

# Ethnic Profiling and Discrimination against Roma in Italy: New Developments in a Deep-Rooted Tradition

By Piero Colacicchi<sup>1</sup>

**A**S MORE AND MORE people throughout Europe become aware of the recent measures passed by the Italian government against Romani people, questions seem to be bouncing back and forth between European Parliament members, Romani and non-Romani NGOs and more generally the democratic world: Why has Italy become so hostile to Roma?<sup>2</sup> Is this open question causing many non-Romani observers and Roma themselves to define this situation as one of apartheid? The questions imply that this is something new and that it has to do with the realisation that the new government has gone very far to the right and is creating policies dangerously close to racist – if not thoroughly so – in dealing with what Italy is repeatedly referred to as “the Roma problem”.

Unfortunately, this is not so: The so-called security measures are just a new development in a deep-rooted problem and all attempts to put a stop to it today, as in the past, have thus far failed. On 5 March 2007, the author of this article was invited to present a paper on the situation of Roma in Italy and on the dangers of growing racism and violence at a roundtable organised by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) in Rome in the presence of Italian politicians, parliamentary representatives, state lawyers and other influential people. Several dramatic incidents which occurred just before that date prompted the author’s conclusion that:

“[...] the situation we have in front of us is becoming more and more alarming, especially

since we see no effort on the part of the Italian government or the majority of local administrators to solve it. The fundamental problem is that in Italy, where there are deep, very strong and increasingly anti-Romani feelings (these are both from the past but also of more recent origin), neither the various governments over the past few years nor any state institution have ever done anything to counteract them.”

A long list of examples of prejudicial, discriminatory and even downright racist attitudes, chosen from among the most recent of a large number of available examples, were listed. Among them:

“[...] while, for example, a first instance court sentence delivered in Verona in 2004 found a group of Northern League members guilty of instigation to racial hatred against members of the Sinti community for having covered the city walls with posters asking for the expulsion of these “nomads”, the subsequent and recent sentence of the appeal court diminished the punishment from six to three months. Flavio Tosi, head of the Verona Northern League, who declared “we must aim to make our city thoroughly inhospitable for Gypsies” and was found guilty, was elected mayor during the next election.

In many sentences delivered against Roma, we find that judges start by taking for granted that the “nomadic traditions” of the accused had strongly influenced the planning of the crime. The sentence of the Florence Appeal Court, N° 664/1998, determining a severe punishment

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, the term Roma is used (unless otherwise specified) to refer to Roma, Ashkali and Sinti; both Italian citizens and immigrants.

for exploitation of minors, began with these words: ‘The Florence administration built a camp reserved for Gypsy type populations [...] to allow nomadic groups to live a life that is more coherent with that to which western people are accustomed and probably not easily acceptable by ethnic groups and tribes accustomed to styles of life totally different from the ones that are known and practiced in our more progressive and civilised countries.’

[...] A very serious accident which occurred in Ascoli in February 2007 involved a young man who ran over and killed four teenagers while intoxicated. All newspapers underlined that he was Romani. The Mentecritica blog, visited a few days later, had posed the following question: ‘What is the purpose of putting in newspaper headlines that the man is Romani except to reinforce the bad feelings which already exist towards these people? Within a few hours there were 494 responses. In 95% of cases, the equation nomad = thief, violent, exploiter was strongly expressed: Nomads steal, are dirty, don’t pay taxes, are animals and must all be sent away.’<sup>3</sup>

Before that date, various Romani organisations and the Italian Federation of Roma and Sinti had denounced the growing racism without success. Not only was there no positive response, but only a few days later the Rome City Council passed one of the worst local laws against Roma ever drawn up in that city.

Reviewing what has happened in Italy in the past (and especially in the last 20 or so years) in terms of laws and politics that have influenced the lives of Roma, both Italians and immigrants, might answer, at least in part, the opening question of this article. That period in fact has marked a change in the history of Roma living in Italy: In earlier decades, one

could define a sort of ‘traditional’ anti-ziganism, the kind of racism across frontiers that Grattan Puxon talked about when he wrote, ‘There was never much difference in the attitudes towards Roma in western and eastern Europe.’ Puxon described it as a generalised series of stereotypes involving fear and repulsion that forced Roma to live on the margins of urban areas and often by, or in, city dumps. This situation prompted Leonardo Piasere (an Italian anthropologist particularly well known for his publications on Italian Roma and Sinti) to give his 1991 book the expressive title *People of the dumps*, ‘meaning [he explained] both in the sense of people *living in dumps* and of people *considered and treated like trash*’ (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

After that period Italian anti-Romani racism began to change and slowly acquired a new dimension. The old stereotypes started being manipulated as useful political tools and anti-Romani feelings were artfully spread through apparently objective publications and newspaper articles, especially at election times by the new fascist right wing to gain political consensus.<sup>5</sup> Soon it became a major component of Northern League campaigns and then, in more recent times, in less obvious hypocritical ways, by centre left politicians. The 2007 campaign of Rome’s former mayor Walter Veltroni’s to build a new party was to a large extent based on securitarian propaganda and on the ‘terrorise and win’ concept, in which Roma and Romanians (grossly confused as one) were assigned the part of the felon. This political use of old hostilities by the centre left, a part of which has been the generalised justification that Italians, typically emigrants, were not prepared to face immigration (while Roma have lived in Italy for the past six centuries), was definitely a new development in the field of anti-Romani racism and it now represents a growing danger both for Roma and Sinti communities and for Italian democracy as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The full Italian text can be found at: [http://sucardrom.blog.tiscali.it/ECRI\\_\\_1\\_intervento\\_di\\_Piero\\_Colacicchi\\_di\\_Osservazione\\_1732227.shtml](http://sucardrom.blog.tiscali.it/ECRI__1_intervento_di_Piero_Colacicchi_di_Osservazione_1732227.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> Piasere, Leonardo. *Popoli delle Discariche*. Rome: CISU, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> A strong and not particularly subtle change in size, frequency and rhetorical effect, in words and photographs, was and still is always apparent during electoral campaigns compared to the time in between.

<sup>6</sup> *European Roma Rights, Centre of Housing Rights and Evictions, osservazione and Sucar Drom. Written Comments Concerning Italy for Consideration by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination at its 72<sup>nd</sup> Session*, <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=#ERRC/COHRE/osservazione/Sucar>.

Proof of this change can first be found in Pi-asere's above mentioned 1991 book (or, to be more exact, in the chapter that gives the name to the book) where there is no mention of anti-Romani racism used specifically to gain political consensus. In it, the author examines in depth the main stereotypes and how they take shape in various Italian regions, local administrative laws against travelling or camping Roma and Sinti and many other aspects of the question in quite a thorough way, but he makes no mention of this trend. The phenomenon, being at the time rather new, did not attract much attention or was considered a passing phase within the more general anti-Romani attitude.<sup>7</sup>

As an example of the latest developments – prior to the 2008 government security package – the speech delivered in December 2007 by then Mayor Veltroni during his campaign to build the new Democratic Party, in which he brags about having evicted hundreds of Romanian Roma from camps in Rome, offers a perfect example.<sup>8</sup>

### Historical aspects of the situation of Roma and Sinti in Italy

The earliest reports of the presence of Roma in Italy date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but the first documented appearance of a group of “Egyptians” is dated

1422 in Bologna. By the end of the same century, many Romani groups were certainly living in various parts of the country and more arrived at later dates to settle in almost every region; some arriving via the sea from Greece and southern Yugoslavia and some crossing the Alps. Groups of Roma of which we have detailed documentation arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and more Sinti and Roma moved to the northern part of Italy after World War One from Germany and Croatia. Recent important migrations of Roma from the former Yugoslavia began in the 1960s (Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and mostly Kosovo) and had a high point during the 1999 war in Kosovo. The most recent wave, from Romania, started in 2001 or 2002. Small groups have also arrived at different times from Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia.

In 1977, Mirella Karpati, an anthropologist and promoter of Opera Nomadi's magazine *Lacio Drom*, estimated the maximum number of Roma and Sinti in Italy to be about 60,000. According to Pi-asere, by the late 1980s, the number had risen to more than 60,000.<sup>9</sup> By the mid 1990s, the Ministry of Internal Affairs estimated the total number of Roma in Italy to be more than 100,000. Recent figures estimate the total number of Roma and Sinti to be somewhere between 150,000 to 180,000, but no census has ever been taken to understand the real numbers;<sup>10</sup> all figures have

<sup>7</sup> *Anti-Romani attitudes in Italy, thus, precede the big immigration waves. Therefore, one cannot find any justification in the fact that Italy, as an emigrant country, was not prepared to face immigration.*

<sup>8</sup> *Omnioroma news agency press release, 6 December 2007: “Circa 6 mila persone spostate tra gennaio e novembre, di cui 5mila dall'inizio dell'anno a settembre e la restante parte da settembre in poi; 995 manufatti abusivi abbattuti da febbraio al mese scorso con l'intervento di Ardis e Ama nelle aree golenali dei fiumi Tevere e Aniene. Questi i risultati degli interventi di sgombero e riqualificazione degli insediamenti di nomadi effettuati negli ultimi mesi nella capitale. Risultati che sono stati illustrati in Campidoglio dal sindaco Walter Veltroni, dagli assessori comunale e regionale alla Sicurezza Jean Leonard Touadi e Daniele Fichera, dal questore Marcello Fulvi, dal vice capo di Gabinetto del sindaco Luca Odevaine e rappresentanti delle forze dell'ordine.”*

<sup>9</sup> *Pi-asere, Leonardo. Il fenomeno della migrazione in riferimento alle difficoltà di adattamento sociale delle componenti nomadi. Roma: Istituto Internazionale di Studi Giuridici, circa 1989.*

<sup>10</sup> *It is important to recall here the findings of the European Committee of Social Rights in its decision on the merits of a collective complaint (No 27/2004) filed by the ERRC against Italy for violations of the right to housing of Roma from 7 December 2005. At paragraph 23 of its decision against Italy, the Committee stated, “[...] when it is generally acknowledged that a particular group is or could be discriminated against, the state authorities have a responsibility for collecting data on the extent of the problem [...]. The gathering and analysis of such data (with due safeguards for privacy and against other abuses [emphasis added]) is indispensable to the formulation of rational policy.” Data should be collected only if in anonymous form, and only after Roma and Sinti will be put by the institutions in a situation of feeling that giving such data will actually not increase control and persecution, but improve integration and participation. Information on the presence of Roma and*



*On 9 April 2008, the excavators began destroying the first line of barracks in the Casilino 900 Romani camp near Rome to pave the way for a large scale demolition operation.*

PHOTO: SIMONA CALEO

always been and still are just estimates. Of the most recently estimated number, about 100,000 are reportedly Italian citizens. The rest are immigrants from non-EU countries (mainly the former Yugoslavia) and the new EU Member States.

Italian Roma, mostly living in southern Italy, settled in those areas a long time ago, earning their living mostly through crafts and commerce. Italian Sinti have mostly lived in caravans, travelling throughout the country to pursue their activities as circus and funfair keepers, spending the winters in small, family sized camps.

The presence of Roma from former Yugoslavia passed virtually unnoticed by the general public and the press until the mid 1980s. They lived in small

groups – mostly enlarged families – in caravans or tents far from towns due to a lack of money and to stay away from the hostile attitudes of Italians. Speaking poor Italian, dressed differently from the local population and with no apparent occupation, they were often seen as the epitome of the legendary dangerous “Gypsy”.

By the end of the 1980s, large camps for immigrant Romani groups started appearing on the outskirts of all major cities. Most of them were unofficially tolerated and a few were actually run by local administrations.

The origin of these large (official and unofficial) camps for Romani immigrants can be seen as the result of several forces; some sympathetic

*Sinti should only be aggregated and collected by Romani and Sinti organisations or in collaboration between institutions and Romani and Sinti organisations. At present, asking institutions to collect data on Roma and Sinti is extremely dangerous. The idea that information on children should be collected to protect children against their parents, only because these children are Romani or Sinti, is the present government's idea of collecting data to help Roma and Sinti.*

to Roma, some hostile. Roma themselves, originally coming mostly from urban areas and now forced to live in shantytowns in caravans, asked for better living conditions than the official camps seemed to promise. The right wing parties and the police saw the big camps as a way to control the small groups that were roaming the countryside and that were often indicated by the press to be responsible for most petty crimes.

At that time, several major NGOs and some local politicians that were following the situation of Roma and Sinti started pushing for some kind of legislation that would protect these groups. Between 1985 and 1995, 10 regional laws were approved. As their names clearly indicate,<sup>11</sup> these were all intended for the protection of nomads and nomadic culture and called for the creation of "camps for nomads", without taking into consideration that most Italian and practically all immigrant Roma (there were already a fair number), with the exception of some Italian Sinti, had been sedentary for generations.

### Development of immigration norms

Since Italy was not at that time an immigrant-receiving country, it never had to pass any legislation to regulate immigration except for a few simple rules related to the short term presence in the country of foreign students, a few workers and refugees from neighbouring countries in periods of turmoil. During the 1970s and 1980s, the situation changed drastically and Italy began to see an ever increasing number of people coming from the so-called third world: Mostly Africa, Asia and the Balkan countries. Faced with this new situation, in 1989 the Italian government passed the first comprehensive immigration law (Law Decree No 416) which went into full effect in early 1990 as Law 39, commonly known as the Legge Martelli (the name of the Minister that signed it). Its main

purpose was to legalise as many immigrants already present in Italy as possible and so determine their numbers, as well as to control future entrances. The law never succeeded in its full purpose. The whole operation was run in a rather haphazard way and many people were left out and often remained without permits for many years to come.<sup>12</sup>

The combination of the Legge Martelli and subsequent immigration norms with the insufficiently funded and wrongly conceived regional laws turned camps for Roma into what have often been called "black holes": Overcrowded, often walled in, "reservations" as Piasere first called them, in which men, women and children still live in caravans or containers with insufficient outhouse toilets in common areas, often in bad repair. They were mostly inhabited by undocumented families without any income because the law prohibits undocumented migrants from working, forcing women and even men to beg with their small children in their arms. Some found relief in drug dealing and became victims of drug pushers who used them and blackmailed them, then ended in jail. Being undocumented, they had no health insurance and were often at the mercy of social workers who knew nothing about their history and were full of prejudices. Because of the bad reputation, the camps were often raided by police who made no effort to keep things quiet but arrived in large numbers at dawn with trucks and buses attracting crowds and journalists, strengthening prejudices and fear in non-Roma who lived in the neighbourhood.<sup>13</sup>

According to Claude Cahn, "In the most extreme case, a direct evolutionary line could be traced from a charitable beginning to a punitive end. Thus, media attention would begin to be devoted to this camp or that, decrying the deplorable conditions "in which the children live". Public scrutiny would grow and authorities would become engaged. Eventually, police would raid,

<sup>11</sup> For example, the title of the Lombardia Region's law is "Regional action for the protection of the populations belonging to traditionally nomadic and semi nomadic ethnic groups."

<sup>12</sup> See: Adinolfi, Adelina. *I lavoratori extracomunitari*. Società editrice Il Mulino. Bologna 1992. Also: Miele, Raffaele. *La nuova legislazione sugli stranieri*. Union Printing Edizioni. Viterbo. 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Colacicchi, Piero. "Down by Law". In *Roma Rights Winter 1998*, <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=497>.

and Roma would be evicted onto the road or expelled from Italy entirely.”<sup>14</sup>

Since 1990, two more important immigration laws<sup>15</sup> and numerous small norms have been passed, each more restrictive than the last. None of these have solved the situation of Romani immigrants who were left out of former legislative measures and thus created new groups of undocumented migrants. The basic principle remained that only immigrants who had found jobs had a right to a permit: And who was going to employ a person, a “Gypsy”, living in a camp and therefore considered a dangerous ‘nomad’?<sup>16</sup>

The effect of this combination of law, misconception and disrespect on the part of administrators and police consolidated the previously vague stereotype of Roma and Sinti as nomads into something official; a very real and scary “nomad” so that from then on all people living in a trailer, in an open area, whether in an official or unofficial camp, *were* and still are “nomads”. So much so that even non-Romani people who happened to find temporary shelter in camps were automatically perceived as “nomads” in the eyes of both society at large and social workers and public administrators and were treated as such. Most camps were far from the public eye which turned them into mythically dangerous places while making it impossible for anyone to see the horrible reality they enclosed.

The promotion of camps for Roma through regional law was one of the worst tragedies that could have happened in Italy, and not only for

Roma. Their existence caused much of the hostility that grew against both immigrant and Italian Roma during the 1990s and onwards and led to the subsequent situation of apartheid.

### Personal document issues

Italian activists Nando Sigona and Lorenzo Monasta have argued:

“The question of citizenship and legal status is a crucial area of concern which covers a broad range of issues. For foreign Roma, personal documents and residence permits are a key priority. The constant threat of being expelled from Italy, the strict relationship between permits to stay and work contracts, the problem of non-recognition of marriages celebrated within the communities, the lack of a coherent and consistent practice in dealing with asylum claims, all pose a continuous burden on the everyday lives of foreign Roma. However, also Italian Sinti, despite their Italian citizenship, which makes them more secure, also have to cope with legal and bureaucratic difficulties and obstacles, in particular with regards to marriage recognition and access to social support.”<sup>17</sup>

Still today, a substantial number of foreign Roma from non-EU countries periodically have trouble with the renewal of their *permessi di soggiorno*, permits required to remain in the country. This condition makes them at risk of removal or deportation and although actual deportations are limited because of the complexity of circumstances

<sup>14</sup> Cahn, Claude. *Roma Rights in Italy: Establishing the Anti-Discrimination Framework. Italy: osservAzione. 2006, [http://www.osservazione.org/articolo\\_21aprile\\_cahn\\_en.htm](http://www.osservazione.org/articolo_21aprile_cahn_en.htm).*

<sup>15</sup> *Laws Turco-Napolitano n. 40 of 6 March 1998 and Law Bossi-Fini n. 189 of 30 July 2002.*

<sup>16</sup> *As is well know, the words “nomad”, “nomadism” as well as “Gypsy”, are heteronyms but with different stories. Whereas the etymology of Gypsy is old and still debated, the original and well known meaning of nomad in Latin is shepherd. This is not particularly appropriate to describe the complex and different ways of life of Roma. In colonial times, the term took on derogatory undertones and the meaning of vagrant, uncivilised, inferior and similar to “wanderer”, as in “Wandering Jew”. White American pioneers were never termed nomads, but American Indians were. In Italian governmental speak and in the news of today, “nomad” is the politically correct word for “Zingaro” (“Gypsy”), but its real meaning indicates people who are hopelessly and dangerously asocial, dirty, lazy; thieves who should be kept out of the way.*

<sup>17</sup> *Monasta, Lorenzo and Nando Sigona, eds. Imperfect Citizenships: Report on Discrimination of Roma and Sinti in Italy. Italy: osservAzione, 2005, [http://www.osservazione.org/documenti/OA\\_imperfetcitizenship.pdf](http://www.osservazione.org/documenti/OA_imperfetcitizenship.pdf).*

and the high cost of implementation, the prospects and security of these people are deeply affected. A growing number of Romani children born in Italy to foreign parents have no documents and have only in some cases received the status of being legally stateless. They have lived for many years, some for their entire life, in a legal limbo affecting many aspects of their lives. After the new measures passed by the Berlusconi government in 2008, these people risk expulsion. To where, you might ask? Perhaps to the country in the Balkans which was their parents' homeland, but the language of which is unknown to them.

### Italian government position on Roma and Sinti

In June 2001, a government publication in Italy revealed the official approach toward Roma and Sinti. In a book published jointly by three of the highest Italian governmental institutions<sup>18</sup> the following statement is made:

“The Roma Gypsies [...] beg, but there are also those who steal; inasmuch as they are ‘gatherers’ they feel no guilt from having deprived some non-Gypsy of the ownership of some object: They believe that they have merely substituted themselves for the other person in possession of that object in order to perform the noble deed of feeding the rest of the family.”

In 2007, in a paragraph explaining why Roma were not included in the linguistic minorities law in its report to the CERD Committee on the review of its implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, Italian government explained:

“In fact the basic criteria for the label of “linguistic minority” depend on the stability and the duration of the settlement in a delimited area of the country, which is not the case for Roma populations. The formulation of an appropriate legislative measure would enable to equalize the status of half of the approx. 150.000 Roma populations resident in Italy to that of the Italian citizens. As regards the remaining Roma populations -*characterized in all cases by nomadism*, (emphasis added) they already enjoy the right to freedom of movement and circulation while, if composed from citizens of the European Union, they are under the rules regulating the stay of foreigners, if composed from non EU citizens.”<sup>19</sup>

Various international bodies concerned with respect for human rights have acknowledged the insistence of the Italian government that all Roma and Sinti are nomads and linked this to the substandard conditions in which Romani people live in Italy. For example, in both 2002 and 2006, ECRI expressed concern about the living conditions in the camps and “the fact that the segregation of Roma/Gypsies in Italy appears to reflect the general approach of the Italian Authorities, who tend to consider Roma as nomads who want to live in camps.”<sup>20</sup> In ECRI's terms:

“About one third of the total Roma/Gypsy population of Italy – including both Italian citizens [...] and non-Italian citizens – currently lives in authorised or unauthorised camps separated from mainstream Italian society. Over and beyond the question of the living conditions in these camps, [...] ECRI is concerned that this situation of practical segregation of Roma/Gypsies in Italy appears to reflect a general approach of the Italian

<sup>18</sup> *President of the Council of Ministers, the National Observatory on Childhood and the National Center for the Documentation and Analysis for Childhood and Adolescence. Not Only Exploited or Violent Children and Adolescents of the Year 2000: Report on the Condition of Infancy and Adolescence in Italy (Non Solo Sfruttati o Violenti Bambini e adolescenti del 2000. Relazione sulla condizione dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza in Italia)*. Rome, 2001. The book was widely distributed to politicians, magistrates, social workers and representatives of non-governmental organisations. See also Colacicchi, Piero. "An Outbreak of Anthropology in Italy: A New Government Publication Describes Roma as "Gatherers". In *Roma Rights 1/ 2002*, <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=719>.

<sup>19</sup> Italy. "Fifteenth periodic report to CERD." 29 March 2006. <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G06/411/25/PDF/G0641125.pdf?OpenElement>, para.172.

<sup>20</sup> European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. "Second Report on Italy." 23 April 2002. [http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XMLEcri/ENGLISH/Cycle\\_02/02\\_CbC\\_eng/02-cbc-italy-eng.pdf](http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XMLEcri/ENGLISH/Cycle_02/02_CbC_eng/02-cbc-italy-eng.pdf).

authorities which tend to consider Roma/Gypsies as nomads and wanting to live in camps.”<sup>21</sup>

Similar concerns were expressed as far back as 1999 by the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which declared that “in addition to a frequent lack of basic facilities, living in the camps not only leads to the Roma’s physical segregation from Italian society, but to their political, economic and cultural isolation as well.”<sup>22</sup>

### Public opinion

A qualitative and quantitative research ordered by the Ministry of the Interior of the former Italian government and published by the [Italian] Institute for Studies on Public Opinion on the occasion of the European Conference on Roma Population held in Rome on 22 and 23 January 2008 (the first and probably last real State organised occasion for Roma and Sinti living in Italy to participate in large and enthusiastic numbers in a serious confrontation with government representatives) offers interesting confirmation of what has been said so far. According to this research only 6% of Italians know how many Roma there are in Italy and only 24% know that more than half are Italian citizens; 84% are quite sure they are all nomads and 47% have a negative opinion of them. Also, between October 1999 and June 2007, public sympathy for Roma went down from 11.8% to 6.7% compared to public sympathy for Philipinos whose rating went down from 77.7% to 64.9%. In addition, 92% of respondents believed that Roma exploit minors; 92% believed that Roma make a living from petty crimes; and 83% believed that Roma chose to live in camps.<sup>23</sup>

Fortunately, 65% of Italians consider Roma to be one of the most discriminated groups. This knowledge, and the hope of support during election times,

has prompted some town administrations to allow a few Roma who originated from the area of the Balkans to move from camps into low cost apartments. Over a period of years, the number has grown and in some towns is now considerable: Around 70 families in Florence and about as many in Bologna and Pisa. This has also taken place in and around Venice, Rome and in other cities.

### Escalation of government actions against Roma from 2007

Commencing at the end of 2006 and intensifying in the second half of 2007, Italian officials adopted a series of laws, decrees and policies which clearly target or have a disparate impact on Roma living in Italy, and appear aimed at pressuring or otherwise forcing a segment of the immigrant Romani community to leave Italy. Among these measures are the so-called “Pacts for Security”, adopted in various cities around the country. A series of “Pacts for Security” were signed in Italy, first in November 2006 in Naples and later in 2007 in Rome, Milan, Firenze, Torino, Genova, Bologna, Catania, Bari, Cagliari, Venezia, Modena, Prato and Trieste by state and local authorities, which reportedly predicted the forced eviction of more than 10,000 Roma from their homes in Rome alone.

The year 2007 was the high-point of the instrumentalisation of anti-Romani feelings for political purposes. The December 2007 speech by former Mayor Veltroni mentioned above described the result of the Pact passed the previous spring: Late that same spring and summer, over 6,000 Roma and Romanians were forced to leave their temporary shelters and 1,000 of those shelters (shacks, campers, trailers and tents) were destroyed.

Bologna Mayor Sergio Cofferati and many other town mayors ordered hundreds of police raids on Romani camps in every part of Italy

<sup>21</sup> [http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XMLEcri/ENGLISH/Cycle\\_03/03\\_CbC\\_eng/ITA-CbC-III-2006-eng.pdf](http://hudoc.ecri.coe.int/XMLEcri/ENGLISH/Cycle_03/03_CbC_eng/ITA-CbC-III-2006-eng.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, “Concluding Observations - Italy,” CERD/C/54/Misc.32/Rev.3. [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/68a4f853997e075e802567a80036bf81?Opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/68a4f853997e075e802567a80036bf81?Opendocument).

<sup>23</sup> Istituto per gli Studi sulla Pubblica Opinione. *Italiani, Rom e Sinti a confronto: una ricerca qualitativa. Conferenza Europea sulla popolazione Rom. Rome 22-23 January 2008.*

which were followed by forced evictions and, after the November 2007 security law, expulsions.<sup>24</sup> According to a 15 October 2008 statement by Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni, 6,553 people were expelled in 2008.<sup>25</sup> This was a 28% increase from the previous year.

In January 2007 in Milan, Romanian Roma living in regular camps were blackmailed by the administration to sign “Pacts of Sociality and Legality”, through which they were compelled to commit themselves, among other humiliating rules, “to respect laws [?!], not to have friends or relatives as guests, and to denounce others when they behaved incorrectly.”<sup>26</sup> In 2007, not a week passed without one camp or other being raided somewhere in Italy, as one can easily see by consulting articles by Italian news agencies from the period.<sup>27</sup> It is not surprising that the government elected in 2008, a coalition of right wing parties including the racist Northern League, continued the same basic programme, expanding it according to their ideology.

Fingerprinting of Roma in Naples, Rome and Milan within a forced, humiliating census has been nothing more than a step forward in the long process over the years towards “eliminating Gypsies” from the Italian territory, as was proposed by Treviso’s former Mayor Giancarlo Gentilini in September 2008 during a speech in public.<sup>28</sup>

The Legislative Decree on Security approved in the Senate on 5 February 2009<sup>29</sup> is the last chapter (so far) of the new course and the logical outcome of the fingerprinting procedure (even though it does not concern only Roma but all immigrants and, to some extent, Italian citizens). The main

developments with this Decree are based on the new concept that irregular immigration is a crime. All foreigners found on the Italian territory without permits will be fined up to 10,000 EUR and expelled. In addition, four years in jail await foreigners found on the territory after having been formally expelled. A fee of between 80 and 200 EUR will now have to be paid to obtain a residence permit and doctors working in state institutions are to denounce to undocumented foreigners seeking medical attention the police. Begging with minors 14 years of age or younger is now punishable by 3 years imprisonment. A census of all persons, foreign and Italian citizens, with no fixed address will be conducted, and in order to receive a residence permit (a very important step that allows one to receive state health insurance and other basic rights that make a person a full citizen), one must prove to reside in an officially approved type of housing – thus excluding Roma and Sinti still living in camps.

So all of those people, Roma and non-Roma, that never obtained permits because of bureaucratic complications produced by the various laws mentioned above, including those born in Italy to immigrant parents who lost their original citizenship and were never allowed to obtain the Italian citizenship, are at risk. It is estimated that 900,000 people, out of which perhaps 10,000 to 15,000 are Romani, will be affected.

## Conclusion

Reports and reproofs by international bodies seemed, at one point last summer, to have put

<sup>24</sup> On 2 November 2007 the government amended Italy’s Legislative Decree 30 of 6 February 2007, which transposed European Directive 2004/38/EC on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States.

<sup>25</sup> Vladimiro Polchi. “Record di sbarchi e vittime il 2008 anno orribile sulle rotte degli immigrati,” *La Repubblica*, 22 January 2009, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2009/01/22/record-di-sbarchi-vittime-il-2008-anno.html>.

<sup>26</sup> *Patto di socialità e di legalità con i cittadini romeni abitanti nello spazio di via Triboniano del comune di MILANO. On file with the author.*

<sup>27</sup> *The 2008 ERRC/Centre for Housing Rights and Evictions/osservAzione/Sucar Drom report to the CERD Committee outlines many examples of this: footnote 5 above.*

<sup>28</sup> *Venice, 14 September 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y63Bpz8GCdU&feature=related>.*

<sup>29</sup> *Legislative Decree 733.*

a stop to unacceptable procedures like fingerprinting of Roma. However, the new Decree 733 definitely crushes all illusions. “The measures that our Senate just approved” writes Alessandro Dal Lago, a well known sociologist and activist “describe the abyss into which Italy fell, the western country in which a consistent part of the resident population is literally persecuted in the name of a xenophobic ideology and by the Northern league’s blackmail. Beginning today, discrimination of foreigners becomes official stigma, a legal brand impressed on the existence, on the bodies and on the possibility to live of those who are already without rights, excluded or marginal.”<sup>30</sup>

From now on life for Roma and Sinti living in Italy, whether Italian citizens or immigrants can only become more and more difficult. The thorough marginalisation – if not yet the elimination invoked by Gentilini – of the “Gypsies” living on the Italian territory has become an almost accomplished fact. Only a strong, coordinated international movement of all of the really democratic forces could produce the pressure that is needed to reverse this trend; and this could very well be stimulated by a continuous, organised pressure on the European Parliament, European Council and other international bodies on the part of the Italian Federation of Roma and Sinti<sup>31</sup> in collaboration with other European Roma organisations.

<sup>30</sup> *Published in the Italian newspaper Il Manifesto, 6 February 2009.*

<sup>31</sup> *Born in 2007, the Federation is composed of 25 Roma and Sinti NGOs.*