

Italy's Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

by Nona Mikhelidze

In line with the EU's policy, former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi and current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni have taken a strong stance in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine by firmly condemning the invasion and offering their full support for Kyiv's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence.

The areas of Italy's support to Ukraine

The Italian response has been characterised by four major areas of support. First and foremost, Italy has unequivocally denounced the Russian annexation of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, just as it has consistently denounced the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Secondly, Rome has demonstrated its support for the defence of Ukraine by approving six significant military aid packages to Kyiv (with a seventh military package currently under discussion) and facilitating targeted training activities

for the Ukrainian army, with the objective of optimising the use of the weapons it has provided. Italy is also due to send a SAMP/T air-defence system to Ukraine. Additionally, Rome has contributed approximately 390 million euro to support measures for Ukraine under the European Peace Facility. The third area involves financial support, including the allocation of over 800 million euro to support approximately 168,000 Ukrainian refugees in Italy, as well as humanitarian assistance worth more than 150 million euro, which also included donations of medical supplies and equipment. Furthermore, in line with the G7 commitments, Italy extended a 200 million euro loan on preferential terms to Kyiv to pay the salaries of education sector employees. The Ministry of Education also secured funding to facilitate the inclusion of Ukrainian students in Italian schools, while the Ministry of Culture launched a 2 million euro programme to support Ukrainian artists. Finally, the fourth set of measures included Italy's full

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support for the unprecedented EU-level sanctions against Russia.¹

Draghi's steadfast response: Sanctions, peace plan and support for EU membership

Since the war began on 24 February 2022, the Italian government has described the Russian aggression as an assault on European peace and security, urging its citizens to brace for the potential economic sacrifices that would arise from the conflict. By the admission of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov himself, Italy's forceful condemnation of Russian aggression caught Moscow² off guard as it represents a significant shift in Italian foreign policy towards Russia. "While I was aware of the strong historical ties between Italy and Moscow, we could not remain passive in the face of unjustified aggression [...]. In Russia, they were likely counting on our ambiguity, which has not manifested", stated Draghi in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.³

¹ Website of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation: *Italy in Support of Ukraine*, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=77000>.

² Giuseppe Brindisi interview to Sergey Lavrov: "Lavrov in esclusiva su 'Zona Bianca': 'Russia non ha mai smesso dialogo per evitare Guerra Mondiale'...", in *TGcom24*, 1 May 2022, https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/mondo/lavrov-in-esclusiva-su-zona-bianca-russia-non-ha-mai-smesso-dialogo-per-evitare-guerra-mondiale_49548127-202202k.shtml.

³ Antonio Polito, "Draghi: 'L'Italia ha dimostrato di farcela. Serve coesione e dialogo'", in *Corriere della Sera*, 24 December 2022, https://www.corriere.it/politica/22_dicembre_24/mario-draghi-intervista-463ee9fe-82f8-11ed-a908-044c2789a441.shtml.

The policy shift has brought about changes in the trade relationship between the two countries. Italian exports to Russia sharply declined by 33 per cent between March and June 2022 when compared to the previous year,⁴ while Italy's reliance on Russian energy resources dropped to a historic low. By September 2022, Russian gas, which had previously made up almost 40 per cent of Italy's total imports, accounted for just 10 per cent due to the government's agreements with other supplier countries, notably Algeria and Northern European states, and should be fully eliminated from Italy's energy mix by the winter of 2024/25.⁵

The Italian government's foreign policy towards Russia has shifted gradually, however. Initially, Italy adhered to NATO's policy of deterrence towards Russia, which included increasing the presence of the alliance on the Eastern flank. The Italian government also attempted to engage in a dialogue with President Putin and called for a ceasefire, while also presenting its own peace plan in an effort to promote a diplomatic solution. The Italian peace plan – which advocated for a ceasefire (although not an immediate withdrawal of Russian troops), Ukraine's membership of the EU as well as its neutrality – proved to be short-lived as it was unlikely to satisfy both

⁴ Italian Trade Agency, *L'Italia nell'economia internazionale. Rapporto ICE 2021-2022*, September 2022, <https://www.ice.it/it/node/5245>.

⁵ Alberto Brambilla and Chiara Albanese, "Italy Secures Enough Supplies for Winter without Russia Gas", in *Bloomberg*, 27 September 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-27/italy-secures-enough-supplies-for-winter-without-gas-from-russia>.

Moscow and Kyiv.⁶ These inherent weaknesses prompted former Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio to acknowledge that the timing was not appropriate for negotiations, and Draghi to declare that Putin had no desire to end the war.⁷

Since then, Draghi labelled the war in Ukraine as a conflict between democracy and autocracy, urging Western nations to remain steadfast in their values and avoid being swayed by authoritarianism.⁸ In addition, the Italian Prime Minister publicly voiced his support for Ukraine's candidacy for EU membership, echoing the calls of other nations, particularly those in Northern and Central Eastern Europe. Initially, according to Draghi, Italy was the only major EU country in favour of Ukraine's candidacy.⁹ During a historic visit to Kyiv in mid-June, Draghi, alongside French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, held a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. At a joint press conference, Draghi

reaffirmed his support for Ukraine's EU application, and both Macron and Scholz echoed his endorsement. A few days later, on 23 June, the European Council granted Ukraine (along with Moldova) candidate status for full EU membership.

In its reaction to the war in Ukraine, Draghi's government succeeded in preserving and enhancing its pro-European and pro-Atlantic position, despite attempts by some political figures to weaken its opposition to Russia. By providing unwavering military, economic and humanitarian assistance to Kyiv, and vocally supporting Ukraine's bid for EU membership, Draghi's administration established Italy as a significant player in the EU, alongside Germany and France, demonstrating that it can be one of the leading decision-makers in Europe when it is governed by an authoritative personality like the former Prime Minister.

Meloni takes charge: Upholding Italy's strong commitment

Following the October 2022 leadership change, the new Italian government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni continued the policies adopted by Draghi's cabinet towards the Ukrainian war and reassured Italy's Western partners of her unwavering support for Ukraine in its defence against Russia. Support for Ukraine has been viewed as part of a broader commitment to strong transatlantic ties. During a meeting with US President Joe Biden, Meloni emphasised the importance of the transatlantic alliance in addressing both the war as well as

⁶ Riccardo Alcaro and Nona Mikhelidze, "Not Yet Time for Diplomacy. Lessons from Italy's Ill-Conceived Peace Plan for Ukraine", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|25 (June 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/15515>.

⁷ See Italian Government, *PM Draghi Holds Press Conference*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.sitiarcheologici.palazzochigi.it/www.governo.it/ottobre2022/www.governo.it/en/node/19970.html>.

⁸ See Italian Government, *Prime Minister Draghi's Address to the Senate*, 20 July 2022, <https://www.sitiarcheologici.palazzochigi.it/www.governo.it/ottobre2022/www.governo.it/en/node/20312.html>.

⁹ See Italian Government, *PM Draghi's Press Conference Following the Special Meeting of the European Council*, 31 May 2022, <https://www.sitiarcheologici.palazzochigi.it/www.governo.it/ottobre2022/www.governo.it/en/node/19993.html>.

its economic repercussions. Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani reassured US Secretary of State Antony Blinken of Italy's continued support for Kyiv and its commitment to strengthening transatlantic security. Tajani also spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart shortly after taking office and expressed Italy's support for President Zelensky's ten-point "fair peace" formula, presented at the G20 meeting in November. Italy has also expressed an interest in actively participating in Ukraine's post-conflict reconstruction.

Being in coalition with two historically pro-Russian forces – *Lega* and *Forza Italia* – from time to time, Meloni has needed to emphasise that Italy would never be the weakest link in the West, affirming that the country is a fully-fledged and committed member of the EU and the Atlantic Alliance. These words have primarily been directed at appeasing her coalition partners, but Meloni has also warned that those who do not agree with these principles cannot be part of the government.¹⁰

In this regard, Prime Minister Meloni was courageous in her speech delivered during the joint press conference with President Zelensky during her visit to Kyiv on 22 February. Despite leading a coalition that includes two party leaders with friendly sentiments towards Putin, and herself heading a party whose

electorate is not notoriously supportive of military aid for Ukraine, Meloni expressed herself in a remarkably clear and decisive manner. She stated that she believes in Ukraine's victory and that Italy will ensure military aid to Kyiv until a just peace is achieved. A true peace is achieved by reaffirming that the international community does not accept a world in which force redesigns the boundaries between states, in which those who consider themselves militarily stronger believe they have the right to invade their neighbour, Meloni added.¹¹

Thus, Meloni's government is upholding Italy's strong commitment to supporting Ukraine, which was initiated by Draghi in February 2022. True, Italy's position within the EU has shifted in terms of decision-making regarding the war. This was made clear when Macron hosted Zelensky and Scholz at the Élysée Palace without extending an invitation to Meloni. However, it should also be noted that Meloni's absence in France is also related to the frosty relationship between Rome and Paris and, in general, to Italy's natural positioning vis-à-vis Eastern European countries, where Rome usually follows Brussels and does not seek to be the protagonist in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood policy.

23 February 2023

¹⁰ Jakob Hanke Vela and Elena Giordano, "Meloni Slams Berlusconi over Putin Remarks", in *Politico*, 20 October 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2268731>; "Meloni: Ue-Nato caposaldi, chi non d'accordo fuori da governo", in *Ansa*, 20 October 2020, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2022/10/19/berlusconi-per-meloni...-lasciamo-perdere_2ea3a52c-8924-4b48-8540-fc497a2a65ac.html.

¹¹ Italian Government, *President Meloni's Statement at the Press Conference with President Zelensky*, 21 February 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21872>.

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