Panel Discussion III — Eurosur and the Future of Border Management

As an openner, Rosa Maria Preteroti, of Italy's State Police, gave listeners a run-down on Italy's state of preparedness for the implementation of Eurosur, which includes the establishment of a National Coordination Centre (NCC) as long as a year ago. Additionally, all relevant actors, civilian and military, are already set up for the introduction of the new system and are already sharing information both on a bi-lateral basis and more collectively through the Frontex Risk-Analysis Network (FRAN).

The European Commission's Oliver Siefffarth, who acts as policy officer for Eurosur, emphasised the importance of moving away from traditional patrolling to a more risk-based approach to border control. He went on to say development of the Eurosur regulation in Brussels was still on track for the system's operational launch by year-end, "I am 99-percent convinced we will have a political agreement on the Eurosur regulation between the Council the European Parliament and the European Commission next week," he said, though he added that not everything is expected to be up and running from day one:

"On the contrary, Eurosur is conceived as a process which will never stop, which will always be further improved," and would represent an evolutionary character and start a new way of thinking about border surveillance.

He stressed, however, that it is the member states that will be the system's backbone and that they already see Eurosur as their system.

"It's a European system but the member states took ownership of Eurosur from the very start," he said. "And while Frontex has a crucial role to play, it is the member states' national coordination centres that are the backbone."

Particularly important in this regard is the inter-agency cooperation that NCCs entail.
"For the European Parliament I think it was very important that they never saw Eurosur as 'Fortress Europe' but understood right from the start that it is a mult-purpose system that also ciontributes to the protection and saving of migrants' lives." This was an important point for the European

Parliament, he added, but expressed the view that, "it was almost equally important to keep the fine balance between Frontex and the member states as proposed by the commission."

Frontex, he said, would be more than a mere service provider, having a "crucial role to play" and that this role had already been played during the negotiation phase of the regulation through the system's development and specifically through the Eurosur Communication Network pilot together with member states, which provided a two-way street, which doesn't always happen in Brussels but which he believes has led to a better system.

Speaking for Romania, the Interior Ministry's Andrea Niculiu confirmed Oliver Siefffarth's assertion saying Romania considered Eurosur its own system as well as a European one and told listeners that all preparations to date had been in line with the principles of Integrated Border Management (IBM) and that the system's components had been integrated into the national strategy. This has led to not only an NCC connected to the national system and to the capital, Bucharest, but also to a EUR 1 billion national system integrating all the country's border crossing points (BCPs).

Asked what Italy expected from Eurosur, Ms Preteroti said it would create a new benchmark for interoperability. Moreover, "data fusion" would create the greatest difference, particularly faster data exchange both between agencies at national level and between other member states and with third countries.

"First of all, the analysis layer that Frontex is developing in cooperation with the member states in the Eurosur Network is a useful tool to improve situational awareness and can certainly provide better performing and more structured risk analysis."

Presenting the view from Frontex's vantage point, Klaus Roesler, Director of Operations Division, said the new system already had practical meaning for the agency as it has to ensure relaible data in the interests of creating accurate situational awareness [...] and to connect that awareness to an adequate operational response.

"The conception of Eurosur was in 2006 when Frontex and the Commission carried out the Bortec study," he asid. "Frontex 'received' Eurosur at least two years ago launching the big pilot project to develop a technical communication network and the products and services that contribute to Eurosur. Even more, Frontex's regular analytical and operational services now feed into Eurosur."

The subsequent three layers of data — the events layer, including migratory flows; an operational information layer showing what member state authorities are doing, and an analysis layer — would affect how risks are assessed and what the operational response would be, ideally saving more lives at sea.

Already, he continued, Frontex is doing more, including impact-level assessments in agreement with member states and this added responsibility requires new tools and working practices. The system's operational running would require additional daily workload and a communications network, he said, was absolutely key. However it remains to be seen how much additional training will be required at border-guard level. In connection with this, Mr Roesler pointed out that Eurosur is more than just a technical system — it involves changing the daily work of border guards.

Andrea Niculiu picked up on this last point saying it was important not to see Eurosur as just a new and expensive toy: "It is another way of border guarding, another way of thinking about our duties. It changes the activities, starting from the basic border guard working in a border patrol or at a border crossing point to middle and high-level management in all the member states."

The possibilities, she said, included better reaction capability and situational awareness at both national and European level. Because of this, she argued, it is important not only to set up the system but also to have the money and capacity to maintain it and run it effectively, and this requires high levels of equipment and training: "Because if you don't have the national system running, you don't have an international surveillance system, you don't have any Eurosur, you don't have images or information and you don't have people to transmit them."

Regarding the state of play with NCCs, the Commission's Oliver Siefffarth reported that, "For once we are ahead of schedule," referring to the fact that by the end of 2012 Frontex had connected the 18 member states expected to implement Eurosur by the end of 2013. While admitting that teething troubles still existed in some member states' creation of NCCs, he concluded that there is a general trend of agencies cooperating better, including within their reapective NCCs.

However, "this is a highly political decision. It is very much about egoes, about traditions, about power and there are quite a number of power struggles going on in the member states [but] the train has left the station [...] and I'm quite confident we'll get there."

Klaus Roesler confirmed this positive prognosis but admitted that it was still a work in progress. He pointed out that Frontex had created an Analytical Layer User Group (ALUG) which was working on the finer details.

A question from the floor changed the focus of the discussion to search-and-rescue capacity and what effect Eurosur would have on the migrant death toll in the Mediterranean. Stefan Kessler of the Jesuit Refugee Service and Co-Chair of the Frontex Consultative Forum on Fundamental Rights, said "We don't have only the question of detecting boats in distress but also the complex discussion about who is responsible, which member state is responsible to render assistance?"

Oliver Siefffarth clarified that saving lives at sea was an orginal element in the 2008 roadmap for the Eurosur regulation and that it remains an objective of the system, but that "well-meant does not necessarily lead to good results."

Elaborating on this point he said that international frameworks for search and rescue already exist and it was importan not to set up a "competing system." That said, he highlighted that, "The main problem we have is the detection and tracking of small boats. [...] If you have a small, seven-metre-long wooden boat that doesn't want to be found, it's very difficult to find them."

"It is worth reiterating that two out of three detected migrants are subject to a search-and-rescue operation," Klaus Roesler added. "[...] Border surveillance regularly turns into a search-and-rescue operation. [...] European border surveillance law is not necessary for that because international law applies. Anything else would add not to saving more lives but to creating more confusion."