

Silvio Berlusconi: A Controversial Protagonist of Italian Politics

by Ferdinando Nelli Feroci

With the death of Silvio Berlusconi, a phase in the history of the Italian Republic ends. This phase drew the so-called First Republic to a close, brought to an end traditional parties, gave way to the spectacularisation of politics and the success of personal parties, and reinforced a direct relationship between leaders and citizens.

An extraordinarily successful entrepreneur first in real estate and then with his tv channels, in the early 1990s, Berlusconi discovered politics and fell in love with it: supposedly, to defend Italy from the risk of a Communist electoral success; in reality, as a result of a compound of passion and his business interests.

Without any doubt, Berlusconi was – for better or worse – the personality who left the most apparent mark on the last twenty-five to thirty years of Italy's history. He founded a new and unprecedented centre-right coalition and embodied and inspired a new way of doing politics, halfway between the aspiration to affirm a model of authentic

liberalism in Italy and the temptation to embrace the methods and practices of a nascent populism. Berlusconi was also the most divisive and contested personality of these thirty years of Italian political life.

Unconditionally loved by his supporters and opposed by his opponents, in these thirty years of prominence in Italian politics, Berlusconi certainly contributed to the modernisation of the country and its institutions. He modernised the party system, reintegrated the post-fascist right-wing Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) into the governing majority and "institutionalised" the secessionist drives of the League. Thanks also to the newly established majoritarian electoral system, he effectively introduced the alternation in government in Italy after decades of consociational democracy. And finally, he forced the oppositions (with rare exceptions) to define their agendas based on a kind of "anything but" anti-Berlusconism that restrained their creativity and vision.

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But it was difficult for the political leader Berlusconi to coexist with the entrepreneur Berlusconi, resulting in a never-resolved conflict of interest. This, in turn, led to a constant challenge to the judiciary, which was perceived as hostile, also conducted through “ad-personam” laws in the name of a supposedly superior “garantism”. But above all, Berlusconi only marginally succeeded in carrying out those reforms that he had promised and were necessary to achieve an Italy with less state and more market, to implement his political agenda that was supposed to liberate the “animal spirits” of Italian capitalism, and to kickstart an economy that had always suffered from too many “fetters and restraints”.

In other words, despite his promises and his long tenure in government, and despite relying on large majorities in Parliament, in the end, Berlusconi too had to reckon with the resilience of powerful lobbies and corporations in a country as difficult and complex to govern as Italy.

In foreign policy, he relied heavily on his ability to establish good personal relationships, taking his approach centred on such relations to the extreme. These were excellent with Vladimir Putin during his early years in the Kremlin (and the reason for the success of the Pratica di Mare summit), but with thorny implications after the Russian aggression against Ukraine; excellent too with George W. Bush, to whom Berlusconi granted Italy’s support at the time of the Iraq war, despite his intimate belief that that war was a tragic mistake; and equally excellent with Muammar Gaddafi,

with whom Berlusconi laid the ground for a collaboration that was expected to guarantee Italy energy supplies and control of migratory flows. Much more complicated, however, were Berlusconi’s relationships with some European leaders, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel or French President Nicolas Sarkozy, from whom he was separated by a gulf in terms of background and political culture, and to whom he never really managed to realise convergences.

Sincerely convinced of Italy’s place in the Atlantic and Western bloc and of its ties with the US, Berlusconi consistently focused on the strategic nature of the transatlantic relationship and the enhancement of Italy’s presence in NATO, also against “third-force” temptations from other political forces in the majority that supported him in Parliament. Toward Moscow, Berlusconi aimed to maintain, over the years, a relationship of convinced and sincere cooperation, convinced as he was that Russia was an indispensable partner for Italy, not only for energy supplies and economic relations, but also as an interlocutor for European security and some global challenges. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine put him on the spot and forced him into an ambiguity that many abroad have considered excessive.

His relationship with Europe and the EU underwent a notable evolution over the years. Berlusconi moved from an initial attitude of mistrust or negative prejudice toward a project that appeared to him as too complex and distant from the real concerns of his constituents to a sincere conviction that Italy’s destiny

was and is closely linked to that of Europe. It is no coincidence that, of late, Berlusconi was keen to put himself forward as the guarantor of Italy's commitment to Europe. His steadfast determination to anchor the party he wanted and founded, Forza Italia, in the family of the European People's Party is, in the end, a testament to Berlusconi's confidence in the European project.

Unable to pick a successor after having dropped so many, or perhaps unconvinced of the need to designate one at the head of the party he had founded, Berlusconi leaves Forza Italia, already declining in support and no longer the leading party of the centre-right coalition, in a difficult situation. Until now, Forza Italia has been the party of choice for a moderate centre-right electorate nationwide. Now it remains to be seen whether the new leadership will ensure the solidity of the party hitherto marked by its founder's leadership – or if, on the contrary, the other partners in the coalition and perhaps the third pole will start the hunt for the voters of the party created and founded by Silvio Berlusconi.

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