



Will Europe Become an Upscaled Riace?

Unfortunately it is time for an unusual newsletter. On the 2nd of [October 2018](#) Domenico Lucano, the now ex-mayor of Riace and initiator of one of the most successful social experiments for refugee integration in Europe, was placed under house arrest.

Three years later, [this week, he was convicted to 13 years in jail](#) for abetting “illegal immigration, embezzlement, and fraud”, the sentence he will appeal.

Although the [project's](#) economic [sustainability](#) may be questioned and clearly needs [improvement](#), it over two decades helped 6,000 refugees to find shelter without much social tension or any major conflicts in the village. It offered housing and integration programs to 500 migrants at a time, representing up to 35% of the population.

Riace, of which the project financing has been discontinued by [Mateo Salvini](#), is in the meantime [back to what it was two decades ago](#), a dying and aging village community without much prospects for any tomorrow.

If this is “[fortress Europe's](#)” new attitude towards migration, Europe (especially rural Europe) is on its way to become an upscaled Riace, without any [demographic](#) and thus economic future.

In my opinion, the [alternative](#) is to change “[irregular migration](#)” into controlled [resettlement](#) for those we can help and offer [education](#) and employment chances in Europe. This is what is needed and what [Refival](#) stands for!

With permission of [Ester Driel](#), I republish [her LinkedIn article](#) about Riace and Domenico Lucano.

Kind Regards,

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(Concept Developer & Initiator)

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A local refugee of Riace working in the ceramics workshop, by now forcedly closed down.

What constitutes justice? A different perspective on the conviction of pro-migration mayor Domenico Lucano

By Ester Driel, Lecturer of Interdisciplinary Social Science / Researcher refugee reception in Italy

Yesterday, Domenico Lucano, ex-mayor of Riace (located in Calabria, Southern Italy), got condemned for 13 years of prison, together with 25 other inhabitants who always tried to support humanity by opening the doors of their town to refugees. In four steps, I would like to reflect upon the (in)justice of this trial and it's implications.

1. Domenico (amongst other things) got condemned for "promoting illegal immigration". Though this seems like he structurally illegally smuggled people into Italy/Riace, he actually tried to help refugees in need in a very few extreme occasions - in line with citizens' obligations written in the constitution. He arranged an identity card for a young kid who needed to be hospitalized immediately due to health circumstances (and therefore needed an identity card). Also, another friend of Riace, Becky Moses, died in a fire in an illegal tent camp/working camp where migrants get exploited to do cheap agricultural work. This happened after she forcedly left her home in Riace because government funding for refugees got blocked. Ironically, she died because she returned to her tent during the fire to collect the identity card which is crucial for refugees and that she legally obtained in Riace (signed by Domenico Lucano). In this light, it may not seem strange if Domenico Lucano (shortly after) informally suggested another local refugee to marry her Italian friend to avoid the same fate.

2. The sentence of 13 years (and in addition having to pay back 700.000 euro to the Italian state) is absurdly high. Especially considering the fact that actual 'mafiosi' (of the local 'nDrangetha mafia) and other criminals that include murderers and people who purposely shot migrants get away with only a few years of prison or without any punishment (for more info, see e.g. [Mimmo Lucano condannato a tredici anni e due mesi](#)). If the judges in Calabria are so strict, one may wonder why these other crimes do not get punished equally hard. Moreover, the accusation asked for only seven years of prison, and one may doubt why the judge gave almost double. This especially raises question marks given the timing: Just a few days before the regional elections where Domenico Lucano put himself forward as a candidate with the anti-mafia magistrate and former mayor of Napoli, Luigi de Magistris, he received this extreme sentence that hinders him from further participation in the elections.

3. What I have also witnessed during my research in Riace is that Domenico Lucano is a reliable politician, an extremely warm-hearted human, and someone who does everything to create a more justified world and revive his beloved Riace. However, simultaneously, I perceived him (I am sorry) as one of the poorest bureaucrats I've met, making him off course, more sensitive to administrative sloppiness - also by others. At a certain point, 7 NGOs (SPRAR projects) were involved in the reception of refugees due to the high emergency and the continuous arrival of refugees sent to Riace by the region. In an area where nepotism and corruption, unfortunately (e.g., due to poverty) have deep roots, one can imagine someone may have profited from this chaos. However, I also witnessed that Domenico Lucano always fought against such practices and tried to combat them as much as possible.

4. The sentence also includes the fact that Domenico Lucano allegedly "counted votes" after the local elections to see who had supported him and who had not. During my fieldwork, where I intensively followed Lucano for five years, I never witnessed such a thing as a 'counting votes policy', led by the mayor. What I did notice, though, is that in all of Calabria, every town I visited, people in the bars, clubs, restaurants, and town squares informally count votes after local elections. By gossiping about 'who voted for whom', they distinguish which citizens are 'part of us'. So, counting votes is a common, historical, cultural practice of the poor Calabrian region that in the sentence is presented as the invention of one specific mayor. And this is only one example of things being interpreted entirely out of proportion and out of context.

I wrote this article with the purpose to nuance the image that the (Italian) far-right tries to put forward (e.g., "people helping refugees are mostly criminals themselves and just do that for their own profit") and to stimulate a debate: What constitutes real justice? Is that obeying the law, even if the law itself seems unjust? Or is that searching for more humane ways to live together on this planet, no matter where you come from?

The above is based on the intensive anthropological fieldwork I conducted in Riace for my Ph.D. at Utrecht University. If you want to discuss more, of course, feel free to e-mail me at any time through e.y.driel@uu.nl.