

MIGRANT CRISIS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF REALISM THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The Mediterranean migrant crisis, fueled by conflict, poverty and political instability in countries of origin, positions the Mediterranean as the deadliest sea in the world. Thousands risk perilous sea crossings, while transit and destination countries struggle with humanitarian relief and asylum challenges. The European Union initially responded to the crisis by applying the principles of unity and liberalism. This paper deploys political realism as a theoretical lens to analyze the crisis, demonstrating how state sovereignty, national interests, and security concerns dominate policy responses – often at the expense of humanitarian principles. The main concepts employed in the analysis include the state as the primary and most significant actor in international relations, sovereignty as the state's right to control its borders, national interest as the central motive driving state policy, and security as the paramount priority of states within an anarchic international system. The concepts of anarchy and self-help describe the absence of a superior international authority and the necessity for states to independently ensure their own security. Within the context of the migrant crisis, migration is often perceived as a threat to national security and social stability, while humanitarian concerns are frequently relegated to a secondary position. Research concludes that although the European Union still has mechanisms for the demonstration of cohesion and comprehensive actions, we might expect further strengthening of a realistic approach.

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Introduction

The migrant crisis in the Mediterranean Sea is a complex issue with multiple dimensions. The crisis is partly the result of armed conflicts, poverty, unfavourable climatic conditions and other conditions prevailing throughout Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The migrant crisis in the Mediterranean is still an ongoing problem. Ten years after the greatest migrant tragedy in the Mediterranean, the situation has not changed significantly. Migrants from Africa still embark to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa. Italy takes rigorous measures to prevent the influx of migrants from Africa, and the European Union prepares to help Tunisia strengthen its economy and stop the departure of ships. However, there are gaps in European cooperation, and France has refused to accept the arrival of migrants from Lampedusa. That is a complex problem that requires coordinated efforts and cooperation of all parties involved.

Search and rescue at sea has gained high political attention after various serious migrant incidents in the Mediterranean Sea in the past years (Dijstelbloem, van Reekum, and Schinkel 2017; Cuttitta 2018; Cusumano 2018). The world's most dangerous migrant routes pass through the Mediterranean Sea. Many of these migrant attempts to cross the sea have tragically ended. Recently, the Mediterranean Sea has become a "maritime cemetery" (Tazzioli 2015, 2-6; Radojević 2020, 56). In 2011, according to UNHCR's statistics, more than 1,500 migrants drowned or went missing trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Wilkes 2012). As noted by Brian and Laczo, "According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in 2014, up to 3,072 migrants are believed to have died in the Mediterranean, compared with an estimate of 700 in 2013" (2014, 11). In 2015, over one million migrants crossed the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. Actually, "the flow of migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean has increased dramatically in 2015" (Grečić 2016). Only in 2016, more than 5,000 migrants lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea (Cusumano 2018). In 2017, at least 3,119 persons died or went missing in the Mediterranean Sea (Albahari 2018). According to data reports by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), from January to August 2018, 60,309 migrants and refugees entered Europe by sea, and 1,524 people lost their lives on the Mediterranean Sea (IOM 2018). According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), more than 400 migrants and refugees drowned in the first three months of 2023 while trying to cross from North Africa to Europe via the central Mediterranean Sea. That is "the deadliest first quarter on record since 2017" (UN 2023).

Since 2014, "more than 28,000 migrants have been reported missing in the Mediterranean" (European Parliament 2023). In reality, since 2014, a total of 31,272 missing migrants have been recorded in the Mediterranean (IOM

2025). The scale of the flows reached previously unseen levels in 2014 and 2015, as did the number of deaths (UNHCR 2015). In response to the high flows across the Mediterranean, the policy has prioritised search and rescue operations and the establishment of maritime patrols.

Migrants undertake perilous journeys, often crossing dangerous waters in unseaworthy boats operated by human traffickers. Many die at sea due to drowning. European host nations sometimes refuse to accept distressed migrants upon arrival. Migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea “face the risk of injury and death relating to the nature of the overseas journey, increasingly dangerous smuggling practices and, in some cases, risky rescue operations” (IOM 2017). Numerous boats and ships frequently sink in the Mediterranean Sea while transporting migrants and refugees. There are many programmes and projects aimed at taking a proactive stance to address the Mediterranean Sea shipwreck issue and enhance migrant safety (Tazzioli 2015; Stierl 2016). Many regional and international agencies, including the UN, IOM, EU, OSCE, UNHCR, and others, are working to address the issue of migrants at sea.

Search and rescue at sea has existed since the beginning of navigation. From first experiences and accidents during sailing, people have developed different rescue techniques and gained knowledge of favourable and unfavourable aspects of rescue and maritime conditions, the functioning of the human organism, and means of lifesaving. It is not uncommon for opposing fleets to act to save enemy soldiers and sailors from the water after sinking enemy ships during combat. In such acts lie the most basic principles of humanity.

According to the Missing Migrants Project, an initiative implemented in 2014 by the IOM to document deaths and disappearances of people in the process of migration, “Saving lives at sea is a legal obligation for States. There is an urgent need for proactive State-led search and rescue across all sea routes to Europe and for an immediate end to the criminalisation, obstruction, and deterrence of the efforts of those who provide such assistance, including NGOs and commercial ship operators” (IOM 2022).

This paper’s methodological approach derives from analysis of the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, observing this specific and complex problem of contemporary international relations from the perspective of the realism theory. The categorical apparatus of the realist approach is reflected in statism, where states are the key decision-makers acting according to their national interests, and in the pursuit and preservation of power to ensure survival. This approach emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system as the reason for limited international cooperation and the predominance of the self-help principle. The migrant crisis is thus viewed primarily as a security challenge, which limits the scope for humanitarian and solidarity-driven policies.

Methodologically, the author employs the theoretical framework of political realism as a basis for a systematic analysis of state motivations and behaviors in the migrant crisis. The analysis includes the study of concrete state policies and international agreements, such as the European Union's cooperation with third countries (e.g., Turkey and Libya), as well as military and border operations like Mare Nostrum, SOPHIA, and activities of the FRONTEX agency. Furthermore, the paper applies critical reflection on political decisions and their consequences for the humanitarian situation of migrants, acknowledging the limitations of the realist approach in addressing ethical and human rights aspects. The research integrates political, security, and humanitarian dimensions, providing a comprehensive insight into the complexity and multidimensionality of the migrant crisis. This approach enables a deeper understanding of state motives and dynamics in crisis conditions but also highlights the necessity for complementary approaches that incorporate humanitarian values and international norms.

The paper highlights the ongoing tension between security imperatives and human rights, underscoring the need for a balanced and coordinated approach. The 2024 EU Pact on Migration and Asylum exemplifies efforts to reconcile these competing demands, though future policies may increasingly prioritize realism if security concerns escalate.

Does the European Union Control Maritime Migrant Routes?

The Italian state-led operation "Mare Nostrum" began as a result of the highly publicised shipwreck that occurred on October 3, 2013, off the coast of Italy, near Lampedusa, where 368 migrants and refugees perished (Zamatto et al. 2017). The Italian navy was entrusted to run the first truly humanitarian operation. Search and rescue was its core activity. The Italian navy monitored and rescued migrants in an area of 70,000 square kilometres between Italy, Libya, and Malta. Mare Nostrum proved to be efficient in saving lives, as it helped 150,000 refugees and other migrants to reach safety.

The EU has increased its capacity for search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and for tackling criminal networks. By tripling the available resources, it helped save over 400,000 lives in 2015 and 2016. Over 2,000 traffickers and smugglers were caught, and 375 vessels were removed.

To replace Mare Nostrum, the EU leaders have enhanced two European Patrol Network Operations, "Poseidon" in the Aegean and "Triton" in the Central Mediterranean, and a military operation, EUNAVFOR MED Operation SOPHIA. Operation SOPHIA aims to control maritime migrant routes through the Mediterranean Sea, suppress the smuggling of people and help

shipwreckers. The increased frequency of migrant maritime accidents limited the possibilities for exploiting search and rescue forces.

On the night of April 18, 2015, a ship carrying more than 800 migrants capsized off the coast of Libya (Johansen 2017). While that was not the first of such incidents, it marked the largest loss of life in a single incident in the Mediterranean. Irregular migration to the EU via the Mediterranean has been increasing since late 2013 due to a combination of push factors in the EU's southern neighbourhood. The scale of the flow of migrants reached previously unseen levels in 2014 and 2015, as did the number of deaths. 2014 marked a particularly lethal year with over 3,500 fatalities, but by early spring of 2015, it was clear that this number was going to be surpassed within a few months (UNHCR 2015). The shipwreck of April 18, 2015, affected the EU in such a way that it immediately began preparation for a possible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation to undertake "systematic efforts to identify, capture, and destroy vessels before they are used by traffickers" (European Council 2015). Following the extraordinary European Council of April 23, 2015, EU Foreign and Defence Ministers agreed to create a naval force, EUNAVFOR MED, and to launch a CSDP naval operation in the Mediterranean on May 18, 2015. From June 2015 to March 2020, the EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA, in its efforts to combat illegal migration in the Mediterranean Sea, has managed to save no less than 45,000 lives at sea, arresting over 150 suspected smugglers and traffickers and removing more than 550 vessels from illegal organisations (Pricopi 2020). Its successor, EUNAVFOR MED IRINI ("peace" in the Greek language), commenced on March 31, 2020, and had a different purpose. The core task of Operation IRINI was the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Libya and inspections of vessels bound to or from Libya in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2292 from 2016.

Nearly 13,000 people have died or are missing in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic since 2015 in an attempt to enter Europe (European Council 2021). Namely, "In 2019, over 100,000 people tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea and enter Europe illegally; concurrently, the newest naval operation of the European Union, EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, does not actively and purposefully conduct patrolling or search and rescue missions in the international waters, thus signalling a downscale of the EU's involvement in the migration crisis" (Pricopi 2020). Who is then responsible for conducting search and rescue at sea?

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on rescues in the Mediterranean Sea have called on the European Union to continue conducting search and rescue operations to help them respond to the huge influx of migrants. In a joint statement, the non-governmental organisations SOS Mediterranee, Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and Sea-Watch have urgently called for "the provision of European state-led search

and rescue maritime assets in the central Mediterranean to prevent more deaths” (MSF 2022).

In 2020, the EU ended the Operation to Suppress People Smuggling and Rescue Migrants in the Mediterranean Sea and replaced it with Operation IRINI, which focused on enforcing the UN arms embargo on Libya. Operation IRINI is a European Union naval operation established on March 31, 2020, with the main objective of strengthening the UN arms embargo on Libya. This mission was launched in response to the chaotic situation in Libya caused by the protracted civil war and international interventions. The main objectives of Operation IRINI were the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Libya to support the political dialogue and efforts of the international community aimed at achieving lasting peace in Libya; the fight against illegal oil trade; and training and equipping the Libyan coast guard to fight more effectively against human and arms smuggling. Further, “equally binding upon IRINI are the UNSC Resolutions on combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking into, through and from the Libyan territory and off the coast of Libya” (Stribis 2020, 20-21). From the beginning, the naval Operation IRINI “has had scant resources”, and its results were poor. In short, after the poor results of the naval Operation SOFIA in the last months of its operation, this operation “represents a new setback for the CSDP and for the EU’s ambition to become a relevant actor in contemporary international society” (Espaliú Berdud 2024). Rescuing migrants is then left to countries, but NGOs complain that countries are ignoring calls for help.

Therefore, without a specific EU naval operation, the burden falls on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency FRONTEX, the EU southern border member states, non-governmental organisations and various activist individuals. FRONTEX is currently deploying three operations in the Mediterranean to rescue vulnerable migrants and fight migrant smuggling: Operation Themis (formerly Triton), covering the Central Mediterranean; Operation Poseidon, covering the Eastern Mediterranean; and Operation Indalo, covering the Western Mediterranean. Thanks to these efforts, over 544,000 lives have been saved since 2015 (European Council 2021).

The EU’s operational patrols in the Mediterranean aim to secure the EU’s borders, fight against migrant smugglers, and rescue migrants at risk. Frontex also extends its activities beyond the EU, cooperating with countries that have signed Status Agreements with the European Commission. These agreements allow Frontex to operate in Moldova, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania.

After years of activity, the European Union adopted a new Pact on Migration and Asylum in April 2024. The Pact consists of a set of new legal acts, all published in the EU’s Official Journal on May 22, 2024 (European Commission 2024). The Pact, entering full application by June 2026, aims to create a more

unified approach to managing migration and asylum. The four pillars of the new migration and asylum policy are secure external borders, fast and efficient procedures, an effective system of solidarity and responsibility, and embedding migration in international partnerships. The Pact also introduces a new legal framework for people saved in search and rescue operations and those entering the EU territory, i.e., stricter border screening procedures and a “mandatory solidarity mechanism”. This mechanism requires all EU countries to either host asylum seekers, contribute financially, or provide operational support.

The Mediterranean migrant crisis has also strained resources in the frontline EU states like Italy and Greece, fuelled debates on burden-sharing, and highlighted concerns over human rights and the effectiveness of migrant policies. However, “civil society organisations, researchers and experts have raised concerns about the detrimental impact of the pact on the right of migrants to claim asylum and on the overall functioning of the EU common asylum system” (Conte and Yavcan 2024, 2). Besides, some authors claim that “on the humanitarian side, the New Pact appears to be less effective” (Gambazza 2024, 289).

However, Antonio Vitorino, IOM Director General, pointed out that “the persisting humanitarian crisis in the central Mediterranean is intolerable” (IOM 2023). He emphasised that states must respond to prevent further loss of life.

The Migrant Problem from the Perspective of Realism Theory

Social unrest, political violence, uprisings and wars in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe have initiated a refugee and migrant crisis which has “fuelled the rise of illiberal, anti-EU and anti-immigrant sentiments, resulting in a security crisis, ruptures between the EU member states” (Düvell 2017, 35). The Mediterranean migrant crisis is a pressing issue, and understanding how political theories apply to it is crucial. Further, the problem is analysed using realism as a theoretical “lens”. Realism postulates that states are central actors in international relations, driven by self-interest and security concerns. According to the realism theory of international relations, the international system is anarchic; states are the primary actors in the international system; states are rational actors; all states are autonomous and unitary actors; and states’ principal interest is their security.

Since the international system is anarchic, there is no overarching authority above states, leading to a concept of “self-help” in which states prioritise their security (Abedin and Akgul 2019, 170). States are the primary actors in international relations, while other actors, such as international or non-governmental organisations, have limited influence. International relations are

driven by the pursuit of power. States strive to increase their power to ensure survival and achieve national interests. States act in their interest, primarily due to a particular need for security and survival.

The Mediterranean migrant crisis represents one of the greatest humanitarian and political challenges Europe has recently faced. This crisis is the result of a complex interaction of geopolitical, socioeconomic, and humanitarian factors, which have influenced the mass movement of people from the regions of North Africa and the Middle East towards Europe. On the other hand, the movement of people across national borders potentially disrupts the internal order and social structure of a state.

States prioritising national security can adopt restrictive border control measures to limit the migration flow, thus putting national interests ahead of humanitarian ones. The arrival of large numbers of migrants is perceived as a threat to national security, and states may prioritise measures to protect citizens and maintain social stability, even if this means denying entry to migrants. The absence of global authority in international relations forces states to rely on themselves for their security, which in the context of the migrant crisis leads to a “self-help” approach, where states prioritise national state interests and are not united towards a common solution.

Realism provides a framework for understanding state responses to the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, emphasising the importance of national security, national interest, and challenging cooperation in an anarchic international system. Realism does not provide a definitive one-stop solution to the refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, but it acts as a critical corrective. In fact, realism encourages different views of the problem to be transformed into the potential for creating solutions (Rösch and Lebow 2018). Dissanayake (2019) states, “Realism can serve as a means to look into the crisis through some of its core assumptions, helping to analyse the problem better”.

Initially guided by liberal values of solidarity and human rights, the European Union’s approach has shifted toward a more realist stance amid rising migration pressures and political challenges. This shift emphasizes stricter border controls, cooperation with third countries, and more restrictive asylum policies. While realism effectively explains state-centric motivations and security priorities, it falls short in addressing the ethical and humanitarian dimensions of the crisis.

In summary, the EU’s shift from liberal values to a realistic approach reflects the challenges posed by the refugee crisis and the delicate balance between regional cooperation and national interests. As the challenges and pressures increased, European countries moved towards a more realistic approach, focusing on controlling and reducing the migrant flows. Acting in accordance with the

realism of the state, they strengthen the borders, enter into agreements with third countries, limit access to asylum, and implement internal pressures.

On the other hand, the EU's attempt to implement a quota system for refugees, the distribution of refugees and migrants by member states, might be a starting point for realism theory analyses (Baylis, Smith, and Owens 2018). The EU has significantly increased resources for the protection of external borders through agencies such as Frontex, which have received greater powers and capacities for border control and surveillance. Additionally, the EU concluded a series of agreements with countries outside the Union (such as Turkey and Libya) to reduce the flow of migrants. For example, the 2016 agreement with Turkey significantly reduced the number of migrants crossing from Turkey to Greece. Some member states have tightened the conditions for obtaining asylum and introduced faster procedures for the deportation of those who have been refused asylum.

Political pressures within the member states, often driven by the rise in popularity of right-wing and populist parties, have also influenced the EU's policy shift towards a more restrictive approach. The EU countries have started to turn to realism, mainly "statism, survival, and self-help", and they became sceptical about cooperation in the international sphere (Dissanayake 2020). A realistic approach has brought certain results in terms of reducing the number of migrants arriving at the EU borders. However, this approach has also drawn numerous criticisms, including human rights violations, lack of solidarity, and humanitarian crises.

Critics argue that many aspects of the realist approach, such as the agreement with Libya, have led to violations of the human rights of migrants and refugees. Restrictive policies have often led to the worsening of the humanitarian situation in refugee camps and at the EU's external borders. The political security situation in Africa, the Sahel region, and the south of the central Mediterranean regarding the illegal transport of migrants is very complex. By closing the so-called "Balkan route", the migrant flow across the Mediterranean has increased.

Possibilities and Recommendations for Solving the Migrant Crisis in the Mediterranean Sea

Scholarly analysis of the Mediterranean migrant crisis, through the lens of political realism, emphasises the state-centric nature of the issue, focusing on how states' pursuit of national interests, concerns about power and security, and the anarchic structure of the international system shape their responses. In reality, states prioritise their own security and view large-scale migration as

a potential threat to social stability and national identity. Migration “has generated new social, political, and economic pressures” in Europe (Kyriakopoulos 2019).

Analysing the Mediterranean migrant crisis through the lens of realism theory underscores the enduring importance of state-centric motivations and the challenges of achieving a unified and humanitarian-driven response in a system where states prioritise their own interests and security in anarchic international relations (Dissanayake 2021). A classical realist perspective may not fully capture the humanitarian dimensions of the crisis, the ethical considerations involved, or the significant role played by non-state actors and international norms. Overall, scholarly work analysing the Mediterranean migrant crisis through the lens of political realism highlights the enduring importance of state-centric motivations and the challenges of achieving a unified and humanitarian-led response in a system in which states prioritise their interests and security in anarchic international relations.

The theory of realism explains the Mediterranean migrant crisis primarily through the prism of state interest and national security. Therefore, states are primarily concerned with their own survival and maximising power. Migrants and refugees are often perceived as a potential threat to their stability, economy, or national identity. An example of this is the building of fences and increased border control by countries such as Hungary or Italy. In this way, states give priority to sovereignty and security over humanitarian aspects. International cooperation is limited because each country acts in accordance with its narrow national interests, which is manifested through the lack of a unified and coherent EU policy towards the migrant crisis.

Since realism interprets the Mediterranean migrant crisis as the struggle of states to preserve their sovereignty and security in an anarchic international system, this results in a limited will for common solutions, where humanitarian imperatives are often suppressed in front of pragmatic and rigid control measures. Examples such as border barriers and the lack of solidarity among the EU members clearly illustrate this realistic perspective. Finally, the crisis is viewed as a security challenge rather than primarily a humanitarian disaster, thus directly affecting policy responses.

While political theory does not provide a single definitive explanation, it offers insights into some contributing factors. A comprehensive approach, grounded in human rights principles, can help mitigate the crisis. The refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean is a complex problem that requires coordinated efforts at the international level. The World Health Organisation’s (WHO) approach is guided by the fundamental principle that all refugees and migrants have a human right to health, and countries must provide them with

healthcare services free of discrimination. In addition, the WHO focuses on the health needs of migrants and refugees, advocating for equal access to health services regardless of legal status, especially during dangerous Mediterranean crossings. It is necessary to ensure safe access to humanitarian organisations and provide adequate protection to refugees and migrants. That includes housing, healthcare, education, and psycho-social support. Further, the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean requires coordinated efforts and cooperation between the countries along the coast. Organisations such as SOS Mediterranee, Doctors Without Borders, and Sea-Watch play a key role in rescuing migrants at sea. The international community should continue to provide support and resources to countries facing the migrant crisis. Cooperation and joint efforts are key to protecting human lives in the Mediterranean and creating a more humane environment for migrants.

Countries along the Mediterranean should cooperate to manage migration effectively. That includes information sharing, joint patrols, and coordination in addressing challenges. Focusing on the prevention of human smuggling and trafficking is key to solving the migrant crisis. That requires the strengthening of border controls and the suppression of criminal networks. People smuggling in the Mediterranean is a serious problem that requires coordinated efforts and cooperation between countries along the coast. Some key steps to resolve this issue are strengthening border controls in such a way that countries improve surveillance of coasts and sea lanes to make it more difficult for smugglers to transport migrants. Cooperation between countries should be improved because joint work and information exchange between countries along the Mediterranean can help identify smugglers and their networks. Prevention plays a key role and should be implemented through education and raising awareness about the risks of migration, which can affect the reduction of demand for smuggling services. International organisations such as UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency) should continue to provide support and resources to countries facing the migrant crisis. Penalty measures and effective justice for smugglers can deter these illegal activities. In addition to immediate measures, it is necessary to develop long-term strategies for the integration of refugees and migrants into the societies of host countries. That includes training, employment, and social inclusion.

These are just some of the steps that can be taken. It is important to involve all relevant actors to achieve a sustainable and humanitarian approach to solving this problem. The migrant crisis in the Mediterranean Sea is a complex problem that requires coordinated efforts and long-term solutions. Taking into account these facts, solving the migrant crisis requires the cooperation of international organisations, states, and humanitarian agencies. It is important to work on prevention, saving lives, and providing safe alternatives for migrants

seeking a better life in Europe. Consequently, understanding the migrant crisis involves considering political, socioeconomic, and human rights dimensions while acknowledging the complexities of migration.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean migrant crisis, driven by conflict, poverty, and political instability in countries of origin, has had devastating consequences. Thousands have lost their lives attempting the perilous Mediterranean Sea crossing, making it the deadliest migration route globally.

Due to its proximity to North Africa, the Mediterranean is a prime destination for those willing to risk crossing the sea. The Mediterranean Sea is a “maritime cemetery”, as many ships and boats transporting migrants and refugees shipwreck. Many migrants have decided to take that dangerous transit route, and rescue ships and humanitarian organisations try to help them. The enormous difficulties that transit and destination countries have in handling arrivals, delivering humanitarian relief, and putting in place cogent, compassionate asylum rules are also part of the Mediterranean migrant crisis. The situation still requires coordinated efforts and cooperation of all involved parties.

The paper shows that realism helps develop a more critical awareness of international politics and the problems of the twenty-first century. To demonstrate the potential of realism as a theory, the refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean was chosen as a case study. Realism does not provide a definitive one-stop solution to this crisis. It acts as a critical corrective. More precisely, realism encourages different perspectives of this problem to be turned into potential for creating solutions.

The application of realism theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the complexity of the Mediterranean migrant crisis. The analysis reveals that the actions and policies of the key state actors involved, including the EU member states and North African countries, are significantly shaped by the core principles of realism theory: state sovereignty, national interest, power politics, and the anarchic nature of the international system. The pursuit of national interests, especially security and stability, often takes precedence over humanitarian interests, leading to different and sometimes conflicting state responses.

The migrant crisis that has hit Europe caused significant changes in the European Union’s approach to migration. The European Union initially acted in line with the expectations of the liberal approach based on the values of solidarity, human rights, and the integration of migrants. However, due to increased migrant pressure and political pressures within the member states,

the EU gradually adopted a more realistic approach. European countries are increasingly following the realist theory in solving the migrant crisis.

The European Union's liberal approach to the migrant crisis was guided by the principles of humanitarianism and solidarity. This approach included open borders and asylum, distribution of refugees, and integration. Many EU member states were initially open to accepting migrants, especially during the height of the crisis in 2015, when Germany, for example, received large numbers of refugees from Syria. The EU tried to establish mechanisms for the fair distribution of refugees among the member states to reduce the pressure on countries on the EU's external borders, such as Greece and Italy.

As the challenges and pressures increased, the EU moved towards a more realistic approach, focusing on controlling and reducing the flow of migrants. This approach includes several key elements, such as strengthening borders, agreements with third countries, limiting access to asylum, and internal pressures. The EU has significantly increased resources for the protection of external borders through agencies such as Frontex, which have received greater authority and capacity for border control and surveillance. Further, the EU has concluded a series of agreements with countries outside the Union (such as Turkey and Libya) to reduce the flow of migrants. For example, the 2016 agreement with Turkey significantly reduced the number of migrants crossing from Turkey to Greece. Some member states have tightened the conditions for obtaining asylum and introduced faster procedures for the deportation of those who have been denied one. Political pressures within the member states have also influenced the change in EU policy towards a more restrictive approach. A realistic approach has brought certain results in terms of reducing the number of migrants arriving at the EU borders.

While realism theory provides a powerful lens for understanding the state-centric motivations and power struggles inherent in the Mediterranean migrant crisis, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. A purely realist perspective may not fully capture the humanitarian dimensions of the crisis, the ethical considerations involved, or the significant role played by non-state actors and international norms. Nevertheless, realism theory remains a valuable analytical tool for experts and policymakers seeking to understand the underlying drivers and dynamics of this complex international crisis, highlighting the enduring influence of state-centric motivations in a world characterised by anarchy and the pursuit of power.

However, this realist approach has also drawn numerous criticisms of violation of human rights, lack of solidarity, and humanitarian crisis. Critics claim that many aspects of the realist approach, such as the agreement with Libya, have led to violations of the human rights of migrants and refugees. Some

member states have been accused of a lack of solidarity, refusing to accept migrants according to the quotas agreed at the EU level. Restrictive policies have often led to a worsening of the humanitarian situation in refugee camps and at the EU's external borders.

The migrant crisis has shown how complex the challenge of migration management is for the EU. While the liberal approach focused on humanitarian aid and integration, the realist approach emphasised border control and reducing the flow of migrants. The European Union will likely continue to balance these approaches, such as the new Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2024, seeking sustainable solutions that take into account both human rights and the need for security and stability within its borders. However, if this challenge becomes more complex and dangerous to the security of the member states, one should expect further strengthening of the realistic approach in the future.

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MIGRANTSKA KRIZA NA MEDITERANU IZ PERSPEKTIVE TEORIJE REALIZMA

Apstrakt: Mediteranska migrantska kriza, podstaknuta sukobima, siromaštvom i političkom nestabilnošću u zemljama porekla, pozicionira Mediteran kao najsmrtonosnije more na svetu. Hiljade ljudi rizikuju opasne prelaske mora, dok se tranzitne i odredišne zemlje bore sa humanitarnom pomoći i izazovima u vezi sa azilom. Evropska unija je u početku odgovorila na krizu primenom principa jedinstva i liberalizma. Ovaj rad koristi politički realizam kao teorijsku perspektivu za analizu krize, pokazujući kako državni suverenitet, nacionalni interesi i bezbednosne brige dominiraju političkim odgovorima – često na račun humanitarnih principa. Glavni koncepti korišćeni u analizi uključuju državu kao primarnog i najznačajnijeg aktera u međunarodnim odnosima, suverenitet kao pravo države da kontroliše svoje granice, nacionalni interes kao centralni motiv koji pokreće državnu politiku i bezbednost kao najvažniji prioritet država unutar anarhičnog međunarodnog sistema. Koncepti anarhije i samopomoći opisuju odsustvo višeg međunarodnog autoriteta i potrebu da države samostalno obezbede sopstvenu bezbednost. U kontekstu migrantske krize, migracije se često doživljavaju kao pretnja nacionalnoj bezbednosti i društvenoj stabilnosti, dok se humanitarne brige često stavljaju u drugi plan. U radu autor zaključuje da iako Evropska unija i dalje ima mehanizme za demonstraciju kohezije i sveobuhvatnih akcija, možemo očekivati dalje jačanje realističnog pristupa.

Ključne reči: Teorija realizma; migrantska kriza; Mediteran; Evropska unija.