

Border security as part of internal and external security

Security issues have been gaining in importance within the European Union in recent years, as a result of terrorist attacks in various Member States as well as the migration and refugee crisis - which in fact must be considered in a much broader context as a crisis of the Mediterranean region. The situation to the east of the EU, particularly in eastern Ukraine, has also accelerated this trend. Border security must thus be examined as part of internal and external security.


Klaus Rösler, Director of the Operations Division at Frontex, pointed out that the removal of internal borders within the Schengen Area requires stronger security measures at the external borders: Border security is a way of safeguarding internal mobility among the Member States. This statement, he said, is “so simple, so valid, and so challenging.” During the 2015 migration crisis, the requirement for external security became crucial in the regions where the EU was confronted with massive migratory flows.

The migration hotspots brought massive flows of people, and they were mixed flows: economic migrants, refugees, unaccompanied minors - various agencies had to get involved in supporting national authorities. The proper security response is to “use the borders as a filter for situational awareness, detection of crime” in order to “start investigations and provide an operational response,” Mr Rösler said. This is true of all types of borders, including air borders.

Egert Belitšev, a Counsellor for Illegal Migration, Frontiers and Schengen Matters at the Permanent Representation of Estonia to the EU, pointed out that the Schengen area is easily one of the EU’s greatest achievements, and thus we have to protect it. Because any stronghold is only as strong as its gates, Border Guards and border management are crucial.

Faced with an increase in traffic, there would seem to be two obvious options: increase the number of border guards, which requires a lot of investment and can’t go on indefinitely, or decrease security controls, which obviously isn’t an option either. Instead, said Mr Belitšev authorities have to find a way to speed up the control process, both on the borders and inland. Pre-processing solutions such as ETIAS help the system to deal with traffic volume before it reaches the border. An entry-exit system offering electronic stamping will also help save time: Border guards don’t have to look for stamps and count days. Thus, they can use the time they save to enhance security and deal with actual threats. Automated border controls allow people to enter and exit without ever seeing a guard - and again, the guards are freed up to concentrate where it matters.

In all of this, information quality is key, Mr Belitšev said: “Having lots of information doesn’t help us if it’s the wrong information.” Information is also like a puzzle: If the pieces are in different boxes, you can’t see the full picture. That means “interoperability is the magic word”: Border guards can’t spend time logging on to separate systems to compare data. This of course raises data protection concerns, which must of course be borne in





mind: Ultimately “border guards aren’t collecting data just for fun, but to safeguard the fundamental rights of EU citizens.”

Julie Norris, a forensic psychologist involved in the development of the European Joint Master’s in Strategic Border Management, pointed out the need for relevant training for people involved in managing borders. Because many of the situations being faced today are new, it is a massive challenge to gather competences from those that have the relevant experience and share them across the entirety of Europe. “Cooperation only happens when people want it to happen” - it doesn’t happen because of a law, or a common set of training standards. “They have to be translated into common values, and into a wish and a desire for us to act in an interoperable way and to cooperate well,” Ms Norris said.

The joint master’s degree was an example of this: a group of six partner universities and more than 20 EU border guard training organisations and academies worked together to develop a true joint response, producing a group of 23 graduates who will make the European response real. Pascal Robin Wolf, a major in the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee and a graduate of the joint master’s programme, echoed other participants in pointing out that people are key to the mission of border security. His master’s thesis looked at the challenges to Border Guards’ mental health posed by the new environments and stressful demands they face. While military and police forces have a wide range of instruments and tools for managing stress, this isn’t always true of Border Guards. Anonymous interviews with Border Guards during the migration crisis revealed a number of stressors, including deaths of children, violence among residents of detention centres and threats to the Border Guards, both from detainees and from armed smugglers. Mr Wolf said the ambiguity of the mission was another source of stress for some Border Guards, who have police powers in their home countries but not where they were stationed, which reduced their ability to respond to violence.

Lessons from the military and police included embedding mental health professionals in units to reduce the distance between the field and hospital-based care; this was tested successfully in Greece. Peer practitioners are another tool: Border Guards can be trained to recognise signs of stress in their colleagues. When planning operations, Mr Wolf said, it’s important to consider the mental health risks and make a plan for stress management. In response to a question from the audience about how Frontex can help convince Member States to invest in external borders rather than internal ones, Mr Rösler pointed out that the best way is to demonstrate effectiveness, such as the recent achievements with migration hotspots. Frontex needs to demonstrate that it’s worth investing further in such controls, to show that internal check can only be a temporary “Plan B”, not the way ahead for the long term.

In response to a question about the joint master’s programme, Ms Harris pointed out that the aim is to build cooperation and strategic thinking; to respond to the constant questions about why nobody saw the migration crisis coming. “Border Guards are very good” at putting out fires, she said; “we need to keep that, but we also need strategic leadership, strategic thinking.”