

Strengthening EU border security won't stop the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean

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01/07/2014

On 30 June, a fishing boat containing the bodies of thirty people was found heading for Italy, once again highlighting the problem of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean. As [Nina Perkowski](#) writes, the incident came at a time when Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi had been pushing for the EU to take a greater role over the issue, with Italy also threatening to halt its 'Mare Nostrum' operation aimed at intercepting boats headed for the country. She argues that ultimately the only way to prevent the death of migrants in the Mediterranean is to provide safe and legal entry routes into the EU.



"A Europe that tells the Calabrian fisherman that he must use a certain technique to catch tuna but then turns its back when there are dead bodies in the sea cannot call itself civilised." Ahead of the European Council meeting in Ypres and Brussels last week, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi used [strong words](#), appealing for more European support for border control. The importance of this statement was emphasised further on 30 June, when [thirty bodies](#) were found in a boat bound for Italy.

Setting out Italy's agenda for its upcoming six-month Presidency of the European Union, Renzi [called](#) for a united European effort to carry out search and rescue activities and border control in the Mediterranean Sea. In particular, he requested the taking over of Italy's ongoing 'Mare Nostrum' operation by the EU border management agency Frontex. A large-scale military operation in the Mediterranean, Mare Nostrum was initiated as a response to the deaths of over 360 individuals off the coast of Lampedusa last October. The operation has cost Italy approximately €9.5 million a month, and is said to have saved almost [60,000](#) people from distress at sea in the first six months of this year.

Now, as summer promises even higher numbers of migrant arrivals, Italy has threatened to suspend Mare Nostrum, citing its high costs and the lack of European support. Some, however, also have other reasons to oppose the continuation of the operation: they blame it for an increase in migrant arrivals in Italy, and claim it acts as a 'pull factor' for migrants. Indeed, the first four months of this year have seen relatively high numbers of crossings compared to the previous [five years](#). With the UNHCR warning that this year, we are seeing the [highest numbers of refugees](#) worldwide since the end of the Second World War, it is however doubtful whether this can really be attributed to Mare Nostrum. More likely, it is the result of escalating conflicts and widespread displacement in the Middle East and parts of Africa.

The European dimension to the problem

In arguing that migrant boat crossings and deaths at sea are not primarily an Italian issue, but a European one, Matteo Renzi is most certainly right. Not only are many of those attempting to reach the EU in this way aiming to travel beyond Italy to other member states, but restrictive EU immigration, visa, and border control policies are also the reason they have to undertake their journey on small boats, investing considerable sums of money and risking their lives.

This is indeed therefore a European issue, and one that the EU as a whole needs to address. And yet, incorporating Mare Nostrum into Frontex is not a genuine solution to hazardous boat crossings and migrant deaths: while it is of course vital that those in distress at sea be saved without delay and permitted to apply for asylum if they so wish, what is needed is a more fundamental change in EU policies and practices.

Mare Nostrum is a military operation that is bound up with [security objectives](#) as well as humanitarian tasks, and as

such it furthers the perception of migration as a security ‘problem’ that should be reacted to with military and security-related means. It is this thinking – the association of migration with security concerns – that has led to restrictive policies in the first place. And it is because of these policies that for the vast majority of today’s poor, persecuted, and marginalised people, the only option to reach Europe is by undertaking irregular, life-threatening journeys.

EU Commissioner Cecilia Malmstroem herself [recognises](#) that there are no legal ways for asylum seekers to enter the European Union, and that this needs to change. While it is thus of utmost importance to save those in distress at sea, the ultimate objective must remain the creation of safe, legal entry routes to the European Union.

This is seen most clearly by those affected directly by exclusion and security measures. While Renzi sought to influence the European Council meeting by speaking in Italy ahead of it, hundreds of refugees and ‘sans papiers’ set up camp in Brussels to make their own claims heard. After walking 500km in a [March for Freedom](#) from Strasbourg to Brussels, they spent one week in the Belgian capital to raise awareness of the struggles by migrants in a variety of EU countries, and to bring forward their demands.

In his speech, Matteo Renzi [appealed](#) to European values when speaking about the need to find European solutions to migrant deaths at sea: “Either we accept the idea of having a common destiny and values... or we risk the role of Europe itself.” Appealing to these same values – freedom, equality, dignity, human rights – the refugee protest movements in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and elsewhere have exposed the violence inherent in the current policies and practices, and demanded fundamental changes over the last two years. To them it is clear that an expansion of Frontex to include Mare Nostrum cannot be the answer.

And the European Council? Seemingly unaffected by Renzi’s appeal and refugee demonstrations in Brussels, the heads of state and government ultimately did [not focus](#) primarily on migration during their meeting, but treated it as one topic among others. The measures they agreed on [include](#) an appeal to Frontex to reinforce its operational activities and capacity to react to new developments; closer cooperation with third states to prevent irregular migration; better use of the surveillance system [EUROSUR](#); a study to look into the creation of a European border guard; and the objective of ‘addressing smuggling and trafficking in human beings more forcefully.’

Partly, the Council Conclusions thus seem to be a repetition of the same approach that the EU has followed over recent years: more surveillance, control, and security, an approach that has led to [20,000 deaths](#) over the last 20 years. At the same time, they recognise the need to increase resettlement to Europe, and to open legal migration routes. If these latter objectives were to be taken seriously and followed up on with political will – in the past too often they were not – it could be, slowly, the beginning of a much-needed opening of Europe’s borders.

Importantly, the Council conclusions make no mention of Mare Nostrum, or the need for search and rescue efforts at Europe’s southern borders more generally. With summer ahead of us and Italy threatening to suspend its operation, the neglect of this vital issue might lead to a renewed increase in deaths at Europe’s frontiers – something which may already have begun with the incident on 30 June.

While in the long run, an opening of legal migration routes is what might decrease risky sea crossings, these will continue in the present, and will continue to cost lives. Rather than averting its gaze and treating incidents like the



Migrants at Lampedusa, Credit: No Border Network (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Lampedusa deaths of October 2013, or the thirty deaths on 30 June, as deplorable and unpredictable exceptions, the EU needs to accept its responsibilities. This includes living up to its self-proclaimed values, and ensuring a functional and civilian search and rescue regime at its southern borders – as well as looking for long-term, genuine solutions.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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