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MEMO FROM ROME

# Divorce Tourists Go Abroad to Quickly Dissolve Their Italian Marriages

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO  
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ROME — The Italian couple boarded a plane from their home in Bologna for Bucharest, Romania. They were met there by a consultant for an Italian company, who took them to an office where they signed papers applying for residency in the Romanian capital.

The same day, they flew home.

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The couple, both in their mid-30s, have no intention of uprooting their lives in Bologna or their small office

services business there. They just wanted to end their marriage.

“A classic divorce takes too much time if you want to reprogram your life and start fresh,” said the husband, who insisted on anonymity.

An Italian divorce takes years. By December, the couple hopes, seven months after their trip to Romania, they will be legally divorced.

They are part of what officials and lawyers say is the growing number of Italians who circumvent the lengthy and often costly Italian divorce process by taking advantage of European Union legislation that recognizes divorce granted in any member state.

After obtaining foreign residency, they can in most cases file for divorce after six months, bypassing [Italy's](#) mandatory three-year legal separation. Romania, in particular, has become a destination of choice for divorce tourists, according to people who work in the business, who say it is quick, inexpensive and seemingly flexible about residency formalities.

“It was easy,” the husband from Bologna said. “I just signed.”

The number of Italians who divorce abroad is hard to gauge. Italy keeps no running total.

Gian Ettore Gassani, president of the Italian Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, said there has been a steady increase in Italians divorcing abroad in recent years, which he describes as “a defeat of the Italian justice system.” His association estimates that at least 8,000 couples have obtained a foreign divorce in the last five years, though he admitted the evidence was anecdotal.

He also points out that declaring a false residency can be illegal. “It’s also a crime to bring money abroad but people do it,” he said. “It’s up to the foreign judge to verify residencies and then each country has different laws.”

But Italy’s notoriously complicated divorce laws and the ease and reciprocity of divorce elsewhere in Europe have clearly created a niche industry.

“It’s true that we’re seeing offices offering such services opening up,” said Diego Sabatinelli, secretary for the Italian League for Quick Divorce, an association affiliated with the Radical Party, which was instrumental in legalizing divorce in Italy in 1970.

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there is a market, there is a need.”

His association has been lobbying Parliament to do away with the three-year separation period, which was originally intended as a period of forced reflection and possibly reconsideration. The period had been five years until it was shortened in 1987, but factoring in the legal process, it still usually takes at least four years.

If the split is not consensual, it can easily take 10.

Mr. Sabatinelli called the separation period “a crackpot compromise” to appease the Vatican, which wields considerable influence in this mostly Catholic country. The church does not recognize divorce, although it does allow annulments.

Spain, France and Britain are also divorce destinations, but Romania is known as cheaper and easier. The company that arranged the Bologna couple’s divorce, Divorzio Comodo, meaning “easy divorce,” offers all-inclusive Romanian quickie divorces, including airfare, starting at about \$5,000.

“Prices vary depending on the country, but basically you’re buying the same eggplant,” said an agent of Divorzio Comodo, who did not want to be identified.

“It’s a fast and cheap solution,” he said. In Italy, he said, “if things go well it can take a couple five years to divorce, but if things go badly a divorce suit becomes bottomless money pit, all to the advantage of lawyers.”

Britain is also popular, if more expensive. Known for its thorough financial investigations, it is often chosen by the financially weaker partner who may gain more there than in other European countries.

“London is called the divorce capital of the world, even for Americans,” said William Longrigg, a family law lawyer there and president of the European chapter of International Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. “In fact, rich men are nervous about moving to England because they know the consequences of getting a divorce in this country.”

Once a judge in the foreign country legalizes the divorce, it is sent to the public registry in Italy, where it is formally recognized.

Even without including foreign divorces, divorce has been increasing in Italy as marriage has tapered off. In 2009, the latest year for which statistics are available, 478 couples separated or divorced for every 1,000 who married, about twice the rate in 1995.

Recent bills in Parliament to hasten the divorce procedure have barely made it past the preliminary commission phase. There were whispers, after Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi separated from his wife two years ago, that speedy divorce might be back on the agenda but that has not been the case.

Apart from time and legal bills, separation also exacts a psychological cost, some divorce lawyers say.

“Once you’ve decided to split, those three years can feel very long, and often lead to more serious family crises, with continuous fights,” said Francesca Zanassi, a lawyer in Milan.

Delaying the end of a marriage rarely saves it, she said. She said that she had worked on countless divorces in the past 20 years, and could only think of one case where the couple got back together.

But a sociologist, Marzio Barbagli, believes that the current law fills the needs of a certain part of the Italian population, especially in the south, which sees legal obstacles to divorce as an important way of safeguarding the institution of marriage, or at least giving it a better chance.

“A legal separation is seen as a less serious break,” he said, “a typically Italian compromise with the principles of a traditional vision where marriage can’t be broken.”

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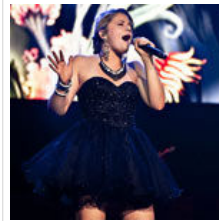
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