States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode #25 'The Rise of Smugglers: Daniel Esdras on Migration, Policy, & Survival in Greece'

Enhanced transcript

By Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: In this episode, Emmanuel Comte interviews Daniel Esdras—former IOM Chief in Greece and interim Migration Minister—on the dramatic shifts in migration policy, crisis management, and human smuggling. Drawing on over three decades of frontline experience, Esdras discusses the Albanian labor influx, the 2015 refugee crisis, Greece's economic dependencies on undocumented labor, and the moral complexities of human trafficking. This episode delivers rare insights into EU-Turkey migration policy, IOM operations, and the systemic gaps in global migration governance. Essential listening for anyone exploring European border politics, humanitarian crises, or migration reform.

Disclaimer: *This transcript has been produced for educational purposes to support the understanding and integration of information discussed in the related conversation. It is not intended for use in quoting the conversation verbatim. For accurate quotations, please refer to the original recording.*

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: Greece is an outward-looking country that relies heavily on international tourism and immigrant labor, but it also upholds some of the most restrictive migration policies in Europe. What insights can we gain from someone who spent 30 years navigating these contradictions behind the scenes?

In this interview, I am joined by Daniel Esdras, former Chief of Mission of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Greece from 1987 to 2017, and caretaker Minister of Migration and Asylum in June 2023.

A cornerstone figure in Southeastern Europe's migration landscape, Mr. Esdras brings a rare dual perspective—as a veteran practitioner in international migration governance and as a policymaker navigating high-stakes decisions at the heart of government.

Together, we unpack the transformation of migration to Greece—from the 1990s Albanian influx to the post-2010 refugee crisis. We explore how international organizations like IOM work with migrants and national authorities, how informal labor sustains the economy despite political resistance, and what regulation policies have achieved or failed to achieve.

Joining IOM: Personal Motivations and Early Career

Emmanuel Comte: Mr. Esdras, thank you very much for taking part in this interview. Let's begin by asking: How did you get interested in migration, and how did you join the IOM?

Daniel Esdras: I was looking for a job in international relations—my latest degree was in that field. I wanted to join a United Nations organization, and migration was one of the key issues I was interested in.

So, when an opening appeared at the local IOM office in Athens, I applied. I was perhaps a bit overqualified, but I was hired, nonetheless. Being ambitious, I realised that if I wanted to pursue a serious career, I had to go abroad.

I left Greece and worked with IOM in various locations—South Africa, the former Yugoslavia, from Bratislava to Chechnya, from Bosnia to Kosovo—all difficult environments. These experiences gave me significant exposure to handling emergency situations.

When I returned to Greece after 2000, the situation was not as urgent—but that changed a few years later with the massive influx of refugees from the East, mainly Syria.

Greece has long been a migration country. In the 1950s, Greeks were emigrating abroad. At that time, IOM—then called ICEM—helped them relocate to countries like Australia, the US, and Canada.

Then Greece became a transit country. Migrants from Eastern Europe would come here, with the goal of eventually moving on to overseas destinations. They would stay temporarily in Greece, waiting to regularize their status. IOM worked closely with receiving countries to facilitate this process.

Later, especially starting in the 1990s, people from neighboring countries—Albania and other Balkan states—began arriving to find work in Greece. They were joined by others: Ethiopians, Eritreans, Iranians, Kurds. Many were former refugees who were no longer considered such but continued to live in Greece.

This was the first real mixture of refugees and migrants in Greece. Most arrived without papers and lived as undocumented migrants, except for a small number who had been granted asylum. At the time, it was very difficult to get asylum in Greece.

Many others lived in the country under a form of tolerated stay, hoping for future legalization. In fact, there were several amnesty laws during the 1990s, recognizing the reality that these people were already working in the informal economy.

These laws were also important for their children, who couldn't attend school without documentation—except for elementary schools, which accepted children regardless of their legal status. I believe there were two or three major amnesties during that period.

Emmanuel Comte: You've just given us a broader overview of your career at the IOM. But let me go back a bit. When you decided to apply, what initially drew you to IOM and to migration issues more broadly?

Daniel Esdras: As I said, I've always been particularly sensitive to the plight of people in vulnerable situations—minorities, undocumented migrants. That sensitivity had a personal dimension as well, and it motivated me to get involved. That's also why I was more interested in working for IOM rather than UNHCR. The latter is very strict—Article 1 of the Convention, determining who qualifies as a refugee, and so on. But many of these people I encountered weren't legally refugees, even though they were clearly in need.

There were no legal migration programs at the time. These individuals couldn't get any documentation, no matter their circumstances. At IOM, we used to say, "Migration is not a problem. Migration is a reality that needs management." That was our motto.

Migration should be managed by both the countries of origin and the receiving countries. Unfortunately, today, it's no longer in the hands of states. It's controlled by smugglers and traffickers—people who profit from the suffering of migrants. That's one of the reasons why, especially in the late 1980s when I joined IOM, we worked hard to push governments to implement amnesty laws and other policies to give these people a future, a perspective.

Migration Transitions in Southeastern Europe

Emmanuel Comte: So, you joined IOM in the late 1980s. Since then, which long-term shifts have you observed in the patterns and drivers of migration to Greece and Southeastern Europe—from the Albanian crisis in the early 1990s to the post-2010 migration crisis?

Daniel Esdras: When I first joined, Greece was mainly a transit country. Migrants came through Greece but were headed elsewhere. But then, as you mentioned, we started seeing more migration from neighboring countries—not just Albania, but other Balkan states as well. With the end of the Cold War, a significant number of people arrived from Poland, Georgia, Ukraine, and the former USSR. Initially, many of them could obtain refugee status due to the political context—the Iron Curtain and its collapse. But later, that changed.

Eventually, even Greece's transit programs stopped. Eastern European citizens could no longer apply for resettlement in places like Canada, Australia, or the US. So they had to stay in Greece or attempt to go elsewhere in Europe, which was not easy, especially for undocumented migrants. The only way was through smuggling, which was dangerous and expensive.

The major influx began with Kurdish populations, then came people fleeing the Iran-Iraq War. After 2000, we started receiving migrants from Pakistan, India, China, and other countries in Asia.

From Transit to Destination: Greece After 2000

Emmanuel Comte: So, the pattern was increasing migration pressure from the East. But at the start of your tenure, Greece was mostly a transit country. Did that change by the end? Was Greece increasingly a destination country?

Daniel Esdras: Absolutely. After 2000, Greece became 100% a destination country. Not necessarily because migrants wanted to stay here, but because it became harder to move on to other European countries.

Also, let's not forget that after 2000, Greece became very attractive—because of the Olympic Games and the general economic climate. There were many jobs available, even if not all were official. Money was circulating, and that made Greece an appealing destination. That period—from 2000 until around 2010 or 2011—was economically strong.

But then came the economic crisis. As you probably know, that changed everything. Jobs disappeared, there was less money, and even informal employment became scarce. Employers who used to pay under the table couldn't afford to anymore. So the whole migration picture shifted dramatically.

The 2015–2016 Migration Crisis

Emmanuel Comte: After around 2010 and especially thinking about the 2015–2016 migration crisis, hundreds of thousands of migrants transited through Greece—mostly toward Germany. That marked another chapter, didn't it?

Daniel Esdras: Yes, but when I refer to 2010, it has nothing to do with 2014. For years, the picture was entirely different.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you wouldn't say that the migrants who arrived in 2015 were more likely to view Greece purely as a transit country because of the preceding economic downturn? That is, that they saw no economic opportunity in Greece and simply wanted to pass through?

Daniel Esdras: No, that's not the case.

Emmanuel Comte: Okay.

Daniel Esdras: And I'll tell you why. In reality, these people were desperate to leave their countries, regardless of the destination. They would go anywhere. Before 2014, the migrants arriving had a different profile—many were skilled, better educated, and looking for better jobs and income.

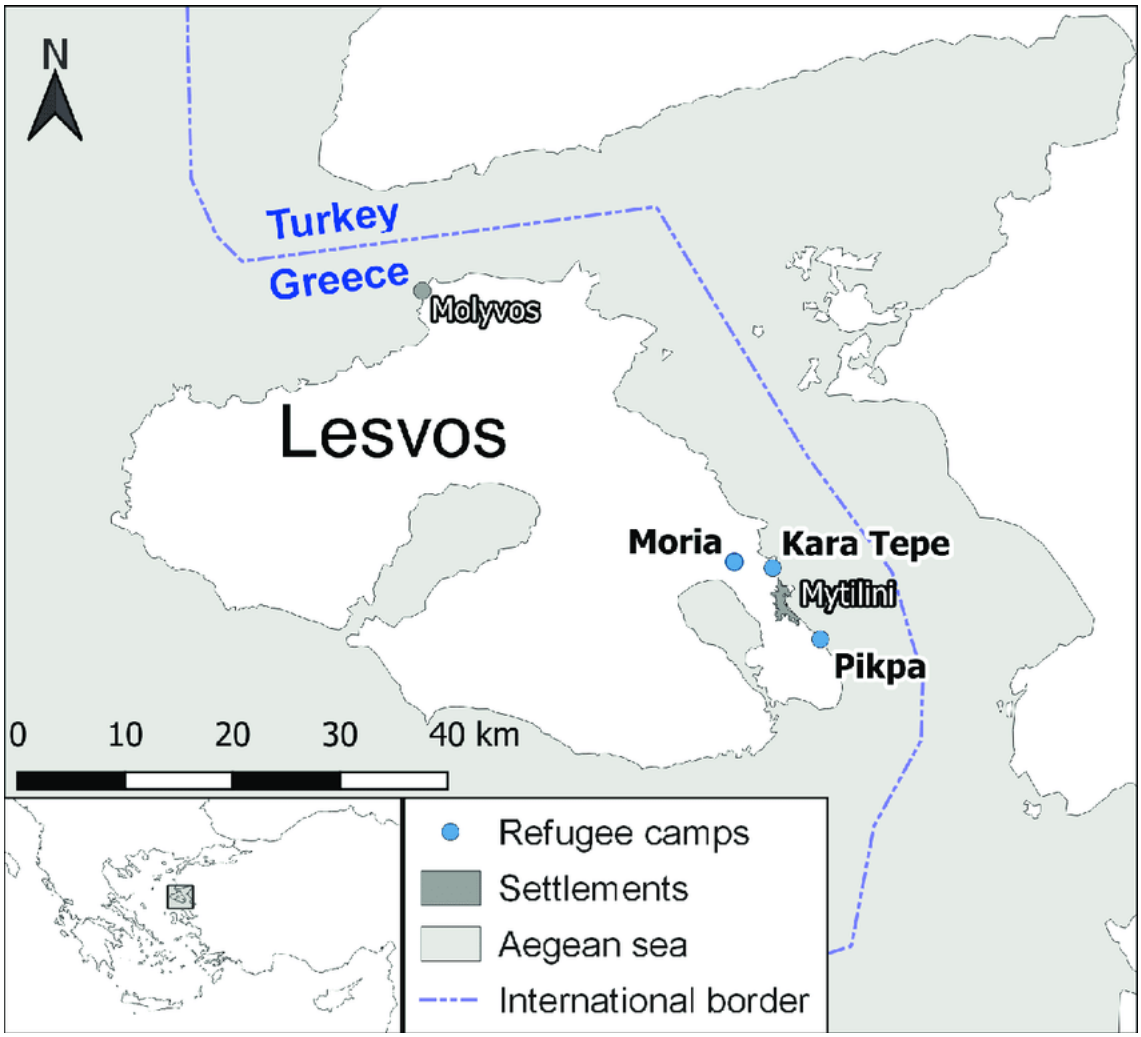
Emmanuel Comte: I see.

Daniel Esdras: After that, it was about escaping at any cost. I was in Greece at the time, and I had the good fortune of drawing on my emergency experience from serving with IOM during several wars in Europe. I knew how to handle such crises.

To give you some figures: in 2013, we received around 10,000 people in Greece over the entire year. In 2014, we had 10,000 arriving per day. I don't think there's any precedent for that in world history—so many people arriving daily.

Emmanuel Comte: The scale of the inflow was such that, regardless of Greece's economic situation, the country would be overwhelmed, and most of the flows would inevitably transit elsewhere.

Daniel Esdras: Exactly. Let me explain why they were coming to Greece rather than elsewhere. Many tried to go to Italy via Libya, but that route was more dangerous, expensive, and difficult. From Turkey to Greece, by contrast, is a very short distance—if you look at the map, it's very close. People could cross even on inflatable boats, which is exactly what they did.



It was cheaper, easier, and when you had such large numbers—again, 10,000 a day—places like Lesvos and other islands were overwhelmed.

I was there, seeing the people arrive. We had to register them, but there was simply no way to screen them effectively. How could you process 10,000 people today, knowing another 10,000 would come tomorrow?

Emmanuel Comte: It must have been chaos.

Daniel Esdras: It was. That's why the European Commission got involved, particularly with financial assistance. Greece was facing not only a major economic crisis but also this massive

human inflow—nearly a million people came during that time. I was deeply involved in managing the response and was later awarded a medal by the Greek government for my services during that period. I received the decoration last year, not at the time, but in recognition of that work.

Emmanuel Comte: Congratulations.

Daniel Esdras: Thank you. But becoming a minister later had nothing to do with that; it was a separate matter.

As for policy, what ultimately happened was that Germany said, "Let them come; we will accept them." That decision shaped the course of events.

Emmanuel Comte: In August 2015.

Daniel Esdras: Exactly. The Greek government at the time was very permissive, partly because it was a left-wing government. They didn't want to stop the migration flow. So everyone was coming through Greece—it was easier, cheaper, and there was no one to stop them.

I warned them. I said, if you let this situation continue unchecked, you'll soon see serious problems in Europe. And indeed, several countries started closing their borders entirely. They wouldn't allow anyone entering from Greece, and I'm talking about Balkan countries, not just EU member states.

Emmanuel Comte: So, in 2015, you advised the Greek government that they needed to implement some regulation?

Daniel Esdras: Yes, they needed to be stricter. There was no other way.

The EU-Turkey Statement and Policy Shifts

Daniel Esdras: Of course, the real solution came with the EU-Turkey Statement. It was entirely in Turkey's hands to stop the flow into Europe.

After the declaration, the numbers dropped significantly. Still, many people were already in Greece and had to be registered and screened—whether they were refugees or not, where they came from, and so on. These people were stuck in Greece because they could no longer move on to the rest of Europe. That created a large caseload the Greek authorities—and, in fact, the entire humanitarian community—had to manage. We started building camps and reception centers.

Daniel Esdras: These were facilities where people would stay while their asylum applications were processed. Establishing those centers was extremely difficult. Building proper infrastructure is no easy task.

Eventually, the European Commission designated IOM and UNHCR as the lead agencies to manage the situation in Greece. That's how the coordination was organized.

IOM's Role in Migration Management, Voluntary Return, and Reintegration Programs

Emmanuel Comte: This is a good moment to move to our next point. You've now outlined the evolution of migration flows from the late 1980s up to the post-2015 period. I'd like to ask you: what exactly was the role of IOM in Greece during this time?

Daniel Esdras: Are you referring specifically to the crisis period, or also before that?

Emmanuel Comte: Both. You mentioned earlier that IOM's mandate differs from that of UNHCR, which focuses solely on refugees. What exactly was IOM's role in Greece during your tenure?

Daniel Esdras: IOM was there to assist. During the transit era, the organization was funded by the governments of the receiving countries—countries like the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. These governments had specific programs to support migrants resettling there.

Once those programs ended, the funding mostly came from the European Commission and the Greek government. For example, the voluntary return programs were co-funded. That's something I personally introduced to Greece, in collaboration with the Ministry.

The idea was to help undocumented migrants—people who had no right to stay and no opportunities to work due to the financial crisis—return to their countries of origin. Many of them didn't even have the money to buy a ticket home.

So, we assisted them—not just with the travel documents and tickets, in coordination with their embassies and consulates—but also by providing some financial support to help them restart their lives back home. After all, they wouldn't have left their countries if they had had job opportunities there.

Later, we introduced another crucial component: reintegration. That means helping returnees find employment or set up a livelihood in their country of origin.

Emmanuel Comte: So, the IOM office in their country of origin would assist with that?

Daniel Esdras: Exactly. Reintegration is, to me, the essence of a successful return program.

Emmanuel Comte: IOM has a comparative advantage in implementing voluntary return programs because of its global network of agencies. You would coordinate with the IOM branch in the country of origin to repatriate individuals.

Daniel Esdras: Exactly. And to assist them once they're back in their home country. For instance, take Pakistan. IOM Karachi worked with us on various programs. One of the greatest strengths of IOM was our vast global network—larger even than many other international organizations, including UNDP at times. This gave us two main advantages: the ability to run joint programs effectively and to access real-time, accurate information from the ground.

Combating Human Trafficking

Daniel Esdras: Let me add something important that you haven't asked, but it's crucial. We were very actively involved in countering human trafficking. Our global reach enabled us to gather reliable data. For example, if I needed to understand the trafficking situation in a specific region—

say Eritrea or any other location—I could simply contact our local colleagues and get detailed insights: the scale of trafficking, the target groups, methods used, and more.

Over time, our human trafficking operations grew so extensively that we even had daily updates—not only on trafficking but also on migrant deaths. We were the only organization with access to confirmed numbers, sourced from our respective offices, about how many people had lost their lives in the Mediterranean, the North Sea, and elsewhere. We had maps and daily records showing how many migrants died, whether related to trafficking or other causes.

Emmanuel Comte: So, in addition to voluntary return programs enabled by IOM's global network, the organization played a central role in fighting human trafficking?

Daniel Esdras: Yes, absolutely. In Greece and globally, we were among the leading agencies addressing this issue.

Emmanuel Comte: You worked with organizations like Interpol?

Daniel Esdras: Yes, we collaborated with Interpol, Europol, and of course, with the Greek police. While we were not an intelligence agency, our focus was on identifying and assisting victims. That was our priority—not catching traffickers, which was the job of law enforcement.

Legally, we collaborated with many NGOs specialized in areas such as legal aid and shelters. I was also part of the team that drafted Greece's anti-trafficking legislation. I served on the Ministry of Citizen Protection's counter-trafficking team, working alongside police officers, judges, prosecutors, and other experts.

Emmanuel Comte: So, your goal was to help the victims and share relevant information with enforcement agencies—not about the traffickers themselves, but about victim support?

Daniel Esdras: Exactly. We didn't have information on the traffickers—that was police work. Our role was focused on supporting the victims. For example, in many cases, the exploiters were Greek nationals—club or cabaret owners. The state would prosecute them, but these individuals often had the means to hire high-profile lawyers, the kind you see regularly on television representing major criminals.

Unfortunately, we didn't have the funds to match that, so we often relied on volunteer lawyers to support the victims legally.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you mentioned people in cabarets—just to clarify, I understand these are not human traffickers. These are employers of migrants, correct?

Daniel Esdras: No, I was actually referring to human traffickers. Let's say trafficking has many faces. I was referring to sex trafficking.

Labor trafficking is quite complicated. Many migrants prefer to work in the black market as long as they can earn something. Naturally, they are taken advantage of—exploited—by employers who pay them very little, and sometimes not at all.

They can't report these abuses to the police because they are undocumented. It's a very complex situation. We need to distinguish between simple labor exploitation and actual trafficking.

For example, we discovered some years ago that certain individuals were literally chained while they waited to work.

That is trafficking—pure and simple. They were slaves. The money they earned went to the traffickers, not to the workers themselves. That's an entirely different and extreme situation.

Undocumented Labor and Policy Proposals

Emmanuel Comte: That's deeply concerning, but it belongs to a different category altogether. Let's turn now to the broader issue of undocumented labor.

So, as I understand it, there is a significant demand in the Greek economy for undocumented workers because they are cheaper—they're not paid social security contributions. Could you elaborate on that? And you previously mentioned cases where the money went directly to traffickers.

Daniel Esdras: Yes, that's a very specific issue. The majority of undocumented workers are not in that extreme situation. They simply work in the black market. They lack legal papers and are unregistered.

One of the questions you raised was, "If there's a labor shortage, why make laws stricter and deport people?" The answer is that we need proper management. Effective migration management involves legal programs that reduce the need for smugglers and illegal work.

Suppose I'm a Pakistani or Bangladeshi wanting to come to Greece for work. There should be a system allowing me to apply through the Greek consulate using a point-based framework. I could indicate my skills and work experience, and the receiving country—Greece—should evaluate my application based on labor market needs.

For example, if Greece needs workers in tourism or agriculture, it can issue work contracts accordingly. The benefit is clear: the migrant enters legally, has a contract, pays taxes and social security contributions, and is traceable. Everyone benefits.

When I served briefly as Minister of Migration—only during the transitional period between elections—I was appointed by the President of the Republic. I'm not a politician, but I have technical knowledge of migration policy. From day one, I knew what had to be done.

In the short time I had, I tried to establish a framework that my successor, a politician, could build upon. The key was to reach agreements with countries of origin and establish quotas based on labor market needs.

For instance, we might need a quota of workers from Pakistan, India, or China—it doesn't matter where they're from, as long as they meet the requirements. A few years ago, Germany needed IT specialists. They didn't care about nationality—if you had the required skills, you got a green card. They recruited people from Korea, India, Pakistan, and elsewhere.

That's the model we should adopt. The current Minister of Migration has announced a new program aimed at regularizing undocumented migrants. I'm not sure how they plan to implement it, but the real challenge is returning people who are not eligible.

Deportation doesn't work well. That's why I introduced the voluntary return program. In voluntary returns, everyone cooperates. But if you try forced deportation, no one helps. Migrants won't reveal their country of origin, and embassies won't issue documents.

For example, you might think someone is from Pakistan, but the Pakistani embassy won't cooperate unless the person voluntarily agrees to return. If they do, it's much easier—no resistance, no bureaucratic dead ends.

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned a regime where migrants would go to the consulate, declare themselves, state their skills, and, on the other hand, employers would do the same. Then, a government agency would match the two.

Daniel Esdras: Yes, that's the idea. We would have organized migration flows.

Emmanuel Comte: But that's not how it works. Why has this approach failed, for instance, in Greece? Why do employers hire irregular migrants instead of following the system you described?

Daniel Esdras: Because there isn't a functioning system right now. It's still only a proposal—it hasn't been implemented or passed into law. It's a concept that IOM is promoting in many countries, but it's not yet operational. And let's be honest—many employers prefer the black market. They don't want to pay taxes or social security contributions.

However, now that there's a serious labor shortage, especially in agriculture and tourism, employers are starting to feel the pressure. When you have a million tourists, you need workers. But how many Greeks are willing to take those difficult jobs? Not many. So, employers are beginning to understand.

I believe the timing is now right for such a program. Employers would be more willing to participate if a legal framework existed. The idea is that the state doesn't pay the costs associated with hiring the migrant—the employer does. If you want to bring someone from Pakistan to work in your restaurant, you cover their expenses. You vouch for them. That's how it works.

Legal Pathways and Employer Incentives

Emmanuel Comte: I heard about a similar agreement between Greece and Egypt not long ago. It aimed to fill labor shortages in agriculture. The two countries agreed on a quota of 20,000 seasonal workers. But when it came time to match job offers with job seekers, there was very little interest from Greek employers. Instead, they continued to hire irregular workers.

Daniel Esdras: Because they could still find undocumented workers. That's why the Greek government is now trying to crack down. If there are no undocumented workers available, employers would be forced to use legal channels. You see, the black market existed even for Greek workers, not just foreigners. Employers simply don't want to pay taxes and social security contributions.

The stricter the system becomes, the less employers can bypass it—because of higher penalties, for both Greeks and foreigners. But enforcement is difficult. I remember speaking with the Ministry of Labor about inspections, especially in Chinese-owned shops. They would often find a permit for one worker being used for many others. It's hard to verify identities, and permits can be reused by dozens of people. It's a sensitive topic, but it's a real problem.

Emmanuel Comte: So, inspectors would find that a single work permit might be used for several workers. That highlights a serious problem in enforcement and employer compliance.

Daniel Esdras: Exactly. You need more inspections and more experienced staff. The same problem occurred with refugees. At one point, everyone arriving was labeled a refugee. Some claimed to be Palestinian, others Syrian, but many were from Pakistan. If you had someone who spoke the language and knew the geography, you could easily verify whether someone was telling the truth.

We need the same approach with migrants—skilled and specialized personnel. It's not easy, but it's necessary.

Ministerial Experience During the 2023 Interim Government

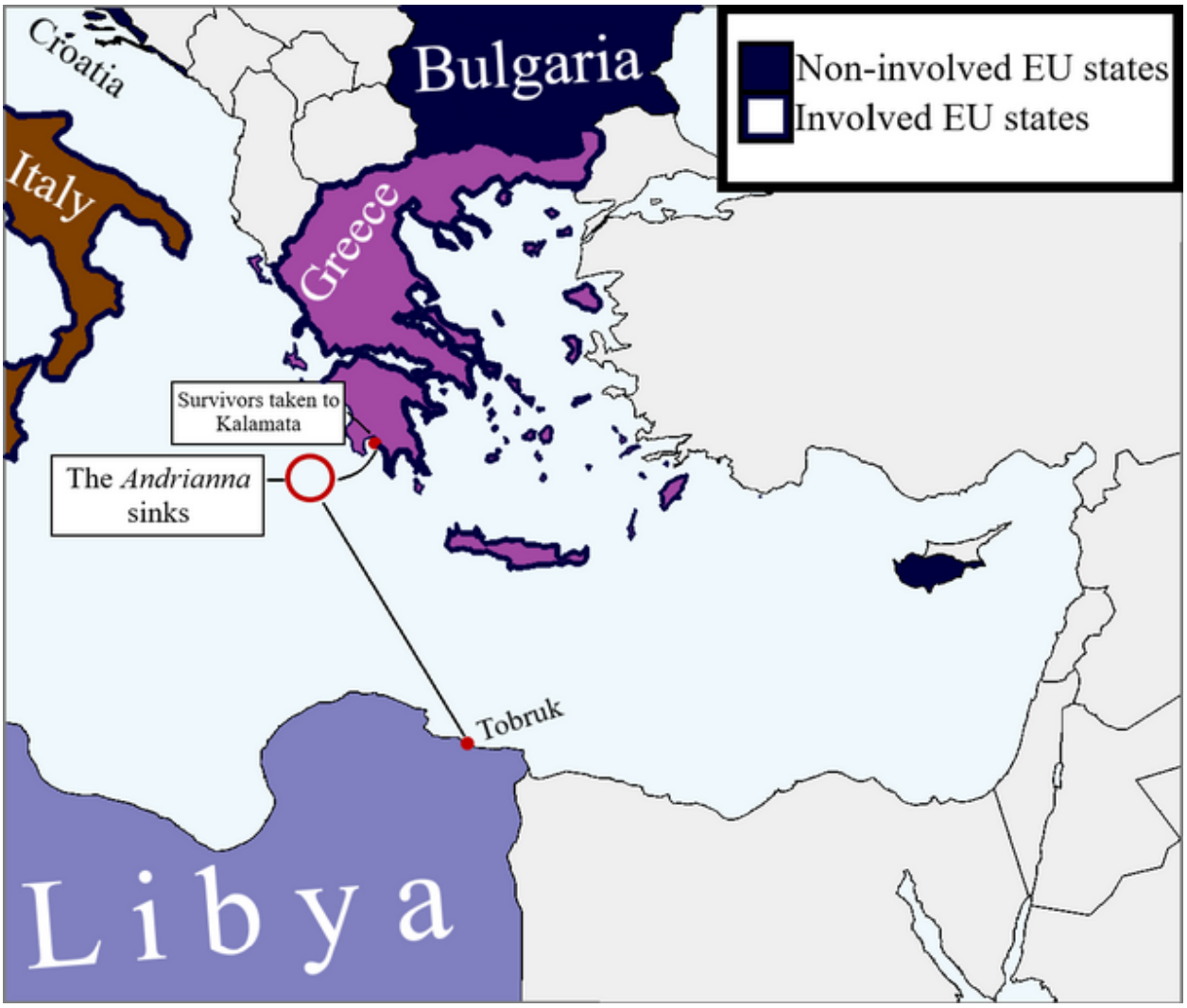
Emmanuel Comte: I see. From your work at IOM, I understand you were involved in voluntary return programs. Yet, you also had a front-row seat to observe Greek migration policies. As you speak, it's clear that you've developed many ideas about how these policies should be structured.

You then became Minister for Migration during the interim government in 2023—a very difficult period. What were the challenges at that time, and what did you try to accomplish, even within such a short mandate?

Daniel Esdras: For me, it was relatively easy because I already knew the programs well. I had previously been on the other side, so I understood what was most important, who was responsible for what, and what the priorities were. That experience helped me manage both migration and asylum issues effectively during my tenure.

Although it was a short period, I had to attend the Justice and Home Affairs Council in Luxembourg. During that time, we finally voted on the EU migration pact, which had been pending since 2016. It was now 2023—seven years later. It was a difficult task because not all member states were in agreement.

Unfortunately, there was also the tragedy off Pylos while I was in office—a shipwreck with 750 people dead at sea.



Emmanuel Comte: 750 dead?

Daniel Esdras: Yes, in the sea. And on top of that, there were renewed influxes from the Evros border, which continued despite our efforts.

So, during my brief time as Minister, I faced more crises than some previous ministers had during multi-year terms. But I found it to be a valuable and interesting experience. Fortunately, my background in handling emergency situations at IOM—in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Africa, and elsewhere—was extremely helpful.

As Minister, I focused on priorities I already knew well. For example, I pushed for a faster and more efficient asylum registration system. We also visited all reception centers to ensure they had sufficient capacity in case of new influxes.

We coordinated with other ministers and reached an understanding with the Turkish government to reduce crossings at the Evros border—although the islands remained vulnerable. All of that took place in June 2023.

Emmanuel Comte: That was quite a lot to take on in such a short time.

The Pylos Shipwreck and Criminal Smuggling

Daniel Esdras: Yes. Despite the challenges, it was an interesting period for me. Unfortunately, though, the shipwreck near Pylos was one of the most tragic events I've encountered.

This wasn't the first time something like this happened. We were aware that smugglers often take the migrants' money and then deliberately sink the ships. It's not just that the vessel was old—though it was. According to the survivors I spoke to, the smugglers intentionally sank it.

Emmanuel Comte: You think it was a criminal act?

Daniel Esdras: Yes, absolutely. They deliberately killed them. Why? Because they didn't want anyone to reach the authorities. After receiving the money, they couldn't risk anyone identifying them if they made it to Italy or Greece—or wherever they were headed.

Emmanuel Comte: But why did it happen in that case, and not in others?

Daniel Esdras: It has happened in many cases, and yet we never find out.

Emmanuel Comte: Some people manage to cross. Why do certain smugglers lead people all the way to their destination, while others abandon them? You suggest it depends on various factors?

Daniel Esdras: I believe it also depends on the specific period and the situation in the receiving country at that time. There are many factors involved. But in reality, we often say the Mediterranean Sea is a vast cemetery. Nobody truly knows how many people have drowned there over the years. We never find out—whether it's Greek authorities or others who eventually discover the bodies, often it's already too late.

The Mediterranean is vast—like an ocean. It's not easy to search and recover bodies. And this is not limited to the Mediterranean. If you look at a global map, you'll find similar cases in the Atlantic, the Pacific, and other regions.

Global Migration Patterns

Daniel Esdras: Interestingly, if you look at global migration flows, the largest movements are not in Europe. The biggest is within Africa—primarily from east to west. Based on the numbers, intra-African migration is the largest. Then comes South to North America. There's also significant

movement from former Soviet states to Russia. And now, although less than before due to stricter controls, there are considerable flows from Southeast Asia to Australia.

So, we tend to focus on Europe, but that doesn't mean it is the epicenter of global migration. Migration is a global phenomenon. It is not just a Greek or European issue. That's why the international community—countries of origin, transit, and destination—must sit together and coordinate. The aim should be to take control of migration management away from traffickers and smugglers.

That is the most important objective. It must be handled by states. That's what I always said when I worked with IOM and the United Nations. It's the only viable solution.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you think the role of smugglers has increased over the years? Or was it already significant when you began your work?

Daniel Esdras: It was growing day by day—for both trafficking and smuggling.

Emmanuel Comte: Why?

Daniel Esdras: Because it involves a lot of money. Unfortunately, human smuggling generates more money than the arms or drug trades. And it's less dangerous. If they get caught, the consequences are often lighter.

Emmanuel Comte: That's a serious issue. But I'd like to return to a point you made earlier. You mentioned that some smugglers deliberately sink boats. Why would they do that? Under what circumstances?

Daniel Esdras: They don't do it systematically—it depends on the situation. If they perceive a risk, such as a patrol or a coast guard about to intercept the vessel, they might prefer to sink it. Often, they assign responsibility for steering the boat to a minor—someone under 18—so that, if apprehended, the legal consequences are reduced. This is something we uncovered during discussions with survivors.

Final Reflections on Migration Governance

Emmanuel Comte: Understood. This has been a very dense and informative interview. As a final question: what most shaped your understanding of migration throughout your career? Was there a particular event that influenced your perspective?

Daniel Esdras: It was a combination of everything. I witnessed the wars in Yugoslavia, the North Caucasus, Chechnya, and Kosovo—experiences that were deeply shocking. And then there was 2015, when the Greek islands faced a massive influx. That was a highly emotional period. I saw so many drowned infants and other unimaginable scenes.

Two-year-old Alan Kurdi lying dead on the beach near Bodrum, Turkey, 2 September 2015

And then there's the daily work. You see people trying to survive—especially undocumented migrants. They have no protection. And the worst part? They don't exist. Without documents, they are invisible. If one of them dies, no one looks for them. No one even knows. That's the most tragic aspect.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. Mr. Esdras, thank you very much for sharing your insights.

Daniel Esdras: I'm happy to help.