

Global coalition of public figures and parliamentarians demands Italian government drop charges against Domenico 'Mimmo' Lucano for supporting refugees

A global coalition of public figures and parliamentarians including Noam Chomsky, Ada Colau, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Carola Rackete, Yanis Varoufakis, Niki Ashton and Jeremy Corbyn have today (Monday) written to Italy's prime minister, Mario Draghi, president Sergio Mattarella, minister of the interior Luciana Lamorgese, and minister of justice Marta Cartabia demanding charges against former mayor of Riace, Domenico 'Mimmo' Lucano, be dropped immediately.

As mayor of Riace (2004-2018), Lucano came to prominence for welcoming migrants. Riace was known as a dying town with its population in freefall. Lucano resettled hundreds of migrant families, breathing new life into the town, and was rewarded with three terms as mayor with his "program of hospitality, rejuvenation, and abundance". He won international acclaim as runner up in the 2010 World Mayor competition, featuring in *Fortune's* 2016 list of greatest world leaders and was awarded the Dresden Peace Prize.

In 2018 he stepped down as mayor and was soon in the crosshairs of far-right politician Matteo Salvini, who became interior minister and placed Lucano under house arrest and accused him of "colonising Italy with migrants." In September of last year, the courts handed down a shocking 13 year prison sentence on Lucano. He is appealing the judgement.

Following his conviction, Lucano appealed to the Progressive International (PI), a global network that unites, mobilises and organises progressive forces, for help. In a letter to the PI, released publicly today, he requested "support to fight the charges set against me, to stand up for the migrants shut out of our society, and to dismantle the fortress that has been constructed along the borders of Europe."



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In response, the PI, in alliance with DiEM25 and Catalunya en Comú, has launched a global campaign to free Lucano, organising the letter to the Italian authorities demanding the charges against him be dropped.

In an open letter to Lucano, released today (Monday), the Progressive International said:

“We believe that the Riace model is an inspiration for the world. When our governments built fortresses to keep migrants out, you welcomed them in. When local criminals and global corporations conspired to exploit their lack of legal protections, you built a global village and a Città Futura — a city of the future — where all residents could learn trades and find shelter.”

“We are unequivocal: Your 13-year sentence is both a travesty of justice and a blatant violation of the common principles of freedom, democracy, equality, peace and stability that the European Union claims to uphold.”

Former mayor of Riace Domenico Lucano said:

“The stakes of this case are much higher than my own freedom. Solidarity itself is on trial. No crime was committed in our town of Riace. The crimes are those of our government in Rome, which denies the most basic rights to the refugees that live here, and leaves them to drown on the Mediterranean Sea instead.”

Noam Chomsky, a member of the PI’s Council, said:

“Domenico Lucano offered real hope for revitalization of Riace and for its becoming a model for others. His punishment is a disgrace. He should be released at once and helped to carry forward the important work he had initiated.”

Jeremy Corbyn, former leader of the UK Labour Party and member of the PI’s Council, said:



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“Our demand is quite simple: drop the charges. Mimmo and his co-defendants are decent humanitarians, who have supported victims of war and misfortune around the world, revived their community and offered an example to the world. Refugees are people just like us trying to find a place of safety. The hospitality of the people of Riace should be rightly seen as the height of human civilisation, not having to defend itself in court.”

Yanis Varoufakis, member of the Hellenic Parliament, DiEM25 co-founder and member of PI’s Council, said:

“Our television screens are full of sad pictures of refugees fleeing from the warzone in Ukraine and being welcomed in the rest of Europe. The way we treat refugees is indicative of our humanity.

“Mimmo Lucano is being dragged through the courts and fined ridiculous sums of money for doing that which we celebrate when it comes to Ukrainians. Double standards are the poison of the soul.”

ENDS

Notes to editors

Text of Lucano’s letter and the PI’s response

To the members of the Progressive International,

My name is Domenico Lucano, and I write to request your support.

For many years, we have suffered a crisis of solidarity here in Italy. While governments in Rome have promised to deliver prosperity, regions like Calabria have been starved of resources. Young people have been forced to emigrate to find economic opportunity. And with their departure, our towns have been abandoned to history.



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Amidst this process of depopulation, migrants from across the world have travelled to Italy to find a better life. But instead of welcoming them, our government has detained them, demonised them, and deported them. The true face of 'Fortress Europe' is visible here in the south of Italy: inhumane, illogical, and — by the right to asylum enshrined in international law — illegal as well.

In my town of Riace, we rejected the drift toward dehumanisation to reawaken our community. We provided decent work, health care, housing, safety — not only to those who had lived here for generations, but also to those who had just arrived from long journeys abroad. We founded the Città Futura to realise a new future for Riace, preserving our local heritage precisely by welcoming refugees to our community.

I was elected on this platform three separate times — a revolutionary program of hospitality, rejuvenation, and abundance. Over the course of these 14 years, Riace became a beacon of hope for the dispossessed peoples living in Italy, and a source of inspiration for sanctuary cities around the world.

For these crimes of compassion, we have been persecuted. Under the banner of "Italians First," the forces of reaction have targeted our town and the model of hospitality that we fostered over more than a decade. First they blocked our funding. Next they placed me under house arrest. Finally they forced out the migrant families in our community. Their aim was not only to destroy the Riace model, but also to send a message that such hospitality would not be permitted anywhere in this country.

Now, the courts have condemned me to more than 13 years in prison for the absurd charge of encouraging "illegal" migration. It is a ruling that left me speechless: a shocking affront to our justice system, and a dangerous signal to undocumented migrants living among us. Prime Minister Mario Draghi speaks often about the need to safeguard human rights, but he is silent in the face of this historic injustice.



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The stakes of this case are much higher than my own freedom. Solidarity itself is on trial. No crime was committed in our town of Riace. The crimes are those of our government in Rome, which denies the most basic rights to the refugees that live here, and leaves them to drown on the Mediterranean Sea instead.

I write now to ask your help to rectify this injustice. In recognition of the Progressive International's courageous defence of persecuted peoples around the world, I request your support to fight the charges set against me, to stand up for the migrants shut out of our society, and to dismantle the fortress that has been constructed along the borders of Europe.

Domenico Lucano

Dear Domenico,

On behalf of the Progressive International, we thank you for your letter, as for your courage in the face of such brutal repression. We stand with you in this struggle. As you wrote in your letter, solidarity is on trial in Italy. The courts do not intend to punish you alone, nor the 26 others implicated in your case. On the contrary, Matteo Salvini and the entrenched interests he represents intend to send a message that they will not tolerate such "crimes" of decency and hospitality. Exclusion and exploitation are the only laws they know.

Sadly, Salvini is not alone. Across the EU and around the world, governments are demonising migrants and criminalising those who give them shelter. From Emmanuel Macron in France to Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Greece, Narendra Modi in India to Joe Biden in the USA, politicians who claim to prize human rights have conducted pushbacks, constructed walls, built detention camps, and fenced their borders with barbed wire.



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We believe that the Riace model is an inspiration for the world. When our governments built fortresses to keep migrants out, you welcomed them in. When local criminals and global corporations conspired to exploit their lack of legal protections, you built a global village and a Città Futura — a city of the future — where all residents could learn trades and find shelter.

We are unequivocal: Your 13-year sentence is both a travesty of justice and a blatant violation of the common principles of freedom, democracy, equality, peace and stability that the European Union claims to uphold.

The Progressive International demands that all charges related to your case are dropped immediately — that a thorough investigation is undertaken by the European Court of Justice and relevant Italian authorities into the connected interests that led to the original indictment — and that Prime Minister Mario Draghi take immediate action to safeguard the rights endowed by international law to all migrants and the humanitarians who come to their aid.

Progressive International

Campaign webpage (on the same embargo):

<https://act.progressive.international/freemimmo/>