

THE GATES OF THE SEA

MIGRATION AND RESCUE
AT THE EDGES OF EUROPE

LUNA VIVES



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*To Inara and Aurora,
who are brave and know the way forward.
And to Alex, always.*

We are very lucky in Spain, because the protection of human life is kept separate from the protection of the border. The problem begins when we mix maritime search and rescue and border control. This has not happened in Spain. Here, we have the protection of human life, regardless of whether or not [the people in distress] are undocumented. Let's bring them to a safe place and let the judicial system decide, but mixing the two is dangerous.

—Ismael Furió, General Secretary GGT Mar y Puertos (2023)

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Acronyms, Organizations, and Conventions

AIS: Automated Identification System.

Alarm Phone: Hotline for people crossing the maritime border on their way to the Europe.

Caminando Fronteras (also known as Walking Borders): non-governmental human rights organization.

CATE (Centro de Atención Temporal de Extranjeros): Temporary holding centre for foreigners.

CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo): Spanish anarchist labour union.

CGT Mar y Puertos: Section of the CGT that represents seafarers and dock-workers.

CGT SASEMAR: Section of the CGT Mar y Puertos that represents SASEMAR rescue crews in the maritime units (boats).

CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo): Spanish confederation of anarchist labour unions.

CCOO (Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras): Spanish labour union historically aligned with the communist left.

CCOE (Centro de Coordinación de Operaciones de Emergencia): Emergency Operation Coordination Centre.

Defensor del Pueblo: High Commissioner of the Parliament responsible for defending citizens' fundamental rights and civil liberties.

ECHR: European Court of Human Rights.

EEZ: Exclusive Economic Zone.

EUROSUR: European Border Surveillance System.

Frontex/EBCG: European Border and Coast Guard.

GEAS (Grupo Especial de Actividades Subacuáticas): elite underwater unit of the Guardia Civil.

GMDSS: Global Maritime Distress Safety System.

IMO: International Maritime Organization.

MRCC: Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre.

MUO (Mando Único Operativo): Military Single Operative command for rescue operations involving migrant boats in the Western Mediterranean.

NRCC: National Rescue Coordination Centre.

REMOLMAR/REMASA (Remolques Marítimos Sociedad Anónima or Maritime Towing Inc.): Spanish private tugboat company crucial to the early development of SASEMAR.

RNLI: Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

SAR Convention: Search and Rescue Convention, 1979/1985.

SASEMAR (Sociedad Española de Salvamento Marítimo, commonly known as Salvamento Marítimo): Spanish maritime search and rescue agency.

SEMAR (Servicio Marítimo de la Guardia Civil): Guardia Civil Maritime Service.

SESN (Sociedad Española de Salvamento de Náufragos): Spanish Society for the Rescue of Shipwreck Victims.

SIVE (Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior): Spanish Integrated System for the Surveillance of the External Border.

SNSM (Société Nationale de Sauvetage en Mer): French National Maritime Rescue Society.

SOLAS Convention: Safety of Life at Sea Convention, 1974/1980.

TRAGSA (Empresa de Transformación Agraria): Agrarian Transformation Inc., Spanish publicly owned company dedicated to rural development and nature protection.

UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores): Spanish labour union historically aligned with the Spanish socialist party.

UNCLOS: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982/1994.

Voices of Note

ALHASSANE BANGOURA: Baby born in a migrant boat on his way to the Canary Islands. He was probably stillborn and is buried at Teguisse cemetery in Lanzarote.

ARAN SOL JUANOLA: Volunteer for the *Prestige* disaster cleanup efforts in 2003.

DÁCIL TRUJILLO HERNÁNDEZ: Municipal social worker and volunteer. She lives in El Hierro with her family.

ENRIC TARRIDA: Retired rescue captain and anarchist union leader with the CGT. Enric started working in maritime search and rescue in 1989 (before SASEMAR was established) and is responsible for creating the section of the CGT representing rescue workers. He currently lives in Valencia with his wife and children.

HELENA MALENO: Founder and coordinator of the NGO Caminando Fronteras. She lives in Tangiers with her family.

ISMAEL FURIÓ GENOVÉS: Guardamar captain and secretary of both sections of the CGT devoted to seafarers and dockworkers (CGT Mar y Puertos) and rescue crews (CGT SASEMAR) between 2019 and 2024. He lives in Valencia with his family.

HARIDIAN MARICHAL NIEBLA: Journalist and activist. She lives in El Hierro with her family and her dog Sol.

JOSEP BORRELL FONTELLES: Spanish politician and main architect of Spain's first maritime search and rescue service. Borrell was involved in Spanish politics (being a member of Felipe González's cabinet between 1982 and 1998 and candidate for leadership of the Socialist Party in 1998) and transitioned to European politics in 2002. He was the EU's High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy between 2019 and 2024.

JUAN CARLOS ARBEX: Writer and documentarian specialized in maritime issues, he was SASEMAR's first Director of Communications in 1992-1993. He lives in Gijón with his family.

JULIE CAMPAGNE: Co-founder and member of Lanzarote's Network of Solidarity with Migrant People, created in 2020. She lives near Timanfaya National Park (Lanzarote) with her children.

LAETITIA MARTHE: Co-founder and member of Lanzarote's Citizens' Network of Solidarity with Migrant People, created in 2020. She lives in Tías (Lanzarote) with her children and collaborates with other organizations in Spain and abroad.

MANUEL CAPA: Second officer employed with SASEMAR since 2012 and union spokesperson with the CGT SASEMAR. When not aboard one of the agency's Guardamares, he lives in Almería with his children.

ORIOl ESTRADA: rescue crew employed with SASEMAR since 1993 and spokesperson with the CGT SASEMAR. He lives in Almería and works in one of the agency's Salvamares.

PATUCA (PATRICIA) FERNÁNDEZ: Spanish lawyer specialized in childhood, social exclusion and migrations and leader of the pro bono legal team that has been pushing for a legal decision on the Tarajal massacre since February 2014.

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Last but certainly not the least, above everyone and everything, thanks to my kids for always asking all the hard questions with a steady gaze. You make me proud.

Preface

PORT OF ALMERÍA, JULY 2019. I came to meet rescue crews employed by the Spanish search and rescue agency, SASEMAR. Instead, I ended up talking to union representatives. Due to a recent gag order from the government, only they were allowed to talk to me without explicit authorization from the agency. On the dock, I met union leaders Manuel Capa and Ismael Furió, who lamented that most people do not understand what they do. “People think we are some kind of NGO,” said Capa, “but I am just a public worker doing my job. I rescue people. I am not a hero. I am not a martyr. I am just a worker.” Ismael Furió, then secretary general for the section of the main union representing sea rescue crews, nodded from across the table and added: “and as rescue workers we don’t rescue migrants: we rescue shipwreck victims.”

By then, I had spent a decade and a half studying migration policy in Spain, with a special focus on sea migration. And yet, listening to the union reps, I realized I did not understand SASEMAR very well either. If they were not an NGO, but they were independent from the military, then what were they? What was their relationship to other government agencies, state security forces, and NGOs elsewhere along the European Union’s (EU) maritime border who were struggling to do their work in an increasingly hostile political climate? How exactly did search and rescue work in Spain, and how was it similar to, or different from, how it was done in other places? How had rescue crews’ work changed as the number of boats carrying migrants across the sea grew, and how had the politicization of these arrivals impacted their everyday? What explains the intriguing fact that the majority of these government workers elected an anarcho-syndicalist union openly opposed to border control to represent their interests? How has this shaped the agency’s response to sea migration since its creation more than three decades ago?

My goal in this book is to answer these questions. I focus on the Spanish approach to maritime rescue at sea: what it is supposed to do, what it

actually does, and who is responsible for it. I am also interested in how this approach has evolved over the last thirty years, as shielding the border against certain groups of people has become an increasingly contentious political issue.

Undocumented border crossers are often simply labelled as “illegal migrants.” But the categories that states have created to serve their own needs and priorities (categories like economic migrant, asylum seeker, refugee, or the most striking of them all, “illegal alien”) do not always reflect the lived experiences of people on the move who frequently shift between categories over time or occupy several at once. To understand what really happens when people cross the border, we need to rid ourselves of this “categorical fetishism” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Moreover, these categories are dehumanizing. For this reason, and following the lead of other scholars and activists, I have used alternative terms such as “people on the move” whenever possible.

Spain has a long-standing history of human mobility, shaped over millennia by commerce, invasions, and its proximity to Africa (only fourteen kilometres away at the Strait of Gibraltar). More recently, the country was the origin of a significant exodus: for much of the second half of the twentieth century, political exiles and poor workers left, looking for safety and prosperity beyond the country’s borders, mainly in Western Europe and Latin America. This dynamic shifted dramatically in the early 1990s, coinciding with Spain’s entry into the European Communities (replaced by the European Union in 1993), as the country transitioned from a place of emigration to a destination for immigration. Spain’s growing economy, political stability, and status as a member state were attractive factors for people on the move on the other side of the Mediterranean.

Sea migration has played a pivotal role in Spain’s migration patterns all along. Initially, boats arrived from the Maghreb to the southern and eastern coasts of the Iberian Peninsula; after the turn of the twenty-first century, these flows expanded to include the Canary Islands. Meanwhile, citizens from former colonies in Latin America arrived by plane in much larger numbers, but these arrivals did not stir as much political and social anxiety. In stark contrast, irregular arrivals — particularly by boat — have been at the centre of public concern and heated political debates. Alongside other southern European nations like Greece and Italy, Spain has often been described as the “soft underbelly” of the EU’s border regime. Against this backdrop, policymakers have increasingly turned their attention to

the rescue infrastructure already in place along Spain's maritime border, repurposing these resources for the enforcement and control of the southern border.

In 2024, nearly 47,000 people arrived in the Canary Islands by boat — 17 percent more than the year before, marking the highest number on record. The emergence of sea migration as a political issue has evolved in parallel to the evolution of SASEMAR. But SASEMAR is very poorly positioned to play the role of the border guard. The agency, a government-run civil body with no law enforcement mandate and unarmed personnel, is increasingly becoming an outlier in the European context.

Across areas of migration in the continent, a two-tier rescue system has emerged: one system for migrant people, and another one (typically more aligned with member states' international obligations) for tourists and locals. Rescue assets (boats, planes, and personnel already at sea) have been reclaimed to act as border guards. In many places this "mission creep" has been rather successful. This has been especially the case in contexts where rescue responsibilities were in the hands of state security forces — in Italy, Greece, or Malta, for example. So far, this is less the case in Spain, but this may change soon. In the following pages, I continuously return to the most crucial question in maritime search and rescue work: why is it that some lives are considered worth saving, while others are not? The answer speaks the quiet part out loud, not just about maritime rescue, but about the construction of self and other in contemporary Europe.

This question is also an existential issue for SASEMAR. As populist discourses throughout Europe successfully exploit sea migration for political gain, the agency's position is becoming untenable. The growing gap between EU member states' international obligations in maritime rescue that SASEMAR upholds and actual rescue practices in zones of migration is a source of endless tension and criticism. In fact, anyone with seafaring experience understands the duty of rescue. Rescuers — alongside a diverse group of actors who have taken up the moral compass politicians have discarded in their pursuit of votes — uphold Spain's international rescue obligations. Among them are activists, union leaders, and senior Navy personnel. Their voices echo Furió's and remind us that the first responsibility at sea is to save lives; the questions come later, once at port. In this sense, this book is not just about changes, but also about resistance to those changes and the power of collectivity to envision better futures and bring them to life.

Sea Migration and the Politics of a Manufactured Crisis

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF 2020, a boat left the Moroccan city of Tantan bound for the Canary Islands. The wind was strong as the grey rigid-hull inflatable boat left the beach. Aboard were forty-three people from various African countries, including the Ivory Coast, The Gambia, Cameroon, Senegal, and Guinea Conakry (Rosati and Martín 2020). Among them were nineteen minors and fifteen women, three of whom were pregnant. Most of the passengers could not swim, and few had lifejackets. Under normal conditions, the journey would have taken about seven hours. But the weather was bad, the engine was weak, their compass was broken, and the boat entered an area with no phone reception shortly after leaving Tantan. The journey quickly turned into a nightmare. By the end of the first day, they had run out of food and water. Some drank seawater, which made them sick. On the second day, they ran out of fuel, and some tried to paddle with their hands in the direction they thought they would find the islands. Caminando Fronteras, an NGO led by activist Helena Maleno with a mandate to defend the rights of migrant people, began receiving calls from worried relatives and alerted emergency services. Shortly after, the regional rescue coordination centre dispatched a helicopter and a plane, but they were unable to locate the tiny boat in the immense ocean. On board, people prayed for mercy, certain they would not survive.

Then, on the third night, a wail pierced the darkness: nineteen-year-old Daria¹ had gone into labour. “God have mercy on me!” she cried. The men looked away as another passenger, a heavily pregnant woman travelling with her eight-year-old daughter, stepped in to assist with the birth (Rosati and Martín 2020). That night, fifteen nautical miles (twenty-eight kilometres) from the island of Lanzarote, Alhassane Bangoura was born. The baby did not cry. It was then that one of the young men turned on his cellphone and received a message: “Welcome to Spain.” He called Caminando Fronteras,

and eventually emergency services were able to locate the boat and dispatch the Salvamar *Altair*, one of the fast rescue boats owned and operated by SASEMAR, the Spanish search and rescue agency. The captain of the *Altair* tried to resuscitate Alhassane Bangoura but was unsuccessful.

Hours later, they arrived at the port of Los Mármoles in Lanzarote. Daria and others were taken to the hospital (Murillo and Martín 2020), while the body of Alhassane Bangoura was taken from his mother and brought to the courthouse morgue for investigation. The young mother spent the next ten days recovering at the hospital, surrounded by some of the other women who had travelled with her, unable to accept that her baby had died. Daria was not allowed to see her son's body. A volunteer working with an organization that supports women through perinatal grief took pictures of baby Alhassane Bangoura and brought them to Daria, who slowly came to terms with the painful fact that her baby had likely been stillborn.

The funeral was held weeks later, on January 25, in the village of Teguiise on Lanzarote. Daria could not attend; she had been sent to Gran Canaria, two hundred kilometres away. Heartbroken, she asked that a small stone bearing Alhassane Bangoura's name be placed on his grave. Laetitia Marthe and Julie Campagne, co-founders of Lanzarote's Network of Solidarity with Migrant People, attended the funeral. Laetitia had been volunteering as an interpreter the night the passengers of the ill-fated boat arrived on the island; at the hospital, she also helped translate for the doctors who attended to Daria and the other women, as well as for the volunteers supporting the young mother through her grief. As Laetitia was heading to her car after the funeral, she recognized a young man standing by the cemetery gates as another passenger from the boat. Overcome with emotion, the man told Laetitia that he believed Alhassane Bangoura gave up his life so the others could survive — he was convinced that the rescue operation would never have happened had Daria not gone into labour. Perhaps he was right.

DEATH AT SEA

Alhassane Bangoura is far from the only person, or the only child, to have lost their life attempting to reach the Canary Islands. In 2023 alone, 6,618 people on the move drowned on their way to Spain according to the organization Caminando Fronteras (2023). The vast majority of these deaths (6,007) occurred in the Atlantic. Most of them happened within Spain's Search and Rescue Region (SRR), also known as a Search

and Rescue (SAR) zone or zone of responsibility. These deaths stand as a stark testament to the failure of punitive migration and border policies in contemporary Europe.

Migration, particularly sea migration, has become a hot-button issue in European and Spanish politics. Its political salience outweighs its statistical significance: according to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM n.d.), 207,000 people entered the European Union by sea in 2024 — less than 0.5 percent of its population of 450 million people. And yet, sea migration is systematically misrepresented, criminalized, and instrumentalized. Indeed, the clandestine movement of poor people (because no wealthy person risks their life on a boat to reach the European Union) appears to offer endless avenues for profiting and for political manoeuvring. On one hand, business-minded people (a mix of small entrepreneurs, criminal networks, and legitimate private companies providing border control technologies) fuel a thriving migration industry. On the other hand, elected politicians across the political spectrum capitalize on increasingly populist rhetoric to gain votes while doing little to address the root causes that drive people to leave their communities and cross borders. In some cases, they contribute through their actions to the political and economic instability that fuels the unwelcomed mobility of the poor. Despite their different agendas, these actors have successfully reframed the conversation and turned sea migration into a crisis that demands a swift and drastic solution. Even worse, by portraying the people who arrive by boat as a national security threat, governments legitimize repression as the only rational and effective response to migration, as if the only possible way to stop the arrival of people on the move was to build taller walls and fill the seas with military patrols. This rhetoric elides the fact that seven decades of experimentation along the US–Mexico border has repeatedly proven this strategy to be both ineffective and costly. It also ignores the fact that the vast majority of undocumented immigrants currently living in the European Union arrived by plane with valid travel documents, and that those crossing the external land and sea borders make up only a tiny fraction of the total. The war on sea migration continues unabated.

The urgency of the task at hand, combined with the framing of migration as a series of crises, has normalized the death toll and the violence against people on the move. Both seem now a tragic yet inevitable price to pay for containing the crises caused by the mobility of the unwanted. If a crisis is an exceptional event that demands an exceptional response, then that response is expected to be swift and decisive. We are led to believe that bypassing

standard procedures and safeguards is unavoidable — that, in the “war” against undocumented migration, the ends justify the means both in terms of human suffering and in terms of financial cost; governments dig deep into their pockets in times of crisis.

Geographer Alison Mountz (2020, 38) argues that defining (certain forms of) human mobility as a crisis triggers “moments of hysteria” in policy making: moments when even those solutions that violate legal and moral boundaries are seen as conceivable. This erosion of moral and legal norms is particularly evident when those on the move are individuals entitled to specific protections, such as children, asylum seekers, and others covered by international conventions and domestic law. The very notion of a “migration crisis,” thus, shifts responsibility for repressive measures onto people on the move, including those in clear need of protection.

Framing human mobility as a crisis also shifts the focus from the lived experiences of those on the move to the challenges faced by governments (Dines, Montagna, and Vaccheli 2018) and imposes a specific sense of temporality. Crises are, by definition, short-lived — and so are the policies crafted in response. Yet, migration in Europe is not a crisis, or even a series of one-time crises: it is a structural fact. Framing individual migration events (for example, population movements following the Arab Spring of 2011 and the so-called Syrian refugee crisis of 2015) as one-time crises disconnected from one another exposes a fundamental illusion in contemporary border policy which is the belief that human mobility is an anomaly, a passing challenge that can be controlled through short-term measures, be they however draconian.

In this context, the securitization of sea migration has fundamentally reshaped how maritime search and rescue is done across Europe. Migration control and sea rescue are, at least in theory, two separate policy areas. While the first is an instrument that governments use to regulate who can and cannot enter their territory, the second is a means to protecting human life at sea, regardless of people’s nationality or administrative status. But, as migration control becomes a source of profit for some and of political leverage for others, the line between control and rescue has blurred. Thus, the universal mandate to save lives at sea is increasingly called into question.

Maritime rescue has become tangled in Europe’s approach to migration management, which rests on three key strategies: militarizing borders to seal them against illegalized human mobility, externalizing border enforcement to regions of origin and transit, and implementing repressive policies centred

on detention and deportation. These strategies are deeply interwoven. The one with the most profound impact on maritime search and rescue has been the fortification of borders, but the other two have also changed the perception of whose lives can be put at risk with no political cost and whose lives are deemed worth rescuing.

Externalization entails countries of destination delegating migration and border-related responsibilities to countries defined (within the European imagination) as spaces of origin and transit for people on the move. The European Union and its member states have, for decades now, shifted these responsibilities to non-EU countries that often lack both the capacity and the political will to uphold the fundamental rights of migrant people – including their right to life. Governments who take on these responsibilities have been rewarded with substantial financial packages. The most well-known of these co-operation agreements is the 2016 EU–Türkiye deal, in which the European Union provided six billion euros in exchange for Türkiye’s commitment to curb irregular migration to Greece. But countries co-operating with the European Union also have their own political motivations to play along. For example, these agreements may help them increase their political and economic leverage within their regions. This is how Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, Senegal, Niger, Türkiye, and others have become the European Union’s border guards across different zones of migration.

At the same time, externalization allows the European Union and its member states to expand their geopolitical sphere of influence and control: the elongated European border region now extends far beyond the Union’s outer territorial limits. For instance, barriers to movement begin as far south as Niger, over two thousand kilometres from the European Union’s border. In effect, Europe’s border is no longer a fixed line but a sprawling, multilayered zone that encompasses both land and maritime spaces. Countries of origin and transit are increasingly integrated into the European Union’s enforcement apparatus, serving as extensions of its migration control strategy. Delegated responsibilities include the monitoring of areas of departure and known nodes along migration journeys; the detention of people on the move; the criminalization of activities that facilitate migration; and the coordination of maritime rescue operations in the waters separating Europe from Africa. In outsourcing these tasks, the European Union shirks direct accountability while reinforcing a system in which migration is treated primarily as a security threat rather than recognizing it as a normal yet complex phenomenon with economic, humanitarian, and legal dimensions.

Externalization aligns closely with militarization, since the responsibility for rescue operations transferred to origin and transit countries is placed in the hands of agencies that are almost invariably a part of armed forces. This process is further facilitated by generous funding from the European Union and individual member states to equip and train security forces in countries such as Senegal, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya.

The third strategy, repression, goes hand in hand with the criminalization of certain forms of human mobility, particularly (in the case of the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean) that of Black people. Repression often hinges on excluding migrants from spaces of freedom. It relies, heavily and increasingly, on the detention of people on the move in centres both within and outside EU territory — centres funded, at least partially, by the European Union.

Migrant detention in the European Union is not as widespread or profitable as in the United States yet, but it is also a component of Europe's border architecture. Often, the primary goal of detention is to facilitate deportation (the expulsion of foreigners from the territory); but detention also serves as a deterrent to future arrivals. Deportation has become a popular electoral promise, but its implementation is both difficult and costly when done within legal frameworks. Specifically, those deported from the European Union need to be taken somewhere outside the European Union, but countries of origin and transit have little interest in accepting the return of their own nationals — citizens who were so dissatisfied or felt so threatened that they risked their lives to start fresh elsewhere — or deported nationals of other countries who could fuel xenophobia at home. Politicians may promise deportation, but what actually happens after they get elected is another matter.

This relatively new border regime — characterized by militarization, externalization, and repression through detention and deportation — is reinforced by a fourth strategy: the use of advanced and highly costly technology. This technology is designed to detect irregular movements of people at and near borders, create biometric databases for identification, and share profiles with countries both within and beyond the European Union. The use of advanced technology also plays a key role in securing the co-operation of countries along migration routes in Africa and the Middle East.

These three strategies, though expensive and spectacular, have proven ineffective at stopping migration. Instead, they have made migration routes more dangerous, contributing to the emergence of a growing network of

spaces of violence and death that includes the Teguisse cemetery where baby Alhassane Bangoura is buried. These strategies have also fostered a highly profitable smuggling business. Because self-directed migration is less and less feasible due to towering border walls and heavily monitored seas, people on the move are left with no option but to hire the services of actors engaging in criminal smuggling. This, in turn, leads to an increase of physical, emotional, financial, and sexual violence against people on the move.

Despite mounting evidence attesting to the failure of these strategies to achieve their official goal, EU member states have doubled down. Maritime rescue has become a casualty in this “war against migrants.” It is remarkable that, while there is no evidence that the presence of rescue boats increases sea migration, populist European policymakers continue to push for the removal of life-saving services from areas of sea migration to deter future arrivals. There is evidence, though, that militarization and the withdrawal and shrinking of rescue services are directly responsible for the preventable deaths of people on the move. Thus, the integration of rescue services into European anti-immigration strategies exposes the European Union’s foundering commitment to the protection of human rights.

HUMAN MIGRATION AS A HYDRAULIC SYSTEM

International migration is a multifaceted and fast-changing phenomenon shaped by deep structural global inequalities. Who moves, where they move from and to, and the conditions of their mobility (both material and administrative) are influenced by many factors that range from the personal to the structural. This inequality has led researchers to talk about a “global mobility divide” (Mau et al. 2015). In their study of visa policies between 1969 and 2010, Steffen Mau and colleagues found that while nationals from wealthy countries enjoy increasing freedom to move across international borders, those from poorer countries face growing administrative obstacles to do the same. This growing disparity is particularly pronounced for citizens from African countries. In other words, the main factor determining how easily people can move is their place of birth.

Precarious migrants from poorer countries navigate routes that open and close in response to wars, natural disasters, economic conditions in their home communities, geographic proximity, the presence of established networks of people from the same community, the demand for migrant labour, and the availability of transportation (legal or otherwise) to their destinations. Over the last few decades, evidence shows that while restrictive

border policies may force people on the move to find new routes, exposing them to greater risks of violence and death, these policies have never stopped migration. This is why irregular migration dynamics are often likened to a hydraulic system: when one route is shut down, the pressure on other routes increases, causing new paths to emerge (Schmoll 2015).

The hydraulic system metaphor helps explain why repressive approaches consistently fail to stop undocumented border crossings. We have seen, time and again, that when a border closes, migrants turn to alternative, more dangerous routes where they are more exposed to violence from smugglers, traffickers, and even state security forces. This metaphor also highlights how quickly migration patterns adapt to changing circumstances. For example, within a month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, nearly four million people fled the country, while six million others were internally displaced. Similarly, within weeks of Senegalese President Malick Sall's renewed crackdown on political dissent in 2023, the southern section of the Atlantic route, which had been dormant for almost fifteen years, resumed with striking intensity. Political repression, compounded by persistent unemployment, drove five thousand people (mostly young Senegalese men) to embark on boats headed toward the Canary Islands in November 2023 alone. Official statistics show that over 37,000 people arrived at the archipelago that year, with nearly 47,000 more in 2024 (Martín and Hierro 2024); an unknown number died along the way. The regional government of the Canary Islands has struggled to respond to the arrivals (many of whom are unaccompanied minors) while also denouncing the lack of solidarity from other regions in mainland Spain. But what happens when borders along the several routes that migrants use to reach the Canary Islands become even more militarized? People on the move find another way in — just as they always have and always will.

Migration Routes

In academic and policy circles, as well as in the media, the term “migration route” is commonly used. In European migration speak, there are four main sea routes: the Atlantic route and the Western, Central, and Eastern Mediterranean routes. The framing of human mobility into routes reflects a pivotal shift in EU migration policy that took place in 2005 with the adoption of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM). This shift redirected the focus of attention of anti-immigration policy from the border to the many spaces that were part of migrants' journeys to Europe.

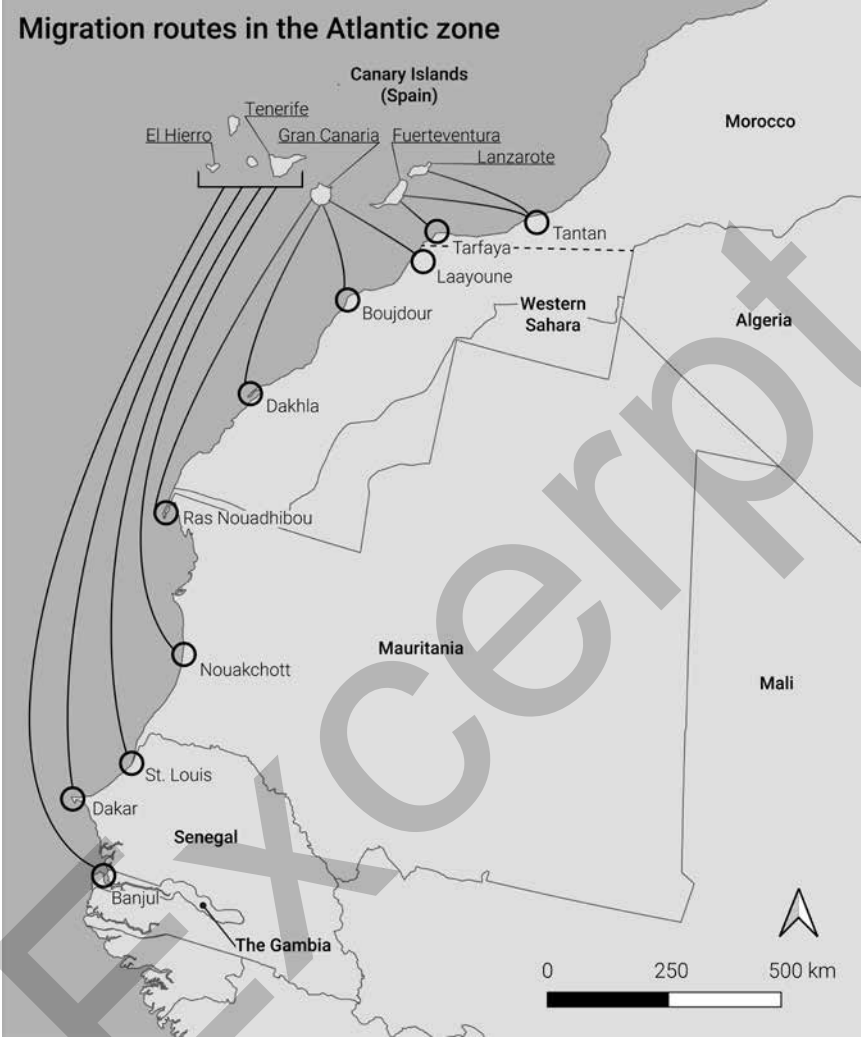
However, the term “migration route,” obscures the multifaceted and fluid nature of migration itself. Take, for example, the Atlantic migration zone (shown in Figure 1 below), which is often referred to as a single route (“the Atlantic route”). In reality, it consists of multiple and overlapping routes stretching thousands of kilometres.

Just like the “crisis” narrative, framing human mobility in terms of routes oversimplifies human mobility dynamics. This perspective reduces journeys to a simple path between two fixed points, obscuring the broader structural factors that drive movement. On a map, a route appears as a straight line or an arrow, implying a direct and short-lived journey from point A to point B. In reality, migration is far more complex, shaped by detours, interruptions, and changing circumstances along the way, with journeys stretching over months or even years, often taking people on the move to multiple destinations without ever necessarily reaching their original goal.

However, from a policy perspective, this simplification is useful. It portrays migration as a temporary disruption of the natural order of things, which is one with sedentary populations, and as a problem that can be fixed by interrupting the line at any given point. This approach disregards the deep historical and contemporary forces driving migration, the interconnectedness of migratory movements, and the opportunities migration offers. It also fails to acknowledge the risks people on the move face and the legal and moral obligations states have toward migrants and refugees. Most crucially, reducing the mobility of people to lines on a map dehumanizes them and enables wealthy states to evade responsibility for finding durable and just responses to this global phenomenon, which is cartographically represented as happening mostly elsewhere.

The routes perspective, thus, paves the way for governments to justify quick and simplistic policy responses to illegalized human mobility such as building border walls or withdrawing rescue services at sea. But these strategies are bound to fail because migration is a complex sociopolitical phenomenon that resists simple answers (Rittel and Webber 1973). Human mobility connects places with long and complicated relationships shaped by colonial histories and ongoing unequal power dynamics. In particular, migration from Africa to Europe is rooted in the enduring legacy of colonial power relationships. People leave their home countries because they are unable to feed their families or achieve their life aspirations due to the continued plundering of natural resources by wealthier countries — often

FIGURE 1: Map showing the different maritime routes that cross the Atlantic zone



Adapted and expanded from *El País* (Rosati and Martín 2020) with data from SASEMAR and activists in Mauritania and Senegal. Created by Elizabeth Rose Hessek and reproduced with permission.

former colonial powers. For instance, would so many young Senegalese fishermen risk the dangerous journey to the Canary Islands if Spanish and Chinese industrial fishing vessels were not engaged in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in the waters off Senegalese coasts (Maritimes Crimes 2023)? Probably not. But this context gets lost when governments think of human mobility as a simple line on the map.

Moreover, reducing human mobility to migration routes shifts the focus of sea rescue from human security — the core principle of search and rescue (SAR)—to national security, where the primary goal is to secure the nation from the myriads of real or imaginary threats (sea) migrants embody (Hyndman 2008). In other words, if people on the move are cast as enemies of the nation, rescuing them is no longer a priority; letting them drown becomes part of the strategy to keep them out. And so, though it is well-known that removing rescue assets from border regions does not stop migration, this strategy persists because deaths at sea are deliberately built as a deterrent into the EU's external border.

THE CREATION OF THE SEA BORDER, ONE RESCUE OPERATION AT A TIME

While border control has increasingly merged with maritime search and rescue across much of the European Union, these two policy areas remain relatively distinct in Spain. The main actor in maritime rescue is SASEMAR (commonly known as Salvamento Marítimo), a government agency. Even though SASEMAR has become a key player along the southern Spanish border, much of the company's work is unrelated to migration. For example, of the 5,356 vessels the agency assisted in 2023, only 21 percent were migrant boats. The rest were leisure boats (43 percent), merchant vessels (10 percent), fishing boats (7 percent) and others (19 percent; Ministerio de Transportes y Movilidad Sostenible 2024).

SASEMAR's archives in Madrid are filled with case logs documenting a wide range of incidents: rescue operations triggered by boats running out of fuel at sea, fishing vessels lost in rough seas, catamarans sinking and leaving their passengers stranded, and numerous false alarms from emergency beacons (EPIRBs), some set off by mistake. Surfers, in particular, are a recurring challenge: annual surfing events in the Strait of Gibraltar (also one of the top ten routes for international maritime trade in the world) require months of planning. In short, key sectors of the economy (including tourism, maritime trade, and fishing) benefit from and depend on having a well-functioning system to safeguard human life and protect the marine environment.

Despite this broad mandate, SASEMAR increasingly finds itself responding to emergencies involving people on the move attempting to access Spanish (and, by extension, EU) territory illegally by sea and encountering difficulties along the way.

The Borders at Sea as Power Structures

Why is migration such a big issue? International migration involves people crossing borders to settle in a country other than their country of birth or regular residence. But what is a border? At its core, a border is a political object, an invention we use to organize and make sense of the world. We imbue borders with meaning through our daily actions and interactions: when we show our passport at the airport, when we accept the border guard's authority to let us in or refuse us entry, when we unconsciously reproduce markers of belonging and unbelonging in our everyday language by labelling people as citizens, migrants, expats, or aliens. While socially constructed, borders have tangible and significant consequences — attempting to argue otherwise with an officer is unlikely to benefit a critical traveller. Much more than lines on a map, borders function as power structures rooted in geography. They shape identities, determine rights, and form the foundation of the modern international order.

The maps we study in school may neatly divide the world into distinct spaces called countries, but social phenomena often defy the rigid boundaries of the nation state, which aim to unite territory, population, and political authority. For example, we are told that national territories are contiguous, but British Gibraltar is surrounded by Spain, the Canary Islands are in Africa, and Spain controls territories in northern Morocco. Sustaining the illusion of stability in a world defined by movement, circulation, and change demands considerable effort. The movement of people across international borders shatters this fragile illusion of stasis. Likewise, the sea defies the very idea of fixed and stable boundaries. Borders, as we know them, were designed with land-space in mind: a space that is solid, immovable, and predictable. How can you draw a border on the ocean, an environment defined by constant change, motion, and fluidity?

Race and Organized Abandonment at Sea

In a context where the mobility of the poor is seen as a threat to national security, Europeans — or, at least, their governments — seem to regard the lives lost at sea and the violence against migrant people as acceptable. This is only possible because those who suffer this violence are often young, racialized men from poorer countries, and apparently less deserving of humanity than Europeans. Stripping migrants of their humanity allows us to block empathy. It stops us from imagining our sisters, brothers, or, god forbid, children enduring the horrors many survivors recount: nights

adrift at sea in total darkness, chemical burns, thirst, hunger, amputations from untreated infections, destitution, detention, deportation, or a forced return to a home that invested everything on the migration of their best and brightest, who then come back humiliated and emptyhanded — if they come back at all. The silent body sinking to the bottom of the sea, perhaps resurfacing on a tourist-filled beach days or weeks later, is not ours. The dehumanization of people on the move is what makes it possible for us to tolerate the many forms of violence witnessed at the border. And that dehumanization is a result of the construction of sea migrants as racial others.

No one is born a migrant. We become migrants when we cross an international border, and even then, only if the laws on the other side define us as such. For example, until 1985, Spain had no comprehensive immigration law. Poor and fresh from a forty-year-long fascist dictatorship, it was a country that people left to look for greener pastures in Europe and Latin America. Few settled there, save for the occasional British adventurer seeking sun and thrills in what they saw as an exotic, backward country. These foreigners were not called migrants. They were wealthy, white, and quirky. They ran with bulls, drank heavily, and pursued local women; they were seen not as threats, but as amusing eccentrics.² Even today, Britons, who number over 290,000 and rank as Spain's eighth-largest foreign group, are not viewed as immigrants. Nor are Ukrainians, even though they are widely (and fairly) accepted as refugees. Somehow, the label "immigrant" does not stick to white people.

This reveals a truth: "migrant" is not just a legal category but a political and social one, deeply tied to race. In this book, then, I have favoured terms like "people on the move" to challenge the prejudices that have become associated with the categories "migrant," "immigrant," and "refugee" (and the most shockingly dehumanizing of all, "illegal alien"). Hopefully, this subtle shift will help us regard the people whose stories I tell here in their whole humanity.

What does race have to do with the transformation of European maritime rescue systems at sea, anyway? In 2007, African American geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, defined racism as exposing certain groups to premature death, be it through state action or neglect (Gilmore 2007). This exposure occurs through the interlocking of distinct spaces connected by history, commerce, and migration. The "here" and "there" are geographies shaped by their interconnectedness and distinctiveness, forged through a shared

history of collaboration and confrontation. This definition of racism is especially useful for understanding the borders between Europe and Africa or the Middle East — regions tied together through history and geography yet held apart through sustained effort. In many ways, the relationship between these different spaces can be summarized by the image of the colossus demigod Hercules, who (according to Greek mythology) created the Strait of Gibraltar by pushing Europe and Africa apart. Spanish and European migration policy have inherited the Herculean task of keeping the two continents and their inhabitants apart. In this sense, the border regime that keeps Africans out of Europe is far more than just a line in the sea: it is a network of laws, institutions, infrastructure, technology, and narratives about who belongs and who does not.

More recently, Gilmore (2022) used the term “organized abandonment” to define the structural, racialized violence that deems some groups unnecessary or disposable because they are no longer economically useful. The abandoned groups are subject to forms of domination that often result in exploitation and exposure to violence and death. This exploitation can take many forms. In southern Europe, it can look like a border policy so restrictive that people must rely on smugglers to cross, and one where the opportunities for criminals to make a profit are rife. It looks like the hundreds of babies born to mothers who were sexually assaulted during their journey, often by state security forces tasked with stopping migration. It looks like people being sold as slaves in Libya, repeatedly and in plain sight, in prisons at least partially funded by the European Union. It looks like migrants forced into physically gruelling, exploitative, and underpaid jobs. For example: in southern Europe, a growing percentage of those labouring in greenhouses, in homes as caregivers, and in construction are immigrants with a precarious status; in Spain, authorities estimate that more than 95 percent of sex workers are immigrant women, mostly from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa.

At sea, Gilmore’s concept of “organized abandonment” (2022) helps explain Europe’s emerging approach to maritime search and rescue. If racism is embedded in the structures of European societies, it will manifest at their borders. The withdrawal of rescue services from migration routes is a tool of domination and control of racialized people on the move.

This abandonment is seen as acceptable not just because it happens to “others,” but also because it is not direct violence: it is engineered structural neglect. By redesigning maritime rescue systems, governments can pretend

that deaths at sea are inevitable — the natural consequence of the ocean's indomitable power. The waves and currents do the dirty work of keeping migrant people out by killing them.³ But these deaths are “systemic, logical, and predictable” (Achiume 2022, 452). Blocking safe, legal pathways for migration and then leaving people to die on perilous, illegal routes is necropolitics in action. Achille Mbembe (2019), the Cameroonian historian who coined the term, defines necropolitics as the use of social and political power to determine who may live and who must die.

These ideas are not just academic. Organizations like Caminando Fronteras have claimed the concept of necropolitics to describe and explain what is happening in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic and have described Spain's approach to sea migration as a policy of “letting die.”⁴ Activists monitoring the Mediterranean have exposed the hypocrisy of Europe's migration policies, where governments are violating their own laws to let the sea swallow the problem of illegalized migration. In other cases, they outsource the violence, paying countries with poor human rights records (countries like Libya, Morocco, or Türkiye) to keep people on the move within their territories, where they may be incarcerated and mistreated.

The waters around Europe are more dangerous than ever, particularly for Black people. Tendayi Achiume (2022, 454), a Zambia-born, Yale-educated leading legal scholar on racial discrimination, argues that modern borders are rooted in colonialism and are inherently racist. Migration and border policies may appear racially neutral, she argues, but they are not: their ultimate goal is to protect and perpetuate the privilege of some to the detriment of the rest, “mainly along the same geopolitical and racial lines that characterized the European colonial project.” Those who move freely are typically white; those who cannot are racialized: Indigenous, Arab, Black, or people from formerly colonized, impoverished nations. This is not a coincidence.

Achiume (2022) describes race as a “border infrastructure,” integral to how states control movement. Who belongs within the imagined boundaries of the nation and who is excluded varies by place and is the result of a historical process of nation-building. In Spain, for example, national identity has long been constructed in opposition to Islam and the African continent (especially the Maghreb; Vives 2011). Spain's contemporary immigration policies reflect this, as they impose the harshest barriers on nationals from African countries. The country's best-funded border infrastructure exists to keep African people out. In contrast, migration

from former colonies in Latin America, though statistically much higher, is seen as relatively unproblematic.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007; 2022) definition of racism and her approach to organized abandonment, Achille Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics, and Tendayi Achiume's (2022) understanding of the border as a form of racial governance are important to understand how and why rescue at sea is mobilized to stop people on the move. Whether we agree entirely with these authors, incorporating race into our analysis is vital, as it reveals whose movements borders facilitate and whose they block, exposing the deep inequalities and the slow, structural violence at the heart of Europe's contemporary border regime.

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK AHEAD: STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Migrants are never truly alone at sea, though at times it may seem that way. The sea is a contested place where people and organizations with different and conflicting agendas often collide. My main goal with this book is to tell the story of the birth and transformation of the Spanish maritime rescue system, with a focus on SASEMAR, the government agency created in 1993 to fulfill this mandate. I do not intend to establish a singular and absolute truth, but to share this story from the point of view of some of the people who played key roles in the survival and evolution of the system. I have not spoken to everyone who makes the maritime borders of Spain and the European Union what they are today; that would be an impossible task. Instead, I have centred the voices of individuals who have been at the forefront of maritime rescue over the past three decades. Their experiences, alongside operational data from the Spanish rescue zone, have inspired the chapters of this book.

Chapter 2 recounts the history of the evolution of maritime rescue and discusses the global events and legal frameworks that shape safety and jurisdiction at sea. Those who originally contributed to the making of safety norms at sea are long gone, and thus their voices in this chapter come to us through the archives. They include figures like the passengers of the *Titanic*, legendary labour organizer Andrew Furuseth, Captain William Caius Crutchley and the crew of the whaleship *Essex*, destroyed by the very whales they sought to hunt. Scholars Hugo Grotius and John Selden, often portrayed as advocating for diametrically opposed visions of sea space, also make an appearance, alongside some of the architects of the French,

British, and Spanish rescue systems from the eighteenth century onward. These individuals, whether through deliberate action or tragic circumstance, played a role in shaping the contemporary idea that governments must protect all human lives at sea.

Despite the legal and policy frameworks that have been put in place to realize this idea, their application remains uneven. Responses to two maritime tragedies in 2023 offer a stark contrast, showcasing maritime rescue at its best and its worst. Thus, while the disappearance of the *Titan* submersible and its five wealthy occupants on its way to the *Titanic* wreckage triggered a swift and massive international rescue operation (an example of the system working as intended), the sinking of the overcrowded *Adriana* and more than five hundred of its passengers (all poor people on the move) on the opposite side of the world exposes how life-saving services are often withheld when those in danger are perceived as a threat or an inconvenience. The contrast between the two events shows that the obligation for sea rescue was never as universal as the legal documents suggest.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to Spain. It discusses the creation and decades-long construction of a national maritime rescue system where there used to be none. At the heart of this story is a small agency, SASEMAR, which, in 2024, had a total budget of 276 million euros (Ministerio de Transportes y Movilidad Sostenible 2024). Neither an NGO nor a branch of the military, SASEMAR was created at a time when environmental disasters were the top concern for the government, and the people on the move mattered little to those in power. This chapter deals with some internal power struggles that shaped Spain's unique approach to maritime rescue, setting it apart from its European neighbours and leaving the agency ill-suited for law enforcement. These struggles were mainly between two visions for Spain's maritime search and rescue. The first was championed by former Guardia Civil chief, Luis Roldán, who sought to establish a militarized Coast Guard. The second was that of Josep Borrell Fontelles, SASEMAR's original architect (and later the European Union's top diplomat between 2019 and 2024). Drawing on archival records and media reports, the chapter brings these tensions to life through the voices of key figures, including Juan Carlos Arbex (SASEMAR's first director of communications), Enric Tarrida (retired rescuer and union leader), and anonymous SASEMAR's crew members who had orders not to talk to outsiders but wanted to do so nonetheless. Ultimately, this chapter explains why, unlike other rescue forces in Europe, SASEMAR struggles to integrate border control into its mandate.

The next two chapters address the question of how the politization of sea migration has played into the transformation of the Spanish maritime rescue service and, most particularly, of SASEMAR's evolving role. Chapter 4 focuses on the Western Mediterranean zone, an area encompassing the Strait of Gibraltar, the Alboran Sea, and the Balearic Sea. Here, big changes happened in 2018–19 when the Guardia Civil assumed control of rescue operations involving migrant boats, marking a shift toward a militarized approach. Chapter 5 turns to the Canary Islands and compares the first and second “*cayuco* crises.” A similar shift toward the militarization of rescue operations emerged in the Atlantic area around the Canary Islands, though its timeline and impact follow a different trajectory. In these two chapters, we hear directly from the people who are involved in search and rescue: crews aboard SASEMAR's boats and helicopters, journalists and activists, and some people on the move.

The agency exists within a broader context where EU member states are increasingly repurposing rescue assets for border control. However, the push to integrate SASEMAR into law enforcement has faced strong internal resistance. The concluding chapter (Chapter 6) explores this resistance and the role of organized labour in both protecting the agency's mandate and challenging official discourses of belonging and mobility. Here, members of the main union representing sea rescue crews share insights about how their work has changed as the Guardia Civil's role in maritime rescue continues to expand. They argue that, as rescuers, discriminating between whom to save and whom to let die at sea based merely on nationality or race goes against not just their deontological code and the core principle of the SAR Convention, upon which the agency is built, but also against their humanity. But the union's opposition to the criminalization of migrant workers and the militarization of the sea is also deeply political: as an anarcho-syndicalist union, the CGT is committed to a struggle that is class-based and internationalist. This means that, in each person saved by a rescue boat, the union sees not an enemy but an equal — and a potential ally. This view is a far cry from the politics of fear and enmity that underpin European migration and border policy in Europe and illustrates the fundamental incompatibility of the Union's perspective within this broader context.

Where SASEMAR's work ends, others take over: rescue is just a fleeting moment in a much longer journey, but one that can mean the difference between life and death, between reaching land or being lost to the sea. For many, departure from a coast somewhere on the African continent and

arrival at a Spanish port are the bookends to their migration story, but not for all. This book tells a story that happens at the border — a space of movement, rescue, and, too often, loss. It explores the sea as a not-so-new stage for the geopolitical tensions in an ever-changing world, and the consequences that high-level political manoeuvres have on the lives of people on the move leaving from places such as Morocco or Senegal and their families. This book is about the everyday work of government workers tasked with Spain's legal duty to protect human lives at sea; about citizens-turned-activists like Julie Campagne and Laetitia Marthe from Lanzarote's Network of Solidarity with Migrant People; people on the move who reach Europe, like Daría, and some who do not, like her son; and about communities burdened by the cost of violent geopolitics. It charts the evolution of Spain's national maritime rescue system, from its modest beginnings in the early 1990s to recent efforts to subordinate it to border control. This transformation remains unfinished. In that sense, this story is like a seabird in mid-flight: we do not yet know where the bird will land.