POLICY BRIEF

Sea Rescue NGOs: a Pull Factor of Irregular Migration?

Eugenio Cusumano, Jean Monnet Fellow, Migration Policy Centre, EUI

Matteo Villa, Research Fellow, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale - ISPI
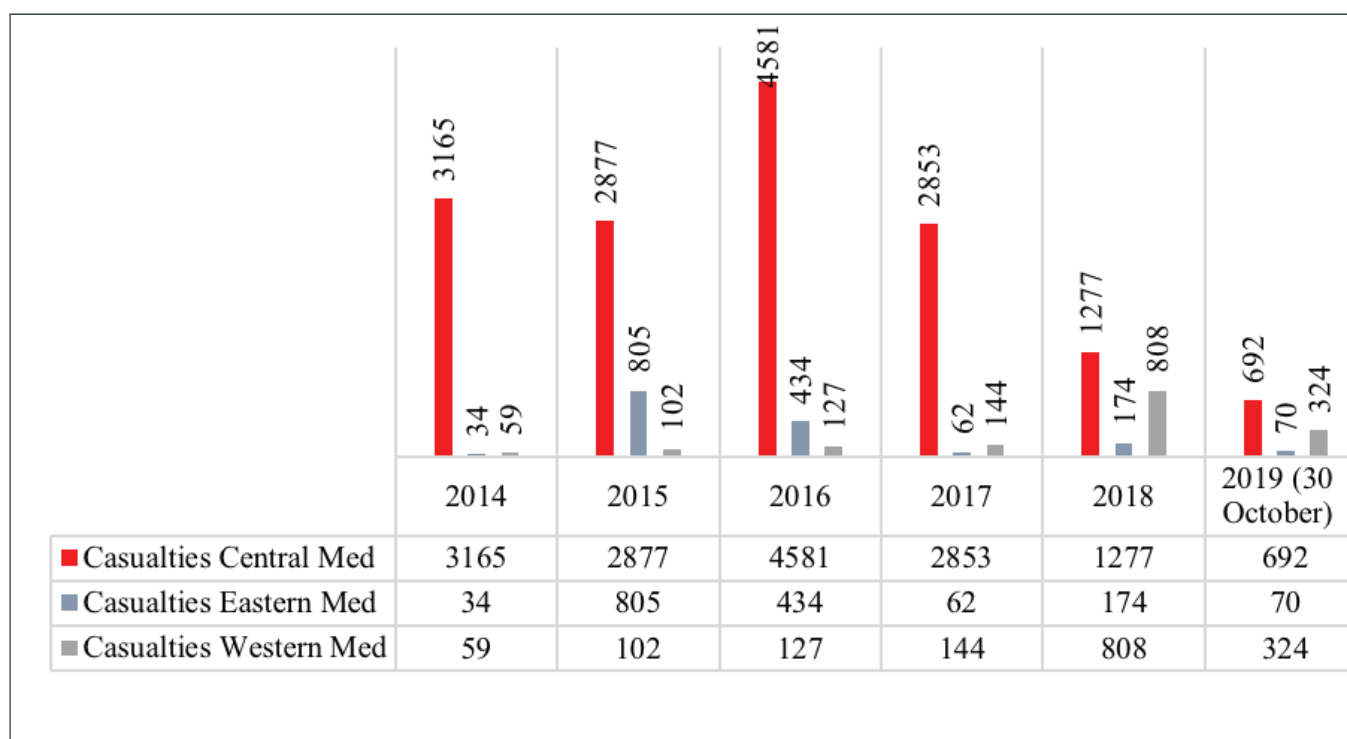
Abstract

The argument that maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) operations act as a 'pull factor' of irregular seaborne migration has become commonplace during the Mediterranean 'refugee crisis'. This claim has frequently been used to criticize humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) conducting SAR off the coast of Libya, which are considered to provide "an incentive for human smugglers to arrange departures" (Italian Senate 2017: 9). In this policy brief, we scrutinise this argument by examining monthly migratory flows from Libya to Italy between 2014 and October 2019. We find no relationship between the presence of NGOs at sea and the number of migrants leaving Libyan shores. Although more data and further research are needed, the results of our analysis call into question the claim that non-governmental SAR operations are a pull factor of irregular migration across the Mediterranean sea.

NGOs' Involvement in Maritime Rescue

The large number of casualties at sea has turned the Central Mediterranean corridor into the world's deadliest migratory route (IOM 2019, UNHCR 2019).

Figure 1 – Recorded Migrant Casualties in the Mediterranean, 2014-2019
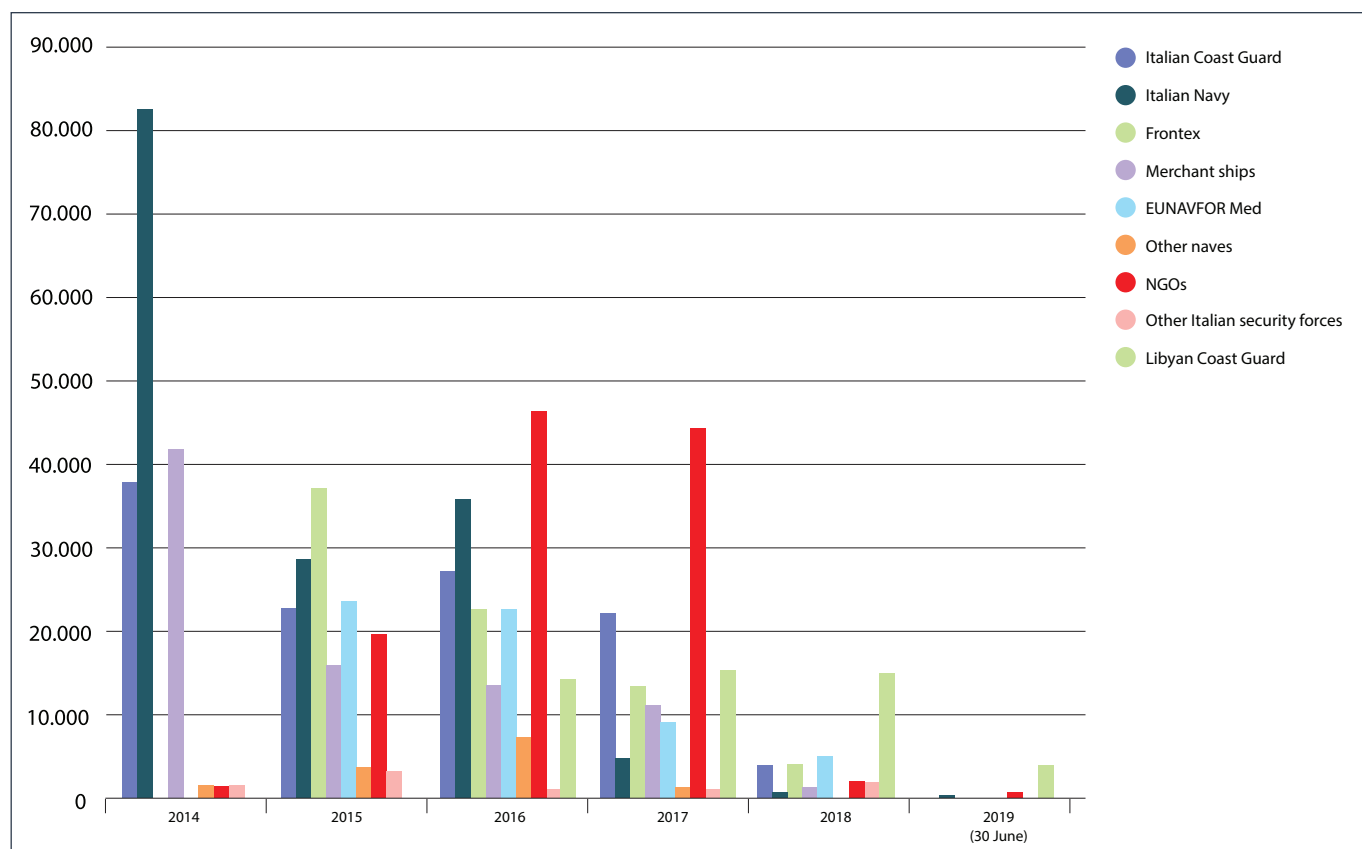
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 (30 October)
■ Casualties Central Med	3165	2877	4581	2853	1277	692
■ Casualties Eastern Med	34	805	434	62	174	70
■ Casualties Western Med	59	102	127	144	808	324

Source: IOM, Missing Migrants Project.

In response to the rising number of casualties, Italy launched operation Mare Nostrum in October 2013, using Navy and Coast Guard assets to rescue migrants in international waters off the Libyan coast. Criticized as "an unintended pull factor encouraging more migrants to attempt the dangerous sea" (House of Lords 2016: 18), Mare Nostrum was suspended after one year. Ensuing European law enforcement and military missions Triton, Themis and EUNAVFOR Med have largely refrained from conducting proactive SAR (Cusumano 2019a). The subsequent gap in rescue capabilities was bridged by a host of civil society organizations, which assisted over 115,000 migrants between 2014 and October 2019 (Cusumano 2019b, Cuttitta 2018).

Figure 2 –Migrants Rescued off the Libyan Coast per Organization

Legend
Italian Coast Guard
Italian Navy
Frontex
Merchant ships
EUNAVFOR Med
Other naves
NGOs
Other Italian security forces
Libyan Coast Guard

Source: Italian Coast Guard and UNHCR.

In 2017, Italy's Interior Minister Marco Minniti took a new approach to migration across the Mediterranean, offering financial support to Libyan militias in exchange for their cooperation in curbing seaborne departures. The concern that NGOs could serve as a pull factor also prompted Rome to draft a Code of Conduct that restricted non-governmental SAR activities, threatening to prohibit non-signatories from disembarking migrants in Italy (Cusumano 2018). Matteo Salvini – who succeeded Minniti as Interior Minister in June 2018 – escalated this threat by declaring Italian ports closed to foreign-flagged ships carrying irregular migrants and enacting a security decree that criminalizes NGOs' activities (Carrera and Cortinovis 2019, Cusumano and Gombeer 2019, Camilli 2019). These measures, in combination with the confiscation of several NGO ships by Italian courts, caused non-governmental SAR operations to plummet. Although the formation of a new cabinet that no longer includes

Salvini slightly softened Italy's stance, European authorities' approach towards NGOs did not change. Indeed, the conclusions of the summit between Italy, Malta, France and Germany held in Valletta in September 2019 implicitly restated the critique that unrestricted NGO rescue operations incentivize departures (Ziniti 2019).

Analysing the Alleged 'Pull Effect'

Since the earliest attempts to develop predictive theoretical models of migration, scholars have conceptualized large-scale human mobility as the combination of negative factors prompting people to leave their homeland (economic hardship, conflict, human rights violations) and positive incentives to move to a specific destination. The latter are usually referred to as 'pull factors' of migration. Scholars have criticized this lexicon as overly simplistic (Geddes and Scholten 2016, Castles et al 2014), developing a more sophisticated conceptual apparatus revolving around concepts like migration networks (Haug 2008) and infrastructure (Xiang and Linquist

2014). However, the dichotomy between push and pull factors continues to dominate policy-oriented studies.

As they enable migrants to cross maritime borders both more easily and safely, SAR operations have been subsumed within the rubric of pull factors. As stated by the European Border and Coast Guard (still better known as Frontex), "SAR missions close to, or within, the 12-mile territorial waters of Libya … influence smugglers' planning and act as a pull factor" (Frontex 2017: 32). Such operations may "unintentionally help criminals achieve their objectives at minimum cost, strengthening their business model by increasing the chances of success. Migrants and refugees… attempt the dangerous crossing since they are aware of and rely on humanitarian assistance to reach the EU" (Frontex 2017: 32).

Ultimately, this alleged pull effect can be summarized by one crucial proposition: all else equal, the higher the likelihood that migrants will be rescued at sea and disembarked in Europe, the higher the number of attempted crossings. There has been very little empirical analysis of this hypothesis. While some preliminary research indirectly supports the existence of a pull effect (Deiana, Mahesri and Mastrobuoni 2019), various academic papers and policy reports dispute the existence of a correlation between SAR operations and irregular departures (Heller and Pezzani 2018). In this policy brief, we focus on the activities of NGOs between 2014 and

looking for migrants in distress at sea, NGOs are especially exposed to the critique of incentivizing irregular departures, thereby providing a 'most likely case' for the existence of a pull effect.

Fig. 3, based on data obtained by combining official figures from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the Italian Coast Guard, shows how non-governmental SAR operations and irregular migrant departures from Libya vary in the period considered. The figure shows that NGOs' SAR activity seems only thinly correlated with monthly departures. Most notably, this correlation holds neither in 2015 nor in 2017: in 2015, the total number of departures from Libya slightly decreased relative to 2014 even though migrants rescued by NGOs increased from 0.8 to 13% of the total number of people rescued at sea; after July 2017, the number of migrants departing from Libya plummeted even if NGOs had become the largest provider of SAR by far. This suggests that the agreement between Italy and Libyan militias reached in July 2017 had a much greater impact on reducing departures than the ensuing attempts to limit NGOs' activities.

$$NGOs'\ involvement\ in\ SAR\ = \frac{migrants\ rescued\ by\ NGOs}{arrivals\ to\ Europe+intercepted\ and\ brought\ back+dead\ and\ missing}$$

October 2019. We operationalize and measure NGOs' involvement in SAR by using the following formula:

Using this formula allows us to address the problem of reverse causality: a large share of the migrants that departed from Libya in the period considered were rescued at sea; however, the absolute number of thos rescued at sea also depends on the total number of migrants who left Libya by boat in the first place. To avoid this issue, we do not look at the total number of rescues conducted in the region, but concentrate on the share of migrants assisted by NGOs. As they have operated closer to Libyan waters than all other actors, proactively
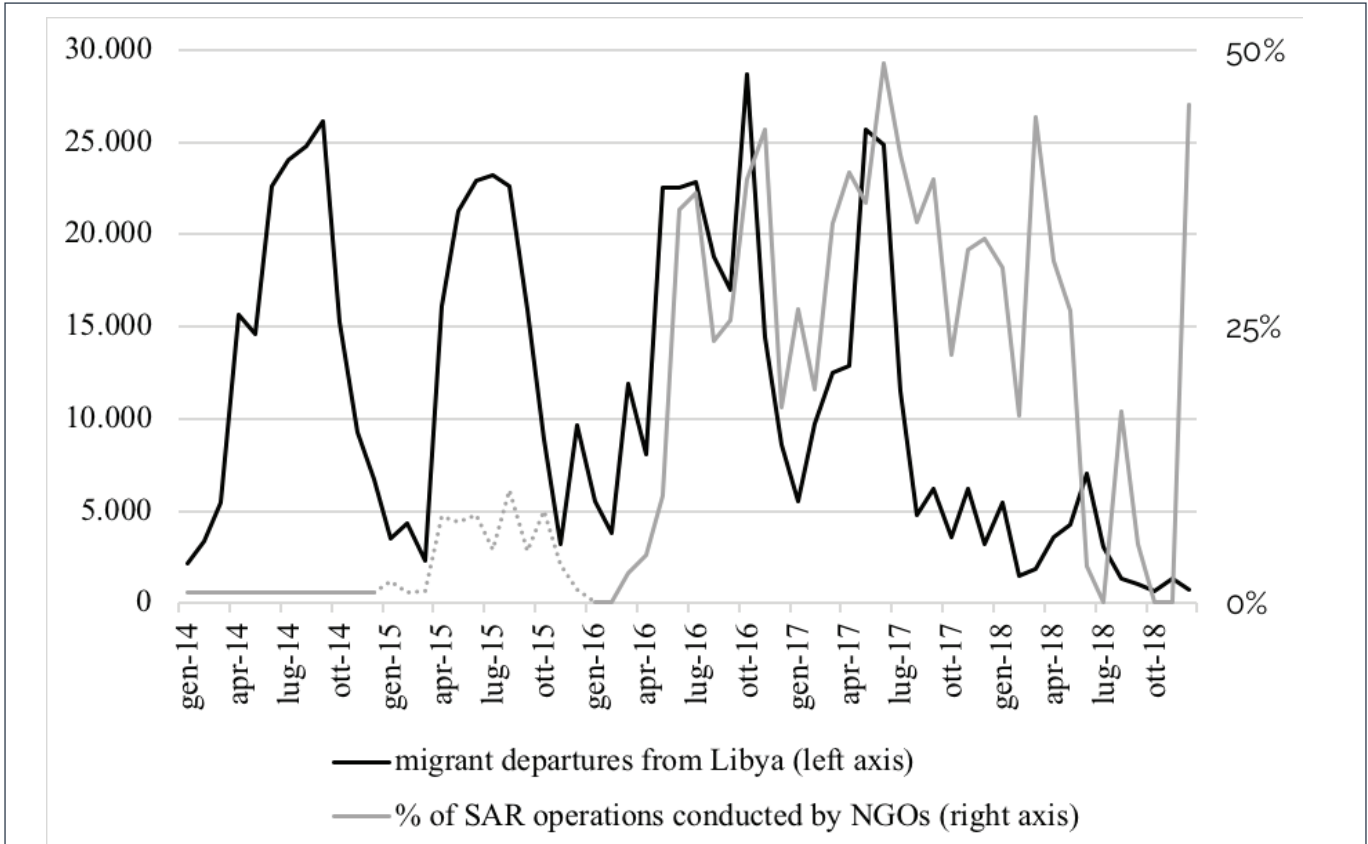
Source: authors' elaborations on UNHCR, IOM, and Italian Coast Guard data.

Figure 3 – Irregular Migrants Departures from Libya and NGOs' SAR Operations[1]

Our exploratory regression analysis controlling for the effect of the 2017 agreement with militias as well as political instability in Libya suggests no significant relationship between NGOs' activities and the number of monthly departures from Libya between 2014 and 2018. The fact that only monthly data are available throughout that period, however, only allows for a small number of observations, which limits the robustness of these results. This is why we have chosen to focus on assessing whether the presence of NGO ships encourages irregular departures from Libya in the first ten months of 2019 (1 January – 27 October). This period provides better conditions to check the existence of a pull effect for two reasons. First, the availability of daily data allows for a much larger number of observations, thereby allowing for a more robust analysis. Second, by 2019 all European navy and coast guard assets had disengaged from carrying out maritime rescue in the Southern Mediterranean. Consequently, NGOs remained the only actor conducting SAR operations resulting in the disembarkation of migrants in Europe.

We obtain data on migrant departures from Libya by combining multiple datasets gathered by UNHCR and IOM, and directly track every SAR mission carried out by NGOs from January to October 2019. Throughout this period, we count 85 days when one (or, very rarely, two) NGOs were operating off the Libyan coast, and 225 days when SAR was conducted solely by Tripoli's Government of National Accord (GNA) Coast Guard and Navy, which intercepted migrants and took them back to Libya. Fig. 4

1 The dotted line shows the average of the multiple imputation models used to estimate monthly SAR activity in 2015, when only the total number of migrants rescued by NGOs throughout the year was available. As it amounts to less than 1 per cent of the total, the number of migrants rescued by NGOs in 2014 is negligible.

contrasts the number of migrants departing daily from Libya with the timing of the various SAR missions by NGOs
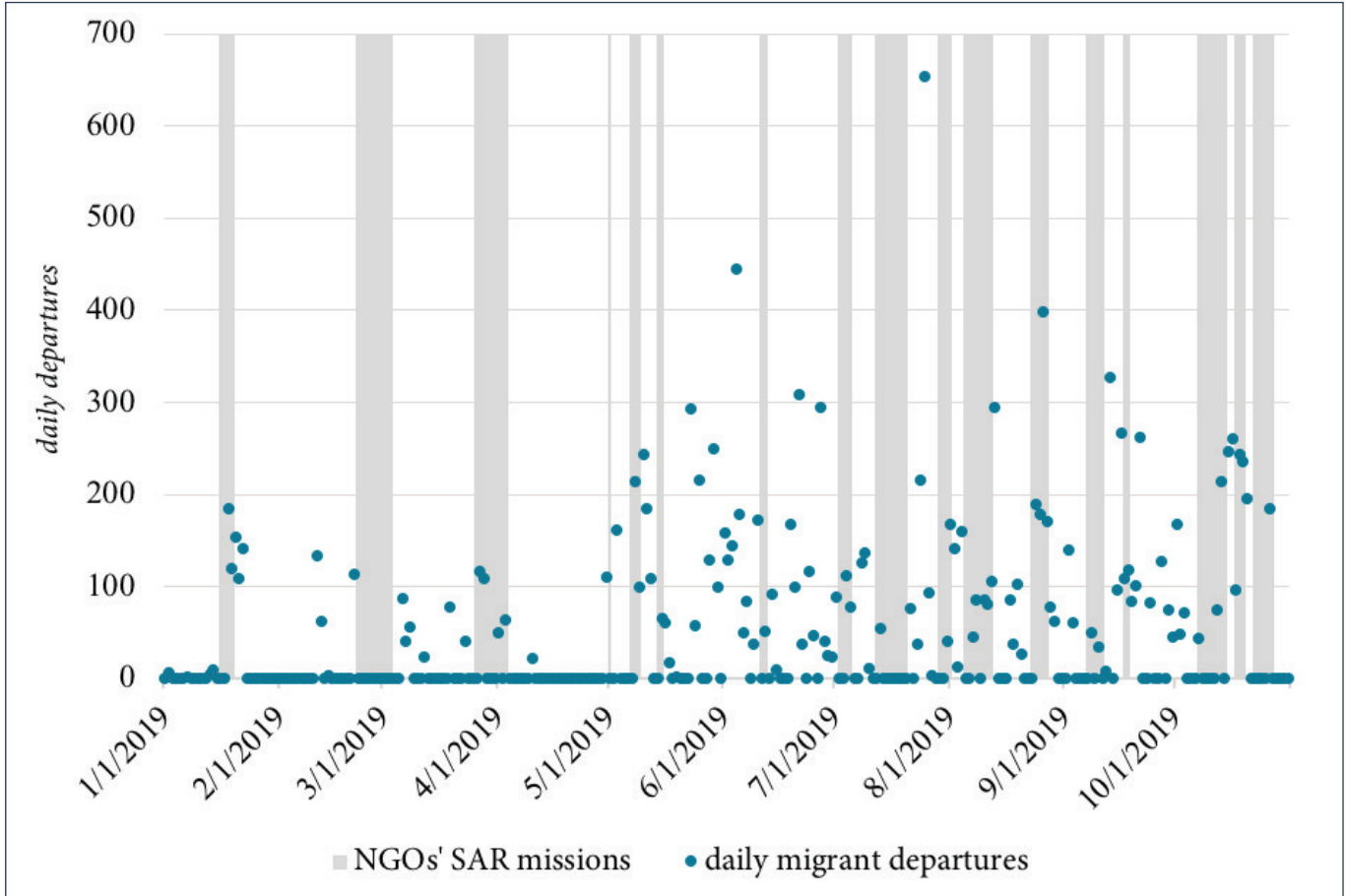
in the Central Mediterranean.

Figure 4 – Daily Irregular Migrants Departures from Libya and NGOs' SAR Operations (1 January – 27 October 2019)

Source: authors' elaborations from UNHCR, IOM and own data. The blue dots correspond to daily migrant departures, while the gray bands show the periods where at least one NGO ship was present at sea.

Given the uncertainty around the actual timing of departures from Libya (we count rescues and interceptions as they occur, not when boats depart from the Libya coast), we use 3-day moving averages of all our variables. The controls of our regression analysis include a lag in migrant departures (thereby checking whether smugglers send migrants in 'batches' independent of other correlates), weather conditions (daily average temperature and wind at Tripoli airport), day of the week fixed effects, and a dummy for the unusual dip in departures that occurred in April 2019, at the peak of general Haftar's offensive against Tripoli's GNA.
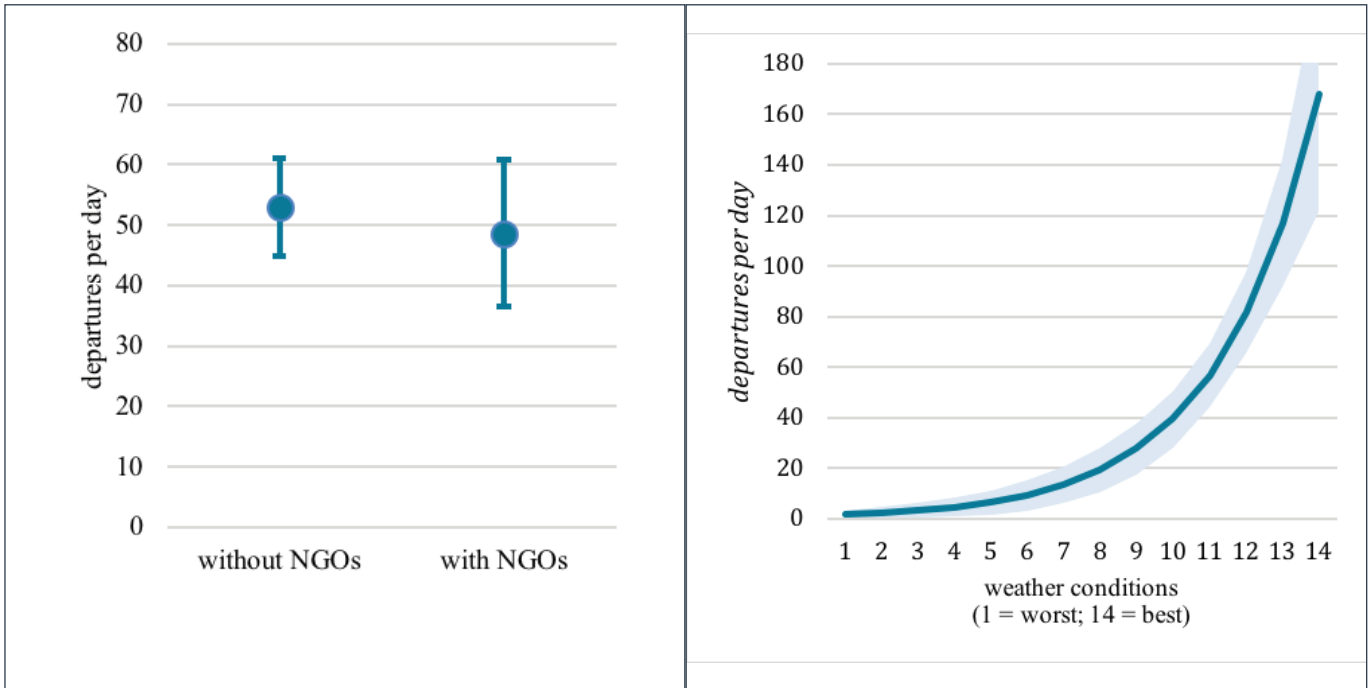
Table 2 – Results of the robust Poisson regression model (with all variables averaged over a 3-day period)

	DV: Daily departures from Libya	
DV $_{t-4}$	-0.0008 (0.0010)	
NGOs	-0.087 (0.162)	
Temperature	0.052 (0.011)	***
Wind	-0.311 (0.053)	***
Political instability (April)	-2.41 (0.47)	***
(constant)	4.34 (0.47)	***
Day of the week controls	YES	

N	282
Pseudo R²	0.346

Figure 5– Estimated effects for NGO presence (left) and changing weather conditions (right), 1 January- 27 October 2019

The charts are derived from the Poisson model above, accounting for robust standard errors. The figures report the 95% confidence interval.

As illustrated, there is no evidence to suggest that departures increased when NGO ships were at sea throughout the period considered. By contrast, a strong correlation exists between migrant departures and weather conditions along Tripoli's coast, as well as Libya's very high political instability in April 2019.

Conclusions

Our analysis suggests that non-governmental SAR operations do not correlate with the number of migrants leaving Libya by sea. Rather than being influenced by the pull effect of NGOs' SAR operations, our analysis suggests that departures from Libya have mainly been shaped by weather conditions and Minniti's policies of 'onshore containment', which played a key role in bringing down irregular arrivals since July 2017.

Given the limited data available, this study of the alleged pull effect of NGOs' rescue activities has been exploratory in nature. Clearly, more data and further research are needed on this issue. Nevertheless, our analysis has important implications for policy debates. Drawing on the results of our analysis as well as ethical considerations, we suggest the following policy recommendations.

First, claims that non-governmental SAR operations act as a pull factor are not supported by the available evidence. Besides being problematic on legal grounds (Carrera and Cortinovis 2019), the policies devised to limit NGOs' activities off the coast of Libya and disincentivize SAR operations at large may have indirectly magnified the deadliness off the crossing without significantly contributing to reducing irregular departures, and should therefore be reconsidered.

Second, the disengagement of EU military and law enforcement assets from the Central Mediterranean occurred on the basis of disputable factual premises. If NGOs – which operate closer to Libyan coasts and lack the power to deter and apprehend human smugglers – do not seem to incentivize departures, warships deployed at a much larger distance from African shores are even

less likely to act as a pull factor. As governmental assets operating farther from Libyan coasts are unlikely to significantly incentivize irregular migration and can both save lives at sea and prevent undetected arrivals, we argue that decision-makers should consider gradually restoring missions combining SAR and border enforcement like Mare Nostrum.

Finally, containment measures taking place in countries of transit and departure, such as Italy's involvement of Libyan tribes in the management of migratory flows, affect migratory flows to a much larger degree than rescue and border control activities taking place at sea. However, these externalization policies are deeply problematic due to the horrific conditions suffered by migrants in Libya. Effective, lawful, and ethically defensible migration governance across the Central Mediterranean should therefore combine attempts to disrupt human smuggling on land with activities aimed both at tackling the push factors of migration and improving migrants' living conditions and access to protection on Libyan territory.

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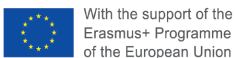Via Boccaccio, 151
50133 Florence
Italy

Contact:

email: mpc@eui.eu website: www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/ twitter: @MigrPolCentre

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