A study of the migration and border control policies of the EU and Italy and the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea over the last 10 years.

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Master in Humanitarian Action

Supervisor:
PhD. Dora Marina Rebelo, Invited Assistant Professor
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"A life lost at sea is not an anonymous tragedy but an indelible mark on humanity's conscience."

Unknown

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest love and gratitude to Erica, Leo, Zoe and Mattia for their unwavering support and the sacrifices they have made, allowing me to pursue this work. I am profoundly grateful for the time and energy I have selfishly taken from them throughout this endeavour, as well as for their patience and generosity.

I recognise the immense privilege I hold, not only as a migrant who has the opportunity to work and study freely wherever I want, but also as someone who can do so in relative security, unlike so many who face tragic circumstances in pursuit of safety and stability. While it may feel pretentious to dedicate this work to the missing migrants whose stories are told within it—as it is surely not enough—I hope in some way it is also for them.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the interviewees who gave up their valuable time to discuss and explain so much me. It has been a pleasure getting to know each of you, and I have learnt a great deal from our conversations.

Finally, I would like to thank my supervisor, for her guidance in helping me shape this work. Her insight and constructive criticism have been very helpful, and her commitment to seeing this thesis reach a standard [hopefully] worthy of submission is deeply appreciated.

RESUMO

Este estudo analisa a relação entre as políticas de migração e controlo de fronteiras da União Europeia e da Itália e a trágica perda de vidas no Mediterrâneo Central na última década. São abordadas áreas como a securitização de fronteiras, as práticas de externalização e a criminalização de operações humanitárias de busca e salvamento (SAR). Através de uma revisão de literatura e entrevistas com especialistas, o estudo identifica algumas tensões entre os princípios humanitários declarados pela UE e os impactos práticos das suas estratégias de migração e controlo de fronteiras. A análise temática destaca como as políticas que priorizam a segurança das fronteiras e externalizam a gestão da migração para países terceiros, como a Líbia, podem contribuir para o desvio das rotas migratórias para percursos mais perigosos, levando a perdas de vidas e comprometendo a proteção dos direitos humanos. O estudo também reflete as perspetivas de especialistas sobre possíveis soluções operacionais e ações políticas para enfrentar a trágica e contínua perda de vidas, incluindo a necessidade de um maior esforço da UE em operações SAR, uma maior confiança e cooperação entre os atores da UE e as ONGs, a descriminalização das atividades de SAR, maior transparência e a criação de vias seguras de migração. Embora limitado pelo tempo e âmbito, este trabalho pretende apoiar a discussão mais ampla sobre a necessidade urgente de um novo quadro de migração da UE—um que coloque os valores humanitários no centro e aborde com mais eficácia as causas profundas da migração. Este estudo também sublinha a necessidade de investigação contínua sobre a perda de vidas no Mediterrâneo Central. Encoraja-se a realização de novas pesquisas para aprofundar a compreensão, colmatar lacunas nas políticas e desenvolver estratégias que alinhem melhor a gestão de migração e os objetivos de segurança de fronteiras da UE com as responsabilidades humanitárias.

Palavras-chave: Políticas de Migração da UE; Princípios Humanitários; Migrantes Desaparecidos; Securitização; Itália

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between European Union and Italian migration and border control policies and the tragic loss of life in the Central Mediterranean over the past decade. It addresses areas such as border securitisation, externalisation practices, and the criminalisation of humanitarian search and rescue (SAR) operations. Through a literature review and interviews with expert stakeholders, the study identifies some tensions between the EU's stated humanitarian principles and the practical impacts of its migration and border control strategies. The thematic analysis highlights how policies that prioritise border security and externalise migration management to third countries, such as Libya, may be contributing to more hazardous routes, leading to preventable loss of life and compromising human rights protections. The study also reflects expert perspectives on possible operational solutions and potential political actions to address the ongoing tragic loss of lives, including the need for increased EU SAR efforts, improved trust and cooperation between EU actors and NGOs, decriminalisation of SAR activities, greater transparency, and the establishment of safe migration pathways. Although limited by time and scope, this work aims to support the broader discussion on the urgent need for a reimagined EU migration framework—one that places humanitarian values at its core and more effectively addresses the root causes of migration. This study also helps highlight the need for continued research into the loss of life in the Central Mediterranean Sea. Further research is encouraged to deepen understanding, address policy gaps, and develop strategies that better align EU migration management and border security objectives with humanitarian responsibilities.

Keywords: EU Migration Policies; Humanitarian Principles; Missing Migrants; Securitisation; Italy

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

On the night between the 25th and 26th of February 2023 the whole world witnessed one of a long list of tragic shipwrecks which resulted in the death of at least 94 people off the coast of Crotone, in the southern region of Italy (Medicins Sans Frontieres, 2023). These were people—adults and minors, mostly from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Pakistan—who had left from Izmir in Turkey, to seek refuge in Europe. The day after the Crotone tragedy, the European Commission President Ursula van der Leyen stated on Twitter that she was "*deeply saddened*" by the incident, adding that the "*loss of life of innocent migrants is a tragedy*". She declared that it was crucial to "*redouble our efforts to make progress on reforming [European Union] EU asylum rules to tackle the challenges regarding migration to Europe*"[1]. In parallel, speaking to Italian television public broadcaster, the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni stated that "*It is inhumane to exchange the lives of men, women and children for the price of the 'ticket' they paid in the false perspective of a safe journey*", and that "*The [Italian] government is committed to preventing departures, and with them the unfolding of these tragedies, and will continue to do so*."

Going back more than ten years to the tragic shipwreck off Lampedusa (Italy) which took place on the 3rd of October 2013, which resulted in the death of more than 360 children, women and men (mostly from Eritrea, Somalia and Ghana) (Amnesty International, 2014), the then president of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso stated: "*The kind of tragedy we have witnessed here so close to the coast should never happen again […] we need to strengthen our capacity for search and rescue, and our surveillance system to track boats, so that we can launch a rescue operation and bring people back to safe* grounds *before they perish*" (European Commission, 2013).

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[1] https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1629835128514961409

However, as reported by the Missing Migrants Project[2] (an initiative implemented since 2014 by the International Organization for Migration to record incidents in which migrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers, have died at state borders or in the process of migrating to an international destination), the Mediterranean Sea has become a site of escalating numbers of fatalities. The very search and rescue mission launched in response to the Lampedusa tragedy (Operation Mare Nostrum[3]) was shut down a year later over concern that the Italian navy ships only encouraged people to set out in the hope of being plucked from the sea (Cusumano, 2019) (Cuttitta, 2015) (Tazzioli & Walters, 2016). The Italian government has since then embarked on a systematic campaign to criminalise and impound civilian boats run by non-government organisation and charities for trying to save lives (European Court for Constitutional and Human Rights, 2024). In addition, Italy and the EU have signed lucrative agreements to provide vessels and equipment to the Libyan authorities to prevent people leaving their shores (Turkey, Tunisia and several other northern African countries also get financial support from the EU) (Cusumano, 2019).

There seems, therefore, to be a discrepancy between the EU's and its Member States' humanitarian principles enshrined under Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (European Union, 2016) and the policies they enact towards migration (Ceccorulli, 2021) (Karageorgiou & Noll, 2022). Scholars argue that these policies, primarily marked by efforts for the prevention of migratory flows and a depreciation of the effort to protect the life and health of migrants, do not reconcile with the EU principles of Humanity and Solidarity (Marin, Penasa, & Romeo, 2020) (Miglio, 2018). Policies at both EU and national level focus on stopping migrants reaching Europe's shores and increasingly introduce tough new laws tightening the rules on rescues (Cusumano, 2019) (Stierl, Rebel spirits at sea: Disrupting EUrope's weaponizing of time in maritime migration governance, 2023). Ten years after the Lampedusa tragedy, Europe has agreed to a new "Pact on Migration and Asylum" (European Union, 2024), one which several civil society organisations, researchers and experts fear that will further build a fortified Europe, increases migrants' vulnerability, does not seem to provide solutions for the safety and security of migrants and refugees arriving in Europe, and ultimately externalises and pushes the problem beyond the EU's borders (Conte & Yavcan, 2024), (International Rescue Committee, 2024), (Amnesty International, 2024).

This research will focus on the broader migration and border management policies enacted both at EU level and by Italy, analyse any discrepancy with the humanitarian principles, and understand if and how these are reflective of the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean.

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[2] https://missingmigrants.iom.int/
[3] http://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/operations/Pagine/MareNostrum.aspx

1.2.   Overview

The first chapter of this study introduces the context and motivation behind the research on migration and border control policies in the EU and Italy, with a focus on the tragic loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean over the past decade. Additionally, the personal connection to the topic is outlined, rooted in the researcher's experience as a second-generation migrant and a drive to explore inconsistencies in Europe's approach to migration.

The second chapter outlines the key focus areas of the research, which aim to address two main questions: the reasons behind the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea, and the alternative political and operational steps the EU and Italy could take to address this crisis. Discrepancies between humanitarian principles and migration policies are examined, drawing attention to the harsh realities faced by undocumented people traveling through the Mediterranean. These research questions are contextualized through an analysis of migration data.

The third chapter provides a literature review, analysing how humanitarian principles are reflected in the EU's political and operational approaches when addressing migration flows. The EU's approach to humanitarian assistance is introduced alongside policies shaping Italy's response to migration. Additionally, the concept of the 'maritime humanitarian space' is discussed, where actors are bound by search and rescue obligations as stipulated by international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982) and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS, 1974). Finally, the externalisation and securitisation of the EU's southern sea border is examined, focusing on its impact on NGOs, solidarity, and human rights in migration contexts.

The fourth chapter presents an overview of the research methodology. The chapter begins with a description of the research design and outlines the chosen methodology. It then details the use of semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from participants, describing the preparation process, including protocols and ethical considerations. Data collection and analysis methods are discussed, with an emphasis on thematic and comparative analysis to identify patterns and compare perspectives from different actors. Reflections on the interview process and study limitations are provided, highlighting the importance of personal interactions, challenges of maintaining anonymity, and the non-reproducibility of semi-structured interviews.

Chapter five presents key findings from the thematic and comparative analysis of the semi-structured interviews. Various perspectives on migration and border control policies, the causes of the tragic loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean, and the impact of externalisation and criminalisation practices are explored. Possible solutions and potential actions to mitigate this tragic loss are also analysed. Core themes that emerged during the analysis are discussed, offering a detailed examination of how political decisions, operational challenges, and policy shortcomings contribute to the ongoing crisis.

The final chapter concludes the document by examining the research findings to better understand the reasons behind the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea, and whether political and operational alternatives are available for the European Union and Italy to address this crisis. The limitations of the research are discussed, and suggestions for future research are provided.

1.3.   Research Motivation and Positionality

As described by the American sociologists John Lofland and Lyn Lofland (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), social research has a direct relationship with the researcher's life, intended as one's personal current biography or remote biography/personal history. The personal motivation is therefore recognised as key in both the choice of the subject of the social research study and the shaping and structuring the research objectives and methodology. Within this context, it is important to share the motivation behind the research study I have decided to undertake in partial fulfilment of the Masters' degree in Humanitarian Action.

I am a second-generation migrant, born in Italy from Iranian-Jewish parents who resettled in Italy at the end of the 1960's. I have been privileged enough to have safely moved around Europe, to study and work and have now settled in Portugal, where I work for the European Union (EU). I have always been a champion of the EU and its values of integration as enshrined in Article 2[4] of the Treaty on European Union (European Union, 2016), as well as all the opportunities it offers by bringing different cultures together. Nonetheless, the principles on which the European Union Member States have built this Union seem now to clash with the dramatic and systemic failings which are preventing human beings to safely reach European shores in search of freedom, peace and hope.

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[4] "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail".

It is for these reasons that I am eager to analyse the motives behind what I view as an inhumane parallel migration system which has erected an undemocratic wall around Europe. It will also help me better understand the stark contrast between the opportunities afforded to my family and me, and the ongoing dramatic loss of people's lives as they attempt to reach European shores, albeit under different circumstances.

This is therefore where the 'starting' position is established, a position that "*…provides the necessary meaningful linkages between the personal and emotional on the one hand, and the stringent intellectual operations to come on the other*" (Lofland & Lofland, 1995)[5]. The subject of this thesis is reflected in this starting position, as the migration and border control policies of the EU and Italy, along with the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea in the period 2015 to 2024, will be studied.

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[5] See page 13

RESEARCH PROJECT

2.1.   Research Questions

The research project will aim to tackle two main questions:

i)   Why are we witnessing the loss of lives of people in the Central Mediterranean Sea?

ii)   What political and operational alternatives may be available for the European Union and Italy to overcome this situation?

In regard to the first question, the Mediterranean Sea is neither inherently a 'dangerous nor deadly sea', it becomes one when people are 'unwanted and illegalised migrants' who primarily need to be policed and controlled (Dickson, 2020). For example, while the Mediterranean Sea is described in the media as treacherous, the European seas are becoming safer than ever. This can be deducted from the data and statistics published by the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) in its annual overview of marine casualties, which show that from 2014 to 2022, there was a total of 604 lives lost at sea (EMSA, 2023). The report published in 2023 describes how, after a continuous large decrease until 2017 when 45 fatalities were recorded, an increase up to 67 was recorded in 2019, while 43 fatalities were recorded in 2020, 36 in 2021 and 38 in 2022 (EMSA, 2023). This corresponds to an average of 68 fatalities per year over the period from 2014 to 2022 within all European waters.

When comparing the relatively low number of fatalities (604) reported by the European Maritime Safety Agency with the 25,749 deaths and disappearances documented in the Mediterranean Sea alone by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) within the Missing Migrants Project (Black, 2024) (for further details see Section 2.3.2 of this thesis) reveals (to me) an alarming, disturbing and deeply disquieting imbalance is revealed. The question arises: why do maritime incidents involving merchant and commercial vessels in European waters result in relatively few fatalities, while individuals attempting similar crossings endure significantly higher death tolls?

While merchant ships and commercial vessels operate under the robust protection of EU and international maritime safety regulations (EMSA, 2024), migrants are often left "vulnerable" (Hudson, 2018), navigating perilous conditions that make the Mediterranean Sea particularly deadly for them. This stark contrast may reflect a state of human inequality, whereby the sea is extremely safe for some, yet very dangerous for others (Tazzioli & Walters, 2016).

This troubling reality raises the question of whether there is a contradiction between the EU humanitarian principles (European Union, 2016) and the persistent loss of lives in the Central

Mediterranean, despite declarations from EU politicians (see for example Chapter 1). If this contradiction exists, it becomes crucial to investigate the underlying factors and reasons that contribute to this ongoing tragedy.

Now considering the second question, as a border country, Italy is at the centre of a complex challenge, balancing its responsibilities between managing migration and enforcing border control measures. Following decades of hard-line political decisions, it has installed a legislative and regulatory framework that dehumanises and endangers the lives of individuals and, in parallel, criminalises those human rights defenders who are engaged in sea-rescue missions (UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, 2023). Some examples include the recent Italian decree-law on 'urgent provisions for the management of migratory flows' (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2023), which requires civilian rescue ships to immediately proceed to a designated port, often a distant port, after each rescue, which delays search-and-rescue operations, and the declared 'state of emergency over migration' which allows the government to bypass parliament in emanating laws, even in derogation of previous legislation safeguarding the safety of migrants. The weakening of global and supranational governance structures, the violation of legal and institutional norms and processes, and the contravention of constitutional principles and international conventions (e.g. the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan and EU-Libya Agreement) are major factors putting at risk irregularised migrants and asylum seekers (Tazzioli, 2020) (Ott, 2020) (Moreno-Lax, 2017).

Their exposure, linked with the absence of an efficient asylum policy and the lack of an independent, transparent and effective monitoring mechanism, to ensure their accountability and consistency with international, regional and national treaties, laws and fundamental rights, can undermine the existing institutional agreements – and associated international instruments – which are used to manage refugee flows (Nicolosi, 2024) (Giuffre', 2013). Thus, the second research question will examine potential alternatives for how the EU and Italy might address this dramatic situation involving the death of people from both political and operational perspectives.

2.2.   Research Objectives

The main objective of this work is to analyse and understand the relationship between the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea and the migration and border control policies enacted by the EU and Italy, focusing on any potential discrepancies in adherence to humanitarian principles. A secondary objective is to explore possible solutions and analyse potential actions for change.

More specifically, in this thesis an understanding will be sought of how a new [political, moral and operational] framework can be identified which encompasses the harms people experienced as they flee their home countries and seek refuge elsewhere, thereby preventing the loss of lives. The crisis faced by these people must be comprehended by both international and national institutions, in order to develop more just responses in the future.

While this thesis addresses the loss of all lives, regardless of status or definition, different categories and hierarchies of people's deservingness in the context of a crisis have been explored by scholars. For example, Maria Kyriakidou (Kyriakidou, 2020) reflects on how societal narratives create distinctions between various groups of migrants, impacting their reception and the type of hospitality they receive (their "deservingness"). Kyriakidou's analysis underscores the need for a critical examination of these hierarchies to foster a more inclusive understanding of hospitality and solidarity in refugee contexts.

Furthermore, the late scholar Barbara Harrell-Bond (Harrell-Bond, 1986) argued that refugees are not dependent and passive, but rather that humanitarian institutions and political structures have created, and even demanded, the dependency of forced migrants upon donors and providers of assistance. Working towards a framework where refugees are empowered rather than victimised, one which recognises and respects the dignity of refugees rather than delegitimises their needs, and where international and institutional collaboration is in contraposition to mere ad-hoc cooperation or self-interest, is required.

2.3. Research Problem and Context

To contextualise the research problem, it is important to understand the definitions of international migrants and refugees. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defines an international migrant as "*any person who is outside a State of which they are a citizen or national, or, in the case of a stateless person, their State of birth or habitual residence*" (OHCHR, 2021)[6]. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM, 2024) describes "migrant" as an umbrella term encompassing anyone who moves away from their usual place of residence, either within a country or across borders, temporarily or permanently, and for various reasons. Under these definitions, individuals living away from home—including international students, expatriates, and workers of all socioeconomic backgrounds—are considered migrants.

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[6] See page 1.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) defines forced migration as "*Coerced departure of a person from his/her home or country due, e.g. to a risk of persecution or other form of serious or irreparable harm*" (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016)[7].

A refugee, on the other hand, is strictly defined in the Geneva Convention (United Nations, 1951) as someone who is fleeing persecution or conflict in their country of origin. The Convention outlines the rights of refugees and the obligations of states to protect them, including the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning refugees to places where their life or freedom is at risk. It emphasises the need to provide asylum and grant refugees access to legal rights, work, and social services. Thus, under the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees are entitled to comprehensive protection under international refugee law.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that international human rights law protects all individuals, regardless of their status. This principle is affirmed in the New York Declaration (United Nations, 2016), which highlights that there can be important overlaps in the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by people who move along similar routes, utilise the same forms of transport, and are exposed to human rights violations, abuse and xenophobia (United Nations, 2019). Moreover, despite the gradual expansion of refugee protections, many individuals are compelled to leave their homes for reasons outside the traditional refugee definitions, such as the adverse impacts of climate change food insecurity.

Notwithstanding these definitions, as previously stated, this thesis aims to avoid compartmentalising or categorising individuals based on rigid definitions. The focus remains on the loss of lives of all individuals, regardless of their status or categorisation. Therefore, the terms 'people' and 'individuals' are used throughout the text. However, when referencing other scholars or interviewees, their specific terminology will be applied.

2.3.1. Narratives vs Data on migrants and refugees

Migration has always been part of human history (de Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020) (Massey, et al., 1993). Nonetheless, in recent times it has been depicted and represented as a disrupting and abnormal event which has caused a significant and ongoing disruption to the ordinary course of social and economic activity (Martin, Weerasinghe, & Taylor, 2014).

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[7] See page 280.

This abnormality is referred to as a 'crisis' and, for example, recorded as unauthorised and irregular border-crossings at the European Union's external borders. However, as extensively analysed by the Greek sociologist Anna Triandafyllidou (Sahin-Mencutek, Barthoma, Gokalp-Aras, & Triandafyllidou, 2022), this very concept of crisis should be clarified and contested, and we should be asking more specifically a crisis of what and for whom? Is it a crisis for those seeking refuge in other countries? Is it a crisis for transit and destination countries because of an increase in migration and asylum flows? Is it a crisis of governance mechanisms, reception centres, welfare systems or border guard capacity?

Other scholars have also highlighted how the term 'crisis' is overused and systematically implies that 'refugees' or 'migrants' are the main cause of the 'crisis', rather than investigating the real causes of the emergency (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018) (Bello, 2022). In some other definitions (Carrera, Santos, & Strik, 2019) (Dines, Montagna, & Vacchelli, 2018), the notion of crisis is used as a signifier to explain its consequences on different actors and systems, see for example how the 2015 flow through Europe's Eastern Mediterranean route was described as the 'European refugee crisis' or the 'European humanitarian crisis'.

The most recent International Organisation for Migration (IOM) World Migration Report (McAuliffe & Ocho, 2024) describes how, at global level, international migration remains relatively uncommon, with a mere 3.6% (or 281 million people) in the whole world being international migrants. The report also shows that most international migration is safe, orderly and regular, and that while the percentage has indeed increased from 2.8% in the early 2000's, these low numbers are a testament to the fact that the vast majority of people do not move across borders to live.

Furthermore, scholars (de Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020) (Kivisto & Faist, 2010) have shown that rather than an overall global increase in migration, the most significant changes in migration patterns have been directional. More specifically one can see how in 1960's, Europeans accounted for 76% of intercontinental migrants, while this figure had dropped to 22% in the 2020's (de Haas, et al., 2019). In contrast, a growing proportion of intercontinental migrants now come from Africa, Latin America, and, notably, Asia (de Haas, et al., 2019)[8]. This shift aligns with the rise of Europe, the Gulf states, and certain East Asian countries as major migration destinations, while migration flows to Latin America and Africa have declined (de Haas, et al., 2019). Interestingly, it also highlights how the notion that international migration has surged and diversified primarily reflects a Western-centric perspective (de Haas, 2023).

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[8] See Figure 2.

However, numbers rather than percentages do show a different trend for refugees. As reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at the end of 2023 there were 37.6 million global refugees (UNHCR, 2024). This is the highest number since 1950, the first date of UNHCR available statistical data. This number does not include asylum seekers (6.9 million), other people in need of international protection (5.8 million), and more worryingly, the number of internally displaced persons (IDP), which currently amounts to a staggering 68.3 million people (UNHCR, 2024). Measured by the number of people who have been displaced from their homes by violence, war, climate change or other forceful catastrophic events, the total number of refugees adds up to 117.3 million people[9].

Data from the Capstone project[10] shows how by far the region with the largest percentage of (outgoing) refugees after the cold war[11] has been Asia (including from Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar and Syria), followed by the Great Horn of Africa (including from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan) and thereafter the rest of the African continent (Capstone, 2024). The populations of these regions have, in this period, been drastically affected by internal and regional conflicts as well as from natural catastrophes.
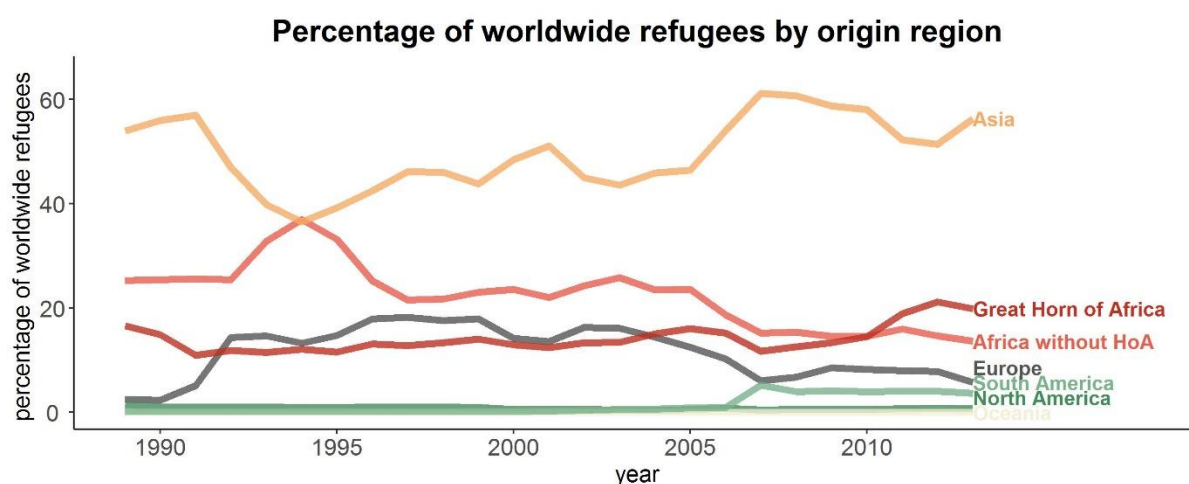
Figure 1 – Percentage of worldwide refugees by origin. Source: Capstone Project

Data from the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2024) show that in 2022 72% of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons originate from the following five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, Afghanistan and South Sudan. On the other hand, 36% of these refugees are hosted in only five countries: Turkey, Colombia, Germany, Pakistan and Uganda. Interestingly, this refugee flow sees that almost 70% of refugees and other people in need of international protection lived in countries neighbouring their countries of origin (UNHCR, 2024)[12].

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[9] The UNHCR website refers data up to 2023, see https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/.
[10] https://refugeemovements.com/main#page-top
[11] Refugee flows from Venezuela and Ukraine are not included in these statistics.
[12] See page: https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics

2.3.2. Missing Migrants

The data from the Missing Migrants Project, an initiative launched in 2014 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to track and document deaths and disappearances of individuals migrating internationally, is pivotal in assessing the human cost of migration and the significant risks that people face when on the move in the Mediterranean Sea (IOM, 2024). The project has been instrumental in moving beyond the often sensationalised portrayal of migration as merely a 'crisis' or 'emergency'. Instead, it underscores the need for systemic solutions that address the root causes of migration while upholding the rights of people (IOM, 2024).

Dead and missing by year

Year	Global	Mediterranean Sea
Total	67,938	30,204
2024	4,588	1,300
2023	8,606	3,155
2022	7,141	2,411
2021	6,201	2,048
2020	4,302	1,449
2019	5,420	1,885
2018	5,008	2,337
2017	6,290	3,139
2016	8,084	5,136
2015	6,750	4,055
2014	5,548	3,289

Year
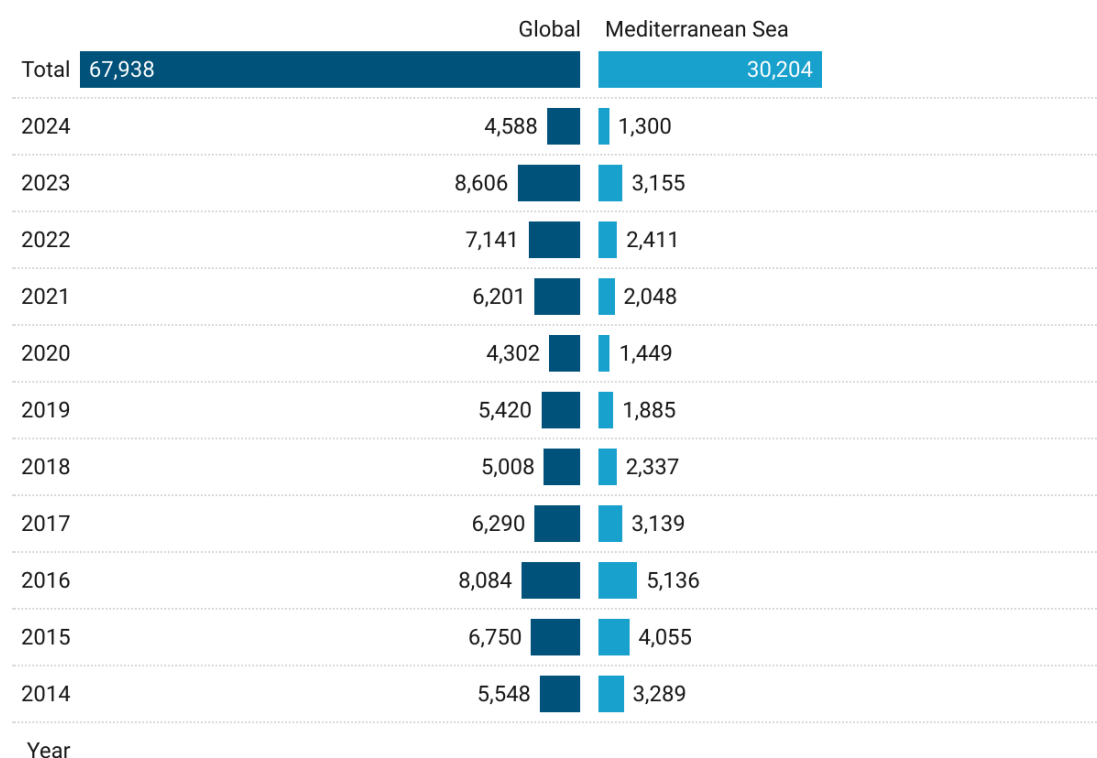
Figure 2 – Number of deaths and missing in the process of migration at global level and in the Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2024 (September). Source: IOM Missing Migrants Project, 2024.

Figures 2 shows the number of persons who have died or gone missing in the process of migration at global level and in the Mediterranean Sea (IOM, 2024). Figure 3 presents the numbers distributed across the Central, Western, and Eastern Mediterranean routes from 2014 to 2024 (IOM, 2024). The data underscores the Central Mediterranean route as the deadliest, with at least 21,288 lives lost since 2014. These stark figures suggest that the true crisis lies not in the management of migration flows but rather in the profound human tragedies experienced by the people lost at sea and their families.

Dead and missing in the Mediterranean Sea

■ Mediterranean Sea   ■ Central Mediterranean Sea
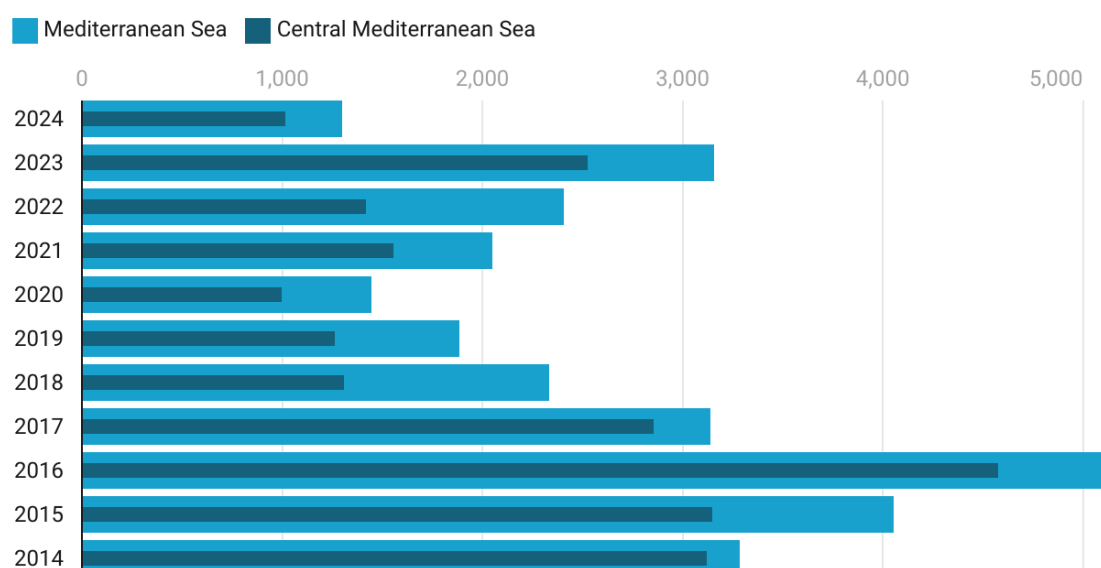
Total deaths in the Mediterranean Sea (by region)

Total Mediterranean Sea

30,204

Central

23,787
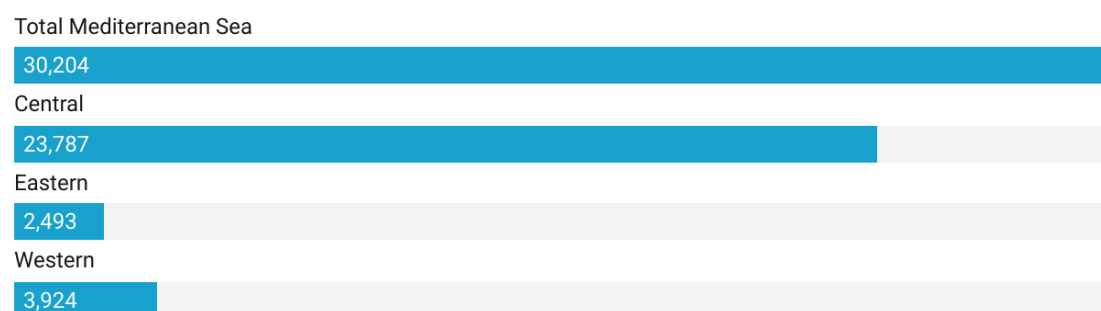
Eastern

2,493

Western

3,924

Figure 3 – Number of deaths and missing in the process of migration in the Mediterranean Sea and Central Mediterranean Sea, per year (top) and distribution between the Central, Western and Eastern Mediterranean routes from 2014 to 2024 (September (bottom)). Source: IOM Missing Migrants Project, 2024.

Figure 4 presents additional data from the IOM Missing Migrant Project, focusing on the causes of death and disappearance during migration in the Central Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2024. The data clearly shows that drowning is by far the most common cause, underscoring the significant risks migrants face on this route. This high incidence of drowning may be closely linked to the lack of adequate safety measures on overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels, as well as delays in rescue operations (Medicins Sans Frontieres, 2023). The challenges of timely search and rescue efforts, combined with insufficient coordination between coastal states and international organizations, may therefore be a significant contributing factor to the ongoing loss of life at sea (Hayden, 2022).

Accidental	39
Drowning	21,951
Harsh environmental conditions / lack of adequate shelter, food, water	265
Mixed or unknown	1,166
Sickness / lack of access to adequate healthcare	20
Vehicle accident / death linked to hazardous transport	299
Violence	47
Total	23,787

Figure 4 – Causes of death and missing in the process of migration in the Central Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2024 (September). Source: IOM Missing Migrants Project, 2024.

The data provided by the IOM Missing Migrants Project underscores the dramatic situation in the Central Mediterranean, where thousands of lives continue to be lost despite ongoing efforts. These figures demand a critical examination of the underlying reasons for this tragic trend. The high death toll, particularly from drowning, highlights the inadequate safety measures and insufficient coordination of rescue operations. This suggests a systemic failure to address the vulnerabilities of these people and the dangers they face on this perilous journey. If we are to reduce the number of deaths, it is therefore important to understand the structural and operational shortcomings.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Humanitarian Principles

First promoted in the 19th century, the core humanitarian principles of Humanity, Impartiality, and Independence remain the cornerstone of classic humanitarian action, assistance and response. These principles have shaped the narrative of humanitarian aid, a story rooted in the experiences of Henri Dunant at the Battle of Solferino in 1859. Dunant's observations of the suffering on the battlefield sparked the evolution of International Humanitarian Law and laid the foundation for humanitarianism as a principled effort (Allen, Macdonald, & Radice, 2018) (Labbe & Daudin, 2016). This classic humanitarianism is primarily organised around the concept of exceptionalism, which views humanitarian action as a response to crises and exceptional circumstances, intended as a temporary measure to meet urgent needs caused by specific crises, rather than a long-term or structural solution (Clahoun, 2010). These humanitarian principles are endorsed by two key UN General Assembly Resolutions (see (United Nations, 2003) and (United Nations, 1991)).

As the world's main humanitarian donor worldwide, the European Union (EU) plays an important role in responding to and addressing disasters and conflicts worldwide (EC, 2021). In 2024, the initial annual humanitarian budget amounted to 1.8 billion Euros, with this funding dedicated for countries outside of the EU (EC, 2024). The EU's humanitarian principles stem from the Red Cross Movement Fundamental Principles (ICRC-IFRC, 2020), and are central to the work of many humanitarian organisations, including the European Union. These principles are enshrined in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (European Union, 2008), which together with the Humanitarian Aid Regulation (European Union, 1996), define the EU's nature and mandate of humanitarian aid.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the principle of Humanity dictates that human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found with the purpose of humanitarian action being to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings (OCHA, 2012). While this thesis does not delve into the debates within humanitarianism concerning the interpretation of these principles, it is important to note that some scholars see Humanity as the least contentious of the core humanitarian principles (Fast, 2015). However, others argue that the concept is more complex, shaped by different interpretations, including those of the people humanitarians aim to assist, and by those who seek to exploit or undermine these notions (Allen, Macdonald, & Radice, 2018).

In the context of EU humanitarian efforts, the principle of Humanity, emphasises addressing human suffering, particular focussing on the most vulnerable populations (European Union, 2008). In addition, the EU defines humanitarian aid as a fundamental expression of the universal value of Solidarity between people and a moral imperative (European Union, 2008). This concept, vital both within and outside of borders, is a

fundamental value of the European Union that must be demonstrated towards all human beings across the world (EC, 2024).

Scholars (Stoddard, 2003) (Cusumano, 2019) (Cuttitta, 2018) have documented how various non-state actors embody different approaches to humanitarian principles, specifically in migration management. These differences are not unique to NGOs involved in Search and Rescue (SAR) operations but reflect broader divergences across the humanitarian sectors. Humanitarian organisations can be broadly categorised into four traditions based on their philosophical approaches:

1) The Henry Dunant Tradition: Named after the co-founder of the Red Cross, this category includes independent and neutral organisations that operate outside state influence, focusing on a needs-based approach.

2) The Woodrow Wilson Tradition: Named after the U.S. president during World War I, this category involves organisations that accept some degree of state influence and are pragmatic in reaching compromises to achieve their objectives.

3) The John Vincent Tradition: Named after the British historian, this group includes organisations that set aside neutrality and impartiality to advocate for victims' rights, adopting a rights-based approach.

4) Commercial/Market-Driven Tradition: This includes private organisations that rely exclusively on government funding and are economically driven in their objectives.

3.2. European Union Humanitarian and Migration Policies

The EU's humanitarian assistance framework is based on Article 21 of the "Treaty on European Union" (TEU —also known as the Treaty of Lisbon), that sets out the principles for all EU external action, covering humanitarian action, and on Article 214 of the "Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union" (TFEU), that constitute the legal basis for humanitarian aid (European Union, 2016). Thus, humanitarian aid is considered to respond to needs outside of the EU, a model that inherently runs into complexities when assistance, relief and protection is needed inside the EU territory.

In the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (European Union, 2008), the statement providing the overall policy framework for humanitarian assistance signed by the European Council, European Parliament and European Commission in 2007, the EU reaffirms its adherence to four core principles of humanitarian action (Neutrality, Humanity, Independence, and Impartiality) and to the respect of international humanitarian law. Enshrined in the 'Consensus', are the commitments to: 1) Preserve life; 2) Prevent and alleviate suffering, and 3) Help maintain human dignity in the face of natural hazards and human-induced disasters (European Union, 2008).

Migration policy, on the other hand, is an area of shared competence between the EU and its Member States. The 1999 Tampere Presidency Conclusions established a "Common European Asylum System, based on the full and inclusive application of the Geneva Convention" (European Council, 1999). Further to this, the

2005 Global Approach to Migration, revised in 2011 as the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility, set a framework for external cooperation on migration consisting of the following four pillars: i) legal migration and mobility; ii) irregular migration and trafficking in human beings; iii) international protection and asylum policy, and; iv) maximising the development impact of migration and mobility (European Commission, 2011). With the incorporation of the 1985 Schengen Agreement into European Union law, through the 1999 Amsterdam Treaty (European Union, 1997), the majority of EU Member states abolished internal border controls, thus allowing free movement of people and goods within the EU. Given that this agreement included non-EU citizens, it soon gave rise to a demagogic discussion on the protection of Europe's external borders, which has since dominated much of the migration (and related humanitarian assistance) policy debate (Gloninger, 2019).

The European Union is considered an area of protection for people fleeing persecution or serious harm in their country of origin, and asylum is a fundamental right and an international obligation to all Member States that are signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees. The Common European Asylum System (CEAS) (EC, 2024) sets out common standards and cooperation to ensure that asylum seekers are treated equally within the European Union. The system is governed by five legislative instruments and one agency: i) The Asylum Procedures Directive (European Union, 2013); ii) The Reception Conditions Directive (European Union, 2013); iii) The Qualification Directive (European Union, 2011); iv) The Dublin Regulation (European Union, 2013); v) The EURODAC Regulation (European Union, 2024), and; vi) the European Union Agency for Asylum (European Union, 2021). These instruments and agency have the objective of sharing equally between Member States the responsibility to welcome asylum seekers in a dignified manner, ensuring that they are treated fairly, and their case is examined following uniform standards. This also entails that, no matter where an applicant applies, the outcome should be similar (European Union, 1997).

But what is the relationship between humanitarian action and migration policies? The French anthropologist Michel Agier noted how humanitarian action "*increasingly finds itself, if not systematically 'trapped', at least included a priori in the control strategies of migratory flows of all kinds*" (Agier, 2011)[13]. The emergence of a humanitarian-security nexus in the control and surveillance of the EU's external maritime borders was highlighted by Ruben Andersson (Andersson, 2018), who noted that humanitarianism is used as a key justification for controls at social, legal, political and even financial levels, with far-reaching consequences for migrants.

We have seen throughout history that migration is a response to diverse types of crises, including political, economic, socio-demographic, and environmental ones (de Haas, 2023) (Kivisto & Faist, 2010) (de Haas, et al., 2019). Within this context the Mediterranean region has historically been an important region for mobility

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[13] See page 33.

involving populations from Western Asian, North African and European states (de Haas, Castles, & Miller, 2020) (McAuliffe & Ocho, 2024). During the last two decades the Mediterranean has seen an increase in migration due to the incumbency of several crises, including - inter-alia - the conflicts in the Balkans, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and the Central African Republic as well as other environmental-economic disruptions due to climate change (Werz & Hofman, 2017). For example, data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that the number of registered refugees and asylum seekers in the Mediterranean region increased by a factor of eight from 2000 to 2020, with 93% of this population originating from Syria alone in 2020 (Benassi, Carella, & Heins, 2022). This increase is accompanied by new migratory routes, which in many instances, become more dangerous and deadly, many of which include the desperate voyage through the Mediterranean Sea to reach the European southern shores of Italy, Malta, Spain or Greece.

After many years of discussion, the EU Member States have recently reached a political agreement on a new Asylum and Migration Pact (European Council, 2023). While the proposal codifies a solidarity mechanism in EU law, critics suggest that there will be an increase in responsibility for those countries at the borders (Amnesty International, 2024).

3.3. Migration, Securitisation and Externalisation of the EU Border

In response to the series of tragedies occurring in the Strait of Sicily during the early 2010's, particularly the Lampedusa shipwreck, Italy launched the 'Mare Nostrum' operation in 2013. This military and civil mission aimed to safeguard human life at sea and combat migrant smuggling (Marina Militare, 2018). Although the operation was indeed successful in rescuing many lives, the large number of people—including migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—arriving in Italy, which the government viewed as unmanageable due to political pressures, ultimately led to its termination (Amnesty International, 2014) (Cusumano & Villa, 2020). Following the closure of Mare Nostrum, the Italian government appealed to the EU institutions for a coordinated EU-wide response, calling for an effective and common system at EU level (Tazzioli, 2016).

This request contributed to the EU's growing focus on fortifying its external sea borders, leading to expansion of the European Border and Coastguard Agency (Frontex) role in managing the EU border. This shift placed border security as the primary objective, with search and rescue becoming a secondary concern (Gloninger, 2019). In response, the EU launched Operation Triton in November 2014, under Frontex's leadership. Unlike Mare Nostrum, Triton focused on border control rather than humanitarian rescue, operating within a more restricted operational area and with fewer resources dedicated to search and rescue (Tazzioli, 2016).

Initially, Triton's jurisdiction extended only to 30 nautical miles off the Italian coast, a limitation that raised concerns among humanitarian organisations about the potential rise in people's deaths (Amnesty International, 2014). When crossings surged in 2015, driven by conflicts in Syria and elsewhere, Triton's

resources proved inadequate to manage this perceived crisis (Cusumano, 2019). Under pressure from Italy and other frontline Member States, the EU bolstered Triton's capacity and scope, and launched additional missions, such as Operation Sophia in 2015, which aimed to disrupt human smuggling networks in the Mediterranean (Cusumano, 2019).

Operation Sophia, also known as the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med), further underscored the EU's shift toward a securitised approach. Although the mission included a mandate to rescue people, its primary goal was to target smugglers, reflecting ongoing tension between humanitarian concerns and border security objectives (Cusumano, 2019).

This process of securitisation—where actors with sufficient political and military authority identify external threats to the State and/or society and implement extraordinary measures in response—has contributed to the rise of the 'Fortress Europe' narrative (Ghezelbash, Moreno-Lax, Klein, & Opeskin, 2018) (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021). Under this framework, people are deprived of their rights under international law and labelled 'irregular' and 'illegal'. As a result, the involvement of military forces in migration governance has become normalised and unchallenged (Bello, 2022), (Panebianco, 2020) (Kinacioglu, 2023).

Notably, securitisation reframes interdiction as an ethically justifiable practice under the guise of 'rescue'. What could be seen as a potentially harmful or lethal means of border control is instead portrayed as a life-saving operation. This 'rescue-through-interdiction' or 'rescue-without-protection' approach shifts the role of human rights, transforming them from safeguards against interdiction into tools of securitisation and humanitarianization efforts (Moreno-Lax, 2017).

Additionally, the European Union has pursued externalisation of its migration and control practices, aiming to manage migration flows and enforce migration policies beyond its own borders (Nicolosi, 2024). Externalisation includes measures such as delegating border control to other countries, forming agreements with neighbouring or transit nations to intercept people without adequate documentation before they reach European shores, and offering aid or incentives to reduce migration flows. For example, the EU has made agreements with several third countries, including Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Türkiye and Niger to manage (reduce?) migration to Europe and assist with resettlement, relocation and repatriation programmes (Sparks, 2023). Independent studies estimate that nearly 13 billion Euros were spent from 2014 to 2020 to support the externalisation of EU migration measures (European Parliament, 2022), though this figure may be higher due to transparency issue (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2021).

Within this context, Italy proposed a political and economic agreement with Libya to establish an 'integrated border and migration management' programme. The Action Fiche of the EU Emergency Trust Fund and the Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding[14], led to the establishment of the Libyan SAR Zone

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[14] Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the fields of development, the fight against illegal immigration, human trafficking and fuel smuggling and on reinforcing the security of borders between the State of Libya and the Italian Republic: https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/MEMORANDUM_translation_finalversion.doc.pdf

(which did not exist before[15]) and the creation of the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Tripoli. This agreement is seen as a clear example of externalisation, absolving the EU of responsibility for the humanitarian consequences (Casajuana & Pintus, 2023). The agreement empowered Libyan authorities to intercept people in open sea and return them to Libya (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Scholars have highlighted Italy's and the EU's responsibility in providing the authorities of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) with the necessary resources (e.g. assets as well as training programmes), fully aware that their actions would lead to forced collective returns or push backs (Cusumano & Riddervold, 2023). These pushbacks are viewed as violations of international law (Palm, 2017) (Giuffre', 2013) (Markard, 2016). Reports by the UN Security Council in 2017 and 2018 revealed that the 'Libyan Coast Guard', funded by the EU, was linked to militias involved in human rights violations and abuses against people (United Nations, 2017) (United Nations, 2018). Other studies have extensively documented the widespread detention, abuse, and murder of marginalised refugee communities in Libya (Hayden, 2022) (Stierl & Tazzioli, 2022).

3.4. Italy's Policies on Migration

The willingness of EU Member States to provide humanitarian support in response to migration pressures varies widely. Italy, as frontline state, has adopted a unique approach to migration management, with policies that reflect both its geographical position and political priorities (Palm & Barana, 2019). Over the past two decades Italy has been a vocal advocate for both restrictive measures and the sharing of the migration burden with other EU countries. However, despite repeated calls for EU solidarity, Italy's migration policies have increasingly focused on deterrence, criminalising humanitarian efforts, restricting non-governmental organisation operations, and externalising border management (Terlizzi, 2019).

Since 2010, Italy has introduced several laws aimed at restricting the entry and stay of undocumented people, often in response to fluctuating migration flows across the Mediterranean (Fedorova & Shupert, 2020) (Cusumano & Villa, 2021) (Perkowski, Stierl, & Burridge, 2023). A key aspect of Italy's evolving migration strategy has been the externalisation of border controls, exemplified by the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding with Libya (Punzo & Scaglione, 2024). This agreement outsourced migration management to Libya, a country where human rights abuses are well-documented, in return of funding, and technical and operational assets and training for the newly constituted Libyan Coast Guard (Hayden, 2022). While this approach succeeded in reducing arrivals between 2019 and 2021, it also pushed people towards more dangerous routes, increasing the risk of death at sea (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

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[15] To be noted that the Libyan SAR Zone, agreed hastily at IMO level, is unusually large for a state with little to no experience in maritime rescue coordination activities.

Domestically, Italy has also enacted domestic policies that hinder the work of NGOs engaged in search and rescue (SAR) missions (Cusumano & Villa, 2021). In 2017, the then Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti, with EU support, introduced a controversial 'Code of Conduct for NGOs' involved in search and rescue activities, which significantly restricted SAR operations (Punzo & Scaglione, 2024).

A further pivotal moment occurred in 2019 when former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini introduced the Security Decree, focussing 'on combating illegal immigration and public order and security' (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2019). This decree heavily penalised NGOs for bringing rescued migrants to Italian shores, imposing hefty fines on ships conducting SAR missions and restricting access to Italian ports. Critics, including NGOs, civil society, academics, and some politicians, argued that these measures placed migrant lives at further risk. The decree also redefined the concept of 'safe harbour' and expanded deterrent actions to a range of actors engaged in sea rescues along the Central Mediterranean route, including not only NGOs, but also merchant ships, Frontex naval assets, and the Italian Coast Guard (Villa, 2018).

In 2023, further restrictions were introduced under the Piantedosi emergency decree, named after Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi. The law limited NGO operations by requiring them to dock at assigned ports—often far from the rescue zones—and submit detailed reports to authorities before being permitted to continue their missions (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2023). Critics argue that this decree deliberately obstructs humanitarian efforts, leading to more deaths at sea as fewer rescue assets are available where needed most (Amnesty International, 2023). This policy appears part of a broader political agenda aimed at deterring migration by making it harder for NGO to offer assistance.

Italy's externalisation strategy continued with the 2023 'Italy-Albania Protocol which established migrant camps in Albania for those intercepted en-route to Italy (Ministero degli Esteri, 2023). Unlike the earlier Libya deal, this agreement allows Italy to exercise jurisdiction in Albanian territory (Nicolosi, 2024) in exchange of 600 Million Euros from 2024 to 2028 (Bocchini, 2024). This move further shifts migration management outside the EU, and critics argue it raises ethical concerns, risking the placement of people in unsafe conditions and could potentially violating international law, particularly the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning individuals to places where they face serious harm (Rosina & Fontana, 2024) (Carrera, Campesi, & Colombi, 2023).

These policies have created a legal and political environment where NGOs, key players in supporting SAR operations, face increasing hostility and criminalisation. While Italy's measures have reduced arrivals since 2017, the numbers have risen again, with 2023 seeing 157,652 arrivals compared to 117, 153 in 2017 (Statista, 2024). More importantly, this has been achieved through various policies of extraterritorial migration management (externalisation) and restrictive border practices, which hinder efforts to alleviate the human cost of the migration crisis (Niemann & Zaun, 2023). Italy's migration policies exemplify the tension between national security concerns and humanitarian and legal obligations, leaving many lives at risk in the process.

3.5. The Principles of Search and Rescue at Sea

The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) (International Maritime Organisation, 1974), the International Convention on Search and Rescue (SAR Convention) (International Maritime Organisation, 1979), and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (United Nations, 1982) form the legal framework regulating the safety, assistance and rescue operations at sea. The SAR Convention mandates that all vessel and their masters must assist persons in distress at sea, irrespective of nationality or status, reinforcing that the duty to rescue is independent of a person's migratory status (Miron, Taxil, Petit-Prevost, & Diallo, 2020). Moreover, survivors of rescue at sea operations are to be considered potential asylum seekers (Esperti, 2020). This aligns the concept of rescue at sea with philosopher Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998), which refers to the reduction of individuals to mere biological existence and survival, devoid of the rights and protections associated with 'full human life' (Agamben, 1998).

SOLAS and UNCLOS also require coastal states to promote the establishment, operation and maintenance of adequate and effective search and rescue services and also cooperate with neighbouring states (International Maritime Organisation, 1974) (United Nations, 1982). Additionally, the 'Guidelines on the Treatment of Persons Rescued at Sea' issued in 2004 by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), require the responsible state to ensure that survivors are disembarked in a place of safety (International Maritime Organisation, 2004). These Guidelines also stipulate that rescued people should not be disembarked in territories where they may face persecution (Ghezelbash, Moreno-Lax, Klein, & Opeskin, 2018).

The Dublin Regulation has effectively complicated SAR efforts by making the first EU state of entry responsible for processing asylum claims (European Union, 2013). As a result, coastal states have become increasingly hesitant to disembark people intercepted at sea, sometimes resorting to "push-backs" without assessing asylum claims (Moreno-Lax, 2017).

Interestingly, scholars have pointed out that SAR operations, culminating in the disembarkation of people in a signatory country of the Geneva Convention II, are inherently inclusive as they effectively allow the rescued people to enter European territory (Esperti, 2020). This inclusivity, critics argue, has prompted European Union institutions and Member States to externalise border controls, moving them beyond EU waters, and to securitise and criminalise SAR operations, as can be seen in Italy's government campaign against NGOs conducting SAR activities in the Mediterranean (Niemann & Zaun, 2023) (Cusumano & Villa, 2021) (Ghezelbash, Moreno-Lax, Klein, & Opeskin, 2018).

While SAR responsibilities legally fall on states under the SAR Convention, UNCLOS and SOLAS, the EU has intervened, framing SAR operations as matters of border security. This is reflected the growing role of the European Border and Coastguard Agency (Frontex) and in joint-military operations which have been

launched to 'defend' EU borders (namely EU-NAVFOR MED, EU-NAVFOR SOPHIA, TRITON, etc.) (European Parliament, 2021). In parallel, Italy has faced significant pressure to manage migration and SAR operations, deploying both vessels and military (navy) and civil (coastguard) resources (Cusumano, 2019) (Cuttitta, 2020).

3.6.   The 'Maritime Human Space'

The merger of search and rescue (SAR) activities at sea with border security has increasingly been pursued by the European Union and its Member States (Moreno-Lax, 2017). A gradual shift in focus from SAR to border control has taken place, with rescue efforts reframed as incidental to the patrolling and anti-criminal surveillance of the seas, while the arrival of undocumented individuals is considered as a threat to be managed (Bello, 2022) (Vives, Banos, Martel, Rose Hessek, & Williams, 2024). Within the architecture of migration, the sea is positioned as a 'moral alibi', and portrayed as a hostile, lawless space beyond sovereignty and justice (Doty, 2011) (Roepstorff, 2019) (Stierl, 2016), despite it being increasingly navigated, monitored and secured (Squire, 2017). Furthermore, many politicians depict rescue and response operations as pull factors that encourage risky journeys (Dickson, 2020).

The concept of 'Maritime Human Space' has been developed to articulate how the Mediterranean is framed as a "*fatal materiality that has the capacity to conceal the political violence of programmes of mobility control*" where human lives, migration, and political control intersect (Dickson, 2020)[16]. This framing goes beyond the physical dangers of the sea, showing how the maritime environment is used by political actors— including the EU and Frontex—to justify limited rescue operations and downplay the political violence underlying migration control. By characterising the Mediterranean as inherently perilous, and responsibility for people's fatalities is symbolically shifted onto the sea itself, thus concealing the role of border enforcement in generating these risks.

In this way the 'Maritime Human Space' is defined as more than a d geographical boundary but as a political construct where sovereignty, selective humanitarianism, and exclusionary practices converge. The Mediterranean is transformed into a regulated yet ungovernable expanse, where the death of individuals is anticipated and embedded within the framework of migration control itself. This logic aligns with the notion of using natural geography as a 'moral alibi', allowing governing bodies to be exonerated from accountability by attributing migrant deaths to the inherent dangers of the sea rather than restrictive policies (Doty, 2011). However, as previously noted, the Mediterranean Sea is neither inherently a 'dangerous nor deadly sea'; it becomes one when individuals are perceived as unwanted and illegal, requiring policing and control. Consequently, the programmes designed to regulate mobility in the Mediterranean do not function to make this sea safer for people; instead, as these security initiatives expand, the sea is transformed into an increasingly fatal maritime human space. This transformation represents more than a site of death, it

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[16] See page 1007.

embodies an assumed fatality that obscures the political violence inherent in mobility control programmes (Dickson, 2020).

3.7. The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

The vacuum left by EU institutions and Member States in delivering a humanitarian response to migrants has been increasingly filled by civil society organisations (Esperti, 2020) (Cusumano, 2017). Despite the NGO sector's vital role in saving and protecting migrants, these efforts have been systematically criminalised over the last decade (Mainwaring & DeBono, 2021). NGOs have often supplemented and, in some cases, replaced national and inter-governmental organisations in undertaking search and rescue (SAR) operations, especially in the Mediterranean (Cusumano & Villa, 2021).

Several NGOs have played a particularly prominent role in SAR activities in the Mediterranean, with organisations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), and Sea-Watch standing out in recent years.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF[17]) is a globally recognised humanitarian organisation that provides medical care in crisis situations. In the Mediterranean, MSF has been active in SAR operations since 2015, focusing on offering medical and psychological assistance to migrants and refugees attempting the perilous sea crossing. MSF's rescue missions, conducted on vessels such as the *Geo Barents*, align with their broader mission of providing emergency aid regardless of political, religious, or ideological affiliations. Notably, MSF refuses EU funding to maintain its independence and uphold its human rights positions, particularly its rejection of forced repatriation and refoulement.

Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS[18]) was founded in Malta in 2014 and was one of the first NGOs to conduct SAR missions in the Central Mediterranean. Operating vessels such as the *Phoenix* and *Topaz Responder*, MOAS partnered with other NGOs and international bodies to assist boats in distress. Though MOAS has shifted its focus to other humanitarian needs globally, it played a foundational role in shaping the humanitarian response to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean.

Sea-Watch[19] was founded in Germany in 2015 and is a staunchly independent organisation that operates based on neutrality and impartiality. Guided by the belief that saving lives is both a moral and legal obligation under international maritime law, Sea-Watch frequently criticises the European governments' insufficient responses to the migration crisis. Sea-Watch not only conducts SAR missions with vessels like *Sea-Watch 3* and *Sea-Watch 4*, but it also engages in aerial surveillance through *Sea-Watch Air* to monitor and report emergencies at sea.

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[17] https://www.msf.org/
[18] https://www.moas.eu/
[19] https://sea-watch.org/

The Italian scholar Paolo Cuttitta has analysed the working methods and narratives of these organisations, highlighting the tensions between their humanitarian missions and the broader political landscape of migration management (Cuttitta, 2018). His research raises, inter-alia, two key questions: a) Can these NGOs truly maintain political neutrality? and b) How compatible are their actions with the principles of Humanity, Solidarity, Neutrality, Impartiality, and Independence?

MOAS adopts a more diplomatic stance, striving to keep politics out of its rescue operations (MOAS, 2015) (MOAS, 2024). MSF, by contrast, argues that humanitarian work is inherently political, especially in the context of migration (Del Valle, 2016). MSF stresses the need to offer viable asylum options and actively rejects policies like forced repatriation, which compromise human rights. Meanwhile, Sea-Watch is even more politically engaged, advocating for systemic changes and pressuring political actors to establish a fully recognised civil SAR service to rectify the failings of the current security-focused system (Sea Watch, 2024).

Several other NGOs also play crucial roles in SAR operations in the Mediterranean, including inter-alia, SOS Méditerranée[20], Open Arms[21] and Emergency[22].

Founded in 2015, SOS Méditerranée is an apolitical European humanitarian organisation operating under the principles of neutrality and impartiality. SOS Méditerranée's mission is to save lives, provide emergency assistance, and protect the dignity of those rescued. The organisation operates the *Ocean Viking*, a state-of-the-art rescue vessel that has saved tens of thousands of lives. In addition to its life-saving work, SOS Méditerranée engages in public advocacy and educational initiatives to raise awareness about the Mediterranean migration crisis.

Open Arms is a Spanish NGO founded in 2015, Open Arms is dedicated to protecting life at sea and emphasises the moral and legal duty to rescue those in danger, regardless of political boundaries. The organisation operates rescue vessels such as *Open Arms* and *Astral*, and also conducts aerial surveillance to monitor distress situations. Open Arms is firmly grounded in humanitarian values and remains apolitical, focusing solely on the need to protect and assist those in danger at sea.

Emergency is another vital actor in in search and rescue SAR operations. Founded in 1994, this Italian NGO provides free medical care to individuals victims of war, landmines, and poverty. In the context of the Mediterranean, Emergency operates the *Life Support*, a rescue ship that offers both search and rescue services and urgent medical assistance to those rescued from perilous situations in the central Mediterranean Sea. Emergency's commitment is rooted in the belief that every person deserves dignity and care, regardless of their circumstances. Its operations in the Mediterranean Sea focus on those whose rights—first and foremost the right to life—are neither recognised nor protected.

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[20] https://www.sosmediterranee.org/
[21] https://www.openarms.es/en
[22] https://www.emergency.it/progetti/nave-life-support/

NGO's has played an indispensable role in filling the humanitarian gap left by EU institutions and Member States in the Mediterranean migration crisis. However, the increasing criminalisation of NGOs raises serious ethical and operational challenges. While organisations like MSF, MOAS, Sea-Watch, SOS Méditerranée, and Open Arms strive to uphold humanitarian principles, their involvement also brings to light the political complexities of migration management. Their work challenges the humanitarian principle of Neutrality, bringing in the need to assume a political positionality and highlights the need for a more coordinated, state-led approach to both rescue operations and the broader migration crisis. The ongoing tension between humanitarian and political objectives underscores the need for a re-evaluation of the EU's approach to managing irregular migration, as the Mediterranean Sea is turned into a political stage where NGO's face contradictions and people continue to perish (Cuttitta, 2018) (Stierl, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Paradigms and Methodological Framework

The US academic John Creswell defined research designs as "*the plans and the procedures for research that span the decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis*" (Creswell, 2009)[23]. The selection of a research philosophy is therefore informed by several key considerations including the researcher's own assumptions, the nature of the research problem, strategies of research, methods of data collection and analysis, audience of the study, and more. Creswell groups these considerations into four different paradigms, or 'worldviews: i) positivism (or post- positivism); ii) constructivism; iii) advocacy/participatory, and; iv) pragmatism.

Postpositivism	Constructivism
• Determination	• Understanding
• Reductionism	• Multiple participant meanings
• Empirical observation and measurement	• Social and historical construction
• Theory verification	• Theory generation
Advocacy/Participatory	**Pragmatism**
• Political	• Consequence of actions
• Empowerment issue-oriented	• Problem-centred
• Collaborative	• Pluralistic
• Change-oriented	• Real-world practice oriented

Figure 4 - Research design worldview types. Source: Creswell, 2009.

This research project aligns with two specific worldviews: i) Constructivism, which seeks to understand the political, operational, social and humanitarian contexts of the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea through direct engagement, and; ii) Advocacy/Participatory, which aims to create a collaborative platform for conducting research 'with others' (as opposed to 'on others') to foster political debate and drive change.

A sound methodology is crucial for rigorous research. Charles Ragin asserts that no 'correct' way of conducting research exists, as researchers will adopt specific strategies to achieve their goals (Ragin, 1994). He identified three main methodologies: i) qualitative methods (to study commonalities); ii) comparative methods (to study diversity), and; iii) quantitative methods (to study relationships among variables) (Ragin,

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[23] See page 5.

1994). Ragin expands beyond traditional qualitative vs quantitative dichotomy by adding the comparative method.

As previously mentioned, the main objective of this work is to analyse and understand the relationship between the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea and the migration and border control policies enacted by the EU and Italy, focusing on any potential discrepancies in adherence to humanitarian principles. A secondary objective is to explore possible solutions and analyse potential actions for change.

These objectives imply that no single research strategy can suffice, and rather a mixture of Qualitative and Comparative is best placed. This approach aligns with Alan Bryman's work, which discussed tailoring research methods to fit guiding questions. Bryman emphasises the relevance of mixed-method research, stating that both qualitative and comparative research can be persuasive when appropriately set up (Bryman, 2007).

Ultimately, the goals of this research project indicate that a constructive and participatory mixed-method approach is most suitable for this study, which will start with a thorough literature review[24], and will be followed by a set of semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2012) with relevant stakeholders and a subsequent qualitative thematic and comparative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (Ragin, 1994) (additional details are provided in the next sections).

To cover all facets of the research objectives, the literature review will include, inter-alia, EU and Italian migration and border control policies, securitisation of migration, externalisation of border management, rescue at sea law and operation, as well as the criminalisation of solidarity towards undocumented people and search and rescue activities. By reviewing relevant literature, the study identifies the current knowledge and align the findings from the interviews with established theories and previous research. This strengthens the analysis in policy adherence and informs the discussion on potential solutions.

The semi-structured interviews will seek first-hand information and reflections from key stakeholders, including public administrations, operational actors, migration scholars and civil society. These will include discussing perspectives on: i) EU and Italy migration and border control policies; Causes for the loss of lives and operational measures to save lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea; Externalisation and Criminalisation Practices; and iv) Possible alternatives available to limit the loss of lives. The interviews will provide insights into the perceived effectiveness of current EU and Italian policies, identify underlying causes of migrant deaths, and explore potential solutions. This directly supports the objectives of analysing discrepancies in humanitarian adherence and exploring actions for change.

Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis Framework will be employed to identify patterns and themes in the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This widely used approach provides a systematic method that involves familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes,

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[24] It should be noted that while the literature review plays an important role in this thesis, it is not considered a research methodology in itself.

naming themes, and producing the final synthesis. This framework strengthens the thematic analysis by grounding it in a clear, repeatable process. A comparative analysis will also be conducted to assess differences and similarities across the perspectives of various stakeholders (Creswell, 2009)[25]. This step is critical for achieving the research objectives, as it allows for a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between policies and their humanitarian outcomes.

4.2.   Semi-Structured Interview Design

Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research due to their balance between structured and flexible approaches. They provide researchers with a framework of questions while allowing participants the freedom to express their views in depth (Bryman, 2012). This method promotes rich data collection as it enables the exploration of complex phenomena from the participants' perspectives (Adams, 2015). Additionally, semi-structured interviews offer the opportunity to probe for further clarification, which leads to a deeper understanding of the topic under investigation (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews are based on using predetermined questions, but even so, the interviewer is free to ask more questions for clarifications and can modify the wording of the questions and explore new paths to gain research purpose (Taherdoost, 2022).

The semi-structured interviews were planned through several steps: the research protocol was prepared, the informed consent was drafted, the interview script (including the preamble) was written, the personal data protection protocol was implemented, participants were selected, and the ethical conduct form was submitted to the ISCTE ethics committee (Bolderston, 2012) (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Examples of the informed consent form and the interview script are available in Annexes A and B.

In designing and preparing the interview script for this research project, the focus was placed on three key elements: purpose, explanations and questions. The interviews were organised around a topic guide that included four broad themes, each with a corresponding set of questions that formed the basis of the discussions between the interviewer and the participant/respondent. As seen in Annex B, the interviews were structured to begin with relatively open-ended questions, follow-up by more focussed and probing questions, used to specify or redirect the conversation as necessary.

4.3.   Interviewees

The interviewees for this research project comprised a diverse range of representatives from several key European and Italian institutions and organisations, including the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission (EC), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Università di Messina, Università di Bologna, and Alarm Phone.

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[25] Section 4.4 contains more details on the qualitative method of analysis applied.

ID	Institution	Type	Years of Experience	Gender
1	European Commission	EU Institution	>15	Male
2	European Border and Coast Guard Agency	EU Institution	>15	Male
3	International Organisation for Migration	Intergovernmental Organisation (Global)	0>5	Female
4	European Parliament	EU Institution	>15	Female
5	Università di Messina, Italy	Academia	>15	Male
6	European Commission	EU Institution	5>10	Female
7	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain & International Organisation for Migration	Academia & Intergovernmental organisation	5>10	Female
8	Università di Bologna & Alarm Phone	Academia & NGO	0>5	Female
9	European Parliament	EU Institution	>15	Male

Figure 5 - Anonymised interviewee details.

When the interviewees were selected for this research project, careful consideration was given to ensuring a diverse representation of key stakeholders involved in the governance, operations, and humanitarian aspects of migration within both the European and Italian contexts. The rationale for choosing participants from institutions such as the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission (EC), and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) was based on their direct involvement in the formulation, implementation, and oversight of migration and border control policies at the European level. These organisations play a crucial role in both policymaking and operational actions, particularly in the Mediterranean region, making their insights essential to understanding the broader institutional and regulatory framework.

Representatives from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) were included due to their critical role in managing migration globally and specifically for their management of the Missing Migrants Project. This initiative places the IOM in an ideal position to provide key insights into the human cost of migration, as comprehensive data on people's deaths and disappearances is maintained, offering a humanitarian perspective that is crucial for understanding the challenges of migration in the Mediterranean region. The involvement of academics from the Università di Messina and the Università di Bologna provided scholarly perspectives, offering insights into how migration policies are shaped by legal frameworks and sociopolitical factors, particularly in Italy. Alarm Phone was included to provide a humanitarian NGO

perspective, particularly regarding search and rescue (SAR) operations. Their direct involvement in monitoring sea operations and assisting migrants added critical depth to the understanding of operational challenges and ethical considerations in SAR activities.

However, it should be noted that the number of interviewees was limited by several factors, including the availability of representatives and the scope of the research. Although a broader set of interviews would have been ideal, particularly with more NGOs and Italian national authorities, practical constraints such as limited time and stakeholder availability had to be considered. The absence of a stronger NGO presence was particularly unfortunate, as their frontline experiences would have further enriched the analysis.

Furthermore, the absence of Italian authorities, at both the political and operational levels, was identified as a notable limitation. Despite multiple requests sent to the Italian Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Transport, and the Italian Coast Guard, none accepted the invitation to participate. This lack of engagement is especially significant given Italy's pivotal role in Mediterranean migration and border control. Informal and private conversations revealed that representatives from Italian public authorities generally prefer to minimise or avoid contact with researchers, as well as with the media and the general public, which may explain their reluctance to participate.

Ultimately, the interviewees were selected for their relevance to the research questions, their roles in shaping and executing migration and border control policies, and their ability to provide firsthand knowledge of the complex interplay between policy, operations, and humanitarian considerations in the Mediterranean Sea region.

4.4. Data Collection and Method of Analysis

All Interviews were conducted online, each lasting no more than 2 hours and were video recorded. The recordings ensured that responses were captured in verbatim, and allowed follow-up questions to be posed without the need for extensive note-taking. After each interview, notes were written summarising key moments, the relationship with the participant, and analytical content.

The qualitative analysis of the interviews employed both thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and comparative analysis approaches (Ragin, 1981). Thematic analysis was initially applied to familiarise with the data, systematically code and categorise it, identifying key themes such as policy formulation, operational challenges, and humanitarian issues. The interview data was transcribed and grouped into thematic clusters (Creswell, 2009) to provide a deeper understanding of migration governance in the EU and Italy and its operational implications.

This thematic analysis was manually conducted by thoroughly reviewing and re-reading the transcriptions, identifying patterns, and then grouping those patterns into themes. Traditional tools such as highlighters, mind maps and sticky notes were used to track and organise the codes and themes.

Additionally, the comparative analysis was carried out to explore differences and similarities across the perspectives of the interviewees. Insights from different institutions, such as the European Parliament, European Commission, Frontex, IOM, NGOs, and academics were compared. Divergences and convergences in how different stakeholders approach migration, border control, and search and rescue operations were highlighted. This comparative analysis also helped identify gaps in policy execution, differences in migration and humanitarian management, and varying ethical considerations across institutional actors.

4.5. Reflection on Interviews and Study Limitations

The relevance of personal interaction between the interviewer and the respondent is an important element to be highlighted. In two interviews, a natural, personal exchange emerged, providing an unexpected depth and relevance to both the interview and the research. Transparency regarding the interviewer's identity and positionality, fostered closer connection between the researcher and the participant.

Several other reflections are important when assessing the limitations of the interview process and methodology, including whether the research method effectively addresses the research questions. Semi-structured interviews offer several advantages, including: i) they provide in-depth insights, though at the potential cost of coverage or extent; ii) they allow for a natural interaction, which may reveal what people truly think and do (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014); iii) their flexibility can be a strength, but also a challenge, as interviews are not fully reproducible (Knott, Rao, Summers, & Teeger, 2022); and iv) ensuring anonymity while capturing rich input remains a crucial concern.

Further to this, the manual thematic analysis process presents several challenges, particularly due to its time-consuming nature and the potential for errors. Without the assistance of software, the researcher must carefully engage with the data through repeated readings, manually coding and categorising themes. This requires meticulous attention to detail, making it difficult to maintain consistency and objectivity. The manual process can also lead to unintentional oversight of subtle patterns, especially when it comes to tracking and comparing large or complex datasets consistently. Nonetheless, manual analysis fosters a deep and engaged understanding of the data.

Finally, while the number of participants was limited, it provided a diverse and representative insight from governance, academia, and civil society. However, greater involvement from NGOs and Italian authorities would have enriched the research by offering a more comprehensive understanding of the operational and political dimensions of migration in the region. The selected interviewees reflect a well-rounded cross-section of influential actors in the European migration and border control system, offering valuable insights into both policy and operational dynamics. Nonetheless, additional representation is necessary for a more thorough research study.

ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS

5.1.   Areas of Analysis

The thematic analysis performed establishes four main areas of analysis, which are linked to the research objectives, as described in the table below.

Research Questions	Areas of Analysis
Why are we witnessing the loss of lives of people in the Central Mediterranean Sea?	Migration and Border Control Policies
	Causes for the Loss of Lives and Operational Measures to Save
	Externalisation and Criminalisation Practices
What political and operational alternatives may be available for the European Union and Italy to overcome this situation?	Alternatives for Change

Figure 6 – Relationship between research questions and area areas of analysis.

In Annex C, a draft mind-map of the themes that were identified through the thematic analysis is presented. These are discussed in more detail in the next sections.

5.2.   Migration and Border Control Policies

The semi-structured interviews began with an open ended question aimed at understanding the interviewees opinions on migration and border control policies. This question was designed to clarify the perspectives on whether migration is driven by economic and demographic forces or primarily by policy. Thereafter, the questions (and conversation) flowed in different ways, depending on the interests and expertise of the interviewees. The analysis of this initial part of the interview revealed several main themes revolving around how the enacted policies impact: migration being viewed as a crisis or structural phenomenon; the loss of lives recognised as a humanitarian crisis; and the shifting narratives and focus.

In agreement with the literature presented in Chapter 3, interviewee 9 stated that "*Migration is a fact. It has always been there and will continue to exist. Africa has doubled its population in the last 30 years. It's going to double it again in the next 20 [...] This makes a huge contrast with aging Europe in which the*

population is declining and aging dramatically. So it means that Africans are on the move... many of them are not aiming [at] Europe... but some of them are aiming at Europe" (ID 9).

This perspective aligns with existing literature in this subject area, which highlights that with a shrinking native-born labour force and an aging population, many advanced economies, including those in the EU including Italy, rely on migrants to sustain their workforce and economic growth. Without migration, the number of taxpayers will decrease while the demand for state support for the elderly will increase, leading to an unsustainable situation (de Haas, 2023).

The belief that tight controls on undocumented migration do not significantly reduce migration, but rather push it into illegality, leading to exploitation and marginalisation, was also identified as an important theme. Interviewee 5 highlighted that *"What we are experiencing is a deeper tension at play between democracy and human rights, perpetuated through populist discourses and pseudo-cultural narratives, one where short-term political gains often take precedence over the protection of human rights, leading to policies that focus more on security than on humanitarian considerations" (ID 5).*

When discussing the 'migration crisis' affecting the EU, interviewees expressed the view that migration is a natural phenomenon that has always existed and will continue to occur within the EU. For example, interviewee 9 stated that *"Migration is not a threat. Migration is not a crisis. Migration is not an eruption. Migration may not be reduced to zero. Some dystopic arguments that I usually confront and fight against are trying to make this claim, and those dystopic points are heavily represented in the governments of the 27 Member States" (ID 9).* Interviewee 3 argued that the real 'crisis' lies not in the number of people arriving, but in the loss of life and the failure to properly manage migrant flows: *"We are against this narrative that migration is seen as a problem and that there is a migration crisis. The real crisis is in the number of missing migrants" (ID 3).* Similarly, interviewee 7 pointed out that *"What we are experiencing is not a migration crisis, it is a response crisis, driven by inadequate and poorly coordinated management of migrant flows" (ID 7).* Further supporting this, interviewee 8 stated: *"Migration itself is not a crisis but rather a structural phenomenon rooted in global inequalities and demographic shifts" (ID 8).* Along the same lines, interviewee 7 argued that *"The [migration] issue should be managed from a safety perspective, rather than from a security one." (ID 7).* Finally, interviewee 5 also noted that *"Italy, despite its proximity to migration routes, still faces relatively low numbers of asylum requests, and therefore, these numbers do not represent a significant problem at the national level" (ID 5).*

What emerges, therefore, confirms that if the term 'crisis' is to be used, it should reflect the humanitarian tragedy of the thousands of lives lost or missing, rather than simply the fact that people are arriving undocumented on European shores (Sahin-Mencutek, Barthoma, Gokalp-Aras, & Triandafyllidou, 2022). The analysis of the interviews also verified that the current securitised approach fuels negative perceptions of migrants and fosters populist slogans that offer short-term solutions but fail to address the root causes of

migration. For example, interviewees 5 stated: *"There is on ongoing discourse that depicts migration in alignment with elements such terrorism, crime and health dangers" (ID 5).*

Further to this, as pointed out by interviewee 3, the tragic figures provided by the IOM's Missing Migrants Project on the official numbers of dead and missing are likely underestimated—possibly by more than 50%: *"It is important to note that [the Missing Migrant Project] numbers are minimum estimates. There are invisible shipwrecks or ghost shipwrecks which go unaccounted for. There are estimates that these numbers could be 50% higher" (ID 3).*

Interviewees also challenged the idea of drastically reducing migration, suggesting, as interviewee 9 pointed out, that *"…the focus should shift from "how to stop immigration" to "how to manage it effectively, enhancing integration and ensuring that the system works for both migrants and longstanding residents…"* (ID 9).

Further analysis identified an important element in the shifting of the external dimension of EU migration from being a secondary concern to one of the most dynamic elements, particularly after the 2015/2016 asylum crisis, an evolution that *"…has involved managing migration beyond EU borders through external border and return agreements, and multilateral aid programs…" (ID 7)*. This is in line with the literature presented earlier describing how the EU relies on external partnerships, focusing on remote control and using incentives to cooperate with third countries. Nevertheless, interviewee 7 highlighted: *"…EU instruments exist and are there to be used and many different EU countries have adopted national policies recognising that migration is necessary and beneficial, the problem is that these need to be adequately implemented to guarantee the required safe and legal pathways for migrants" (ID 7).*

5.3. Causes for the Loss of Lives and Operational Measures to Save Lives

The second part of the interview revolved around the causes of the loss of lives and the existing operational measures put in place to save lives at sea. The analysis of the interviews identified several recurring themes, including drivers for migration; role of smugglers and human traffickers; conditions during sea crossing; potential inconsistencies in search and rescue (SAR) decision making; and political dynamics.

Scholars have documented how migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean face extreme vulnerability, particularly those who pass through Libya, where exploitation, violence, and inhumane conditions are widespread (Hayden, 2022) (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Many migrants embark on this perilous journey out of desperation, driven by a complex combination of factors, including economic hardship, political instability, family reunification, the search for job opportunities, and, in some cases, the impacts of climate change. As described by Benassi et. al. (2022), despite the inherent dangers, reaching Europe is seen by many as a beacon of hope, offering the possibility of a better life, even though their legal and social futures remain uncertain upon arrival. Interviewee 9 stated: *"Youngsters all over the place, billions under age in despair and ready to do anything, to flee from famine, drought, despotic regimes, tyranny, war,*

oppression, and corruption…[…]…they actually know the dangers and the risks of attempting [the journey] and still had to try…[…]…they felt they had no choice" (ID 9).

The analysis revealed how the role of smugglers was identified by some interviewees as a critical factor exacerbating the risk to people, as smugglers exploit their situation. Interviewee 1 pointed out: *"The responsibility of the deaths is in the first place with the smugglers and traffickers that put people on those boats, unseaworthy, as I said with no sufficient food, water, and fuel in conditions that are sometimes objectively unlikely to get them safely to shore" (ID 1).* Additionally, interviewee 2 noted that *"Smugglers are the primary responsible for the death of migrants" (ID 2).* This emphasis on the primary role of smugglers contrasts with some of the literature presented in Chapter 3, which shows that people turn to smugglers out of necessity and that the unseaworthiness of the boats is linked to the strategy of destroying vessels used for migrant transport (Punzo & Scaglione, 2024). Furthermore, both interviewees confirmed that the conditions under which people attempt these voyages are exceptionally dangerous and therefore are to be considered as the main causes for the loss of lives. Interviewee 1 stated that *"…the main cause of death is attributed to unsafe and overcrowded boats organized by smugglers with insufficient provisions such as food, water, and fuel" (ID 1)*, while interviewee 2 identified the following three aspects as the main contributing factors: *"…the vessels are not sea-worthy, they are all over-crowded and the meteorological conditions are very often very unstable and dangerous…" (ID 2).*

These unsafe voyages are further compounded by the inadequate availability of search and rescue (SAR) resources in the region, putting many lives at risk. While international law mandates the rescue of persons in distress at sea (United Nations, 1982) (International Maritime Organisation, 1974), there is an uneven distribution of responsibility for SAR operations. As observed by interviewee 1, individual EU Member States bear the primary responsibility for conducting these missions: *"It is the duty of Member States at the external border of the Schengen area to contrast irregular border crossings while respecting international obligations in terms of asylum protection…[]…The overwhelming majority of rescues, both in the central Mediterranean and the Mediterranean as a whole, are carried out by the Italian Coast Guard and Guardia di Finanza. The complexity of search and rescue at sea, particularly in high seas, poses a significant operational challenge"* *(ID 1).* Additionally, interviewee 6 pointed out, *"…there is no competence on SAR at European Commission level" (ID 6).* However, some interviewees highlighted, the problem lies in differences in the interpretation of key definitions. For example, when deciding actions related to SAR operations, different actors and different organisations may differently interpret *"…distress and safety…" (ID 5)*, or *"…interdiction and interception…" (ID 7)*, or *"…interception and SAR operations…" (ID 8).* As shown in the literature, this fragmented approach can therefore result in coverage gaps and inconsistent response efforts, which increase the likelihood of tragedy for those stranded at sea (Amnesty International, 2014) (Medicins Sans Frontieres, 2023).

Thus, this lack of clarity is an important factor in understanding the causes of deaths at sea, as it creates a space where EU Member States and other actors such as Frontex, can decide when to provide SAR and when to allow other actors (e.g. the so-called Libyan Coast Guard), to carry out SAR operations or border security interceptions, with the latter prioritising repatriation over safety. Consequently, people are often left in dangerous situations "*…with the arbitrary distinction between law enforcement and SAR compromising the fundamental principle of safety at sea…" (ID 7)*. The analysis indicated that there is a perceived ambiguity which may be problematic, as it leaves room for operational interpretations with tragic consequences for those at risk.

Beyond operational challenges, there is also a sense of political responsibility at play. While international conventions and agreements exist to safeguard lives at sea, the effectiveness of these frameworks remains contentious. For example, while interviewee 2 stated that these legal instruments are sufficiently clear "*…the rules [of engagement] in SAR operations are very clear, there is no need to change them as they are actually effective…" (ID 2)*, others argued that their ambiguity allows for varying interpretations, creating a space in which rogue actors, such as the Libyan Coast Guard, can operate with impunity "*…there are too many instruments, and definitions are often open to interpretation which may lead to these instruments being used in ways which are not helping the fate of migrants and asylum seekers…" (ID 6)*.

Furthermore, analysis highlighted a link between the EU's securitisation and criminalisation policies, which prioritise border control and deterrence and the humanitarian concerns related to the loss of lives. For example, interviewee 3 shared the belief that "*…[these policies] have pushed migrants to take even more dangerous routes in their attempt to reach European shores, resulting in a higher number of deaths" (ID 3)*. While these strategies may have succeeded in temporarily reducing the overall number of arrivals (Statista, 2024), they have done so at a significant human cost, as the root causes of migration remain unaddressed, and migrants are forced into increasingly perilous conditions, resulting in tragic numbers of missing and dead people (Black, 2024).

In summary, the analysis highlighted a complexity of opinions regarding the motives behind the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean. An environment has been created through the interplay of political decisions, operational challenges, and external pressures, where the loss of lives continues to escalate, and the measures designed to save lives fall short. This situation can be interpreted as a "catch-22" cycle in Europe's current migration response: the death of individuals prompts calls for intensified anti-smuggling measures, which, in turn, force smuggling to occur under increasingly dangerous conditions, ultimately resulting in more fatalities. Addressing this crisis would therefore require not only clearer, more effective and better coordinated search and rescue capabilities but also a re-evaluation of the policies governing border control and migration, ensuring that they are primarily rooted in the effort to save human lives.

5.4. Externalisation and Criminalisation Practices

The third area of analysis covered the complex issues surrounding externalisation policies and the criminalisation of NGOs involved in search and rescue (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean. Specific themes emerged from this analysis, including: the impact of externalisation policies; human rights and the collaboration with third countries; and the impact of criminalisation of NGOs. As previously outlined, while externalisation has gained traction in EU migration policy, it has sparked intense debate among migration and human rights scholars (Nicolosi, 2024) (Santos Vara, Andrade, & Molnar, 2023) due to its ethical and humanitarian implications, alongside concerns about the increasing restrictions placed on humanitarian actors.

A significant concern identified in the analysis was the externalisation model and EU agreements with North African states, such as Libya. Interviewee 4 highlighted the need for a "*…comprehensive evaluation of the human rights implications of the EU's external migration policy, paying particular attention to the cooperation with Libya…[…]…the EU development funds should not be used for actions that result in the violation of human rights in border management, for example linked to the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) in Libya*" (ID 4). Interviewee 9 added "*What we've seen is the ad-hoc action of Member States traveling to the other side of the Mediterranean, shaking hands with no matter whom, offering money to stop the boats from crossing to Europe. This short-term reaction is caused by the lack of a European system*" (ID 9). Furthermore, these externalisation policies and agreements have led to violations of international law, including the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning individuals to places where they may face persecution (European Court of Human Rights, 2024) (Giuffre', 2013). Referencing this, interviewee 7 observed how "*…one has to pay particular attention to the ECHR landmark judgment Hirsi v Italy, as Italy was ultimately condemned for its push back operations in the international waters in cooperation with Libya…[…]…it raises questions on responsibility and accountability…*" (ID 7). Importantly, in reviewing the EUTF, the European Court of Auditors identified how "*the Commission has not yet defined either formal procedures for reporting and following up allegations of human rights violations, or practical guidance to clarify in which situations EU support may be suspended*" (European Court of Auditors, 2024)[26], thereby concluding that, despite the auditors' previous call in 2018, human rights risks have not been properly addressed.

Another key point raised was the high humanitarian cost of these agreements, as they shift the burden onto countries that are often unequipped to handle it. For example, interviewee 5 questioned the externalisation paradigm, stating that "*…it is really strange why the EU keeps relying on Libyan forces to handle irregular migration […] not only does this go against their own commitments and raise serious ethical*

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[26] See page 5.

concerns that could end up in court, but it also seems ineffective given how unstable the political situation is in Libya and the weak position of the Government of National Accord" (ID 5).

Interviewee 1, in contrast, noted that the concern was not on the externalisation agreements per se, but rather with the specific countries these agreements are signed with, stating *"…Libya is not a state which can be considered a Place-of-Safety, not by the EC nor by Italy, but Tunisia on the other hand is…" (ID 1).* This shifts the criticism away from externalisation as a policy itself, suggesting that partnerships with [more] stable and reliable states may offer ways to disrupt human smuggling networks at their source, potentially preventing dangerous journeys before they begin. However, this approach ultimately reverts to the discourse on combating smugglers, which, as already seen, does not effectively address the loss of lives.

Another theme that emerged from the analysis was the pressure felt by Member States in managing migration flows. Interviewee 1 stated that *"…while we are not experiencing a crisis per se, Italy is however under pressure. For example, arrivals on small islands are problematic from a practical perspective. Legal migration is positive, and more is needed, but irregular migration is what Italy considers an emergency, and which is why it has enacted political decisions to tackle this state of emergency" (ID 1).* There is, therefore, a perception that the pressure on frontline EU Member States, such as Italy, remains significant. While some border countries feel they bear the brunt of managing this perceived migration crisis, it remains uncertain whether the burden-sharing mechanisms introduced in the New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum will genuinely address this issue (Conte & Yavcan, 2024).

The increasing criminalisation of NGOs involved in SAR operations has been widely documented in literature and in this thesis (Cuttitta, 2020). NGOs play a critical role in saving lives at sea, particularly in areas where state resources are lacking (Esperti, 2020). However, current efforts by the Italian government to restrict NGO operations, under the guise of administrative and safety regulations, are making it more difficult for these organisations to operate (Cusumano & Villa, 2021). This has resulted in a reduction in the number of SAR assets available, thereby increasing the risk of migrant deaths (European Parliament, 2021). Concerns over the criminalisation of humanitarian actors have been echoed by interviewees, as it ultimately curbs life-saving operations. Interviewee 9, for instance, stated *"We need to put up a European scale of response and a European system... so that there is synergy instead of lack of synergy, instead of lack of positive cooperation, and that would result in saving lives, reducing the number of lives lost…[…]…We need to stop the reasoning where NGO search and rescue operations are diverted to someone else's harbour, forcing NGOs to take migrants to places like Barcelona instead of Naples, for example. This reasoning is absolutely evil" (ID 9).* This aligns with the grave concern raised by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, the Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants regarding the detentions carries out by the Italian government,

which have been stated to be *"without justification, and amount to a restriction on the right to freedom of association and the right to promote and protect human rights"* (OHCHR, 2024)[27].

One interviewee countered this viewpoint, suggesting that NGOs are not being criminalised but are instead being asked to comply with the same laws and regulations that apply to all maritime actors. Interviewee 1 stated that: *"While the Commission does not support criminalising humanitarian activities, sanctions have been issued against NGO vessels by Italian authorities for failing to comply with instructions from maritime coordination centres" (ID 1)*. This perspective, however, may be challenged, as empirical data demonstrates the systematic criminalisation of NGO activity and shows that restricting their SAR operations decreases the overall capacity for rescues in the central Mediterranean Sea, with significant implications for human safety at sea (Cusumano & Villa, 2021) (Mainwaring & DeBono, 2021).

An answered fundamental question still remains though, should the success of externalisation be measured solely by the reduction in migration numbers, or should the focus be on creating safe and legal pathways for migrants, thereby reducing the humanitarian toll? While the EU's approach prioritises security and border control at the expense of migrant safety, and the number of lost lives continues increasing and the number of people reaching EU's shores does not decrease, is this an indicator that externalisation policies are failing politically, operationally and in their moral and humanitarian responsibilities?

5.5. Alternatives for Change

The fourth area of analysis pertains to the 'participatory' worldview adopted in this study and, more specifically, to the second objective of the thesis, which examines potential operational and political alternatives which may emerge for the European Union and Italy to address the loss of lives in the central Mediterranean Sea (see also Figure 6). Although this study is not intended as a policy paper, it offers a platform for analysing proposals from frontline stakeholders, contributing to the discourse on potential solutions. By examining perspectives from those involved in search and rescue (SAR) and migration management, the analysis highlighted actionable insights that may inform future policies to address the tragic loss of lives. In line with the concept of the 'engaged researcher', common in some areas of social sciences, this approach frames the researcher as an active participant in the pursuit of meaningful change. For example according to some scholars (Burawoy, 2005), such engagement positions the researcher as an advocate who not only documents social realities but also actively supports pathways to improve them. Similarly, other scholars (Flyvbjerg, 2001) (Denzin, 2017) argue for a participatory research model where the researcher collaborates with the community to co-create solutions, emphasising research as a tool for social action and transformation. While this study is only intended as a Master thesis and not a transformative

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[27] See page 4.

paper, the thematic analysis identified consensus on proposals that could aid to reduce fatalities, through the reform of SAR operations and political measures.

One focus was placed on the reform of the current SAR operational regime. Interviewee 4 shared an innovative project, NAVIRE-AVENIR[28], described as "*a pioneering tool, the first European vessel specifically designed for high-seas rescue; it is a medical refuge, equipped with all the necessary facilities for the reception and care of survivors; it is a Mediterranean public square, a place of collective life where vibrant hospitality is affirmed in multiple languages; it is a research laboratory for desirable futures, an observatory from which to create the vessels and futures that are continuously missing*" *(ID 4)*. This concept embodies not only practical SAR solutions but also envisions a broader humanitarian and research function. While it is a welcome and engaging European initiative that fosters community and collaboration, a sustainable model is still needed to ensure its long-term impact and effectiveness.

Further recommendations on SAR improvements involved enhancing EU coordination and NGO involvement in SAR operations. Interviewee 6 proposed "*…strengthening of the European Commission SAR Coordination Group, which comprises operational representatives from EU Member States responsible for SAR activities. Empowering this group and including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that operate in the SAR field would be an important step towards fostering greater collaboration and trust*" *(ID 6)*.

In addition, interviewee 5 praised the Italian Coast Guard (ICG) for its exceptional SAR operations in the mid-2010s, however, interviewee 8 noted that the ICG "*…should be freed from political manipulation and allowed to return to its core mission of saving lives at sea. Political influence has undermined the Coast Guard's ability to act effectively and impartially*" *(ID 8)*. An interesting point was raised by interviewee 4, suggesting that "*…enhanced coordination between the IMO and IOM could help mitigate some of these challenges, offering a more unified approach to both migration management and SAR operations*" *(ID 4)*.

Concerns were raised regarding the current SAR zones of Malta's and Libya, with interviewee 8 suggesting they should be renegotiated "*Malta's SAR Zone is particularly large, and the country lacks the assets and political will to patrol it effectively. Meanwhile, Libya is not considered a legitimate state actor, and its Libyan Coast Guard is viewed as unfit to provide the necessary SAR services*" *(ID 8)*. Interview 1, on the other hand, recommended an expansion of Frontex's current operational: "*Frontex plays a crucial role through aerial surveillance to detect boats in distress and communicate this information to the responsible maritime rescue coordination centres. Expanding Frontex's capacity and improving cooperation with third countries like Tunisia could enhance search and rescue operations and reduce the number of deaths*" *(ID 1)*. However, the role of Frontex has been scrutinised not only by scholars (Cuttitta, 2020) (Vives, Banos, Martel, Rose Hessek, & Williams, 2024) (Perkowski, Stierl, & Burridge, 2023), civil society representatives (front-LEX, 2024), but also by the European Ombudsman (European Ombudsman, 2024). An inquiry conducted by the

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[28] https://www.navireavenir.eu/en/welcome/

Ombudsman revealed that, while existing rules and protocols had been followed by Frontex, significant gaps were identified in its response to maritime emergencies encountered during joint maritime operations and multipurpose aerial surveillance. The findings underscored Frontex's limited guidance for its units in addressing potential emergency situations, including issuing emergency alerts, and emphasised a need for clearer roles and responsibilities—especially in its collaboration with national authorities. Importantly, the inquiry highlighted Frontex's failure to adequately integrate fundamental rights monitors into decision-making processes in emergency scenarios, raising concerns about the safeguarding of human and fundamental rights during its operations. Given these operational challenges, a deeper analysis would be necessary to determine under which conditions the Agency could evolve in a trusted agent of change among all stakeholders.

Themes revolving around policy-level reforms were also identified during the analysis. Interviewee 3 highlighted the *"… need to revive the European Parliament's proposal for a legislation on Missing Migrants. This legislation would formalise and standardise the response to the ongoing tragedy of missing persons, providing a legal framework for the identification, reporting, and protection of these vulnerable individuals"* (ID 3). Interviewee 4 emphasised the urgency of implementing the European Parliament's "*Resolution on the Need for EU Action on Search and Rescue in the Mediterranean (European Parliament, 2023) which highlights the critical need for coordinated EU efforts in SAR operations. This resolution, passed in July 2023, must not remain a symbolic gesture but should lead to concrete actions that enhance SAR capabilities and save lives in the Mediterranean*" (ID 4). Interviewee 9 further advocated for "*A European search and rescue framework, which we've been advocating for, would involve combining all individual efforts in the Mediterranean into a cohesive system. This would improve coordination, saving lives, and reducing the number of lives lost*" (ID 9).

Further analysis showed the importance given to reducing the fragmentation of EU policies related to migration and SAR. Interviewee 7 pointed out "*…there are both too many instruments as well as inconsistencies in implementation of these existing EU instruments…[…]…discrepancies between different Member States' approaches create confusion and inefficiencies that put lives at greater risk*" (ID 7).

In line with the literature and scholarly discussions cited in this study (Bello, 2022) (Ghezelbash, Moreno-Lax, Klein, & Opeskin, 2018) (Nicolosi, 2024) (Cusumano & Villa, 2021) (Mainwaring & DeBono, 2021), interviewees identified reforms to the current securitisation, externalisation and criminalisation policies as crucial. Interviewee 3 argued that *"securitisation is contributing to the number of deaths […] the rhetoric on smuggling is not helping, we need to focus our efforts and invest in developing safe and regular pathways for all "* (ID 3). Interviewee 5 added that *"The externalisation process is counterproductive…[…]…it externalises responsibilities as a means of evading accountability while exacerbating the challenges of migration management. The focus should be on developing legal and safe pathways"* (ID 5). Lastly, interviewee 8 underscored that *"…the criminalisation of NGO's efforts to assist SAR missions must end, these humanitarian actions should be recognised and supported, rather than obstructed by legal and political barriers"* (ID 8).

Based on the thematic analysis, perspectives among interviewees reveal both contrasts and commonalities, shaped largely by their institutional roles, responsibilities, and experiences. All respondents agree that migration does not constitute a crisis but rather a complex, ongoing phenomenon. Additionally, there is consensus on the need for greater EU coordination, trust, and cooperation with NGOs to improve migration management and support humanitarian efforts. However, notable differences emerge in how they frame specific challenges and priorities.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that varying institutional perspectives shape the discourse on migration, influencing policy approaches and the practical application of Search and Rescue (SAR) protocols. A humanitarian approach prioritises reducing deaths through safe and legal pathways, whereas a security-focused stance underscores the need to cater for border management. This divergence highlights the need for an integrative approach—one that harmonises humanitarian priorities with operational efficiency, thereby ensuring that migration management in the Mediterranean truly addresses human rights. Such a synthesis provides a foundation for future policy discussions aimed at balancing safety, legal frameworks, and ethical responsibility in migration and border control.

Differences also emerge in how these themes are prioritized across professional contexts. Those in EU political (parliament), academic, and humanitarian roles emphasise the human rights implications of migration policies, advocating for a shift toward safety, integration, and protection for individuals. In contrast, individuals within European Commission institutions often focus on operational challenges, stressing the importance of clear mandates, efficient coordination, and policy compliance to manage migrant flows effectively while maintaining security. Global migration institutions concentrate heavily on the plight of missing individuals who have lost their lives during voyages and the need to guarantee full accountability for their cases, as well as to ensure comprehensive support for their families.

An integrative approach that harmonises these humanitarian and operational priorities could support a more comprehensive framework for migration management, aligning institutional mandates with the overarching goal of safeguarding human lives in maritime spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to understand the relationship between EU and Italian migration policies and the tragic loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean. Through an analysis of existing literature and input from a select number of expert practitioners and stakeholders, several relevant issues were identified related to the externalisation of EU borders, the criminalisation of humanitarian search and rescue (SAR) operations, and the challenges in balancing border security objectives with humanitarian responsibilities. The findings underscore a discrepancy between the EU's declared humanitarian values and the practical effects of its border control strategies, particularly when these result in human rights abuses or loss of life.

In addressing the first objective—why are we witnessing the loss of lives of people in the Central Mediterranean Sea—it is possible to conclude that the prioritisation of border security and the enforcement of stringent border control measures have ultimately led to increased fatalities at sea. This securitisation and externalisation were seen as intensifying the risk of death by pushing people toward more hazardous routes, often with tragic outcomes. The perception of needing to manage a crisis, has led policy makers toward restrictive measures, exacerbating the plight of those people attempting to reach Europe, while the true crisis lies with the escalating death toll. Additionally, responsibility for border management has been shifted to countries like Libya, where documented human rights abuses point to limitations in both capacity and commitment to adhere to humanitarian principles. Interestingly, during drafting of this conclusion, a recent decision by the European Ombudsman criticised EU institutions for not being transparent about the human rights information it relied on before signing an agreement with Tunisia that included EU funds for border management. This reveals a worrying pattern regarding EU's externalisation policies.

In addressing the second objective—what political and operational alternatives may be available for the European Union and Italy to overcome this situation—a number of options emerged from the interviewees. The need for immediate policy reforms were emphasised, including re-evaluating externalisation practices, decriminalising NGO SAR activities, and adhering to international human rights standards and agreements. It was stressed that the current EU migration framework places disproportionate emphasis on deterrence, thereby exacerbating the dangers faced by people attempting to reach the EU borders. The need to end criminalisation practices, establish legal pathways and build trust through a coordinated and united EU search and rescue response was underlined as essential.

It is important to note that this study is not exhaustive and is limited by several factors. First, the research relies on insights from a select group of interviewees, whose views, while valuable, may not represent the full spectrum of perspectives from all relevant actors, particularly of Italian authorities and additional NGOs. Time and access constraints also limited the scope of interviews, meaning that perspectives from certain key groups being underrepresented. Furthermore, thematic and comparative analyses conducted were

conducted manually, which, while thorough, poses potential challenges in consistency and comprehensiveness, particularly when identifying nuanced patterns across a broad data set.

Given the limitations and complexity of the issues, it is essential that further research be undertaken to deepen understanding and broaden the scope of analysis on the drivers and impacts of migration and border control policies. A multi-level framework could allow for structured examinations of policies, impacts and responses across various levels. Future research should also expand the participant pool to include more diverse stakeholders, especially those from EU states and additional NGOs involved in SAR operations, to develop a more comprehensive view of operational challenges and policy impacts. Quantitative studies examining correlations between policy changes and fatalities could also provide valuable insights.

Finally, further analysis of the long-term impacts of EU externalisation practices is needed to assess whether reforms, if implemented, lead to a measurable reduction in human rights violations and loss of life. Examining alternative frameworks that emphasise the protection of human rights and the establishment of safe migration pathways may contribute to reshaping EU migration governance into one that prioritises humanitarian values over security concerns.

While this research is not groundbreaking, it underscores the critical need for a reimagined migration framework within the EU—one that aligns more closely with the humanitarian principles espoused by the European Union and its Member States, and one that safeguards the lives of those affected. This study also emphasises the importance of continuing to study the persistent loss of life in the Central Mediterranean to inform policies and strategies that can more effectively address and reduce this ongoing tragedy. By bringing attention to these issues, it offers a small contribution in sustaining critical discussions that keep the humanitarian impact at the forefront of policy and operational debates, ensuring that the focus remains on finding solutions to prevent further loss of lives.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

This study is part of a research project taking place at Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa.

The study concerns migration and border control policies of the EU and Italy over the last 10 years and aims to analyse why we are witnessing the loss of lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea and what can/should the EU & Italy do from a political and operational perspective to overcome this situation. Your participation in the study, which is highly valued as it will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this field of science, consists in being interviewed and conducting a dialogue with the researcher identified below and could take around 2 hours.

Iscte is responsible for the processing of your personal data that are collected and processed exclusively for the purposes of the study, legally based on Article 6(a) of the GDPR, as applicable.

The study is conducted by Samy Djavidnia (Samy_Djavidnia@iscte-iul.pt), who you may contact to clear up any doubts, share comments or exercise your rights in relation to the processing of your personal data. You may use the contact indicated above to request access, rectification, erasure or limitation of the processing of your personal data (name, email address, organisation, role and video/audio recordings).

Your participation in this study is confidential. Your personal data will always be processed by authorised personnel bound to the duty of secrecy and confidentiality. Iscte assures the use of appropriate techniques, organisational and security measures to protect personal information. All investigators are required to keep all personal data confidential.

In addition to being confidential, participation in the study is strictly voluntary: you may choose freely whether to participate or not. If you have decided to participate, you may stop your participation and withdraw your consent to the processing of your personal data at any time, without having to provide any justification. The withdrawal of consent shall not affect the lawfulness of processing based on consent before its withdrawal.

Your personal data will be kept for 6 months after the defence of the Master's thesis (planned for Q3 2024), after which they will be destroyed or anonymised, with their anonymity being assured in the study's results, being disclosed only for purposes of statistics, teaching, communication in scientific meetings, books or articles. There are no expected significant risks associated with participation in the study.

Iscte does not disclose, or share with third parties, information related to its personal data.

Iscte has a Data Protection Officer who may be contacted by e-mail: dpo@iscte-iul.pt. If you consider this necessary, you also have the right to submit a complaint to the Portuguese Data Protection Authority (CNDP).

I declare that I have understood the aims of what was proposed to me, as explained by the investigator, that I was given the opportunity to ask any questions about this study and received a clarifying reply to all such questions. I accept participating in the study and consent to my personal data being used in accordance with the information that was given to me.

<div align="center">I ACCEPT ☐ I DO NOT ACCEPT ☐</div>

Name: _____Date: _____

Signature:_____

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Name:
Code/number:
Date:
Place of Interview:
Format: *(Presential or Online)*

A. Interview Procedure:
Description of the Interview Procedure and Informed Consent
o *Explaining the purpose of the study*
o *Explaining the data protection procedures and ethical standards*
o *Explaining recording purpose (in case the person refuses the recording the interview will be handwritten)*
o *Getting written informed consent*

Questions:
o *Do you agree with these procedures?*
o *Do you have any doubts or need any clarifications?*

I. Background Information
Gender, age, nationality, education and training, professional background,
institution/group they belong to, years of experience in the field of migration and/or border control policies and operations.

II. Views on migration and border control policies
Exploring the experts views on migration and border control policies.
Ex. Questions:
- *Official data from UNHCR shows that global migration is not at an all-time high. Based on your knowledge and experience, is the EU and its Member States (Italy) experiencing a migration crisis?*
- *What are, in your point of view, the main challenges and difficulties that the EU and Member States, like Italy, experience in managing migration?*
- *As you are probably aware, the EU Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) has been activated only once since 2001 (in March 2022 the Council adopted a decision unanimously establishing the existence of a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine): why do you believe that this instrument has not been used for other migration instances?*
- *Migration and border control policies have often been used, or understood, as synonym terms used to describe policies to manage and contain migration within the EU. Why, in your expert opinion, has migration developed into a security issue? What is the relationship between human rights and securitisation policies?*
- *Migration experts have identified that border restrictions often produce [unintended] more migration The EU "New Pact on Migration and Asylum" of 2020 has introduced the concept of*

"enhancing economic opportunities to address the root causes of irregular migration" and "help people feel that their future lies at home". On the other hand, the European Parliament (as early as 2006) published a motion which identified two illusions: i) migration is only based on poverty, and; ii) borders can be made watertight. In your opinion, can the EU and its Member States manage and control migration (and its root causes) through preventive development policies (which may transition to repressive security policies)?

III. Views on causes for the loss of lives and operational measures to save lives

Exploring the experts views on the causes of deaths and on potential measures to prevent the loss of lives.

- *The International Organisation for Migration has reported that since 2014 more than 28,000 lives have been lost while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to seek asylum or to migrate to Europe, of which 22,500 in the central Med Sea. What do you believe are the causes for the for the loss of lives in the central Mediterranean Sea?*
- *When analysing the causes of these deaths, is it reasonable to try and identify the roles and responsibilities of the different actors involved?*
- *SAR Rescue Regions, Exclusive Economic Zones, Territorial Waters, Contiguous Zones, High Seas, Places of Safety, Refugee Convention and non-refoulment principles…Is there enough clarity on the instruments to determine the rights, and more importantly the obligations of state actors, when it comes to rescuing lives at sea in open waters? For example, should Libya qualify as a Place of Safety and have such a large SRR?*
- *In 2013 Italy mounted a humanitarian operation - known as Mare Nostrum - to tackle the increase in migration flows in the Straight of Sicily, with the primary objective safeguarding human life at sea. This operation was deemed hugely successful, nevertheless it was considered too expensive (both economically and politically) and not sustainable.*
- *When it comes to saving lives at sea, do you believe that EU and Member States should be empowered to operate Search & Rescue operations? Which actors should be involved: EU, national and NGO's? How could these operations be coordinated?*

IV. Opinions on externalisation and criminalisation practices

Exploring the opinions of the experts on the EU and MS (Italy) policies of externalisation (border security) and criminalisation *vis-à-vis* the adherence to humanitarian principles.

- *The EU and Italy have sought to externalise border security management to non-EU neighbouring countries like Libya and Tunisia. What is your opinion on this externalisation practice, especially when these non-EU countries are under international scrutiny for contravening basic human rights and principles of international refugee law?*
- *Both the irregularised migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea and the actors trying to save their lives through Search and Rescue operations, are criminalised by national governments. Why do you believe this to the case?*
- *Do you believe there is a potential discrepancy between EU and Member States (Italy) adherence to humanitarian principles and the migration and border control policies being enacted?*

V. Opinions concerning priorities for change

Exploring participants' views on what needs to be changed in order to overcome this situation
Ex. Questions:

- *In light of your considerations and experience, what changes are needed at EU and Member State (Italy) level from both a political and operational perspective?*
- *What are in your opinion the possible solutions to reduce and eliminate the loss of lives of migrants in the central Med? What actions for change should be advanced?*
- *Are there other aspects that you would like to see changed in the future? If so, which ones?*
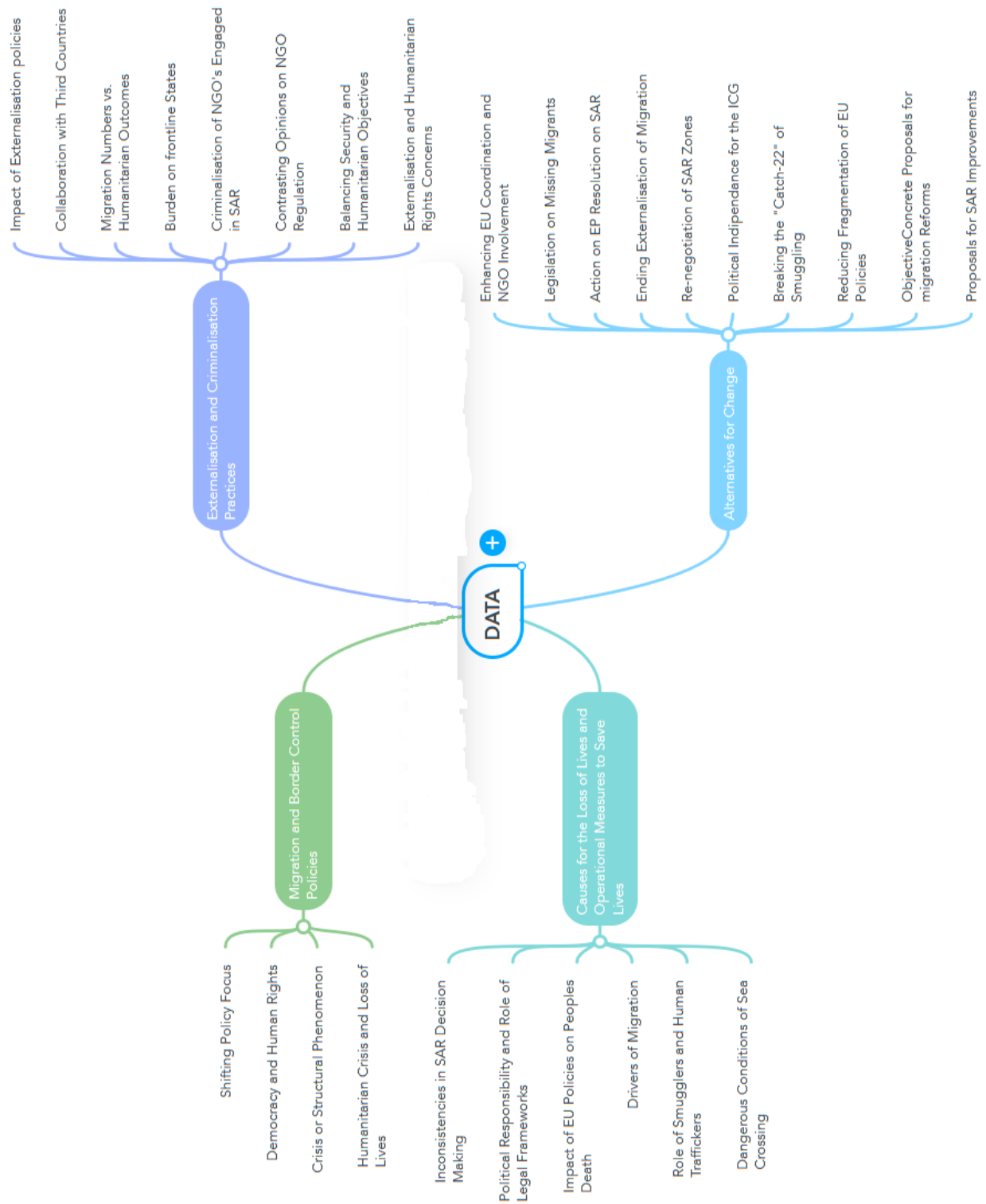
VI. Interview Assessment

Encouraging participants to give general feedback on the interview process and, in particular, on the comprehensibility, appropriateness and relevance of the questions asked.

Giving participants the opportunity to add any information/reflections they did not mention before, or also to repeat anything they would like to emphasise.

Thanking participants for their time and generosity in sharing their experiences.

Exchanging contacts for returning the interview transcripts (to double-check them) or for providing information about the outputs of the research (if they want to).

ANALYSIS MIND MAP

Externalisation and Criminalisation Practices
- Impact of Externalisation policies
- Collaboration with Third Countries
- Migration Numbers vs. Humanitarian Outcomes
- Burden on frontline States
- Criminalisation of NGO's Engaged in SAR
- Contrasting Opinions on NGO Regulation
- Balancing Security and Humanitarian Objectives
- Externalisation and Humanitarian Rights Concerns

Alternatives for Change
- Enhancing EU Coordination and NGO Involvement
- Legislation on Missing Migrants
- Action on EP Resolution on SAR
- Ending Externalisation of Migration
- Re-negotiation of SAR Zones
- Political Indipendance for the ICG
- Breaking the "Catch-22" of Smuggling
- Reducing Fragmentation of EU Policies
- ObjectiveConcrete Proposals for migration Reforms
- Proposals for SAR Improvements

DATA

Migration and Border Control Policies
- Shifting Policy Focus
- Democracy and Human Rights
- Crisis or Structural Phenomenon
- Humanitarian Crisis and Loss of Lives

Causes for the Loss of Lives and Operational Measures to Save Lives
- Inconsistencies in SAR Decision Making
- Political Responsibility and Role of Legal Frameworks
- Impact of EU Policies on Peoples Death
- Drivers of Migration
- Role of Smugglers and Human Traffickers
- Dangerous Conditions of Sea Crossing

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