A coast-guard officer's perspective: reinforcing migration through legal channels

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Given that we cannot always rescue refugees or economic migrants in danger at the EU's maritime borders, efforts are needed to reinforce legal channels for migration to Europe and to prevent refugees and migrants being exploited by organised criminal networks.

As far back as 1994 when I was inducted as an Ensign of the Hellenic Coast Guard, we were dealing with both refugees and economic migrants on Lesbos Island, which lies only ten nautical miles from the Turkish coast. At that time the vast majority of the mixed migratory flows were of economic migrants but there were also refugees in fewer numbers. More recently there has been a sharp increase in the number of refugees coming to Europe, so that refugees have become the majority of the mixed migratory flows.

The real problem for Europe nowadays is not migration – which has been happening for many years and cannot be expected to end – but migration done in an illegal way, illegal migration. The Schengen Area of Europe constitutes an area of freedom of movement, security and justice for European citizens and other nationals who enter it legally. But other third-country nationals are being helped by organised criminal networks to enter the Schengen area illegally, networks which are not based in Europe but in the migrants' countries of origin. While we cannot make illegal migration legal, we could reinforce migration through legal channels, turning it into regulated migration.

A legal solution

I have worked as a practitioner on the issue of migration and sea borders for 22 years, and have dealt with refugees and economic migrants on the 'front line'; I have been Director at the Sea Borders Protection Directorate of the Greek Ministry of Shipping and Maritime Affairs; I have worked as an operational analyst in Frontex; and I have witnessed the problems associated with migration in Europe for decades. I have one proposal for this problem: that is, to isolate refugees and economic migrants from the organised criminal networks by setting up procedures for asylum status (for refugees)

After being rescued from an overcrowded smuggler's boat, some 186 people from Nigeria, Pakistan, Nepal, Ethiopia, Sudan, Malaysia and Syria are transferred to an Italian navy ship as part of the Mare Nostrum operation, March 2014.

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and residence permits (for economic migrants) in EU embassies in certain third countries.

At a first glance, this would seem risky, with possibly unforeseen dangers and challenges for implementation – for example, the challenge of deciding who is a refugee and who is an economic migrant. But we are doing it already in the EU, with the help of screeners, debriefers, interpreters and so on. We would need to arrange for appropriate infrastructure and procedures in the embassies too, as well as staff with appropriate experience for this task.

Given the fear that such a policy might create a 'pull factor' for many more refugees and economic migrants to come to Europe, certain criteria would have to be laid down, such as those described in the European Agenda on Migration 2015.[1] There are of course difficulties to be overcome but migrants in all categories are anyway coming to Europe illegally and in their thousands, maybe risking their lives at sea and being exploited by organised criminal networks in order to reach their destination.

But if a refugee could go to a European State's embassy nearer to home and apply for asylum there, and if that was granted, they would have the possibility of being legally escorted to that European State. In this way the refugee would avoid the hazards of the long journey to Europe, would not be exploited by the criminal networks outside or inside Europe, and would not risk their life on the Mediterranean or at the land borders.

Refugees are the main priority for Europe now; nevertheless, the same policy (strengthening of legal channels for migration) could be applied to economic migrants but with one basic difference, that is, the reinforcement of the EU return mechanism for those migrants whose visas expire or who have entered the EU illegally. This action should not give the impression that Europe 'is closing the doors' for economic migrants but rather send the message that migration has to become regulated for economic migrants too, so that they can enjoy the privileges of freedom, security and justice, like Europeans do.

This policy cannot bring immediate results; it will take time. But, thus far, exclusive use of suppression and law-enforcement measures have not dealt with the migration problem and cannot be expected to.

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1. http://tinyurl.com/EuropeanAgendaMigration