

Italy's Hidden Epidemic: The Shadow of the Mafia over Post-Emergency Europe

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On 4th April, more than two months after the declaration of the state of emergency and almost one month after the start of the quarantine throughout the national territory, comforting news began to arrive in Italy. The epidemiological curve has now stabilised, a new hospital specialising entirely in the treatment of critical coronavirus patients is ready, and there is a significant drop in patient admissions to intensive care units.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte refers to this time as “the worst crisis experienced since the war”¹, and we continue to direct our daily focus to the Civil Protection bulletin. Every day at 6pm the bulletin gives the population live updates on the number of new infections, people healed, and, above all, the deaths caused by Covid-19. Awaiting this information has become the most important daily appointment for many, for the past few weeks now.

Now, nearing the end of the first (but certainly not the last) month of quarantine, and having seen and considered some comforting news on the health front, the attention of public opinion can begin to turn to other concerns. The first, and most pressing, being the economic one. This is no surprise, as the economic stand-by experienced by Italy, and across Europe, will cost dear to the Old Continent and beyond. These worries are even more understandable in a country like Italy, that has still not managed to wriggle its way out of the quicksand of the 2010 sovereign debt crisis, and the subsequent years of heavy austerity that followed.

Therefore, the political debate is dominated by the problems in the Eurozone with a battle that (for a change) sees Rome (supported, among others, by Madrid, Paris, Lisbon) and Berlin (together with The Hague); the first nations calling for the creation of an ad-hoc common debt mechanism to face the impending economic crisis (the so-called Eurobonds), with the latter two not in the least willing to consider such a scenario.

On the other hand, problems are not lacking on the domestic front either. Firstly, from the cracks in the majority enjoyed by the former Prime minister Matteo Renzi, who pressed for a reopening of the factories and a gradual end of the quarantine to be started before Easter (called “madness” by Luigi Lopalco, an internationally renowned epidemiologist in the fight against Covid-19)², to the opposition of the nationalist right-wing, who consider Conte's anti-crisis measures insufficient and wish to ride the continental crisis triggered by Germany's denial to the request for European solidarity brought forward by Italy.

Yet, if the majority of the newspapers begin to allocate more column-space to post-crisis analysis, with editorialists intent on predicting more or less imaginative social revolutions, or boring the readers with already-heard speeches about technology and its fundamental role in everyone's lives, very little space (especially in proportion to the seriousness of the problem) has been dedicated to what will be the most serious and immediate economic, social and political consequence of the collision of Covid-19 in Italy: the increase in the power of the mafia.

It is important to remember that, aside from the exoticism and nostalgia of Coppola and Scorsese films, Italy has many organised-crime groups with strong domestic-territorial designations, as well as another three ‘international’ mafias which count on well-structured networks that go beyond national borders and undertake

¹ Ansa.it, 22 March 2020.

² Corriere.it, March 28, 2020.

their business on every continent: *Cosa Nostra* (Our Thing), *Camorra* and *'Ndrangheta*.

The first, originally from Sicily, has been the world leader in heroin trafficking for many years and is closely linked to the Italian American mafia. *Cosa Nostra* rose to the fore in national and international news during the massacre of 1992-93, where the Sicilian '*Dome*' under the command of the so-called 'boss of the bosses' Totò Riina, targeted politicians, law enforcement officers, and magistrates engaged in the anti-mafia struggle. Nowadays their power has been reduced somewhat, thanks to the investigations of courageous magistrates and martyrs such as Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, and by international operations such as the 'Pizza Connection' (aimed at cutting the bridges between Palermo and New York)³. Even after the arrest of Riina and his deputy Bernardo Provenzano, *Cosa Nostra* has continued to have a very strong influence within their Italian territories and national political life⁴. Perhaps surprisingly, evidence was found of a secret negotiation between a part of the State and *Cosa Nostra* for cessation of the massacres⁵. The most influential member, Matteo Messina Denaro, has been on the run since 1993, yet his power and penchant for violence has struck the Italian collective imagination so much that *Cosa Nostra* has become to be considered the mafia *par excellence*.

The second international mafia, the *Camorra*, or '*O Sistema*' ('The System') to their affiliates, originated in Campania and mainly dedicate their attentions to drug trafficking. This operation manages the largest 'shop square' in Europe: Scampia (a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Naples). The *Camorra* leaped into the headlines in the first half of the 2000s due to the so-called 'Scampia war' that broke out within the powerful clan of the boss Paolo di Lauro. Drugs, however, are not the only way the *Camorra* have made their money; together with a prostitution racket, the exploitation of irregular immigrants, and illegal gambling, they run a unique and lucrative business around the illegal disposal of toxic waste. These highly toxic materials are dumped without the slightest attention to hygiene and sanitation standards, and they are burnt mainly in the area between Naples and Caserta; now referred to as '*terra dei fuochi*' (Land of Fires)⁶. These activities resulted in an increase in tumours in the local population, which was calculated as 46% higher than the rest of southern Italy by a local public health authority in 2017; an unprecedented health disaster that earned the area the nickname of 'Italian Chernobyl'⁷.

The third mafia has its headquarters in the tip of Italy's 'boot', in Calabria. *Never heard of the 'Ndrangheta?* Well, it is what is by far the *most powerful* Italian criminal organisation. Despite its influence, the '*Ndrangheta* tends to have a lower profile compared to the other two international mafias. Through solid family structures they maintain a rigid hierarchy that is mainly based on blood ties. This characteristic has meant that it has taken more than a century to investigate the complete organisational structure of the '*Ndrangheta*. As stated by the anti-mafia writer and journalist Roberto Saviano, finding the correct targets within this mafia took "eight times longer than mapping the human genome"; quite a feat. Today it is still not known who has historically held the highest position within the organisation⁸. Called 'the honoured company' by their affiliates, the '*Ndrangheta* manage 90% of the cocaine circulating in Europe, thus effectively controlling the continental market. They are therefore a real economic giant. To illustrate, when Rome was still in the middle of a heavy recession in 2013, the mafia's annual turnover was estimated at around 53 billion Euros- more than McDonald's and The Coca Cola company's profits⁹.

So, when we mention the mafia we are not just talking about violent criminal organisations capable of holding localised Italian regions hostage through their military strength and a certain consensus in the weaker sections of

³ Nytimes.com, March 4, 1987.

⁴ Definitive sentences have also shown connections between the Sicilian mafia and the ex Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, the politically longest-serving Premier in the history of Republican Italy. (Ilfattoquotidiano.it, April 20, 2018).

⁵ Marco Travaglio, e stato la mafia, Chiarelettere, 2014.

⁶ Roberto Saviano, Gomorra, Mondadori, 2006.

⁷ Ilsole24ore.com, November 15, 2017; Repubblica.it, November 14, 2013; Blood screening for heavy metals and organic pollutants in cancer patients exposed to toxic waste in southern Italy: A pilot study, Journal of Cellular Physiology, December 15, 2019.

⁸ Roberto Saviano, King of Crime, Nove Channel, October 18, 2017.

⁹ Clarin.com, December 17, 2019; Ilsole24ore.com, July 15, 2013.

the population. These are first and foremost real multinationals, giants of criminal capitalism capable of infiltrating the legal economy and politics through the huge flows of money they control.

Having clarified this point, if the world faces the consequences of what has been called "the most brutal recession in living memory"¹⁰ in an already weak economic context like Italy, the rubble of the country represents a table prepared for organised crime, which, according to many, have already started to feast.

For example, between the 7th and the 9th of March, at the very beginning of the Covid-19 emergency, violent rebellions exploded in twenty-two Italian penitentiaries, stretching from Palermo in the south to Milan in the north. The reports about the riots speak of a situation out-of-control: huge structural damage, looting, fires, dozens of injuries among prisoners and prison guards, and twelve deaths among prisoners due to drug overdose and methadone stolen from prison pharmacies. To this war report must be added the evasion of seventy prisoners, some of whom are linked to organised crime. These riots were supposedly begun as a result of visitor restrictions and concern over protective equipment and contagion within the cramped prison spaces. However, according to the judiciary, united by suspicion over the fortuitous timing, these riots may have been orchestrated by the mafia¹¹.

But this would be only the tip of the iceberg if so. If the estimates are correct, and an agreement cannot be made within the European Union to inject liquidity into the Italian economy, the country would suffer from a 6% loss of GDP¹². According to Ashoka Mody, former director of the European office of the International Monetary Fund, Italy will need a figure between 500 and 700 billion Euros to compensate for the effects of the virus, as this crisis "could soon become unmanageable"¹³. In short, these losses predict a catastrophe that would force many companies to close and would inflate the already high unemployment rate. In a crisis scenario like this, the Mafias face unique prospects of strengthening.

Firstly, they are already taking advantage of the loosening of controls in Italian ports to move cocaine more safely¹⁴. Further, with greater chances for financial security, the mafias will have the opportunity to penetrate the legal economy by injecting liquidity into companies suffering post-emergency financial difficulty, taking *de facto* control of operations and laundering dirty money coming from illegal activities.

Social control of the territories in which they are rooted also follows economic growth. As Piero Grasso, former national anti-mafia prosecutor and former President of the Senate, suggests, if those in the more vulnerable social strata are brought to their knees, without reference points for behaviour or good governance, they may turn to organised crime to meet basic subsistence needs¹⁵. If the mafia make up for state shortcomings by guaranteeing welfare for families in need, this social influence increase would result in even greater political control of their territories, especially in the regions where the 'exchange vote' (vote-buying)¹⁶, is already a widespread phenomenon.

So, how to potentially overcome the problem of the mafia in post-emergency Italy? The solution surely relies upon considered economic strategy and European unity.

¹⁰ The Economist, March 21th-27th 2020.

¹¹ Ifattoquotidiano.it 4 April 2020.

¹² Calculated by Confindustria (the confederation of Italian industrialists) (Il sole 24 ore, 31 March 2020).

¹³ MarketWatch.com, March 10, 2020.

¹⁴ As reported by the national anti-mafia prosecutor Federico Cafiero De Raho (Radio 24, March 31, 2020).

¹⁵ Ifattoquotidiano.it, 30 March 2020.

¹⁶ The buying and selling of votes for politicians close to, or affiliated with, the clans.

As Mody recalled in March, if not handled in time and with the right measures, the Italian crisis could have wreaked havoc in international markets around the world¹⁷. About a month after these claims, the lockdown and the consequent heavy recession are indisputable realities in Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, as well as in the rest of the world. In a context of a globalization that is not only economic but has supported mass viral-contagion, almost all countries across the globe are thrown into the same precarious situation. The final outcomes will be based upon when, and how, individual governments decide to intervene to protect their economies.

Italy, deprived of a fundamental crisis management tool like that of monetary sovereignty (along with the other great patient in Europe, Spain), would be unable to restart its economic engine through a strategic devaluation. That said, other solutions that would allow a rapid and almost painless exit from the crisis arguably remain on the table. For example, the creation of a common debt system with security issues, guaranteed directly by the European Central Bank and no longer by individual Eurozone member states, would represent a solution to this problem and, if continued after the emergency, could help the Union to achieve some important objectives such as the strengthening of national health systems, the speeding up of the ecological transition, the strengthening of education systems, and the improvement of living conditions in the least economically-sound areas of the continent. Poverty alleviation, quality education accessible to all and, more generally, the presence of the state, are the key requirements without which the battle against the Mafia can only be considered quixotic.

Another essential element is the harmonisation of EU national legislative systems. The mafia is globalised and it has been since well before the fall of the Berlin wall and the beginning of the post-cold war era. States alone do not have the slightest chance of addressing the problem. Yet, the specific crime of 'mafia association'¹⁸ does not exist in any other country except Italy¹⁹. Therefore, in countries like France and Germany where the Italian mafia has been present and active for a long time, the crime of 'criminal association' does not succeed in differentiating a gang of extortionists (however well organised and dangerous they may be), from the international mafias. Cooperation is needed, yet despite the existence of a European prosecutor, the investigation of mafia activities does not figure in their tasks.

Another fundamental element is law-tightening against money laundering. As stated by Roberto Saviano in 2017, Luxembourg, Lichtenstein, Andorra, Malta, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (via Jersey island and Gibraltar) engage with mafia capital one way or another²⁰. Yet further, as the courageous anti-mafia magistrate Nicola Gratteri recalls, many mafia operations are not intended to make money, but to expand their grip on their territories, their support, and power²¹.

The evidence is there, we just need to listen. If Europe does not prove united at a time like this, then the hidden epidemic, that of the *mafia virus*, is going to compromise the health of Italy, and of Europe as a whole. With the country already on its knees before Covid-19, if the mafia is able to strengthen their grip then democracy itself may be infected.

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¹⁷ MarketWatch.com, March 10, 2020.

¹⁸ Article 416 bis of the Italian penal code, introduced in 1982.

¹⁹ *Ilfattoquotidiano.it*, report "United Mafias of Europe".

²⁰ Euronews.com, April 4, 2017.

²¹ *Ilfattoquotidiano.it*, March 31, 2020.