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Drowned Europe

*Authors: Philippe Fargues and Anna Di Bartolomeo,
Migration Policy Centre, EUI*

POLICY
BRIEF

The drowning of 800 migrants, 19 April 2015, after the capsizing of a smuggling boat, triggered responses from across Europe. But when EU leaders met four days later, the news-cycle had moved on and the European Council, 23 April, gave a disappointing response. The 28 agreed to scale up their joint search-and-rescue efforts at sea to the more substantial efforts of what Italy has achieved alone in the last year. There were, also, a handful of other minor actions. Mr Juncker, President of the Commission, lamented that the EU should be more ambitious. He was right, in as much as the EU meeting will not sustainably curb the deadly trends we have seen in the Mediterranean in recent years.



So, what are the facts?

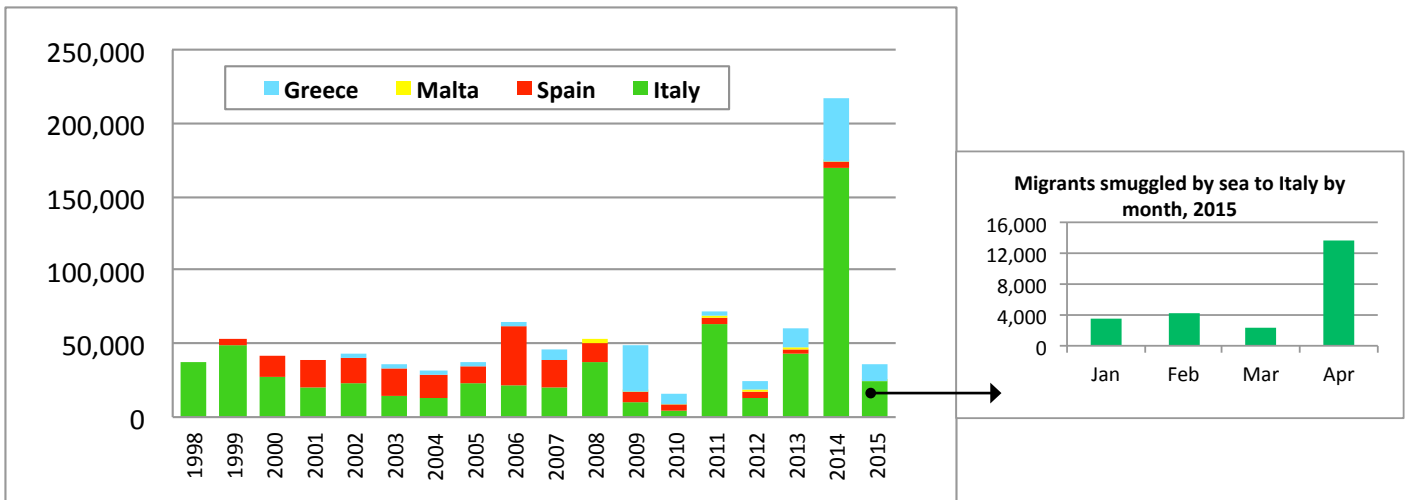
Dangerous, irregular migration to Europe across the Mediterranean has been endemic for at least 25 years. No one in the Italian ports of Brindisi and Bari can, for example, forget the two huge ferries disembarking close to 50,000 people fleeing chaos in the People’s Republic of Albania. That was in the summer of 1991. Routine records of irregular entries by sea started later, in 1998. At the time of writing (end of April 2015) 922,971 clandestine migrants have been recorded, to which one must add the unknown but probably high number of migrants who were not recorded at entry because they were smuggled successfully into the EU.

In conjunction with mounting waves of refugees from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa and with political chaos in Libya, numbers have been

growing and growing dramatically. From 1998-2013, an average 44,000 people were smuggled and recorded annually. In 2014, the number jumped to almost 220,000 and in the first three and a half months of 2015, close to 40,000 entries by sea have already been recorded (figure 1).

The numbers crossing have been growing and, of course, the deaths. In the period 1988-2015, 18,403 people died while trying to reach European coasts. Half of them (44.9%) were recorded in the last five years – i.e. after 2011 – whereas – the highest peaks are observed in 2014 (3279) and 2015 (1719 in only four months) (figure 2). In addition, an unknown number of migrants died in the Mediterranean without being noticed: their bodies did not turn up in European jurisdictions.

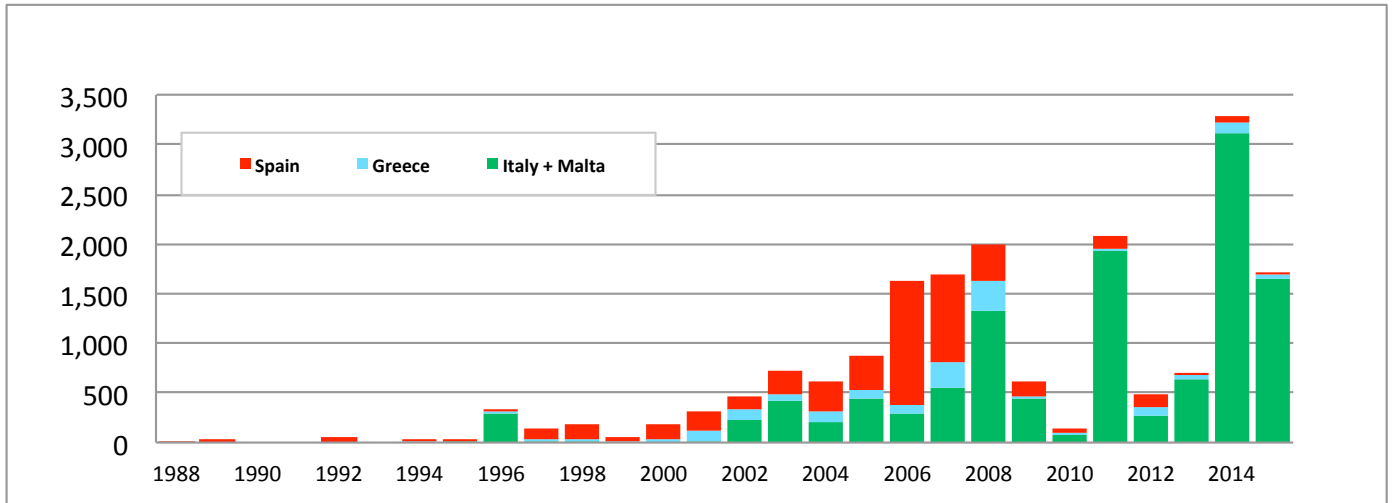
Fig. 1: Migrants smuggled by sea to the EU 1998-2015 (as of 20/04)



Sources: Italy: Ministry of Interior; Spain: Ministry of Interior for 1999-2013 and UNHCR for 2014 and 2015; Malta: Frontex-watch for 2008-2013 and UNHCR for 2014 and 2015; Greece: Hellenic Police, Ministry of Public Order & Citizen Protection for 2009-2013 and UNHCR for 2014 and 2015. Data on 2015 refer to Jan 1-Apr 20 for Italy and to Jan 1-Mar 31 for Greece and Malta.



Fig. 2: Dead and missing persons on maritime routes of irregular migration to the EU 1988-2015 (as of 19/04)



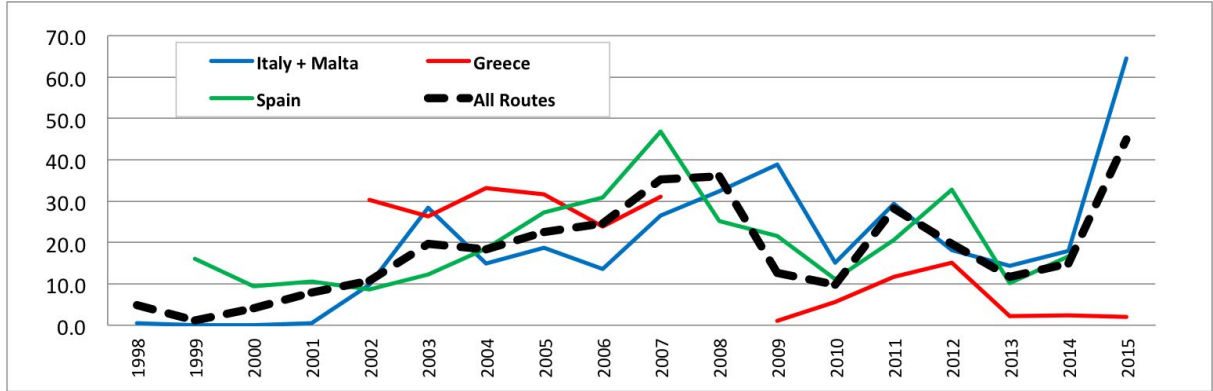
Source: Authors' calculation based on data retrieved from Fortress Europe (<http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it/>) for the period 1/1/1998-31/12/2013, from IOM (<http://missingmigrants.iom.int/incidents>) for the period 1/1/2014 13/04/2015 and from various newspaper articles for the period 14/4/2015-19/4/2015

Not only the number of deaths, but also the probability of dying during the journey has significantly increased in recent years. From 7.6 ‰ between 1998

and 2004, it peaked at 20.5‰, 2005-2014, to reach 45‰ in the first four months of 2015 (figure 3).

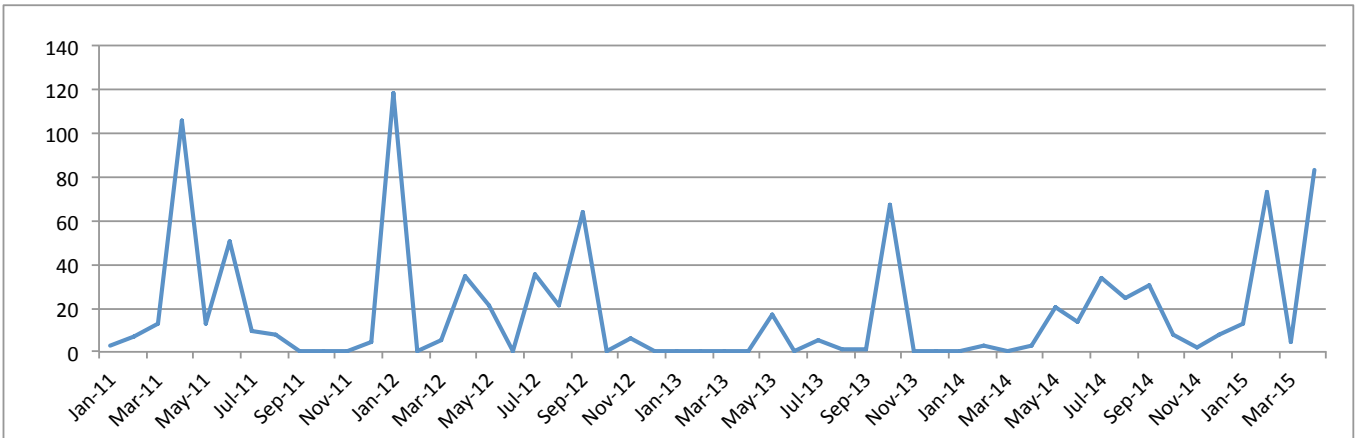


Fig. 3: Probability of dying at sea on maritime routes to EU, (per 1,000 persons), 1998-2015 (as of 19/04)



Source: Authors' calculation based on data on dead at sea retrieved from Fortress Europe (<http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it/>) for the period 1/1/1998-31/12/2013, from IOM (<http://missingmigrants.iom.int/incidents>) for the period 1/1/2014-13/04/2015 and from various newspaper articles for the period 14/4/2015-19/4/2015 and on data on migrants smuggled at sea retrieved from Italy: Ministry of Interior; Spain: Ministry of Interior for 1999-2013 and UNHCR for 2014 and 2015; Malta: Frontexwatch for 2008-2013 and UNHCR for 2014 and 2015; Greece: Hellenic Police, Ministry of Public Order & Citizen Protection for 2009-2013 and UNHCR for 2014 and 2015.

Fig. 4: Probability of dying at sea on maritime routes of irregular migration to Italy by month (per 1,000 persons), 2011-2015 (as of 19/04)



Source: Authors' calculation based on data on dead at sea retrieved from Fortress Europe (<http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it/>) for 1/1/2011-31/12/2013, from IOM (<http://missingmigrants.iom.int/incidents>) for 1/1/2014-13/04/2015 and from various newspaper articles for 14/4/2015-19/4/2015 and on data on migrants smuggled at sea retrieved from the Italian Ministry of Interior.



Italian data allows us to pick out a seasonal trend in mortality. Clear peaks appear in the first months of the year, as well as in autumn (figure 4). Increased risks of dying at sea are the result of a combination of factors. Routes used by smugglers have become longer, and therefore more dangerous. Both points of embarkation and disembarkation have been moving all the time, the former with the changing geography of conflicts displacing people, and the latter with increased controls at destination and the smugglers' strategy of bypassing controls. The old maritime routes across the Strait of Gibraltar (seven miles wide) or the Strait of Otranto (80-miles) were less perilous than the new routes from Libya to Sicily (300 or more miles) or even from Egypt or Turkey to Italy (ca. 1500 miles). With the shift by the Italian navy from border control interventions to search and rescue missions in the framework of Mare Nostrum in October 2013, smugglers seem to have adopted a new strategy of deliberately meeting, instead of bypassing controls, which can reduce mortality. But, with demand growing, boats are increasingly rusty and overloaded and smugglers unscrupulous. The result? A soaring number of deaths.

What to expect in 2015? If differences observed between January-April 2014 and January-April 2015 were to continue through December 2015, in terms of crossings and deaths at sea, the total number of people arriving by sea in 2015 would be 152,872 compared with 170,099 in 2014. If mortality was to stay at the level recorded in January-April 2015, taking into account too seasonal variations, the total number of people drowned during the journey would be 9,867 during 2015 compared with 3,120 in 2014. In brief, arrivals are expected to decrease in 2015 but mortality to dramatically increase.

Data recorded by the Italian authorities do not allow us to easily disentangle the difference between forced and voluntary migrants, i.e. between refugees in need of international protection and people simply searching for a better life. Their distribution by nationality gives some indications, however. The vast majority of people smuggled by sea to Italy come from what we might call 'refugee' countries (Table 1). There are strong reasons to think that most of those from Syria, Eritrea, Somalia and Palestine are genuine refugees in need of protection.



**Tab. 1: Migrants smuggled at sea in Italy 2012-2015 (as of 20/04) by declared nationality
Top ten nationalities**

Nationality	2012	2013	2014	2015 (Jan 1-Apr 20)	Total
Syria	580	11,307	41,941	1,596	55,424
Eritrea	1,428	9,834	33,451	3,248	47,961
Somalia	2,179	3,263	5,644	2,566	13,652
Nigeria	358	2,680	8,570	1,991	13,599
Gambia	348	2,619	8,159	1,810	12,936
Mali	218	1,675	9,314	1,279	12,486
Egypt	1,221	2,728	4,091	47	8,087
Senegal	48	1,314	4,652	1,586	7,600
Palestine	37	1,075	6,024	384	7,520
Pakistan	1,238	1,753	3,678	513	7,182
Top ten nationalities	7,655	38,248	125,524	15,020	186,447
Total nationalities	13,267	42,925	170,099	23,943	250,234

Source: Italian Ministry of Interior

How is Europe responding?

In its 23 April meeting, the European Council committed itself to at least tripling the budget of the EU sea operations, Triton and Poseidon, from 2.9 to 9 million euros monthly: Triton and Poseidon are aimed at controlling irregular migration flows towards the EU and tackling cross-border crime in, respectively, the central and eastern Mediterranean. The objective is to increase search and rescue; to fight traffickers by disrupting their networks, destroying their vessels and removing the internet content they use to attract migrants and refugees; and more generally to preventing illegal migration flows (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2015/04/23/>). In the longer term, the EU will support UN-led efforts to restore the government in Libya and to bring back peace in Syria.

Providing EU operations at sea with financial resources equivalent to those put in place by Italy last year could in principle save lives. But we cannot be certain that Mare Nostrum actually reduced the risk of dying at sea (see Figure 4). Also, the area covered by Triton and Poseidon (the entire Mediterranean) extends well beyond the waters Mare Nostrum was watching over (the Central Mediterranean), and one might fear that more diluted resources will be less efficient. In addition, increasing “search and rescue” operations “within the mandate of Frontex” seems a rather ambiguous objective. As noted by Fabrice Leggeri, Executive Director of Frontex, “we cannot have provisions for proactive search-and-rescue action. This is not in Frontex’s mandate, and this is in my understanding not in the mandate of the European Union”¹. Accordingly, unlike Mare Nostrum,

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/22/eu-borders-chief-says-saving-migrants-lives-cannot-be-priority-for-patrols>, retrieved 24 April, 2015.



Triton and Poseidon are likely to be destined to “protect borders” rather than to “save lives”.

Moreover, fighting the smugglers should reduce, in the first instance, mortality at sea. If they smuggle fewer migrants, the number of deaths will be lower, unless the risk of each crossing increases. But, reducing the number of people dying at sea may mean collateral risks. The first one is that new smugglers rapidly replace neutralised smugglers. The new routes will be, if recent history is anything to go by, longer and more dangerous than the ones just neutralised. The second risk is that blocking the mobility of those who need to move will aggravate their plight in Libya and in other transit countries. There are many accounts of refugees and migrants suffering abuse in Libya, including life-threatening conditions. Trapping them in that most unsafe country would amount to denying them their right to protection.

Removing the smugglers can work only if it is accompanied with alternatives: we must remember that in many cases these smugglers are the only way for refugees to actually claim international protection. Creating safe corridors between conflict areas and Europe has become a must. Moreover, the last segment of the journey could be secured as during the Libyan war, when humanitarian ferries evacu-

ated thousand of migrants from Misrata to Bengazi, avoiding sea mines, constant fire, etc. Humanitarian corridors are, it should be noted, cheaper than sea rescue operations.

The European council reiterates the EU’s commitment to implementing readmission agreements with third countries and announces a new return programme for the rapid return of illegal migrants. However, the statement of the European Council says nothing about a commitment to do more in asylum terms. Accordingly, opening new channels of legal entry for asylum seekers by guaranteeing them the possibility of humanitarian visas to the EU in their countries of origin or in third neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Sudan, etc.) might be an important part of the solution. People fleeing from European wars and dictatorships, many years ago, left their country of origin for safer places (such as the US) in an irregular fashion: they had no choice. Today migrants at sea are trying to escape old and new humanitarian crises, and are searching for international protection for themselves and their children. They not only deserve but are entitled to that protection.



Migration Policy Centre

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society. The Migration Policy Centre is co-financed by the European Union.

Migration Policy Centre Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies - European University Institute
Via delle Fontanelle 19I-50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI) Italy

Tel: (+39) 055 4685 817

Fax: (+39) 055 4685 770

mpc@eui.eu



Complete information on our activities can be found online at: www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/