

Italy as the Kremlin's 'Trojan Horse' in Europe: Some Overlooked Factors

Written by Artem Patalakh

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ARTEM PATALAKH, APR 11 2020

Prominent academic studies (e.g. Orenstein & Kelemen 2017) and think tank analyses (e.g. Germani & Iacoboni 2017) mention Italy among Moscow's 'Trojan horses' in the EU. Indeed, even under the central-left pro-EU governments in 2014-2018, Rome's stance on Moscow was much friendlier than the approach advocated by most EU members. From the very beginning of Putin's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Italy demonstrated certain reluctance concerning the introduction of economic sanctions on Russia. Two years later, it was Italy's position that hindered the EU from adopting further sanctions over the brutal bombing of Aleppo carried out by the Russian army. Italian Premier Matteo Renzi was the first major European leader to pay a visit to the Kremlin after the annexation of Crimea. In general, as stated by the Atlantic Council's researcher Anna Pellegatta, among leading Western countries, the Italian political elite represents 'a weird exception' by having especially overt ties with Moscow.

Some analysts (e.g. Germani & Iacoboni 2017) portray Italy's loyalty to Russia in the context of mutual friendship between the European far-right and the Kremlin. Yet, research shows that Rome was equally friendly towards Moscow under the Democratic party governments of 2014-2018 and under the 2018-2019 populist cabinet containing members of the Eurosceptic far-right Lega party (Mikhelidze 2019). Other researchers (e.g. Siddi 2019) accentuate economic motives while explaining Italy's inclination to cooperating with Russia. This point appears fairly valid: before 2014, Italy was Russia's sixth greatest economic partner, and the decrease of its export to Russia by 11,8% in 2014, 25,4% in 2015 and 5% in 2016 (De Maio & Sartori 2018: 13-15) was notable for a country undergoing a chronic economic stagnation.

However, Rome's amicability to Moscow is scarcely limited to economic considerations. Indeed, why does Italy ardently criticize the sanctions while the EU members, which have suffered a more considerable economic damage, like the Baltics (see Fritz et. al. 2017: 8-9), fervently support them? Why do high-ranking Italian officials repeatedly call for the sanctions' abolition even though figures show that, in the main, Italian producers adapted themselves to the sanctions regime three years ago (De Maio & Sartori 2018: 15)? Finally, why does Rome direct its main accusations toward *Brussels* even though the Italian economy has mostly been hurt not by the EU sanctions themselves, but by Putin's food embargo which he imposed as a response? By stark contrast, Poland, one of the main suppliers of food to Russia before 2014, criticized *the Kremlin* shortly after the food embargo had been introduced and asked the European Commission to prepare a formal complaint to the WTO. The same differences can be seen in public reactions: while affected Italian producers condemned Brussels for its sanctions against Moscow, Polish farmers demanded some compensation from their government without questioning the reasonability of the EU sanctions.

Italy's desire not to quarrel with Russia—among its political elite and especially its public at large—seems to be rooted in deeper causes rather than dictated solely by momentary material concerns. It appears to partially originate in the Soviet-Italian close cooperation during the Cold War, the motives for which on Italy's part neither at that period were reducible solely to the existence of a potent communist party in the country. One study notes that '[e]ven while anti-communism and anti-Sovietism flourished on the domestic level, diplomatic openings to the Soviet Union were pragmatically explored, often as an expression of idealistic aspirations to play an international role' (Dassù 1990: 109-110).

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Yet, alongside with foreign policy traditions, there are other factors which currently strengthen Rome's friendliness toward Moscow. In this article, I will outline three of those which influence Rome's foreign policy decisions to varying degrees, but seem to be insufficiently covered by journalists and academic scholars. I will refer to these factors as 'problems' meaning that their presence eventually undermines the unity of the EU and weakens its value-based foreign policy.

Problem 1: Public Indifference to Values in Foreign Policy

Italy's desire to have good relations with the Putin regime is clearly in accord with the perception of the value of democracy and liberal freedoms that are prevalent in Italian society. Indeed, recent polls show that Italians generally prize liberal freedoms less than many other European nations. In 2019, 35%, 42%, 56% and 52% of them believed in the importance of a free civil society, free opposition parties, free media and the free internet respectively—with these proportions being the lowest among 11 EU members included in the study (Wike 2019: 37, 40). Only 31% of people were satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, and this indicator has been stably low in Italy for several decades (Isernia & Di Mauro 2012: 149, Wike 2019: 43). In December 2019, almost a half of Italians wanted a strong leader that would not need to care about elections and the parliament. Not surprisingly against this background, 38% of Italians were approving of Putin's foreign policy. Among 14 EU member states covered by the study, the rate of such people was higher only in Bulgaria, Greece and Slovakia.

This data can be combined with psychological studies showing Italians as a nation that is generally 'low in morality': not only do Europeans conceive of Italians as one of the most corrupt people in Europe, but also Italians themselves deem their fellow citizens as more corrupt, dishonest and cunning compared to other Europeans (Moscatelli 2019: 94). Finally, Italian society is characterized by a notable shortage of trust vis-à-vis political institutions (Isernia & Di Mauro 2012: 150).

Taking account of this, it is fairly unsurprising that Italians, as a nation largely disappointed in democracy and skeptical towards freedoms, care little about the state of democracy and freedoms in autocracies, especially those who could bring benefits to Italy as pragmatic economic partners. This seems to be the guiding foreign policy principle of Rome vis-à-vis such autocracies. One study on Italy's close cooperation with the Qadhafi Libya concludes by stating that "[i]n the classic "stability or democracy dilemma," Italy has always chosen the former, contributing more than any other country to strengthening Qadhafi's regime" (Varvelli 2010: 130). Of special note is the invariable unwillingness to express concerns of human rights and democracy violations, a feature that is present in Rome's approach not only to Moscow, but also, for example, Beijing. One study managed to find just two instances of—fairly moderate—concerns over human rights violations in China in the Italian Parliament's resolutions in recent years and no evidence that this has ever been done by the Italian government and leaders (Casarini *et. al.* 2018: 51-53).

In its cooperation with autocracies, Rome occasionally finds itself alone in the Western camp. This repeatedly happened when Italy continued strengthening its partnership with Libya while other Western countries cooled off their relations with Qadhafi (Varvelli 2010). This also happened, as I stated earlier, when Renzi visited Moscow in 2015. Finally, this happened in May 2017, when the then Italian Premier Paolo Gentiloni was the sole EU and G-7 member's leader present at China's High-level Belt and Road Initiative Forum (Casarini *et. al.* 2018: 52).

This is, of course, not to say that Italy is the only country that approaches autocracies with economic pragmatism—in fact, it has become a general trend among EU members to 'outsource' the burden of making human rights related accusations to EU institutions. Yet, what stands out in Italy's case is a seemingly *complete absence* of concerns over values, which is so atypical of leading Western states. For example, despite their overall pragmatic approach to China, high-ranking German officials frequently express their anxiety over human rights violations in China with Merkel herself meeting Chinese human rights activists and their families during her visits to that country. The same approach can be observed in Berlin's policy toward Moscow: while collaborating on issues representing strategic economic importance like the North Stream 2 pipeline, Germany still sometimes criticizes the Kremlin for human rights abuses in Russia.

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Problem 2: Russian Diaspora in Italy

One more factor that does not appear on the surface, but still contributes to Italy's pro-Russian aspirations, concerns the Russian community in Italy. Consisting of less than 40,000 people as of 2019, this group is hardly large in number, however, IR studies show that even new and relatively minor ethnic communities may successfully influence their host countries' foreign policy officials (see Tellander & Horst 2019 for an example of the Somalian diaspora in Norway).

The majority of Russians residing in the West are active or passive supporters of the Putin regime, as indicated not only by credible media publications, but also Russian elections' results at the polling stations located in Western countries. Yet, in many EU states, liberal-minded Russians have established organizations that allow such people to get together as well as help them get engaged in political activism by building links with the local media, NGOs and politicians (Makarychev 2019). These organizations include the Forum of Russian speaking Europeans and the Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom operating in Germany, the Free Russia House existing in Poland, the Association of Russian Civil Society Development functioning in Latvia etc. Italy hosts none of such organizations, which, if projected onto Rome's approach to Moscow, points to a chicken-and-egg situation. On the one hand, due to the lack of a value-based foreign policy, Italy is not an attractive land of immigration for democratically-minded Russians. At the same time, the complete absence of Russian opposition groups leaves the Italian government short of—perhaps, a limited, but still—an important impetus which could induce it to rethink its stance on the Kremlin.

Concurrently, the Kremlin in Italy—similarly to what it does in other Western countries—tries to embrace the Russian diaspora through the creation and sponsoring of organizations which have a primarily non-political focus, but follow the pro-Kremlin agenda whenever it comes to political matters. To illustrate, among its goals, the Milan-based cultural and educational association 'Alye parusa' ('The scarlet sails') mentions 'contributing to the comprehension of Russia's position in the world's civilization' and 'strengthening the positive image of Russia among the Italian public.' In a similar vein, the cultural and business association 'Sinerghia,' when explaining why it is needed to promote cooperation between Italy and Russia, states (my translation):

[f]or Italy, this unique look eastward is an opportunity to escape from the propagandistic stereotypes imposed by multiple media channels and Western institutions. It is an opportunity to get rid of many mutual prejudices which are too often nourished thanks to several media channels speculating on our fears.

While Italy-based Russian *organizations* promote the Kremlin's viewpoint in a relatively moderate way, their *leaders* often express pro-Putin views more overtly and emotionally. For instance, the personal Facebook page of Darya Byrsanu, the leader of the Council of Young Russian Compatriots, consists primarily of the publications of the Russian foreign ministry and affiliated agencies. Very often, they are devoted to alleged biases against Russia, Russian-speaking people and media in the Western world. The Facebook page of Tatiana Ryabchenko, Milan's coordinator of "Immortal Regiment" parades annually organized on 9 May, comprises much more fiercely pro-Kremlin and anti-Western materials. These include multiple publications of the group "Russia without liberals" containing harsh criticism of the Russian liberal opposition, opinions justifying the arrest of anti-Putin protesters in Moscow, criticism of Ukraine's human rights record, posts praising Lega's leader Matteo Salvini as well as materials supporting more general conspiracy theories about Western countries, for instance, the denial of the fact that US astronauts ever flew to the Moon.

Such comments and posts do not get many 'likes' on Facebook and are certainly unable to consolidate the Russian diaspora, even though this is a declared goal of Kremlin-backed associations in Italy. However, since those associations are the only organized form of the Russian diaspora's presence, only their representatives are able to meet Italian officials and speak in the name of the Russian community, even if such meeting may be able to produce fairly modest results.

What exacerbates the situation is a shortage of other potent communities capable of countering the activities of pro-Putin Russians. In the countries where the Ukrainian diaspora is strong (Australia, Canada, Poland, the UK, the US), it has enough power to arrange protests against Putin's foreign policy that do not go unnoticed by local politicians

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and publics (Reshetchenko 2014, Lapshyna 2019). In Italy, even though the Ukrainian community outnumbers the Russian one roughly by six times, it consists predominantly of middle-aged female domestic workers that are poorly paid and have a heavy workload (Vianello 2016). Although they occasionally arrange manifestations against the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine, they obviously lack intellectual resources, money and time for a more orderly protest. By contrast, the Russian community in Italy is comprised mostly of university students and Italian husbands' wives who get a good salary and hold a decent position in society.

Problem 3: Perceived Imbalances in EU Priorities

The EU is notorious for a so-called 'North-South divide,' that is, differences between the socio-economic models of its Southern and Northern members which make it hard for Brussels to find measures that will suit them all. This phenomenon regards foreign policy as well: dissimilarities between the foreign policy priorities of different member states complicate the functioning of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. While Italy's priority is Mediterranean politics, Eastern and Central EU members dedicate more attention to the Eastern Neighborhood and Russia, a situation that generates occasional disputes. In 2015, Rome was strongly discontented with the fact that Central European states were resistant to accept refugees from Italy while appealing for the prolongation of the Russia sanctions. At that period, not only were the sanctions themselves of little importance for Italy, but also Rome was hoping to use Moscow's growing involvement in Mediterranean politics for tackling the ongoing immigration crisis. Later that year, Italy expressed its dissatisfaction with Germany's cooperation with Russia regarding the North Stream 2 gas pipeline, perceiving it as contrary to the spirit of the economic sanctions on which Rome had unwillingly agreed.

Coupled with the Rome-Brussels disputes over budgetary issues, disputes of this kind have entailed a situation in which over 50% of Italians deem the EU as biased against Italy on such issues as budget and immigration (Isernia & Greco 2019: 33). The fiercely Eurosceptic Lega party has become the most popular political party in Italy. Also, most Italians feel that Germany abuses its position of the strongest EU member and benefits more than Italy from its EU membership (FES 2016). The Sputnik Italia website, the main mouthpiece of Russian propaganda in Italy, exploits such sentiments to its own advantage by publishing opinions depicting Western institutions as inefficient and useless and pushing for more cooperation between Italy and Russia.

The ongoing coronavirus epidemic is being heavily exploited by the Putin regime to improve its image and ignite Eurosceptic sentiments in Italy. A number of EU members provided Italy with medical aid, however, even pro-EU experts admit that, unfortunately, those steps were somewhat belated and accompanied with insufficient media coverage, leading to growing criticism of the EU in Italy. The Kremlin, on the contrary, was fast in sending its aid on military planes immediately after Putin's phone conversation with the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. The Kremlin-sponsored media, as a BBC investigation shows, exploited this situation to its fullest for propaganda purposes, often reporting fake or inaccurate information, as a BBC investigation shows. At this period, Sputnik Italia published numerous articles praising the Russian aid and criticizing the EU for its alleged inefficiency, even though materials published by the reputable center-left La Stampa newspaper cast doubts on the helpfulness of the aid provided by Russia and the real goals of the presence of Russian military personnel in a NATO country.

However, the very fact of the provision of Russia's aid to Italy in times of need has activated patriotic feelings among Russians living in that country. This concerns even generally apolitical people and organizations. For instance, one magazine of the Russian community, which predominantly publishes interviews with local Russians and news about the Russian community-related events, reacted to Russia's aid on its Facebook page as follows (my translation):

We are proud of our motherland! Long live #grandemadrerussia!.. Yes, Russia may be a notorious 'dictatorship,' but the much-ballyhooed democracy at a difficult moment turned out to be rotten to the core. "No comment" about Europe, [it gives Italy] no single positive thing, neither economic nor moral assistance—just slaps in the face and humiliations.

Conclusions

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This article has shown that Italy's position of the Putin regime's 'Trojan horse' in the EU does not merely stem from a pragmatic calculation of the Italian political elite. It also reflects some trends ongoing at the societal level which mold popular perceptions of a foreign policy appropriate for Italy. First, as a nation disappointed in democracy, Italians demonstrate little interest in what political regime exists in a country that can be useful for Italy as an economic and political partner. Second, unlike in many other Western countries, the Russian community in Italy is represented exclusively by pro-Kremlin associations; these are the only organizations which speak in the name of Russians and influence the general perception of what Russians want. Third, Russian propaganda in Italy actively ignites the widespread idea of the EU's alleged partiality against Italy and uses it to promote viewpoints favorable to the Kremlin.

At the moment, the influence of these factors may not be decisive, yet, it might rise already in the foreseeable future due to the current trends. For example, the number of Russians in Italy grew by 20% in 2013-2019 and continues growing. Also, Italians' democratic skepticism low political trust are unlikely to fade away given a high instability of government coalitions and the country's continuously stagnated economy which has not been improving under different governments representing a whole variety of political views. It remains to be seen whether Italians will continue to perceive the EU as biased against their country, since this will strongly hinge on future events. However unoriginal this policy implication may be, it seems that on the part of the EU, the current situation can be improved by a better coverage of its political steps and a better explanation of their necessity.

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