

The EU Too is Asleep on the Rocks

Judith Harris (June 16, 2015)



The flood of migrants pouring into Italy shows no sign of abating, and Italy is appealing to the European Union for assistance. Instead France, for one, has closed its border with Italy at Ventimiglia, leaving refugees to sleep in train stations and on rocks on the beach. The political fallout for Italy has far-reaching consequences.

ROME – Like any drowsy three-year-old, she curls up and hugs a somewhat grubby teddy bear. She sleeps, not in a bed, but on the well-trodden floor of a train station, for she is one of the hundred or so very young children and women who spent the night – today their fourth – at the Ventimiglia train station, close to the border with France, whose police are denying entry to migrants. Another hundred or so migrants, all males, have nowhere better to sleep, wrapped in hand-out aluminum blankets, than on the huge rocks at the seashore at nearby Ponte San Ludovico.

Not all the locals are indifferent. The Italian state railway Trenitalia allowed Ventimiglia use of a



waiting room for the women and children migrants. Catholic charity volunteers are doing their best to provide food and clothing. Local mothers have brought toys and their own children down to the train station to help the migrant toddlers pass the time. And a day of crash-mob solidarity is planned, with music, to bring together both locals and emigres.

Besides the war in Syria, youth migration from Africa is also being fostered by the fact that the Eritrean government has decreed obligatory military conscription for an indefinite period beginning at age fourteen. To avoid their underage sons being sent into the ongoing war with Ethiopia, parents prefer to send very young Eritreans over the dangerous crossings of first the desert and then the Mediterranean. Last year, some 4,000 Eritreans fled that country each month, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The figure is on the rise, with 5,000 crossing the Mediterranean last October.

The Italians are calling for a “humanitarian corridor” for those migrants trying to rejoin family members in the North of Europe, and blame France for blocking the border. “It is the duty of European countries to address the problem of migration all together, but the muscular attitude of certain ministers from foreign countries is heading in exactly the opposite direction,” said Premier Matteo Renzi bluntly during a press conference Monday. “The EU is at a crossroads: either it reasons like a community, and accepts the responsibility for resolving the problem all together (and this is Plan A). If no solutions are found, we must act alone (our Plan B), which means that this great country that is Italy will address the problem.”

The French deny they are blocking the border. As spelled out in a radio interview by Bernard Caseneuve, Interior Minister, “Since the first of the year we have had 8,000 entries and had to send 6,000 back to Italy. The Schengen rules must be respected, and Italy has to agree to create centers in which the irregular economic migrants, who must be sent back home immediately, can be separated out from [political] refugees.” A confrontation on this between Renzi and Francois Hollande is expected Sunday, when the French president arrives for a visit to Milan’s Expo, in the wake of British Premier David Cameron and of Michelle Obama.

A certain number of outraged British tourists are meanwhile complaining (so says the Daily Mail and its ilk) that the tawdry sight of the migrants on beaches and train stations is a blight on their holidays. The migrants are moreover dangerous: “Parts of Rome are being turned into a ‘no-go area’ because of concerns about security and sanitation linked to the huge surge of migrants in the city, local businesses have claimed,” the Daily Mail reported June 15. “Migrants camping near Rome’s Tiburtina station have been forcibly cleared by police amid protests by local businesses. As the build-up of refugees at the Italian capital’s train station increased, it led to ugly clashes with police, an outcry from the right and fresh calls from Rome for EU help.”

For their part, Italians complain that the European Union has left Italy alone to deal with the expected summer flux of a half million migrants, while the EU is agreeing to allow just 85,000 to apply for asylum. Together with the fraying financial situation of Greece, anti-EU sentiment in Italy is on the rise, and not only from those like Matteo Salvini of the (now not only) Northern League, who oppose the Euro on monetary grounds. Salvini, in truth, denies he opposes the Euro; “It’s the Euro which is anti-Italian,” he said last week while speaking to Confindustria, the national association of manufacturers. Anti-migrant sentiment is politically easy, and elsewhere Salvini has accused the migrants of enjoying luxurious stays in four-star hotels, “thanks to Renzi and [Interior Minister Angelino] Alfano,” who included the towns of Sestri Levante, Rapallo and Santa Margherita, beloved of posh tourists, on the list of places where migrants are to be given hospitality.

The crisis of the migrants, which plays into the hands of the Le Pen-style rhetoric on the right, makes life ever harder for Premier Renzi, whose Partito Democratico has just come out of a series of widespread local elections significantly weakened. The working word is “territory:” the PD, once



anchored in regions which traditionally voted left, no longer does. Although the PD more or less skimmed by in recent regional elections, it has taken a shellacking in local elections this past week. The worst was in once traditionally center-left Venice, where former magistrate Felice Casson, the PD candidate, lost the race for mayor, 47% to 53%, to conservative Luigi Brugnaro, backed by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. "I didn't lose – the party did," said Renzi lamely.

Renzi's PD is further weakened by the widening revelations of corruption and criminal ties within the Rome city administration. No one considers Rome Mayor Ignazio Marino, a doctor, involved in the scandal, but he is under fire for failing to have noticed anything untoward in his entourage during his past year of governing the capital of Italy. Dozens have been arrested.

By contrast, Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), which had been losing consensus, appeared revived. Having presented candidates in five towns scattered throughout Sicily (Gela and Augusta in Sicily, Port Torres in Sardegna, Quarto in Campania and Venaria in Piedmont), the M5S showed new muscle, winning, in each case, no less than 65% of the ballot and, in Augusta, 78%.

In addition, a re-galvanized Berlusconi announced a forthcoming political swing through Italy to relaunch his party. "The winds up North have changed, and days like this prove that Matteo Renzi is losing ground," said Berlusconi after the election results were counted Sunday, showing that especially in Lombardy the PD lost ground. "And here they'd said that we were dying.]"

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