



Schengen's maritime border: Another *annus horribilis* in the Med?

by Hugo Brady

EU leaders are understandably focused on Ukraine and the political fallout from the European elections – but they should not forget the south. The Schengen area, Europe's 26-country passport-free zone, faces a challenging summer due to increasingly high levels of uncontrolled migration from across the Mediterranean. In May, Frontex, the EU's border agency, published figures showing that the number of undocumented migrants arriving by sea from North Africa and the Middle East nearly doubled last year. The trend hints that the numbers may return to their 2011 heights when the so-called Arab Spring led tens of thousands of desperate migrants to attempt to cross the Mediterranean in makeshift boats.

Syria's civil war is partly to blame: around 25,000 Syrians sought refuge in the EU through the Greek islands or at Bulgaria's land border with Turkey last year. Libya and Egypt – where political stability remains elusive – served as the chief embarkation points for some 40,000 more migrants, mainly West Africans, Eritreans and Somalis headed for Italy.

Foreign nationals are more and more likely to attempt the hazardous voyage all year round: off-season crossings increased 100% in 2013. The tragic and eerie shipwreck in October which cost the lives of over 360 Eritreans and Somalis off the island of Lampedusa is the most dramatic example to date; but at least a dozen more people have drowned off the coast of the Italian island since the beginning of the year.

What is being done

Panic rarely contributes to sound policymaking. It is particularly pointless in the context of the Schengen area which, plugged into the Eurasian landmass, has hugely complex land and sea borders that will never be possible to police fully. In any case, Frontex estimates that only around 100,000 immigrants in total entered the passport-free zone illegally last year. While this is hardly a negligible figure, it is not a shocking one either: over 10 million legitimate travellers visit the Schengen area annually. Meanwhile, neighbouring Turkey is currently sheltering over 750,000 refugees from Syria alone.

Furthermore, Schengen countries now have a range of new border management tools the like of which they could only have dreamt of three years ago. For starters, Frontex is simultaneously supporting Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Spain to manage migration flows at their land and sea borders, including through the so-called European Patrols Network (EPN). The EPN is a system whereby national coastguards and border services from different Schengen countries patrol the maritime border together without duplicating each other's efforts. It is set to become much more effective following last December's roll-out of Eurosur, a new EU-wide IT network which allows both coastal and landlocked states to swap surveillance and satellite data. Coastguard and naval services in the Schengen area should progressively be able to coordinate their



reactions to border and humanitarian emergencies in real time.

Second, the EU's relations with so-called sending and transit countries are improving. North Africa was the first region where the Schengen area's shared visa database – the Visa Information System – became operational at national consulates in 2012. The Union has recently initialled 'mobility partnerships' with Tunisia and Morocco, and is likely to do so soon with Jordan. These partnerships are not deals on returning illegal entrants home (known as readmission agreements). But they do pave the way for such accords by building up local administrative capacity through dozens of specific projects related to border management, immigration administration and the care of refugees. For the partner country, the joint projects are a first step on the road to easier visa applications for their own nationals.

In early 2013, the EU deployed a 'border and assistance' mission (EUBAM) to Libya to provide advice and training on migration and security issues to local authorities. The mission has already trained hundreds of border, law enforcement and customs personnel at sites such as Ghadames and Ras Ajdir. In December 2013, Cecilia Malmström, the EU's Home Affairs Commissioner, signed a readmission deal with Turkey after more than ten years of talks. The landmark accord means that Ankara will begin taking back not just its own nationals but any unauthorised entrant that crosses its border with the EU. In addition, Schengen countries have just set up a joint office of national immigration liaison officers in Turkey to establish closer links with the Turkish border and immigration services.

What might be done

Immigration is not a security issue. But uncontrolled maritime migration can become one, especially if facilitated by organised groups who may use much the same contacts and strategies to smuggle drugs or firearms. Frontex has launched a series of operations at vulnerable seaports – from Varna in Bulgaria to Algeciras in Spain – to support local border guards in efforts to detect not only unauthorised entries but also cocaine shipments and stolen cars.

Furthermore, human traffickers from Eritrea, Somalia, Libya and Sudan act as violent gatekeepers along the migration route through North and sub-Saharan Africa. Traffickers extort money from the vulnerable, manipulating and abusing would-be migrants at various staging posts along the migration route (as happened to the victims of the Lampedusa tragedy). Europol, the EU's police agency, along with 11 national authorities,

is attempting to counter these networks by tracking the satellite phones they use to coordinate their maritime activities. Frontex, as part of its Operation Indalo, has worked with Spain's Guardia Civil since 2011 to prevent an organised gang, based in Oujda (Morocco) from trafficking people, including pregnant women and vulnerable minors, across the Strait of Gibraltar.

EU governments recently agreed that Frontex can now possess its own naval and air assets. But it has yet to acquire any because purchasing a single patrol vessel would cost approximately €40 million, equivalent to half its budget for a typical maritime mission. Moreover, due to budgetary rules, the agency may not receive funds ear-marked by governments for humanitarian emergencies on the scale of Lampedusa for three or four months after the crisis has arisen. Hence one option worth considering is the gradual evolution of the European Patrols Network into a small EU Littoral Fleet (EULF) with its own equipment, emergency fund for rapid deployment and capacity to conduct airborne maritime surveillance. The EULF could be leased on a flexible basis from participating EU countries with some equipment coming from the private sector.

Meanwhile, the EU needs to help break the 'business model' of organised people smugglers and traffickers on their own territory. Although the 300-strong agency will need more resources to do so, Frontex should post its own 'Schengen liaison officers' (SLOs) to the EU's delegations in North and sub-Saharan Africa. Amongst other things, SLOs would coordinate networks of national liaison officers, such as that established in Turkey and another envisaged for Libya; gain the trust of the local authorities; and assist in raising public awareness of traffickers in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan. In the meantime, Frontex, Europol and the EU's new 'asylum support office' could – along with national experts – create a small cell at the EU's External Action Service to compile a single picture of human trafficking activity into Europe from origin to destination.

The Arab Spring forced EU countries to accelerate plans to build a new border infrastructure for Schengen, complete with its own visa database and surveillance networks. Undoubtedly, increased migratory pressure in the Mediterranean in 2014 and beyond, allied with new political leadership in Brussels, will spur its further development. In the short term, this might not be enough to calm voter anxieties over immigration. Nonetheless, pinpricks of light are appearing in the struggle of an affluent continent – surrounded by poor and unstable regions – to rise to the challenge of maritime migration.

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