



## **Hanging Between Hope and Fear: Italians at the Heart of International Crisis**

**Emiliano Alessandri and Raffaello Matarazzo**

### **Abstract**

Italy's public opinion seems more open and daring of its political elites on some hot issues of the international agenda. Although increasingly concerned about the economic context and for the future of the European integration process, Italians seems rather optimistic about stabilizing the situation in Libya and strongly in favor of promoting democracy in the Arab world, even if this entails the risk of greater short-term instability. Divided over the notion that the EU should gain greater authority over member states' economic and budgetary policies, Italians are among the most unsatisfied, at the European level, of the government's management of the economic crisis and of the conflict in Libya. These are some of the outcomes of the survey *Transatlantic Trends 2011*, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo.

**Keywords:** *Italy / Public opinion / Italian foreign policy / Transatlantic relations / European Union / NATO / Libya / Arab revolts / Turkey / Afghanistan / China / United States*

## Hanging Between Hope and Fear: Italians at the Heart of International Crisis

by Emiliano Alessandri and Raffaello Matarazzo\*

### Introduction

Quite unusually for a country which rarely enters the international radar zone, Italy has come under close global scrutiny as media and analysts around the world are debating its ability to pull itself out of the worsening financial troubles and proliferating political scandals that have overwhelmed it of recent. As the third economy of the Eurozone and the one with the highest level of debt after Greece as a percentage of the GDP, Italy is widely seen as one of the critical (and weak) spots of the ongoing financial crisis - as unforgivingly highlighted by repeated attacks of international speculators in recent months.

According to optimistic and pessimistic commentators alike, Italy's fate is inextricably linked to Europe's and its economic performance will be key for the future of the Eurozone as a whole. The country's position is weakened by a political system that remains highly polarized and segmented, and by the growing unpopularity of the current government, both internationally and at home. This makes it particularly interesting today to investigate the country's perception of the main international, economic and security challenges, and its public opinion's view on the state of the transatlantic relationship and the degree of its confidence in Europe's ability to survive its major crisis since the European community gave birth to the 'European Union' some twenty years ago. It is worth noting, however, that on some hot issues of the international agenda, Italy's public opinion seems more open and daring of its political elites.

### 1. Transatlantic unease

According to the newly released *Transatlantic Trends* survey<sup>1</sup>, Italy is the European country with the strongest perception of a deterioration of the transatlantic relationship over the last year (just 47% of Italians defines "good" the relations between the EU and the US, in comparison with the 76% of 2010). Nevertheless, Italians still largely approve (79%) of Obama's handling of international affairs and believe in greater numbers than in the past years that NATO remains essential (63% in 2011 from 54% in

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<sup>1</sup> *Transatlantic Trends 2011*, [http://trends.gmfus.org/?page\\_id=3189](http://trends.gmfus.org/?page_id=3189).

2010). The NATO air campaign in Libya may have reinforced the latter view, although the poll was taken in early June when the rebels' success was far from certain. As a comparison, in Germany the number of those who maintain that NATO is essential to Western security has significantly dropped from 70% to 58% between 2004 and today.

The survey does not directly explain the reasons causing Italians to be more pessimistic about transatlantic cooperation compared to recent years. Part of the reason may be the fact that thanks to extensive media coverage of US politics, Italians have clearly perceived a weakening of Obama's leadership and a loss of standing among Americans. As their optimism for the future of transatlantic relations in 2009-2010 was mostly fed by confidence in and admiration for Obama as the leader of a 'new America' - Italy was among the countries in which the 'Obama bounce' after Bush was more pronounced - the fading of Obama's domestic and international popularity is likely to have translated into greater scepticism about the future of transatlantic cooperation.

The latter may also be fed by the low profile ("leadership from behind") maintained by the US administration during the Libyan conflict, Italy being one of the countries more exposed to its direct consequences (the flows of thousands illegal immigrants from Tunisia and Libya on Italy's southern coasts received extensive media coverage, igniting tensions between Italy and the EU). Another explanation may be that Italians are currently more worried than others in the European context about the state of the economy, and therefore they are also more sensitive to the lack of a transatlantic coordination on economic and financial issues - a theme that Italian media have also amply covered. Moreover, the peculiar impact that the publication of the documents by *WikiLeaks*, at the end of 2010, had on the Italian public opinion should not be underestimated (*WikiLeaks* revealed, among other things, that the US leaders were concerned about Berlusconi's close links with Putin and about its volatile style of government).

## 2. Inconsistent Europhilia

This growing anxiety emerges also towards the EU. Together with the Germans, Italians continue to be the strongest advocates of a prospective EU 'leadership in world affairs' (85%), and to prefer EU leadership to US leadership (56%), notwithstanding the high grades given to the current US administration.

When it comes to economic issues, however, Italy's Euro-enthusiasm becomes more controversial. More than in other EU countries, public opinion in Italy is divided on the euro, which a plurality believes has weakened, rather than strengthened, the Italian and European economies. It is worth noting, however, that despite the worsening of the sovereign debt crisis over the last year, those who look at the overall adoption of the common currency as positive have slightly grown (49%) in Italy - a trend on display also in France (39%) and in Germany (48%). A similar split exists over the notion that the EU should gain greater authority over member states' economic and budgetary policies, with a tiny majority of Italians opposing such development (47% against 46%). The split is even more notable in France and the Netherlands where those against strengthened European economic governance peak to 55%.

This orientation is partly offset by the number of those who favor the establishment of a common EU fund to rescue EU member states facing dire financial circumstances, which finds in Italy the highest support (76%, in line with the French, the Portuguese and the Spanish, while the Germans - who unlike most Europeans seem to favor greater budgetary authority of the EU over the member states - are much colder).

Although the number of those declaring to be personally affected by the economic crisis is still higher (67%) than the EU average (61%), but stable, a good half of the public opinion is in favor of cutting the public spending.

Italians are also largely dissatisfied with the way the Italian government has handled the economy since the outbreak of the crisis in 2008. Though the data of the *Transatlantic Trends 2011* were collected before the most recent speculative attacks against Italian bonds, they nonetheless provide evidence that a majority of Italians thinks that the economy has not been supported with the necessary determination and means by their own government.

### 3. The Libyan conundrum and the Arab Spring

Despite domestic financial constraints and uncertainty about their economic future, Italians seem willing to extend economic aid to countries in transition in the MENA region and actually prefer economic aid over military support or engagement, as a way to ensure that the 'Arab Spring' leads to successful democratic transitions. Interestingly, together with the French, Italians are strongly in favor of democracy promotion in the Arab world even if this entailed the risk of greater short-term instability. According to the *Transatlantic Trends 2011*, in fact, Italians are considerably more supportive of a democracy agenda in the EU's southern neighborhood than Americans or citizens of other EU member states. Together with the Germans (75%), the Portuguese (85%) and the Spanish (83%), Italians (75%) are the most supportive of the idea that the EU can play a role in promoting democracy in other countries.

When it comes to the NATO military operation in Libya, Italy's public opinion in June 2011 was among the less enthusiastic (49% disapproved), also if - paradoxically in some respect - Italians were among the most optimistic about stabilizing the situation in the country. However, a majority of them criticized the Italian government's handling of the crisis. The latter is most probably due to the flip-flopping of the government during the first months of the conflict, and to Prime Minister Berlusconi's reluctance to ask Gaddafi to relinquish power. Italians were the most determined in asking a full demise of the Libyan leader (79%) or of intervening to protect civilians (83%), but only a minority supported sending arms to the rebels (33%), let alone 'putting boots on the ground' (29%).

### 4. Turkish paradox

On Turkey, a major subject of transatlantic debate in recent years, Italians display less favorable views (just 33% have a favorable opinion of Turkey) than even the French

(53%) and the Germans (42%), whose governments have made no mystery of their reservations about the country's future accession to the EU. In fact, Italians seem relatively more positive about the prospect of integrating Turkey into Europe (which enjoys bipartisan support among the political elites) than they are about Turkey as a country, probably more because of cultural diffidences than for political reasons. However, the number of Italians unfavorable to Turkey as a country decreased significantly this year (from 62% to 49%), together with the EU average (from 48% to 40%). Probably this is also due to the proactive role played by Turkey during the 'Arab Spring', also in terms of promotion of its political and institutional system as a model of democracy for Arab countries.

Moreover, Italians believe that Turkey's EU membership would help the EU increase its leverage in the Middle East and would help stabilize Europe's southern neighborhood, also if in decreasing number than the last year. Mostly, they think that Turkey's EU membership would positively affect both the Turkish and EU economy (40%), but also in lower numbers than the last year (the EU average is 50%). This growing pessimism is probably linked to the overall pessimism about the economy. Finally, Italians are not particularly concerned about the risk of what some experts have called a 'drift' of Turkey towards the Middle East. They are also not as cynical and pessimistic as other countries about the outcome of Turkey-EU negotiations, which many believe will be a full membership despite all the uncertainties and obstacles currently undermining the accession process.

## 5. Afghanistan and China

Even if the majority of Italians remains strongly pessimistic about Afghanistan (61%), this trend is on the fall, probably thanks also to the killing of Osama Bin Laden, which occurred a few weeks before the realization of the poll. Unlike in the case of Libya, Italians seem supportive of the Italian government's handling of Afghanistan. However, as with other European societies, they ask for a reduction, or outright withdrawal, of troops from the country within a certain timeline.

Opinions about China, which in the past used to be more negative in Italy than elsewhere, are improving and are now virtually the same as the views held by the American public, with the gap between unfavorable and favorable views having shrunk to around 10%. Italians look at China more as an economic threat (47%) than an opportunity (37%), but the trend has significantly changed in the last year. This depends on two main factors: the shift in the international balance of power which increases the perception of China as international stakeholder; and the decreasing salience of the domestic controversies about the dumping of Chinese products in Italy.

## 6. Alignments with the US

Italians approve of Obama's Iranian and Russian policies - two areas in which the democratic administration has wanted to mark a change from Bush. On Iran, Italians are significantly more worried about the risk of nuclearization than the citizens of other EU states on average, and even more than Americans. Nonetheless, Italians remain

very reluctant to contemplate the use of military force to contain Iran's ambitions. In fact, military spending and the use of force are key elements of difference between the Italian and American public views (the same is true when the larger European public view and the American one are compared) which are otherwise aligned in important ways. Most probably due to historical and cultural factors, including Italy's defeat in WWII, Italians see the use of military force as generally unadvisable, even in situations of crisis. In this respect, they are very much tuned with the German public opinion.

Nonetheless, on a large majority of issues, from the fight against terrorism to attitudes towards the 'Arab Spring', Italians stand out as strong supporters of US positions and confirm their pro-Atlantic orientation although they have become more realistic about the actual prospect for transatlantic cooperation than some years ago. The fact that Italians' support for transatlantic cooperation has remained high throughout the ten years of the *Transatlantic Trends* survey testifies to its rooting. Under both center-left and center-right governments, and largely irrespective of the opinions of their leaders, the Italian society has constantly looked towards the West, valuating that the West has a clear and vital stake in the future of Europe. This significant fact is often neglected in the debate over Italy's international standing, which tends to focus on the vagaries of Italian leaders.

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