

Policy Memo

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**Italy and Eastern Europe:  
A Dossier Subordinated to the  
Rome-Moscow Axis?**

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# Italy and Eastern Europe: A Dossier Subordinated to the Rome-Moscow Axis?

Nona Mikhelidze\*

Over the years, Italy's foreign policy towards post-Soviet countries has developed in the framework of bilateral relations and in the context of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Italy welcomed the launch of the EaP in 2009, and since then has supported almost all EU initiatives under the project, including visa liberalization for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Moreover, official Rome favored launching the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia following the Georgian-Russian war of 2008.

Given that Italy is a Mediterranean country, however, its attention has always been focused on its Southern neighborhood, rather than its Eastern one. Italy's 2014-2020 budget for the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) clearly indicates this preference, allocating one-third of its funds to the East compared to two-thirds to the South.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Italy's relationship with its Eastern neighbors both at the bilateral and multilateral levels has tended to be subordinated to its partnership with Russia. When the EU launched the EaP in response to the Russian interventionism in Georgia in 2009, official Rome was concerned it would be perceived as anti-Russian and proposed to involve Moscow in the program. To understand the importance and value Italy places on the Eastern neighbourhood, one must examine the essence and rationale of the Rome-Moscow political and economic axis.

## Italy-Russia Partnership

### *Political Relations*

Both Italy and Russia refer to their relations as "privileged and strategic." Russia considers Italy to be critical to its greater European policy, while Rome believes that including Moscow in all dialogues on international affairs is the best way to ensure long-term security on the continent.<sup>2</sup> In particular, Italy sees Russia as indispensable in the new European security order. Indeed, back in 2008, Rome enthusiastically welcomed the proposal of then-Russian President Dimitri Medvedev for a new European security architecture.

Multilaterally, Italy holds observer status at The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)<sup>3</sup> and has an active Arctic policy with a number of international cooperation initiatives. Additionally, Italy's admission to the Arctic Council as an observer country in 2013

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<sup>1</sup> Francescon, Silvia. "Italy and the Eastern Partnership: the view from Rome", Commentary, European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 May 2015, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_italy\\_and\\_the\\_eastern\\_partnership\\_the\\_view\\_from\\_rome3034](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_italy_and_the_eastern_partnership_the_view_from_rome3034).

<sup>2</sup> Arbatov, Nadezhda. "Italy, Russia's Voice in Europe?" *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No 62, September 2011, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifrirussieitaliearbatovaengsept2011.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> "International Organizations" *Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, [http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica\\_estera/aree\\_geografiche/europa/ooii/ooii.html#3](http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/aree_geografiche/europa/ooii/ooii.html#3).

intensified the scientific, economic and political relations between the two countries.<sup>4</sup> The NATO-Russia Council (NRC), founded in Rome in 2002, is another format for cooperation.

Over the years, the two countries have reached roughly fifty bilateral agreements, with frequent visits by heads of state. Today, the political partnership persists despite Russia's intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. Indeed, Italy's foreign minister commented that relations have "remained strong and positive even during the critical period of sanctions imposed on Moscow."<sup>5</sup> Rome also maintained close relations with Moscow throughout the Georgian-Russian war and took a more moderate stance than other EU member states, refusing to place responsibility for the conflict solely on Russia.<sup>6</sup>

The Italian intellectual and political elite actively contributed to the formation of a "Russia first" policy when it comes to Italy's relationships with Eastern European countries. Starting with politicians, there is no observable difference between left, right, radical right and populist parties. Over the years, all the Italian political parties have had similar foreign policy approaches toward Russia, actively propagating the appeasement of Moscow. Both active and retired politicians and ambassadors often claim that NATO and the EU should have reassured Putin that Ukraine and Georgia would never become members of the Euro-Atlantic institutions (Italy was among those states which blocked granting the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine at the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008). Often, any criticism towards the Kremlin is labelled as Russo-phobic and intended to humiliate the Kremlin.

The Italian media has created fertile ground for the populist agendas of all movements and parties pressing for Italy's exit from NATO, the EU and the Eurozone. Russian government officials regularly meet with representatives of Italy's anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) and anti-immigration Lega Nord (Northern League). Indeed, opposition to sanctions against Russia has become a central part of the political agenda of Italy's large coalition of Eurosceptic parties, which includes the M5S, the Northern League and the right-wing "Fratelli d'Italia" (Brothers of Italy) party. The policy is also shared by part of the governing coalition led by the Democratic Party (PD).

The success of Russian propaganda among the political establishment is partly connected to the fact that Italy was home to Europe's most influential communist party during the Soviet era, of which many of its leaders studied in Moscow. That history of collaboration has made sure that some ideological affinities and funding channels are still present. On the other side, the relationship between the Italian right-wing and Russia's political elite has been guaranteed by the personal friendship of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (who alone controls 50% of the national media) with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

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<sup>4</sup> "Italy in the Arctic: the political dimension" *Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*.

[http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica\\_estera/aree\\_geografiche/europa/artico/strategia-dell-italia-nell-artico.html](http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/aree_geografiche/europa/artico/strategia-dell-italia-nell-artico.html).

<sup>5</sup> "Relations Between Italy and Russia." *Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*,

[http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica\\_estera/aree\\_geografiche/europa/i\\_nuovi\\_rapporti.html#1](http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/aree_geografiche/europa/i_nuovi_rapporti.html#1).

<sup>6</sup> Arbatov, Nadezhda. Op. cit.

## *Economy and energy*

Economic cooperation between Italy and Russia has always been substantial, especially in the energy sector. Economic data from 2015 shows more than €21 billion in total bilateral trade, despite drops in hydrocarbon prices and devaluation of the Russian rouble.<sup>7</sup> Hundreds of Italian businesses have carved out niches in the Russian market, most notably in the banking sector, where Italian-operated UniCredit has become the largest foreign bank in Russia.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, tourism flows from Russia to Italy have increased dramatically since 2009.

In 2016-- in the midst of EU sanctions against Russia – official Rome and Moscow signed deals worth more than €1 billion. Deals involved co-operation in various sectors, from space to energy, shipping and aeronautics. Russian gas producer Novatek signed two separate agreements with Italy's Saipem on liquified natural gas (LNG) co-operation. Russian oil company Rosneft signed various agreements with Eni; a joint venture with Fincantieri on designing and engineering of a new vessel; another joint venture with Pietro Barbatto regarding international sea freight; and a strategic partnership with Russian Helicopters and Leonardo-Finmeccanica for the supply of 30 Agusta Westland 189 helicopters.<sup>9</sup>

As for the energy sector, Russia remains Italy's primary supplier. According to data from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the country imports 20% of its oil and 47% of its gas from Russia. Consumption of natural gas represents the largest portion in Italia's energy mix, at 36.7%. Moreover, Italy's commitment to the EU's "20-20-20" decarbonization plan and the instability in competing energy providing regions will only stand to increase reliance on Russian energy resources in the near term. In addition, uncertainty surrounding the transit of North African natural gas from Algeria and precarious domestic conditions in Libya make the diversification of energy resources even more challenging.

However, it also appears that Italian policymakers have taken no serious action to lessen dependency on Russian energy supplies. On the contrary, Italian participation in the Blue Stream and (now-cancelled) South Stream pipeline projects signalled an increased desire to move closer to Russia in the energy market.<sup>10</sup> Aiming at further rapprochement, Russian gas company Gazprom and Italian Eni signed a treaty in 2003 prohibiting the re-export of Russian gas.<sup>11</sup> In 2007, *The Economist* commented on "Italian energy companies Eni and Enel [which] directly promoted Gazprom's interests".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Relations Between Italy and Russia." *Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, [http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica\\_estera/aree\\_geografiche/europa/i\\_nuovi\\_rapporti.html#1](http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/aree_geografiche/europa/i_nuovi_rapporti.html#1).

<sup>8</sup> "Relations Between Italy and Russia." *Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, [http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica\\_estera/aree\\_geografiche/europa/i\\_nuovi\\_rapporti.html#1](http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/aree_geografiche/europa/i_nuovi_rapporti.html#1).

<sup>9</sup> "Italy strengthens Russian ties", GTR Global Trade Review, 21 June 2016, <https://www.gtreview.com/news/europe/italy-and-russia-strengthen-ties/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Energy Policies of IEA Countries: Italy" *International Energy Agency*, 2016, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303738148\\_Italy-Russia\\_relations\\_energy\\_politics\\_and\\_other\\_business](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303738148_Italy-Russia_relations_energy_politics_and_other_business).

<sup>11</sup> Arbatov, Nadezhda. "Italy, Russia's Voice in Europe?" *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No 62, September 2011, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifrirusseitaliearbatovaengsept2011.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> The position of Gazprom depends on the support of European concerns that are leaders in their countries of industrie – Gaz de France, Eni and Ruhrgas, *The Economist*, 13 April 2017.

## Italy and Russia's Wars in Georgia and Ukraine

In Italy, Russian propaganda regarding Georgia and Ukraine (and in the Eastern Partnership countries more generally) began during the Georgian-Russian war and continuing with the Maidan events in 2013, intensified by the annexation of Crimea. The success of the Kremlin's narrative, which relies on classic Soviet disinformation methods, found fertile ground in Italy thanks to a political-cultural climate that is more open to the geopolitical narratives put out by President Putin.

What are the reasons for this? Firstly, there is a lack of knowledge about Eastern Europe and Russia, and about the history of political developments in the region. That lack of knowledge is not only among ordinary people but, even worse – among key political, economic and social stakeholders such as politicians, civil society representatives and academia. The great majority of the latter believe that since the end of the Cold War the West has failed to take Russian sentiments into consideration; therefore, NATO's Eastern extension and the EU's policy of promoting democracy in the post-Soviet space were tactical mistakes, provoking a Russian counter-reaction that manifested itself in two wars, first with Georgia and then with Ukraine.

Apart from some qualified exceptions, Italian analysts of Eastern Europe and Russia are often former correspondents from Soviet-era Moscow or even researchers close to the Kremlin who offer poor and polarized analyses – a kind of “copy paste” of articles mainly coming from Russian mass media. For example, after the Georgian-Russian war, the Italian semi-academic journal “Limes” published a volume called “Eurasia, our Future?” The volume, with the exception of a small number of articles, could be considered a manifesto of the Eurasian project promoted by Russian Eurasianist Alexei Dugin. The same journal argued that the war was a demonstration of Georgia's then-President Mikheil Saakashvili's “glittering madness” and the country's unpreparedness to become a member of any Western alliance. The author of the article called for Western actors not to “leave the nodes of geopolitics in the hands of fanatics, criminals and imbeciles and to support them with the weapons and the resources of [European] taxpayers”.<sup>13</sup>

When conflict broke out between Ukrainian government troops and the separatists of the Donbas, the majority of the Italian media was already aligned with the Russian narrative. In many newspapers and online publications, the Kyiv government has been labelled as a Nazi junta; historian and medievalist Franco Cardini, interviewed by Libero, defined Euromaidan as a Ukrainian-Polish coup orchestrated by the United States and demonstrators on the Maidan as Nazis.<sup>14</sup> In order to comprehend the success of Russian propaganda in Italy, in particular when it comes to Ukraine, one must go back to 1990s and look at the newspapers and journals of the time – Limes, for example – to see how they depict the post-Soviet country. In the Italian narrative, Ukraine has never been described as an independent state but rather an annexe of Russia, a country that, ultimately, would

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<sup>13</sup> Mini, Fabio. Com'è davvero andata la guerra [How the war really started], LIMES: Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica, 2 September 2008, <http://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/come-davvero-andata-la-guerra>.

<sup>14</sup> Intervista: Lo storico Franco Cardini: "Usa, che flop in Ucraina. Hanno scatenato quattro nazistacci" [USA, flopping in Ukraine. They unleashed four Nazis], 31 March 2014, <http://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/esteri/11583308/Lo-storico-Franco-Cardini--.html>.

become part of the Russian Federation or be divided into two parts: West and East Ukraine.<sup>15</sup>

## **Italy Still Committed to its Euro-Atlantic Policy Towards Russia**

Despite a growing number of Italian politicians who argue that there is simply no alternative to restoring top-level bilateral relations between Italy and Russia, the relations between the two are, of course, a long way from the coziness that existed between Rome and Moscow under Silvio Berlusconi.<sup>16</sup> The Gentiloni cabinet (after Renzi) has claimed that Russia remains a strategic partner but, at the same time, does not recognize the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum and condemns Russia's annexation of the peninsula. In addition, it has supported Russia's ejection from the G8 and joined the anti-Russian sanctions regime. Moreover, in the framework of the Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank initiative, Italy decided to send 140 soldiers to Latvia. Then-Minister of Foreign Affairs and now-Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni noted that Italy has always contributed to strengthening defensive structures in the Alliance's north-eastern region. However, Gentiloni also underlined that this is a measure that "is not part of a policy of aggression against Russia, but rather a policy of reassurance and defence of [the] borders of the Atlantic Alliance", pointing out that the initiative "does not have a minimal impact" on the dialogue between Italy and Russia.<sup>17</sup> Thus Italy has maintained dialogue with the Kremlin while remaining "fully committed" to the West's policy in relation to the Ukraine crisis, confirming once again that Europeanism and Atlanticism are fundamental pillars of Italy's foreign policy.

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<sup>15</sup> Pasquale, Massimiliano Di. Perché la propaganda russa trova terreno fertile in Itali? [Why does Russian propaganda find fertile soil in Italy?] *Strade Verso Luogo non Comuni*, <http://stradeonline.it/55-numeri/2017/maggio-giugno-2017/2829-perche-la-propaganda-russa-trova-terreno-fertile-in-italia>.

<sup>16</sup> Kostyuk, Ruslan. Why Italy is looking to break Russia's isolation from the West, *Russia Direct*, 6 March 2015, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/why-italy-looking-break-russia%E2%80%99s-isolation-west>.

<sup>17</sup> Russia, Italia invia 140 soldati in Lettonia. Nato: "Mosca potrebbe usare la forza". Cremlino protesta: "Politica distruttiva" [Russia, Italy sends 140 soldiers to Latvia. NATO: "Moscow could use force". Kremlin protests: "Destructive politics"], 14 October 2016, <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/10/14/russia-italia-invia-140-soldati-in-lettonia-nato-mosca-potrebbe-usare-la-forza/3098173/>.

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