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Gunboat Asylum Policy A Spatio-temporal Analysis of Naval Operations and Migration-related Incidents in the Central Mediterranean

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Gunboat asylum policy

A spatio-temporal analysis of naval operations and migration-related incidents in the central Mediterranean

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Abstract: This research evaluates the impact of five major national and international naval operations on the number of migration-related incidents in the central Mediterranean. Our methodological approach is based on linking operational areas and cell-specific frequencies of ships in distress and migrant fatalities in the years 2012-2017. Using variations in operational areas over time we investigate whether different types of operations, i.e. those with a focus on border protection or search and rescue, may be of differing effectiveness in the short- and medium run. Applying a novel Area-of-Effect placebo test we investigate the robustness of our results with respect to various forms of operation area misspecification. We further examine the relevance of violence and the level of governmental control in the countries of departure with respect to the formation of migration flows, and subsequently the occurrence of migration-related incidents in the Mediterranean.

Background: The European Union is one of the primary destination regions for immigrants from all over the world. In 2017, 4.2% (21.6 million) of the European Union's population held citizenship from non-member countries (Eurostat, 2018). A substantial fraction of these immigrants arrived during recent years. In 2016, for instance, approximately 2 million new immigrants arrived in the EU from non-EU states.

These flows from outside the EU comprise regular and irregular migration. According to European Border and Coast Guard Agency data (Frontex, 2018), the number of detected irregular border crossings rose from 72,000 in 2012 to 1.82 million in 2015, and then dropped to 193,000 in 2017. During this period, the majority of irregular migrants (57% to 92%) did not choose a land route, but the Mediterranean in order to reach the EU. Within the Mediterranean, and aside from the eastern route, the central Mediterranean route is the most frequently chosen way of entry into the European Union. This journey, however, has proven to be perilous: in the two peak years 2015 and 2016, 8,925 migrant deaths have been recorded for the Mediterranean region (IOM, 2018).

The high numbers of irregular migrants and the relative high fatality figures have different implications for EU policy makers and European societies. The first posed some challenges to European destination countries, i.e. with respect to the accommodation of new arrivals or their integration into civil society. To a certain extent, the increasing number of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers also affected the political landscape in European countries (Hatton, 2017; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2018; Vasilakis, 2018). It also led to questions concerning the goals and effectiveness of European border enforcement policies (Fasani and Frattini, 2018). The latter, i.e. high

fatality figures, have clear humanitarian implications. How should the European Union, its member states and citizens react to large-scale human tragedy in their backyard?

EU member states pursued various avenues to address these issues in a collective or individual manner. With respect to the Mediterranean, a number of naval operations has been implemented over the years. Typically, they varied with respect to their operational area or agenda, and the number of deployed military or patrol vessels. Related to the importance of the central Mediterranean route, most of the large-scale naval operations were located in Italian or contiguous international waters. Whereas operation Mare Nostrum, run by the Italian Navy, placed a special emphasis on search and rescue activities, the succeeding EU operation Triton had a stronger focus on protecting territorial waters.

Although these operations were often relatively resource intensive and frequently debated in politics and the media (e.g. House of Lords, 2016), there has not yet been a rigorous empirical evaluation of their effectiveness. Since the beginning of a new naval operation often coincided with the winter months, which usually feature a seasonal decline of migration in the Mediterranean, investigating operations' effectiveness is not a trivial task.

Research methodology: Our research investigates to which extent EU or member states' naval operations contributed to changing patterns of migration-related incidents in the central Mediterranean over the years 2012 to 2017. The focus rests on five naval operations: Two were initiated before the onset of the migration crisis in 2014 (operation Aeneas and Hermes) and three implemented as reaction to the surge in irregular immigrants (operations Mare Nostrum, Triton and EUNavForMed/Sophia) crossing the central Mediterranean.

Our identification strategy rests on the variation of operations over time and space - some operations were repeatedly paused, entered a new tactical phase or featured modified operational areas. We then use this variation to explain changing migration-related incident likelihoods over the 72 month period in a specific area. In order to obtain robust measures of area-specific monthly incident likelihoods, and similar to Berman et al. (2017), we superimpose a hexagonal grid on our study area and aggregate two alternative migration-related incident types for a given cell-month. The first incident type refers to the number of dead (or missing) migrants originating from the IOM's Missing Migrants Project, yielding a measure for the fatality likelihood. We construct an alternative measure based on ship in distress incidents - this gives a broader picture with respect to incidents with migrants at risk.

Drawing upon a balanced panel of cell-month-specific incident likelihoods and operational activity patterns, we estimate high dimensional fixed effect models. In doing so, we take into account all potentially unobserved variation of confounding geographic or political factors on the cell and month level. Moreover, we isolate the effect of naval operations from location-specific effects of additional intervening policies, such as the EU training mission for the Libyan coast guard or the EU-Turkey deal. This is important since the effectiveness of naval operations in areas close to Libyan territorial waters or the coastline might be affected by how these intervening policies shift migration trajectories. In addition, and in light of the repeated or ongoing conflicts in the aftermath of the Arab spring, these trajectories could be influenced by conditions in the hinterlands. Therefore, we integrate dynamic proximity to conflicts in countries of departure, which might affect migration routes, and thus, the incident likelihood in different regions of the central Mediterranean. In this regard, our estimation strategy also accommodates the existence of migrant clusters in Libya which reflect the potential migratory pressure in specific regions.

We subject our results to a number of robustness checks: First, we investigate our results' sensitivity with respect to the definition of our hexagonal grid. Second, we apply alternative definitions of operational areas, conduct permutation tests and implement a novel Area-of-Effect placebo test diagnostic. These geographic placebo tests provide useful insights in how operational area misspecification, i.e. regarding its position, orientation or size, might have impacted on our effectiveness estimates. We also control directly for one of the major causes of ships in distress, i.e. conditions at sea. Over and above, we re-estimate the impact of intervening policies in a sub-area for which we have data on the number of detected and intercepted migrant vessels.

Results: We find a distinct interrelation between the occurrence of migration-related incidents in an area and the activities related to three major naval operations (Mare Nostrum, Triton and EUNavFor/Sophia), which were initiated after the migration crisis gained in momentum in 2014 and 2015. The Italian-led operation Mare Nostrum led to a temporary decrease in migration-related incidents in the patrolled areas. This effect, however, faded over 8 to 10 months. We further document a decline in the ship in distress incident likelihood in areas surveilled by operation Triton assets. There is some evidence that Areas patrolled by EUNavFor/Sophia assets experience a reduced incident likelihood over time. With respect to the occurrence of migrant fatalities, the evidence of operations' effectiveness is less evident.

We also investigate whether additional EU policies, such as the EU-Turkey deal and the training of the Libyan coast guard, might have repercussions with respect to the occurrence of migration-related incidents in the central Mediterranean. One consequence of the EU-Turkey deal is a notable increase of ship in distress and missing migrant incidents in eastern Libyan territorial waters. This implies that closing down the eastern Mediterranean route came at a (possibly unanticipated) cost. In addition, we scrutinise the relevance of conditions in countries of departure with respect to the occurrence of migration-related incidents in the central Mediterranean. Here, we document the adverse effects of a fragile or conflict-ridden state. Local outbursts of conflict and violence seem to change migrants' preferred routes, and eventually, lead to an increasing likelihood of migration-related incidents in coastal waters. This illustrates that the provision of technical or financial assistance to local forces in disputed areas might not yield the expected outcome. In light of most recent events in Libya, i.e. this April's escalation of the battle for Tripoli (The Guardian, 2019), our research also suggests that we could be witnessing rising numbers of migration-related incidents in the western Libyan waters in the coming months.

Ultimately, while our research cannot answer how any of the five major naval operations in the central Mediterranean impacted on the evolution of immigration numbers, we demonstrate a limited and hardly lasting effectiveness with respect to reducing the likelihood of a migration-related incident. If we interpret the observed incident dynamics as indicators of the humanitarian situation of migrants on their journey to Europe, it becomes highly unlikely that any of the investigated naval operations or intervening policies led to a substantial improvement. Eventually, the EU's approach of deploying gunboats seems to be an inefficient substitute for a coordinated, proactive and considerate asylum policy.

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