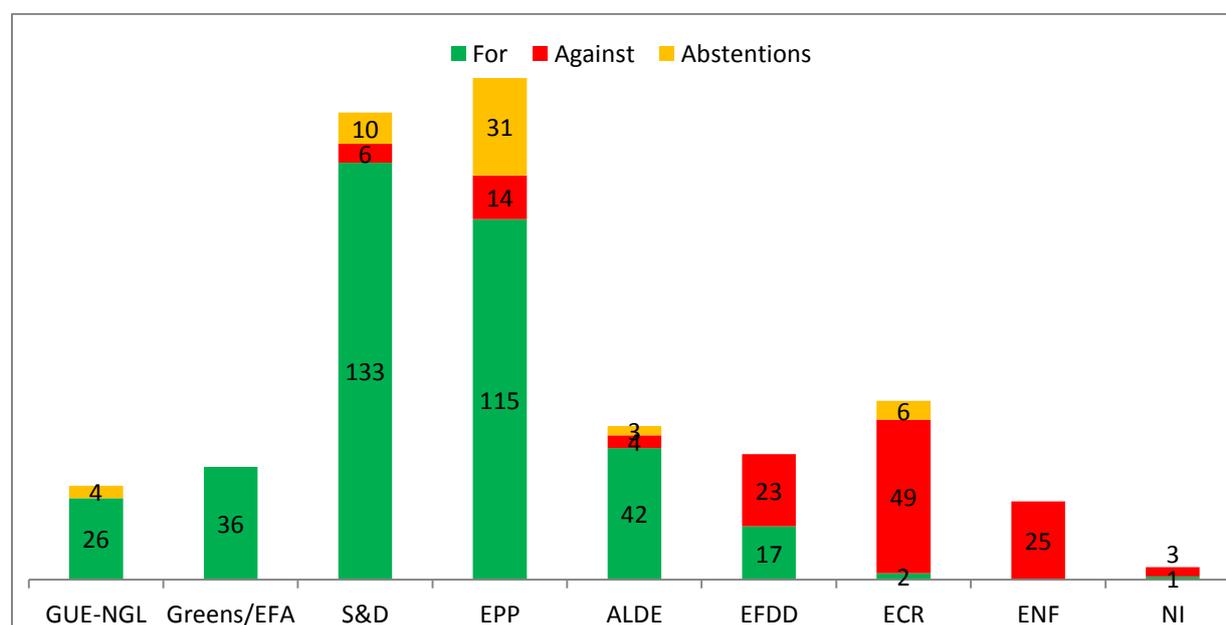


Source: VoteWatch Europe; created with mapchart.net (numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes, countries with an even number of votes in yellow)

The apparent rift between MEPs from Eastern and Southern EU countries is supplemented with ideological cleavages between groups at the left and right of the political spectrum. Opposing views on the necessity and scope to provide shelter for asylum seekers separated political groups in the EP and affected their voting cohesion. The EPP in particular displayed an unusually low voting cohesion of merely 57%. Of the 45 MEPs that did not their group’s recommended position, 14 MEPs from Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic voted against the relocation scheme (see figure 3).

In addition to geographic cleavages in the EPP, the group of conservative parties struggled with internal discords whether to prioritise limiting national arrival numbers or to allow a temporary increase of arrivals for the benefit of a common European solution. This dissonance found expression in the 2018 [dispute among Germany’s governing coalition](#) over a demand by Interior Minister Horst Seehofer to turn back asylum seekers at the German-Austrian border.

Figure 3: Voting patterns by political groups



Source: VoteWatch Europe (numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

Voting cohesion was also particularly low in the populist EFDD group. 17 Italian MEPs from the Five Star Movement, which describes itself as centrist and received most of its votes from an electorate formerly associated with the left, voted in favour of the relocation mechanism. The EFDD's right-wing UKIP members rejected the proposal, [arguing](#) that it was 'encouraging an exodus of biblical proportions'.

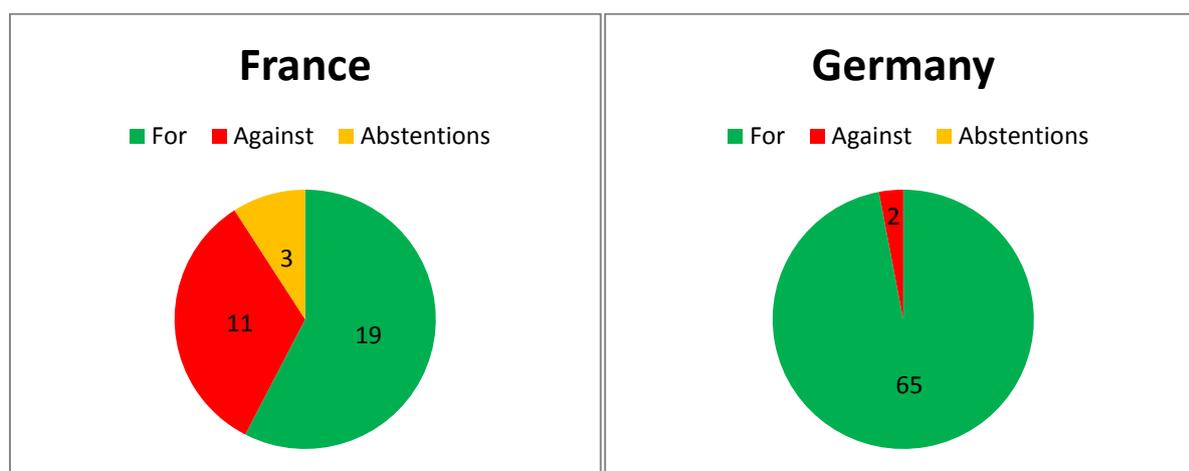
Meanwhile, the right-wing ECR and far-right ENF groups displayed an unusually high voting cohesion (ECR: 78%; ENF: 100%). They commonly rejected the mechanism claiming that it would lead to 'opening the gates of Europe' against the public will. Interestingly, ENF members from the right-wing Italian League rejected the relocation mechanism in the 2015 EP vote. However, they changed their mind when their leader, Matteo Salvini, became Italian Interior Minister in 2018. Since entering office, Salvini consistently [pushed for other EU countries](#) to relocate asylum seekers arriving in Italy.

Liberal and left-wing parties were united in their value-based support for the relocation mechanism. In the plenary debate on 17 September 2015, Neoklis SYLKIOTIS from the GUE-NGL group, for instance, stressed that closing the EU's border is unacceptable in light of the humanitarian crisis in its neighbourhood.

3 Zooming in on France and Germany

France and Germany have been among the driving forces behind establishing the emergency relocation mechanism. Ahead of the EP vote, then President Hollande and Chancellor Merkel put forward a [common position paper](#), pressing for a ‘sustainable and binding’ relocation mechanism and the establishment of ‘hotspots’ in Italy and Greece. However, French MEPs were much more divided in their vote than their German counterparts (see figure 4).

Figure 4: French and German votes compared



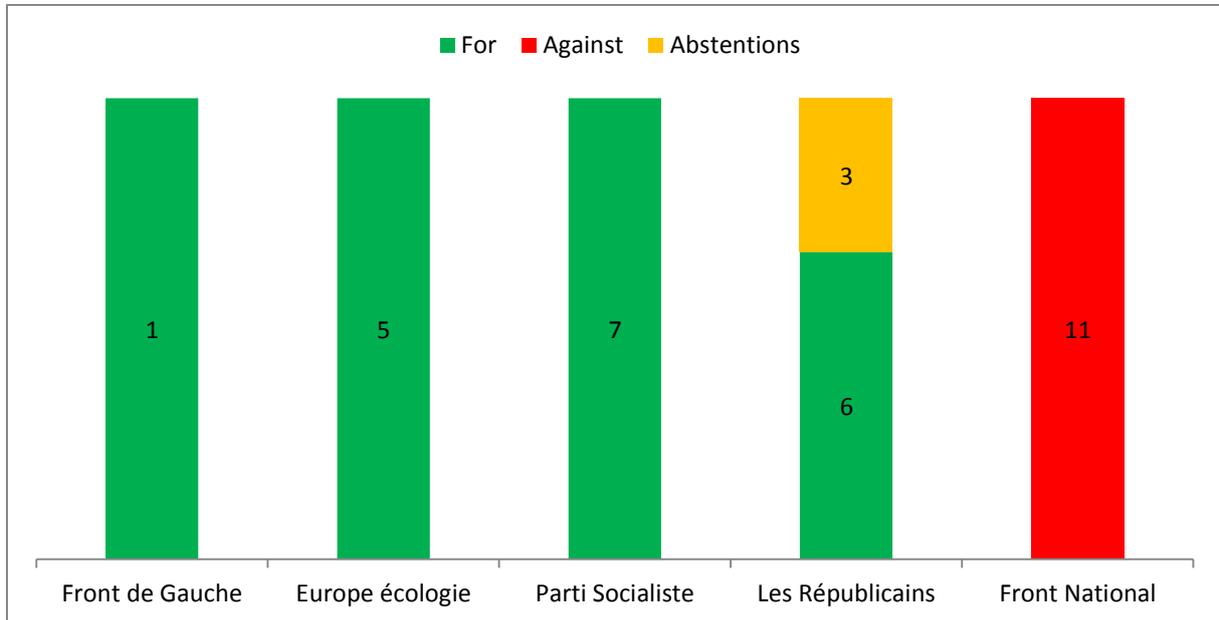
Source: VoteWatch Europe (numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

Germany received more than 470.000 asylum applications in 2015, which made up around [34% of all applications](#) lodged in the EU that year. The proposed relocation mechanism was hence understood as a first step towards building a European system of responsibility sharing, which enjoyed a broad consensus among German parties.

The cleavages between political parties, particularly among French MEPs, correspond with the aforementioned left-right divide. In both countries centrist, liberal and left-wing parties supported the relocation mechanism while right-wing parties opposed it (see figures 5 and 6). However, the far right Front National (now Rassemblement National) is much more strongly represented in the EP (21 seats) than the Alternative für Deutschland (two seats). Its impact on the French vote has therefore been much stronger.

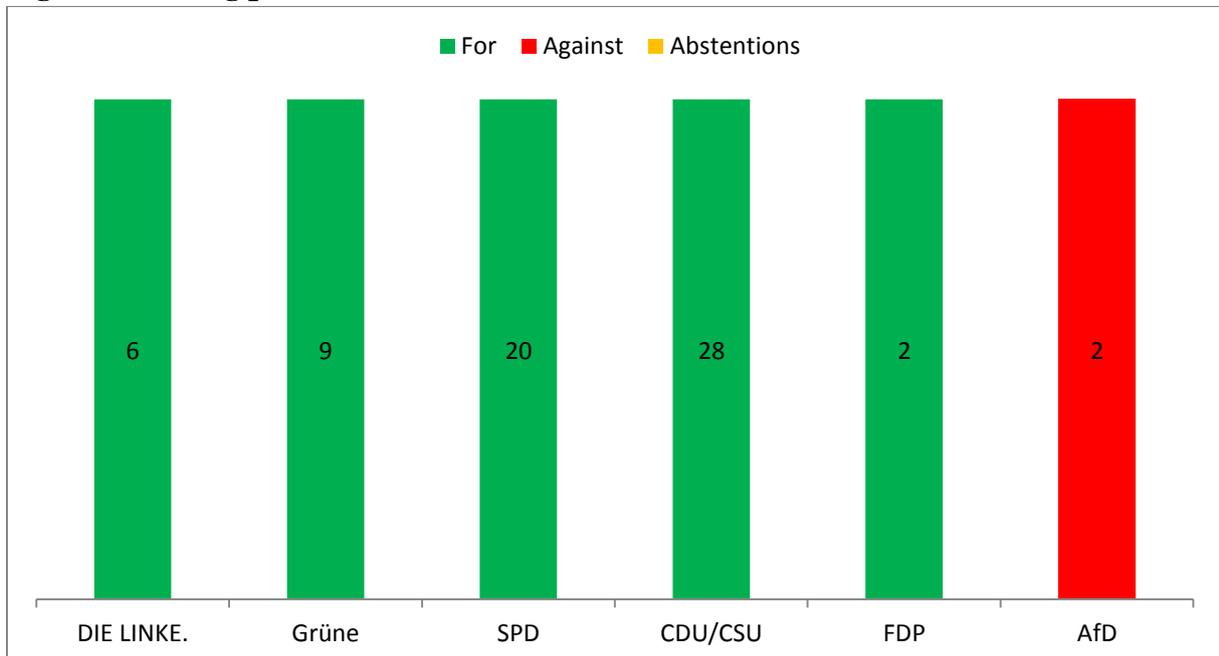
The Front National framed the proposed relocation mechanism as yet another decision made in Brussels and ‘[imposed by Angela Merkel](#)’. It warned that the mechanism would result in a surge of ‘illegal migrants’ coming to France. A similar narrative was employed by the AfD, whose leader Alexander Gauland [referred to the relocation mechanism](#) as ‘Brussels dictatorship’. Both far-right parties used the drastic increase in arrivals throughout 2015 to [capitalise on growing anti-immigrant sentiments](#) among the French and German public and to establish themselves as increasingly relevant players. Especially the AfD has since expanded its influence on domestic politics. In the 2017 general elections, the party secured almost 13% of the votes with a campaign that was predominantly built around painting a grim image of an alleged ‘takeover’ through Muslim immigrants.

Figure 5: Voting patterns – French MEPs



Source: VoteWatch Europe (selection of parties - numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

Figure 6: Voting patterns – German MEPs



Source: VoteWatch Europe (selection of parties - numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

4 Conclusion and outlook

The EP vote on 17 September 2015 came as a quick response to the Commission proposal and was intended as a signal for member states in the Council to take immediate action. Yet, implementing the emergency relocation scheme has been troublesome. By November 2015, Italy and Greece had each merely [opened a single 'hotspot'](#) to EU staff. As of October 2018, only 34.705 of the initially proposed 160.000 asylum seekers were [in fact transferred](#) to other member states. In response to the underwhelming results of the mechanism, the EP issued a [resolution](#) on 18 May 2017 stressing 'its disappointment regarding the unfulfilled commitments of member states' and urged them to 'systematically relocate asylum seekers'. The Commission even launched an [infringement procedure](#) against the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, referring them to the European Court of Justice for their non-compliance with the legal obligations under the scheme.

To ensure that relocation is dealt with more effectively in the future, the EP proposed a permanent and mandatory relocation mechanism to be included in the revised Dublin regulation. However, negotiations to reform the Dublin rules are stuck due to the aforementioned cleavages between the member states. The issue of relocation will thus remain on the EP's agenda in its next legislative turn.

Efforts to [forge a reconfigured alliance](#) of right-wing parties, comprising current members of the ENF, ECR, and EFDD, appear to bring a sea change to the next EP. However, it is unlikely that such a group could in fact change the EP's position on relocation. Most importantly, the group would have trouble speaking with a single voice on EU migration policy. Despite univocal calls to seal off European borders, right-wing parties across the EU are divided on the details. The Rassemblement National (former Front National), the AfD and the majority of other right wing parties continue to reject the relocation of migrants from distressed member states. Yet, one of the potential group's most powerful members, the Italian League, consistently pushes other member states to relocate asylum seekers arriving in Italy.

More relevant to the EP's future stance on migration is the EPP's position. Conservative parties in the EPP struggled to find a common position on the relocation mechanism in 2015. In an attempt to win back voters from right-wing parties, conservatives have since increasingly imitated their rhetoric. Whether the EPP aligns itself with the centre-left or decides to drift further to the right will thus play an important role in future EP votes on asylum and migration legislation.