

## **Europe and drug policies: Italian propaganda ends up in a fiasco**

**by Salvina Rissa**

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"As a group of NGOs and professionals working in the field of drug addiction and as the main organizations involved in harm reduction policies and programs in Italy, we are deeply concerned about the position of the Italian government on harm reduction".

This is the opening sentence of a letter sent by a group of NGOs and professionals to the chair of the European Horizontal Drugs Group in Brussels. This was a serious but necessary step to avoid being misrepresented in the war of attrition led by the Italian government against harm reduction policies at the European level.

But let us take a look at the facts. In Europe, a common position on harm reduction has been found over the years and confirmed in the "European Union Drug Strategy 2005-2012". Incidentally, Italy signed this document too. As of late, however, Italy has been trying to impose its own concept of harm reduction. In our country, the ideological fury is aimed at dismantling the very basis of harm reduction, to the point of cancelling this term (substituted for by a reductive and strongly stigmatizing circumlocution: "prevention of diseases and deviant behaviours correlated to drugs"). On the Old Continent, where harm reduction has been developed, cancelling this term is a battle lost from the start. The Italian delegation has therefore taken a position demanding to impose its own "definition", via a list of "accettable" and

"unacceptable" interventions: the latter are treatments with heroin for medical uses, injection rooms, and pill testing.

The countries which implement these measures (and there are many in Europe) must have been shocked, one can be sure. No country has the right to impose or to forbid any kind of intervention to others, and everyone is free to experiment at home whatever practice they prefer. But this is the etiquette in civilized countries, not in ours. It goes without saying that the Italian demand clashes with any rational principle: what we need is evidence-based new practices, not anathemas. But rationality is even less among our customs. The *diktat* on harm reduction cannot be accepted, but in the meantime the Italian "hard line" jeopardizes European cooperation in the drug field. At least we are coherent in being anti-european.

As in all wars and skirmishes, a dose of propaganda does no harm. So the Italians have come to Brussels showing off a document of their Antidrug Department. The text, which blacklists the abhorred practices (heroin treatments, injection rooms, pill testing) is presented as having been agreed upon by both the government and the non-profits. This is a blatant falsehood. Only some of the non-profits have participated in the working group for the discussion of the "guidelines for the prevention of correlated pathologies" (this is the ill-famed document). Moreover, several of the leading ones (Gruppo Abele, Cnca, Lila) have refused to underwrite the final text - hence the letter sent to the European group in order to restore a minimum of fairness.

A war is a war, and the propaganda machine knows no rest. If a blow ends up in a fiasco, better to hit harder - this must have been the brilliant idea of the Antidrug Department. In

fact, a few days ago, shortly after the last meeting in Bruxelles, Mr. Giovanardi - the Prime Minister's Undersecretary for drug policies - has declared to the Italian media his personal reading of the results: at last, Europe has accepted the Italian position on harm reduction, clarifying which interventions are "admissible" and which ones must be banned. But for the sake of truth this spoof story must be exposed. The motion concerns the treatment and support of intravenous drug users with Hiv; and asks the UN to promote the access to *basic* prevention measures (such as the exchange of syringes), which in many countries are not yet implemented. This has nothing to do with the European position on harm reduction, also because harm reduction is a strategy with much wider scopes and a much wider range. Therefore, Europe has not sanctioned any practice as heresy, as several delegates have underlined in Brussels.

If the War on drugs is in a tight spot, Giovanardi's skirmish further downgrades it to a farce. And the whole affair is discrediting Italy on the international scene.