



**Italy**

## Pro-refugee Italian mayor sentenced to 13 years for abetting illegal migration

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The former mayor of an Italian town who revitalised his community by welcoming and integrating migrants has been sentenced to more than 13 years in jail for abetting illegal migration and for “irregularities” in managing the asylum seekers.

Domenico Lucano, 63, known locally as Mimmo, the former mayor of Riace, a tiny hilltop town in the southern Calabria region, was **put under house arrest** in 2018 for allegedly abetting illegal immigration, embezzlement, and fraud.

According to the magistrates, Lucano had flouted the public tender process by awarding waste collection contracts to two cooperatives that were set up to help migrants look for work.

His arrest came a week after Italy’s former far-right interior minister, **Matteo Salvini**, announced a series of anti-immigration measures, which included slashing funds for migrant reception and integration. It also followed the **suspension by the public broadcaster, Rai**, of a TV show about Riace during the investigation.

During his mandate, Lucano, a former schoolteacher, made Riace famous for its much-lauded model of integration as a means of reversing depopulation. He was hailed in 2016 by Fortune magazine as one of the world’s 50 greatest leaders, having settled more than 500 refugees in Riace, a town of 1,800 inhabitants, and preventing the closure of the local school.

On Thursday, the former mayor was sentenced to 13 years and two months in jail.

The ruling came as a shock in **Italy**. It was almost double the seven years and 11 months requested by prosecutors.

Lucano was also charged for organising “marriages of convenience” after he helped arrange a wedding between a Nigerian woman and Italian man so that the woman, who had been forced into sex work in Naples, could live and work in **Italy** legally. The charge was previously struck down by the supreme court of cassation, Italy’s highest court of appeal.





Protesters voicing their support for Domenico Lucano in 2018. Photograph: Matteo Bazzi/EPA

“I have no words, I didn’t expect it,” Lucano told reporters after the sentence. “I spent my life chasing ideals, I fought against the mafia; I sided with the last ones, the refugees. And I don’t even have the money to pay the lawyers ... today it all ends for me. There is no justice.”

News of the sentence was hailed by Salvini - a fierce opponent of Lucano’s pro-migrant policy - who is standing for the regional council. With Lucano also a candidate in a regional election, Salvini wrote: “The left is running candidates sentenced to 13 years in prison.”

Lucano said he would appeal his sentence. He will remain under house arrest, as in Italy sentences become definitive only after two appeals, the second to the supreme court.

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