ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Defend(ing) Europe? Border control and identitarian activism off the Libyan Coast

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Abstract

In the summer of 2017, the identitarian youth organization 'Defend Europe' deployed a ship in the Mediterranean to prove sea rescue NGOs' alleged collusion with human smugglers and assist the Libyan Coast Guard in interdicting migrants. This study shows that Defend Europe developed organizational structures, discourses, and practices that display meaningful similarities with those of the charities it sought to oppose, strategically portraying itself as a humanitarian actor despite its very dubious humanitarian credentials. Defend Europe's tendency to behave as a 'doppelganger' of sea rescue NGOs shows that institutional isomorphism and discursive frame appropriation can be found even among organizations with diametrically opposite ideologies. Besides contributing to scholarship on political activism, humanitarianism, and migration, these findings also add to the study of European (in)securities, showing that discourses and practices developed to enhance human security at sea can be emulated and hijacked to support agendas restricting human mobility

Keywords Defend Europe · Far right · Migration · Isomorphism · Maritime security · Humanitarianism

Introduction

More than 15,000 people died off the coast of Libya between 2014 and 2019 (International Organization for Migration, undated). The insufficiency of state-led search and rescue (SAR) operations in addressing this humanitarian crisis prompted several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to start their own maritime rescue missions. Initially praised by media and public authorities,

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non-governmental sea rescue has eventually raised heated controversy as an alleged pull factor of irregular migration and a catalyst for human smuggling. The delegitimization of NGOs' activities culminated after the 2018 Italian elections, when Interior Minister Salvini declared Italian ports closed to foreign-flagged ships carrying rescued migrants and new legislation explicitly criminalizing SAR NGOs was enacted (Cusumano and Villa 2020; Carrera et al. 2019). As this article shows, the migration 'crisis' fatigue of European publics and the increasing delegitimization of sea rescue NGOs provided an ideal environment for the inception of a new form of right-wing activism. In August 2017, the identitarian youth organization Defend Europe launched a maritime mission aimed at unveiling NGOs' alleged collusion with human smugglers and assisting the newly created Libyan Coast Guard in rescuing migrants and taking them back to African coasts.

The direct impact of Defend Europe's mission was very modest. Unlike the humanitarian NGOs they sought to oppose, which rescued more than 110,000 migrants over several years of operations, the Identitarians only conducted one relatively short-lived mission at a time where no migrants left Libyan coasts. As a result, Defend Europe was unsuccessful in helping Tripoli's Coast Guard to rescue and interdict migrants. The purpose of this article, however, is not to suggest that the identitarian youth mission had a direct influence on European border control, nor to compare Defend Europe with sea rescue NGOs, which had a far greater operational record and much more genuine humanitarian credentials. Despite the short duration of their operation and its modest operational record, Defend Europe's maritime deserves scholarly investigation as a novel form of far-right political activism that has strategically hijacked some of the discourses and practices developed by humanitarian NGOs.

Social movements scholars have extensively examined migration to Europe as a catalyst of social mobilization (Della Porta 2018). Asylum seekers' arrivals into Europe also fuelled a large-scale upsurge in far-right and anti-immigration street politics (Veugeler and Menard 2018; Schneiker 2018; Mudde 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2017; Blum 2016). Most existing research, however, has concentrated on initiatives showing solidarity towards asylum seekers, dedicating scant attention to right-wing, anti-immigration activism. Scholars working on maritime political activism have mapped the features and organizational cultures of sea rescue NGOs (Cusumano 2019; Cuttitta 2018), examined the tension between SAR operations and humanitarian principles (Stierl 2018; Pallister-Wilkins 2017), and critically analysed recent initiatives aimed at restricting the activities of NGOs (Cusumano and Villa 2020; Carrera et al. 2019). As epitomized by the case of Defend Europe, however, the 'repoliticization' of maritime borders (Cuttitta 2018) occurred in the wake of the Arab Uprisings also triggered forms of political activism aimed at restricting human mobility. Although not surprising given the much smaller and short-lived role played by Defend Europe in comparison to humanitarian NGOs, the shortage of scholarly engagement with far-right maritime political activism is worth addressing to expand our knowledge of the competing security discourses at practices at play in the Mediterranean sea in the wake of the European migration 'crisis'.

Anti-immigration activism has usually taken place within state borders and consisted of practices like street patrols or the occupation of symbolic buildings, whistleblowing, and institutional actions aimed at influencing sympathetic political parties (Froio and Castelli Gattinara 2017). Defend Europe combines the first and second type of practices. Their actions, however, have not only taken place on European streets, but also in the international waters off the Libyan coasts. Defend Europe's mission was the first form of far-right maritime political activism directly seeking to stop migrants from reaching European shores. Examining Defend Europe's maritime activities does not only provide new empirical evidence on the repoliticization of the sea and right-wing political activism. Identitarians' maritime operation also offers novel theoretical insights into how such organizations adapt to new missions and legitimize themselves by portraying as humanitarian missions exclusionary forms of political activism that are deeply problematic from a normative standpoint.

Institutionalist scholarship has long maintained that organizations operating in the same field converge in a process of isomorphism, adopting their predecessors' structure and behaviour cope with uncertainty and increase their legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Isomorphic tendencies have been documented among maritime rescue NGOs too (Cusumano 2019). As sea rescue NGOs are like-minded organizations sharing the same objective and pursuing identical activities, the fact that they display elements of isomorphic convergence comes hardly unexpected. Defend Europe's similarities with and deliberate emulation of the NGOs it seeks to oppose, by contrast, are much more counterintuitive. As this article shows, legal, operational, and normative pressures urged identitarian activists to adopt some of the same practices of sea rescue NGOs. Moreover, Defend Europe strategically appropriated part of these NGOs' discursive frames, extensively using humanitarian narratives to justify their presence at sea. In the words of one activist, Defend Europe acted as a 'doppelganger' of maritime rescue NGOs. While the short duration of the identitarian mission inevitably limits the robustness of my conclusions and warrants additional research, Defend Europe's mission resonates with existing literature in suggesting that far-right organizations appropriate elements of their rivals' identity—discursively and in practice—in the attempt to increase their legitimacy and effectiveness (Schneiker 2018; Bob 2012).

Unlike all the other charities offshore Libya, Defend Europe was the only civil society organization operating at sea with the explicit goal of stopping migration to Europe. Owing to the diametrically opposite ideological stance of maritime rescue NGOs and the identitarian movement, Defend Europe can be seen as a 'least likely case' (Levy 2008) for any instance of isomorphism to take place. Hence, this case selection does not only investigate an unexplored instance of maritime political activism, but also provides a strong test for the institutionalist argument that organizations operating in the same environment tend to converge in an isomorphic process.

Besides contributing to scholarship on political activism and organizational change, these findings offer insights into the study of the shifting borders of European (in)securities, resonating with other contributions to this special issue in illustrating how different understandings of security inform European migration

governance discourses and practices. Most notably, this article reveals that identitarian activists effectively combined ostensibly competing notions of security, merging traditional anti-immigration discourses securitizing human mobility across the Mediterranean with a human security narrative focusing on stopping deaths at sea.

To this end, I used various methods. Empirical information on Defend Europe's mission is drawn from news articles in English, French, German, and Italian as well as twenty semi-structured interviews with Defend Europe activists, humanitarians, and Italian and European law enforcement officials. In addition, I conducted a discourse analysis of all Defend Europe's outward communications published on the organization's website, Facebook, and Twitter webpages between its inception in 2016 and January 2018. Two key discursive frames were identified: a *securitizing* frame, encompassing the terms stressing the importance to protect European borders from the threat of illegal migration, and a *humanitarian* frame, consisting of words associated with migrants' suffering and the attempt to relieve it. A frequency list of 25 words per category (see Appendix) was then used to assess the relative prominence of each category vis-á-vis the other.

Conducting research on far-right activism entails methodological challenges as well as ethical issues associated with to access to empirical information, biased data, and the risk of advertising socially harmful groups (Toscano 2020; Blee and Creasap 2010). As far-right group members are often difficult to access and unwilling to answer researchers' questions, scholars often struggle to 'establish rapport without implying sympathy for the goals or tactics or these movements' (Blee and Creasap 2010, p. 279). Two Defend Europe activists, however, remained willing to participate in an anonymous interview even after I explained the purpose of my article and identified myself as a scholar who had previously studied humanitarian NGOs and their praiseworthy role in rescuing migrants off the coast of Libya.

A second challenge relates to the fact that data published by right-wing groups and the information they provide during interviews may be deliberately false or misleading (Blee and Creasap 2010, p. 278). In order to avoid this risk, however, the data obtained from interviews with identitarian activists as well as Defend Europe's website and social networks posts have been triangulated with those provided by a variety of other sources. Most notably, I have relied on official documents and reports published by anti-racist and pro-migrant organizations like Hope Not Hate, but also held interviews with Italian Coast Guard and Navy officers, EU officials, and activists from sea rescue NGOs. I also had the opportunity to gather first-hand insights into sea rescue operations by conducting two weeks of field research aboard an NGO ship off the coast of Libya in August 2016.

Last, while researchers may risk promoting socially harmful groups by publicizing their occasional 'good deeds' (Bizeul 2020), empirically rigorous studies of far-right organizations are important not only to advance the scientific study of political activism, but also ripe with normative and policy implications, providing insights into how to halt the spread of exclusionary ideologies. The case of Defend Europe in particular shows that discourses accusing NGOs of colluding with human smugglers and serving as a pull factor of migration disseminated by organizations like Frontex have unintended consequences, legitimizing extreme forms of political activism that may be deeply problematic for human security at sea.

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The article proceeds as follows. Section one draws on sociological institutionalism, explaining the factors underlying organizations' isomorphic convergence. Section two provides an overview of political activism at sea, outlining civil society responses to deaths off the Libyan coasts before focusing on Defend Europe's maritime campaign. Section three examines the Identitarians' discourses and practices in light of sociological institutionalist expectations, showing that legal constraints, normative pressures, and a deliberate attempt to imitate solutions already proven successful by humanitarian NGOs have prompted some meaningful similarities between Defend Europe and the organizations it sought to oppose. The conclusions flesh out the implications of these findings and outline avenues for future research.

Institutionalism and transnational political activism

Sociological institutionalism is a key paradigm in the study of how public and private organisations form, adapt, and change (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The study of NGOs, where institutionalist studies abound, is no exception. This section briefly outlines the main mechanisms of isomorphic convergence, reviews institutionalist contributions to the study of humanitarianism, and finally presents Defend Europe as a least likely case for isomorphism to take place.

The dynamics of isomorphic convergence

A central tenet of sociological institutionalist theories is the belief that organisations sharing the same environment develop similar structures and employ similar practices, thereby becoming similar to one another. This 'constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 149) is referred to as institutional isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three mechanisms of convergence: *coercive*, *mimetic* and *normative* isomorphism. Such processes are not mutually exclusive, but overlapping and complementary.

Coercive isomorphism embraces the different factors that forcibly compel organizations to follow certain templates. Legal obligations arising from the jurisdiction of the countries where they operate, for instance, force organisations to comply with specific requirements by imposing costly sanctions on deviant, unlawful behaviour. Consequently, 'regulatory environments constrain heterogeneity' (Oliver 1997, p. 707). Even when not explicitly coerced into adhering to certain rules, collective actors seeking to increase their legitimacy tend to spontaneously show adherence to prevailing social norms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Beckert 2010). The compliance pull of established norms urges organizations to adopt similar types of behaviour, converging in a process of *normative isomorphism* (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

Coercive and normative isomorphism alike prompts organizations to inadvertently standardize their structure, rhetoric, and behaviour. *Mimetic isomorphism*, by contrast, refers to the deliberate imitation of organizational models seen as legitimate

and effective. In order to cope with uncertainty, institutional entrepreneurs often seek attractive off-the-shelf solutions to the new problems they face. Consequently, emulation is especially pronounced among organizations entering a new field and lacking know-how and institutional memory (Beckert 2010).

Institutionalism in the study of NGOs

Consistent with institutionalist hypotheses, several studies note that isomorphic tendencies can be found among both small local charities and large International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), which 'behave similarly to other organizations, internalizing the values, goals, and methods of their institutional environment through imitation and isomorphism' (Cooley and Ron 2003, p. 13).

This is especially the case for humanitarian NGOs. Such organizations are subjected to coercive isomorphic pressures arising from security risks, logistical challenges, and the jurisdictions of the states where they operate, but also informed by similar normative beliefs. The professionalization and bureaucratisation of the humanitarian sector have prompted the socialization of a sizeable pool of individuals to the same logics of appropriateness (Barnett 2009; Riddell 2008). Tight professional networks and information and personnel exchange encourage NGOs to deliberately emulate one another. Often operating under a strong sense of urgency, humanitarian organizations display a high propensity to adopt solutions already proven effective by other charities (Cusumano 2019; Schneiker 2015).

Maritime rescue NGOs also display such tendencies. The willingness to rapidly start effective and financially viable SAR operations, the obligation to adhere to maritime safety standards, and the need to avoid criminalization prompted sea rescue charities to develop similar rescue models, deliberately emulating some of each other's practices, fundraising strategies, and legitimizing discourses. To be sure, sea rescue NGOs did not uncritically imitate each others' structure and behaviour, but developed different rescue models, different interpretations of humanitarian principles, as well as different approaches towards European governments and their migration policies. For instance, organizations like MOAS and later Save the Children developed a prudent, apolitical stance, while NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Sea-Watch, and Jugend Rettet explicitly sought to use maritime rescue as a platform to denounce the human costs of European restrictive border policies (Cuttitta 2018; Stierl 2018). As newcomer organizations only imitated the models they deemed compatible with their capabilities and identities, they engaged in a process described as 'selective emulation' (Cusumano 2019).

Isomorphism between rival organizations: defend Europe as a least likely case

While isomorphism tendencies are widespread among public and private organizations alike, they should ostensibly not apply to an outlier, right-wing activist group like Defend Europe. As Defend Europe's main operation took place in international waters, its activities were at least partly shielded from the coercive isomorphic pressures arising from state legislation. Although ships and crews remain subjected to

flag state jurisdiction, ship owners can often cherry-pick lenient legislation by flying flags of convenience. So did Defend Europe, whose vessel flew the flag of Mongolia, a landlocked country with loose labour, environmental, and safety regulations.

An organization like Defend Europe should also be less subjected to normative isomorphism. Humanitarian NGOs all internalize a commitment to 'save lives, alleviate suffering, and enable those suffering to maintain their human dignity' (Riddell 2008, p. 311), irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity, religion and status. This also applies to maritime rescue NGOs' personnel, who, notwithstanding their different interpretations of humanitarian principles and more or less confrontational approach towards European migration policies, all share a cosmopolitan mindset grounded on the belief that everyone, including irregular migrants, deserves to be rescued from drowning and safely apply for asylum (Cusumano 2019; Stierl 2018). Far from sharing this cosmopolitan mindset, Defend Europe is imbued with a communitarian agenda aimed at preserving European's ethnic distinctiveness by enforcing its borders (Castelli Gattinara 2017). Organizational cultures and identities shape 'the behaviours expected or obliged of members in a certain situation', thereby informing actors' interpretation and internalization of international norms (Fearon and Laitin 2000, p. 848). Defend Europe, which defined its identity in opposition to sea rescue NGOs, should therefore not be subjected to the same normative isomorphic pressures that influence humanitarian charities. Mimetic isomorphism is also unlikely to take place since, as argued above, organizations usually tend to selectively emulate only like-minded actors with similar identities and cultures (Cusumano 2019).

Looser legal constraints and a radically different identity suggest that no isomorphic convergence should exist between Defend Europe and maritime rescue NGOs. Consequently, Defend Europe is a least likely case for isomorphism to take place. As the remainder of this article shows, however, the identitarian youth movement mirrored some aspects of maritime rescue NGOs' discourses and practices. This puzzle makes Defend Europe's case a crucial source of insights into the study of isomorphism, political activism, and human (in)security at sea.

Political activism at sea

The maritime regions extending beyond twelve nautical miles from the coastline, known as international waters or high seas, are areas where no state jurisdiction applies. Over the last decades, the high seas have witnessed a growing process of 'zonation' which led states to extend their sovereign claims and accept specific responsibilities over international waters (Ryan 2019). Most notably, the 1979 SAR Convention divided the sea into maritime rescue regions, requiring states to coordinate effective rescue operations in the area (Panebianco and Fontana 2018, Aalbert and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2014). Nevertheless, state sovereignty in the high seas remains much more limited than on land, and private vessels continue to enjoy a right to innocent passage across maritime areas. Thanks to the vastness of the sea and its unique legal status, non-state actors have always played an important role in maritime security. Moreover, the sea provides a unique platform

for social mobilization. Historians, for instance, have documented maritime workers' solidarity against apartheid and racial discrimination (Cole and Limb 2016). Substantial attention has been dedicated to maritime environmental activism. Most notably, social scientists extensively studied Greenpeace's ability to confront states and corporations through advocacy campaigns and direct actions against oil rigs, whaling vessels, and nuclear experiments (Chartier and Deléage 2007).

In recent years, the moral imperative to enhance human security at sea has prompted new forms of maritime political activism, urging both small charities and larger INGOs to conduct SAR in the Mediterranean. Started in September 2014 with the creation of the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), non-governmental sea rescue gained momentum after the end of Italian Navy operation *Mare Nostrum* created a gap in SAR capabilities off the coast of Libya. In the spring of 2015, MOAS was joined by MSF and Sea-Watch. In 2016, six other organizations deployed boats at sea to conduct SAR missions, namely SOS-*Méditerranée*, Sea-Eye, Pro-Activa Open Arms, the Lifeboat Project, Jugend Rettet, the Boat Refugee Foundation, and Save the Children. In 2017, 13 boats from 10 different organizations were stationing in the Southern Mediterranean (Cuttitta 2018; Stierl 2018). By sustaining themselves through crowd funding, buying or chartering small ships from likeminded ship owners, and deliberately emulating some aspects of their predecessors' model, NGOs assisted over 110,000 migrants crossing the Mediterranean (Cusumano 2019, p. 251). Moreover, maritime rescue NGOs engaged in accountability politics (Keck and Sikkink 1998: p. 19), using their presence at sea to denounce European governments' failure to conduct effective SAR (Cuttitta 2018; Stierl 2018).

The Italian authorities and public initially welcomed NGOs' efforts. However, the increase in arrivals from Libya in 2016, combined with the EU's failure to provide Italy with meaningful burden sharing in the reception of asylum seekers, eventually created a growing migration crisis fatigue among the Italian public. After the European Border and Coast Guard (better known as Frontex) first criticized rescue NGOs for serving as a pull factor of migration and a catalyst for human smuggling (Frontex 2017), attorneys and opposition leaders started accusing NGOs of violating existing legal obligations and colluding with human smugglers. In April 2017, a Senate Defence Committee investigation acknowledged that no evidence of illegal behaviour could be found, but called for the regulation of NGOs to preserve Italy's control over its borders. In response, the Ministry of Interior drafted a Code of Conduct making permission for NGO vessels to disembark migrants in Italian ports conditional on refraining from entering Libyan waters, helping collect evidence for police investigations, and accepting law enforcement personnel on board. Some charities refused to sign the code, arguing that being forced to collaborate in apprehending suspect smugglers would violate the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. One of these NGOs, *Jugend Rettet*, had its vessel confiscated in August 2017 under suspicion of abetting illegal immigration (Carrera et al 2019).

As of January 2021, all indictments against NGOs have resulted in humanitarian organizations' acquittal (Cusumano and Villa 2020, p. 11). This growing wariness of non-governmental sea rescue, however, provided Defend Europe with an ideal climate to launch its first maritime mission, aimed at showing humanitarian NGOs' alleged collusion with human smugglers.

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Defend Europe's maritime mission

Defend Europe was created in 2016 as a spin-off of the pan-European identitarian movement started in France in 2012, when *Génération Identitaire*, the youth section of the far-right political organization *Bloc Identitaire*, was created to protect European identity from unregulated migration and Islamification. Their example was replicated in other European countries, including Germany, Austria, and Italy (Guenther et al. 2020; Schneiker 2018; Blum 2016; Virchow 2015). Although small in size, the identitarian movement obtained media coverage through stunts like the occupation of a mosque in Poitiers (Castelli Gattinara 2017).

Besides engaging in European 'street politics', Defend Europe also turned the sea into a platform for political activism. The first of Defend Europe's maritime demonstrations dates back to May 2017, when a group of Identitarians aboard a speedboat sought to block an NGO ship from leaving the port of Catania. This stunt only slightly delayed SOS-*Méditerranée*'s Aquarius departure but worked effectively as a demonstrative action, gaining visibility on international media (York and Anselmi 2017). Defend Europe received endorsements from far-right organizations and media outlets worldwide, including Breitbart and former Ku Klux Clan leader David Duke (Mulhall 2017).

Drawing on this newly achieved popularity, the identitarian youth organization started a crowd funding campaign to conduct a more ambitious mission. Upon request from civil society groups, online money transfer platforms denied their services to Defend Europe once the hashtag #StopDefendEuropePaypal went viral on social media. Notwithstanding these initiatives, by 26 June 2017 Defend Europe had collected around 165,000 EUR from over 2000 anonymous donors, used to charter the 422-ton vessel 'C-Star' (Mulhall 2017). The vessel, then flying the Djibouti flag and known as Suunta, was previously used as a floating armoury by the UK-based private security company Maritime Global Services, specialized in protecting vessels from pirates (Murdoch 2017, UK Parliament 2014). The Swedish ship owner Tomas Egerstrom, allegedly sympathetic with identitarian views, chartered it at a discounted price, declaring that he did not see any problem with the vessel 'being in the area to conduct legal research' (Murdoch 2017).

At first, Defend Europe's declared goal was to proactively stop NGO ships through interdiction and sabotage. As explained by an activist, however, they soon became aware that the unauthorized boarding and sabotaging of a vessel would entail harsh legal consequences. Hence, the organization settled for the more modest goal of monitoring NGO ships to document and deter their alleged contacts with human smugglers.[1] Both Defend Europe's website and the activists I interview declared that the goal of their mission was not to stop NGOs from saving lives and never not openly questioned the moral and legal imperative to assist those in distress at sea. Their main bone of contention lay in NGO's recurring disembarkation of migrants in Italy, deemed to be a pull factor of irregular migration. Accordingly, Defend Europe sought to delegitimize NGOs and assist European authorities

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[1] Authors's interview with Identitarian Activist 1 and 2, August 2017.

in criminalizing them by providing evidence of their alleged contacts with human smugglers. Furthermore, the organization endeavoured to assist Tripoli's Coast Guard in rescuing migrants and taking them back to Libya. These goals would purportedly allow Defend Europe to simultaneously save lives and disrupt illegal immigration, framed as a threat to European identity and security.

The C-Star ship was crewed with eight Defend Europe activists. Priority was given to those with seafaring and medical experience. Consequently, activists with a background in the Italian and German navies were appointed as shipmaster and first officer. As already done by NGOs like SOS-*Méditerranée*, MSF, or Save the Children, however, Defend Europe addressed its shortage of seafaring expertise by relying on a crew of Sri Lankan sailors chartered together with the ship. Dispatching the vessel to the Mediterranean proved complex. The ship's journey was first halted in Suez due to irregularities with its documentation and then in Cyprus, where port authorities found some of the sailors to be without visas. Ironically, Defend Europe itself was then charged with abetting illegal immigration. Although the ship was eventually released, pressure from civil society prompted Italian and Maltese authorities to prohibit Defend Europe from entering their ports, while a mobilization of Tunisian fishermen prevented the Identitarians from docking in Zarzis (Murdoch 2017). Defend Europe denounced the closure of ports as a human right violation, claiming that 'while ISIS terrorists are welcomed in Europe, patriotic activists are locked out of their own continent'.

The mission was also plagued by technical problems. Left adrift due to engine malfunctioning, the C-Star was even forced to launch a distress call ten days after the start of the mission. When a maritime rescue NGOs responded, Defend Europe refused assistance. This episode, however, provided humanitarian activists and media with the possibility to ridicule Defend Europe as in need of rescue from the very NGOs they were seeking to stop.[2] Maritime safety concerns and pressure from right-wing activists eventually prompted Malta to authorize disembarkation, allowing the ship to dock on 25 August. After Defend Europe's activists landed, the C-Star and its crew continued to station at sea for several weeks, unable to enter any port because the ship owner would not guarantee the payment of docking fees. Its Sri Lankan sailors, left without payment and food, were finally allowed to disembark in Barcelona in late October (Serafini 2017).

When at sea, Defend Europe repeatedly confronted migrants and NGOs, issuing warning messages via radio and megaphones, waving banners at migrants stating 'no way! You will not make Europe your home' and attaching stickers with Defend Europe's logos on rescue ships. While conducting these stunts, the Identitarians also monitored NGOs' activities and radio communication, and offered support to Libyan authorities in conducting maritime border patrols.[3] The practical impact of these activities was modest. Contrary to their initial claims, Defend Europe failed to provide any evidence that NGOs were collaborating with smugglers, and even the Libyan Coast Guard refused Identitarians' help.

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[2] Author's interview with sea rescue NGOs humanitarian workers, August 2017.

[3] Author's interview with Identitarian Activist 1, August 2017.

Nevertheless, Identitarians considered their mission successful in terms of advocacy.[4] By communicating their activities in four languages (English, French, German and Italian) on the main social networks, Defend Europe reached a broad audience and helped spread narratives that found ample support in right-wing circles. Even if the Identitarians' direct influence on European border and migration policies was very limited, the confiscation of Jugend Rettet's ship and other NGOs' decision to suspend operations in September 2017 gave Defend Europe the opportunity to portray their efforts as successful. As these developments took place shortly after their mission, the Identitarians claimed credit for NGOs' reduced presence at sea, presented as proof of their mission's effectiveness.

Isomorphism at sea in discourse and practice: an analysis

Defend Europe's discourses

Unsurprisingly, securitizing discourses were an important component of Defend Europe's communication. As noted by Castelli Gattinara (2017, p. 291), identitarian activists are 'entrepreneurs of fear'. Accordingly, Defend Europe's communication features the main discursive repertoires identified by the scholarship on the securitization of migration, explicitly outlining a migration-terrorism nexus and a migration-crime nexus (Lazaridis and Wadia 2015; Borbeau 2011; Huysmans 2000). For instance, the terrorist attacks at the Bataclan in Paris and large-scale harassment of women in Cologne were both mentioned as examples of the threat posed by migrants, explicitly associated with rapists and 'ISIS terrorists'. Depicting migration as a threat also resulted into an attempt to frame sea rescuers as detrimental to European security. NGOs rescuing migrants off the Libyan coasts were therefore stigmatized as 'useful idiots' or 'active accomplices of smuggler mafias', or simply labelled themselves 'criminals' and 'smugglers'. The widespread adoption of such securitizing discourses and guilt by association expedients has already been documented by scholars of extreme right-wing and anti-immigration parties (Guenther et al. 2020; Van der Valk 2003).

Identitarians' discourses, however, also display a strong humanitarian component. In Defend Europe's communication, the willingness to protect Europe and humanitarian objectives are inextricably linked, as epitomized by slogans such as 'Let's Defend Europe & Save Lives!', and 'Help us Save Europe! Help us Save Lives'. Defend Europe's mission was thus primarily presented as a humanitarian operation or, in the organization's phrasing, an 'identitarian SAR mission' simultaneously seeking to 'save Europe, stop illegal immigration, and end the dying at sea'. Relatedly, the commitment to stop migration was depicted as a humanitarian endeavour through catchphrases like 'No way: no deaths'. As explained in detail in their website, Defend Europe's mission would 'make the sea more safe [sic.] in two ways'; First, 'an additional ship will be there to answer SOS signals'. Second, by

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[4] Author's interview with Identitarian Activist 1 and 2, August 2017..

exposing collaboration between NGOs and human smugglers and destroying the dinghies used to carry migrants, Defend Europe would 'cause serious damage to the criminal networks', thereby 'saving lives in the future'. As forcefully stressed by Defend Europe's activists, their ship 'would never get in the way of any rescue operations', but also conduct SAR whenever needed. When answering the question of whether migrants could die because of their activities, Defend Europe activists assured that (emphasis mine) 'As soon as we receive an emergency signal we will of course immediately help the people in danger and hand out life vests… as the law prescribes'. Consequently, Defend Europe's mission would help save lives by 'adding a ship to the humanitarian rescuing fleet'.

Consistent with this narrative, the attempt to delegitimize humanitarian NGOs did not merely consist of the claim that non-governmental sea rescue jeopardizes European security by facilitating illegal border crossings. Defend Europe consistently sought to discredit NGOs' humanitarian motives by holding them responsible for deaths at sea. They claimed that 'by luring Africans into the sea', the 'so-called humanitarian NGOs are responsible for the mass drowning of thousands in the Mediterranean', deliberately ignoring 'the humanitarian collateral damage caused by their own actions' in order to 'play the role of saviours' and enrich themselves through donations.

The quantitative content analysis I conducted shows that the dubious claim of having humanitarian objectives is not an occasional rhetorical expedient, but a consistent feature of Defend Europe's narratives. Surprisingly, humanitarian discourses were given even greater prominence than the securitizing vocabulary that depicted migrants as a threat to the safety of European citizens. Overall, terms associated with a humanitarian frame are iterated slightly more frequently (139 times) than those based on a securitizing frame (132). Although the small size of the body of documents focusing on Defend Europe's maritime operations does not allow for drawing strong conclusions about the Identitarians' discursive strategies, the findings of this article resonate with the broader scholarship on far-right political communication. As first noted by Bob (2012), 'rightwing groups have adopted many of the same strategies and tactics as their leftwing foes'. This is especially the case for the radical right-wing organization Generation Identity, from which Defend Europe was created. As documented by Schneiker (2018), Generation Identity developed discursive strategies that resonate with those of established human rights NGOs like Amnesty International.

Defend Europe's practices

As shown above, Defend Europe's mission displays some surprising analogies with the operations of maritime rescue NGOs. Like the charities conducting SAR off-shore Libya, The Identitarians resorted to a crowd funding campaign to charter a vessel from a sympathetic ship owner, staffed it with a crew comprising both professional sailors and activists, and conducted a mission that, at least on paper, purportedly combined advocacy and maritime rescue.

In spite of its diametrically opposed normative stance, Defend Europe replicated several features of smaller charities like Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye, and Jugend Rettet. These NGOs engaged in accountability politics, conducting maritime missions to simultaneously assist migrants in distress and act as watchdogs of European border control policies, serving as a whistleblower of Frontex and military missions' failure to rescue migrants. Conversely, Defend Europe endeavoured to both conduct SAR operations and act as a watchdog of NGOs, thereby serving as a whistleblower of the alleged contacts between humanitarians and smugglers.

Not only did Defend Europe engage in the same type of accountability politics as humanitarian NGOs: its fundraising strategies and operational practices also display some similarities with sea rescue charities'. Furthermore, as also shown above, the discourses deployed by the Identitarians drew on the same humanitarian lexicon employed by the NGOs they sought to oppose. Institutionalism provides important insights into this tendency. The concepts of coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism all contribute to explain Defend Europe's adoption of some of humanitarian NGOs' organizational features and communication strategies.

Coercive isomorphism

The legal obligations imposed by international maritime and humanitarian law played an important role in reshaping Defend Europe's mission. By vocally condemning the actions of the Identitarians and apprehending its activists after their demonstration in Catania, Italian authorities made immediately clear that the attempt to physically stop NGOs would not be condoned.[5] Consequently, Identitarians became aware that stunts like forcibly boarding or damaging NGO ships would trigger serious legal consequences. If conducted in international waters, such actions could even be construed as an act of piracy, and therefore amount to a crime against humanity.[6] Hence, Defend Europe decided to relinquish sabotage, opting for a mission primarily consisting of monitoring NGO activities.

Defend Europe was also subjected to the coercive pressure arising from the international law of the sea. Maritime safety requirements shaped the composition of the crew, making the presence of professional figures such as a licensed ship master and engine officer compulsory. Moreover, the C-Star crew were—as all seafarers—subjected to the positive obligation to assist people in distress at sea. Even if the C-Star's flag country—Mongolia—did not sign the 1979 SAR Convention, the duty to rescue is an obligation under customary international law applying to all seafarers (Ghezelbash et al. 2018; Mann 2016). Consequently, failing to abide by this obligation threatened criminal sanctions for the shipmaster and crew.

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[5] Author's interview with Italian Coast Guard officer, June 2017; Author's interview with Italian Navy officer, July 2017; Author's interview with Italian Coast Guard officer, June 2017; Author's Interview with EU official, June 2017.

[6] Author's interview with EU official, June 2017; author's interview with Italian Coast Guard officer, June 2017; Interview with Identitarian activist, August 2017.

By issuing requests to verify Defend Europe's compliance with relevant standards and regulations, advocacy NGOs like Hope not Hate and Human Rights at Sea tightened these constraints further, increasing the pressure to comply with all relevant legislation in order to avoid lawsuits. As a result, the Identitarians felt compelled to rhetorically stress their commitment to rescue people at sea 'as the law prescribes'. Defend Europe's behaviour, however, was not solely shaped by legal constraints, but also by the need to gain legitimacy by showing adherence to the logics of appropriateness underlying normative isomorphism.

Normative isomorphism

Defend Europe's activists too were subjected to the compliance pull of the maritime rescue norm. Sometimes referred to as the unwritten law of the sea, the duty to rescue displays the features of strong international norms. Maritime rescue operations have been increasingly disincentivized or even criminalized, causing seafarers to indirectly shirk the obligation to assist people in distress at sea by, for instance, rerouting away from maritime migration corridors. The duty to rescue those in distress at sea, however, continues to generate widespread stigma when directly violated by ships refusing to provide assistance to people drowning in their vicinity. Consequently, Defend Europe did not only seem to take the maritime rescue norm for granted by using expressions like (emphasis mine) 'we will **of course** immediately help the people in danger'. When confronted with the insinuation that Defend Europe would not assist migrants in danger of drowning, an activist even spontaneously snapped 'We are not murderers!' (Horowitz 2017). Accordingly, the description of the mission provided in Defend Europe's website repeatedly stressed compliance with the duty to rescue. The fact that Defend Europe did not actually conduct any SAR operation and never acknowledged the problematic ethical implications of returning migrants to Libya obviously casts serious doubts over the authenticity of their humanitarian commitments. Paying lip service to the maritime rescue norm, however, was essential for Defend Europe to acquire a modicum of legitimacy and present themselves as a humanitarian organization. As predicted by the mechanisms of normative isomorphism, the compliance pull of strong norms like the duty to rescue those in distress at sea prompted some similarities with both the communication strategies and the operational behaviour of humanitarian NGOs.

Mimetic isomorphism

Such similarities were not just the inadvertent by-product of coercive and normative isomorphic tendencies. Defend Europe also strategically imitated some of NGOs' practices, engaging in a mimetic isomorphic process. As a recently formed organization with no previous seafaring experience, Defend Europe found a suitable template for their mission in existing forms of maritime political activism. Specifically, the May 2017 action against SOS-*Méditerranée* was deliberately inspired from Greenpeace's early stunts, frequently characterized by the use of speedboats against ships and oil rigs. As explained by an activist, Defend Europe explicitly sought to behave

like 'a black Greenpeace'.[7] Accordingly, the group considered emulating the sabotaging strategies used by environmentalists against whaling vessels, including the use of nets to stop NGO ships' engines (Murdoch 2017).

The legal consequences attached to sabotaging ships, however, compelled the Identitarians to reconsider this approach. Consequently, Defend Europe turned to another familiar model of maritime political activism, provided by the same maritime rescue NGOs they sought to oppose. Institutionalist scholarship has long argued that isomorphism is primarily an attempt for organizations to increase their legitimacy by adopting the behaviour and rhetoric of established actors (Di Maggio and Powell 1983). Still widely regarded as morally praiseworthy by many, NGOs provided a suitable example for Defend Europe to emulate in their attempt to increase its legitimacy. The Identitarians' use of a humanitarian rhetoric to legitimize their mission can be therefore understood as a form of discursive appropriation, a strategy already documented by studies of other private actors suffering from a legitimacy deficit like security companies (Joachim and Schneiker 2012).

By selectively emulating specific aspects of maritime rescue NGOs' narratives and organizational templates narratives, Defend Europe could strategically employ existing, off-the-shelf discursive strategies and repertoires of action against the same actors who had deployed them in the first place. As observed by an identitarian activist, Defend Europe could therefore be described as 'a doppelganger' of maritime rescue NGOs.[8]

Conclusions

Although Defend Europe's maritime mission was short-lived, an examination of their rhetoric and practices has important empirical, theoretical, and policy implications, offering novel insights into the complex relationship between (in)securities and human mobility investigated in this special issue.

Considering its ideological stance, Defend Europe is a least likely case for isomorphism with maritime rescue NGOs to take place. Nonetheless, some elements of isomorphism can be found in in both discourses and practices. The legal obligation to abide by the international law of the sea, the compliance pull of the maritime rescue norm, and the availability of some viable, off-the-shelf maritime activism templates all exerted coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphic pressures on Defend Europe, prompting them to develop some of the same operational practices already experimented successfully by sea rescue NGOs. Although the case of Defend Europe provides a strong test for the argument that civil society organizations tend to display isomorphic tendencies, additional research is needed to corroborate this finding. Most notably, future scholarship should both map the existence of isomorphism across different public, commercial, and non-governmental maritime organizations more systematically and assess whether other conservative, not-for-profit

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[7] Author's nterview with Identitarian activist 1, August 2017.
[8] Interview with Identitarian activist 2, August 2017.

organizations have displayed the tendency to behave as doppelgangers by adopting the rhetoric and behaviour of the progressive NGOs they seek to oppose.

The finding that a far-right civil society organization—Defend Europe—has emulated the progressive NGOs they seek to oppose provides a novel contribution to the scholarship on human rights and political activism. Identitarian activists' purported willingness to behave as 'doppelgangers' of humanitarian NGOs should be especially relevant for the study of right-wing extremism and its response to human mobility. Scholars have noted that conservative groups, previously wary of the human rights culture, have increasingly deployed human rights discourses in order to advance their political goals. Originally conceived as a counterhegemonic instrument for addressing historical injustices, human rights have been turned into avenues for reinforcing existing and often oppressive power relations (Perugini and Gordon 2015).

In a similar vein, scholarship on migration to Europe has noted that migrants' right to life has been instrumentalized to legitimize policies primarily aimed at restricting human mobility (Moreno-Lax 2018; Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Tazzioli 2016). EU border control and anti-smuggling policies, justified as an attempt at 'reducing deaths by stopping the crossings' (EEAS 2016) are a case in point. Similar dynamics can be found in Defend Europe's discourses, dominated by a humanitarian narrative whereby the sole way to protect migrants' life is preventing them from crossing the Mediterranean. Scholarship on international norm contestation has noted that norms can be appropriated by actors with very different agendas (Krook and True 2012; Wiener 2014). By arguing that migrants found in distress in the Southern Mediterranean sea should be taken back to Libya, Defend Europe ultimately conflated SAR and interdiction, attempting to turn the maritime rescue norm into an opportunity to restrict human mobility.

In addition, Defend Europe both drew on and directly contributed to the discourses used by European and Italian authorities to delegitimize and criminalize NGOs, first accused by Frontex of serving as a pull factor of irregular migration. These discourses helped the Identitarians to portray themselves as the 'true humanitarians' and present their cause as an attempt to simultaneously protect Europe and migrants themselves. Thus, the finding that organizations like Defend Europe are capable of strategically appropriating existing discursive frames is not only relevant from a theoretical standpoint, but also yields policy implications. The fact that European public authorities' discourses have served as a source of legitimacy by an extreme right-wing group suggests that the criticism of sea rescue operations formulated by organizations like Frontex has unintended consequences that policy-makers should carefully consider. Although Defend Europe only conducted one short mission with a modest operational record, their example may serve as a precedent for other, more radical and sustained forms of right-wing political activism.

Moreover, Defend Europe's active media engagement also contributed to disseminating previously marginal conspiracy theories like the belief that NGOs are in agreement with human smugglers or partake in a conspiracy poised to replace native Europeans with cheaper foreign labour. Although the Identitarians' overall influence on migration discourses and policies was limited, examining the behaviour and rhetoric or organizations like Defend Europe can therefore provide important

insights for scholarship of human mobility to Europe, maritime security, human rights, migration, and political activism.

Appendix

Defend Europe's discourses

Humanitarian frame	Securitizing frame
Sav*	Illegal
Help	Smuggl*
SAR	Traffick
Humanitarian	Border
Life	Patriots
Lives	Guard
Deaths	Mafia
Die	Investigation
Dying	Law
Asylum	Disrupt
Children	Fight
Rescu*	Collusion
Safe	Criminal
Sinking	Destroy
Assist	Embargo
Protect	Surveil
Innocent	Police
Shipwreck	Clandestine
Drown	Terror
MRCC	Threaten
Aid	Bataclan
Dead	Security

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author states there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

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