



Migrants stand aboard a patrol boat as they are brought into Haywharf in Valletta on July 7, 2019 | Matthew Mirabelli/AFP via Getty Images

No EU solidarity on migration, says Maltese foreign minister

Evarist Bartolo says top EU leaders 'do not come down here to see what has happened.'

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The EU's smallest member is dealing with record numbers of migrants arriving on its shores but is not getting the help it needs, Malta's foreign minister said.

"In the first three months of this year ... the Central Mediterranean route saw a jump of 438 percent in terms of illegal migration," Evarist Bartolo told POLITICO, quoting [a figure](#) from Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency. He said "about 1,200 arrived in Malta" and as the island nation has a population of less than half a million, that number "would translate into a lot of thousands in other states."

If the same proportion "arrived in Madrid, it would be over 12,400, very similar to the 13,000 that [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan sent to Greece [earlier this year]," Bartolo said. Then, "the leaders of the European Union [flew](#) [to the EU's border] to encourage Greece to stop what was happening. In our case, there isn't that visibility: the top EU leaders do not come down here to see what has happened."

In Brussels, not all countries are equal, according to the Maltese Labour Party politician. "The big countries do what they like and the small ones have to obey and behave ... it's very unbalanced."

Malta, like Italy, closed its ports because of the COVID-19 pandemic but in nearby Libya there's a "humanitarian crisis developing" because of the virus, Bartolo said.

A major problem for Malta is that its migration centers "are full," said Bartolo, adding that the country has around 4,000 migrants out of a population of more than 400,000.

"We're very worried," he said, because "since 2005, we've had about 22,000 arrivals. EU member states took 1,700 of those, eight out of every 100 ... that is definitely not solidarity. We are very grateful for Germany, for France, Ireland, Portugal, Luxembourg. They help us in their own way, but the numbers are small, they are nowhere near what we need."

And "to make it more painful, since 2005 the United States took double the amount that the European Union members in total took ... the United States of Barack Obama took 3,300, compared to the 1,700 that EU member states took."

A major problem for Malta is that its migration centers "are full," said Bartolo, adding that the country has around 4,000 migrants out of a population of more than 400,000, "which means that about 1 percent of people living in Malta are in detention centres or in centers waiting to be processed."

The European Commission confirmed last week that it will present a proposal to reform asylum laws but "unless the two issues are tied together, the issue of disembarkation and relocation, no proposal will address our needs," Bartolo said. Relocation pledges have to be made first, he said, because otherwise "we do get promises, but then they are not kept."

Maltese Prime Minister Robert Abela [said last week](#) that the country will keep 57 rescued migrants on a ship outside its territorial waters until the EU can relocate them and admitted that a second group of asylum seekers had been returned to Libya, while [denying that was a "pushback"](#) — a practice that is against international law.

But Bartolo didn't rule out other asylum seekers being returned to Libya in a similar manner: "The biggest pushback in the Central Mediterranean is coming from the European Union," he said, because the EU is pushing all the responsibility on to Malta and Italy.

"We do not like to do this, but if we are not helped and we are left to our own devices, what do you want us to do? ... If other countries do not help us, we have to look after ourselves."