



The Berlusconi government and the debate on the future of the European Union

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This brief commentary would like to address the silent revolution currently taking place in Italy: for the first time in decades, this founder member is reassessing its role in Europe. Throughout most of their recent history, Italians across the political spectrum had regarded Europe as a sort of moral imperative, as an alternative and indeed superior identity in a country with a traditionally weak national identity of its own. In recent months and years, however, this has begun to change, and it is no longer politically incorrect to raise questions which would have seemed almost unthinkable a decade or so ago. The long-standing official Europeanist rhetoric is being questioned, if not abandoned altogether, and it is now perfectly legitimate for Italians in positions of authority to ask themselves: where do our national interests lie in Europe? As Italians, what type of Europe should we favour?

In spite of the above, and contrary to what one might assume when one listens to some of our politicians, public opinion in Italy, which became estranged from Europe during the past couple of years, would appear to be returning to its traditionally pro-European stance. As the recent Eurobarometers show, there is very considerable support for enlargement (which is by no means the case in other large EU member states, such as Germany or France), for a European constitution, and for enhanced second and third pillars. To a large extent, this pro-European come-back would appear to be the result of both the events of 11 September (giving rise to the notion of the EU as a protective shield) and the successful introduction of the Euro (strengthening perceptions of the EU as an area of economic prosperity and stability).

The Italian government currently led by Silvio Berlusconi would appear to be swimming against this tide, and is seemingly less enthusiastic about the European project than any of its immediate predecessors. Most significantly, the notion that there is necessarily a basic continuity in Italian policy towards the EU has now been discarded, as the political demise of foreign minister Renato Ruggiero, who had championed this interpretation in the past, clearly shows. Contrary to what the opposition parties would have us believe, however, this does not imply that the Berlusconi government is inherently anti-European or even Euro-sceptical. It is rather that, for the first time in Italy, Euro-realism seems to have gained the upper hand, leaving behind decades of rhetorical flourish. This Euro-realism basically implies a more pragmatic evaluation of Italian national interests within the on-going process of European integration. In the past, when it came to European politics Italian politicians tended to see their country as a sort of over-grown Benelux; in marked contrast, the Berlusconi government is trying to turn Italy into a Spain writ large, a 'Spain plus', though it remains to be seen whether it can achieve its goal.

The internal coherence which is Spain's major source of strength in Europe will not be easily attained in Italy, where highly contrasting views of the European project are currently to be found in government circles. In the first place, there is the position defended by the president of the republic, Carlo Ciampi, which is still an influential one, not least due to his personal role in enabling Italy to join the single currency. The president's stance is akin to that of the German president, Johannes Raus, and is partly based on the notion that Italy should cooperate closely with Germany in the future of Europe debate if it wishes to play an influential role. In this sense, Ciampi's vision of Germany is closer to that defended by Raus than that of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

At the opposite end of the spectrum we have Umberto Bossi, who likes to lambast the EU for its supposedly technocratic, antidemocratic nature, to the extent of labelling it 'the Soviet Union of the West'. Giulio Tremonti, the Finance Minister, who is widely regarded as the human, intellectual face of Bossi's Lega Nord, has argued that the era of technocracy is over in Europe, and it is high time that it is should be replaced by politics and democracy. Furthermore, given that in his view legitimacy still lies with member states, a more powerful Europe will have to be based on stronger nation states, which will devolve functions (but not sovereignty) upwards towards Brussels and downwards towards sub-national entities. Tremonti has referred to Lionel Jospin's by-now famous speech on Europe as a federation of nation-states in very favourable terms, and has occasionally warned against an over-extension of qualified majority voting in the future.

In addition to the above, we find in the Italian government what is left of the Catholic tradition, which undoubtedly plays in favour of the pro-European position. Interestingly, this is reinforced by the post-Fascist attitude towards the EU which is also favourable to a degree of continuity with the past, essentially because the National Alliance sees Europe as a source of badly-needed legitimacy. This attitude is best represented by the deputy prime minister himself, Gianfranco Fini, who is also the government's representative in the Convention, where his words are likely to adopt somewhat neo-Gaullist overtones favourable to the notion of a *Europe des patries*.

Last but by no means least, amongst Forza Italia ministers currently sitting in the cabinet there is a great deal of pro-British thinking, as is probably best demonstrated by recent statements by the Minister of Defence, Antonio Martino, whose pro-Anglo-Saxon mind-set includes a somewhat sceptical attitude (of a pre-Blair character) towards the Euro itself.

A word or two are also in order concerning the attitude of the branches of the Italian administration most involved with European affairs, which are currently very divided amongst themselves. As recent debates have shown –most notably regarding Italy's hesitations over the third pillar– the Foreign Ministry is broadly in favour of continuity with the traditional pro-European line. In marked contrast, the Ministry of Defence is much cooler about the European project, though this is hardly a novelty, and other branches of the administration simply tend to follow the political

momentum.

Given all of these very different attitudes and preferences, it will not be easy for the Italian government to act in a coherent manner, and for the time being a great deal will be left up to Berlusconi, the interim Foreign Minister. Partly as a result of this, the official Italian position in the debate on the future of Europe has yet to be clearly defined. In his first address to the Convention, Fini, who is facing the rather daunting task of finding a degree of common ground in the divergent positions of the coalition partners, was inevitably vague and lacking in precision. The deputy prime minister emphasized the role of sovereign nations (the Union, he said, is founded on the idea of sharing sovereignty, not sacrificing it), and claimed that he favoured integration "only where necessary", listing matters such as external and internal security. At the same time, however, he urged that decentralization should be applied "wherever it is possible to do so". In other words, it would appear that Italy's new government still needs time to define its position on Europe.

In spite of the above, it is possible to look a little more closely at the problems facing the government in this arena. As far as the future Basic Treaty (or Constitution) is concerned, the specific problem facing Italy concerns the legal value of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, given the vocal opposition already expressed by Bossi (and supported in this regard by the Finance Minister, Tremonti, who has objected that we already have the Geneva Convention). In addition, the government cannot ignore that the Catholics would like to modify the Charter in order to insert specific references to the Christian roots of the European project.

Other aspects of the Convention's task –as defined at Laeken– will pose fewer problems for the Italian government. True to form, Italy will underline the importance of involving national parliaments in controlling subsidiarity, and will also speak out in favour, not of a rigid catalogue of competences, but rather of a clear definition of the European Union's goals and missions. Amongst other things, this will mean pressing for a stronger integration in Common Foreign and Security Policy, given long-standing Italian fears of being excluded from informal 'hard cores'.

Given this scenario, it is not easy to predict what Italy's contribution to the debate on the future of Europe will finally be. Indeed the most important lesson to be learnt from recent developments is that Italy is becoming a less predictable European actor, and also a more difficult one to deal with. This has come as something of a surprise to fellow member-states: until now, the European Council had traditionally regarded Italy (not without some complacency) as a problem-solving member, at least once its economic difficulties had been brought under control. In future, it will not be so easy to take Italy for granted.

Secondly, and partly as a result of the above, we will probably see changes in Italy's bilateral alignments. More specifically, the Berlusconi government will continue to run into difficulties in its relationship with Germany (conversely, its centre-left predecessor worked well with Schröder during the Nice exercise), show considerable sympathy for the souverainist French approach, engage in marriages of convenience with the United Kingdom and align itself politically with José María Aznar's Spain. Mario Monti, the European Commissioner responsible for competition, has indeed suggested that Italy could best defend its national interest by means of the following European 'policy mix': staying close to Germany on institutional reforms, and joining Spain and the United Kingdom on issues concerning the liberalization of the economy. For the time being at least, the Berlusconi government is following the latter part of this recipe, not least because it can prove of assistance in implementing its plans for liberalization of the labour market. The first half of the formula is less likely to be applied in the near future, but Monti's observation has much to commend it when it comes to defending Italian interests. Even if it may be discarded in the short-term, given the Berlusconi government's apparent wish to position itself in a sort of intermediate position in Europe, it will probably be given further consideration in the not too distant future.

Ultimately, the role finally played by the Italian government will largely depend on broader European trends. At present, Europe is still perceived by Berlusconi as being too much on the left ideologically for it to be considered a safe arena. However, if the pendulum swings even further to the centre-right (as would appear to be the trend) then the European game could become much more interesting for this Euro-realist Italian government.

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