

Научная статья

УДК: 327

DOI: 10.48612/rg/RGW.22.2

Роль Италии как медиатора в диалоге между Россией и Европейским союзом

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***Аннотация.** Италия является одной из стран - учредителей Европейского Союза (ЕС), а также одной из его наиболее влиятельных экономик, однако экономическая ситуация в Италии, в ЕС и в самой Европе далека от стабильной. Кроме того, отношения между Россией и ЕС ухудшаются с каждым годом. В статье описывается позиция итальянского правительства в Европе, освещаются отношения с Россией, а также рассматривается роль итальянского правительства как связующего звена между Россией и ЕС. Если итальянский ВВП является третьим по величине в Европе, то государственный долг напротив близок к 135% и, в сочетании с тем, что в казну ЕС поступает больше денег, чем требуется, также отмечается сильный недостаток европейских настроений. В связи с этим трудно говорить о едином ЕС. Это приводит к антиевропейским протестным движениям во многих частях Италии. После европейских выборов 2019 года и последовавшего за ними мирового кризиса в области здравоохранения становится все более очевидным, что существует сильная путаница в отношении роли Италии в Европе. Целью данной работы является анализ экономической и политической ситуации в отношениях Италии с ЕС и обсуждение италийно-российских отношений в контексте политики ЕС.*

Ключевые слова: РОССИЯ; ИТАЛИЯ; ЕВРОПА; ЕВРОСОЮЗ; МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ; ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА; ЭКОНОМИКА

Для цитирования: Боссоло Ф., Суринкова К.Ю. роль Италии как медиатора в диалоге между Россией и Европейским союзом // Россия в глобальном мире. 2022. № 22(45). С. 18–30. DOI: 10.48612/rg/RGW.22.2

Original article

The role of Italy as the mediator in the dialogue between Russia and the European Union

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Abstract. *Italy is one of the founding nations of the EU, as well as one of its most influential economies, yet the Italian economic situation in the EU and the European itself is far from being stable. Moreover, the relations between Russia and EU are getting worse year by year. The paper describes the position of Italian government in Europe, highlights the relationship with Russia, and considers the role of Italian government as the mediator between Russia and the EU. If the Italian GDP is the third one in Europe, there is also a public debt close to 135% and, combined with the fact that more money is paid into the EU coffers than received, and that there is a strong lack of European sentiment. Due to this fact, it is difficult to speak about the united EU. This leads to anti-European protest movements in many parts of Italy. Following the 2019 European elections and the subsequent world health crisis, it has become increasingly clear that there is strong confusion about the role of Italy in Europe. The purpose of this work is to analyze the Italian economic-political situation in relations to the EU and discuss the Italian-Russian relations in the context the EU policy.*

Keywords: RUSSIA; ITALY; EUROPE; EUROPEAN UNION; FOREIGN AFFAIRS; FOREIGN POLITICS; ECONOMY

For citation: Bossolo F., Surinkova, K.Y. The role of Italy as the mediator in the dialogue between Russia and the European Union. *Russia in the Global World*. 2022; 22(45): 18–30. (In Russ.). DOI: 10.48612/rg/RGW.22.2

Introduction. It is important to ask a question, namely what Europe is and, more precisely, the European Union in order to understand better this topic. In addition to a continent, the term Europe also indicates two political and economic projects, specifically, the European Union [1] and the Council of Europe [2] aimed at bringing together several countries]. The EU is certainly the more known and needs to be understood well. The EU is a supranational organization born as the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 to cope with the need to maintain peace and bring member state economies back to pre-WWII levels. It is no coincidence that the founding states were France, Italy, West Germany, UK, Greece and others, in short, the nations of the European continent most affected by the War. Subsequently, the union solidified with the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, a treaty that established the three fundamental pillars at the basis of the European Community as not only a commercial but also political entity. They provide: 1. European market and common currency, this includes free movement of goods and people; 2. Construction of a single policy towards third countries to the European Community; 3. Collaboration and cooperation of the judicial and security systems (this does not include a supranational police force, as can be the FSB in the Russian Federation or the FBI in the USA, but the organization of collaboration takes the stance of sharing information among the police forces of the EU nations). Finally, all the agreements stipulated in 2007 merged, with the Treaty of Lisbon, into the actual birth of the European Union (EU) with the establishment of the institutional

figure of the President of the European Council. Despite the fact that EU cannot be considered as an authentic Federation of states and a really cohesive political body does not exist, every country keeps its identity being just represented in the European Council by their ministers. The Ministers try to do their best for their country and to cooperate with the others.

It is also important to remember that there is another European organ, the Council of Europe, which was founded in 1949. The purpose of this organization is to promote and protect the human rights (like the right to get education, to protect health, freedom of mass media, and etc) and to protect the democratic values. The policy of the Council is to identify European identity and promote the cultural cooperation. As the name suggest it is a council of representatives of the various member states. The EU is the largest channel for a European dialogue with the members (EU consists of 27 members for now).

Materials and discussion. According to the main topic of this article, we need now to focus on the EU and Italy as a part of it. If the previous historically rising picture suggested a cohesive Europe that with the progress of time has increasingly solidified its strength, the real situation is of course more complicated and far from it. There have always been strong disputes and difficulties in addressing every issue brought to the attention of the EEC first and the EU afterwards. These difficulties precisely have led to discussions on whether or not the Union itself is necessary, and it is the fragile Italian situation that we want to bring to attention and analyze in this article. There is a kind of dispute in European Union focused on the shift from national currencies to the single European currency that some nations have refused to accept (UK above all but also, to date, Romania, Sweden, Poland and others) and which, although Italy's accession to the Euro dates back to 1999, is still debatable and causes violent arguments.

The second example is the issue of refugees' flow. The migrants are arriving in Europe via the Mediterranean Sea and find Italy and Greece as the first landing nations. This has created discord within the Union with some nations that have refused to pass a law which leads to the redistribution of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe while the management of them becomes increasingly problematic in the landing countries.

The period of greatest crisis in the EU began around 2010, after the great world economic crisis of 2008 which led to the growth of public dept of such

states as Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal [2]. This led to a greater disparity between the states of the EU and a greater economic effort by the EU itself which was forced to set up a European loan fund, the EFSF, from which troubled nations can request money at advantageous rates in order to restore the economy. Many governors consider the EU, as a mere economic union, and the economically undeveloped states are to take advantage by loans if the states are in a difficult economic situation. Other economists, as much as they recognize the political validity, believe that each nation is supposed to follow its interests without helping others. The latter accusation is also deeply felt in Italy and, especially today with the disparities brought about by the health crisis, it has been seen that the EU is still politically weak and unable to manage crises in a cohesive manner [3].

At the Italian level, some of the most perceived problems are precisely the incorrect management of migratory flows, the investment and loss of large sums of money as the aid of nations that have recently entered the Union, the political weakness of the Union and, more generally, the lack of real union. The authors mean the idea of some states superiority. In Italy the population is divided almost in half on the idea of staying in Europe or not, an example of the low interest in European issues can be illustrated using a survey [4] carried out after the 2019 European elections. The party that obtained the most votes in Italy was the party ruling the nation at that time, *Lega*, with 34% of the votes (party ruling the nation after the 2018 general elections with 17% of votes and in coalition with *Movimento 5 stelle* which obtained 32% and fell to 17% in the 2019 Europeans). The poll reports that 74.3% of voters voted thinking that the election result had, in some way, national, rather than European, significance. In order to explain the situation and show the misunderstanding that led a lot of Italians to choose the national way of economic development, we need to add that the government coalition faced a crisis that led to the fall of the government. The Italians expected a victory in national politics. The lack of a European sentiment can also be found in the Italian politicians themselves, the president of *Lega* after the victory in the Europeans elections exploited the media hype to attribute to his party the role of "First party in Italy" while he would correctly be titular as "The first Italian party in Europe".

Combined with the political fragility, the European management of finances often made the ambitious skeptic notes and favored the birth and

consolidation of sovereign and populist parties and movements, as *Lega* and *Movimento 5 stelle* was. Speaking about data [5], the *Movimento 5 stelle* and *Lega* have seen their consensus grow exponentially. The first was founded in 2009 as a populist movement and in the two elections in which it presented itself obtained respectively 25,55% of the votes in 2013 and 32,7 % in 2018. The second, *Lega* (whose official name is *Lega Nord*), after twenty years in which the maximum obtained was 10.1% in 1996, obtained 17.6% in 2018 and then began to govern precisely in coalition with *Movimento 5 stelle*. In the end *Lega* increase his consensus to 34% in the 2019 European elections. One of the key points of these parties is a discourse of sovereignty and disunity from the EU (very similar to what led the UK to vote for *Brexit*) accusing it to impoverish Italy.

An objective fact is that Italy is effectively at a loss in the European accounts, in 2017 it received from the EU 9,795.3 million (almost 10 billion) of Euro against a payment on the EU accounts of 13,840.2 million (almost 14 billion), which leads to a shortfall of 4,569.3 million (4.5 billion). But it is true that these losses are expected by the nation and the economic functioning of the Union is approved by the nations themselves, it should not surprise either Italy or any other nation. Each nation must pay an annual fee into the coffers of the European Union to ensure that they can be allocated for management costs and financing on the nation's most in difficulty. How to allocate the money is proposed by the European Commission and the MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) of each nation vote democratically whether or not to approve these expenses.

What is one the main arguments that is used in Italy to accuse the EU? It is necessary to understand that to calculate how much each nation must pay to the Union is used the index called gross national income (GNI). GNI is a figure obtained by adding and subtracting the country's income flows from the GDP of a nation, which often do not cause the value to vary too much. This is an excellent objective value, whoever produces and earns more has a higher GDP and therefore provides more money to Europe but is not a method without problems. The public debt that each nation has on its GDP is not considered as it is a private matter of each nation and has no influence on how much must be paid in the EU.

If Italy is one of the nations that pay the most in Europe, being the third highest GDP after Germany and France, it is also true that, unlike these other

two, it has an annual debt that exceeds 100% of GDP and today is around 134%. This means that Italy annually finds itself at a loss and that the anti-European political groups can leverage this figure to assert, in part without being wrong, that not only Italy's accounts are in the red, but that Europe does not help nations in difficulty and even takes more money, impoverishing them even more.

If on the one hand is true that the perception of EU in Italy, and in other countries, as evil is very mediated and untruthful, that there is no common conscience or strong politics and this leads to division rather than union, it is also true that the EU itself sometimes tends to be too impartial without being able to pass decisions that are optimal for everyone. This is certainly derived from the fact that most of the time the MEPs of each nation try to serve the interests of their own country rather than those of the EU and, as we have seen, everything seems to be brought by the real weakness and fragility of the central body.

However, it is not the EU that is bad towards some of its members, it is the lack of real cohesion that leads to dissension. If a nation looks only at itself and in the electoral campaign is strengthened only on the negative points of the EU, forgetting the positive ones, there can only be a negative feeling. Not for this is a justified feeling. In Italy, the so-called strategy of "scaricabarile" ("passing the buck" in English) has always been used in the election campaign by every party. Whoever was in government before, rather than the EU, are blamed for not looking at the mistakes made by the current government. In 2019, the *Lega - 5 stelle* government brought with its decision huge shortages in the national budget (-2.4% of GDP) and blamed for this the previous government which, in reality, led to growth (+ 1.4% in 2017). In the same way, the *Lega* party has always campaigned a lot against the EU, talking about how much it impoverishes Italy even though what is paid into the European coffers does not exceed 0.4% of GDP, much less than the 2.4% derived by the choices of the government itself.

Now, after that we would like to illustrate a topic which in Russia can be a confusing one, we can move on and watch closer to the relations between Italy and Russia. These relations have a history spanning 5 centuries, the first Russian ambassador mission in the Italian peninsula dates back to the 16th century with the reign of Vasili III Ivanovich of Russia but already from the 15th century on the reign of Ivan III Vasilyevich, until the 19th century, lot of Italian artists and

architects were invited in Russia to help design and build many buildings and churches, from the Kremlin of Moscow to the Winter Palace of Saint Petersburg.

The Russian Empire officially recognize the Reign of Italy 1 year after its unification in the 1862 and since then, except between 1941-1944, the two country always had good and strong relations. Despite during the so called “cold war” Italy was part of the NATO and, theoretically, sided against Soviet Russia, the truth is that the two-country continued to have good relations with commercial and cultural agreements and exchanges. To understand the strong relation, we can make some examples, a Russian city, Stavropol-on-Volga, was renamed Togliatti in 1964 after the death of the Italian politician Palmiro Togliatti. In 1966 the AvtoVAZ company was born in that city due to an agreement between the Soviet government and the Italian manufacturer FIAT. In 1958 Italy was the first European country to sign an economical partnership with URSS for the supply of fuel and in 1969 happened the same for gas, a product of which Italy is still a major importer in Europe. Almost half of the imported gas from Italy comes from Russia and for Russia Italy is the 5th largest buyer.

On the website of the Russian Federation embassy in Rome is written:

«Today Italy continues to remain one of the closest partners in Europe for the Russian Federation, with which a fruitful and intense cooperation has been established in practically every direction. Russia and Italy continue to conduct a political dialogue, also interacting actively in international organizations and mechanisms» [7].

A phrase that proves the strong relations between these two countries that still have a lot of economical, scientific, technological and cultural agreement. As it was during the cold war period, also nowadays Italy continues to maintain a friendly attitude towards Russia despite some European policies that in the last years are trying to isolate Russia and it also exists an Italo-Russian chamber of commerce (CCIR), founded in 1963 and still active, that help companies working within the two countries.

All of this may seem strange considering the stringent policies of the European Union towards Russia and all the sanction putted by EU on Russia, but another thing that is sometimes forgotten is that every nation in EU can choose his commercial and strategical partners without any restriction by the Union. It means that European nations can entertain private bilateral agreements with non-EU nations as there is no law that limits the sovereign rights of

individual states. This refers to the already mentioned right of self-determination which remains fundamental and inviolable for every nation within the Union. Thanks to this freedom of action Italy always maintained a fairly neutral position, trying to keep peace and dialogue with every country to find good agreement and live in a pacific world.

Back to 2004, the good relation, and friendship, within the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and the Russian President Vladimir Putin made many European statesmen believe on the concrete possibility on a Russian decision to join the EU. Moreover, it was significant the Italian position in 2014 after the events of Crimea. Even though Italy officially considers illegitimate the annexation of Crimea, its position was always to maintain a political approach with dialogue and not just sanctioning Russia. Following this line Italy was the only nation that after 2014 restarted the typical 2+2 meeting, the bilateral dialogue between foreign affairs and defense ministers, with Russia. The meeting was held in February 2020 when the Russians Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergej Lavrov and Minister of Defense Anatolij Serdyukov went to Rome and it led to another meeting in October when the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio came to Moscow. Apart from this important occasion that opens on a continuous collaboration, it is also important to remember that the Russian President Vladimir Putin often visited and held political and economic missions in Italy in the last years and this was matched by the visits to Russia of the different Italian Prime ministers during years.

To show the role of Italy between Russia and Europe we can think that thanks to the mediation of the Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi in 2016 the European parliament agreed to reduce the sanctions and to rediscuss them every 6 months. Before, it was decided that the sanctions had to continue without term until a motion were taken to the EU parliament, Italy from 2014 insisted on the necessity to avoid sanctions and until now obtained to rediscuss and evaluate them periodically. As we can see in this scenario, Italy has always been partnering with Russia and played this mediating function between it and EU also gaining the nickname of “the voice of Russia in EU” [8] given by some politicians skeptical on the Italian position. In relation to this, on the conference in October, Sergey Lavrov said:

«We discussed key international and regional issues, paying special attention to relations between Russia and the European Union (EU). The

state of this is a source of serious concern in Russia. We set forth our views of the current state of affairs. We emphasised that unfriendly moves by Brussels, especially a number of Russophobic EU members, undermine the overall potential of Russia-EU cooperation. At the same time, we appreciate and note the efforts of our Italian partners to maintain the existing constructive potential of our relations although we understand that not everything depends on individual EU members» [9].

And also:

«We spoke in detail about relations between Russia and the European Union. We are grateful to our Italian colleagues for their constructive position on this issue, which is aimed at normalizing these relations» [10], putting an effort on the fact that is not common nowadays for European countries to continue maintaining dialogue with Russia. In the same meeting the Italian Minister Luigi Di Maio said that Italy remains among the countries most strongly in favor on a dialogue and collaboration with Russia and that Italy is always ready to contribute on this to end the conflicts.

In the speech about the relations between Russia and EU in 2019 the Italian diplomat and ambassador Sebastiano Cardi argues that [11] the role of Italy on the European policy towards Russia is in absolute continuity with the solid and recognized tradition of cooperation with Russia and stems from the conviction that the objective differences and criticalities that mark the current phase of Euro-Russian relations and that request to be addressed, cannot overshadow the positive synergies that unite Italy and Russia and lead to privilege dialogue, rather than confrontation, to achieve the objectives of stability and peace, as well as mutual development and prosperity. Why Italy in particular? In addition to the various historical relationships already mentioned, there is a fact that may be important. Many of the problems between Russia and Europe can be found on the inability of Russia and EU to dialogue for some substantial differences. The ways of doing politics are very different in these two realities, the result is that the dialogues between them have often led to closures and tightening of relations. Russia has a very strong political approach centered on its own positions derived from its political history which often aims to look suspiciously at the interlocutor, seeing it first as a potential enemy with whom first need to show strength and then perhaps as a potential partner. In

Europe, these attitudes are frowned upon, but the result is that it similarly used them. Regarding Russia the hard line of sanctions has often been preferred rather than dialogue, a fighting fire with fire. We could write much more about the correctness or otherwise of the European sanctions against Russia. Whether Russia has ignored the European attempts at dialogue or if they never took place, but this is not our topic. However, we need to try to answer of the question “why Italy?”. If Italy can be defined politically weak and look a little bit silly, as it appeared in the first part of this article, in fact is far from stupidity.

Italy from the post-war period to today has never had a nationalist policy and has never strengthened the idea of its own nation above the others. Over the years this has led to an excellent foreign policy with almost every country. This kind of non-aggressive politics is for sure reconcilable with Russian foreign policy interests and allowed to maintain a constant and constructive dialogue between the two parts. Also, the already mentioned parties that are more nationalists, like Lega, are just using this kind of rhetoric to obtain more consensus and wanting to put some Italian interests before European ones but without wanting to stop the dialogues between the parts. It is also important to note that after the 2020 this part of the Italian politics and a lot of Italian people often looked on the Russian direction rather than the European one. At the beginning of the pandemic when Italy as first decided to declare the national lockdown lots of countries in Europe and the representatives of EU were confused on how to accept this situation and the European government failed to take timely action to help Italy both economically and healthily. While at first EU refuse to help request of Italy [12], some countries like Germany refused to send masks through Europe [13], and others like France started to discriminate Italy and the Italians [14], the Italian government needed to look seek other directions to find the help that it needed. These requests were heard by Russia and China as first and even if after one year Europe changed the attitude towards Italian pandemic problems, a lot of Italian people still do not forget the lack of cohesion that the first European reaction expressed [15].

These episodes can show how much Italy and Russia are strongly connected, they also raise attention to the relations between Russia and Italy, especially after Brexit event, that highlighted the reasons of the UK’s departure from the EU [16]. They also show why the Italian consensus towards Russia also increased last year. More than that, the leak of cohesion shows how much

the EU needs to change its external politics as well as the internal politics. For Italy, the EU is a great opportunity, like for every other country, but the union needs more unity and, therefore, more impartiality in the European congress. Italian people would like to be aware of equality and partnership together with respect and independence from their European partners.

In conclusion we would like to emphasize the fact that Italy can really be a key point in the dialogue between Russia and EU. If the cohesion grows and the open politics takes advantage, Italy can be the key country in Europe where the dialogue between the EU and Russia is supposed to start. The changes in foreign policy are the obligatory demands. The states should not compete but just cooperate. The governments should consider the ways of political, economic and cultural dialogue, and try to avoid stereotypes, prejudice, and misconceptions. If the wish to achieve the understanding prevails, Italy can be the significant mediator between the Russian Federation and the European Union.

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Статья поступила в редакцию 02.03.2022; одобрена после рецензирования 31.03.2022; принята к публикации 04.04.2022.

The article was submitted 02.03.2022; approved after reviewing 31.03.2022; accepted for publication 04.04.2022.