

Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Conference Paper

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Sofia, Bulgaria, November 6-8, 2008

www.nece.eu

Saving Racism in Europe – the Italian case

Hundreds of [Roma/Gypsy¹] children have asked us to fingerprint them so that we could give them temporary papers . . . these children must be protected. By giving them papers, **I am actually saving them.**

Franco Frattini--Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs and ex-European Commissioner for Justice and Civil Liberties²

On 25 June 2008, Roberto Maroni, the Italian Minister of Internal Affairs, member of the extremist party Lega Nord, announced the intention of the Italian government to have a “census” of all “nomads” in Italy. On 28 June, Maroni revealed a plan for fingerprinting all Roma residents in camps, including children, insisting that this plan is a solution to inadequate housing problems and rising crime rates in Italy.

The Italian government has been blasted for the idea of fingerprinting Roma children by the UNICEF, the Council of Europe, and the European Commission and parallels are drawn with the census of the Jews in 1938, conducted by the fascist regime of Mussolini.

In an act of brazen disregard of the grim historical echoes prompted by mob violence, camp clearances, arbitrary arrest and deportations, ethnic profiling and the fingerprinting of Romani children, Franco Frattini chose the occasion of a visit to Israel to defend the emergency measures and present himself as the saviour of Romani children.

A recent chronology of events in Italy could explain why a number of human rights activists accused Frattini of hypocrisy.

On 25 May 2008, a Sinti girl in Brescia was stopped from going to school by some non-Romani children yelling “dirty Gypsy, dirty kidnapper”.

On 11 May 2008, four Molotov cocktails were thrown into Romani/Gypsy camps in Milan and Novara.

¹ Gypsy is considered by many Roma to be pejorative.

² <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1001042.html>

On 13 May, assailants burned the Ponticelli Romani settlement in Naples to the ground, causing the approximately 800 residents to flee while Italians stood by and cheered. On the day of the arson attacks on the Ponticelli settlement, RAI television showed Italians in the area screaming, “Roma out.” This was broadcast before the police were alerted to the riot. Further arson attacks on the Ponticelli settlement undertaken by locals continued into the week of 26-30 May, with evident impunity.

On 9 June 9 2008, Italian media reported that a settlement of around 100 Romanian Roma in Catania , Sicily had been attacked and burned to the ground.

Interior Minister Roberto Maroni has reportedly downplayed the attacks, stating, “As for vigilante attacks on immigrants, that is what happens when gypsies steal babies, or when Romanians commit sexual violence.”

On 3 November 2007 Mr Frattini, then Italian Commissioner for Justice and Civil Liberties declared:

What has to be done is simple. Go into a nomad camp in Rome, for example, and ask them, “Can you tell me where you live?” If they say they do not know, take them and send them home to Romania. That is how the European directive works. It is simple and safe. Romania cannot say they will not take them back, because it is an obligation that is part of being a member state of the EU.

He also urged Italy to pull down the camps to prevent any Romanians from returning.

The Commissioner implied that Romania should receive anybody who does not know where he or she resides. This statement was extremely worrying, coming from a Commissioner charged with safeguarding civil liberties in Europe.

Frattini seemed to forget during this brief period that he was not in the pay of the forces of the Italian far right or Silvio Berlusconi, but rather in the employ of the European Commission, formally committed to promote “respect for human rights,” “tolerance,” and “unity through diversity.” At the end of 2007, he joined the new Berlusconi-led Italian government, a coalition which includes the extremist Lega Nord.

If Frattini was a deluded messianic type assuming the role of the Saviour incarnate, or one of his doughty apostles preaching in the wilderness his comments would merit no attention in the democratic world. However, the burdensome reality is that he is the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs. When I had the occasion to meet Mr. Frattini I was struck both by his arrogance and his profoundly limited and stereotypical views concerning Roma. The last thing I can imagine is thousands of Roma children flocking to him to be ‘saved’. Neither could I envisage this Saviour ever listening to them or caring about their plight.

The history of what Mark Mazower describes as the “Dark Continent”(or Europe’s dark history in the 20th Century) bears grim testament to the logic of appeasement of past Saviours and the dire consequences of such logic. Acquiescence in the face of contemporary racism wherever it manifests itself will fatally undermine European ideals of tolerance, respect for human rights and ‘unity through diversity’.

Neither Frattini nor Maroni are saving anybody or anything besides racism itself in a Europe which, paradoxically, through the branch of the European Commission led for four years by Mr. Frattini, struggles to eliminate it.