


## **Gates or Bridges? The Future of border control.**

Under the expert moderation of Paweł Świeboda, President of demosEUROPA – Centre for European Strategy think tank, four heavy hitters in the field of migration and border management pored over the most topical themes of the moment in the opening debate of this year's European Day for Border Guards (ED4BG). Under the title "Gates or Bridges? The future of border control," the speakers gave the assembled audience of border-control players the benefit of their insight into areas as diverse as the Arab Spring, the age of mobility, changing migratory trends, preparedness at operational and policy level, third-country cooperation, technology and the financial crisis.

Mr Świeboda set the tone by describing European border control in macro terms as "Europe at work and Europe at its best" before setting the scene in the light of the ongoing developments in North Africa and the Middle East. As a continuation of last year's main debate, he described the so-called Arab Spring as, "one of the most inspiring events of the last decade," but one that brought challenges, not only for the countries and regions involved, but also for management of the southern EU external border. What had been the extent of the phenomenon over the past year, he wanted to know, and what should we expect in the months to come?

Gervais Appave, Special Policy Advisor at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), opened the bidding with the IOM's international perspective on migration. Raising a number of key themes that would echo throughout the discussion, he first highlighted how the modern world has become increasingly defined by mobility. In the global perspective, he elucidated, as many as two billion people are "mobile." This he broke down into approximately one billion migrants — 200 million "external migrants" that cross international borders, and a further 800 million "internal migrants" that move within their own countries of origin. In addition there are up to a billion movements in tourism and business travel. Though most of these movements he described as "remarkably fluid," certain events catch migration management by surprise, and one of them was the Arab Spring with all the challenges it wrought.

"With the wisdom of hindsight, one could say that we should have thought that this could happen," he told the audience. But that said, the situation could have been much worse. With the collapse of governance in Libya, for instance, many expected a flood of migration towards Europe. But this didn't happen. "At IOM we were very surprised that most of the movement was not towards Europe," he admitted, adding that many of those displaced by the fighting were migrant workers who simply wanted to go back home. And while IOM assisted around 300,000 to return home to Asian or African countries, in addition to the many from neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt, the phenomenon illustrated two important things in Mr Appave's view: "Disorderly movement can happen, and it can happen quickly and in unexpected ways." Moreover, it demonstrated why it is important to have "border management issues integrated within a broader management framework" which was what allowed those people to get back home. This raised the important issues, to Mr Appave's mind, that "Migration to Europe, while problematic, was managed," and that it highlighted "another challenge for the whole of this room: What will be the next pressure point and how might it emerge?"





Picking up on these issues, Mr Świeboda asked what implications these changing migratory trends might have in the policy domain and, “to what extent do we in Europe have to monitor these developments and what lessons should we draw from them?” In response, Mr Appave said the immediate future seemed likely to hold much of the same, namely:

“A world defined by mobility, suffering the lingering effects of the economic crisis, which has served, if anything, to depress the number of movements.” But, he stressed, “The pressure for irregular movements remains extremely high. That’s unlikely to change. [There is] no reason to believe that the smuggling and trafficking industries will be any less active than they have been in the past, so that will very much continue.” As such, he concluded, the main policy implication would be to maintain existing levels of control despite straightened economic times. He concluded:

“From a broader perspective, there may be a challenge in trying to bring down levels of asylum seekers because we know that most of these requests are not well founded. Could we find — from a policy perspective — ways of ensuring that movements are more orderly so that less pressure occurs? It’s a huge challenge. [...] Therefore there is a great need to think of possible scenarios and certainly a great need for preparedness and capacity building.”

The themes raised, of preparedness, the integration of broader migration and border management, and the need for capacity building, were all issues that were to become central to later topics.

### **The known and the unknown**

Continuing the theme of preparedness, and citing Donald’s Rumsfeld’s ‘known unknowns and unknown unknowns,’ Paweł Świeboda turned to the panel’s two law-enforcement specialists — Frontex Executive Director Ilkka Laitinen and Oldřich Martinů, Deputy Director of the Governance Department at Europol — with a question on risk analysis: How good is our knowledge of the risks in store for us?

Ilkka Laitinen concurred that hindsight is always 20/20. In this regard, he said, there were lessons learnt from last year’s movements from North Africa, and this had become a key element of risk analysis at Frontex.

“What we learnt last year with the Arab Spring is that certain facts come out of our screenings and debriefings that can later be analysed as indicators that something like the Arab Spring might happen. But we only learnt it afterwards,” he admitted. “If we’d known before we could have raised more awareness in advance.” Risk analysis is all about “the big unknowns,” he pointed out, “which means we have to create a lot of scenarios. One leads to another so it’s a lot of work.”

The creation of possible scenarios during the Arab Spring, particularly at the beginning, was a major element of the value Frontex added to Member States’ readiness, he said, and something that would continue.

From the Europol perspective, Mr Martinů admitted that traditionally police were better at responding than predicting. To give a concrete example of the daily implications of this, he told the conference, “This year we have to prepare our programme of work for 2014 and we still don’t know what might



happen tomorrow. That's why we need threat assessments and risk analysis to identify threats and vulnerabilities."

## **People and Policies**

For the policy-level view on these challenges, the spotlight was turned on Roderick Parkes, Head of Brussels Bureau of the German Institute of International Security Affairs. From the Brussels perspective, Mr Parkes argued, there have traditionally been two main "blind spots" in planning:

"One is to see Europe as more attractive than it is, and we've learnt that rather more in our efforts to attract highly qualified migrants. The second is that we tend to think of irregular migrants and unexpected migrants as rather weak and helpless, meaning that essentially anyone can come to Europe." This, he believed, was misguided. "We see it more and more as an 'adaptation strategy' on the part of [relatively] wealthy individuals, well connected individuals, who may when they arrive in Europe look rather helpless, but that's not necessarily the case."

In the policy domain, Mr Parkes continued, there is a third blind spot. This relates to planning by border authorities.

"I think because of political sensitivity, you're nervous about criticising the political process," he said. "[This can cause] fault lines within European migration policy that can cause problems for Europe." In this area Mr Parkes highlighted three specific issues: "Active efforts to liberalise travel," as examples of which he cited visa liberalisation and local border travel arrangements with neighbouring countries, which he argued could cause "accidental criminality," such as being refused entry for having a non-biometric passport; side effects stemming from reactions to European efforts to improve security — for example improved document security leading to an increase in identity theft or heightened exit controls "pushing" people into staying illegally, and failure in broader cooperation at EU level leading to increased pressure from beyond Europe's borders — and here he cited insufficient burden sharing: "A failure of our interior ministries to cooperate with each other and absorb burdens leaves us reliant on other countries to do that work for us, to implement controls." An example of this, he said, was the "threat from Belarus to lift controls to Europe. Equally, not giving Turkey the visa deal it expects, can leave it to opening itself up to its other regional neighbours [which] then creates pressures on us."

## **Policy integration**

The themes of integration, cooperation and holistic approaches resurfaced as talk turned to the diversity of flows. How, Paweł Swieboda asked, can such wide-ranging forms of migration as victims of trafficking, refugees and stranded migrants be managed? The answer, posited Mr Appave, is essentially simple but in practice much harder.

"What we need is a comprehensive approach to migration management," he said. "Of course border management is an absolutely crucial part of that whole. [But] there must also be a system of protection. And if the system of protection is not working perfectly, that's going to create huge



challenges for border management. [...] The answer is a comprehensive system within which border management finds its real purpose and becomes efficient and effective.”

Ilkka Laitinen concurred that border control is by its nature much more complex than the public realises, but must be conducted in a world that likes simple solutions to simple problems.

“By the nature of border control, we don’t have a copyright on anything but we serve many purposes,” he told the conference. “Migration, organised crime, terrorism – these are complicated issues. The public and policymakers want simple things. They like simple solutions.”

As a topical example, the Frontex Executive Director cited the Greek-Turkish land border. The factors at play in the Evros region ranged from external relations to law-enforcement capacity to returns policy and practice, to asylum processes and beyond, he reminded listeners, but: “All too often the ‘simple solution’ is border control. If you have a problem, you put more border guards there and you think the problem is solved. If only it was that simple. It’s not.”

One aspect of broader cooperation, all agreed, is third-country partnerships or, as Roderick Parkes put it: “Europe cannot do it by itself.”

### **The cash factor**

The discussion wrapped up with a mention of Europe’s financial woes and the austerity measures intended to alleviate them. What would their impact be, wondered the moderator, and where should border-management authorities place their priorities?

Roderick Parkes replied concisely. Training, he said, was key: “No amount of resources will make a difference if border management staff are not properly trained.”

His second suggestion was a more selective and effective use of technology, a position strongly supported by the IOM’s Gervaise Appave.

“There are times when I’m not quite sure whether it is our real needs that drive the search and purchase of technology, or whether it is the purchase and promise of technology that make us believe we have needs,” he commented, going on to stress the importance of interoperability and standardisation and raising the spectre of alert lists that do not connect.

“If there are to be cuts I would look long and hard at making sure that the ones we purchase are going to contribute to having a global system that’s more effective,” he said. “Otherwise we will all be building rockets all over the place and they will all go to different planets.”

By way of more concrete policy proposals, Roderick Parkes was again unambiguous, making five specific suggestions. Firstly, he said, there should be a greater focus on voluntary rather than forced returns. Secondly, pains should be taken to avoid national overlaps as well as to increase pooling and sharing of resources. “Are we prepared as countries,” he wondered, “to rely on other countries to develop capacities that we will be able to make use of?” Related to this was his third point, that of



focusing more on capacity building to enhance the general state of readiness. Fourthly, he emphasised the role of border services in the economic recovery process - improving business links and business travel, recovering customs duties from smuggling, and development of new border technologies not only for Europe but for the international market.

Ilkka Laitinen shared many of these views as he put forward Frontex's case. Economic hardship brings with it the risk of reduced capabilities as well as threatening the integrity of individual officers. But, he emphasised, it is not all bad. Ending the discussion on an optimistic note, he argued that as in the private sector where increased competitiveness and a cleaning of markets are seen as the pay-off for a downturn, so in public service the same principles apply.

In addition to reducing the pull factors for irregular migration, the upsides of a downturn are that they: "Make institutions more efficient. They force people to consider the added value of activities. [And moreover] austerity promotes increased and enhanced inter-agency cooperation and increased efficiency."