

## Seas of solidarity and treacherous waves of hate: Volunteer Perspectives on Civil Search and Rescue Missions in the Mediterranean.

For the sake of protecting people against the backdrop of criminalization of sea rescue and migrant solidarity, names of people and of vessels have been removed to safeguard anonymity. Also, due to security reasons, instead of a detailed paper, an in-person presentation will be given at Bard College, in which I will go over the intricacies of the internship and provide an intimate look into the work I did as part of this grant.

Thanks to the grant from BCSH, I managed to spend the summer in Italy and Greece working with different groups who support people on the move arriving in Europe. The groups varied from civil search and rescue organizations operating rescue vessels in the Mediterranean, to support groups at shore who support people rescued or intercepted by European coast guard. I was interested in learning how these groups function and how they navigate the escalating criminalization of their work. At the same time I was looking at how hateful speech targeting migrants and refugees affects the work of migrant-solidarity networks. During the summer I had the privilege to be part of the civil search and rescue (SAR) volunteers who work tirelessly to save migrant boats in distress. Volunteers on ships such as Geo Barents operated by Doctors Without Borders, Louise Michel, Sea-Watch, Nadir, Aurora, Aita Mari and others. This work is done against a backdrop of an increasingly hostile environment, not only from legal authorities but also from the rising tide of xenophobia and hateful speech targeting both migrants and those who assist them. While the Mediterranean is one of the world's deadliest migration routes, volunteers are battling not only the dangers of the sea but also the racism, criminalization, and hate that intersect with their work.

Hateful speech works on multiple layers, but always needs the grounds from which it is misconstrued and fueled. In the case of sea rescue, it starts from a very problematic premise: being optional! Whether it is the portrayal of fleeing war as "optional", or the framing of rescue as "optional charity". On one hand it is important to understand that no one puts themselves and their loved ones through such a dangerous and life-threatening trip, unless the deadly waters are safer than home. On the other hand, rescue at sea is not a matter of choice. It is mandated by international and maritime law. The 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) both mandate that vessels assist persons in distress without regard to nationality or status. These laws codify the ancient maritime tradition of aiding those in peril, ensuring that all captains provide assistance "in so far as they can do so without serious danger to the ship, the crew, or

the passengers" (UNCLOS, Article 98). Additionally, the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) outlines the coordinated efforts required by states to ensure swift and effective rescue operations. In this legal context, blocking or delaying SAR missions is not only a humanitarian failure but a violation of binding international obligations. Nowhere does any of these laws mention reason for being at sea, skin color, race, ethnicity, legal residency or reason for departure. A boat in distress must be rescued. Yet, governments like those in Italy and Greece have increasingly framed rescue operations as discretionary acts of charity rather than legal requirements and obligations. These governments also frame humanitarian efforts in the Mediterranean as acts of defiance and criminality. The misrepresentation of rescue as "charity" as opposed to legal obligation, as it is, perpetuates the criminalization of SAR missions and feeds into the xenophobic narrative that SAR organizations "encourage migration" and specifically the so-called "illegal migration". Instead of addressing the failure of governments to meet their legal responsibilities and provide safe passages and access to legal frameworks for asylum and migration, governments use migrants and refugees as electoral fodder by pondering to populist political agendas. E.M., a Greek volunteer, described how authorities have begun treating them as part of the problem: "They act like if we weren't here, people wouldn't risk the crossing. But people are already dying at sea. We're just trying to stop more deaths, and we are only responding to the structural failure of the authorities. If they do their job, we wouldn't necessarily be here".

For SAR volunteers, the decision to participate in rescue missions stems from a deep-seated belief in human dignity and the right to life. The volunteers—activists, medics, seafarers, and civil society workers—are often the first point of contact for migrants after harrowing journeys across the Mediterranean. However, their humanitarian work often comes into conflict with an atmosphere of hostility. The criminalization of their efforts has intensified, with Italy and Greece enacting laws that threaten SAR teams with legal repercussions for allegedly facilitating illegal immigration. Volunteers like M.R., a medic aboard one rescue vessel, emphasize that the problem extends beyond legal challenges: "We're seen as criminals for saving lives, and it's not just the authorities. We sometimes face hate from the public, too". This public hostility is driven by far-right rhetoric that portrays migrants as economic burdens and security threats, fostering xenophobic narratives that fuel online and offline hateful speech.

Hateful speech, amplified by politicians and media, has shaped public perceptions of both migrants and SAR operations. Xenophobic terms like "invasion" and "flood" dehumanize those seeking refuge, reducing their struggles to mere statistics. Volunteers are frequently targeted by hate-filled messages accusing them of treason or

encouraging illegal migration. L.R., a volunteer on a small rescue sailing boat, shared how social media comments, despite wide support from many sections of society, often echo the hate they sometimes encounter in local communities, but “people tend to feel more emboldened to express hate and violence on social media. I don't know if it is the anonymity or the digital environment itself. But something there goes extremely wrong”, L.R. told me. He continued that platforms allow for much more blatant expression of hate without accountability. “People accuse us of enabling migrants to come here, saying we should let them drown”. This toxic discourse extends into the wider public sphere like on TVs and in mainstream media, particularly in Italy and Greece, where far-right populism has mainstreamed anti-immigrant hate, blaming rescue efforts for tarnishing the reputation of tourist destinations and resulting in a surge in crime. During my internship I had the chance to witness the barrage of hate tweets and comments targeting the groups I worked with. Using my personal account, I reported some comments to the platforms, including statements like “let them drown” and “send them back to where they came from”, and both were not considered in violation of X's (formerly known as Twitter) terms on hateful content. A grave issue which various volunteers managing social media accounts of SAR groups shared with me. A problem which long existed, but aggravated on platforms like X under Elon Musk's leadership.

The reality on the ground is as complex as it is horrifying. Hateful speech and racism are not only an external threat and reality. Sadly they are deeply rooted across societies, with shifting targets and perpetrators depending on the context. During my internship, I learned the hard reality that racism and hateful speech also manifest within migrant communities crossing the Mediterranean. Racism becomes starkly visible in the dynamics onboard the boats themselves, and even on the rescue vessels. Survivors frequently report that people from sub-Saharan Africa, or from countries like Bangladesh, are relegated to the most dangerous parts of the boat—typically the lower decks—where the risk of drowning is higher, the conditions are much worse, and the dangers of fuel burns and suffocation due to fumes are elevated. These cramped, unstable sections are often the first to flood, and those placed there typically have little or no access to life-saving tools like life jackets, or even to air ventilation and daylight throughout the trip. Similarly, economic access and access to languages spoken in countries of departure, play an important role in the type and the state of the boat, access to safety tools, and the general safety of the trip. Location on the boat, the condition of the boat, the load (at times by far exceeding any safety considerations), the provided equipment like life jackets and communication devices, etc, are all decided by the person's financial capacity, which as we know, very much intersect with race, gender, country of origin, among others. These racial and economic divisions highlight the extent to which racism permeates every facet of human experiences, manifesting even in life-or-death situations where survival should be paramount. The fact that these

inequalities persist even in moments of such extreme vulnerability underscores the pervasiveness of racial and class hierarchies, showing that systemic discrimination and prejudice are not left behind when migrants embark on their perilous journeys.

What I found extremely inspiring, is how most SAR workers and volunteers I met, take these issues very seriously. Even during rescues, deep in the treacherous seas, and through high intensity and emergency situations, crew doesn't waste a chance to correct the narrative, and make a point that hateful speech is not accepted and that racism or any other forms of discrimination will not be tolerated. What I found particularly interesting is that, part of the anti-racism training volunteers like me received, is the rejection to view racism or sexism, as inherent parts of cultures and communities. This shows a commitment to anti-racist activism which refuses to take individual acts or even social problems and make them synonymous with cultures and entire populations. Though the work involved a high sensibility towards cultural expression, it was a shared understanding that no culture or society is inherently racist or hateful. To a large extent, volunteers tried hard to understand the context without condoning racism, to be mindful of different forms of expressions and associations, without being apologetic towards hateful speech or justifying it. The context is complex and multi-layered, and a nuanced approach is extremely necessary, not only to fend off the damage and the hurt of the moment, but also to use it as a learning moment for everyone involved. For example, Arabic is a language which often faces discrimination and multiple racist and Islamophobic tropes especially in Europe. So it was important to make sure people coming from Arab countries feel welcomed and safe to speak their language without prejudice. At the same time, Libya, an Arabic country, is known for being a hellscape for people on the move, under the horrors of the EU-sponsored so-called Libyan Coast Guard, and the trafficking and detention camps which were the center of multiple reports documenting severe human rights violations. For many non-Arabic speakers, who end up being stuck in the torture machine in Libya, Arabic is a triggering language associated with the horrors they survived. Crew members have to be mindful of this complexity. Understanding that while Arabic could be triggering for some, understandably, it is a language of safety for others, while at the same time, refusing to typecast Arabic as a language of racism and violence. It is such intricacies which make the work even more important, but also even more inspiring. I am very grateful to have been able to witness this, be part of it, and learn from it.

There is so much to unpack and to process. There is so much to be discussed, so much to be shared and so much to be denounced. There is a dire need for a collective conversion, and for collective intervention. Not only to stop deaths at sea, but to protect the frameworks our societies have to safeguard human dignity and life. We can't allow solidarity to be criminalized, or humanitarian work to become a punishable criminal

offense, at least not as long as we consider that we live in democratic societies which uphold human rights. What is happening in the EU, and also in the US, is extremely alarming. Solidarity, be it with an anti-colonial struggle or to stop deaths at sea, should be at the core of our social values, celebrated and encouraged. Similarly, facing hate cannot be relegated solely to legal frameworks and policies. It should be a consistent practice across the board, even, during moments of emergency.

Anonymous, given the nature of the internship

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