

Scirocco - Latest News from Italy

28.07.2026: New EU Sanctions Regime: Criminalizing Flight Under the Guise of Combating Smuggling

On [July 9](#), the EU announced the introduction of a new, targeted sanctions system aimed at migrant smuggling, human trafficking, and other forms of organized crime, including the trade in firearms and illegal drugs. Similar to existing sanctions regimes, the sanctions are to be directed against natural persons and entities [“posing a serious threat to the EU's values, its security, or international security”](#).

The package rests on [three operational instruments](#): freezing the assets of listed individuals and organizations, prohibiting all persons within the EU from making funds or economic resources available to those individuals and organizations, and banning entry into or transit through EU territory.

Combating [“migrant smuggling and people-smuggling crime”](#) has long been at the top of the European Union's migration policy agenda, and the adoption of corresponding measures was already announced by the Commission President in her State of the Union address to the European Parliament last September. Rather than aiming to improve the safety of people on the move and the conditions of their flight, however, the sanctions regime is above all another building block in the EU's policy of external border closure. The adoption of the package must therefore necessarily be viewed against the backdrop of the entry into force of the new EU Migration Pact and the adoption of the Return Regulation, which once again lead to a profound curtailment of access to protection, as well as to the precarization and criminalization of flight and migration. While the EU has for years been unwilling to create safe migration routes, it has itself created precisely the conditions it is now trying to combat. What is at stake is stripping people seeking protection of the last remaining possibility of reaching Europe.

The cynicism of this policy becomes unmistakably clear especially with regard to the cooperation between the EU and Libya. Although it has long been comprehensively documented that the [Libyan smuggling network](#) is deeply intertwined with state structures and largely in the hands of militias, the EU has only recently announced an [expansion of cooperation](#) with the rival Libyan authorities and their allied armed groups in the east of the country. While the so-called Libyan coast guard is supported by the EU with extensive financial and increasingly also military means for 'migration deterrence,' those same militias simultaneously earn considerable sums as smugglers from people seeking protection who board boats headed for Europe - often only to intercept those very boats themselves again shortly thereafter.

In its criticism, published even before the official announcement of the planned measures, Sea-Watch addressed precisely this absurd dynamic: [“Sanctioning individual actors while politically and financially cooperating with the very same structures is simply hypocritical”](#), an NGO spokesperson told »nd«.

Following the official announcement of the sanctions regime by Commission President von der Leyen and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kallas, Italian Prime Minister Meloni wasted no time claiming the [‘success’ of the agreement](#) on the measures for herself. [“Europe is finally heading in the direction that our Government](#)

[has indicated with determination](#)", the Prime Minister wrote in a post published on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Ankara, shortly after the EU's announcement, on the platform X.

Italy's shameful pioneering role, which Meloni continually uses to position herself both domestically and abroad, is the result of a long-standing national migration policy that criminalizes flight under the guise of ostensibly combating smuggling. According to our data, collected as part of the ["Dal mare al carcere"](#) project in cooperation with Arci Porco Rosso, 467 arrests based on the offense of "aiding illegal immigration" under Art. 12 TUI were documented in press reports in 2025 alone. The actual number of detentions is likely significantly higher. The arrests often occur immediately after a boat carrying people seeking protection lands, with summary evidence, frequently affecting individuals who are then wrongly convicted as smugglers, even though they are themselves seeking protection.

The consequences of this criminalization are increasingly being felt by the general public as well, and have recently come to pose a real threat to the functioning of the Italian judiciary. The presiding judges of Italy's supervisory courts recently drew attention, in a [letter](#) to Mattarella, to the record overcrowding of Italian prisons, and the national judges' association ANM (Associazione Nazionale Magistrati) [sounded the alarm](#) over the growing staff shortage that the Italian judiciary has already been struggling with for some time. While legislative reforms continually expand the judiciary's responsibilities and duties, the corresponding personnel resources are not being increased. The ANM's central board warns that this situation threatens to worsen considerably as the new EU Migration Pact is implemented, since the new rules ["will lead to a significant increase in the urgent proceedings assigned to the specialized chambers, without this being accompanied by a corresponding increase in judicial and support resources"](#).

Against the backdrop of the severe restrictions on the fundamental rights of people on the move enabled by the implementation of the CEAS reform (see our [Scirocco](#) of June 12 on this), as well as the steadily advancing criminalization of flight and migration, the simultaneous disruption of the justice system is more than just an alarming signal. A supposed constitutional state whose policies knowingly result in it no longer having sufficient capacity to fully ensure compliance with rule-of-law standards has long since abandoned its commitment to the validity of universal human rights.

The sole consequence of this domestic and foreign-policy criminalization of flight, and of the EU's systematic curtailment of existing migration routes, is more death and suffering. If the EU wants to live up to its own claims to the rule of law and human dignity, it must start by creating safe and legal migration routes and finally put an end to the death and suffering of innocent people.

