

Operation Sophia: A Mirror of EU Political Disagreement and the Rise and Fall of EUNAVFOR MED

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The migration crisis (2013-2017) which has involved Europe was a many-sided phenomenon. Among many aspects, migration routes across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe have attracted attention and concern from the very beginning, both because of the high number of migrants who arrived using them and because of the increase in victims and activities related to illegal human trafficking. However, as envisaged by the strategic response represented by the 'European Agenda on Migration' agreed in May 2015, the EU, among its very first actions taken in this field, launched, in the second half of May 2015, the European Union Mediterranean Naval Force (EUNAVFOR MED), then renamed Operation Sophia. Recognizing the relevance to tackle the security and humanitarian threats posed by the migration in the Mediterranean waters, the military Operation was designed 'to support the detection and monitoring of migration networks', but also to fight the human smuggling or trafficking through 'boarding, search, seizure and diversion on the high seas of vessels'. This paper offers a revised and updated version of the previous one appeared in 2018 for the Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies. The study, in this new shape, aims to provide a more comprehensive analysis focusing more on the last years of activities of the Operation until its official closure on March 31, 2020. Indeed, in this period due to the reduction of migration inflow mainly as a result of the EU externalization strategy, the utility of Sophia started to decrease. At the same time, the discussions on the Operation have increasingly become a scenario of disagreement between EU states. The paper promises to give an account to the (in-) evolution followed by one of the first instrument set-up by the EU to address the "2015" migration crisis.

Keywords: migration, security, European Union, EUNAVFOR MED/Sophia

Introduction

The 2013-2017 migration crisis posed several concerns for Mediterranean and European security and stability (Villa 2020). The increase in migration flows by sea registered since 2013 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2013), quickly evolved into a structural phenomenon, which saw the Union reacting late and without fully understanding the real dimension of the emergency at the time, partly due to simultaneous engagement in other security issues, such as the threat of terrorist attacks and the fight against ISIL (European Council [EC] 2015a and Nilsson 2017).

From the beginning, one of the main aspects of this “new” challenge was its maritime dimension. All the main migration routes to Europe - namely the Western,

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Central and Eastern Mediterranean route - passed through the basin (Frontex 2018), which also became the scene of illegal human trafficking and fatal accidents for thousands of migrants. These problems directly affected the southern members of the Union, especially Greece and Italy which, by their geographical position, began to bear the brunt of more arrivals to their shores, especially during the peak phase between 2014 and 2016 (Ritter et al. 2017): for instance, in 2015, almost the 80% of the 800,000 migrants arrived in the continent passed through the Aegean Sea and Greece (UNHCR 2015a) while, in 2016, Italy recorded 181.436 arrivals through the Central Mediterranean route (IOM 2017). In such a complex context, still characterized by the absence of a comprehensive and general approach by the EU, the Mediterranean Border States started to outline their own strategies to address this emergency. However, all the answers lacked a broad perspective, as they were focused on those aspects representing a direct threat to their national security.

In front of the daily deaths of hundreds of people at sea, the first strategies elaborated presented an important maritime dimension. Between the summer and autumn 2013, Italy had been the first to theorize a naval operation guided by its Navy, to save lives at sea and to fight the traffickers in the Mediterranean. In October, the *Mare Nostrum* Operation officially started; and in its ten months of activity some lights and many shadows would emerge. Among the positive aspects, the usefulness of naval operations as a tool capable of contributing to the management of emergencies at sea quickly emerged; an aspect, the latter, recognized and replicated especially at the multilateral level, firstly by the EU with the launch of *Operation Triton* in the fall of 2014 as a replacement for the defunct Italian mission, and later by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with the establishment of *Operation Sea Guardian* in July 2016.

Among the many maritime initiatives launched, the aim of this paper is to outline the activity of the main military operation led by the EU, known as the *European Union Naval Force Mediterranean* (EUNAVFOR MED), which was established in May 2015 and put under Italian command (European Union External Action [EEAS] 2016a). This operation deserves attention both for its nature and the timing when it was launched. The EUNAVFOR MED – since autumn 2015 renamed *Sophia Operation* – in its characteristic of European naval military mission can be considered an important step of the migratory answer by the EU, but also an expression of the European cooperation in the field of Defence. The *Operation* was approved in the high-tension weeks of the spring 2015, when the number of deadly tragedies in the Mediterranean reached dramatic levels. In this context, while the Union started to better define its migratory strategy with the presentation on May 13 of the *Agenda on Migration*, the need to find an instrument capable to answer the most urgent and critical aspects of the flows started to emerge. The European military operation was the found answer to this claim, and it was set up with two main purposes: to fight the illegal routes of traffickers of human beings and to destroy smugglers' boats and train Libyan coastguards (Hermanin 2017).

This paper offers a revised and updated version of previous one appeared in 2018 for the *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies*. In this new shape the study

aims to provide a more comprehensive analysis focusing more on the last years of activities of the *Operation* until its official closure on March 31, 2020.

Since the second renewal agreed in July 2017, in a period in which the EU externalization strategy seemed to achieve concrete results with the reduction of the migration flow to Europe, the urgency for a European Naval Operation in the Mediterranean Sea started to decrease. At the same time, discussions over *Sophia* have increasingly become a scenario (another one) of disagreement between EU states, resulting in a general growing feeling of disaffection towards the operation, including from Italy, which quickly shifted from being one of the main proponents to a fierce opponent.

The article aims primarily to provide a historical reconstruction of how the Operation came about and ended (Table 1), while also reflecting through specific research questions on some policy implications such as: the role of *Sophia* as a military mission in a European common Defence perspective; the impact of the Operation on the 2015 migration crisis and then on the EU strategy; and finally, its consequences in the relations and solidarity between the European Member States.

State of Art and Methodology

Nowadays (2024) the specific literature on the *Operation EUNAVFORMED/Sophia* has grown in number and quality.

The works of Chantal Lavallée and Florent Pouponneau (*L'approche globale à la croisée des champs de la sécurité européenne*, 2016); Anne Ingemann Johansen (*Assessing the European Union's strategic capacity: the case of EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia* 2017); Niklas Nováky (*The road to Sophia: Explaining the EU's naval operation in the Mediterranean*, 2018) and Marianne Riddervold (*The Maritime Turn in EU Foreign and Security Policies: Aims, Actors and Mechanisms of Integration* 2018) still remain a useful starting point to understand the origins and the early stages of the Operation.

Among the most recent studies, the following papers offer an updated law and historical perspective of the Operation: Ruxandra-Laura Boşilcă, Matthew Stenberg and Marianne Riddervold, *Copying in EU security and defence policies: the case of EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia* (Boşilcă et al. 2021); Federico Alagna, *From Sophia to Irini: EU Mediterranean Policies and the Urgency of "Doing Something"* (Alagna 2020); Carolina Soler García, *La Unión Europea, ¿Un Gendarme en el Mediterráneo Central?* (Asociación Española de Profesores de Derecho Internacional y Relaciones Internacionales 2022); Laure Durang, *EUNAVFOR MED - Operation Sophia - A Success Story or Rather the Opposite?* (Durang 2023); Johanna Greiwe, *EU Policymaking in Times of Crisis – Analysing EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia under the Lens of Crisisification* (Greiwe 2023); Renske Vos, *The many beginnings of Operation Sophia: international law and literature in the governance of the EU* (Vos 2023); Carlos Espaliú Berdud, *The naval operation Irini of the European union: a step backwards of the CsDP in the fight against the illegal immigration and search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean* (Berdud 2024). Along with this specific literature, the study presented here should be read taking

into account the previous paper written by the author (Zichi 2018a).

In addition, in line with the History of the International relations methodologic approach, to offer an inside view of the question, the paper is based also on official documents and notes, including the reports of the mission, available until May 2019.

The Migration Emergency towards Europe: A Challenge from the Sea and the Background of the Operation

Some of the most critical humanitarian and security problems related to the migration challenge first appeared in the basin even before the emergency of 2015.

From 2011-13 there was an influx of flows from the sea into the coastal states of Southern Europe, in particular Greece and Italy, stimulated by the political upheavals in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area in the aftermath of the Arab Springs and the surge of the Syrian civil war (Park 2015, Grant & Domokol 2011, Faath & Mattes 2014). In 2013, Greece has seen the number of migrants arrived on its shores tripled: from 3,600 in 2012 to 11,400 (UNHCR 2015b); in the summer of the same year, Rome also registered a huge increase in the incoming flows (Warnes 2014, Chalabi 2013), with a record of 8.932 rescued in six weeks between July and October, 75% of the annual arrivals gathered in four months (Chope 2013). In comparison with the previous year, the number of arrivals in Italy in 2013 had quadrupled: from 10.379 to 40.304 (FRONTEX 2014).

In Autumn, to react to this humanitarian emergency, but also to quiet the domestic political and social anxieties, the Italian government was the first to organize, under the command of its Navy, a large-scale national naval operation in the Mediterranean. On October 18, the *Mare Nostrum Operation* was thus officially launched as a “*military and humanitarian operation aimed at tackling the humanitarian emergency in the Strait of Sicily, due to the dramatic increase in migration flows*” (Marina Militare 2014). At first, the Italian initiative was praised as an important humanitarian action, capable to rescue over 160,000 migrants at sea, with an average of 400 per day during its ten months of activity (Bajekal 2014, Gauci & Mallia 2016). However, the operation attracted also ferocious criticism – especially from the United Kingdom – and it was questioned to be a pull factor capable to increase illegal migration (Crawley et al. 2018). Anyway, after less than a year in which *Mare Nostrum* saved more than 150,000 people at sea (UNHCR 2014), on 9 October 2014, the Italian Government, through the Interior Minister Angelino Alfano, announced the intention to interrupt the mission, mainly due to the high cost of the operation that reached more than €9m per month and a total of €114 (Ministero dell’Interno 2014). The closure of the mission was not related to the end of the emergency: indeed, in 2014, Italy itself was hit by a record number of 170,000 arrivals of migrants by sea. This situation led the Italian institutions to ask the EU for a shared commitment in the basin (IOM 2015). The claims by Rome were accepted and resulted in the launch by the Union, through the Frontex agency, of the *Triton Operation*, which replaced *Mare Nostrum*, but in a very different way. In fact, the new operation – in which 26 Member States took part - it had

more border control tasks, with a range of activity closer to the Italian coasts and started to operate with a lower budget of €2.9 per month (Riddervold 2018).

The transition from the Italian to the European operation was accompanied by the persistence of the emergency and the increase of deaths in the Mediterranean, which in the first four months of 2015 reached the number of 1,710 (IOM 2018). These daily tragedies at sea represented a strong stimulus for the EU Institutions to reconsider, with a new attention, the maritime dimension of this political and humanitarian emergency. The turning point, which led the EU to act strongly, was represented by one of the deadliest migration tragedies in the Mediterranean: on April 18th more than 800 migrants lost their lives in a single shipwreck (Kirchgaessner & Bonomolo 2015).

Following this event, a joint meeting of the Foreign and Interior Ministers was held on April 20th in Luxemburg, chaired by High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) Federica Mogherini, in which the Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Commissioner, Dimitris Avramopoulos presented the *“Ten points action plan on migration”*. The second of these points, prefigured the creation of *“a systematic effort to capture and destroy vessels used by the smugglers”*, through *“the positive results obtained with the Atalanta¹ operation should inspire us to similar operations against smugglers in the Mediterranean”* (European Commission 2015a); this was a first opening to the possibility of creating a naval military operation as an instrument to manage the migration flows in the basin. The EU took a political position on the opportunity to launch a specific mission in the Mediterranean waters with the Special meeting of the European Council held on April 23, 2015. In this occasion, the Council invited the High Representative *“to immediately begin preparations for a possible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation”* (European Council 2015c). The European Commission and the Political and Security Committee (PSC) received the mandate by the Council and started to design the basis of the military operation as part of a broader political strategy that was about to be presented in those weeks. The European approach on migration was finally announced by the Commission on May 13th through the *Agenda on Migration*, which was the first cornerstone of a coherent European policy on the matter. In this document, the attention for the Mediterranean clearly emerged. Under the framework of the *Agenda*, the Commission established to triple *“the capacities and assets for the Frontex joint operations Triton and Poseidon”* and to *“save lives, clamp down on smuggling networks”* (European Commission 2015b). Even without any explicit reference, these measures represent the political coverage under which further practical and operational action - such as military-naval operations - would have been possible. It is also important to point out that, from this moment, the Commission believed in the opportunity to deal with the migration challenge through a double approach: one focused on the improvement of the search and rescue (SAR) capabilities and to fight the traffickers of human beings at sea; the other based on an internal cooperation among the European States under the relocation quota system.

¹The European Union Naval Force (Op Atalanta) Somalia - Operation Atalanta was launched on 8 December 2008 and it is the main European attempt in order to fight the illegal business of the piracy in the Horn of Africa. See also at: <http://eunavfor.eu/>.

However, this strategy clashed with the increasing of the arrivals and with the criticisms by some Member States on the mandatory relocation quota system of the *Agenda* (Hammond 2015, Dobrescu et al. 2017).

Between the end of April and mid-May, with the Commission confronted by these issues, the EU Council took the initiative to realize the easiest part of the European strategy on migration at the time: i.e., the establishment of a maritime military operation. It is also important to underline that, if a supposed mission immediately received unanimous general approval among member states, outside the Union it raised some criticism.

First of all, the United Nations (UN), as stated by the Special Envoy on migration Peter Sutherland, expressed perplexities about the possible collateral damages of the mission and for its emphasis, in particular during the first phase of the *Operation*, on *“intelligence-gathering and ‘seizure’ of ships”* (Rettman 2015). Nevertheless, above all, the Union has tried to avoid the likely opposition of the UN Security Council, which could have stopped the launch of the mission at this stage, due to the manifest opposition by the Russian Federation, which refused any military action in the Mediterranean capable to destabilize the region, citing the 2011 NATO campaign in Libya against Qaddafi as a negative record (Faleg 2015).

While the Union was still trying to secure a mandate from both the United Nations and the Libyan authorities to obtain a political coverage for the operation - including the permission to *“capture and destroy vessels used by the smugglers”* (European Parliament 2015)-, the European Council on May 18, through the decision number 2015/778, launched the *“European Union military operation in the Southern Central Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED)”* (Coppens 2016). It was described as *“a military crisis management operation»* capable to disrupt *«the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean”* through *“systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and assets used or suspected of being used by smugglers or traffickers”*. The art.2 of the Council decision described more deeply the mission, which would take place in three different phases. In the first, the operation was supposed to *“support the detection and monitoring of migration networks through information gathering and patrolling on the high seas”*. The second and third phases were the more critical ones, because during these, the Mission should be allowed to conduct *“boarding, search, seizure and diversion on the high seas of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking”* and *“in accordance with any applicable UN Security Council Resolution or consent by the coastal State concerned, conduct boarding, search, seizure and diversion, on the high seas or in the territorial and internal waters of that State, of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking”* (second phase). In addition, especially in the third stage, the Operation was supposed to take *“all necessary measures against a vessel and related assets, including through disposing of them or rendering them inoperable, which are suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking, in the territory of that State”*, but only *“in accordance with any applicable UN Security Council Resolution or consent by the coastal State concerned”* (EU Council 2015d).

Finally, it was agreed that “*political control and strategic direction of EUNAVFOR MED*” would be exercised by the EU Council, the HR and the Political and Security Committee (PSC), while the Operational Commander would be the Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino from the Italian Navy, with the located in Rome and with a financial amount of 11.82 euros for a period of 12 months (Marrone & Nones 2016).

Table 1. EUNAVFOR MED Sophia Timeline and Chronology of Key Events

EUNAVFOR MED Sophia: A chronology of the Operation				
May 18, 2015 Establish of EUNAVFOR MED (Decision number 2015/778 by the EU Council)			July 22, 2015 Launch of EUNAVFOR MED (EU Council decision 2015/972)	
Renewals/ mandate extensions				
May 23, 2016 First renewal/mandate extension (one year extension, until July 27, 2017)	July 25, 2017 Second renewal/mandate extension (one year and a half extension, until December 31, 2018)	December 11, 2018 Third renewal/mandate extension (three months extension, until March 31, 2019)	March 29, 2019 Fourth renewal/mandate extension (six months extension, until September 31, 2019)	September 26, 2019 Fifth renewal/mandate extension (six months extension, until March 31, 2020)
March 31, 2020 Official ending of EUNAVFOR MED Sophia				

The Deployment of the Operation: Original Shortcomings and New Commitments

The EUNAVFOR MED Operation was officially launched on July 22, 2015, by the EU Council (decision 2015/972) (European Council 2015e). In that occasion, the HR Federica Mogherini praised how the Union was capable to act in a very “*fast way, with unanimity and unity*”, and how the Operation was “*just one part of a bigger strategy to save lives*” (Mogherini 2015).

The deployment of the units started in the aftermath of the official announcement, with 14 European Member States involved (Nielsen 2015), in particular: Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom; London particularly expressed its will to cooperate, as stated by the Minister of State for Europe David Lidington, who recognized as “*the UK supported the operation, and was contributing a ship, HMS Enterprise, and a Merlin helicopter*” (Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2015). Among the European Navies, Italy was the principal contributor, with the aircraft carrier *Cavour* identified as flagship, led by the Italian Rear Admiral Andrea Gueglio, plus 8 other naval units and 12 air assets (EEAS 2015a). In its first phase, the operation focused on “*surveillance and assessment of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean*” (European Council 2015b). This kind of reconnaissance action was needed due to the lack of information by the EU about how the illegal businesses of the smugglers worked in the basin and represented the main activity during the summer for the European vessels. The EUNAVFOR MED also conducted an important action of search-and-rescue (SAR) in the Mediterranean, with 2186 migrants saved in its four

months of activity (Deutsche Welle 2015). This commitment led to a name change of the Operation: the HR Federica Mogherini, during a visit to the Rome office on September 24, released a statement in which she suggested to Member States “*to change the name of our Operation: instead of calling it EUNAVFOR MED, I suggest we use the name Sophia. To honour the lives of the people we are saving, the lives of people we want to protect, and to pass the message to the world that fighting the smugglers and the criminal networks is a way of protecting human life*” (Mogherini 2015). Indeed, *Sophia* was the name of a little baby born on 24 August on board of a German rescue ship of the EUNAVFOR MED forces (EEAS 2015b).

The period between the end of summer and the beginning of autumn was an important one for the Operation. In fact, after the positive evaluation by the Defense and Foreign Ministers at the informal meetings on 3 and 5 September, the EU Council entitled the Political and Security Committee (PSC) to move the mission to its second phase (European Council 2015f).

On September 28, the EU Ambassadors of the PSC established that, as of October 7, *Sophia* would have been able to “*board, search, seize and divert vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking on the high seas*” (European Council 2015g): *Sophia* was on the eve to enter on its crucial phase of activity. In addition, on October 9, a multilateral coverage was achieved, when the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted the Resolution 2240, authorizing the UN Member States “*to inspect vessels on the high seas off the coast of Libya that they had reasonable grounds to suspect were being used for migrant smuggling or human trafficking from that country*” (United Nations Security Council [UNSC] 2015).

These steps were positively welcomed by the EU States, although some shadows started to surround the mission. Some perplexities came from the limit of the operative area of the mission confined to the “*high seas*”: That was a provision coherent with the original mandate, but the reality of the situation even more suggested that the core of the illegal activities by the traffickers of human beings was closer to the Libyan shores.

An aspect, the latter, registered by the first activities report, prepared and submitted by the Admiral Credendino to the Council on January 28, 2016. The document refers to the period from June 22 to December 31, 2015 and provides also a fair overview of the migratory scenario at that time.

In fact, the report revealed that since September there has been a significant shift among the main routes used by migrants, with a decrease of the Central Mediterranean route and an increase of the Eastern Balkan route. In particular, the 83% of the people who arrived in Europe (771,237) came via the Eastern Balkan route and only 16% (154,725) used the Mediterranean one: a 1664% increase in the former route and a 9% decrease in the latter compared to the previous three-year period.

The document also replied to the accusation of being a *pull factor* for migration, highlighting the deterrence role played by the Operation in discouraging the trafficking of human beings.

On this specific point, Adm. Credendino had the opportunity to present his reasons during its audition to the Senate of the Republic on April 6, 2017, when he

pointed out that the even if *“spesso siamo accusati di essere il pull factor [...] questo non è vero”*, explaining that Sophia had done *“soltanto l’11,8 per cento del totale dei soccorsi, quindi un numero tutto sommato basso; 34.000 persone sono tante, sono un grande paese, ma è l’11 per cento del totale, perché il SAR (Search & Rescue) non è nel nostro mandato”*, concluding that *“quindi non siamo noi il pull factor”* (Senate of the Republic-Italian Parliament 2017).

In addition, the first report of Sophia mission presented an account of the activities carried out from June to September 15 during Phase 1, in which the units involved (in particular the Italian Air carrier *Cavour*, the *HMS Enterprise* and the FGS *Schleswig-Holstein* and *Werra*) were committed to establish *“a patrol cycle predominantly located in the southwest of the operating area in what was determined the area of highest migration concentration”*. During these months, the main purpose of the Operation was *“to establish a presence and develop an understanding of the patterns of life within the area”* and to *“determine the background merchant and other maritime traffic, whilst determining the main hubs for migrant launch activity”*. Then, the Operation successfully moved on to phase 2A (actions against traffickers on the high seas), with a total of 16 ships deployed, and it was capable to arrest 46 suspect criminals and to destroy 67 boats used for illegal purposes.

The data seemed also to confirm that Libya was at the center of 91% of all illegal activities, with the value of the business of human trafficking estimated in 250-300 million euros. On this basis, Credendino stated that he was *“ready to move to phase 2B in Libyan Territorial Waters, but there are a number of political and legal challenges that must be addressed”*. The aforementioned *«political and legal challenges»* referred to the absence of a specific UNSC Resolution or a local Government authorization that could allow Sophia to operate closer to the North African country to disrupt the smuggling network on Libyan territorial waters. This was a key (and problematic) aspect of the entire mission; indeed, the second part of the report is almost entirely focused on the need of moving to phase “2b” (action against traffickers in Libyan Territorial Waters) and to prefigure the steps for the third and final phase. In particular the Italian Admiral suggested how *“in order to move to phase 2 in Libyan territorial waters, we need firstly an invitation from the GNA, as the sole legitimate Government of Libya”*, but he also argued that *«conducting operations under the conditions set out in an eventual Libyan invitation without any new applicable UNSCR would provide a weak legal basis to the operation”*. The importance of an international political commitment in this area was considered essential and recognized by the report when it highlights how *“the International Community is called upon to respond urgently to requests for assistance from the GNA for the implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement and to support in building the capacity of the Libyan Government of National Accord”* (EEAS 2016b).

To sum up, from the first activities report, Sophia appeared engaged to provide a *“deterrence effect in international waters, preventing smugglers from operating in international waters”* and militarily ready to move forward to the next stages, but undermined by the lack of full political commitment and international support: two aspects, the latter, that can be seen as the original sins of the mission.

Following the evolution of the Operation, the second activity report, presented on November 30 to the European Council is of great importance, covering the events of almost all 2016: from January 1 to October 31.

That year was a turning point for the migration in Europe. Mainly as the result of the EU-Turkey Agreement in March 2016, the total number of arrivals in Europe dropped from almost 1 million in 2015 to 354.833 at the end of 2016. But this general decline in arrivals hid a more complex reality.

Indeed, 2016 marked also the return of the “*most intensively used pathway into Europe*” (Jones 2016), i.e., the Central Mediterranean route (CMR) issue, especially for Italy, which recorded a total of 181.436 arrivals, i.e., almost 30,000 migrants more than the previous year (Ministero dell’Interno 2017). The reasons of this increase are to be found in the simultaneous closure of the Eastern Mediterranean Route following the EU-Turkey agreement, together with the worsening of the situation in North Africa, as evidenced by the ethnicity of the migrants.

With the focus once again on the Mediterranean, *Sophia* assumed new centrality. During the first six months, the mission continued its duty, acting as deterrent, capturing 53 suspected criminals, destroying 269 boats and rescuing 29.317 migrants, with the latter action grown in its visibility.

However, new criticisms arose due to the rapid inflow of migrants attempting to cross the Sea through the CMR, and the Operation was again accused to be a “*pull-factor*” for migration again. Again, the Commander categorically denied any allegation, arguing that “*the number of persons rescued by our assets accounts for only 13 percent of the total number of migrants rescued on the CMR*”.

The report gave an account of the great confusion in the area, recalling that “*26 NGO maritime assets have been registered on the high seas on the CMR [...] that are ready to rescue migrants within the limit of, and sometimes inside, Libyan territorial waters*”: in this scenario, the Operation tried to “*act as a stabilizing factor in the Mediterranean*” (EEAS 2016c).

In this complex situation, in late spring 2016, *Sophia* was about to see its mandate renewed and add new tasks.

On May 23, the EU Council – with the approval of both the HR and the Presidency Council of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) Fayeze Serraj – decided “*to extend and amend EUNAVFORMED’s mandate and add two further supporting tasks: capacity building and training of the Libyan Coastguard and Navy*” to contribute to the “*implementation of the UN arms embargo on the High Seas off the coast of Libya*” (European Council 2016a).

The new commitments, confirming the relevance of the Operation, for the Union, testified the priority for *Sophia* to develop a stronger political collaboration with the Libyan authorities.

On June 20, the Council, also to pursue these added goals, announced the extension for another year (until July 27, 2017) of the Operation mandate (European Council 2016b). Meanwhile, on June 14, the United Nations Security Council issued the Resolution 2292, which allowed the mission to secure the UN embargo on Libya (EEAS 2016a). By the end of the summer, *Sophia* seemed to be able to start its activities closer to the Libyan coast - that is, to concretize its new tasks and implement phases 2A and 2B – when, on August 30, the PSC finally authorized the mission to

start the training course of the first group of Libyan Coast Guard personnel (Political and Security Committee [PSC] 2016).

Giving the general migratory context and these new tasks assigned to the mission, the second activity report stated that “*ENFM is only a small piece of the big puzzle*” and that it is “*is part of the Comprehensive approach, but it is necessary that all efforts are synchronized and coordinated*” (EEAS 2016b). Credendino's words appeared very significant: although the contribution of the mission was clearly recognized, it was realistically affirmed that it was just a part, and not the solution to the migratory crisis.

Furthermore, a more significant role would not have been possible without a coherent political strategy and support together with the solution of that still threatens the *Operation* at the end of November 2016.

In particular, the Commander referred to the impossibility of passing to phase 2B and on the funding amount. On the latter, in fact, even with new assignments, the renewed common budget approved was of 6.7€ million, almost half less the first budget: a significant signal which put in a bad light *Sophia*'s future (Gilioli 2017).

2016-2017: *Sophia* in Dangerous Waters

The reduction of the budget was just the tip of a bigger iceberg. Although the EU institutions appeared to be giving a fair consensus on the *Operation*, the weeks leading up to its renewal (May 2016) were also marked by a fresh wave of criticism related the usefulness itself of a military naval mission, especially from one of the key contributors, namely the United Kingdom (UK) (BBC News 2016).

The British perplexities were listed in a report presented on May 13, 2016 at the House of Lords by some Members of the Parliament (MPs) of the *European Union Committee*, significantly entitled “*Operation Sophia, the EU's naval mission in the Mediterranean: an impossible challenge*” (House of Lords, European Union Committee 2016). The report analyzed in deep many aspects of the mission, arguing that “*the Operation Sophia does not, and cannot, deliver its mandate. It responds to symptoms, not causes*”. More in detail, the British MPs explained how “*the intentions and objectives set out for Operation Sophia exceed what can realistically be achieved. A mission acting only on the high seas is not able to disrupt smuggling networks, which thrive on the political and security vacuum in Libya and extend through Africa*”. The result was “*a limited operation with limited objectives*”. To their eyes, *Sophia* should remain just one of the tolls and could not be the solution for the European migration, because “*it cannot be considered in isolation from the global phenomenon of mass migration*”. Focusing on the mission and not on creating the right political conditions in which the mission could operate, was exposing *Sophia* to vicious accusations. For instance, its incapacity to pass to the second and third phases and the limit to operate just into the high seas, fostered the recurrent interpretation (which had now become an accusation) for which “*the search and rescue activity would act as a magnet to migrants and ease the task of smugglers, who would only need their vessels to reach the high seas*”; in this

context, the Operation “does not in any meaningful way deter the flow of migrants, disrupt the smugglers’ networks, or impede the business of people smuggling on the central Mediterranean route”.

The British report suggested to the EU and its Members to draw attention to the causes of the flows in their global dimension, affirming that “the current migration crisis is exacerbated by conflicts in the Middle East and the security vacuum in Libya, but it is also part of a wider phenomenon of mass migration from the developing to the developed world. This will remain a challenge for the developed world in the long term”.

Finally, the MPs did not claim for the withdrawal of the UK from the mission or its closure: on the contrary, they invited the Member States to “review and renew the mandate in summer 2016”, but also to realize a complete revision of the mission taking into care its real possibilities of action; to this end, it was necessary to develop political and technical contacts with the Libyan authorities (House of Lords, European Union Committee 2016).

However, the shadows emerged in 2016, did not disappear in 2017. *Sophia* seemed to follow the advice of the British report and, in the first part of the new year, managed the training of new 89 officials of the Libyan Coast Guard (EEAS 2017a), but the Operation still remained surrounded by doubts and, more importantly, unable to move to Phase 2A.

At that point, the perplexities also involved the EU institutions, as confirmed by a report produced by the EEAS for the PSC last May 15, which asked for a revised strategy. The document recognized that “due to continued political and legal challenges preventing the operation from entering Libyan sovereign waters and thereby transiting to subsequent phases of its mandate” the Operation “has been constrained to continue operating on the high seas” and it “is likely not to be able to transition to Phase 2b in the foreseeable future” (EEAS 2017b).

However, much like the British reflection, the EU agency categorically refused the possibility of ending the mission, because “the closure of Op. Sophia would incur a reputational risk in a context where more rather than less is expected from the EU and containment of the security challenges facing the EU would not be addressed” (EEAS 2017b).

On the contrary it suggested to use *Sophia* “as a lever to foster further Libyan ownership”, and in particular to “continue the operation as it is, and prolong its mandate until 31 December 2018 to enhance 1) focus on maritime security operations on the high seas 2) information sharing with law enforcement agencies 3) cooperation with the Libyan authorities through training and information sharing and 4) support the establishment of a monitoring mechanism” (EEAS 2017b).

Nevertheless, on July 12, a few days before the end of the term and on the eve of discussions for the renewal, a new report by the British House of Lords was published, with a harsher tone and significantly titled: “Operation Sophia: a failed mission” (House of Lords, European Union Committee 2017). The document began with a strong sentence: “Operation Sophia has failed to achieve its objective of contributing to the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean” and that – despite the fact that the mission faced “an impossible challenge” – “a naval mission is the

wrong tool to tackle irregular migration which begins onshore: once the boats have set sail, it is too late to undermine the business of people smuggling” (House of Lords, European Union Committee 2017). The SAR activity at sea was listed as one of the most positive elements of the *Operation* but, even for this action, better results could only be obtained *“using more suitable vessels than the high-end air and naval assets of Operation Sophia”* (House of Lords, European Union Committee 2016).

The 2017 MPs document concluded that *“Operation Sophia is unlikely to move into either Phase 2B or 3 in the short term. We therefore see little reason to renew the mandate of the mission in its current form beyond 2017”* (House of Lords, European Union Committee 2017).

Despite the negative British evaluation, when the talks about the future of the operation began, most of the other states showed to still believed in the mission. It was the case of Spain which, on June 22, 2017, announced that it would assume the command of the naval operations for the period between September and December, replacing the Italian guide. The Madrid Government was the only, among the 25 Member States involved, to positively answer the Italian claim of sharing the operative responsibilities (and its financial and political costs) of the mission.

Spain - which was a major contributor to the EU's efforts in 2016, with 254 soldiers and financial support of € 67 million (Urrea 2017, BBC News 2017) - was directly affected by the migration “crisis”, being the main arrival point of the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR), through which three times more migrants would have arrived in the summer of 2017 compared to that of 2016 (IOM 2017).

Regarding the reasons why Rome asked for help - even if the General Command of the operation would have remained in the hands of Admiral Credendino - some diplomatic sources argued that *Sophia* has begun to lose relevance also for Italy as a useful tool for steaming migratory flows. This belief was reinforced when, especially between May and June 2017, more than 23,500 migrants were registered in Italy. The Italian reflection on *Sophia* seemed in line with the new strategy launched by the Minister of the Interior Minniti from February, with the signing of the Malta Memorandum with the Libyan authorities, which aimed to support the formation of the Libyan Coast Guard and to reach a political agreement on the migratory management with Northern Africa country (UNHCR 2018, Toaldo 2017).

In this situation, on July 25, the EU Council – embracing the previous decision taken by the PSC on 4 July – decided to *“extend the mandate of the EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia until 31 December 2018”*, adding to its mandate (once again) other new tasks, i.e., the commitment to *“set up a monitoring mechanism of trainees of the Libyan Coastguard; conduct new surveillance activities and gather information on illegal trafficking of oil exports from Libya in accordance with UNSCR 2146 (2014) and 2362 (2017)”*; and finally *“enhance the possibilities for sharing information on human trafficking with member states' law enforcement agencies, FRONTEX and EUROPOL”* (European Council 2017).

The unanimous decision taken by the Council – overcoming the British perplexities (Morgan 2017) – was an important achievement for the *Operation*, which was able

to survive once again to limits and critics; however, new and old troubles awaited *Sophia* on the horizon.

The Beginning of the End for *Sophia*: from the Issue of Ports of Disembarkation to a Naval Operation without Vessels

At the beginning of July, the negotiations for the second extension of the mandate also saw the emergence of one of the issues that deeply undermines *Sophia*'s future, namely the so-called issue of ports of disembarkation/landing.

According to the "Operational Plan (O-Plan)", the people rescued by EUNAVFOR MED had to be disembarked in Italy. From late spring 2017, Italy began to ask for a revision of the rules of Operation Triton, which also regulated the EUNAVFOR MED mission, asking for the identification of new ports in Europe where *Sophia* ships could disembark people rescued at sea.

The Italian government expressed its position for first at the informal EU Council of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers on 6-7 July 2017 in Tallin, but the reaction from other European countries was negative. Germany, through its Minister of Interior Thomas de Maizière, affirmed its contrariety over the "*regionalization of rescue operations*": on the same line was Stef Blok, the Dutch Minister for Security and Justice, who declared how "*just opening more ports will not solve the problem by itself*" (Barigazzi 2017).

On the contrary, the Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti expressed his annoyance, arguing that his country welcomed the 86% of the total migrants landed in Europe in the first six months of the year, and advanced the intention that Italy could have left the mission if Rome's reasons had been ignored. The Italian claim for "*aprire i porti*" was rejected due to the danger that this issue would have undermined the European efforts to tackle the migration flows, in particular the "*externalization strategy*", i.e., the political and economical dialogue between the EU and the African and MENA third countries to prevent departures toward the continent (Zichi 2018b). But, specifically, this aspect would have influenced what was (and still is) the most difficult open question of the entire migration issue, namely the relocation and management quota system of migrants between Member States.

The Italian point of view definitely remained unheard on July 25, 2017, when the EU Council extended the mandate of the mission until 31 December 2018, and no mention was made of new disembarkation ports for the *Operation*'s ships.

A partial satisfaction for Rome came, from one side, from the confirmation of the mission leadership to the Italian Navy and, on the other, from the greater emphasis posed on externalization actions - such as a more specific attention of the mission towards "*surveillance activities and gather information on illegal trafficking, including information on crude oil and other illegal exports*" -, and on stronger contacts with the Libyan authorities (European Council 2015h).

Although the second renewal was generally considered as a success – and in this way was presented to European and National public opinions - a deeper analysis suggests how the beginning of the end for the *Operation* can be found retrospectively from this moment.

This assertion seems to find evidence looking to the events which took place in the immediate aftermath of the second renewal. The rapid and significant decline in the influx of migrants to Europe since the end of summer 2017 (- 65% compared to the same period in 2016) (IOM 2022) - mainly due to the externalization strategy by the EU and by some specific initiatives by single member states, in particular those by Italy towards the Libyan authorities since February 2017 (Borzoni et al. 2020) -, contributed to outshine the relevance of *Sophia*.

Nevertheless, the unresolved issue of ports of disembarkation and its worsening in the months following the July extension has fostered a decisive discontent among the European states, starting from Italy (Carrera & Cortinovis 2019). Above all, even if Italy was already experiencing a significant drop in arrivals at the end of 2017 (-34% compared to 2016, in line with the pre-crisis level) (Ministero dell'Interno 2017), Rome showed a growing disaffection towards the mission. On July 28, a few days after the renewal, the Italian Government tried to make bilaterally what *Sophia* would have done multilaterally and by itself, i.e., a closer cooperation between the Italian Navy and the Libyan Coast Guard was announced, to fight the traffickers of human beings and preventing departures.

However, the turning point in the Italy's loss of confidence in the *Operation* took place in the late spring of 2018. The newly elected government, and in particular the Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, begun to publicly express fierce criticism against the mission, presenting the latter as an obstacle to Italian migration policy. With a narrative between the political propaganda (given the constant reduction of the number of arrivals) and the reiteration of the well-known reserves towards the mission, the Italian authorities put a new urgency on the issue of ports of disembarkation. This was clearly visible during the EU Council (2018) and at the Common Foreign and Security Policy meeting (CFSP) (17-18 July), where the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Enzo Moavero Milanesi, addressed a letter to the HR Mogherini in which Italy officially asked (again) the change of the disembarkation rules of *Triton* and *Sophia* missions² (Farnesina 2018).

Despite the new effort, the Italian claims (again) have fallen on deaf ears in Europe: the CFSP refused to take into consideration any modification (Mauro 2018). Only the Deputy Chief Spokesperson of the European Commission Natasha Bertaud seemed to leave the door open, arguing that a revision of the strategic mandate of *Sophia* was «*imminent*», and the right occasion to discuss the Italian proposals would have been at the end of the year, before the expiry of the mandate (ANSA 2018).

In the following months, Italy continued to support its aspirations also through an increasingly aggressive tone, as during the EU informal meetings of Defence and Foreign Affairs Ministers in Austria, which took place at the end of August: on the eve of these events, the Interior Minister Salvini openly said that “*Se non cambieranno le regole di alcune missioni navali internazionali, noi di queste missioni possiamo fare anche a meno*” (Cremonesi 2018, The Telegraph 2018). The result was, once again, a political and diplomatic defeat for Italy, with the HR Mogherini

²The Italian MFA wrote that “*da parte italiana non vengono più ritenute applicabili, [...] le attuali disposizioni del 'piano operativo' della missione Eunaformed Sophia, che individuano esclusivamente l'Italia come luogo di sbarco dei migranti che vengono soccorsi dalle proprie unità*”.

that affirmed how “*this is not an issue for Defence Ministers. This is not an issue for Foreign Ministers. This is an issue that the June European Council discussed at length - by night, by the way - and work is ongoing at a different level, i.e. at Heads of State and Government and Interior Ministers*” (EEAS 2018a).

However, during the press conference at the end of the Foreign Affairs meeting, Mogherini highlighted the EU's priorities on *Sophia*, i.e., to find “*a unanimous commitment to continue the Operation*» and a «*practical, operational solutions to the issue of the sharing of responsibility of the management of those who disembark from search and rescue operations*». The latter was identified as «*a difficult process*», but the HR expressed optimism on the possibility that the EU «*could reach positive results in the coming weeks*” (EEAS 2018b).

Over time, the positive auspices gradually gave way to pessimism. The long-awaited discussions over the issue of ports disembarkation took place in December, but ended with a significant disappointment for Italy.

Despite Salvini's harsh words during the negotiation – “*Senza convergenza sulle nostre posizioni non riteniamo opportuno continuare la missione: noi chiediamo di cambiare le regole di ingaggio*” (Arachi 2018) – Italy, together with the other EU countries, finally decided to extend the mandate of EUNAVFOR MED operation SOPHIA until 31 March 2019 (third renewal), but without any changes to the O-Plan (European Council 2018). However, Italy remains the main recipient of rescued migrants, even if the number of people discharged was significantly lower than in previous years: in this way, the three-month extension has been interpreted as a way to gain additional time to find a solution for the disembarkation issue (Rasche 2018).

In early 2019, an event not only undermined any possible mediation, but also threatened *Sophia's* entire future.

On January 23, Berlin announced, through the Minister of Defence Ursula Von Der Leyen, the withdrawal of the German naval asset (the frigate *Augsburg*) from the *Operation*. According to the German authorities, the decision - which took place a few days after the signing of the Aachen Treaty between France and Germany, which renews their bilateral relations - was justified, as a response and protest to the Italian Command, accused of having sabotaged the mission by sending the German ship to distant corners of the Mediterranean where there were no “*smuggling routes whatsoever*” and no refugees to rescue (Knight 2019).

Italy has strongly rejected these claims that it would covertly and unilaterally find a way to solve the disembarkation port issue by deploying ships away from the core of migration routes by reducing their rescue capabilities at sea: the tension between the two capitals reached a level that prevented a concrete political and diplomatic step forward (Farnesina 2019a).

In March, as the end of the mission approached, the future of *Sophia* was even more at stake. This time, the EEAS and the HR Mogherini also seemed to have lost their enthusiasm and, for the first time, officially considered “*the definitive closure of the anti-migrant smuggler operation Sophia*” and “*the possible birth of a new non-executive mission exclusively aimed at training the Libyan Coast Guard*”. The new position was dictated, on the one hand, by the reduction of the migratory influx towards Europe and by the perception that the crisis was behind us for the

continent; on the other, by the apparent impossibility of overcoming the *impasse* around the disembarkation's issue that has been going on for almost two years (ANSA 2019).

Along with this new plan, there were still some possibilities for *Sophia*, linked to a possible «*technical extension of three/six months*» to maintain a presence in the Mediterranean before the entry into force of the new asset. On this point, Brussels and other EU capitals looked to Italy, where an institutional dispute was underway between the Ministry of the Interior (without changes to the O-Plan, contrary to the extension of *Sophia*), Defence (interested in maintaining command of an EU mission) and with the Farnesina in the role of mediator and committed to negotiating with the EU (Ludovico 2019).

The reservation was disclosed a few days before the end of the month, when the EU states within the Political and Security Committee (PSC) agreed – despite the Italian, French and Hungarian perplexities – to renew (4th extension) EUNAVFOR MED/*Sophia* Operation to six months (until 31 September 2019), but “*for operational reasons, to temporarily suspend the deployment of Operation Sophia's naval assets [...] for the duration of this extension, while continuing to implement its mandate reinforcing surveillance by air assets as well as reinforcing support to the Libyan Navy Coastguard*” (EC Press release 2019).

The unresolved question of the ports of disembarkation, together with the slowdown of the migration emergency in Europe (between January-March 2019, 16,526 migrants and refugees arrived in Europe: 13% less than the same period last year [18,946]; 52% less than the 34,531 arrivals registered in 2017 and 91% less than the 174,508 in 2016) contributed to this controversial result to have a naval mission without vessels (IOM 2019).

The following months saw the extension of the air surveillance capabilities – mainly through the use of drones – of the *Operation*, but they also revealed a growing loss of faith by the EU states on the relevance of *Sophia*.

Although Italy and Germany succeeded to find a way to settle their differences – with the German Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas who, speaking to the Italian homologous Moavero Milanesi at the end of August, left the door open to a possible re-deployment of German vessels - no significant political initiatives to revitalize the mission were registered (Farnesina 2019b).

On the second half of September, the EU Council agreed to extend the mission of other six months, until 31 March 2020 (5th extension), confirming the absence of vessels with only the possibility “*to revert to this matter whenever necessary [...] with possible new guidance regarding the deployment of the Operation's naval assets*” (European Council 2020a).

Nevertheless, this prospect has never been realized. Although without the naval component the tensions between states over *Sophia* quickly settled down, this new configuration increased the sense of obsolescence and uselessness of the mission which, from the second half of 2019 was kept in life more to gain time and prepare the next EU operation in the Mediterranean, rather than relaunch the ongoing one. On January 19, 2020, the Berlin Conference on Libya designed to find a peaceful solution for the conflict in the country, put emphasis on the implementation of the UN arms embargo (UNSMIL 2020).

To this end, on February 17, 2020, the EU Foreign Affairs Council agreed on the closing of the ‘*European Naval Operation in the Mediterranean*’ (EUNAVFOR MED) *Sophia* at the end of its mandate and decided to launch a new EUNAVFOR MED, named *IRINI* (from the Greek word for *peace*), tasked to contribute “to preventing arms trafficking” and “to implement the UN measures” against “the illicit export of petroleum from Libya” (Berdud 2024). Additionally, *IRINI* shall also “assist the development of the capacities and in the training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy” and work for “the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks” (European Council 2020b).

In essence, the mandate of the new “*military crisis management operation*” reflected what *Sophia* had become since March 2019 without her naval assets, i.e., a mission focusing more on aerial surveillance activities rather than marine ones. While Europe and the world started to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak, on March 31, 2020, in the general anonymity by the public and political opinion, *Sophia* officially ended (Alagna 2020, Licastro 2020).

Conclusions: The Many Lessons from *Sophia*

Although *Sophia* already belongs to history, it still possesses numerous points of interest for the current (and future) migration scenario.

The *Operation* possessed its clear nature of military naval mission, but it has represented many things and had resulted in different and controversial outputs.

On the one side, it has been one of the first common and shared actions by the EU member states when the migration *crisis* started to hit Europe; it was also a renewed expression of the technical capability to set up a military naval mission by the Union, after the experience gained with the *Operation Atalanta*, deployed since 2008 in the Horn of Africa with anti-piracy purposes (Boşilcă et al. 2021). Moreover, its significance in terms of European military and defence cooperation seems to be even deeper. In fact, the tensions that arose in January 2019 between Germany and Italy, while stemming from political disagreements over the purpose of the *Operation*, made and still make people reflect on an atavistic obstacle to common European defence, namely that the absence of shared political leadership can undermine common military coordination.

On the other, the contribution of the mission to stem the migration flows to Europe remains disputed and it risks appearing residual compared to the weight had by the externalization strategy of the EU and by the bilateral actions by some countries.

For sure, the mission made a significant humanitarian contribution, rescuing and saving more than 45,000 people at sea between 2015 and 2020 (European Council 2022).

However, the *Operation* was, especially after the second renewal, an accurate mirror of the political divisions between the European states on migration management. The ‘*ports issue*’ specifically affected the mission, contributing to definitely cripple the mission, which was already facing the difficulties to move on to the more operational phases of its mandate; but it was only a small part of a larger problem, i.e., the

(still today) unresolved question of the disembarkation and relocation of the migrants arrived in Europe.

To sum up, the legacy of *Sophia* appears many-sided and with at least two main lessons for present and future European and national policymakers. Firstly, the experience of the mission suggested how it is impossible to address a complex challenge such as the migration one, just with one specific action, but it needs a comprehensive approach with a plurality of aspects. Secondly, it became clear that no initiative can be successful if the sensitive issues it touches are not first resolved. With the disembarkation question, the *Operation* was dragged in the vicious debate on the management of the migrants landed in Europe: an issue closely related to the bigger and more crucial problem of the lack of solidarity between EU states.

These lessons should be kept in mind by EU institutions and countries, not only to give importance to an experience that lasted 5 years and cost millions of euros and energy, but also to avoid the mistakes of the past and be ready for the next moment of “crisis” of the migration challenge which, even if it follows a seesawing evolution, it still one of the main open questions for the Euro-Mediterranean region for the years to come.

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