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The EU needs an alliance for sea rescues

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Emergency rescues at sea cannot be decided on a ship-to-ship basis. EU countries with a desire to help must quickly create an Alliance of the Willing. A guest column, first appeared in [Tagesspiegel](#).

After being rescued in the Mediterranean, the migrants on board the Sea-Watch 3 had to hold out for a total of 17 days until Capitan Carola Rackete's ship docked in the Port of Lampedusa, although the Italian authorities had forbidden exactly that. She could not have "guaranteed the safety of the people any longer", said Rackete later, in regard to the situation on board the ship. Since no EU State offered to accept the refugees, she made her decision: "I'm docking now, over."

What happened next is a classic example of the dilemma The EU faces in dealing with migrants rescued at sea: while the Italian authorities accused Rackete of abetting illegal migration, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (both SPD), among others, chided Italy's conduct.

Although it is right to criticise its conduct, attributing blame simply works in favour of Matteo Salvini's populist behaviour. As a result, the Italian Minister of the Interior announced another increase in the sanctions for civilian rescues at sea.

The new EU Commission must adopt the asylum reform quickly

The Sea-Watch 3 and its captain have become a symbol of Europe's failed asylum policy. For more than three years, EU heads of state and government have been negotiating a reform of the rules for accepting and distributing asylum seekers. Currently, an agreement seems inconceivable. This means that a regulated system for the relocation of migrants rescued in the Mediterranean will not be implemented any time soon.

Now, after the election of Ursula von der Leyen as the new President of the EU Commission, the direction must be clear – the new Commission must make every effort to complete the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) as soon as possible.

Due to the humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean, however, it would be catastrophic to wait for a breakthrough in negotiations at this stage. Even though increasingly fewer migrants are attempting the crossing, the likelihood of dying on the Central Mediterranean route has risen from two percent in 2014 to almost ten percent. Parallel to the long-term reform efforts, a core of Member States with a desire to help should take the lead and accept refugees rescued at sea in the future. Such a proposal for an “Alliance of the Willing” has already been discussed by German Foreign Minister Maas.

Alliance for sea rescue: not a risk-free proposal

The idea behind it is simple – if it is already clear in advance who will take in the migrants, the civilian sea rescue ships will be able to dock without waiting for days and then quickly return to saving more human lives.

Certainly, this proposal also comes with risks – because the forming of such an alliance would mean surrendering to certain Member States’ obstructive stance. They would be exempted from any responsibility to accept refugees. Just short of 20 years after the cornerstone was laid for today’s European asylum system, the conscious division into willing and unwilling States would be a sober anniversary for the community of solidarity.

The truth is, however, that these lines of division already exist. States such as Germany, France, Sweden, Portugal and Belgium have not only regularly distributed refugees rescued in the Mediterranean among themselves. They have also accepted the majority of asylum seekers from the “hot spots” of Italy and Greece as part of the emergency programme implemented in 2015 for those two countries. The accepting countries stand in contrast to not only the Visegrad States (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia), but also Austria above all. In reaction to the proposal by Maas, Ex Chancellor Sebastian Kurz merely replied that the distribution of migrants had failed.

Positive incentives to accept migrants

If the alliance put forward by Maas is to be implemented, we first have to accept that EU Member States are indeed divided. In practice, this would mean finding a legally binding framework that would turn the current de facto coalition of some willing EU countries into a de jure alliance. Taking economic output, total population and previously accepted refugees into account, a fixed share of migrants rescued in the future would be allocated to each participating Member State. Other factors, such as services for the registration and initial reception of asylum seekers, could be included in the distribution key to make it more attractive for the States at the outer limits of the EU.

In addition, the “alliance States” should be supported with funds from the EU’s asylum and regional Funds. To facilitate this, the new Commission would have to increase its previous proposal in the forthcoming negotiations on the European Multiannual Financial Framework. It is important to create positive incentives for participation in the alliance. Municipalities and cities should also be allowed to accept refugees in addition to any distribution key. Just recently, 60 German cities, under the auspices of the organisation Seebrücke, declared themselves as “safe havens” and demanded they be allowed to take in the rescued asylum seekers on board the Sea-Watch 3.

Only an Alliance of the Willing will help in the current situation

Contrary to some fears, the acceptance of asylum seekers rescued in the Mediterranean would be a manageable additional burden for national authorities. Between January and July of 2018, roughly 18,800 made their way across the Mediterranean to the EU. Thanks to questionable agreements with the Libyan Coast Guard, this number fell to just under 4,000 over the same period in 2019. However, at least 682 people have lost their lives in the Mediterranean this year.

The weeks-long impasse over the Sea-Watch 3 showed once again that decisions on how to handle migrants rescued in the Mediterranean can no longer be made on a ship-to-ship basis. The obstructive stance adopted by some Member States means that an “Alliance of the Willing” is currently the only way to preserve the EU’s ability to act. Over the long term, however, the objective should be to integrate the relocation system practised on a small scale in the EU’s common asylum system. Members of parliament in Strasbourg should bind the new Commission to this objective.

To ensure the values advocated by the EU do not lose further credibility, the efforts to find a pan-European solution must not be allowed to degenerate into a pretext for watching on idly as migrants continue to die in the Mediterranean.