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Italian diplomacy and the Ukrainian crisis: the challenges (and cost) of continuity

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to analyse the Italian diplomatic response to the Ukrainian crisis. To this end, the article relies on role theory to understand how Italy's diplomatic posture during the war was influenced by the expectations deriving from its EU and NATO membership, but also by the different role conceptions emerging in the public debate. Though Italy under its Prime Minister, Mario Draghi, not only responded to but effectively led European strategy towards Ukraine during the crisis – including supporting Ukraine's membership bid – on the internal front the country was polarized, unwilling to push for further punishment of Russia in view of its economic reverberations, but also questioning military involvement in the war in Ukraine. After a failed attempt to reconcile external expectations and domestic preferences, centred around Italy's sponsorship of a 'peace plan' for Ukraine, the tension between the two sets of influences intensified to the point of precipitating the end of the Draghi government in July 2022, with Italy's response to the Ukrainian crisis invoked as one of the main causes of the government's fall. Although the right-wing alliance of political parties that won the ensuing general elections campaigned on a populist and nationalist, 'Italy first', platform, the country's posture towards the war in Ukraine has not really changed – under its current Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, Italy has continued to align with the multilateral expectations set by the EU and the US. The differences in foreign policy outlook within the current governing coalition, however, are not insignificant, and public opinion continues to be divided. This suggests that the tension underlying Italy's foreign policy in the Ukraine crisis has not been resolved – in fact, it could still potentially undermine the country's diplomatic posture, as well as the government's own stability, in the months to come.

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1. The war in Ukraine: a view from Rome

On 25 January 2022, barely a month before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and with tension at the Russian-Ukrainian border already at an all-time high, Italy's attitude towards

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Moscow was one of concern and yet engagement. Although recognizing the rising danger of an invasion, Prime Minister Draghi was still suggesting that ‘the EU needed to keep engaging with President Putin’ (Politico 2021). Engaging with Russia was a strategy that Italy knew well – after all, it had become a bipartisan policy shared by all recent governments, irrespective of their centre-left or centre-right orientation. Apart from clear economic reasons, with Italy being greatly dependent on Russia energy supplies, Italy’s close relations with Russia were motivated by the recognition that Moscow was a strategic partner for settling a number of conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, as well as in the fight against terrorism. Before Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Italy-Russia relations had achieved a high level of excellence deserving ‘privileged relations’ status (Giusti 2017, 71). Therefore, engagement was exactly what top Italian executives were pursuing at the forum of the Italy-Russia Chamber of Commerce on 25 January 2022, an event during which Vladimir Putin praised Italy for its continued economic cooperation, congratulating Italian businesses on a 54% increase in trade between the two countries from the previous year (Bloomberg 2022a). Only one month later, the extent of this cooperation was to be dramatically reduced by the introduction of EU sponsored sanctions against Russia following the country’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

In the run-up to the invasion, and much like Germany and France, Italy had been cautious in completely alienating Russia. With the notable exception of the then Italian Defence Minister, Lorenzo Guerini, who unequivocally expressed Italy’s full commitment to NATO’s leadership (La Repubblica 2022a), government officials did not think the war was imminent, echoing a general opinion expressed by most Italian pundits (Sciuto 2022). Thus, in the weeks preceding the invasion, Draghi expressed mild optimism concerning the possibility of a negotiated solution to the crisis, while Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, a prominent member of the pro-Russian ‘Five-star Movement’, voiced no explicit condemnation of Putin’s actions. In line with Italy’s handling of previous crises involving Russia, such as Crimea and Georgia, Italy was therefore officially critical of Moscow, in line with the position taken by the US and the EU, while promoting a stance of moderation and engagement, rather than outright confrontation.

Once the invasion started on 24 February, however, and unlike Germany and France, Italy’s position quickly snapped into line with the Atlanticist and pro-Ukraine positions expressed by both the US and European institutions, and any last-ditch attempts to avert the crisis by government officials (such as Matteo Salvini), were definitively dropped. Thus, between 24 and 28 February, Italy adopted the three packages of economic sanctions issued by the EU, which included: the banning of Russian aircraft from EU airspace; the banning of Russian state-owned media outlets, *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, from the EU; the introduction of export controls on electronic and high-tech goods (in tandem with the US); the exclusion of Russian banks from the SWIFT global payments system, and the freezing of Russian central bank deposits (European Parliament 2022). Later, as the war progressed, and in agreement with the other EU member states, Italy supported sanctions against Belarus (9 March 2022) and other five packages of sanctions against Russia (European Council 2022).

Italy’s cooperation with the EU and the US’ strategy of isolating Russia and supporting Ukraine, however, proved to be more complicated in two critical sectors: energy and

defence. Russia's attack on Ukraine – a key transit route for about a third of Europe's supplies of Russian gas – forced a reorganization of national energy policies across the continent. Before the war, Italy received about 40% of its imported gas from Russia. By June 2022, the country's dependence had already decreased to 25%, with the former Minister for Ecological transition, Roberto Cingolani, suggesting that a shift in the country's energy mix would take at least two years to complete (Bloomberg 2022b). The need for diversifying energy supplies rapidly forced Draghi's government and Italy's diplomats to find alternative suppliers. Thus, Italy embarked on strengthening relations with strategic Northern African countries, such as Algeria and Egypt, as well as Azerbaijan, despite long-standing reservations around their human rights records, as well as open disputes, such as in the case of Egypt (for further background, Brighi and Musso 2017).

As expected, Eni played an important role in this strategy, re-affirming its historic role as an actor in parallel diplomacy and Italian foreign policy (Monzali and Soave 2021; see also Prontera and Lizzi in this special issue). The government's short-term need to diversify energy suppliers perfectly dovetailed with Eni's long-term strategy of creating a gas hub in the Mediterranean and 'pivoting' towards the Middle East and Africa (Brighi and Musso 2017). In particular, after the 2015 discovery of the largest gas field in the Mediterranean just off the coast of Port Said, Egypt became one of Eni's main production basins worldwide (Brighi 2020, 2021). Building on the extensive cooperation of the last decade, in April 2022 Eni signed a framework agreement with Egypt's state-owned EGAS for the production of up to 3 billion cubic metres of liquid natural gas (LNG). This agreement, together with previous ones, aims to promote 'Egyptian gas exports to Europe, and specifically to Italy, in the context of the transition to a low carbon economy' (Eni 2022). Rather than being part of a new socioeconomic model of energy transition, these moves were clearly determined by the urgent need to find a quick solution to energy shortages.

The necessity to diversify energy supplies due to the war in Ukraine provided a crucial platform for rebranding gas as 'transitional', rather than a fossil fuel – a troubling development in more than one way. Firstly, this shift has ended up increasing the international legitimacy and political viability of gas-rich states like Egypt, despite its authoritarian regime and abysmal human rights record. Secondly, this development has re-entrenched the power of oil companies such as Eni, effectively stalling a more radical turn towards renewables (the Guardian 2022b). The urgent need to find a quick a solution to energy shortages, therefore, clearly trumped long-term, sustainable solutions to the energy crisis – which the Draghi government had however committed to.

Other EU members have pursued similar strategies with gas producers around the world, to reduce dependency on Russia's energy. Azerbaijan and Algeria are on the frontline of suppliers willing to increase gas exports to Europe, including Italy. Furthermore, in June 2022, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and Italian Prime Minister Draghi went to Israel to discuss gas supplies with Israeli officials. This paved the way for a memorandum of understanding between the EU, Egypt and Israel that would see Israeli gas liquefied at Egyptian processing plants before being shipped to Europe (Bloomberg 2022c).

In terms of defence and military aid, Italy's contribution to the strategy of arming Ukraine pursued by the US and the EU did not come without its problems either. At the

outset of the crisis Italy agreed to send only ‘non-lethal’ military equipment. However, on 2 March 2022 the Draghi government issued a decree that outlined the sending of offensive weapons and military vehicles, including heavy machine guns, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, and ammunition (Il Post 2022). A few weeks later, endorsing an initiative of the right-wing opposition party Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), the government also agreed to include in the ‘Ukraine decree’ a measure providing for a considerable increase in military expenditure, so as to align Italy, by as early as 2024, with the NATO recommended contribution of 2% of GDP (Il Sole 24 Ore 2022).

Although perceived as drastic, this measure was in fact entirely in line with Draghi’s commitment to raising military expenditure, an objective reiterated throughout his term of office (see Cotichia and Moro in this special issue). If anything, the war in Ukraine provided a convenient justification for the government’s strategy, which was now presented by the Prime Minister as ‘urgent’ and ‘imposed by NATO’ – although the 2% NATO contribution was actually never legally binding (Reuters 2019). What is certain is that under the Draghi government, Italy had already raised its military expenditure to a significant degree. In particular, between 2021 and 2022 Defence Minister, Guerini, had authorized an unprecedented number of new defence programmes, while endorsing increased levels of state support for the Italian defence industry (European Security & Defence 2021). Amongst the Italian companies to benefit the most was Leonardo spa, which in recent months expanded to become the most important defence company within the EU (Sipri 2022) as well as the recipient of the largest proportion of European defence funding (Europa Today 2022). Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Leonardo has managed to significantly increase not only its profits (Reuters 2022) but also its influence on the Government (Med-Or 2022).

If the decision to increase Italy’s rearmament and send offensive weapons to Ukraine was welcomed by the defence industry, it proved, however, to be controversial with public opinion. In fact, it paved the way for a growing rift between government and electorate, on the one hand, and within the governing coalition, on the other. Just as the Government, in May 2022, was passing a further decree approving the supply to Ukraine of an undisclosed number of FH-70 long-range weapons and a stock of multi-role armoured vehicles, the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s) as well as the Lega (League) started openly to challenge Prime Minister Draghi by calling for an end to offensive military supplies to Ukraine (La Repubblica 2022b). The tension within the governing coalition became so significant that in July 2022 the M5s boycotted a key confidence vote on an important economic relief package and on military aid to Ukraine. This was the beginning of the end for the government of Draghi, who formally resigned on 21 July 2022. In diplomatic terms, this political crisis was widely perceived by NATO allies and EU member states as weakening Italy’s stance and benefitting the Kremlin. As it happens, however, the new government that emerged from this crisis did not stray too far off the path charted by its predecessor.

Despite having the League and Forza Italia in coalition, the government of Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right party FdI, has so far maintained the commitments to military aid to Ukraine made by the Draghi government, preparing a further package of weapons to be sent to Ukraine. The new government is also supporting a further increase in military expenditure, which is unsurprising considering the right-wing party’s long-

standing support of the defence industry, but also the fact that the former President of Italy's defence industry association (AIAD) is now the new Minister of Defence, Guido Crosetto. It remains to be seen whether Meloni will be able to maintain this line in the face of the criticisms voiced by both Silvio Berlusconi and Salvini on the matter (Politico 2022a; the Guardian 2022b), as well as the considerable opposition from public opinion, as manifested in the mass demonstration for peace held in Rome on 5 November 2022.

2. Roles and reality of Italian foreign policy

What countries do and how they behave on the international stage is always the result of a multitude of disparate factors, influences and pressures. Just as it is impossible to explain social and political action outside of the contoured context in which it emerges, and which it helps to shape, so it is also difficult to analyse foreign policy, of which diplomacy is the official expression, if not as a veritable crucible where a host of drivers of action converge, merge or clash (Hill 2003, 2015). Traditionally, foreign policy has been understood to emerge at the 'international/domestic nexus', ie. at the boundary between international politics and domestic politics, although globalization has definitively complicated this neat geometry by revealing how transnational influences impact a country's external projection from all sides.

Recent literature in foreign policy analysis has also investigated how material and ideational factors combine or clash, zooming into the latter category to explore issues not only of identity and political culture, but also of emotions, leadership styles, norms and socialization processes (Aran, Brummer and Smith 2021). Within this wave, some scholars have drawn on the literature on roles and role theory to analyse foreign policy as shaped by domestic sources of self-image and identity, on the one hand, and perceptions of the country's place within the international system, with its possibilities, challenges and expectations, on the other (Harnisch, Frank and Maull 2011; Breuning 2017). As the article suggests, this is a particularly fruitful angle of investigation to adopt when analysing Italy's foreign policy during the Ukrainian war.

In a nutshell, Italy's diplomatic posture has been shaped by two colliding sets of influences. These are, on the one hand, the expectations deriving from its role in multi-lateral frameworks such as the EU and NATO, as well as the perceptions and expectations connected to this role. On the other, they include collective ideas surrounding Italy's identity, political culture(s) and self-image, particularly centred around pacifism and the critique of US hegemony. Unlike other countries, Italy's role has been prone to uncertainty and crisis because the drivers of its behaviour point in opposite directions – so that it often seeks a way out of the dilemma through 'creative' diplomacy. While this pattern has clear historical roots, it is particularly acute at the present time, when populist discourses (including disinformation and fake news) at a time of war disrupt and exacerbate the strength of the 'domestic constraint'.

Questions of role and status have affected Italian foreign policy at many critical junctures of its recent history (Brighi 2013). A 'late comer' to the modern international system, a country with a distant imperial past and an ever-to-be-completed national project, Italy has often struggled to affirm its place in the international system and find a role that would suit its character. The fact that during the XIX century Italy was considered the 'least of the great powers', if not dismissed as a '*quantité négligeable*', to

use Lord Salisbury's sneering formula, provided much of the ammunition for the foreign policy revanchism of fascist Italy, a country determined finally to make it into the 'A' division of great nations (Bosworth 2009). The loss of status that came with the defeat of fascism combined with the 'death of the country' (*la morte della patria*) to make a *tabula rasa* not only of Italy's international ambitions but also of many of its self-conceptions. In other words, it deprived Italy of any sense of status and role (Galli della Loggia 1998). After the Second World War, much like Germany, Italy was able to regain international legitimacy only by being fully socialized into multilateral institutions such as NATO and the EU, a choice that Italian policy makers were hoping would not only benefit the country's economic and political prospects, but could also help reshape the country's fractious national identity and political cultures, finally transforming Italy into a modern country and a good international citizen (De Leonardis 2014).

Three decades after the end of the Cold War, with the current post-liberal turn in international relations in full swing, it is fair to argue that this historic process not only has never come fully to fruition, but it has started to encounter serious challenges. The 'anchoring' of multilateral frameworks has been placed in question by waves of Euroscepticism that have swept the entire political spectrum and found a receptive audience especially amongst the centre-right electorate. On the other hand, Italy's deep-rooted tradition of anti-Americanism, traditionally at home on the centre-left, has been given a new lease of life by populist discourses rooted in conspiracy theories and fake news – attitudes that have been further cemented during the pandemic, creating a convergence of the anti-capitalist, anti-vax, and pro-Russia electorates. Although these political attitudes do not necessarily translate into political action, they can be easily exploited by political parties and political entrepreneurs to create opportunities for disruption and crisis.

The result is that while most Italian foreign policy makers today repeat the mantra of Italy's multilateralism – the three circles of EU, NATO and UN membership – and the international community continues to expect Italy to perform according to its multilateral commitments, the reality of Italian foreign policy is a much messier affair, one where contrasting and sometimes centrifugal tendencies coexist. Draghi's government encountered this challenge early on in its term, especially with regard to its European policies. The Prime Minister's attempts to reframe the role of Italy as a shaper of EU politics and a protagonist of the European project were met first with the traditional scepticism of populist, Eurosceptical sectors, and then, once the crisis in Ukraine started to loom, with open hostility towards Brussels on the part of an even larger part of public opinion.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine provided an even starker illustration of this problem. Before the outbreak of the crisis, and similarly to France and Germany, Italy had charted its own path in terms of its relations with Russia, pursuing a strategy of enhanced cooperation that was somewhat eccentric vis-à-vis mainstream European and American attitudes. The rationales for this strategy were not only economic and strategic, as mentioned above, but they reflected a heritage of engagement with the non-Western world, and more specifically with the Soviet and post-Soviet space, that drew on old and new political cultures: on the one hand, Italy's long-standing culture of pacifism and its deep-rooted tradition of anti-Americanism, drawing *inter alia* on the legacy of Europe's largest

Communist party outside of the USSR; on the other, the contemporary fascination with illiberal regimes that cuts across political cultures and unites parties such as the League and the M5s. With the start of the hostilities, however, the path of cooperation with Russia was no longer politically viable. The expectations deriving from Italy's multilateral commitments – to which, it is worth repeating, Italy still owes its international political legitimacy – were set out rather quickly and starkly: they involved a clear distancing from Russia and unequivocal support for Ukraine. It could not have fallen to a more suited leader than Mario Draghi (the former President of the European Central Bank), then, to translate these expectations into actions. The embodiment of European institutions and transatlantic loyalty was now, after all, at the head of Italy's government – what could possibly go wrong?

Draghi's hardening of policy in the name of 'international expectations', however, disavowed public perceptions and political cultures that told a different story about Italy and its role in the international environment. Just as many notable post-war leaders had done before him, Draghi had banked on the strength of the '*vincolo esterno*' (Giusti 2022; Romero 2018; Diodato 2014) not only to guarantee the stability of his government, but also to shape domestic politics, including the orientation of parties within the governing coalition as well as public opinion at large. This was perfectly in line with Italy's history of using the EU as an external lever for domestic institutional policy change, for imposing unpopular measures, or for justifying why certain things could not be done (see, for instance, Italy's entry into the European Monetary system, which helped the country reduce its budget deficit; Hopkin and Lynch 2017). The war in Ukraine and the end of the Draghi government, however, seem to suggest that this clever trick by Italian policy makers may have stopped working. Draghi lost his gamble, and his premiership, because the legitimacy of the multilateral anchoring which inspired its foreign policy in the Ukrainian crisis was openly called into question. Indeed, Draghi's vision of what Italy stands for internationally no longer corresponded to a number of resilient cultural beliefs and new political discourses about the nation. Public debate around the crisis featured a mounting criticism of Western, pro-Ukraine positions which were influenced not just by 'old' beliefs of Anti-Americanism and pacifism, but by 'new' populist and pro-Russian discourses, as well as new practices of information warfare and propaganda. Draghi's governing coalition came apart precisely because of political parties exploiting different attitudes regarding what Italy should do in Ukraine, particularly whether to send weapons, or not.

As the next section will illustrate, Draghi tried to compensate for these inconsistencies of role and self-image, as well as patch over any ambiguities on the part of public opinion and his coalition partners, by firstly placing the country at the helm of European institutions, to shape the Government's strategy from the top and maximize its domestic leverage. But it also engaged in 'creative' diplomacy, pursuing 'peace plans' that were more expendable in the domestic foray. These attempts, however, ultimately failed to win the support of coalition partners and of a public opinion increasingly influenced by populist discourses and propaganda wars. The Ukrainian crisis, therefore, presented a stark reminder of a timeless imperative, which Draghi ultimately fell foul of. It is not enough to pursue a foreign policy that is compatible with the international environment and credible in the eyes of the international community: foreign policy must also be able to resonate domestically and maintain enough political support if it (and its government)

is to survive. In a world so transformed and in flux, vague injunctions about what Italy must do to be a good international citizen simply no longer do.

3. Diplomacy compensating for Italy's inconsistencies of role

What Italy lacked in terms of unequivocal alignment with the energy and military policies pursued by the EU and the US, the Draghi's government tried to compensate for with strenuous diplomatic and political activity revolving around two pillars: support for Ukrainian EU membership, and peace plans. This activity was also meant to reap benefits domestically, as it aimed to appease that part of the public that was opposed to military support for Ukraine and dissatisfied with the negative effects of sanctions for European countries.

The role of Italy and especially of its Prime Minister Draghi has been crucial in pushing for the recognition of Ukraine as an EU candidate member. In June 2022 Draghi paid a high-profile visit to Kyiv and Bucha which marked a clear endorsement for Ukraine in the EU. During this visit he praised the Ukrainian people for defending 'every day the values of democracy and freedom that underpin the European project, our project'. And as for Ukraine's EU membership, he quipped 'we cannot delay this process' (the Guardian 2022c). The fact that Draghi was joined during the visit by German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, French President, Emmanuel Macron, and Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis, also demonstrated the EU's unity in supporting Ukraine both in the war and in its application for membership, implying that Ukrainians were fighting for Europe, not just for their country. From that trip Draghi returned to Italy as the European leader most invested in the EU push to grant Ukraine EU candidate status, and most able to persuade the other member states to go along. In the end, Ukraine received special treatment, as its application became one of the first acts of resistance against the Russian aggression, having therefore great symbolic meaning. Despite many shortcomings in terms of its fulfilment of the entry criteria (Petrov and Hillion 2022), on 23 June 2022, the European Council granted Ukraine its candidate status.

Italy also supported President Macron's proposal for a European Political Community (EPC) presented in May 2022 to serve as a forum for European leaders to 'find a new space for political and security cooperation' and discuss issues of common concern, like energy policy and infrastructure. The idea was first floated by former Italian Prime Minister, Enrico Letta, and then embraced by Macron, German Chancellor, Scholz, and European Commission President, von der Leyen (Pisani-Ferri, Schwarzer, 2022). The proposal also reflected the enhanced convergence between Italy and France set in motion by the Quirinale Treaty in November 2021.¹ Because the EPC encompasses leaders of EU member states and countries seeking accession, this forum is clearly suited to the inclusion of Ukraine – as well as Moldova and countries outside the EU, like Israel, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Although it is still not clear what level of institutionalization the EPC may reach (so far preference has been for a flexible structure and twice-yearly meetings, without needless procedural rules), the idea is to create a regular forum for leaders on the European continent to come together, outside formal EU institutions, to discuss not just the crises of the moment, but broader geopolitical challenges in the face of threats from countries such as Russia and China.

Aside from the considerable political support lent to Ukraine's application to join the EU, and the construction of an inclusive new European forum, the Draghi government also engaged in attempts at brokering peace. The most relevant act in terms of formal diplomacy (without considering backchannel, informal, parallel diplomacy) has been an ambitious plan for peace that the then Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luigi Di Maio, reportedly shared with the Quint – an informal consultation group comprising the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy – and presented to the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, on 18 May 2022. The move was meant to show Italy's willingness to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict while leaving a channel open with Moscow in view of a possible de-escalation. The peace plan, concocted by Italian diplomats in coordination with the office of Prime Minister Draghi, envisaged four consequential steps, under the supervision of an International Facilitation Group (IFG). The first step of the plan consisted in the call for a ceasefire, to be negotiated while fighting. This would be accompanied by supervisory mechanisms and the demilitarization of the front line, to prepare the ground for a definitive cessation of hostilities. The second step would entail the start of multilateral negotiations on the future international status of Ukraine. The third step, the hardest one, would deal with the definition of the bilateral agreement between Russia and Ukraine on territorial issues, after international mediation. Finally, the fourth step would be a new multilateral agreement on peace and security in Europe, possibly in the context of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). While logically structured, the plan had almost no chance of success and, in fact, did not accomplish much, except on the domestic front. Indeed, after its appearance it was rather clear that the plan was aimed not so much at the conflicting parties, but rather that its goal was to appease public opinion and de-escalate conflict within the governing coalition at a time when the M5s and the League were questioning the engagement of Italy and its loyalty to the US position. Domestic expediency might explain why Draghi did not oppose the plan but at the same time never referred to it in public (Alcaro and Mikhelidze 2022).

4. A divergent public opinion?

There are plenty of data to suggest that the Draghi government's position and its alignment with the US, NATO and the EU were not fully supported by public opinion. Krastev and Leonard (2022) report that although 56% of Italians held Russia responsible for the war, 27% of them thought that Ukraine, the EU, or the US were to blame for it. Compared to, for example, Finland – where 90% said Russia was responsible and just 5% blamed the EU, US, or Ukraine – Italians seem to hold a very favourable view of Russia, to some extent similar to French, Romanian, and German citizens. Another poll by Euroskopia (quoted in Isernia and Martini 2023) involving five other European states found that a third of Italians, from the early stages of the conflict, deemed Russia's attack on Ukraine understandable, if not outright acceptable.²

Even more strikingly, when asked which country constituted the biggest obstacle to peace between Russia and Ukraine, 35% of Italians chose Ukraine, the EU, or the US – the largest proportion of all polled countries (Krastev and Leonard 2022). Compare that again with Finland, where just 5% of Finnish citizens hold the same opinion. Finally, 52%

of Italians are in favour of what they have labelled the ‘peace camp’ – calling for peace even at the cost of Ukrainian concessions to Russia – and 48% of Italians thought that the Government was too focused on the war, at the expense of other problems facing ordinary people (e.g. energy, inflation) (Krašev and Leonard 2022).

The poll results show that in the current context of tensions between Russia and the West, the Italian electorate does not have an automatic preference for transatlantic leadership – or, at least, not for the current one (Marrone 2022) – as assumed by the Draghi government. As mentioned above, this can be explained by the long tradition of friendship with Russia, the close cultural ties between the two countries, as well as recent governments’ inclination towards strategic cooperation. At the same time, anti-Americanism continues to be deep-rooted and it is articulated today as opposition to American unilateralism, democracy promotion at all costs, including military intervention, and interference in the internal affairs of third countries, including allies (Fabbrini 2002). As Isernia and Martini (2023) have pointed out, most of the resistance to the Government’s decision to impose sanctions on Russia and send weapons to Ukraine came from the electorate on the right, as well as from voters for parties not placed on the traditional left-right continuum, such as the M5s. On the whole, the electorate on the left was more favourable towards the Government and followed the party line – and yet, a considerable percentage of voters on the left (48%) still expressed their opposition to sending weapons. Discontent crossed all political factions, therefore, distancing the Government from public opinion and providing much political ammunition for the crisis.

Popular criticism of Italy’s handling of the war in Ukraine climaxed in the mass demonstrations for peace of 5 November 2022. In Rome, a rally was called by a wide spectrum of civil society groups such as trade unions, civil society and religious associations, the Italian Disarmament Network, the Community of Sant’Egidio, Emergency, Greenpeace, Fridays for Future, the ‘Sardines’ (a grassroots political movement, which began in Italy in November 2019 in Emilia Romagna, to try to prevent a victory for Salvini’s League at the regional elections), and the Italian National Association of Partisans, as well as being supported by political parties such as the M5s and the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD). The Rome rally criticized the Government for disregarding public opinion and not pursuing the path of negotiations to end the war. The leader of the M5s, Giuseppe Conte, positioned himself as a key spokesperson of this large camp, and during the demonstration he urged the Italian government ‘to negotiate with Russia’, because ‘the way out is not a military victory but a peace negotiation’ (Open 2022). The Catholic world was also well represented at the Rome demonstration. Italian Catholics have been generally critical of Italy’s posture and, together with pacifist movements such as the Italian Disarmament Network, they have fully supported the position of Pope Francis on the conflict. The Pope called on President Putin to stop the war, but he also invited Ukraine to be open to the prospect of negotiations, urging everyone ‘to commit to demilitarizing hearts, starting with their own, and then defusing, disarming violence. We must all be pacifists. We must want peace, not just a ceasefire, which may only make it possible to rearm. Real peace is the fruit of dialogue’ (La Stampa 2022). The Vatican offered its mediation to put an end to the conflict, as did the Community of Sant’Egidio, a Catholic NGO with a particularly notable track record of success in conflict resolution (Morozzo della Rocca 2018). On

23 October 2022, an International Conference for Peace was organized by the Community of Sant'Egidio, where the prospects for peace in Ukraine were discussed, featuring also the intervention of French President, Macron.

As further proof of divisions within public opinion, on the same day as the demonstration for peace in Rome, another rally was held in Milan by the centrist parties, Azione, led by Carlo Calenda, and Italia Viva, led by former Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi. Although also demonstrating for peace, the Milan rally called for all measures necessary to protect the Ukrainian people, confirming its support for the sending of weapons. 'Asking for the delivery of weapons to be stopped' – Calenda argued – 'does not mean promoting peace, but handing over Ukraine to the Russian aggressors' (Corriere della Sera 2022a). A major point of difference between the two demonstrations was the more or less favourable attitude in the crowd towards Russia.

Russia has not looked favourably on Italy for siding with Ukraine and has expressed its disapproval through official means as well as less transparent channels. Thus, for instance, during the political crisis leading to Draghi's resignations, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev took to Twitter and Telegram to express his satisfaction that 'friends of Ukraine', like the then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and now Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi, had been driven out of government, adding later that citizens of Europe should 'not only express their discontent [at the ballot box] with the actions of their governments ... but also punish them for their blatant stupidity' (RAI News 2022). The issue of Russia's meddling in Italian politics was further raised by an intelligence review of the US State Department that claimed that Russia had given over \$300 million to foreign parties, officials and politicians since 2014, including in Italy (Politico 2022b). In particular, Russia's funding of Matteo Salvini's party had been a matter of concern since at least 2019, when leaked cables had revealed the extent of cooperation between Moscow and the far-right party of Salvini (Espresso 2019). In the run up to the elections of 25 September, all these developments triggered a debate on the question of disinformation and Russian propaganda. Senator Adolfo Urso – a member of FdI and chairman of the Intelligence Committee – stated that 'Medvedev's grotesque statement is just the tip of the iceberg. We need to raise awareness and resilience, as Italy is a key piece of Western and Atlantic defence and therefore a target country' (Corriere della Sera 2022b). The Intelligence Committee pointed out that in Italy there was a risk that external autocracies polluted and distorted the public debate, and Russia was seen as a risk for the country's infosphere. Be that as it may, Russia's meddling in Italian politics may further puzzle an already divided public opinion and further disrupt an already fractious 'domestic constraint'.

5. Conclusions

This article has illustrated and analysed the Italian government's response to the war in Ukraine. Despite its solid, long lasting and bipartisan relations with Russia, Italy has substantially aligned with the Euro-Atlantic community, although encountering more problems in pursuing this strategy in sectors such as energy and military aid. The strict alignment with international expectations deriving from Italy's multilateral commitments, however, presented challenges to the Draghi government, which tried to compensate for these difficulties politically and

diplomatically. Thus, Italy's peace plan proposed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs mostly responded to a domestic need to demonstrate the Government's commitment to finding a solution to the conflict, rather than being aimed at the parties in the conflict. The stability of the Draghi government was undermined by the increasing distance between public opinion and the Government on the question of Ukraine, as well as divisions within the governing coalition that built on that widening gap.

The overall diplomatic orientation of the country, however, has emerged from this crisis unscathed. The newly elected government of Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, has confirmed its commitment to Ukraine, both politically and militarily. Aside from proving the strength of the external constraint, not least in terms of its role expectations, this also suggests that Italy is not in a position to question the EU's posture towards the war, given that there are many sensitive dossiers (e.g. migrants redistribution, gas cap, full implementation of the recovery and resilience plan) on which it needs the support of the EU's member states. Nevertheless, if economic and social conditions greatly deteriorate due to the increasing price of energy, shortage of food and consequently high inflation, the Government might be forced to give in to domestic imperatives and rethink its position, pressing for peace negotiations.

This article has drawn on role theory to show the roots of the dilemma experienced by Italian governments in the war: the dilemma between responding to the external expectations of its allies, fulfilling the role of an important, trustworthy European country that the Draghi leadership has helped to shape, and maintaining the support of a public opinion that holds different views of Italy's place in the world – a public opinion increasingly influenced, amongst other things, by populist parties and discourses, as well as propaganda wars. Despite some of its key allies being pro-Russian, the new government led by Meloni so far has seemed very much inclined to fulfil the role that Draghi forged for Italy, guaranteeing continuity – it remains to be seen whether this can be sustained in the medium to long term.

Notes

1. The press drew a parallel between the Quirinale Treaty and the 1963 Elysée Treaty (renewed in Aachen in 2019) with which France and (West) Germany tried to overcome past enmities and lay the foundation of a long-term friendship (Alcaro 2021). The Treaty is especially aimed at forming a strategic alliance between the two countries providing them with a new political tool to overcome disagreements at the bilateral and European levels.
2. For a detailed analysis of Italian public opinion and the war in Ukraine see Isernia and Martini (2023).

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