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When humanity is washed ashore of Europe: SAR operations in the Mediterranean, their challenges and roles in the context of the Refugee crisis

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Abstract:

The number of deaths in the Mediterranean continues to hit the record year after year since the beginning of Europe refugees' crisis in 2012, scaling up to 2,297 deaths in 2017. Instead of increasing search and rescue (SAR) capacity in the Mediterranean, Europe has intensified the migrants control procedures by deploying more security and military agents at sea, despite legal duties to provide SAR that are stipulated in many laws and conventions. The failure of the European response led to the emergence of a new phenomenon: humanitarian SAR operations run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society initiatives in order to fill the gap. Many factors have paved the way for the proliferation of this phenomenon. The complexity and multi-faceted nature of the crisis, together with various actors involved in the rescue scene with conflicting objectives, imposed new challenges and produced many critiques that put humanitarian SAR actors in a dilemma: whether to save people's life or to comply with states' procedures and challenge their adherence to the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality. Overall, SAR NGOs - in addition to saving lives- have played a unique yet important political role in the Mediterranean context.

Key words: Europe Refugee crisis, migrants, Search and Rescue (SAR), non-governmental SAR operation, Mediterranean crisis.

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Acronyms

UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
CFR	Charter of Fundamental right
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
ICC	International Criminal Court
MOAS	Migrants off Shore Aid Station
MRCC	Maritime Rescue Coordination Center
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
SAR	SAR search and rescue
SAR	international convention on maritime Search and Rescue

1. Introduction

*“No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land”
(Warshan Shire, Home)*

The Mediterranean Sea, the water passage that separates three continents, was used since the ancient ages as a trade route to connect the various cultures scattered across the continents. Throughout history, it was considered as a passage for various sea travelers including those fleeing wars and oppression. Long ago before the creation of human rights laws and sea laws, many were rescued and protected out of pure humanity. In 1492 the Spanish ports were crowded by those persecuted under Ferdinand and Isabella, the monarchs of Spain. The sea captains demanded huge amounts from passengers, then left them at sea or sold them to pirates. In response, the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II sent his navy to Spain to rescue Muslim and Jews alike considering them added value to his country (Cliff, 2013). During the Second World War, the Mediterranean was used again by Europeans fleeing the war seeking refuge in some camps established the Middle East (Taparata & Ser, 2016). Nowadays, unprecedented flows of people are crossing the Mediterranean in what is called the “Europe refugee crisis”, the “Mediterranean crisis” or the “Migration crisis”. Even if there is a legal background to protect human beings who are drowning in the sea, as laws and regulations were enacted during the 20th century, it is not respected by European governments, causing constant yet preventable innocent loss of life at sea. In the 21st century, the sea route has been popular; many migrants have been crossing the sea aiming to find better life opportunities in Europe. The dramatic changes in the political situation in the Middle East and North-Africa since 2011 resulted in a peak in the refugees’ number in general and in the number of those crossing the sea in particular. In 2015, 1,000,573 refugees crossed the Mediterranean (UNHCR, 2015); the number was alarming, especially if compared to 60,000 crossings in 2013 (European Parliament, 2015). Contrary to expectations, the sea that represented a new life away from violence and oppression turned out to become a big floating grave, and the hope boats turned out to be ghost boats. Refugees’ and migrants’ deaths in the Mediterranean kept hitting the records year after year, the number of deaths at sea increased from 3,283 deaths in 2014 to 5,143 in 2016, which was considered the deadliest year ever (IOM, 2017). Deaths at sea are caused by the exploitive and lucrative strategies used by traffickers, and by territorial factors, due to the disputes between Mediterranean countries regarding territorial waters and whose responsibility it is to intervene.

Saving people in distress at sea, or what is technically and legally called search and rescue (SAR), is states' and ships' responsibility and obligation. The 1979 international convention on maritime search and rescue (IMO, 1979, p.7) defines search and rescue as:

““Search”. An operation, normally co-ordinated by a rescue co-ordination centre or rescue sub-centre, using available personnel and facilities to locate persons in distress. “Rescue”. An operation to retrieve persons in distress, provide for their initial medical or other needs, and deliver them to a place of safety”

The daily catastrophic deaths at sea have not only represented obvious violations and negligence of the legal obligation to help persons in distress at sea, but they have shown the utter lack of efficient humanitarian response by European governments. The magnitude and the constant recurrence of drowning incidences at sea were alarming. Yet “based on the assumption that a countless number of people want to come to Europe” (The conversation, 2016), Europe responded by developing deterrence migration policies that focus on preventing people from reaching EU borders, instead of facilitating legal migration and deploying more rescue operations to save lives. Europe's response is linked with what is now called securitization of migration, as a result of 9/11. Migrants, who are crossing the sea, are considered threats given the fear of ISIS proliferation (Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi, 2014; Irrera, 2016). Besides, the concept of migration management was an integral issue for the Schengen cooperation, which required certain surveillance and control procedures, to guarantee the safety of EU population. (Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi, 2014).

Nevertheless, despite the EU political and security reasons, the deaths at sea remain unjustifiable. According to Heller and Pezzani, “the Mediterranean has been made to kill through contemporary forms of militarized governmentality of mobility which inflict deaths by first creating dangerous conditions of crossing, and then abstaining from assisting those in peril” (Heller & Pezzani, 2014, p. 659; Stierl, 2016, p. 565). With the non-stopping influx of refugees, European land and sea borders were fortified. By 2015 some members of Schengen zone reinstated unilateral internal border control, while other countries like Hungary erected physical borders with non-Schengen countries, then the Balkan route was closed, all aiming to stop the refugees' flow (Greenhill, 2016). This tight control of the land borders left no choice to people but to take the sea. At sea, EU launched Triton operation with border control and surveillance mandate with interception authority, while anti-migration and anti-smuggling policies were intensified by launching EU military operation EUNAVFOR MED in the central Mediterranean to fight smugglers. Moreover,

agreements with border countries were established to outsource and externalize the control of refugee exodus outside EU borders, like the EU-Turkey deal in March 2015 (Wauters & Cogolati, 2016).

The daily innocent deaths and the questionable EU states' responses thus led to the emergence of a new phenomenon to fill the existing gap: search and rescue missions. Non-governmental organizations and civil society initiatives intervened at sea by initiating rescue operations in order to minimize the human loss that dramatically increased with the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the Mediterranean, after the ending of the Italian "Mare Nostrum" search and rescue mission in 2014 (Cusumano, 2017a). Some of these NGOs were newly established with one mandate, namely to stop death at sea, such as MOAS, SOS Mediterranean, Sea-Watch, Proactiva Open Arms, Sea-Eye, Watch the Med Alarm Phone; while others were well known humanitarian organizations, like MSF and Save the Children.

This study will propose a new concept of humanitarian intervention different from the traditional concept that is closely linked with governments action and humanitarian-military operations that intend to stop foreign state from oppressing and persecuting the human rights of people within that state, or to avert the recurrence of large-scale mortality and suffering caused by actions or deliberate inaction of the authorities in foreign states (Simms & Trim, 2013). The concept of humanitarian intervention that will be introduced in this study does not involve any military or governmental operations, rather it is a pure humanitarian intervention initiated by civilians and NGOs out of humanitarian sentiments, with no political, military, or financial ulterior interests, but has deep interference with politics, and policy-making and fight for supreme objectives to protect and maintain the human rights, dignity, and universal humanitarian standards inside their own states.

This paper will aim to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors that led to the creation of these non-governmental SAR operations, analyzing this new humanitarian intervention and the role NGOs are playing in the Mediterranean context. Working in very sensitive political space, with various actors, and contradictory objectives, this new type of humanitarian operations impose many challenges to provide humanitarian principled action and entail new political roles of the humanitarian actors.

This paper aims to respond to the following questions:

- 1) How humanitarian SAR operations compact the challenges and critiques to position themselves in the humanitarian map?

- 2) What political roles SAR NGOs are playing in the complex Mediterranean Refugee crisis?

The methodology used in this study is exploratory and analytical, focusing on the humanitarian SAR NGOs' roles and activities in the Mediterranean. The study will depend on a systematic literature review of secondary sources and be supported by some recent empirical data and reports issued by academia, sociologists, and forensic oceanography, as well as a review of the media coverage about SAR operations. Given the novelty of the topic, only a scarce literature covers the SAR NGOs operations in the Mediterranean, while the majority of the available literature focuses on the legal, political, migratory aspects of the Mediterranean crisis.

Therefore, this study is limited due to the scarcity of related literature, the recency of the topic, and the difficulties to have interviews with various NGOs. The other limitation is that the research is conducted in Geneva and not at the field level, therefore the study relies heavily on literature review, and interviews.

The dissertation will be divided into four chapters. The **first** chapter will explore the context of the Mediterranean refugee crisis, search and rescue operations, and the legal and moral obligations at sea. The **second** chapter will describe the different activities conducted by humanitarian SAR NGOs and civil society initiatives, and factors that led to the proliferation of such operations. The **third** chapter will scrutinize the critiques and attacks on humanitarian SAR operations, analyzing them based on empirical studies, and the **fourth** chapter will highlight the challenges to these operations as well as the political roles SAR NGOs are playing in the Mediterranean based on evidence from literature review, media coverage, and interviews.

2. Concepts and literature review

We first explore here the main maritime rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea since the beginning of the migrant crisis in 2012, before explaining the legal and moral obligations. The literature review was done through reviewing articles on Jstor, Taylor& Francis, Google Scholar, Rero, Saga, Academia, news articles, NGOs' websites as well as reviewing the major newspapers' and media outlets' websites. In total around 30 academic articles, 34 NGOs' websites, and 25 media and news articles were reviewed.

2.1 Chapter one: context of rescue missions and obligations

2.1.1. The migrant crisis in the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean Sea has increasingly become the final choice for many people from MENA region escaping death, violence, oppression, armed conflicts, and an unstable economic situation. The deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in the Middle-East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa are the main push factor of sea migration (European Parliament, 2015). The collapse of the Libyan Regime and the deterioration of security situation there pushed many people; the majority of them are already migrants living in Libya, to flee the persecution (Frontex, 2017). The ongoing civil war and displacement in Syria have pushed more 5,057,986 Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2017). The new political instability in Afghanistan in 2014 forced Afghani to leave the country. The increased repression in Eretria and the growing armed conflict in Iraq, as well as, Nigeria have been pushing many to leave (European Parliament, 2015). The people who are crossing the sea are a mixture of different profiles, ranging from refugees, or asylum seekers escaping war and violence in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Eretria, and Nigeria, to migrants feeling the deadly consequences of climate changes like the drought and famine crisis in Somalia and economic migrants heading to Europe seeking better chances (European Parliament, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the term migrant will be used to refer to all those crossing the sea regardless of their legal status.

Consequently, the number of people who are taking that choice increased dramatically, soaring from 60,000 in 2013 (UNHCR, 2015) to at least 363,348 people crossing the sea in 2016 (UN News Center, 2017). Despite the remarkable decrease in the migrants' numbers in 2016 and 2017 compared to 2015, the number of deaths remained high. The total death toll in 2017 reached 2297 up to July 5, 2017. Annex 1 illustrates the monthly deaths in the Mediterranean Sea from 2014-2017. It is worth mentioning that the available numbers of deaths at sea remain a mere estimation, as these numbers count only the found and identified bodies, ignoring all those who have been missed and remain undetectable. (Tazzioli, 2015). With the increased number of people willing to cross the sea, so did the traffickers' greed to make more gains. Boats were overloaded with hundreds of people, unseaworthy rubber vessel is used instead of wooden ones, while sometimes boats are sent to sail without sufficient quantity of fuel, making the route riskier and leading to more deaths (UNHCR, 2017). What happens in the Mediterranean is considered a crisis from a political perspective, not because people are crossing the sea illegally, nor because people including

women and children are drowning on daily basis, but because the European borders become “unmanageable” (Reekum, 2016). Nevertheless, the constant drowning spectacle at sea witnessed by the entire world with no sufficient actions taken to avoid preventable deaths is what makes the Mediterranean a crisis, and even a humanitarian crisis.

The main routes used by migrants to cross the sea are the eastern route from Turkey to Greece, which is not used a lot since the EU-Turkey Agreement. The central route from Libya to Italy and Malta is the most used and most dangerous route, due to the deteriorating security situation in Libya, and the western route between Morocco, Tunisia and Spain (European Parliament, 2015).

2.1.2. Overview of the SAR operations in 2015

In response to the sea crisis, maritime operations were initiated to provide search and rescue services to save lives at sea. After *Mare Nostrum*, the Italian military humanitarian operation launched in October 2013, the Triton operation led by Frontex was initiated in 2014 to strengthen European sea borders. Despite these official European missions, several more were initiated by NGOs and civil initiatives, which questioned the limited action of *Mare Nostrum* and Triton (for a review, see annex 2). These new SAR missions aimed to fill legal obligations and based their mandate on moral duties.

2.1.3. Legal obligations

This part will review the legal and human rights obligations in the Mediterranean context to illustrate how the relinquished legal responsibilities by states have to lead to the emergence of the humanitarian SAR. The sea space is controlled by many laws and conventions. States’ and shipmasters’ SAR responsibilities have been thoroughly identified and stressed through these laws. The current Mediterranean crisis proved what William Walters pointed out:

there is a potentiality of the maritime spaces to turn into void, despite all existing laws and regulations that legally necessitate the provision of assistance at sea, and available means to make it predictable and managed yet there is always ‘circumstances under which the ancient idea of the high sea as a lawless space beyond sovereignty and justice is capable of being reactivated (Walters, 2008, p. 5; Stierl, 2016, p. 565).

2.1.3.1. Duty to render assistance in the laws of sea

The duty to render assistance to people in distress at sea dates back to 1910, by the creation of Brussels Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules with Respect to Assistance and Salvage at Sea. This convention constituted the basis of international marine salvage law. In 1989, it was

substituted by the international Convention of Salvage, which states the ship master duty to provide assistance to people in distress at sea. Later in 1982, another convention was concluded, namely the United Nation Convention on the Law Of the Sea (UNCLOS). Article 98 in UNCLOS highlights the states' duty and obligation to render assistance to people in distress at sea, to require the ships flying its flag to do so and to establish effective search and rescue operation and ensure coordination with neighboring states for this purpose (UNCLOS, 1982). Both conventions represent a coherent legality encompassing the personal responsibilities of the shipmasters to render assistance and the states to establish the needed measurements to enable shipmaster to render this assistance as per 1989 International Savage Conventions, and emphasizes the responsibility of the states to request the shipmasters to provide assistance to persons in distress and to establish necessary and effective search and rescue services over sea through cooperation, as per the 98 article in UNCLOS Convention (Nollkaemper, et al., 2017) .

Two other conventions should be mentioned in the same regard. First, the 1974 Convention on the Safety of Life at the Sea (SOLAS), which was first adopted in 1914 after the tragedy of the Titanic, and was modified and updated till its final version was adopted in 1974. Second is the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, which was created in response to increased non-rescue instances at sea to the Indochinese refugee crisis, where due to the increased number of refugees, the neighboring states decided to not allow any more disembarkation. Accordingly, the shipmasters avoided conducting rescue operations as they did not know what to do with the survivors. Thus, the SAR convention was created to identify who is responsible for the duty to rescue and the consequences of this duty. Due to the repetition of the obligations to render assistance at sea in many treaties and conventions and domestic law, it is considered nowadays as customary law (Nollkaemper, et al., 2017).

Paradoxically, despite the existence of necessary regulations that ensure human safety and protection at sea, these laws evaporated with the Mediterranean winds. People were fleeing their countries because the laws that protect them, namely the human rights and international humanitarian laws were transgressed; and Europe was deemed a place where similar laws are respected. While the entire world including Europe has been strongly and publicly condemning the laws' violations in war-torn and crisis affected countries, the same laws were disregarded at EU shores.

2.1.3.2. Human Right Violations in the Mediterranean

Migrants and refugees, like any other human being, enjoy a set of rights mentioned in various laws, treaties, and conventions. The basic rights that migrants and refugees should have in the Mediterranean context will be discussed in this part. Even though the international laws and treaties do not pose any obligation on the EU states members to grant asylum to all migrants, migrants' rights are preserved in the international treaties signed by the EU and its states members (Wauters & Cogolati, 2016).

2.1.3.3. The right to life

The right to life is a basic, fundamental human right that all humans regardless of their origin or legal situation must enjoy as per Article 2(1) of the Charter of Fundamental Right and Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Right. Based on this right, all above-mentioned sea treaties and conventions were created to protect life at sea. Force should not be used to prevent migrant entrance to EU, as long as it jeopardizes migrants' lives (Wauters & Cogolati, 2016). The violation of right to life is not limited to physical and direct use of force implemented by coast guards to prevent migrants reach to EU, it includes as well the extra measurements and restrictions through which "the Mediterranean has been made to kill" by "hindering migrants" arrival to EU shores, pushing them to take harder ways that expose them to more risks (Stierl, 2016, p. 565).

2.1.3.4. The right to non-refoulement:

Migrants and refugees have the right to seek asylum from persecution in other countries. This right is granted under article 14(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the 1951 Refugee Convention, and in the EU Charter of Fundamental Right (Wauters & Cogolati, 2016). Despite the signing and the ratification of these treaties and conventions by the EU and its member states, this right has been violated in the Mediterranean. Many push-back operations were reported, where the coast guards deliberately returned migrants boats to their departure point and prevented them from reaching certain territorial water. On 11 June 2016, a boat carrying 53 refugees including 14 children was returned to Turkey upon reaching Greece territory. After being transferred to coast guards vessels and promised safety in the presence of Frontex, refugees were returned and pushed to move to a Turkish boat under gun threat (Alarm Phone, 2016). Amnesty International has been documenting push-backs from Greece to Turkey since 2012; documented stories include encircling and towing incidents risking boats to capsize, and intentionally damaging and pushing-back the unseaworthy boats to Turkish water then abandon it (Amnesty International, 2014).

2.1.3.5. Right not to be tortured

The push-back operations implemented in the Mediterranean context would return migrants to points where they most probably would face some sort of detention, ill-treatment or even torture. The deteriorating security situation, and increased human rights violation in some of the departure countries like Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt poses more threats on returned migrants. (Wauters & Cogolati, 2016). Many reports of beating, whipping, detention, and other forms of torture, have been documented by Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2014). Let alone the fact that drowning in itself is a sort of torture. By letting people drown at sea all involved inactive actors are participating in passive torture.

2.1.4. Moral obligations

Apart from the afore-mentioned legal obligations to rescue people, maritime rescue missions imply *per se* humanitarian and moral obligations as well. Helping people in need should be a strong motive navigating human actions, especially if the distressed people are taking such a risky journey to escape death and sufferings in their countries, where they might actually lose their life doing so; if help is not granted. It is ironic how Western countries talk strongly and passionately about their human and ethical duties and show a will to support those in need, speaking about their “tradition of refuge”. However, this humanitarian slogan fades away when the sufferings happen at the EU doors. Despite all mentioned legal and ethical obligations, Europe is still showing reluctance to respond, and continue deploying more security and border control actors.

On January 2017, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini stated that EU would continue to host refugees: "We have a history and a tradition and an identity based on the fact that we celebrate when walls are brought down and bridges are built", she said after a meeting with Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende (European External Action Services, 2017). While on the same day a man from Pakistan suffocated to death as he was trying to keep warm in a tent at the Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, the third death recorded in a week (Euobserver, 2017). Not to mention, the bad conditions of the so called hotspots created by EU in Italy and Greece, that are so miserable to the extent that refugees are returning voluntarily to Turkey from Greece islands after the Western Balkan route was closed. On the other hand, out of 160,000 planned resettlements – in a two-year humanitarian plan that will end in September 2017 - only 10,000 have been relocated from Italy and Greece to other EU states. The EU disputable humanitarian tradition was uncovered by the recent €200 millions deal with Libya and other North African states that included training of Libyan coast guards to improve their surveillance skills, a deal with which “Europe wants to

dispense with its obligation to provide protection” by returning people to Libya, as Catherine Woollard, secretary general of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles has stated (Euobserver, 2017).

After the exacerbation of the Mediterranean crisis with the tragic deaths of April 2015, when more than 1,250 people had drowned within one week only, making it the deadliest month whatsoever (IOM, 2016), EU states claimed to adopt a humanitarian response to protect people lives at sea by launching EUNAVFOR MED operation. In a special meeting on 23 April 2015, the EU heads of states unanimously concluded that “the situation in the Mediterranean is a tragedy”, confirming that “our immediate priority is to prevent more people from dying at sea” (European Council, 2015; Riddervold & Bosilca, 2017, p.8). The humanitarian approach was clearly illustrated when the operation name was changed to Sophia, after the name of a baby born on one of its ships. Despite the humanitarian model that Sophia claims to embrace, its military approach was evident, as the operation main objectives were to identify, capture, and dispose vessels and assets used or suspected of being used by smugglers or traffickers (European Parliament, 2015), without any guarantee that these vessels and assets are not carrying any migrants (Llewellyn, 2015). Sophia mission was planned through four operational phases: first, surveillance activities; second, interception and destruction of vessels used for smuggling, first on the high seas and later, if a UN resolution and Libyan consent was granted, into territorial waters; a third phase involving action on Libyan land following similar approval; and finally a fourth phase of handing over migration control from Libya to Libyan authorities (Heller, et al., 2017).

Many observers mentioned that Sophia is becoming less humanitarian with the newly added tasks, and the assistance received from NATO (Riddervold & Bosilca, 2017). While the training to be provided to Libyan coast guards was considered by Human Rights Watch as a move from EU to bypass the nonrefoulement principle “so it wants to outsource the dirty work to Libyan forces [...] the EU – soon perhaps with NATO’s help – is basically deputizing Libyan forces to help seal Europe’s border” (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Riddervold & Bosilca, 2017, p.11). Additionally, Triton despite its obvious security mandate insists on portraying its work in humanitarian terms, emphasizing the number of saved lives by the operation (Perkowski, 2016).

In the same line, closing the legal route for migrations, and opposing humanitarian Visas issuance (Euobserver, 2017), while granting asylum only to those who could reach European shores through the illegal routes, is morally and ethically unacceptable, knowing that the majority of people crossing the sea are eligible for refugee status (Afghanis, Eritreans, Iraqis, Syrian, are fleeing

worldwide known wars). The Mediterranean crisis posed double moral obligation because deaths and sufferings are witnessed; broadcasted, shared, and documented on daily basis, nonetheless, it remains ignored. It is not anymore the traditional type of crisis that takes place in remote inaccessible parts of the world where governments or fighting parties are cruel enough to protect or allow the protection of human lives, or what some call “distant suffering” (Boltanski, 1999).

All of this has put the NGOs in a dilemma: should they let people die and comply with the applied policies? Or should they save people at sea and defy these policies? Since the human and ethical values weighed more than political considerations, NGOs and civil society initiatives intervened in the sea not only to fill the self-evident shortage in the existing response but also to fulfill the abandoned humanitarian ethical imperative. Because of that, the NGOs SAR intervention in the Mediterranean was strongly attacked by states and politicians, as it will be discussed later.

2.2. Chapter Two: Factors behind the proliferation of SAR NGOs

The humanitarian intervention at the sea and the phenomenon of humanitarian SAR operations are unique in the humanitarian context because humanitarian work usually takes place on land. Also, SAR operations are traditionally states’ responsibilities as per international laws discussed above. The NGOs playing an active role in rescue operations can be divided into various categories:

- 1) NGOs established by philanthropists who initially supported the SAR mission financially from their own private firms and who have previous experience in related field of operation. Such experience enabled these organizations like MOAS and Proactiva Open Arms to enter the SAR field easily as they already have the needed expertise and funds.
- 2) Traditional NGOs who are well-known in the humanitarian field, such as MSF and Save the Children, to whom the SAR operation is a partially (MSF) or totally (Save the Children) a new experience.
- 3) Civil society initiatives like Sea-Watch, SOS Mediterranean, Sea-Eye, which are limited in their financial resources and depend primarily on private donations.

The model of the intervention of these organizations varies as well and can be divided into three categories: NGOs that initiated full SAR operations by rescuing people in distress, providing needed medical intervention and transferring the migrants to the safe ports. While other NGOs focus on patrolling and surveillance, provision of needed basic aid like water, safety jacket, and ensuring the arrival of big vessels which conduct the SAR mission. This category deliberately refrain from carrying out SAR operations either because of their limited capacities, like Proactiva

Open Arms, or because of ideological belief that SAR services are pure governmental responsibility and NGOs’ role is to supervise the rescue scene and ensure that related authorities are implementing their duties, like Sea-Watch and Sea-Eye (Cusumano, 2017a). The last category includes the NGOs that receive calls from boats in distress, inform the related authorities and ensure that rescue operation is completed. Despite the various mode of response, the majority of NGOs are involved in documenting the sea violations, publicizing it, and shaming the deficiency of the governmental response. Table 2 below presents the different categories of SAR NGOs as per the operational model¹.

Table2: SAR NGOs models of operations

NGO providing complete SAR operations	NGOs providing patrolling services	NGOs receiving call from distressed vessel	NGOs working on documentation & states shaming
MOAS, MSF, SOS Mediterranean, Save the Children	Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye, Proactiva Open Arms, Judend Rettet, HPI	Watch the Med- Alarm Phone	MSF, Sea-Watch, SOS Mediterranean, Proactiva Open Arms, Watch the Med- Alarm Phone

Within three years the number of humanitarian SAR NGOs jumped from one, i.e. MOAS in 2014, to thirteen in 2017. Many factors contributed to the propagation of this phenomenon, as it will be explored hereafter.

2.2.1. The level of death at sea

The magnitude of deaths at sea together with insufficient response leads to the creation of many NGOs involved in SAR activities. The decision to establish MOAS came after the disastrous death of hundreds offshore Lampedusa in 2013 (MOAS, 2017). Similarly, SOS Mediterranean founder captain Klaus Vogel decided to do something the minute *Mare Nostrum* was ended (Lorenzo, 2016).

¹ The table is based on a table that exist on Eugenio Cusumano’s “The sea as humanitarian space Non-governmental Search and Rescue dilemmas on the Central Mediterranean migratory route”. But it is developed more in this study.

2.2.2. Media coverage of the refugee crisis

Eugenio Cusumano mentioned that the immense and intensive media coverage of the crisis sensitized the European public of the issue, and dramatically shifted the way the crisis is perceived from a threat to humanitarian tragedy, especially after the picture of Aylan Kurdi² (Cusumano, 2017a). Aylan's picture was a trigger to many organizations and initiatives to launch their operations, like Proactiva Open Arms whose creation was decided upon seeing the image of Aylan body laid at the shores (AJ+, 2015). See-Watch and Sea-Eye were pushed by news reports about the crisis (Cusumano, 2017a). A documentary about refugees' situation on Lampedusa "Fuocoammare" that won Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival 2016 was one of the underlying factors to establish SOS Mediterranean (SOS Mediterranean, 2016). On the other hand, the media played an important role in promoting the humanitarian SAR NGOs' work and presenting them in a positive way, which created legitimacy for these NGOs within the EU public. Many articles and news reports were published on elitist media such as *The Guardian*, Reuter, BBC, CNN, talking about the heroic NGOs rescuers in the Mediterranean. Equally important was the documentation, recording, and posting of live rescue operations on the NGOs websites and other media platforms showing real live records of SAR NGOs rescuing drowning people from inevitable death.

In the same line, the coverage of both the crisis and NGOs response has guaranteed to maintain and to increase the funds for these operations (Cusumano, 2017a). As per an article published in the *Guardian*, MOAS gained "15-fold rise in donations in 24 hours [...] donations hit €150,000 in past 24 hours" (The Guardian, 2015; Cusumano, 2017a), after publishing the picture of Aylan.

2.2.3. The legality

The legality of the SAR operations and the sea conventions that enshrine SAR has been thoroughly discussed above. Yet the rescue operations cannot be completed unless rescued people are landed in a safe place. This safe place cannot be granted without concerned state authorization. In 2004, Cap Anamur German humanitarian ship came across a boat with 37 people in distress in the Mediterranean; after saving the people on board, the ship was not granted any authorization to disembark from Italy, Germany, and Malta. After eleven days of waiting at the Italian territorial water, the shipmaster decided to land in Italy, especially after the deterioration of the psychological status of the migrants. Consequently, the shipmaster, first officer and head of humanitarian organization were prosecuted, while the NGO was closed later (Cuttitta, 2014). Since then, various

² Aylan Kurdi is the three-year old Syrian child, whose dead body was found ashore Turkey on 2015.

cases were reported of commercial vessels and fishing boats prosecuted and delayed for days in water before and during the current crisis, this discouraged boats from rescuing people out of fear of prosecution consequences. Consequently, commercial ships deliberately ignored boats in distress (Cuttitta, 2014), or changed their route to avoid areas with high migrants crossings (Aarstad, 2015). Many incidences of left and ignored distressed boats took place at the beginning of the crisis. The most famous documented cases are the boat that was left drifting at sea for 14 days, during which water and biscuits only were provided, and that later landed by itself on the Libya shore with only 9 survivors out of 72 (Heller, et al., 2013). And the October 2013 boat that was attacked by a vessel flying Berber flag, and capsized only 100 kilometers away from Lampedusa; the dispute in the responsibilities between Italian and Maltese forces delayed the rescue operation, causing the death of more than 260 people including many children (L'espresso, 2013; Stierl, 2016). With the peak of the refugee crisis and repeated incidence, Italy committed to allowing disembarkation of all migrants in its ports. Moreover, Italian authorities had expanded the interpretation of the “notion of ‘boat in distress’, considering all overloaded migrants vessels at risk of capsizing and therefore in immediate danger” (Cusumano, 2017a, p. 95), hence necessitating SAR support even if the vessel is not drowned yet. Such commitment created a good environment for SAR NGOs to operate safely. Greek government attitude was different: repeated threats were declared against SAR NGOs operations, while some NGOs personnel were arrested then released soon without trial. Apparently, worries of reputation are so far preventing the Greek government from adding more threats (Cusumano, 2017a). However, the future of these operations is still ambiguous if Italy changed its attitude.

2.2.4. Space where humanitarian principles easily applied

The humanitarian intervention in the Mediterranean was triggered first and foremost by the high number of mortality at sea and the indifference of the political authorities to take an appropriate action to stop the preventable death. Yet the move from the land is considered undisputable life-saving intervention, where the compliance with the humanitarian principles, especially impartiality, independence, and neutrality, is guaranteed. Many scholars are arguing that the humanitarian space on dry land has been shrinking (Collinson & Elhawary, 2012; Cusumano, 2017b), humanitarian actors on land are facing more and more challenges to adhere to the humanitarian principles due to various factors: the complexity of conflicts, the variety of actors, the politicization and militarization of aid, the complex security situation in conflict-torn areas, the increased respect to

the sovereignty of the states and increased threat to the safety of humanitarian workers (Cusumano, 2017b). All these factors had implications on the humanitarian work and are leading to some compromises of the guiding principles. The sea, on the contrary, appears to be a space with more chances for NGOs to work easily in accordance with the humanitarian principles.

Neutrality implies not taking any sides in hostilities or engaging in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. Impartiality means that aid should be provided based on the need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions, while independence means autonomy from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented (OCHA, 2012).

Working at sea seemed to ensure neutrality since humanitarian actors do not take any sides with the state and/or non-state actors. Simply NGOs are reacting to a catastrophe, only taking the side of those at risk of drowning. While in most of the land conflict-crisis, humanitarian NGOs are obliged to take sides in order to gain access and thus benefit some warring factions (Cusumano, 2017b). Likewise, impartiality is considered easier to be applied at sea than on land, because SAR services are provided to all people in distress at sea regardless of their origin, color, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and status as a refugee or economic migrants. Also, working at sea can guarantee humanitarian actors greater independence from political authorities than on land, because SAR operations take place in international waters that are not subject to any state jurisdiction. Also, the law of the sea grants all seafarers innocent passage “making it illegal to state actors to limit vessel freedom to navigate unless in very exceptional circumstances” which increased NGOs ability to work legally and freely at sea. (Cusumano, 2017b; Wauters & Cogolati, 2016). Not to mention the financial independence that is granted because the majority of SAR NGOs depends financially on private donations (Cusumano, 2017a), as it will be discussed later.

However, a deeper look at the humanitarian SAR operations in the Mediterranean may reveal some challenges to the strict application of the humanitarian principles. The coordination with the maritime rescue coordination center MRCC in Italy is mandatory “sine qua non” (Cusumano, 2017b). MRCC Rome is the authority leading all SAR operations in Maltese, Libyan and Italian SAR zones, and it has the sole authority to give the order to the closest vessels in the rescue area to save boats in distress. Therefore, no SAR operation can be initiated without MRCC instructions, and all NGOs are obliged to be in constant contact to know who, when, and where to conduct their operation. This close work with Italy may jeopardize the NGOs independence, as they might be

seen as a tool to implement Europe borders control policies. On the other hand, the increased militarization and securitization of the Mediterranean pose another threat to the independence and neutrality of SAR NGOs. The noticed expansion of law enforcement actors like Triton and Sophia, to ensure border control and anti-smuggling procedures, make SAR NGOs worry about becoming complicit in the anti-smuggling and migrant identification procedures under the pressure from the Italian and European authorities (Cusumano, 2017b).

In addition to the already complicated context of the SAR operations, the non-stopping accusations from the Frontex, Italian and European authorities and politicians are exacerbating the complexity of the situation. SAR NGOs are accused of colluding with smugglers; their financial resources are questioned, and are criticized for being a pull factor encouraging people to cross the sea consequently leading to more death (Ventrella, 2017; Heller, et al., 2017), consequently, putting more pressures on SAR NGOs that might jeopardize the respect of humanitarian principles.

2.3. Chapter Three: Critiques raised against SAR operations

2.3.1. Humanitarian SAR operations, spontaneous action or humanitarian action

The response at sea was nothing but a literal incarnation of the pure concept of humanitarian action. Saving a life, alleviating sufferings, and protecting human dignity is the sole motivation behind these interventions. For MSF, the human suffering is the basis of intervention. As a medical organization, the medical need at sea does not seem to be sufficient to prioritize the intervention at the beginning, particularly if compared to other places in the world. The situation at sea was undoubtedly a humanitarian crisis, thus moving to the sea was a logical step (Del Valle, 2016). Likewise, MOAS as their motto indicates “no one deserves to die at sea”, their main objective is literally saving lives. The decision to intervene at sea was not an *ad hoc* one, particularly for MSF. It took MSF four years to decide to intervene. The first proposal in 2011 was not approved due to worries about the legal repercussions and fears of ending up with a boat stuck at sea; the previous case of Cap Anamur during the boat people period in the 1970s (see chapter 2.3.4) and the aforementioned persecution in 2004 were haunting the MSF discussion. Hernan Del Valle³ argued that the increased public attention to the crisis after October 2013 tragedy, the ending of Mare Nostrum, and the establishment of MOAS encouraged MSF to step in.

³ Hernan Del Valle, head of Advocacy and Operational Communications, Medecins Sans Frontieres, Operational Centre Amsterdam. Del Valle wrote an article about MSF SAR operation “Search and Rescue in the Mediterranean Sea: Negotiating Political Differences”. This article is used intensively in the following chapter.

These humanitarian SAR operations are by no mean a spontaneous action; rather they represent a new phase of the humanitarian action, returning to the very essence of humanitarianism, namely saving people whose suffering is palpably witnessed. Similar to what Henry Dunant did at Battle of Solferino, consequently resulting in the creation of the ICRC movement. The help was provided for the sake of help solely. These operations represent a shift in the humanitarian action back to the personal civil initiative level that is strongly touched by the hypocrisy of the systems and the unbearable dehumanization of people. Unlike the majority of the existing humanitarian aid organizations where a huge percentage of the fund goes to indirect cost, the SAR operations presented an example where lives are really saved with minimum indirect costs. Even though NGOs intervention is confined by their limited budget and capacities in comparison to Triton and *Mare Nostrum*, yet no one can deny their crucial life-saving role at sea. According to UNCHR, NGOs provided 26 % of all rescue operations in the central Mediterranean, two times higher than NGOs contribution in 2015 (UNHCR, 2017).

While States and UN supported aid struggle to respond to the peoples' need, the civil society and volunteers group proved to be key actors to help refugees and migrants in their journey, overcoming the administrative, political and institutional obstacles. These civil societies showed a high level of citizen solidarity that leads to effective response (MSF, 2015).

The SAR humanitarians defending and helping those at risk at European sea borders, despite countless political attacks, are proving that the pure universal humanitarian imperative is the core in humanitarianism, defying those who consider humanitarianism as Western neo-colonization techniques applied only in different parts of the world away from Europe. (Del Valle, 2016).

2.3.2. Necessary intervention, not substitution:

Humanitarian SAR operations at sea might tempt the governments to relinquish their responsibilities. Therefore, humanitarian SAR NGOs are constantly stressing the fact that they are only filling the gap that the EU governments created by focusing on the securitization and militarization at sea. Along with their rescue operations, the majority of the NGOs are focusing on reminding the EU governments of their responsibilities and urging them to have more humanitarian perspective in their response. SOS Mediterranean in its press release was calling EU states to guarantee “universal right to life and physical integrity to everyone” and “re-establish state-led rescue operation” (SOS Mediterranean, 2017). In addition, the well-structured comprehensive and complementary range of services provided by the various SAR NGOs, together with their ability to

deploy all required equipment as well as the level of coordination among themselves and with other actors operating in the area enhanced the effectiveness and the necessity of NGOs SAR operations, demonstrating their ability to work whenever there are people in distress at sea. Thus, confirming that humanitarian SAR operations are not an antagonist to Triton or EU states-led operations, they are only filling the gap in order to prevent more avoidable mortality at sea. This proves how different kind of intervention – governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental - can effectively interact (Irrera, 2016). Easter 2017 rescue scene was the best example of humanitarian SAR operations as the only actor to fill the continuing absence of states-led SAR vessels. On the Easter weekend of 2017, it was reported by MRCC that out of the 25 ships engaged in the SAR operations, one belonged to Frontex and one to EUNAVFOR MED/ Sophia, six to Italian coast guards, six were merchant's vessels, one was an Italian navy ship, and ten to SAR NGOs (Heller, et al., 2017), constituting the highest percentage between all involved actors.

2.3.3. SAR operations as a pull factor

Many accusations were fabricated against the humanitarian SAR interventions. SAR NGOs are facing a de-legitimization and criminalization campaign that “has not only involved Frontex, high-level politicians, and the media but has also led to the opening of several exploratory inquiries by prosecutors in Italy” (Heller, et al., 2017). In February 2017, Frontex published a Risk Analysis Report, which hinted that SAR operations have facilitated the sea crossing and encouraged more people to do so; consequently, SAR NGOs are unintentionally helping the flourishing of the smugglers’ works and leading to the death of more people (Heller, et al., 2017). Other EU leaders have publicly stated that SAR boats work as a "magnet" or even a "bridge to Europe" (Anetzberger, 2014; Steinhilper, 2017). It is worth mentioning that the same allegations were made against *Mare Nostrum*, leading to the termination of the operation (Heller, et al., 2017). Similar accusations have always been present in the humanitarian field (Del Valle, 2016), but they always proved to be baseless. On land, building camps have never encouraged people to leave their homes; on the contrary, the numbers of refugees living within host communities and abandoning camping status is increasing, hence demonstrating that people are not leaving their homes because they are tempted by the camp’s life. Likely the high numbers of migrants who, up to this moment, keep taking the perilous routes through Libya despite the catastrophic security situation, are not taking the risk because they are 100% sure that NGOs will save them.

The hypothesis that NGOs are pull factor has been strongly refuted by a recent study that is still unpublished. In this study, the rescue scene was divided into three phases: *Mare Nostrum* high rescue capacity, post-*Mare Nostrum* low rescue capacity and NGOs operations phase with high rescue capacity. The periods of comparison were selected equivalently from November to May (2013-2016) consecutively, to make the study more reflective, due to the seasonality of the migration. The findings showed that the numbers of arrivals of low SAR period were slightly higher than high SAR period, while mortality rate was much higher during low SAR operation (Steinhilper, 2017). The increase of mortality rate is a result of 13th and 18th April 2015 tragic incidents with total deaths around 1250. An investigative study about “death by rescue” by the University of London’s Forensic Oceanography department (Heller & Pezzani, 2016), analyzed these two incidents thoroughly, using photos, interviews with rescue vessel crews and survivors, and GIS locations and have proved that death would have been prevented, had more intensive SAR operations been available in place. The study findings show that the absence of SAR leads to more death and its availability have no effect on the number of arrivals (Steinhilper, 2017). It is curial that Frontex in their report recognized the fact that the rising of the number of crossings in 2016 was consistent with migratory trends from several parts of Africa that were underway over 2015, prior to NGOs SAR assets becoming the major actors in the central Mediterranean (Heller, et al., 2017). Thus, the root drivers for existing migratory trend, namely persisting economic and political crises affecting the region, were recognized by Frontex in their internal and external report, yet they were deliberately omitted from the argument that focused on SAR NGOs role as a pull factor. Furthermore, the 46% increase of migrants’ crossings in the western Mediterranean route in 2016 despite the absence of any NGO SAR assets whatsoever, as documented by Frontex, is enough to refute these attacks (Heller, et al., 2017).

Since humanitarian and ethical imperatives continue to be more important than all the above mentioned accusations, NGOs cannot refrain from saving people in distress as long as no one else is doing so, even though the attacks against NGOs are becoming more physical recently. Lately, a far-right extremist group has launched a boat to hinder SAR missions from doing rescue (The Guardian, 2017; Al Jazeera, 2017). The boat is supported by a racist, anti-Muslim and anti-Migrants movement called ‘Identitarian’ that talks of a need for a “reconquista” in Europe (referring to the Christian recapture of the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors), using strong xenophobic terms against refugee “invasion” where “Europeans will become minority in their homeland” (The Guardian, 2017). The Identitarian activists established *Defend Europe project* with a boat mission that initially

aimed to block SAR NGOs vessels, while now they claim that “they will “monitor” the situation and intervene should they see wrongdoing by the NGOs”, namely landing rescued people in EU ports and sailing off shore Libya (The Guardian, 2017). So far, they have disturbed the vessels of MSF, Save the Children, and SOS Mediterranean, while some of the activists were detained by Italian coast guards for attacking SOS Mediterranean boat, and then released. The environment that leads to the emergence of such movements was created by some politicians who talked about “swarms” of migrants, and propagate negative concepts of rescue operations as “pull factor” or a “taxi service” (The Guardian, 2017). The impact of this racist counter operation and the new conflicting dynamics at sea on the SAR NGOs is still not assessed so far.

2.3.4. History repeats itself, what was learned?

Four decades ago when the Vietnamese people fled the war through the South China Sea, the entire world denounced the closure of neighboring countries sea borders. An initiative led by a group of intellectuals called ‘boat for Vietnam’ was launched in Europe, to send a boat from Europe to support refugees. This boat sparked others to join or do the same. Bernard Kouchner, MSF member at that time, wanted to send a medical team on the boat. Kouchner’s proposal led to a fraction in MSF, as Claude Malhuret (MSF president at that time), along with others, feared that it would be understood as an ideological stand against communism (Del Valle, 2016), seeing the ship as not having any technical and medical value in terms of assistance. Eventually “L’Ile de Lumiere” was sent without MSF agreement, and Kouchner and his supporters established Médecins Du Monde in 1980 (Del Valle, 2016). L’Ile de Lumiere was strongly criticized for the media “spectacle” it made of the Vietnam boat people misery (Fox, 2014).

Motivated by the same initiative, Cap Anamur, a German ship, was established by German Emergency Doctors GED NGO, based on the “radical humanitarianism” concept. The radical humanitarianism believed that humanitarian aid should concentrate on human suffering while purposefully ignoring all political contexts, showing no interest in knowing the root causes behind the crisis. As Rupert Neudeck (GED’s Cap Anamur founder) motto was “Either knowing or curing”, he believed that saving people is more important than knowing why they are fleeing. Rupert Neudeck and his supporters found in the ship a solution to the people drowning, without thinking of what to do with these people once on board. The innate radical humanitarian impulse immediately failed when countries like Thailand and Malaysia refused to accept the refugees, accusing the ship of encouraging people to flee. The Cap Anamur had to stop its rescue trips in

1982 because the German federal government refused to take any more refugees; after a while, it resumed its work taking refugees to camps in the neighboring countries (Merziger, 2016).

Many other initiatives appeared in the South China Sea, like the ‘Seasweep’ of World Vision and the ‘Akuna II’ of Food for the Hungry, but each was working individually. ICRC proposed to coordinate the aid agencies’ vessels, to ensure the existence of one vessel at least in the most frequented rescued zone. However, the initiative failed as each agency adopted different conflicting approaches and rivalry feelings were prevalent among them (Merziger, 2016).

Many similarities exist between the Vietnamese boat people and the Mediterranean crisis, yet the current humanitarian sea intervention represents more mature humanitarian action; far away from Neudeck’s radical humanitarianism and Kouchner’s enthusiasm, the current humanitarian SAR operations appear to be more pragmatic and realistic. Despite all the sympathetic feelings involved in these operations, they were not launched until approval for landing were granted from Italy to avoid any unwanted consequences with the related authorities that would end them up stuck in the middle of the sea. This proves that the ultimate goal of these operations is to save lives rather than seeking fame or attracting media attention, even though the media found them an attractive topic to talk about intensively.

Moreover, to ensure their legitimacy and effectiveness, all Mediterranean SAR operations are strictly coordinated with MRCC Italy, presenting a high level of cooperation to ensure well-organized and effective response. The cooperation and coordination are not only with the official authorities but are also clear among all working SAR NGOs, as some organizations are working together supplementing each other like MSF, SOS Mediterranean, MOAS. Also, information sharing about boats in distress is done among the majority of NGOs. Both MOAS and MSF collaborate with Alarm Phone by exchanging information when their vessels are in the vicinity of people who contacted AP hotline (Llewellyn, 2015).

Contrary to Cap Anamur founder deliberate ignorance of the pushing factors of the Vietnamese boat people, the Mediterranean SAR NGOs are fully aware of the root causes of the Mediterranean crisis. As Del Valle mentioned, MSF discussed benefiting from their existence in the countries from where the refugees are coming, to raise awareness about the atrocities and violations the refugee are facing while escaping at sea.

2.3.5. Challenges to humanitarian principles at sea

Compliance with humanitarian principles at sea appears to be easy and feasible, yet it is fraught with some challenges. As aforementioned, the assumption of smooth compliance with the principles is one of the factors that encouraged some to join the SAR intervention. In this part, the complexity of the Mediterranean context in terms of adherence to humanitarian principles will be discussed. The EU border control policies have created a sort of classification of those who deserve to be rescued and those who do not, creating a kind of discrimination that challenge the universal human standards (Basaran, 2015) and humanitarian principles. The humanitarian SAR operations from the beginning rejected this categorization. Based on the humanity principle, lives must be saved at sea and suffering must be alleviated of all people in distress regardless of their legal status. Impartiality is strongly interlinked with humanity at sea since assistance should be granted to all in distress if not, some people would be literally left to die. The complete compliance with humanity and impartiality is clear-cut at sea, more than any other humanitarian interventions at land. All humanitarian SAR actors at sea are strictly adhering to these two principles. However, the humanitarian SAR operations are strongly accused of putting their independence and neutrality at stake. To work at sea is confined by certain obligations that necessitate coordination with other actors. The existence of many actors in the Mediterranean, namely states, governments, security forces, smugglers, and NGOs that are working together and against each other imply complexity. This complexity created a fertile soil for non-supporters of SAR NGOs to pour down contradictory accusations. On March 2017, an Italian prosecutor opens an investigation⁴ to check whether humanitarian SAR NGOs had connections with smuggling operations; his allegations were supported by Frontex's report that says NGOs rescue patrols near the Libyan coast encourage the business of smuggling (The Intercept, 2017).

While others argued that both humanitarian SAR and security bodies at sea are tools in the hand of governments, used to implement and strengthen border control. Perkowski claims that humanitarianism at sea is the “management of undesirable” and a “form of policing”, working hand in hand with government and security actors for the purpose of governing the European borders (Perkowski, 2016, p. 323). Working together with governments and law enforcement actors cannot undermine the ultimate goal of saving lives at sea. Many NGOs developed measures to ensure their independence and neutrality. For example, MSF has refused to use drones or any visual materials

⁴ The accusation was made after an NGO refugee boat received a signal from fisher boat that have rescued two migrant, after taking the passengers Italian authorities claimed that there fisher men were smugglers .

that could be used by authorities to prosecute smugglers (Cusumano, 2017b). MSF decision was made before starting the operation to keep a distance from smugglers and avoid having any contact or negotiation with them (Del Valle, 2016). The nature of the rescue operations necessitates strict cooperation between all involved actors as it cannot be implemented individually. The coordination is a must to have better coverage and responses. Not having the currently existing level of coordination in the sea would lead to deadly response and chaotic situation. It is obvious that the coexistence and the coordination between all actors are inevitable necessity to improve the response (Irrera, 2016).

Additionally, refusing to work under the coordination of MRCC would *de facto* lead to undesired consequences. However, the situation now has changed with the creation of a voluntary code of conduct for search and rescue operation in March 2017 by Human Rights At Sea⁵ with the participation of many of the SAR NGOs. The aim of the code of conduct is to create a principled approach and enhance coordination. Humanity, impartiality, independence, neutrality, and transparency were highlighted as the main principles guiding the SAR operation (Human Rights At Sea, 2017).

Up to now, the majority of NGOs working in the sea are struggling to comply with the humanitarian principles by refusing to be involved in any migrant identification measurement requested by the governments. The humanitarian work is not the “management of undesirable” rather it is the “undesired management” of a situation that NGOs were pushed to be part of to stop more innocent deaths.

2.4. Chapter four: SAR NGOs political roles in the Mediterranean

In the Mediterranean context, the humanitarian SAR operations played peculiar roles in addition to their life-saving role. In this part, the politicized aspects of the SAR missions will be discussed thoroughly.

⁵ Human Rights at Sea is a Foundation Charitable Incorporated Organization (CIO), based in the United Kingdom, they aim to explicitly raise awareness, implementation and accountability of human rights provisions throughout the maritime environment, to promote human rights (as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent United Nations conventions and declarations) for seafarers, fishermen and others involved in working at sea throughout the world

2.4.1. Mirror European public attitude

The humanitarian SAR operations were intensively discussed in the media and political debates. Along with the accusations SAR operations received as discussed above, many compliments and public support were shared. Humanitarian SAR operations in the Mediterranean are a manifested representation of the positive European public attitude towards search and rescue operations. The vast majority of these operations were founded by European civil society members, people who were brought up to human rights, justice, and equity principles, and who did not accept the sufferings at their shores, like MOAS, SOS Mediterranean, Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye, Proactiva Open Arms, Watch the Med Alarm Phone. A survey conducted under FIR2014 project, where experts including journalists, academics, politicians, NGOs officers, and civil protection workers were asked about their opinions of the role NGOs and civil society initiatives are playing in the Mediterranean, showed extremely positive attitude in favor of the continuation of the non-governmental SAR operations (Irrera, 2016).

Moreover, the continuation of the SAR operations up to now shows the evidence of European public support, simply because the majority of these NGOs, if not all, are depending on private funds from European publics. Almost all SAR NGOs are collecting donations online through public crowd funding. MOAS started its mission funded by its own founders; later, donations were raised online to sustain MOAS missions. 95% of Sea-Watch budget, 96% of Proactiva Open Arms, 99% of SOS Mediterranean and 100% of Judend Rettet are from private donors (Open Migration, 2017) (Openmigration, 2017). The high dependence on private donors reflects the strong support for SAR operations value, mission and message and the insistence for their continuation. The issues of losing donors support and public creditability were discussed inside MSF when the rescue operation was decided. Del Valle mentioned MSF unlimited independence and ability to make strong political stands, as a result of MSF private donors who constitute 90% of the yearly 1 billion Euro funding. The probability of MSF losing some donors was present the moment the intervention at sea was discussed because the migration topic is a very touchy and critical. Upon announcing the operation, many donors had withdrawn their donations, disagreeing with MSF involvement in the sea. However, new donors emerged offering their support. All the fear of losing fund proved to be baseless as MSF SAR operations are still functional up to date and it expanded from the Amsterdam branch to Spain and Brussels.

The scrutiny and strong criticism of far-right activists project's *Defend Europe* by various elite media, such as *The Guardian*, *the Independent*, *the Huffington Post* as well as the *Washington Post*

are another sign of the tremendous support for SAR NGOs. *The Guardian* and *the Huffington Post* were criticizing the media outlets that give platforms to some journalists to talk positively about Defend Europe, leading to “the normalization and mainstreaming of explicitly far-right and extremist people”, considering their attacks against “the lifesaving work of NGOs is not helpful and should not be supported or condoned, calling the European public including those who are critical of the current SAR NGOs response to condemn Defend Europe project to avoid mainstreaming extremism in Europe” (The Guardian, 2017; Huffington Post, 2017). The *Washington Post* stated that Defend Europe and its supporters are “paranoid” and their attempts to hinder SAR NGOs live-saving activities are “completely illegal” not representing the current generation (The Washington Post, 2017).

The Mediterranean is becoming a political complicated spot. Defend Europe’s mission is gaining support from well-known extremist activists from USA and Canada, and neo-Nazi leaders. Moreover, some journalists are dedicating some of their work to support and promote such extremist activities like Katie Hopkins, a journalist who described refugees as “cockroaches” in national newspapers, is dedicating her column in the *Mail Online* for “a full-on propaganda/PR machine for an extremist operation” (The Independent, 2017; Huffington Post, 2017). The boost of far-right profiles in Europe and the increased funds they are gaining is worrying (The Independent, 2017). More disputes are expected as some officials are now requesting not to allow Defend Europe’s vessel to dock in Catania port (The Guardian, 2017), thus posing more challenges to the SAR NGOs.

However, the public support of SAR operations is a real representation of the European humanitarian values and spirits that were more eloquent than politicians’ speeches and governments’ constrictions in the Mediterranean.

2.4.2. An example to be followed

Many of the first initiatives in the Mediterranean were aiming to set an example to be imitated by others (Cusumano, 2017a). It was clear that SAR NGOs limited capacities cannot save everyone; as a result, they wanted others to follow their steps. This is exactly what happened. The first initiative by MOAS inspired many others to do the same. Del Valle mentioned that MOAS intervention encouraged MSF to approve the pending decision to launch SAR activities. Some of the NGOs put this aim clearly in their mission statement like See-Watch, believing that their extended goal is “to find imitators”, and confirm their willingness to provide advice to others (See-Watch, 2017). This

aim becomes true when Sea-Eye name and operational mode was solely inspired by Sea-Watch (Cusumano, 2017a). Up to date, there is thirteen humanitarian SAR NGOs in the Mediterranean and the number is still increasing. The factors that enabled these initiatives to exist and be effective are available in many crisis-stricken countries, where humanitarian aid is fraught with challenges, obstacles, and compromises. The mere presence of the humanitarian SAR operations might inspire civil societies in different complicated and protracted contexts to provide effective and life-saving intervention where humanitarian aid is much needed.

2.4.3. Polishing EU image

Europe has always been considered as the epitome of human rights, justice, democracy, and humanity above any other consideration. People are heading to Europe either because their countries are suffering from wars and instabilities or because the host countries cannot receive anymore refugees or have difficult living conditions. The predominant belief was that Europe had always dictated humanity and humanitarian standards to the entire world and it would never fail them. Europe's reaction to the refugee crisis would have negative global humanitarian implications. If the European developed rich countries, that are receiving a very small portion of the world refugees and displaced population (only 10,258,121 out of 67,749,838 (15%), see (UNHCR, 2017), are creating all means to restrict migrants' entrance, then how would the low-income developing hosting countries react? Upon the European-Turkey deal, the Kenyan president threatened to close the Dadaab camp, the largest refugee camp, impressed by EU behavior (The Independent, 2016). Thus, the humanitarian SAR operations are actually saving Europe's face in front of those who cross the sea as well as the entire world. This is true in fact because migrants generally have little information about the availability of SAR capacities (H.Crawley, et al., 2016; Steinhilper, 2017) and they do not differentiate between different actors, thus for them Triton, Sophia, or SAR NGOs represent Europe. While at the global level, SAR NGOs activities are a confirmation that Europeans can apply the humanitarian standards even though their governments are refraining.

2.4.4. Pressure to counter indifference and shame current politics

In the "saved and the drowned", Basaran argued that the deaths in the Mediterranean strongly reflect a systematic collective indifference culture nourished and strengthened not by law, but by a system of sanctions and punishment imposed by political authorities against rescuers. The criminalization of the rescue process provided to particular people, namely refugees and irregular migrants, cunningly guiding and imposing human conduct at sea by encouraging seafarers to ignore

and even let people die in distress. Basaran used the aforementioned prosecution case against Cap Anamur in 2004 and the prosecution of Tunisian fishers as an example, notifying that even though all defendants were acquitted after a couple of years, the prosecution in itself was a strong lesson to others. As Captain Stefan Schmidt, one of the acquitted defendants of the Cap Anamur expressed: ‘If seafarers at sea notice a refugee boat, they know that we stood trial for three years, the acquittal then perhaps does not play an important role anymore’ (Basaran, 2015, p. 7). Such sanctions were one of the underlying reasons of the Mediterranean crisis as seafarers including commercial ships- out of fear of migrants’ rescue consequences- turned blind eye to vessels in distress (Basaran, 2015; Aarstad, 2015). Additionally, normalizing the death in sea by considering it a result of nature (people are dying because of the overcrowded boats, not because no one helps them) and presenting the migrants as a security threat that would attack and invade Europe, subtly justified Europe’s unwillingness to respond, and ensured public acceptance. Both reasons led to justified indifference. The humanitarian intervention in the sea came as a reaction to the man-made crisis of systematic indifference. Out of rejection and apprehension of such (in)human conduct, NGOs, and civil societies expanded their role beyond saving lives at sea to include fighting the indifference epidemic. Through many reports, NGOs claim that border control is a form of war against migrants, people are dying despite or because of these controls. NGOs have strongly shared critical views about the position of Europe, using the terminology of “Fortress Europe”. Also, NGOs have been publicly criticizing Frontex of killing people indirectly by not making active efforts to save them, denouncing EU inability to evaluate the crisis and change their policies (Irrera, 2016). Furthermore, many NGOs are working like watchdogs to ensure that authorities are adhering to their legal duties. Watch the Med Alarm Phone keeps constant contact with related authorities, pushing them to send rescue ships. In case of no response, Alarm Phone mobilizes European communities and media, making public pressure campaigns to provoke SAR official authorities to take their responsibilities of saving people at sea⁶. Additionally, the direct contact of Alarm Phone with the SAR crews of MSF, MOAS, and Sea-Watch is now destabilizing the monopoly of the states’ authorities over the SAR zone (Stierl, 2016). Moreover, the majority of NGOs believe that criticizing or even condemning the states and policy makers’ action against migrants at sea is their indispensable role. Sea-Watch, in addition to supervising the rescue scene and making sure that

⁶ The first campaign happened on 10th April as a vessel with 600 passengers was reported to Alarm phone. Italian Authorities were reluctant to respond. With the time passing, water started to enter the vessel and the engine broke down. MRCC Rome remained unwilling to cooperate. Alarm Phone started a snow balling social media campaign, asking the public to demand a rescue mission. MRCC acted upon receiving various emails yet denounced the campaign (Stierl, 2016)

authorities do send rescue ships, is considered an active platform to shame the current policies, report the violations, and publicize the migrants' situation in the Mediterranean, to make pressure on the decision makers. Recently, Sea-Watch contacted the International Criminal Court (ICC), requesting an investigation of the Libyan coast guards' attacks against SAR NGOs and migrants, who cut across Sea-Watch in order to reach migrants boats, causing the death of many while pointing fingers at MRCC coordinating the refoulment in international water (Sea-Watch, 2017). Likewise, Proactive Open Arms works on raising awareness among European population, especially targeting schools to provide a real picture of the refugees' crisis at sea, hoping to build better generations who do not tolerate the indifference to the human's deliberate death at their borders (Proactiva Open Arms, 2017). Jugend Rettet, as an NGO representing young Europeans, is also taking a strong stand against what is going on, criticizing through letters and press releases, the fact that they are taking over the governments' duties because they cannot watch the negligence of EU responsibilities at sea (Jugend Rettet, 2017). For MSF, the political stance for joining SAR operations was thoroughly discussed before launching MSF SAR operation. As Del Valle mentions, even though the advocacy and testimony approach represents MSF identity, yet the proximity of the refugees' crisis and its link with the politics of "MSF home society" was peculiar. Around the discussion table, some rejected MSF engagement at sea since it is a very political issue that would jeopardize neutrality. Others argue that MSF intervention should be purely humanitarian, namely saving and bearing witness of those who suffer without making any political statement. Another group pointed out that humanitarian action is political by nature and helping the most vulnerable have political implications *per se*, arguing that MSF has a very special role in the Mediterranean context due to its credibility, and public support, thus putting pressure by condemning EU policies that lead to people death must be an integral part of the SAR mission (Del Valle, 2016), and this is what happened. This political role adopted by SAR NGOs in this context is very unique, even though taking a political stand is not new in the humanitarian context, but playing the role of observer to ensure that authorities' commitment to their duty is unprecedented. Fighting the indifference by publicizing the sea context, spotting a light on it, documenting and reporting it proved to be effective as more and more initiatives are established to remind people of the crisis. In the end, two interviews were conducted to obtain additional information about humanitarian SAR operations with two experts⁷: Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Humanitarian Affairs Adviser at MSF

⁷ The interview with Ms. Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui was done on 15 June, 2017, and the interview with Ms. Maryse Etiennoul was on 6 July, 2017.

Amsterdam and Maryse Etiennoul, a nurse worked with MDM SAR operation on the SOS Mediterranean's *Aquarius*. The data collected through the interview was completely in line with what was found in the literature, therefore not interesting enough to be treated in a separate discussion part in this paper.

The main determinant for MSF decision to move to the sea was the increased mortality rate at sea, while MDM intervention was intended to make a political stand about the refugee crisis and to advocate for humanitarian visas. On the other hand, MSF emphasized that SAR intervention was mainly to fill the gap and MSF is ready to withdraw immediately from the sea once EU improves their SAR capacity, arguing that nowadays there are many crises all over the world. Had the EU take full humanitarian and ethical responsibilities in the Mediterranean, MSF would leave and concentrate its interventions somewhere else.

MSF pointed out that one of their roles at sea is to shed light on the root causes that push women, minor children, and men to take so perilous journey to the extent that women are taking contraceptives before crossing the sea, due to the high likelihood of sexual violence. MSF assured that the level of current coordination reflects high solidarity and understanding of the importance of the role of each NGO, and it is the one main factor behind the success of these operations, while MDM stated that during their presence at sea a year ago the coordination between humanitarian SAR was relatively limited.

Both interviewees confirmed that if Italy would deny disembarkation for migrants, the remaining option would be repatriation to Libya; unlike what Cap Anamur did by landing refugees in camps in neighboring countries once disembarkation in Europe was denied (Merziger, 2016). Both interviewees emphasized that repatriation is out of question for SAR NGOs, knowing the disastrous security situation in Libya. MDM confirmed that even though Italy keeps threatening to stop disembarkation, however, it is difficult to do so due to the huge number of SAR NGOs working and the pressure they are creating. Etiennoul added that the impact of such a decision on Italy's reputation would prevent Italy from taking it. Sahraoui argued that MSF intervention at sea is principled yet pragmatic. Even though MSF is coordinating with Italian authority, yet MSF is strongly refraining from sharing any information about the rescued migrants; moreover, MSF is still rejecting to comply with the Italian government request to include police officers onboard. Another important point to highlight here is the concept of humanitarian principles in itself. It was novel to the majority of the newly established SAR NGOs and initiatives. Etiennoul mentioned that MDM noticed that and started informing the SOS Mediterranean teams and the seamen on the ships about

humanitarian principles. On the other hand, MSF does not believe that lecturing new initiatives about humanitarian principles is their duty. This contradicts with Cusumano who mentioned that MSF's condition to support SOS Mediterranean was not to accept governments' donation (Cusumano, 2017a), which implies informing SOS Mediterranean about independence principle. MSF added that they do not believe that humanitarian SAR operation's objective is to inspire others to imitate. Finally, both MSF and MDM mentioned that some of the migrants have no idea that NGOs are providing rescue services at sea and cannot differentiate between NGOs and other security and military vessels. Etiennou added that actually some of the migrants are frightened upon seeing NGOs SAR boats, and begged the staff not to take them to prison thinking that SAR boats are police boats. This defeat the pull factor accusation and support the above-mentioned point about SAR NGOs role as saving EU reputation.

3 Conclusion

So far there is no sign that the migration crisis is to be controlled despite all attempts. The number of arrivals on winter 2017, usually considered a low migration season due to bad weather, was 81 percent higher than the same period in 2015 (The Telegraph, 2017). In brief, the EU response -with exception of a few countries- was the first nail in the coffin of Western enlightenment. Europe's historical legal responsibilities for saving people at sea were unreservedly abandoned, instead all possible deterrence measures to prevent the flow of refugees from reaching EU land were adopted under protection excuses, while the rhetoric of security threats was used to foster public support and indifference. The refugee crisis was a test to assess EU adherence to the long-established values (Irrera, 2016), a test that EU states and political bodies have remarkably failed. However, it was a chance that allowed the emergence of new type of humanitarian intervention, in which EU public and civil societies emerged as key actors who proved that universal humanity standards and human rights principles are intrinsic components in the European societies and population. Many factors have contributed to the creation and mushrooming of the humanitarian SAR phenomenon: the constant high mortality at sea, the media coverage of the crisis, the legal facilitations embodied by the Italian government's commitment to grant migrants' disembarkations, and the presumed feasibility of adherence to humanitarian principals at sea. However, the ethical and humanitarian imperatives remain the substantial underlying impulse behind SAR operations. A lot of studies and reports have proved that as long as root causes of migration exist, all EU measures to stop the

migration flow will remain ineffective. Many have argued that effective solutions for the migration's root causes are needed (Del Valle, 2016). Even though such solutions are indispensable, it seems to be a long-term process; thus proactive SAR operations are the only applicable solution to prevent mortality with the absence of legal paths (Steinhilper, 2017; Heller, et al., 2017). This was evident in Easter 2017, when 9,262 people - a number similar to April 2015 - crossed the Mediterranean, travelling on 55 different boats. Almost all were rescued, with only 115 recorded casualties instead of 1200 recorded in April 2015 (Heller, et al., 2017), thus making it the biggest and most effective SAR event during the past years.

The novelty of the humanitarian intervention at sea is nothing but an evolution in the history of humanitarian action that brought it back to the individual initiative level, but with more professional and political aspects. Humanitarian SAR operations face many attacks that are challenging their continuation. Even though some considers them substituting to the obligation of the states, SAR NGOs keep insisting that they are only filling the gap. Many studies have proved that SAR operations are not a pull factor, despite the accusations of encouraging migrants to cross the sea. In spite of complexity and diversity of actors involved the Mediterranean, SAR NGOs are adhering to the humanity and impartiality principles and still doing their best to adhere to independence and neutrality. SAR NGOs and civil society initiatives have proved that they have learned many lessons from the past humanitarian SAR intervention with Vietnamese refugees, during which they learned about the need for professionalism and coordination between the involved actors that is strongly praised during the current crisis.

Humanitarian SAR operations played a remarkable role in decreasing the unprecedented mortality rate in the Mediterranean; their effectiveness in this regard has been well-studied and documented. However, due to the peculiarity of this crisis, SAR NGOs have a unique role that might have an impact on the future of humanitarianism; hence more research is needed to explore this impact. The multifaceted nature of the current refugee crisis has compelled new roles on the humanitarian actors; SAR NGOs and initiatives have shown that EU civil societies can have a say in the refugee context that represents the European spirit and can defy the political attitude. At the same time SAR operations are fiercely fighting against the indifference-through public shaming and criticism- that some political and legal institutions have been subtly trying to root through sanction and punishments system against whoever rescues migrants.

More efforts and advocacy are needed to extend the humanitarian SAR capacity at the Mediterranean, at the same time more protection and support are required to guarantee the safety

and continuation of SAR activities. The majority of the currently available studies are focusing on SAR live-saving role in terms of numbers of rescued people. Despite the importance of such studies, yet more attention should be paid to the political role these NGOs and initiatives are involved in and the evolution of this role with the daily political development in the Mediterranean. Recently, the emergence of the far-right activists' attacks against the SAR NGOs added more challenges and might have more implications; therefore, more analysis about this is needed. Even though this paper has shown the SAR NGOs are supported by EU public through the public financial support and media coverage of SAR operations, more research and surveys are needed to show the evolution in the future. Public surveys about the acceptance and the support of SAR operations might have a positive impact on increasing the humanitarian SAR capacities and might add pressures on policy-makers.

The SAR phenomenon is still mushrooming: the last initiative was the Humanitarian Pilots Initiative (HPI), operating this time a SAR plane 'Moonbird' that played crucial role in Easter 2017, by identifying boats in distress from the sky, that would otherwise not be noticed due to the documented decrease of satellite phones provided to boats. The innovativeness of the new SAR interventions is demonstrating civil societies' ability to adapt to the evolving situation at sea with new technologies (Heller, et al., 2017). It is important to deeply analyze the current available SAR services to understand what types of additional services are needed to ensure the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the SAR response. Finally, this paper demonstrated that SAR NGOs and initiatives presented a good example that motivated others to imitate at sea. Since the factors behind the proliferation of SAR exist all over the world (such as the sea migration road from Southeast Asia to Australia), more research is needed to explore the availability of similar initiatives elsewhere, and if not the factors that hinder it.

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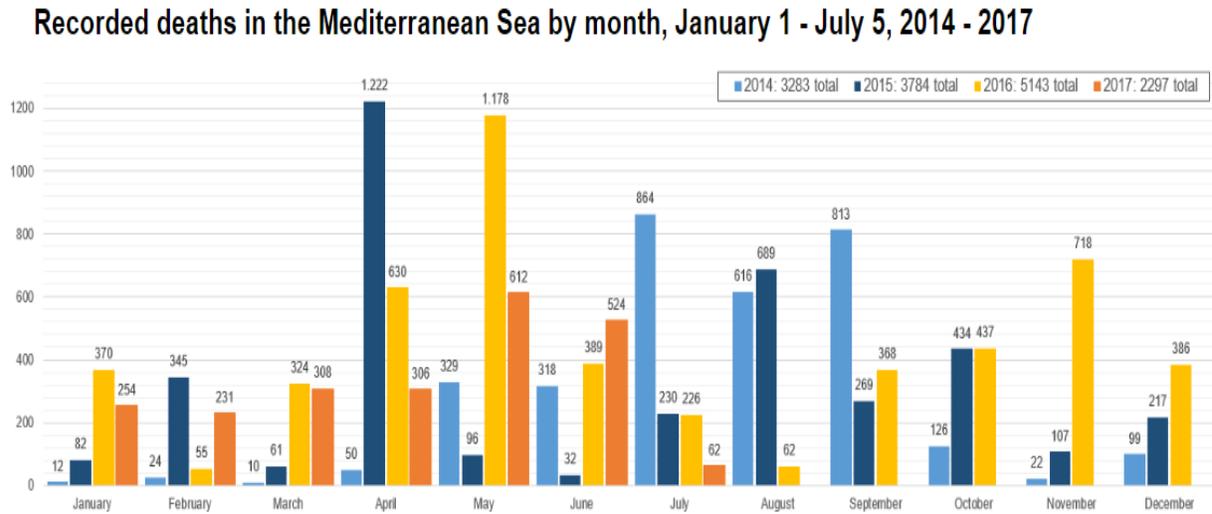
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5. Annexes

5.1 Annex1, Number of Deaths in the Mediterranean Per month January 2014- July 5, 2017.



Recorded Monthly Deaths in the Mediterranean January 2014-July 5,201, from Missing Migrants Project (IOM, 2017)

5.2 Annex 2, Overview of Humanitarian Search and Rescue operation in the Mediterranean 2014-2017

Mare Nostrum

The Italian military humanitarian operation was launched by the Italian government on October 18, 2013, after the death of 600 persons off the coast of Lampedusa (UNHCR, 2014). *Mare Nostrum* was the first official response to the increased deaths that lasted more than a year. Up to now, it is considered the most effective governmental response to the crisis, rescuing up to 156,362 (Patalano, 2015). Despite the success, *Mare Nostrum* did not have the capacity to save each and every migrant at sea, as over 3000 persons were lost during the operation period (Cuttitta, 2014), indicating a need to expand the operation or provide additional SAR support in order to have a response that is up to the crisis' scale. *Mare Nostrum* received many critiques from EU states, considering it as a “pull factor” that encouraged migrants to cross the sea knowing that SAR assistance is available. (Patalano, 2015). Or, as the German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière commented: “it was an emergency plan but it has proven to be a bridge to Europe” (Riddervold & Bosilca, 2017). Along with its humanitarian mandate, screening and migrants' identification procedures took place on the board of *Mare Nostrum* ships, which highlights the migrant' control and anti-smuggling mandate in addition to the humanitarian one (Patalano, 2015). The humanitarian framework of *Mare Nostrum* was nothing new; Italy had previously done similar rescue operations in the sea since 1995 with fewer budgets (Cuttitta, 2014).

Frontex, Triton operation

After Italy's various calls for Europe to support and share the responsibility of migrants' crisis, *Mare Nostrum* was ended, and Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, initiated Triton operation on November 2014 (Llewellyn, 2015). Triton was officially presented not as a replacement to *Mare Nostrum* (Irrera, 2016). Unlike *Mare Nostrum*, Triton main objective was to strengthen EU border control and “encircling Europe with a wall” (Spinelli, 2016). While *Mare Nostrum* ships were used to patrol the Libyan territorial water, the operational area of Triton was limited to 30 nautical miles from the Italian coast (Spinelli, 2016). Other than Triton's space limitation, its budget was three times less than *Mare Nostrum*. As per sea laws, Triton is supposed to participate in rescue operation upon request, even if it is out of its operational area; however, it was strongly stressed by Frontex officials that sending ships outside its planned operational area to

verify and provide assistance to vessels in distress is not within the operation mandate, even if the accident was reported to Frontex. This attitude was clearly expressed by a letter sent from Triton operative division director to MRCC, asking to stop ordering Triton ships to move beyond 30 miles, and requesting verification and investigation to be conducted before sending any rescue ship (Spinelli, 2016). Such attitude highlights the operational priority of border surveillance and control over rescue (Llewellyn, 2015).

Migrants offshore Aid station MOAS.

MOAS was the first non-governmental organization to be involved in the SAR operation, established in 2014 after Lampedusa tragedy. It is a private initiative established by a couple millionaires who came from the private sector, owning a firm Tangiers Group that works in the field of disaster management. MOAS has two boats, the Phoenix that provides SAR operation in the Mediterranean since 2014, and the Responder, a vessel that started the SAR operation in the Aegean sea in 2016 (Cusumano, 2017a). On June, 6 both vessels were used together to operate in the central Mediterranean. To date, MOAS has rescued and assisted over 30,000 persons (MOAS, 2017).

Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)

MSF is a well-known medical humanitarian NGO established in 1971. MSF was already providing medical care to the migrant and refugees who reached Europe. The SAR operation was a new experience to MSF, in 2015 MSF Amsterdam started SAR activities through a partnership with MOAS and deployed medical staff on the board of MOAS's Phoenix. The partnership was over once the operation was suspended in the central Mediterranean. MSF Amsterdam resumed their experience in the SAR operation through a new partnership with SOS Mediterranean supporting it with medical staff and covering part of the running cost. Another two branches of MSF carried out fully-fledged SAR operations. MSF Brussels launched its SAR boat Bourbon Argos on May 9, 2015. And MSF Barcelona launched Dignity 1 on 13 June 2015 (Cusumano, 2017a).

Sea-Watch

A private German-based initiative founded on 2014 by civilians, aiming to provide aid to people in distress at sea. With two vessels Sea-Watch 1, and Sea-Watch 2, Sea-watch provides the migrants' boats with safety jackets and water without any transportation services. Sea-Watch crew stays with distressed boats to monitor the situation till a bigger vessel arrive to rescue (Cusumano, 2017a). In 2016 Sea-Watch was able to assist in rescuing 20,000 persons (Sea-Watch, 2017).

Watch the Med Alarm Phone

A hotline services for migrants in distress in the Mediterranean Sea started by activists' networks and civil society actors in Europe and Northern Africa (Alarm Phone, 2014). Available 24/7 a week, the Alarm Phone (AP) network operates from the five continents. Alarm phones works as an alarm, upon receiving calls from ships in distress, AP sends the verified information to the concerned authorities, and provide advice to people in distress making their situation publically known, AP monitor the response to the distressed boats and in case of negligence or delay its network launch political pressure by alerting media, ship captains in the vicinity, international organizations, religious authorities, and online supporters' networks. (Llewellyn, 2015). Since its launch, the phone activists have engaged in more than 1400 distress cases (Stierl, 2016)

SOS Mediterranean

Civil society initiative founded in May 2015 by sea captain Klaus Vogel a German merchant ship captain. Witnessing the refugees at sea, Vogel decided to do something. Together with the French humanitarian worker Sophie Beau, he established SOS Mediterranean (The independent, 2015). Vogel's the Aquarius is larger than all other NGOs' vessels, 77mt ship specially designed for SAR, which can operate under all weather conditions, and is capable of hosting up to 200 migrants under deck and 500 in total. The Aquarius first rescue mission started on 26 February 2016 (Cusumano, 2017a). The medical services were provided on the Aquarius by the French NGO Médecins du Monde (MDM). Once the partnership with MDM was over, MFS Amsterdam partnered with SOS Mediterranean providing medical services, and part of financial support on board (Cusumano, 2017a). This partnership is still active up to the time of writing this article.

Sea-Eye

A German NGO founded in autumn 2015 by Michael Buschheuer and a group of family and friends. With two ships the Sea-Eye and the Seefuchs – two 26 meters-long re-equipped fishing boats, Sea-Eye started operation in the Mediterranean. Sea-Eye mission focuses on identifying boats in distress and providing life vest, drinkable water, and medical treatment until the arrival of the larger vessel to transport them. Sea-Eye depends totally on volunteers who join the mission for two weeks, and who are willing to partially cover their living and travel costs. As for the end of 2016 summer, Sea-Eye was able to save 5,568 people as of November 2016. In April 2017 Seefuchs resumed its work in the Mediterranean (Sea-Eye, 2017; Cusumano, 2017a).

Proactiva Open Arms

A charity NGO established by a firm from Barcelona called Pro-Activa that provide life guard and commercial diving service. At the beginning, they relied totally on the firm budget (Cusumano, 2017a). Proactiva Open Arms services include sea surveillance and provision of needed humanitarian activities to people in distress until other vessels transport them to land, along with raising awareness about the injustice at sea (Proactiva Open Arms, 2017).

Judend Rettet

A German civil society organization founded in October 2015 and triggered by the daily reports about death in the sea IUVENTA. Judend Rettet boat IUVENTA go to people in distress based on information from MRCC or on personal identification, they move people at risk to their boats and wait till a larger boat arrives at transports them to land (Judend Rettet, 2017).

Save the Children

In September 2016 Save the Children started SAR operation in the Mediterranean, together with VOON the owner of the ship Vos Hestia and RINA services that maximized the rescue capacity of the ship (Marine Insight News Network, 2016). Save the Children is providing medical assistance, basic needs such as food and water, and protecting vulnerable children. In April 2017 the operation was re-launched and will continue operating in the sea till November 2017 (Save the Children, 2017).

Boat Refugee

Boat Refugee Foundation sailed the international waters between Libya and Italy with a rescue ship for six weeks in 2016. More than 1,500 children and adults were saved during that period. In 2017 Boat refugees stopped their SAR operation and focused on providing medical and psychosocial aid in the refugee camps on Samos and Lesbos. The re-launch of the rescue operation in 2017 might be reconsidered if needed (Boat Refugee Foundation, 2017).

Humanitarian Pilots Initiative

HPI is a Swiss initiative created by a Swiss pilot Fabio Zraggen to search for migrants' boats in distress in the Mediterranean from the sky. HIP started operation in 2016 with a group of pilots and supporters using their skills to spot boats in distress in the Mediterranean (SwissInfo, 2016). In 2017, HPI returns to fly over the Mediterranean supported by Sea-Watch (Humanitarian Pilot Initiatives, 2017).