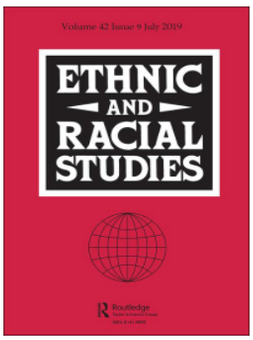

Article:
Stierl, M. and Dadusc, D. (2022) The "Covid excuse": EUropean border violence in the Mediterranean Sea. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 45 (8). pp. 1453-1474. ISSN 0141-9870

https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1977367



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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rers20

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To cite this article: Maurice Stierl & Deanna Dadusc (2021): The "Covid excuse": EUropean border violence in the Mediterranean Sea, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2021.1977367

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1977367

Published online: 06 Oct 2021.

ETHNIC AND RACIAL STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1977367

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The "Covid excuse": EUropean border violence in the Mediterranean Sea

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ABSTRACT

This article examines developments along the central Mediterranean border, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in EUrope. In response to the pandemic, EU member states enacted emergency legislation, further curtailing movements across borders. Italy and Malta declared their harbours "unsafe" for migrant arrivals, withdrew rescue operations, and installed offshore detention facilities. Though ostensibly enacted in the name of "saving lives", these measures had the opposite effect. The article assesses how border violence has become justified by reference to the pandemic, what we call the "Covid excuse". We highlight how people on the move were subjected to both biopolitical and necropolitical modalities of control through pushbacks, offshore containment and abandonment. Instead of being exceptional, we argue, these measures must be situated in longer continuities of EUropean border violence. We also discuss how people on the move are not only shaped by racialized border violence but enact fugitive practices of resistance.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 26 March 2021; Accepted 27 August 2021

KEYWORDS Covid-19; European borders; migration; Mediterranean Sea; border struggles

Introduction

"I can't breathe" has become a powerful slogan in the *Black Lives Matter* movement in light of the suffocation of Eric Garner by police forces in New York in 2014 and of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020, both of whom uttered these words before dying. During a global pandemic, the slogan "we can't breathe" has taken on another literal meaning: the inability to breathe due to a Covid-19 infection and the lack of access to ventilators and other protection equipment for large parts of the population, in particular marginalized and racialized communities. The inability to breathe is also a

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known phenomenon in the context of precarious forms of Mediterranean migration, with thousands of people drowning over the last years. In the Mediterranean context, violent policing, the racialized effects of Covid-19, and migrant drowning have coalesced during the pandemic. Since spring 2020, and in the name of combatting the pandemic, a range of violent policing measures have been introduced at EUrope's maritime borders that have targeted racialized people "on the move" and have worsened the already devastating situation in the central Mediterranean region.

Soon after the Covid-19 pandemic reached Europe,[1] EU member states began to enact measures to curtail trans-border mobility, into and within the union. The mobilization of what we refer to as the "Covid excuse", has exacerbated existing political, economic, or social disparities along axes of race and citizenship (Laster Pirtle and Wright 2021), including the divergent ability to move across borders (Solomos 2021; Reynolds 2020), with border control efforts becoming portrayed as protective measures safeguarding the health of the EUropean community. Narratives framing migrants as criminals or (potential) terrorists shifted to their portrayal as virus carriers, and thus as a threat to public health. This racialized portrayal of migrants crossing the Mediterranean as both potential carriers and victims of Covid-19 has legitimized violent border practices and reinforced processes of border militarization and securitization, leading to grave human rights violations and instances of mass drowning. By declaring their harbours as "unsafe" for migrant disembarkation, by impeding non-governmental Search and Rescue (SAR) actors from rescuing, and by strengthening ties with Libyan authorities, Malta and Italy have further enlarged the existing "rescue gap" in the central Mediterranean Sea. In addition, they have produced a floating carceral regime (Stierl 2021), both within and outside their territorial waters, with quarantine ships becoming extra-juridical spaces which were in effect curtailing access and the right to asylum.

Our article assesses the "Covid excuse", thus the ways in which EU member states have justified and implemented violent border enforcement practices in the central Mediterranean Sea in the name of protection and care of both EU citizens and, paradoxically, of migrants themselves. Racialized practices targeting migrant lives, including through forms of expulsion, containment, and abandonment, have escalated over the first year of the pandemic. Yet, although these practices occur during a global pandemic, we also make the case that they need to be situated in longer continuities of EUropean border enforcement, thereby constituting an acceleration of, rather than an exception to, pre-existing border strategies. Therefore, while the violent border enforcement practices we outline may appear, at first sight, as exceptional measures during exceptional times, we make the case that they need to be situated in a continuum and history of border violence in the Mediterranean Sea.

This article draws from first-hand experiences we have made in support of people trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea on precarious boats and in documenting violent border enforcement practices. Besides focusing on questions of migration and borders in our scholarly work (see Dadusc 2019; Stierl 2019), we are members of the *WatchTheMed Alarm Phone* network, a project that runs a hotline for migrants in distress at sea. Since its foundation in October 2014, this network has assisted over 3,700 boats and thereby become directly implicated in the political struggles over migration and its governance that play out in one of the world's deadliest borderzones. Not least since all but one of the SAR NGOs were prohibited by EU member states from rescuing in the Mediterranean Sea over the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, exchanges between distressed migrants and the Alarm Phone have proven pivotal to gain rare glimpses into the realities of Mediterranean migration and its control. The materials discussed in this article are based on collective forms of documentation, with Alarm Phone activists mapping distress cases and collecting testimonies of survivors. Such documentation work has played a crucial role in the legal and political challenges of EU border violence. Besides this empirical material, we draw on reports provided by NGOs and international organizations, media sources, as well as government statements and documents.

Part I of this article situates the article in existing scholarship, including in the interconnected fields of migration and border studies, security studies, border criminology and political geography. We point to the significance of Foucault's concept of governmentality across these fields in highlighting the diffusion of contemporary borders and their biopolitical "management", while also pointing to the increasing entanglement of biopolitical and necropolitical modalities of control and violence in "Covid times" and in deadly spaces such as the Mediterranean Sea. Part II explores the bio-necropolitical measures taken at EUrope's external borders in light of the spread of the Covid-19. In three sub-sections, we focus on particular practices that have escalated at the Mediterranean border: forms of (a) migrant expulsion, (b) containment, and (c) disappearance/abandonment. Part III discusses how these escalations, though portrayed as emergency measures responding to an exceptional health crisis, need to be regarded within a continuum of European border violence. We argue that the "Covid excuse" has been weaponized to justify and normalize border violence, shifting anti-migrant rhetoric from a threat to public order to a threat to public health, expelling or confining migrants in the name of protecting EU citizens from potential virus carriers, as well as, letting racialized people on the move die in the name of saving (EU citizens') lives. In this way, both Covid-19 related deaths and deaths at the border that have resulted from Covid-19 restrictions are an integral part of a regime that

functions through a continuum of biopolitical and necropolitical configurations of violence and control.

Bio-necropolitical border violence

The Mediterranean border zone has received considerable attention over the past decade, especially since the turmoil of the Arab Uprisings "re-opened" the central Mediterranean corridor in 2011, leading to increased migrant crossings. Scholars in migration and border studies have highlighted forms of structural, colonial, and racialized violence that underpin EUropean border enforcement practices (Isakjee et al. 2020; Mainwaring 2019; Mayblin 2017; Squire 2020; Cuttitta 2017) while security studies scholarship has highlighted the changing modalities of migration "management" and maritime "borderwork" (Rumford, 2008; Walters 2011; Vaughan-Williams 2015; Tazzioli 2020) with an increased focus on the lethal effects of the criminalization and illegalization of border crossing (Pallister-Wilkins, Cuttitta, and Häberlein 2020). In particular, studies in the fields of border criminology (Weber and Pickering 2011; Aas and Bosworth 2013; Canning 2019; Mann 2016), and political geography have drawn attention to the increasing intersection between migration control and punitive technologies, with particular focus on the carceral spaces that have multiplied in the governing of migration, which point to the emergence of novel carceral geographies (Maillet, Mountz, and Williams 2018; Mountz 2020).

Across these fields, Foucault's concept of governmentality has proven useful for departing from state-centric views on border control and in order to grasp the emergence of governmental border regimes (Hess and Kasparek 2017) that are not organized through a clear hierarchy but a coming-together of diverse actors, technologies, knowledges, and rationales. Such diffuse "management" of borders and migration (Geiger and Pécoud 2010) implicates heterogeneous actors and has also prompted the EUropean border to become increasingly deterritorialized, offshored, and externalized (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Ould Moctar 2020; Frowd 2021). What underpins many of these governmental accounts is Foucault's (2003, 137) conception of biopolitical power that, rather than excluding and oppressing, "exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations".

Unlike disciplinary or sovereign modes of power, biopolitics is usually associated with a "decorporealization of violence" (Bargu, 2014, 58), with populations being governed through the "art of conducting, directing, leading, guiding, taking in hand, and manipulating" (Foucault 2009, 165). Considering the deadly violence that can be continuously observed along contemporary borders, some recent scholarship has responded "to the inadequacy of biopolitics to conceptualize the more extreme cases of body

regulation" (Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi, 2017, 1267). Mbembe's (2019, 12, 39–40) concept of necropolitics, which allows to conceive of the subjugation of (some) "life to the power of death" and the creation of "death worlds", has found wide currency, with scholars highlighting not only forms of necropolitical subjugation but also the often intimate relationship between bio- and necropolitics, that can give rise to a "bio-necro enforcement" of borders (Williams, 2015, 18).

In "Covid times", the relationship between biopolitical and necropolitical modalities of control and violence appear to have become ever-more entangled, with biopolitical rationales of preserving lives and managing their health serving as reasons to justify necropolitical practices: killing and abandoning. In the Mediterranean Sea, as we go on to show, racialized migrant bodies have become subjected to forced immobility and forced mobility through both biopolitical and necropolitical border enforcement measures (Browne 2015). In this article, we explore "economies of violence that are simultaneously necropolitical and biopolitical" (Tazzioli and De Genova 2020), and add needed empirical detail from the Mediterranean context to ongoing scholarly discussions on racialized forms of "organized abandonment alongside organized violence" (Gilmore 2007).

The Covid-19 pandemic and escalations in the Mediterranean Sea

In times of a global pandemic, human movements have turned into an object of restriction and control. The battle against the pandemic has coincided with a battle against human movement, prompting reconfigurations in the governance of human mobilities at local, regional and international levels. With the figures of those afflicted by the virus rapidly rising in Spring 2020, EU member states began to impose restrictions on cross-border movements within the Schengen Area and further securitized the external borders of the union. In mid-March 2020, with EUrope turning into the "epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic", the European Commission (2020) recommended travel restrictions aiming at reducing arrivals at the EU external borders, characterizing the external borders "as a security perimeter for all Schengen States".

In the name of countering the spread of Covid-19 and of preventing a further escalation of the health emergency, the securitization of EUrope's already heavily securitized border was recommended not merely to curtail the "import" of the contagious virus, but also to return to free mobility within the Schengen Area. The narrative quickly shifted from the need to limit internal and external mobility of citizens, workers, and tourists to prevent the spread of the virus, to conflations of cross border mobility with migration. Referring to the battle against the virus as a "war", several EU state leaders suggested that only exceptional restrictions on migration

would be able to sustain the public's well-being and avoid a collapse of health systems and the economy. Most explicitly, Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán (in Heller 2020) stated: "We are fighting a two-front war, one front is called migration, and the other one belongs to the coronavirus, there is a logical connection between the two, as both spread with movement".

According to Charles Heller (2020), rather than serving public health interests in slowing the spread of the virus, border closures have had a symbolic and performative function of state power, giving rise to "sanitary apartheid" where parts of the global population were allegedly kept "safe" at the expenses of illegalized travellers from the Global South. In this way, the Covid-19 pandemic serves as an *excuse* to normalize the deaths of racialized people on the move people (Benjamin 2020). In the central Mediterranean context, both the Italian and Maltese governments have conflated measures against the virus with those against precarious migration, leading to a convergence of racialized border enforcement measures and racialized Covid-related measures.

On 7 April 2020, the Italian government announced the closure of its harbours to migrants through an emergency decree, suggesting that Italy could not be considered a Place of Safety (POS) anymore, given the spread of the pandemic within the country. Two days later, the Maltese government followed suit, declaring its harbours "unsafe" and stating that migrants could no longer disembark due to the risk of worsening the pandemic and draining important resources needed to counter its spread within Malta. Even though, at that time, merely one Covid-19-related death had been recorded in Malta, the government considered itself "not in a position to guarantee the rescue of prohibited immigrants on board of any boats, ships or other vessels, nor to ensure the availability of a 'safe place' on the Maltese territory to any persons rescued at sea" (Government of Malta 2020). Despite these declarations by the Italian and Maltese governments, people continued to flee Libya across the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, with about 34,000 people arriving in Italy and Malta in 2020, figures of migrant arrivals more than doubled in comparison with figures of the year prior (UNHCR 2021a).

In light of continuous maritime crossings and arrivals on EUropean shores, Malta and Italy have resorted to unprecedented acts of violence, condoned by other EU member states and institutions who held back public critique. In what follows, we highlight three bio-necropolitical border enforcement measures enacted by the Maltese and Italian authorities throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. First, we will focus on practices of migrant *expulsion*, by discussing the so-called "Easter push-back" that took place in April 2020. Second, we turn to forms of migrant *containment* in floating carceral camps, which included the installation of so-called quarantine vessels by Italy and private offshore detention facilities by Malta. Third, we discuss the

increase in *abandonment* at sea and invisibilization of shipwrecks off Libya, the consequence of an ever-expanding "rescue gap" in the Mediterranean Sea. We contend that the fact that people on the move are being expelled, contained and abandoned at sea is not a matter of fate or a lack of resource but the intended consequence of a bio-necropolitical regime that EUrope has emerged in the Mediterranean. Throughout our analysis, we emphasize how this regime is also resisted and contested, and the significance of counter-narratives produced by migrant survivors, whose testimonies have been crucial factors in exposing the violence and crimes that the EU border regime attempts to hide.

Migrant expulsions

In the night between 9 and 10 April 2020, sixty three people, including eight women and three children, sought to escape the Libyan war and the violence of its migrant detention centres. Despite having applied for asylum in Libya through the UNHCR, many of them had been abandoned in camps for up to three years, during which they experienced torture and abuse. Their only means of escape was an overcrowded dinghy that they hoped would bring them to EUrope. Less than twenty-four hours after leaving the Libyan shore, the sixty three people found themselves in distress in international waters and called the Alarm Phone with their satellite phone, reporting that their rubber dinghy was embarking water and that they needed help urgently. The Alarm Phone immediately alerted the coastguards of Malta and Italy, as well as the so-called Libyan coastguards. However, none of the authorities confirmed that they would initiate any rescue procedures.

Hours later, the Libyan authorities stated in a phone conversation with the Alarm Phone that, due to the pandemic, there would be no rescue operation: "The Libyan Coastguard now only does coordination work because of Covid-19. We can't do any rescue action, but we are in contact with Italy and Malta". Whilst the situation on board turned increasingly critical, the dinghy slowly continued north and reached the Maltese SAR zone around midday of Sunday 12 April. After a final desperate phone call that afternoon, Alarm Phone activists lost contact to the people in distress. Days later, eight women who had been on board the rubber boat, reached out to the activists once more. This time not from a boat at risk of capsizing but a Libyan detention centre. By secretly using a hidden phone in the Tarik Al Sikka detention centre, the women sent several voice messages to the Alarm Phone and other human rights activists. In these clandestine messages, the women carefully reconstructed their maritime journey.

Only through these testimonies of survivors could the whole dimension of the tragedy be grasped: twelve people had drowned or died of thirst while fifty one survivors had been illegally returned to Libya by a private vessel deployed in secret by the Maltese government. The women said:

> We are eight women in this place. We are all trembling. We were at sea for about seven days. We were picked up on the seventh day and we were hopeful. However, we were deported back to Libya without being told anything. We returned to Libya and we're back locked up in Sikka again. We have returned to the place where we found no hope in the first place. Our throats were so dry that we had no choice but to drink sea water. What made us lose hope further was seeing helicopters fly over us and not helping when we were left stranded at sea because the boat was out of fuel. (Survivor's testimony)

According to their testimonies, three people had drowned when a merchant vessel passed their boat but failed to rescue them. Desperately trying to attract attention, three men swam toward it but quickly disappeared in the high waves and the vessel left, without providing assistance. According to survivors, four others died in the following hours either due to the lack of water and food, or when they jumped into the sea out of despair. The Armed Forces of Malta, after failing to act for days, spotted the boat via an aerial asset in the night between 13 and 14 April.

> [An] airplane came to us and go to [inaudible]. We know that is an airplane of Malta, we know it. So when it came to take a photo and then it went back very soon […] to call a boat to come to rescue us. And then when a boat was rescuing […] the airplane was [inaudible] up. Even it opened the light and looking for us. (Survivor's testimony)

During that night, the Libyan-flagged fishing vessel *Dar Al Salaam* left Valletta harbour, approached the rubber boat in distress, and took the fifty six survivors on board. Even though the Maltese authorities had instructed the fishing vessel to intervene, it did not belong to the Armed Forces of Malta. "They told us that they were not the real rescuers", one of the survivors said, "that they only rescued us because they real rescuers did not want to rescue us".

Although the distressed migrants could have been disembarked at the closest port of Lampedusa within an hour, they were returned to Libya, 150 nautical miles south. This forced return implicated not only Maltese but also Italian authorities as they had been alerted to the situation as well and could have provided assistance, despite the boat's location in Malta SAR. Indeed, given the proximity to Lampedusa, the Italian authorities could have guaranteed the quickest disembarkation at a place of safety. Facing allegations of failure to render assistance, the Italian authorities declared the incident a "state secret" and refused to release documentation, as such disclosure of information could compromise Italy's diplomatic relations with Malta and Libya.[2] During the long journey to Libya on the *Dar Al Salaam*, five migrants died as no water and food were provided. On 15 April, fifty one survivors and five corpses arrived at Tripoli harbour and the survivors were detained in the Tarik Al Sikka detention centre, infamous for its inhuman conditions.[3]

Migrant offshore containment

Despite escalating attempts of EU member states to push migrant boats back to Libya during the Covid-19 crisis, hundreds of people continued to attempt reaching EUrope from the Libyan and Tunisian coasts. In response, new forms of offshore containment have emerged, including through the installation of private ferries off the coast of Malta, and vessels supposedly functioning as quarantine centres off Italy. Restrictions on disembarkation also affected merchant vessels and NGO assets who had engaged in SAR operations, turning them into temporary offshore holding facilities. In this section, we discuss these forms of maritime containment, focussing first on developments off Malta's and then off Italy's coast.

In April and May 2020, the UNHCR documented the arrival of merely 138 people in Malta. This low figure was the result of a novel strategy developed by the Maltese government in order to enforce its closed harbour policy: the incarceration of hundreds of migrants offshore. For weeks, about 425 migrants were held in offshore detention on board of chartered *Captain Morgan* tourist ferries. These were not quarantine ships but floating camps outside Maltese territorial waters, explicitly used to deny the rescued a place of safety on Maltese territory, and to pressurize the EU to relocate the migrants elsewhere. A banner demanding "European Solidarity" was placed on one of the ferries and a government spokesperson argued: "Malta's position remains very clear. Our ports are closed. Now it's up to the European Union to shoulder responsibility and show solidarity towards these illegal migrants" (Times of Malta 2020a).

On board the privately-owned ferries, some of the detainees found a way to contact the Alarm Phone, reporting of hunger strikes and suicide attempts in their "water prison", and passing on an image showing a person overboard: "We are now in a deplorable situation […] anxiety, hopelessness and depression increased". Denying such reports, the Maltese government suggested that "every possible care" was provided to those on board (Times of Malta 2020b). Although not specifically introduced as an anti-Covid-19 measure at the time, Malta's prime minister used the "Covid excuse" afterwards, in a letter sent to Amnesty International (2020, 12):

> Ferry boats were used as a quarantine area, during the period that the Closed and Open Centres [for reception of asylum-seekers and migrants] were subject to considerable pressure due to the influx in arrivals. […] Once the period of quarantine elapsed, on the 6th June 2020, the migrants disembarked in Malta and the asylum process initiated immediately.

Given that the routine Covid-19 quarantine period of two weeks was significantly exceeded, and that, as Amnesty International notes, "no end date was ever set for the detention of the rescued people and no legal grounds [were] ever articulated", the measures by the Maltese government constituted "an

unlawful deprivation of liberty". On 6 June 2020, after about five weeks and following protests on board, the offshored detainees were finally allowed to disembark. The Maltese government, seeking to shift the focus away from its unlawful actions, was quick to accuse the imprisoned of having staged riots, threatening crew members. Malta's offshore detention practices, which had cost 1.7 million Euro, mostly spent on security guards, prompted the condemnation from international organizations and NGOs and led to legal challenges (Aditus 2020).

Besides the deployment of floating prisons to keep migrants from reaching Malta, the Maltese government denied merchant vessels that had rescued migrants the permission to disembark. Among them was the *Talia*, a livestock carrier that had rescued fifty two peoples in July 2020 after being alerted by the Alarm Phone. Despite the request of the Maltese Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC) to assist the people at sea, and despite appeals of *Talia*'s captain Mohammad Shaaban to EUropean authorities to permit disembarkation, the merchant vessel was not allowed to land. Only in light of mounting public pressure, the Maltese authorities gave in after five days and allowed the *Talia* to disembark the rescued. A similar, but much longer, stand-off near Malta's coast occurred in August 2020. After rescuing twenty seven migrants off the coast of Libya, following an alert by the Alarm Phone, the chemical tanker *Etienne* stranded off Malta's coast for over five weeks. Believing that the Maltese authorities could be convinced to allow disembarkation through dialogue, *Etienne*'s company Maersk Tankers was initially unwilling to seek public attention. However, relatives of the detained did. On day 23 of the stand-off, the brother of one of the migrants on board sent a plea to the public after reaching out to the Alarm Phone (2020b): "Please, let my brother Osman and the other twenty six refugees disembark in Malta, let them free! It is a matter of humanity to give all of them access to a safe place and to their right of Asylum!" With the Maltese government unyielding, the stand-off was only ended after a record thirty eight days when the non-governmental rescue vessel *Mare Jonio* trans-shipped the migrants to Italy.[4]

Five days after closing the harbours on 7 April 2020, also the Italian government installed offshore facilities to quarantine migrants who had arrived on the Italian shores autonomously or who had been rescued by NGO rescuers. Private cruise vessels such as the *Rubattino, Azzurra, Allegra* and *Moby Zazà* were repurposed into floating camps. The extraordinary measure was justified as a way to protect local communities and implement new forms of "health surveillance" of migrants. Several human rights organizations denounced the conditions on these ships and the isolation imposed on people who had just survived a traumatizing sea journey and previously experienced harrowing forms of confinement in Libya (Borderline Sicilia 2020). The Italian government was accused also of failing to ensure adequate

access to health care and to asylum procedures. Moreover, those contained on quarantine ships were cut off from the outside world and not given access to phones, thereby prevented both from notifying relatives of the fact they had survived the sea crossing and from documenting and denouncing their situation in offshore confinement. Nonetheless, the tragic consequences of Italy's offshore confinement became soon visible.

In May, Bilal Ben Messaud, a 28-year-old from Tunisia died after jumping from the *Mobi Zaza* vessel in an attempt to swim ashore (ADIF 2020a, 2020b). In September, Abdallah Said, a 17-year-old from Somalia, died of Tuberculosis after an emergency evacuation from the *Azzurra*. In October, the 15-year-old Abdou Diakite from the Ivory Coast, whose body showed torture marks from his time in Libya, died of several health complications after being detained on the *Allegra*. In the same month, at least ten people jumped overboard from the *Azzurra*, with one person going missing, assumed to have drowned (ADIF 2020c). Whilst none of these deaths were due to a Covid-19 infection, all of them were the direct result of Covid-related forms of offshore confinement.

Besides private ships, also NGO rescue assets were turned into places of confinement. With EUropean authorities denying SOS Mediterranée's *Ocean Viking* the permission to disembark in July 2020, the NGO declared a state of emergency and requested the emergency evacuation of forty four rescued migrants who were at risk of committing suicide (SOS Mediterranée 2020a). During the standoff, two migrants jumped overboard, one person attempted suicide, and two others initiated a hunger strike to protest their confinement. As the crew wrote in their press release: "A ship at sea is not a safe place for survivors who have just endured a near-death experience on an unseaworthy dinghy in distress". Only after an eleven-day-long stand-off and three days after the state of emergency was declared, disembarkation was granted and the rescued transferred to a quarantine ship regardless of the fact that they had all been tested negative for Covid-19 (SOS Mediterranée 2020b, 2020c). Offshore standoffs have occurred several times since. For example, in September 2020, when the *Open Arms* was forced to wait off the coast of Palermo, resulting in seventy migrants jumping overboard in desperation.

Migrant abandonment and disappearance

Throughout 2020, and particularly since spring when Covid-19 mobility restrictions were enacted by EU member states in the name of public health, dozens of migrant boats capsized, and hundreds of people disappeared in the central Mediterranean Sea. While many of these shipwrecks were known to authorities, not least as they engaged in extensive aerial surveillance operations off the Libyan coast or were alerted to capsizing boats by

Alarm Phone, mass deaths and disappearances were nonetheless silenced in public, with authorities regularly refusing to release evidence. During the pandemic, an already existing "rescue gap" in the Mediterranean was enlarged through both the withdrawal of EU assets from the deadliest area of the sea and the systematic blocking of NGO rescue efforts by EUropean authorities.

Over the past year, Malta in particular has reduced its SAR efforts dramatically. While about 1,700 migrants were disembarked in the first half of 2020 (UNHCR 2021a), merely 582 reached Malta in the second half. This decreasing trend has continued in 2021, with merely 147 people reaching Malta over the first five months. While sea arrivals have increased in Italy, from about 11,500 in 2019 to about 34,150 in 2020, the Italian authorities have equally reduced the frequency and operational area of rescue activities. As the UNHCR (2020) notes: "Only approximately 4,500 of those arriving by sea in 2020 had been rescued by authorities or NGOs on the high seas: the others were intercepted by the authorities close to shore or arrived undetected". Moreover, of these 4,500 individuals, about 3,700 were rescued by NGO vessels, in particular from June 2020 onward, when some were able to return to the sea. These figures point to a dramatic withdrawal of Maltese and Italian state vessels from rescue operations, thereby widening the already-existing rescue gap. In consequence, migrant boats have to travel much further in order to be rescued, or to arrive autonomously. While about 12,000 people were unable to escape Libya in this way and were forcibly returned in 2020, many others have died or disappeared somewhere in this Mediterranean rescue vacuum.

Besides the withdrawal of state assets from SAR operations, the continued attempt to prevent civil rescuers from engaging at sea has also contributed to the widening rescue gap. After the strictest Covid-19 restrictions were lifted and some civil assets started to resume their missions over the summer of 2020, they faced both administrative harassment and obstructions, ostensibly for "health and safety" reasons. For example, in July 2020, after allowing the disembarkation of the *Ocean Viking*, Italian authorities confiscated the vessel, suggesting that it "has been carrying more persons than the number certified according to the Cargo Ship Safety Equipment Certificate" (SOS Mediterranée 2020c). Despite Italy's systematic withdrawal from rescue operations, and its role in amplifying health risks on NGO vessels by denying quick disembarkation, the reason for blocking civil rescue was thus framed as a supposed failure to meet safety standards. Similarly, the *Sea-Watch3* was confiscated also in July for carrying too many life-vests on board, and the *Sea-Watch4* was impounded in August for carrying a number of people that exceeded "the total number of persons for which life-saving appliances can be provided on the ship" (MSF 2020). Italian authorities, blurring the differentiation between "passengers" and "shipwrecked persons", punished civil rescuers

for rescuing too many people. As Sea-Watch stated in a press release: "legitimate procedures and maritime law are being weaponized by the Italian authorities to stop search and rescue activities" (MSF 2020).

Deaths at sea and their invisibilization have been the most disastrous consequence of the "Covid excuse" and the ever-growing rescue gap in the central Mediterranean Sea. In a context in which EUropean authorities have withdrawn rescue assets and obstructed civil society's attempts to fill this vacuum, shipwrecks have occurred that were never officially documented by states or international organizations, therefore substantially exceeding the estimate of 735 deaths in 2020 in the central Mediterranean (UNHCR 2021b). Whilst most bodies disappear at sea without being searched for, the few that wash up along the Libyan shores may feature in statistics on the deadliness of the Euro-African maritime border, but often remain unidentified and unnamed.[5] In our maritime engagement with the Alarm Phone, we have frequently received requests from family members and friends of the disappeared to search for the missing. Without the testimonies of shipwreck survivors, or of relatives and friends of the missing, many of the necropolitical actions and inactions of EUropean and Libyan authorities would have never been reconstructed. In collaboration with survivors and relatives, some shipwrecks and the identities of the missing could be documented, including the large-scale shipwreck off the coast of Libya on 9 February 2020, when ninety one people drowned (Alarm Phone 2021b).

Particularly after Spring 2020, in light of an increase in officially unaccounted shipwrecks, testimonies of survivors and attempts by relatives, friends, and activists to find the missing have become crucial. By countering the imposition of silence on disappeared migrants, such alliance of survivors, relatives, and activists seeks to also counter the invisibilization of EUrope's violent role in, and responsibility for, the production of the Mediterranean death zone. Through collaborations with relatives and survivors, the Alarm Phone has been able to document at least fifteen shipwrecks (Alarm Phone 2021a). Never before has the Alarm Phone documented such a high number of shipwrecks and never before have so many shipwrecks gone unaccounted for in official statistics.[6] In one of the shipwrecks of August 2020, the poet Abdel Wahab Yousif, aka Latinos, from Darfur, lost his life along with forty four others, when the boat they were travelling on was shot at and took fire. Before departing, Latinos wrote a poem:

> You'll die at sea.
> Your head rocked by the roaring waves,
> your body swaying in the water,
> like a perforated boat.

Latinos seemed certain that "no last-minute saviour will come", and that all would be gone "except a violent vacuum, dead bodies wrapped in melancholic silence".

In this Mediterranean rescue gap, the silencing on migrant death and disappearance is often only ruptured when survivors or the relatives of the missing speak out. Several of those who survived the shipwreck that killed Latinos recorded a video in which they requested international organizations to denounce EU border violence:

> The Europeans let people drown and take them to Libya, because it is easy for them. I can't believe it. I can't believe what happened to us. We drowned and there was fire everywhere! Nobody came! Some ship could have saved us! But no one came. Thanks to the fisherman who saved us, we are still alive. (Survivors of the 16/17 August shipwreck)

Abul Latif Habib Doria, another migrant traveller who lost his life at sea in October 2020, wrote a letter to his mother before departing, tragically predicting his own death at sea:

> I do not like death as you think, I just have no desire for life … I am tired of the situation I am in now … If I did not move then I will die a slow death worse than the deaths in the Mediterranean. There are rescue ships! They laugh and enjoy our death and only photograph us when we are drowning and save a fraction of us … Mom, I am among those who will let him savor the torment and then die. (Alarm Phone 2021a)

Those who survived the shipwreck that killed Abdul, reported how, for several hours, an airplane had circled above them, watching them from afar. No rescue arrived until a fisherman spotted them and returned the few survivors back to Libya.

Covid as an excuse, not an exception

From Spring 2020 on, the already dire situation in the Mediterranean Sea has deteriorated significantly. The Covid-19 pandemic has been used as an opportune moment to accelerate expulsions and interceptions, and to further securitization and containment practices that we have observed already for several years along the Mediterranean border. The pandemic has served as a suitable excuse to declare EUropean harbours unsafe and closed, push migrants back to Libya, install offshore carceral spaces, prevent NGO rescuers from engaging in operations, enlarge the rescue gap further, intensify aerial surveillance efforts and collaborations with the so-called Libyan Coastguard, and invisibilize shipwrecks. In effect, the necropolitical space off the Libyan coast has been reinforced, where authorities selectively intervene in order to intercept migrant boats still able to reach EUrope, while routinely delaying or denying rescue operations for those at imminent risk of drowning.

Under the "Covid excuse", existing border enforcement measures were taken to new extremes and it appears likely that some of them will be kept

in place even after the global pandemic has ended. We argue that while seemingly exceptional, border escalations under Covid-19 need to be understood in the continuity of the EUropean border regime. With Ruth Gilmore (2007) we can refer to these continuities of EU violence at the border as "organized abandonment alongside organized violence" that functions through biopolitical and necropolitical modes of power. Acknowledging the *continuity* in which these practices are inscribed counters official declarations that justify them as exceptional measures during exceptional times. Moreover, an analysis of their continuity highlights the ways in which they do not suspend the norm but operate in the continuity of a border regime that uses necropolitical tools in the name of protecting life. The "Covid excuse" has created the conditions to push forms of migrant *expulsion*, *containment*, and *abandonment* to new extremes. Conceiving of such measures as an excuse, allows us to see how the pandemic has exacerbated racialized techniques of bordering and, at the same time, to situate them within longer trajectories and historical precedents, which we outline briefly.

The violent expulsions of migrants from EUropean SAR and territorial zones around Easter 2020 and mass interceptions by Libyan forces need to be situated in a long history of remote and offshore border control that includes bilateral agreements between EUropean and north African countries reaching back to the 1990s and 2000s which both externalized and outsourced the EUropean border (Carrera 2007). In the central Mediterranean context, successive agreements between Italy and Libya between 2000 and 2008 implemented coordinated push-and pull-back of migrant boats to Libya "so as not to allow them to reach sovereign soil" (Mountz et al. 2012, 532). After Italy was condemned in the 2012 *Hirsi* ruling by the European Court of Human Rights for handing over a group of migrants rescued by an Italian navy ship to Libyan authorities in 2009 (Moreno-Lax 2012), the prohibition of collective expulsions has prompted a range of "remote control" measures (Alarm Phone et al. 2020a), whereby interception activities were largely outsourced to third countries. Besides intensifying relations with north African authorities, Italy and other EU member states have engaged in "push-back by proxy" activities, whereby, merchant vessels were instructed to return rescued migrants. Between 2018 and early 2020 alone, merchant vessels have returned about 1,800 people in this way (Kingsley 2020). The Easter push-back of 2020, carried out by a fishing vessel instructed by the Maltese government, stands in continuity of mass expulsions of migrants, but also highlights the violent escalations under Covid-19, where the pandemic was used to justify the expulsion, no matter the costs.

Besides migrant expulsions, also the forms of offshore containment that we have outlined need to be understood in longer histories of migrant incarceration. Vessels, platforms, or islands serving as places of capture and containment had been in discussion already in 2016, when then Austria's

foreign affairs minister Kurz and other politicians floated the idea of following Australia's model of outsourcing and offshoring migrant detention. Two years later, in 2018, Italy and Malta turned NGO vessels into floating detention sites by refusing to allow disembarkation, prompting lengthy stand-offs. While the closed harbour policies of 2018 were opposed by a wide coalition of civil society actors, the installation of supposed "quarantine" vessels in 2020 did not prompt a similarly concerted outcry and opposition. The "Covid excuse", it seems, has legitimized offshore migrant containment measures. While arriving migrants could have well been placed in quarantine facilities on land, keeping them offshore served as public and symbolic reminders that EUrope's harbours were supposedly closed in order to protect against potential virus carriers. These offshore containment spaces, although exceptional in their new Covid-19 configuration, are an integral part of the EUropean border regime which imprisons and isolates migrants away from society, keeping them a state of non-arrival. Indeed, while at sea, some of the detained offshore wondered if they were being deported to Libya or Tunisia. Although installed in the name of protection, offshore containment has led to violence and death, by neglecting the critical physical and psychological condition of the detained. Moreover, the widening rescue gap off the coast of Libya can also be traced back several years, at least to 2014 when the terminated Italian humanitarian-military operation Mare Nostrum was replaced by EUropean operations that prioritized border control over rescue, a shift which signalled that "institutionalized neglect" was becoming the norm (Heller and Pezzani 2016). With the rescue gap starting to widen, civil rescuers first came onto the scene in 2014 and 2015 in the hope to fill the vacuum. Though being welcomed, at first, by state authorities "as an important multiplier of their SAR capabilities" (Cusumano 2019, 107), draconian criminalization efforts have systematically obstructed civil SAR operations from 2017 on, leading to the withdrawal of various actors as well as the confiscation of vessels. Moreover, though EUrope's reinforced aerial surveillance operations were ostensibly designed to find and rescue distressed migrant boats, they prompted mass interceptions instead, while the phenomenon of invisibilized shipwrecks increased. The rescue vacuum off the coast of Libya has thus been in the making for years, but the Covid pandemic has allowed for the most drastic withdrawal of EUropean rescue assets to date.

Practices of migrant *expulsion*, *confinement*, and *abandonment* have thus existed long before the Covid-19 pandemic and need to be understood in a necropolitical continuum of border violence. However, as we have demonstrated in this article, the pandemic has been an opportune moment to escalate these violent practices. Drawing attention to the governmental but violent modalities of the Mediterranean border, we can see how a bio-necropolitical regime has emerged that speaks in the name of protecting life while expulsing, containing, and abandoning life, in effect normalizing migrants'

"premature death" (Gilmore 2007, 244). With Butler (2020, 17) we can think of the Mediterranean Sea as a "racially saturated field of visibility" where visible forms of violence against racialized bodies are turned invisible even in moments of spectacular visibility:

> the visual is fully schematized by racism, the "visual evidence" to which one refers will always and only refute the conclusions based upon it; for it is possible within this racist episteme that no black person can seek recourse to the visible as the sure ground of evidence.

In the Mediterranean Sea, we witness how visualized and spectacular forms of violence targeting Black and migrant bodies remain inconsequential while institutionalized neglect and abandonment also prompt their disappearance, turning them into the "missing missing, the doubly missing" (Edkins 2011, 6).

The fact that shipwrecks are often left un-investigated and migrant bodies thus rarely found unless remains wash up along shorelines means that it is difficult, often impossible, to establish the identities of the disappeared and dead. Kept in a state of unknowingness, relatives and friends are unable to begin the grieving process. This exhausting uncertainty leaves them with unanswered questions and traumatizes families and entire communities – necropolitical echoes that travel from the sea "back home". These absences and silences hide and erase violence against Black and migrant bodies as well as EUrope's responsibility and accountability, effectively blaming migrants for their own deaths or operating as a form of "passive capital punishment" for their attempts to transgress borders (Brady 2008; Walia 2013).

Conclusion

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has illuminated and reinforced global inequalities, hundreds of thousands of people have died across the globe. People precariously on the move and the displaced have been the first targets of border and policing measures legitimized by the "Covid excuse". Focussing on the central Mediterranean region, we have outlined some of these violent measures in empirical detail, highlighting escalating forms of migrant *expulsion*, *containment*, and *abandonment*. The "Covid excuse", we have argued, has normalized and legitimized these forms of biopolitical and necropolitical violence, not least through the portrayal of border control efforts as protective measures safeguarding the health of the EUropean community. Clearly, push-back operations, offshore confinement, and the expansion of the existing rescue gap in the central Mediterranean Sea were not necessary, adequate, or inevitable measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather, they reinforced existing border "protection" practices, thereby clearly demarcating which lives were worth saving, and which ones could be left to die. The "bio-necro"

paradigm of "letting people die to save lives" appears to justify border violence in Covid-19 times.

Whilst a growing scandalization of anti-Black police violence has led to the emergence of a transnational "Black Lives Matter" movement that demands racial justice and the abolition of the police, the hundreds of deaths of migrant and Black people in the Mediterranean Sea have not instigated a similar movement and the demand to abolish the border regime. At sea, Black and migrant lives continue to matter little, being left to die and made disappear in near-absolute silence. And yet, they are not merely subjected and shaped by racial violence, thus the "structural patterns intended harm, kill, or coerce a particular grouping of people" (McKittrick 2011, 947), but instead enact fugitive practices of resistance, subverting and re-making space, as well as producing counter-narratives to contest and subvert border violence. Indeed, despite EUrope's attempts to silence and invisibilize their crimes at sea, migrant survivors and their allies have developed strategies of contestation and resistance. Thanks to the brave voices of people trapped in Libya, or detained in floating camps, not only shipwrecks and deaths at sea but also push-backs, acts of non-assistance and other human right violations by EU authorities have been documented. Throughout 2020, these voices have created counter-narratives to official discourses and have been powerful weapons against EUropean forms of border violence perpetrated under the "Covid excuse".

Notes

1. This article speaks of "EUrope" throughout. In this way, it seeks to problematise frequently employed usages that equate the EU with Europe and Europe with the EU and suggests, at the same time, that EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU.
2. In response to a FOI request, on the 3rd of June 2020, the "Comando Generale del Corpo delle Capitanerie di Porto" appealed to "ex art. 5 bis comma 1 lettera d) D.L.vo 33/2013 per la salvaguardia delle relazioni internazionali".
3. Some of these events are reconstructed in an Alarm Phone report published on 16 April 2020 – whilst some of the testimonies were collected in the following weeks and are not included in the report (Alarm Phone 2020a).
4. The price that the maritime activists had to pay was high. Following the disembarkation, the Italian authorities prevented the *Mare Jonio* from returning to the sea. Not only that, in March 2021, an investigation was launched into the *Etienne* incident, with Italian authorities alleging improper monetary exchanges between the shipping company and the maritime activists for the trans-shipment of the migrants – an accusation that both Maersk Tankers and the activists of Mediterranea have refuted (Mediterranea 2021).
5. When shipwrecks take place, most bodies disappear at sea and rarely wash-up along shorelines. The people whose bodies are not found are then declared as "missing" rather than dead unless their death is confirmed by shipwreck survivors.

6. That survivors or relatives notify the Alarm Phone instead of organisations such as IOM or UNHCR, highlights distrust in the ability and willingness of these organisations to follow up and report on shipwrecks and disappearances.

Acknowledgements

We thank all the activists of the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone and their relentless work in supporting people in distress in the Mediterranean Sea over the past seven years. Besides assisting thousands of boats in distress, this network has provided unique insights into diverse forms of border violence at sea, also during the Covid-19 pandemic. We are grateful to the editorial team of Ethnic and Racial Studies and the peer reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier version.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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