

The International Spectator 2/2002

## Italian foreign policy survey

---

# The Second Berlusconi Government and Italian Foreign Policy

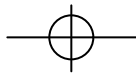
Oswaldo Croci\*

The victory of the centre-right coalition, *Casa delle libertà*, in the May 2001 elections and the consequent formation of a second Berlusconi government were met with some apprehension by Italy's European partners, the loudest grumbling coming from Belgium and France. Their concern was about the allegedly lukewarm attitude of the new government towards the European Union (EU) and the process of European integration in general. Yet the record of the first Berlusconi government could hardly justify such uneasiness. Apart from an anachronistic and ill-advised initiative against Slovenia's application for admission, that government was too short-lived to leave its mark on anything.<sup>1</sup> More likely, the grumbling heard outside Italy was due to the increasingly common practice of EU institutions and member states to signal loudly their displeasure and misgivings whenever a member state elects a government which includes political forces perceived to be at the margins of the ideological mainstream of Western Europe. In this specific case, both the *Lega Nord* and *Alleanza Nazionale* were, for different reasons, regarded as falling into this category.

During the 2001 electoral campaign, Berlusconi promised that he would appoint a foreign minister capable of eliciting bipartisan support. His choice

\* Oswaldo Croci is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada.

<sup>1</sup> On the foreign policy of the first Berlusconi government, see P. M. Neal, "The new foreign policy" in Katz, R. S. and P. Ignazi (eds) *Italian Politics and Society: The Year of the Tycoon* (Boulder: Westview, 1996) pp. 159-68.



## 90 The Second Berlusconi Government and Italian Foreign Policy

of Renato Ruggiero, former director general of the World Trade Organisation, aimed precisely at reassuring those, in Italy and abroad, who called into question the European vocation of the centre-right coalition.<sup>2</sup> When Ruggiero resigned in early January 2002 denouncing the "scepticism" towards Europe of some of his cabinet colleagues and warning that the continuity of Italian foreign policy, which he was supposed to guarantee, was in danger, the diatribe over Italy's role in Europe broke out again and with even more virulence.<sup>3</sup>

This article provides a review and an assessment of the foreign policy of the second Berlusconi government, focusing primarily on the question of continuity in what have traditionally been the two pillars of Italian international action, namely the Atlantic Alliance and the EU. Its conclusion is that if the Berlusconi government has brought changes to Italian foreign policy, they concern its tone and style and not its substance. Accusations that Italy has embarked on a Europe-sceptic path are exaggerated.

### Continuity and change in Italian foreign policy

The term "continuity" is used in this article with reference to the substance and style of the foreign policy that Italy seems to have embraced with the end of the Cold War. Italian foreign policy during the Cold War was little more than a perfunctory, periodical restatement of the country's commitment to the Atlantic Alliance and the process of European integration. Only on a few occasions, and limited mainly to issues considered central to domestic political equilibria, did Italian governments speak out and/or take some bold initiatives (for example, on the Trieste question in the early 1950s or the Sigonella affair in the mid-1980s).<sup>4</sup> Even these initiatives, however, whether of the Byzantine variety typical of the former Christian Democrats or of the populist one typical of Craxi's

<sup>2</sup> D. Campus, "La formazione del governo Berlusconi" in G. Pasquino (ed.), *Dall'Ulivo al governo Berlusconi. Le elezioni del 13 maggio 2001 e il sistema politico italiano* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002) pp. 275-94. Apparently, both President of the Italian Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and FIAT Chairman Gianni Agnelli recommended the appointment of Ruggiero.

<sup>3</sup> S. Rizzo "Che tristezza lo scetticismo del mio governo", *Corriere della Sera*, 3 January 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020103am.htm>>; "France urges Italy to restate EU credentials," *Financial Times* website (henceforth FT.com), 6 January 2002.

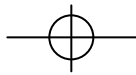
<sup>4</sup> On these two episodes, see the chapter "The USA, Yugoslavia and the Question of Trieste: The American Policy Reversal of October 1953" by O. Croci in Morison, J. (ed.) *Eastern Europe and the West* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) pp. 140-70 and A. Silj (ed.), *L'Alleato Scomodo. I Rapporti tra Roma e Washington nel Mediterraneo: Sigonella e Gheddafi* (Milan: Corbaccio, 1998).

Socialists, were a result of perceived domestic political necessities, often of a partisan type. Hence, they too were more indicative of the primacy of domestic politics than of the existence of a foreign policy conceived as a sphere of action based on "national interests" and independent of party politics. Since the end of the Cold War, however, Italy has begun to exhibit a more active and pronounced foreign and security policy, which it has openly conceptualised and upheld in terms of "pursuit of national interests".<sup>5</sup> The contours of this new policy can be briefly summarised as follows.

After the war, Italy disposed of its security problem by making a choice of camp and joining the Atlantic Alliance. Italian governments could afford to play a minimal role within the Alliance since the latter dispensed security automatically and reliably through the American nuclear umbrella. With the end of the Cold War, however, Italy had to rethink its security arrangements. This happened for at least three reasons. First, NATO might have been the ideal means to counter the Soviet threat but it is a more questionable instrument when it comes to dealing with post-Cold War threats, mainly local crises in neighbouring regions such as the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa, which may spread into regional conflicts and cause large and uncontrollable migratory influxes. Second, in the new, post-bipolar international system, disagreements are more likely to arise within the Alliance concerning the severity of different threats and the best way to deal with them. Last, but not least, in the case of a major disagreement between the US and European allies, the latter do not have the institutional structure, political ability or military capability to act alone.

Having realised that in the post-Cold War environment security was no longer automatically guaranteed by membership in the Alliance, Italy revised its traditional role as a "security consuming" country and embarked on an effort to become a "security producing" country as well. Thus, since the early 1990s, Italian governments have pursued a number of policies aimed at reinforcing and functionally linking the different multilateral organisations of which the country is a member, primarily the UN, the EU, and NATO. For instance, Italy fully supports the development of a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) but, unlike France, regards its development as complementary and not alternative to NATO. Italy also recognises that in the post-Cold War environment NATO must take responsibility for some out-of-area missions, especially at its periphery,

<sup>5</sup> M. Molinari, *L'interesse nazionale. Dieci storie dell'Italia nel mondo* (Bari: Laterza, 2000).



## 92 The Second Berlusconi Government and Italian Foreign Policy

whether for humanitarian or other reasons. Unlike the US, however, it does not think that such interventions should take place without some kind of legitimisation coming from the UN. One of the consequences of the changed thinking about national security has been that Italian governments have begun to play a much more active role within each of these organisations, thus becoming more visible and audible on the international scene. Today, Italy's national interests are no longer vaguely defined by passive membership in these multilateral organisations (as was the case during the Cold War) but are identified with the active pursuit of policies aimed at shaping the future of these organisations in a functionally linked manner.<sup>6</sup>

### The US and the EU in the foreign policy of the second Berlusconi government

Conscious of the centrality of the EU and the Atlantic Alliance (particularly the bilateral relationship with the US) in Italian foreign policy, soon after his electoral victory Berlusconi reassured everyone of his government's commitment to these two institutions: "We are proud to be part of Europe. We are proud of the special relationship that we have with the United States. We will work attentively in the next few months and years to develop those relations even more."<sup>7</sup> The choice of Antonio Martino, usually regarded as an Americanophile, as defence minister and of Renato Ruggiero as foreign minister was certainly a confirmation that the government did indeed attach great importance to both Italy's relationship with the US and its role in Europe. Although the Atlantic commitment of the winning coalition had not been openly questioned the way its attitude towards European integration had, the presence of the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale in the Cabinet could certainly raise the same misgivings about the government's handling of Atlantic relations.

Italy's Atlantic relations, and those with the US in particular, have hardly changed since the advent of the new government. Berlusconi's government was more than eager to participate in the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and made available some 2,700 troops to "Operation Enduring Freedom". This initiative, moreover, received bipartisan approval in the Chamber of Deputies (7 November 2001), with only the Green Party, Rifondazione

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the changes in Italian foreign (and particularly security) policy in the 1990s, see O. Croci, "Italian Security Policy in the 1990s", presented at the 52nd Annual Conference of the UK Political Science Association, Aberdeen, 5-7 April 2002.

<sup>7</sup> "Victorious Berlusconi pledges new era of change for Italy", FT.com, 14 May 2001.

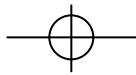
Comunista and Comunisti Italiani opposing the resolution. The eagerness with which the government joined the war on terrorism, however, does not imply a change in preferences on how to deal with the so-called "rogue states". The Berlusconi government has in fact continued the policy of "constructive engagement" pursued by its predecessors even after President Bush's "axis of evil" speech. In February and March of this year, first the Iraqi Minister of Culture and then the President of the Iranian Parliament were officially received at the Italian Foreign Ministry and had meetings with Berlusconi as well as President of the Italian Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. The government also continues to manifest serious reservations about the American plan to strike a final blow against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

Although Italy did not oppose NATO enlargement to the east, it would have preferred that the process take into account Russia's security concerns. This position has not changed under the Berlusconi government, which, while supporting NATO's expansion to Southeastern Europe (Bulgaria and Romania in particular) has continued to push for the setting up of some kind of formal institutional link between NATO and Russia. In early April, the two established the NATO-Russia Council, which is an institutional mechanism enabling NATO member countries and Russia to consult as well as to cooperate on a wide spectrum of security issues. Although the agreement was not of exclusive Italian making, as Berlusconi was perhaps indirectly trying to suggest when he rushed to announce it ahead of Lord Robertson, the Alliance has recognised that the UK, Germany, and Italy played the key role in bringing it about.<sup>8</sup>

Italy has also made what the Financial Times described as "discrete efforts" to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>9</sup> Besides the support given to the Saudi peace plan, Italian diplomacy has also repeatedly suggested holding a conference between the two contenders and the US, the EU, and Russia, as well as the launching of what Berlusconi has, perhaps a bit grandiosely, defined as a "Marshall Plan for Palestine". The plan provides for the reconstruction of Palestinian social and economic infrastructure and

<sup>8</sup> "Nato e Mosca sempre più vicine. Insieme contro le crisi", La Repubblica website, henceforth La Repubblica.it, 12 April 2002. "L'Alleanza irritata, presa in contropiede" and "Con una gaffe, Berlusconi annuncia l'accordo Russia-NATO", L'Unità online, 12 April 2002. See also the official documents of the Rome summit held on 28 May 2002. <[http://www.governo.it/nato/doc\\_index.htm](http://www.governo.it/nato/doc_index.htm)>

<sup>9</sup> "Italy ready to meet requests for military aid", FT.com, 10 October 2001.



## 94 The Second Berlusconi Government and Italian Foreign Policy

consists of various micro-projects concerning education, culture and the arts, as well as garbage collection and sewers.<sup>10</sup> In early May, both ideas were picked up by the US government, which announced its intention to organise a conference (or meeting, the exact terminology not having yet been decided), together with the EU, Russia and the UN, (the so-called Quartet) on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Tentatively planned for this summer, the conference or meeting would tackle not only the question of peace and security but also other issues such as humanitarian needs, the reconstruction of Palestinian society and economy, and cleaning up corruption within the National Authority.<sup>11</sup>

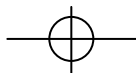
Also in early May, the Berlusconi government had to deal with the issue of thirteen Palestinian terrorists who had found sanctuary in the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem. Following negotiations aimed at lifting the siege of the church by the Israeli army, an agreement was reached that the thirteen terrorists would be sent into "exile" in a Western country. For reasons that are not yet completely clear, the media announced that the country would be Italy. Apparently, there was pressure from the US. The Berlusconi government resisted such pressure while at the same time expressing its willingness to contribute to finding a solution as long as it was an EU decision.<sup>12</sup> This position prevailed, and a meeting of the foreign ministers, held in Brussels on 13 May, decided that the exiled Palestinians would be divided among six different countries (Belgium, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Spain). The difficult task of defining their juridical status in the host countries was given to the Committee of Permanent Representatives.

Finally, yet importantly, the Berlusconi government has been careful to take a position equidistant from both sides in the Middle Eastern conflict. It has also been less reticent than any predecessor in condemning the use of terrorism by Palestinians. Thus, on 15 April, for instance, Italy joined the UK and Germany in refusing to endorse a United Nations Human Rights

<sup>10</sup> For more details, see the interview with Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Alfredo Mantica in *Il Secolo d'Italia*, 7 February 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020207a.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> "US, in surprise, announces an international meeting to tackle the Middle East", *New York Times on the web*, 3 May 2002.

<sup>12</sup> On the background of the negotiations which also involved the Vatican and Senator Andreotti, see "Fini: 'L'Europa si muova e l'Italia farà la sua parte'", *La Repubblica.it*, 8 May 2002, and the interview with Undersecretary Alfredo Mantica in *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 9 May 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020509a.htm>>; "Il Cav. Europeista la spunta su Betlemme. Ora tocca all'Europa", *Il Foglio.it*, 13 May 2002.



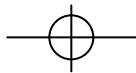
Commission document that condoned Palestinian violence as a way of achieving statehood. Six other European countries (France, Austria, Belgium, Portugal, Spain and Sweden) voted in favour of the resolution.

The Berlusconi government has had more problems in its relationships with the EU. Some of its ministers have the reputation of being Euro-sceptics. But apart from Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Lega Nord, whose anti-European ramblings should be discounted in any case given his penchant for verbal excesses, such a reputation might be slightly exaggerated. Defence Minister Martino and Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti, for instance, were labelled as Eurosceptics following their criticism of the Maastricht criteria – not proof per se of Euroscepticism. But even assuming that some government ministers are indeed more Euro-sceptic than any of their predecessors, this does not mean that the Berlusconi government is going to reverse or even change in any dramatic way Italy's role in Europe. If there is a rupture with the past, it primarily concerns the style with which Italy is acting, at least at the ministerial level. The Berlusconi government has in fact been more outspoken and assertive in its dealings with Europe than any of its predecessors. For Italy, this is indeed new, but it cannot be equated with being Eurosceptic, or even worse, anti-European.

The first squabble occurred over the issue of the Airbus 400M military transport aircraft. Foreign Minister Ruggiero openly supported Italian participation in the pan-European consortium for the construction of this plane but in the end Berlusconi and Martino, after consultation with the military, decided not to take part. Berlusconi justified his government's decision in business terms ("I acted as a businessman," he affirmed later before the Parliament Foreign Affairs Committees), adding, however, that had the project not been able to take off without Italy, his government would not have abandoned its European responsibilities.<sup>13</sup>

Then came the issue of the common European arrest warrant. Perhaps for the first time in the history of European integration, the Italian government found itself isolated when it began to question the list of crimes to which the warrant would apply. Justice Minister Roberto Castelli later justified his government's behaviour with the need for transparency and legitimacy: an

<sup>13</sup> "Intervento del Presidente del Consiglio e Ministro degli Affari Esteri ad interim Berlusconi alle Commissioni Riunite (Affari Esteri e Comunitari) della Camera dei Deputati e (Affari Esteri, Emigrazione) del Senato della Repubblica" 5 February 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020205a.htm>>



important juridical instrument such as the international arrest warrant should be approved by representative assemblies and not by a few people acting over the heads of European citizens. The procedure was justifiable only with respect to the emergency of the fight against terrorism, and hence was appropriate only for some of the crimes on the original list.<sup>14</sup> It is of course likely that two other considerations played an important role. First, the government might have opposed the inclusion of crimes such as "fraud" and "corruption" in the list because of the judicial problems faced by some of its members and close friends. Second, the fact that the warrant also applied to the offences of "racism and xenophobia" was particularly troublesome to the Lega Nord. A report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (a body of the Council of Europe), adopted in June 2001, labelled the Lega as "racist and xenophobic" and invited Italian authorities to adopt "ad hoc measures against those politicians who use belligerent speeches of a racist or xenophobic variety".<sup>15</sup>

The handling of the arrest warrant episode might merely be evidence of the fact that under the current government Italy will not always, and almost automatically, support all European initiatives. The handling of it might also be considered amateurish and a manifestation of the government's desire to be in the spotlight: disagreements with European partners are usually revealed and addressed during the preparations for an EU Council and not during the final meeting.<sup>16</sup> It is not evidence, however, of Euroscepticism or of an anti-European attitude. After the Belgian presidency refused the Italian proposal and threatened to use the instrument of "reinforced cooperation", which meant that the other fourteen members would go ahead without Italy, the government quickly fell in line and accepted the warrant, which will however require a minor constitutional revision.

These tendencies on the part of some of his colleagues to "improvise" or "spring surprises", coupled with Bossi's verbal intemperance, were the

<sup>14</sup> R. Castelli, "Le mie domande sull'Europa a cui nessuno sa rispondere", *Corriere della Sera*, 9 March 2002.

<sup>15</sup> See Council of Europe, European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, Second report on Italy, adopted on 22 June 2001 and made public on 23 April 2002 <[http://www.coe.int/t/E/human\\_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/2-Country-by-country\\_approach/Italy/CBC2-Italy.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/E/human_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/2-Country-by-country_approach/Italy/CBC2-Italy.asp)>

<sup>16</sup> A similar episode took place at the end of the Laeken summit. Berlusconi caused a final decision on the choice of the headquarters of a new EU food standards agency to be delayed until next year when he decided to oppose, using colourful arguments, the choice of Helsinki instead of Parma.



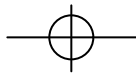
reasons for Ruggiero's decision to resign.<sup>17</sup> In terms of substance, not much has changed either before or after Ruggiero's resignation. And such continuity cannot be attributed simply to the influence of the professionals in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose views and actions assure continuity and perform a stabilising function over the idiosyncratic preferences of changing governments. Berlusconi himself has clearly and repeatedly called for extending the "community method" to the second and third pillars of the EU. He supports the emergence of a Common Foreign and Security Policy. After 11 September, for instance, he lamented that individual European leaders – himself included – queued up to see George W. Bush and said that "it would have been far better if Javier Solana had represented [them] all".<sup>18</sup> He has also advocated European-wide solutions to a range of problems. Besides the issue of the thirteen Palestinian terrorists, Berlusconi has called for a European approach to the problem of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. The aim should be not only to develop a common policy for these fields but also to adopt "common and efficacious strategies ... vis-à-vis countries from which such flows originate" and to have the Community police the "most exposed points of entry".<sup>19</sup>

Berlusconi is also attempting to instil an entrepreneurial spirit in the national diplomatic service so that it can fulfil the task of promoting the Italy's industries on foreign markets. Although dismissed by the opposition as an effort to turn diplomats into salespeople, Berlusconi is actually copying

<sup>17</sup> "Ruggiero rompe il silenzio: 'Con la Lega non potevo stare'", La Repubblica.it 5 March 2002. Berlusconi has tried to minimise such intemperance by pointing out that it is one of Bossi's many idiosyncrasies when addressing his electorate. After the 3 March outburst, during which Bossi called the EU a "Stalinist construction" and "the new fascism", Berlusconi remarked: "You all know Umberto's colourful language. It's not a problem and, even abroad, people have begun to understand these expressions" ("Ruggiero criticises Bossi's attack on the EU," FT.Com, 4 March 2002). Others have been less understanding. Minister for European Affairs Rocco Buttiglione affirmed for instance: "There are limits which one cannot trespass, unless one wishes to give the impression of not believing in Europe. These limits have been reached." (Il Messaggero, 5 March 2002, p. 6).

<sup>18</sup> "Berlusconi says Italy will become EU broker", FT.com, 17 January 2002.

<sup>19</sup> "Il governo decreta l'emergenza immigrati" La Repubblica.it, 20 March 2002; M. Boniver, "Fronte europeo per fermare i clandestini", Il Giornale, 25 March 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020325a.htm>>. At the beginning of May, the European Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs, António Vitorino presented a three-stage plan aimed at achieving the common policing of EU borders. It is part of a package to bring in common procedures for the treatment of asylum seekers and of common standards for immigration ("Brussels in push for European border guard corps", FT.com, 7 May 2002).



## 98 The Second Berlusconi Government and Italian Foreign Policy

a model adopted successfully in various other countries.<sup>20</sup> This project has also led to the development of a plan to restructure and revitalize the Istituti Italiani di Cultura, which are now conceived as places of promotion not only of Italian "high culture" but also of what the government has defined as the Italian "way of life". The project is to link them with the private sector and the universities and to organise their activities around a chosen theme every year, 2002 being the year of fashion and design.<sup>21</sup>

### The challenges ahead

The Berlusconi government should perhaps devote more attention to two areas. The first concerns relations with France. They have deteriorated considerably since the new government came to power. First, the rapport between Chirac and Berlusconi is not good. In late October, Chirac invited Blair and Schröder but not Berlusconi to attend a meeting in Ghent to discuss the war on terrorism.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the French government has never lost an opportunity to manifest the low esteem it has for its Italian counterpart. It even broke protocol by letting a protest demonstration against the Berlusconi government (organised by Italians) at the Paris book fair in late March 2002 get out of hand. The government delegation withdrew in protest after it was told that the French government could not

<sup>20</sup> In Canada, for example, the prime minister, after the Canadian embassies in loco have done the groundwork, leads groups of businesspeople to the "conquest" of specific markets abroad. See G. Baldocci (Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), "La nuova Farnesina: come far correre la diplomazia nell'era globale", *Corriere della Sera*, 3 May 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020503a.htm>> as well as his letter to *L'Unità*, 8 May 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020508a.htm>>.

<sup>21</sup> On this initiative, see the interviews with Mario Baccini (Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs) in *Il Tempo*, 26 February 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020226a.htm>> and *Il Mattino*, 7 March 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020307a.htm>>. See also his article "Istituti di Cultura; l'azione dei direttori," *Corriere della Sera*, 14 March 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020314a.htm>>.

<sup>22</sup> Some observers have argued that Chirac intended to retaliate against the Italian decision to abandon the A400M military transport aircraft project. It is also interesting to note that since the meeting took place immediately ahead of an EU summit, it undermined the image of a collective European response and, therefore, of the nascent CFSP. Yet, the only critical voice raised was that of President Ciampi who publicly invited the three to abandon any idea of returning to a Europe dominated by great powers ("Italy warns on domination of 'Big Three' states", *FT.com*, 18 November 2001).

guarantee its security.<sup>23</sup> But there have also been disagreements on concrete matters. In February 2002, Berlusconi lamented the restrictions imposed unilaterally by the French government on freight traffic through the Mont Blanc tunnel and filed a complaint against it with the Commission.<sup>24</sup>

The second area concerns the lack of a clear vision for the future of Europe. Instinctively, Berlusconi is very close to the British view of promoting a classic liberal Europe, that is, one in which government plays a smaller role in the management of the economy. This similarity of views has led Berlusconi to begin to pay lip service also to the traditional anti-federalist British vision, which he has had to reconcile however with the traditional Italian pro-federalist stance.

The result is that he seems to have embraced the compromise slogan of "a federation of nation states". The problem is that it is not clear exactly what is meant by this, and to define it – as he often does – as "an original and dynamic synthesis between a union of states and a federal state" does not help to clarify the nature of the beast. Most likely, Berlusconi does not wish to commit himself and his government to either an intergovernmental Europe or a more communautaire one, and prefers to fancy himself as a broker between these two visions, an efficient chairman "who can bring people to agreement".<sup>25</sup>

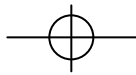
This lack of vision seems to be a serious shortcoming especially at a juncture when, as Berlusconi himself recognises, "European elected institutions, national parliaments, and member states have collectively to decide the future of Europe."<sup>26</sup> The major Italian contribution to the construction of the Europe of tomorrow may well come from the Italian delegates to the so-called European Convention on the Future of

<sup>23</sup> The French Minister of Culture, Catherine Tasca, allegedly went so far as to make the not very diplomatic statement that she would have preferred to receive the delegates of a government other than that of Berlusconi. Reported in B. Biancheri, "L'ospite indifeso", *La Stampa*, 23 March 2002.

<sup>24</sup> "Italy warns over access to the EU", *FT.com*, 27 February 2002. The problem for Italy was compounded by two other facts. First, Austria retains, by the terms of its accession agreement, the right to restrict heavy goods transport across the Alps until the end of 2003. Second, the St. Gotthard tunnel with Switzerland is also working with restrictions following the 2001 fire.

<sup>25</sup> "Europe's broker", *FT.com*, 17 January 2002.

<sup>26</sup> "Discorso del Presidente del Consiglio e Ministro degli Esteri ad interim Berlusconi alla Camera dei Deputati" 14 January 2002 <<http://www.esteri.it/attualita/2002/ita/interventi/i020114am.htm>>.



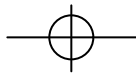
Europe.<sup>27</sup> All of them (they include Convention Vice-President Giuliano Amato, former Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini, President of the CCD Parliamentary group, Marco Follini, and Deputy Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini) have good pro-European credentials, and the vision that they will promote is more likely to be communitarian than intergovernmental, and hence in keeping with the traditional Italian view on the subject.

### Conclusions

Italy's traditional pro-European policy has not changed during the second Berlusconi government. At most, the current government can be said to lack the kind of fideistic attitude that characterised some former governments. In the past, Italian government officials often and effectively used the need to embrace Community agreements to build support for domestic policies that would otherwise have been more difficult to implement, as well as to restructure domestic interest coalitions. This was done to the point that European integration projects were often turned into salvation myths. One should note, however, that the general public was probably quite happy to be lulled into these myths, given that their most direct consequence was to constrain a domestic political elite in which Italians have generally had little trust. If this interpretation is correct, the European myth was to some extent a lie, which both sides, the rulers and the ruled, were quite happy to accept.<sup>28</sup> That this might be changing, that is, that the current government looks at European projects on their own merit, can be considered a positive development. The Berlusconi government probably feels that its preferred domestic policies can be implemented without the need of external constraints or prodding. At the same time, it also feels confident in taking an uncharacteristically assertive stance in EU negotiations, just as other

<sup>27</sup> The European Convention is charged with the task of preparing the ground for the future of the EU in view of the 2004 Intergovernmental Conference (IGC). The Convention is a novel approach to the preparation of an IGC and is aimed at making the debate on the EU's constitutional future more transparent and increasing its democratic legitimacy. It is a large body, including representatives from EU institutions, national institutions (including for the first time representatives of national parliaments), and civil society. See, E. Philippart, "The 'European Convention': Anatomy of the New Approach to Constitution-Making in the EU", *EUSA Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2002, pp. 5-7. See also <<http://european-convention.eu.int/>>.

<sup>28</sup> For a development of this point, see O. Croci and L. Picci, "European monetary integration and integration theory: insights from the Italian case" in Verdun, A. (ed.) *The Euro. European Integration Theory and Economic and Monetary Union* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) pp. 215-40.



countries – from France to the UK, from Spain to Denmark, and more recently also Germany – have done without anyone finding it surprising or scandalous.

It is unlikely that this new and more assertive attitude will cause Italian support for European integration at the popular level to decline. Even if this were the case, however, and popular support were to move towards the European mean, then one could say that also in this respect Italy is becoming, to use a slogan dear to the centre-left, *un paese normale* (a normal country). And in a normal country, where two parties or coalitions face each other, the job of the opposition is to criticise, often noisily, the actions of the government. This is exactly what the *Ulivo* is doing, but if the second Berlusconi government can be faulted for a number of things, so far at least, foreign policy is not one of them.

