

In Latest Polls, Salvini's Lega Bests the Five Stars

Judith Harris (June 22, 2018)



It is no surprise that anti-immigrant rhetoric is a vote getter. Latest opinion polls show that the Lega of Matteo Salvini, just now threatening to expel the Romani ethnic people, or Roma, has overtaken Luigi Di Maio's Movimento Cinque Stelle, even though in national general elections only three months ago the Five Stars won 15% more than the Lega.

ROME -- The Italians did not need [President Donald Trump](#) [2] to teach them that anti-immigrant rhetoric is a vote getter. They are already there. In latest polls [Matteo Salvini](#) [3] of the Lega, whose latest campaign is viciously anti-Romaani ethnics, or Roma (we used to say Gypsy), just topped the [Movimento Cinque Stelle \(M5S\)](#) [4] headed by [Luigi Di Maio](#) [5]. The victory was by a hair, 0.2%, but victory it was: in the March 6 national general elections the Five Stars won 32% and the Lega, only 17%. This means that to date the Lega has bounced up by 15%. With this comes the implicit threat that, if Di Maio's starlets (who include the obviously distressed [Premier Giuseppe Conte](#) [6]) whine too much about Lega policies, the result will be an autumn vote and an even stronger Lega.

And what policies they are. The latest is Salvini's demand that Italy take a census of the Roma and expel all those lacking the right credentials to remain. In Italy, according to Rome University Professor Marco Brazzoduro, president of the Cittadinanza e Minoranze Association, six out of ten Roma are already Italian citizens and cannot be ejected from their own country. "Unfortunately we shall have to keep the Italians among them," acknowledged Salvini, who is Interior Minister in the fledgling government he shares with the Five Stars.



"The sad truth is that this government has many supporters and is popular because it identifies targets: categories of individuals that people can unleash their frustration on; enemies to be stoned," writes [Roberto Saviano](#) [7] in The Guardian June 19. This government, "even before it has got down to real work, has already done irreparable damage.... In today's world the notion of a 'zero landing' Mediterranean, where no migrants reach Europe, is nothing short of criminal propaganda." Read more here [>>>](#) [8]

To some extent the Roma statistics are already public record. In Rome itself, fully one-third are Italian citizens while another third are Romanians. The rest are from the countries of East Europe or those once part of Yugoslavia, such as Bosnia and Serbia. Kicking these out of Italy would not be possible, experts say, because they technically have no home. This leaves perhaps 300 Roman Roma without a proper residence permit and hence subject to possible expulsion -- "But these tend to leave Italy anyway, they want to go to Germany, where they are likely to be better treated than here," according to Prof. Brazzoduro.

Their camps are a problem. Of Rome's 6,900 Roma, the vast majority (5,700) reside in 17 legally authorized camps. Another 1,200 occupy unauthorized camps . These "camps of desperation," as one newspaper here called them, are broken up by police from time to time, but then reconstituted wherever new space is found. Indeed, 175 unauthorized Roma camps were torn down between 2014 and 2017 and, of course, immediately rebuilt elsewhere.

The reactions to Salvini's outburst have been extraordinary, as is hardly surprising. As the late lamented [New York Times](#) [9] correspondent Flora Lewis always warned, keep an eye on attitudes toward the Roma, for they forewarn a rise of anti-Semitism and of what comes after that. In fact, a statement from the Jewish Communities in Italy warned that, " Interior Minister Salvini's announcing of a possible census of the Roma population in Italy is worrying. It brings back memories of the racist laws of 80 years ago, which sadly are being ever more forgotten."

For the Partito Democratico's Acting Secretary, former minister [Maurizio Martina](#) [10], this marks "a dangerous and unacceptable escalation," and Salvini's words are "aberrant." And for Laura Boldrini, former president of the Chamber of Deputies, this is "inhumanity in power."

Even within the government there were signs of distress. Conte reportedly complained at Salvini's words, which undermined a meeting taking place just then in Berlin between the new Italian premier and [Chancellor Angela Merkel](#) [11], where the two had been working toward finding an EU solution to the problem of migrants. The meeting had been carefully arranged from Rome by Di Maio. whose campaign of presenting himself as representing ordinary Italians fades beneath Salvini's more aggressive stances. Not only -- Di Maio himself is notably weakened within his own suddenly weaker party.

Given the reactions, Salvini to some extent backtracked later in the day, saying that he was "not calling for the Roma to be fingerprinted," but that he still expected those without papers to be expelled.

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