

## Rescue Operations

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In places where crossing the border to the Global North is a matter of life and **death** for thousands of people, a special kind of border is created. This border, which William Walters calls a humanitarian border (Walters 2011: 138), is characterized by the parallel, even synergistic, action of securitarian and humanitarian logic, and rescue operations constitute one of its integral parts.

For decades, various activist and state, technopolitical operations, vessels and crews focused on saving the lives of refugees and other migrants have been operating on the Mediterranean Sea (cf. **maritime cemetery**), which is, for many, a symbol of the humanitarian border. The most famous such undertaking is the military-humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum, initiated by the Italian government in 2013, which introduced saving lives into the mandate of border control missions (Cuttitta 2018: 638). Mare Nostrum was succeeded by Frontex's (today: Border and Coast Guard Agency) operation Triton, much less supported in terms of finances, equipment and personnel, focused on rescuing those who were already close to their goal in the northern part of the Mediterranean. Frontex justified keeping Triton's vessels close to the Italian coast with the following argument, which speaks volumes about the twisted priorities of this operation. Had the people crossing the Mediterranean been rescued closer to the Libyan coast, it could be expected that more people would have been saved, but this would lead to a decrease in the cost, duration and danger of the migration, and ultimately to an increase in the number of irregularized crossings (Frontex, according to Cusumano 2019: 11). Thus, Triton and similar operations, in accordance with the principles of organized hypocrisy, carried out a "relatively limited number of search and rescue operations, prioritizing border control and anti-smuggling tasks" (Cusumano 2019: 4). In addition to state, military and similar actors, rescue operations in the Mediterranean are simultaneously carried out by activists, and even "regular citizens" who, united in various groups, form a self-organized, as Maurice Stierl (2018) terms it, humanitarian fleet. Some of them, such as the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), continued the tradition of apolitical, to some extent close cooperation with the authorities, while the majority, including Sea-Watch and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), tried to not only act independently, but also to shed light on the illegalities, violence, avoiding and ignoring calls for rescue, which is why they were subjected to criminalization (cf. Stierl 2018).

Unlike rescue operations in the Mediterranean, saving lives in countries on the **Balkan route** is generally not carried out as part of rescue operations focused on refugees and other migrants, but are incorporated into national civil protection systems, and are, in the case of emergencies in nature, performed on "'inaccessible', 'rough,' 'hilly' and 'wooded' terrain, even in locations with 'mines', in harsh, cold weather" (Popović et al. 2022: 67) based on individual reports. In contrast to self-organized life-saving actions in the Mediterranean, non-governmental organizations, activist groups and individuals on the Balkan migration route deal with rescue only indirectly and sporadically. In these instance, the people on the move whose lives are threatened are referred to state rescue services, as was the case in the rescue of a "twenty-two-year-old migrant from Afghanistan" after the local Protection and Rescue Service in Pljevlja was contacted by an "activist from the non-governmental sector." One such example points to, in addition to the mediating role of activists in state-coordinated rescue operations, the two-fold responsibility of state actors and services – their responsibility for endangering life and their responsibility for saving it – the action was initiated after a member of a non-governmental organization from Belgrade received a call for help from a family of seven banished into a forest near the Serbian-Bulgarian border, immediately after they were issued decisions on the intention to initiate asylum applications in Serbia (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020: 52-53).

In non-EU countries, such as Montenegro, Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, where everyday life and the movement of people on the move have been significantly less criminalized for years, which meant they were not exposed to dangerous situations or death as often, news about saving lives are not presented in the media to the same extent and are not part of the strategy of humanitarianization of border control, for which Croatia is an extreme example. The Croatian police regularly issues detailed public announcements on the rescues and publishes press releases and media articles with such information in a dedicated section on its website. Headlines such as "42 Migrants Found Near Novska, Saved at the Last Minute from Suffocating," or "Dramatic Rescue: Migrants Stuck in Deep Snow, Police Officers Carry Hypothermic Children in Their Arms" in the tried and tested tradition of combining compassion with repression (Fassin 2005) add a "humanitarian note" to a context otherwise shaped almost exclusively as an issue of security (Hameršak and Pleše 2021). They introduce news about their rescue into the discursive field hitherto focused on the capture of migrants, and sometimes make it difficult to

conclude whether the incident is actually a capture operation that is presented as a rescue operation, i.e., a rescue/capture, which is an expression sometimes used in the literature (e.g. Fontanari et al. 2022: 75).



Photo: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia, 16 January 2019

In this context, rescue operations, as Maurizio Albahari (2015) noted for such actions in the Mediterranean, are presented as individual spectacles, isolated, one-time events in the discourse and in the media. That is additionally emphasized in news reports about rescue operations that are already spectacularized at the location where they take place, such as the rescue operation on the Dragonja river on the Croatian-Slovenian border during the winter of 2021, when hundreds of police officers and other people from both sides of the border searched for a little girl, in actuality for her body, who disappeared in the river during the night. In these kinds of news reports, people on the move are portrayed as victims who need the help of others. They are exhausted and hypothermic, and the police officers help them, saving them from danger, nourishing them with drinks and food, and even carrying them in their arms to doctors and ambulances when necessary. Numerous articles “in which the police ‘rescues’ cold, tired, exhausted women, sometimes pregnant, as the brave police saviors ‘carry them in their arms’ and even help them give birth in the forest” mobilize the archetypal categories of women and men, in which men are “dynamic, active, they move, and women are static, passive and vulnerable, they stand still in place” (Popović et al. 2022: 11).



Photo: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia, 22 October 2021

In short, by spectacularization, victimization and individualization of guilt, reports on rescue operations ultimately skillfully conceal that the border control system, the visa regime and restrictive migration policies generally force people on the move to hide in nature or in means of transport, that this system consciously and deliberately leaves them in danger, even exposes them to it, as well as the fact that, in the end, their saviors are the same people they flee and from whom they hide. A certain number of cases also leave the impression that they are literally aimed at production of media events or presenting rescue operations as media events. For example, in the days following the release of another series of videos and other evidence of routine and violent pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the media reported on the rescue of migrants, families with children near Mrežnica and Topusko. Similarly, the reaction to the Human Rights Watch report was published on the Ministry of the Interior’s website on the same day as a report stating that “even today, thanks to the quick reaction of the Croatian police, a family of five was taken care of” in the area of Korenica. Along with emphasizing the care and efficiency of Croatian police officers, the text states that the police checks all reports from non-governmental organizations, despite the fact that they “usually do not contain enough information for a criminal investigation” and despite the fact that “when investigating allegations from the accusations thus far,” there have been several cases involving “false reporting.” Thus, it is no surprise that, in a turn of events, some media recognize the police playing politics and boasting in press releases about rescue operations, which they point out to their readers in the editorial elements, primarily with lines above the headlines such as Police Brags About Rescuing Migrants: Polish Couple Crams 12 of Them into Camper, Another 19 Found near Jasenovac or Police Boasts: Six Exhausted Migrants Rescued in Forest near Plješevica.



Photo: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia, 7 August 2019

That idea that this is a strategic heroization and humanitarianization of the police is also supported by the practice of combining news about rescue operations with police press releases, such as a news report from the beginning of 2019, which ends with the following appeal, mirroring the Call to organizations operating in states along the so-called Balkan Route published a month earlier: “to inform migrants on the rules of legal entry into the Republic of Croatia, to warn them of the danger, hazard and uncertainty of such a journey and to dissuade them from such intentions, in order to prevent possible injuries, freezing and severe suffering of illegal migrants.”

Finally, the police and its representatives also directly refer to rescue operations when reacting to new accusations or evidence of border violence, especially those coming from abroad. Responding to an article published by The Guardian on violent pushbacks, beatings and sexual abuse on Croatia’s borders, the Croatian Minister of the Interior underlined that the media making the accusations “never, interestingly, said anything about how the Croatian police acts humanely” (cf. also presentations at the session of the parliamentary Committee on Human and National Minority Rights). He expressed similar points at a press conference addressing the verdict against Croatia for the death of **Madina Hussiny**:

You yourself, at least some of you, have reported on the many times the Croatian police rescued migrants who had drowned or would have drowned in rivers. How many times have Croatian police officers carried pregnant women and children to the nearest medical institutions, which then provided them with health care and help. I always try, and will always continue doing so, as long as I hold this position, to point out the fact that Croatian police officers act in accordance with the law. And they act in a humanitarian and humane way.

The political and media landscape described in broad strokes in this text, in which rescue operations have a prominent place, generally lacks questions on the relationship between the Schengen and visa systems and drownings at the Slovenian-Croatian, Schengen border, but also at the borders between Croatia and its neighboring non-EU countries. These questions ask why do people on the move even have to hide in vans, trucks and forests? Why do they have to move during the night and through snow, and cross rivers over waterfalls instead of bridges? Media articles about rescue operations mostly do not touch on these questions, nor do they try to answer them. Quite the contrary, as noted by Pallister-Wilkins (2017) in relation to rescue operations in the Mediterranean, they implicitly or explicitly mobilize narratives of self-responsibility or, ultimately, the irresponsibility of migrants who embarked on such a dangerous journey alone or with their families, found reckless and greedy smugglers who packed them into cars and vans, or got into a boat by themselves or in an organized operation, moved through forests and minefields, knowing that there was a very real possibility that they would die on their journey because of the Balkan winter, deep snow, numerous rivers, forests, landslides and other hazards.

In short, the European Union and its Member States react to the contradictory demands to simultaneously save lives and reduce the number of border crossings – which, for countries on its external border, is underscored by the possibility of activating the **Dublin Regulation** and subsequent mass deportations of rescued persons who continue their journey to other European Union countries – by spectacularizing humanitarianism and the border in the form of rescuing distant foreigners, on the one hand, and continuous efforts to keep foreigners at a distance in the long term, on the other (Pallister-Wilkins 2020: 997). Rescue, as pointed out by Tazzioli (2015), does not imply salvation at all, because it can be followed by cycles of expulsion, **pushbacks** or **pullbacks**, **detentions** or waiting.

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