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How the squeeze on standards enables small flags to flourish

Nik Winchester of the Seafarers’ International Research Centre looks at the difference between the established open registers and some of the new arrivals on the scene.

When we see the flags flown by ships, and the ports of registry painted on their stems, we notice that they are attached to such places as Panama and Liberia, Bahamas and Malta. We take them for granted because they have become so familiar and so numerous even though we may find it difficult to connect these flags with our understanding of what constitutes a primary criterion.

In recent years a number of other flags have arrived on the scene from countries that are not so familiar, such as Belize, Bolivia, Cambodia, and Equatorial Guinea. The registration of ships attached to these flags show extremely rapid growth rates over their short lifespans, it is reasonable to wonder why this growth has occurred and what the consequences might be.

The initial response to these new arrivals is simply to see them as yet further examples of open registers or flags of convenience. After all, don’t all open registers operate in the same manner? Well no, they don’t. Not any longer.

A number of large and long series of tanker disasters began in the late 1960s and culminating in March in the two halves of the Kristal adrift off Newfoundland. The administrations of Belize, Cambodia and Equatorial Guinea have been obliged to aim at chasing ships coming from these flags with our under-standing of what constitutes a primary criterion.

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