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Introduction: Italy in the EU—Pigmy or Giant?[1]

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Summary

This introductory article discusses the circumstances under which Italy manages to forge 'national preferences' and push them through the European policy-making process. Drawing from the analysis of several policy areas, it concludes that Italy plays a major policy-making role, particularly when it acts as mediator between large countries and small- and medium-sized ones, and when it argues its case according to policy- and EU-appropriate logics. While Italy may not have it 'its way' all the time (as no member-state does), it still manages to influence the EU policy-making process more frequently and more significantly than the literature has so far conceded.

Introduction

This issue of *Modern Italy* is dedicated to understanding Italy's role in the European Union (EU) since the mid-1980s. Italy is still examined and studied as if it is not part of the process of European integration. Yet, this process, especially after the Maastricht Treaty (1992), has deepened to such an extent that it is practically impossible to discuss Italy (or any other member-state of the EU) independent of the process of Europeanization into which it has been drawn.[2] Maybe it is not a coincidence that the authors who have contributed to this issue of *Modern Italy* were also involved in the first comprehensive research by Italian scholars of the 'Europeanization' of Italy.[3] Its conclusion was unequivocal: there is no aspect of the Italian institutional framework nor of the public policy process that has not been shaped or influenced by decisions taken in Brussels—in which Italians had taken part. The results of that work led us to ask whether it was still possible to maintain the distinction that still holds in research and world views between domestic and European politics. Our reply was not, nor could it be, unequivocal. The distinction was thrown into question in different ways and degrees in various national policy, political and institutional sectors. However, the fact remains that Italy is increasingly shaped by the EU: or, rather, by its interactions with the EU.

'Europeanization' is not simply a process of influence that flows top-down, from the European to the national and sub-national levels, but also one that is

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bottom-up, from the sub-national and national levels to Europe.[4] However, in the Italian case, while research examining the first type of influence is beginning to be published, Italy's influence on the EU continues to be somewhat of a mystery.[5] There is a widespread view that Italy is a passive actor and is marginal to European decision-making. In the language of policy analysis, it is held that Italy is more of a 'policy-taker' than a 'policy-maker'. Much of the research of EU scholars has centred on the three largest member-states (Germany, Britain and France), based on the assumption that relations between these three are, and were, the only ones that have an impact on the EU. Obviously, it cannot be denied that such an assumption has a solid empirical basis. The equilibrium that has been established from time to time between the 'Europeanist' pressure of the German—French axis and the 'Atlanticist' position of Britain and its northern European allies has contributed greatly to understanding some of the decisions taken by the EU. Yet, history is not (nor was it) always so simple. This is not only because other small and medium-sized members have played a role in shaping the evolution of the EU, but also because Italy itself helped influence that evolution.[6] It may have done it in a peculiar way, but it did so nonetheless. It did so when it was able to make maximum use of its anomalous position: of being a large country which, precisely because it did not occupy a place among the 'great' powers in the EU, was the only one capable of playing a mediating role between the latter and the small and medium-sized members. Italy's strength, then, was in being accepted as a mediator between the 'large' and the 'small and medium—sized' member-states. As soon as it positioned itself differently, its influence decreased.[7]

In order to avoid an unfocused discussion of Italy's role in the EU, the authors in this issue of *Modern Italy* have examined various policies in the EU, including those of clear interest to the public (foreign policy and constitutional politics); policies that are of immediate financial or journalistic interest (Structural Funds and environmental policy); and those that touch upon consolidated social and structural features (employment and state aid policies, and gender policy). An attempt has been made to reconstruct Italy's role in the EU by probing terrain often left uncovered. This has not been a simple effort; rather, it has required, above all, a reconstruction of the EU's basic multi-level nature which contains the decision-making processes considered in this issue. It has involved the precise identification of Italian actors (ministers, parliamentarians, officials, interest group representatives, experts) who play a role in policy-making in the different areas being considered. Readers who can see through the complex picture that emerges will find themselves with a less simplified and less pessimistic view of Italy's role. It goes without saying that Italy did not always win in Europe; but nor did it always lose. The authors in this issue have chosen to analyse both decisions in which Italian preferences prevailed in European decisions and those in which Italy's positions were rebutted. What are the reasons that might explain why Italy was successful in some cases, and not in others?

Between the 'First' and 'Second' Republic

The various contributions to this issue of *Modern Italy* have an underlying theme: understanding whether Italy or the Italians in Brussels pursued objectives

that might be described in some way as in the 'national interest'. We must proceed with caution because precisely what constitutes the 'national interest' is not immediately clear, and even less clear is how to measure the influence of national interests in EU policy-making. The intergovernmental literature has not yet given a persuasive answer to either problem. Indeed, an academic industry has been spawned, producing rows of bookshelves with contesting visions, in an attempt to provide just such definitions. Our research has reversed the traditional position assumed by scholars, which has the national interest as the starting point of their work. We see national interest as the *result* of research, not its premise. In other words, we have taken an inductive, almost guarded approach rather than a deductive and quasi-normative one. We asked the question of whether, in this or that policy question being considered, an equilibrium point emerged that aggregated the preferences of the Italian actors involved (single actors, public officials, politicians, lobbyists). We see the manifestation of 'national interest' when relevant national actors agree on a specific preference and act in a coherent and agreed way to promote it. This, then, is the crystallization (albeit temporary) of an 'aggregated preference': that is, a policy position that has the capacity to rearrange the preferences of different actors who have different institutional roles, political affiliations and points of view. In this way, there is no doubt that our research provides some interesting insight into the capacity of Italians to identify their 'national interest'.

This insight should not be underestimated, especially in the light of Italy's post-war political history. The so-called 'First Republic' (which was established with the 1948 Constitution and lasted until the early 1990s) was characterized by a deep internal ideological division.[8] It could never develop a culture of 'national interest' because its principal political parties were bearers of different internationalist strategies: proletarian internationalism (in the case of the Communist Party) and Catholic ecumenism (in the case of the Christian Democratic Party). This ideological and geo-strategic fracture was institutionalized in a fragmented and rigid party system; more precisely, in the words of Giovanni Sartori, a system of 'polarized pluralism'.[9] The intractable ideological contrast between Communists and Christian Democrats, subsequently tempered in parliamentary committees where the majority of legislation was developed and agreed upon by the two parties, produced a country that was culturally introverted. For the Italian political elite, concern over domestic politics was always superior to that over foreign policy. Individual Italian political leaders of great intellectual capacity provided a positive contribution to the definition of the post-war international order in which Italy was placed: for instance, initiating the process of European integration (with the Catholic Alcide De Gasperi), or pushing Italy to full involvement in the military security system provided by NATO (with the secular Ugo La Malfa). Nevertheless, internal divisions led to the justification for the contracting-out of military and foreign policy choices to the main allies in the Atlantic Alliance (with the United States at the forefront). Italy thus became a 'semi-sovereign' state in the international system, limiting itself to effective, but not strategic, autonomy in some areas, such as the Middle East, that had an impact on internal security. Therefore, although Italy was a founding member of the process of European integration and a supporter of NATO, it did not have a political elite that was capable of promoting and defending the reasons for either. For a long period of time, the political elite on the left was radically

opposed to European integration and the Atlantic Alliance, while the governing political elite of the centre used Europe and the United States for domestic political reasons rather than for foreign policy purposes.

Given this historical, political and cultural context, it is understandable why Italy was considered a secondary actor in the European integration process, and continues to be so, despite the fact that its pro-European attitude has underpinned that process all along. However, Italy's attention towards Europe began to change in the 1980s, largely because the Communists, led by Enrico Berlinguer, began to recognize Europe's importance, along with that of NATO. Gradually, the Italian Left abandoned its opposition to the European Community (as it was then called) and became a coherent Europeanist political force. In addition, there were no alternatives to supranational integration after the failures of the nationalization policies pursued by the two French governments led by Pierre Mauroy between 1981 and 1983. It was the entire Italian political class in the 1980s that became increasingly aware of the need to play a more active role in the European process. This led to Italy becoming one of the supporters of the Single European Act of 1986 (with the government led by the Socialist, Bettino Craxi) and one of the protagonists of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 (with the government led by the Christian Democrat, Giulio Andreotti). Europe had finally become part of the horizon of Italian politics; it could not be otherwise, especially with the crisis, and its aftermath, of the post-war system of consensual democracy in the first half of the 1990s. The crisis significantly modified the predisposition towards introversion in Italian politics. While it may have resulted from the dissatisfaction generated by *Tangentopoli* ('rake-off city', referring to the exposure of systemic corruption in 1992–93) and by protest generated by the Northern League and electoral referendums, it also exploded because of the financial bankruptcy of the summer of 1992. The subsequent strict financial constraints imposed on public finances by the convergence criteria set at Maastricht removed the conditions for 'democracy, Italian style'; that is, for a democracy that was able to contain its internal divisions through an unscrupulous use of public finances.[10] Thus, the structural conditions of Italian democracy were changed both by the fall of the Berlin Wall, which ended the internal ideological cleavage, and by the convergence criteria in the Maastricht treaty and, more generally, by the Europeanization of the country.

The so-called 'Second Republic', which emerged during the crisis of 1992–96 and was gradually institutionalized with the transition towards a democracy capable of alternation with the 1996 elections, contains many old features alongside many new.[11] Despite the attempts by the leader of the centre-right, Silvio Berlusconi, to revive the fear of communism, Italian politics seem less divided ideologically than they were in the past. Indeed, alternation in government between competing political and policy alignments occurred for the first time in post-war history with the victory of the centre-left in 1996 and was repeated by the centre-right in 2001. These alternations could take place because, for the first time in the history of the Republic, there was a 'bipartisan' consensus of both political alignments on Italy's position in the international system. With the exception of a few minor political forces (Communist Refoundation on the extreme left and the Tricolour Flame on the extreme right), no party in the Second Republic questioned Italy's position within the Western alliances (especially NATO) nor its support for European integration. There

were anti-European sentiments expressed in public opinion and in the new party system in reaction to the deepening of the Europeanization process, especially on the centre-right with the anti-immigration stance and xenophobia of the Northern League. In addition, in the wake of the centre-right election victory in 2001, Italy's traditional support for the French-German axis in Europe was questioned. This led to the dismissal of the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Renato Ruggiero, who wanted to continue Italy's support. Berlusconi, who became Minister of Foreign Affairs *ad interim* in 2002, began to voice more loudly Italy's distancing of itself from its traditional Europeanist positions, placing the country in the Atlanticist coalition led by Britain, which included Spain and some of the states which entered the EU in 2004 (such as Poland). The Atlanticist position was moderated by Franco Frattini, who succeeded Berlusconi as Minister of Foreign Affairs. However, these are differences that are part of the democratic debate about the future of Europe and not the result of ideological models that are democratically incompatible. Moreover, as Fabbrini's article on Italy's role in the constitutional Convention demonstrates, Berlusconi's Atlanticist position was not shared by the entire centre-right. For instance, the government's representative at the Convention, Vice-Premier Gianfranco Fini from the National Alliance, ended up assuming positions that converged with the Europeanist views of the Convention's Vice-President and one of the Italian centre-left's leaders, Giuliano Amato.

Despite the emphasis on the Atlantic Alliance by Prime Minister Berlusconi and parts of Forza Italia (represented by the Minister for Defence, Antonio Martino), and despite the Euroscepticism of the Northern League and parts of Forza Italia (represented by the previous Minister for the Economy, Giulio Tremonti), the Italian political elite was far less divided on Europe than was commonly believed, especially outside of Italy. This elite became aware that Europe mattered, and mattered a great deal. The administrative structure of the national government, as well as those at the regional and local levels, have gradually been reformed to interact better with European institutions. Expertise in European matters has increased among Italian public officials as well as among the media, especially journalists dealing with economic issues. Above all, the sensitivity of public opinion to European issues has grown, developing a less uncritical attitude towards the EU (although public opinion in Italy remains the most pro-European on the continent).[12] If Europe matters, and matters a great deal, then it is a good thing that the traditional Europeanism of Italians has evolved towards attitudes that are better informed and reasoned. While Italian trust in Europe remains moderately high, so do both worries about the constraints integration implies, and expectations about the economic, social and cultural opportunities that may be offered.

Italy's role in the EU

If the EU's choices and decisions can have significant effects on single member-states (and, therefore, also on Italy), then exercising an important influence on the process that produces those choices and decisions is essential for a member-state. If an integrated Europe is both an opportunity and a constraint, then it is inevitable that every member-state will seek to maximize the former and minimize the latter. As the research here demonstrates, Italy is no

exception to this rule. The 'European game' is extremely complex. Europe is a supranational system that pursues a strategy of post-national democracy without precedent.[13] Its institutional organization and operational logic have all the characteristics of a compound democracy—that is, a democracy based on multiple separations of power.[14] Integrated Europe is more a system of *governance* rather than *government* one, having multiple levels of authority, often overlapping and structured around informal relations between groups, actors and institutions.[15] In this way, Europe governs without a government in that its decisions are the result of a sharing of responsibility and powers by distinct and separate institutions, and by the actors that work within them.

Although no institution within multi-level governance holds the monopoly of ultimate decision-making power, it does not mean that decisions are not taken.[16] During the initial phase of the European Economic Community (EEC), the Council of Ministers was the institution that represented the interests of the member-states and assumed this central decision-making role. However, the gradual institutionalization of the Community system strengthened the other institutions, such as the Commission, the European Parliament (EP) (directly elected since 1979) and the European Court of Justice (ECJ). The EU (as it has been called since the Maastricht Treaty) is now organized around three pillars: the single market, the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), and justice and home affairs. The first of these pillars is the most important for understanding the basic features of European integration. It rests on an equilibrium between institutions that represent the interests of the member-state governments (such as the Council of Ministers and the European Council), and those that represent the interests of the Community (such as the Commission, Parliament, and the ECJ). In the first pillar, an increasingly large majority of the decisions are made with the agreement of all the institutions, while under the other two pillars (and especially CFSP), they are made exclusively by the Council of Ministers (that is, the intergovernmental body), although, more generally, it has been the European Council of heads of state and governments which has come to play a growing strategic role in all three pillars. (It is sufficient to recall that even the powerful Council of the ministers of the economy and finance, the so-called ECOFIN, report to the European Council in certain policy areas.)

In such a compound institutional system, it is not an easy task to establish the influence of specific national actors—be they governments, interest groups, or single individuals. Some governments may be important in intergovernmental structures, such as the Council, but much less so in the EP; or, by contrast, they may find great resistance in the Commission. The Council's positions may even be contested before the ECJ. It is precisely to avoid generic (and, therefore, unverifiable) assessments of Italy's role in the EU that we decided to seek and find that role in the various areas in which European decision-making authority was manifested. Clearly, this empirical examination does not allow us a *definitive* interpretation of Italy's role in the EU, but it does provide us with a wide range of useful information. Moreover, because of its comparative nature, it allows us to identify the *factors* that may contribute to an explanation of the reasons for influence, or the lack of it. These factors may lead to higher-level conceptualization of prevailing influences in EU decision-making.

First, Italy was able to exert an influence on European decision-making when it was able to make use of *policy entrepreneurs* or *domestic bodies* with the

capacity to promote a particular position or preference with coherence and determination. For instance, although foreign policy has all the features mentioned earlier, it was the initiative by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Gianni De Michelis, that led to Italy's promotion of an agreement on European security and defence in 1991. Furthermore, it was Giuliano Amato's skill, with the support of Gianfranco Fini, that shaped Italy's influence on the constitutional treaty (although Giuliano Amato was not the representative of any Italian institution).

Second, and more importantly, Italy was able to exert an influence when it was able to generate *coordination mechanisms and procedures* among various national actors with an interest in a particular European decision. This form of concerted pressure was particularly manifested in the policy-making process that resulted in the definition of Structural Funds for the 2000–06 period, from which the Italian regions and government benefited greatly. Equally positive results occurred in the case of Italian policy-making for the establishment of a European position on genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and in the important institutional and legal objectives achieved through the coordination efforts of different Italian representatives during the constitutional politics of the Brussels Convention.

Third, Italy's position was successful when it was able to mobilize the *technical expertise* of ministerial officials and Italy's representation in Brussels. The quality and professionalism of the political leaders and officials from the Ministry of the Environment (in the case of GMOs), from the Department of Development and Cohesion Policy (in the case of Structural Funds), from the Department of Equal Opportunities (in the case of sexual discrimination policy) and from the Ministry of Economy and Finance (in the case of subsidies to Alitalia) allowed Italy to promote its interests or to limit the extent to which its interests were penalized.

Fourth, Italian negotiators were more effective when Italian positions were *argued* in the appropriate way with respect to the institutional arena in which they took place and to the negotiating tradition of the particular policy area. For instance, an appropriate argumentation strategy was used in the Directive on equal treatment of men and women, but not in the case of the initiative on the setting of military convergence criteria. Similarly, the Italian position was articulated in a convincing fashion in the reform of the Structural Funds regulations in 1999, but not in the case of anti-discrimination policy in the workplace.

Fifth, the use of the appropriate argumentation strategy was often the result of *policy learning*. This is what happened in the case of regional policy, where Italy had traditionally been among the least influential and, therefore, most penalized. Here, constraints on public spending and the ability of other member-states forced Italian political and public officials to adapt to the new European context and to become effective policy-makers. The same occurred in the case of Alitalia, where the Minister of Transport and the company's managers re-designed their strategies on the basis of European constraints and not on domestic political considerations. It was also the case for the Brussels Convention when Vice-Premier Fini had quickly to recognize that his initial Eurosceptic and Atlanticist positions were pushing him to the margins of the constitutional debate.

Sixth, Italy exerted an influence when its European policy-makers promoted interests or preferences that occupied a *middle position* between the extremes held by other national representatives or other groups and associations. It, thus constructed complex transnational coalitions and carefully chose the arenas in which to act and successfully achieve the compromise solutions characteristic of European decision-making. The capacity to mediate between contrasting positions had a positive influence on the decision to construct the CFSP, but was clearly missing in the Directive on the composition of chocolate. The same capacity had a favourable impact on crucial decisions taken in the Convention, but was lacking in the fixing of convergence criteria for the military.

Conclusion

If it is true that member-states with internal cohesion and external authority (such as the three largest) generally had greater possibilities to influence European decision-making, it is also true that single member-states had or could have had great or varying degrees of influence in different policy areas. Clearly, the Italy of the Second Republic has yet to achieve sufficient internal cohesion and a recognized external authority to hope for a greater role as a protagonist in EU politics. Indeed, in some respects, the experience of Berlusconi's centre-right government has inflicted new wounds in domestic politics, partly due to the Prime Minister's conflict of interest, which has enabled his control of six of the seven national television channels. Yet, this is also partly due to the government's incessant, frontal assault on the judiciary which has weakened the already feeble rule of law. In addition, Berlusconi's policies have opened deep divisions within the centre-right coalition itself, subjecting the government to constant internal turmoil.[17] Nonetheless, in the policies considered in this issue, which evolved over a considerable period of time, Italy's preferences (that is, those expressed by its governments, ministers, parliamentarians, interest groups or single political leaders) had a significant impact on decisions and choices taken within EU institutions. Europe may matter in Italy but Italy also matters in Europe. This does not allow us to conclude that Italy is among the giants in the European process. However, it does allow us to reject the numerous interpretations that consider it a pigmy in the integration process.

Notes

1. The editors and contributors wish to thank the two anonymous referees for their helpful and generous contributions to this special issue.
2. As Alberta Sbragia argues convincingly, in 'Italy Pays for Europe: Political Leadership, Political Choice, and Institutional Adaptation', in Maria Green Cowles, James Caporaso and Thomas Risse (eds), *Transforming Europe: Europeanization and Domestic Change*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2001, pp. 79–96.
3. Sergio Fabbrini (ed.), *L'europeizzazione dell'Italia: l'impatto dell'Unione Europea sulle istituzioni e le politiche italiane*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2003.
4. Hussein Kassim, Anand Menon, B. Guy Peters and Vincent Wright (eds), *The National Coordination of EU Policy: The European Level*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001; Husseim Kassim, B. Guy Peters and Vincent Wright (eds), *The National Coordination of EU Policy: The Domestic Level*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000; Yves Mény, Pierre Muller and Jean-Louis Quermonne (eds), *Adjusting to Europe: The Impact of the European Union on National institutions and Policies*, Routledge, London, 1996; David Hine and Hussein Kassim (eds), *Beyond the Market: The EU and National Social Policy*, Routledge, London, 1998.

5. See the forthcoming issue of *Journal of European Public Policy*, edited by Claudio Radaelli and Fabio Franchino.
6. Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, *Europa forza gentile*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2001, especially chapter 3.
7. For foreign policy, see Filippo Andreatta, 'L'Italia a un bivio: la politica estera di una media potenza dopo la fine del bipolarismo', in Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa and Stephen R. Graubard (eds), *Il caso italiano 2*, Garzanti, Milan, 2001, pp. 103–27 (originally in *Daedalus*, 130, 2, 2001, pp. 45–66).
8. David Hine, *Governing Italy: The Politics of Bargained Pluralism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993; and Sergio Fabbrini, *Quale democrazia? L'Italia e gli altri*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 1998, 3rd edition.
9. Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976.
10. Sergio Fabbrini, 'Political Change Without Institutional Transformation: What Can We Learn from the Italian Crisis of the 1990s?', *International Political Science Review*, 21, 2, 2000, pp. 173–96.
11. For an analysis of this period and for the distinction between crisis and transition, see Sergio Fabbrini, *Tra pressioni e veti: il cambiamento politico in Italia*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2000.
12. According to data in *Eurobarometer* 60, published in February 2004, 60 per cent of Italians identify strongly with being Italian and European and 81 per cent are proud or very proud to be Europeans. These are the highest figures in the EU.
13. Alberta M. Sbragia: 'La democrazia post-nazionale: una sfida per la scienza politica', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 34, 1, 2004, pp. 43–68.
14. Sergio Fabbrini, 'A Single Western State Model? Differential Development and Constrained Convergence of Public Authority Organization in Europe and America', *Comparative Political Studies*, 36, 6, 2003, pp. 653–78.
15. Thomas Christiansen and Simona Piattoni (eds), *Informal Governance in the European Union*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2004.
16. Alberta Sbragia, 'The European Union as Coxswain: Governance by Steering', in Jon Pierre (ed.), *Debating Governance: Authority, Steering and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 219–40.
17. Mark Donovan, 'Il governo di centro-destra di Silvio Berlusconi', in Vincent Della Sala and Sergio Fabbrini (eds), *Politica in Italia, Edizione 2003*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004, pp. 101–23.