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Nina Perkowski

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The Arrival and Summary Deportation of Irregular Migrants in Sicily

By Nina Perkowski

On 27 June 2012, a boat carrying irregular migrants arrived in Catania/Sicily, and all its passengers were disembarked, isolated from NGOs, UNHCR, and the general public. The following night, all those above 18 years of age were summarily returned to Egypt, where the boat had started its journey. Some of those deported had stated explicitly that they wanted to apply for asylum.

‘Some of the most pressing human rights challenges Italy has to face’ are posed by the treatment of migrants, Roma, and the Sinti in the country, according to the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muižnieks. In a damning report released on September 18 2012, he outlines his findings during a four-day visit to the country in early June. Among other shortcomings, the excessive length of court proceedings, the failure of the country to assist refugees and the exclusion and marginalisation of migrants, Roma and Sinti are criticised. Moreover, the Commissioner expresses concerns that bilateral readmission agreements with Egypt and Tunisia could lead to the *refoulement* of refugees. This February, Italy was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights for ‘pushing back’ irregular migrants to Libya (*Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy*). While this practice has been stopped, summary returns under readmission agreements might constitute exactly the same human rights breaches, violating the prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment, the prohibition of collective expulsions, and the right to an effective remedy.

One such summary return occurred right in front of my doorstep this June, and it illustrated clearly that Muižnieks’s concern is justified. I was living in Catania/Sicily, conducting human rights monitoring for borderline-Europe in the region and conducting research on the situation of migrants and refugees in Sicily more generally. During the three months I spent on the island, I witnessed and heard about many difficulties that irregular migrants and asylum seekers are facing there – many are sleeping on the streets, have no access to state support, and wait for excessive periods of time to receive a decision on their asylum application. The last week of June, however, posed particular challenges to the activists and advocates dealing with refugees and asylum seekers whom I had supported and with whom I had worked.

On Monday 25 June, the Italian Refugee Council (CIR) and a range of other organisations had celebrated World Refugee Day with a slight delay, and had welcomed a variety of speakers reflecting on current conditions and pressing needs regarding the situation of refugees in Italy. Speakers included delegates of various NGOs, UNHCR, the prefecture, and the local police station. Naturally, they came with varying viewpoints and agendas. Overall, the atmosphere was benevolent; many refugees attended, and it was a rather interesting afternoon and evening. The event was closed with the screening of *Terraferma*, an impressive drama dealing with the struggling of an Italian island’s inhabitants to respond to the increasing presence of migrants in distress at sea around their shores.

Only a few days later, this positive and welcoming atmosphere seemed light years away. On Wednesday night, 27 June, migrants irregularly arrived in Catania. 115 people were intercepted close to the city, after having been observed by the Guardia di Finanza, the country’s law enforcement force dealing with smuggling and financial crime, for two days. They came in an old fishing boat from Egypt, about 15 metres long. During the same night, some 30 of those newly arrived were identified as under-age and were transferred to reception centres for minors. The

rest were brought to an abandoned building, which was once meant to serve as a gym for a school. From what I heard, it was never actually used as it failed to fulfil safety standards.

I received notice of what was going on around midday the next day, and decided to go for a stroll to the former gym and have a look at the situation. When I arrived, I was struck by how little I could see: two big gates, a fence with a shirt tied to it, an apparently abandoned sports ground behind. Looking through the fence from the side, I could see that behind the gates, there were police cars, and a few uniformed policemen were standing around. I walked back and forth twice, and then decided to return home. I learned later that the migrants were apparently hosted in the basement of the building, and were thus completely invisible to passers-by.

A little later, somebody called me and told me they were going to the Palestra (the gym), asking if I wanted to come along. I did, and so I found myself in front of the very same gates I had passed by a few hours earlier. This time, representatives of UNHCR and local NGOs were there as well, and told me they had tried obtaining access to the migrants in order to identify them and advise them on the possibility of requesting asylum. They were, however, not allowed to enter the premises or talk to those arrived. After a little while, they decided to head home and to return the next morning. I did the same – after all, nobody was left in front of the place, there was no way to enter, and I was supposed to meet people to watch the Italy-Germany football semi-final. Many people were out to watch that match, and to eventually celebrate Italian victory. A local, leftist organisation that was hosting an international youth meeting decided to bring their guests in front of the Palestra, and to monitor the situation a little longer. Thanks to their initiative, we now at least have some information about what occurred over there late that evening.

The group present raised the alarm and mobilised a number of other activists to join them when they noted two large buses close to the Palestra at about 10:00pm, with a carrying capacity of over 100 passengers. Personally, I did not receive a phone call – my contacts had decided that it was ‘too late’ to disturb me and get me to come into a rather dangerous area, and I thus obliviously celebrated Italy’s footballing achievements. Only the next morning I learned about what had happened, and was told the whole story by my friends and contacts who had been present that night.

First, another 22 minors were transported away from the Palestra to specialised reception centres. As they did not know what was happening to them (there was no translator present), they shouted ‘political asylum’ and made it understood that they were Christians – they were afraid that they were about to be deported back to Egypt. To calm them down, a police officer apparently entered the bus and lifted his weapon – certainly a much easier way to make them shut up than organising a translator in due time.

Then, all remaining adults (53, as some had been taken in custody for being suspected of people smuggling) were about to be brought to the airport, where they would be summarily deported to Egypt. The activists present decided to stage a sit-in and blocked the bus from departing. They managed to sustain this situation for two hours, passing on information to the migrants via megaphone. In the meantime, a little crowd of onlookers had gathered – and after a while, some of them approached the activists and openly threatened them, saying they did not like disturbances in their neighbourhood. Only a few metres away from the Palestra is, allegedly, one of the main spots for cocaine dealing in Catania, which the Mafia, again allegedly, controls.

When some of the activists sought to approach the police regarding these threats, the answer was clear: those policemen present had miraculously not heard or seen anything, despite having stood nearby. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, as I have heard quite often during the last few weeks from my friends and contacts that there are intricate links and agreements between the Mafia, local politicians and the police. Given the threats and the apparent unwillingness by the police to protect the activists present, a number of them got up, leaving the sit in. In the end, only two

were left. Demoralised, fearful and tired, they eventually agreed to give up the blockade and to instead drive to the airport, to try to affect something there.

When they reached the airport, however, it was closed – after all, it was 2.30am, and no more flights were operating. This morning then, the press confirmed what all had feared – all 53 migrants had been summarily deported back to Egypt. Not only had neither UNHCR nor NGOs in Catania been given the opportunity to talk to them and to provide them with information, or to take note of potential asylum requests. But also there were apparently a number of people who clearly stated that they were Coptic Christians, and that they wanted to apply for asylum. The minors who stayed in Italy confirmed that this had been the case. Nevertheless, all adults were sent back to Egypt within less than 48 hours – without having their nationality confirmed by non-state actors, or having been able to exercise their right to apply for asylum.

This expulsion occurred in blatant violation of EU, international, and Italian law. Isolating 53 people from outside access, rendering them invisible to the outside world by locking them in a basement, not allowing even UNHCR to speak to them, and deporting them at dead night; all this has reminded local activists of the last boat arrival of irregular migrants in Catania, one and a half years ago. Now, as then, they tried their best to stop the summary expulsions. Now, as then, they failed.

Shocking as they are, these two incidents are not isolated events. When talking to the Italian Refugee Council, I learned that UNHCR and NGOs – who are part of the so-called ‘Praesidium’ which has a formal partnership with the Ministry of the Interior – are, despite this partnership, regularly denied access to irregular migrants also in other parts of Italy. As Nils Muižnieks’ report illustrates, this is reflective of a greater problem in the country: Italy’s unwillingness to respect the human rights and dignity of migrants and refugees entering its territory. Those newly arriving face a wealth of difficulties, including the threat of summary expulsion, very poor reception conditions, and excessive waiting times for court decisions.

There was an emergency meeting on 29 June of some activists, who were discussing what had occurred, what had gone wrong, and how one could learn for the future. The desperation, powerlessness and frustration were palpable; some were fighting back their tears.

As I was sitting there, I couldn’t help but feel hopeless, too – the system and structures against which both they and I are trying to work seem almighty at times; the support for migrants and refugees amongst politicians and the population more generally is vanishingly little. Are we all just battling a hopeless battle in the end, celebrating tiny victories while, in essence, nothing will ever change...?

Just the other day, a dear friend of mine listened to these rather destructive thoughts, and reminded me of something I wrote on my Couchsurfing profile many years ago. It’s a quotation by Dorothy Day, who said that

‘Nobody has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do.’

Maybe Dorothy Day was right, as was my younger self who decided to quote her, and as was my friend who so kindly reminded me that I did.

There is an incredible amount of work to be done.

Nina Perkowski holds an MSc in Refugee and Forced Migration from the University of Oxford. During her studies at Maastricht, Berkeley and Oxford, she focused on EU border controls and immigration policies. Nina is a German national and has just completed a three-month research stay in Sicily, where she conducted human rights monitoring in relation to migrants and asylum seekers for borderline-europe. She wrote about her experiences in her blog, which you can access via <http://ninanou.tumblr.com>. In September 2012, Nina started her PhD at the Graduate School of Social and Political Science at Edinburgh University.