

Refugees. Mediterranean mission

Italian rescue boat confronts Salvini over migrants

Politicians and NGOs behind patrol vessel say they are upholding maritime law

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The Mare Jonio was only a few nautical miles from Italian waters when its crew spotted the wooden boat filled with migrants. At first, coastguards from Italy and Malta refused to attend: only when the Mare Jonio insisted did an Italian vessel come to pick up 70 people inside Italy's territorial waters, taking them to the island of Lampedusa.

"This is our victory: we forced the government to follow the law," said Erasmo Palazzotto from Libero e Uguali, a coalition of leftwing parties in opposition to the government, and one of the initiators of Mare Jonio's mission.

The first Italian-flagged, civilian vessel to operate in the Mediterranean since the beginning of the migrant crisis, the Mare Jonio was bought by a coalition of non-governmental organisations, leftwing politicians, artists and intellectuals in an act of defiance against Italy's far-right deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, who said in June that Italian ports would refuse boats carrying migrants.

The Mare Jonio project, called "Mediterranea", raised more than €250,000 through crowdfunding within three weeks and provoked an angry response from Mr Salvini. "Good news, listen up! A ship organised by NGOs is going to roam the Mediterranean looking for migrants that want to come to our shores," the League party leader wrote on Facebook. "They can do what they want, go where they want, but for them to come to Italy . . . Never!"

Like the League, Mr Palazzotto sees migration as a defining issue for Italy and Europe.

But he interprets it differently and wants Mare Jonio to initiate a wider movement of resistance against the far-right's narrative about immigration.

"It is a genocide, and the whole of Europe is to blame. Mediterranea is our way of transforming our indignation into action. We are open to anybody who wants to join," said Mr Palazzotto, who is from Sicily, a destination for migrants for two decades. He said his motivation was humanitarian and political: "Nowadays saving lives is political."

International maritime law requires ships to provide assistance to "persons in distress at sea" upon receiving a signal from any source, and to take them to a safe harbour. But that law has been open to interpretation this summer, with different European governments closing their ports to charity boats carrying migrants and Italian coastguards backing out of rescue operations.

In June, Mr Salvini cracked down on NGOs helping migrants. He repeatedly accused them of providing "taxi boats" and aiding people smugglers – even though the number of migrants arriving in Italy fell sharply in August 2017 after

return to Libya and are often subject to torture and extortion. The EU-Libya deal has been described as "inhuman" by Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, the UN human rights chief. In June, the UN imposed sanctions for human smuggling on a former militia leader, Abd Al Rahman al-Milad, regional commander in the EU-trained Libyan coastguard.

In July, Libya declared a 76-mile search and rescue zone (SAR), taking control over a stretch of the Mediterranean, extending halfway to Lampedusa. Before that, these were international waters.

The Libyan SAR is where Mare Jonio spent most of its first mission. Mr Palazzotto said that as a result of Libya taking control, it had become "a desert". Because of this, he added, "we have no idea what is going on there. Our first aim is to report about the situation."

Mediterranea has been financed with a loan from Banca Etica, a co-operative bank experienced in investing in NGOs and charities. Ugo Biggeri, its president, said he was aware of the risks and "afraid of the political repercussions", but added that the bank was "proud" of its involvement.

Mr Palazzotto insisted this was not just an Italian matter: "The future of Europe is at stake. It's time to decide on which side of history you want to be."

Erasmo Palazzotto: 'It is a genocide, and the whole of Europe is to blame,' says the Sicilian politician



the EU brokered a deal with Libya to control migration, funding coastguard training and donating equipment. But while the numbers arriving are lower, according to the UNHCR the proportion of people who died trying to get to Europe in 2018 doubled compared with last year.

Mr Palazzotto blames the Italian government and the EU. "Despite the NGO crackdown, people are still trying to get to Europe. The only thing that changed is that more of them are dying," he said.

According to international NGOs, migrants are being put in detention centres controlled by local militia on their

