

Italy & Europe / Focus on Structure, Not Personality

by Simon Serfaty

U.S.-Italia Weekly; March 5, 2006

Across Europe, for the past three years, previously strong governments became weak and previously weak governments became weaker. Whether or not such a trend resulted in a change of majority in national elections, it always reflected the deep ambivalence felt by voters throughout Europe about their current condition, at home and in the world.

Such ambivalence is neither a matter of personalities nor even of ideology at home or alignment abroad. Leaders on both the Left and the Right have proven susceptible. José-Maria Aznar, whose party suffered a stunning defeat in March 2004 and Gerhard Schroeder, whose party barely managed to find its way into a coalition government this past fall, are examples of changes that moved Spain and Germany from one side of the political spectrum to the other and from one side of the trans-Atlantic debate over Iraq to the other.

That Silvio Berlusconi, too, would have been seriously weakened over the past few years is accordingly not surprising. As his turn has come to face his electorate, his main strength is the weakness of his opposition; irrespective of who wins, conditions, it appears, will have to get much worse before they get marginally better. Whether at home or abroad, the agenda grows out of an economic conjecture and a security normalcy that neither Berlusconi nor Romano Prodi can escape, irrespective of their electoral rhetoric. That is not unique to Italy; it is so everywhere else in Europe.

Much of the public discontent in Italy seems to reflect a widely shared sentiment that somehow Berlusconi's reduced influence on the E.U. is responsible for the nation's declining prosperity, eroding identity and threatened security. Making the case for change in a European context responds, therefore, to two aspirations: less E.U. influence on Italy and more Italian influence on the E.U. When he was first elected, Berlusconi certainly promised to deliver on both of these propositions.

Admittedly, this pledge has not been met: that Italy's influence on the E.U. and its institutions would now stand at an all time low is not truly debatable. What is in question is whether that condition is Berlusconi's personal responsibility. With the idea of Europe broadly questioned everywhere in Europe as well, the issue is not what Europe thinks of Italy (or any other E.U. state), but what Italians (or the citizens of any other E.U. member) think of Europe.

Prodi's position on Europe is, therefore, no less delicate than that of his opponent. True enough, Berlusconi allowed Italy's status within the E.U. to erode as his cacophonous sounds were progressively muted by his European colleagues during his five years in office. But as a former president of the European Commission whose performance was widely questioned in Brussels,

Prodi allowed the E.U. to be more intrusive without helping it become more effective. What's worse?

Clearly, Berlusconi always seemed to show a predilection for the U.S. and N.A.T.O. over Europe and its union. Thus, his eagerness to join the coalition of the willing in Iraq reflected a mindset that was apparent even before the horrific events of September 11, 2001 and the trans-Atlantic crisis that erupted the following year. In so doing, Berlusconi may have assumed that together with Britain—but also with Spain and Poland—he could build a new axis of influence within the E.U., which would liberate Europe from a reportedly excessive Franco-German influence.

Better yet, as America's main man in continental Europe, the Italian prime minister would also elevate Italy's voice within N.A.T.O. and thus restore for his country a "complete" presence within the two institutional pillars of a Western world in quest of cohesion against the cultural assault unleashed in September 2001 and confirmed in Madrid 18 months later.

That such a grand strategy did not work either is all too obvious. Today, Italy's influence within N.A.T.O. is also lesser than what it was five years ago when Berlusconi was elected or three years ago when he challenged France and Germany in and over Iraq—not to mention now, when he belatedly shares the doubts he has over the war in Iraq in the spring of 2003.

But in this case, too, explaining Italy's diminished influence as Berlusconi's personal responsibility would be excessive. Like the unfolding crisis in the E.U., the crisis within the Atlantic alliance cannot be reduced to its personal or bilateral or even circumstantial dimensions. The crisis was, and remains, a structural crisis of strategic relevance—structural because the organization of the alliance needed to be adapted to the new conditions in Europe and strategic because its military organization had to be adjusted to provide for the capabilities to address the new conflicts it faced in a twice-changed world. Failure to address that crisis effectively is widely shared on both sides of the Atlantic. Berlusconi is hardly the only head of state or government who contributed to that failure.

It may well be that the time has come to bid *addio* to Silvio. Should that be the case, however, the warm hello that might be extended to Romano should not be misleading. Italy will need to put its house in order if it is to regain its voice in Europe; Europe needs to rethink its institutions if it is to regain the attention of its members; and, both need to do so expeditiously if they are to maintain the interest of their larger partner across the Atlantic.

Simon Serfaty holds the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy at the Center for Strategic & International Studies in Washington, DC. His most recent book is *The Vital Partnership: America and Europe Beyond Iraq* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005)