

**Italy**

Sicilian prosecutors wiretapped journalists covering refugee crisis

Guardian staff

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Sicilian prosecutors investigating sea rescue NGOs and charities for alleged complicity in people smuggling have wiretapped several Italian journalists covering the central Mediterranean migration crisis and allegedly exposed their sources.

Prosecutors in Trapani this month charged rescuers from charities including Save the Children and Médecins Sans Frontières with collaboration with people smugglers after thousands of people were saved from drowning in the Mediterranean.

The Italian newspaper Domani revealed on Friday that in the course of their investigation, prosecutors secretly recorded dozens of conversations between journalists and rescuers who were unaware their phones had been bugged.

The newspaper published the contents of a file assembled by magistrates containing the transcripts of dozens of conversations between at least seven reporters and their sources, in apparent violation of their journalistic rights.

Lawyers and watchdog organisations described the move as one of the most serious attacks on the press in Italian history.

The documents show prosecutors in Sicily secretly recorded conversations between reporters and charity staff in which they discussed travel details and confidential information on the preparation of their articles.

“Among the reporters whose conversations have been wiretapped, are journalists who have risked their lives to expose the tragedy in the central Mediterranean, or the torture of migrants,” Domani investigative reporter Andrea Palladino told the Guardian. “This is a move that seriously jeopardises the freedom of information.”

The most serious case appears to be that of Nancy Porsia, a journalist described by prosecutors as a freelance journalist and expert on Libya who had worked for publications including Repubblica, Sky, Al Jazeera and the Guardian.

Prosecutors allegedly tapped Porsia’s phone for several days, collecting personal details and the names of her sources, Domani reported. The investigators also tracked her movements using her mobile phone’s geolocation facility.

In 2019, after [she exposed the criminal activities of a human trafficker working for the Libyan coastguard](#), Porsia and another journalist, Nello Scavo from Avvenire, were given police protection.

Prosecutors listened in on calls by both journalists, with Scavo’s conversation recorded while he was talking to a source about how to receive a video showing the violence suffered by migrants in Libya. Scavo’s own phone was not bugged.

“At that time, I gave the authorities and the police important information on the traffickers’ network, on their connivance with politics in Libya,” Porsia said. “But it is clear that, while I was giving them that information, they were intercepting my calls.”

She added: “The sad thing is that at that time, they knew my life was in danger after the threats from the traffickers and, instead of protecting me, they followed my movements.”

Other journalists whose calls were intercepted include investigative journalist Francesca Mannocchi; Sergio Scandura, a Sicily correspondent of Radio Radicale; and a

reporter from the newspaper El Mundo.

Andrea Di Pietro, a media lawyer and legal adviser for the Italian watchdog Ossigeno per L'informazione, told the Guardian the scandal was "one of the biggest attacks against the press in the history of this country".

Di Pietro said it was not forbidden to wiretap journalists if they were suspected of committing crimes, "but in this case it sounds like the journalists concerned are not under investigation by the prosecutor's office".

"According to Italian law, wiretaps relating to conversations or communications of those people - such as journalists - who benefit from professional secrecy cannot be used."

Italian prosecutors intercepted a journalist's conversations in 2017, when prosecutors accused of mistaking a refugee for one of the world's most notorious people-smugglers [wiretapped Guardian correspondent Lorenzo Tondo](#).

At the time, documents produced in court showed that Palermo prosecutors secretly recorded two conversations between Tondo and one of his sources.

In 2019, [Medhanie Tesfamariam Berhe, an Eritrean refugee](#) who had spent more than three years in prison, was acquitted by a judge of being a human trafficking kingpin, confirming Tondo's reports that he was the victim of mistaken identity.

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