

# With Italy's rescue operation for migrants in the Mediterranean being phased out, it is vital that Frontex is given greater support from EU governments

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*Italy's 'Mare Nostrum' operation, which has rescued thousands of migrants in the Mediterranean, officially ended on 1 November, although the Italian Navy has continued to conduct some operations. A new operation led by the EU's external border security agency Frontex, named 'Triton', has been launched and will aim to help compensate for the end of the Italian mission. Sarah Wolff writes that while Frontex has been heavily criticised by some policymakers and activists, it is now vital that the agency is given more financial and human resources, as well as the independence required to perform its role effectively.*



Faced with unprecedented migratory fluxes from Africa and Asia, Europe has become the most deadly migration destination in the world. It is urgent that policymakers and activists stop criticising Frontex, the European agency for border management, and instead advocate for more financial and human resources as well as more independence for the agency. These steps should be taken within an overall reform of the [European Common Migration Policy](#) that includes increased rescue at sea capacities, expanding legal migration possibilities and setting up European common asylum centres in source countries.

## Europe: the deadliest migration destination in the world

While tourists have deserted Mediterranean beaches, Syrians, Eritreans and many more refugees are putting their lives at risk by trying to reach Europe. This year, 3,072 migrants have died in the Mediterranean Sea, following the 366 who died at Lampedusa in October 2013. Since 2000, according to a [recent study](#) by the International Organisation for Migration, 22,000 people have died during their high-risk journeys to Europe. Europe has become the most deadly migration destination in the world, ahead of the United States with 6,000 fatalities on the border with Mexico for the same period.

Faced with this tragedy, the absence of political action is galling. The European border management agency [Frontex](#), which catalyses the obsessions of the European common migratory policy, is in the front line. As of 1 November, a new operation *Frontex Plus* (or *Triton*) has taken over from the military and humanitarian operation *Mare Nostrum*. Conducted by Italy, the latter has, [according to Amnesty International](#), rescued more than 138,000 migrants this year. Italy has thus compensated for the deficiencies of Malta, which contests its international obligations to perform rescues at sea. For the Matteo Renzi government it is time to share the financial and material 'burden' with its European partners.

The capacities of Frontex to carry out the mission are however questioned by EU Member states and civil society. Since its creation, there has never been a European agency which has aroused as much controversy as Frontex. A campaign calling itself '[Frontexit](#)' has pushed for the suspension of Frontex activities. Based on testimonies of migrants and an analysis of Frontex legal obligations regarding asylum-seekers' rights, such as [the principle of non-refoulement](#), this NGO platform has rightly criticised the lack of progress on human rights and the opacity of the agency. [Research](#) has indeed shown that Frontex is suffering from a lack of legitimacy. It is also difficult to ignore the role played by the agency in the diversion of migration routes, making them more dangerous.

The message that Frontex 'has considerable resources and considerable autonomy', and that its activities should be suspended, is, however, a smokescreen which reinforces the collective fantasies of European migration policy. It is critical to get the record straight. Since 2009, neither the European Parliament nor EU Member States have been

willing to increase the budget of Frontex. This year, its budget has declined from 94 to 89 million euros. An insignificant sum compared to the 10 million euros spent monthly by Italy for the Mare Nostrum operation. Furthermore, although Frontex has the legal capacity, it cannot afford to buy its own equipment, and must rely on the goodwill of member states to allocate what is required. Its hands are tied.

Stopping Frontex activities would lead to a retrenchment of national immigration policies and the abandoning of a European collective solution. It would increase the competition between Member States and lead to more opacity in their practices. The recent scandal of the backlog of 11,000 asylum seeker cases in the UK confirms how much EU Member states need to rethink collectively their immigration and asylum policies.

Frontex is an easy scapegoat, created by EU governments for European public opinion, and it is important not to fall into the trap of blaming Frontex for the problems experienced until this point. Civil society must continue its necessary role as a 'watchdog', but it should also be constructive and assess why Frontex leads to so many heightened reactions and fantasies.

Rather than suspending its activities, Frontex must instead become a real European Corps of Border Guards with more resources, independence and democratic control. This requires an ethical anchor and a professional ethos through the common training of European border guards. Humanitarian rescue at sea capabilities, as well as facilitating the reception of asylum seekers, should be at the heart of this future organisation. Parallel initiatives such as the facilitation of legal migration to Europe and the opening of European centres for asylum applications in source countries would curb the flourishing human trafficking industry.

However, without the cooperation of source countries, whose border practices are also disputed, these ideas remain unrealistic. Closing down Frontex is not a panacea. Civil society and academics must continue to educate the public and support innovative humanitarian and diplomatic means on a large scale. If it is to be successful, this case will also need to be made to the new European Commission and, in particular, Federica Mogherini, the new EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

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*Note: A version of this article originally appeared in French in [Le Monde](#). The article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Lampedusa, Credit: Luca Moglia (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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