

# Italy: The Interaction between European Integration and Domestic Politics

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## I. Outline

A major change is about to take place as far as the relations between domestic politics and European integration are concerned.

The history of the so-called first Italian Republic can be summarized as a process of growing domestic consensus on the European integration, beyond the traditional left-right, catholic-non catholic cleavages. Around 1978-79, such a general agreement between all constitutional parties reached a top level, after both the important statement of the Parliament on foreign and European policy (voted by Christian Democrats, Socialists and Communists as well as by the small center parties) and the common federalist engagements at the first European direct election.

On the contrary the so-called second Italian Republic is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty on the attitude of Italian parties in European policy matters. Since the very background of the past consensus is about to decline, the expected change is supposed to be a conjunctural but not a structural one: once again Europe may be faced with a domestic cleavage of Italian politics, even if this new situation is completely differently shaped than during the former period of 1947-1977.

## II. The background of the European consensus between democratic Italian parties during the first Italian Republic

Why did the Socialist Party and the Communist Party join the two fundamental foreign policy choices which, during the very first decades, only had been adopted by Alcide De Gasperi, Carlo Sforza, Altiero Spinelli and by the cultural and political streams they represented?

Such a question has to be answered in the light of several international and domestic factors.

As far as the international implications are concerned, I would like to emphasize two main points that happen to be also the two main differences between Italy and Belgium in the matter of foreign policy in general:

a) in spite of the antinazi engagements of 1943-45, the Allies treated Italy as a defeated nation -as clearly appears from the peace treaty of 1947.

b) during the long era of the Cold War and the dramatic East-West confrontation, Italy was, and was considered as such by the USA, a "border country". It is impossible to really understand the European choice made by the new Italian de-

mocratic regime without taking into account the role of this general historical framework which gave Italy both constraints and positive chances.

These two main domestic factors are linked to the characteristics of the major Italian parties.

a) The Christian Democrat leader, Alcide De Gasperi clearly understood since 1945 the absolute priority for international and European policy to deepen and stabilize the new Italian democracy. The political "miracle" accomplished by De Gasperi was that he succeeded in convincing the very traditionalist and provincial catholic electorate of the need not only to join the NATO and the CECA but also to accept to be part of the Western and European block, including its economic and social values. Anticommunism of course played an important role, but economic interest and democratic values were also part of the strategy, in particular the option of free economy and free international trade (in association with Einaudi) on the one hand, the christian awareness of the need of a supranational democracy beyond the nation-state (see its contribution to the political dimension of the European Defence Community "CED") on the other hand.

De Gasperi didn't want Italy to come back to the pre-fascist democracy and emphasized the international constraints in order to stabilize the political modernisation (as did Adenauer in Germany and, later on, F. Gonzales and M. Soares in their own countries).

b) In spite of the harsh political confrontation with that block led by the Christian-democrats, the parties of P. Nenni (PSI) and P. Togliatti (PCI) remarkably contributed to the new Italian Republican Constitution in 1947, that even allowed some transfers of national sovereignty to supranational and international bodies, likely to reinforce peace and cooperation.

The Left's "step by step" maturation of an option for Europe, needed the communists to burst their bonds with the international communist movement and both the communists and the socialists to follow the europeanization process, common to all the European Left parties (but the Belgian and the French socialists), to succeed in going over from opposition to support of the EC. The evolution of the PCI was partly influenced by the SPD way to Europe, from K. Schumacher to W. Brandt. The constitutional characteristics of their opposition prepared the europeanization of the Italian Left parties.

For the Left parties, accepting European involvement was first of all part of their legitimization process aiming at conferring them an image of accountable government parties. However, it also gave them an opportunity to search for allies in the European Parliament. It finally was a means of improving the cohesion of the European Left. European institutions were the best framework for the social-democratic transformation of the PCI, the biggest communist party in Western Europe. Of course, the "détente"-era, the Ostpolitik and the need to react to the oil crisis (that originated a first confrontation between Europe and the USA) gave a concrete impulse to the europeanization of E. Berlinguer's PCI. The achievement of such a process includes the integration of the PCI (since 1991 Left Democratic Party, PDS) into the socialist group of the European Parliament and into the Socialist International.

Such backgrounds illustrate that, in Italy, Europe was not only a matter of foreign policy but also of domestic politics. On the one hand, the reference to Europe forced the Italian political system to modernize and to become more consistent with the European one. On the other hand, the political parties used Europe to grapple with some traditional as well as new handicaps of Italian demo-

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cracy. It would be wrong to consider it only as a party rhetoric. Europe more and more tends to be a part of the parties' identity, more particularly a part of the balance between national and international dimensions of their strategies, since the nationalistic option is no longer to be put forward after the fascist adventure.

One of the major issues of such an evolution was the involvement of Italians in favour of a federal Europe: the very high participation rate in European polls, the strong support given by all Italian democratic parties to the pattern of a federal Europe, including the vote at the European Parliament for the so-called "Spinelli Treaty" (voted by the EP in 1984), the critical attitude against the weakness of the Single European Act and the referendum of 1989 giving the EP constitutional powers.

### **III. The dark side of the European consensus in the '80s**

It is extremely important to realize that the "bon élève" in the matter of European federalism became a very bad one as for the implementation of European standards.

First of all, this clearly appears if we analyse the delayed transposition of European law into the domestic legislation.

Secondly, Italy's domestic compromises of the '80s increased the gap between national economic performance and European standards in matters like inflation rate, public deficit and debt, interest rates. The consequences on currency policy appeared in 1972 for the first time, then in 1978 with the hard debate on the European Monetary System (EMS).

The debate that took place in 1978 was strongly conditioned by domestic factors, such as:

- the crisis of the national solidarity government;
- the break between the PCI and the other parties.

It was the last one. During the 80s, the European rhetoric did not succeed in improving the public opinion's interest in European affairs. In spite of the remaining high participation rate in the European elections, often used as a kind of protest vote by the citizens, the public debate on European options was poorer in Italy than in France or in the United Kingdom. The Italian chairmanship in 1985 of course gave an impulse to the approval of the Single European Act (Milan summit) but, in general, the low profile of the Italian participation to the Council and the Commission confirms the gap arising between European rhetoric and disappointing political action at the European level.

### **IV. The time of uncertainty**

The Maastricht Treaty can be considered as a tremendously accelerating factor of the Italian Republic's crisis: to go on with the domestic "pact for inflation and currency devaluation", in order to finance social consensus and political clientelism, clearly became impossible, in front of the new compulsory convergence criteria to fit in with the European Monetary Union (EMU). Since such means were essential to maintain the internal stability, achieved by the "pentapartito" government but often backed by the opposition parties, the political crisis soon turned into an institutional crisis. The Italian kind of "Consensus Democracy" was about to separate Italy from Europe. The main worth of the new Treaty of 1992 lies in the fact that it openly showed that "the king is naked".

The raising European constraint (simultaneously with the end of the Cold War and with the so-called "tangentopoli scandal") had very important domestic consequences both for the "pars destruens" and the "pars construens": first of all the breakdown of the two major government coalition parties, the DC and the PSI, and secondly the self-assertion of new political parties (Forza Italia, Lega Nord, Alleanza Nazionale) and more political cleavages, opening a new era for the European policy.

The fluctuations of foreign and European policy between 1989-90 and 1995 witness objective difficulties. See, for example:

- the hyperactivist foreign policy of De Michelis ("pentagonal" or Center-European initiative, Mediterranean security policy, conjunctural alliance with UK...);
- the anti-Maastricht parenthesis of the Berlusconi government in 1994 and his Foreign Minister Martino (openly criticizing the EMU);
- the return to European orthodoxy with the Dini-Agnelli foreign policy.

It is a matter of fact that Italy loses, in the new geopolitical environment of the post-Cold War Europe, its past bargaining power as a "border country" in the framework of the bipolar system and that it meets raising problems to keep its status (see the exclusion from the "contact group" concerning Bosnia). Furthermore, the domestic instability of 1992-95 deepens the Italian political inclination towards introversion, which weakens both the European and the international policy of the country.

If pure continuity with the past is impossible, there are still no new European policy patterns in view for Italy. However the country is faced with an absolutely new phenomenon: European integration is about to cause negative reactions.

On the one hand, the need to fit in with the Maastricht convergence criteria resulted in an important and positive tripartite agreement on social and economic policy between employers, unions and government (Ciampi government, 1993), in fact a kind of "import" of the German model of social concertation. On the other hand, nationalistic reactions are about to rise: for instance, the right wing parties (Alleanza Nazionale and often, Forza Italia) represent opposition streams against the European Union.

Of course, the bad habit taken by many former governments to focus on the EU as responsible for economic and social sacrifices doesn't help to promote the popularity of the European ideals. There is a real danger of seeing a dramatic decrease of people's support to new steps forwards due to develop European integration. But it would be impossible to import the Thatcher or Chirac pattern of a "Nations Europe" into Italy.

The worst scenario is the fragmentation of the country. European reference could paradoxically be instrumentalized to deepen the crisis of the Italian nation's unity and more particularly the secession tendencies of Northern Italy emphasized by the Lega Nord.

Some similarity exists between the crisis the Italian and the Belgian states are presently facing: both countries are confronted with the rising of fundamental regionalist movements which sometimes even stress the opposition between European unification and national solidarity. The difficulties of the Maastricht project are of course particularly favourable to a reinforcement of such disintegration bias in weak European countries.

The best scenario is the achievement of the transformation of Italy into a "démocratie de décision" (Duverger) using both the chances of the domestic politi-

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cal revolution and of the Maastricht constraints to stabilize a modern and accountable democratic pattern. The logic of a bipartisan political system could lead to a new and deeper debate on European unification in the public opinion and so improve people participation as well as democratic control of the European process. However European integration is not to become a fundamental cleavage of domestic politics. Europe needs a certain degree of bipartisan consensus between major parties.

The open question is: how can such a virtuous evolution towards a kind of neo-republicanism take place in spite of the limited sovereignty that characterizes many European countries in the '90s? A crucial variable is the new balance between on one hand the extent the unavoidable limitation of the national sovereignty will reach, and, on the other hand, the reinforcement of common European institutions.

*Abstract*

*The European policy of the Italian Republic can be split into three periods:*

- *the first one is characterized, on the one hand, by the historical decision of the young democracy to integrate both the EC and the NATO, but on the other hand, by the harsh domestic political confrontation;*
- *during the second period the domestic consensus for Europe increased to become almost unanimous, but there was a dark side: the growing gap of economic performances, and more particularly as far as the public deficit was concerned;*
- *the third period can be qualified as the time of uncertainty concerning both the ability of Italy to belong to the hard core of the European Monetary Union and the negative interaction between the paneuropean fragmentation and the tensions concerning the unity of the Italian nation.*