


Hotspots: Interagency response to migratory pressure

The panel focused on the implementation of the hotspot approach adopted by the European Commission in 2015 in response to unprecedented flow of migrants to Europe. Klaus Rösler, director of the Operations Division at Frontex, started the discussion by reminding participants that hotspots are locations at the EU's external borders that are under extraordinary migratory pressure. In line with the Commission's Agenda on Migration, these locations require a joint response from European agencies dealing with migratory issues to help frontline Member States better cope with the inflow of people. Rösler also said the hotspot approach is being implemented by the European Union Regional Task Force (EURTF), which comprises offices in distressed border areas co-ordinating and enabling information exchange between EU agencies engaged in the management of the migration crisis. Apart from Frontex these include: the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the EU Policy Cooperation Agency (Europol), the EU Judicial Co-operation Agency (Eurojust) and the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). So far, two EURTFs has been established: in Piraeus and Catania.

Next, speakers from each of the EURTFs, from Europol and from Greek police explained the role of the EURTFs in implementing the hotspot approach. Grigorios Apostolou, head of the Piraeus EURTF, said that even prior to this approach, Frontex's operational office in Greece saw the need for closer co-operation of EU agencies, to help Greek authorities better tackle the situation on the borders. With the hotspot approach, this co-operation became institutionalised and enhanced. Currently, apart from Frontex officers, the EURTF office in Piraeus is also staffed with representatives of Europol, EASO, Eurojust and FRA, as well as with officers from the Hellenic Coast Guard. Moreover, the Piraeus EURTF co-operates with the Commission's Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) based in Athens, and with the EURTF in Catania.

Robert Črepinko, head of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre at Europol, said Europol used to be an office-based agency supporting member states in fighting organised crime and terrorism with in-house analysis. However, with the migratory challenge, the Agency has changed its approach, becoming more operational. This means it has sent officers to Greece and Italy to work in the field. The main aim of field officers working at EURTF is to make the life of migrant smugglers more difficult, and their business less profitable and more risky.

Dimitrios Mallios, director of the Border Protection Division of Hellenic Police, presented the perspective of the country where five hotspots are located. He stressed that adoption of the hotspot approach was a demanding task for the Greek authorities, as it required institutional adjustment within domestic administration, and developing new channels of communication and co-operation with EU agencies such as Europol and Eurojust. Nevertheless, with the support of EU member states channelled through Frontex, Greece has managed migratory flows and registered almost 100% of migrants.





In response, Miguel Nicolau, the Head of EURTF Catania, said the biggest challenge for his team of experts was to show local officers how they can benefit from the joint support of EU agencies in their daily activities. He added that while a couple of years ago, the EU was accused of not being engaged in problems on the spot, this is no longer the case, as EU agencies have representatives in the field working hand in hand with local authorities.

Asked how co-ordination and co-operation looks on a day-to-day basis, the speakers shared their experiences. In the case of Europol, co-operation detection of individuals who can pose a threat to the EU, carrying out second-line checks for enhanced identification of possible migrant smugglers and reporting them to the national authorities, as well as sharing this information with EU Member States. Mallios, from Hellenic Police, said that thanks to the requirement of collaboration, the Greek administration has learnt how to develop “a culture of co-operation” and become less fragmented in its own actions. Nicolau used the example of EURTF and EUNAVFOR Sophia to illustrate how interagency operational co-operation looks in practice. Concretely, the use of maritime incident reports by EUNAVFOR Sophia helps EU agencies at the hotspots to better organise their work prior to disembarkation of migrants: i.e. to allocate cultural mediators who speak the languages of the incoming persons.

Rösler stressed that this example demonstrates that work is done on the islands and on the coasts, not in offices in the EURTF in Piraeus or Catania. Apostolou agreed that EU agencies have become more operational, and the idea behind the EURTF is to co-ordinate their efforts in dealing with migratory issues.

An audience member asked about the role of EASO and FRA at the hotspots. Nicolau said there are four EASO experts at the EURTF in Catania, who provide information on relocation schemes to eligible migrants. Rösler emphasised that the relocation procedure starts at the hotspot. Apostolou added that with the new asylum procedures, EASO experts are also engaged in the procedures, including registrations and interviews. Referring to the role played by FRA, Apostolou said that this is a new concept, and that there were only a few representatives of FRA, who were mainly monitoring the situation at the hotspots.

The second question delved into the stalled relocation of migrants, and measures taken by the Greek government to address the problem. Mallios explained that the Greek authorities cannot force member states to fulfil their obligations in taking in migrants, therefore Greece focuses on registration of newcomers, processing asylum applications and providing the migrants with decent living conditions.

The third question concerned the use of personal data about the arrivals. Nicolau, Črepinko and Mallios assured the audience that personal data is safe and is used by the EU agencies for analytical and operational purposes - in particular, for risk assessment reports as well as detecting organized crime.

The fourth and last question was about cases of migrants who refused to be identified. Nicolau said this was indeed a challenge, and that EU agencies have tried to support host countries where the law requires fingerprinting as part of an identification procedure, by engaging culture mediators and using psychological techniques to encourage co-operation.