

February 2017

## Outlook for the informal European Council and informal meeting of 27 Heads of State or Government on 3 February 2017

The informal summit taking place on 3 February 2017 in Valletta, Malta, will take place in two parts: an informal European Council meeting in which all EU Member States will participate, followed by an informal meeting of the 27 Heads of State or Government without the UK. The informal European Council will discuss further steps to address the migration crisis, in particular the external dimension of migration. The main issues will be the Central Mediterranean route and EU-Libya cooperation. EU leaders will also [exchange views](#) on other international challenges and the wider global context. The EU-27 leaders will then continue their reflection on their common future.

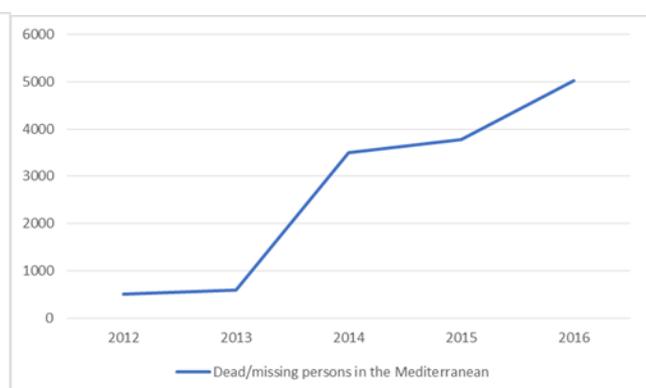
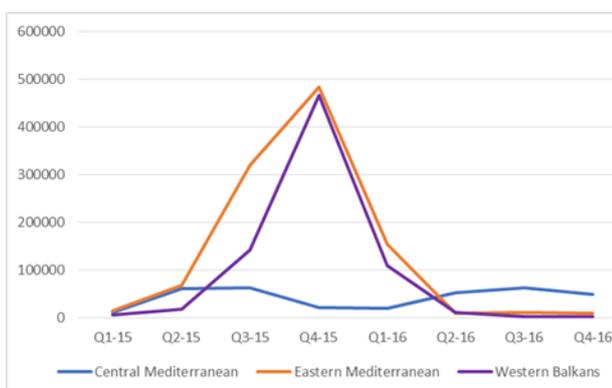
### 1. Migration

The President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, has [indicated](#) that Libya and the EU's approach to the Central Mediterranean route will be the key points for discussion at the informal summit in Malta. The loss of life in the Central Mediterranean triggered the migration crisis, bringing it on to the European Council agenda in 2015. It was on this route that the Heads of State or Government first concentrated their attention, before shifting their focus to the Eastern Mediterranean route (see EPRS's [European Council and crisis management](#)).

While the [number](#) of migrants and refugees coming from Turkey through Greece and onto the Balkan route has decreased since 2015 (the number of migrants arriving on the Greek islands in December 2016 was only 2 % of the number in December 2015), flows via the Central Mediterranean have increased. An all-time high of 181 100 people crossed the sea from Libya in 2016, mainly to Italy (see figure 1), leading to record levels of loss of life at sea (see figure 2). Unlike the Eastern Mediterranean route, those crossing on the Central Mediterranean route are [predominantly economic migrants](#).

Figure 1: Illegal Border crossings on the main routes

Figure 2: Dead and missing people in the Mediterranean Sea



Source: [Frontex](#)

Source: [UNHCR](#)

EU leaders are expected to endorse a recent [Commission proposal](#) on how to manage migration along the Central Mediterranean route. The actions set out in this proposal include stepping up the fight against

smugglers and traffickers, increasing dialogue and operational cooperation with partners in North Africa, and boosting funding from the [EU Trust Fund for Africa](#), as well as a series of actions to support the Libyan authorities in enhancing border management and migrant protection.

The Heads of State or Government will most likely build on and expand their commitment from the last European Council, on 15 December 2016, when they called for greater support for the Libyan coastguard, including through [EUNAVFOR MED/Operation Sophia](#). When [reporting](#) to the European Parliament on the [conclusions of that meeting](#), President Tusk expressed the European Council's willingness 'to step up the EU's engagement to strengthen the capacity to address security issues and consolidate institutions, in full respect of Libyan sovereignty'.

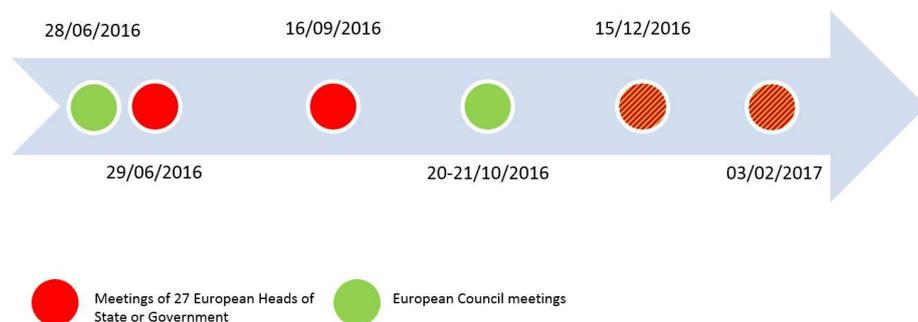
The Maltese government, which currently holds the rotating [Presidency of the Council of the EU](#), has been [discussing](#) with the other Member States the idea of an EU-Libya cooperation agreement on migration, modelled on the [EU-Turkey statement](#), which contributed to reducing the migration flows on the Eastern Mediterranean route. Whether this idea will be supported by the European Council is not certain, as the European Commission has already [signalled](#) its opposition to it.

## 2. Meeting of 27 Heads of State or Government

As provided for in the [Bratislava declaration and roadmap](#), EU leaders will use the informal European Council meeting in Valetta to come together in an EU-27 format too. The objective is to prepare for the upcoming 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties on 25 March 2017, at which time the Heads of State or Government will 'round off the process launched in Bratislava, and set out orientations for [the EU's] common future'. In his [dedicated invitation letter](#) for this meeting, President Tusk drew attention to the internal and external threats the EU currently faces. He called upon the EU-27 leaders to stand up for the dignity of a united Europe, to be expressed in the forthcoming Rome declaration.

Since the UK referendum on EU Membership, held on 23 June 2016, EU leaders have already twice used the occasion of European Council meetings to hold discussions among the EU's 27 Heads of State or Government, without the United Kingdom (see EPRS's [post-European Council briefings June 2016](#) and [December 2016](#)). At these meetings, they have considered the political and practical implications of the UK vote to leave the EU, the future of the European Union with 27 Member States, and the procedural arrangements for the negotiation process which will follow the United Kingdom's expected notification under Article 50 TEU during March this year.

**Figure 3: Meetings of European Council and meetings of 27 Heads of State or Government**



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