
Racist Violence in Italy

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An assessment of overall trends and patterns

Over the past decade racist incidents have been on the rise both in numbers and seriousness. The lack of reliable updated official data makes it difficult to have a clear picture of the situation in Italy. Nevertheless, international surveys, unofficial recordings and surveys show that racist violence, in all forms, is a daily occurrence.

The Office for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported in 2007 148 hate crimes in Italy, of which 42 were xenophobic, 54 were anti-Semitic and 52 were racist¹. The Italian Raxen Focal Point compiled a list of 175 episodes between 1st October 2006 and 20th September 2007, among which there were 27 cases of violence against persons, 75 cases of racist graffiti and propaganda and 40 cases of abuses and threats².

A report was compiled of hate crimes that were reported in different media outlets including national, local and internet sources. Over a 35 day period, between 24 October and 28 November 2008, 48 different incidents had occurred. Amongst these 62% were acts of violence against persons, 21% were racist and anti-Semitic publications, graffiti and propaganda and 13% were verbal threats. Amongst the victims, the biggest group is that of migrants (71%), followed by Roma and Sinti (13%) and Jews (6%)³.

A similar survey covering the period between 1st January 2007 and 15th April 2009⁴ shows a constant increase of racist incidents. There were 119 cases of reported racist violence in 2007, 124 in 2008, 76 in the first 100 days of 2009, amounting to a total of 319 cases in 28 months. Among those 95 were verbal offences and threats, 30 racist publications, public discourses, graffiti and propaganda, 187 acts of violence against persons, 15 of which lead to the death of the victim. Overtime verbal offences slightly decreased while violence against persons rapidly increased. It is worth noting that the perpetrators were mostly 'ordinary' citizens. In 34 cases the actors were reported to be members of racist groups or extreme right parties, in 28 cases, Police officials. The most victimised group were immigrants (203 cases), Roma and Sinti persons (83 cases), Muslims (20 cases) Jews (13 cases). In 124 cases the gender of the victims was known: 95 women, 29 men; in 40 cases the victims of the racist violence were minors. As regards national origin, the most targeted national groups are Romanian and Bangladeshi citizens.

The reasons for the increasing number of incidents are numerous: unforeseen transformation of Italy from an emigration to an immigration country; anti-terrorism

¹ OSCE – ODIHR, *Hate crimes in the OSCE region – Incidents and responses. Annual report for 2007* (Warsaw: OSCE, 2008)

² Rivera, Annamaria and Naletto, Grazia, *Racist violence and crime*, in: Cospe, *Raxen annual report 2007* (Vienna: FRA 2008).

³ Bencini, Camilla, Cerretelli, Sara and Di Pasquale, Laura, *Racism in Italy. ENAR shadow report 2008* (Brussels: ENAR 2008).

⁴ Naletto, Grazia (ed.) *Libro bianco sul razzismo in Italia* (Roma: Lunaria 2009) p. 110

policies focused on Muslims and more generally on 'Arabian-looking' people and social insecurity due to the economic crisis. However the main reasons can be found in the interaction of three factors which feed each other in a dangerous short-circuit: a xenophobic and racist political discourse and governmental action; reproduction and dissemination of ethnic stereotypes and prejudices by media; the widespread 'ordinary' racism and xenophobia among the poorest social groups, whose members often vent their frustration and anger blaming immigrants for the worsening of their economical and social status.

Extreme right groups do not have a big role in this process. Openly racist and xenophobic discourses are a consolidated aspect of mainstream political parties' propaganda. Populism is more and more characterizing political proposals of both right and left wing parties. Schematically the mechanism is simple; real events, often not particularly relevant ones, are selected and misrepresented by the media and shown to be an alarming chain, creating an 'emergency'. Sensationalist campaigns are launched about the 'immigrant crime problem', the 'Roma problem', and the 'Muslim problem', the underlying message being that the presence or even the existence of a certain group of 'aliens' is menacing to our own security. Political parties fuel these alarming campaigns to build a consensus among the voters pretending to be the defenders of citizens' security against the alien menace. The Government used such an 'emergency' described below, to adopt discriminatory measures against immigrants and ethnic minorities. The combined effect of media and political discourse strengthen the racist and xenophobic attitudes widespread among the population, and this feeds the media sensationalism and the political populism. Racist and xenophobic violence becomes a natural response: immigrants and ethnic minorities are a menace in Italy; we have a right to defend ourselves, by any means necessary.

The 31st October 2007 an Italian woman, Giovanna Reggiani, was murdered in Rome by a Romanian Roma. Mainstream media linked that murder to other incidents and minor offences involving either Roma or Romanian citizens, launching a campaign about the 'menace to citizens' safety and life' represented by those two groups, with no distinction between 'Roma' and 'Romanians' and no consideration of the fact that Romanians are European Citizens and were in some instances described as 'illegal immigrants'. The Mayor of Rome, who was also at the time the Secretary General of the biggest left wing party, called for emergency measures, including giving police authorities the possibility to expel Romanian citizens for 'national security reasons'; measures that were adopted by the Government in an emergency meeting two days later. Police raided and dismantled Roma settlements in Rome, arresting several 'suspected' persons. In the following days attacks by Italian citizens on both Roma camps and Roma and Romanian individuals were reported across the country. The so called 'Roma emergency' became the main issue during the electoral campaign for the April 2008 general elections which was won by the centre-right coalition. The new Minister of Home Affairs stated that on 11th May 'All Romani camps will have to be dismantled right away and the inhabitants will be either expelled or incarcerated'. Shortly after, the Government adopted the so called 'Roma emergency decrees' giving

the Police extensive powers to arrest, deport and expel Roma people. The legal basis for those decrees was the environmental disaster legislation⁵.

The weak reaction of law enforcement agencies and the judicial system adds an unofficial justification: if racist violence is not strongly addressed, then it means that it is not a serious crime. Although there have been some prosecutions against political representatives on the basis of hate crime legislation⁶, normally racist incidents are not even recorded as such by the police. Instead, they are recorded as ordinary offences, unless the victims or witnesses insist on the acknowledgement of their racist nature. Courts are also reluctant to acknowledge racist motivation as an aggravating circumstance. Moreover, members of the law enforcement agencies are often themselves perpetrators of racist violence and are granted substantial impunity. Racial and ethnic profiling is ignored, if not denied, by Police authorities even when evidence is provided. No enquiry ever took place in many proven cases of physical aggression by police officials against immigrants⁷. Violence against the Roma and Sinti is a daily occurrence, in most cases originated and legitimated by political administrative authorities. Victims have no support from institutions; on the contrary undocumented immigrants who denounced racist aggressions have often been deported before a judgement could take place.

As a final note it should be considered that the increase in violent crimes against immigrants and ethnic minorities, as well as against women, is an opposing trend. The general framework shows a clear decrease of violent crimes in the country, with the possible exception of organised crime.

Typical case study

A dramatic and emblematic episode took place in Bussolengo, near Verona in September 2008. Three Roma Italian families stopped in a car park for lunch. While they were preparing their lunch, they were confronted by a local police patrol and ordered to leave. They told the police officer that they would leave directly after lunch. However a Carabinieri (one of the national police agencies) patrol was called; the Roma were beaten and forcibly brought to the police station. There, they underwent terrible violence for over six hours. In addition to beating and verbally abusing the adults, the Carabinieri, continuously hit the children. One child lost three teeth, whilst another was kept for a long time with his head under the water. The episode was reported by an

⁵ For more details and further examples see Naletto *Libro bianco sul razzismo in Italia*, p. 45; Open Society Institute, Center on Housing Rights and Evictions, European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), Romani Criss, Roma Civic Alliance in Romania *Security a la italiana* (n.p., 2008). Available at http://www.soros.org/initiatives/brussels/articles_publications/publications/fingerprinting_20080715, accessed 4 August 2010

⁶ Law n. 654 of 13th October 1975 (Ratification of the ICERD) as modified by Law n.205 of 25th June 1993.
⁷ A typical case is that of Enamul Hoque. See *DHUUMCATU* 'Ambulante bengalese picchiato a Fontana di Trevi e mandato in ospedale dagli uomini di Alemanno', <http://www.dhuumcatu.com/2008/11/ambulante-bengalese-picchiato-fontana.html> accessed 4 August 2010.

association that subsequently supported the families in reporting the incident to the judicial authorities. However they were charged with 'resistance and aggression to police officials'. They were found guilty some weeks later and were released after withdrawing the accusations against the police⁸.

Recommendation

- Actual implementation of the legislation against racist violence and hate crimes, including
 - Training police officials
 - Training judges, lawyers and public prosecutors
 - Implementation of a network of monitoring centres on racist violence
 - Monitoring and sanctioning racist public and political discourse
- Revision of the police recording system to include clear and mandatory guidelines for the assessment of racist and xenophobic aspects of ordinary offences
- Creation of an official and permanent mechanism of monitoring and reporting racist behaviour by members of law enforcement agencies.
- Creation, in cooperation with civil society organisations, of a network of territorial agencies to provide free legal support and psychological assistance to the victims.

⁸ *UO Velto* 10 October 2008, 'Bussolengo (VR), una battaglia persa', <http://sucardrom.blogspot.com/2008/10/bussolengo-vr-una-battaglia-persa.html> , accessed 4 August 2010

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Annex 1

Recording incidents of racist violence

1.1 Are records kept of incidents of racist violence reported to your NGO?

Yes

1.2 What is recorded about incidents reported to your NGO?

Descriptions of individual cases

1.3 Are records kept of the characteristics of victims, such as their:

Age	Yes
Sex	Yes
Ethnic identity	Yes
Language	No
Religion	No
National origins	Yes

1.4 Are records kept of any other characteristics of victims not mentioned above?

Residence
Citizenship
Juridical status (legally/illegally resident, refugee, asylum seeker)

1.5 Are records kept of the types of incidents reported, such as whether they involve physical violence, verbal abuse and threats, and damage to property, for instance?

Full description

1.6 Are records kept of the locations of incidents reported?

Yes

If "Yes", what information is recorded?

Place, city, address

1.7 Are any records kept about the perpetrators of incidents reported?

Yes

1.8 Are records kept of the characteristics of the perpetrators of incidents reported, such as their:

Age	Yes
Sex	Yes
Ethnic identity	No
Language	Yes
Religion	No
National origins	Yes
Affiliation with any extreme group	Yes
Other (Please specify)	

1.9 Has your NGO carried out or commissioned any victim surveys of racist violence? If “Yes”, please provide details.

No

1.10 Are any records kept of incidents of racist violence reported to your NGO used by any national or international bodies for their monitoring of racist violence? (If “yes”, please specify)

No.

Reviewing incidents of racist violence

2.1 Does your NGO periodically review any records it keeps of incidents of reported racist violence?

No. This is due to the fact that we lack the sufficient resources and manpower to carry out such a review. However we do use these records to provide information to international organisations and such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)