For Right-Wing Italian Youth, a Mission to Disrupt Migration

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Lorenzo Fiato, a leader of an Italian right-wing group, plans to board a ship in Sicily and embark on a mission to stop migrants. Credit Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

MILAN — As dawn broke over a quiet suburb, Lorenzo Fiato lugged a silver suitcase packed with windbreakers and anti-seasickness gum out of the bedroom he had decorated with stickers (“Enough Immigration”) and shelves filled with medieval knight toy soldiers.

At the front door, Mr. Fiato, 23, hugged his mother goodbye and set out to catch a flight to Sicily, where he planned to embark on the last leg of what has become Europe’s alt-right odyssey.

It began in May, when Mr. Fiato, a leader of the Italian branch of a European right-wing movement that calls itself identitarian, joined his allies in using an inflatable raft to momentarily delay a ship carrying Doctors Without Borders personnel that was chartered to rescue migrants at sea. The tactic appalled human rights organizations, which argued that the activists, mostly in their 20s, threatened the lives of desperate migrants making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea.

But it also attracted publicity, new members and, identitarians say, at least $100,000 in private donations. That money went to Defend Europe, a project that included as its centerpiece the chartering of a 130-foot ship previously used off the Horn of Africa.

Mr. Fiato and his allies around Europe suspect aid ships of colluding with human traffickers and believe migration amounts to a Muslim invasion. They wanted to disrupt and monitor the operations of rescue vessels and make sure they did not cross into Libyan waters, cooperate with human traffickers or bring more migrants to Europe’s shores.

“I certainly wish them the best,” said Richard B. Spencer, a white nationalist in the United States who is a leader of the so-called alt-right, a far-right movement. “This sounds like a wonderful mission.”

Except that, as of now, Mr. Fiato’s ship still has not come in.

On Thursday morning, the boat was stuck in Egypt, where he said inspectors seemed to be looking for “any misplaced hair” to hold up its arrival. In Italy, members of Parliament have excoriated the mission, and others have wondered if the band of activists might not come under attack by armed smugglers. A Spanish aid group has accused them of being pirates.

“It’s a bad climate,” Mr. Fiato said with a sigh over a beer on Wednesday night in Milan.

A tense atmosphere hangs over much of Italy these days.

While Europe and its leaders are confounded by the waves of migrants in the warm southern months, no country is as exposed as Italy, with its southern islands, miles of coastline and proximity to the smuggling hub of Libya.

has set off political upheaval across the continent, but it has especially dominated Italy’s attention. It has left the government scrambling for solutions, from furnishing Libya with patrol boats, to floating
the possibilities of closing Italian ports to ships that do not fly Italian flags, to granting travel visas to migrants so they can go north.

As Italian politicians have physically scuffled over whether to extend citizenship to the children of immigrants born in Italy, the left-leaning government, keenly aware that the issue is fueling the conservative opposition, has grown exasperated by the reluctance across Europe to open up borders and ports and share the burden of a mass migration.

Much of the focus has recently fallen on the ships run by nongovernmental organizations, or N.G.O.s, which according to Italy’s interior minister, Marco Minniti, operate 34 percent of rescue missions in a sea where about 2,000 refugees have drowned this year.

More than 93,000 migrants, the majority sub-Saharan Africans, have been rescued and taken to Italian ports so far this year. There is a concern the arrivals could top 200,000 by year’s end.

Right-wing groups have particularly latched onto an Italian prosecutor in Sicily who, without providing any evidence, began investigating potential collusion between aid groups and human traffickers. This month, human rights groups lashed out after an aid group leaked a draft of a government proposal that would bar N.G.O. ships from entering Libyan territorial waters for rescues, and slow them down by banning them from transferring refugees to bigger vessels.

Mr. Fiato, like some of Italy’s leading right-wing politicians, argues that the aid ships become a magnet for more immigration, and that they end up benefiting smugglers and mobsters who exploit reception centers, all the while costing more lives by drawing more migrants into the water. The United Nations immigration agency called this argument baseless.

In Milan on Wednesday, Mr. Fiato seemed eager to get out to sea. He sat in shorts and a blue shirt at Bar Magenta with his grade school friend and fellow identitarian Lara Montaperto. One of the city’s oldest bars and an institution, it has become a favorite place for Mr. Fiato’s group to plot how to preserve Europe’s identity.

selling cigarettes and roses, the two spoke against multiculturalism and forced integration as threats to traditional European cultures.

Ms. Montaperto, who recently started an identitarian women’s chapter (“We’re not home making tortellini”), argued that Europe’s overly welcoming posture resulted from excessive guilt over transgressions during colonialism and World War II. She said she was not alone in thinking there was a horrible paradox in Europe creating refugee centers, which she called “not totally different from concentration camps.”

They considered the alt-right a separate American phenomenon and a “big minestrone” in which a lot of different right-wing flavors were tossed in. But Mr. Fiato admired how a person highly familiar with the movement, Stephen K. Bannon, had become President Trump’s chief strategist.

In 2012, around the time Mr. Bannon took control of a favorite alt-right news outlet, Breitbart News, a friend alerted Mr. Fiato to a YouTube video called “Declaration of War” promoted by Generation Identity, a France-based right-wing group. Then 18, he had no strong political opinions, but the film’s themes struck a chord with his deep interest in European history and the “great mystery” about the
He soon started reading right-wing philosophers like Dominique Venner, Guillaume Faye and Gianfranco Miglio.

“We want to change something,” said Ms. Montaperto, who regretted missing the coming mission because of a long-planned trip to practice her Russian in Moscow. (“Lara’s crazy for Putin,” said Mr. Fiato, who recently gave her a gift of the works of Aleksandr Dugin, the ultranationalist Russian traditionalist and anti-liberal writer who is sometimes called Putin’s Rasputin.)

That opportunity to do something finally came, Mr. Fiato said, in May. Modeling themselves after Greenpeace, which works to impede whaling boats, he and a small crew rented a rubber raft with a 40-horsepower engine and a banner reading “No Way.”

For about three hours he said he waited, “cold, depressed and feeling like I was going to vomit,” until the aid ship set out to sea. Mr. Fiato and his friends sprang to action and momentarily blocked it.

“It was like David versus Goliath,” he said triumphantly.

Critics of the identitarians across Italy’s political spectrum have questioned the competence of the right-wing movement beyond its ability to briefly bother an aid ship or publish sleek YouTube videos of nonwhite people looting and laying waste to cities. (Mr. Fiato, for example, missed his flight on Thursday. “I’ll be in Sicily tomorrow,’’ he insisted Thursday evening.)

Human rights groups and some Italian officials have questioned the morality, and legality, of their tactics. So has Ms. Montaperto’s father, a retired Italian Navy official, who has argued with her about the group’s potentially breaking maritime law.

The identitarians bristle at critics who say they are endangering the lives of desperate migrants by slowing rescue ships.

“There are life vests so we can help,” said Mr. Fiato, noting that maritime law required them to help those in need.

“We are not murderers,” Ms. Montaperto said.

What they are, for sure, is the immigration story of the moment. As Mr. Fiato waits for the ship to arrive in Catania from Egypt, he said he had to deal with a horde of journalists, some of whom had arrived in Sicily before he even boarded a flight. Every day, he said, his phone rings with reporters — from the major American networks, Vice News, the BBC and Vanity Fair — many asking to accompany them out to sea.

“I can’t take it anymore,” he said.

Ms. Montaperto understood her friend’s frustration but offered him a comforting thought.

“We’ve found the media to be useful,” she said. “It gives us visibility.”