

The death of migrants in the Mediterranean is a truly 'European' tragedy

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*Over 300 migrants travelling from Libya to Italy died on 3 October when the boat they were travelling in caught fire and sank in the Mediterranean. **Nando Sigona** writes that efforts to prevent further disasters taking place must focus on the reasons why migrants choose to risk their lives by travelling to Europe. He argues that the EU has not taken on its fair share of asylum seekers in comparison to developing countries in Africa and the Middle East, and that opening up the asylum process should be a key priority.*



On 3 October a boat carrying migrants from Libya to Italy sank off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa, killing over 300 people. On 11 October a second shipwreck approximately 120 km from the island claimed the lives of at least another 30 migrants. At a time of crisis for the European project, when we witness various attempts to renationalise powers previously delegated to Brussels, tragedies like the one in Lampedusa can become an opportunity for the EU to reaffirm the principles on which the EU project was initially founded, and claim back a role that has recently been questioned as never before. Finding an EU answer to the tragedy of Lampedusa is therefore essential not only to avoid more deaths in the Mediterranean, but for the EU itself and its survival as a political project.

Cecilia Malmström, the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, is well aware of this opportunity and is trying to find a solution, but there are no easy answers. Tragedies like the one in Lampedusa are **no accident**. Nor are the combined 19,142 deaths at the EU's borders over the last 20 years. They are a 'side-effect' of the fortification of EU borders and the closure of legal routes to migration for low-skilled migrants, particularly those who are non-white and non-Christian.

Increasing the militarisation of the Mediterranean and sending **Frontex** (the EU agency for external border control) to patrol the coasts from Morocco to Turkey will not terminate the desire for people to leave their countries in search of a better future. On the contrary, it may end up forcing people towards even more dangerous routes. Smuggling is not the cause of migration, it is **'a reaction to border control'**. Moreover, we should not forget that many people are escaping from violence, persecution, and war, and the risks they are prepared to take are judged against this background, not some abstract health and safety handbook. Opening up opportunities for legal immigration – temporary, seasonal, long term – and making access to asylum for those escaping persecution possible would provide a more effective answer.

Less wealthy countries are doing much more than the EU's member states to provide shelter and protection to refugees fleeing persecution in places like Syria, and (previously) Libya. The number of refugees who have been accepted on resettlement programmes in the EU is so tiny as to be embarrassing, particularly when compared to the



Abandoned ship on Lampedusa, Credit: piervincenzocanale (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

hundreds of thousands of people hosted in countries like Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Tunisia.

What the EU is effectively doing is signing a cheque to house people as far away from its shore as possible. This is based on a narrow interpretation of the obligations deriving from the UN Refugee Conventions and international law. Protection is not only about keeping refugees alive in refugee camps located in remote areas. Protection is also about giving people the opportunity to rebuild their lives as autonomous and self-reliant individuals. Refugees are survivors. Given the opportunity, they will be able to create a new life for themselves. For many who have lost everything, this opportunity can only be found in Europe. Instead of providing support, the application process for claiming asylum in the EU is increasingly difficult. Often the only way to apply is to travel 'illegally', possibly on a boat like the one that sank off Lampedusa on 3 October.

Anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and Eurosceptic sentiments are strong in most EU member states, fed by political entrepreneurs willing to gain political capital and power out of the fear of 'the other'. Directing societal anxieties towards external targets is a well-known tactic in times of crisis such as the one we are living in. This helps to divert attention away from domestic problems and maintain a sense of shared belonging.

What is at stake now, however, is who 'we' are – that is, are we Italians, English, French, Germans, or Europeans? Pro-EU politicians, like Commissioner Malmström, struggle to maintain and build forms of solidarity that cross national borders. By showing EU leadership in attempts to avoid such incidents in the future, and publicly mourning the deaths of migrants as Europeans (e.g. the [visits](#) of EU President Barroso and Commissioner Malmström to Lampedusa), the Commission can pro-actively make Lampedusa a truly European tragedy, claim the incident as an issue of home affairs, and strategically project the boundaries of 'us', as a community of values and solidarity, beyond individual member-states.

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About the author

Nando Sigona – *University of Birmingham*

Nando Sigona is a Birmingham Fellow and Lecturer in the Institute for Research into Superdiversity at the University of Birmingham. He is also one of the founding editors of the Journal *Migration Studies*. He is the co-author of [Sans Papiers: The Social and Economic Lives of Undocumented Migrants](#) (Pluto Press, 2014). He tweets [@nandosigona](#)

