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May 20, 2013 8:10 pm

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Italy faces pressure over Roma 'ghetto' camps

By Guy Dinmore in Rome



Thousands of Roma live in camps on the outskirts of Rome

It takes Pamela Salkanovic more than two hours by train and bus through the outskirts of Rome to get to technical school each day. The 15-year-old is determined to start a new life. "I want to be a hairdresser and get out," she says.

But Pamela is ethnic Roma or gypsy, not Italian although she was born in [Italy](#). She lives in what Rome's municipal authorities call a "model equipped village but which she and the other 1,200 Roma inhabitants compare to a concentration camp with its high walls, security cameras, squalid conditions and a ghetto subculture of drugs and juvenile prostitution.



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Life in such camps, which Pamela recorded in an award-winning documentary, has brought strong criticism of Italy from international rights groups.

The packed Salone camp of caravans, shipping containers and huts is one of several built, or expanded from existing settlements, under rightwing mayor Gianni Alemanno beyond the capital's ring road, far from the nearest population centre.

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In nearby Cesarina camp, Roma families from Bosnia and Romania live on land rented to the city by the Catholic church, recently cut off from electricity and running water. Reporters gained access for the first time last week as guests of a parliamentary delegation.

A shocked Vincenzo Spadafora, head of the state authority for children, a toothless watchdog, says: "I am speechless. It is absurd and a disgrace that people in 2013 live like this on the margins of everything."

The fate of such camps in several cities is in doubt, however, as Italy comes under pressure to live up to its commitment to integrate an estimated 40,000 homeless Roma, many of them Italian citizens, through housing, education and work.

"Italy is the only country in Europe to boast a systematic, publicly organised and sponsored network of ghettos aimed at depriving Roma of full participation or even contact or interaction with Italian life," says the European Roma Rights Centre, a Budapest-based lobbying group.

The Court of Cassation, Italy's highest appeals court, this month outlawed a "state of emergency" imposed in 2008 by Silvio Berlusconi's then government and later defended by Mario Monti's technocratic administration which formed the legal basis for the camps and the vetting on an ethnic basis of their inhabitants through fingerprinting, height measurement, family pictures and recording of tattoos.

"Italy has got away with this policy but this should not stand," says Nils Muiznieks, commissioner for human rights of the Council of Europe watchdog, welcoming the court ruling.

"This policy has been an absolute disaster, costing incredible amounts of money, traumatising families, leading to further segregation, marginalisation from society, and breeding racism. This should provoke a huge outcry in Italy and abroad," says Mr Muiznieks who wrote a damning report after visiting the camps last year.

Carlo Stasolla, head of Associazione 21 Luglio – a group that campaigns against discrimination, which organised last week's visits – says Rome's so-called nomads plan has cost taxpayers €62m, more than the cost of social housing for the Roma involved. Contracts for private security firms, suppliers and managers, has involved corruption and "local mafia", he says.

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Viviane Reding, European Commission vice-president leading efforts to integrate an estimated 10m-12m Roma across the EU, is assessing progress in implementing national integration strategies submitted by governments last year. One in every four or five new job seekers in Bulgaria and Romania are ethnic Roma, she notes.

But 15 of the EU's 27 member states, including Italy, have failed to identify funding, which would be co-financed by Brussels, for their inclusion policies.



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The commission can launch infringement procedures leading to sanctions if it sees evidence of “systemic discrimination”, a spokeswoman says, noting that Ms Reding’s report “may name and shame”.

Mr Muiznieks hopes that Italy’s new government, formed last month, will break with the past. But officials question how a fragile coalition of left and right will reach agreement.

Angelino Alfano, rightwing interior minister, has already rejected a proposal by Congolese-born Cecile Kyenge, minister for integration, that children of immigrants born in Italy should be given citizenship.

Although some cities have progressed in integrating Roma families, Mr Alemanno is campaigning for re-election as Rome’s mayor this month and [knows his tough line is a vote-winner](#). As in the UK, rightwing groups are raising the spectre of an influx of Roma from Bulgaria and Romania next year when the EU allows freedom of movement for job seekers from those countries.

For Ms Salkanovic, stateless and born of parents from the former Yugoslavia, acquiring Italian citizenship is crucial to a future outside Salone. She has sent her video to Giorgio Napolitano, head of state. “Ciao Giorgio,” she says. “Please give us our documents.” She awaits a reply.

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