

Italy's Draft Law on the Prevention of Radicalization: A Missed Opportunity?

by Francesca Capano

As Italy prepares for long-awaited general elections planned for March 2018, a series of events involving acts of political intimidation and outright physical threats have been registered in a number of Italian cities. A far cry from the reoccurring incidents of political violence witnessed in Italy between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, recent events claimed by right and left-wing extremist groups do reflect a worrying trend that holds significant parallels across Europe and indeed the world.

The Italian Parliament is presently debating the approval of a draft law on the prevention of radicalization, an opportunity to develop common norms to combat extremism and radicalization across political or ideological alignments. Yet, it appears this opportunity may be missed, as the draft law in its current form places an exclusive focus on the threat of jihadist extremism over that of any other movement or manifestation.

On 28 November, in the northern city of Como, a group of right-wing skinheads interrupted a meeting of local NGOs discussing means to integrate migrants into the social fabric of the city.¹ No violence occurred, but the group forced their way into the NGOs' office and read out a "manifesto" about the migration crisis, defined as an "invasion" of Italy (and Europe). A video of the event caused a storm of indignation by both local and national political leaders, some of which, including the ruling centre-left Democratic Party, organized an anti-fascist citizen march in the city.

On 6 December, two days before the anti-fascist march in Como, a small group of activists tied to the Italian far-right political party Forza Nuova organized a blitz at the Roman headquarters of

¹ Jessica Phelan, "Video: Italian Neo-Nazis Interrupt Volunteers' Meeting to Bemoan Migrant 'Invasion'", in *The Local*, 29 November 2017, <https://www.thelocal.it/20171129/video-italian-neo-nazis-como>.

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the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*.² Dressed in black, the demonstrators had their faces covered and used smoke bombs, in what was billed as an act of intimidation against the whole editorial group *L'Espresso*. As later confirmed by the leader of the political party, the raid was described as the "first act of a political war against the Espresso Group and the Democratic Party".³ The editorial group is in particular accused of favouring increased protection for migrants arriving in Italy, as well as of supporting a now defunct legislation – the *Ius soli* law – that was supposed to grant citizenship rights to the children of regular immigrants who have spent at least five years in the Italian school system.⁴

Two days later, on 8 December, clashes broke out between activists linked to Forza Nuova and members of the Italian trade union, the General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) in the Italian town of Forlì. As reported by the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Forza Nuova had a stand at the town's Christmas market, gathering signatures against immigration policies, while representatives CGIL were distributing

leaflets in the same location.⁵ When the latter confronted representatives of Forza Nuova by creating a human shield in front of the stand, clashes broke out as the right-wing activists tried to disperse the crowd.

Three episodes in ten days make it clear that far-right extremism in Italy cannot be underestimated. However, tensions are simmering at both ends of the political spectrum. For example, in the early hours of the morning on 7 December an improvised device exploded at the entrance of an Italian police station in a central neighbourhood of Rome, causing no injuries. An Italian anarchist group later claimed responsibility, motivating the action as the start of "an international campaign to attack the men, structures and tools of repression" and in particular "law enforcement agencies" accused of being the primary "guardians" of "capitalism".⁶

The fact that polarization is mounting within Italian society, like in the rest of Europe, is not a novelty. The situation has been aggravated in the last couple of years, mainly due to the conjunction of lukewarm economic growth, heightened migrant arrivals and recent terrorist attacks on European soil.

² Jessica Phelan, "Italian Newspaper Offices Blockaded by Far-Right Forza Nuova Party", in *The Local*, 7 December 2017, <https://www.thelocal.it/20171207/italy-newspaper-repubblica-espresso-forza-nuova>.

³ "Blitz fascista sotto Repubblica. Militanti di Forza Nuova a volto coperto lanciano fumogeni. 'Solo il primo attacco'. Minniti nella sede del giornale", in *La Repubblica*, 6 December 2017, http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/12/06/news/forza_nuova_mascherati_fumogeni_intimidazione_repubblica-183252738.

⁴ "Ius Soli, Vitalizi Bills 'Sunk'", in ANSA, 20 December 2017, http://www.ansa.it/english/news/business/2017/12/20/ius-soli-vitalizi-bills-sunk-4_15626d80-7f65-443c-9f9f-17f8ae1009b3.html.

⁵ "A Forlì scontri tra Forza Nuova e sinistra: ferito un sindacalista", in *Corriere della Sera*, 8 December 2017, http://www.corriere.it/cronache/17_dicembre_08/a-forli-scontri-forza-nuova-sinistra-ferito-sindacalista-8f0ed00c-dc56-11e7-96bf-2722fd237ccc.shtml.

⁶ "Roma, gli anarchici del Fai rivendicano bomba esplosa davanti caserma carabinieri a San Giovanni", in *La Repubblica*, 7 December 2017, http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/12/07/news/roma_bomba_esplode_davanti_caserma_carabinieri_nessun_ferito-183339850.

Inspired by the German movie and book (*Er ist wieder da*, in English *Look Who's Back*), I have already addressed the issue of polarizing attitudes in our societies: ideas cannot be killed.⁷ Therefore, it is extremely important that we never let down our guard to any form of political or ideological violence.

The 2017 Europol *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* warns against the rise of right and left wing extremism in Europe.⁸ While right-wing extremist acts mainly target refugees, ethnic minorities and politicians, left-wing and anarchist groups are known to target government property and law enforcement agencies. According to Europol, there have been 27 left-wing and anarchist attacks in 2016, an increase from the 13 incidents reported in 2015. Despite having reported only one right-wing attack that can be classified as terrorism in 2016, 12 arrests related to right-wing terrorism were reported in total in the Netherlands, Germany and Poland.

According to Europol, member states believe there is no indication of a propensity by these groups to adopt terrorist methodologies, consequently leading them to consider the threat posed by right-wing groups as low. The discrepancy between increased crimes against refugees, migrants, minorities and politicians and the low threat perceptions reported by member states is explained by Europol with the lack

of organized structures behind these incidents: individuals and small groups mainly carry out attacks, and many perpetrators remain unknown. Thus, these incidents do not qualify as violent extremism or terrorism and are not reported by member states as such,⁹ a reporting dynamic that in itself should be reviewed by member states.

Despite worrisome signs, Italy seems to be focussing its preventive efforts entirely on religiously inspired radicalization. While a draft law to criminalize acts of fascist propaganda has been approved by the Lower House of the Italian Parliament,¹⁰ "criminalization" is a reactive prescription. Instead, Italy should make the most of this opportunity to enact proactive legislation, one that is capable of increasing preventive capabilities while also sending an important message to society: radicalization, extremism and the use of violence knows no ideological, political and religious boundaries.

As of late December 2017, the Upper House of the Italian Parliament, is discussing the country's first draft law on the prevention of radicalization,

⁷ Francesca Capano, "Un viaggio circolare per la storia?", in *La chiave di Sophia*, 18 February 2017, <http://www.lachiavedisophia.com/?p=12505>.

⁸ Europol, *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2017*, June 2017, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/tesat/2017>.

⁹ For more on right-wing extremism, including the lack of a clear definition of the phenomenon, see, Sophie Gaston, "Far-Right Extremism in the Populist Age", in *DEMOS Briefing Papers*, June 2017, <https://www.demos.co.uk/?p=3581>.

¹⁰ Crispian Balmer, "Italian Parliament Votes to Toughen Laws against Fascist Propaganda", in *Reuters*, 12 September 2017, <https://reut.rs/2xiEiQ6>. The draft law currently awaits final approval from the Upper House. See Draft Law No. 2900: *Introduzione del reato di propaganda del regime fascista e nazifascista* (Introduction of the Fascist and Nazi-Fascist Propaganda Crime), <http://www.senato.it/leg/17/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/48275.htm>.

approved by the Lower House back in July.¹¹ While there is no certainty that the law will be approved, the legislation foresees the establishment of a National Centre on Radicalization and a number of regional coordination centres. The National Centre is tasked with the development of the annual strategic plan for the prevention of radicalization and for the rehabilitation of already radicalized individuals, while the regional centres will be responsible for implementation at the local level. The National Centre is also required to assist the Ministry of Justice in the development of prison interventions aiming at the disengagement and rehabilitation of radicalized prisoners.

The draft law recognizes the importance of specialist training for police and military forces, penitentiary administration staff and ombudsman, teachers and directors of schools and universities and social and health care workers. It also requires the institution of university and post-university education, specifically dedicated to practitioners specialized in the prevention of radicalization, inter-religious dialogue and economic and intercultural relations with third countries of emigration. Training and education, as well as de-radicalization programmes, will need to be developed coherently with the national plan developed by the National Centre, to ensure inter-agency dialogue, thus reflecting the multi-agency approach

¹¹ Draft Law No. 2883: *Misure per la prevenzione della radicalizzazione e dell'estremismo violento di matrice jihadista* (Measures for the Prevention of Jihadist Radicalization and Violent Extremism), <http://www.senato.it/leg/17/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/48213.htm>.

that many scholars consider paramount in the prevention of radicalization.

Key elements for the development of a successful prevention strategy are therefore present in the law: education, social work, employment, health and social care, disengagement and rehabilitation programmes, training for staff, countering of extremist narratives on social media and interreligious dialogue. However, there is one caveat: the word "jihadist" accompanies the word "radicalization" in the whole text. Art 1. paragraph 2 limits the scope of action and defines radicalization as "the phenomenon of those persons who, even without any stable link with terrorist groups, uphold ideologies of jihadist origin, inspired by the use of violence and terrorism, even by Internet and social media".¹²

Therefore, the draft law is specifically tailored towards the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism of jihadist origin. If the law passes and enters into force, it will ensure the implementation of a national structure that could be useful to prevent any type of radicalization and violent extremism, but will be limited by law to act only in cases of radicalized jihadist extremism. Such an eventuality would represent a missed opportunity, both in terms of improving prevention and law enforcement effectiveness and as a more general antidote to growing instances of political and ideological radicalization within Italian and European society.

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¹² Ibid.

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