

ECRE INTERVIEW

with

**Dr. Robert Visser, Executive Director of the
European Asylum Support Office**

“We would have less incidents if all asylum procedures in the European Union were at the same level of quality”



Brussels, 23 September 2011 - The ECRE Weekly Bulletin has talked to Dr. Robert Visser, Executive Director of the [European Asylum Support Office \(EASO\)](#) about the work of the Agency in Greece, and its possible role in Italy and Malta. EASO Executive Director has also talked about country of origin information, cooperation with other EU Agencies and civil society, and the budget of the new Office.

The hardship faced by asylum seekers in Greece is well known: over 50,000 people waiting for their asylum applications to be examined, asylum seekers living on the streets without any material support or in overcrowded conditions and with little chances of being recognised as a refugee. According to the [EASO work programme](#), supporting the reform of the Greek asylum system will be the first priority in 2011. Which concrete improvements do you expect to see in the following months?

The EASO support to Greece is the priority for this year and next year.

Why Greece? Greece, at this moment, faces structural problem in their asylum system, as Greece is not fully equipped to handle all the asylum cases and backlog. Greece asked for support of EASO in this regard. The European Union is a system based on basic principles and common values, which should be in place in all Member States. That is why it is very important to support Greece to build up a new asylum and reception systems.

The Greek government has the responsibility of setting up and maintaining a system which provides quality in procedures, reception and treatment that are up to the standards set within the European framework. We are supporting the Greek government in this endeavour. It is a challenging task for Greece to establish totally new and independent asylum and reception services, and to deal with the backlog of asylum applications. These two years will certainly be two very full years.

As EASO, we organise support at all levels. For example, we provide training for officers and caseworkers who will work in the new asylum service, undertake project management to set up the asylum and reception services, and advise on how to deal with the backlog etc. What Greece is now confronted with has happened to other countries in the past. We have had countries with big backlogs for all sorts of reasons. Many countries in Europe have changed the structure of their asylum services and we can build on each other's experience. By putting the experience and expertise together, EASO can provide support to Greece.

We can already see the first results. For instance, the asylum and reception services are in the process of being set up. In order to have a better system, it is a precondition to have institutionalised services working in the best possible way.

There is also some progress with regard to the handling of the backlog. In close cooperation with UNHCR, Greece has achieved some good results on the timing and quality of first instance decisions.

I hope that, next year, the basic structures of the two services will be in place. By then, the caseworkers will be following the newest European Asylum Curriculum modules. This is very ambitious, but with the help of member state experts and considering the cooperation of Greece in this dossier, their willingness and eagerness to really make it a success, we can make it.

28,000 people have arrived in Italy from war-torn Libya this year. Malta has received some 1,500 people since the start of the Libyan crisis. Is there a role for asylum teams there? In concrete terms, what could they do to support these countries?

The support teams provide 'emergency support'. For teams to intervene, there should be an emergency situation above the normal handling of the regular influx into a Member State. Besides, the Member State itself should ask for that support. Once a Member State asks for support and we set a coordinated European mechanism in motion, a lot of money, people, time, capacity will be invested. Therefore, it's important that the requesting State shows its commitment from the beginning. So far, no Member States have issued a formal request for support in relation to the arrivals from North Africa. This means that they can still handle the influx with their own capacity.

It is difficult to predict what will happen next in North Africa. Up to now, every prediction failed: nobody predicted Tunisia, nobody predicted Egypt, nobody predicted Libya, and nobody predicted the migrant flows resulting from the unstable situation in these countries.

If large numbers of refugees arrive in Eastern Europe from the Middle East, or in South Europe from North Africa, then probably, the best help that EASO can organise is support to Member States at the first stage. EASO can support Member States' asylum authorities with identification, for example through advising and supporting on the preparation of the first instance treatment. EASO can also play a role on reception. EASO will however not have any power in relation to decisions on individual applications for international protection.

Peoples' chances of being granted asylum still vary hugely depending on which European country their asylum claim is processed. Do you think the work of your office will contribute to changing this status quo?

That is certainly a very important aim. I distinguish between emergency support and more permanent, more general support. In the end, permanent support is, of course, of more importance than emergency support. Emergency assistance is important, but sometimes it's just a sign, as in the case of Greece, that things are not as they should be. If all asylum procedures in the European Union were at the same level of quality, then

one may expect less incidents and basically a functioning system. Obviously there can always be a sudden uprising or something which creates an emergency situation, but convergence certainly would help.

EASO will concentrate on a number of activities to improve this situation. One of the main activities is the implementation of a European training curriculum: if caseworkers in all the European Member States receive the same basic training, that will have a converging effect on decisions and recognition rates.

In addition, there should be a common assessment within the EU of what happens in countries of origin. The combination of a common legal framework, with the same common criteria, common training and a common assessment of what is happening in regions of the world should lead in general to the same outcome, irrespective of whether you are in Cyprus, Greece, Finland or Spain.

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How will the Office create common country of origin information (COI)? How will it relate to already existing resources, such as the [ecoinet portal](#) or the material used by UNHCR?

EASO is an independent centre of expertise. EASO should certainly not re-invent the wheel, nor build up separate databases. I will use all existent expertise which is already available on COI.

EASO's added-value here is the common European assessment of countries of origin in order that asylum claims will be assessed on the same available information. This should be an independent expert assessment on the situation in a country of origin.

Drafting reports on COI, will not be an easy process. The work of EASO should be independent. The approval of the Management Board will underline the fact that the COI report is written following the best possible methodology in consultation with all relevant sources of information.

EASO will make a real difference if we do manage to have common independent COI reports. It will help the goal of having not only a common legal framework but also a common operational practice within the European Union.

Will the country of origin information reports be public?

As far as the country of origin information is essential for the individual decision on an asylum request, it should be public. Judges should be able to assess the COI reports to make their decision.

There will always be parts in the whole process of country of origin reports, where you have to protect sources. But the reports itself should be self-evident and open.

EASO will publish an annual report on the situation of asylum in Europe. What will this cover? In practical terms, how will you gather the information?

EASO will use information from different sources such as UNHCR, Member States and Eurostat. We will also ask Member States' specific information, either because we want to deal with a certain topic, or because we want to set up a trend analysis.

What I have in mind for the annual report is "A State of the Union on Asylum". The Common European Asylum System will be the framework for that report. Regarding the topics, the work in the first years will concentrate on the comparability of data. Eurostat has made tremendous progress on definitions, but I believe that there is space for improvement. If you only compare the numbers, you might draw the wrong conclusions. For instance, if you look at the recognition rate of asylum requests from Turkey, you might see that some countries have a different recognition rate than others. And you might draw the conclusion that there is something wrong in either one of these countries' system. But it might be that if you look into the facts behind the numbers, one country is dealing mainly with traditional Turks and another mainly with Turks from a certain ethnic group. And that might give a different outcome.

Deepening our knowledge of what is behind the numbers and an accurate interpretation of what they say is crucial. In this way, the annual report will contribute to the sound discussion on asylum and migration in Europe. The public discussion is sometimes based on images instead of real knowledge. I hope the annual report will contribute to a discussion based on real facts.

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What do you expect from cooperation with civil society?

A very happy marriage! I come from a tradition where civil society has always had a very big impact on public policy and public operations, and I believe that the cooperation between governmental organisations and civil society is not only very necessary but also very useful. There are of course different responsibilities for both sides.

NGOs have experiences that often governmental organisations do not have, such as experience on the ground. Using that expertise and feeding it into the process of EASO would really contribute to the quality of our work and in the end to the European system.

We will use the expertise from NGOs in all the activities of EASO. For instance, we asked for the input of NGOs concerning practical training materials dealing with questions such as treatment of unaccompanied minors and interviews of vulnerable groups.

NGOs work in countries where access is difficult for governmental organisations, and their information will be very useful for assessments regarding country of origin information. UNCHR, IOM, the International Committee of the Red Cross just to name a few – they all have a lot of experience. The focus should be on the expertise available.

How will EASO work together with Frontex and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA)?

Border management and asylum and migration is always linked. It is all about the same flows in the end. Cooperation with Frontex is a must. The same is true for FRA. When it comes to people in the EU, FRA is always involved in any case.

But it's not only about these two agencies. Europol and other agencies will certainly be involved as well. We know that human smuggling and human trafficking is a large phenomenon in migration flows. One cannot deny this important reality.

EASO has been given a budget of €8 million for 2011. This seems quite modest in comparison for instance with Frontex € 86 million budget and with the long list of tasks that you are expected to deliver this year. How are you dealing with this?

EASO is now in its starting up phase. I took my functions on the 1st February 2011 whereas Frontex is a full functional agency since a number of years. Therefore, comparing budgets of EASO and Frontex at this stage seems not correct. The budget allocated is public money so the Agency first has to prove itself and fully develop its activities. A gradually growing budget is foreseen by the European Commission. When EASO's activities will be recognised and we will be able to prove its importance an added-value, then I hope that if needed, more possibilities will be there.