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1. Introduction

Italy has, for the last year, been wracked by serious political and institutional crisis, to which no certain outcome can as yet be predicted. As a result, the attention of both the Italian public and the political world has been concentrated on the problems of domestic policy, neglecting those connected to the country's many and growing international commitments.

There seems to be a tendency in many Western countries, starting with the United States, to give priority to domestic problems, but nowhere has that trend been more evident than in Italy. Especially during the most acute phase of the political maelstrom which uprooted the old ruling class, the interest shown, above all by the mass media, for international developments--even those of extreme relevance to Italy--declined sharply. And this accentuated that "agnosticism" which is one of the characteristic features of Italy's attitude toward foreign policy. In addition, the awareness that the crisis of the political system produced by deep-seated degeneration would require a long and difficult reform process weakened Italy internationally.

Yet, just as political debate was essentially concentrated on the reforms required to overcome the domestic crisis, the Italian government decided to take on a number of international commitments, contributing to the attempts undertaken by international institutions to manage certain crises (in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia and Mozambique). Paradoxically, therefore, this exceptional growth in Italy's international exposure coincided with an inward-looking period marked by relative disinterest in foreign policy. As a result, some of the more weighty international decisions recently taken by Italy were not accompanied by sufficient debate to make the main implications evident to public opinion.

Only recently, thanks to a slight slackening of internal political tensions, has this glaring contradiction come to light. Criticism has increased of the lack of strategy characterizing the government's policy in the Yugoslav crisis, above all, of its inability to identify and bring to bear specific national interests in the Balkan area. This critique is put forward by politicians and commentators from a broad political and ideological spectrum, but it is backed particularly vehemently by a neo-nationalist tendency which claims that, with the end of bipolarity, the world has entered a new phase again characterized by balance of power. Italy, so the argument continues, must acknowledge this change in the international situation and make every effort, as other Western countries have long been doing, to promote its national interests, if necessary, without the support of its allies and partners. In any case, even exponents of political positions totally foreign to such nationalistic aspirations lament the lack of awareness of Italy's strong exposure in the war in the Balkans and draw attention to the need for actions specifically directed at safeguarding national interests. In short, although public opinion is still in favour of Community and Western solidarity, the need is felt for a rethinking of Italian policy towards the Balkan area based on a clearer definition of national interests at stake.

The geopolitical developments in Europe have to some extent put into

question the general guidelines underlying Italian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. While confirming the commitment to promote European and Community solidarity and to strengthen the institutions pursuing it, it is widely believed that Italy should play an autonomous role in the development of cooperation with Eastern European countries. At the same time, the regional cooperation initiatives that Italy has tried to promote to that end have come up against increasing difficulties owing to the portentous geopolitical changes that have taken place in Central and Eastern Europe. Specifically, the plan for cooperation with Central-Eastern European countries promoted by Italy, initially known as the *Quadrangolare* and today as the Central European Initiative, has gone into crisis since 1991. The strongest blow to the plan came from the disintegration of Yugoslavia. For some time, the Italian government hoped to be able to use is as an additional instrument in managing and containing the crisis. Then again, the Yugoslav crisis has clearly revealed the limits of the regional approach advocated by Italy as a complement to Community and Western policy. Indeed, other regional initiatives, which seemed to have a more solid foundation, also suffered the same fate (Visegrad Group).

Italy has no choice but to review the policy towards Central and Eastern Europe and, in particular, Yugoslavia that it has pursued to date. The cornerstone of that policy will remain its anchorage in the institutional framework of Europe and the West, but it is likely that Italy will take a more assertive attitude towards its specific national interests. The promotion of these interests could well include a relaunching--on new bases--of a regional plan for cooperation.

2. From support for Yugoslav unity to recognition of the secessionist republics

Like most European countries, Italy shifted during 1991 from a policy aimed at preserving Yugoslavia's political and territorial unity to a more realistic stance accepting the inevitability of disintegration of the Yugoslav state. After having been among the most convinced supporters in Community debate of the various projects for construction of a new federal arrangement, during the crucial phase on recognition of the secessionist republics in December 1991, Italy aligned itself with Germany, supporting recognition of Slovenia and Croatia.

There were a number of reasons for Italy's initial rejection of the prospect of the accelerated disintegration of the Yugoslav state.

First, there was the fear that this was only the first sign of a dangerous trend towards new equilibria in Europe, which could lead to the progressive weakening of Italy's position and its role in Europe and the West. The main fear was the re-emergence of a balance of power policy in the Balkan area and, consequently, the end of European solidarity.

Second, there was the reluctance to give up the close relations built up over the years with the leaders in Belgrade. Thus, Italy continued to express its confidence in the federal authorities (first Prime Minister Markovic and later President Mesic), and to cast itself in a mediating role.

Third, Italy was concerned that acceptance of the claims of independence would have uncontrollable repercussions that could directly affect Italian security. A particularly strong source of apprehension was the danger of an influx of refugees (the arrival of the Albanian refugees had already had a strong psychological impact on the country).

Fourth, like other European countries with minorities that manifest separatist tendencies more or less openly, there was the concern that the Slovenian and Croatian examples would constitute an ominous precedent. As a matter of fact, in 1991 the Italian government was engaged in passing measures aimed at safeguarding the rights of the German-speaking minorities in Upper Adige-South Tyrol.

The champion of this policy of containment of secessionist tendencies and support for projects for reconstruction of a federal Yugoslav state, albeit on a new basis, was Italian Foreign Minister De Michelis. For a long time, De Michelis tended to minimize the magnitude of the Yugoslav crisis and encourage expectations--which were regularly revealed to be unfounded--about the effectiveness of the agreements repeatedly reached in the various negotiating fora. De Michelis's optimism was sharply criticized by both the press and parliament, but the cautious line pursued (then as now) by the government was supported by broad consensus in the public opinion and among political forces. On the whole, the debate on Italian policy regarding Yugoslavia confirmed the tendency towards bipartisanship in foreign policy that started to emerge in the mid-seventies. In the major parliamentary debate on the Yugoslav crisis which took place on 25 September 1991, the line sketched out by then Prime Minister Andreotti received the consensus not only of the parties forming the government coalition (Christian Democrat, Socialist, Social Democrat and Liberal), but also the main opposition party, the PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra). This broad convergence among political forces was not affected by subsequent developments and the unsuccessful intervention of international organizations. Indeed, the recent parliamentary debate (9 June 1993) on the situation in Bosnia concluded with the passage of a motion by a 90 percent majority.

The government's reluctance to recognize the secessionist republics was shared by a broad range of political forces, including, once again, the PDS. Only the small (but very active) Radical Party and the right-wing opposition party, MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano) called for unilateral recognition of Slovenia and Croatia. And the Republican Party, in disagreement with De Michelis's position, urged the government to persuade its European partners of the expediency of recognition. Nevertheless, in the second half of 1991, the number of exponents of parties in the government coalition--above all Christian Democrats--in favour of recognition gradually grew. The most pressing entreaties for a change in stance came from the members of parliament from the northeastern regions and from the Catholic world (in an interview, De Michelis polemicallly quipped about the existence of a "Croatian lobby" at the Holy See). The government, on the other hand, while admitting that recognition would be inevitable if an illegitimate military or authoritarian regime were to come to power in Belgrade, continued until the end of November to maintain that recognition would only exacerbate the situation.

Thus, the government decision in December 1991 to recognize Slovenia and Croatia on 15 January 1992 before a formal EC decision could appear surprising (the EC had decided to leave the final decision regarding the admissability of the requests for recognition advanced by the Yugoslav republics up to the Badinter commission). Italy's position turned out to be one of total, although tardy, alignment with the German stance. This decision should probably be attributed more to considerations of an international character than to growing domestic pressure. First, the inevitability of recognition had become ever more evident as the conflict escalated, leaving little hope for reconstruction of any kind of federal structure and increasingly revealing the major responsibilties of the Serbs (denounced by the EC after the bombing of

Dubrovnik). Second, Germany's choice after the Maastricht summit to recognize Slovenia and Croatia created a completely new situation within the EC that seriously jeopardized Community solidarity. By taking sides with Germany, Italy hoped to put pressure on the other Community partners to abandon their reserve and reach a common position (which, in fact, occurred on 15 January), thus avoiding a crisis within the EC which could have had unpredictable consequences.

Since the beginning of 1993, the Italian government has worked actively in favour of recognition of Macedonia by its Community partners. The government argues that Macedonia must be brought out of its international isolation if the deterioration of the country's social and economic conditions--which could have serious repercussions on the stability of the Balkan area--is to be halted. Also as a result of its sizable commitment in Albania, Italy feels particularly exposed to the possible effects of the spread of the conflict to the south (involving Macedonia, Kossovo and Albania).

On the whole, Italy has continued to pursue a cautious policy giving priority to Community solidarity and a strategy based essentially on the use of diplomatic and political instruments. Thus, the government has made constant efforts to keep channels open with the authorities in Belgrade, underlining any positive signals from the Serbian leaders. This attitude has, however, often been criticized by the mass media and both government and opposition forces. In particular, Foreign Minister Colombo was severly censured for his decision to meet with Serbian leaders in Belgrade on 21 January 1993. The new government sworn in April 1992 also confirmed its preference for a diplomatic rather than a military approach to the crisis: the Italian government supported the Vance-Owen plan until the very end. Moreover, in their meeting with American Secretary of State Christopher (7 May), Italian leaders rejected the American proposal to revoke the embargo against the sale of weapons to Muslims and to bomb Serbian artillery positions in Bosnia also on the grounds that developments in Belgrade were positive. On 13 May, the current Foreign Minister Andreatta claimed before Parliament that credence should be given to Milosevic, underlining the divergence that had appeared between the leadership in Belgrade and the Serbs in Bosnia. But also in this case, government optimism turned out to be largely unfounded.

3. Italy's role in the international efforts to manage the crisis

As already mentioned, the Italian government was always very reluctant to consider military intervention in the absence of a global political agreement among the parties at war. Even when, in September 1991, the possibility of European intervention in Croatia for the purpose of "interposition" was concretely discussed in the WEU and the EC, some leading exponents of the government majority voiced their objections to that option (before the Twelve decided to formally reject it). On several occasions, the former secretary of the Socialist Party, Craxi, expressed his conviction that the presence of European soldiers on the war front would only complicate the situation, with the risk of entangling the EC for an indeterminate period of time in a mission lacking clear political objectives. The military were also against military intervention, especially if it was to be an enforcement action. In May 1993, Army Chief of Staff Canino made alarmistic statements to the press about the loss of life involved in the deployment of ground troops in Bosnia. This attitude was

basically shared by the Defence Minister, while the Foreign Minister declared himself more willing to take on participation in an enforcement action. Italy, therefore, witnessed the same divergence in views between those in charge of foreign policy and those in charge of defence which marked political debate on the possible forms of intervention in other major Western countries.

However, the Italian government repeatedly manifested its willingness to participate in humanitarian or peacekeeping missions. In the autumn of 1991, Italy was ready to participate in the FORPRONU in Croatia with a force of 3000 men. One year later, the Minister of Defence again spoke of participation of an Italian contingent (1200-1300 men) in the UN humanitarian mission in Bosnia. In both cases, a veto from the Serbs (and the Croats) kept these plans from being realized. The UN, at the same time, continued to rule out the participation in military missions of countries bordering on the crisis area. More recently, Foreign Minister Andreatta declared that Italy is ready, should the UN request it, to participate in operations in Bosnia aimed at implementing a peace plan agreed on by the parties.

Worthy of mention is the coordinating role played by Italy in its capacity as WEU president-in-office, in operations of control and enforcement of the embargo in the Adriatic against the Serbo-Montenegrin federation. Indeed, the government claims to have been the mediator during Western consultations between the French, in favour of a strictly European force, and the Americans, keen on reasserting NATO's supremacy , thereby favouring a compromise solution.

As for humanitarian intervention, Itlay used its own aircraft to participate in the international airlift to Sarajevo from 3 July to 3 September, the date on which an Italian G-222 was shot down. Subsequently, Italy participated in ground rescue operations. In the course of 1993, Italy has made its most important contribution in the field of logistics, by offering use of its airbases to the allies for various missions: the airport in Falconara for the airlift to Sarajevo; the one in Brindisi for the US and German airdrops of humanitarian aid; the nine in various parts of the country for missions enforcing the no-fly zone over Bosnia. The use of those bases was also scheduled for any NATO bombing of the Serbs in Bosnia, a threat brandished by the West against the Serbian leadership last July (and which obtained the withdrawal of Servian forces from the hills overlooking Sarajevo).

Italy's progressive transformation into a "propulsive platform"--as the current Defence Minister, Fabbri, has put it emphatically--for intervention in the former Yugoslavia naturally poses a number of problems.

First of all, the Italian government insists that each operation departing from Italian soil must have UN coverage and that it must be informed in detail, on a case-by-case basis, of the plans of every mission to be carried out. It is particularly concerned, however, that its logistic role is not receiving adequate political recognition. In particular, the government officially expressed its disapproval at being excluded from the consultations that led to the Washington Plan for the implementation of protected areas (24 May), vaguely threatening to reconsider its commitments should the same thing reoccur in the future.

As a result of its growing commitment in support of the efforts at crisis management undertaken by international organizations, Italy has to reckon with increasing security risks. The threats by Serbian extremist leader, Vojeslav Seselj, to launch a missile attack against Italy in the event of NATO intervention against the Serbs was avidly picked up by the mass media. Various exponents of the Serbian government denied the threats and the Italian government ruled out the existence of a

concrete missile threat from the Serbs. Nevertheless, the fear that the Serbs could retaliate against Italy for military intervention remains. In particular, the government has warned against terrorist attacks by Serbs should more intensive measures be taken against them. It should be noted that the Minister of Internal Affairs has not ruled out the hypothesis of an international origin to the terrorist attacks recently perpetrated in a number of Italian cities. In order to combat the infiltration of terrorist groups from the former Yugoslavia, the government has decided to intensify border controls with Slovenia, a measure which has already brought protests from authorities in Ljubljana. Some analysts feel that Italy should equip itself with the instruments needed to deal with the possible threat of Serbian expansionism. At the moment, however, a direct Serbian threat to Italy seems improbable.

4. The problem of Italy's eastern borders and the Treaty of Osimo

The government's line towards Yugoslavia has received broad consensus. In contrast, divergences among the political forces and within public opinion on the policy to be pursued in managing the new problems created along Italy's eastern borders by the dissolution of Yugoslavia are far more marked. Debate centers on the Treaty of Osimo, signed in 1975 by the Italian and Yugoslav governments and definitively sanctioning the border changes that emerged from the Second World War. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the dividing up between Slovenia and Croatia of the territory assigned to Yugoslavia by the Treaty of Osimo has given rise to the problem of whether or not the treaty is still valid in this new, radically different situation or whether it should be renegotiated or denounced.

From the beginning, the Italian government has kept a low profile on the issue, avoiding all actions that could cause tensions with authorities in Ljubljana or Zagabria. Upon Slovenia's announcement (31 July 1992) of its intention to replace the former Yugoslavia in all treaties with Italy concerning it, including the Treaty of Osimo, Rome merely issued an official communiqué (8 September 1992) acknowledging with satisfaction the Slovenian initiative which indicates a desire to continue to consider the treaty valid. This government reaction triggered polemics in the political world. Charges even came from within the government majority. Some parties asked for denunciation of the treaty. Only the extreme right (MSI) openly claimed the return of Istria and Dalmatia, but other groups, above all the Liberals and Republicans, claimed denunciation of the treaty as a condition for renegotiation with the new republics of the questions regulated by it. On the whole, these forces were in the minority in parliament. The major parties (Christian Democrat, Socialist and PDS) substantially supported the cautious line adopted by the government.

A rather large movement in favour of denunciation has sprung up in Trieste, led by the organizations of the Italian exiles that were forced to leave Istria and Dalmatia after the war (approximately 300,000 persons), and several local political forces and leaders. Mobilization centers around the issue of compensation for and return of goods abandoned by the exiles in Istria and Dalmatia. Another fundamental demand is guarantees from the Croatian and Slovenian authorities for the protection of the rights of the Italian minorities (35,000 persons) that remained in Yugoslavia. Many of those advocating unilateral denunciation of the treaty do not rule out revision of the borders, but the only force that considers this a central issue is the extreme right.

While rejecting unilateral denunciation of the treaty, the Italian government

has acknowledged the need to adapt the treaty to the new situation. According to the government, that should involve only the parts of the treaty referring to economic problems and the protection of Italian minorities, not the borders. In fact, the government claims that, pursuant to the Helsinki Final Act, borders can only be renegotiated in agreement with the states concerned. Basically, Rome has tried to keep the problem of redefinition of the borders separate from the other aspects of the treaty, considering only the latter in need of "adaptation". This was the premise for the opening of negotiations with Slovenia for revision of the treaty; negotiations formally started on 23 February in Ljubljana (a joint Italian-Slovene commission charged with giving relations between the two countries a "historical and cultural foundation", has been set up to study their common past).

There are two fundamental arguments in favour of unilateral denunciation of the Treaty of Osimo. The first is of a legal nature, and claims that the treaty should be considered terminated as the principle of the unity of the Italian ethnic group established in Article 8 has been violated by the division of Istria between Slovenia and Croatia. The second is more political and revolves around the thesis that the Treaty of Osimo had a precise strategic objective: to ensure good relations with a country which could play an important role in containing the Soviet power in a crucial area like the Balkans. Since this objective--in the name of which Italy, under pressure from its allies, agreed to sacrifice its national interests--no longer exists, there is nothing to keep Italy from reopening the dispute over the issue regulated by the Treaty. The advocates of a simple updating of the treaty respond that, although strategic concerns linked to the bipolar arrangement have disappeared, Italy continues to be vitally interested in maintaining a stable situation on its eastern borders. Entering into a territorial dispute would mean helping to foment the trend towards territorial revisionism that is one of the major threats to stability on the continent today. Furthermore, it would jeopardize the fundamental objective of obtaining guarantees to protect the rights of the Italian minorities in Croatia and Slovenia and would deprive Italy of the support of its European partners.

Finding a solution to the two points on which the Italian government has chosen to centre negotiations for the updating of the Treaty of Osimo--the question of compensation for and return of goods and the safeguarding of Italian minorities--is no small order, either. Yugoslavia has paid only a minimal part of the sum promised in the 1983 agreement on compensation for the goods left by Italian refugees. Refugee organizations are now demanding the right to repossess those goods. But that would involve immense problems in both legal and practical terms. In particular, neither Slovene nor Croatian legislation provide for the ownership by foreigners unless joint ventures are set up. The Italian government threatened to impede the signing of the economic protocol between the EC and Slovenia and its entry into the Council of Europe unless these problems were solved, but then did not follow through. Foreign Minister Andreatta recently declared that Italy will make the entry of Slovenia into the EC contingent upon revision of its legislation on ownership.

No less complex is the problem of safeguarding Italian minorities. Italy and Croatia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the issue on 15 January 1991, but Slovenia refused to join in as the MoU lacks a clause on reciprocity for the Slovene minority in Italy. The problem of reciprocity was subsequently also raised in Zagabria.

In the last municipal elections in Croatia (February 1993), the Istrian Democratic Diet, a political formation with a large Italian component, recorded

landslide victories in the Istrian constituencies. The Diet's aim is to transform Istria into an autonomous transborder region with legislative powers, but both the Croatian and Slovene governments are categorically opposed to the idea. The day after the Croatian elections, Croatian President Tudjman severely admonished the Diet, accusing Italy of "imperialism". Last May, the Croatian government denounced the unconstitutionality of all acts aimed at maintaining or introducing bilingualism into the Istrian population. Yet the consensus obtained by the Istrian Democratic Diet does not seem to be linked to separatist tendencies; it seems to rooted in the profound dissent of the Istrian population for Zagabria's nationalist policy.

5. Concluding remarks

1. Italy's exposure to the effects of the Yugoslav crisis has been growing as a result of the gradual escalation of the conflict--the refugee problem has become increasingly serious--and of the new measures adopted by international organizations. Although Italian troops are not deployed on Yugoslav territory, Italy is providing a significant contribution to the implementation of those measures and therefore finds itself in a front line position. Other sources of concern are the risks of the conflict between the Serbs and the Croats flaring up again over control of Slavonia and Krajina and of the southward spread of the conflict. Finally, Italy is engaged in delicate negotiations on the revision of certain aspects of the Treaty of Osimo, on which hinge future relations with both Croatia and Slovenia.

2. In this context, the government is being urged to work more actively in promoting national interests in the Balkans. Openly nationalistic tendencies, however, seem to be a minority. In any case, Italy lacks the capability and instruments with which to expand its influence in the Balkans outside of the Western and European framework. There is, therefore, no realistic alternative to close cooperation with Western allies. Without their support, Italy would have difficulty in obtaining positive results in the matters that most directly involve its national interests (such as the question of the safeguarding of the rights of the Italian minority in Istria).

3. A policy of consistent search for European and Western solidarity cannot be reconciled with choices that could contribute to and increase the already high level of instability in the Balkan area. Italian political spheres are well aware of this. The most difficult test for the Italian government will be management of the problems connected with revision of the Treaty of Osimo. It has already produced some tension with Slovenia and Croatia, but there are also many areas of possible common interest, especially in the economic field. Both republics have shown keen interest in being fully integrated into the European trade and communications system and in diversifying their economic and trade relations to avoid excessive dependency on Austria and Germany. Italy thus has remarkable opportunities to develop economic cooperation between the two republics, even if it will have to do with the limited resources at its disposal. Of particular interest in this regard are certain cooperation projects, such as setting up forms of long-term collaboration and integration between the ports of Trieste and Koper and the construction of new highway and railway links along the east-west axis.

4. Italian attempts to develop forms of regional cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries have met with increasing difficulties deriving from the re-emergence of nationalist rivalries. Nevertheless, the idea of integrating Community policy with a regional cooperation effort is still valid. With respect to the former Yugoslavia, such an initiative could be taken into consideration if a stable solution were found to the present conflict. Italy is particularly interested in strengthening its ties with the northern republics (Slovenia and Croatia). But it could also play an important role, both politically and economically, towards the southern republics in light of the commitment it has taken on in Albania, which gives it special responsibilities within the Community framework.