



Scirocco
borderline-europe, Sicily – Part 6
Palermo, 21.06.2021



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Scirocco [ʃiˈrɔkko-Sherocco] is a south-easterly, hot strong wind that carries dust and sand across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Italy's north for often only a few hours. This short info in the age of the pandemic will be published from March 2021 in an approx. bi-weekly rhythm. The Scirocco replaces the Corona Update Italy.

Political and Social Situation

There seems to be some movement in the debate on a common European migration and asylum policy, which has been deadlocked for years. [In a letter to the Executive Director of the EU Asylum Agency, Nina Gregori](#), dated June 8, 2021, the Mediterranean countries Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Italy and Malta - the so-called Med5 - agreed to the proposal of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) to reform the EU Asylum Agency by means of selective mini-deals instead of within the comprehensive Immigration and Asylum Pact (we reported [here](#)). This proposal had long been resisted by the five coastal states. But the EASO is only a small part of the pact. Controversial issues such as the regulated redistribution of refugees within the EU (we reported [here](#)) remain unresolved: Draghi demands support, other EU member states, especially the Visegrad states, continue to show **no interest in the distribution of refugees**: only at the beginning of June, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson asked for support for Italy, as the **number of arrivals** in Lampedusa is rising again for seasonal reasons. Compared to the same period last year, the number of arrivals [has tripled](#). According to [Filippo Grandi](#), the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees, the number of arrivals could easily be coordinated by the member states with a state-run sea rescue programme.

According to the anti-racist forum in Palermo, about **60 Sicilian and international organizations support the work of the civil rescue at sea**. In their [joint manifesto](#), the non-governmental organizations criticize the criminalization of sea rescue and call for an alternative, democratic migration and asylum policy based on international law. The manifesto was signed by [borderline-europe](#) and its sister organization [Borderline Sicilia](#).



The mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, met with representatives of several civil sea rescue organizations. He expressed solidarity with their operations at sea, recalled the [Charter of Palermo](#) from 2015, and denounced the "intolerable genocide in the Mediterranean" in a letter to EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. More politicians should take a stand against the criminalization of NGOs, the seizure of their ships and then also take action against it.

Contrary to what is often assumed, the situation on the Mediterranean for refugees has **worsened** since the centre-left government under Draghi/Lamorgese took office in February 2021. This is shown by a comparison of [documented deaths](#) and [active rescue missions](#) on the Mediterranean in the first half of 2021 compared to previous years. The high death toll is partly due to the fact that there are hardly any civil sea rescue ships on the Mediterranean: while under the Conte/Salvini government humanitarian ships were denied entry to Italian ports and NGOs were criminalized in the media, under the Conte/Lamorgese and now Draghi/Lamorgese governments ships were prevented from leaving with the help of regulations. According to [Matteo Villa](#), a researcher at the

Institute for International Policy Studies, this is the most legal and formally independent form of blocking civil rescue at sea because it comes from the judiciary. Moreover, under the current government, the number of **pull-backs** to Libya exceeds the number of arrivals. Additionally, relations with Libya have been (further) **normalized** - despite the ongoing Libyan human rights abuses on land and breaches of international law at sea.



Port of Palermo

About Rescue at Sea

In the last week, a strong **increase in arrests of alleged "smugglers"** ("Scafisti") has been observed. However, it is unclear whether the number of "smugglers" has actually increased, whether the controls have become more stringent due to seasonal factors or whether more cases are simply becoming public.

The **Geo Barents** rescued in 7 **missions 410 people from distress at sea**. Previously, the crew of the rescue ship observed several "interceptions" - illegal returns of refugees at sea - who could not be rescued by the Geo Barents and brought to a safe port (we reported [here](#)), as well as a noticeable number of **drone missions** by FRONTEX. The increased cooperation between Italian and Tunisian authorities as well as the **drone operations of FRONTEX** off the coasts of Libya and Tunisia lead to the fact that departing boats are registered early and (illegal) "pull-backs" are carried out. In this context, the **International Organization for Migration** reports that more than 13,000 refugees have **been**

illegally turned back since the beginning of the year. This means that the number of re-foulements after the first half of the year is already higher than that of the whole of last year.

The **SEA-EYE 4** was **seized** in the port of Palermo on the absurd grounds that it had rescued too many people and was thus endangering the safety of the crew and the ship. Again and again, the Italian coast guard seizes civil sea rescue vessels because they are allegedly falsely certified for humanitarian purposes. In addition to the SEA-EYE 4, the Alan Kurdi, the Sea-Watch 3 and the **Sea-Watch 4** have already been seized on these grounds.

It is not only NGOs that are stopped from rescuing. The **fisherman** Vincenzo Partinico, who saved the lives of 24 people in international waters, has now been **charged** because he should not have gone so far out. "I would have done it a thousand times. I couldn't have just reversed course and left them at sea," he says.

Situation of Refugees

Jalila managed to bring her **dead sons back home from Sicily** at the end of April (we reported [here](#)). Like Jalila, other families are also trying to find their missing loved ones. Now the relatives of **Mamoun, Jasser, Adel, Mohamed and Ayoub** - five young people from Tunisia - have **filed missing persons reports** with the Marsala police headquarters and public prosecutor's office. The families have been waiting since February this year for news of their sons, who had been just off the Sicilian island of Pantelleria before contact with them broke off. Borderline Sicilia, borderline-europe and the Alarm Phone continue to receive requests from families looking for their missing loved ones.

The **European Commission's Public Health Department (EDDC)** has identified **an increased risk of infection for migrants** compared to non-migrants during the Covid 19

pandemic and is therefore calling for targeted measures to better protect this population group. However, these demands do not seem to have reached European governments. On the contrary, despite the legal right to the Corona vaccination, more than **700,000 foreigners in Italy are currently excluded** from the vaccination campaign, according to [Quotidiano Sanità](#) estimates.

Recently, racist attacks on refugees and migrants have been on the rise again (we reported [here](#)). In mid-May, a youth from Gambia was racially attacked in [Catania](#). After the youth had evaded verbal attacks, the perpetrator, who had several previous convictions, shot at him. The youth was able to flee to the reception center opposite and fortunately remained unharmed.

The suicide of 20-year-old [Seid Visin](#), a Black Italian and youth football player for AC Milan, shows the dramatic effects of racist structures on refugees and Italian people of color alike. In his farewell letter, Visin reports on the looks of disgust he received from other people on a daily basis because of the color of his skin.

For more information on the situation in Italy, see our [Steiflicht Italy](#) and our previous [Corona Updates](#) on our [homepage](#).

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