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[Opinion] What Salvini teaches us about Operation Sophia

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In his political rampage since becoming Italy's minister of the interior, Matteo Salvini has recently begun targeting European crisis management missions [such as Operation Sophia](#).

This mission, currently led by an Italian admiral and specifically pushed for back in 2015 by the then-Italian government, aroused his displeasure because of its rescue efforts for migrants in the Mediterranean.

Rescuing humans at sea is not really the mission's mandate, but an obligation by international law for all ships (under the [UN convention on the law of the sea](#)) – something that Salvini seems to dislike.

He has [pressured the other member states of the EU](#) into drawing up a new operational plan for Operation Sophia by the end of August in accordance with his demand that the mission [stop transferring migrants to Italian harbours](#).

Otherwise, he will push for its termination. Already in June, he called on other (often privately organised) humanitarian rescue missions to stop rescuing people in the Mediterranean – and closed the Italian harbours to their ships.

Well, even if he wishes to, Salvini cannot change international law for ships at sea nor ask Operation Sophia to take rescued people all the way to Spain, France or Portugal.

That would absolutely overstretch the mission and limit its capacities to implement the original mandate.

Nevertheless, he managed, again, to produce a populist (and nonsensical) request, which pleases his political base and further complicates the ongoing search for a European Union solution to migration.

Mission creep?

But his move could teach us something else: that missions under the [Common Security and Defence Policy \(CSDP\)](#) of the European Union should not be used for highly-contested internal policy issues such as migration.

The rescuing of people and the prevention of smuggling and trafficking must be dealt with by national coast guards and national police or the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), with its mission Themis, as well as Europol.

Indeed, the Italian coast guard accounted for 40 percent of the rescued migrants between 2015-17 while Themis for ten percent and Operation Sophia for 13 percent.

CSDP missions such as Sophia are very political from the outset as they can only be established by a wide consensus of all member states.

They always display an important and political message to the public: that the EU as a whole is engaged.

But that makes such missions especially vulnerable to political fights between member states or their haggling over diverse geopolitical interests.

In contrast, EU Commission instruments and agencies, such as Frontex or Europol, are less affected by political quarrels in their daily operational tasks.

Nevertheless, the EU and its member states are currently implementing a reform of their civilian crisis missions that could further entangle these with the populist debates we see today around Operation Sophia.

Like other instruments, EU missions are more and more called upon as tools to "fight" problems related to migration.

Diagnosis

One can actually pinpoint this development to early summer of 2016 when the [new EU Global Strategy](#) - which then became a key reference for European foreign and security policy - was published.

The Global Strategy has changed the foreign policy of the Union, realigning it more clearly than before with the internal security interests of its member states.

As a result, European peace operations have begun to change, too.

Previously, missions were mostly supporting local partners in stabilisation and peace-building efforts.

Nowadays, they are advising them on how to close their borders

and "manage" migration – with the clear aim to reduce migration into the EU.

It seems as if the EU and some member states are trying to "sell" European external action to migration-critical populist governments in Italy, Austria, Poland and Hungary by advertising it as a key to solving their internal issues – and thus pulling these missions right into the middle of today's populist debates.

Maybe the EU should indeed contemplate closing Operation Sophia to prevent future political hostage taking by Salvini and others.

Instead, it could strengthen Themis and the Italian coast guard and make sure that Italy upholds international law for its vessels so that finally the number of people dying in the Mediterranean goes down, again.

The [training of Libyan coast guards](#) and the fighting of smugglers can anyway only be tackled in a sustainable manner once Libya has reached a certain level of stability and national governance.

Achieving that has always been beyond Operation Sophia's mandate or capability.

Salvini cynically hopes that more deaths at sea would work as deterrence.

What happened to the political decency that the Italian government displayed in 2013 and 2014 with '[Mare Nostrum](#)', the so-far most efficient rescue mission in the Mediterranean?

Its narrative that "nobody is dying in our sea under our watch" is clearly missing in today's inhumane debates.

And it is a rather disturbing coincidence that Austria's new conservative-populist government holds the presidency of the EU during the time that Europe will decide about the future of its migration policies – as well as the future of its external crisis missions.

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