

# A Stronger Italian-German Partnership: Closer Cooperation in Time of Energy Crisis

by Federico Castiglioni



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## ABSTRACT

For over a year, Italy and Germany discussed the possibility of signing a common “Action Plan”, an agreement designed to cultivate a practical cooperation between Berlin and Rome in some specific policy fields. The war in Ukraine and the resulting energy challenge are currently at the top of the list. In the energy sector, Italy and Germany face the same dilemma, which encompasses foreign policy priorities, alternative energy sources and the investments in the framework of Next Generation EU. In November 2022, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) and the Hanns Seidel Stiftung (HSS), in strategic partnership with Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, hosted the first edition of the Italian-German Strategic Dialogue (IGSD), a joint roundtable whose goal was to strengthen ties between the two countries and identify potentials for cooperation. The conference was attended by scholars, experts, business representatives and policy makers. This document provides a summary of the key findings and policy recommendations emerged throughout the debate.

*Italian foreign policy | German foreign policy | European Union | Energy*

**keywords**

# A Stronger Italian-German Partnership: Closer Cooperation in Time of Energy Crisis

by Federico Castiglioni\*

## Introduction

Italy and Germany are and have always been close partners. Besides the cultural and political ties connecting the two countries since the Middle Age, their relationship today is solidly rooted in an interwoven economy and a reciprocal political interdependence. This profound connection – made deeper by the common European institutional framework – makes Germany and Italy natural interlocutors whenever a crisis breaks out. Indeed, sharing interests and values does not always prevent conflicts or misunderstandings, as the economic and financial crisis of 2008 fully demonstrated. The German and Italian governments on several occasions displayed diverging institutional attitudes, particularly when the economic rules upholding the common house of the European Union were being discussed. Only in the last decade the two countries have been at odds over the European Banking Union, monetary policy, and, most importantly, the rules governing debt issuance and fiscal policy. Nonetheless, the polycrisis of the last two years suddenly changed the picture, strengthening the cooperation between the two countries at both bilateral and European level.

The first event that smoothed this transition was Covid 19, and the European Union's unprecedented response. On that occasion, Germany and Italy agreed to use shared debt instruments to aid the recovery of member states afflicted by pandemics. Such innovative instrument was Next Generation EU, designed in a relatively short period of time to deal with an unexpected economic downturn that affected all EU member states equally. The fund, which is financed by European Union common debt, has assigned resources totaling around 750 billion euro. The targets of this programme, fingerprinted with breakthrough objectives in terms of

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digital innovation and eco-sustainability, were revolutionary in the making and in line with the strategic priorities shared by Rome and Berlin. Italy is scheduled to receive approximately 200 billion euro from the EU budget by 2027, divided into loans (122 billion c.a.) and extra additional finance (69 billion c.a.). Germany will receive around 25 billion euro in new funding at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Former Chancellor Angela Merkel and the newly elected Scholz administration both supported this initiative, which benefited Italy the most.

The second crisis that is fastening the two countries together is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. After the beginning of hostilities, in February 2022, both Italy and Germany stood strongly alongside the government of Vladimir Zelensky, victim of Putin's aggression, and paid a major price for this political stance.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the two countries were significantly reliant on Russian gas and so necessarily more vulnerable than their counterparts to the turbulence jeopardising international supply lines that is sweeping not only Eastern Europe but the entire European continent. The 2011 Libyan civil war, the Syrian civil war, sanctions against Iran (which are currently impossible to lift), and, eventually, sanctions against Russia all contributed to disrupting the value chain that was feeding the Italian-German industry, depriving both countries of the majority of their traditional suppliers. Rising raw material and energy prices are currently affecting Western support for Ukraine, particularly in countries vulnerable to Kremlin pressure. Not coincidentally, in both Germany and Italy there is a strong pro-Russian narrative advocating for the reduction or withdrawal of aid to Kiev. According to the most recent polls (April 2023), the majority of the Italian public opinion opposes the delivery of new military equipment to Kiev,<sup>3</sup> and allegedly think alike at least half of the polled Germans.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Gas, economy and the EU

The Italian and German economies rely heavily on energy imports to uphold and sustain their assembly lines of goods, commodities, and households. The appetite for cheap energy results in an equation connecting the price of energy with the performances of the two countries' economy. This is particularly true for gas, a relatively cheap energy source which is widely used both in the heating sector

<sup>1</sup> German Federal Government, *Green Light to Boost Digitalisation and Climate Protection*, 22 June 2021, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/service/archive/recovery-and-resilience-plan-1935088>.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, it was the former Prime Minister Mario Draghi to suggest the freezing of the Russian assets abroad, crippling the Russian economy. See: Valentina Pop, Sam Fleming and James Politi, "Weaponisation of Finance: How the West Unleashed 'Shock and Awe' on Russia", in *Financial Times*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/5b397d6b-bde4-4a8c-b9a4-080485d6c64a>.

<sup>3</sup> Ipsos, *Russia-Ucraina, le ultime news e sondaggi: opinioni degli italiani*, 3 April 2023, <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/node/883216>.

<sup>4</sup> "Poll Shows Half of Germans against Sending Tanks to Ukraine", in *Al Mayadeen*, 25 December 2022, <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/poll-shows-half-of-germans-against-sending-tanks-to-ukraine>.

and for industrial processing. Nowadays, natural gas maintains a strategic value for industry, and at the same time is a key enabler of the green transition; as a low emission fossil source, gas-fired power plants serve as stabiliser of the electricity grid, in time where the share of renewable but volatile energy sources in the electricity mix grows.

The two countries' dependence on gas imports have grown over the years as result of lowered domestic energy output (e.g. Germany's decision to dismantle nuclear and phase out coal by 2030,<sup>5</sup> as well as the Italian nuclear opt-out) and a consequent upsurging in gas demand. At the beginning of the new century, post-Soviet Russia seemed to be the best partner to supply such cheap energy, following the fruitful trade started in the last years of the cold war. The gas import grew exponentially from 2015 onward, supported by new infrastructures and the narrowing of alternative suppliers in Northern Africa and the Middle East. This momentum provided the two nations with the means to overcome their structural lack of decarbonised raw materials, sustain their industrial output and bolster their green energy commitments.

Rome and Berlin, which built their own wealth and international standing on exports and manufacturing, are now in a similar predicament and have failed to identify a common basis for efficient coordination and cooperation. In order to stabilise the economy, Germany is looking for alternative gas partners in Northern Europe<sup>6</sup> and in the Gulf, whereas Italy resorted to a deal with Algeria,<sup>7</sup> and rested some of its hopes in the Mediterranean exploration of new gas deposits.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, both accepted to import more liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the US and invest in plants for regasification.<sup>9</sup> For the time being, the challenge will be replacing the existing gas networks (pipelines) with new infrastructures, which might be either different pipeline or LNG terminals. The first consequence of the energy crisis started in February 2022 was a further step increase of the energy prices already hiked by Covid 19. As a response, the German government immediately delivered 200-billion-euro package of state aid over 3 years to help German citizens and firms,<sup>10</sup> whereas Italy could only afford a fund of 21 billion for

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Franke, "German Coalition Agrees 2030 Coal Exit, Aims for 80% Share of Renewables", in *S&P Global*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/electric-power/112421-german-coalition-agrees-2030-coal-exit-aims-for-80-share-of-renewables>.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Kennedy, "Norway Replaces Russia As Germany's Top Gas Supplier", in *OilPrice*, 6 January 2023, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Norway-Replaces-Russia-As-Germanys-Top-Gas-Supplier.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Italy Signs Energy Deals with Algeria in Bid to Sidestep Russia", in *Al Jazeera*, 19 July 2022, <https://aje.io/eh7rgq>.

<sup>8</sup> "Eni: nuova scoperta di gas nel Mediterraneo orientale al largo dell'Egitto", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 15 January 2023, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/eni-nuova-scoperta-gas-mediterraneo-orientale-largo-dell-egitto-AEuUi5WC>.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Donnelly, "LNG Fever: European Firms Sign Mega-Contracts as US Shale Gas Imports Boom", in *Investigate Europe*, 9 January 2023, <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/en/?p=29769>.

<sup>10</sup> Simone Tagliapietra, Georg Zachmann and Jeromin Zettelmeyer, "Germany's Gas-Price 'Defence Shield': Problems and Redeeming Features", in *Bruegel Blog*, 30 September 2022, <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/germanys-gas-price-defence-shield-problems-and-redeeming-features>.



2023.<sup>11</sup> The disproportion – apparently huge – is however partially normalised by the different GDP per capita of the two countries (35k of Italy vs 51k of Germany in 2021) and the odds related to the respective economic growth. After the crisis, Italy supported the EU Commission’s proposal to establish a price cap for gas, whereas Germany was rather sceptical. On the one hand, the Scholz government displayed concerns for an excessive EU-led market intervention, and on the other for possible disruptions of the supply chain that could farther hinder the gas demand.

Eventually, the Council agreed on a 180 euro/MWh price cap with a mechanism automatically triggered whenever the market exceed that price range.<sup>12</sup> From the Italian side, stakeholders underlined how the compromise was necessary because it would have helped the resilience of Europe, avoiding discrimination between stronger and weaker nations, and isolated the bad inflation (driven by energy) from good inflation (driven by economic growth). However, the prevalent German view was that this proposal – potentially right in principle – is probably yet outdated, considering the price collapse of oil and gas in December 2022. According to the German stakeholders, the downward rebound of gas during the winter was a demonstration that the European market is flexible vis-à-vis external shocks and can adjust itself quite promptly.

Therefore, the direct intervention of the States to adjust prices, in addition to the one already in place to save householders and companies, would have been unnecessary and burdensome. During the roundtable, some participants pointed out how the stock market is not self-regulatory but rational, and it requires public initiative and money inflows when it is looming, thus preventing new trends whose origin is always the State. Despite these differences, a common understanding was that gas prices peaked in Autumn 2022, resulting in a bad European inflation that was severe enough to partially cripple both countries’ efforts to mitigate the disruption of Covid 19. Inevitably, the Italian and German governments encouraged the trend by racing against each other to secure the winter stocks, and this was a sign – at least – of poor European coordination. This lack of coordination appeared to be a paradox during times of shared European poly-crisis: Europe responded to Putin’s Russia war in several ways, including energy sanctions (oil and gas) and the sending of armaments to Ukraine, with a few national nuances. However, in specific aspects of the unfolding crisis, the EU member states displayed an apparent disconnection, with Italy and Germany being particularly concerned.

[bruegel.org/node/8335](https://bruegel.org/node/8335).

<sup>11</sup> Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, *Le principali misure della manovra 2023*, 29 December 2022, <https://www.mef.gov.it/focus/Le-principali-misure-della-manovra-2023>.

<sup>12</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Agrees on Temporary Mechanism to Limit Excessive Gas Prices*, 19 December 2022, <https://europa.eu/!p3PcQm>.

## 2. The “Zeitenwende”

All the European efforts notwithstanding, Rome and Berlin not always showed to be on the same page on Ukraine. For instance, the afore mentioned lack of coordination between the two countries surfaced when President Scholz and Macron met with President Zelensky on the 8th of February, a meeting that the Italian Prime Minister Meloni called “inappropriate”.<sup>13</sup> In fact, both Italy and Germany have been accused, since the beginning of the conflict, to offer a wavering support to Kiev and be more exposed to the propaganda coming from the Kremlin. The main reason found by analysts and political observers, lie in the presence of new or old political figures that are undermining the two governments’ resolution.<sup>14</sup>

Today, Germany has a government coalition (so-called “traffic light”), composed of greens, liberals, and social democrats, and apparently in this canvas there is little room for the legacy of the former conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel, who left a memory of stability and popular support. Merkel’s trough-time consistency and moderation had been interpreted as a safeguard for economic models and patterns that minimised the necessary costs of transition between diverse political eras (the end of the Cold War and the new century) and stages of globalisation in Germany. Yet, the collateral damage of this otherwise sensible strategy is that the German public is now less prepared to come to terms with dramatic changes, such as those underway after the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The new government, which indeed vowed a certain degree of continuity with its predecessor, took a bolder stance on key priorities of the coalition programme, including forced decarbonisation and denuclearisation, but was taken off guard by the outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict.<sup>15</sup>

From its part, Italy is also living an unprecedented political moment. The election of September 2022 has been won by a right-wing coalition that sparked preoccupation in Europe for the democratic resilience of the country.<sup>16</sup> Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy, which was the only opposition party during the tenure of Mario Draghi, emerged as the leading partner of the coalition. The ambiguous positions of the other two leaders of the coalitions, Matteo Salvini and Silvio Berlusconi towards Russia threatened to undermine Italy’s firm stance taken after the invasion of Ukraine, waving concerns that Italy could somehow follow in the

<sup>13</sup> “Italy Prime Minister Irked by ‘Inappropriate’ Zelenskyy Meeting”, in *Al Jazeera*, 9 February 2023, <https://aje.io/rjcb8n>.

<sup>14</sup> Jacopo Iacoboni, “Italy: Putin’s Biggest European Friend?”, in *Europe’s Edge*, 23 February 2022, <https://cepa.org/?p=2003>; Guy Chazan, “Germany’s Olaf Scholz Struggles to Get His Message across on Ukraine”, in *Financial Times*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/1dbf9a05-09b2-4706-b44c-717ec934d6c5>.

<sup>15</sup> James Snell, “Germany’s Missteps in Ukraine Have Left Scholz Fighting for His Political Life”, in *The Spectator*, 16 January 2023, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/?p=408277>.

<sup>16</sup> Valentina Di Donato, Ben Wedeman and Antonia Mortensen, “Giorgia Meloni Sworn in as Italy’s Prime Minister. Some Fear the Hard-Right Turn She’s Promised to Take”, in *CNN*, 22 October 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/22/europe/giorgia-meloni-italy-new-prime-minister-intl-cmd>.

footsteps of Orbán's Hungary. However, as of today, these concerns might appear amplified. In some cases, such as migration, Italy's stance indeed hardened and sparked Europe-wide debate.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, in international relations, particularly in terms of sanctions against Russia or a proclivity to seek European agreements, the country's policy shifted very little.

Despite their differences, both Italy and Germany appear to face the consequences of what the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called in February 2022 a "Zeitenwende" (turning point) of their domestic politics. Although intended by the Chancellor as an adaptation to new and dangerous times rather than a voluntary shift towards new policies, the "Zeitenwende" undoubtedly entails a huge twist in investments and priority areas. Sectors that used to be at the very bottom of a scale of importance, like defence, are surging to the top of governments' priorities worldwide. The shift was particularly noticeable in Europe, a continent that had never experienced conflict in the previous 20 years, and particularly in Western Europe, which was even stranger to what is (sometimes disparagingly) referred to as "hard security". But even other sectors that were in the spotlight, like energy security, are now climbing up the urgency, and requiring immediate action.

Italy and Germany are facing up these same challenges in similar ways. Germany is responding to the "Zeitenwende" triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine by investing an unprecedented one-off 100 billion euro in defence, and reserving part of this money to finance European R&D projects (whose details though are still undisclosed).<sup>18</sup> Italy is also increasing the Defence budget, but to a more gradual pace and closer to its current fiscal capacities (200 million euro per year). Furthermore, Rome is working on deals in the defence field with Poland, UK and Japan. All these efforts notwithstanding, the war represented an important blow for the EU strategic autonomy (and hence the autonomy of the two countries) for the conundrum entangling together energy, defence, and strategic autonomy. In the last year, both Italy and Germany have been upscaling investments in defence, energy security (particularly through Next Generation EU) and new technologies (hydrogen). However, both countries as much as the whole EU are still hugely dependent from raw materials (mainly imported from China) that are vital to both uphold the envisaged energy transition and update the continental defence.<sup>19</sup> Against this background, many EU energy targets (i.e. 2035 goals) might not always appear realistic, nor might the pledge to invest in breakthrough defence technologies that would lack of the necessary components. Energy and defence dependence are just some of the fragilities identified by the European Commission

<sup>17</sup> Frances D'Emilio, "Italy's Contested Bid to Crack Down on Migrants Sparks Flap", in *AP News*, 18 April 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/fedcc52d3de7f3ec6c5830d1dc675597>.

<sup>18</sup> Holger Hansen, "German Lawmakers Approve 100-Billion-Euro Military Revamp", in *Reuters*, 3 June 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-lawmakers-approve-100-bln-euro-military-revamp-2022-06-03>.

<sup>19</sup> The EU is particularly dependent from microchips, lithium batteries, Beryllium and other critical raw materials. International Energy Agency, *The 2020 EU Critical Raw Materials List*, last updated 26 October 2022, <https://www.iea.org/policies/15274-the-2020-eu-critical-raw-materials-list>.

in the broader framework of the EU's strategic autonomy, whose aim is to mitigate the European shortfalls in strategic sectors and thus develop a common response to the challenges that the current "Zeitenwende" entails.

### 3. The way ahead

The new security threats in Europe and the challenges of the energy transition have overlapped with earlier economic and social challenges arising from previous crises. Having been significantly impacted by them, Italy and Germany should adopt a common stance at the European level, setting out a clear political agenda of mutual interest. One of the priorities should be upgrading the existing energy infrastructure, for example by expanding the connectivity for hydrogen and LNG through Austria and across the Alps. The second priority should be staging a joint discussion over the green transformation of the heavy industry and devising a strategy on how to cope with the inevitable rebounding effects on downstream sectors like automotive. In this regard, investing, for instance, in mobility and the transformation of regional production networks would harmonise the existing connections between the two countries, and strengthen a transnational supply chain that currently underpins a significant share of the EU's overall manufacturing.

A third priority should be a common effort of scaling up production and developing resilience of Reliability Enhancement of energy distribution technologies, such as electrolysers, semiconductors, and batteries.<sup>20</sup> The fourth and final priority should be fostering new common bilateral initiatives with different partners, advancing energy and climate diplomacy in the Gulf, North Africa, and Central Asia. For Germany, this common diplomatic effort would entail partially shifting its energy diplomacy from the world East/Northeast to the South/Southeast. Italy, which often enjoys long-lasting partnerships with the countries of this world region, would support this effort, along with the European External Action Service and the European institutions. The two countries, at the core of the EU economy and key NATO partners, would thereby strengthen their bilateral cooperation and dialogue, and alongside reinforce the European position. In order to reach such a level of cooperation across different sectors, it would be pivotal to establish closer contact between decision-makers, the business community, and experts in the two countries. The Italian-German Strategic Dialogue aims to support this effort through regular exchanges and joint analyses.

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<sup>20</sup> Takele Ferede Agajie et al., "Reliability Enhancement and Voltage Profile Improvement of Distribution Network Using Optimal Capacity Allocation and Placement of Distributed Energy Resources", in *Computers & Electrical Engineering*, Vol. 93 (July 2021), Article 107295, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compeleceng.2021.107295>.



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