



ROMANIAN GYPSIES - VICTIMS OF XENOPHOBIA IN **ITALY**

XENOPHOBIA AGAINST ROMA PEOPLE

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Gypsies are a people found in many countries. The name Gypsy comes from the word 'Egyptian' because Gypsies were once thought to have come from Egypt. Some people now believe that they originally came from India. In the US Gypsies are called Roma, and in Britain they are known as Romanies or travellers. The name travellers is more often used for Irish travellers, a group in Britain who, like Gypsies, do not live in settled communities but travel about from place to place living in caravans. The traditional language of the Gypsies is Romani, and new words are made up from Romani elements rather than borrowed from English. Roma or Romanies, like many other minority groups, feel very proud of their identity. In Britain, they are sometimes treated with fear and suspicion by the rest of the population and are often forced to move on from places where they stop. Gypsies usually make money by selling new and second-hand goods. Some collect and sell scrap metal, while others do farm work. A few make a living from entertainment and singing. In the past the women were known for selling clothes pegs, 'lucky' white heather or bunches of flowers. Many meet each year at the Appleby Horse Fair in Cumbria. Americans have little contact with Gypsies and think of the Roma as exciting, mysterious people who wear bright clothes and gold jewellery and have unusual powers.

An estimated 150,000 Roma, or Gypsies, live in Italy, many of them in encampments on the edges of cities such as Rome and Naples. Some of the camps are unofficial and badly rundown. After Romania joined the EU at the start of 2007, an estimated 10,000 Romanian Gypsies came to Italy, forming part of a Romanian population in the country believed to total about 500,000. Many people are openly hostile to the Roma, accusing them – especially the newer arrivals – of avoiding work in favour of theft and other crime and shutting themselves off from mainstream Italian society in squalid, illegal camps. Rights groups working with Roma people say they face severe discrimination, some of it tied to more general anti-Romanian and anti-immigrant feeling.

When Italian dictator Benito Mussolini introduced racial laws that stripped Jews of their rights and property in 1938, one of the measures was a census. Roma were eventually targeted too. Like Italy's Jewish population, they faced internment and deportation to Nazi concentration camps. Tens of thousands of Roma, also known by the derogatory term "Zingari", live across Italy, many in squalid shanty towns on the outskirts of major cities. One recent newspaper survey found 68% of people wanted all Italy's Gypsies expelled, whether or not they held Italian passports. Another poll said more than three-quarters of people want unauthorised camps demolished. Being referred to as second-class citizens may not reverberate well among the countless Italians who generally view gypsies as robbers, delinquents and charlatans. Globally speaking Italians hold a negative view of Roma people, making Italy first in Europe in its dislike for gypsies (a 2015 Pew study found). Despite the Roma first coming to Italy over 700 years ago they were never accepted or integrated on the peninsula. In fact, their experience could easily be used as a framework for what happens when mass migration is met with segregation and lack of integration policies. Roma people in Italy are usually amassed into unhygienic emergency camps, with high levels of illiteracy and catastrophically high unemployment rates. Italy's ruling populist coalition has vowed to "close all Roma camps."

From the second half of the nineties, increasingly large groups of Romanian Roma began to emigrate to Italy. This is mostly "economic" immigration: if, in fact, some groups arrive in our country as a result of persecution and discrimination, the vast majority come to look for a job, to enter the job market permanently. Romanians gypsy have more difficulty in finding housing and work: in many cases they earn their living by begging at traffic lights and camp with shacks and tents in temporary settlements on the border of big cities. Since their first arrival, the Romanian Roma became part of the institutional circuit reserved for communities perceived as "gypsies": more often in "illegal" settlements, victims of evictions and forced removals, and sometimes in "regular camps" already built for the Roma of the former ex-Yugoslavia or for Sinti of Italian nationality. Therefore, Italy imposes on Roma of Romanian origin the ghettoizing definition of "nomadic gypsies": the Roma, arrived in our country following an ordinary migratory flow, are relegated to the "camps" or the *favelas* of the urban suburbs.

Before going into some specific cases of Romania Roma stories in Italy reported by the media, I would like to underline that it is important to make the following considerations (which I take from reflections I expressed in the paper "Political Communication and Xenophobia – media report in Italy" done for Professor Irina Pop): Italian newspapers, like those of other countries, are strongly politicised and the newspapers often report inaccurate news that foment xenophobia in their readers.

Gypsies - Victims of xenophobia in Italy

NOVEMBER 2013 NAPLES- A group of kids, between 11 and 13 years old, beat up a 10-year-old Roma boy who was begging in Naples. The assailants, a group of peers just out of school as soon as they saw him kicked him in the stomach and punched him in the face, apparently for no reason. The little Roma boy fell to the ground, terrified and only the intervention of a local merchant prevented the situation from degenerating even more. "He's a shitty gypsy" justified the kids who then disappeared when the police were called.

<https://chiaia.napolitoday.it/chiaia/bambino-rom-picchiato-chiaia.html>

MARCH 2016 NAPLES- After the Madrid and Barcelona football match, a Sparta Prague fan urinated on a Romanian woman on the Sant'Angelo bridge in Rome. The woman's name is Elisabetta, she is 45 years old and comes from Romania. She tells a journalist what happened: "There were 3 of them, they had drunk beer. I was not afraid. A lady was taking pictures".

<https://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/media/Follia-ultra-tifoso-Sparta-Praga-urina-su-una-mendicante-Lei-C-era-chi-faceva-le-foto-2d709034-0fab-4493-bd97-f464c2f5b353.html>

FEBRUARY 2017 FOLLONICA- Two employees of Lidl (a supermarket) in Follonica lock two Roma women "as a joke" in a rubbish cage. The two women were rummaging through the dustbin and the two supermarket employees film the whole scene with a mobile phone.



The women in this video scream and ask to be released while the supermarket employees laugh and make this video public on Facebook. The two men will lose their jobs shortly after, when the story becomes public. They'll be charged with kidnapping and a case

will be opened against them. Despite this, some newspapers a few months later will report the news like this: "Once the video bounced off the net, the indignation of the good guys skyrocketed, and racism was cried out. A hammering media campaign forced Lidl to fire the two young employees (26 and 36 years old). Now, however, far from the spotlight and with a clear mind, the prosecutor who is interested in the case has asked for the case to be dismissed. The Prosecutor, in fact, after having analyzed the material against the two former employees of Lidl, considers the accusation of kidnapping formulated, at the time, by the Carabinieri, unfounded."

<https://www.ilgiunco.net/2017/02/24/rom-chiuse-in-gabbia-il-video-era-stato-postato-in-un-gruppo-chiuso/>

<https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/approfondimenti/rom-chiuse-gabbia-lidl-pm-archivia-caso-72672/>

AUGUST 2017 NAPLES - The flames have burst into flames in the Neapolitan quarter of Scampia. Almost all the barracks occupied by the gypsy were burned by the flames, also fed by the abandoned rubbish along the nearby streets. The area was affected by important institutional and social interventions that were taking place: the timing of the fires is suspect, with several outbreaks in different points. Some spoke of "disturbing intimidation" and "criminal arson". For others it was an attempt to "clean up the Roma camp". The fire broke out just the day before the meeting convened with the Minister of



the Interior (at the time Marco Minniti) to discuss the eviction of occupied buildings and new guidelines on the subject. Among the issues on the table was also that of the Roma unauthorized camps and in particular the area of Scampia.

<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/08/28/incendio-a-scampia-bruciato-il-campo-rom-prima-dellincontro-con-minniti-sul-tema-sgomberi-de-magistris-e-doloso/3821727/>

APRIL 2018 ROME - Local police raided the camp, one of 148 government-recognized camps in Italy for Roma and Sinti people. They searched for stolen vehicles and checked residency papers. Ten people were arrested, 25 cars impounded, and an illegal landfill of dangerous waste was sealed off. They are accustomed to police raids in River Village, a litter-strewn, dusty camp of mobile homes just beyond Rome (Italian capital). The raid was taken as a signal by CasaPound (a neo-fascist grassroots group turned political party) to organize a demonstration a few days later to demand the camp's closure, which houses 400 people, half of them minors, saying it had become "a perfect example of abuse and



illegality and degradation." That in turn goaded gypsies and their supporters in anti-far-right groups to mount a counter-protest complaining of state abuse. After this event, Matteo Salvini (the leader of the far-right *Lega* party) called for a head count of Roma people with a view to deporting those without papers,

fears are growing that vigilante attacks on Roma camps, formal and informal, are only a matter of time

"Irregular [undocumented] foreigners will be deported via agreements with other countries, but Italian Roma unfortunately you have to keep at home," Salvini told a north Italian broadcaster. His remarks prompted a chorus of outrage from critics as well as disapproval from leaders of the Lega's coalition partners, the Five Star Movement.

The Lega has already said it wants measures that would make it easier for authorities to remove Roma children from their families, if they are found not to be attending school. Many Italians have long resented and feared Roma people, associating them with crime. Polls suggest that two-thirds of Italians think all Roma and Sinti should be expelled. Berlusconi (leader of another extreme right-wing party - Forza Italia) embrace of a headcount fed anti-Roma hostility, prompting local police raids and creating the climate for a jump in vigilante attacks on camps of Roma and Sinti people and hate crimes towards them.

<http://www.romatoday.it/politica/campi-rom-studio-21-luglio.html>

<https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/roma-sgombero-rom-volevano-dividere-famiglie>

JULY 2018 ROME- A one-year-old Romanian Roma girl, who was in her mother's arms, is reached on her back by a plumb shot from a balcony with an air gun. The little girl risked being paralyzed but she recovered, although it is not excluded that she could be crippled for life. Marco Arezio, accused of aggravated intentional injury and violation of

the weapons law, had constituted himself one week after the incident and the investigation had begun. The man had at first declared that it was an accident and that he had inadvertently pulled the trigger, then he admitted that he had modified the gun to make it more powerful. The man in question is a ex-senate employee of the Senate and had explained that he had accidentally fired high, thesis then denied by the ballistics report requested by the gip. After a year he asked for a plea bargain, in order to get up to a third off his penalty. The lawyers also offered a sum of 220 thousand euros as compensation for damages for the little girl and her parents.

https://www.leggo.it/italia/roma/roma_bambina_rom_patteggiamento_220mila_euro-4771934.html

DECEMBER 2018 ROME - Scenes of violence in the subway at the San Giovanni stop in Rome, where a man yanked and beat a young Roma woman. The scene took place in front of the eyes of a little girl of about 3 years old, who started crying desperately. The woman was already blocked by the police because she'd been caught stealing. But the man in question starts beating her head violently. The 3-year-old girl in the woman's arms falls to the ground. This scene continues until an Italian woman, a journalist who was on the scene, screams asking to stop beating her.

But what left the journalist more disappointed than the aggression itself was the reaction of the other passengers when she got on the train. In an interview she says: "A guy insulted me by saying the man did well, that's how the bitch learns. Two women (one of them a foreigner) say that this is the way to do it, that evidently they never stole anything from me. I say that there were already vigilantes, who are not for impunity, but for respect, especially in front of a little girl. They say that who cares about the child, they steal as much as they do, indeed we should beat the little ones and burn the big ones (referring to the Roma). They also shouted at me from the nearby wagons. They call me a shitty communist, radical chic, why don't you go earn your fucking good money. Around me, no one to defend me. Nothing. Anyone who doesn't insult me, looks amused or looks down."

<https://roma.fanpage.it/roma-ruba-portafoglio-nella-metro-a-san-giovanni-rompicchiata-davanti-alla-figlia/>

https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/rom-picchiata-in-metro-dopo-tentato-furto-insultata-la-giornalista-intervenuta-in-sua-difesa_3179157-201802a.shtml

FEBRUARY 2019 ROME- A 30-year-old Italian man chased an 11-year-old Roma boy out of Rome's main train station and hit him over the head with a box cutter. The newspapers reported: "I want to kill you all" he shouted accusing him of stealing from him. The man was then arrested by the police for aggravated injuries and carrying objects of offence.

https://www.ilmessaggero.it/roma/news/aggreisce_bambino_rom_termini_taglierino_ruba-4317600.html

APRIL 2019 NAPLES- Two women and seven Roma children leave a cinema, in the centre of Naples, where they were accompanied by two workers from a social cooperative: the group is attacked by four young boys, with insults, screams, spitting and throwing stones. The young boys chased the group for a few dozen metres, threatening to use knives: when the social workers and the Roma found refuge in a bar, they disappeared.

https://napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/04/13/news/napoli_rom_razzismo-223915044/

MAY 2019 ROME- A Roma family of 14 people assigned to a council house in a neighbourhood of Rome, has suffered death threats. About 30 people protested against the Roma family. A member of the extreme right-wing political party - Fratelli d'Italia - on that occasion declared: "A shame, an outrage to all those *Italian families* without a roof".



Among the protesters were also some representatives of CasaPound (another far-right party) called by residents, who announced a sit for the following days. The family took possession of the house, escorted by the police.

<https://www.dire.it/06-05-2019/328344-roma-casa-assegnata-a-famiglia-rom-scoppia-la-protesta-a-casal-bruciato-vi-tiriamo-una-bomba/>

CONCLUSION

Hostility against Roma populations is not a recent phenomenon in Italy, and it is not limited only in the big city. In many cities, there were cases of verbal and physical aggression against Roma and Romanians. In Milan, Genoa, Viareggio, Trento, Asti and Bologna groups of citizens protested against the presence of Roma camps in their neighbourhoods.

The Romanian Embassy made available, since April 2008, a hotline for Romanian citizens to report situations of danger or extreme difficulties encountered in Italy. The Embassy emphasised that it would do all that it could, diplomatically and otherwise, to help anyone who may be facing discriminatory and/or xenophobic treatment. In June 2008, the National Council of the Association of Journalists and the Italian National Press Federation (FNSI), in cooperation with the UNHCR, adopted a document known as the 'Charter of Rome', which outlines professional ethics and standards that should be respected when writing about asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking of human beings, and migrants.

Following these events, a group of journalists launched a petition expressing concern about the active role of the media in fomenting xenophobia against foreigners. The authors of the petition called on fellow journalists to respect the ethics of their profession and fight cases of discrimination and racism in the media. Despite this, a lot of xenophobia remains in daily use both in acting and in reporting the facts in Italy to the Gypsy, Romanians and Romanian Gypsy.

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https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/rom-picchiata-in-metro-dopo-tentato-furto-insultata-la-giornalista-intervenuta-in-sua-difesa_3179157-201802a.shtml

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