

## **Heroes or criminals? The legitimacy of humanitarian organisations rescuing lives in the Central Mediterranean Sea after 2017**

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### **Abstract**

Since late 2016, NGOs operating in the Mediterranean have been at the centre of a campaign of delegitimisation and criminalisation culminating with former Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini's 2018 NGO ban, which de facto erased the presence of humanitarian search and rescue operations and left the national coastguards to deal with an unprecedented migration crisis. Drawing upon discourse analysis of Italian and international news media articles and informed by semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives, this study investigates the implications of such media-driven public hostility. The results are threefold: first, the climate of suspicion surrounding NGOs has damaged them profoundly and led to a dramatic increase in deaths. Consequently, second, NGO's ability to present themselves publicly as legitimate has been heavily limited. Last, it is fundamental to investigate the range of legitimisation strategies all organisations can use when victims of a media-led scandal or a smear campaign are legitimised by political institutions.

### **Keywords:**

NGOs

boat migration

Matteo Salvini

Aquarius

media hostility

Mediterranean Sea

sea rescue

NGO legitimacy

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## **Introduction**

On Saturday 9 January 2021, the Italian far-right League Party leader Matteo Salvini faced the first session of a trial in which he is accused of abusing power and kidnapping. The charges are pressed over a 2019 incident in which Italy's former Interior Minister refused disembarkment to a national coast guard ship, named 'Gregoretti' and its 116 rescued refugees on board as part of his 'closed ports' policy enforced in 2018 to prevent humanitarian organisations involved in search and rescue operations from docking in Italy (BBC 2018). The Gregoretti trial, still ongoing at the time of writing, is of great significance for understanding the changes in Italian and European immigration regulations and the progressive criminalisation of NGOs operating in the Mediterranean to such a point that the ban has been defined as a showcase of Matteo Salvini's 'hardline anti-immigration policy' (Giuffrida and Tondo 2019).

The Gregoretti case is not an isolated episode. In the same summer, Matteo Salvini's ministry denied port to NGO rescue vessel *Sea Watch*. After being left for seventeen days at sea with over 40 refugees on board, captain Carola Rackete forced the ban and docked in Sicily, where she was immediately arrested. In 2020, the Italian Supreme Court of Cassation dropped the charges (ANSA 2020). Adapted from Maria Mancuso's MA thesis, this article

investigates the role of the media in developing public opinion to support far-right policies through an analysis of the shift of language, terminology and representation of NGOs in the most popular Italian newspapers and identifies 2017 as the key moment for this media shift.

### **Political background and mediascape**

Since 2010, a consistent part of African boat migrants have undertaken the Central Mediterranean route - also known as the world's most lethal migration route (Dehghan 2017) - seeking to reach the other side of the Mediterranean in search of a better life. In October 2013, the Italian Government launched and financed entirely a Search and Rescue (SAR) operation called *Mare Nostrum* which allowed the rescue of 156,362 refugees in 2014, as opposed to only 95 interventions carried out in 2013 and zero in 2010 (Panebianco 2016). In October 2014, it was substituted by European Union (EU)-led border control and management operation *Triton*, which shifted the patrolling line back to thirty miles from the Italian coast, leading to a new rise in the death toll (Cusumano 2017). As these operations proved insufficient, an increasing number of NGOs started their own activities, soon becoming the largest provider of SAR in the Central Mediterranean. However, over time the EU and Italian authorities and the press started looking at SAR operations carried out by NGOs with increasing suspicion. As a result, in early 2019, only a few months after the enforcement of Matteo Salvini's NGO's ban, the numbers of non-profit organisations covering the Central Mediterranean route dropped to zero. Meanwhile, the death rate rose dramatically, counting 2.270 deaths and missings in 2018 - one every 61 arrivals - and 207 in the first forty days of 2019 - one every 29 arrivals (UNHCR 2019).

From 2014 to 2016, media representation NGOs corresponded to the stance undertaken by Italian institutions led by prime minister Matteo Renzi, leader of the centre-left national Partito Democratico (Democratic Party). The narrative of rescue operations at sea,

different from the representation of migration flows, has in this phase the ‘expressive power to humanise the migration phenomenon’ and portrays rescuers as heroes, or ‘sea angels’ (Barretta 2017:5) who deserve admiration and gratitude. Interestingly, the media does not differentiate operations carried out by NGOs from those of the national coast guard, suggesting the first were legitimate and analogous to military or institutional bodies. In 2016, overall media representation of rescues at sea focused primarily on shipwrecks (39% of cases), then on rescues (22%) with personal accounts recounted by rescuers and survivors. Arrivals is the third most visible theme (15%) — with *Il Giornale* defining it as an ‘invasion’ — then politics (14%), with a focus on the lack of cooperation and of a common strategy between European states. Finally, criminality claims (10%) focussed on smugglers, human and organ trafficking and murders (Barretta 2017).

Then, only two days after the fall of Renzi's Government, on 14 December 2016, the *Financial Times* published an article referring to a classified FRONTEX document accusing NGOs of colluding with traffickers. The document did not mention any particular NGO and ‘it quickly started to show holes’ (Campbell 2017). According to Heller and Pezzani, until the FRONTEX document was made public, this accusation remained confined to conspiratorial speculations of far-right groups. In November 2016, only a month before the *Financial Times* made public the allegation, GEFIRA — a Dutch-based think-tank with ties to the far-right — published the first of a series of articles blaming NGOs of being part of a human smuggling network. A week later, FRONTEX denied the fact and revised the document. (Floris and Bagnoli 2017). On 27 February 2017, during the ad-interim Paolo Gentiloni's administration in Italy, in an interview with *Die Welt*, FRONTEX executive director Fabrice Leggeri openly criticised NGO rescues off Libya for encouraging human traffickers (Wintour 2017). With more measured tones, in its *Risk Analysis 2017* published in February, FRONTEX reaffirmed that NGOs represent a pull factor and support human trafficking in that they ‘unintentionally

help criminals achieve their objectives at minimum cost, strengthen their business model by increasing the chances of success' (FRONTEX 2017). On 23 April 2017, on *La Stampa*, Italian prosecutor Zuccaro reiterated the 2016 accusations, declaring he had 'evidence that there are direct contacts between certain NGOs and people traffickers in Libya' (Albanese 2017). In May, Zuccaro retreated his position, admitting he had no proof of 'wrongdoing'. (Scherer 2017)

Despite the lack of evidence and concomitantly to Matteo Salvini's campaign for the 2018 elections, two months later the Italian Government and the EU drafted a code of conduct for NGOs operating in the Mediterranean, including the obligation to let law enforcement personnel travel on board. The code contravenes humanitarian principles, and most of its measures are either redundant or dangerous for NGOs (Cusumano 2019). Despite evidence of human rights abuses being the norm in Libyan detention centres (McVeigh 2017 and Graham-Harrison 2017), in August 2017 Italy and the EU put in place a deal aimed at drastically reducing arrivals, which mainly consists of providing funds, equipment, and training to the Libyan coast guard, and making deals with local groups in control of the territory (Baczynska 2017 and Marex 2017). The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, defined the EU-Libya deal as 'inhuman' (BBC 2017 and Graham Harrison 2017). Additionally, the Libyan coast guard has been extremely aggressive towards NGOs, to the point that in 2017 *MSF*, *Save the Children* and *Sea-Eye* decided to suspend their activities (Henley and Giuffrida 2017; Fekete, 2018).

Whilst a positive portrayal of rescuers persists in mainstream media until the end of 2016 which is, *de facto*, the end of Matteo Renzi's centre-left administration, for the first months of 2017 which interestingly coincides with the rise of Matteo Salvini's popularity (Stille 2018), we record a profound change of frame subverting the depiction of NGOs. In particular, the FRONTEX report published on 17 February 2017 and the subsequent stances

made by Carmelo Zuccaro, is the turning point in the narration of SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean. According to a survey poll conducted by political scientist Ilvo Diamanti in 2017, Zuccaro's statements heavily weakened the credibility of NGOs in Italy. The results show that only 42% of Italians trusted NGOs. In particular, the survey shows that right-wing voters are the most suspicious: only 35% of Forza Italia, 34% Fratelli D'Italia (Brothers of Italy) and 21% of the Lega (League)'s voters trusted NGOs'. Similarly, only 36% of Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S - Five Stars Movement) voters supported NGOs. In contrast, 64% of left-wing voters and 59% of the centre-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) electorate trusted them. According to Diamanti, this difference suggests that most Italians did not believe NGOs to be not-for-profit like all other charities (Diamanti, 2017).

Parallel to this, NGOs have also faced serious challenges at the judicial level which eventually ended with no charges (Gatti, 2018; Tondo and Jones, 2018; Il Post, 2018), such as the investigation of *Iuventa* (Pantaleone 2017; Jugend Rettet 2018a and 2018b), *Proactiva Open Arms* and *Sea Watch* (Squires and Strange 2018), and the most famous 'Aquarius issue' which led to the enforcement of Salvini's NGOs ban in 2018 after the vessel coordinated by SOS Mediterranée was denied port and kept out at sea for eleven days with 629 refugees on board before being redirected to Spain (Vandoorne and Said-Moorhouse 2018; Signorelli 2019). Equally, national coast guard vessels have also been affected. In August 2018, the Italian Coast Guard ship 'Diciotti' was not allowed disembarkment by the same Italian authorities and forced to remain docked at the port of Catania for five days and with 177 rescued migrants onboard. This adds up to the already mentioned 'Gregoretti' case, for which Salvini is currently facing trial.

### **Aims and research questions**

Gaining organisational legitimacy is a fundamental prerequisite for non-profit organisations. (Sommerfeldt and Xu 2015). NGOs cannot be successful unless they are perceived as legitimate by at least a segment of the population, indicating that public support is vital for organisations campaigning for social change (Gower 2006). This is why, both the media and the political environment play a vital role in bolstering legitimacy. That way, they can be a channel for conveying legitimacy claims to conscientious publics, whose support is crucial (Coombs 1992). Inspired by Paola Barretta's pivotal work, this article aims to trace the impact of media representation of Italian and EU press on NGOs operating in the Mediterranean in 2017 and to identify the origins of the hostile environment legitimised by the enforcement of the 2018 NGO ban, this study addresses two main research questions: first, how did Italian news media frame NGOs operating in the Central Mediterranean after FRONTEX and Zuccaro's statements?; and second, what implications did media coverage reporting Frontex and Zuccaro's statements have for NGOs?

### *Methodology and sampling*

This study employs the triangulation of discourse analysis of news media and semi-structured interviews as the main research methods. Triangulation allows weaknesses of one research method to be neutralised or accounted for by the strengths of the others (Arksey and Knight 1999).

### *Discourse Analysis*

The first research question is addressed through discourse analysis (DA) as this method has been proven to emphasise 'the way versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological words are produced in discourse' (Potter 1997:146). Thus, DA is the most suitable method for revealing, identifying and examining news frames employed by media in



their depiction of NGOs operating in the Central Mediterranean, as the first research question aims to do. This study considers media news as a type of discourse, rather than content that can be thoroughly analysed through quantitative and objective methods. As Van Dijk explains: 'News is not characterised as a picture of reality, which may be correct or biased, but as a frame through which the social world is routinely constructed' (Van Dijk 2013:8). This construction of the social world is intrinsically subjective and is indicative of power relations shaping our society. DA is thus employed in this research as it establishes the pre-eminence of one version of the world over other competing versions (Bryman 2016: 534).

The sample selected comprises 30 articles from five mainstream news agencies: *Il Corriere della Sera*, centre-right political stance, 2.107.000 readers, owned by international multimedia publishing group Rizzoli; *La Repubblica*, centre-left stance, 2.080.000 readers and *La Stampa*, centre stance, 1.240.000, both owned by media conglomerate GEDI; *Il Giornale*, right stance, 436.000 readers, owned by Silvio Berlusconi's family and finally, *Il Manifesto*, left stance, less than 57.000 readers and owned by a cooperative of journalists.

The selection of newspapers combined high readership, different ownership - except for *La Repubblica* and *La Stampa* - and a range of political views. Regardless of its lower readership, *Il Manifesto* was included to counterbalance *Il Giornale*, openly right-wing and traditionally anti-immigrant. News articles were accessed using the online database Factiva. There was an anomaly in the sample retrieved from Factiva. It was not possible to identify the author of two of the articles published by *Il Giornale*. Additionally, often the headline was not the original one.

The sample included all articles containing specific keywords from 14 December 2016 — when the *Financial Times* published an article referring to a leaked classified FRONTEX document accusing NGOs of colluding with traffickers and only two days after the resignation of Matteo Renzi as Prime Minister — to 30 April 2017 — a week after Italian

prosecutor Zuccaro first claimed he had evidence of contacts between NGOs and Libyan smugglers. (Figure 1).

**[Insert] Figure 1** - *Articles selected for discourse analysis*

### *Interviews*

To comprehensively address the second question, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with NGO representatives between June and July 2018, right when the NGO ban was enforced by the new interior minister Matteo Salvini, who took office on 1 June 2018. Semi-structured interviews were considered more appropriate in investigating which implications NGOs themselves considered a direct consequence of media representation (Bryman 2016). Four NGOs have eventually agreed for an interview: *MSF*, *Sea Watch*, *Proactiva Open Arms*, *Jugend Rettet* (Figure 2).

**[Insert] Figure 2** - *List of Interviewees*

The choice to interview Eugenio Cusumano from the University of Leiden is justified by his expertise and extensive publications on humanitarian SAR activities which heavily informed the literature of this study.

### **Limitations**

Despite using a mixed-method approach that should reinforce the validity of the results, as a qualitative, geographically and temporarily confined study, this research is not apt to generalisation. Also, it cannot be representative of the whole Italian news media system.

## Results and Findings

Figure 3 presents only the frames shared by at least three dailies, although *Il Giornale* and *Il Manifesto* adopt frames that are exclusively distinctive of their narrative. Given the existing discrepancies between news media, and in some cases, between articles published in the same news media, the findings elicited from the DA are arranged by newspaper and not by frame. Additionally, whenever an article is quoted, the reference to the source indicates the media title, instead of the author name, and the full date of publication. More specifically, Figure 4 describes the contents of each frame.

**[Insert] Figure 3** - *Frames used by Italian news media*

**[Insert] Figure 4** - *Description of the frames used by Italian news media*

Figure 5 shows the frequency of each frame's occurrence in each news media, enabling comparison and contrast.

**[Insert] Figure 5** - *Frequency of occurrence of each frame by news media*

### *Il Corriere della Sera*

Italy's second most read newspaper after sports daily *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Berry et al. 2015), is traditionally representative of the conservative establishment. The sample indicates the use of the 'suspicion' and 'political instrumentalisation' frames as the backbone of their narrative against NGOs. 75% of the articles contain each of these two framing conventions. The 'suspicion' frame is associated with Zuccaro's accusations: 'The public prosecutor's office in Catania suspects there is something little humanitarian in the conduct of some [NGOs]. [They suspect] It is becoming a business.' (24 March 2017). Although *Il Corriere* seems to

attempt to take a neutral stance, by, for instance, quoting NGOs such as MSF and Amnesty International, or devoting an entire article (28 April 2017) to the fact that Zuccaro does not have any evidence for his accusations, in some instances it fails to hide its bias. The 'political instrumentalisation' frame is not used to exculpate NGOs in any way or hint at a potential political agenda behind the accusations. Instead, it is used to criticise the opposition: 'Now between opposition parties — M5S, The League, Forza Italia and Brothers of Italy — started a competition on who uses the sternest voice against NGOs' (24 April 2017).

### La Repubblica

This is the national centre-left newspaper *par excellence* and the third most read in Italy (Berry et al., 2015). Nearly 70% of the sample is composed of articles written by Ziniti. The others are a reportage on board the *Aquarius* (18 April 2017), an opinion piece by Roberto Saviano, a famous mafia-journalist under police protection since 2016, (25 April 2017) and an interview to Enrico Letta, Prime Minister from 2013 to 2014 and founder of *Mare Nostrum* (28 April 2017). Despite this, the sample is reasonably heterogeneous, especially compared to the other newspapers. Eighty per cent of Ziniti's articles use the 'suspicion' frame as the dominant one — however, this percentage drops to 50% overall.

Ziniti uses the expression 'taxi service' to refer to NGOs' operations, failing to immediately fact-check the statement of Luigi Di Maio, leader of M5S, which erroneously claimed the definition was present in the FRONTEX report (17 February 2017). A further inaccuracy consists in the claim that FRONTEX hypothesised collusion between NGOs and smugglers without specifying that Frontex promptly denied those accusations (17 February 2017).

Nonetheless, the report on board *Aquarius* (18 April 2017) recalls the heroes or sea angels narrative. (Barretta et al. 2017). Here, volunteers show 'generous compassion toward

migrants welcomed on board', and operate according to international maritime law with 'martial rigour' (18 April 2017). The reporter claims Frontex 'criminalised the work of humanitarian operators' and when Zuccaro's accusations are mentioned, they are balanced with the rebuke of personnel onboard Aquarius explaining why people depart and why NGOs are there. 'As long as desperate people do not have safe alternatives to enter Europe, we have to stay at sea and rescue them' (18 April 2017).

Saviano's *'The reasons I defend NGOs'* (25 April 2017) is openly in favour of NGOs' work. He writes profusely on the 'lies about the vessels rescuing migrants', fact-checking Di Maio and M5S founder Beppe Grillo's statements against NGOs. Saviano claims that when Di Maio says Frontex defined NGOs as a 'taxi service' for migrants, he manipulates the Frontex report with deliberate inaccuracy.

### La Stampa

It has a centrist stance. (Berry et al., 2015). Compared to *Il Corriere*, suspicion is by far the dominant frame (75%): 'How come increasingly more migrants are fished out by NGO vessels?' (12 April 2017); 'Carmelo Zuccaro confirmed to *La Stampa* that there is instead evidence of contacts between NGOs and traffickers' (26 April 2017).

*La Stampa* blatantly defines NGOs as a pull factor, remarking that their presence does not mitigate death at sea and facilitates traffickers' work: 'Indeed, in the Mediterranean, we are witnessing a race to collect people at sea. And to the rage of those, like FRONTEX, who should safeguard that [the EU] border but are bypassed by NGO vessels' (12 April 2017).

An article published on 15 March 2017 claims that NGOs are used as a 'taxi service' by smugglers. The piece begins with the words 'FRONTEX's accusation (...) is at page 32 of the report *Risk Analysis 2017*', thus hinting that Frontex itself defined NGOs as a 'taxi service', as Di Maio erroneously claims too. The same definition is used in the interview with Stefano

Argenziano (23 April 2017b), operations coordinator at MSF and the only NGO representative quoted in the *La Stampa* sample. In another article, the journalist does not clearly affirm that the definition is not present in the 2017 FRONTEX report, but it has to be attributed to Zuccaro (23 April 2017a).

The second most used frame by *La Stampa* is the 'good vs bad NGOs', which is present in 50% of cases. According to *La Stampa*, the most suspicious NGOs are the 'smaller ones' (26 April 2017). Often, *La Stampa* allows room for conspiracy theories, such as that NGOs in the Mediterranean are funded by George Soros' Open Society Foundations. 'Is magnate Soros one of your funders?' (23 April 2017b). This allegation, according to *The Guardian* has become 'a common dog-whistle allegation used by the far-right' (Kirchgässner 2018). Soros' name is often associated with plots such as the so-called 'Kalergi plan' according to which the world's most powerful men are planning the ethnic replacement of 'European races' (Nurra 2018). In 2018, Hungary passed the 'Stop Soros' law, against NGOs helping illegal migrants claim asylum. (Walker 2018). Notably, Matteo Salvini used the allegation of being funded by Soros in June 2018 as a reason for refusing disembarkation to *Aquarius*. However, no evidence of such accusations was provided. (Italian Senate 2018).

### *Il Giornale*

Among the newspapers included in the sample, *Il Giornale* is positioned uniquely in that it only shares one frame with other dailies, the 'suspicion' frame with statements such as 'Migrant rescue is a new frontier of the business of solidarity' (26 April 2018); 'What is sure is that prosecutors have, if not the evidence, at least the certainty that there have been contacts between NGOs and traffickers' (28 April 2017). According to *Il Giornale*, NGOs are a 'taxi service', and, as happened in two articles by *La Stampa* (15 March 2017; 23 April 2017) and one by *La Repubblica* (17 February 2017), the journalist omits that FRONTEX never used

that expression, yet the definition is in quotation marks. In its narrative on NGOs rescuing migrants at sea, *Il Giornale* merges sensationalist language with conspiracy theories, leveraging on fear and conjectures: 'At this point, it is clear that we want to auto-invade us. We are witnessing an unprecedented event in history: there has never been before a deliberate strategy, planned and self-financed to fill the demographic gap “importing” “human material” (...) to prevent the natural extinction of 500 million European citizens' (26 February 2017).

### *Il Manifesto*

*Il Manifesto* is known for its strong left-wing stance despite not being connected to any political party. Its narrative on NGOs focuses on the necessity of having humanitarian organisations in the Mediterranean. This is the only daily that does not employ the 'suspicion' frame at all, and only points at the lack of evidence for Zuccaro's claims, the inadequacy of the EU in managing the migration crisis and the instrumentalisation of this issue by right-wing parties and M5S.

*Il Manifesto* claims that the accusations against NGOs originate from far-right groups. Indeed, as previously shown, the European research foundation GEFIRA, 'specialised in anti-Muslim and pro-Trump statements' (29 March 2017) is the first to accuse NGOs of colluding with smugglers in November 2016 (Heller and Pezzani 2017). These allegations would be part of a strategy to criminalise NGOs, fuelled by 'fake news and strategic hoaxes' aiming to 'obstacle or block NGO vessels rescuing migrants between Sicily and Libya.' (29 March 2017); as 'No evidence to prove the heavy accusations but in the meantime the suspect is instilled.' (31 March 2017). Similarly to Saviano (*La Repubblica*, 25 April 2017), they fact-checks all allegations, providing a summary of all accusations and accusers, including FRONTEX, who 'started the campaign', the *Financial Times* who 'contributed' and Zuccaro who 'releases worrying statements' (29 March 2017).

## **Interviews**

The findings in this section are arranged according to the topics covered by the interview questions.

### *Relationship with institutions before Frontex and Zuccaro's statements*

Interviewees unanimously agree that, before the accusations, the relationship between NGOs and the Italian coast guard was positive and collaborative. All interviewees stressed they operated under MRCC (Italian Maritime Coordination Centre) guidance. Cusumano, in particular, says that an NGO operator he talked with referred to the Italian MRCC as 'MUM RCC', highlighting the close relationship between organisations and the coast guard.

### *Relationship with the media before Frontex and Zuccaro's statements*

Schmidt explains they received attention from German media primarily, with little confrontational questions before the statements. According to Linardi, media portrayals of NGOs before the end of 2016 was positive: 'NGOs were depicted in general more as heroes (...) Civilians in the frontline to rescue people in distress.'

Hamamy and Gatti indicate that *Sea Watch* and *Proactiva Open Arms* have always welcomed media on board since they started in 2015, such as *AP*, *AFP*, *El País*, *Repubblica*, *eldiario.es*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *Reuters*, *El Periódico*, *Ara.cat*. Lodesani emphasises the role of MSF as a witness and the role of journalists in disseminating stories as 'witnessing is one of the pillars of MSF and for this reason, we are very keen on telling the stories we see in all the countries where we operate. Journalists are great allies to this purpose.'

### *What changed after the statements*



Except for Hammamy and Lodesani, all participants argue that the relationship with the media transformed due to Frontex and Zuccaro's statements. For Linardi and Cusumano, this represented the breaking point for the perception of NGOs in public opinion, especially in Italy. Schmidt claims that after those statements, Italian media started asking more pointed questions. When asked how they justify this shift, Linardi and Cusumano stress the importance of NGOs' political involvement, their role as 'watchdogs', and change in public opinion towards migration. From their declarations, it can be inferred that the change involved European institutions first, and not the media autonomously.

#### *Implications of media coverage following Frontex and Zuccaro's statements*

First: delegitimisation and criminalisation. Most of the interviewees share the view that media coverage of FRONTEX statements defining NGOs as a pull factor for migration, and Zuccaro hinting at criminal links between NGOs and human traffickers, resulted in a delegitimisation of their presence in the Mediterranean and with Frontex initiating the campaign. In Cusumano's words

FRONTEX has always been critical towards NGOs' role and that report [*Risk Analysis* published in February 2017. FRONTEX 2017] and the later interview [with Fabrice Leggeri, FRONTEX executive director, published by the German newspaper *Die Welt*] triggered the delegitimation of NGOs in Italy and elsewhere.

Schmidt, Linardi and Hammamy refer to a potential political agenda and a smear campaign behind what happened. Gatti explains that by discrediting NGOs and looking for consensus in public opinion, the Government wants to eliminate NGOs from the Central Mediterranean, thus any witness of irregular activities as 'this allows them to do illegal actions, like closing

the ports. There is no official communication, there is no official decree, and they are doing it through Twitter or [media] statements.'

Second: reputational harm. Participants claim their organisation lost credibility in the eyes of public opinion and donors. Schmidt refers to 'doubts' in those statements left in the public. Lodesani signals that 'during these ongoing attacks, the organisation is losing credibility'. Linardi added that 'there is a general sense of diffidence that has become hate. 'We received many attacks and the attacks against NGOs are now legitimised and encouraged by the Government.' To Hammamy, 'there are many people accusing us of smuggling and people threatening us. And yeah, the strategy to destroy the reputation of NGOs worked out quite good' .

Third: reduced funding. Cusumano, Gatti and Linardi mention a decrease in donations, which affected NGOs' ability to fund their operations. Gatti explains that donations decreased after media and institutional attacks, but increased every time authorities claimed their innocence. Lodesani instead reports that some donors withdrew their support, whilst others 'increased [it] to help us facing these difficult times'. Nonetheless, as Cusumano and Alfonsi point out, SAR NGOs do not heavily rely on Italian donors due to their international nature. Thus, they can still manage to operate with reduced donations.

Fourth: judicial attention. This aspect seemed to worry participants more than funding, despite all investigations failing to find any evidence of illegitimate conduct. According to Cusumano, the negative climate against NGOs was 'a catalyst for judicial attention and provided fertile ground for Zuccaro's as well as other prosecutor's investigations.' In Linardi's view 'there has been an abuse of power against us, for example right now we are in Malta with no permission to leave without any legal ground, and this abuse of power has been used on any possible level'. Similarly, Gatti is

sure they will fabricate evidence for us and other NGOs as happened with Juventa [coordinated by Jugend Rettet]. Because in the end if they can't stop us either by discrediting us or by closing the ports (...) what are they going to do? Evidence [against us] will turn up. (...) When you do something that annoys the system, it will use all means to destroy you. They are doing this.

## **Discussion**

*First research question: How did Italian news media frame NGOs operating in the Central Mediterranean after Frontex and Zuccaro's statements?*

Despite intrinsic differences, overall Italian news media, with the only exception of *Il Manifesto*, depict NGOs rescuing lives in the Mediterranean and their operations as suspicious, both in the way they operate and the way they are funded (Boltanski 2000). More specifically, all news media except for *Il Manifesto*, differentiate 'good' from 'bad' NGOs — however, only *La Stampa* and *Il Giornale* clearly hint at which NGOs belonged to one category or the other. Only *Il Giornale* omits to state that populist and right-wing parties instrumentalise NGOs in preparation for the elections held in March 2018. This is most likely due to its political alignment (close to Matteo Salvini's party) and readership. This typifies the process of politicisation of the issue of migration only for electoral purposes, which precedes and accompanies practices of depoliticisation of border management (Cuttitta 2017).

*La Repubblica*, *La Stampa* and *Il Manifesto* point at the institutional gap left by the EU that eventually led NGOs to conduct SAR operations in the Mediterranean. However, only in *Il Manifesto* is this frame present in most articles, thus becoming a meaningful aspect in its depiction of NGOs as necessary actors reducing the death toll of sea migrants. All newspapers except *Il Giornale* state that Zuccaro's accusations are backed by no evidence. Only in *Il Manifesto* is this frame prominent, with 67% of frequency, as opposed to 12,5% in

*La Repubblica* and *La Stampa*, and 25% in *Il Corriere Della Sera*. In *La Stampa* and *Il Giornale*, NGOs are merely voiceless actors, and likewise, Zuccaro's statements are omnipresent and never called into question.

Even though the time-frame selected for the sample goes from 14 December 2016 to 30 April 2017, most of the sample comprises articles published in March and April 2017, with only two articles published in February by *La Repubblica* and *Il Giornale*. This suggests that Italian newspapers did not consider the news published in December 2016 by the *Financial Times*, regarding the Frontex leaked document accusing NGOs of colluding with smugglers to be worthy of coverage. Indeed, only when Zuccaro appropriates it, the accusation becomes newsworthy. This illustrates the agenda-setting mechanism media use when selecting which events should be presented to public attention. Establishing what constitutes a 'fact' becomes subject to internal processes that, as partial as they can be, end up shaping public opinion and influencing attitude changes towards political issues (Blumler and Gurevitch 1982; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999).

Throughout the sample, FRONTEX and Zuccaro are depicted as being in perpetual agreement, to the point that the two are confused with each other. When Di Maio claims that 'taxi service of the Mediterranean' is an expression that everyone can find in the 2017 FRONTEX report, he is, in fact, referring to a statement by Zuccaro. However, even prestigious and less politicised dailies (such as *La Stampa*) fail to fact-check the sentence which is not present in the report. The general lack of exactness and numerous omissions in the description of events, along with the presence of easily avoidable inaccuracies - such as 'pool factor' for 'pull factor' in *La Repubblica* (18 April 2017) - reflect a systemic bias and the inadequacy of the fourth estate in performing its duty with professionalism and integrity.

Further, the findings demonstrate how Italian news media reflect political divisions in accordance with what is also known as political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Referring back to the survey conducted by Diamanti in 2017, voters' political views seem to affect the perception of NGOs' conduct heavily. To exemplify, the electorate of the Lega (League) is the most suspicious towards NGOs. This attitude perfectly corresponds to that of *Il Giornale*, which tends to represent that party's political views.

The same for the remaining newspapers, with *Il Manifesto* representing the Italian left and whose readership is the most trustworthy vis-à-vis NGOs. *La Repubblica* tends to be in line with the centre-left, meaning the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party), whose voters are slightly less confident, but overall positive towards humanitarian organisations. Finally, *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* with a more conservative stance and a more sceptical readership in covering the role and legitimacy of NGOs search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. This combination of interlaced relations between the political sphere, the media and public opinion mutually influencing each other certainly poses questions about the health of democracy in Italy. At the same time, this hostility leverages the sense of isolation Italy has experienced vis-à-vis the refugee crisis, due to the unwillingness of other EU member states to share the responsibility of its management equally: a responsibility which has instead been almost entirely delegated to Mediterranean countries, including Greece and Spain.

*Second research question: What implications did media coverage reporting Frontex and Zuccaro's statements have on NGOs?*

As the interviewees posited, the main implications of such media portrayals comprise the criminalisation and delegitimisation of NGOs operating in the Mediterranean. Firstly, in recent decades media discourse has reflected a crisis of pity. It has become more complicated to sympathise or believe in the validity of someone else's sympathy for an issue without falling into uncertainty, or, indeed, suspicion (Boltanski 2000). This difficulty to sympathise with the

sea victims, turns into impossibility as a result of the dehumanisation of migrants and asylum seekers in media discourse. Media-driven public hostility towards immigrants is not a new phenomenon in Italy and public discourse about fear towards immigrants often suggests the erosion of Italian cultural identity, illegitimate welfare claims and increased job competition. (Berry et al. 2015).

This inability to sympathise with SAR NGOs' cause is further sustained by an increasing re-politicisation of the topics of migration and border management. Depoliticising such issues benefits political institutions as policies become unchallengeable and made incontrovertible in the eyes of public opinion so that disagreement and contestation are eradicated (Cuttitta 2017). In the case of the EU, this process helps justify externalisation as an inevitable measure to prevent death at sea, delegating border control activities increasingly to North African states (Heller and Pezzani 2017). This also hides the absence of a state-led SAR mission after the closure of *Mare Nostrum* in 2014.

As Lodesani and Alfonsi contest, we are witnessing the criminalisation of solidarity, aimed at discouraging European citizens in aiding immigrants and refugees (Fekete 2018), such as trials held in France against people who have hosted or helped refugees (Brown 2017) and the 2018 Hungarian 'Stop Soros' law, which imposes jail terms on organisations or individuals allegedly aiding illegal immigration (Walker 2018). As a result, when SAR NGOs attempt to politicise the maritime border or the EU migration policies — by, for instance, publicly claiming their role of witnesses of unlawful actions carried out by the EU-equipped Libyan coast guard — European institutions run a high risk of reputational harm.

In this context, humanitarian organisations have seen political and media attacks against them. Eventually, the toxic narrative produced toxic effects. (Heller and Pezzani 2017). On the organisational level, the implications of this smear campaign limited the freedom of NGOs to continue their operations. Investigations against NGOs were extremely

instrumental and gave public opinion the impression that humanitarian organisations were *de facto* engaging in illegal activities. This further contributed to a decrease in donations which 'are hitting a new low' (Sanderson 2019) and threatening one of the fundamental requisites for organisations dependent on public beneficence.

This study shows the causes of a legitimacy gap along with a lack of guidance on how organisations should react to media-led delegitimisation campaigns. Despite the critical importance conferred to organisational legitimacy, many of the resources investigating how NGOs can successfully claim legitimacy for themselves are either outdated or do not address current developments influencing the third sector discussed in this study, such as media-led scandals or smear campaigns (FRA 2018a).

Today, the ground where NGOs operate is more slippery. As polls increasingly show, the charity sector is losing credibility, thus it is important to focus on acquiring a deeper understanding of how organisations can use legitimacy claims to counter media attempts to undermine their reputation. The case of SAR NGOs is particularly meaningful as it shows how difficult it is to claim legitimacy even when judicial evidence contradicts any false accusation. As the interviews stress at the time when data has been collected, NGOs managed to claim legitimacy in front of the judiciary. Nonetheless, this did not change the outcomes of the smear campaign led by some Italian mainstream media, which legitimised the criminalisation of NGOs and the absence of any humanitarian SAR mission in the world's most lethal migration route.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored how Italian news media framed NGOs carrying out SAR activities in the Central Mediterranean after being accused of acting as a pull factor for migration and of collusion with smugglers by influential European and Italian institutional actors. Within the

sample analysed, frames of SAR NGOs in Italian news media mostly leverage a sentiment of suspicion towards their conduct and the source of their financial assets.

This research demonstrated the principal implications of the changing media discourse on NGOs operating in the Mediterranean consisted of their delegitimisation and criminalisation culminating with their ban in 2018. Concerningly, the very first accusation of collusion with human traffickers against NGOs first came by a far-right think tank, GEFIRA. This shows the power of anti-immigrant discourses in shaping society, which in recent years has attracted attention after the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016, or the results of the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016.

Currently, NGOs find themselves in a vicious cycle. To operate successfully, they need to be perceived as legitimate. Nonetheless, their legitimacy is at risk of political and media attacks, which in most cases result in their delegitimisation. When they lose legitimacy, they cannot operate successfully as they do not have public support. To acquire legitimacy, however, media support is crucial — nonetheless, as demonstrated, media can be a catalyst for their delegitimisation. Hence, if legitimacy is a fundamental prerequisite for non-for-profit organisations attempting to influence society and policymakers, this impasse represents an important issue that needs to be examined more closely in the future.

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