

"Don't Ask - I'll Tell!" Italian Homosexuals Fight for Their Rights in the Army and Police Corps

Marina Melchionda (September 03, 2008)



The right of the homosexuals to serve in the armed forces without concealing their sexual orientation is still subject to a ban in Italy as well as in the United States. But among animated political and civil debates, things seem to be changing, in Italy at least.

Italian homosexual police officers and soldiers are beginning a battle already fought by many of their colleagues in Europe: they want to end the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy that forbids the enrollment of people who openly manifest homosexual conduct.

Under the current policy gays and lesbians must keep their sexual preferences a secret while on the force or in the military. The "macho culture", according to them, has for too long deterred many enrolled homosexuals from coming out after seeing reprisals of various kinds against colleagues -- from ostracism to 'punitive' transfers.

With this in mind, a group of activists has set up an association called [Polis Aperta](#) [2] (Open Polis), whose statute will be drafted on September 26 in Bologna.

"We're coming out against creeping discrimination," said Nicola Cicchitti, the President of the association, while announcing the intention to organize a great number of events to bring the issue to the general public



Although Polis Aperta only counts 200 members, spread throughout the different branches of the Italian Army (among which the Carabinieri paramilitary corps, the finance guards and the traffic force), it is already pressing for an official recognition from the Ministry of Defense.

In the meanwhile, it has received strong support by [Arcigay](#) [3] (Italy's main lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender -LGBT - organization), which helped funding the association and is paying for the advertisement of its various events in Italy's biggest selling newspaper, [Il Corriere della Sera](#) [4]. One exponent of Arcigay has recently declared that "The birth of Polis Aperta marks an important new landmark in the creation of an ever more visible LGBT community. The presence of gays and lesbians in the armed forces and police will help these institutions to address the homosexual issue in a new and positive way and lead to a significant improvement in the everyday lives of gay service people".

[The Mario Mieli Association](#) [5], another gay rights group, also approves the constitution of Polis Aperta: "This is a novelty...that will move Italy closer to the rest of Europe and break with the absurd macho taboos which still pervade the armed forces".

The association has actually taken the decision to openly fight for the cause when encouraged by other European groups, particularly [Gaylespol](#) [6] of Spain, which hosted this year's annual get-together of 14 uniformed gay associations in Barcelona.

Italy is among the few democratic countries left that still impose a ban on the enrollment of homosexuals: nowadays, of the 26 NATO member countries, only 6 still apply this kind of discrimination. France, Germany and Spain already allow lesbians, gays, and bisexuals to serve. Italy is in countertrend, together with the United States of America.

But the prospects seem different in the two countries: while Italy could pretty soon be obliged to conform its legislation to the standards adopted within the European Union with respect to the protection of Human Rights, for the United States there appears to be no obligation of such a kind.

[The Pentagon's New Policy Guidelines on Homosexuals in the Military](#) [7], adopted after the promulgation of [Pub. L. 103-160](#) [8] in 1993, under Bill Clinton's presidency, state that "Sexual orientation will not be a bar to service unless manifested by homosexual conduct. The military will discharge members who engage in homosexual conduct, which is defined as a homosexual act, a statement that the member is homosexual or bisexual, or a marriage or attempted marriage to someone of the same gender". Thus in the U.S. the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy still forbids homosexuals to serve openly in the military, although 75% of Americans nowadays claim to be in favour of ending such discrimination, according to the [Pew research Centre](#). [9]

The cause of the expulsion of more than [11,000 policemen and militaries](#) [10] since the time it was approved, these rules still receive the applause of the Republican Party and of its candidate McCain: "[Let's not tamper with them](#)" [11], he said.

It seems instead that they could be revised if the Democrats win: Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic Candidate from Illinois, might start to repeal the current policy right after his election, according to Joe Solmonese, president of the [Human Rights Campaign](#) [12], the gay advocacy group. Solmonese affirms to be seeing "a sea of change" in the attitudes of the Democratic candidate.

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[4] <http://www.corriere.it/>

[5] <http://www.mariomieli.org/>

[6] <http://www.gaylespol.org/>

[7] <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CE5D81F30F933A15754C0A965958260>

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