



The Future of Europe: Criminal Networks Seeking Alternative Routes as Refugees Remain in Limbo

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Interview and introduction by Antonella Ciancio

Building walls does not represent a solution to the migrant and refugee crisis in Europe, as smugglers are already seeking alternative routes to human trafficking and thousands of migrants stranded at the border risk to fall prey to criminal networks as their fate remains uncertain, said **Emiliano Alessandri, senior external co-operation officer in the Office of the Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).**

Speaking in an interview with the USITA Forum ahead of the visit of OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier to New York and Washington, DC this week, Alessandri said **new, long-term migration policies are necessary** to manage the migration emergency, which is becoming a new emerging security issue for Europe.

Mr Alessandri, what role is OSCE playing in this particular emergency?

The OSCE is in a brain-storming mode about the so-called migration refugee crisis. Traditionally, we have been dealing with the economic legal migration, which has been a mandate of OSCE for many years. But we are looking at migration and in particular at the mass movement of people at a time of crisis through the prism of security. We do not support the view that migration as such is a threat in any way to Europe and we promote the view that refugees should have access to international protection. We have seen inter-state tension increasing as a result of movement of people across borders in an unorderly way.

How has the situation evolved in Europe?

We have seen fences been built, walls been built, we have seen the rise of xenophobia and of populist parties and we are looking at all of these issues with a lot of concern for the negative implications that these phenomena may have for stability and cooperation in Europe. We are trying to promote a comprehensive approach to managing the so-called crisis, which combines border management, human rights with dialogue between states and long-term investment, integration, tolerance, non-discrimination.

Migrants arrivals in Greece slowed sharply in April, according to Frontex, the EU border agency, indicating that the agreement reached with Turkey to reduce the flows of migrants may be working. However, there are concerns that the free movement of people in Europe is at risk as countries tighten their borders. What is your assessment of the situation?

We are not in the position at OSCE to comment on the policy of the European Union. We look with concern at unilateral policies from a number of European Union states in the direction of suspending or eliminating arrangements about the free movement of people. **We do not believe that policies that build legal or even physical walls will be successful and sustainable.** That is our belief. After the so-called Turkey-EU deal was put in place, concerning migration, we have definitely seen a drop in numbers in the Balkans. However, our people on the ground - at OSCE we have several field missions in the Balkans - are reporting that there are **visible signs of increased smuggling activities**, precisely because these people do not have easy access anymore to the routes that take them to central and northern Europe. **So, criminal activities are on the rise, even if or maybe because flows on the contrary have declined.** We believe that the only advisable policy in the long-term is reforming migration policies.

What can OSCE do?

We are very much interested in the global conversation that has already taken place with involvement of the UN Secretary General himself towards some kind of Global Compact on migration, establishing new principles for legal migration. We are also looking at the root causes of mass movement of people., and one them are armed conflicts. As an organization that has been dealing with conflict for a long time, and has developed experience along we think we can contribute with a regional view to make sure that conflicts do not take place and if they take place they do not lead to such massive displacement of people as we have seen recently.

How about the risk of pro-Islamic State militants reaching Europe via migration routes?

We are reviewing information according to which for now there is **no systematic relationship between terrorist groups and terrorist activities and the refugee and migration flows.** So it's wrong to conflate the two as these were part of the same phenomenon. They are not. However, there is **evidence that some terrorist groups have taken advantage of using proceedings and profits made from the illegal business of human smuggling to finance their activities.** We are not talking of a large scale phenomenon, but there have cases of individual terrorist groups that have been using money originating from these activities. **And there is also evidence that some individual terrorist uses some of the same routes that also refugees and migrants use.** But we need to be very clear that these phenomena are completely separate that people coming to Europe are people who are in most cases fleeing conflict, they are looking for a peaceful society that can host them that can offer them a better life. **We should be careful not to confuse people in need with people who would do harm to us.**

Italy recently rescued another 800 people, mostly coming from north Africa. Is the humanitarian crisis going to get worse before getting better?

At OSCE we are not much involved in the humanitarian response, there are specialized UN agencies and very dedicated NGOs on the ground who are doing that. The number of stranded people as a result of this international agreement that the EU has concluded has led to a situation where there are people who don't know for now what their fate is. And in refugee camps and other types of camps there are people who are now probably in a situation where **it's relatively easy to fall prey to people** - being them smugglers or criminals of other kind - who can exploit

them. We know that the EU is working hard to address to this situation. It's in the interest of everybody to avoid the situation of stalemate for some of these people who are in a limbo and make sure that they can apply for asylum or be relocated to their countries or other countries that may accept them. Behind these mass movement of people there are **huge criminal networks, sometimes very complex, very sophisticated**. This is a very lucrative, terrible business based on exploiting people and desperation. These networks are adapting sometimes much more quickly and effectively that institutions, governments, law enforcement agencies can possibly do from their side. **They are changing routes**. We cannot simply build fences because routes may change as a result. The only solution we have is to fight criminal networks on one end and provide for better expanded legal channels on the other end to make sure that those in need can find a future in our society.