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Urban and social resilience—the role of cities and civil society organizations in the Search and Rescue system in the Mediterranean

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Search and Rescue (SAR) in the Central Mediterranean has been at the center of the European debate on migration management of the past decade. In response to the challenges posed by maritime rescue operations, European governments have increasingly centralized their efforts through Frontex operations, departing from the previous collaborative framework with SAR NGOs that was established in the aftermath of the Lampedusa shipwreck. The political discourse has predominantly focused on the designation and definition of a Port of Safety, sidelining the imperative need for an effective SAR infrastructure, leading to life-threatening impasses at sea, and also leading to the complete disregard for the agency and will of cities. While the cooperation between governments, cities, and civil society organizations has been at the center of successful decentralized migration management efforts on land, a contrasting trend of centralization and diminished cooperation has emerged at sea in the Central Mediterranean. The article argues that the European Union's shift from SAR-oriented efforts to border management has resulted in heightened inefficiencies within the Mediterranean SAR infrastructure. This inefficiency is attributed to the diminished collaboration with NGOs and local entities. Utilizing the category of resilience as a theoretical framework of migration management, the article will address the role of cities and NGOs in the creation of a coordinated SAR system in the Mediterranean.

KEYWORDS

Search and Rescue, urban resilience, civil society, NGOs, migration management, resilience, cooperation, migration governance

1 Introduction

With numbers of global migration and forced displacement rising by the year ([European Commission, 2024](#)), and cities and city networks becoming crucial actors in migration management ([Lacroix, 2022](#); [Schweiger, 2023](#)), there has been an increased attention by scholars on the application of the urban resilience lens in the field of migration governance, as a social ([Zapata-Barrero, 2023c](#)) and as a political category ([Triandafyllidou and Yeoh, 2023](#)). The concept of resilience, as both a category of practice and category of analysis ([Brubaker and Cooper, 2000](#); [Zapata-Barrero, 2023b](#)), has been applied to migration governance in a large and diverse body of literature to understand and analyze the pressures and challenges faced by cities in developing their growing governance capacities for migration

(Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017; Oomen et al., 2021; Zapata-Barrero, 2023c), as well as creating innovative political strategies employed by cities, on their own or within networks (Lacroix, 2022), to maintain cohesion and urban justice when hit with exogenous shocks provoked by large inflows of migrants or to proactively defy national or supranational migration policies (Schweiger, 2023).

In the context of forced migration in the Mediterranean, Zapata Barrero has invited scholars to pair the resilience lens with the regional approach of Mediterranean Migration thinking (MedMig), in order to move away from the national securitarian narratives that have prevailed so far and move towards a local bottom up approach to region making and governance paradigm change (Zapata-Barrero, 2023a). Building on this agenda, this article will explore the interaction between city governments, civil society and European states in the governance of the Search and Rescue (SAR) system in the Central Mediterranean, through a political urban resilience lens and a MedMig approach.

While the cooperation between governments, cities, and civil society organizations has been at the center of successful decentralized migration management efforts on land (Appave and Neha, 2017), a contrasting trend of centralization and diminished cooperation has emerged at sea in the Central Mediterranean. Ever since 2017, organizations active at sea have been calling for a more coordinated and sustainable SAR system, yet in response to the challenges posed by maritime rescue operations, European governments have increasingly centralized their efforts through Frontex operations, departing from the previous collaborative framework with SAR NGOs that had been established in the aftermath of the Lampedusa shipwreck (del Valle, 2020). What started as a collaborative SAR effort, which saw European governments using SAR NGO boats as strategic specialized rescue assets, soon left the place to a discernible trend towards centralization, meaning Italy's attempt to consolidate their authority over all SAR activities in the Mediterranean. That meant not only decreased cooperation of governments with NGOs, but also an active effort to disincentivize, discredit and attack NGO SAR missions.

The attacks to civil society and to the SAR system, pushed cities to mobilize in a resilient manner to “declare their ports open” and create city-NGO networks like the Palermo Charter Process (From the Sea to the City), yet the political pressure posed on cities as well as NGOs crippled the resilient efforts, causing the city networks to slow down.

Given the recognized acknowledgement that collaboration with NGOs and local entities enhances effectiveness in migration management, why did States opt for an increased centralization in the Central Mediterranean? I argue that European states suppressed the resilient efforts and reduced cooperation with local entities, and started targeting NGOs working at the border because they act as watchdogs (Cuttitta, 2018) and as enforcers (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Sharman, 2021) of those international obligations that states actively try to circumvent to advance their interests through liberal strategies of exclusion (Lori and Schilde, 2021).

The objective of this article is twofold: first, to explore the reasons behind the decreased cooperation with local entities and increasing criminalization of NGOs by liberal states, and second, utilizing the category of resilience as a theoretical framework of migration management (Zapata-Barrero, 2023a,b,c), to address the role of cities and NGOs in the effort to create a coordinated SAR system in the Mediterranean. Through the analysis of the European response and

Frontex operations, the article will argue that the European Union's shift from SAR-oriented efforts to border management has resulted in heightened inefficiencies within the Mediterranean SAR infrastructure. This inefficiency is attributed to the diminished collaboration with NGOs and local entities.

This study originates from the author's participant observation while working with the SAR NGO SOS Mediterranee from 2017 to 2020. The research utilizes a blend of semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives from some of the largest NGOs currently operating in the Central Mediterranean, along with representatives of city networks. Additionally, desk research is employed, involving the analysis of SAR data, press releases, newspaper articles, and documents released by Frontex and various other European institutions.

2 Framework: resilience, cooperation, and migration governance

Emerging from scientific origins, the concept of resilience is widely recognized as the capacity of individuals, communities, and systems to endure, adapt, and potentially undergo transformation in the face of stress and unexpected challenges (Triandafyllidou and Yeoh, 2023; Zapata-Barrero, 2023a,b,c).

The category of resilience, as both a category of practice and category of analysis (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Zapata-Barrero, 2023b), has been applied to migration governance in a large and diverse body of literature to understand and analyze the pressures and challenges faced by cities in developing their growing governance capacities for migration (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017; Oomen et al., 2021; Zapata-Barrero, 2023b), as well as creating innovative political strategies employed by cities, on their own or within networks, to maintain cohesion and urban justice when hit with exogenous shocks provoked by large inflows of migrants or to proactively defy national or supranational migration policies (Zapata-Barrero, 2024). Applying urban resilience as a framework for migration governance is valuable in comprehending challenges and opportunities associated with migration in cities. This approach allows an examination of how cities can enhance their governance capacities to respond effectively to migrant needs, fostering social cohesion and urban justice, while also shedding light on the intricate relationship between migration governance and state surveillance devices in cities. Additionally, this resilience-based research approach enhances understanding of how current state regulations and structures challenge cities, as social-ecological systems, to absorb migration and ethnic-related pressures (Zapata-Barrero, 2023b).

In this article I will look at resilience applied to migration governance in the Central Mediterranean as the capacity of a system to resist but also to process the pressures they have and that provoke stress through determinate mechanisms, with the objective of both survival and to keep the functioning of the system (Zapata-Barrero, 2023c). Considering the migration process, and its consequent management, as a sequential journey involving three distinct phases—departure, travel, and arrival—my focus centers specifically on the intricate dynamics and challenges associated with the maritime component of this trajectory, which involves Search and Rescue (SAR) and directly impacts arrival. In fact, while most scholars have focused on the resilient efforts of cities and civil society organizations in the

process of integration and advocacy (Ambrosini and Van der Leun, 2015; Caponio, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2018; Oomen, 2020; Kaya and Nagel, 2021; Casanovas i Oliveres, 2022), and other authors have analyzed the creation of urban militant network in the Mediterranean stemming from the SAR crisis (Lacroix et al., 2022), or on the activity of civil society organizations at sea (Cusumano, 2018, 2019a; Tazzioli, 2018; Cusumano and Bell, 2021; Cuttitta et al., 2023), little to no research exists on Search and Rescue as a resilient system itself, made up by the relations between States, NGOs and cities.

In the following sections, drawing from the insights of Lori and Schilde (2021), I will argue that European States suffocated the resilient efforts of both NGOs and cities to centralize the SAR process in the Central Mediterranean in order to advance their interests through liberal strategies of exclusion. Resilient networks of cities and NGOs often function both as watchdogs (Cuttitta, 2018) and enforcers (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Sharman, 2021) of these obligations, becoming uncomfortable actors for the state. That became especially true after the beginning of the “open port” campaign and the beginning of the Palermo charter protocol, which saw the cities stand up to the “closed port policies” of the Salvini government.

3 Search and Rescue (SAR) context in the Central Mediterranean—from cooperation to centralization

The following section investigates the European response to the Central Mediterranean humanitarian crisis and assesses the evolving dynamics in cooperation between Member States and SAR NGOs, shedding light on a discernible trend towards centralization, meaning Italy’s attempt to consolidate their authority over all SAR activities in the Mediterranean.

Contemporary patterns of maritime large-scale migration in Italy are far from new. Mass arrivals by boat were in fact a defining characteristic of the 1990s, marked by thousands fleeing the communist regime in Albania.¹ However, Italy’s collective memory seemed to have forgotten about twentieth-century boat arrivals, until 15 years later, on October 3, 2013, when a tragic incident unfolded as a large wooden boat traveling from Libya to Italy capsized near the Italian island of Lampedusa. The overcrowded vessel had departed from Misrata, Libya, carrying hundreds of people. When the Italian Coast Guard arrived on the scene of the shipwreck, over 360 people had already lost their lives. Only 155 passengers were rescued. A week later, on October 11, approximately 120 kilometers away, a second boat, reportedly carrying people fleeing Syria, faced a similar fate, resulting in the confirmed loss of at least 34 lives. The events of the Lampedusa shipwreck shook the

international community, and particularly the Italian government that had been at the forefront of the events, pushing Italy to intervene in accordance with the international obligations to save lives at sea.

Within days, specifically on October 18, 2013, the Italian government initiated Operation Mare Nostrum, a military and humanitarian operation aimed at addressing the pressing humanitarian crisis in the Strait of Sicily (Mare Nostrum Operation—*Marina Militare Italiana*, n.d.). As the largest Search and Rescue operation in the area to date, Mare Nostrum involved units from the Italian Navy, Air Force, and additional armed forces, spanning an extensive area of 70,000 square kilometers in the Central Mediterranean. Encompassing strategic zones near the Libyan coastline, the operation boasted a sophisticated array of resources, including two submarines, coastal radar technology, helicopters equipped with infrared capabilities, drones, and a workforce of around 1,000 military personnel (*Marina Militare Italiana*, n.d.). Despite the successful rescue of 150,810 individuals (*Marina Militare Italiana*, n.d.), in 2014 Operation Mare Nostrum was shut down and accused by the European Union of being a pull factor. In an interview to an Italian newspaper in 2014 the vice president of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani stated that while it was true that many lives had been saved, it was also true that Mare Nostrum had pushed the smugglers to increase their business, because they knew that the “boats of death” would be saved by the Italians (Masini, 2014). The Italian-led operation was replaced by a succession of operations led by Frontex—the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders - that, from 2014 onward, both shrank the area of operation and shifted the objective of the presence at sea from “safeguard of human life” and “compliance with SAR obligations” to “counter terrorism” (Trombetta, 2023).

Indeed, after Operation Mare Nostrum ended, Frontex took charge of border surveillance at Europe’s external borders. Established in 2004 to coordinate Member States’ border control, Frontex expanded its role in November 2014 with Operation Triton, primarily emphasizing border surveillance. Triton’s initial limitations due to funding and manpower, were eventually extended following a series of tragic shipwrecks off the coasts of Libya in April 2015. Yet, that same year, Triton was replaced by Operation Sophia, which had as its stated mission to address trafficking and smuggling concerns comprehensively (*EUNAVFORMED Operation Sophia - misison*, n.d.). However, these missions actually resulted in smugglers’ altering their tactics, transitioning to cheaper, unsafe rubber dinghies that increased the risk for migrants at sea. Although both operations maintained a humanitarian facade, their rescue efforts gradually decreased over time. For instance, Triton’s share in total rescues dropped from 24 percent in 2015 to 13 percent in 2017 according to Italian Coast Guard data (*Guardia Costiera Italiana*, 2022).

The SAR gap that was increasingly left open by the EU institutions in the Central Mediterranean was soon filled with what the media referred to as a ‘civil fleet’ of NGO boats patrolling the high seas between Italy and Libya since 2014 to help combat the loss of lives at sea (*Mediterranea Saving Humans*, n.d.). The Maltese NGO ‘Migrant Offshore Aid Station’ (MOAS), was the first organization to launch a civil society-led SAR ship in August 2014. Operating only during summer months, MOAS boat Phoenix rescued over 3 thousand people between August–October 2014 alone. This, along with the 44 thousand rescues by merchant ships and Mare Nostrum that summer,

1 This event was triggered by the preceding day’s chaos at Durres Port in Albania, where the merchant ship *Vlora*, carrying sugar from Cuba, encountered turmoil. The ship’s captain, Halim Milaqi, was forced by the crowd to set sail for Italy, leading to the vessel’s docking in Bari the following day. The ship’s entry into the port faced challenges, with the captain citing severe injuries on board and the cargo’s size, ultimately forcing the blockage and docking at the remote “Molo Carboni.” During this process, several individuals jumped off the moving ship in an attempt to swim to the quay in a bid to escape.

underscored the urgent need for SAR assets in the Central Mediterranean to prevent further fatalities.

Instead, assets at sea drastically decreased after the Summer of 2014, between the end of Operation Mare Nostrum and the beginning of Operation Triton. As European SAR forces decreased, the number of SAR NGO forces increased to over 10 Search and Rescue NGOs that set sail in the Central Mediterranean, evolving in size and mission with the evolution of the political context throughout the years (Cuttitta, 2018; Stierl, 2018; Cusumano, 2019a). As the EU withdrew their SAR assets, these NGOs assumed substantial responsibility, left alone in the region to fulfill SAR obligations and safeguard human lives. They saved a total of 111,478 between 2014 and 2017 (Guardia Costiera Italiana, 2022). Yet, the decrease in governmental Search and Rescue forces did not correspond with a reduction of attempted crossings or deaths, nor did it result in a weakening of the duty to provide assistance at sea, which - as explained in the following section - remains incumbent upon anyone at sea.

From 2014 to early 2017, Italian media and society commonly portrayed NGOs as supportive of public rescue operations. Reports on SAR activities predominantly emphasized Europe's humanitarian obligation to aid distressed migrants, seldom making a clear distinction between public and private SAR providers. However, when the public-private distinction was mentioned, NGOs were often portrayed in an exceptionally favorable manner, being labeled as "heroes" or even "angels of the sea" (Cusumano and Villa, 2021). In the summer of 2017, however, SAR NGOs began to be identified in the political discourse and in the media as disrupting rescue activities and were increasingly portrayed as criminals. What followed the public discreditation of SAR NGOs was an active targeting by the state of the SAR NGOs through policy and law, which will be the focus of the following sections.

3.1 Trends of centralization and decentralization

The criminalization of SAR NGOs in the Central Mediterranean by the state is exemplified by the history of NGO-state cooperation in Italy, specifically, in the context of NGOs as major maritime rescue actors. As analyzed by several scholars, such as Lemberg-Pedersen (2019) and Mainwaring and DeBono (2021), alongside the scholarship focusing on the State-NGO relations at sea (Cusumano, 2018; Cuttitta et al., 2023) also in terms of humanitarian v securitarian approaches (Cuttitta, 2018; Ghezelbash et al., 2018; Cusumano, 2021), this interaction calls for the need to draw a deeper connection to a neo-colonial structure unfolding in the Mediterranean. Building on that trend, this section traces how a failed attempt to formally centralize the NGO presence at sea under Italian coordination through the 2017 Code of Conduct, resulted in the state strategy reverting to distancing NGOs work from that of the other institutional actors at sea, primarily that of the Italian Coast Guard.

Since the beginning of the SAR crisis in the Central Mediterranean, the Italian Coast Guard had always been the only entity responding to distress calls and coordinating SAR cases. This was also due to the "lack of a Libyan maritime coordination center," and of the non-responsiveness of the Maltese Maritime Rescue Coordination center (Senato Della Repubblica-Documento XVII n. 9-XVII Legislatura, 2017; Cusumano, 2021). That meant that the Italian Coast Guard coordinated the SAR activities of all actors in the areas, including NGOs.

Up until the political shift in Italy 2018, that saw the openly anti-immigrant Lega Nord-Movimento 5 Stelle coalition at the government, not only did NGOs function within a more permissive environment, facing fewer logistical and security challenges (Cusumano, 2019a), but they were also employed as an extension of the state's SAR assets. In an interview on *La Vita in Diretta* on Italian television in September 2016, Filippo Marini, captain of the Italian Coast Guard stated that there are many actors involved in Search and Rescue efforts alongside the Italian Coast Guard in the Central Mediterranean: the Italian Military's operation Mare Sicuro, Eunavfor Med, Frontex, and the Italian Navy, "as well as the international organizations, are providing a very important contribution and aid" (Barretta et al., 2017). When asked about coordination, he drew an analogy to an orchestra conductor, explaining how the Italian Coast Guard had been coordinating all efforts at sea and taking advantage of all the instruments available due to the area of SAR spanning from Italy to 20–30 nautical miles off the coast of Libya.

The pre-2018 attitude towards the NGOs can be clearly identified in the 2017 Italian Senate's conclusive document "*on the investigation regarding the contribution of Italian military to the control of migratory flows in the Mediterranean, and the impact of NGOs activities*," that positions the NGOs in a role of asset to the Italian Coast Guard, and the intent to centralize their efforts officially. By "centralization" I mean the state's attempt to consolidate their authority over all SAR activities in the Mediterranean, including autonomous NGOs. The document in question was the conclusive report of an inquiry initiated by the Italian Senate Defence Committee in response to suspicions of NGOs aiding illegal immigration. The Senate's conclusive report states: "*As highlighted by Coast Guard Commander General Admiral Melone, NGOs, like any other vessel, should be considered, for all intents and purposes, useful resources for the purpose of rescue activities. [...] Admiral Marzano, commander of the Naval Squadron, noted that NGOs are not a hindrance to the Navy's activities in the area*" (Senato Della Repubblica-Documento XVII n. 9-XVII Legislatura, 2017).

The Senate's document continues by recommending that: "*it would be advisable that, since these [NGO] vessels are exclusively present for SAR activities and not of a commercial nature, invested from time to time on the basis of international law, they should fully fall under a permanent coordination managed by the Coast Guard. They should also receive instructions on the timing and manner of service, as well as the area in which to position themselves*" (Senato Della Repubblica-Documento XVII n. 9-XVII Legislatura, 2017). Merely 3 months later, the Italian left-wing government, under Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, imposed a Code of Conduct for maritime rescue in August 2017 that was intended to codify the relation between the Italian Coast Guard and the SAR NGOs. It was created operating on the premise that NGOs refusing to sign the code of conduct would be denied authorization to disembark migrants in Italian ports. While not carrying particular organizational nor legal value, as well as having unclear consequences, the Code of Conduct represented an attempt to officially enlist the NGOs under Italian command. Most of the requirements for the NGOs were restatements of obligations already in place, like the commitment to constantly inform the Italian MRCC and execute its instructions, hence redundant but not problematic (Cusumano, 2019b). Yet what did make the Code of Conduct problematic for NGOs were provisions requesting NGOs to "loyally cooperate with the public security authorities by sharing sensitive information, or to receive on board, upon request by Italian

authorities, judicial police officers. Conducting investigations related to migrant smuggling,” which violated the neutrality of the humanitarian mission of the NGOs (especially the ones like MSF) (Cusumano, 2019b).

Despite the fact that most NGOs ended up signing the Code of Conduct, the situation at sea was unchanged and the attempt to centralize failed. Retaliation towards SAR NGOs culminated in the summer of 2018, with the newly elected right-wing *Lega Nord* government, when ministry of the interior Matteo Salvini, declared Italy’s ports “closed” to all foreign-flagged vessels. This did not actually entail the closure of ports, but it effectively represented the next phase of targeting of SAR NGOs. In fact, it has never been possible for the Italian authorities to refuse the disembarkation of rescued individuals, as shown by the Carola Raketete case (Trombetta, 2023). The state’s strategy then reverted to decentralization, which entailed the outright opposition to NGO activity at sea and the complete outsourcing of coordination of SAR cases to the newly established Libyan Coast Guard - as of 2017 trained and funded by the EU and Italy.

4 Post 2018—ports, port cities and disembarkation

The present-day obligation to preserve life at sea is explicitly outlined in Article 98 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as well as in various international maritime law treaties, including the Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS Convention) and the International Convention on Salvage. The duty to rescue extends to all individuals at sea, and more specifically countries and shipmasters. It mandates that shipwrecked individuals, regardless of their identity, should be saved. This obligation is outlined in Article 98 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Chapter V of the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention (Regulations 33 and 7), and the Search and Rescue (SAR) Convention. Beyond the legal framework, the duty to rescue at sea is deeply rooted in humanitarian principles that transcend borders. The moral imperative to save lives regardless of nationality, race, or status is enshrined in customary international law. It underscores the shared responsibility among nations and individuals to assist those in distress at sea. For this reason the duty to assist does not solely rest upon states and their maritime authorities but also extends to all vessels, including commercial ships, pleasure crafts, and fishing boats.

Despite the unequivocal legal and moral obligations imposed on states by international law, challenges and ambiguities persist in the practical application of the duty to rescue. Within the clear definition of the duty to render assistance at sea, none of the international instruments elaborates on the criteria for disembarkation, which leaves the debate open as to where to disembark and who should be responsible for assigning the port, whether the port should be the one geographically closest to the place of the shipwreck, the next port of call of the ship operating the rescue, a port within the SAR region of the coastal State coordinating the operation, or the safest port in terms of human rights (Moreno-Lax and Papastavridis, 2016; Trombetta, 2023). Therefore, the years after 2018 were characterized by a political and mediatic focus on disembarkation and on Ports of Safety. The debates over the *Place of Safety* for disembarkation following rescues took a central role by understanding the act of disembarkation of people rescued at sea as the acceptance of migrants

into the disembarkation country and into Europe, using a traditional and literal border-crossing lens (Trombetta, 2023).

Ever since the beginning of the so-called migration crisis in the Central Mediterranean, the Italian Coast Guard and its Rescue Coordination Center (MRCC) have been the only European coastal state authority in the Central Mediterranean to coordinate Search and Rescue efforts and therefore being left with the implied responsibility of assigning a port to disembark rescued people (Guardia Costiera Italiana, 2022, CS2, CS3, CS4). Even after 2018, when the coordination was deliberately left in the hands of the newly constituted Libyan Coast Guard, Italy remained the only authority left in the Central Mediterranean to respond and assign a different port than Tripoli, which is deemed unsafe (Facchini, 2022; Guardia Costiera Italiana, 2022, CS2, CS3, CS4).

Alongside the legal ambiguities regarding disembarkation, the role of port cities in the SAR system remains unfettered and uncharted, which, I argue, leaves space open for resilient pushes, as I will continue exploring in the following paragraph. In fact, while never officially included in the SAR system, European cities have carved for themselves an influential space in the politics of disembarkation, which was later attacked by national governments (CS1, CN1).

4.1 The Palermo Charter process and the attack to the resilience of cities

As the culmination of discrediting and targeting of Search and Rescue NGOs’ activity in the Central Mediterranean, in June 2018 the newly elected Italian right-wing *Lega Nord* ministry of the interior, Matteo Salvini, declared Italy’s ports “closed” to all foreign-flagged vessels. The rescue boat *Aquarius*, chartered by SOS Mediterranee and MSF, was stranded at sea with 630 rescued people until June 17th, when it was sent to disembark in Spain, more than 1,500 km—and a week of navigation—away (SOS Mediterranee, n.d.). The announcement of the unwillingness of Italy to let them disembark, was relayed to the press before it was even relayed to the *Aquarius* crew, highlighting the mediatic and spectacularized nature of the political maneuver aimed at pressuring other European governments into contributing to rescue efforts, at the expense of the rescued lives, which was later proven illegitimate by Italian courts with the Racketete case (Trombetta, 2023).

In light of the first “port closure” for SAR NGOs by the Italian government, the mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, along with other Southern Italian mayors (like Naples, Messina, and Reggio Calabria), declared their cities’ ports open and ready to allow the rescued migrants to safely disembark. This declaration served as a pivotal initial step to publicly challenge the legitimacy of the national policy of non-rescue (Moreno-Lax, 2018), initiating a debate that persisted in the subsequent years and kickstarted the Palermo Charter Process:

“On the 11th of June 2018, the Italian government closed its harbours to the NGO ship Aquarius while it was carrying more than 600 migrants rescued at sea. This dramatic and yet foreseeable decision is the culmination of years of virulent attacks against migrants and those who stand in solidarity with them, across the Mediterranean, in Europe and around the world. [...] Several municipalities as well as non-governmental and self-organised groups active in different cities have mobilized against this state of affairs, against the crimes

and atrocities committed by national governments and supranational institutions. Some of us met in Palermo in late May in order to discuss precisely the scenario of closed harbours that has now become a reality. We want to call on others to join forces and mobilize together with us, against this rising tide of oppression.” (Alarm Phone, 2018)

The Palermo Charter is a political manifesto, launched in response to mounting political pressure on European NGOs involved in search-and-rescue operations to stop (CN1, CS1). Due to the heightened hostility of National governments and the European Union, NGOs started partnering with city governments who had openly sided against the “closed port” policy, both because of a closure of political opportunities at the EU and national levels, and because of the opening of specific opportunities at the local one (Lacroix et al., 2022).

The push by Southern Italian mayors and SAR NGOs soon involved major European cities like Berlin, Marseille, Potsdam, Barcelona, and many others (CN1). This amazing resilient effort by cities and NGOs to defy the anti-immigrant policies of national governments gave birth to the “From Sea to City” campaign, initiated in June 2021, which brought together 33 European municipal representatives to sign a declaration advocating for international safe harbours. The campaign focused on five objectives: lobbying the European Commission on migration policy, creating a framework linking Search-and-Rescue operations and city reception, advocating for EU funding for cities and civil society organizations, establishing legal corridors for asylum seekers within Europe, and ensuring access to fundamental rights (Charter of Palermo, 2015, CN1, CS1).

But, while the process was explicitly created in response to hostility towards Search and Rescue, which is also reflected in the name of the campaign itself, “from the sea to the city,” the “consortium over time lost this connection [to SAR] which became less emphasized, and it wasn’t until the most recent strategic meeting in Florence in January of this year [2024] that the issue was revisited.” (CN1). In the same way, “we ‘lost’ most of our Italian cities” - as in they went from leading the process to being completely inactive - due to political pressure and political changes in the local administrations (CN1). Italian cities technically never had the power to allow boats to disembark, but as a network of resilient cities had gained strong leverage and dissident political strength, by claiming more power through voice and mobilization; all pieces that belong to “the puzzle of urban resilience” (Zapata-Barrero, 2023b). That is in line with the other urban resilient efforts that empower cities, develop urban capacities, and learn to govern with the range of uncertainties, hazards, and risks associated with the constraints of migration” (Zapata-Barrero, 2021).

The political pressure posed on cities as well as NGOs crippled the resilient efforts, causing the city networks to slow down, and shift their focus from SAR to integration policies, and from national to European lobbying (CN1). The political debate of early 2019 was an arm-wrestling game played on social media between Italian city mayors and Salvini. For instance, notably Naples mayor De Magistris on January 3rd 2019 challenged Salvini on the radio, declaring Naples “Ready to open the port to Sea Watch” - NGO who had been in stranded for days with 32 migrants on board - “I hope that this boat will approach the port of Naples because contrary to what the government says we will put in place a rescue action and we will bring it into port. I will be the first to lead the rescue action.” (ANSA, Agenzia, 2019). On the side of the government instead, Salvini

directed open attacks to the dissident mayors on social media and to the press: “With the PD chaos and illegals, with the League order and respect. Some mayors regret the good old days on immigration, but the fun is over for them too!” or, “Mayors will be held personally, legally, criminally and civilly accountable because it is a state law that puts order and rules in place” (Italia Oggi, 2019).

So while resilient efforts by Italian cities to reshape the Search and Rescue disembarkation system were halted due to political pressure and changes in the leading administrations (CN1, CS1), in conjunction with the Palermo Charter Process and the From the Sea to the City Network, activists from the civil society movement Seebrücke and the urban research platform Tesseræ initiated the Moving Cities mapping project aimed at improving the capacity of individual municipalities in their resilient effort to contrast anti-immigration policies² (CS1). The cooperation between civil society actors in support of municipalities - together with the involvement of non-Italian cities - might be the key to bring forth resilient change at the local level (CS4). One of Moving Cities’ current projects and a significant milestone in its current project timeline is the finalization of a publication aimed at providing guidelines for cities in Germany, which includes a thorough legal analysis and a step-by-step guide. The analysis examines the legal options and rights available to German cities for directly relocating and receiving individuals from sea rescue situations at a municipal level. It analyzes the question of whether cities in Germany have the possibility to undertake such actions, against national and European will (Appendix).

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study focused on the complex dynamics surrounding Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Central Mediterranean, shedding light on the reasons behind the decreased cooperation with local entities and the increasing criminalization of NGOs by liberal states. Despite the recognition that collaboration with NGOs and local entities enhances effectiveness in migration management, European states opted for increased centralization in the SAR system.

This article has argued that European states actively suppressed resilient efforts and reduced cooperation with local entities, opting instead to target NGOs working at the border. These NGOs, as well as resilient port cities, acted as watchdogs and enforcers of international obligations that states sought to circumvent through liberal strategies of exclusion.

Search and Rescue (SAR) operations represent the new frontier of urban resilience. Cities, as key actors in migration management, have indeed ventured into this territory, seeking to address the pressing humanitarian needs arising from migrant rescues at sea. However, their efforts have encountered significant challenges, leading to setbacks in the quest for urban resilience. SAR operations are fundamentally rooted in the duty to save lives at sea, and the process of disembarkation is inherently necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of rescued individuals. Therefore, it is imperative for states to cooperate with NGOs and port cities to establish a seamless system

² The project was then adopted by United4Rescue–Gemeinsam Retten e.V. in 2022.

that facilitates swift and safe disembarkation, in respect of international rights.

Despite this imperative, the reality on the ground has been characterized by obstacles and resistance. European states, in particular, have increasingly centralized their SAR efforts, sidelining the role of NGOs and port cities in the process. This shift has led to tensions and frictions, undermining the collaborative spirit necessary for effective SAR governance. Moreover, the targeting and criminalization of NGOs involved in SAR operations have further complicated matters.

In light of these challenges, the notion of SAR as the new frontier of urban resilience appears to be at a crossroads. The use of this category gives rise to its critical ability to both criticize reality and offer ways to construct new realities. It can be used to deconstruct and construct new narratives, which is an added value of this work. While cities have demonstrated the willingness to engage and respond to the humanitarian imperative of SAR operations, their efforts have been met with resistance and setbacks. Moving forward, it is essential for states to recognize the crucial role of cities, NGOs, and port communities in SAR governance, and to work collaboratively towards a system that prioritizes human rights and safety at sea. Only through genuine cooperation can SAR truly become a beacon of urban resilience in the face of migration challenges.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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Appendix

List of interviews.

CS1	Moving cities
CS2	SOS Mediterranee
CS3	Medicins Sans Frontiers MSF
CS4	Sea-Eye
CS5	Sea Watch
CN1	From the Sea to the City