



Blog

# THE CASE OF LAMPEDUSA: A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE MIDST OF A DILEMMA BETWEEN EU SOLIDARITY AND STATES' SOVEREIGNTY

---

Nicolas Rouillard

December 2023

## About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.



Co-funded by  
the European Union



On September 12th, 2023, an overwhelming influx of 6,000 individuals, primarily mothers and children, descended upon the small Italian island of Lampedusa in less than 24 hours. This surge marked a significant uptick, with a total of 10,000 people arriving on the island since the beginning of September. A few days later during her press release, Ursula Von der Leyen stressed the EU's determination to exert control over who enters the EU and under what conditions, citing the persistent issue of smugglers and traffickers breaching border security.

The Lampedusa crisis has illuminated internal divisions and vulnerabilities within the EU on matters of migration and solidarity. It underscores that security concerns are prevailing over humanitarian ones. While countries like Italy advocate for enhanced solidarity in managing the influx of immigrants among the Member states, others, like Poland, express hesitance towards this policy.

This surge in number of arrivals to Europe from the Mediterranean Sea follows a tumultuous summer for countries of EU's neighborhood. Adding to the ongoing catastrophe in Syria, Libya grappled with deadly floods, Tunisia faced economic instability and migrant rights violations, and Morocco endured earthquakes. Faced with these natural disasters and economic challenges, individuals have limited lawful options, often resorting to illicit border crossings due to strict legal constraints. Following the [rise of arrivals into southern Europe](#), especially through Lampedusa, various stakeholders such as EU representatives, head of governments and local communities, have spoken up about the situation in the island while characterizing it in very different light.

EU Commission, as reflected in von der Leyen's address, perceive it as a migration crisis, leading it to introduce a 10-point plan focused on strengthening support and cooperation with Frontex. Italian Prime Minister Meloni, however, frames it as a "threat to the future of Europe," with an emphasis on security concerns. In contrast, Giusi Nicolini, the former Mayor of Lampedusa, highlights the

humanitarian dimension of the crisis, emphasizing the need to prioritize basic needs and civil protection over reinforcing border controls. Another recent example is Elon Musk's tweet questioning whether the German population supported a German NGO rescuing migrants at sea close to Libya and bringing them to Italy, calling it "human trafficking". The German foreign office responded affirmatively, emphasizing that it's fundamentally about saving lives, while for instance, French Minister of Interior, Gerald Darmanin, stated that France would not accept migrants from Lampedusa but would aid Italy in relocating them to Africa, raising questions about the country's willingness to participate in the asylum process. This difference in focus, both among government officials and the public, has led to questions about the coherence of European solidarity

While we are witnessing strengthened unity within the EU in the past years, these different commentaries show that EU's unity remains fragile in terms of migration policy, particularly regarding the reception of new asylum seekers. The primary focus often centers around issues of identity and security rather than humanitarian aid, despite the legal obligation under International Law to assist people and ships in distress at sea.

This crisis spotlights the limitations of current European regulations and laws, prompting calls for reevaluation. Presently, seeking asylum is only possible upon arrival in a safe country. The absence of established legal pathways and safe routes compels individuals to embark on perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea which demonstrates the difficulty to find common ground on migration due to divergent opinions.

Moreover, it's crucial to emphasize the significance of regional collaboration in the Mediterranean area. An illustrative example is the EUMed9 Summit held in Malta on September 29th, where prominent Mediterranean leaders, including those

from France, Italy, and Greece, convened to address the ongoing migration crisis in the Mediterranean Sea.

However, the most pivotal aspect lies in the European Union's approach, particularly with regards to the new Pact on Asylum and Migration. The forthcoming Pact, planned for a vote in early 2024, represents a pivotal juncture. Its success depends on member states' willingness to dedicate both effort and resources, further highlighting the vital role of voluntary cooperation in shaping EU policies. This pact holds the potential to instigate substantial changes in the management of migration across Europe.

The main discussion revolves around altering the Dublin Rule, which stipulated that an EU country must handle asylum seekers under the first arrival concept, meaning they would be held in charge of each person entering the EU through their territory. However, this rule has shown its limitations, as most migrants enter the EU through the Mediterranean routes, arriving mostly to Italy, Greece, or Spain. Thus, the currently proposed solidarity mechanism aims to distribute migrants, acknowledging that only a few countries bear the responsibility for processing asylum applications. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that participation in this mechanism will not be obligatory, contingent on each country's willingness to demonstrate solidarity. This could potentially lead to no change at all.

Maintaining the status quo would only make it more challenging for Mediterranean countries to independently manage the escalating migration flows in the coming decades, spurred by the impacts of global warming. Finally, the EU should contemplate adopting a more humanitarian stance on migration. This could involve prioritizing the creation of common assistance initiatives and establishing frameworks that ensure safer avenues for refugees to seek asylum, rather than engaging in debates about the allocation of responsibility for managing migrants.