



Italy's Dangerous Slide Toward Euroskepticism

By [Valentina Pasquali](#), on 21 Feb 2013, [Briefing](#)

BOLOGNA, Italy -- Since the beginning of the financial crisis in Europe, anti-Brussels sentiment has been on the rise from Britain to Hungary. These days, however, the European Union is losing ground not only among citizens of traditionally recalcitrant member countries but also, and more troublingly, among those that have historically been ardent supporters. The EU's relations with Italy, for example, a founding member and the bloc's fourth-largest economy -- the eurozone's third-largest -- are on the rocks. Italians have historically been in favor of a strong Europe. But now, crushed by record-high taxes and sharp cuts in government spending, and persuaded by their politicians that bureaucrats in Brussels and Berlin are to blame for all of the country's ills, they are turning into outspoken euroskeptics. Alarmingly, the elections of Feb. 24-25 threaten to accelerate this trend.

Two surveys released last year, one by the Washington-based [Pew Research Center](#) (.pdf) and one by the Italian polling firm [ISPO](#) (.pdf), chart this remarkable turnaround.

According to Pew, in 2012, 61 percent of Italians believed that integration among the 27 EU member countries had weakened the national economy -- a 20 percent jump since 2009. Only 40 percent said that membership in the EU was a "good thing" for Italy, down from 47 percent three years earlier. And while 59 percent continued to rate the EU favorably, this represented a 19-point drop since 2007. The single currency got the worst grades, with only 30 percent of Italians viewing the euro in a positive light. A similar outlook is apparent in the ISPO study, according to which only 38 percent of Italians trusted the EU in 2012, a staggering 26 percent decline since 2005.

Italy's financial balance sheet is in better shape than those of Greece and Spain. But Italian public debt is a worrisome 130 percent of GDP. Even worse, the national economy basically stopped growing more than a decade ago and has in fact been contracting for the past six consecutive quarters, most recently shrinking 0.9 percent in the final three months of 2012. Unemployment now stands at more than 11 percent -- 36 percent among young people.

With less money in their pockets and increasing concern about the future, Italians are frustrated and easily angered by what they perceive as never-ending austerity imposed by Brussels and Berlin. However, according to Daniele Archibugi, research director at the Italian National Research Council, the phenomenon is not exclusive to Italy. "At a moment of crisis, people look for a scapegoat, and in many European countries they identified it in the EU," he says. Yet, because of the Italian people's profound distrust of their own national institutions, Archibugi believes that "the government in Rome is still blamed much more." According to the Pew study, 84 percent of Italians do, in fact, seem to think precisely this way.

While Italians clearly have deeply rooted misgivings about their own government, the data also undeniably show that, like most Europeans who have felt the pinch of the crisis, their skepticism of the EU is rapidly intensifying. But what sets Italy apart might be the way that its national politicians have exploited popular discontent to their own benefit.

“The political class, especially the previous government led by Silvio Berlusconi, bears enormous responsibility for blaming on the EU everything that is not working,” says Gianni Bonvicini, vice president of the Institute for International Affairs in Rome. “And no Italian leader, except perhaps for Prime Minister Mario Monti, [has clearly said that reforms are necessary](#) no matter what, whether we are in or out of the EU.”

Bonvicini looked at the platforms of Italy’s major parties and found that the European Union is largely absent from the ongoing campaign, when not outright assailed by the separatist Northern League and Berlusconi himself. Even those who defend it, like Pier Luigi Bersani of the Democratic Party and Monti, do so only half-heartedly -- yet another sign that Italians have turned inward and are focusing on their own grievances.

The overall picture is rather glum. But the surveys by Pew and ISPO also provide a glimmer of hope, suggesting that, no matter how disillusioned they may be with European institutions, most Italians remain unwilling to even consider the possibility of leaving the euro or the European Union.

“I think the exit scenario is out of the question at the moment,” says Paolo Graziano, a professor at Bocconi University in Milan. But he cautions that “if tensions persist, if Europe continues to be perceived as the enemy of an economic recovery because it only imposes cuts and austerity, an enterprising politician could exploit these emotions and push the Italian people to consider the value of getting out.”

This is what makes the upcoming election so crucial. Opinion polls put the center-left coalition led by Bersani ahead in the House of Deputies. However, because of Italy’s convoluted electoral laws, the race for the Senate looks tighter. Thanks to a few weeks of effective campaigning, Berlusconi’s center-right coalition is catching up, making it more likely that no party will enjoy an outright majority in the Senate and that deadlock will ensue.

The consequences would be disastrous. The reform process started by the Monti government would certainly slow down, if not halt completely. The chances of fresh elections being held again soon would increase; the Italian rumor mill is already betting on a new vote in October. The concerns of international investors would be reignited, further widening the much-feared bond spread. And Italy would be unable to speak with a unified voice in the context of European budgetary negotiations, losing credibility along with the chance to obtain much-needed concessions like more burden-sharing between creditor and debtor nations.

As a result Italians would continue churning in the vicious cycle of growing euroskepticism, and, at this vital turning point, a people that has traditionally been among the European Union’s biggest enthusiasts would slip even further from Brussels.

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Photo: Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, Rome, Italy, Jan. 16, 2013 (Department of Defense photo).