

## **ITALY: SICILIAN COSA NOSTRA'S INTERESTS IN "GREEN ECONOMY" AND ITS LOW-PROFILE STRATEGY**

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The latest operations carried out by Italian police forces against the Sicilian mafia, also known as Cosa Nostra, demonstrate that the criminal organization, despite heavy losses, still has the feasibility and capacity to adapt to unfavorable circumstances, to reorganize itself to maintain a low profile and to infiltrate the economy through a "grey area" of white collars and entrepreneurs and a consolidated control of the territory.

The prime example of its new entrepreneurship can be gathered by the largest confiscation ordered in Italy's history from a single person on April 3. Italian judges seized 1.3 billion euros from Vito Nicastrì, dubbed as "Sicily's "Lord of the wind". Nicastrì is a 57-year-old Sicilian businessman, a native of Alcamo, near Trapani, in western Sicily, who earned his nickname through his interests in vast wind farms. According to the investigators, even if he is not an affiliate of Cosa Nostra, he had strong links with the top fugitive leader of Cosa Nostra, Matteo Messina Denaro, and laundered money made from extortion, drug sales and other illegal activities carried out by the criminal organization. Investigators said that "his well-aware and constant contiguity to the interests of the organized crime" allegedly facilitated his transformation from an electrician to a wind farm tycoon.

It is worth mentioning that the seizures include 43 companies; 98 pieces of real estate including buildings, stores and land; 66 bank accounts, credit cards and investment funds. These assets were seized not only in Sicily but also in the regions of Lazio and Calabria and in the rich northern Lombardy. The entrepreneur not only had strong links with the clans, known as "families", of western Sicily, but also with the clans of eastern Sicily and the clans, known as "ndrine", of the powerful Calabrian mafia, 'Ndrangheta, such as the Nirta, Giampaolo and Mammoliti 'ndrine from the town of San Luca and the Ciriaco 'ndrina from the town of Africo, in Reggio Calabria province. He was able to make business with companies from Luxembourg, Spain and Denmark.

In 2010, with the police operation “Aeolus”, it emerged that Cosa Nostra was attempting to infiltrate the business of the so-called “green economy” to take millions of euros from both the European Union and the Italian government by investing in wind power and environmentally-friendly business. The latest reports of the Anti-Mafia Investigations Directorate (DIA) and of the Italian secret services emphasize that Italian mafias invest not only in great constructions contracts but more and more in the alternative energy industry.

Vito Nicastrì was not an affiliate of Cosa Nostra, but he was part of the “grey area” of corrupted public officials and businessmen who don’t hesitate to act as linkages between the organized crime organizations and the legitimate business. He was a so-called “developer”. According to the latest DIA report, because of their acquaintance of the territory, the “developers” are figures specialized in dealing with local administrations proposing wind farms, obtaining public funding for their construction and, after their building, consigning them to the companies which have to manage them. These figures can develop their own businesses relying on their links with both organized crime and corrupted administrators. In exchange they facilitate money laundering and the infiltration of the clans in the legitimate market.

The business involving the “green economy” is so profitable for the various mafias that in the nineties a neologism was created for their involvement in the sector: ecomafias. Just to give an idea of the profits in the sector it should be mentioned that every produced Megawatt is sold for 2 million euros. With the economic crisis, farmers are more than happy to rent their lands to the photovoltaic or wind plants. A hectare of rented land can make a profit of 5,000 Euros per year, often much more than the profits from olives or grapes. Nicastrì allegedly corrupted public administrators to obtain public contracts. Between 2005 and 2006, one of its company obtained funds from the Sicilian Region for over 3 million euros. Nicastrì was placed under surveillance and must remain in the town of Alcamo for three years.

The links between the Cosa Nostra leader Matteo Messina Denaro and entrepreneurs of the contiguous “grey area” are shown also in the operation that on April 9 brought police to seize assets worth 30 million Euros owned by two building contractors, Francesco and Vincenzo Morici. The two entrepreneurs would have won a public contract for the renovation of the port of Trapani, in the western part of Sicily, according to the investigators, because they were part of a business cartel controlled by the Cosa Nostra powerful boss. They had to pay a percentage to corrupted officials of the province of Trapani and to the mafia “families” of the city. The contract envisaged the renovation of the Trapani port in preparation for the “America's Cup” that took place in Trapani in 2005. Among the seized assets there are 142 real estates and some docks of the port of Trapani.

Another blow to Cosa Nostra was inflicted on April 8, when 37 members of the organization were arrested. The investigators of the Anti-Mafia Investigations Directorate (DIA) discovered that the jailed historical representatives of Cosa Nostra, from prison, had delegated the boss Antonio Sciortino to reorganize the “families” in the province of Palermo, severely hit in the last years by arrests and seizures carried out by security forces, especially with operation “Perseus” in December 2008 in which 98 senior members of Cosa Nostra had been arrested in Palermo province. At least one person was throttled by the Cosa Nostra killers because he had opposed the reorganization plan inside the criminal organization. The boss Sciortino was arrested

with 36 other Cosa Nostra affiliates, among them the mayor of the town of Montelepre, accused of extortion. Carabinieri discovered, through telephone tapping, that several local politicians demanded assistance of the Cosa Nostra bosses to be elected as mayors in little towns of the province.

Despite the tactical defeats, Sicilian Cosa Nostra is still powerful, under the leadership of Matteo Messina Denaro. To recall, this “man of honor”, as mafiosi like calling themselves, earned a reputation of brutality by murdering a rival boss, Vincenzo Milazzo, and strangling his three-months pregnant girlfriend, Antonella Bonomo, in 1992. Cosa Nostra’s resilience is mainly due to its new strategy of “submergence” that it means maintaining a low-profile and camouflaging its activities. This strategy highlights its capacity to reorganize itself and to adapt itself to the new circumstances even in a moment of transition and crisis.

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