

Between removal and emphasis: Racism in Italy in 2018

Focus 1/2019





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Introduction

A new eviction at the former Canapificio of Caserta, one of the most vital and creative experiences of reception and social inclusion put in place in Italy, was carried out in March. The social center ran a Sprar project that housed 200 refugees in apartments; in what is now an empty warehouse, there used to be a legal help desk and a service to request the so-called "citizenship basic income". The ongoing campaign that criminalizes solidarity and NGOs did not stop in 2019 and one more social space becomes an uncomfortable symbol that shows that reception and inclusion are achievable targets. Another election deadline is upon us and some politicians need to continue to show the people their "iron fist".

Institutional racism was a constant in 2018, it was sprinkled in every way and with the use of all the possible tools on the Web and, in a more tangible way, in real life through administrative deeds, directives and new rules such as those contained in Law 132/2018. We have written about this in two different reports during the year (available here in Italian: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/pubblicazioni/>).

In this brief focus, we look back over the past year, summarizing the data related to 628 cases of verbal and physical violence, discrimination and damage of a xenophobic and racist nature. These are not official data, but only those we have documented last year.

Our role is to narrate and denounce the evolution of everyday racism to make it visible and activate forms of awareness, solidarity and protection. When we look at the hostile and violent public debate and the violence that targets migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and Roma with particular fury we tend to focus on the present or at most on the recent past and we seek support in the available data, often interpreting them incorrectly. An example: it is different to talk about reports of violence than about complaints – we gather both when we have news about it.

Hence the choice to propose our summary reading of 2018, recalling that it is difficult to understand the present times without looking at what has happened in Italian society in recent decades. The legitimacy and ostentation of racism that many today denounce comes from afar, it is difficult to understand and contrast them thoroughly without analyzing their historical, political, social and cultural roots.

For some times we have flagged the worrying spread of discriminatory and racist acts and behaviors in the public discourse which feeds discriminatory and violent social behavior. This pre-dates the beginning of the current legislature and even the campaign that led to March 2018 elections.

Racism is not "an emergency" but, unfortunately, it comes from afar. As well as the 628 cases of racism that we document do not legitimize us to define our country as a racist country. They simply warn us that the germ of xenophobia and racism has dug deep and that to fight it today we need to join forces and react. Today more than ever. As it happened in Caserta.

1. Chronicles of Ordinary Racism documented 628 cases in 2018

Verbal violence, Physical violence, Damages against properties, Discrimination documented by Lunaria: Years 2017-2018		
	2017	2018
A VERBAL VIOLENCE	418	400
<i>A1 Offenses, threats or racist violence</i>	86	130
<i>A2 Propaganda</i>	241	239
<i>of which:</i>		
<i>Hate speech, racist speeches, incitement to hatred</i>	80	68
<i>Written, banners, flyers, racist posters, articles, publications racist</i>	90	90
<i>Racist messages on social networks, sites, blogs</i>	71	81
A3 Public events	91	31
<i>of which:</i>		
<i>Procession, torchlight processions, principals, collections of signatures</i>	75	26
<i>Blitz</i>	16	5
B PHYSICAL VIOLENCE	46	126
<i>Deaths caused by abuse, violence and mistreatment</i>	7	5
<i>Violence against the person</i>	39	121
C DAMAGES AGAINST PROPERTY OR THINGS	24	29
<i>Damages</i>	14	17
<i>Fires</i>	10	12
D DISCRIMINATION	76	73
<i>Institutional</i>	44	42
<i>From individuals</i>	32	31
TOTAL	564	628

Source: Lunaria, www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org

Between January 1 and December 31, 2018 there are a total of **628 cases** of verbal and physical violence, property damage and discrimination of a xenophobic or racist nature that we heard. What we upload in our database are reports that we receive directly from the victims or witnesses, NGOs, or found on the web and media reports (that we verify crossing sources).

These are mostly verbal violence (400 cases), while 126 are physical violence against people, 29 property damage (ranging from devastation to fires) and 73 cases of discrimination (institutional or other).

Verbal violence

Among the 400 cases of verbal violence, as many as 239 pertain to the sphere of racist propaganda (90 are related to writings, banners, flyers and racist posters). After the initial, intense and virulent period of electoral campaign, the recurrence of racist propaganda episodes decreased, numbers, nonetheless remain in line with those of 2017 (241).

We also documented 81 cases of hate speech online, spread mainly through social media (a figure that is obviously more than underestimated). An important part of the latter has fueled the campaign of criminalization of solidarity (already started in the previous legislature), which became more systematic and ferocious during 2018. The closure of Italian ports to the NGO's vessels that carry migrants rescued at sea was accompanied by a strategy aimed at hitting and delegitimizing the activity of any group that promotes solidarity, reception and social inclusion initiatives - the Caserta example is a perfect one of the institutional attitude towards civil society solidarity.

Among these cases there are also those that have seen a sharing on the part of online media of strong themes crafted with the purpose of raising fear and prejudice on migrants and asylum seekers with a political will.

When it comes to the recurring "crime" issue (which is related to the more general theme of security), media often tend to de-humanize perpetrators (and suspects) and their entire national group when these are foreigners. This characterization was often backed by statements from elected officials shifting the attention from the seriousness of the crime committed to the authors.

We also recorded 68 cases of hate speech and 130 cases of offenses, threats or verbal harassment pronounced by ordinary citizens (86 cases in 2017), while 31 are the different forms of public demonstrations (rallies, blitz, torchlight marches and collection of signatures on petitions) which had migrants, asylum seekers and refugees as target. A substantial decrease from 2017.

Discrimination

We registered 73 episodes of discrimination a number aligned with that of 2017. In 43 cases the discrimination came from institutions such as elected assemblies, mayoral offices, etc. (motion proposals, public bans, denial of first aid, refusal to host reception centers). We also recorded 31 discriminations by private citizens (mainly advertisements for rent and work). Again: recording institutional discrimination is easier as those tend to become news. Private citizens' discrimination is acknowledged only when someone denounces it.

The so-called "Lodi case" was probably the most symbolic because it marked the return of "creative institutional discrimination": an attempt to circumvent the law to exclude foreign citizens from accessing welfare services or carrying out certain activities. The municipality of Lodi, a Lombardy town with 50 thousand residents, asked foreign families for additional documentation from their country of origin, to access meal at schools. These institutional of discriminations are unconstitutional and in many cases the Italian Constitutional Court has rejected them.

Damages

15 of the 29 cases damage property we have recorded had reception centers for asylum seeker as target. There was stone throwing, paper bombs and incendiary bottles which in some cases have caused damage to the structures. They occurred throughout the year in various locations: in Spinetoli (AP), Capriglia (LU), Pietra Perzia (EN), Ceprano (FR), San Lorenzo Dorsino (TN), Appiano (BZ), Pescolanciano (IS), Belmonte del Sannio (IS), Grammichele (CT), Bettola (PC), Oristano, Rimini (two cases a few days later), Marano (NA) and Rome.

The year opened and ended (January 23rd in Milan and December 10th in Rome) with two acts of vandalism against the stumbling blocks placed in front of the buildings where apprehended to be deported. On January 29th the posters of an exhibition on the Shoah were ripped off in Venice.

A fire damaged the door of a mosque in Padua in March. On February 2nd in Brescia two explosions caused damage near Via Gatti, where 65 Sinti people lived in prefabricated buildings while in Turin on May 7th a motorhome where a Roma family lived was set on fire.

In Mezzano (TN) on 13 April and in Oderzo (TV), on the 1st of May, the posters of two events that included the pictures of a black violinist and a black athlete were vandalized.

Physical violence

These are the numbers that are more worrying than others. From 2007 to 2018, the racist violence we have documented had a very fluctuating trend: in 2009 we had already registered 129 cases, while in the following year they almost halved. In 2011 the documented cases grew again to then decrease every year until 2016. When they started growing again. Considering what we documented, we can affirm that the recurrence of episodes in 2018 was an anomaly.

These are 121 cases of racist physical violence (46 in 2017) and 5 deaths caused by the same xenophobic violence. Among the latter, we recall the murders of Idy Diene, a 55-year-old Senegalese citizen, and Soumaila Sacko, 29-year-old Malian citizen, in San Calogero. Both were shot. In addition to the quantitative data, what is also worrying is that in 78 cases the aggressions were related to the somatic features and/or color of the victims' skin.

We have witnessed a peak in armed attacks during the summer. In many occasions these attacks involved the use of an air pistol. We can probably say there was a perverse emulation effect.

It all started with the attempted massacre in Macerata on February 3rd (carried out by Luca Traini, supporter of Forza Nuova and CasaPound and former candidate by the Northern League in local elections). In June, in Caserta, two boys from Mali, were hit by a rift of compressed-air gun shots fired from a car. A few days later, in Naples, a 22-year-old Malian received a plummet in his belly while he was returning home. In Forlì, on July 3th and 7th, two other people were injured: a young Nigerian woman and a 33-year-old Ivorian, always struck by an air gun. In Latina, again in July, the victims were two Nigerian asylum seekers waiting for the bus. Same month, in Rome, Cerasela, a 14-month-

old girl, risked the use of her legs after a plummet hit her back. The shot came from the balcony of a retired Senate employee who claimed he was "trying the weapon". In Vicenza, a Cape Verdean worker was hit by a firearm by a man, who motivated his gesture by stating that he wanted to hit a pigeon. In Aprilia, on the day of Ferragosto, a Cameroonian citizen was hit by a plummet shot from a window while he was walking. Similar cases have also happened in Castelfranco Emilia, Pisa, Terracina and Vicofaro. Physical violence did not always come with the use of weapons. At the end of July, in Moncalieri, Daisy Osakue, the Italian athlete of Nigerian origin, was hit with an egg-tossing from a racing car. Many other attacks followed, often carried out in groups, as was the case in Partinico (PA) where a group of adults attacked 6 unaccompanied foreign minors on August 15th. Or like the beating, on the same day, of a young man of Dominican origin, by the managers of a restaurant in Falerna (CZ). Recent violences include a Nigerian citizen, beaten with jacks on the street in Bagheria (PA) in September, or that in Raffadali, (AG) against a foreign minor, also attacked and beaten in the street.

More aggressions came during the end of the year: Naples on November 23, October 10 and October 31 and September 15; the double beating in Brindisi on the night of August 20 and the violence by groups of minors - as that against two minors originating in the Congo in Latina on December 1 and that against a Bengali rose vendor Palermo of December 16th. We have documented 25 cases of racist physical violence carried by groups (mostly young aggressors). Even when attackers are individuals (89), by-standers tend not to act or to encourage: almost all of the physical violence was carried out in of public spaces (97): on the street, on a bus, in a bar, at the bus stop. The aggravating circumstance for racist reasons has often been raised in trials, but seldom recognized.

2 Media and Racism

This is nothing new, but in 2018 the media undoubtedly played a crucial role in fueling and spreading the racist and xenophobic discourse, as well as feeding the alarm on the racist emergency that oversimplifies its threat and loses sight of the depth and complexity of the phenomenon. We are obviously referring to two diverging attitudes, which need to be analyzed in a distinct way.

The racist media discourse takes different forms. There is, on the part of some sites and newspapers, an obsessive attention to re-launch news stories in which foreign citizens play the bad character. It is a way of feeding the equivalence "more foreigners = more crime", an equivalence that the available data does not justify in any way. Those media that choose this path do it as an editorial/political choice. Then there is the manipulation and distortion of news. The first example is the campaign of aggression against NGOs that help migrants crossing the sea on rubber dinghies and makeshift boats.

"Call them sea filthy scam (zozzoni del mare)", is the headline of a comment dated 21 November 2018 by editor Maurizio Belpietro on the daily newspaper "La Verità", which associated the alleged disposal of special waste in normal landfills, of which MSF's Acquarius vessel was accused, to the "Terra dei Fuochi", the area of the country where toxic waste has been buried for decades by organized crime and people dies because of the

pollution. The "filthy scam" cheat to save money and the reason they do it is "always the money", writes Belpietro. Those who defend the work of NGOs, on the other hand, are "facilitators of the infection". The editorial was based on an inquiry by the Catania Public Prosecutor that would have ended in no prosecution. On the same day, *Il Giornale*, another daily newspaper, also wrote about waste disposal: "Scabies, tuberculosis and AIDS, a health bomb from migrants". That these diseases are either easily treatable and/or non-transmissible through contact with special waste (or clothes), there was no writing in the newspaper.

The goal was to discredit the work of rescuers and sow the idea that migrant ships are floating epidemics. We found other titles on this tone on *Libero* and *Il Tempo* referring to a case of malaria and one of cholera: "Cholera is back in Naples, immigrants brought it" (October 4, 2018) and "Here is the malaria of immigrants" (the latter dates back to 6 September 2017). Individual cases, diseases that cannot be transmitted by air, viruses that contract even tourists are not included in the information that the newspapers believe they should give. The issue is always and only: in Italy there is a foreign body which produces negative effects. If news is manipulated to support this assumption, well, it does not matter. This way of talking about immigration and landings is not new to 2018. But the campaign against the NGOs, which involved some media and various members of the political class and has found great echo on social media, has perhaps reached unknown peaks.

Let's now move on to the more complex subject, the one on alarm caused by racism. A theme on which *Lunaria* and in particular the site *Chronicles of Ordinary Racism* are directly involved for the work of monitoring daily racism that is frequently used by the media. On several occasions in the aftermath of serious episodes - either because they were violent or because they involved minors - the big newspapers raised the alarm: Italy is becoming/has become a racist country. Often to corroborate this thesis our data for 2018 was mentioned (as we said before, 2018 is a peak year for violent episodes).

For ten years we have been doing this work and for ten years we have been repeating that ours is a work of documentation and of denunciation of what happens, our numbers are not statistically representative and cannot be compared to the official ones - which however are not collected and above all systematically disseminated. True, in 2018 there were some moments when several episodes of racist violence were concentrated - "the summer of pellets" is undoubtedly a worrying sign - but the reasons may be different. Of course, there is the general climate in the country that legitimizes the use of certain expressions or hostile tones towards migrants. Of course, there are the years immediately preceding, during which the caravans of refugees that crossed Europe were used to feed the fears of a part of Italian society. And, of course, as we noted above, there is the possible phenomenon of emulation and the too weak condemnation by Italian institutions. But tensions and drifts have been present in Italian society for a long time, racism creeps into everyday life before taking the extreme and violent forms that end up in the newspapers and it is not by sharing a video that documents an unpleasant episode resumed with the mobile phone that it will be defeated.

It is also plausible that the normalization and legitimacy of racist behavior and the concerns generated in some portions of society and among the immigrant population have fostered the awareness that racism is widespread. And this may have prompted more people, victims or witnesses of discrimination, to report the incident more frequently than it occurred in the past. The media, which also has the problem of feed their online editions with a continuous stream of images, tend to reuse whatever they find on social media. Thus the greatest number of documented cases of racism may depend on many factors. The risk is that the media, in good faith, will re-launch an alarm which is the mirror image to that of those who cry to the dangers of immigration. Or that they focus on the phenomenon because this is considered a topic pertaining to the Interior Minister and other politicians considered to be adversaries. By launching the racism alarm and documenting more seriously than in the past certain serious episodes, in short, some media find a way to oppose the Lega-5Stars government.

Let's take another example. The attention of some Italian media for the living conditions in Libyan detention centers has increased after the majority change (for other media the problem does not exist: the conditions of migrants are not "our" problem). This is an attitude that is also found among the international media that document what is happening in Italy: the political climate throughout the continent (and in the United States) tends to emphasize, to suddenly notice, a phenomenon that is not new; maybe the forms with which it manifests are new.

The truth is that documenting and recounting everyday racism would require constant attention, memory and the will to find the facets that it takes in the different dimensions of public, social and institutional life, often in a subtle or indirect way. There is not only ostentatious racism on social media, group thugs or lone shooters. There are ordinary discriminations carried out by public officials, in the workplace, in public services. Easy simplifications or sensationalist representations do not help understand them or to effectively counter them.

Lunaria

Lunaria is an Italian not-profit Association for Social Promotion. It was created in 1992, and since then it is a non governmental body, autonomous from religious and political affiliations.

Lunaria promotes peace, economic and social justice, equality and citizenship rights, democracy and grass-root participation, social inclusion and intercultural dialogue through advocacy, political-cultural initiatives, communication, non-formal education, training and research.

Since 1996 Lunaria has been carrying out research activities, information and campaigns on migration and against racism. The main objectives of its campaigns include full guarantee of citizenship rights and asylum, reform of the law on citizenship, closure of Identification and Expulsion Centers (today Permanent Residence Centres for Repatriation). Since 2000 Lunaria promotes, in collaboration with 48 civil society organizations, the Sbilanciamoci! campaign.



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