All at Sea: Search and Rescue Policy in the Central Mediterranean

Benjamin Thom (UK)

Supervisor: Professor Nilsson

Abstract

Search and rescue policy, the act of rescuing those in distress at sea, has become a key topic in the European Union since the disaster at Lampedusa in October 2013 which resulted in the deaths of 360 migrants. This thesis discusses the developments within this policy area since Lampedusa, with a focus on Operation Mare Nostrum and Operation Triton, the two most high-profile responses to the challenges in the Central Mediterranean.

Mare Nostrum was an Italian-run policy which was an immediate response to the Lampedusa tragedy, and yet one year after commencing, it was replaced by a Frontex-led EU operation called Triton. Mare Nostrum was a search and rescue mission, whereas Triton was a border surveillance operation. This thesis analyses why this policy transition occurred, and for what reasons two missions, which on paper appeared to be entirely different, were deployed to deal with the same increasing and challenging migratory flows.

This thesis seeks to explain why the EU introduced a downgraded form of search and rescue, and what effect this had on the safety of those seeking to cross the sea.

Based on interviews with policymakers, official documents, journal and news articles, this thesis seeks to understand the reality behind the confused policy transition from Mare Nostrum to Triton.

This research suggests that the withdrawal of Mare Nostrum, and its replacement with Triton represented a clear policy failure which failed to achieve its objectives. However, due to the realisation of shortcomings in the policy response, there has been a gradual move towards solidarity on the European level. Consequently, search and rescue policy has diversified through a reinforced Operation Triton working alongside numerous other actors. Search and rescue may thus come to represent another example of the European Union seeking increased solidarity against the backdrop of a crisis, and, in short, perhaps the failure has ultimately led to the solution.