

## Migration and “pull factor” traps

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**Abstract:** This article engages with the centrality that the push–pull theory regained in the context of border deaths in the Mediterranean Sea and particularly as part of the debate against the criminalization of nongovernment organizations (NGOs’) rescue missions at sea. The article opens by illustrating the context in which the push–pull theory re-emerged—after having been part of migration studies’ history books for over a decade—as part of an effort to defend non-state actors engaged in rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea against an aggressive campaign of illegalization conducted by European states. We then take a step back to trace the history of the push–pull theory and its role as a foil for critical migration studies in the past 20 years. Building on this history, the article then turns to interrogating the epistemic and political outcomes that result from bringing evidence against the NGOs’ role as pull factors for migrants. The article closes by advocating for a transformative, rather than evidencing, role of critical knowledge in the current political context where migrants and actors who fight against border deaths are increasingly criminalized.

On February 17, 2020 the EU announced a new naval operation in the central Mediterranean, Operation Irini, tasked with the mission of monitoring the UN-Libya arms embargo. One year after the withdrawal of the main assets of the Eunavfor Med Sophia Operation (officially concluded on 31 March 2020) an intelligence operation with different priorities enters the Central Mediterranean. The mission of “saving lives at sea and targeting criminal networks”<sup>1</sup> that characterized Sophia is hence officially shrunk<sup>2</sup> and transformed into an intervention for controlling arms. Interestingly, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luigi Di Maio, declared that Operation Irini should be stopped if it started working as a pull-factor for the migrants who attempt the Mediterranean crossing from Libya<sup>3</sup>.

The argument that Navy vessels stationed in front of the Libyan coasts might function as a pull-factor has been gaining centre stage in the recent European political debate and is often taken at face value. What gets discussed in fact is not the pull-factor narrative per se but, rather, the evaluation about

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/migratory-pressures/sea-criminal-networks/>

<sup>2</sup> The Operation’s assets will perform rescue operation only in compliance with the laws of the sea but the goal to “protect human life at sea” will not be part of its mandate.

<sup>3</sup><https://secolo-trentino.com/2020/02/17/di-maio-affonda-loperazione-ue-sophia-piu-migranti-meno-armi/>

when and under which conditions the presence of vessels in the Mediterranean Sea starts to work as an active factor of attraction for migrants. In debates about rescue vessels, in fact, the iconic figure of the refugee stranded at sea has been increasingly replaced with the image of the flow of migrants headed towards Europe via the Mediterranean thanks to the presence of state and non-state vessels that, it is said in this context, act as pull factors.

In this paper we engage with the centrality that the push-pull theory regained in recent public and scholarly debates to suggest that it politically hinders that the important debate against the criminalization of NGOs' rescue missions. The paper opens by illustrating the context in which the push-pull theory re-emerged—after having been part of migration studies' history books for over a decade—as part of an effort to defend non-state actors engaged in rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea against an aggressive campaign of illegalization conducted by European states. We then take a step back to trace the history of the push-pull theory and its role as a foil for critical migration studies in the past twenty years. Building on this history, the paper then turns to interrogating the epistemic and political outcomes that result from bringing evidence against NGOs' role as pull factors for migrants. The paper closes by advocating for a transformative, rather than evidencing, role of critical knowledge in the current political context where migrants and actors who fight against border-deaths are increasingly criminalized.

### **Pull factor talk and non-state actors at sea**

Quarrels over migration are often fights over numbers. One of the many controversies between state and non-state actors has to deal with the number of migrants who cross the Mediterranean Sea: does the presence at sea of NGOs and independent search and rescue actors constitute a pull-factor for migrants, hence increasing the number of aspiring and successful crossings across the Mediterranean Sea? This question has to some extent took over the current public debate about migrant deaths at sea in Europe, at the same time as independent search and rescue actors have been increasingly targeted and criminalized by EU member states. Over the last three years, several NGO vessels have been seized by state authorities and their crews have even been put under trial in some cases, with the accusation of facilitating irregular migration to Europe (Cusumano & Pattison 2018, Fekete 2018, Tazzioli and Walters 2019, Rigo 2020). Right-wing politicians consider independent search and rescue vessels doubly responsible for actually ferrying migrants to the European shores upon rescue, and for representing an incentive to attempt the dangerous crossing since rescue vessels are deployed to assist migrants in case of distress. In the same vein, the former Italian Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini accused NGOs of provoking migrants' deaths at sea in 2019. According to him, in

fact, the presence of NGO vessels allegedly enhanced smuggling activities and, thus, put migrants in danger.

The legal pursuit against NGOs often went in hand with a generalized political discrediting and condemnation of independent search and rescue actors, who were accused of serving as taxis of the sea for the migrants<sup>4</sup>. Notably, the UK also criticized the Operation Mare Nostrum led by Italy in 2013 for being a pull-factor for migrants and such a criticism contributed to bringing the operation to an end in December of the same year. Actually, as Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani have pointed out “ending Mare Nostrum did not lead to fewer crossings, but to more deaths at sea and a higher mortality rate” (2016). In 2017 Italy signed the bilateral agreement with Libya - which establishes that the Libyan coast guard is in charge of “saving” migrants at sea, a measure that de facto authorizes Libyan authorities to intercept migrants at sea and take them back to Libya. At the same time, NGO vessels active close to the Libyan waters constituted an obstacle to the “pull-back” (Forensic Architecture, 2018) activities of the Libyan coast guard and were classified as “a pull factor for the migration phenomenon [...], that is as an incentive to arrange departures”<sup>5</sup> by the Italian government. The tasks of the Libyan coast guard (i.e., rescuing, capturing and taking migrants back to Libya) can be considered like *proxy push-back* operations, as they are conducted by the Libyans upon request<sup>6</sup> of Italian authorities and under their coordination.

The European agency Frontex argued in its 2017 annual Risk Analysis that Search and Rescue operations close to the Libyan waters “influence smugglers’ planning and act as a pull factor” (Frontex, 2017). The *Financial Times* fueled the debate on NGOs as potential pull-factors for migrants publishing an article based on confidential reports issued by Frontex that hinted at direct collusions between smuggling networks and NGOs operating in the Mediterranean Sea: according to the European agency, independent search and rescue actors would act “as a beam for the migrants”<sup>7</sup>. Violeta Moreno-Lax reconstructs how, in 2015, the European Commission prevented the Frontex-led operation Triton from becoming a proactive search and rescue operation, as this would have introduced a further pull-factor at sea for the migrants (2018). In 2019, the pull factor argument combined with

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/05/02/in-italy-conspiracy-theories-about-collusion-between-smugglers-and-charities-rescuing-migrants-are-spreading/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1023441.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> As part of the Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding, Libya received around 200 million of euros in 2017; the agreement was renewed in February 2020. However, the exact amount of money given by the Italian government to Libya has not been declared and remains an opaque issue. By giving the mandate to the Libyans to take migrants back to Libya, Italy is trying to dodge any accusation of migrants *refoulement*.

<sup>7</sup> Financial Times (2016) EU border force flags concerns over charities’ interaction with migrant smugglers <https://www.ft.com/content/3e6b6450-c1f7-11e6-9bca-2b93a6856354>.

restrictions for NGOs operating at sea became a dominant narrative at the EU level. As the Commissioner Avramopoulous plainly stated “all actors, including NGOs, have to respect the rules and act responsibly in order not to perpetuate the business model used by traffickers to exploit human misery” and the cooperation with third-countries, he added, “will allow us to ensure solidarity with the most exposed EU countries while avoiding creating a pull factor”<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the disciplining of search and rescue actors is perpetrated in name of a fight against the migrant smuggling economy.

It is important to notice that the pull-factor argument was pushed forward also under different guises and framed as a deterrence mechanism against migrants’ departures in the context of the European deploy of military assets in the Mediterranean. European member states in fact enlisted naval assets and push-back operations to disrupt the logistics of migrant crossing in the “asymmetric warfare” against migrants at sea (Garelli, Tazzioli, 2018). As stated in Eunavfor Med documents on Operation Sophia, the goal of deploying navy vessels in the central Mediterranean was to enhance the “deterrence against the smuggler and traffickers’ activities in international waters” (EAAS, 2016). Actually, what is defined as deterrence against smugglers is notably and primarily a deterrent measure against migrants themselves in a context where the border regime “enacts illegalization on a global scale” (De Genova, Roy, 2020: 352) and therefore forces those racialized as (illegalized) “migrants” to make use of smuggling networks. Vessels can both be seen as deterrent elements or, inversely, as potential pull-factors for migrants. Deterrence ultimately appears as the reverse of the pull-factor and, at the same time, as a preventive measure apt at avoiding the very possibility of vessels acting as pull-factors<sup>9</sup>.

### **Predictive critical migration studies via Push/Pull theory?**

Within such a context, the political quarrel around the pull-factor emerged as a main terrain for political disagreement and as a weapon for demonstrating that the presence of NGO vessels at sea attracts migrants to Europe<sup>10</sup>. “Pull-factors”, “magnets” and “beams for migrants”: these are some of the tropes used to accuse NGOs at sea of encouraging migrants to cross the Mediterranean by virtue of their presence at sea with rescue vessels.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_19\\_304](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_304)

<sup>9</sup> In this regard it is worth highlighting that deterrence was officially one of the main tasks of EU naval operation Eunavfor-med Sophia launched in 2015 for “disrupting the business model of migrant smugglers and human traffickers <https://www.operationsophia.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Factsheet-about-Mission-EUNAVFOR-MED-Operation-SOPHIA-1.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Mare Nostrum operation was criticized for working as a “magnet” for migrants <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/09/italys-decriminalising-of-illegal-immigration-has-acted-as-a-green-light-to-boat-people/>

As a response, humanitarian actors, journalists and academics played defense in an admittedly difficult context (but see a significant exception—MSF, 2016), trying to mobilize evidence to support that in fact NGOs are not a pull factor (Cusumano, Villa, 2019; Steinhilper, Gruijters, 2017; Steinhilper, 2018). Reading migrants arrivals' numbers in relation to the presence of NGO vessels these works have demonstrated that a growth in the presence of independent actors at sea does not correspond to an increase in migrants' arrivals by sea or to an increase in the number of people setting sail to Europe from the Libyan coasts. In other words, they showed that the argument that NGO vessels are pull-factors lacks evidence since “non-governmental SAR operations do not correlate with the number of migrants leaving Libya by sea. Rather than being influenced by the pull effect of NGOs' SAR operations, our analysis suggests that departures from Libya have mainly been shaped by weather conditions and Minniti's policies of ‘onshore containment’” (Cusumano, Villa, 2019: 7)<sup>11</sup>.

Before turning again to the push-pull theory, let us pause here to reflect on the epistemic implications of this intervention of “bringing evidence” in the context of NGOs working as a pull factor and migrants' perilous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. As Lorenzini and Tazzioli observe, an important epistemological question is at stake here: “to what extent does the operation of bringing evidence *actually* disrupt the normalization and the threshold of acceptance of migrants' deaths? What forms of critical practice would counter the saturation of political space generated by the proliferation of images and the accumulation of evidence?” (Lorenzini, Tazzioli 2020). Through a focus on the pull-factor debate, this paper intervenes in critical migration and border studies scholarship by questioning knowledge production predicated on bringing evidence of border violence and, problematizing the trend to reduce migrants to lives to be saved, also through a problematic use of statistics, as Heller and Pécoud show about border-deaths statistics (2020) Against such background, we turn the pull-factor on its head, and, in the concluding section, we distance ourselves from the push-pull logic and instead gesture towards a politicization of humanitarianism which actively supports migrants' crossing. This seems particularly important in a discursive context where the notion of the pull factor is used to justify the withdrawal of state efforts in search & rescue operations at sea (Euractiv 2014) and to criminalize the work of independent actors at deadly borders.

A long-time foil for critical migration studies, the push and pull theory has only recently entered its argumentative toolkit as the evidence against NGOs' criminalization, as we showed above. In this

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, confronting the numbers of migrant deaths and arrivals when NGOs rescue operations were in place with those when they were not deployed, Steinhilper, Gruijters conclude that “the number of arrivals in the low-SAR period was not higher than in the equivalent high-SAR periods, as predicted by the pull factor hypothesis. In fact, arrivals were highest in the low-SAR period. Moreover, we can observe that mortality rates were substantially higher in the low-SAR period (Triton I) than in the periods before and after” (Steinhilper, Gruijters, 2017).

section we look back at the history of the relationship between push/pull theory and critical migration studies. Our goal is to problematize the argument that NGOs are not a pull factor for migrants—an argument, we contend, that brings an uncanny predictive turn in critical migration studies which not only loses argumentatively against detractors of the work NGOs have been carrying out at sea, but also introduces an un-scrutinized liberal agenda in the critical debate about the politics of migration.

So the pull factor vocabulary entered the “humanitarian battlefield” (Garelli, Tazzioli, 2019) in the Mediterranean, by discursively framing both camps: on the anti-migrant politics front, the pull factor is the accusation (independent actors’ rescue assets are a pull factor for migrants); on the pro-migrant activist and scholarly front, the pull factor equally takes center stage as the accusation to respond to. It is on this second camp that we now want to turn our attention by taking a step back to situate the “pull factor” argument within critical migration studies before illustrating our criticism of the “defense” against a pull factor accusation.

Despite its different voices, the critical migration studies’ agenda has been organized—at least since the 1990s—in stark opposition to the predictive approach to the study of migration that tended to be hegemonic within 20<sup>th</sup> century social sciences. First formulated by English geographer Ernest George Ravenstein, the push/pull theory (1889), was part and parcel of the attempt to identify laws of human behavior that would allow the mapping of people’s movements into predictable patterns. In his “Laws of Migration”, in fact, Ravenstein used census data from England and Wales to identify predictable migration patterns that he then generalized to all geographic contexts and times. Based on these primary sources Ravenstein concluded that migration is governed by a “push-pull” process, which is based in economic motivations. Unfavorable conditions in one place push people out, and favorable conditions in another location pull them in—from poorer to wealthier countries, from low wage to higher-wage areas. In other words, individuals are pushed and pulled in predictable directions, and the search for these features of migration has since become a feature of migration studies.

While drawing from a geographically restricted (England and Wales and historically limited timeframe (between 1871 and 1881), Ravenstein’s study was adopted to explain global migration flows within the social science canon and particularly within mainstream social science research. Explaining migration in these terms, in fact, was instrumental in framing a liberal take on migration and particularly in justifying two assumptions. First, if left to itself, the open migration market will achieve its own equilibrium thanks to the ‘natural’ laws of push and pull factors. Second, migration is the project of rational individuals who weigh up the costs and benefits of their options before making the decision to migrate.

Some important updates to this theory have been brought by scholars from different disciplines and studying migration in different contexts, particularly along the lines of adding other factors alongside the emphasis on economic ones (e.g., political conditions, wars, and lifestyle). Barry Chiswick (2000), for instance, uses the push/pull model to study ‘who’ gets to move in terms of motives, abilities, skills to get to the problematic conclusion that migrants self-select in their migration project. The predictive focus of the push/pull theory holds strong even in these updated versions and supports unspoken assumptions that have important implication about migration as an object of research. We particularly refer to the governmental gaze on migration as a problem to be governed and to the methodological nationalism this approach is grounded on. It is under these premises that Migration Studies’ epistemic goal becomes to build a predictive model of migration flows based on the analysis of push and pull factors.

Starting from the 1990s, Critical Migration Studies profiled itself as a discipline exactly against this approach. As Sandro Mezzadra put it in his seminal piece “Right to Escape” (2004) the push/pull theory is part of the “hydraulic models of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... [that] reduce migrations to objective causes, looking for the factors of push out and pull up, and putting a particular emphasis on the naturalized imbalances of the international division of labor” (2004: 269-70). Instead, the Critical Migration Studies’ agenda is concerned with the multi-layered motives, desires, and struggles that underpin the contested politics of migration (Ataç et al 2019; BurrIDGE 2014; Garelli and Tazzioli 2013; Isin 2010; Squire 2010) and distances itself from a deterministic gaze on migration that tends to read immigration “as a response to economic and social malaise” (Papadopolous et al, 2008: 202) and frames migrants as mere respondents in an international mechanism of supply and demand.

For instance, the Autonomy of Migration approach (one of the most significant voices within critical migration studies) expresses this opposition against the push/pull theory by proposing a model that looks at “migratory movements and conflicts in terms that prioritize the subjective practices, the desires, the expectations, and the behaviors of migrants themselves” (2011). In the AoM debate this focus is summarized in opposition to push/pull factors and expressed by the concept of “excess”: “migratory movements are crisscrossed by a set of subjective behaviors, claims, desires, affects, imaginations structurally *exceeding* the «objective» and structural causes which are of course very important in determining them. It is this moment of *excess* which is politically strategic” (5).

By focusing on migrants’ subjectivities (enacted in lived practices, survival strategies and deliberate claims), the Autonomy of Migration theory can be seen as a call against neoclassical theoretical models (economic and demographic), with their tendency to inscribe immigration in relation to ob-

jective factors of “push and pull,” rational choice and economical calculation or to describe immigration as the inevitable consequence of the “world-system”, its structures and the asymmetrical relations between center and periphery. In this epistemic shift (from the objective factors of immigration to the subjectivities that crisscross migratory movements) migrants are staged as a *social movement* and finally subtracted to the hydraulic iconography of flows and the deterministic vocabulary quotas, which the push/pull theory rely on.

As anti-migrant discourse and sentiment steep deeper and deeper into European politics, an epistemological simplification seems also to be taking place. In this context two important goals are overshadowed, i.e., the impelling goals to claim the right of migrants to flee through the Mediterranean and to support the work of actors ensuring they will survive the crossing. Efforts are instead mainly focused on falsifying NGOs pull factor role in a debate where a pro-migrant action seems legitimate only insofar as it does not “pull” migrants in. In the next section we show how the pull factor discourse is problematic and propose an alternative frame to re-instate the contested politics of mobility into the debate about the role of NGOs at sea.

### **The trap of the “pull-factor discourse”**

What are the implications of taking the pull-factor narrative at face value and as a target in the battlefield against the criminalization of NGO rescue at sea? Could a response to states’ politics of migration containment be instead framed on other grounds than the pull factor’s discourse? Opposing the pull-factor argument by bringing evidence about its fallacy might in fact turn into a slippery terrain for three reasons, which are mutually connected to one another. First, the statistics about migrant departures from Libya published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) are only estimates<sup>12</sup> since migrants who die at sea without being spotted by anyone (the so called “ghost shipwrecks”) remain of course uncounted. As part of the important task to defend NGO rescue missions, these statistics are mobilized as the decisive evidence that falsifies the accusation against NGOs. These statistics are mobilized uncritically and taken at face value. By the same token, however, departures’ estimates can be used as evidence of the pull factor influence of NGOs in a discourse that treats estimates as data. In other words, the pull-factor debate might turn into a double-edge sword and end up serving anti-migrant coalitions.

Second, the push-pull logic is deeply inadequate to explain migration dynamics and, in particular, to account for migrants’ desires, and subjective drives that exceed structural economic factors or elements of deterrence (De Genova, 2017; Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010; Mezzadra, 2010; Tazzioli, 2015). Sandro Mezzadra conceptualized the autonomy of migration as a sort of critical response to

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<sup>12</sup> As IOM itself states, “data sets are estimates from IOM, national authorities and media sources” <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.



the push-pull factor theory, by stressing “the tense relations between the autonomous, ‘stubborn’ practices of migrants and the conditions within and against which they take shape” (Mezzadra, 2010). Building on Nikos Papastergiadis’ work, Mezzadra suggested to use the notion of “*turbulence* to grasp the multiplicity of paths and patterns that characterize contemporary global migrations, while also accounting for the unpredictability of changes associated with these movements” (Mezzadra, 2010). The notion of a “turbulence of migration” (Papastergiadis, 2000) undermines the alleged linearity and predictability of migratory movements that underpins the push-pull logics.

A pro-refugees politics predicated on numbers’ evidence and on statistics de facto contributes to flattening migration to a calculable phenomenon and to erase migrants’ subjective drives. More precisely, by accepting the very terms of the accusation (the pull-factor framing) in order to prove it does not apply to NGOs at sea, the processes of *migration abstraction* is enhanced: that is, migrants’ movements, drives and desires are translated into physics’ metaphors (i.e., movements channeled by forces that push and pull). More broadly, such an understanding of migration is at the core of critical migration studies’ disagreement with other epistemic communities’ approach to migration, and particularly with how international actors and migration agencies tend to reduce migrants’ movements and presence into abstract bits of data, as it is clear, for instance, from the maps that agencies such as IOM, Frontex and UNHCR produce.

Yet, in this regard it is worth stressing that even migration agencies have moved beyond the push-pull factor rationale in their visual representations and instead are now producing maps documenting risks (Neal, 2009; Paul, 2017). This is particularly the case of the European Border Surveillance (EUROSUR) Agency’s map, which translates migrants’ presence into risk factors on the basis of their current and future level of governability. Hence, the EUROSUR map generates situational awareness pictures that should represent “migrant pressure” at the external frontiers of Europe in (almost) real time, but it is also a future-oriented map, that is used for predicting and anticipating future migration flows (Tazzioli, Walters, 2016). While the European Commission continues to present migration as a manageable phenomenon, EU official texts constantly point to challenges and pressures which cannot be calculated, and which will partially remain ungovernable as they pertain to the domain of risk management<sup>13</sup>. Ultimately, what does it mean governing through the epistemic of risk? Governing through risk is about seeking to “secure uncertain futures” (Amoore, 2013: 55) and, therefore, managing movements through a probabilistic logic. And yet, the way in which risks and potential threats

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<sup>13</sup> This clearly emerges if we look at the so called “vulnerability assessment” activities conducted by Frontex, that consist in evaluating the level of migrant pressure and risk that member states are exposed to. See “Progress report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration” (2019).

can be secured is never comprehensive or fully predictable, as a margin of unpredictability and unmanageability always persists: “we are asked to make decisions to curb actions, not on the basis of what we know, but on the basis of what we do not know (Aradau, Munster, 2007: 102)<sup>14</sup>.

The knowledge about migration that agencies like Frontex produce is characterized by the predominance of an epistemology of risk over a mechanical understanding of it like in the push-pull model. If we turn our attention from the political discrediting of NGOs in public discourse to the knowledge produced by actors like Frontex, it is noticeable that these agencies’ objectification of the migration phenomenon (with the goal of managing it) is quite distant from a push-pull logic. As Maribel Casas-Cortes and colleagues have aptly pointed out, migration agencies such as the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) have reoriented their migration governmentality strategy away from mere border control and towards migration routes management (Casas-Cortes et al. 2017). The shift from controlling borders conceived as lines towards managing flows across borders (which is central in the vocabulary of Frontex and ICMPD) is connected to the appraisal of the migration phenomenon at large. “Flows” and “routes” can be diverted, channeled, rerouted or anticipated—it is harder, instead, to manage them on the basis of a deterministic push-pull factor rationale. “The unpredictability and randomness of the movements of migrations” Sandro Mezzadra contended “are explicitly assumed as central challenges by the cartographers of the ICMPD” (Mezzadra, 2009: 1)<sup>15</sup>.

This means, first, that there is always a margin, however little, of partial un-governability in any migration management strategy. Second, it means that any governmentality and epistemic rationale is wedded to the idea that migration cannot be fully stopped nor erased as a phenomenon but, rather, needs to be managed, filtered and controlled (Foucault, 2007). Third, and most importantly, demonstrating that the presence of rescue boats at sea does not constitute a pull factor for migrants and does not encourage crossings through the Mediterranean Sea means endorsing the idea that NGO vessels should not act as an incentive and as an active support for migrants. Against this perspective we suggest that, in a time when rescue activities and practices of solidarity are harshly criminalized, more than defending humanitarian interventions as neutral actions apt “only” at saving lives, we could engage in a politicization of migration humanitarianism in opposition to the politics of containment

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Aradau and Munster contend that “for a governmental approach, what counts is not whether terrorism can be controlled or not, but the dispositif that is being deployed to make action upon the contingent occurrence of terrorism thinkable and practicable. Technologies of intervening upon the future are always failing; their failure is, however, part of governmentality” (Aradau, Munster, 2007: 2018). Such an argument is quite helpful, we suggest, for analysis how agencies like Frontex operate.

<sup>15</sup> The I-map is a cartographic tool that the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) deployed to visualize migrant routes from Africa to Europe making estimations about future flows. <https://bluehub.jrc.ec.europa.eu/catalogues/info/dataset/wp00170>

and letting die that states have adopted. This is what we describe in detail in the next section, by gesturing towards turning the pull-factor on its head.

Before discussing this move, however, a clarification is needed: when we invoke the need of “politicizing humanitarianism” we do not mean to suggest in any way that humanitarianism is neutral. On the contrary, as it has been widely shown, humanitarianism is constitutively political and works exactly by enacting hierarchies of humanity (Fassin, 2007; Tictkin, 2005). Hence, the politicization of humanitarianism that we are thinking of here consists in a specific move, i.e., strategically appropriating the non-neutrality of rescue and humanitarian interventions and translating it in the present context as a support to migrants’ obstructed passage. The pro-active politics of containment put into place by the EU, in collaboration with third-countries, has turned the Mediterranean Sea into a “humanitarian battlefield”, i.e., a “space where humanitarian interventions to save lives at sea are obstructed, blocked and discouraged” (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2019). At the same time, the expression “humanitarian battlefield” refers to a space characterized by a multiplication of hindrances and blockages in the access to the channels of asylum and to Europe as such. As Maurice Stierl and Sandro Mezzadra contend “what plays out off the coast of Libya are forms of mass abduction that are not merely tolerated but strategically organized and orchestrated by European governments and [Libya’s] coastguards” (2019).

Within such a context, search and rescue operations *both* save lives at sea and disrupt the politics of migration containment that is implemented by preventing migrants’ safe passages to Europe and taking migrants’ presence off the sight of European citizens and actors. By confining and detaining migrants in Libyan prisons, for instance, their presence as people seeking asylum in Europe is wiped out: the forced geographical distancing of migrants’ presence from the European shores contributes to their physical containment and, together, to the ethical and political dismissal of their quest to international protection.

When we speak of a growing politicization of humanitarianism (also as the outcome of its criminalization) we do not think of humanitarianism as a homogenous referent and mode of intervention. On the contrary, the criminalization of actions in support of the migrants who risk their lives in the Mediterranean should be taken as a lens for highlighting the differences and ruptures within the field of humanitarianism (Fassin, 2017; Fekete, 2017). To be under attack, in fact, are not NGOs in general or international humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross. Rather, those who are under attack are the organizations and groups that do not act in concert with the EU and its member states. In other words, what states are responding to by criminalizing NGOs is not the mere presence of humanitarian actors at sea. Rather, the target of this attack are specific independent actors whose work can be largely labeled as “humanitarian” insofar as it consists in saving lives and supporting migrants’ basic needs. These are actors that have famously refused to comply with restrictions and rules imposed by

the EU and member states to seafarers in the Mediterranean Sea. A case in point is represented by the Code of Conduct<sup>16</sup> for non-state search&rescue missions that the Italian government issued in July 2017 with the goal of obstructing NGOs work as providing support for migrant boats in distress and saving lives at sea. Due to the draconian restrictions and impositions listed in the Code of Conduct<sup>17</sup>, most NGOs refused to sign the Code and, therefore, their presence at sea started to be seen at the edge of the law. Rescuers suddenly appeared as dodgy actors in the Mediterranean who were portrayed as working in collusion with smugglers as part of the logistics of migrants' journeys via sea

If we consider that scholars and, in a different way, also migration agencies have questioned the push-pull logic as an appropriate analytical grid for understanding migration movements, why is this logic re-emerging in the current debate about rescue missions, and why is it entering the debate from the ranks of pro-migrant discourse? A wide consensus around the deep inadequacy and limits of the pull-factor argument is shared by migration scholars (De Genova, Garelli, Tazzioli, 2018; De Haas, 2011; Squire, 2016). At the same time, the official discourse of migration agencies is fundamentally ambivalent: on the one hand, they criminalize and criticize the presence of NGO at sea even as the knowledge they produce about migration has long moved beyond push-pull factors to adopt a framing of migration management in terms of "risk"<sup>18</sup>. The pull-factor debate has become popular again in the aftermath of the first criticisms raised against Operation Mare Nostrum in 2014. In this context, the pressure that independent search and rescue actors were exposed to resulted in a polarization of the debate between those who put state sovereignty before the duty of saving lives at sea, and those who engaged in campaigns for not letting migrants die.

While thousands of women, men and children who seek asylum die at Europe's borders and while humanitarian actors are under attack, claiming our active support and solidarity with migrants is a way of turning the pull-factor discourse on its head. As long as rescuing lives at sea is deemed to be a pernicious activity and humanitarian actions to support migrants appear to states as illegitimate and almost criminal intrusions, we cannot accept to deal with the pull-factor argument, even if this is to prove its untruth. Independent organizations and single individuals should not prove their "innocence" against the accusation of rescuing and ferrying to Europe people seeking asylum. Ultimately, bringing evidence and providing real figures and numbers about migration does not seem to be a successful factor for triggering mobilizations in Europe: the evidence of the migrants blackmailed

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<sup>16</sup> <http://statewatch.org/news/2017/jul/italy-eu-sar-code-of-conduct.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> These include the ban of light signals that can be of help to the migrants; the obligation for humanitarian actors to accept the presence of armed police onboard; the prohibition of transferring rescued migrants to smaller boats in order to disembark them into a safe harbor.

<sup>18</sup> More broadly, agencies such as the ICMPD and Frontex gather information about migrants' routes and strategies of crossing in order to prevent and divert migrants' flows.

and tortured in the Libyan prisons is under our eyes due to the circulation of images, video and media reports. In short, it is not by adding further proofs and data that racism and anti-immigration attitudes in Europe might be tackled.

Or better, while it is definitively important to carry on the battle against fake news by undermining the myth of a “migrants’ invasion” we suggest that this approach should not become the main struggle in a critical migration approach, nor should it become the only lens for building an anti-racist politics. In the place of accepting the terms of the pull-factor debate, we can draw attention to the violent politics of migration containment and look at independent search and rescue actors as attempts to disrupt this latter. In a time when rescue operations are criminalized and migrants are hampered from claiming asylum, independent humanitarian support to migrants has been highly politicized and appears as a factor that troubles EU member states. Thus, it is not only a question of demanding to save migrants at sea; the active support to migrants’ movements and access to refuge is part of the laborious work for crafting an anti-racist politics which opposes the inequalities among lives.

### **Turning the pull-factor on its head**

The pitfalls of discourses centered on (and against) the pull-factor narrative should be situated within a broader regime of knowledge production that is widespread today both in academic and in non-academic analyses about the so called “refugee crisis”. Indeed, the paramount focus on the pull-factor narrative in the media (whether used to verify or falsify NGOs’ role in attracting migrants) is telling, we contend, of the current politics of knowledge on migration. The exponential border violence at the frontiers of Europe tends to be approached in terms as a battle between truth and fake news and as the effort to produce evidence against false claims — and this tends to be a constant among the many epistemic communities that contribute knowledge on migration (Garelli et al. 2015). This cumulative process (consisting in the collection of the broadest possible multiplicity of evidences of border violence and of violations of the international law perpetrated) has become one of the main heuristic through which a critical approach to issues of migration, borders and deaths is implemented. However, as we have shown in the paper, an epistemic of migration built on the quest for evidence fails to craft a counter-narrative that is not just reactive but could, rather, be transformative. Crafting a counter-narrative in a time when a rhetorical “race to the bottom” ends up focusing on the pull factor as a foil, means generating a relatively autonomous discursive terrain, not fully dependent on the terms imposed by state actors and policy makers — hence, turning the pull factor on its head, as it were. So, what does it mean to turn the argument based on the pull-factor on its head? How might critical migration scholarship engage with the debate against the criminalization of NGO rescue mission without replicating the push/pull governmental logic?

First, countering the argument that NGOs are a pull factor by proving evidence of the pull factor groundlessness legitimizes these terms of the debate and finally results in a governmental approach to migration, preoccupied with predicting and managing migration flows. Instead, a critical knowledge of migration and borders involves to constantly undo the governmental gaze on migration. Second, on an epistemological level accepting the discursive terrain of the push-pull argument (even if to criticize that NGOs act as a pull factor) ultimately means contributing to *abstracting* migration and framing knowledge production about migration in terms of *bringing evidence*. We propose that critical migration and border scholarship should rather turn to a discourse which replaces the “race to the bottom” - centered on saving black bodies at sea (De Genova, 2019) - towards an account of how hierarchies of movements and desires are constantly reproduced. About this point it is important to underline that the epistemology of “bringing evidence” and “evidencing” may play an important role as a tool to record and archive the traces of the violence that is currently happening at the external borders of Europe — both in terms of the multifarious ways in which border violence play out and the heterogeneous ways in which migrants struggle at the borders.

Third, on a more directly political level, we suggest that in a time when NGOs are criminalized for rescuing migrants at sea and independent actors are accused of collision with smuggling for supporting migrants and not letting them die, humanitarianism could be strategically mobilized as a political terrain. While by politicization of humanitarianism authors have mainly referred to the cooperation between state and non-state actors or to the hierarchies of humanity enforced by it, we can reframe it in a different direction and show how some (and not all) humanitarian actors and interventions operate as a logistical mobile support in solidarity with migrants.

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