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Germany's *Ostpolitik*. An Italian Perspective

by Riccardo Alcaro

ABSTRACT

Italy has traditionally looked to Germany as a natural partner in defining the EU's approach to Russia. Shared views of Russia as a member of the European family of nations, converging assessments of Europe's security needs, and parallel energy and trade interests have all contributed to this. However, since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis a perception has begun to emerge in Italy of a widening gap between the Italian national interest and Germany's *Ostpolitik*. While German policy *per se* is not a major topic of discussion, the Italian debate about the most appropriate policy course towards Russia and Eastern Europe contains a number of implicit assumptions about German choices and interests. This debate runs along political cleavages, with Italy's expanding Eurosceptic coalition increasingly advocating a normalization of relations with Russia. Germany's *Ostpolitik*, or at least some of the fundamental assumptions on which it is predicated, seems thus destined to become the object of greater contestation in Italy.

Italy's foreign policy | Germany | Russia | Ukraine | Sanctions | NATO | European Union



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by Riccardo Alcaro*

Introduction

Historically, the order of Italy's foreign policy priorities has largely dovetailed with Germany's. Both countries have considered European integration and the transatlantic relationship as strategically vital interests to preserve national security and prosperity while promoting rules-based international regimes. Like Germany, Italy has also put much energy into cultivating relations with Russia, which it sees as a fundamental interlocutor to secure Europe's long-term stability and energy supplies. German and Italian policymakers alike have conceived of these three dimensions as organically linked. With European integration and transatlantic relations generating a mutually reinforcing dynamic, the Euro-Atlantic framework has provided a platform to engage Russia from a position of strength.

Recent developments have contributed to blurring this picture. While Italy, like several other European countries, has struggled to cope with the effects of the economic crisis and has experienced an increasingly divisive politics, Germany has remained financially and politically stable. With US President Donald Trump flirting with the idea of disengaging from Europe, France stuck in an economic swamp and Britain on its way to leave the EU, Germany's geopolitical role has gained in significance. Expectations for German leadership have thus extended beyond policy areas where German power has traditionally been dominant, such as Eurozone governance, to migration and security. German foreign policy has consequently become the object of greater international scrutiny.

It is against this changed backdrop that the Italian debate about the merits of Germany's policies towards Russia and Eastern Europe should be appreciated. To be sure, speaking of a debate is presuming too much. If there is a debate, it concerns how membership in the EU and NATO affects Italy's relations with Russia, rather than German policies. However, given Berlin's clout in the EU, whatever positions the Italian government, politicians, businesspersons and analysts hold about Russia and Eastern Europe implicitly contain assumptions about German

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policies. To the extent that it is possible to draw conclusions from an embryonic and often confused debate, Germany's *Ostpolitik* is likely to become the object of greater contestation in Italy.

1. Italy, Germany's *Ostpolitik* and the Ukraine crisis

Until recently, Italy looked to Germany as a natural partner in outlining the framework of relations between the West and Russia. The Italians shared Germany's view that Russia should be engaged, including by progressively associating it to Euro-Atlantic frameworks, to guarantee Europe's long-term security and to better manage threats such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

Of course, there were also areas of competition. Energy infrastructure was one of these. After Russia's state-run energy giant Gazprom and a group of mostly German companies agreed to develop Nord Stream, an offshore gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea, the Italians rushed into securing a similar arrangement in the Black Sea, South Stream, to safeguard Italy's position as southern Europe's energy hub. Both projects were highly controversial because they would undermine the EU's stated goal to reduce its energy reliance on Russia. Another source of concern was that the pipelines' prospective routes would bypass transit countries, such as Belarus and especially Ukraine, thereby increasing their vulnerability to political pressure from Russia. Sharing the blame with Germany provided some cover for Italy's lacklustre commitment to the former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

Like Germany, Italy had resisted the US push for offering Ukraine and Georgia a roadmap to NATO membership and had worked towards restoring cooperation with Russia after the latter's war against Georgia in 2008. However, whereas Germany tried to strike a balance by investing money and political capital in Eastern European countries, the Italians showed no particular activism. They did not oppose the launch of the Eastern Partnership – the 2009 EU initiative aimed to boost trade and political dialogue with six former Soviet republics – but urged caution. In a way, the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, triggered by popular demonstrations in favour of closer ties to the EU, validated Italy's concerns that the EU was moving too fast.¹

When Russia annexed Crimea, the Italian government joined in the general condemnation of the first land grab in Europe since 1945. It also agreed to limit cooperation with Russia (including by suspending its participation in the G7) and target a handful of Russian officials involved in the takeover of the peninsula with

¹ For an overview of Germany and Italy's relations with Russia prior to the Ukraine crisis, see Susan Stewart, "Germany", and Riccardo Alcaro, "Italy", in Maxine David, Jackie Gower and Hiski Haukkala (eds.), *National Perspectives on Russia. European Foreign Policy in the Making?*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 13-29 and 67-85.

visa bans and the freezing of financial assets. At the same time, Italy advocated de-escalation, echoing then German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's insistence that diplomacy, not sanctions, and moderation, not confrontation, should guide the Western response to the crisis.² The hope in Italy (as elsewhere) was that the Crimea incident could be compartmentalized and West-Russia relations return to a semblance of normalcy. Yet, as Russia went on to foment unrest in south-eastern Ukraine, the prospects for de-escalation receded – and the seed for a potential contrast between Germany and Italy was planted.

Some time had to pass before any appreciable divergence emerged, however. When Chancellor Angela Merkel, in coordination with the Barack Obama administration, argued that Russia's responsibility for the destabilization of Ukraine warranted a tougher response, Italy fell in line. Then foreign minister Federica Mogherini nonetheless stated that Rome saw the sanctions regime as a reversible measure aimed to bring Russia to negotiate a political solution to the crisis.³ She took care to emphasize that her assessment was shared by, among others, Steinmeier. Evidently, at this point in time Italy appreciated Germany's role in the crisis as a force moderating calls from Washington for more drastic measures and keeping open the channels of communication with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The lingering perception that Italy and Germany shared the same concerns was ostensibly the reason why Rome welcomed the setting up of the Franco-German-led "Normandy format" to broker peace between Ukraine and Russia. Italian support was nonetheless marred by misgivings about the French and Germans being in charge for the rest of the EU. The perception that Germany was embarking on a major undertaking potentially in contrast with Italy's interests thus began to surface. Analysts spoke of a German ambition to fill the geopolitical vacuum in Ukraine.⁴ This interpretation may not have been universally shared. Yet it constituted a first systematic attempt at delving into the geopolitical implications for Italy of the Ukraine crisis, which somehow inflated its potential for persuasion. And while in itself it was meant to be a dispassionate, neutral analysis, in fact it nurtured the conviction of some in government, research and the private sector that Germany was pursuing a hegemonic design.

In sum, up until 2014 Italy viewed Germany's *Ostpolitik* as being in line with its own interest in a constructive EU-Russia relationship, with the notable exception of energy infrastructure development. That Italian and German preferences largely converged was part of the conventional wisdom of Italian foreign policy thinkers and, to a lesser extent given the competitive nature of relations between German

² Ulrich Speck, "Germany Plays Good Cop, Bad Cop on Ukraine", in *Carnegie Europe Articles*, 25 June 2014, <http://ceip.org/2oNOZWS>.

³ Claudio Cerasa, "Farnesina politica, una Nato aggressiva non serve a nulla contro Putin", in *Il Foglio*, 19 April 2014, <http://bit.ly/2oNPQqT>.

⁴ Germano Dottori, "Anche Berlino ha perso Kiev", in *Limes*, No. 4/2014 (April 2014), p. 217-226; Brendan Simms and Liam Fitzgerald, "Berlino, Mosca, Pechino: tre sindromi da accerchiamento", in *Limes*, No. 8/2014 (August 2014), p. 163-168.

and Italian firms, in political and business circles too. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, however, cracks have started to show in this picture. Even if Italy has largely followed Germany's line, the gap between Italy's perceptions of its own interest and Germany's *Ostpolitik* has widened.

2. Germany's *Ostpolitik* and Italy's grievances

With the West-Russia confrontation showing no signs of abating, Italians have started to reconsider the merits of the German-led EU approach to the Ukraine crisis, and by extension Germany's *Ostpolitik* in general.

Support for the EU sanctions regime has eroded rapidly. The Italian Trade Agency recorded significant reductions in Italian exports to Russia, particularly in the agribusiness sector, already in April 2015.⁵ A few months later reports about thousands of jobs lost and diminished export revenues worth billions of euros started to circulate.⁶ The numbers were speculative (and perhaps exaggerated), but the downward trend was undisputable. In June 2016 *La Repubblica*, an Italian daily, estimated that the EU-Russia trade row had cost Italy around 3.6 million euros.⁷ The reported decrease of Italy's exports to Russia was indeed substantial: -11.8 percent in 2014, -25.2 percent in 2015 and an expected -8.3 percent in 2016, with the car-making, metallurgy, agriculture and textile sectors suffering the most. In February 2017 a news report by Italy's respected and generally reliable financial daily, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, put the direct costs of the lost trade with Russia at four billion euros and 80,000 jobs.⁸

Some elaboration is necessary to grasp the full meaning of these figures. EU sanctions on trade in dual use and energy technologies have had only a marginal effect. But financial restrictions imposed on Russian banks have been more harmful, as they have contributed to drying up credit lines that Russian importers tapped to purchase Italian products. Moreover, Russia has shrewdly retaliated against vulnerable sectors, such as agribusiness, rightly calculating that complaints of exposed exporting firms would complicate the task of keeping a cohesive EU front over time. A specific problem for Italy is that a number of agribusiness and textile firms harmed by Moscow's retaliatory measures are small and medium-

⁵ Maurizio Forte, *Interscambio, esportazioni settore agroalimentare, attività promozionali a supporto di EXPO Milano 2015*, Presentation at the ICE Agency Moscow, Italian-Russian Chamber of Commerce, 29 April 2015, http://www.ccir.it/ccir/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Presentazione-ICE_it.pdf.

⁶ Marco Sabatini, "Russia-UE: il costo delle sanzioni", in *Exportiamo*, 16 September 2015, <http://www.exportiamo.it/aree-tematiche/12157/russia-ue-il-coste-delle-sanzioni>.

⁷ Jenner Meletti, Raffaele Ricciardi and Nicola Lombardozzi, "Il conto salato delle sanzioni russe", in *La Repubblica*, 15 June 2016, http://inchieste.repubblica.it/it/repubblica/rep-it/2016/06/15/news/il_conto_salato_delle_sanzioni_russe-141193594.

⁸ Laura Cavestri, "Russian Sanctions Have Cost Italy €4 Billion", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 8 February 2017, <http://24o.it/8N7IKd>.

sized enterprises poorly equipped to absorb violent shocks. Shoemakers in Italy's Marche region, to cite just one example, rely almost entirely on exports to Russia, which has raised the costs they have incurred due to sanctions exponentially.⁹ Italian agribusiness associations also complain that the Russian market has been flooded with fake Made in Italy products that have caused further damage. Adding these indirect costs to direct trade losses, they have contended, brings the overall cost borne by Italian firms to a staggering ten billion euros in just two years.¹⁰

So far, Italian grievances about the EU-Russia trade row have not turned into widespread resentment against Germany, the driving force behind the EU sanction policy. After all, Germany has incurred severe costs too. Italians do blame Germany, however, for applying what they perceive as a double standard. The case in point is the plan to double the capacity of Nord Stream by building a second offshore pipeline, Nord Stream 2.

Seen from Rome, Germany is playing unfairly. On the one hand, it champions EU cohesion and firmness vis-à-vis Russia over Ukraine. On the other, it has ignored its own calls to limit cooperation with Moscow and green-lit a project that would run counter to the goal of reducing EU reliance on Russian gas supplies, deprive Poland and others of revenues coming from transit fees, and undercut Western efforts to bolster the flailing Ukrainian government. Nord Stream 2 is unpalatable to Italy also because, in the meanwhile, President Putin has withdrawn Russia from the South Stream project. He has blamed the excessive rigidity of EU competition rules for the decision, yet it is difficult not to attribute the collapse of South Stream to tensions over Ukraine and sanctions. Some analysts have concluded that the Italians should just recognize the impracticability of opposing Nord Stream 2 and argued that Italian firms, specifically oil and gas contractor Saipem, should seek a slice of the pie.¹¹ The prevailing opinion, however, is that the project is detrimental to Italian interests.¹² The enlarged pipeline could turn Germany into the EU's main energy distribution hub, whereby Italian firms would eventually be compelled to look north for supplies that would come at a higher cost.¹³

⁹ "Nuove sanzioni alla Russia, la rabbia di Confindustria: 'Politica disinteressata al territorio'", in *Corrierenews*, 22 December 2016, <http://www.corrierenews.it/economia/nuove-sanzioni-alla-russia-la-rabbia-di-confindustria-politica-disinteressata-al-territorio>.

¹⁰ Luigi Grassia, "Sanzioni alla Russia, per l'Italia il costo è di 10 miliardi (finora)", in *La Stampa*, 19 December 2016, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/12/19/economia/sanzioni-alla-russia-per-litalia-il-costo-di-miliardi-per-ora-xRIUMsiDTa8C0inDj80huO/pagina.html>.

¹¹ Alfonso Bianchi, "Dis-jointed European Energy", in *EastWest*, Nos. 67 (September/October 2016) and 68 (November/December 2016); Margherita Paolini, "Nord Stream 2: colpo doppio oppure a salve?", in *Limes*, No. 1/2016 (January 2016), p. 103-112.

¹² Germano Dottori, "Renzi tenta il rilancio ma ora paga dazio", in *Limes*, No. 1/2016 (January 2016), p. 113-120.

¹³ Giovanna De Maio, "A Tale of Two Countries: Italy, Germany and Russian Gas", in *U.S.-Europe Working Papers*, 18 August 2016, <http://brook.gs/2b1UDKn>. It was Claudio Descalzi, head of Italy's energy company Eni, who predicted higher gas prices for Italy: "ENI CEO says Nord Stream 2 Would Raise Gas Prices in Italy", in *Reuters*, 23 May 2016, <http://af.reuters.com/article/idAFL5N18K4KG>.

The Italian government has struggled to act upon these concerns. Former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (in office in 2014-16) singled out Nord Stream 2 as a case of duplicity¹⁴ and tried in vain to have the European Commission declare the new pipeline incompatible with EU rules on gas distribution in the Union (the very same rules Putin blamed for the scrapping of South Stream).¹⁵ Renzi also used the six-monthly renewals of EU sanctions to voice broader Italian worries. On one occasion, Renzi delayed the extension of sanctions to send a signal that Italy did not want the spat over Ukraine to undermine possible cooperation with Russia on issues of mutual interest, ranging from climate change to the fight against Islamic terrorism and the stabilization of Libya.¹⁶ Even if Renzi eventually let the extension go on as planned, Italy's line was clear: it would agree to renew sanctions only to support the implementation of the peace deal struck by the Normandy format in Minsk in 2015 (the so-called Minsk II agreement); no more than that. True to his word, in October 2016 Renzi refused to consider sanctioning Russia's allegedly indiscriminate bombing of civilians during the battle of Aleppo, the main front of the civil war between the Russian-backed Syrian regime and a plethora of opposition forces. Italy managed to have the proposal, tabled by Germany along with France and the UK, removed from the EU agenda.¹⁷

Renzi's publicly aired misgivings about sanctions and Nord Stream 2 contained a measure of political opportunism, as the prime minister calculated that picking a fight against Germany, the resented (in Italy) champion of austerity, would shelter him from his opponents' charge that he was in thrall to Berlin.¹⁸ Yet, below the surface of electoral expediency, there were substantial matters that have continued to cast a negative light on Germany's Russia policy after Renzi's fall.

3. An embryonic, yet already polarized, debate

Italy has experienced no policy change under Paolo Gentiloni, Renzi's successor as prime minister. Angelino Alfano, head of a small centrist party in the ruling coalition and new foreign minister, has vowed that Italy remains committed to the implementation of the Minsk II agreement (and therefore to sanctions as a way to achieve that goal). Yet, he has emphasized again that Italy believes that

¹⁴ Peter Spiegel and James Polity, "Italy's Renzi Joins Opposition to Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Deal", in *Financial Times*, 15 December 2015.

¹⁵ Marco Tacconi, "The Italian Ally in the V4 Gas Security Battle", in *Visegrad Insights*, 15 July 2016, <http://visegradinsight.eu/?p=3928>.

¹⁶ Gerardo Pelosi, "PM Renzi Plans to Tell EU Council that Renewal of Russia Sanctions Should Not Be Automatic", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 16 December 2015, <http://24o.it/f0CMzT>.

¹⁷ Arthur Beesly, "Italy's Renzi Forces Retreat from New Sanctions on Russia", in *Financial Times*, 21 October 2016.

¹⁸ Michael Day, "Italy 'Preparing to Cause Trouble' for EU as Relations with Germany Sour", in *The Independent*, 17 January 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/italy-preparing-to-cause-trouble-for-eu-as-relations-with-germany-sour-a6818341.html>.

engagement with Russia, not confrontation, is the right path, and has confirmed that Rome remains opposed to the automatic renewal of sanctions.¹⁹ In the face of mounting anger in the business community, it is uncertain whether the tendency of the Italian government to complain loudly about a policy it continues to support can be sustainable.

The political opponents of Renzi and Gentiloni's Democratic Party (PD) have seized on this discontent. They have regularly attacked the government for being too subservient to Italy's powerful allies – most notably the US and Germany. Opposition to sanctions against Russia has thus become a central tenet of the political agenda of Italy's large Eurosceptic coalition of parties, including the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), the anti-immigration Northern League and the right-wing "Fratelli d'Italia" (Brothers of Italy) party. Critically, it is also shared by part of the PD-led governing coalition²⁰ and by such respected centre-left figures as Romano Prodi, prime minister in 1996-98 and 2006-08.²¹

While sanctions are the main bone of contention, the debate is not limited to that one issue. Another fundamental pillar of Germany's *Ostpolitik*, namely the role of NATO in Eastern Europe, has also been subject to greater scrutiny. The debate about NATO is much less developed and more divisive than the one on sanctions, yet it marks a relative novelty in Italy's post-Cold War foreign policy conversations worth further discussion.

The M5S was extremely critical of the decision by the Italian government to deploy 140 troops to Latvia in keeping with NATO's decision to boost its military footprint in the Baltic states. Leading M5S figures have depicted the troop deployment as an unprovoked, aggressive move imposed on NATO by the Obama administration and its main European allies (including Germany, although there was no direct attack on Berlin). It is noteworthy that the M5S made no reference to the deteriorated security environment from which NATO's decision originated, namely Russia's aggressive behaviour in Ukraine, menacing mobilization of troops along the borders with the Baltic states, and the deployment of nuclear-capable missiles in

¹⁹ Paolo Valentino, "Il ministro Angelino Alfano: 'Fronte comune contro il terrore. Bisogna coinvolgere anche Mosca'", in *Corriere della Sera*, 20 December 2016, http://www.corriere.it/politica/16_dicembre_20/fronte-comune-contro-terrore-1f95b7c8-c644-11e6-81c3-386103f9089b.shtml.

²⁰ Pier Ferdinando Casini, leader of a tiny centrist party in the ruling coalition and chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, contended in 2015 that the sanctions regime was harming Italy and that the West could not think of framing relations with Putin's Russia as if it was still the weak, poor and pro-Western country led by Boris Yeltsin, Russia's president in the 1990s. See Francesco Pesce, "Le sanzioni internazionali: successi e limiti", in *Formiche*, 24 May 2015, <http://formiche.net/?p=512109>.

²¹ Prodi argued that the EU should lift sanctions to avoid being sidelined by the Trump administration. See "Ue, Prodi: 'Togliere sanzioni alla Russia per prendere in contropiede Trump. Berlino? Forse vuole uscire dall'euro'", in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 23 January 2017, <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/?p=3334141>.

the Kaliningrad enclave.²²

The M5S has gone further than criticizing a single policy decision and has started debating how Italy should revise the terms of its NATO membership. While some favour leaving the Alliance altogether, others (probably the majority) aim at a disengagement from NATO commitments deemed too onerous for Italy, such as the pledge to raise military spending, the nuclear-sharing agreements with the US, and participation in out-of-area missions.²³ On a broad, general level, the M5S's sceptical view of NATO is rooted in the same feeling that has made the movement a leading Eurosceptic force, namely the perception that external powers drive Italy's foreign and economic policies (NATO and the US the former, the EU and Germany the latter). The M5S's stance is also related to the conviction that Italy should work towards normalizing relations with Russia, with which the M5S is now so aligned that it is considering a formal agreement with Putin's United Russia party.²⁴

In other words, in a large section of the Italian political spectrum – which is centred on the M5S but encompasses also other fringe forces from both the left and the right – the idea has taken root that membership in the EU and NATO complicates Italy's relations with Russia. Hence, the M5S and other parties – most notably the Northern League, which has recently partnered with United Russia²⁵ – are much less ready, or are not ready at all, to meet requests by Eastern NATO members for stronger security guarantees, or to frame Italy's strategic needs in light of NATO membership. Even though Germany's *Ostpolitik* is not a main topic of discussion, this position is hardly compatible with two of its key propositions, the pursuit of closer ties with the former Soviet republics and strategic reliance on the transatlantic relationship (although this may change if President Trump does indeed disengage from Europe).

Taken together, the general perception of Italy being on the losing side of the EU-Russia trade row, the difficulty that the PD-led government has in articulating a positive narrative about the EU approach to the Ukraine crisis, and the pro-Russia stance increasingly characterizing powerful political forces such as the M5S and the Northern League, all lay bare a growing potential for divergence between Italy and Germany.

²² Alessandro Di Battista, a potential premiership candidate in the M5S, called the deployment of Italian troops to Latvia "unacceptable". See "Nato. Di Battista (M5S). Invio truppe inaccettabile. Renzi e Napolitano chinano testa", in *AgenPress*, 14 October 2016, <http://www.agenpress.it/notizie/?p=3240>.

²³ Michele Arnese, "Italia fuori dalla Nato? Le due (diverse) visioni del Movimento 5 stelle tra Camera e Senato", in *Formiche*, 7 July 2016, <http://formiche.net/?p=525049>.

²⁴ Andrew Rettman, "Moscow 'Ready' to Sign Pact with Italy's Grillo", in *EUobserver*, 7 March 2017, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/137136>.

²⁵ Max Seddon and James Politi, "Putin's Party Signs Deal with Italy's Far-Right Lega Nord", in *Financial Times*, 6 March 2017.

Conclusions

Italy's view of Germany's *Ostpolitik* can be inferred from the debate about what Italians think they have at stake in the current confrontation with Russia, rather than from the sporadic assessments of German foreign policy made by Italian politicians, businesspeople or opinion-shapers. The debate has a strong political undertone, with opposition forces such as the M5S and the Northern League using foreign policy as a way to further mark their distance from the PD-led ruling coalition. Leaving political opportunism aside, the unresolved question confronting Italian policymakers is how to define the Italian national interest. At the cost of oversimplifying, it is possible to distinguish two main schools of thought.

Those holding a more "sovereignist" position are centred on, but extend beyond, Italy's large Eurosceptic coalition (together, the M5S and the Northern League have the support of about 45 percent of the population).²⁶ They put the emphasis on the imperative to restore cooperation with Russia to safeguard Italy's commercial, energy and security interests. Consequently, they doubt the strategic value of Italy's membership in NATO and the EU. They also show a tendency to neglect the relevance of local agency in the former Soviet republics, which they seem to perceive as passive bystanders in the geopolitical conflict between the West and Russia. These forces do not appreciate the EU as a multilateral system generating benefits for all its members. Instead, they increasingly see it as an instrument in the hands of Europe's most powerful countries, most notably Germany, to exert influence over the weaker and poorer – or poorly led – member states. Even if Germany's *Ostpolitik* is not a regular topic of discussion, it is safe to assume that the sovereignist camp perceives it as an initiative driven by the exclusive German national interest, to which Italy should react according to its nationally defined priorities.

On the other side of the cleavage are the PD and a few centrist and centre-right parties. They maintain that membership in the EU and NATO provides Italy with invaluable strategic advantages, as it contributes to the country's economic prosperity and security and amplifies its foreign policy influence. These forces recognize that Italy should defend its commercial and energy interests by advocating moderation and the pursuit of a dialogue-based relationship with Russia. Yet they contend that Italy has a greater interest in supporting a European order based on respect for international obligations, predictability of state behaviour and abstention from the use of force to solve international disputes. Allegations of Russian meddling in the domestic politics of the US and some

²⁶ Specifically, around 30 percent of the population says it would vote for the M5S if elections were held now, and around 14 percent for the Northern League. See Emanuele Vera, "Sondaggi elettorali Lorient: scissione PD, M5S e centrodestra non ne approfittano", in *Termometro Politico*, 15 March 2017, http://www.termometropolitico.it/1248548_sondaggi-elettorali-lorient-intenzioni-di-voto-scissione-pd-m5s-centrodestra-affluenza.html.

European countries have only added to concerns that Putin wants to divide the EU, and news reports – so far unverified – about secret links between Russia and the M5S give the more pro-EU camp an incentive to keep a firm line.²⁷ These forces are therefore sympathetic with Germany's *Ostpolitik*, but only inasmuch as they see it as a contribution to the EU's capacity to defend and promote a rules-based order. If this connection becomes less relevant, as it might if anxieties about sanctions or Nord Stream 2 grow, Germany's *Ostpolitik* is destined to experience much greater contestation in Italy.

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²⁷ Last November the news outlet *Buzzfeed* claimed that the M5S leaders control a network of fake news websites that spread stories very much in line with the Kremlin's propaganda. See Alberto Nardelli and Craig Silverman, "Italy's Most Popular Political Party is Leading Europe in Fake News and Kremlin Propaganda", in *Buzzfeed*, updated 8 December 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/italys-most-popular-political-party-is-leading-europe-in-fak>. The US administration has reportedly been warning Italian authorities about links between the Kremlin's propaganda machine and the M5S for months. See Paolo Mastrolilli, "Il governo Usa avverte l'Italia: 'Fate attenzione. Ci sono legami Russia-M5S'", in *La Stampa*, 30 March 2017, <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/03/30/italia/politica/il-governo-usa-fate-attenzione-ci-sono-legami-russiams-rjU0Oeh4jTV4se549OSnxL/pagina.html>.

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