

Treacherous Mirror: Misinterpreting Italian Euroscepticism

by Jean-Pierre Darnis

The COVID-19 crisis triggered intense debates about Italy's position concerning Europe. While the epidemic was kicking in, criticism against the EU was piling up, leading to what many described as a reinforcement of Eurosceptic trends in Italy.¹ At the same time, debates about of Italy's foreign policy projection towards two non-EU countries, Russia and China, also surfaced in connection with the COVID-19 emergency, creating a sense of increased competition over Italy's international references.

Euroscepticism in Italy has often been explained by external factors, such as a general mistrust towards the EU during and after the economic crisis, and internal drivers, with certain political

forces using Europe as an easy scapegoat for all kinds of shortcomings.² Yet those analyses do not address the evolution of the concept itself, meaning the story of Italian international identity and the evolution of its representation.

After World War II, Italian international identity has expressed itself through two pillars: the Atlantic alliance (NATO) on one side and European integration on the other. This strong commitment to integration and multilateralism corresponded to a weak concept of the national approach. Italy did maintain a set of autonomous bilateral relations folded within the concept of its "Mediterranean policy",³ but the classic instruments of national power

¹ See European Parliament, *Public Opinion Monitoring in the Time of COVID-19*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/public-opinion-in-the-time-of-covid-19>; "Euroscepticism Grows in Italy by Coronavirus", in *CE Noticias Financieras English*, 18 April 2020.

² See Rosa Balfour and Lorenzo Robustelli, "Why Did Italy Fall Out of Love with Europe?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|48 (July 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10658>.

³ See Jean-Pierre Darnis, "La crise du Covid-19, un tournant géopolitique pour l'Italie?", in *Le Grand Continent*, 10 April 2020, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/?p=67713>.

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were side-lined and seen as corrupted following the trauma of fascist imperialism.

The European Union on the other hand, was an unrivalled space of economic prosperity for Italy. It provided a more than useful institutional and political framework and positive external pressure to achieve a series of goals, corresponding to the different steps of integration.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, the weakening of the international framework led to an evolution in Italy's international position and domestic policies. It did not change Italy's commitment towards European integration but produced a reshuffling of Italy's sense of its own international positioning. The works of scholar Carlo Maria Santoro illustrate this trend when elaborating on Italy's role as a "middle power".⁴ From Santoro on, international relations analysts adopted this category as a baseline when discussing Italy's foreign policy.⁵

The remarkable evolution of this thinking lies in the concept of "power" associated with Italy, directly translating an implicit re-legitimization of the national scale as a legitimate category to describe Italy in international relations. Furthermore, a realist view of international relations summarized as a

⁴ See Carlo M. Santoro, *La politica estera di una media potenza. L'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1991.

⁵ See for example Giampiero Giacomello and Bertjan Verbeek (eds), *Italy's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century. The New Assertiveness of an Aspiring Middle Power*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2011.

competition among powers is generally adopted. This trend corresponds to two main influences.

The first lies in the tradition of Italian political science, which, from Niccolò Machiavelli on, is keen to use the category of "power" as its main tool,⁶ a tradition that is quite significant among scholars of Italian international relations. The second, is the emergence of a new breed of international relations scientists, well represented by Santoro, who are basing a set of interpretative frameworks on Anglo-Saxon realist theory. This evolution has created an epistemological cognitive habit within Italian international relations and historical academia keen to develop national-based power games. This in turn, has been translated into the description of Europe as a competitive rather than cooperative political space.

This nation-centric thinking was popularized by the Italian geopolitical journal *Limes* which, from its creation in 1993, advocates the need to reshuffle Italian national interest.⁷ According to this line of thought, the nation returns as a primary category and Europe is described as a competitive playing field among its members but also as the product of geopolitical global power

⁶ Sonia Lucarelli and Roberto Menotti, "Le relazioni internazionali nella terra del 'Principe'", in *Rivista italiana di scienza politica*, No. 1/2002 (April 2002), p. 31-82.

⁷ The first op-ed of *Limes* in 1993 clearly indicates the nation as the main category to project Italian interests while criticizing Atlanticism and Europeanism. See "La responsabilità italiana", in *Limes*, No. 1-2/1993, p. 7-11, <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/la-responsabilita-italiana>.

games,⁸ excluding multilateral and institutional thinking.

Therefore, since the 1990s, the European Union has been conceptually criticized by Italian historical and geopolitical thinkers, spreading the interpretation of a zero-sum, if not negative, game to be described and played in a purely realist “power politics” approach. The problem is that reality is far more complex, and that the manicheism of such a vision does not help understand the cooperation and multilateral side of the European integration process.

Power theories are certainly useful tools to understand European politics, but they miss the point if they do not also take into account the hybrid and complex political framework of the EU, where organs like the Commission, agencies, the Court of Justice or Parliament follow other rules than purely neo-Hobbesian ones. The adoption of a “realist-Machiavellian” nation-centric thinking in terms of international relations by Italian elites is an important point in understanding the spread of Euroscepticism in Italy over the last decades. It also fits well with the growing emphasis on sovereignty.

After three decades of spreading, these theories have reached critical mass among Italian elites and public opinion, which also explains why they have registered a wider consensus across political spectrums during the last decade, reinforcing other economic or political factors which have favoured Euroscepticism in Italy.

⁸ See for example Lucio Carraciolo, “L’Europa non è europea”, in *Limes*, No. 4/2019, p. 7-30.

This vision, which focuses on power games, also helps us understand why Italy is building direct relations with China or Russia even when it conflicts with the EU or the Atlantic framework, increasingly perceived as a secondary reality by pro-sovereignty political movements in Italy, like the right-wing League Party or the Five Star Movement (M5S). China and Russia also offer the flattering possibility of installing a power-to-power relation, a treacherous mirror in which Italian sovereigntists like to see themselves. Furthermore, if competition among nations is natural, then it becomes normal to consider EU countries such as France or Germany as competitors, if not enemies, rather than allies, a trend which has been recently observed in Italy.⁹

Italy is currently experiencing an ultra-realist perception of international relations and of Europe, which is leading to a strong misinterpretation of reality. This is obviously not the only cause of Euroscepticism, which is on the rise in other countries as well, but can help cast a useful light on the Italian domestic context and a series of factors to be taken into consideration when speaking about and dealing with Italy’s current ultra-sensitivities towards the European Union and its member states.

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⁹ See Jean-Pierre Darnis and Federico Niglia, “Come l’emergenza può ridisegnare le relazioni diplomatiche nell’Unione europea”, in *Il Foglio*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.ilmfoglio.it/esteri/2020/04/14/news/come-l-emergenza-puo-ridisegnare-le-relazioni-diplomatiche-nell-unione-europea-313042>.

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