# Starmer faces setback as Albania rejects UK return hub proposal amid wider immigration strategy challenges



Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson found herself in a difficult position during a live interview when pressed about the ramifications of Prime Minister Keir Starmer's recent visit to Albania. Starmer's discussions there aimed to explore options for processing failed asylum seekers, but the Albanians took a firm stance, with Prime Minister Edi Rama stating unequivocally that Albania would not serve as a location for UK return hubs. This public rebuff raised immediate questions about the viability of Starmer's immigration strategy, leaving some observers to conclude that his outreach had not gone as planned.

Phillipson responded to the interview's focus on embarrassment by insisting that Albania was never a contender for a return hub, a point she reiterated during her exchange with Nick Ferrari on LBC. She stated, “There was never any intention to seek a return hub with Albania,” highlighting that Starmer’s visit was previously arranged to discuss other pertinent issues, particularly their collaborative efforts against organised crime. The framing of the trip in this light aimed to downplay any embarrassment or fallout from the Albanian leader's refusal.

Despite these assertions, the broader context reveals a landscape of ongoing negotiations as the UK seeks to establish return hubs in various countries to expedite the removal of individuals who no longer have the right to remain in the UK. Starmer confirmed that discussions are underway with multiple nations, though Albania’s unwillingness to participate marks a setback for his strategy, which aims to mitigate irregular migration through deterrent measures.

The proposed return hubs have drawn mixed reactions. Advocates argue that they provide a practical solution to rising numbers of asylum seekers arriving in the UK through dangerous channels, such as small boat crossings, which surged by 33% this year alone. In contrast, critics, including prominent voices from within the Conservative Party and leaders like Nigel Farage, have raised concerns over the effectiveness of such measures, given that the UK recorded the largest number of migrant returns since 2017—24,000 between July 2024 and March 2025.

Adding complexity to Starmer's immigration approach is his engagement with other Western Balkan countries, where he hopes to explore viable arrangements for processing asylum seekers. Although the models discussed differ from the controversial Rwanda plan previously touted by the Conservatives, they nonetheless aim to address the pressing challenges of migration in a way that Starmer believes is more aligned with legal and ethical standards.

In his efforts to reshape UK-European relations following Brexit, Starmer has also shown an interest in offshoring asylum processing, echoing discussions held during a recent European Political Community meeting. His focus on security cooperation with EU nations underscores a strategy aimed at tackling broader issues of organised crime and people smuggling, recognising that simple return mechanisms are not sufficient alone to address the root causes of migration. In this context, the UK’s commitment of £84 million to tackle migration at its source highlights a dual approach that seeks to manage immediate challenges while also confronting long-term solutions.

As Starmer navigates this multifaceted landscape, the pressure remains palpable, particularly given the tragic incidents of migrant deaths in the English Channel, necessitating a more aggressive stance on illegal crossings. His discussions with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni further indicate an openness to adopting some of her methods to reduce migrant inflows, particularly as Italy has reportedly achieved notable reductions in sea crossings through agreements with Albania and North African states.

Yet, both local and international critics caution against hastily adopting Italy's controversial approaches, which have been scrutinised for their potential human rights implications. As Starmer seeks to refine his immigration policy, balancing the urgency of the situation with the principles of human dignity and international cooperation appears essential.

In conclusion, while the immediate fallout from Albania’s rejection poses a challenge for Starmer, it also reflects the intricate balancing act required in formulating a coherent and compassionate immigration strategy—one that paves the way for meaningful reform in the ever-challenging landscape of global migration.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: Source 1
2. Paragraph 2: Source 1
3. Paragraph 3: Source 2
4. Paragraph 4: Source 2, Source 3
5. Paragraph 5: Source 4, Source 5
6. Paragraph 6: Source 6, Source 7
7. Paragraph 7: Source 6, Source 4
8. Paragraph 8: Source 4, Source 6

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## 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/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.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/4566173e-e99d-4a3e-8394-163d796b262e> - UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has suggested that Britain might offshore the processing of asylum claims, exploring a possible deal under which asylum seekers could be processed closer to their origin countries, such as a deal between Italy and Albania. This announcement was made during a European Political Community (EPC) meeting, where the main focus was combating people smuggling gangs and other issues related to irregular migration. Starmer is aiming to rebuild UK-European relations post-Brexit and has pledged not to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights. Additionally, he announced £84 million in funding to address migration at its source. The EPC meeting, which included leaders from 44 countries, offered a platform for Starmer to propose a reset in UK-European relations that encompasses defence and security cooperation.
4. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/09/17/starmer-interested-in-italy-s-far-right-solutions-on-immigration_6726346_4.html> - Keir Starmer, the UK's Labour leader, recently visited Italy to discuss immigration issues with Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Despite aiming to differentiate from Conservative predecessors, Starmer praised Meloni's progress in reducing migrant arrivals. This includes Italy's controversial agreement with Albania for outsourcing asylum processing, which has seen a significant drop in migrant arrivals. Starmer is under pressure after the deaths of eight people in the English Channel and seeks rigorous measures to curb illegal crossings. The scrapped Rwanda agreement, initially proposed by Boris Johnson, was deemed unviable by Starmer. Instead, his strategy focuses on combating smuggling gangs and fortifying border security. However, the IRC and political opposition caution Starmer against adopting Italy’s costly and potentially ineffective methods.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/1039dc9f-8566-400a-a386-eeb37244ae11> - Keir Starmer will meet Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to discuss her strategies on irregular migration. Starmer named Martin Hewitt as the head of the new UK Border Security Command to combat migrant smuggling across the English Channel, following the deaths of eight migrants. Meloni's policies have significantly reduced sea crossings by 60% through deals with North African nations to curb smuggling and return migrants. Starmer's government is looking to adopt parts of Meloni's successful Rome Process. Starmer is also open to offshore asylum processing, similar to Meloni's controversial deal with Albania. However, the Albania plan, criticized for potential human rights violations, will not be discussed. Starmer aims to strengthen relations with EU capitals and improve the UK’s border security.
6. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uk/2024/09/15/uk-looking-at-sending-asylum-seekers-to-albania-to-tackle-small-boats-crisis/> - British Prime Minister Keir Starmer will discuss Italy's agreement for processing asylum seekers in Albania when he meets Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. The UK is considering a similar approach to address the small boats crisis. The plan involves sending asylum seekers to Albania for processing, aiming to reduce the number of migrants crossing the English Channel. This strategy is part of the UK's broader efforts to tackle irregular migration and manage asylum claims more effectively.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/18/keir-starmer-says-he-is-open-to-processing-asylum-seekers-offshore> - Keir Starmer is looking into plans to process asylum seekers outside the UK as part of a rethink of the government's immigration policies, even as a returns agreement with the EU appears more distant than ever. The prime minister said on Thursday he was open to the idea of Britain processing claims offshore, after a day spent discussing illegal migration with fellow European leaders at Blenheim Palace. Those talks included a meeting with Edi Rama, the Albanian prime minister, whose country processes asylum claims on behalf of Italy. But he admitted a deal to return failed asylum seekers to the EU was low priority, as the French president, Emmanuel Macron, said his country was not willing to shoulder any additional burden. Starmer said: "In relation to the agreement between Albania and Italy, obviously there's interest in how that might work, but that wasn't actually the central discussion in the taskforce in the roundtable. That was about the practical measures that we want to discuss, which is about how we deal with taking the gangs down in the first place. But look, I’m a practical person. I’m a pragmatist. And I’ve always said we’ll look at what works and where cases can be processed closer to origin, then that is something which of course ought to be looked at."