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borderline-europe, Sicily

SCIROCCO

News from Italy



Scirocco [ʃiˈrɒkko-Schirokko] is a southeastern, hot strong wind that carries dust and sand across the Mediterranean to Sicily and up to Italy's north often for a few hours only. This newsflash has been published on an approximately bi-weekly basis since March 2021.

Political and social situation

Before the [UN General Assembly](#), Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni praised the **nationalist concepts** of "nation" and "identity". She called for a collective commitment against migration, disguised as the "fight against criminal organisations" or the "fight against traffickers". This strategy has been adapted by other EU states as well. In their search for smugglers, they repeatedly **sentence people seeking protection to long prison terms**. This can be especially observed in Greece (see also a [report by Monitor](#) with participation of borderline-europe on the demanded release of [Homayoun Sabetara](#)).

Deal with Tunisia

The [deal](#) negotiated between Tunisia and the European Union to stop migration from Northern Africa to Europe continues to raise questions. Tunisia has not received the funding promised by the EU yet. The funds [have not been fully released](#) by the European Commission because the Tunisian president Kais Saied has not agreed to use them for projects of border protection and counter-migration, as well as the deportation of refugees from Italy to Tunisia. Moreover, an EU [investigation](#) is currently assessing whether the agreement is compliant with human rights, i.e. whether the deal guarantees adequate protection measures and security arrangements for migrants and refugees. However, considering the numerous **public human rights violations perpetrated by the Tunisian government against people on the move**, the inquiry seems obsolete. Tunisia itself is affected by an economic, political, and social crisis and cannot guarantee Tunisian citizens a dignified and safe life. People seeking protection in Tunisia – especially Black migrants and refugees – are exposed to daily threats and discrimination (see our publications: [Tunisian diary](#), part 1-3). Many people from African countries

were [abandoned](#) in a narrow border area between Tunisia and Libya where they died due to the heat, starvation and thirst. There is no guarantee of human rights or compliance with the Geneva Refugee Convention in Tunisia. **Protection mechanisms remain to be denied to those affected.**



Street scene in Tunisia, Photo: Ludovica Gualandi

A consequence of the suspension of the deal could also be the numerous departures from Tunisia to Italy. As [the Italian newspaper il manifesto](#) reported, hundreds of people from Sfax had been transferred by the Tunisian interior ministry to the towns of Jebiniana and El Amra, where most of the departures towards the Italian coasts start. In addition, measures to clear the city centre of Sfax have been intensified. One can assume that this is **a strategy of the Tunisian president to put pressure on the EU by increasing the crossings across the Mediterranean**. This reminds of the consequences of the EU-Turkey deal (which was negotiated by then Chancellor Angela Merkel). The Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used the agreement by opening the Turkish borders to Greece. He conditioned the renewed blockade of migration on financial demands to the EU. In such situations, those seeking protection have been and are being instrumentalized by international politics. Their rights do not matter.

Italian migration policy

Italy has decided to further undermine asylum and migration law: From now on nationals from so-called safe third countries are to be detained and subjected to an accelerated asylum procedure. Detention can be avoided if asylum seekers pay a **bail of 4,938 euros**. This is according to a [decree published in the Italian Official Gazette](#). A first of those detention centres was [completed in Pozzallo](#), Sicily. [Politicians of the opposition](#) criticised the decree as “inhumane”.



Deportation detention Caltanissetta, Photo: Borderline Sicilia

Moreover, the government approved the **construction of new deportation centres** (so-called “repatriation centres”). Also, the period of detention for those waiting for deportation has been extended [from six to 18 months](#). This mainly affects migrants who have been charged with or convicted of various crimes and not those who have arrived in Italy without papers and are applying for asylum. The deportation centres are controversial from a humanitarian and [constitutional](#) point of view. Moreover, [in practice only few people are actually deported to their countries of origin](#), as Italy has no repatriation agreements with a lot of countries. Those affected are therefore treated like criminals and held in deportation detention: In 2022, 2,900 of the 28,00 ordered deportations were carried out (equals approx. 10.4%). In 2023 the number of deportations amounts to 3,200 according to the data available [until 19 September](#).

[Giuliano Foschini](#) told the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* that the new deportation centres are to be built with the help of the military, “without ruling out the solution of tent camps”. These are currently being set up mainly in the regions of Liguria, Emilia Romagna and Piemonte to accommodate the large number of arriving protection seekers. However, it is [not clear yet](#) how high the budget for the construction of new deportation centres will be and who will be accommodated there. Moreover, [mayor of Bologna, Matteo Lepore](#) complains that tent camps are not adequate first reception facilities: “(T)he government is turning the arrival of migrants into a public order problem so that Meloni can claim all the powers.” This strategy – to create chaos in the Italian reception system to then to impose restrictive, anti-immigrant and misanthropic laws – is already familiar from the former Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini. Actual solutions were and are not sought.

Militarisation of the reception system

The [military turn](#) in Italy’s reception system requires the **amendment of military law**. According to a new legislative decree, the deportation centres (CPR), as well as the hotspots and exceptional reception centres (CAS) are to be classified as “objects of national defence and security”. This means that they will be treated like barracks, arsenals, naval and missile bases. The handing over of new reception and detention centres to the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence, which has them built by military engineers, is part of the [militarisation of the reception system](#). The Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto furthermore clarified that the control inside the centres will be the responsibility of the police and remain in the hands of the Ministry of the Interior. He also ruled out the establishment of new centres on deserted (“prison islands”).

European migration policy

The European Union is divided over its planned migration pact: The [European Parliament](#) has **suspended negotiations** on the European asylum application database and joint verification of arrivals after the EU Council has blocked them. In addition, the discussions on the mechanism for the redistribution of migrants repeatedly sparks disputes between the member states.

Within the EU, Italy is becoming [increasingly isolated](#): Not only is the EU-Tunisia deal, negotiated by Meloni, currently on ice, but France has (once again) stepped up border surveillance at the Italian-French border. The French Minister of Interior, [Gérald Darmanin](#), stressed in a conversation with his Italian counterpart Matteo Piantedosi, that France would not accept migrants and refugees arriving from Lampedusa. **Germany, too, has recently put a stop to the voluntary reception of refugees via the "solidarity mechanism"**. Through this mechanism, Germany had taken in a (small) number of migrants and refugees who had arrived in Italy and would have had to apply for asylum there according to the Dublin-III regulations. However, the suspension of the solidarity mechanism should **not** be seen as a sign against Italy's right-wing migration policy, as Germany also wants to get rid of protection seekers: Those who, according to Dublin-III, have to apply for asylum in Italy are currently [not being taken back](#) by Italy.

In the EU's migration debate, migrants and refugees **are denied the right to express themselves**, argues [Giuliano Granato](#) in an article worth reading. He adds that those affected are instead degraded to objects in the narrative about the "migration crisis". Moreover, it is argued, that **current policies are shaped by the extreme right** and largely focus on closing off the EU and externalising borders. Extreme and even fascist positions are increasingly spreading across the political spectrum and are gaining ground even in social democratic parties.

Plan for Africa?

The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Antonio Tajani, will present an **"Italian Development and Resilience Plan for Africa"** to the United Nations. The 7-point plan foresees, among other things, a special G7 summit and hotspots in the Maghreb states (countries in western and central northern Africa: Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia). Italy, a country that colonised for many years, now presumes to draw up a plan for Africa (as a continent), is an idea that is more than odd. The French head of state, Emanuel Macron, [made it clear](#) during his visit to Rome at the end of September, that France neither understood nor approved the plan.



Lampedusa, in front of the hotspot, middle of September 2023, Photo: Maldusa

State of emergency on Lampedusa

Since September, the number of arrivals on Lampedusa has risen sharply and the reception system on Lampedusa [has collapsed](#). **It is no longer able to accommodate such a large number of people**. However, the current challenges on Lampedusa are not a "migration crisis" but an [operational emergency](#).

While in recent years around 10-20% of the arrivals in Italy landed on Lampedusa, it is currently **over 65%**. The increased rescue of people in distress at sea and an acceleration of transfers to the EU could solve this problem. The [city council of Lampedusa](#), faced with thousands of protection seekers who have arrived,

declared (again) a state of emergency. This was announced by Mayor Filippo Mannino on 13 September (on the subject of "state of emergency" see our [magazine](#) "Spotlight on Italy - Zones of lawlessness"). The Lampedusan population, who not only showed rejection, but also provided the refugees with food, demanded the return of the state rescue mission [Mare Nostrum](#) (by which the refugees were not taken to Lampedusa, but directly to Sicily and the mainland). Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini speaks of an "[act of war against Italy](#)", fuelling anti-migration and conspiracy narratives. Meanwhile, head of government, Giorgia Meloni, asked the EU for help to stop migrants from crossing the Mediterranean. She said [in a video message](#), that, if necessary, the navy must be deployed to stop boats from leaving the shores of North Africa. This is, however, prohibited according to the European Court of Human Rights in [Hirsi](#) (2012). According to the judgment, no one shall be returned to a country that is not safe for them – also at sea. Similarly, the rescue of people in distress at sea follows from international conventions on the law of the sea.

The hotspot Contrada Imbriacola, with a capacity of [389 people](#) was therefore **occupied by more than 7,000 people** – who managed collectively for the first time in months to leave the closed facility and meet with the local population. Therefore, **migrants and refugees were suddenly visible on the island again.** Many islanders tried their best to provide the arrivals with water, clothing, and food. "We know what to do," [repeated many residents of Lampedusa](#), who have been accustomed to come together and help where they can by the prominent location of their island. The local church of San Gerlando also opened a small house called the "Casa della fraternità" (House of Fraternity) to give the most vulnerable arrivals a refuge. "We didn't eat for three days and spent many hours on the boat with the sun burning on our heads," explains [Aboubakar](#), a young man from Mali who found refuge in the church. It shows a breakdown of the years-long segregation system that had undermined any possible encounter with newly arrived people, reports [Maldusa](#), an

organisation working on Lampedusa. "(A) segregation that also provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories about migration, making people on the move either victims or perpetrators of an alleged "migration crisis"". Following the [numerous posts](#) from Maldusa, it becomes clear that Lampedusa can also be an [island in the Mediterranean without a border: A place where streets invite people to meet and be welcomed](#) – and without a closed centre, that stifles any space for self-managed solidarity.



Call for the collective mourning of the death of a baby upon arrival on Lampedusa, Photo: Maldusa

One problem remains the [continued slow redistribution of unaccompanied minors](#). Most unaccompanied minors remain in Southern Italy, as there are more first reception facilities available there. But there are hardly any free places, so that many minors are housed in centres with adults and thus do not receive the adequate protection. The necessary transfers from Lampedusa to Sicily led again to the complete overload of the large tents in Porto Empedocle (Agrigento) [with 1,200 refugees](#). Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni reiterated that Italy will not be the refugee camp of Europe, but **she is doing everything she can to turn it into a large open-air prison**, [Giansandro Merli](#) aptly comments on the Italian government's strategy.

International reactions

German minister of Interior, [Nancy Faser](#), supports the European Commission's proposal to increase air- and sea border surveillance at the so-called EU's external borders. The [German federal government](#) welcomed the [ten-point-plan for managing migration](#), presented by the president of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen: The plan foresees, among others, the increase of transfers from Lampedusa and the functioning of the solidarity mechanism. Furthermore, FRONTEX shall play a more active role in deportations, the search for smugglers and sea and air surveillance. Overall, asylum procedures and deportations shall be accelerated. It is well known that the new measures will not decrease migration and the smuggling of humans. **The most effective countermeasure against smuggling of persons remains legal entry routes.**

[Frontex](#) expands its support for Italy in the area of border management. The agency has agreed to increase the number of flight hours to monitor the central Mediterranean and to provide additional satellite imagery of the of the main departure points of refugees in North Africa. Fortunately, Portugal will support refugees from Lampedusa through the European Solidarity Mechanism. This was stated by the Portuguese Secretary of State for European Affairs, [Tiago Antunes](#). Antunes, however, did not give an exact figure.

Situation of the refugees

[Migrants and refugees](#) protested in a first reception facility for unaccompanied minors in Rosolini in the region of Syracus (Sicily) against **the inadequate water supply, poor hygienic conditions, poor food and stinking rubbish**. The protest was broken up by the police. The facility, managed by the Red Cross, gave the responsibility for rubbish collection and water supply to private companies, which do not take sufficient care of them. The ones who suffer are the approximately 180 unaccompanied minors, who are housed in the makeshift facility.



Unaccompanied minors in a reception facility in Sicily Photo: Borderline Sicilia

At the [S. Anna reception centre in Isola di Capo Rizzuto in the province of Crotona \(Calabria\)](#), up to **200 unaccompanied minors are de facto detained** for long periods of time, sometimes until they reach adulthood, under inadequate material conditions and in social isolation. This is the result of two inspections by the Italian Association of Italian Lawyers (ASGI) in the reception centre (most recently on 14 February this year). ASGI has therefore applied to the Civil Court of the **immediate release** of the unaccompanied minor refugees and migrants. According to a statement, their reception would constitute an "open violation of (...) the inviolability of the right to personal freedom".


As recently as 31 August, the Italian state was convicted by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for **inadequate protection of a minor girl** (we reported on this in [issue 16/2023](#) of this newsletter).

At the start of the new school year, Italian President [Sergio Mattarella](#) emphasized that migrants and their children represent a great potential for the country. He pointed out that about 800,000 students - one tenth of the total enrolment in Italian schools - are migrants or the children of migrants. They are at **a higher risk of dropping out of school**, as they often live in poverty (this poverty is, however, among other things, the result of political decisions, which should not be forgotten).

For more information on the situation in Italy visit „Projects“ on our [homepage](#), the previous issues of [Scirocco](#) and our magazine [“Zones of lawlessness”](#).

finden Sie unter „Projekte“ auf unserer, in den vorherigen Ausgaben des [Scirocco](#) sowie in unserem [Streiflicht „Zonen der Rechtlosigkeit“](#).

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