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Whose Crisis? What Crisis? Irregular Sea Crossings and the EU's Governance of Asylum and Borders

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ARTICLE

European Union leaders have, with a few exceptions (see Italian Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano) publicly expressed condemnation of US President Donald Trump's permanent ban on Syrian refugees, and temporary ban on all other refugees. The vice-President of the EU Commission Federica Mogherini, intervening in the European Parliament, said recently: "The EU will not turn back anyone who has the right to international protection. This is where we will continue to stand."

But if one considers what the EU and its Member States are actually doing on the ground to address the 'migration crisis' (this is how they prefer to call it now), it becomes apparent that considerable resources have been deployed to stop refugees and vulnerable migrants from reaching the EU. Three main routes (Eastern Mediterranean, Western Mediterranean and Balkan) have been sealed. The Central Mediterranean route is still open, but this has to do with the persistent political instability in Libya not some principled grandstanding on human rights and fundamental principles.

Europe's responses to Mediterranean boat migration since October 2013 (the Lampedusa shipwreck) have been variously characterized as inadequate, shambolic, inhumane, and ineffective. There has been very little critical scrutiny, however, aimed at ascertaining what exactly *the problem* is with regard to boat migration and from what perspective such criticism was lodged. Do all actors who are ready to attack the EU for its handling of the situation share the same understanding of the problem? I argue here that at closer inspection the answer is no, however it is also possible to identify some convergences.

Since 2014, an estimated 1.6 million refugees and migrants crossed the Mediterranean to Europe in search of safety and a better life. Over 12,000 are estimated to have died trying to make this journey. In 2015 alone, 845,000 people travelled to Greece from Turkey, whilst 153,000 travelled from Libya to Italy. Migration across the Mediterranean have dominated European political debate and media coverage. These events were widely perceived as constituting a 'crisis' of uncontrolled and unregulated movement into Europe; of the political failure of states to respond collectively; and of the international community to address the pressing humanitarian needs of those arriving on Europe's shores. So far, the EU and its

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Member States have struggled to come up with a coordinated response and have only agreed to close routes, for example preventing departure from Turkey and transit through the Balkans. The point I want to make here, however, is slightly lateral. I argue that a closer look at those key figures of the 'crisis' reveals a more complicated story, one in which the very meaning of 'crisis' in the context of the rapid growth in irregular sea crossings in the Mediterranean since the early 2010s has been far from static and fixed. Different actors have constructed narratives, timelines and benchmarks of the 'crisis,' and of the subjects involved - i.e. the boat migrants - that are only on the surface and to some extent compatible with each other.

Taking such a starting point, there are a number of questions that need to be urgently answered. To mention three: how have such narratives been validated? In what ways and for what purpose can different actors mobilize them? What are the consequences for boat migrants?

To help conceptualize the issue at task, I suggest seeing the 'crisis' as a *floating signifier* (a concept developed in semiotics) malleable enough to accommodate a wide range of agendas and empty enough to project a sense of coherence that enables multiple actors to operate within such a frame. 'Crisis' means different things to different people and its meaning, - adapting Stuart Hall's interpretation of 'race' - 'because it is relational and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation.' The questions for researchers to answer are then: by whom? What for? How?

Let us begin with the latter: we have witnessed, over the course of the last three years, endless debate about the naming issue. Is this a migrant crisis? A refugee crisis? Both? A petition with tens of thousands of signatures was directed to the BBC asking for them to acknowledge the presence of refugees in the migration flow, challenging the BBC's use of 'migrant crisis.' Al Jazeera came out publicly saying that they would only talk of 'refugees.' Again, no fixed solution, but it is worth noting that the name has oscillated like a pendulum. Research (Vis 2015) shows how a single image of Alan Kurdi drowned on a beach changed the language used on social media regarding immigration, with a substantial shift towards 'refugee' in the days and weeks that followed the event. 'Migration' is now the dominant term in political and media discourse in Europe.

But the naming debate went beyond the media and involved the major national and international agencies working on human mobility and humanitarian emergencies. Almost everyone developed some kind of position in which the Mediterranean migration phenomenon had to be framed within the respective mandate of the organization. An important component of such positioning, and for some posturing exercises, was the production of knowledge on the 'crisis.' Charts, daily bulletins of arrivals and deaths, of sea interceptions and sea rescues helped each organization in its own way to sustain and validate different and competing meanings and narratives of what was going on at sea and on land. Better resourced organizations invested heavily in in-house research, some even created *ad hoc* permanent observatories, others commissioned bespoke research to academics and consultants (often with quite narrowly defined terms of reference).

The implications of such debates are far from abstract. As it was recently pointed out to me by a senior practitioner: "There is a debate within our operational centres about the relevance of the existing legal frameworks (refugees, asylum seekers, migrants) for defining our clients' protection and assistance needs and our priorities in terms of public communication and advocacy. Some would like us to prioritize 'refugees' over 'migrants' in our positioning, based on the fact that the former have clearly defined rights to enter and stay, as they are fleeing for their lives."

As researchers, I feel it is our duty to analyze, understand and criticize how the 'crisis' has been produced and constructed, and engage critically and constructively with various stakeholders.

Methodological note

The paper is informed by reflections stemming from research carried out by the author as part of the ESRC-DfID funded study 'Unravelling the Mediterranean migration crisis' (MEDMIG), which aimed to better understand the processes which influence, inform and shape current boat migration by speaking directly with those who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015 and with the numerous state and non-state actors who created opportunities and constraints along the way. The project was led by the University of Coventry in collaboration with the Universities of Birmingham and Oxford.

We carried out semi-structured interviews with a total of 500 refugees and migrants, 440 of whom had crossed the Mediterranean Sea by boat in 2015 to Greece (215 interviews), Italy (205 interviews) and Malta (20 interviews), together with a further 60 respondents who had moved to Turkey and were considering making the onward journey to Europe. These countries reflected the key locations of the crisis. We also interviewed more than 100 stakeholders, including politicians, policy makers, naval officers and coastguards, representatives of international, non-governmental and civil society actors, from migrant and refugee associations to volunteers. These voices reflect the broad range of organizations that responded to the crisis in politics and practice, enabling us to gain clear insight into the varied ways that the situation was perceived, understood and experienced in each location.