

What About the Roma People? The Enigma of an Italian crisis. Context. Response. Effects?

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Abstract: *Ever since the end of 2007 Italy is facing a continuous crisis with regard to Roma communities on its territory. The present article identifies a number of factors that have contributed to its development and maintain, such as: the significant growth of foreign population and its national diversity, the growth of illegal immigration, the rise of criminality, the sudden growth of Roma communities and their excessive poverty, the radicalization of the political discourses. All these and others contributed in a concerted manner to the advancement of the crisis. The vicious circle of causes and effects will perpetuate unless more constructive solutions to the above-mentioned issues are being set in place.*

Keywords: *Roma, crisis, Italy, Roma camps, migration, xenophobia, identity politics, discrimination*

On the 30th of October, 2007 Italy witnessed an event that shocked the whole peninsula to its core, both through its capacity to generate consequences and change but also by its power to bring to the forefront a serious social concern. The murder at Tor di Quinto (Rome), known in the Romanian media as the Mailat case (following the name of the accused) and in the Italian press as the Reggiani case (following the name of the victim), in which a naval captain's wife was assaulted, robbed and abandoned in a deplorable state in a ditch by the side of the road, is basically the moment of inflection described above. Metaphorically speaking the event is a means by which a social issue becomes visible. It proved to be powerful enough to unleash a crisis with multiple implications (social, political, economic, legal, diplomatic, regional etc.).

The situation referred to and discussed in this article concerns the condition of the Roma population residing in Italy.

This article aspires to identify the nature of the Roma predicament and to bring forth a set of phenomena that have contributed in a concerted manner to its advancement. Furthermore, it aims to draw attention to a number of risks and effects. The general belief that is being defended throughout this paper is that the political interventions and solutions proposed are better suited to attracting popular support than to bringing a viable way out. The disparity between the nature of the issues on the one hand and the political responses on the other may lead to nothing else but a sure degradation of the already fragile state of affairs, and in the end, to an endless perpetuation of this vicious circle.

Chronologically speaking the events had the following course. The incident and the proceeding actions were subject to extensive media coverage, causing great fear and alarm within society, but also sparking a seething political debate and strained relations at European level. As a result, the Roma issue has climbed up the political agendas of both parties in power and opposition, becoming a question of public security. The issue combined with other matters of public order and security received profound political connotations at the beginning of 2008. Ultimately, it led to the step-down of the government in power, which was deemed incapable of finding suitable responses. The subsequent election campaign took a particularly violent and xenophobic turn to the advantage of the Centre-Right reunited around the former prime-minister and media magnate Silvio Berlusconi. The still young Centre-Left government under Walter Veltroni crumbled and lost both office and public confidence. As a result, the new government in office initiated a number of measures as a means to react to the public security demand. Among others, the government enacted procedures specifically targeting the Roma: orders of expulsion, dismantlement of camps etc. With the breakout of nation-wide attacks on Roma camps and the Ponticelli arsons in Naples¹ the Roma communities were declared of central concern to security, which led to emergency measures to be enacted all throughout 2008 and the beginning of 2009. Before long a real crisis unleashed in Italy. (Amnesty International, 2008)

All these measures combined with a particular economic and social circumstance resulted in a highly complex and problematic situation. The state of affairs was advanced even more by the political context. However, the predicament in question proved to be far from just contingent and ephemeral. More profound questions rose with regard to the factors that caused it. A deeper understanding of causes may

1 On 10-15 May 2008 Ponticelli, a remote district of Naples, experienced the break-out of massive mob attacks on Roma camps. Soon the plague expanded to other areas on the peninsula, especially to cities where camps were numerous and ethnic tensions had accumulated. The phenomenon was regarded as a major issue of concern and determined swift and radical intervention.

be helpful to find suitable solutions. Therefore, when did Roma communities start being a matter of concern for the Italian state? In what way was the state prepared to accommodate the phenomenon? How were political actors responsible of advancing a national crisis? Did such measures have any impact on society? Did they meet with public support? In the end, what might be the future outcomes?

Without even daring to claim exhaust of the subject or to exclude alternative perspectives on the matter, the present article aims at answering some of the above-asked questions. The importance of this theme cannot be doubted especially at a point where the issue is being replicated in at least every other Member State of the European Union (in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and more recently in France, to name just a few). Such analyses and possible answers may interest the academic community and the common European public equally in view of finding long-sought solutions at a normative level and in day-to-day life. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the Italian case might provide some instruments necessary to understanding similar situations elsewhere. Finally, the aim of this article is to cause further thought and research on the subject.

The Roma question is a topic that has been close to exhausted in the media over the past several years. However, in comparison to other related themes, little on this topic has emanated from academic enterprise so far. Yet, the area is of great complexity. Therefore, the current endeavor isolated its focus geographically and temporally (regarding the time span between the springs of 2008 and 2009). However, reference will be made to a wider context, which explains the causes, context and effects of the situation that developed during this period.

With regard to the methodology used in research, it may be useful to mention that the approach has been mainly historical. Many of the findings are based on an extensive study of relevant documents, academic studies, media accounts, various reports, surveys and statistics provided by governmental and non-governmental, European and international institutions. Specifically, aiming to understand the situation of the Roma in more depth, the answer to the first question will be given by making reference to migration history literature but also to statistical data, reports and studies made by institutions such as ODIHR and HCNM/OSCE, the Council of Europe and EUFRA. The academic literature on political parties in Italy has been intensively researched in order to understand more correctly the role played by the parties in the current predicament and to identify how Italian political organizations reconciled the Roma question with their ideological and pragmatic interests. Moreover, two of the most important Italian journals, namely *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*, have been followed on regular basis for a period of one year in order to discover the trend of public discourse with reference to the Roma and to keep track of the course of events and novel enactments. Furthermore, in order to better comprehend the trend of the party that played a core role in managing the crisis – *Lega Nord*, the holder of the home affairs portfolio – the most representative publication, *La Padania*, have

been followed regularly during the same time span. Various studies made at national and European level have proven particularly interesting for understanding popular response and attitudes. The priceless research done by the Italian specialist Marzio Barbagli over the years has been a key to understanding the social and legal context in the region. For a better understanding of future risks regarding the Roma and the Italian society at large we shall refer to diagnoses made by relevant EU bodies and NGOs (such as ERRC/Budapest and the Human Rights Coalition).

The Situation of the Roma in Italy

Most recent assessments estimate the number of Roma in Italy as high as 150,000 individuals.² This corresponds to approximately 0.23% of the entire population (ODIHR/HCNM, 2009, 24), which statistically speaking is a relatively low percentage when compared to other Central and Eastern European states or some other Western European countries. In spite of this, a number of factors identified here have caused the situation of this ethnic group to become particularly distinct in this Italy.

From a historical point of view, it might be useful to refer to the heteronym *zingari*, which incorporates at least three subgroups: namely, the Sinti, the Caminanti and the Roma. As the origin of the three groups is believed to be common, the main distinction between them is, according to some opinions, their time of arrival in the region. The former two groups arrived much earlier (around the 14th century) and thus claim a certain legitimate connection to the territory. The latter arrived fairly recently. Irrespective of this, however, they have always preferred to organize in homogenous, highly traditional and relatively closed communities, a reason to cause suspicion in mainstream communities, which regarded them with repugnance and associated them with depravity, immorality, crime disease and dreadful epidemics. This led, more often than not, to enactments that called for their surveillance, expulsion or even extermination (Barany, 2002, 9-14).

The more recent Roma settled in the region in waves. Around 7,000 Roma arrived in Italy after the First World War as the regime was somewhat friendlier than in other parts of Europe. (Barany, 2002, 14-15) During the economic boom of the 1970s and up until the 1990s the incoming workforce was accompanied by a large number of Roma. (Fakiolas, 312-314) Some studies acknowledge that around 40,000 arrived in Italy during this period (Barany, 2002,14-15) With the changes on the international scene, most notably with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the conflicts in Yugoslavia and the last two waves of European integration, a large number of Roma arrived in

2 In this context it is of great importance to state that statistical data on the total Roma population residing in Italy is imprecise due to at least three reasons: the absence of papers, reluctance to assert ethnic origin, elevated mobility for economic reasons or as a result of massive actions of camp dismantlement and relocation policies.

Italy. (ODIHR/HCNM, 2009, 13) More and better opportunities, a relatively permissive legislative framework and the geographical proximity of the peninsula to all these regions made Italy an easy to reach and attractive heaven. From all the cited phases of migration however, it is through the last one, namely the integration of Bulgaria and Romania, and most notably of the latter, that the Roma population in Italy grew a large amount at once. Romania is the country that comprises the largest Roma population in Europe – between 2.5 and 3.4 million persons, which corresponds to 15% of the total population. (Barany, 2002, 7) This latter phase contributed decisively to the occurrence of a real social concern that culminated with a critical 2008-2009. The number of Roma that arrived in the peninsula during this phase is uncertain. However, partial results of the census made in 2008 approximates that there are at least 150,000 persons living in the region, and that a large majority are of Romanian origin, having arrived here since integration. (ERRC, 2000,18)

Factors of crisis

The Roma population grew with an accelerated pace since 2007. However, Roma immigration solely cannot be regarded as the cause of a social crisis, even if it has often been referred to as such. More often than not, such elusive arguments have been made to suggest that the Roma are an *a priori* social problem through their simple presence in the region. Yet, it is obvious that such stances fail every moral and rational assessment being, thus, deemed unacceptable. For that reason, a number of factors have been spotted to become meaningful sources of crisis in the context of Roma migration in Italy.

The first factor proposed here regards the general growth of migration and national diversity in Italy. Roma communities are just a slice of the general phenomenon, representing not more than 4% of it. It is important thus to analyze it in the much larger context. An annual report issued by the Italian national statistics institute in 2008 concludes that Italian society has lately been confronted with a complexity of internal economic and social changes as a result of international migration. We may discover that the phenomenon can become of even greater importance if we look at all economic and social implications: unemployment rate and layoff especially during the current financial crisis, xenophobia and social acceptance etc. Referring back to the migration trend, the same study points out the fact that between 2002 and 2009 the number of foreign residents on Italian territory grew significantly (about 150%) reaching approximately 3.9 million individuals at the end of 2009, which is almost 6% of the total population. In terms of annual dynamics one can approximate the wave of newcomers of between a quarter and a half of a million individuals yearly. The influx of foreigners peaked in 2007, the year which is anterior to the advance of the crisis. (ISTAT, 2010)

Moreover, the quantitative growth was joined by a qualitative dynamic. Not only was Italy overwhelmed by the number of newcomers but it also experienced a great

diversification of its guest residents. As it is difficult to separate national origin from tradition and habits, integration can become an even more challenging task when one administration has to face such a diverse pool of expectations. Diversity can become an important social and economic externality for every state which finds itself in the context of distributing public goods and managing order and security in a sundry society. Statistics illustrate that Italy is the home of 191 nationalities. This is mostly due to its particular geographic position. Thus, with its elongated shape it constitutes a gateway to Europe for various areas with high migration potential, which are located in its immediate vicinity. Africa, for instance, which is a continent with generalized low living standards and economic development and a fast-growing population is just a few hours of a boat-ride away from Sicily, its most southern territory. The Balkans, a region not long ago shattered by dreadful conflicts and genocide is even closer. Eastern Europe is too at fairly close distance.

From a geographical distribution point of view, the Italian region most preferred by migrants is the northern half of the peninsula, which is economically more developed and more urbanized. The presence of foreigners in the North is thus more than 4 times higher as compared to the South. (Barbagli, 2008, 48-51). The cities comprising more aliens, such as Lombardia, Veneto, Lazio, Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont and Tuscany, are also those which are home to more Roma, who experience more ethnic tensions, and that have proved to be less tolerant with regard to camps. (Caritas, 2008)

A second factor of importance that we presently propose is the growth of illegal migration in Italy. Earlier we referred exclusively to data that mirrors legal residence. However, the illicit component of the phenomenon cannot be ignored and its characteristics can influence to a large degree both decision making and the public imaginary with regard to migrants in general and to certain groups of aliens in particular. The Roma are especially targeted by this phenomenon because, as we have already discussed, they are being traditionally associated with many facets of illicit migration such as: crime and organized crime, black market, abuses, poverty, to mention just a few. Thus, many of the mishaps are being automatically attributed to the Roma, because of their particular visibility and negative perception. According to some studies, at the beginning of the emergency situation, in May 2008, the number of foreigners that did not possess a legal status reached the critical level of 600,000 persons³ (as high as 20% of the legal group). (Dalrymple, 2008)

Thirdly, the rise of criminality in Italy can be a further significant factor. In the field of migration studies there is an important body of literature dealing with the relation between immigration and criminality. At least two prerequisites are deemed crucial in

3 The number of illegal immigrants remained high despite of massive naturalization initiative, by which more than 1.5 million *sans papiers* were registered between 1986 and 2002 (Barbagli, 2008, 87)

this relationship: The rise of illegal migration, on one hand, and that of petty crimes on the other. (Barbagli, 2008, 22-26) The first has already been discussed. With regard to the second, the Italian sociologist Marzio Barbagli has noticed over the past few years a rising trend in crimes, major and petty alike, reaching a peak in 2007. Petty crimes are felonies that are of lesser social danger, such as: theft, burglaries, robbery etc. They are acts of subsistence, which are mostly associated with an extreme state of poverty. Statistically speaking, petty crimes are more frequent than severe felonies. However, due to their commonality they can be an important source of fear, resentment, sense of moral decadence and insecurity. Most often, they are associated with the Roma due to their dire living conditions and to the subsistence occupations they oftentimes perform in the public space and for which they are renowned, such as: various forms of begging, windshield wiping, garbage rummaging, occasional musical performance, some undeclared day jobs etc. Generally these activities are considered illegal and related to criminal activities. Moreover, statistical data demonstrates a clear rise in crime and crimes committed by foreigners and the Roma. It also suggests a growing negative perception of the Roma among the population, an attitude that is being fed by traditional expectations, by day-to-day experiences or by the images promoted in the media. (Barbagli, 2008, 51-53)

In the fourth place, we can also refer to poverty as an important vector of crisis. This criterion shall be analyzed in more detail in the following paragraphs as a means of causing better understanding of the situation of the Roma in the peninsula and of discovering what might be the causes of their subsistence in a wealthy society. For this purpose the present article identifies the institution of Roma camps as the main source of degradation. It involves legal, economic and social aspects causing multiple forms of poverty. But before proceeding into its analysis we shall regard how poverty might manifest itself.

Poverty is a multi-faceted phenomenon. From a classical perspective it is expressed in economic terms as a function of income level per household. However, the monopoly of this perspective is currently being highly criticized for it excludes other forms of poverty. Recent definitions have tried to offer a more embracing perspective. This was inspired by the argument that society is a reality, which involves not just economic aspects but also social, psychological, medical, qualitative elements, causing thus poverty to be defined in all these terms alike. (Perkins, 125-127) For instance, the Human Development Report published by UNDP is a document that measures poverty in such terms, defining it as a limited access to a number of rights of fundamental meaning to human existence and development. In theory, the wealthier a state is, the better off its entire population will be. However, in practical terms, this depends highly on the policies that are being enacted in every situation. One such policy that disadvantaged the Roma and limited their access to many opportunities available in the Italian society is the creation of Roma camps.

Roma camps – a source of poverty and social deprivation

Camps are an important element of Roma life in Italy. The phenomenon is spread on the entire Italian territory, therefore causing its extremely poor conditions to be visible basically everywhere. Currently, most of the camps are concentrated in large cities, such as Rome (and the entire region of Lazio), Milan (and the whole of Lombardy) and Naples (and its surroundings). According to recent findings based on the preliminary results of the census performed in 2008, these regions encompass at almost 170 camps, from which only 43 are authorized. Altogether, they are the home of some 12,000 Roma (the majority of the Roma residing on Italian territory). The largest part of the Roma population resides in the northern half of the peninsula, around Brescia, Pavia, Padova, Genova, Bologna, and Reggio Emilia. In the South, Bari is an important location. (Ministero dell'Interno, 2009) Large cities are highly populated and problematic locations (due to poverty, massive layoff, unemployment and criminality). More often than not, Roma camps (which are crowded, dirty and poor) are tagged the source of problems of the mainstream Italian community where they reside. Therefore, their simple existence can generate strong feelings of insecurity, of profound moral decadence and hatred. These feelings are also encouraged in the media and political discourses.

There are various reasons why these structures have resisted and multiplied over time. On the one hand, they have been encouraged by state authorities all along. On the basis of projects aimed at “cultural maintain”, the Italian state sponsored ample actions of camp erection all around the peninsula beginning with the 1980s. In that and the following decade several regions adopted such programs in view of guarding the nomadic culture of the Roma. (ERRC, 2000, 17-22) Later on, these methods were promoted and adopted as efficient means of containing the Roma and guarding public order. Most recently, one of the measures adopted during the emergency situation in 2008/2009 enacted a massive dismantlement of illegal structures and their replacement with authorized ones elsewhere. Alternatively, as long as they could be supervised by the state, they were admitted both by authorities and local communities irrespective of their legal situation. Their acceptance oftentimes took the form of segregation and isolation. On the other hand these communities, which have been growing at an accelerated pace over the past several years, comprise individuals which have been deficient in integrating socially and economically over generations, be they local or foreign. This is not their sole disadvantage. Roma communities are generally known for their traditional reluctance to open, integrate and adapt. They have a natural tendency to isolate themselves. This sense of cohesion and conservation encouraged the establishment of highly closed and isolated communities. In conclusion, Roma camps, which have been encouraged by these two concurring dynamics, are somewhat natural sources of deprivation. Moreover, various state enacted policies mounted their situation of dearth even more.

It may be useful to discover in what way these structures succeed to cause deprivation and poverty. There is a diversity of forms of settlements in which there are distinct mechanisms at work that cause disadvantages in relation to the mainstream population. Distinction can be made between legal (authorized) and illegal (unauthorized) camps. There is also a third category that can be added, the status of which is somewhat uncertain – the so-called semi-formal structures. (ERRC, 2000, 26) The latter have not been granted authorization. They have been *de facto* accepted by the authorities and the population in the surrounding area, and may benefit from facilities similar to those available for the legal settlements.

Legal camps are structures that have been erected by local authorities or which have been granted official authorization by administrations after being informally established by Roma communities. They are thus administered by the public authorities, and in some cases, in cooperation with NGOs. As opposed to informal settlements, these structures are well delimited and surrounded by fences or walls. They are also under permanent surveillance by the authorities. Access and dwelling are conditioned by the possession of valid residence documents and by signing an agreement, which constrains the inhabitants to a certain social and camp conduct and to maintaining their legal condition. (OSCE, 2008, 19-20) There are a number of advantages that legal camp dwellers are provided, such as: the access to a shelter, infrastructure, electricity and water (generally at a cheaper price), waste collection, ecological toilets and other hygiene related services, but also school buses for children, medical care, postal services etc. Moreover, authorities take the responsibility of maintaining these settlements and of making sure that their dwellers benefit from the above-listed services regularly.

In reality, the condition of these camps is very poor and the hygienic standards considerably low. The quality of life provided by these structures is far from encouraging human development. Many accounts also point out that even if they are, theoretically, administered by the local authorities, the supply of needs is rather superficial and infrequent, whereas camp conditions do not offer acceptable living standards. Dirt or concrete pavements make camps muddy during the rainy seasons or unbearably hot in summer. So are the shelters offered, which, most of the time, consist of large metal booths, and which become inhabitable during the hot summers. Access to water is also limited. Altogether, these circumstances make personal hygiene, health and other basic conditions of human dignity and social integration problematic. An alternative form of housing is also not available. Most of the time authorities have prohibited the building of brick houses within the camps. The situation has *de facto* forced many Roma to live for decades in shacks, which prevented them from developing a decent standard of living. Moreover, the construction of these settlements at the edges of towns and in isolated places, make access to a number of services and information very difficult. Many attempts at developing regular housing for or by the Roma inside or outside the camp areas have been halted due to legal difficulties or opposing political

and civil forces. Finalized projects are few as compared to the existing needs. (ERRC, 2000, 20-22) Most of the time the Roma have no other welfare option than to remain in these structures, and to depend on inconsistent state services. This situation renders them stuck in circumstances that offer no means of human development.

Unauthorized camps, on the other hand, are structures that have been erected by Roma communities without receiving any legal authorization. In other words, they reside unlawfully on a public or private land or in abandoned buildings or construction sites. The 2008 census results proved that the majority of the Roma residing on the Italian territory lived in such structures. (ERRC, 2000, 26) Therefore, they constitute an important source of deprivation for most of the Roma in Italy and a driving factor in the advancement of the crisis. Unauthorized camps are very much diverse in size, duration of existence but also in their degree of social acceptance etc. Some of them established decades ago, and are somewhat accepted by the local administration and by the population from the areas where they exist. In such cases, they gave birth to semi-formal/semi-informal camps. (ODIHR/HCNM, 2009, 20-21) Still, most of them remain illegal. Therefore, they do not benefit from access to public services equal to those received by legal settlements. They rest in extremely dire situation, below the most basic sanitary and living standards. Their existence is oftentimes the cause of social conflicts, which occasionally result in public violent manifestations, such as the events at Ponticelli were.

This type of settlements has been proliferated with high speed over the latest period of time and is deemed a veritable social alarm. If legal camps are located in isolated areas at the edges of towns and benefit from some kind of protection and resources, unauthorized settlements can basically be found everywhere from the outskirts to central areas of cities and lack any type of insulation and any resources.

In conclusion, irrespective of their nature, Roma camps are a means of social and physical segregation: they prevent access to a number of public, economic and welfare facilities, while generating social downgrading and stigmatization and tensions. In the end, an attempt to “cultural guard” was transformed into a process of “ghettoization” without resemblance across the European Union. (ERRC, 2000, 7)

Moreover, camp life does not only deprive the Roma from a variety of social benefits, but also exposes them (pre-eminently above all the illegal settlements) to a variety of dangers such as the camp raids. Camp raids can be conducted either by the authorities or by civil mobs, or by a combination between police and civilians, as it has been often accounted. As opposed to the legal settlements it is more common for both these types of raids to take place in illegal camps. However, NGOs have collected evidence that such occurrences are not completely unknown to the latter category. Yet, provided they are under constant surveillance, they are only subjected to such searches in exceptional situations. (ERRC, 2000, 32-33)

Usually, police raids are perceived as missions aimed at enhancing individual security in the public space. Reality proves, however, that these actions are directed,

more often than not, against Roma communities, endangering the security and rights of their members. In such cases, they are aimed at containing these groups the members of which are generally thought of as being criminals and social foes. Moreover, police raids are generally characterized by an elevated degree of violence. (ERRC, 2008) They are usually performed at very unusual hours and without previous notice. Besides, during one such action access in, or way out are completely forbidden, inevitably disturbing the daily routine and engagements of camp residents. (ERRC, 2000, 24) The extreme form of police raids is evacuation and camp dismantlement. (*Ibidem*, 32) Generally, actions of evacuation lack alternative housing solutions. It has often occurred that victims were determined to move endlessly from one improvised shelter to another, without even daring to ever hope for stable and prosper lives. (ERRC, 2000, 24-31) What is more unfortunate is that such actions are highly encouraged by public support, being thus rarely associated with unlawfulness, abuse and inefficiency. (ERRC, 2000, 32-33)

Another type of violence faced by the Roma in Italy is vigilant action. This has occurred both in the form of in-person attacks but also as group manifestation of anger – or mob vindication. Reports account for the fact that popular violence has increased significantly over the 1990s reaching a peak with the turn of the century. (ERRC, 2008, 30) Such as in the Ponticelli case, vigilant actions are fueled by politically spread ethnic tensions, fears and stigma. They are more likely to happen in highly populated regions, where economic and social problems are many and where the rate of criminality is high. Ponticelli, for example, a region on the outskirts of Naples, fulfilled these conditions completely. Roma camps were held responsible for many of the difficulties in the area. So did Scampia, another province of Naples, which had had a similar experience a decade earlier, and other regions that followed suit. (ERRC, 2000, 72-73)

Authorized, unauthorized or semi-legal camps developed to be important sources of discrimination, alienation and poverty. Occasionally they tried to be ousted through various political actions. In the end such actions proved to be less effective and more populist. Unfortunately, political measures validated and encouraged further on ethnic tensions, fears and stigma.

Therefore, we currently propose a fifth factor of crisis, namely the role played by the political actor in the Roma crisis. The fact that a certain political discourse can fuel a national predicament is not at all a novelty or a conclusion that requires scientific arguments. There are various reasons as to why governments choose to do so. It might be that they need to reassure themselves of the popular support, or that they choose to hide a real crisis behind an induced one. No matter what the motivation may be, there is always a strong populist rationale at work. These mechanisms are especially discussed by a body of literature in the field of nationalism studies, called *alterity theories*. Alterity theories deal with the opposition between the Self and the Other and the consequences that derive from it. According to these theories the Self (the

national) will always perceive the alien (the Other) as foreign, not entitled to the same material and symbolic rights. Therefore, the relationship between the two entities will always be strained, in crisis. Erik Landowski explains the role the political factor plays in such contexts. Individuals, by nature, have the capacity to make value-based judgments about practically anything, including any type of Alter. These judgments are based on personal findings made either in contact with reality or by embracing values upheld by various moral instances. The latter are particularly powerful in the process of opinion-making as they are able to formulate simplified and coherent discourses, which are easily recorded by the large public. Ever so often important values are being sent out by various authorities through such mechanisms. Messages become easy to decode and adopt by individuals. Political elites are classical examples of such instances. Compared to other authorities, they have better access to more efficient and more far-reaching means of communication. Oftentimes, a message of divide between Alter and Ego can be a particularly useful means of creating social cohesion. (Landowski, 1992, 7-18) This type of political cohesion based on the existence of a common enemy, has been practiced at various levels of decision making, serving, for example, to unite the West against the USSR during the Cold War.

Returning to our level of analysis, Marzio Barbagli refers to the notion of “moral panic” to describe the phenomenon in the context of migration. Psychology uses this notion to describe the reaction of every society to its outsiders. The phenomenon refers to an excessive focalization on and unfriendly reception of an unknown phenomenon, individual, group of people, considered to be a threat to the common system of values. These responses are generally dominated by fear. Fear is encouraged by so-called “moral entrepreneurs”, which are most often identified with the political elite or the media. By means of various discursive instruments they create imaginary dangers, to which society generally reacts with fear. (Barbagli, 2008, 154-155) From another point of view, critical theory refers to professional politicians in terms of masters of means of manipulation, who are able to generate large consensus around a certain idea in order to maintain power. This is based on specific techniques of communication by which reality is being simplified to a very high extent.

Such forms of populism are present across the political spectrum. However, organizations on the extreme right are more likely to use them for xenophobic purposes. Therefore, such parties are oftentimes labeled “anti-migrant” (Hainsworth, 2000, 70) It is also important to mention that such parties exert great influence on their competitors, being able to literally influence the content of their political discourses, and to general political trends (Eatwell, Mudde, 2004, 12-13). It would be interesting to observe how such tendencies developed in Italian politics and to understand in what way parties contributed here to advancing the Roma crisis. These questions could form the object of a completely separated research. However, in the present context we shall only refer to selective aspects, in order to discover general trends.

The entire confrontation took place within a feeble legal framework. The already very few enactments made after 1990 with regards to public order were characterized by inefficiency, lack of political will and crass contradictions caused by tactless political competition. This explains why strong xenophobic stances were allowed to develop and even received support within a highly democratic society. Right after the turn of the century the migration question developed as a highly important electoral topic. The Roma issue has always been an important part of it. However, it was only in 2008 that the concern itself became central. Discourses and legal texts alike became progressively radical on these issues as time passed. Whereas in the past they tended to also point out the economic and social gains from migration, as soon as 1998, laws, such as the centre-left Turco-Napolitano initiative, sparked a violent political dialogue on the issue, generating fear among people and a sense of moral degradation and insecurity, due to the presence of foreigners. Later on, the Bossi-Fini law initiated by the centre-right in 2001 managed to put through a more negative language with regard to aliens. The phenomenon was labeled a social concern that had to be contained and ousted in order to prevent insecurity and degradation. (Barbagli, 2008, 177-178)

The political language became particularly violent, especially during the electoral campaigns, when the topics were highly debated. Studies pointed out the fact that during the elections of 2001 and 2006 the issue of migration ranked second among the most important electoral topics, that the perspective was highly negative, and that the Northern League was the most influential party in this respect. (Colombo, Sciontino, 2004, 167-168, Pasquino, 2008, 353) Migration ranked first during the 2008 elections, whereas the Roma was the community identified to be most concerning of all. As soon as the centre-right administration took office the Roma were defined in terms of social hazard and insecurity. A series of radical measures with regard to them were enacted. The centre-left was too feeble and too divided on the issue to be able to take a balancing stance with regard to these decisions.

The centre-right governing alliance is formed of three factions: Alleanza Nazionale and Forza Italia, on the one hand, melted into one single party - Popolo della Libertà. On the other, there was Lega Nord, which remained to the day of writing particularly influential on the Roma issue.

Alleanza Nazionale (AN) is oftentimes associated with the traditional extreme right due to its structural and ideological roots in Mussolini's Repubblica Sociale Italiana. (Ignazi, 1995, 35) Over the time, however, one of its leaders' goals has become to adapt and democratize the party, so as to maintain its relevance on the Italian political market. Studying the change that was determined inside the party, in his book, *Political Parties in Europe*, Daniel Seiler placed AN under the category of extreme centralisms and of neo-fascism, which he described as characteristic of entities which are particularly able to adapt to the new standards of society, by giving up their past without having to abjure it. (Seiler, 1999, 98) It is thus easy to understand why a large number of its member encountered major difficulties in renouncing some of the

earlier values and beliefs. Its leader, Gianfranco Fini, himself one of the hard-core conservatives of the formation, was inspired, on many issues, by the French National Front. (Ignazi, 1995, 46) In this regard its radical position on immigration remained a problem until after 1995, the year of the party's democratic rebirth. Studies show that even after this historic event a large majority considered immigration a menace to national identity (59%) and a growing segment the main cause of crime (35%). (Ignazi, 1995, 47) Surprisingly, this became the official position of the party during the 2001 election. After the 2008 election, the AN branch of the Popolo della Libertà party radicalized its discourse even more, attacking the issue from two different directions: On one hand AN was referring to the failures of the former government to manage the migration phenomenon, on the other hand they were referring to migration as the main cause of urban degradation. The Roma issue was of special concern in their action and discourse. At the national level, AN supported the measures proposed by the government in 2008 with a particular interest. At the local level, AN massively supported individual camp dismantlement actions. Moreover, we can also refer to the Gianni Alemanno case. As a member of AN he was elected mayor of Rome. Running for this position he was known for his radical stance on the Roma issue, and for the support he received from neo-Nazi groups in this respect. His main electoral commitments, namely the complete dismantlement of Roma camps and the reduction of foreign residents in Rome, were highly appreciated by voters. (Santoro, 2008)

The Northern League (LN) party has incorporated identity politics as a *raison d'être* of its political function early in its existence. But what is even more worthy of note is the redefinition of its ideology with the increase of the targeted electorate. The party renounced its locally relevant identity discourse, in favour of one of regional and later on, of national importance. (Ignazi, 1995, 57) The topics of national immigration and the Roma suit the latter framework perfectly. This is why their adoption happened almost naturally. However, LN only succeeded to influence policies in these fields after it gained political power by entering an alliance with the centre-right cluster, at first in the opposition (2000-2001) and then in power. Its position on these issues was nevertheless radical and firm. The topics were, after all, issues of common interest that allowed these parties to overcome possible tensions, and to come up with a consensual, yet radicalized discourse. This strategy proved to be successful because the party succeeded to grow significantly in opinion polls. (Pasquino, 2008, 353) LN alone claims to have earned at least 11% more voters only during the situation of emergency given its radical stance on migration and the Roma. (La Padania, Nov. 17, 2008) Given the enthusiasm with which the electorate welcomed its actions, the allegations might even be true.

The policy-making role of the LN in 2008-2009 was an active one. Therefore, the discursive element is central in the process. Many of the traditional elements it developed in time occurred and were employed in this period. As an electoral and post electoral topic migration was not only defined as an issue beyond the Centre-

Left's ability to contain, but also as a "scourge" it encouraging for electoral gains. The phenomenon was mainly depicted as an overwhelming influx impossible to be socially sustained or integrated. (La Padania, Oct. 4, 2008) In terms of security, migrants were often associated with crime and delinquency, a prejudice for the Italian society (La Padania, Nov. 2, 2008) and identity.

Within the general context, the Roma predicament occupied an extreme position. From a discursive point of view, the two issues have mostly been referred to in terms of insecurity, criminality, delinquency and social prejudice etc. (La Padania, Nov. 2, 2008) More recently, the Roma were generally associated with negative factors, social aspects and outcomes, which have justified a number of measures of security and prevention, such as: camp dismantlement, evictions, expulsions, fingerprinting, civil patrol brigades, or the denunciation of illegal immigrants by medical doctors etc. Roma settlements have frequently been depicted as sources of crime and social decadence. These were all measures that were proposed by the LN and Minister Roberto Maroni during the emergency period. The topic did, however, not constitute a novelty in LN discourse. A European Roma Rights Centre 2000 report accounts of anti-Roma statements and demonstrations within LN culture since the beginning of the 1990s. (ERRC, 2000, 8-9) Shortly after the Ponticelli incidents, the Italian Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni publicly stated: "this is what happens when gypsies steal babies, or when Romanians commit sexual violence", therefore "all Roma camps will have to be dismantled, and the inhabitants will be either expelled or incarcerated". (ENAR, 2008) Reference to traditional prejudices with regard to the Roma, or the appeal to statistics and authorities was also oftentimes used as a means of legitimation: The undersecretary in the Ministry of interior stated, with one occasion, that it is proven by statistical data that the Roma ethnic group is associated with certain types of crimes such as: "thefts, robberies and... kidnapping" (FRA, 2008, 21), along with child abuse and others. Most recently articles have depicted bagging as a traditional Roma undertaking in order to legalize the practice at certain hours of the day – an uncivilized civilization, and therefore a menace for the Italian society: "this is a ballet for civilization... a battle for survival". (La Padania, June 26, 2008)

Forza Italia is the central element of this political triangle especially thanks to its notoriety function. The charismatic leadership of Silvio Berlusconi, but also the fact that the party was built on a massive media industry and that it was using professional marketing techniques, contributed massively to promoting the centre-right on the electoral market. The facile access to means of communications proved central also to the way the Roma question developed in the region. No study has yet to quantify the relationship between the way the Roma question is being approached in the mainstream Italian media and the evolution of the crisis itself. However, it is hard to ignore that there is one. Many authorities have warned about such a tendency. A study made by the Italian National Council on Economics and Labour (CNEL) points out the fact that as early as 2004 the Italian media was providing a negative picture

of aliens, by attributing them a unfavourable stereotypes. This, according to CNEL opinion, has succeeded in giving birth to prejudices and to a social milieu in which integration became a difficult endeavour. (Fusie/CNEL, 2004, 38-39) More recently, international and European Union institutions have agreed on the matter that the Italian media, especially during the emergency situation has succeeded to encourage a general negative evaluation of foreigners and of the Roma especially. Moreover, reports issued by various NGOs have pointed out the fact that political actors contributed decisively to the advancement of the crisis. Right-wing political parties and their xenophobic agendas played an even more important role.

Facts on effects

We have identified a number of active factors at work that contributed, in a concerted way to advancing the crisis. It would be irrational to think of these turnouts as intentional effects. Immigrants on the one hand, far from having the explicit intention to produce social instability, aimed at improving their own existence in a country with far more possibility than their own. One can easily conclude that the agenda of any given Roma, local or alien, was not any different. On the other hand, political parties are generally interested to be successful in their tasks in order to be validated in power at least once more. We can easily conclude that unintentionally a confrontation with reality caused change in how these initial agendas have been implemented and perceived. Outcomes have not failed to produce at various levels. Earlier we have talked about a possible radicalization of society as a result of unfavourable information promoted in the media. Studies point out the fact that in time opinions radicalized along with policies and discourses (ISMU, 2008). There is statistical evidence in favour of a progressive radicalization of the public opinion. Studies performed by the European Commission point out the fact that the situation of the Roma has worsened across the EU, and in some countries more particularly. Italy ranks third among the least tolerant societies with regard to a neighbour with a different ethnic background. The anti-Roma feeling is even stronger. In this respect Italy ranks second after the Czech Republic, with a score of 4.0 in tolerance as compared to the EU average of 6.0. Conversely, the degree of contempt with a Roma neighbor is 14% (as compared to a 9% minimum in the Czech Republic, a 58% maximum in Poland and an EU average of 36%). In terms of the intensity of discomfort produced by living in close proximity to Roma communities, Italy ranks last together with the Czech Republic (47%) whereas the EU displays an average of 24%, whereas Poland is most tolerable with 12% of the population agreeing to such vicinity. (European Commission, 2008). One more specific analysis published by the highly-read paper "La Repubblica" during the Ponticelli crisis pointed out the fact that 60% of the Italian population perceives the Roma generally as a threat to their family's security (Persano, 2008). A social study proves that 60% of children fear public places, a large part of them due to the presence of "drug addicts, Gypsies and Maroccans" (ERRC, Campland, 9-10)The anti-Roma

feelings remain embedded to a large extent in the public imaginary and traditional prejudices. They are associated with a lack of order, social decay, degradation, extreme poverty, homelessness etc. Only a minor portion of the population regards them with a neutral opinion (8%) and even less credit them with a positive estimation (2% of the population positively assesses their cultural background) (FRA, incident report, 6). As a result of this perception of the Roma, many feel that this is an issue that needs swift political intervention and solution (75%). As for the means to be used, a majority (52%) feels that expatriation is an efficient measure, whereas a considerably larger group agrees that dismantlement of camps and expulsion are highly efficient measures (68%) (Persano, 2008). The possibility of integration is held by a minority of the Italians. Just 27% would consent with measures of integration of the Roma. As to the success of such solutions, Italians deem the ability of their society to fully incorporate rather limited (4%). (Mannheimer, 2009)

With regard to the emergency policies and actions adopted by the government in 2008, a study published by "Corriere della Sera" points out that support is particularly significant within the right-wing population (86%). However, consensus is widely spread across the political spectrum (58%). In general 3 out of 4 Italians agree with the centre-right's legislative package. (Mannheimer, 2009).

We grasp that the social situation of the Roma generates an elevated degree of nausea. The political situation has contributed a lot to this. On the other hand effects are also measurable with regard to the Roma. More and more often the current evolution of events is being characterized as having a genuine harmful effect on these communities. Actions such as camp dismantlements, raids, the Roma census, a policy of camp erection, excessive control of legal camps etc. but also the unfavorable accounts of the media and the degrading political discourses, have the potential to cause economic discrimination, social isolation and pauperization of the Roma. More and more authorities point out the fact that the current state of events has a certain potential to increase the misery of this social segment. By promoting such discriminatory policies the Roma will have a lesser chance to integrate socially and economically. Conversely, poverty will increase in these communities, general social repulsion as well, the chance to adhere to criminal initiatives will rise within this communities with a matching trend etc. Policies will certainly not reach the expected finality.

In conclusion, the present article has tried to point out a number of aspects that have contributed to the advancement of the Roma crisis: more general social issues such as immigration and criminality that have mounted over the past two decades, but also specific issues, such as the legal status of the Roma and the political management of their communities over the years by creating the institution of the Roma camps. More recent development in the political agendas of parties and their public discourses at a moment of intense electoral competition contributed decisively to generating a real crisis. So has a chain of unfavorable enactments. Such a demarche cannot ever

be justified in moral terms and neither in terms of social effects. Identifying social evil in a certain segment of a population be it local or of foreign origin is not acceptable. Conversely a solution can only be found behind the apparent, by trying to come up with viable answers for the setbacks: to try to fix the issue of cross-national illegal migration; to firm up the legal framework with regard to it; to estimate Italy's needs of foreign labor and optimize its process of reception; to accommodate newcomers; to promote the real gains Italy can achieve through the free movement of labor; to find a viable alternative solution to Roma camps, by putting in place efficient social programs (housing, labor and formation) that can help them to thrive, develop and integrate and learn to act on their own, cheap social measures might bring about high social costs; to establish firmer provisions with regards to xenophobia; to change the political and mediatic discourse, and help it accommodate a constructive, reconciliatory perspective.

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