

Will Italy set up a DNA Databank?

Frank M. Pizzorusso (September 24, 2007)



Political disagreements and preoccupations are voiced. Will the tests also used to stop illegal immigration? Will people's dignity always be respected? May this be the beginning of an effort to "catalogue" the entire population?

Last year Italy decided to sign up to the Treaty of Pruem. The agreement, already signed by seven other states, fosters ways of tackling cross-border crime by allowing for individual DNA profiles to be directly compared to those from computerised databases of other member states, for instance for identification and prosecution purposes. The intent is to boost cross-border cooperation, with a particular focus on fighting terrorism, cross-border crime and illegal immigration.



The only European countries without some form of DNA databank are Italy, Greece and Ireland. Italy is now preparing to set up its DNA databank, having set aside 11 million euros for this purpose.

But the passing of this piece of legislation may not be so easy, after all.

One obstacle stems from the suspicion that the DNA test could be used for purposes different from what it would be officially introduced. Rightwing MPs, for instance, have suggested using DNA tests to prove that immigrants applying to enter the country to join relatives already there were in fact really related. The proposal echoes a legislation recently approved in France and is bound to cause major reactions in the center-left government coalition.

A call for clear rules on how the database will be used have been voiced by Francesco Pizzetti, the president of Italy's Privacy Authority. "What is this database for? What information is to be put into it? There needs to be clarity about how this data is collected so that people's dignity is always respected," he said in a press interview. "Above all clarity is needed on which people can be forced to give samples and in which cases".

Leftists in the ruling coalition also appear to have reservations. The Communist Refoundation Party worry about the "cataloguing" of citizens, while the Green party fears that this could lead to DNA records being collected for the entire population. On the government side Maurizio Fistarol, an MP with the center-left "La Margherita" (Daisy) party and one of the many supporters of the initiative, said the databank is "a measure that in terms of security finally puts Italy on the same level as the rest of Europe".

"The DNA code extracted from biological samples is completely anonymous and offers no sensitive information about the person it came from," assured Alberto Intini, head of Italian police's forensic science unit.

The draft law envisages DNA samples being extracted from a saliva sample from anyone arrested for a violent crime punishable with a prison sentence of over three years. If a person is first accused and then cleared of a crime, his or her DNA record would be erased. The database could also include DNA from the family of missing persons, but only on a voluntary basis.

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