

Fixing Europe's Immigration Problem

Without reforms across the European Union, the Italian race riots will prove only a hint of the darkness to come.

By [SANDEEP GOPALAN](#)

Italy's recent race riots are only a forerunner of things to come. Massive illegal immigration and native resentment are inevitable by-products of the European Union's broken immigration system, while xenophobia and rampant racism undermine its moral authority and put it in the camp of many of the tyrants it claims to despise. Italy and other European countries must learn from the American experience that comprehensive immigration reform is essential. Here's why.

Even the most hot-headed Italian xenophobe cannot drive all of Italy's foreigners out of Europe. It is estimated that there are over 4.5 million immigrants in Italy. Precise numbers about the illegal population are hard to find: The Christian charity Caritas Internationalis puts it at over one million, but others claim that it is between 500,000 and 700,000. This is small fry compared to the 12 million illegal immigrants that the U.S. faces, and makes real reform possible.

Italian law makers have sought to institute harsh financial penalties and imprisonment to tackle illegal immigration. Under a recent law, those caught can be fined up to €10,000 (\$14,000). In early 2009, the Italian Senate approved a law to authorize doctors to report illegal immigrants who come to them for medical treatment. Landlords face jail terms of up to three years for renting their properties to illegals. The government even entered into an agreement with Libya's Moammar Gadhafi to return illegal migrants to Africa via Libya in exchange for \$5 billion over 25 years. These are quixotic follies.

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Race riots in Italy are a harbinger of worse to come if the EU doesn't act.





Despite all the legal saber rattling, immigrants pack Italy's jails: Almost half of the jail population is comprised of foreigners either awaiting trial or serving their sentences. Other than creating soft targets for blame and alienating immigrants, what exactly have they achieved? Criminalization and lack of opportunities guarantee a vicious cycle of self-perpetuating ghettoization. Crime becomes the only option, reinforcing popular stereotypes about African immigrants being dangerous criminals. The result is a net social loss.

What is the alternative? The Italians have tried amnesties before. Hundreds of thousands of people have been granted legal status under these amnesties, most notably between 1986 and 1998, but millions more are attracted by the possibility that they will become legal one day. Similarly, in an attempt to sustain its construction-fueled economy, Spain legalized over half a million illegals just a few years ago, but the flow of migrants continues unabated there also.

Illegal immigration is not just an Italian problem. It is a European problem and the EU must act. Many immigrants who enter Italy and Spain move to other countries. Given that many of these people come from countries with strong terrorist activity—like Somalia—illegal immigration poses dangerous national-security threats. The involvement of human trafficking rings with links to organized crime syndicates is another cause for alarm. In addition to the security implications, the horrendous plight of most illegal immigrants poses a challenge to European humanitarian values. All of these provide sufficiently strong incentives for all European states to confront the problem at an EU level.

There is no escaping this reality. Even the U.K., which is relatively friendly to immigrants, has seen horrific attacks on immigrants in cities like Belfast. Unless something is done fast, fortress Europe will show the world its most ugly face. This

will be a return to Mussolini's Europe—not the image to project if Europe is to be taken seriously in international relations.

Piecemeal legislative responses will not solve the problem. They make for good political theater and embolden local thugs to take the law into their own hands. The U.S. experience with the Minutemen—armed vigilantes who patrol the Mexican border—must be a sobering reminder of what lies in store. Italian vigilantes have already conducted house-to-house attacks on immigrants and the day is not far off when they escalate matters further.

Opportunistic politicians will also seek to take advantage in Europe, just as they have in the U.S. Many states in that country have passed harsh laws to take enforcement action against illegals, most notably the border state of Arizona. Backed by aggressive local police officials, these laws are used to harass both locals and foreigners. Employers, landlords, hospitals, and state agencies, all risk penalties unless they turn into government spies.

The current situation will increase tolerance for xenophobia and racism in Europe. Progress in human rights—achieved over decades—will be undone.

Comprehensive immigration reform must be built on strong borders and legal rights to employment. First, all EU states must contribute resources to border states to ensure that illegal crossings are prevented. This must include better policing, electronic fences, and more enforcement personnel. Funds must also be used to transport those worthy of deportation to their home countries after a legal process.

Second, a transparent and efficient regime of legal work permits must be put in place. Most immigrants come to Europe because there is a market demand for their services. A system of guest work permits granted in the applicant's home country is the first step. This would be funded almost entirely by application fees. Illegal immigrants must be allowed to qualify for these guest passes upon payment of a fine, with a guarantee of returning to their home countries upon expiry of the work permit. Work permit holders must have the right to change employers without losing the right to work—essential to prevent exploitative slave labor. Employers must be able to hire and fire workers under the scheme, and there must be no entitlement to welfare payments from the state. This model will eliminate the black-market economy, ensure tax revenues, and create a climate for acceptance and reconciliation.

Whether the EU likes it or not, a multicultural society is the reality for many states because of demographic challenges. If Europe does not act quickly, its politics will return to the dark ages of racism and xenophobia.

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