# Bridget Phillipson defends Starmer’s failed Albanian return hubs plan amid immigration tensions



Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson faced challenging questions during a live interview regarding Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s recent visit to Albania, which many interpreted as a setback for Labour's immigration strategy. Starmer's discussions in the Balkan nation were intended to explore the establishment of "return hubs" for failed asylum seekers, a policy aimed at addressing the UK's ongoing immigration crisis. However, during his visit, the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, explicitly declined to host such facilities, casting doubt on the efficacy of Starmer's diplomatic efforts.

Phillipson attempted to deflect the negative perception, asserting in an interview with Nick Ferrari on LBC that Albania was never on Labour’s shortlist for processing sites. She maintained that the trip had been scheduled for other reasons, particularly focusing on the collaboration between the UK and Albania in tackling organised crime. This reflects Labour’s broader immigration strategy, which has recently pivoted toward stricter measures in a bid to reduce net migration, currently at approximately 725,000, while also addressing political pressures linked to public sentiment on immigration.

Starmer’s policy, though ambitious, has proven contentious. In recent discussions, notable voices have raised concerns about its implications, particularly in the context of ongoing labour shortages in sectors like health and construction. Critics have pointed to the potentially harsh language surrounding migration in Starmer’s approach, drawing unfavourable comparisons to infamous rhetoric from the 1970s. This shift to the right on immigration policy, along with proposed cuts to welfare and foreign aid, threatens to alienate Labour's traditional left-leaning support base.

Central to Starmer’s strategy is the idea of enhancing cooperation with Western Balkan nations to deter irregular migration. While Albania has committed to an agreement with Italy for hosting migrants temporarily, its refusal to collaborate with the UK undermines the effectiveness of Labour’s proposed return hubs. Experts have noted that Starmer’s emphasis on distinguishing between failed asylum seekers and those undergoing legal processes is crucial in framing this debate, especially as other European nations grapple with similar challenges.

Starmer’s political positioning has become even more problematic with the rise of Reform UK, led by Nigel Farage, who has capitalised on public dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of illegal migration. Polls indicate that Reform UK is now a significant force, posing a challenge not just to Conservative popularity but also to Labour’s perceived leadership on immigration. Starmer’s approval ratings have begun to wane, particularly among core Labour voters, prompting concerns about his ability to refocus the political discourse effectively.

Despite these setbacks, Starmer has attempted to reinforce his commitment to combating organised immigration crime, unveiling measures aimed at preventing deported Albanian nationals from returning to the UK. Moreover, efforts to expand joint operations with neighbouring countries underscore his administration’s dedication to tackling the broader implications of migration in the region.

As these political maneuvers unfold, the implications for Labour’s future strategies on immigration remain uncertain. The potential for a major political realignment looms, as Starmer seeks to navigate the complexities of public opinion, party ideology, and the practicalities of international diplomacy. The outcome of these efforts will be critical, not just for Labour's immediate electoral prospects, but for the broader dialogue on immigration in the UK.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
2. Paragraphs 3, 4, 5
3. Paragraphs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
4. Paragraphs 1, 3, 5, 6
5. Paragraphs 4, 5, 6
6. Paragraphs 3, 5, 6, 7

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2056408/bridget-phillipson-in-denial-keir-starmer-albania-plan> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/8579af75-0d05-4ab6-abe8-4792620f41c0> - In this episode of the Financial Times' Political Fix podcast, Lucy Fisher and colleagues discuss Labour's new immigration policy, spearheaded by Keir Starmer. The strategy aims to significantly reduce net migration—currently around 725,000—through measures like ending the care visa route, imposing stricter standards for skilled work and dependents, and extending the residency requirement for settlement from five to ten years. The hosts debate the policy's economic implications, highlighting labour shortages in health and construction sectors, and its political risks, particularly the controversial language used by Starmer, which critics liken to Enoch Powell's rhetoric. The episode also examines Labour's pivot to the right on foreign aid cuts and welfare reforms, risking alienation from left-leaning supporters. Separately, the growing prison capacity crisis is addressed, with Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood announcing early release plans and anticipated penal reforms. The hosts conclude with political stock picks, noting internal tensions within Labour and potential electoral shifts in Scotland and Wales.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/087f35aa-6d0b-49ec-af6c-9b30b87d787d> - UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer now identifies Nigel Farage's Reform UK as his primary political opponent amid rising support for the party and waning Conservative influence. Starmer believes a major political realignment is underway, referring to the Conservatives under Kemi Badenoch as nearing 'the end of the road.' Public opinion polls confirm this shift, showing Reform UK ahead of both the Conservatives and Labour. Despite mounting criticism from within his party over welfare cuts and his tough rhetoric on migration, Starmer continues to push his agenda. He recently visited Albania to firm up his migration policy ahead of next week's EU-UK summit. Starmer is also proposing 'returns hubs' for failed asylum seekers, though Albania has declined involvement. Farage, capitalizing on record-high small boat crossings and the government's inability to curb illegal migration, has called for a national emergency. Starmer's approval ratings continue to decline sharply, especially among Labour voters, despite his attempts to refocus political debate around migration and economic control. His warnings about the increasing threat from Farage underscore concerns about the efficacy of his strategies and the challenge of converting political messaging into tangible results.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/a2a86b3ab6e0b834176fa699942b6885> - British Prime Minister Kier Starmer announced that the UK is in discussions with several countries to establish 'return hubs' for migrants whose asylum claims were rejected, allowing them to be housed elsewhere while awaiting deportation. On a visit to Albania, Starmer praised the concept as a key innovation to address irregular migration effectively, but did not disclose which countries are involved. Albania, despite an agreement with Italy to host migrants temporarily, has rejected similar deals with other nations and ruled out cooperating with the UK on this matter. The previous British government had attempted to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, a plan Starmer criticized and discontinued. The new proposal differs by focusing only on rejected asylum seekers rather than outsourcing asylum processing. Migration expert Meghan Benton emphasized the legal and moral distinctions between different programs proposed across Europe. Meanwhile, joint UK-Albanian efforts have led to a steep decline in Albanian migrants crossing the English Channel, although overall migration by small boats has risen over 30% this year. Starmer also signed a defense cooperation agreement with Albania during his visit and is set to participate in the European Political Community summit in Tirana.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/c6bb168f-4869-4a15-99a8-23048488705b> - UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has confirmed that the government is in discussions with several countries to establish 'returns hubs' for failed asylum seekers who are not eligible to remain in the UK. During a visit to Albania, Starmer stated that these third-country processing centres are intended to expedite removals and deter irregular migration, forming part of a broader immigration clampdown. However, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama clarified that Albania will not host such a hub for the UK, limiting its agreement to a separate deal with Italy. Despite this, the UK continues talks with other Western Balkan nations, exploring the feasibility, legality, and cost-effectiveness of such arrangements. The proposed returns hubs would not replicate the Conservative party's Rwanda plan, as they target individuals who have already exhausted legal immigration avenues. The UK returned 24,000 migrants between July 2024 and March 2025—the highest figure since 2017—but small boat crossings have surged by 33% this year with 12,700 arrivals. While the model is supported cautiously by the UN, critics, including Conservative figures and Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, have expressed skepticism and called for stronger action to manage rising migration levels.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-steps-up-efforts-tackle-organised-immigration-crime-west-balkans-2025-05-14/> - British Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced increased efforts to combat organized immigration crime in the Western Balkans, aiming to strengthen his position amid political pressure over immigration policies. During his first official visit to Albania, Starmer revealed measures to prevent deported Albanian nationals from re-entering the UK and to combat money laundering between the two countries. The UK will donate forgery detection machines to help identify fake passports. Additionally, the UK will expand its joint migration task force to include North Macedonia and Montenegro, building on existing partnerships with Albania and Kosovo. This initiative follows a sharp decline in Albanian migrants arriving in the UK via small boats, largely due to a previous deportation agreement. The increased attention to illegal migration complements Starmer's broader pledge to reduce legal migration significantly, warning that without stricter immigration rules, Britain faces the risk of becoming 'an island of strangers.'
7. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-seeking-third-countries-host-deported-migrants-2025-05-15/> - The British government, under Prime Minister Keir Starmer, is in negotiations with several unspecified third countries to establish 'return hubs' for migrants who have been denied asylum and have exhausted all legal means to stay in the UK. This move aims to bolster the government’s credibility on immigration control, a politically sensitive issue. Starmer is seeking effective alternatives to the previous Conservative administration’s controversial plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda, which he had previously criticized and scrapped upon taking office. During a visit to Albania, Starmer emphasized efforts to combat human trafficking and was met with a refusal from Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama to establish a similar returns model for the UK. The proposed policy targets individuals who are using legal delays to avoid deportation and would involve relocating these individuals to safe third countries while awaiting necessary documentation. Further specifics of the plan are expected to be revealed in due course.