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The Real Dangers of Being from a so-called Safe Country

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In March 2023, the Italian government expanded the list of so-called safe countries of origin. While Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cape Verde, Georgia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia were previously on the list, Gambia, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia have now been added. Back in May (DL 7 May 2024), the Italian government updated the list of 'safe countries', designating the nationalities which, simply by virtue of their place of birth, are earmarked for a super-fast asylum process, almost always leading to expulsion papers and sometimes deportation. The new countries on the list are Bangladesh, Cameroon, Columbia, Egypt, Peru and Sri Lanka. Being added to the list is rarely based on an evaluation of the objective conditions in any given country, whether it is really a safe place or not, but instead on diplomatic deals that prioritise economic trade links over human rights. This can be seen, for example, in the recent decision by the Court of Catania against the police in Ragusa (case n. 9302/2024), recognising the right for an Egyptian citizen to stay in Italy, arguing that Egypt cannot be defined as a safe country even according to the Italian Foreign Ministry's own communications on the state of free speech under al-Sisi. It is also striking that the countries from which many people are currently coming to Italy have been added to the list.

Below are a few instances of people we have met in Palermo over the last couple of weeks, all from so-called 'safe countries', who are suffering the consequences of this inhumane policy.

1) Y. is a young Egyptian man that we've known for some years now. He entered Italy 10 years ago as a minor, gained documents, then didn't manage to renew them as an adult. Since a year now he goes to school, does odd jobs, and has gone to great efforts to take care of his psychological health despite the huge difficulties he faces. Together with his lawyers, he's prepared a request for protection in Italy, based on his years of integration and his lack of any solid ties elsewhere (including in Egypt). But with the new procedure on safe countries, simply going to the police station to present the request would almost certainly lead to him being detained in a detention center, and possibly deported.

2) H. is a young woman from Peru who came to Italy recently with a tourist visa. She managed to find work, is learning Italian, and wants to find a way to remain here. Her options, however, are even more limited than before, given that Peru has just been added to the list: simply going to the police to present an appropriate request could land her in administrative detention.

3) T., from Ivory Coast, has just come out of one of Sicily's detention centers. He made an asylum request and – because of the sped-up process for safe countries – was interviewed and had his claim rejected within the span of 3 days. He tried to call his lawyer but to no avail, probably because of the Summer holidays; the sped up process also means that there's less time to present an appeal (15 rather than 30 days). T. is now out of the official time limit to present an appeal, even though his new lawyer will try.

4) A. is a young Gambian man who, after a few months in Algeria, Libya and finally Tunisia, entered Italy by sea one year ago. He was placed in a reception center in central Italy, where he began to learn Italian. Because of the new accelerated procedures, however, after only a few months he had already made his asylum request, been interviewed, and been refused international protection. While he took a lawyer to lodge an appeal, the judge nevertheless refused to 'suspend' the expulsion notice; if Gambia had not been on the safe country list, this suspension would have been automatic. This means that while he waits for an appeal on his case, K. does not have a permit to stay. He moved to Sicily to stay with a cousin, his only family in Europe, who thankfully took him in. He spent the Summer months doing manual work in a beach resort, without a work contract because the expulsion order is still active. His next court hearing is in October, by which time he will somehow need to prove his integration in Italy in order to have even a fighting chance of regularising his presence here – despite not having a temporary permit.

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