

Hate speech

The alleged relationship between immigration and criminality



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Oftentimes, in the public arena, a **direct association is drawn between immigration and criminality**. As reported in the **Idos dossier** from 2020, crimes being equal, those committed by foreigners generally produce more fear, distrust, and resentment. Migrants are both inferiorised and demonised. This narrative is then instrumentally manipulated by media and politicians to gather support.

Data on foreign inmates has to be contextualised.

On a first reading, indeed the share of foreigners on the total amount of inmates in Italian and European prisons outweighs the share of foreigners on the total population. This figure should however be interpreted critically, through a series of clarifications. First and foremost, we need to consider that foreigners' **socio-economic conditions** are on average worse than natives'. Socio-economic hardship is tightly related to criminality.

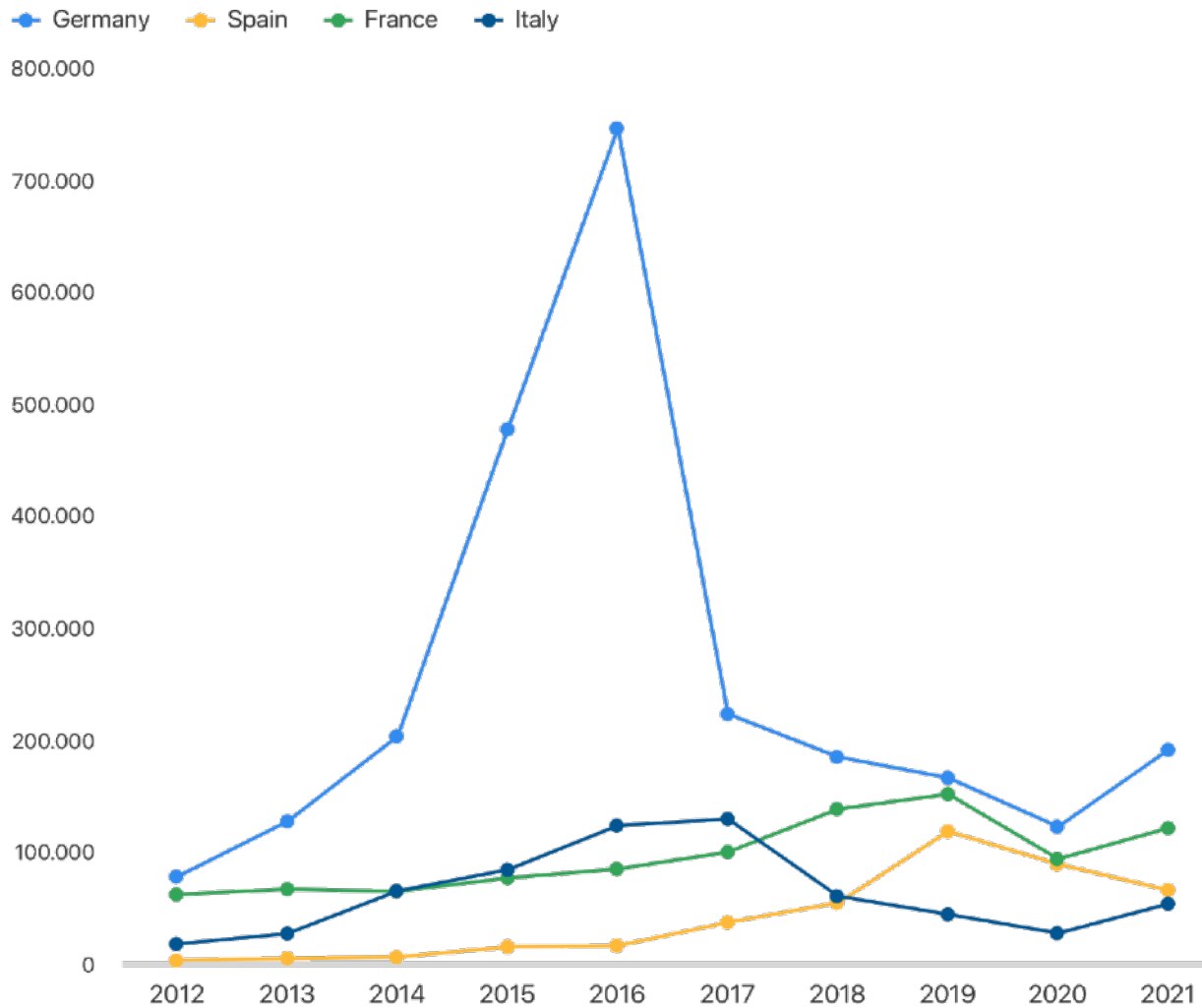
Secondly, the condition of **irregularity**, which characterises most foreign offenders, forcibly leads people towards illegality and thus inevitably to crime. Lastly, a relevant point is the **type of offense**, which has different features among foreigners and natives - usually foreigners commit less serious offenses, punished through shorter sentences.

More foreigners, unsafer societies?

One thing worth noting is that, despite the tendency to criminalise migrants, if we analyse the figures we see that **European societies have not become less safe as the foreign share of the population - particularly, asylum seekers, structurally more exposed to irregularity - increased.**

In all of the larger EU countries, the number of asylum seekers has increased

Asylum seekers in Germany, France, Italy, and Spain (2012-2021)



MUST KNOW: Figures exclusively refer to first requests and include those who, according to the Dublin regulation, will then request protection in another member state.

SOURCE: Eurostat

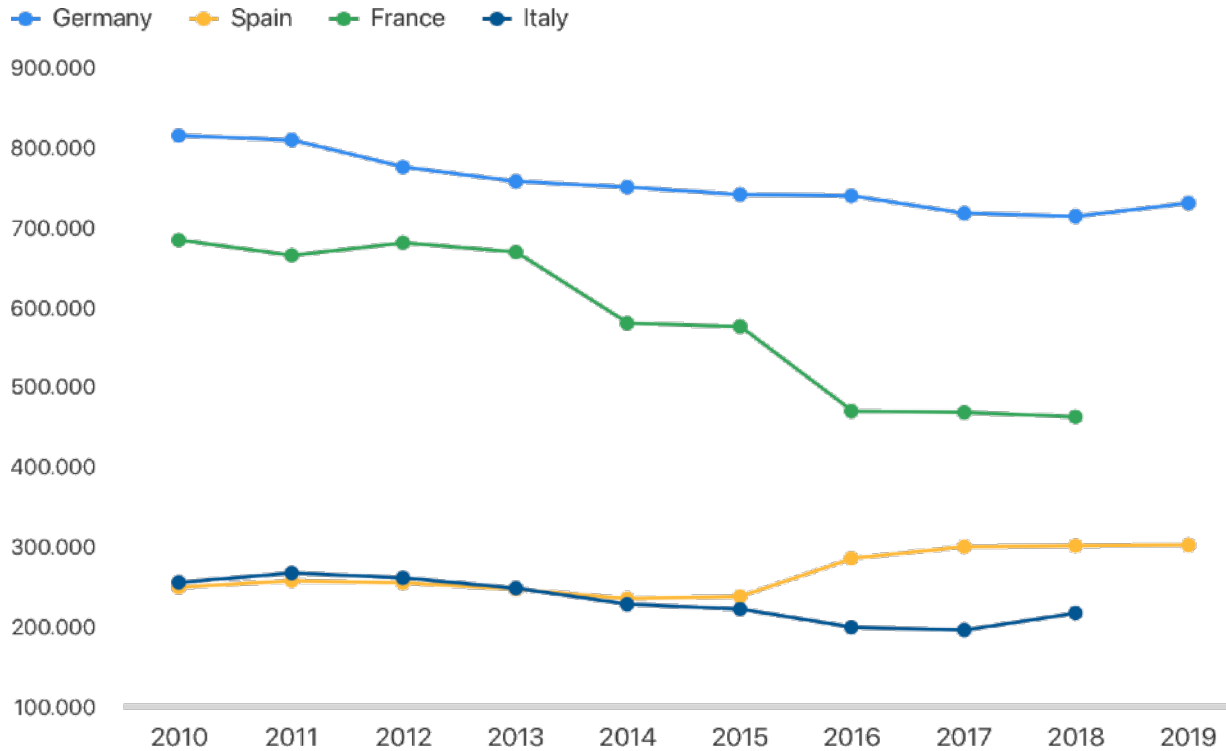
In larger European countries (Germany, France, Italy and Spain), in 2021, the number of asylum seekers was significantly higher than in 2012. In the case of France and Germany, it was double, in Italy three times as high. As for **Spain**, the figure is 20 times higher than in 2012.

Such an increase has been rather irregular through the years. In all these countries but especially in **Germany**, in the years 2014-2017, in correspondence of the so-called “refugee crisis”, there has been a peak in arrivals. In Germany, there have been 745 thousand in 2016, in Italy about 129 thousand in 2017, while the number then decreased, only to record a mild growth between 2020 and 2021.

Except for this irregularity, **the general trend was towards a gradual increase in the number of asylum seekers.** However, at the same time there is no record of an increase of criminality in the analysed countries, with the exception of Spain.

Criminality is declining in larger EU countries

Convicted people in Italy, France, Germany, and Spain (2010-2019)



MUST KNOW: The figures represent convicted people in Italy, Spain, Germany, and France, of all nationalities. French and Italian figures from 2019 are not available.

SOURCE: Eurostat

Only in Spain has there been an increase in the number of convicted people between 2010 and 2018 (+20.9%), from about 25 thousand to 30 thousand. In Germany, France, and Italy, on the other hand, there has been a reduction - particularly significant in the case of **France** (-32.4%).

-15.1%

the number of convicted people in Italy between 2010 and 2018.

These figures show that, even alongside a growth of the foreign share of the population, European societies have not become less safe. If anything, criminality on the whole has recorded a reduction.

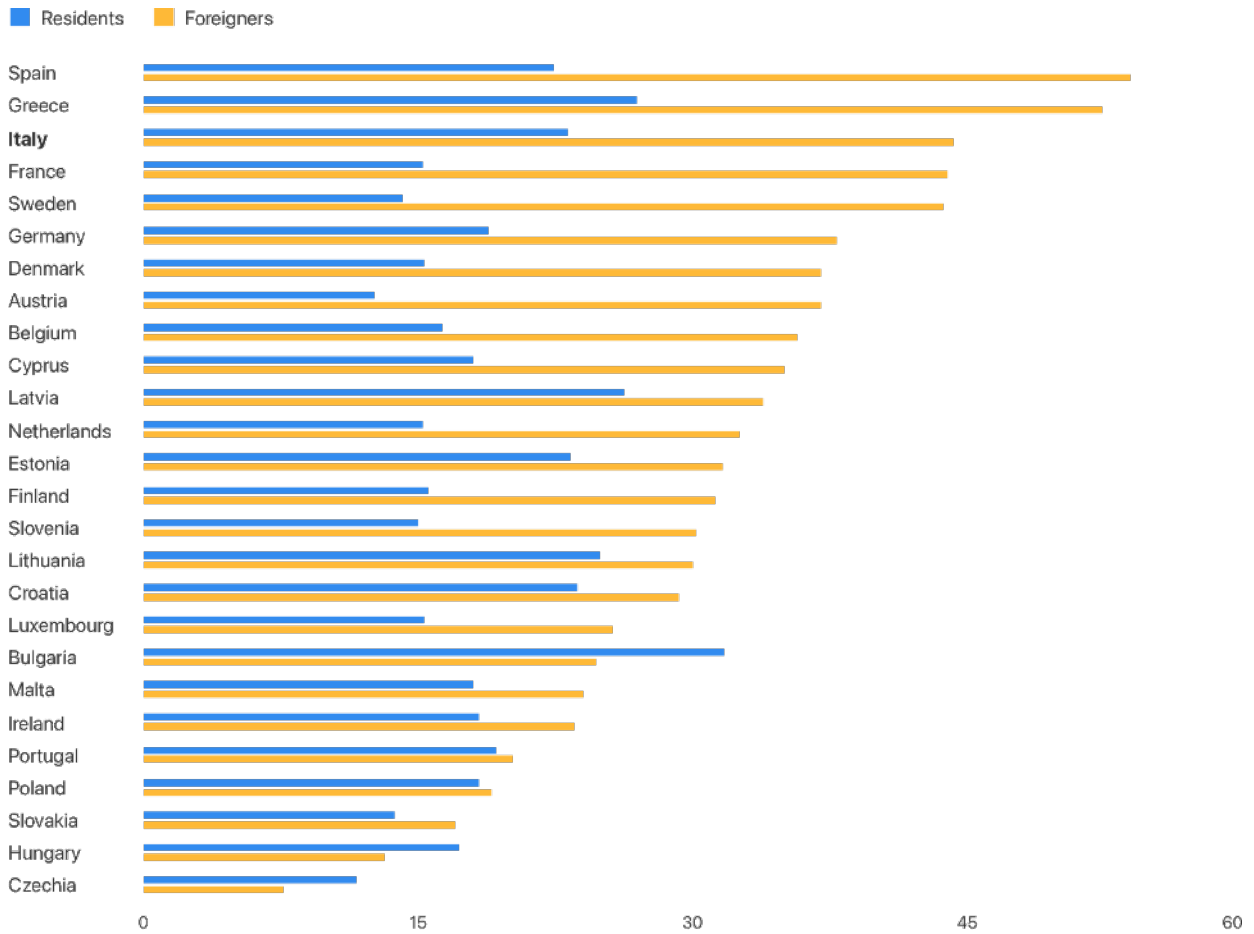
Socio-economic conditions and criminality

On average, the **crime rate is higher among foreigners than among native citizens**. However, this statement needs to be accompanied by a serie of clarifications.

First of all, as mentioned, a crucial aspect of criminality is that it is often determined by socio-economic hardship. This is something we need to take into account when we talk about foreign criminality, as today in Europe foreign citizens are considerably more exposed to poverty compared to natives.

In Spain and Greece, more than half of foreign residents are at risk of poverty

The share of citizens, natives, and foreigners, at risk of poverty or social exclusion in EU countries (2020)



MUST KNOW: With "at risk of poverty or social exclusion" Eurostat means people whose income is lower than 60% of the median income (at risk of poverty), in conditions of severe material or social deprivation (a complex indicator which measures the ability of a person to afford a number of things that are not considered essential for survival, but are indeed essential to lead a decent life), and who are part of families with very low working intensity. Figures only refer to the regularly residing population (thus excluding people with no residence permit). Romanian figures are not available.

SOURCE: Eurostat

Except for 3 countries, moreover countries that have rather low percentages of foreign residents (Bulgaria, Hungary and Czechia), in the whole of Europe foreigners are more exposed to poverty or social exclusion.

The highest shares are recorded by the **Mediterranean countries** (Spain, Greece and Italy), while the lowest ones are recorded by some Eastern European countries.

54% of foreign residents, in Spain, are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (2020).

Aside from Spain, the widest gap with natives is recorded in **France** and **Sweden**. In Sweden, in particular, almost 44% of foreigners are at risk, compared to 14% of Swedes. The French situation is similar: 44% and 15% respectively.

Foreigners and criminality

As mentioned, we know that in most cases it is irregular migrants who commit crimes. Irregular migrants are people who reside in a country but have no valid residence permit.

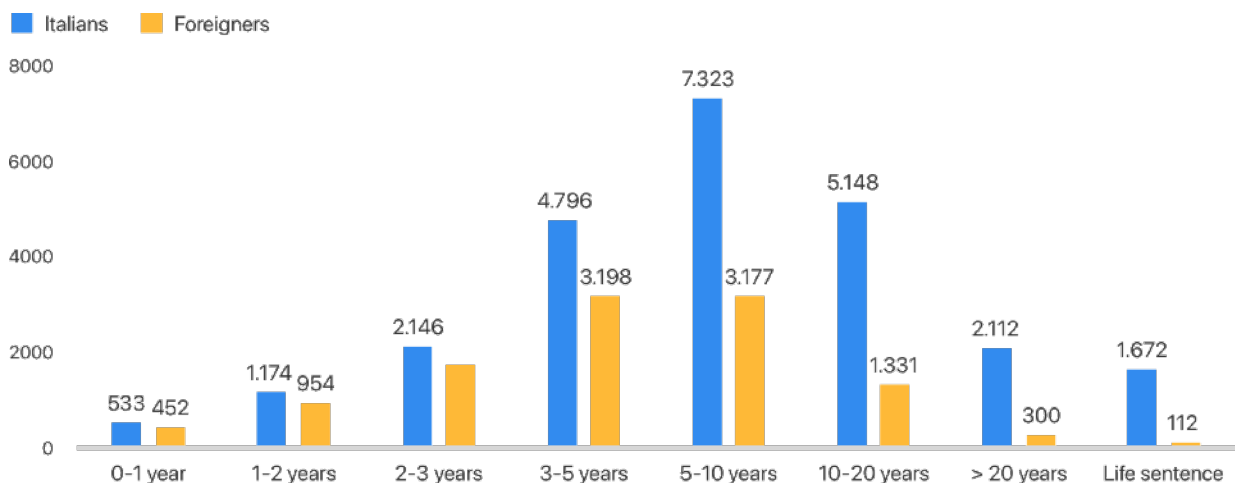
Most often it is irregular migrants who commit crimes, as they are forced to live in illegality.

As reported by the Idos dossier, **the Ministry of the Interior estimated that 67.5% of all offenses involving foreigners are committed by irregular residents** - more than two thirds. With regard to this figure, it is important to highlight that irregular migrants are much more exposed to criminality as they live in illegality and are thus prevented from finding a regular job or accessing social security measures. These are all factors that increase the incidence of criminality among them.

According to a 2016 [study](#), **if we only consider regular residents, the criminality rate would seem to be analogous among foreigners and Italians**. Generally, however, it is worth noting that foreigners, both regular and irregular, tend to commit different types of offenses. They mainly commit offenses that are considered less serious and this is reflected in the length of their sentences.

A higher share of foreigners serve shorter sentences

The number of Italian and foreign inmates by length of the sentence (2020)



MUST KNOW: Figures are from 31 December 2020 and refer to inmates by the length of their sentence, in absolute numbers. Among foreigners, only those regularly residing in Italy are considered - irregular ones are excluded.

SOURCE: **Antigone**

As the data collected by Antigone shows, the gap between foreign and Italian inmates increases as the length of the sentence increases. The former make up almost half of all detainees serving sentences shorter than 1 year but only 12% of those longer than 20 years. This figure is even lower in the case of the most serious sentence: life sentence.

6%

of inmates serving life sentence in Italy are foreigners, according to data collected by Antigone (2020).

The fact that **foreigners more often commit offenses out on the streets**, where they are easier to identify, adds up to this.

Furthermore, foreigners are disadvantaged, compared to Italians, from the juridical point of view, and this also weighs in the picture. Generally, as the aforementioned study underlines, **they experience greater difficulties in accessing measures alternative to prisons**, such as house detention, probation, and parole.

Another relevant issue is that **the foreign population is statistically more exposed to crime because it is mostly made up of young males, who often have no family**. These are features that, in all nationalities alike, are correlated with a higher crime rate.

There are thus a series of reasons that make us understand that the relationship between immigration and criminality is very complex. And yet the media and politicians often depict it rather simplistically. In order to understand why and how this happens, we asked a few questions to **Marcello Maneri**, professor of sociology of cultural and communicative processes at the university of Milano-Bicocca.

In the last years, the number of migrants in Europe has increased, and yet the criminality rate has not grown. Why do people often draw a line between these two phenomena?

This association has nothing to do with real numbers, neither with the number of migrants nor with the number of offenses and so on, because social problems follow a different logic, that has nothing to do with the objectivity of the problem itself, but with the fact that some people push them through. In the specific case of Italy, there is no relation (but this is always the case) between the number of offenses and the social reaction. The emergence of a new problem in the public arena can paradoxically take place in the complete absence of the phenomenon itself, or more often by drawing the attention to certain behaviours, at the cost of other ones which are equally problematic.

In Italy, migrants have been criminalised by playing with fear, by highlighting the theme of insecurity, exclusively meant as the possibility of falling victim to a crime committed by a foreigner (here, insecurity and immigration are used as synonyms). Some people have made profit and gained followers by managing to portray this as a relevant social problem, at times even the most relevant one. This happened for instance in the electoral campaigns of 2008 and 2018, when elections were won precisely on this theme. These are the factors that lead to certain definitions of social problems and their salience in the public arena.

If, on the other side, the political counterpart is not able to oppose an alternative discourse (and this happened in the whole of Europe), then the definition of the social problem easily becomes the hegemonic one, that everyone takes for granted.

Why, even when migrant arrivals are less of a discussion topic in the media and politics and there is no emergency, an offense is always more sensational when it is committed by a migrant?

There are certain cycles of criminalisation. They have taken place when the centre-left was in power or the centre-right had just won the elections. The centre-right accused the centre-left of do-goodery, of being too tolerant if not complicit or even an inspirer of migrants' crimes, so when in power, they need to show that they are using the iron fist and offering solutions. In technical governments you cannot do the same and thus the theme was less at the centre of attention. However, even when it was not, foreigners were always easily criminalised. This has to do with other dynamics, for instance the fact that this theme strengthens the right.

Then, you can make a distinction between marked and unmarked categories. Before there was any foreign immigration in Italy and before anyone became aware of the phenomenon, in the 80s, you could read on Italian newspapers news such as "honour killing: Southerner shoots wife and children", or about thefts and frauds, often they would highlight the Southern origin of the culprit, even if most offenses were committed by Northerners. But nobody would say this or make it salient. The same holds true today with foreigners. You do not hear "Italian kills, Italian shoots, Italian steals", it is not emphasised, made salient and memorised, because the category "Italian" (as "Northerner" before) is not marked.

Do you believe that all foreigners are criminalised or is this specifically about migrants?

This question can be interpreted in many ways. With "foreigners", you can refer to representatives of financial companies, so-called "expats", rich immigrants, or even tourists. But perhaps the answer would be the same one in all of these cases. There is a very strong component in racism against immigrants that does not have anything to do with their objective diversity, with the fact that they are not Italian, even though this is obviously present in the discourse about representation, identity, cultural threats etc.

Although it is often overlooked, a very important element is the fear of the poor or the stigma on the poor. Many representations of migrants in Italy are similar to those of the first half of the nineteenth century, for instance, with the phenomenon of urbanisation, in Paris. Victor Hugo's *misérables* were described in a similar way. There is a tendency, in very unequal societies, to fear those who are most deprived and might react and contest this subordinated position.

The tendency is often to naturalise subordination.

Secondly, the tendency is to naturalise this state of subordination and describe it not as the outcome of exploitative and discriminatory social relationships or lack of rights, but as the very nature of these people. Southerners were depicted as lazy, idle, and often foreigners are represented in the same way. Generally, there is a strong attention towards offenses committed by the poor and a certain carelessness when it comes to those, even systematic, committed by the rich. Of course, if they are celebrities, it is a topic, because it makes the headlines. However, generally the gaze of the media and the political world belongs to a certain social class. Journalists and politicians do not come from the lower classes. They look at the poor with fear, mistrust, and difficulty of understanding.

The criminalisation of migrants exists in the whole of Europe, but is the problem addressed homogeneously or are there different models of dealing with the issue?

First of all, the concept of criminalisation is even broader, it means creating potentially criminal subjects through norms, legislation, and institutional practices. From the moment you make immigration illegal, you have already created criminals, because people will still escape violence. This is already part of the criminalisation process.

However, if by criminalisation we only mean the representation of these people as criminal, if we refer to the discourse that connects criminality and immigration, then I must say that first of all there is no strictly comparative research (or at least I have not found any) that allows us to tell precisely what differences there are on the basis of data. But there is an abundant literature, even though not comparative, that leads us to believing that different countries have gone through the same phases in different moments.

Italy for instance, in the 90s, in the second half of the 2000s, and towards the end of the following decade, has gone through virulent and violent criminalisation campaigns specifically targeting migrants, more so than other countries. In other moments the difference was not that evident, as in the case of the famous Cologne rapes (one-millionth of the rapes that take place in Europe), that everyone knows something about. It was a moment in which, in Germany, migration were represented as a “refugee crisis”, an expression that has not been used in the case of Ukraine, even though more people arrived in two weeks than in a year of refugee crisis. There was a context of strong political and social tension, largely constructed.

These dynamics exist in all countries but follow different periodisations and sometimes even have different configurations. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the criminalising discourse is even fiercer and more violent on tabloids, but broadsheets do not do the same, whereas in Italy it is less violent and explicit, but it is generalised, even in mainstream information. Therefore, there are differences in the periodisations, in the distribution of the discourse among different types of media and political parties (let us not forget that up until one year ago Spain had no xenophobic party, it was the only case in Europe, alongside Portugal), so yes, there are differences.

What counts is that in other countries there may be themes that are less felt in Italy, which leave less room for this specific discourse. Except for these differences, though, the logic is the same.

How much does the way in which migrants and foreigners are represented in the media weigh, in your opinion, and which are the graphic and narrative tools that are used to criminalise them?

There are countless ways. The first is, simply, attention. When two girls were raped, one in the Caffarella park in Rome, one in the town of Guidonia, by some foreign youths, *La Repubblica* (neither a right-wing nor a xenophobic newspaper) dedicated hundreds of articles to this event, so attention is the first thing. Violences committed by Italians have never received the same coverage.

Origin is mentioned, as if it were a useful category to understand events.

The second thing is referential strategies (how you call people). You put the spotlight on the foreign nationality, according to the cycles I mentioned before, sometimes in the title sometimes in the text, but you always do it, even when it is not relevant to understand the news. This violates many deontological codes. If knowing that someone is from Tunisia does not help me understand, why say it? It is like saying “person with curly hair commits robbery”. It fixates this category in your memory as a marked category that helps you understand why something has been done.

Or in the case of the sexual violences committed in Rimini in '97, the media of the whole country started thematising the news, interpreting it as a case of “sexual violence & immigration”. Newspapers sometimes have little tables about “migrants and criminality” where they mention all the similar episodes, because the news has been thematised in that way, not as young rapists or male rapists, but as foreign rapists. At this point, they look for similar news and tell us that that is the interpretative key to understanding what has happened. That is what they are implicitly telling us. These are all ways in which newspapers and television news are making sense of the event. It is not interesting to say “person A did x to person B in that place”, whereas saying “the wave of serial killers” gives us the idea of a new phenomenon and thus becomes journalistically interesting. Sadly, it is oftentimes based on the category of origin.

Then you have the use of photographs: the Italian rapist is never depicted, his picture is not published, because he might sue the newspaper, while it is done with foreigners. Lastly, language, in the use of generalisations, of the plural form: “another event that adds to the long list of crimes committed by immigrants”, which is another way to say “this is not an isolated event”.

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