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The *Mare Nostrum* Operation and the SAR approach: the Italian response to address the Mediterranean migration crisis

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1. Introduction

Italy has a long-lasting experience regarding migration. In the XIX and XX centuries Italy was a major outgoing country; but in the XXI century it became an incoming country. In the late XIX-early XX centuries, during the so-called Great Italian Diaspora, Italians migrated mainly to North and South America; in the Fifties and Sixties, during the second wave of Italian migration, the European healthier countries became the most preferred Italian migration destinations. As a result, large Italian communities settled in the USA, Argentina, Germany and Belgium.

This historical legacy has probably affected the Italian approach towards migration when it became an incoming country. A mass exodus from Albania to Italy characterized the early 1990s, when Albanians begun crossing the Adriatic with unsecure gunboats. The early 2000s registered an increasing amount of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, mainly departing from the Tunisian or the Libyan coasts directed to Italy in order to reach the European Union (EU). What had started as an unstructured phenomenon, favoured by geographical proximity, quickly turned into a systemic one controlled by organized crime groups smuggling people from sub-Saharan countries through North Africa and across the Mediterranean Sea directed to Europe. Mediterranean migration has become a global issue, connecting Europe with sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa, involving state and non-state actors, and deploying effects well beyond the Mediterranean region.

Faced with the dramatic Mediterranean migration crisis[1], Italy has plaid the role of a front-runner in experiencing hosting and rescue strategies, while EU member states - with their different interests and approaches towards migration – demonstrated a high level of disunity and divisions. Although it is both a legal

[1] In this JMWP reference is made to 'migration crisis' to stress the complexity of the phenomenon and the various implications for migrants, alongside with the involvement of state and non-state actors, national and EU agencies, NGOs and humanitarian associations in the migration flows' management.

and moral duty to render assistance to vessels in distress at sea and save lives[2], a 'duty to assist' via search and rescue (SAR) operations is having a hard time to emerge as the prevailing approach to be adopted at EU level. Yet, an increasing number of SAR operations are being conducted by commercial vessels and EU operations such as TRITON or EUNAVFOR MED.

This paper analyses the Italian government's decision to launch the Mare Nostrum Operation (MNO) in October 2013[3], and the animated Italian and European debate that followed bringing Mediterranean migration high in the EU agenda. Italy has succeeded in rising the awareness of EU member states' governments and public opinion that the Mediterranean migration crisis affects all EU member states - not just Italy or other South-European countries – and therefore the EU involvement in the management of the crisis is urgently required. Nevertheless, EU member states still resist the adoption of a EU common approach inspired by humanitarian needs and are reluctant to openly adopt the SAR approach. Despite the appealing political discourses of the current Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, Italy is having a hard time to exert political leadership in migration issues[4]. However, as the Sophia operation indicates, thanks to its expertise and its Guardia Costiera, Italy plays a leading role in the management of EU operations 'on the ground'.

2. Migration across the Mediterranean Sea: the proportion of the humanitarian crisis

Since the early 2010s the Mediterranean has been affected by a severe migration crisis, with tens of thousands of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach the South-European coasts (Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the NATO intervention in Libya and the

[2] Fulvio Attinà provides a thorough analysis of international treaties about the protection of migrants, refugees and people in distress in seawaters (Attinà, 2015).
[3] Enrico Letta was guiding the Italian government at that time, but in February 2014 Matteo Renzi became Prime Minister.
[4] Since the beginning of his mandate, in February 2014, the premier Matteo Renzi declared that the Mediterranean is the core of his foreign policy and migration is set high on the political agenda.

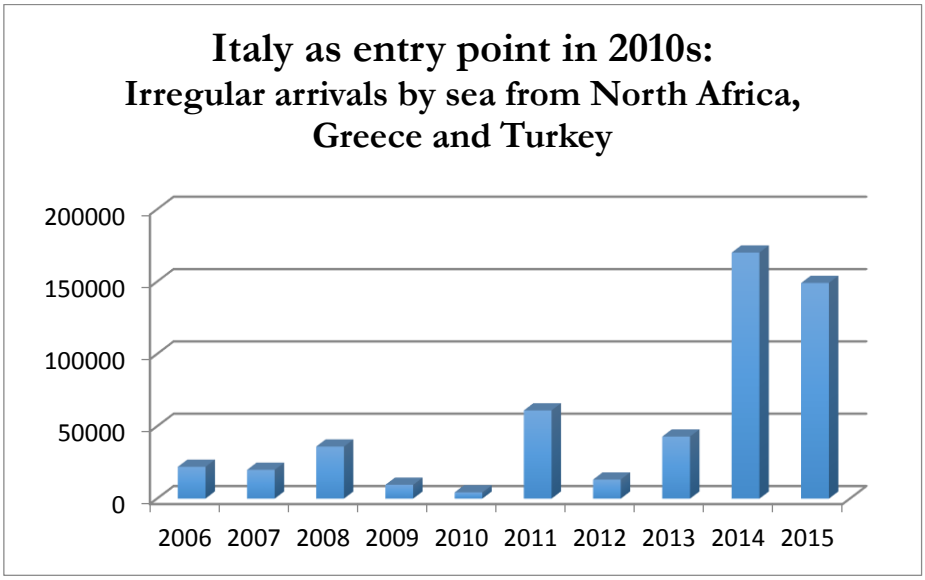
beginning of the Syrian war, the number of people leaving from North African coasts to cross the Mediterranean on unseaworthy boats has increased enormously and – inevitably - the number of migrants loosing their lives in continuing series of shipwrecks has increased as well.

Migration is a global trend (Attinà, 2015) and migration flows tend to change according to contingent complex dynamics (Fargues and Bonfanti, 2014). Over the last two decades, Italy has become one of the main entry points to Europe for migrants coming from the Mediterranean routes. Due to its geographical position in the middle of the Mediterranean, to its lengthy coasts and its proximity to North-African countries (Tunisia and Libya in particular), Italy is currently one of the most exposed EU countries with figures mounting significantly over the years. However, Italy is primarily a transit country for thousands of migrants wishing to reach other EU member states, Scandinavian countries in particular.

As Figure 1 indicates, when the Jasmine Revolution started - in January 2011 - and the regime of Ben Ali was overthrown, thousands of migrants suddenly arrived to Lampedusa and the Italian government had to declare a state of humanitarian emergency[5]. This mass exodus decreased in 2012 to start again in 2013. In 2015, roughly 140,000 people arrived to Italy; about 170,000 people had arrived in 2014. This is the highest number of arrivals to Italy in the last ten years. Mediterranean migration is not a spontaneous phenomenon favoured by geographical proximity, but rather a structured one, with organized crime planning and controlling any phase of migrants' long risky journeys. 90% of migrants arriving to Italy come from sub-Saharan Africa. Migrants' journeys are extremely expensive and could even last several years, thus generate enormous profits for the smugglers (Baird and van Liempt, 2016).

[5] After a formal Italian request, the European Patrol Network Joint Operation (JO) Hermes was launched in February 2011 as a response to the migration flows that followed the Arab Spring. After just 19 operational days, JO Hermes had recorded the arrival of more than 3,000 migrants in the Pelagic islands South of Sicily. These figures brought the hosting center in Lampedusa to the collapse.

FIGURE 1



SOURCE: UHNCR data.

In terms of global figures, in 2015 the central Mediterranean route was less relevant than the oriental route, because the highest number of migrants arrived to Europe via Greece and Turkey (Triandafyllidou, 2015). However, the central Mediterranean route is by far the most dangerous one. Estimates of the International Migration Organization mention more than 2,800 migrants dying in the Central Mediterranean in 2015, compared to about 500 in the Oriental Mediterranean, where the migrants' flows are five-time bigger.

The Syrian war has become one of the major factors responsible of the Mediterranean migration crisis[6]. Fargues has calculated more than 300,000 illegal migrants only in 2015 (Fargues, 2015). But the migration crisis at the South-Eastern EU borders demonstrates that Syrians are mainly exploiting the Mediterranean oriental route to reach Europe.

[6] For the third quarter of 2013, FRONTEX reported a massive 93 per cent increase of detected illegal border crossings into the EU in comparison to the same period in 2012, mainly due to a significant increase of illegal immigrants from Syria and Eritrea (Monar, 2014: 147). Over the 2014, asylum applications increased by 44 per cent in comparison with the year before, with a total number of 626,026; applications by Syrians topped the list with 122,790 (Monar, 2015: 128).

These figures suggest that continuing pressures on the EU external borders require quick reaction and prompt intervention for a EU border policy which could imply more coordination and cooperation. The long series of incidents taking place in the Sicily Channel attract the media coverage and humanitarian associations' attention, while the EU is still unprepared to face this humanitarian emergency. The EU capacity to manage the mounting migrants' flows across the Mediterranean to reduce - in the short-term - and ideally stop - in the medium-to long term - the number of deaths has been rather weak and riparian states remain more exposed to the migration crisis, although the High Representative of the EU for foreign affairs and foreign policy, Federica Mogherini, has repeatedly claimed the EU collective responsibility.

In 2004 the EU tried to address migration with the launching of FRONTEX - the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union[7]. In 2014 the Triton operation was adopted to focus more effectively on the maritime border management. In April 2015 thousands of migrants lost their life in shipwrecks in the Central Mediterranean. After the dramatic accident off the shores of Lampedusa of the Black April 2105, the High Representative Federica Mogherini urged the EU to act. In May 2015 the European Commission adopted the European Agenda on migration. In December 2015 and February 2016 the European Council adopted important measures relying on hotspots, relocation and returns.

However, despite the humanitarian implications of the migration crisis, the EU has not officially adopted a solidarity common system to jointly address the Mediterranean migration crisis. More importantly, EU member states are reluctant to delegate the supranational EU institutions to deal with such sensitive issues. In February 2016 the European Council has regarded the EU-Turkey Action Plan as one of the main pillars of EU migration policy and has welcomed NATO's decision to assist in the conduct of reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance of illegal crossings in the Aegean Sea. As if EU

[7] On 26 October 2004, the Council Regulation (EC) 2007/2004, published on 25/11/2004, established FRONTEX.

member states were opting for a 'fencing Europe' approach rather than a humanitarian one. Their main interest seems to be the protection of their borders, to please the domestic public opinion and obtain or maintain the electorates' support.

3. The Italian political debate and the security-migration nexus

Over time migration issues have been securitized both in the academic and political debate, and the humanitarian dimension of migration has been overwhelmed by security aspects. The linkage between security and migration had been originally exemplified by the so-called Copenhagen School in the early 1990s. Since the publication of the famous book *Identity, migration and the new security agenda in Europe*, by Ole Waever, Barry Buzan, Morten Kelstrup and Pierre Lemaitre, in 1993, the migration-security nexus has been largely made the object of wide scholarly research. More recently, the so-called Paris School has stressed the importance of 'routinized practices', i.e. practices of surveillance and border controls[8].

Unfortunately, by adopting a much less sophisticated approach to security and securitization, in the last decade the widespread politicization of migration all over Europe has been accompanied by the simplistic assumption that migration generates insecurity. The effects of increasing migration flows have been interpreted through the securitization approach rather than by focusing on the humanitarian aspects related to the Mediterranean migration crisis. The large electoral support obtained by populist and extremist parties - both at European, national and local elections, derives from the mounting feeling of insecurity and the supposed incapacity of the ruling governments to guarantee personal security. Europeans are more and more concerned about immigration, but instead of appreciating the positive effects that migration might have at socio-economic level, large part of European societies tend to exaggerate the presumed cultural, political and economic threats brought about by migrants

[8] For these developments in the 2000s see, for instance, Bigo (2000) and Bigo and Tsoukala (2008).

(Barbulescu and Beaudonnet, 2014: 217). In this respect, Italy is not an exception.

Being one of the main EU entry points, in the last few decades the political debate on migration in Italy has become very animated, attracting the interest of public opinion, mobilizing the citizens and polarizing political parties. Since the 1990s the Italian political debate on migration has been affected by the security-migration nexus assuming that migration is primarily a security issue. Some political parties have constructed a sort of linear correspondence between migrants and crimes. First of all *Lega Nord* (initially with its founding party leader Umberto Bossi and currently with its leader Matteo Salvini), but also - more recently - *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (with its leader's statements on 'migration as a security emergency', as reported by Beppe Grillo's blog) tend to exacerbate the public debate on migration. The Italian political debate on migration is now dominated by an aggressive populist discourse (nourished primarily by *Lega Nord*) that the richest Italian areas – Northern Italy in particular, would risk being harassed by thousands of incoming desperate migrants inclined to commit violent crimes.

Yet, research-based knowledge indicates that the public debate is amplifying the direct linkage between crimes and migrants; the migration-insecurity nexus is more a projection of party ideology than the result of real figures. Populist propaganda also portraits an 'invasion' of migrants from North Africa to Italy that is not supported by real figures. According to the most recent UNHCR figures, Italy currently hosts less than 100,000 migrants, mainly coming from Eritrea, Niger, Somalia, Sudan and Syria, who are entitled to some forms of international protection. Most migrants are not located in Northern Italy, because almost 50% of illegal migrants stay in Sicily, Campania, Puglia and Calabria. The comparison between the Italian situation and other European countries shows that – even though the migration crisis is perceived very seriously by the Italian public opinion – Italy has a lower ratio of refugees/population compared to other EU member states. Italy hosts one refugee over 1000 people, Sweden 11 refugees over 1000, France 3,5/1000. While figures concerning Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon or Jordan

point to unbearable situations: millions of refugees represent half of the Lebanese population and one third of the Jordanian population.

The securitization of migration is not only an Italian phenomenon. Migration has become a conflictive and highly divisive topic in Europe as well. Xenophobic movements and extreme right parties requesting to close the EU borders to render Europe more secure dominated the 2014 EP electoral campaign and several domestic and local elections all over Europe are contributing to a public debate permeated by rising intolerance. Extremist parties have acquired large electoral support and are well represented both in the EP and in national European parliaments[9].

Another populist argument very widespread is the perceived 'Islamic threat', but figures indicate that Europe has slightly more Christian than Muslims migrants (Foret and Mouraõ Permoser, 2015: 1089).

4. The *Mare Nostrum* Operation: Towards a humanitarian approach to migration?

As Figure 1 above has shown, in 2011 the number of migrants' arrivals to Italy has increased a lot because of the feeble control over the North African coasts due to the Arab revolts and the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. The Mediterranean migration crisis then acquired serious proportions and the high number of shipwrecks and deaths at sea challenged the migration-security nexus to attract the attention on the humanitarian

[9] In 2014 extremist parties have consolidated their presence in the EP. The *Europe of Nations and Freedom Group* has 38 out of a total of 750 MEPs and groups parties such as the French *Front national*, the Italian *Lega Nord* or the Dutch *Partji voor de Vrijheid* and the Belgian *Vlaams Belang*; *Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group* has 45 MEPs ranging from the Italian *Movimento Cinque Stelle*, the UK *Independence Party*; the *Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left* includes 51 MEPs belonging to *Lista Tsipras-L'Altra Europa*, *Podemos*, *Sinn Fein*, *Bloco de Esquerda*, *Partito Comunista Portugues*, *Die Linke*.

emergency. Due to its geographical position, Italy - being on the forefront of the Mediterranean migration crisis - decided to react and experience new strategies to tackle the emergency.

In October 2013 a special momentum of political and public pressure towards a new strategy was registered. Italy, Europe and the international community were shocked by the death of over 500 people in just a few days as the result of the shipwrecks of two refugee boats: on 3 October, 366 migrants (plus many missing people) lost their lives a few miles off the costs of Lampedusa, and on 11 October a boat sank in Maltese territorial waters. The President of the European Commission, Josè Barroso, the EU Commissioner Cecilia Malmström, the Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta and the Italian Interior Minister Angelino Alfano paid a visit to the island of Lampedusa; media reported the visit and echoed the touched involvement of the EU officials and Italian politicians.

These incidents not only provoked a national day of mourning in Italy and the official visit to Lampedusa of EU institutions' representatives and Italian politicians , but also sharp criticism from Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat who spoke about an emerging 'cemetery within our Mediterranean sea' while the rest of Europe only provides 'empty talks' (Monar, 2014: 141).

The Italian Government led by Enrico Letta decided then to launch the *Mare Nostrum* Operation (MNO) to search and rescue migrants in the Sicily Channel in order to prevent other similar disasters. MNO was initiated under the direct responsibility of the government: there was neither a parliamentary debate nor a parliamentary vote. On the one hand, this procedure allowed for an immediate response, thus rendering the Italian government more efficient; on the other, this procedure led to an a-posteriori parliamentary control that was instrumentally used by the government's opposition to claim for a lack of legitimacy and a reduction of the parliamentary representation. This soon turned against the government like a boomerang.

The MNO consisted of the empowerment of the Migration Flows Control activities carried out within the Italian Navy operation Constant Vigilance[10]. It had a twofold objective:

1) to rescue migrants travelling on vessels in distress.
2) to combat organized crime and smugglers.

The MNO was a complex operation that relied upon the cooperation between several state and non-state actors. All rescued people were to undergo medical triage to assess their health conditions and necessary treatments. The doctors on board allowed early prevention from the risks of possible infections spread ashore. An agreement with Save the Children provided for the presence of professionals on board and units for information, support, legal counselling and cultural mediation for the children and teen-agers rescued at sea. The Italian Navy ships' commanding officers intervened to seize mother ships and to stop human traffickers in accordance with the law enforcement on the high seas regulations; hundreds of smugglers have been brought to justice.

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[10] To implement the MNO the Italian Navy had deployed several units:

- One amphibious vessel with specific command and control features, medical and shelter facilities for the would-be migrants;
- One/two frigates and two second line high seas units – either patrollers or corvettes – with wide range and medical care capabilities;
- Helicopters on board (to be readily deployed to Lampedusa or Catania);
- A SAN MARCO Marine Brigade team in charge of vessels inspections and the safety of migrants on board;
- A Coastal radar network and Italian Navy AIS (Automatic Identification System) shore stations;
- One ATLANTIC 1 Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) based in Sigonella for maritime patrol;
- One Air Force PREDATOR A+ based in Sigonella for maritime patrol;
- One MM P180 aircraft equipped with Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR), based in Catania;
- Two Camcopter S-100 unmanned aerial vehicles onboard ITS San Giusto;
- One Forward Logistic Site (FLS) in Lampedusa for logistics support to the units deployed to Mare Nostrum.

The Air Force also contributed with unmanned aerial vehicles; and the Carabinieri Corps with a helicopter. Submarines have been used to gather evidence of the criminal activities.

MNO covered a wide area in the Straits of Sicily: about 70,000 sq. Km, which is three times the Sicily Region. The number of interventions of the Italian navy was consistent: about one hundred in 2013 and almost 450 in 2014. This led to the rapid increase of rescued migrants: from 2587 in 2005 to 156362 in 2014 as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Number of SAR interventions of the Italian Navy

YEAR	INTERVENTIONS	RESCUED MIGRANTS
2005	47	2587
2006	45	4025
2007	41	1711
2008	93	6963
2009	11	1322
2010	0	0
2011	20	2686
2012	24	2586
2013	95	11499
2014	439	156362

SOURCE: Italian Ministry of Defence, online data

The MNO operation stemmed from an old and consolidated rule of the sea: the moral duty of seafarers to render assistance to other seafarers. Over the centuries, a sort of 'humanitarian regime at sea' has emerged, stating the duty of commercial ships to render assistance; with the mounting of the Mediterranean migration crisis, the number of commercial ships involved in SAR operations has increased enormously, rescuing thousands of migrants

(Kalland Aarstad, 2015: 413). Moreover, the protection of life of human beings at risk in the seawaters is codified in the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea and other international law documents (Attinà, 2015). Also article 78.3 of the Treaty of Lisbon, refers to the Duty to Assist and opens the way for such solidarity measures to be taken among member states in emergency situations[11].

Inspired by the duty to intervene to rescue people in distress at sea, the MNO conducted by the Italian Navy contributed to recast EU needs and priorities and suggested new approaches and strategies. The debate on humanitarian intervention acquired since then a greater relevance and challenged EU member states traditionally reluctant to pool their competences to agree on a common EU ground in order to address illegal migration in the Mediterranean, which unfortunately is perceived by some EU member states as a 'remote' area.

However, this has not prevented MNO from criticism both in Italy and at EU level. Since its adoption - in October 2013 - MNO became the object of daily domestic political tensions, with opposition parties pointing to the high financial cost faced entirely by Italy and the potential unintended consequences of migrants starting a perilous trip across the Mediterranean Sea knowing that they would be saved at sea by SAR operations conducted by the Italian navy (Carbone, 2015: 87) thus constituting a sort of 'pull-factor'. MNO soon became politically and economically unsustainable. Alongside domestic and EU political opposition, it was economically unbearable for Italy: €9 million a month was a great burden for Italy. In 2014 the new Italian government led by Matteo Renzi since February - and the Italian Interior Minister in particular - called for the EU to take over the Italian mission. Various discussions followed with European leaders and the EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmström.

[11] Article 78: *1.The Union shall develop a common policy on asylum, subsidiary protection and temporary protection with a view to offering appropriate status to any third-country national requiring international protection and ensuring compliance with the principle of non-refoulement. This policy must be in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951 and the Protocol of 31 January 1967 relating to the status of refugees, and other relevant treaties. […] 3.In the event of one or more Member States being confronted with an emergency situation characterised by a sudden inflow of nationals of third countries, the Council, on a proposal from the Commission, may adopt provisional measures for the benefit of the member State(s) concerned. It shall act after consulting the European Parliament.*

In October 2014 the Italian government stopped the MNO and the EU launched the Frontex's Joint Operation Triton.

It is often claimed that Triton has replaced the MNO, but this is an over-simplification, because the two operations are slightly different. While the MNO was set up to conduct SAR activities, Triton is a mission whose primary purpose is border control. Compared with Mare Nostrum, Triton possesses significantly reduced assets and its main area of patrolling covers a far smaller area than that overseen by Mare Nostrum. Triton includes also search and rescue operations, but since the majority of migrant ships in distress are outside its core patrol area, it cannot target the main reasons for the death tolls in the central Mediterranean Sea.

When the most dramatic shipwreck ever happened in the Mediterranean took place, in April 2015, and almost 1000 people lost their life in a single accident at sea, the debate on the Mediterranean migration crisis mounted again, much more than in 2013. The Italian Government reiterated then the request to adopt effective strategies by involving all EU member states. An extraordinary EU summit on the migration crisis in the Mediterranean was convened to adopt extraordinary measures. In May 2015 the High Representative Federica Mogherini expressed the EU political commitment when she delivered a speech in front of the UN claiming for a common EU response supported by the UN and the international community. The European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission engaged then in a political debate focused on emergency measures, internal solidarity and shared responsibility. Both the content and tone of the European political debate on the migration crisis then changed, focusing on the 'refugees' issue' rather than the 'illegal migrants' issue.

5. Italy on the forefront of the Mediterranean migration crisis: acting as EU agenda-setter

The 'new' political style adopted by Enrico Letta's successor, Matteo Renzi, and the Italian politics' 'New Deal' he continuously claims for, has led to a more aggressive political rhetoric, both domestically and internationally. The political style adopted by Renzi seems to replicate Silvio Berlusconi's 'personalistic leadership' relying upon a post-ideological, anti-political and innovative type of leadership, in brief a sort of 'leftist Berlusconi' style, as his detractors often call it (Bordignon, 2014: 3)[12].

As far as migration is concerned, Matteo Renzi's outspoken style has attracted the attention of EU leaders. Premier Renzi has tried since its very beginning of his governing mandate to internationalize the MNO - which was extremely expensive for the Italian budget - and to set migration issues high in the EU agenda. Overwhelmed by the Mediterranean migration crisis, faced with the difficult task of managing increasing incoming flows and confronted with domestic opposition parties, Renzi tried to exert a regional leading role by defending the 'burden-sharing' principle in all European fora. In line with his predecessor, stressing that the Mediterranean migration crisis is a *EU* concern, not just an Italian one, he tried to persuade EU Member States to take a common approach and accept the principle that EU member states must share the burden of increased migration flows. Moreover, he urged the EU to move from an occasional 'emergency approach' to a 'structured humanitarian intervention'.

Unsurprisingly, Premier Renzi tried to use the EU Presidency to shape the EU agenda and set EU policy goals. In fact, migration was one of the Italian EU presidency priorities listed among the main eight objectives of the Italian

[12] Since the early 1990s, when Berlusconi entered the political realm, Italy has experienced a personalisation process of the Italian political system that has produced a 'post-modern leadership' founded on the personal qualities of the leader rather than a distinct ideology leading to specific political choices of the ruling parties. Also the Five Star Movement leader, Beppe Grillo, has contributed a lot to this personalization phenomenon.

presidency (Sannino, 2015). Italy succeeded in putting migration high in the EU agenda.

At the beginning of the Italian semester presidency, president Renzi had set very ambitious goals, trying to emulate the political discourses delivered by Alcide De Gasperi or Altiero Spinelli, the inspiring Italian founding fathers of the European Communities. In July 2014 the Italian Prime Minister launched the Italian EU Presidency. When he delivered a speech in front of the European Parliament, his ambitious plan to propose a new vision for a different Europe was clear to all. He wanted to relaunch European integration with new enthusiasm and new objectives, but he failed to alter the course of the European Union (Carbone, 2015: 83). He wanted to profit of a privileged position to initiate a new course and to exert a political leadership as the founding fathers of the European Communities had done in the 1950s-1960s in the common interest of the EU[13].

Yet, the Italian presidency has been successful in bringing the European Council to address migration in October 2014 and to push the European Commission to elaborate an Action Plan[14]. The Joint Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Interiors in November 2014 acknowledged the Italian capacity to set the agenda. Since the deteriorating situation in the Mediterranean

[13] It must be acknowledged that the current political context is very different from the late 1950s-early 1960s. European integration today cannot be simply understood as the result of an elitist process; serious systemic constraints and external threats intervene either in relaunching or stopping the integration process. Moreover, EU domestic élites often act as veto-players. Last but not least, the emerging of new stakeholders with a more critical stance toward European integration and the growing involvement of the public in the political debate on Europe, is producing rather negative consequences in terms of 'voice' against further integration instead of support for more integration (Lucarelli, 2015: 58). There are Eurosceptic forces – both political leaders and political parties – blaming the EU for not being able to cope with the economic crisis and for not being effective in the management of the migration crisis (in Italy above all *Lega Nord*, but also *Fratelli d'Italia* and the Five Star Movement). Nowadays, there is a more mature political debate on European integration that gives rise to a conscious opposition to the EU. This transformation of the political and public debate weakens the political leadership, either in Italy or elsewhere in the EU.

[14] Jorg Monar reports that at an informal meeting of JHA ministers in Milan on 8 July 2014 a big effort was made to overcome the polarization between (mostly southern) Member States demanding more intra-EU solidarity and (mostly northern) Member States emphasizing more responsibility in terms of more effective migration and border management (Monar, 2015: 130).

in the second half of 2014 was of obvious concern, the Italian Presidency introduced a paper aimed at a sustainable approach beyond short-term emergency measures in the migration field. This was transformed into the formal Council conclusions on 'Taking action to better manage migration flows' by the JHA Council of 8–9 October 2014. These Council conclusions identified three 'pillars' for the new approach consisting of: (1) co-operation with third countries with a primary focus on the fight against smugglers and trafficking in human beings; (2) the strengthening of the ability of Frontex to respond in a flexible and timely manner to emerging risks and pressures; (3) actions within the EU to uphold and implement the Common European Asylum System fully with a special emphasis on operational co-operation (Council of the European Union, 2014). Moreover, the launch of the EU Joint Operation Triton in August 2014, to be co-ordinated by Frontex, was saluted in official discourses as a success of the Italian presidency (Carbone, 2015: 87). [15]

The Italian government did not succeed in using the Italian presidency of the Council of the EU to frame a new EU strategy, nor could it profit of the EU presidency to play the role of a policy-shaper regarding migration issues. Because one thing is to act as agenda-setter, another thing is to frame the content of the EU common policy[16]. Although migration has entered the EU political agenda, existing different interests and approaches of EU member states slow down cooperation and weaken the common management of Mediterranean migration.

[15] Unfortunately, the Italian successes in the migration field have attracted poor media attention; and this can probably be attributed to the personal ambitions of the Prime Minister that shadow specific political issues to stress instead his leadership capacities (Carbone, 2015: 90).

[16] Alongside political reasons, there are also institutional explanations for an Italian EU presidency not that influential in terms of policy-shaping. After Lisbon, with the institution of the EU Presidency and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs chairing the Foreign Affairs Council for the five years of the mandate, the semester presidency has been weakened. In post-Lisbon EU decision-making, the rotating Council presidency essentially involves limited, yet important, responsibilities without much power to set policy priorities (Puetter, 2015: 29). Moreover, the Italian Presidency was particularly short, unfortunate and limited (Bonvicini, 2014) due to the fact that - following the 2014 European elections - the European Commission and its Presidency were replaced.

6. Italy in search of regional leadership

In the last few years the Italian governments have tried to acquire a leading role to address the Mediterranean migration crisis. This has been done in two main ways. First of all, with the adoption of the MNO, a humanitarian approach to migration relying upon SAR operations was experienced to replace existing policing operations. Secondly, the continuous Italian requests for a comprehensive EU common strategy contributed to set the migration issue high in the EU agenda.

The Italian pressing has been accompanied by a series of EU initiatives launched in 2015 to frame a concerted EU response to illegal migration: *ad hoc* Joint meetings of Foreign and Interior Ministers; a Commission migration crisis plan; an extraordinary EU summit in April 2015; the EU Agenda for Migration in May 2015; the launching of the EUNAVFOR MED in June 2015; European Councils on Migration in June 2015; the Extraordinary Home Affairs Councils in September 2015; the Valletta EU-Africa Summit in November 2015; the Dublin convention under reform. These initiatives and the comprehensive approach that lays at the basis of the EU Agenda for Migration mark the recent political developments at EU level.

This slight change of the EU approach derives more from the serious and systemic conditions of the crisis than just to the Italian political leadership. The proportion of the migration crisis - as dramatically highlighted by the 2015 Black April - has certainly contributed to compel EU member states to invest on a common EU approach. If migration has entered the EU agenda, this is the result of a combination of two factors: on the one hand, the gravity of the migration crisis - and the repeated shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea; on the other, the insistence of the Italian government that a *EU* management for a *EU* common problem is urgently required.

Although this cannot be regarded solely as the result of the Italian leadership concerning the Mediterranean migration crisis, it has to be acknowledged that in the last few years the Italian governments have been extremely active and succeeded in fixing the principle that Mediterranean migration crisis cannot be a unique concern of the EU Mediterranean border states and that a new comprehensive approach stemming from burden-sharing and joint responsibility plus SAR activities aimed at rescuing people at sea is to be preferred to policing initiatives.

Due to the increasing number of shipwrecks in the Sicilian Channel, Italian governments have repeatedly claimed that EU member states must cooperate to jointly address the migration crisis. One of the recurrent political claims of Renzi's government is that - although Italian coasts represent most of EU Mediterranean borders - all 28 EU member states and not just riparian states have to be involved in securing EU borders. Moreover, the Italian government has repeatedly stated that time has come to pass from an emergency approach to a structural one, proposing a new vision for a different Europe. Italy has tried to act via political and institutional channels.

Faced with other influential political leaders (Angela Merkel in particular), Renzi's political leadership at EU level still has a hard time to emerge, and in no case can bypass the Big three EU member states' interests (Germany, United Kingdom and France)[17]. The Italian government did not succeed in using the EU presidency to play a pivotal role in the relaunching of the European integration with a new *élan*, nor to promote a new EU migration policy based upon a humanitarian approach.

As mentioned above, the Italian presidency has been successful in bringing the European Council to address migration in October 2014 and push the

[17] Compared to Renzi's declared political goal, the achievements of the Italian presidency have been inevitably far below expectations. Carbone talks about a 'mediocre performance' (2015: 90) and Greco is not surprised of the poor results of the Italian presidency, because the burden sharing for patrolling the EU borders, SAR activities and migration managements are controversial issues, opposed by some EU member states (Greco, 2014).

European Commission to elaborate an Action Plan. The Joint Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Interiors in November 2014 acknowledged the Italian capacity to set the agenda. Also the adoption of Triton can be regarded as a partial success of the Italian diplomacy at EU level (Bonvicini, 2014). Yet, this operation is still distant from the Italian MNO and its effectiveness in the management of the crisis is dubious. The several EU political initiatives that followed the Black April have impressed a new emphasis in the direction of a comprehensive approach. Hence, the contingent emergency pushed and influenced EU institutions more effectively than the Italian political leadership.

As stated in the previous paragraphs, the MNO was highly criticised both domestically and internationally. Domestically, the MNO was instrumentally attacked by the violent political debate that characterised the Letta government's existence[18]. Internationally, neither the Letta government not the Renzi one were able to portray the MNO as an innovative strategy to be adopted at EU level to save and rescue people in distress at sea to comply with the International law. The MNO was rather unfortunate so as the government that had launched it. It was certainly an economic burden; but it also lacked an Italian leadership able to bring to the fore SAR operations as an approach to invest on.

The Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has repeatedly tried to 'take the lead' on migration, but by no means can Italy be regarded as being 'bound lo lead' (Nye, 1991); this would imply possessing leadership capacities that Italy wishes to have within the EU, but has not. And the MNO experience did not help much in this respect. In fact, this role has not been recognized to Italy by other

[18] The Letta government remained hostage of domestic troubles all over its existence, irrespective of the fact that Enrico Letta had begun his mandate under good auspices. Being an Europeanist - due to his education and political background - and having good personal relations with most European leaders, since the beginning of his mandate he had tried to have a constructive dialogue with European leaders to relaunch the European integration by reducing EU austerity and investing on growth and economic development. Both the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy and the President of the European Commission José Barroso were impressed by Letta's pro-Europe discourses. Nevertheless, his good reputation and appreciation in Europe soon proved to be insufficient to exert political leadership at EU level and to give a new *élan* to the European integration process as he aimed to; to face the migration crisis would have required a much stronger domestic political support.

EU member states, and there is a clear difference between 'expected' or 'ascribed' roles and 'performed' ones (Aggestam, 2004: 18).

7. SAR operations and the EUNAVFOR MED

After the Black April, the content and tone of the European political debate on the migration crisis changed, passing from a concern on 'illegal migrants' to the 'refugee' issue. The Italian Government reiterated the burden-sharing principle and requested to adopt effective strategies by involving all EU member states in the migration management. An extraordinary EU summit on the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean was urgently convened in April 2015 to adopt extraordinary measures. In a touching speech delivered in front of the UN in May 2015, the High Representative Federica Mogherini claimed for a renovated EU political commitment and urged for a common EU response supported by the UN and the international community. The European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission engaged then in a political debate focused on emergency measures, internal solidarity and shared responsibility.

The EU Agenda for Migration presented by the European Commission in May 2015 set out a comprehensive approach to migration management. While borders' control seems to be the main concern of the European Council Conclusions on migration issued in December 2015 and, more importantly, on 18 February 2016, the 2015 European Agenda on Migration is more incline to embrace humanitarian stances. A number of new measures have been introduced – including the adoption of two emergency schemes to relocate 160,000 people in need of international protection from the most affected EU Member States to other Member States.

The most innovative aspect of this EU approach is probably embodied by the Operation Sophia acknowledging the use of naval forces to intercept and disrupt ships used by smugglers. In June 2015, the European Council decided to launch the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR

MED). Also known as Operation Sophia, this is a military operation conducted by 22 European states aimed at neutralising established refugee smuggling routes in the Central Mediterranean[19]. In some respects this operation follows and develops the MNO; in particular it profits of Italian expertise in SAR operations. Italy plays in fact a leading role within the EUNAVFOR MED: the operational headquarters are located in Rome at the Guardia Costiera headquarters; the Operation Commander and the Force Commander of the EU Naval Force are Italians.

EUNAVFOR Med consists of three phases. The first phase focuses on surveillance and assessment of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Mediterranean. The second one provides for the search and, if necessary, diversion of suspicious vessels. The third one allows for the disposal of vessels and related assets, preferably before use, to apprehend traffickers and smugglers. A EU budget of € 11.82 million for a 12 months period has been approved. In addition, military assets and personnel are provided by the contributing EU member states to cover the running costs and personnel costs. In July 2015, Italy has authorized the participation in this naval operation with € 26 million and the involvement of 1020 military personnel units.

The first phase of the Sophia operation was initiated in June 2015, by the Italian Aircraft carrier Cavour, the English Echo-class survey ship Enterprise and German units Werra and Schlewig- Holstein. Within one month the EUNAVFOR MED had reached the goals set for this phase: to understand the smugglers' *modus operandi*. In October 2015 Sophia entered its second phase, aimed at contrasting the smugglers' network. To this aim Sophia foresees activities such as boarding, search, seizure and diversion, on the high seas, of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking. In this phase the EUNAVFOR MED operation can proceed with inspections, kidnapping and blocking of ships suspected of being used for human beings' trafficking. In the third phase, cooperation with the Libyans is required in order to operate in the Libyan sea area. Unfortunately, the instable political situation in Libya and the difficulty in finding a reliable political counterpart render the implementation of the third phase rather problematic.

[19] The states participating in Sophia are Italy, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Poland, Check Republic, United Kingdom, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Hungry.

It is a bit too early to claim that - departing from a security approach - a specific narrative on humanitarianism (Cuttitta, 2014) has developed and has been firmly adopted at EU level. But data show an interesting trend. Figure 1 above has shown that the 'rescue-model' inspired by humanitarian purposes has been successful in terms of number of migrants saved at sea. Via several EU initiatives adopted in 2015, the SAR strategy that had inspired the MNO seems to pave the way for humanitarian concerns to prevail over border policing. Table 2 indicates that, following the Italian MNO experience (2013-2014), SAR operations aimed at saving people in distress at sea are increasing, irrespectively of the declared aim of the involved agency. In the first few months of 2016 (until 21 March) SAR operations have been conducted primarily by the Italian Coast Guard and the Italian Navy; but also EUNAVFOR MED and Frontex have been involved in rescuing people at sea. Merchant vessels and NGOs have participated as well in rescue operations.

TABLE 2. People rescued at sea by MNO and other interventions

	2014		2015		2016 updated 21 March 2016	
	ASSETS	PEOPLE	ASSETS	PEOPLE	ASSETS	PEOPLE
ITALIAN COAST GUARDS	243	38.047	273	41.341	36	4550
ITALIAN NAVY	459	82.952	172	29.178	47	5624
FRONTEX ASSET	--	--	80	15.428	2	877
NGOS	--	--	123	20.063	2	194
MERCHANT SHIPS	12	1.683	140	23.885	4	334
EUNAVFORMED	--	--	--	--	22	2624

SOURCE: Elaboration of data provided by the Italian Coast Guard in March 2016[20].

[20] My thanks go to Valeria La Spina for this data collection.

8. Conclusions

Due to its geographical location, being at the outer borders of the Union, Italy experiences everyday the forefront of external borders' control and seeks to push for a new European migration policy to manage Mediterranean migration effectively. Despite the declared ambition of the Italian government and the expertise Italy has acquired with the launching of the MNO, Italy has not succeeded in playing a leading role at EU level in addressing the Mediterranean migration crisis.

Maybe the Italian lack of strategic long-term priorities domestically, affects its role and prevents it to have an impact at EU level. To quote Ettore Greco (2014: 24 *ss*), there is a difference between Italy 'influencing' European foreign policy and being 'present' (or participate) in European foreign policy. Italy actively participates in European negotiations, but does not exert an influence nor set priorities of EU foreign policy. The expertise Italy has acquired over the last years in the management of migration can be interpreted in a similar way.

Unsurprisingly, migration was one of the priorities of the Italian EU presidency. Nevertheless, the Italian government could not use the Italian presidency of the Council of the EU to frame the content of the EU migration policy. So far Italy has been unable to play the role of a *policy-shaper* regarding migration issues. Not much has changed during the Italian presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second semester of 2014.

However, the Operation Sophia provides interesting indications on the Italian contribution to address migration in the Mediterranean by making use of its expertise, know how and best practices. On the political side, Italy is lagging behind, but on the technical and operational side Italy is on the forefront of the migration crisis, providing vessels for SAR operations and commanders. SAR operations are regularly conducted by Italian authorities (Guardia Costiera in particular), but also EU led instances such as EUNAVFOR MED and Frontex,

regardless of their specific goals, are getting involved. This suggests that a new sensibility for the humanitarian approach has developed regardless of the popular populist political rhetoric on a 'fencing Europe' policy.

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