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EUROPE AT THE POLLS

LESSONS FROM THE 2013 ITALIAN ELECTIONS

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SUMMARY

“THE 2013 ITALIAN ELECTIONS WERE IN SEVERAL RESPECTS A ‘EUROPEANISED’ CONTEST”

The 2013 Italian elections were in several respects a ‘Europeanised’ contest. As a severe institutional crisis unfolded, political parties paid great attention to European issues, broadly defined, and a ‘European-level party’, the European People’s Party (EPP), made an unprecedented attempt to shape the outcome. The election results must therefore be analysed in relation to Europe. Negative aspects appear to have prevailed in both the discourse of parties and the choices of voters. In terms of policy, Italians clearly rejected the fiscal austerity policy advocated by the European Union since the outbreak of the crisis. Regarding EU governance, the predominantly negative character of this Europeanisation process may be a source of instability in the future.

A few key figures from this Policy Paper:

- Parties opposed to the fiscal compact and the continuation of fiscal cuts, whether they were left- or the right-wing, together garnered over 60% of the votes cast.
- Support for Grillo’s movement is estimated to have reached 35% in the 18-24 age group.
- The two political groups that called for a referendum on Italy’s Euro membership – the Lega Nord and Grillo’s Five Star Movement – together secured almost 30% of the vote.
- Mario Monti, who represented fiscal austerity line mandated by the European Union, suffered a clear defeat with 10.5% of the vote
- In several pre-election surveys, around two thirds of respondents claimed they would regret if Italy were to leave the Union.
- The overall level of trust in the EU remained below the EU average (31% versus 33%) (Fall 2012 Eurobarometer).
- 62% of Italians appear to think that their country’s interests are not adequately taken into account in the EU (Fall 2012 Eurobarometer).
- Italy also tends to be more pessimistic than the average about the future of the EU (47% versus 45%) (Fall 2012 Eurobarometer).
- Only a minority (29% versus an EU average of 32%) is convinced that they would be better off outside the EU (Fall 2012 Eurobarometer).
- The level of support for the Euro remains high (57% versus 31%) despite a 10% drop since the spring of 2007 (Fall 2012 Eurobarometer).

“NEGATIVE ASPECTS APPEAR TO HAVE PREVAILED IN BOTH THE DISCOURSE OF PARTIES AND THE CHOICES OF VOTERS”

INTRODUCTION

“THE 2013 ITALIAN ELECTIONS BECAME AN IMPORTANT MOMENT IN EUROPEAN POLITICAL LIFE”

One of the interesting aspects of the 2013 elections in Italy is that they appear to innovate in several respects. Since they unfolded during a severe economic crisis, in which EU austerity policies had created strong discontent, European issues could not be ignored. Some of the race's major themes revolved around the policies candidates intended to pursue vis-à-vis the EU if they were elected. 'European-level parties' and their representatives in European institutions played a meaningful role in several instances. Other member states closely followed the elections, and several foreign leaders even voiced their preference. Considerations related to European issues also seem to have influenced the choice of various groups of voters. All this transformed the nature of the election, which became an important moment in *European* political life. It is still too soon to assess the consequences at the EU level. Yet one can only be struck by the fact that this 'Europeanisation' pattern replicates developments that occurred in the 2012 elections in countries like France and Greece. It remains to be seen whether this transformation of the electoral process should be seen as an occasional phenomenon, prompted by a context of crisis, or rather the harbinger of a profound change in party competition throughout Europe.

1. The Context: Growing Ambivalence towards the EU

The 2013 elections took place against a background of thorough change in Italians' attitudes towards European integration. Pro-European feelings have traditionally been very strong in Italy. In all the Eurobarometer's indices of support for European integration, Italy regularly ranked among the countries with the most positive responses. It was the only country where Altiero Spinelli's idea of vesting the European Parliament with the power to write a European constitution was subjected to a referendum and approved by an overwhelming majority (88%). As in other countries, this high level of Europhilia was obviously connected to a strong mistrust of the Italian political system and its political class. Having little faith in their national elites, Italian citizens tended to perceive European integration as an opportunity to cure many national pathologies.¹

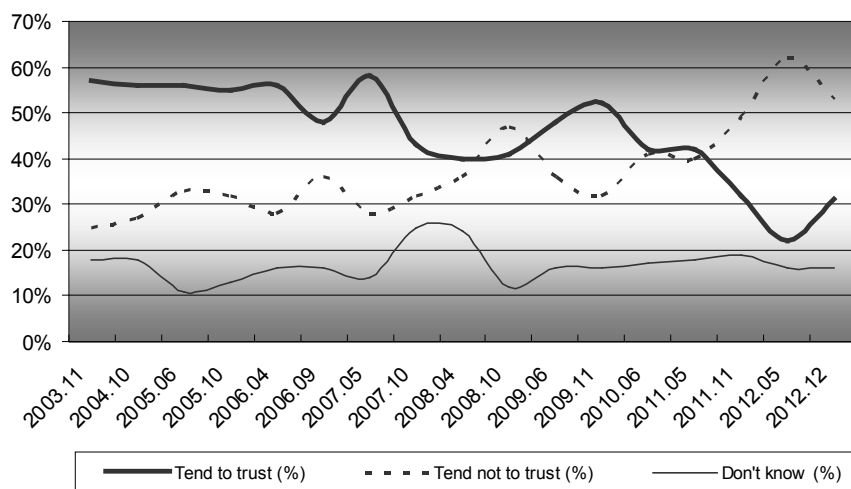
“THE LEVEL OF TRUST IN THE EU HAS GRADUALLY DECLINED, WITH A SHARP DOWNTURN SINCE THE ECONOMIC CRISIS”

However, over the last decade the situation has changed. The 'permissive consensus' eroded following the introduction of the Euro, EU enlargement towards Central and Eastern European countries and the structural reforms encouraged by European institutions.² The level of trust in the EU has gradually declined, with a sharp downturn since the economic crisis (See table 1). While public opinion was mostly positive until 2009, the trend has clearly turned negative since, despite becoming somewhat more erratic than the aggregate EU trend. At the end of 2012, despite an upswing (probably linked to the support enjoyed by the Monti government at the time) the overall level of trust remained below the EU average (31% versus 33%). Moreover, although the downward trend is apparent throughout the EU, it is more pronounced in Southern European countries. In Italy, the drop has reached 27%, 3 points above the EU average.

1. Sánchez-Cuenca, Ignacio (2000) 'The Political Basis of Support for European Integration', *European Union Politics* 1(2), pp. 147-71; Ferrera, Maurizio (2003) 'Un'Italia salvata dall'Europa, ma ancora libera di danneggiare se stessa', in Sergio Fabbrini (ed.) *L'europeizzazione dell'Italia*, Rome: Laterza, pp. 243-54.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all figures quoted in this section are from the *Fall 2012 Eurobarometer*, No. 78.

Table 1
Trust in the European Union in Italy (%)



Source: Eurobarometer 78

Several factors account for the decline in Europe's popularity. First, Italians' assessment of the overall economic situation is rather negative. According to a pre-election poll, a substantial majority is convinced that globalisation has perverse effects on employment (78%), social protection (57%) and even consumer prices (67%). Immigration and Islam are perceived as threats by 62% and 56%, respectively. And on both sets of issues, many do not believe Europe offers adequate protection: 52% fear that integration may result in a lowering of their social protection, while 51% view it as a threat to their identity.³ Second, the EU is perceived as insufficiently responsive to their needs: 62% of Italians appear to think that their country's interests are not adequately taken into account in the EU; the share of those who think their voice counts in Brussels (24%) is also lower than the European average (31%). Like other Southern European countries, Italy also tends to be more pessimistic than the average about the future of the EU (47% versus 45%).

THE LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR THE EURO REMAINS HIGH AND THAT FOR A 'FEDERATION OF NATION-STATES' IS ABOVE THE EU AVERAGE"

Nevertheless, only a minority (29% versus an EU average of 32%) is convinced that they would be better off outside the EU. Similarly, while they tend to consider that their personal situation has deteriorated since the launch of the single currency, the level of support for the Euro remains high (57% versus 31%) despite a 10% drop since the spring of 2007; however, support is weaker than in other Eurozone countries.⁴ Support for Jacques Delors' idea of a "federation of Nation-States" is above the EU average (42% versus 30%).

This apparent paradox has several explanations. First, Italians are aware that their country urgently needs to be reformed; 80% agree that the reduction of public debt and public deficits cannot be delayed. Second, for all that has been said about weakening support, the EU overall remains more trustworthy than the Italian state. To take but one example, the EU is most trusted to take action to resolve the economic and financial crisis (26%, versus 15% for the national government and 14% for the International Monetary Fund). And despite repeated interstate frictions since the beginning of the crisis, Italians, again in line with other Southern European countries, believe the crisis has brought them closer to the citizens of other European countries (60% versus an EU average of 44%). In other words, regardless of the degree of disenchantment, they see Europe as an indispensable actor in bringing about the changes their country needs – a "necessary evil".⁵ At the same time, their mood is cautious: when asked what steps they think are necessary to address current challenges, only 36% support strengthening EU powers. Idealistic "Europeismo" is no longer the widely shared value it used to be.

3. Data from an IPSOS poll conducted for the Centro italiano studi elettorali (LUISS) in February 2013, courtesy of Roberto d'Alimonte.

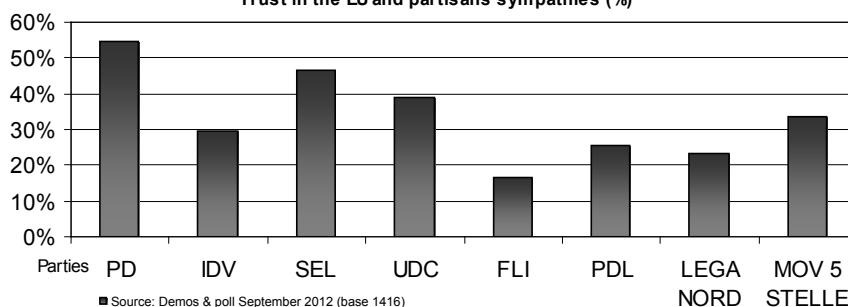
4. Debomy, Daniel (2013) 'EU no, euro yes! European public opinions facing the crisis (2007-2012)', *Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, Policy Paper No. 90*, March 2013.

5. Diamanti, Ilvo (2012) 'L'UE è diventata un male necessario', *La Repubblica*, 24.09.2012.

“EUROPE IS SEEN AS A
‘NECESSARY EVIL’”

Of course, levels of support for the EU vary significantly according to the political opinions of the persons polled. Thus, according to a Demos poll from September 2012 – three months before the beginning of the electoral campaign – levels of trust were about twice as high among supporters of the parties that formed the centre-left coalition than among supporters of centre-right parties, with backers of the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* falling about midway between the two groups (See table 2). Also noteworthy is that levels of trust in the EU appeared to be significantly higher among supporters of the Monti government.

Table 2:
Trust in the EU and partisans sympathies (%)



These differences may explain some aspects of the race that followed the Monti government’s resignation in December 2012, becoming one of the most ‘Europeanised’ elections of all time. Two aspects were especially striking: the importance of European issues in the campaigns, and the role played by European actors – be they members of European institutions or leaders of other member countries – in what was supposed to be a purely domestic race. We will now turn to these two points.

2. A ‘European’ race

“THE ‘EUROPEAN
DISCOURSE’ ALSO INVOLVES
DISCUSSION ON HOW TO
MANAGE THE RELATIONSHIP
WITH EUROPE IN A RANGE OF
POLICY AREAS”

A semantic clarification is needed in order to properly assess the Europeanisation of the electoral campaign. How does one define which issues qualify as “European”? The most immediate response to this question generally includes a number of relatively abstract subjects: European discourse refers to the importance one places on European integration, how one believes the EU should be organised, the tasks that it should undertake, the relations it should maintain with national societies, etc. However, after more than half a century of integration, the very nature of the subject has evolved.

While the EU still does not come close to affecting 80% of national legislation, as is often claimed⁶, it has become a key player in many areas. National political leaders know that the leeway they enjoy can be affected by decisions made in Brussels. For many years, they generally tended to downplay this process, which could lessen the prestige of the office to which they aspired, and thereby largely contributed to a gap of understanding of public policy, be it national or European.⁷ To a growing extent, however, the Eurozone crisis has made this soft-peddalling more difficult. After years of discussions on the way to respond to the sovereign debt crisis and the threats it entails for the future of the euro, today pro-growth policy or assistance to the disadvantaged cannot be discussed without taking into account the constraints Italy faces as a result of its EU membership. Similarly, those who intend to curb immigration cannot ignore the fact that

6. Brouard, Sylvain, Costa, Olivier and König Thomas (eds.) (2012) *The Europeanization of Domestic Legislatures. The Empirical Implications of the Delors Myth in Nine Countries*, New York: Springer.

7. Schmidt, Vivien (2006) *Democracy in Europe: The EU and National Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

freedom of movement plays a key role in the European project as it currently stands. Candidates wishing to address these public policy issues must therefore invariably stake a position in relation to European policies, be it to explain how they would adjust to EU decisions or what policy approach they would defend in Brussels. The “European discourse” has thus transformed. It no longer merely encompasses general views on the best way to organise the continent, but also involves discussion on how to manage the relationship with Europe in a range of policy areas.

In this light, the Italian campaign was highly “Europeanised”. Most parties paid great attention to issues over which the EU’s influence was clearly visible, from employment and economic policy – a central theme for most parties – to immigration, which both the PdL and *Lega Nord* repeatedly raised. Unsurprisingly, these issues featured rather prominently among the Italian public’s top concerns according to many opinion polls.

“MONTI: ‘NATIONAL AND EU POLICIES HAVE BECOME SO INTERTWINED THAT THEIR RESPECTIVE POLICY AGENDAS HAVE TO BE CONSIDERED TOGETHER’”

In the so-called “Monti Agenda”, made public at the time he decided to enter the race, Prime Minister Mario Monti declared that national and EU policies had become so closely intertwined that their respective policy agendas had to be considered together: EU support was necessary to reform Italy, but would not materialise if Italy failed to become a reliable partner. In order to redirect more of the EU’s attention to growth and greater financial solidarity, social inclusion and environmentally friendly policies, Italy would have to become a reliable partner by sticking to its commitments on restructuring its public finances. Only then would Italy be able to make its voice heard at the European level.⁸

Whereas this policy line was hardly surprising from someone who had been a member of the European Commission for a decade, and who had repeatedly stressed the necessity of restoring the country’s credibility at the European level during his term as Prime Minister, the same cannot be said of Pier Luigi Bersani’s *Partito Democratico*, given the lukewarm attitude of many centre-left parties in Europe vis-à-vis an integration process often perceived as excessively market-oriented. Yet the PD’s platform was perhaps the most openly “Europeista” on the Italian political scene. The section on Europe was one of the longest of the party’s manifesto; moreover, the general introduction unambiguously emphasised in its second sentence “Italy’s strong commitment to a federal and democratic Europe”. Similarly, it expressed the conviction that Italy’s problems called for more, rather than less integration: without Europe, nothing will be possible (“*nulla senza l’Europa*”).⁹ His leftist allies from SEL (*Sinistra Ecologia Libertà*) also adopted a federalist rhetoric, with references to the mythical figure of Altiero Spinelli, and strongly criticised the recessionist policies imposed by “an EU dominated by Merkel”.¹⁰

“THE PDL AND THE LEGA NORD ADVANCED THE IDEA OF A ‘EUROPE OF PEOPLES’”

However, this orthodox line, faithful to the traditional attitude of Italian elites, was clearly repudiated by a large number of parties. Silvio Berlusconi’s *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL) identified Mario Monti’s fiscal austerity policy “imposed by an EU dominated by Germany” as the main source of the country’s woes and pledged to unremittingly fight to protect Italy’s interests at the European level. While calling for rapid movement towards a political, economic and banking union, the PdL advanced the idea of a Europe of the peoples rather than a Euro bureaucracy, and called for a direct election of the Commission President.¹¹ Throughout the campaign, Berlusconi and his followers directed a number of hostile statements at the German chancellor; they also frequently referred to the complacent attitude of Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy in the final weeks of Berlusconi’s government in 2011. Interestingly, Berlusconi’s allies from the *Lega Nord* directly transposed a number of the PdL’s points into their

8. Mario Monti’s programme: *Cambiare l’Italia, riformare l’Europa. Un agenda per un impegno comune*.

9. Programme for Europe of the *Partito Democratico*.

10. Programme of the party *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà*: “L’impianto recessivo di matrice di stampa merkeliana”.

11. Programme of the party *Il popolo della libertà*.

platform, while adding that the party had never been hostile to the very principle of European integration, but that it favoured “a Europe of the peoples, based on macro-regions”, including of course the mythical “Padania”.¹²

The programme of Beppe Grillo’s *Movimento a Cinque Stelle (M5S)*¹³ made no reference to the EU, except for European directives on environmental protection. This is hardly surprising, considering the particular features of a movement based on participatory initiatives focusing on local needs and policies.¹⁴ International issues were conspicuously absent. A complicating factor was that the ‘horizontal’ structure of the M5S makes it somewhat difficult to identify the bodies that are qualified to express the movement’s official position. The only undisputed authority appears to be the very popular web site of the M5S leader.¹⁵ The best way to tease out the movement’s European positions is therefore to review comments posted on the site.

“EUROPEAN
INTEGRATION IS PERCEIVED
BY THE M5S AS A
CONSTRAINT RATHER THAN
AS AN OPPORTUNITY”

Often written in reaction to recent developments in a colloquial style, the posts do not amount to a political programme in the proper sense of the term, but they provide insights into the movement’s perception of the EU. The dominant trend is clearly negative. European integration is presented as a noble ideal that has been hijacked by organised interests: “the annihilation of European politics, and their replacement by a banking union, is not what the founding fathers wanted.”¹⁶ The EU in its current form is described as a remote, unknown and unresponsive structure, into which Italians poured more money than they received. Any kind of ‘*vincolo esterno*’ (external constraint)¹⁷ has to be categorically rejected, since European constraints are systematically instrumentalised by political parties, the movement’s main enemies.¹⁸ On various occasions, Grillo claimed to be against retaining the Euro at all costs, and even proposed a referendum on this issue. In other words, in line with the movement’s emphasis on local issues, European integration is perceived as a constraint rather than as an opportunity.

Thus, ‘European’ issues, broadly defined, occupied a significant place in party manifestoes. However, the most striking feature of this Europeanisation process is its *negative* character. Although most parties insisted on their pro-European credentials, it was often to better criticise the orientation of EU policies. Judging from party manifestoes, only two parties had an unqualified pro-European stance: Bersani’s *Partito Democratico* and Monti’s *Scelta Civica*. In contrast, the opposition came in different shades.

Peter Mair¹⁹ has identified different types of opposition to Europe.

- The first is quite radical: the very idea of a united Europe is rejected, along with its attendant sovereignty losses. This is the view held by parties such as UKIP in the United Kingdom or the *Front national* in France. Interestingly, this radical view seems to be largely absent from the Italian political scene, where even the most critical parties made a point of underscoring their pro-integration stance, while criticising the way the integration process is currently developing.
- A second, less direct form of opposition accepts the European project and focuses on the political choices of the European Union. As seen above, this line of criticism was quite prominent in the race, with a majority of parties expressing their disagreement with austerity policies. Even the mild Mario Monti, who cannot be suspected of hostility to the EU, found it necessary to warn against the dangers of ‘*creditocrazia*’, a system in which all decisions would be dictated by countries with sound public finances, without regard for their partners’ situation.²⁰

12. Programme of the party *Lega Nord*.

13. Programme of the *Movimento a Cinque Stelle*.

14. Bordignon, Fabio and Ceccarini, Luigi (2013): ‘Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo Shakes Italian Politics’, *South European Society and Politics*, pp. 1-23.

15. *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*.

16. *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, ‘C’è del marcio in Bruxelles’.

17. Dyson, Kenneth and Featherstone, Kevin (1996) ‘Italy and EMU as a ‘Vinculo Esterno’: empowering the Technocrats, Transforming the state’, *South European Society & Politics*, 1 (2), pp. 272-299.

18. *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, ‘C’è del marcio in Bruxelles’: “I partiti italiani usano la UE come un alibi, alla bisogna, quando serve, come per la Tav in Val di Susa, che in realtà non vuole più nessuno in Europa, oppure la ignorano completamente, come avviene per il falso in bilancio, la legge anti corruzione.”

19. Mair, Peter (2007) ‘Political Opposition and the European Union’, *Government and Opposition*, 2007, 42 (1), pp. 1-17.

20. Goulard, Sylvie and Monti, Mario (2012) *La Democrazia in Europa. Guardare lontano*, Milan: Rizzoli.

- Finally, the Italian elections saw the emergence of a new kind of opposition, consisting of an openly critical stance of other European leaders. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, pinpointed as the main culprit of austerity policies, was repeatedly targeted by both the right (Berlusconi) and the left (SEL). Although this type of opposition was used less frequently than the former, it signals the crossing of a red line in EU politics. Indeed, the very construction of Europe, with its complex set of institutions and its emphasis on rules-based policies, can be understood as an attempt to mediate political conflicts among European nation-states. As a rule, political leaders seek to avoid direct clashes. The resurgence of direct confrontations could therefore be indicative of a systemic change under way in the European political system.

Be that as it may, the mushrooming opposition to Europe probably owes much to both the economic and political context in which the campaign was fought. There was indeed a striking parallel between the European discourses of each party and the views held by their supporters. Pre-election survey data clearly show that supporters of the centre-right coalition and of the *Movimento 5 stelle* felt uneasy about the changes experienced by Italy. Thus, while 53% of the persons polled agreed with the idea that there are too many immigrants, this view was endorsed by 62% of M5S supporters and 73% of those backing Silvio Berlusconi. Similarly, respondents with a mildly or strongly negative view of Islam accounted for 47% of all people polled, but the share rose to 50% within the ranks of M5S supporters and to 59% among Silvio Berlusconi's supporters. The evaluation of both groups was equally negative as regards the EU: while on average around 30% claimed their country had not benefitted from membership in the EU, this view was held by no less than 49% of centre-right supporters and 50% of those supporting Beppe Grillo's movement. Support for Berlusconi and Grillo was also above average among those who thought that European integration could lead to a lowering of social protection in Italy. Unsurprisingly, this translated into fairly weak levels of support for European integration: whereas a mere 15% of the respondents declared they would feel relieved if Italy were to leave the EU, this figure rose to 28% among supporters of the M5S and 32% among those of the centre-right coalition. The two groups were also strongly in favour of preserving national prerogatives, rather than enhancing those of the Union, with levels of support respectively reaching 64% and 69%, versus an overall average of 52%.

“IN TIMES OF CRISIS
THERE ARE MORE VOTES TO
BE WON BY CHALLENGING
EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS
THAT BY SUPPORTING
THEIR POLICIES”

In sum, it appears that party leaders chose to speak a language that would resonate well with prospective voters. Since in times of crisis there are more votes to be won by challenging European institutions than by supporting their policies, the overall negative tone of the campaign is hardly surprising.

3. A top-down Europeanisation process?

So far my comments have focused on the way European issues were seized and exploited by domestic political actors. However, this bottom-up Europeanisation process was buttressed by a symmetric, top-down process in which various types of European political actors played an unprecedented role in what formally remained a domestic contest.

One of the most spectacular examples of this phenomenon was the official endorsement of Mario Monti's candidacy by European leaders in December 2012. In the days that followed the PdL's announcement of the withdrawal of its support for the Monti government, and of a possible Berlusconi candidacy for the office of Prime minister, reactions at the European level conveyed strong support for Monti. At the celebration organised in Oslo to award the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union, Monti enjoyed universal support. Both Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and European Council President Herman Van Rompuy praised his role at the helm of Italy during a critical period. French President François Hollande, who had fought at Monti's side for a softer fiscal line in the preceding months, expressed hope that Monti would retain an active role in Italian politics. Another socialist leader, the European Parliament's president Martin Schulz, who was famously targeted by Berlusconi in a parliamentary debate in Strasbourg years ago, characterised the latter's

possible return as “a threat to Italy and to Europe”.²¹ Party lines became clearer in the ensuing days. Monti was invited to the Summit of the European People’s Party (EPP), of which he was not even a member, and was greeted with strong declarations of support from many European leaders, who openly encouraged him to enter the race to prevent Italy’s political turmoil from stoking the euro-crisis once again. Interestingly, some of his most vocal supporters – Finnish leader Jyrki Katainen, Germany’s Elmar Brok, a senior member of the European Parliament – came from Triple A countries that were the chief architects of the fiscal austerity approach espoused by the EU. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was the most outspoken: “it is clear that the EPP supports Mario Monti and not Silvio Berlusconi” – a position that was widely considered to be shared by Angela Merkel.²² In an attempt to deflect the pressure, Berlusconi, who also attended the meeting, declared that he himself had asked the EPP leadership to invite Monti (EPP President Wilfried Martens immediately denied this), and that he would drop his plans of running against Monti if the latter accepted to run as head of a centre-right coalition. Monti immediately rejected this proposal.

“EUROPEAN POLITICAL ACTORS PLAYED AN UNPRECEDENTED ROLE IN WHAT FORMALLY REMAINED A DOMESTIC CONTEST”

Throughout the race that followed, several clashes pitted Berlusconi against the EU establishment. In a press conference held in January, the EPP group leader in the European Parliament, Joseph Daul from France, reiterated that Monti was the party’s candidate, to the outrage of PdL representatives in Brussels. Two weeks later, in an address to the European Parliament, Commissioner for economic affairs Olli Rehn criticised the Berlusconi government’s decision not to respect the commitments to fiscal consolidation it had made in the summer of 2011, and praised his successor’s reliability as a critical asset at a time when Europe’s credibility was being severely tested.²³ Berlusconi’s anti-European remarks and his attacks against Merkel were rumoured to be irritating to the EPP, which was allegedly contemplating an expulsion of the PdL to pave the way for an Italian branch of the EPP that would unite all its members under the leadership of Mario Monti. Although Angela Merkel ostensibly remained silent on the Italian situation, as the campaign drew to a close German government sources clearly expressed hope that the next Italian government would carry on the reforms initiated by Monti and that Berlusconi would not return.²⁴ In each of these instances, Berlusconi and his aides bitterly protested against what they claimed were unwelcome interferences in Italian politics and these protests fed into their critical discourse on Europe. Judging from the sustained growth in support for the PdL in the final phase of the race, it may well be the case that the EPP’s intervention was ultimately counter-productive.

The situation was apparently simpler for the left: Pier Luigi Bersani received an explicit endorsement from other centre-left parties. In a show of support for François Hollande in March 2012, he had framed the French presidential campaign as the first stage of a European-wide political struggle to change the direction of EU policy that had thus far mainly been dictated by fiscally conservative governments who paid insufficient attention to the social cost of their decisions. Together with a number of European left-wing foundations, the *Partito democratico* organised a rally in Turin that was presented as the second stage of this initiative. The third stage was to take place in Leipzig on the eve of German Parliamentary elections.²⁵ The meeting provided Bersani with an opportunity to stress Berlusconi’s responsibility for the deterioration in Italy’s international credit, and to play up his own European credentials before a transnational audience. In this case, however, the Europeanisation process clearly was the product of bottom-up dynamics: a national party sought the support of a European-level organisation, assuming it would benefit from European backing.

21. Giulia Belardelli, ‘Crisi governo: i leader europei si schierano con Mario Monti’, *Huffington Post*, 10.12.2012.

22. ‘Italy: Monti hailed at EPP summit, Merkel ‘asks’ him to run’, *ANSAmed*, 13.12.2012.

23. ‘Rehn: Berlusconi’s Italy a prime example of unreliability’, *Eunew.it*, 29.01.2013.

24. ‘Possible Berlusconi comeback is nightmare for Merkel’, *Reuters*, 19.02.2013.

25. FEPS, *Renaissance for Europe. A Common Progressive Vision*, Turin, 8-9.02.2013.

4. Analysing the Outcome from a European Perspective

As is known, the vote delivered a strong message. Support for both the left and the right crumbled, to the benefit of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, which garnered the most votes, becoming Italy's largest political force – the movement explicitly refuses to be labelled a 'party' since it characterises itself as 'anti-politics'.²⁶ Given the absence of a concurrent majority in both houses of Parliament, the formation of a government has been extremely difficult. So far, the implications of the vote at the European level have only received scant attention. What are the main messages voters intended to deliver on EU policies, and what consequences could the creeping Europeanisation under way have on the European political system in the longer run? These are complex questions and what follows is a first take.

“ THE ELECTIONS TURNED INTO A REFERENDUM ON FISCAL DISCIPLINE AND STRUCTURAL REFORM ”

On the one hand, issues with clear connections to EU policies, such as employment and economic policies, played a central role in the race. To a large extent, the elections turned into a referendum on fiscal discipline and structural reform. In this respect, Italian voters delivered a message free of ambiguity: parties opposed to the fiscal compact and the continuation of fiscal cuts, whether they were left- or the right-wing, together garnered over 60% of the votes cast. The youth, which is most hurt by a policy that seems to be more concerned with protecting savers' interests than with growth, massively opted for a protest vote: support for Grillo's movement is estimated to have reached 35% in the 18-24 age group.²⁷ The two political groups that called for a referendum on Italy's Euro membership – the Lega Nord and Grillo's Five Star Movement – together secured almost 30% of the vote. These are clear signs of growing impatience with the fiscal austerity line mandated by the European Union. Mario Monti, who represented this policy, suffered a clear defeat. With 10.5% of the vote, his coalition's performance was weaker than expected; furthermore, he fell short of his goal to become kingmaker in the Senate. On the other hand, this result cannot be interpreted as an outright rejection of European integration: in several pre-election surveys, around two thirds of respondents claimed they would regret if Italy were to leave the Union.²⁸

“ A SECOND LESSON TO BE DRAWN IS THE LIMITED SUCCESS OF TECHNOCRATIC GOVERNANCE SCHEMES ”

A second lesson to be drawn from the vote is the limited success of technocratic governance schemes set up under external pressure. In Italy as in Greece, the dramatic pressure of financial markets and the weakness of the political class, both delegitimised and bitterly divided, resulted in the establishment of cabinets led by experts with strong European credentials – Lucas Papademos as a former Vice-president of the European Central Bank and Mario Monti as a long-time member of the European Commission. Although both of them maintained strong ties with political parties that supported their governments, their accession to power was largely perceived as necessary to assure the country's European partners and the financial markets that order would be restored to public finances and that commitments would be honoured. In Italy, Monti did manage to improve the country's financial credit rating. This largely explains the support he received from his European partners during the race. In both countries, however, the ties to political parties hampered major reforms, and the experience was ultimately conducive to the emergence of a strong protest vote. Anyone interested in the long-term viability of fiscal austerity would therefore be well-advised to consider other ways to establish social legitimacy.

If one accepts my characterisation of national elections as 'Europeanised' elections, these outcomes bear a message that ought to be analysed beyond the borders of the peninsula, just as regional elections can provide important insights on the popularity of policies pursued by national governments in a federal system like Germany, for example. From this perspective, one cannot help but notice that Italy is the third country in a row where the EU's fiscal austerity has been severely challenged in the polls. In the 2012 elections in Greece,

26. Natale, P. and R. Biorcio (2013) *Politica a 5 Stelle. Idee, storia e strategie del movimento di Grillo*, Milan: Feltrinelli.

27. IPSOS (2013) Voto 2013. Analisi IPSOS, Ipsos Public Affairs; Albertini, Marco, Impicciatore, Roberto and Tuorto, Dario (2013) 'Un Grillo nella testa dei giovani', *La Voce*, 5.03.2013.

28. See e.g. the IPSOS survey cited above in footnote 3.

**“ IN ANY FEDERAL
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two consecutive ballots had to be organised before a clear majority could emerge in Parliament; in France, Hollande won adopting a critical stance.²⁹ In all three countries, opposition to Europe largely benefited various populist forces. In any federal system this succession of warnings would lead the central government to reconsider its policies to avoid suffering a major setback at the next general elections. But the EU is not a federal system, and the main agenda-setter, the European Council, is composed of leaders who are accountable to voters of their own country only...

29. Dehousse, Renaud and Tacea, Angela (2012), 'The French Presidential Elections: A Europeanized Contest?', *Cahiers européens de Sciences Po*, 2012/2.

CONCLUSION

“ THE 2013 ITALIAN ELECTIONS WERE CHARACTERISED BY AN UNPRECEDENTED DEGREE OF EUROPEANISATION ”

Gone are the days when Europe could be characterised as “invisible but omnipresent” in domestic electoral contests³⁰ At a time of crisis, as their relevance has become clearer to most, European issues can no longer be ignored. The 2013 Italian elections, which unfolded in a context of severe economic crisis, were characterised by an unprecedented degree of Europeanisation, with both bottom-up and top-down features. Parties paid greater attention to European issues than in the past. The race even featured an attempt by a European-level organisation, the European People’s Party, to shape the contest from above. To my knowledge this is the first attempt in the political realm to transpose a top-down Europeanisation process that has been observed in civil society organisations.³¹ The process clearly owes much to the high degree of interdependence among Eurozone members: their political stability is a key to their financial credibility and therefore an element of systematic risk that their partners cannot afford to ignore. The fact that this attempt was unsuccessful should not obscure its novelty; and it may be too early to dismiss it as irrelevant.

Another significant aspect of this Europeanisation process is its predominantly negative character. Against the election’s gloomy backdrop most parties cloaked their discourse in more or less strong opposition to Europe, while trying to speak to their respective voters’ main concerns. This ended up transforming the race into a referendum on the fiscal austerity advocated by European institutions. Voters ultimately rebuffed the politician who had been the most forceful advocate of this policy – Mario Monti.

“ OPENLY ADDRESSING EUROPEAN ISSUES DURING NATIONAL ELECTIONS COULD ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY BY CLARIFYING CAMPAIGN ISSUES ”

The implications of this result at the European level are still hard to assess. In terms of economic policy, the period following the election of François Hollande in 2012 was already marked by a mild reorientation of the European strategy, with the adoption of a growth plan to alleviate the effects of the crisis. Some have interpreted this as a replacement of the “Merkozy” axis with a “Latin alliance”.³² This is probably too hasty an assessment; for this new direction to materialise, the advocates of a strong pro-growth strategy would need to secure a clear victory. So far, since the adoption of the fiscal compact in 2012 that marked the high point of the fiscal austerity policy imposed by ‘creditor countries’, successive elections have yielded ambiguous results, thereby precluding the emergence of a clear alternative at the European level. Hopes for a ‘social-democrat’ wave in the wake of the French elections were clearly dampened by the Italian voters. The new Letta government brings together representatives from pro-European and Eurosceptic parties. It will clearly find it difficult to find an agreement on how the country’s public finances need to be put in order, even though three quarters of the Italians are convinced that it is necessary.

It remains to be seen whether the phenomenon of Europeanisation that developed in recent national elections was primarily caused by the context of crisis in which they took place or whether it signals a deep-seated and lasting structural change. If the latter is true, we should consider its effects on the European Union’s political

30. Belot, Céline and Cautrès, Bruno (2004) ‘L’Europe, invisible mais omniprésente’ [An invisible but omnipresent Europe], in Bruno Cautrès and Nonna Mayer (eds.), *Le nouveau désordre électoral : les leçons du 21 avril 2002 [The new electoral disorder: the lessons of 22 April 2002]*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2004, pp. 119-141.

31. Della Porta, Donatella and Caiani, Manuela (2006) ‘The Europeanization of Public Discourse in Italy: A Top-Down Process?’, *European Union Politics* 7: 77; Sanchez-Salgado, Rosa (2007) *Comment l’Europe construit la société civile [How Europe builds civil society]*, Paris: Dalloz.

32. Massimo Franco, ‘Una nuova guerra di religione’, *Corriere della Sera*, 5.09.2012.

system. At first sight, openly addressing European issues during national elections could enhance the quality of democracy by clarifying campaign issues. But as long as this process is carried out by politicians whose main frame of reference remains national, both politically and intellectually, the odds are that it will continue to fuel anti-European discourses, since this is the most electorally rewarding option. The Italian situation is a warning: for the first time in many years, Italians have singled out the leader of another country as the main culprit for the evils of the day.

**“ THE STRENGTHENING
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If this kind of tension were to grow, a dramatic polarisation could ensue. On the one hand, anti-German protest votes might develop in all Southern European countries, where disenchantment is very strong; on the other hand, ‘anti Club-Med’ feelings might harden in Triple A countries such as Germany, Finland and the Netherlands. Anti-Greek comments found fertile ground in the German press at the outbreak of the sovereign debt crisis in 2010, and an anti-Euro movement has recently been launched in Germany.³³ The strengthening of these centrifugal forces could render the governance of Europe even more difficult than it is now. At best, consensus, which is one of the hallmarks of the EU system, will be harder to reach; at worst, the political stability of the whole project could be threatened. The only way to counterbalance this development is for a *positive* Europeanisation process to emerge, whereby political forces in all member countries would develop an agenda for Europe to pursue if elected. For the structural reasons mentioned above this is unlikely to happen in national elections, where the contenders’ main objective is to gain control of national government. The most logical venue for this kind of race would seem to be the European elections, but that would require European-level parties to play a more active role. There are indications that at least some of them might be willing to move in this direction.³⁴ The future will tell whether they will be able to assert their authority.

33. ‘New anti-euro party forms in Germany’, *EUobserver.com*, 12.03.2013.

34. Priestley, Julian (2010) ‘European Political parties: the missing link’, *Notre Europe, Policy Paper No. 40*, October 2010.

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