

Italy's interior minister announces plan to register Roma and Sinti

By Marianne Arens
23 June 2018

Following his threat to expel “all 600,000” immigrants from Italy, Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini (Lega) now plans to register and count all Sinti and Roma living in the country. Such a move would be the prelude to mass, fascist-style repression.

“I’m drawing up a dossier on the Roma in Italy at the Ministry, it’s a mess. It used to be called a census, but you cannot call it that anymore. So let’s call it a personal register or an inventory,” Salvini said in an interview on *Telem Lombardia*, a Milan-based local television network, on Monday. He would prefer to deport all of the country’s 140,000 Roma, but, “unfortunately, we have to keep the Italians among them,” he added provocatively.

On Wednesday, Salvini announced that many local authorities had already contacted him to declare their readiness to start counting.

Salvini’s project of a Roma card index recalls one of the darkest periods in European history. It draws inspiration directly from the vicious measures of Benito Mussolini’s fascist regime, which registered all Jews in the country before their deportation to Nazi extermination camps. Sinti and Roma were also deprived of all rights, persecuted and murdered by the Italian fascists in league with Hitler’s regime.

The plans of the ultra-right interior minister are so monstrous that representatives of his own government, from Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement), were forced to repudiate them. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said on Tuesday, “No one here has any intention of filling a register or making counts on an ethnic basis, a measure which, by the way, would be unconstitutional and obviously discriminatory.” Luigi Di Maio (M5S), vice premier and Salvini’s coalition partner, whose father was a neo-fascist local councilor, commented: “One cannot conduct censuses on a racist basis.”

There has also been criticism from the European Union (EU) and Italy’s opposition parties. The vice-president of the European Commission emphasised that the expulsion of EU citizens from other states based on their ethnicity would

violate existing law.

In Italy, Roberto Speranza of the opposition party Free and Equal (LeU) announced that his party would file a lawsuit against Salvini for “incitement to racial hatred.” Ettore Rosato (Democratic Party, PD), vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies, said: “The Roma count is vulgar and demagogic, recalling the worst precedents.” Matteo Richetti (PD), a confidant of former prime minister Matteo Renzi, declared: “He is offering Italians an enemy, a guilty party to beat and eliminate.”

The indignation of the EU and the Italian opposition is hypocritical and worthless. Salvini’s inhumane plans are part of a systematic offensive against refugees and minorities, supported and implemented by the entire ruling elite in Europe. On the same day Salvini made his threats against the Roma, the German chancellor Angela Merkel met with Conte to discuss her so-called “European solution” to the refugee question. Her plan includes a massive build-up of the notorious European border police, Frontex, and the establishment of de facto concentration camps for refugees in North Africa.

The Italian opposition parties, now so vociferously critical of Salvini, also support anti-refugee measures and pursued similar policies when they were in government. Just ten years ago, in 2007-2008, both the Left Democrats-led Olive Tree government and the subsequent Silvio Berlusconi regime insisted on the need for a Roma card index. The project was only shelved after the EU and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) intervened.

In 2007, when Romania became an EU member, Romano Prodi headed a coalition government that included the Rifondazione Comunista (PRC), the Greens (Verdi) and the Stalinist Party of Italian Communists (PdCI). Both the Prodi government and the PD mayors of major cities such as Rome and Milan launched a campaign against Roma, who had come to Italy based on the EU’s principle of freedom of movement.

In October 2007, the Italian government and media organised a campaign around a rape case. A young Roma

was charged with the crime. Attacks on Sinti and Roma are usually ignored by the media, but this time Italy's national newspapers ran hysterical headlines on the rape case. Within days, brutal raids and arson attacks were carried out by fascists on so-called "nomad camps." Prodi responded by introducing a new racist law, which allowed for the detection and expulsion of "EU citizens" who "posed a threat to public order." The police immediately started combing the camps and drawing up lists.

The mayor of Rome at the time was Walter Veltroni, who went on to stand as the PD's presidential candidate. In May 2007, he introduced a "Pact for a Secure Rome" in the city council allowing for the containment of "people without land" and the establishment of police run settlements for up to a thousand so-called "nomads." A similar project was pursued by Giuliano Pisapia (PD) in Milan.

In January 2008, Berlusconi won the federal election and the agitation against Sinti and Roma was stepped up. Under the then interior minister from the Lega Nord, Roberto Maroni, Roma children were registered and their fingerprints stored in a special file.

Only in July 2008 did the European Parliament and OSCE for the first time determine that registration and fingerprinting on an ethnic basis were illegal. This decision was preceded by mass rallies on June 8 and July 8, 2008. On both occasions over 10,000 people demonstrated against the new race laws.

The collection of fingerprints was subsequently discontinued except for three alleged areas of "emergency" (Rome, Milan, Naples), where special commissioners continued the registration of Roma with photo files. Finally, in 2013, the Italian judiciary declared systematic ethnic registration to be unlawful.

Although Roma card files are racist and violate every democratic principle, they exist either secretly or openly in many European countries. As the website "Roma-Servie" reveals, such Roma databases exist in Sweden and France. In Sweden, around 4,000 Roma, including minors, were recorded in a secret police file up until 2013. French police also kept a secret file on Roma based on genealogy, including DNA samples, up until 2007. Similar files exist in Austria and other countries.

The Sinti and Roma are among the poorest, most oppressed and deprived sections of the population, but governments largely ignore their basic needs. In Italy, about half of all Roma are citizens with all the necessary paperwork. Those who have no permanent residence status live in miserable, unhygienic conditions in camps, often without adequate water and electricity supply. Politicians ignore the fact that Roma children may be unable to attend school, are denied access to local infrastructure and

prevented from integrating. The Roma are continually harassed by police and forced out of their housing with no prospect of alternative accommodation.

The isolation, criminalisation and oppression of Sinti and Roma have a social and political function. Representatives of all parties use them as scapegoats to distract attention from attacks on the social gains of the working class as a whole. The campaign against Roma by the Prodi government took place at the same time as the collapse of the real estate market in the US, which heralded the 2008 global financial crisis. In October 2007, at the same time the racist decree was made law, the Prodi government passed its 2008 budget, which included a major assault on pensions, education and social assistance.

Once again today, the propaganda against Roma and refugees is directed against the working class as a whole and serves reactionary political goals. In order to impose their policies of militarism, a strong state and social devastation, the ruling elites in Europe are ready to repeat the worst crimes in history to combat growing popular opposition.

An openly racist commentary in the daily *Malta Independent*, cited by Deutschlandfunk on Wednesday, defended Salvini's initiative. It read in part: "There can be no progress when people move around and withdraw from school and work—just as the Roma do. Anyone who represents any kind of control as a revival of the Nazi era misunderstands the situation. The Jews sent to extermination camps were innocent and did not deserve the punishment they had to endure. But there are millions in Italy and many in Malta, who have repaid the generosity shown to them with criminal activity and they must feel the consequences of their actions."

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