

# **No Welcome for Foreigners; Italians Across Political Spectrum Seek Curbs on Immigration**

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## **Body**

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A new wave of anti-immigration fever is sweeping Italy, and while its cause is familiar -- perceived lawlessness among the aliens -- the reaction it has provoked is not.

The political response this time has included not only the customary calls by right-wing conservatives for tough action, but an outcry from across the entire political spectrum, including self-styled progressives.

Debate has broken out in a number of cities over whether to expel foreigners who commit crimes, whether to group all illegal aliens in camps and whether to toughen border vigilance or even ban immigration outright. Even in Florence, a city that takes pride in its cosmopolitan atmosphere, a fierce political dispute has arisen over construction of camps for a relative handful of East European transients.

Such calls to curb immigration and control immigrants have long occupied right-wing political agendas, not only in Italy but in Germany, France and to some extent the United States -- all places where strains have grown between citizens and newcomers. In Italy, established leftist parties long ago dismissed concerns about the influx of foreigners as racist. That is now changing.

"When one talks about immigration, there is a risk of touching an exposed nerve on the left," wrote Miriam Mafai, an old-line leftist intellectual and columnist, in a newspaper column last month. "The problem is difficult, but it's not a good idea to put it aside."

The change in attitude is due somewhat to the prospects of national elections, perhaps next year, and concern that the right wing might pick up traditional left-wing voters because of the immigration issue. "It's time to choose, however painful that might be, between Italian citizens and immigrants. If the left does not understand this choice, it risks handing the working classes over to the right," said Giorgio La Malfa, a center-left politician.

More broadly, Italy appears shocked by the numbers of foreigners crossing its borders and uncomfortable with the changing face of the country and the appearance of many Africans, Arabs, Slavs and Central Asians on its streets. The country may be particularly ill-prepared for such an influx. Until about 20 years ago, Italy was a relatively poor country and a source of emigrants seeking a better life abroad, usually in the Americas or in neighboring countries, particularly Germany. Rarely did Italy receive the poor and desperate from other lands.

Italy is now wealthy; its economy is the fifth largest in the world. Lax border controls and law enforcement, once regarded simply as a part of Italy's celebrated easygoing nature, are now under fire as not befitting the times. For several years, Italian law has made provision for expelling alien criminals. But it has been applied only rarely.

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The country sits astride an immigration crossroads. The north touches the heart of prosperous Western Europe, but the far south is separated from Africa only by a narrow passage of the Mediterranean. To the east, Italy borders on Slovenia, a through road to the other former Yugoslav republics, where war has set off a huge wave of migration. Impoverished Albania is a puddle-jump across the Adriatic Sea.

The Interior Ministry says that Italy, which has 58 million people, hosts about 780,000 registered aliens, most of whom clean houses, pick crops, clean streets and perform other menial tasks. Immigration officials estimate the number of illegal aliens at about 800,000, doing about the same work, but underground. Caritas, the Roman Catholic relief agency, puts the figure much lower, at 300,000.

North Africa, particularly Tunisia and Morocco, provides the largest share of immigration to Italy, about 10 percent. Eastern Europe, including Bosnia, Poland, Romania and Albania, provides large numbers; from sub-Saharan Africa come Somalis, Cameroonians and Eritreans; from Asia, Filipinos, Sri Lankans and some Chinese.

Cities that pride themselves on social order have lashed out the loudest against immigrants, and crimes linked to aliens have brought tensions to the surface. In late summer, a series of rapes in Turin, along with chronic crime and drug dealing in the city's San Salvario district set off anti-immigrant demonstrations. Police recently intercepted gangs of Italian youths who were said to have been on their way to beat up immigrants. Turin's mayor, Valentino Castellani, while defending the arrests, also said that the youths "express a real unease to which the central government ought to respond."

In Milan, petty crime and drug dealing in immigrant quarters of the city have caused an uproar. Bologna and Rome have been scandalized by an influx of Nigerian prostitutes. Rome police allege that when they try to nab Nigerian prostitutes, the women smear themselves with feces so the police will not touch them, and they run away.

Citizens of Florence, where soaring art and architecture project an image of civic perfection, have been upset by growing, petty criminality and drug traffic. Police headed off a group of youths last week as they prepared to firebomb homes of Chinese immigrants.

When Mayor Mario Primicerio suggested recently that a few hundred Gypsies from Albania, Macedonia and the Serbian province of Kosovo be sheltered in two new camps to supplement older, established camp grounds for immigrants, the outcry was immediate and furious, particularly in San Salvi, one of the neighborhoods chosen for a new camp.

San Salvi is typical of Florence's middle-class neighborhoods. There are neat rows of low-rise apartments, beige and yellow with green shutters. Garbage collection is regular, traffic lights are respected, quiet appreciated. "These immigrants come in all day begging and stealing, and now city hall wants to put them to live in this neighborhood," complained Lanfranco Foschi, proprietor of a toy store. "They should put them in front of the municipal palace and the Uffizi Gallery if they want to find a place for them."

Across town at the Poderaccio transient camp, which adjoins a marsh of the Arno River, migrant Macedonians and Kosovars expressed dismay at the changing climate in Florence. The camp is 10 years old, although longevity has hardly translated into comfort. Badly drained sewers, flies, improvised wood and tin shacks contrast starkly with the neat rows of apartments in the nearby working-class neighborhood of Isolotto. Poderaccio residents bad-mouth each other: Macedonians say the Kosovars are criminals, the Kosovars blame the Macedonians.

"Italians are beginning to hate us," said Amet Remzi, a Macedonian who is licensed to do janitorial work in the city. "We're not animals, but we want to work. If we don't have work, we either beg or steal."

That kind of comment infuriates Florentines, whose history of civility and self-governance dates back centuries. Rightist politicians have tapped the public disgust and called for expulsion of even petty criminals, and for opposition to any new camps.

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"More camps just mean more attraction for Gypsies," said Achille Tatora, a city councilman from the far-right National Alliance party. "In Italy, work is not guaranteed for Italians. How can we guarantee it for foreigners? There must be a will to stop immigration."

He was speaking over coffee in the city's main square, which is dominated by the Palazzo della Signoria -- seat of self-governance in Florence since the 14th century.

"Europe's history is of the Roman Empire and Christianity. Just look at Florence," Tatora continued. "There is a specificity to our culture that cannot contain people from other cultures. In any event, if the foreigners work, they can live in housing like any Italian. If they don't, they should move on."

Tatora's party is collecting signatures to force a referendum on blocking construction of new camps and forcing a crackdown on criminals. The success in gathering signatures has awakened insecurity in the ruling coalition on the city council made up of the Democratic Party of the Left, which was formerly the Communist Party, Catholic liberals and centrists.

"For the first time, we are facing a big problem of race and culture different from our own. I don't think we are ready," said Daniele Fortini, provincial secretary for the Democratic Party of the Left, now Italy's largest left-wing group.

"Something has changed within the left," Fortini continued. "Now we feel the necessity of responding to the populace on law-and-order issues. Our duty is to find the proper balance, and not turn legality into repression."

## Graphic

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Illustration, brad wye, ITALY'S IMMIGRANTS Number of immigrants by region: Lombardy (includes Milan) 175,000 Latium (includes Rome) 160,000 Emilio-Romagna 58,000 Veneto 58,000 Sicily 51,000 Tuscany 48,000 Piedmont 45,000 Campania (includes Naples) \*40,000 Other areas 145,000 Total 780,000 Total illegals 800,000 \*Estimated to have a large number of illegal immigrants Origin of immigrants: North Africa, Former Yugoslavia, Other Eastern European nations, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Sub-Saharan Africa Occupations of legal and most illegal immigrants: 60% house cleaning 17% street vending 15% agricultural workers

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