

# LAMPEDUSA: THE DIRECT CONSEQUENCE OF EUROPEAN MIGRATION POLICY



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## 1

For over two decades, the island of Lampedusa has been one of the main entry points to European territory for people fleeing their countries of origin or residence, seeking international protection, and who do not have legal and safe pathways to access the asylum procedure. However, its geographic position, as well as the opacity with which the Italian authorities operate on the island, means that it is one of the European Union's external borders where there is less presence of social organisations, activists, and media. As a result, the information that reaches us is often biased, incomplete, or generalised, and does not provide a true picture of the particular context on the island.



# LAMPEDUSA AND THE ARRIVAL OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

## 2

Lampedusa is a small Italian island with a population of 6,000 inhabitants, part of the Agrigento province, which belongs to the administrative region of Sicily, in the south of the country. It is only 145 km from the coast of Tunisia and is the entry point to Europe for thousands of migrants and international protection seekers, especially in the last decade. Its proximity to the African continent is the reason why it receives such a large influx of migrants, as boats attempting to reach mainland Italy or other European countries must take longer and, consequently, more dangerous routes.

The arrivals of migrants and refugees to Lampedusa in recent years have overwhelmed the island's reception capacity, due to a negligent management system for arrivals and accommodation, as well as structural deficiencies<sup>1</sup>. In mid-September 2023, over 10,000 new migrants arrived in just three days, exceeding the island's total population. The mayor of Lampedusa, faced with this situation, declared a state of emergency and requested the intervention of the central government's military. The police transfer the migrants and refugees

by planes and boats to Sicily, but the emergency approach to migration management, which only has a reception centre with 400 places, has not provided the island with effective tools to cope with the situation. It is important to note that the current overwhelming situation in Lampedusa is not new, and that the lack of a structural approach to meet the needs of migrants is the result of government policy. However, Meloni's extreme right-wing government is calling for more involvement from the European Union in the sharing of responsibilities for reception.

It is important to emphasise that the primary reason why migrants and refugees have to use the dangerous sea routes across the Mediterranean sea to reach Europe is the lack of legal and safe routes. This situation forces migrants to physically reach European territory, putting their lives at risk at sea and subjecting them to severe human rights violations in transit countries. The establishment of legal and safe pathways would prevent risk situations and the deplorable reception conditions faced by migrants and refugees in territories with high arrival numbers.

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<sup>1</sup>Europa Press, "Llegan más de 1.200 migrantes a la isla de Lampedusa en poco más de 24 horas" (in English, "More than 1,200 migrants have arrived on the island of Lampedusa in just over 24 hours"), 15th November 2023: <https://www.europapress.es/inter-nacional/noticia-llegan-mas-1200-migrantes-isla-lampedusa-poco-mas-24-horas-20231115104110.html>.

# The Central Mediterranean Route to Italy

Since the 1990s, thousands of people have used sea routes across the Mediterranean sea from North Africa and Turkey to migrate or seek asylum in the European Union. There are three main migration routes across the Mediterranean sea: the central route (from North Africa to Italy and Malta), the western route (from North Africa to Spain), and the eastern route (from Turkey to Greece).

The central Mediterranean route is the most commonly used, with Italy being the primary destination for migrants and refugees, and the island of Lampedusa serving as one of the main entry points. Boats typically departed from Libya, but recently Tunisia has become the departure point for most migrants and refugees, alongside Algeria and Egypt, although in much smaller numbers.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 60% of migrants who crossed the central route used boats that left from Tunisia. Only 8% of the total arrivals in Italy arrived via Lampedusa during the large migration influx of 2015 and 2016<sup>2</sup>. One explanation for the high number of arrivals on the island in recent years is

the increase in boats leaving from Tunisia, which is very close to Lampedusa. Another important factor to consider is that the authorities in Malta, which is just over 170 km from the Italian island, do not carry out rescues nor allow non-governmental maritime rescue organisations to perform operations to dock at their ports. This situation forces boats to head to other nearby destinations, such as Lampedusa.

From 2011, there was a notable increase in the arrival of migrants and refugees in Italy. In that year, a total of 62,692 people arrived, compared to 4,406 the previous year. The upward trend continued until 2016, when the total number surpassed 181,000 migrants in Italy<sup>3</sup>. From 2017 to 2020, there was a decline, but this drop did not mean that fewer people were using the central Mediterranean route; rather, it can largely be explained by the interception operations carried out by the coast guards of North African countries, mainly Libya and Tunisia. For example, 49% of the people attempting to cross the central Mediterranean route by 2018 were pushed back to one of the two countries mentioned.

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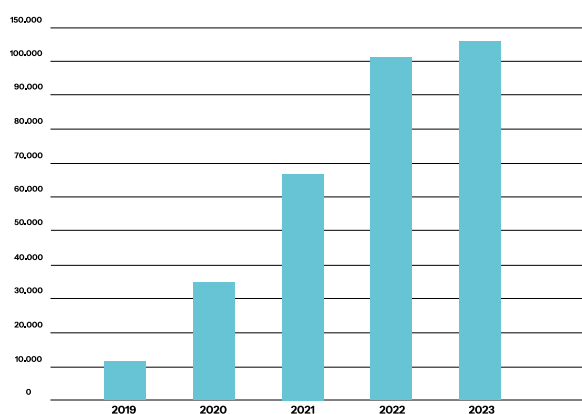
<sup>2</sup> Dw, "Lampedusa: 'Una crisis operativa, no una crisis migratoria'" (in English, "An operational crisis, not a migration crisis"), 28/09/2023: <https://www.dw.com/es/lampedusa-una-crisis-operativa-no-una-crisis-migratoria/a-66847642>.

<sup>3</sup> IOM's Missing migrants Project: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

In July 2023, the European Union signed an agreement with Tunisia, with Tunisian President Kais Saied, known as the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Its goal is to curb the arrival of migrants on the Italian coasts in order to “manage irregular migration and combat human trafficking”. The agreement marks another step in the EU’s externalisation of its borders and aims to achieve the same as the 2017 Italy-Libya agreement: brutal control by authorities over migrants, including the interception of boats by Libyan and Tunisian coast guards and the subsequent pushback of migrants to Africa. The harassment of Sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia has been condemned by several human rights organisations and has increased since President Saied gave an incendiary speech about migrants from other African countries. With this agreement, the EU is putting the lives of migrants and refugees at risk by keeping or returning them to unsafe countries.

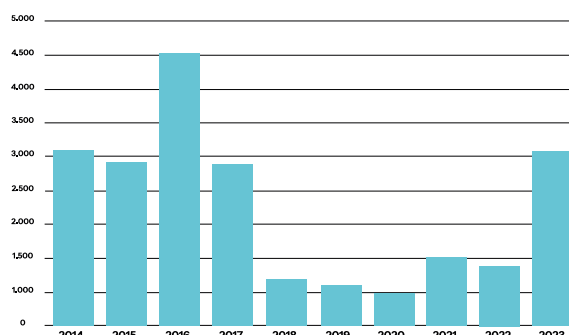
Regarding migrants who have arrived in Italy in 2023, by early November, a total of 144,657 people had been counted . These numbers are very high compared to other EU countries that are also destinations for migrant and refugee boats, as Greece saw 36,059 arrivals and Spain saw 45,758 arrivals during the same period.

\* Data for a graph of arrivals in Italy (source: IOM’s Missing Migrants Project):



As of today, the central Mediterranean route is also the most dangerous in the world. In 2023, the IOM recorded a total of 3,155 migrant and refugee deaths or disappearances on the central route, which is double the previous year’s figures and the highest number since 2016 .

\* Data for a graph of migrants dead or missing on the central route:



In 2023, arrivals in Lampedusa accounted for 70% of the total arrivals in Italy. The main countries of origin of migrants and refugees are, in this order: Tunisia, Sudan, Guinea, Mali, Syria, and Ivory Coast. The dangerous nature of the route and the high number of boats heading to the island have led to a high number of rescues and shipwrecks in the area in the past decade. The shipwreck and deaths of 368 migrants and refugees in Lampedusa on 3rd October 2013, and of other 200 people in a separate shipwreck a few days later, highlight the severity of the situation and the extreme need for maritime search and rescue operations. The Italian Government launched the “Mare Nostrum” search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean sea, but stopped it after a year, claiming it became too costly. A decade later, inaction and a lack of resources and political will continue to put the lives of migrants and refugees at risk.

<sup>4</sup> IOM’s Missing migrants Project: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

<sup>5</sup> IOM’s Missing migrants Project: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

It is important to emphasise that the high number of arrivals in European countries, and in territories like the island of Lampedusa, would not actually overwhelm reception systems if they had decent conditions and were provided with the necessary resources. On the contrary, governments use these figures to give the impression that the situation is unsustainable, justifying the inhuman conditions in which people are received. As Flavio di Giacomo, spokesperson for the IOM, stated, the situation in Lampedusa is not a “migrant crisis”, but an “operational crisis”.



# Migration and Asylum in Italian National Policy

The Italian Ministry of the Interior is responsible for processing international protection applications in the country. According to the European Union's Dublin Regulation, the first European country to which an asylum seeker arrives is, in principle, responsible for processing their application. This situation means that Italy, being on the EU's border, faces a much higher number of applications than other European countries. This scenario implies that border countries experience intense migration pressure, resulting in asylum seekers not receiving the same treatment across different member states.

One of the most alarming trends in migration policies of the Italian state, and the European Union as a whole, is the externalisation of borders to prevent migrants and refugees from reaching Europe. As noted in the previous section, in February 2017, the Italian government signed an agreement with Libya to externalise migration control. Under this pact, Italian authorities provide financial and technical assistance to the Libyan coastguards to increase sea patrols and pushback intercepted boats. The appalling human rights situation for migrants and refugees in Libya has been extensively denounced by human rights organisations, as well as by the United Nations<sup>6</sup>.

Furthermore, this agreement between the two states condemns those trying to reach Europe to illegitimate detention and serious abuses, including rape and torture, in Libyan detention centres. Although the agreement provided that the Libyan state would improve the protection of migrants and refugees, and despite evidence showing that violations have persisted, Italy decided to renew the agreement in February 2020, precisely three years after its signing, for another three years.

Similarly, in July 2023, the European Union announced an agreement signed with Tunisia (Memorandum of Understanding)<sup>7</sup> to address migration, among other issues. This new pact demonstrates a trend towards the externalisation of borders to countries with severe human rights abuses, even denounced by the European Parliament itself. The president of the North African country has been harshly criticised by the United Nations for his racist statements against sub-Saharan migrants. Like the Italy-Libya agreement, this pact will also serve to provide Tunisian authorities with funding and technical support to patrol their coasts and pushback migrants and refugees from intercepted boats, many of which head towards Lampedusa.

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/28/un-experts-find-war-crimes-crimes-against-humanity-libya>

<sup>7</sup> El millonario acuerdo entre la UE y Túnez: pagar a una dictadura para frenar la inmigración (in English, "The multi-million dollar agreement between the EU and Tunisia: Paying a dictatorship to stop immigration"), *El Diario*, 18/07/2023: [https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/millonario-acuerdo-ue-tunez-pagar-dictadura-frenar-inmigracion\\_1\\_10387260.html](https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/millonario-acuerdo-ue-tunez-pagar-dictadura-frenar-inmigracion_1_10387260.html).

In November 2023, Italy signed an agreement with Albania to establish two migrant detention centres to which rescued individuals in Italian waters would be sent<sup>8</sup>. Although Meloni argues that these individuals would be under Italian jurisdiction, they would in fact be outside the European Union's territory and thus not subject to EU asylum regulations<sup>9</sup>. At the time of publishing this report, the Albanian Constitutional Court has admitted two appeals against the agreement, which suspends its implementation until the court issues a final ruling within a maximum of three months<sup>10</sup>.

In addition to these agreements with third countries, throughout 2023, Meloni's government has implemented various regulations, via decree, to hinder the arrival of refugees and the work of organisations carrying out sea rescues.

The first decree imposes obstacles on sea rescue organisations by assigning them ports far from their current positions for disembarkation, as well as requiring them to return to port every time they conduct a rescue operation. This last measure has a significant psychosocial impact on rescued individuals and prevents organisations from carrying out consecutive operations<sup>11</sup>.

The second decree eliminates the minimal protection that migrants and refugees previously

had by deeming them ineligible for any form of international protection. This poses a serious risk of exclusion and marginalisation for thousands of people.

The third decree extended the maximum period of detention in permanent centres for repatriation (CPR, as per their Spanish acronym) for individuals awaiting expulsion orders to 18 months, the maximum allowed by European legislation. It also provides for the construction of new administrative detention centres, although there are already a dozen in Italy. These centres have been repeatedly denounced for serious human rights violations within their facilities<sup>12</sup>, and represent a disproportionate measure as they imply deprivation of liberty as a precautionary measure prior to carrying out an expulsion from the territory.

The fourth and final decree facilitates the expulsion of unaccompanied migrant minors by accelerating the process for conducting anthropometric tests to determine age. It also includes sanctioning measures for minors who undergo age determination tests with results that contradict their stated age<sup>13</sup>. Age determination procedures based on anthropometric testing have a high margin of error and do not guarantee children's rights.

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<sup>8</sup> El Gobierno de Meloni construirá una cárcel italiana para personas migrantes en Albania (in English, "Meloni's government will build an Italian prison for migrants in Albania"), *El Salto*, 18/11/2023: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/italia/gobierno-meloni-ha-anunciado-construir-una-carcel-italiana-personas-migrantes-albania>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/noticias/noticia/articulo/italia-el-acuerdo-para-la-detencion-extraterritorial-de-personas-refugiadas-y-migrantes-en-albania-es-ilegal-e-inviabile/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-12-13/el-constitucional-de-albania-suspende-el-acuerdo-con-italia-para-acoger-centros-de-inmigrantes.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Italia: el nuevo decreto obstruye los esfuerzos de salvamento en el mar y causará más muertes (in English, "Italy: New decree hampers rescue efforts at sea and will cause more deaths"), Médicos Sin Fronteras, 05/01/2023: <https://www.msf.es/noticia/italia-nuevo-decreto-obstruye-los-esfuerzos-salvamento-mar-y-causara-mas-muertes>.

<sup>12</sup> Los escándalos que esconden los centros de detención de migrantes que Meloni quiere construir en cada región de Italia (in English, "The scandals behind the migrant detention centres that Meloni wants to build in every region of Italy", *El Diario*, 19/10/2023: [https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/escandalos-esconden-centros-detencion-migrantes-meloni-quiere-construir-region-italia\\_1\\_10527854.html](https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/escandalos-esconden-centros-detencion-migrantes-meloni-quiere-construir-region-italia_1_10527854.html).

<sup>13</sup> Italia expulsará a los migrantes que se declaren menores si los análisis certifican su mayoría de edad (in English, "Italy will expel migrants who declare themselves to be minors if tests confirm they are of legal age", *El País*, 28/09/2023: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-09-28/italia-expulsara-a-los-migrantes-que-se-declaren-menores-si-los-analisis-certifican-su-mayoria-de-edad.html>.

# The Socio-Economic Situation of the Island of Lampedusa

Lampedusa has historically been a territory forgotten by the Italian authorities. In the late 1980s, when two missiles launched from Libya nearly struck the territory, the island began to appear in the media and entered the Italian public consciousness. Later, the arrival of boats carrying migrants and refugees continued to draw attention to the island, something that, at the time, was viewed positively. From that moment, Italians began to discover the tourist appeal of an island where the residents had traditionally been devoted to fishing and the canning industry. The growth of tourism, primarily domestic, led many to reorient their businesses and way of life towards this sector, fostering the construction of hotels and apartments without urban planning, as well as the opening of hospitality venues and small businesses offering boat trips or diving lessons. Today, only a small percentage of the island's inhabitants continue to engage in fishing, with the vast majority relying on tourism.

The capital of Lampedusa is in the southeast and is the island's only inhabited area, as the rest of the territory consists of barren land, abandoned old buildings, and a few summer residences. Despite tourism becoming a relatively stable source of income over the years, Lampedusa continues to suffer from significant precariousness, mainly due to its dependence on the mainland. On the one hand, food, fuel, and other essential goods are transported via the ferry that connects the island with Sicily, so any everyday mishap (such

as adverse weather conditions, breakdowns, or worker strikes) can leave the island short of supplies for several days. Even access to drinking water was problematic for Lampedusa's inhabitants until 2015, when the island's only desalination plant was built. On the other hand, regarding healthcare, the island has only one clinic, with staff commuting daily from Sicily to provide routine check-ups, conduct tests, and handle emergencies and maternity care. For specialised medical services, residents must travel to Sicily, and the island has air ambulances for emergencies.

The lack of basic goods and dependence on the mainland for access to public services are not the only factors isolating Lampedusa. Even telephone and Internet connections are affected by bad weather, as they are supplied via an underwater cable from Sicily.

Over the years, while tourism has brought benefits to the island and its residents, its negative impacts have also become apparent. Mental health issues among young people and adults have risen considerably due to the stress experienced year-round as they hope the summer season proceeds smoothly and allows them to earn enough money to support themselves for the rest of the year. Beyond the economic aspect, the residents who reoriented their businesses towards tourism, working from June to September, find it challenging to endure

the winter months without employment on an island with few leisure options or activities.

The people of Lampedusa see themselves as compassionate and hospitable, with their main grievances directed at the Italian authorities for their systematic neglect of the island. Over the years, residents have launched various initiatives to welcome and support new arrivals, mobilising to organise distributions of food and essential items for those fleeing the reception centre and seeking refuge in town, especially during times when the facility was overwhelmed. Several mayors have also stood up to national and European authorities in defence of migrants' and refugees' rights. Giusi Nicolini, Lampedusa's mayor from 2012 to 2017, advocated for welcoming migrants and refugees, implemented integration policies later adopted by other European councils, and met with international figures to garner support<sup>i</sup>. Salvatore "Totò" Martello<sup>ii</sup>, the island's mayor from 2017 to 2021, initiated a participatory process that culminated in the Lampedusa Charter, a municipal call "to recognise, defend, and promote solidarity dignity, and human rights as the foundation for a renewed, fair, and effective governance of human mobility at all levels."<sup>iii</sup>

The new approach to managing arrivals on the island and subsequent transfers is also linked to Italy's national political context. Giorgia Meloni assumed the presidency of the government, promising a "firm stance" against migrants and refugees. She pledged to end migrant and refugee arrivals on Italian shores and to reject reception mechanisms. The strategy to make the arrival and presence of migrants and refugees on the island invisible is also related to the harsh criticism she faces from her extreme right-wing voters, who have expressed dissatisfaction as the reduction in arrivals she had promised has not materialised.

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<sup>i</sup> Giusi Nicolini, former mayor: "Con Lampedusa, la ultraderecha ha abierto la campaña para las elecciones europeas" (in English, "With Lampedusa, the extreme right-wing has opened the campaign for the European elections"), *El País*, 24/09/2023: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-09-24/giusi-nicolini-exalcaldesa-con-lampedusa-la-ultraderecha-ha-abierto-la-campana-para-las-elecciones-europeas.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> The mayor of Lampedusa: "Si cada Gobierno, incluido el español, actúa de forma independiente, se crean bloqueos como el del Open Arms" (in English, "If each Government, including the Spanish one, acts independently, blockades like the one against Open Arms are created"), *El Diario*, 30/08/2019: [https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/lampedusa-gobierno-independiente-open-arms\\_128\\_1382859.html](https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/lampedusa-gobierno-independiente-open-arms_128_1382859.html).

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.uclgmeets.org/processes/Lampedusa-Charter?locale=es>.

As part of the “*Camins de refugi*” project (in English, “Refuge Paths” project), the Catalan Commission for Refugees (CCAR, as per the Catalan acronym) has been conducting observation visits to various internal and external borders of the European Union for years to gain first-hand insight into the conditions faced by migrants and refugees in these areas, subsequently undertaking political advocacy and public awareness-raising efforts with Catalan institutions and citizens. In previous years, CCAR has visited borders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Bulgaria, Serbia, France, Italy, and Spain’s southern border.

From 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> November 2023, a team from CCAR and Fotomovimiento travelled to the island of Lampedusa for observation and documentation tasks, with the aim of reporting on the current situation of migrants and refugees arriving on the island in their attempt to reach European shores. The visit also intended to monitor potential violations of basic human rights that migrants and refugees might experience from the moment they disembark on the island to their transfer to the mainland.

During the team’s stay on the island, they visited key locations related to migrant and refugee arrivals, including the Porta di Europa, the Old Port and the New Port, embarkation and disembarkation zones, the Imbriacolo reception centre, various beaches where boats make landfall, and the communal cemetery in Lampedusa. Additionally, they were in contact with the organisation Sea Watch, UNICEF Italia, and researcher Francesca Soliman.

Since Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni visited the island last September<sup>14</sup>, there has been a significant shift in the management of arrivals and transfers to the mainland, primarily with the intent to conceal from the public, organisations, and media both the arrival of migrants and refugees and their presence on the island and subsequent relocation. The potential impact on the island's tourism is cited as a justification for this opacity and lack of transparency, which makes observation efforts to ensure migrants' and refugees' rights much more difficult. Accordingly, boats are no longer arriving independently on various beaches of the island. They are instead intercepted at sea, and migrants and refugees arrive at the ports directly on vessels of various police forces or on rescue boats operated by NGOs working in the Mediterranean sea.

In this context, the observation visit was challenging. Unlike other locations where migrant and refugee arrivals occur, such as the Greek island of Lesbos or the Canary Islands, there is no presence of activists or social organisations on the island. Despite conducting our work discreetly, it was evident at all times that our presence caused some discomfort among a section of the population.

The island is currently heavily militarised, with the presence of the Polizia di Stato, Carabinieri, Guardia Costiera, Guardia di Finanza, and Marina Militare. In fact, CCAR's personnel shared a flight with numerous members of the Carabinieri and

the Marina Militare on the way from Palermo to Lampedusa. Additionally, Frontex's personnel were observed during disembarkations, although no Frontex vessels were spotted. Interceptions at sea and transfers to the Favalaro Pier are carried out by the Guardia di Finanza or the Guardia Costiera, while the Carabinieri and the Polizia di Stato guard the access points to the pier where disembarkations occur, as well as the various transfers conducted by Croce Rossa Italiana between the New Port and the reception centre, and between this centre and the Old Port. Meanwhile, the army is responsible for guarding the various elevated control points surrounding the reception centre.

There is no visible presence of migrants or refugees on the island; they can only be seen upon arrival at the port after being rescued by Italian security forces or during transfers between the New Port and the island's sole reception centre. Both the Favalaro Pier, where the rescued individuals disembark, and the reception centre in the Imbriacolo district, are guarded by the army and located in places not visible from any public areas. The authorities' intent to conceal the presence of migrants and refugees on the island from locals, journalists, and organisations is evident. The reception centre is managed by Croce Rossa Italiana, which also provides assistance during disembarkations. Their presence on the island is noticeable, although it is much more discreet than that of the various police forces.

<sup>14</sup> Von der Leyen anuncia en Lampedusa un plan europeo ante la crisis migratoria de Italia edad (in English, "Von der Leyen announces a European plan in Lampedusa to address the migration crisis in Italy", *El Diario*, 17/09/2023: [https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/1-000-migrantes-llegan-lampedusa-dia-visita-von-der-leyen-meloni\\_110521043.html](https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/1-000-migrantes-llegan-lampedusa-dia-visita-von-der-leyen-meloni_110521043.html)).



# The arrival: the New Port and the Favaloro pier

Disembarkations take place at the New Port, specifically at the Favaloro Pier, a strip of land designated as a militarised zone where access is prohibited and can only be observed from a distant viewpoint in the centre of the small town. This pier serves as the landing point for both those intercepted by Italian authorities and those rescued by various NGO's vessels operating rescue missions in the Mediterranean sea. The opposite end of the pier -its entry point from the mainland- is guarded by the police and connects to the road used by Croce Rossa Italiana's buses to transport migrants and refugees to the reception centre.

Neither NGOs nor the press are granted access to the pier; only the organisation Mediterranean Hope has permission to assist during disembarkations, primarily supporting Italian security forces and Frontex's personnel. In this regard, on-site organisations have been able to confirm to us that Frontex conducts interviews at the port aimed at identifying who captained the boat, connections between passengers, and who is responsible for the journey, often by applying pressure, isolating individuals from the group, or directly conducting interrogations.

On the team's first day on the island, approximately 1,200 people arrived in Lampedusa, having been intercepted at sea in about 20 vessels coming from Libya and Tunisia. Among them, there was a boat transporting numerous Nigerian nationals. At 6.30 a.m., a Tunisian national travelling alone in a 4-metre-long vessel intercepted by the Guardia di Finanza arrived at the port; at 2.00 p.m., a Guardia di Finanza's vessel brought around 40 people to the port; and, at 3:20 p.m., a Guardia Costiera's boat brought approximately 50 rescued individuals to the port. Most of the day's disembarkations occurred at night, including those by various NGOs. Then, in the afternoon, local authorities reported two shipwrecks. In the following days, the arrival of migrants and refugees at the port continued on Italian authority vessels or social organisations' rescue boats, although in smaller numbers than on the first day.



*\* Photo of the New Port and the Favaloro Pier*

# Detention: the imbriacolo reception centre

The only reception centre on the island, with a capacity for around 400 people, is managed by Croce Rossa Italiana and is located in the Imbriacolo district in a remote area between two mountains. A single road connects the centre to the small village of Imbriacolo, and it is permanently used by vehicles from the Croce Rossa Italiana and various security forces on the island. By the road, about 200 metres from the entrance to the reception centre, guarded by a huge fence, there is a car park and the first police checkpoint. Just before the fence leading into the facilities, there is a Croce Rossa Italiana's tent where police officers are "conspicuously" stationed. In the mountains surrounding the reception centre, at the only vantage points offering a panoramic view of the facilities, there are several surveillance posts occupied by military personnel.

The centre receives all migrants and refugees disembarked on the island. Due to the inability to access the centre or to obtain information about its internal conditions, it remains unclear whether separate areas are provided for older individuals and unaccompanied minors or whether there are specific protocols for identifying and assisting particularly vulnerable groups. Croce Rossa Italiana is present inside

the centre, while its exterior is guarded by various security forces.

The centre is of a closed and opaque nature, which means that those housed there are, in practice, deprived of their liberty. Authorities argue that this arrangement makes it easier to track people for quicker transfers to Palermo. However, this deprivation of liberty is a disproportionate measure, especially given the island's small size. For organisations, however, the reasons are different: the isolation of refugees from the island's residents is a way of preventing the creation of links and bonds of solidarity, an image that Italy wants to avoid at all costs; the confinement of refugees within the centre promotes their criminalisation; and the presence of migrants and refugees outside the reception centre would clearly demonstrate that Meloni's political agenda, which promised to put an end to migrant and refugee arrivals<sup>15</sup>, is not having an effect. Since April this year, there has been a "state of migratory emergency", which tries to maintain an image depicting an "overwhelming invasion". The overcrowded and closed reception centre serves this purpose perfectly, which would not be the case if people could move freely around the island.

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<sup>15</sup> Italia decreta el estado de emergencia migratorio durante seis meses (in English, "Italy declares a state of immigration emergency for six months"), *El País*, 11/04/2023: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-04-11/italia-decreta-el-estado-de-emergencia-migratorio-durante-seis-meses.html>.



In Italy, the administrative detention of migrants awaiting deportation is carried out in CPRs. However, since the enactment of the “Salvini Decree” (Italian Law 117/2018), other facilities, such as reception centres and transit areas, have also been assigned these functions.

Organisations with a presence on the island criticise the lack of transparency and the inability to know the conditions within the reception centre. As with the Favaloro Pier, access to the centre is prohibited for both the press and social organisations. Since the summer, the reception centre is no longer directly managed by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, but by Croce Rossa Italiana. According to organisations, conditions within the reception centre have improved since then.

Although the reception centre was not overcrowded on the first day of the visit, the arrival of 1,200 people led to the collapse of the facilities, as it is a structure with a number of places that does not meet the island’s needs.



*\* Photo of reception centre*



*\* Photo of reception centre*

# Transfers: from the old port to porto empedocle

Transfers to Porto Empedocle in Palermo are primarily conducted by ferry from the Old Port, although some transfers by air have also been noted. The ferry service consists of commercial ferries operated by the Italian company Liberty Lines, docking in an area of the port that is in principle freely accessible to the population. However, when migrant and refugee transfers take place, the pier is heavily patrolled by police, preventing observation. On the second morning of the visit, vehicles from Croce Rossa Italiana, along with a supply truck, were seen transporting migrants and refugees to the pier in the Old Port to board a Liberty Lines's ferry bound for Porto Empedocle, in Palermo, Sicily. According to local authorities and media, transfers occur daily, both in the morning and afternoon, due to insufficient capacity at the island's reception centre to accommodate the arrivals throughout the day. However, the criteria for transfers to mainland Italy remain unclear; some individuals spend a few hours in the centre after arrival, while others spend weeks there, deprived of liberty.

At around 3 p.m. on the second day, a Croce Rossa Italiana's bus and two Croce Rossa Italiana's vans were observed transferring several groups of people at Lampedusa's airport. They entered via a rear access, slightly away from the

terminal intended for commercial flights, and those on board were flown to Palermo. Similarly, at approximately 3 p.m. on the third day, three vans and two full buses were seen at the airport. It was verified that migrants and refugees were transferred on ad-hoc flights, which, although departing from the island's only airport terminal, do so from an area that is far from where commercial flights are located and, ironically, via a runway that paradoxically ends just a few metres from the Porta d'Europa (the monument created in 2008 by artist Mimmo Paladino, commissioned by the NGO Amani, in memory of those who lost their lives at sea).

According to Italian authorities, those transferred from Lampedusa to Palermo are then distributed among various reception centres in the country. Individuals who qualify for the international protection procedure are sent to reception centres while their applications are being reviewed by the authorities. For those who do not qualify for the asylum procedure, detention continues at CPRs until deportation is enforced. The closest CPRs to Lampedusa are in Trapani-Milo and Caltanissetta-Pian del Lago, both in Sicily, although transfers to other CPRs also occur.





*\* Photo of a Croce Rossa Italiana's bus filled with passengers*



First, the closed nature of the reception centre and the lack of transparency about its conditions, as well as about what goes on inside, are extremely worrying. The presence of independent social organisations strengthens the protection of those deprived of liberty and reduces the possibility of arbitrary actions and institutional violence. The media also play an important oversight role and guarantee the public's right to information.

Moreover, the presence of Frontex's personnel during disembarkations at the Favalaro Pier may suggest that interviews are being conducted with arrivals even before they receive initial aid from Croce Rossa Italiana with the intention of identifying those who may have organised or captained the journey, or facilitated entry into European territory. This situation is not unique to Lampedusa as similar strategies of criminalising migrants and refugees -and the organisations conducting sea rescues- are recurrent at other EU external borders. In 2023, the People's Advocate recommended that arrivals in the Canary Islands receive humanitarian assistance before being interviewed by Frontex, given their extreme vulnerability upon arrival. Frontex's practice of conducting these interviews with questionable methods at the point of disembarkation poses a risk to the integrity of those rescued and contributes to their criminalisation.

Another pressing issue is the lack of clarity on access to the international protection procedure. It remains uncertain whether newly arrived individuals receive adequate information on their right to seek asylum, whether they are allowed to submit requests on the same island, or if they must be submitted after the transfer.

The presence of unaccompanied minors in the reception centre, in conditions that in practice entail deprivation of liberty under police and in facilities that they share with adults, is also cause for concern.

There is a disturbing level of opacity surrounding the various processes affecting migrants and refugees from their arrival on the island to their transfer to mainland Italy, leaving the media, social organisations, and the public unable to oversee and guarantee respect for human rights.

## 6

The Imbriacolo reception centre is inadequate and faces issues such as overcrowding and lack of access to essential services like medical care and adequate food. It would be necessary to have structures with suitable capacity and conditions to receive migrants and refugees arriving on the island, including safe and separate spaces for minors unaccompanied by family members and for women who are victims of sexual violence.

There is a lack of information and support for asylum procedures, making it difficult for applicants to understand their rights and options. During their time on the island, their main points of contact are limited to Frontex's personnel, Italian security forces, and Croce Rossa Italiana. Measures should be enforced to ensure that people arriving on the island receive all information on the international protection procedure in their native language from human rights organisations that can then assist them during the procedure.

The inclusion of refugees in the local community is hindered by a lack of social and employment integration programmes. The increase in hate and anti-immigration discourse promoted by political and media bodies has had a negative impact on local population's perceptions of migrants and refugees on the island. It is necessary to implement policies that promote the inclusion of refugees and combat the discourse that stigmatises and criminalises this group.

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