

Italy on the Brink of Xenophobia?

Ottorino Cappelli (November 03, 2007)



Following a crime wave involving immigrants from Romania (an EU country), an outburst of xenophobia seems to be sparking in Italy.

Italy decided to start expelling from the country EU citizens considered a menace to society. The decision was taken in the mist of a crime wave involving many immigrants from Romania that peaked due to a deadly assault on a navy officer's wife, Giovanna Reggiani. The woman died Thursday night at 47 years old after two days in a coma. According to the police she suffered "massive" head injuries consistent with blows from a blunt object such as a rock.

The alleged aggressor is a 24-year-old Romanian gypsy. The suspect was arrested and accused of homicide and robbery. The man denies part of the charges. He stated that he never hit, but only stole her bag.



Meanwhile, on Thursday night President Giorgio Napolitano signed an emergency decree allowing the expulsion of potentially dangerous EU citizens. According to Italian Police Chief Antonio Manganelli the Italian authorities have already compiled a list "with absolute respect for human dignity, avoiding a witch-hunt and without criminalising ethnic groups" of potentially dangerous people that might qualify for expulsion. According to the new regulation, which Italian officials say are allowed under EU law, these people will be sent out of Italy without trial. As part of the crackdown, bulldozers in Rome knocked down shantytowns where thousands of illegal immigrants live.

Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, under fire from the center-right opposition for being soft on crime, pledged such incidents would "never happen again". Former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) party called Prodi "a liar" for claiming that the previous government underestimated the immigration problem. Gianfranco Fini, leader of the right-wing National Alliance (AN), stated that the government should be "ashamed of itself". He declared also that his party will vote to ratify the decree provided it also covers jobless immigrants.

Prodi however, is also facing critics from the left wing of his own coalition, who believe the government is following a tide of rising xenophobia.

This opinion seems in line with what the Romanian Prime Minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu said on Saturday: "We should fight against the wave of xenophobia that is manifesting itself in Italy and we must fight against the bad image that Romanians who are working in Italy have." The statement came after Mr. Tariceanu, who had backed the crackdown earlier this week, came under fire at home for apologizing for violence blamed on Romanian immigrants.

Meanwhile last Friday a band of Italian youngsters wearing motorcycle helmets attacked a group of Romanians with knives, metal bars and sticks in the parking lot of a Rome supermarket, injuring three persons, one rather seriously. Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema condemned the mob attack as "gang aggression unworthy of our country."

i-Italy will come back to this issue with more information and commentary in the following days. It is only too normal that we are particularly concerned about immigration in Italy sparking periodic outbursts of xenophobia, nativistic prejudices, racism, and hate crimes.

Nobody should forget that Italian immigrants have been usually identified with the "Mafia" and perceived as naturally prone to crime. As late as 1973 President Richard M. Nixon could claim that "you can't find one [Italian] that's honest"

To blame Romanian and gypsies and all "jobless immigrants" in today's Italy as gangsters and bandits and dangerous is the same old nonsense.

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