



ITALY

Civic space in Italy is rated "narrowed" on the CIVICUS Monitor. The country was downgraded in November 2018

The data from 2016 show that the third sector in Italy has been growing in an economic context characterised by a deep and prolonged recession. 11,6% more entities were registered compared to 2011, with a growth in the number of volunteers and employees, respectively +16,2% and +15,8%¹. While half of these entities are concentrated in the northern part of the country, the sector grew in all Italian regions compared to 2011. In 2018, however, the establishment of a new government has put pressure on associations. The space for solidarity, in particular, has been hit by a heavy campaign of criminalisation directly driven by the Government of the time in parallel with restrictive legislation, with repercussions on the whole sector. At the same time, a multitude of initiatives have taken place, promoted and also coordinated by new and informal social groups and coalitions, to reverse the trend and reclaim the right to act.

¹ ISTAT, Censimento permanente delle Istituzioni non profit. Primi risultati, 2017

THE NUMBERS OF THE THIRD SECTOR IN ITALY (2015)

Population:

60.8 million

Number of Third Sector entities:

336 275

+11.6% compared to 2011

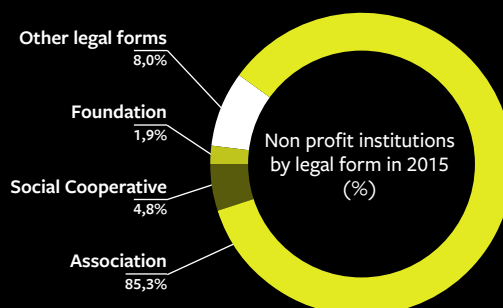
Number of employees:

788.126 (2015)

Number of volunteers:

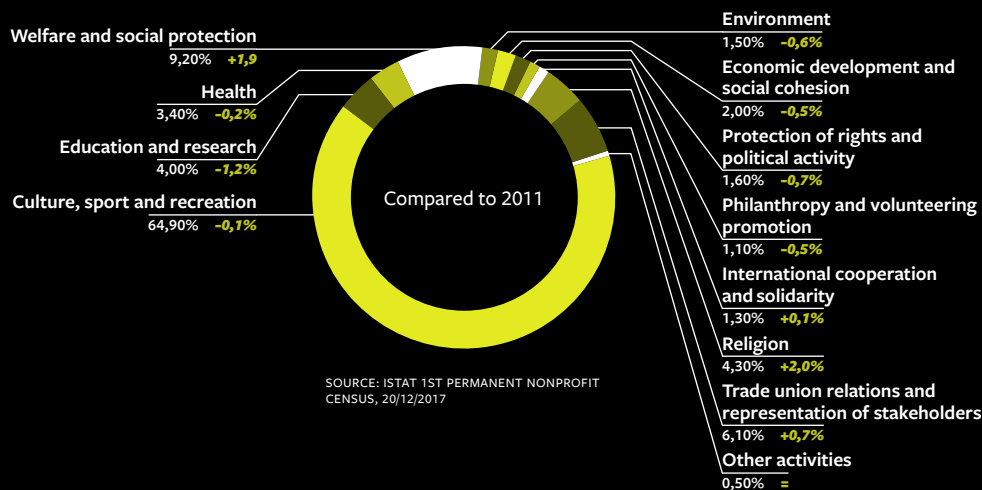
5 528 760 (2015)

SOURCE: ISTAT 1ST PERMANENT NONPROFIT CENSUS, 20/12/2017



SOURCE: ISTAT 1ST PERMANENT NONPROFIT CENSUS, 20/12/2017

DISTRIBUTION OF NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS BY FIELDS OF ACTIVITY



SOURCE: ISTAT 1ST PERMANENT NONPROFIT CENSUS, 20/12/2017

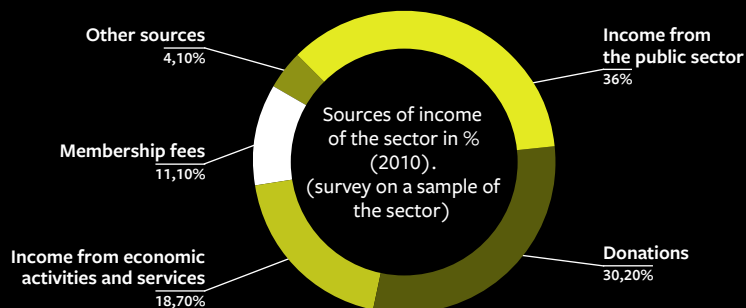
THE ECONOMIC WEIGHT OF THE SECTOR

Budget of the third sector:

circa 64 billion euros

It represents **3,8%** of national GDP

SOURCE: ISTAT, 3RD PERMANENT NONPROFIT CENSUS 2011



SOURCE: RICERCA SUL VALORE ECONOMICO DEL TERZO SETTORE IN ITALIA 2012, UNICREDIT FOUNDATION
WWW.FORUMTERZOSETTORE.IT/MULTIMEDIA/ALLEGATI/RICERCA.PDF

CRIMINALISATION OF SOLIDARITY AND WIDER REPERCUSSIONS FOR THE SECTOR

Towards an acceleration of shrinking space

By Gaia Romeo, A buon diritto

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From June 2018 to August 2019, Italy has experienced an attempt of centralisation of power under the so-called “yellow-green” government. The agenda was led de facto by the Minister of Interiors Matteo Salvini, head of the far-right League party and co-deputy prime minister together with the Minister of Labour, Luigi Di Maio, leader of the anti-establishment Five Stars Movement. These fifteen months accelerated the reduction of space of civil society, in particular for those working on the issue of immigration and especially for those engaged in rescue-at-sea. However, the measures had wider repercussions on the democratic space, including the right to protest and to criticise the actions of the government and its leaders.

BACKGROUND

In Italy, criminalisation of solidarity has a long history. Already in August 2016, the centre-left mayor of Ventimiglia, a village at the borders with France and transit point for many migrants, issued an ordinance prohibiting to give food to migrants in the street. Expulsion orders started being issued against young activists assisting migrants with food and legal help in Ventimiglia, Como and other cities. The ordinance was later repealed after three French volunteers were arrested sparking a large protest.

The turning point was in 2017 when the Public Prosecutor of Catania, Carmelo Zuccaro, announced an investigation into illegal funding and collusion with human traffickers and organised crime of NGOs rescuing migrants at sea. In March 2018, he also opened an investigation towards Marc Reig Creus and Ana Isabel Montes, respectively commander and chief of

mission for the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms, after they had saved more than 200 people shipwrecking in international waters. The charges were criminal conspiracy aimed at smuggling, smuggling and private violence. Later in 2018, Zuccaro himself had to ask for dismissal of the general investigation towards NGOs and the charges of criminal conspiracy in the investigation against Creus and Montes, while the other charges are still pending. In none of these cases nor in the following similar ones anyone was found guilty by Italian justice. However, these accusations had and still have a strong effect as they contribute to poisoning public opinion against the work of NGOs. At the same time, the then centre-left Minister of Interiors Marco Minniti introduced the controversial “Code of Conduct” that NGOs were compelled to sign in order to keep operating in the Mediterranean Sea. The code put all the

operations under Rome's direction, introduced the presence of armed police officers on board and forbade the transfer of rescued people from one boat to another. The Code was strongly criticised by several NGOs and organisations, as its provisions made the rescue operations more difficult. Also, it strengthened the idea that NGO should be "controlled".

The same Minister passed a law which undermined the minimum legal guarantees in the procedures for the recognition of asylum and other kinds of protection, for example by abolishing the second degree of judgment. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that in the first degree the asylum seeker is not necessarily assisted by a lawyer, and the third degree only sentences about the regularity of the procedure. Therefore, the second degree was the moment in the procedure when the lawyer could properly intervene.

The law on immigration was adopted in combination with a law on security, which authorised the mayors, in collaborations with the prefect, to cast out individuals "undermining the public use of the area" from determined urban areas. Such vague definition was interpreted especially against migrants and homeless standing or sleeping in public areas, with the effect of identifying poverty with insecurity.

LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENTS

When Salvini – whose nationalist propaganda is fiercely anti-immigration and by extension against civil society dealing with migrants – took power, the ground was fertile enough to pass two governmental decrees on "security and immigration". The two bills were approved as matters of urgency, skipping the parliamentary discussion, and then converted into law.

The first one, approved in late November 2018, eliminated the "humanitarian permit of stay", the type of protection most

commonly provided by Italian national law. It also excluded from the reception system the holders of this permit and prevented asylum seekers from being registered in municipal registries, with the effect of depriving them of all the rights connected with residency. It also increased penalties for strangers committing crimes and foresaw the possibility to revoke Italian citizenship for those who have acquired it in adult age, as a consequence of some crimes.

In parallel, the Ministry of Interiors blocked the ongoing conventions with profit and non-profit entities in charge of managing the CAS ("Centri di accoglienza straordinaria", centres for special reception), a very widespread type of reception centre for migrants. The decree also strongly reduced the previous daily budget per capita, by cutting, in particular, the integration part and the possibility for many to live autonomously in apartments and not in the centres. The stop to the conventions created a very chaotic situation for both the hosting entities and the people benefiting from their services. As Oxfam Italy denounced in its report¹, up to 15,000 CAS operators risk to lose their jobs by the end of 2019 as an effect of the decree.

The second Security Decree – enacted in summer 2019 – gave to the Minister of Interiors the power to prevent boats suspected of "being a threat to national security", namely smuggling, to enter into the Italian territorial sea. It also established a huge fine of up to 1 billion € and the confiscation of the boat for the offenders.

While the core of the government narratives and legislation targeted migrants and solidarity, the aim was to have a broader effect on civic space. The two bills on immigration contained detrimental measures concerning freedom of assembly: the first decree foresees imprisonment

up to six years for anyone who blocks or obstructs a road, while the second one increased penalties for crimes committed during manifestations and use of force or threats against a public official. It also establishes imprisonment between 2 and 3 years and fines from 2000 up to 6,000 euros for anyone who uses protective helmets, or any other means to make it difficult to recognise the person. Moreover, the 2018 budget law had reduced tax advantages for nonprofit organisations, and with the law "against corruption" the government tried to penalise organisations whose members held elected offices. Both measures were eventually corrected afterwards.

THESE FIFTEEN MONTHS ACCELERATED THE REDUCTION OF SPACE OF CIVIL SOCIETY, IN PARTICULAR FOR THOSE WORKING ON THE ISSUE OF IMMIGRATION AND ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE ENGAGED IN RESCUE-AT-SEA. HOWEVER, THE MEASURES HAD WIDER REPERCUSSIONS ON THE DEMOCRATIC SPACE, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO PROTEST AND TO CRITICISE THE ACTIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT AND ITS LEADERS.

¹ Oxfam Italia, Invece si può! Storie di accoglienza diffusa, https://www.oxfamitalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/oxfam_invece-si-pu%C3%B2-paper-accoglienza_2.05_digitale.pdf, 2019.

THE LONG WAIT ON BOARD, OFTEN WITH ADVERSE WEATHER CONDITIONS, CREATED VERY RISKY MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SITUATIONS FOR BOTH THE CREW AND ESPECIALLY THE RESCUED, AMONG WHICH WOMEN AND CHILDREN AND VICTIMS OF TORTURE AND DEPRIVATION.

THE POLITICS OF “PORTI CHIUSI”

On several occasions the government postponed for days and weeks the authorisation to land to boats which had performed rescue operations by announcing that “Italian ports are closed”, a procedure considered against national and international law. The long wait on board, often with adverse weather conditions, created very risky medical and psychological situations for both the crew and especially the rescued, among which women and children and victims of torture and deprivation. Often, the boats concerned belonged to NGOs – except the vessel “Diciotti” which was under the Italian guard coast – and in some cases their captains were put under investigation.

For example, in late June 2019 the captain of the Sea Watch 3 Carola Rackete was arrested straight after her entry into the port, and charged with violation of the second law on security and immigration – for having landed illegally – and for smuggling. She had forced the entry into the port of Lampedusa, the

Sicilian island which is famous for being the arrival point for many migrants rescued at sea, after two weeks of waiting in international waters with more than 40 people on board. The judge asked for the dismissal of the first charge, as Rackete was considered to have acted in a state of emergency, and because a boat saving lives cannot be considered as a threat to national security.

SMEAR CAMPAIGN AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

About freedom of expression, while no restriction action was formally taken, it can be reported that Salvini’s attitude towards journalists has been and still is very hostile when unwanted questions have arisen. For example, a journalist was intimidated by Salvini’s security men after he filmed Salvini’s teenage son on the Police watercraft, on the beach, on July 2019, raising questions on the personal use of police equipment. When asked about this case during a press conference, Salvini insulted the journalist and accused him to “like children too much,” insinuating he was a paedophile. The three police officers involved – those who were serving as security men – are now under investigation.

Furthermore, Salvini has often publicly addressed threatening words to judges and prosecutors issuing decisions against the government policy, accusing them of making political decisions: it was the case of the judge who released Carola Rackete, or the judges of the Tribunal of Bologna, who sentenced in favour of the right of two asylum seekers to be registered in the municipal registry. After these episodes, the Associazione Nazionale Magistrati (National Association of Prosecutors), in a note, denounced Salvini’s contemptuous attitude in their regards.

A similar intolerance against the “enemies” can be found on the social media of the former Minister of Interiors. His Facebook page – whose staff was paid with the budget of the Ministry, namely

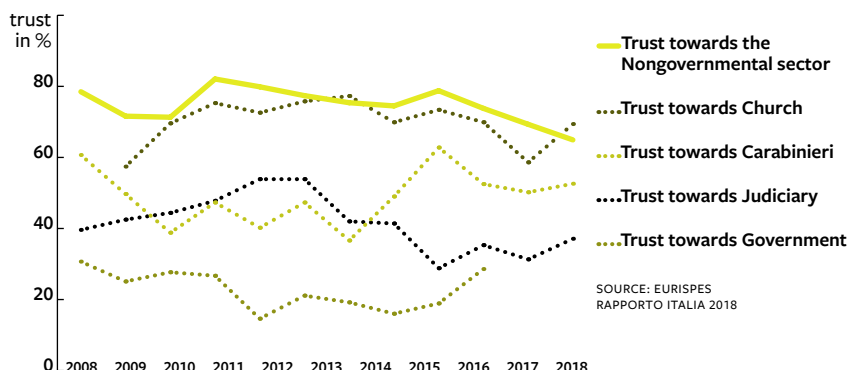
with public funds – often shared photos of undesirable journalists, judges or simple protesters – even teenagers –, never insulting them directly, but exposing them to the hatred of his followers. For example, in March 2019 he shared the photo of a young woman holding a sign against the Minister during a manifestation, collecting thousands of insults.

Also, it must be recalled that the last years have seen the rise of small but numerous neo-fascists groups, whose violent words and actions against both migrants and journalists have contributed to a climate of hate and intolerance. For example, two journalists – Federico Marconi and Paolo Marchetti from “l’Espresso” – were hit and threatened while they were documenting a fascist commemoration in Rome’s monumental cemetery Verano in January 2019. A month later Paolo Berizzi, a journalist from “Repubblica”, was intimidated several times by fascist groups on which he had been writing about. There is no formal relations between these groups and the party League, and Salvini has never given them his endorsement, but no serious action against them was even taken, or strong condemnation pronounced.

Another important alarm bell concerning anti-rights groups was the World

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Citizens' trust towards CSOs



Congress of Family that was held in Verona in March 2019. The WCF – the global anti-abortion, anti-reproductive rights, anti-feminist, anti-divorce and anti-LGBTIQI movement promoting the defence of the “natural family”- has been classified as a “hate group” by several civil society groups. However, the government first gave its sponsorship to the Congress and, only after the strong opposition of many citizens, withdrew it, while it was anyway accorded by the Ministry of Family. The Minister himself, Lorenzo Fontana, together with the Minister of Education Marco Bussetti and Salvini participated to the Congress.

CONCLUSION

In this framework, the response of civil society has been very diversified. Several actors – associations, lawyers, citizens – have put in place initiatives to contrast criminalisation of solidarity and to abrogate through legal means part of the legislation on security and immigration. Huge donations were raised to pay legal expenses for NGOs charged with accusations, and very active support groups were set up. For example, when Mimmo Lucano, famous for having repopulated the village of Riace in Southern Italy with migrants, was arrested as suspected of abetting illegal immigration, fraudulently awarding contracts and having organised “marriages of convenience”, civil society

mobilised strongly to protest against the accusations and to show solidarity. If the response of civil society proved many times to be remarkable, it lacks a central strategy.

In the last months, however, the situation has overturned very fast. In August 2019, Salvini, at the top of his popularity, decided to end the alliance with the Five Stars Movement and asked for new elections, certain to strengthen his power in the Parliament. Surprisingly, a new government was formed thanks to the

unexpected alliance between the Democratic Party and the Five Stars Movement, under the same Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte. The government program announced a new strategy on migration and the modification of the two Decrees introduced by the former government in the parts concerning migration – but not the part concerning security. On September 23rd, in Malta, the new Italian Minister of Interior – Luciana Lamorgese, former prefect of Milan – met her counterpart from Malta, France, Germany in the presence of the Minister of Interiors of Finland – this latter country having the Presidency of the EU Council – and the outgoing EU Commissioner for Migration Dimitris Avramopoulos. The outcome of the meeting was an agreement to establish a European mechanism of redistribution of migrants, which will soon be discussed by the Council on Justice and Home Affairs. The next months will be crucial to understand how the new government will deal with the legacy of the previous one, and how this will impact civil society and its place and space in Italian society. ■



THE AUTHOR

Gaia Romeo, born in 1993. Since 2012 he has been collaborating with A Buon Diritto Onlus, for which she has been focusing on deprivation of liberty, torture, police abuse and psychiatric restraint. She is the reference for A Buon Diritto's international partners.

SEVERAL ACTORS – ASSOCIATIONS, LAWYERS, CITIZENS – HAVE PUT IN PLACE INITIATIVES TO CONTRAST CRIMINALISATION OF SOLIDARITY AND TO ABROGATE THROUGH LEGAL MEANS PART OF THE LEGISLATION ON SECURITY AND IMMIGRATION.

*Central Mediterranean has become a frontline in the global war against universal rights and their defenders: a liquid wall of the Fortress Europe and a migrants' cemetery. The war against rights and solidarity has yet to be won, but if there is still room to fight and to change, we owe it also to those who have resisted and keep resisting in the sea. They show everybody the duty to resist unjust orders in order to obey higher laws. They embody the living proof of the strength of the values enshrined in the national, European and international conventions of rights. They have become a symbol of democratic resistance, providing courage to other democratic activists. Among them, Mediterranea is an Italian participative platform born from the grassroots, involving many civil society actors, thousands of citizens and local groups that daily support, in many ways, their ships. We interviewed **Alessandra Sciurba** in July 2019 when the rooms of the Italian Interior Ministry were used as a megaphone for hate speech. Italy has now a new Government, and the institutional discourse is more civilised. However, a real discontinuity in the practices around the issues of migration and the Mediterranean Sea is still to be conquered. The struggle goes on.*

Raffaella Bolini, Member of ARCI, Member of the Steering Committee of the European Civic Forum

THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA BECAME A BATTLEFIELD FOR VALUES IN EUROPE

How Mediterraneana has reactivated hopes for democratic resistance in Italy and beyond

Interview with Mediterraneana

**Tell us about Mediterraneana.
Where does it come from?
How has it changed over time
- if it has?**

Mediterranea was born out of a movement of fear and desire.

Fear regarding a historical moment when the criminalisation of solidarity had transformed the Mediterranean into a desert, as well as a cemetery, with [people on] social networks cheering to every news of shipwreck like at the stadium. At the end of 2018, there was no one at sea to witness violations of human rights and to save people where necessary. It seemed that a complete loss of decency and respect for the value and dignity of human life was becoming the norm. We felt at a point of no return: the Mediterranean Sea had become the battlefield to try to stop the process [of erosion] of the ethical foundations that - albeit fragile - had been built

after the end of the Nazi-fascism in Italy and Europe.

Hence the desire to do something starting from the fundamental value of human life. There was a strong feeling that, crushed between the Europe of the Troika and the Europe of Visegrad, there were many people who could no longer find a space to express an alternative vision of the world. There was also a conviction that, in order to reclaim our voice, it was necessary to act, to do something extraordinary, significant and, at the same time, utterly tangible.

Putting all these elements together, the idea of a ship emerged immediately, [the idea] of a ship that could fly the Italian flag, given that Italy is one of the protagonists of everything that is happening in the Mediterranean. And also because for us it was crucial to be able to claim that the terrible slogan "Italians first", established

with the new government, could mean something completely different: Italians first in solidarity and in defense of the rights of every person.

To turn [this] desire into reality and to overcome fear, we had to learn a lot: how

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Alessandra Sciorba

to search for a ship, how to buy a ship, how to form a crew, how to get ready to rescue lives where necessary, how to deal with the port authorities, and a thousand of other things.

Initially, the departure was made possible thanks to a credit line granted by Banca Etica with the signature of 5 guarantors: Mediterranea owes a lot to this bank and the people who have placed their signature. That first money was used to buy our ship Mare Jonio.

The main objective has always been to be at sea, to carry out the very important function of monitoring violations of fundamental rights, without ever evading the ethical and legal obligation to save human lives. For this reason, we have defined ourselves as an act of *moral disobedience* and *civil obedience*. Moral disobedience to this terrible rhetoric of “zero-sum” rights, for which the only way to have rights is to take them away from someone else, so that the only way to live is to let them die. At the same time, *civil obedience* to those wonderful conventions of international law of the sea and human rights – emerged after the Second World War to say “never again” to the horrors of previous decades. These make the life and dignity of people an un-negotiable priority both on land and at sea.

Mediterranea was born from all these solicitations, from all these considerations. Its

objectives have never changed, what has changed is the political and regulatory framework in which we operate and which has forced us overtime to review our ways to resist and live at sea.

You call yourself an open platform rather than an NGO: why this choice? How do you manage participation from the ground up?

Mediterranea is not an NGO, but as we define it, – an NGA, a Non-Governmental Action: it is born from a group of friends and some associations. It was not only a decision at the beginning to be an open platform but also a matter of fact. We were many – with diverse backgrounds, ways of acting and training, but [we were]

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united by years of concern and fights for the defence and protection of the rights of all. [Together we] took an action [that was] extraordinary but also needed, tangible, like buying a ship and putting it at sea. It was in its nature to be open. Already since the start, Mediterranea involved the web magazine “i Diavoli” from Milan; the co-working restaurant of Palermo “Molti volti”; a large national association like Arci; an NGO like Sea Watch, the reception community San Benedetto al Porto of Genoa founded by Don Gallo; the association Ya Basta that had always worked

in the field of cooperation from the grassroots in Latin America. Very different realities that merged with many others that immediately joined.

It was and [still] is a complicated process, very different from having an organisation with a hierarchical structure and clear roles. Instead, we made an effort to keep open the different methods of participation and decision-making in the intersection of different realities, and this is a challenge. We can say that the form of Mediterranea on the ground is also a challenge of various types of self-organisation. Now we are trying to establish a second-level association, which can formally hold all these realities together, while the individuals who have participated will form themselves an association. We need to give ourselves a formal structure, for fundraising and also for the transparency of our actions. But we got there after a journey and after a study on what could be the most effective forms of participation.

And anyway, beyond this formalisation, small territorial communities and groups have sprung up spontaneously and autonomously, immediately after the launch of Mediterranea, after 4 October 2018 and the press conference which announced that the ship Mare Jonio had left the day before, on the anniversary of the great massacre of Lampedusa. They aim to support this project because they have grasped its strength, importance and potential of/inclusivity.

That is why we have always talked about crews at sea and crews on the land.

The land crews are Mediterranea: they come on board even if not physically. Tugboats and sailboats cannot accommodate thousands of people, but symbolically they are always there.

The explanations for the transfers to our crowdfunding are moving, we should write a book by lining them up. They are all small donors, and they are many: we have spouses who ask to donate to Mediterranea instead of gifts for their



Mediterranea Mare Jonio.

I BELIEVE THAT ENERGIES THAT ALREADY EXISTED HAVE FOUND IN MEDITERRANEA A SPACE TO REDISCOVER HOPE AND MOBILISE, FROM THE SEA AND FROM THE LAND.

wedding, parish dinners, film screenings, birthdays, book presentations, shows. Anyone who has something to stage, or to celebrate, or can build ad hoc initiatives, participates not only

economically but also by defending the values of Mediterranean, or telling its story. They contribute to restoring hope. This is demonstrated by the figures we have reached, which are enormous even if they are never enough for a project with very high costs such as Mediterranean. Even though none of us – the rescue teams, our ship-owners and myself as a spokesperson – no one gets one euro. For example, think that a single tank of Mare Jonio costs 38,000 euro and every mission at least 100,000 euro and that we have to pay every month for the professional crew needed to put a commercial ship into the sea.

To support these costs, a great deal of creativity has been put in place: we provide the logo on our website, and many groups and individuals have come up with the most diverse ways to make self-financing:

bags, bottles, cups, pins, and a thousand other things.

This lack of centralisation certainly has limits, but it also allows us to free and express many energies.

I believe that energies that already existed have found in Mediterranean a space to rediscover hope and mobilise, from the sea and from the land.

How has the Mediterranean changed since you became operational?

The year of the turning point was 2017 when we were not at sea yet. It is the year of the agreement with Libya, a monstrous pact made by an Italian centre-left government, signed by the then Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni with Al Sarraj, head of one of the militias already engaged in the



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On board the Nuestra Madre de Loreto, Spanish fishing vessel.

conflict that would later become a real civil war.

This happened in a climate in which several initiatives to criminalise sea rescue had already been carried out: the code of conduct for NGOs, pretextual investigations which then never even led to an indictment of civil society ships. These had made the Mediterranean a desert.

We arrived in a desert. It was already very clear that there was a war against solidarity at sea, and what that war meant symbolically and politically. In this respect, we are very different from our friends from other rescue ships. They had been put into the sea in a phase of collaboration with the maritime coordination centres of countries such as Malta and Italy, and with their respective coastguards or military navies, and, therefore, initially experienced a moment of confusion with regard to this radical change in the attitude of governments.

Our action started when the process of criminalisation and desertification was already in place. And so we were already equipped with instruments – from the very beginning those of international law – and clear ideas of what was at stake.

I think we can say, without looking presumptuous, that Mediterranean has

contributed to restoring courage to other organisations, and has shown that, despite the sudden violence that hit all the ships of civil society the previous year, it was still possible to be at sea. This also thanks to its Italian flag that has revealed the hypocrisy of the political attack on the “foreign ships that bring migrants to Italy”.

In fact, together with Mediterranean, all those who still had a ship have returned to the sea with the shared idea of upholding international law. I believe that we have given a very important key to

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understanding this: when there is no longer cooperation with governments, when you become a target rather than a subject to reward or recognise, we must cling to something certain – the international law. At sea, we shall not obey hashtags, but instead, ask ourselves what international law says. [The international law] is based on fundamental principles, first and foremost, the protection of human life always, and we must obey to that.

It is this approach that has always saved us so far, despite the enormous increase in violence that has been put in place against us since the new government in Italy took office in 2018. This government has found fertile ground prepared by the previous one, and has taken the process of denial of reality to the extreme consequences, through the implementation of agreements with countries where there are dictatorships or wars or where violations of human rights happen daily, with acts that can be clearly defined as crimes against humanity. And so the cooperation with pieces of power in Libya has been strengthened, despite the fact that Libya has entered a phase of civil war. In fact, this has greatly facilitated the networks of traffickers who act in full continuity with the so-called Libyan coastguard – disguised militiamen – who capture people, take them back to detention centres and make them victims of extortion and violence before putting them back at sea and catch them once again. This endless trading cycle is broken only by the ships of civil society when they save people and bring them to safety in Europe. The accusations made against NGOs and Mediterranean of favouring or even collaborating with traffickers are slanders that mask an opposite reality: governments are currently the best allies of criminal networks and, in cases such as Libya, even their largest donors more or less directly. It is an upside-down world: a combination of repressive, administrative and criminal measures is now being applied against us, recalling the one used against the mafia



Mare Jonio crew.

© MICH SEIXAS

in Italy. They want to strike at the symbolic value of our ships.

They are affirming a gloomy, grey regime, where rights count for nothing and where the arbitrariness of power prevails, and they must destroy any possibility of an alternative vision. And at this moment the ships of civil society and *Mediterranea* represent the possibility of a gap, a discrepancy, the reaffirmation of principles that are not compatible with a regime of arbitrary violence like the one that is being imposed: and they must be destroyed for this.

As history teaches us, in times of economic and political crisis the best way not to deal with people's problems is to invent enemies and act with policies of hate that are completely unreasonable from all points of view. Even in this historical phase, this is the way that the government has found to stop talking about inequalities, poverty, welfare: in a country

like Italy that falls apart, immigration is used as a weapon of mass distraction.

The myth of immigration and the war against the ships of civil society serve this purpose. In this context, staying at sea is becoming more and more complex and risky: fines of millions of euros, confiscation of the ship, arrest in flagrancy of the captain, according to what is provided for in the Security Decree bis which at this time is about to be converted into law. But just being there and staying at sea is also becoming increasingly important: the more our ships become the political target to be hit, the more they become a symbol of humanity and resistance.

How did you cope and react in the most challenging moments, especially after the seizure of the boat Mare Jonio? How did you find the courage and strength to

continue your mission? What role did solidarity play in all this?

We had two seizures of the boat *Mare Jonio*: a seizure, a release and, then, another seizure, which ended only a few days ago, with the restitution of our ship that can return very soon to the sea (we hope it will be already by the time this interview is published). Then the sailboat *Alex* was also seized and confiscated.

And *Alex* is already an answer to the question: the ship was seized, so we went out into the sea on an 18-metre sailboat. Of course, we were not expecting we would rescue 59 people; we had to be just a support for the activities of other ships already at sea, but we believed that we had to be there at all costs and by all means. Civil society and people on the ground have been fundamental. First of all, because crowd-funding continues even when we are stopped and forced on the

shore. On the social media and in many other ways there are thousands of people who ask us to return to the sea, and for this reason, they help us economically, and it is a huge push to never stop. I must say we have never had a moment of discouragement.

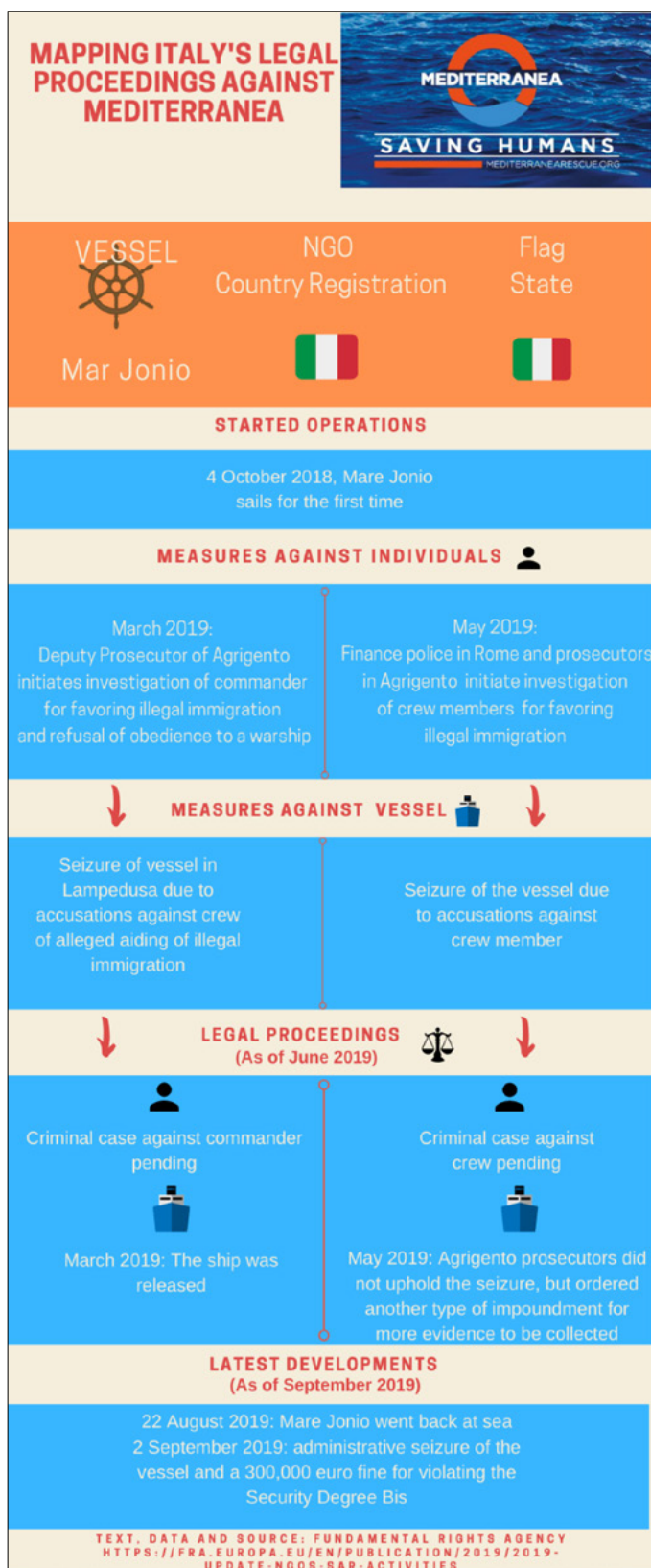
Of course, sometimes we are frightened by the economic issue: we ask ourselves *"Mamma mia, we have six hundred thousand euros of debt... how do we go on to pay the missions?"*. But we never thought that we had been defeated or that we could not go back to sea. We never feared that we could not continue to do what we started. This is not an option at a time like this and when you have built something like Mediterraneana.

When I am in a city that is not my own, I often see people I have never seen before wearing the Mediterraneana shirt. A few days ago I asked one of them why, and the answer was "Because I want people to know where I stand". These are the things that give us courage and strength, huge confidence to continue.

So we never thought for a moment that the conditions were no longer there. There are the material difficulties that

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sometimes make us wonder how we can do it, but none of us ever thought of stopping.

Which objectives do you think you have achieved and which ones are still to be achieved?

Our goal, our dream is that there will no longer be any need to go at sea, that there will no longer be any shipwreck of people forced to cross the sea to escape war or torture, and that no one will be forced to be there to help them. From this point of view, *Mediterranea* was born to dissolve. We are where we do not want to be, but where it is necessary to be. No one should be forced to shipwreck in the Mediterranean, and no one should be forced to become a rescuer.

We had to accept this absurd battlefield as they transformed the Mediterranean into; a battlefield that we certainly did not help to set up, that governments created by closing all legal entry channels for people migrating, even if they are fleeing war. A battlefield where now we have to be to defend lives, the future of our rule of law, and the possibility to speak out against injustice.

I have already talked about the objectives achieved. The main one, in addition to the hundreds of lives that we have directly saved or indirectly contributed to saving, has been to revive dreams, possibilities, to show that nothing is over, that there are spaces to give voice back to those who defend fundamental rights, to those who fight all forms of racism. Everything is in action, and it is the beginning of a great historic battle that certainly *Mediterranea*

does not face alone. But I am happy that *Mediterranea* has contributed to reactivate it, to show possible ways that obviously still have to be developed for the most part.

Do you think that the European Union can be an ally in your battle and that of many citizens for solidarity? In what way?

Certainly in the European Union contradictions are becoming more and more evident. Someone is realising that the Europe of the Troika was not the winning move. The tightening of economic policies, together with the tightening of migration policies used as an instrument of propaganda, already at the time when the progressives were much more incisive in Europe than now, has led to a deep crisis affecting the very existence of the European Union. [As a result] sovereignty, populism, Nazi-fascism are dangerously rising and, in some countries, have even entered Parliament.

I think that awareness of this is emerging at the European level. I say this without naivety: I do not believe that suddenly politics at European level have been filled with strenuous defenders of human rights, but I believe that also at the economic and financial level the risks of this situation are being felt.

Therefore, it seems to me that someone is pointing at a few inconsistencies. There have been important positions taken by

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Germany recently on sea rescue, some voices are also being raised in France, but certainly, there is too much shyness.

In front of the crimes committed by some governments, there should be a much stronger stance, but they cannot do so because there is huge hypocrisy.

We have observed European missions at sea that remotely control the Libyan militiamen with their air assets, to help them capture refugees and bring them back in violation of all the principles of human rights law. So Europe is actually a full part of this terrible scenario.

The repurposing of the *Sophia* mission¹ is this, but even before that, the policies of the last few years, mainly structured by the European Migration Agenda of 2015, have been horrible and terrifying; the agreement with Turkey, for example, was at the origin of the agreement with Libya. I believe that the European Union is realising that it is moving quickly towards suicide and that it is trying, in a contradictory and disjointed way, in some parts, to find some remedy.

The work of the United Nations is stronger at the moment, at least in terms of narrative: the interventions of the Special Rapporteurs of the United Nations on trafficking, human rights and migration are fundamental for the important effort to reaffirm priorities, values and principles against governments and, in particular, against the Italian government at this time.

However, if I have to think of real allies at a political and institutional level, I think more of the networks of cities in Germany, Spain and many other countries, including Italy.

These networks are under construction, depending on the country, but there is

¹ Note of the editor: Established in 2015, Operation *Sophia* is a military operation of the European Union aims at countering refugee smuggling in the Mediterranean. In 2017, the mandate was further expanded to support and train Libyan authorities. See: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/07/25/eunavformed-sophia-mandate-extended/>.

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a movement of mayors who are experimenting, of local realities that every time there is a ship at sea opens its doors, offers to welcome people. A network that meets, discusses, thinks about how to try to impose solidarity from the bottom up, starting from the cities. This seems to me to be a very interesting process.

And then there is the Europe of associations, groups, people, movements that care about life, dignity, rights and democracy. There are already relations with many of them, but one of the commitments for the coming months is to strengthen European solidarity. The boats of Mediterranean fly the Italian flag, but our objective is that it should be an European project – open to European crews and the active support of social actors from all over Europe because the threats, challenges and dreams we face are common.



The interview was carried out in Italian.