# Keir Starmer announces new UK immigration strategy focusing on Albania amid diplomatic tensions



During a recent visit to Albania, Prime Minister Keir Starmer signalled a new phase in British immigration policy, focused primarily on illegal migration. This trip was strategically significant as Albania has emerged as a noteworthy case study in the complex political landscape of controlling migration, particularly given the considerable reduction in the number of Albanian nationals seeking asylum in the UK. In 2022, approximately 12,500 Albanians made the perilous crossing of the English Channel in small boats; however, by early 2025, these numbers had dropped dramatically. Starmer's government has claimed success based on previous initiatives aimed at discouraging risky crossings, as well as a joint task force that effectively addresses human trafficking networks.

Starmer, seeking to build on this narrative, proposed the establishment of "return hubs" in third countries for asylum seekers whose claims have been rejected. This initiative, he argued, would allow for a more efficient deportation process, enabling those without legal standing in the UK to be relocated before they could exploit legal loopholes to prolong their stay. However, the proposal was met with immediate pushback from his Albanian counterpart, Edi Rama, who pointedly stated that Albania would not entertain any such arrangement beyond its existing agreements with Italy. Despite Starmer's assertions that these return hubs are distinct and legal, criticism from Conservative figures suggests a disconnect between ambition and practical policy alignment.

This situation brings to light the stark contrasts with previous Conservative government initiatives, notably the controversial plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda, which Starmer, in his current role, has categorically scrapped. The Rwanda policy aimed to deter crossings by suggesting a harsh consequence for those making the journey, but Labour's approach appears to be shaping itself as a less drastic alternative, at least in rhetoric. Starmer has additionally stressed the necessity of maintaining strong links with European nations in addressing migration issues, aiming to offer a credible immigration control strategy that has so far proven elusive for many Western nations.

The broader context of Starmer's visit also included an exploration of cooperation on criminal matters, particularly as they pertain to organized immigration crime. The UK government announced plans to donate technology designed to combat forgery and bolster security measures, aiming to complicate the operations of human trafficking networks that capitalise on vulnerable migrants. This notion of a joint effort against crime in the Western Balkans is also set against the backdrop of Albania's persistent aspirations to join the European Union, a goal that has become more pressing amid geopolitical tensions exacerbated by conflicts closer to home.

In a bid to position himself favourably within ongoing domestic political discourse regarding immigration, Starmer's emphasis on legality and partnership with other nations is coupled with the acknowledgment that immigration remains a contentious issue. Small boat crossings have reportedly surged again in early 2025, despite earlier successes against Albanian arrivals, resulting in increased scrutiny on the government’s handling of the crisis. As migration patterns shift and increase, political leaders find themselves caught in a web of historical commitments and the pressing urgency of needing to implement cohesive, practical solutions.

Starmer's visit culminated in a commitment to greater bilateral cooperation that extended beyond migration to include defence agreements, recognising the multifaceted nature of both the migration and security challenges faced by the UK and Albania alike. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, the partnership points towards a future where collaboration and shared responsibilities may offer a path to tackling persistent issues that both countries face, while also reiterating the significance of the broader political commitment to reform immigration processes.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cql2de96kn3o), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/c6bb168f-4869-4a15-99a8-23048488705b)
2. Paragraph 2: [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/c6bb168f-4869-4a15-99a8-23048488705b), [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/a2a86b3ab6e0b834176fa699942b6885)
3. Paragraph 3: [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-seeking-third-countries-host-deported-migrants-2025-05-15/), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-steps-up-efforts-tackle-organised-immigration-crime-west-balkans-2025-05-14/)
4. Paragraph 4: [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-steps-up-efforts-tackle-organised-immigration-crime-west-balkans-2025-05-14/), [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/a2a86b3ab6e0b834176fa699942b6885)
5. Paragraph 5: [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/small-aspirational-albania-hosts-giant-european-summit-2025-05-15/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cql2de96kn3o> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/c6bb168f-4869-4a15-99a8-23048488705b> - UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer confirmed ongoing discussions with several countries to establish 'returns hubs' for asylum seekers whose claims have been rejected. During a visit to Albania, Starmer emphasized that these hubs in safe third countries could effectively support the removal of failed asylum seekers. However, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama clarified that Albania would not participate as a host for UK returns hubs. Despite criticism from Conservative figures and political opponents, Starmer asserted that returns hubs are a legal and cost-effective part of a broader immigration control strategy, distinct from the previous Conservative government's Rwanda plan. The hubs would process individuals who have exhausted all legal avenues in the UK before arranging their return to origin countries. The initiative aligns with European Commission proposals and has conditional support from the UN refugee agency. The UK government has reportedly been exploring potentials in Balkan countries for several months. While the Home Office recorded high removal numbers recently, small boat crossings have increased to record levels in 2025, prompting further political pressure on Starmer to address migration challenges.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/a2a86b3ab6e0b834176fa699942b6885> - British Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced during his visit to Albania that the UK is in talks with several countries about establishing 'return hubs' to house rejected asylum seekers awaiting deportation. Starmer described the initiative as an important innovation aimed at curbing irregular migration. Although specific countries were not named, the plan contrasts with previous strategies, such as the former UK government's controversial Rwanda deportation scheme, which Starmer scrapped upon taking office. These return hubs differ from transferring asylum responsibilities; they instead house individuals whose claims have already been denied. The concept has support from the European Commission and is being considered by countries like the Netherlands and Sweden. Albania has an existing five-year agreement with Italy for a similar migrant arrangement, though Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama clarified that their cooperation with Italy was a one-time exception and rejected similar proposals from other nations, including the UK. Starmer also highlighted the success of a joint task force with Albania, which led to a sharp decline in Albanian migrants crossing to Britain. Despite this, overall migrant arrivals via small boats have risen over 30% this year. Starmer and Rama also signed a defense industry cooperation deal, and Starmer will participate in the European Political Community summit in Tirana.
4. <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.
5. <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.'
6. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/small-aspirational-albania-hosts-giant-european-summit-2025-05-15/> - On May 16, 2025, Albania hosts the European Political Community Summit, attracting leaders from major European nations such as France, Germany, and the UK. While the Ukraine-Russia war and ongoing peace talks will dominate discussions, small Balkan countries hope EU enlargement also garners attention. Albania, home to 2.4 million people and one of Europe's poorest nations, is striving to shed its communist past and join the EU. The summit symbolizes its progress, despite challenges like poverty, political corruption, and a reputation for money laundering. Prime Minister Edi Rama’s initiatives—including a migrant agreement with Italy, renewable energy development, and increased foreign investment—are seen as improving Albania’s EU bid. Nonetheless, concerns remain over political transparency after a contested election and ongoing investigations. Opposition leader Sali Berisha plans a peaceful protest during the event. Experts note that Albania and Montenegro, due to their small size, may represent achievable EU expansion success stories. However, the EU must regain credibility in the Balkans, where complex issues—like tensions between Kosovo and Serbia—continue to hinder broader accession hopes. Tight security and logistical challenges are expected in Tirana during the summit.