



New Europe Center
Kyiv, Ukraine

Discussion Paper

<http://neweurope.org.ua/>
info@neweurope.org.ua

<https://www.facebook.com/NECUkraine/>
https://twitter.com/NEC_Ukraine
https://t.me/n_e_c

New Europe Center, 2019



INTERNATIONAL
RENAISSANCE
FOUNDATION

HOW TO COUNTERACT RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN EUROPE: THE CASE OF ITALY¹

Kateryna Zarembo

THE GOALS OF RUSSIA

Traditionally, Italy is one of the “easiest” partners for Russia among the member states of the European Union. Partnership and mutual understanding between Russia and Italy date back to the early 20th century, when Italy and the tsarist Russia signed the Racconigi Agreement, aimed at preventing unipolar domination in Europe. During the World War II, Stalin and Mussolini agreed on the recognition of mutual spheres of influence: the Mediterranean

The paper was written within the Think Tank Development Initiative for Ukraine (TTDI), carried out by the International Renaissance Foundation in partnership with the Think Tank Fund of the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE) with financial support of the Embassy of Sweden in Ukraine.

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Embassy of Sweden in Ukraine, the International Renaissance Foundation, and the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE)

¹ *This discussion paper was prepared within the framework of the New Europe Center's project "Atrophy of Trophies. How Can Ukraine Take Advantage of the Vulnerabilities of Russian Policies in the EU?" The author expresses her gratitude to the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine to Italy Yevhen Perelyhin as well as to Nathalie Tocci, Nona Mikhelidze, Riccardo Alcaro, Marco Di Liddo, Oksana Pakhliovska, as well as to the interlocutors who wished to keep the anonymity for their assistance in preparation of this discussion paper. The author also commends the International Renaissance Foundation and, personally, Sofia Golota for organizing her internship at the Institute of International Affairs (Rome) from June 25 to July 6, 2018. Internship and preparation of the paper were organized within the framework of the Think Tank Development Initiative in Ukraine, implemented by the International Renaissance Foundation in partnership with the Open Society for Europe Initiative (OSIFE) with the financial support of the Swedish Embassy in Ukraine. The views and positions expressed in this publication are solely the author's position.*

region for Italy, Central and Eastern Europe for the USSR². During the post-war period, the Italian Communist Party, the largest in Europe, had close ties with the USSR and contributed to the development of anti-Americanism in Italy.

“Understanding Russia,” along with strong economic ties (Russia is among the top 15 trade partners of Italy) has survived in Italy until today. Italy is also ready to engage Russia in joint security initiatives, as Rome does not perceive Moscow as a threat: it was Italy’s idea to establish the NATO-Russia Council in Rome in 2002. Italian politicians from virtually all parties sincerely believe that sanctions against Russia imposed by the EU are an unfair and ineffective instrument against a friendly country. The coalition agreement of the current government states, for the first time in the history of the EU member state since the introduction of sanctions, that sanctions against Russia must be lifted. It is also important to emphasize that the current Italian government sees in Russia in general and in the person of Vladimir Putin in particular an ally in confrontation with the EU. The Government formed by the Lega and the Five Star Movement does not oppose Russia; in many respects it acts along with it.

Obviously, Russia cannot but use such a situation in its own interests. The goals that it sets in the relations with Italy are as follows:

- general destabilization of the European Union and, in particular, elimination of the EU’s unity on the issue of sanctions with their further abolition;

- presence of a partner among the NATO member states and influence on the Alliance;
- international legitimization; Italian politicians, such as Salvini, Di Maio, and Berlusconi, establish precedents for other countries and send a signal to Russian elites and population that they have support in the world by visiting Crimea or calling for the lifting of sanctions and advocating Russia’s return to the G7 without restoring the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine.

2. INSTRUMENTS USED BY RUSSIA

ENERGY SECTOR AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS

The key instrument of Russia’s influence on Italy is energy sector and economic ties. Russia not only supplies Italy with 20% of oil and 45% of natural gas consumption³; it is also among the top 13 importers of Italian goods. In 2016, for example, Russia and Italy signed agreements worth more than 1 billion Euros, with key cooperation in the energy sector (an agreement between Russian Novatek and Italian Saipem on cooperation in liquefied natural gas production, as well as an agreement between Rosneft and Eni), shipbuilding and aircraft industry (the sale of 30 AgustaWestland 189 helicopters)⁴. In 2017, the largest Italian bank, Intesa Sanpaolo, signed an agreement on fundraising for a new extraction

² Rosato, A. “A marriage of convenience? The future of Italy–Russia relations.” July 15, 2016. Accessed July 17, 2018. https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_marriage_of_convenience_the_future_of_italyrussia_relations

³ School Energy&Environment. “Natural gas in Italy.” Accessed July 21, 2018. <http://www.eniscuola.net/en/argomento/natural-gas1/extraction-and-distribution1/natural-gas-in-italy/>

⁴ Mikhelidze, N. “Italy and Eastern Europe: A Dossier Subordinated to the Rome-Moscow Axis?” *Open Society Georgia Foundation*. Tbilisi. 2017. P. 3.



project with the Independent Petroleum Company, a Russian oil refining company that is subject to US sanctions. In an interview with Financial Times, the bank's representative stated that the decision did not concern the financing or promotion of the project, but the assessment of the project's compliance with international law and regulations⁵. In 2018, during the visit of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to Moscow, Italian and Russian businesses signed another 13 contracts with a total value of around 1.5 billion Euros, one of which (with Rosneft that is also subject to sanctions) concerns the production of high-pressure protection systems for natural gas and oil pipes⁶. Given that EU sanctions prohibit Russia's access to certain services and sensitive technologies that could be used for oil production, as well as and double purpose goods, it becomes clear that Italian companies interpret these prohibitions in a fairly liberal manner. Consequently, the economic (lucrative) part of the relations is the component that primarily determines the loyalty of Italy to Russia.

DISINFORMATION AND FAKES

Disinformation is neither an exclusive phenomenon for Italy, nor is it related exclusively to Russia in Italy itself; the situation is rather opposite. In Italian language, there is even a special term to designate a fake, "bufala." Given the fact that little is known in Italy about Ukraine, while the pro-Russian business lobby spreads convincing for Italian ears allegations, such as

damage brought by the sanctions on the Italian economy, distorted information about Ukraine in Italian media is a normal trend. In fact, the share of imports banned by Russia is only 1% of Italian exports of agricultural products, compared with 2013 figures. Moreover, the export of agricultural products from Italy to other countries has steadily increased since 2013 having reached a record high of 41 billion Euros in 2017. At the same time, the share of Russia in it in 2013 was only 2%, and the share of products affected by the embargo on all exports to Russia is only 1.7%!⁷

Among the major Italian media, only La Stampa publishes more or less balanced materials about Ukraine. As for Sputnik and RT, they are generally trusted in Italy. The Russian pseudo-media, as well as trolls and bots, generally target their messages not so much against Ukraine (which is not particularly present in the Italian media space), but against democratic Italian politicians. For instance, the Spanish newspaper El Pais found out that Sputnik and RT had a certain impact on the spread of anti-immigration discourse on the eve of the elections. El Pais has processed more than 1 million posts published by 98,000 social media accounts and found that 90% of content distributed by Sputnik and RT came from anti-migrant activists and civic organizations⁸. While anti-migrant sentiment has many roots, it can be argued that Russian channels of media influence have contributed to the radicalization of anti-migration discourse

⁵ Financial Times. "The ties that bind Italy and Russia." Accessed July 21, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/ffbe03c0-b976-11e7-8c12-5661783e5589>

⁶ La Stampa. "Conte da Putin: "Sanzioni da superare". Firmati 13 accordi commerciali Italia-Russia." October 24, 2018. Accessed August 5, 2018. <https://www.lastampa.it/2018/10/24/esteri/putin-riceve-conte-litalia-partner-economico-importante-della-russia-wZ7LvVSGdAoTrFjD007KbM/pagina.html>

⁷ Data by Eurostat. Details in the research „Who Will Be the First? Which Countries Would Dare to Violate the Unity of the European Union Against the Sanctions Imposed on Russia?“ by the New Europe Center. 5.12.2018. Accessed 5.08.2018. <http://neweurope.org.ua/analytics/hto-pershij-yaki-krayiny-navazhatsya-porushyty-yednist-yevropejskogo-soyuzu-shhodo-sanktsij-proti-rosiy/>

⁸ El Pais. "How Russian networks worked to boost the far right in Italy." March 1, 2018. Accessed August 10, 2018. https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/03/01/inenglish/1519922107_909331.html

within Italy, which in turn worked in favor of the Lega Nord and its leader Matteo Salvini, known for his ultra-right views on migration. Similarly, RT presented demonstrations in support of the “yes” campaign on the eve of the constitutional referendum in December 2016 as anti-government protests, and these fakes have been spread rapidly in social media and websites close to the Five Star Movement⁹.

Italian Twitter is a particularly important tool of Russian influence in Italy. As former US Security Council Adviser to Barack Obama noted in his book, Matteo Renzi, while still Prime Minister of Italy, warned him of Russian intervention through Twitter attacks before the referendum in Italy¹⁰. La Stampa has published its own investigation material on several accounts. After that some of them were deleted, and the Italian court opened the proceedings based on the press investigation¹¹.

Another example is Twitter attacks targeting Italian President Sergio Mattarella (calling him to resign) on the night of May 27–28, 2018, when he refused to appoint a Euroskepticist and odious politician Paolo Savona as Minister of Economy. When in August 2018, the American information website Fivethirtyeight.com published nine Excel files containing about 3 million tweets by profiles suspected by the US Special Prosecutor Robert Muller to be a part of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a

pro-Kremlin organization accused of leading a complex online campaign to interfere in the US elections using Twitter, it turned out that about 16,000 of them are Italian and have been active during the campaign against Mattarella, as well as before, spreading criticism and threats toward the Democratic Party politicians in Italy, or praising Russia, etc. While *Corriere della Sera* published an article with rather sharp anti-Russian formulations (“Russia tries to infiltrate its own propaganda in favor of populist parties, sovereignists and anti-Europeanists into our country”¹²), today only the opposition Democratic Party insists on investigating Russian interference in the process of the Government formation. So far, these signs of Russia’s direct or indirect intervention in the course of political campaigns in Italy have not become an alarm bell for either the Italian society or the ruling coalition, which itself does not hesitate to use fakes and which has come to power, essentially, with the aid of Russian information influence. Both the Lega and the Five Star Movement use materials produced by Sputnik and RT and apply propaganda as a political tool.

CULTURAL AND ACADEMIC COOPERATION

Throughout entire Italy, there is a network of Russian cultural centers and offices at the universities (*Rossotrudnichestvo* in Rome, the *Russkiy Mir* branches at the universities of Milan, Pisa, Naples, and Verona, etc.) promoting Russian culture and Russian narrative on the history and the present of the Eastern Europe in Italy. It is also important that Russia invests heavily

⁹ Atlantic Council. “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses 2.” November 2017. Accessed August 10, 2018. P. 18. http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/The_Kremlins_Trojan_Horses_2_web_1121.pdf

¹⁰ Mastrilli, P. “Renzi svela a Obama le interferenze della Russia nella politica italiana”. *La Stampa*. July 10, 2018. Accessed August 12, 2018. <https://www.lastampa.it/2018/07/10/esteri/renzi-svel-a-obama-le-interferenze-della-russia-nella-politica-italiana-klcGiZlKRezqQKOct6tTP/premium.html>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Fubunu, F. “Le manovre dei russi sul web e l’attacco coordinato a Mattarella. In 400 per l’attacco sull’impeachment.” *Corriere Della Sera*. August 2, 2018. Accessed August 12, 2018. https://www.corriere.it/politica/18_agosto_03/manovre-russi-web-c6e7d71e-9699-11e8-8193-b4632fd4d653.shtml



in promoting Russian studies in Italy, which is why Russian studies, compared to other Slavic disciplines, is a highly beneficial direction for an academic career¹³. A network of local speakers ready to promote the Russian point of view in the Italian discourse include Nikolai Linin, a naturalized Russian writer from Transnistria, a kremlinologist Giulietto Chiesa, etc. On the other hand, Russia does not even have to always invest money to educate loyal specialists. An illustrative example is the Italian Institute for International Cooperation (SIOI), the “diplomatic academy” of Italy training specialists in a wide range of disciplines in international affairs. This institute is headed by Franco Frattini, currently the OSCE Special Representative for the Transnistrian Settlement, known for his pro-Russian views. Certainly, this does not mean that his position is also the position of SIOI, but his actions and rhetoric are at least an example for future Italian diplomats.

A special case of the promotion of Russian narrative is the opening of “representative offices” of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic” in Messina in 2018 and in Turin in 2016, respectively. Despite the appeals of both concerned Italian citizens who support Ukraine and the Embassy of Ukraine to the central authorities and law enforcement agencies of Italy, there are no formal grounds to cease the operations of these organizations. Their stated goals do not violate Italian law, and they are registered by Italian citizens (one of them, Maurizio Marrone, is a member of the ultra-right

Italian party Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy), affiliated with the Lega) as civic organizations.

LONG-TERM AND STRATEGIC TIES WITH ITALIAN POLITICIANS

While the long-standing and personal friendship between Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin is no secret to anyone, Russia has also worked in advance to establish ties with the new parties, the Lega Nord and the Five Star Movement, back when both of them were relatively marginal. The rapprochement with both parties started in 2013 and was especially successful with the Lega, representatives which, among other things, visited Crimea; in 2017, the Lega Nord signed an agreement on cooperation with the “United Russia” party. Collaboration with the Five Star Movement has not yet yielded a similar result; its representatives are currently taking a cautious stance: they supported the clause on the lifting of sanctions against Russia in a government agreement, while emphasizing in private conversations that their priority is the Euro-Atlantic axis. It is important, however, to note *that before 2013, the Five Star Movement demonstrated critical rhetoric toward Russia, reaching the turning point after Russia’s persistent efforts to persuade the party to cooperate*. All key Five Star Movement’s speakers (Luigi Di Maio, Manlio Di Stefano, Alessandro Di Battista) often state that they are neither pro-Russian, nor pro-American, but only pro-Italian¹⁴.

¹³ Zarembo, K. “Oksana Pakhliovska: In Italy, there is virtually no opinion leader to adequately narrate the Ukrainian story.” *Glavkom*. 1.01.2016. Accessed 20.08.2018. <https://glavkom.ua/interviews/oksana-pahlovska-v-italiji-val-antiukrajinskihoji-literaturi-jiji-leytmotiv-kijivska-hunta-vchinila-genocid-385760.html>

¹⁴ *Il Foglio*. “Non siamo mai stati filorussi parla Manlio.” November 15, 2017. Accessed August 13, 2018. <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2017/11/15/news/non-siamo-mai-stati-filorussi-parla-manlio-di-stefano-163451/1>

3. COUNTERING RUSSIA'S POLICIES: BEST PRACTICES AND VULNERABILITIES

3.1. BEST PRACTICES OF COUNTERING RUSSIA'S SUBVERSIVE POLICIES IN ITALY

There are few examples of countering Russia's subversive policies in Italy, and those existing are related mainly to accomplishments in the times of the previous Italian government. There are, however, a few successful cases worth paying attention to.

CASE 1. THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT POLICIES

The situation with the Five Star Movement is relatively more hopeful due to the opportunism of this force. Even in spite of the overtures towards Russia, the Five Star Movement has not yet formed its foreign policy agenda, not least since members of this force lack political and foreign policy experience, not to mention knowledge of the region. Because of this, they are easy targets for the Russian narrative, but are still open to alternative positions. For example, at the parliamentary session in 2014, Italian MP from the Five Star Movement Marta Grande spoke about the "filtration camps" built by the Ukrainian authorities for the Russian-speaking population and demonstrated photos of supposed evidence of cannibalism by Ukrainian soldiers. As it turned out, the photos came from the Russian fantastic film "We are from the future" shot in 2008. On the other hand, after a public discussion with Ambassador of Ukraine to Italy Yevhen Perelyhin on the pages of the Italian press and during the multilateral forums, Marta Grande admitted her mistake of using an unverified photo evidence. After the recent elections, Marta Grande headed the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Considering the fact that her Deputy in

the Committee is Paolo Grimoldi, founder of the previous convocation's interparliamentary group "Friends of Putin," which also includes the Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the Senate, representatives of the Five Star Movement appear to be the most adequate interlocutors in the ranks of the current governing force.

It is also important that the announced visit to Crimea by the Five Star Movement MPs has been "postponed" and has not yet occurred. This was due, among other factors, to the efforts of the Ukrainian Embassy that found convincing arguments for the Five Star Movement (in particular, that "peacekeeping" visits are required not in Crimea, but in Donbas; or that such a visit would be harmful to the international image; besides the Five Star Movement is now in search of its international "niche," and the niche of "Putin's friends" in Italy is already occupied by Berlusconi and Salvini).

CASE 2. TERMINATION OF THE ORGANIZATION INVOLVED IN THE RECRUITMENT OF ITALIANS TO FIGHT IN DONBAS

The Italian Carabinieri uncovered an organization that recruited and sent Italians to Donbas to fight for illegal armed formations. The case of unlawful participation of Italians in hostilities in Donbas has been opened by the Genoa Public Prosecutor's Office and carried through with the aid of the information (data on about thirty Italians who, according to the Italian state, fought on Donbas) provided by the Ukrainian Embassy in mid-April 2018. According to an investigation conducted by BuzzFeed News, Gianluca Savoini, a close associate of Salvini and the Chairman of the Lombardy-Russia association, was tied to the accused individuals. In this case, the cooperation between Ukrainian and Italian law enforcement agencies is an example of a success story.



3.2. THE VULNERABILITIES OF THE RUSSIA'S TOOLS THAT COULD BE USED BY UKRAINE OR ITS PARTNERS FOR THEIR NEUTRALIZATION

It is very difficult to find vulnerabilities and weaknesses in Russian policies in Italy; even prominent Euroatlantists among Italian politicians and experts treat Russia either rather or very favorably, not to mention its neutralization. No political force in Italy sees an enemy in Russia. However, there are certain “windows of opportunity” in the current Italian state of affairs, which could work in favor of Ukraine.

EURO-ATLANTIC COMMUNITY AS AN “ANCHOR” OF ITALIAN POLICIES

Traditionally, Italy’s foreign policy has been based on three pillars: European integration, Euro-Atlantic integration, and Mediterranean regional policy. Accordingly, Russia was important to Italy, but still not a priority partner, and European unity, even despite certain inconveniences to Italy, was a priority before concessions to Russia. For instance, under the previous Parliament, the lifting of sanctions against Russia was put to the vote 11 times, but never got enough votes.

With the current renewed Parliament and the Lega’s Eurosceptic government, many Italian observers have begun to doubt whether Italy will maintain a pro-European and Euro-Atlantic course. Considering an opinion widespread in Italy that the EU has abandoned Italy to resolve the migration crisis by itself and is responsible for the long-term economic recession, support for sanctions against Russia looks for Italians as yet another case where Italy is forced to sacrifice its own interests under pressure of Brussels and Berlin receiving nothing in return. However, certain indicators allow for cautious optimism.

The first ambassador visited by Salvini after the elections was the Ambassador of the United States. As for Di Maio, the United States was the first country he visited during the election campaign, and during that visit he tried to ward off the accusations about the pro-Russian sympathies of his political force.

Today, virtually every political force in Italy has certain attributes that could work or could be used for the benefit of Ukraine.

EXAGGERATION OF ITALY’S INTEREST TOWARDS RUSSIA

Certainly, due to institutional ties and firm stance towards Russia, today, the Lega is by far the most difficult negotiating partner. However, among the three components of their election promises (to solve the problem with migrants, improve the economic situation in Italy and reform the Eurozone, and lift the anti-Russian sanctions), the third issue has the lowest priority for both voters and Salvini and his team. Moreover, Salvini and Di Maio distributed portfolios according to their program points: Salvini chose the position of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior to deal with migration issues, and Di Maio was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labor and Economic Development. Thus, the portfolio of the Minister of Foreign Affairs remained without immediate custody from one or another coalition leader. This does not mean that Salvini does not have the influence over the Foreign Minister, Moavero Milanese, but reflects the priority of the spheres of influence for both coalition leaders.

On top of that, it should be noted that the Ukrainian information space creates an impression of Russia being in the focus of Italy’s attention, while this is not entirely true. Despite the intense partnerships between Italy and

Russia, Italian Government focuses not on Russia, but on the confrontation with Brussels, and among the geographical regions, on the Balkans and North Africa. Even Italian analysts note that their materials with such a geographic focus are much more in demand than research on Russia.

A FUTURE ALTERNATIVE TO POPULISTS

Regarding the most ideologically close to Ukraine's Democratic Party, today it is in a state of transformation and search for a new identity. After the elections and the formation of the government, opposition is virtually non-existent in Italy; according to the representatives of the Democratic Party, they are "not accustomed" to being in opposition, being in power since 2013¹⁵. Currently, the Democratic Party has no strategy and alternative to offer the voters, as well as an understanding of how to work with the new Government with so many unfamiliar faces¹⁶. However, this party is certainly worth maintaining ties with both in terms of strategic relations with the political class in Italy, and due to the fact, that after Russia's open support for the Lega, certain members of the Democratic Party feel more skeptical, even antagonistic, towards Russia than before, and do not consider the disturbing signals regarding the Russian threat coming from Ukraine an exaggeration¹⁷. It is also important to remember that there is the opposition to

Salvini in the liberal and educated Italian circles, while major Italian media – La Stampa, La Repubblica, and Il Corriere della Sera publish articles containing criticism towards the Italian government.

THE INSTABILITY OF THE COALITION IS AN IMAGINARY WEAKNESS

Now that Italy has virtually no opposition to the current government, there are warnings voiced in Italian discourse that the opposition could exist inside the coalition, which is a hint of a possible coalition failure in case if coalition partners Salvini and Di Maio have too many disagreements over the course of the country, or if Salvini breaks the coalition after the elections to the European Parliament¹⁸. However, this Government is worth taking seriously, in particular, because it has about 60% of public support, while Salvini's support has increased by 10% since the March 4 elections¹⁹. Thus, even if the current Government fails, pre-term elections might only consolidate the Lega's position. Salvini himself claims that he has come to rule for 30 years²⁰. Support for the populists could decay only under one condition: if they fail to fulfill their pre-election promises. Such a scenario is particularly likely in case of deterioration of the economic situation

¹⁵ An interview with a senator from the Democratic Party. Rome, 3.07.2018.

¹⁶ An interview with a deputy from the Democratic Party. Rome, 5.07.2018.

¹⁷ Mastrilli, P. "Renzi svela a Obama le interferenze della Russia nella politica italiana". *La Stampa*. July 10, 2018. Accessed August 12, 2018. <https://www.lastampa.it/2018/07/10/esteri/renzi-svela-obama-le-interferenze-della-russia-nella-politica-italiana-kicGiZlkRezqQKOct6tTP/premium.html>

¹⁸ Malaguti, A. "Di Maio: "L'Europa con noi deve cambiare voglio fisco e welfare uguali per tutti." Accessed July 5, 2018. <http://www.lastampa.it/2018/07/05/italia/di-maio-leuropa-con-noi-deve-cambiare-voglio-fisco-e-welfare-uguali-per-tutti-tlO0gM8fOC79SFcQgyAYWN/premium.html>

¹⁹ Kirchgassner, S. "Matteo Salvini: from far-right fringe player to strongman leader." *The Guardian*. Accessed August 15, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/matteo-salvini-from-far-right-fringe-player-to-strongman-leader>

²⁰ *Financial Times*. "Italy's Matteo Salvini calls for European populist alliance." Accessed August 15, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/b65fed5e-7d2c-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d>



in Italy: while Di Maio promises to reduce unemployment and introduce universal basic income for citizens, it is difficult to reduce the enormous external debt of Italy by additional expenses instead of cost cuts.

ITALIAN JUSTICE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT SYSTEM

Despite the right-wing deviation of the Lega party, Italy has not yet been transformed from democracy into a dictatorship, and the system of checks and balances, including against members of the government violating the law is still working. For example, the Sicilian Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation against the Vice Prime Minister for abusing power and illegally detaining people after the incident when Salvini's did not allow illegal migrants rescued from the ship in the sea to land for a week. Another legal scandal related to the demand for the Lega to return 49 million Euros received and misused by the party in 2008-2010 to the state budget. The Genoa Prosecutor's Office ordered the Lega to pay 600,000 Euros to the state budget each year until full reimbursement. It is important to remember this in the event that Ukraine has evidence of a violation of the law by Italian citizens, including those inspired by the Kremlin.

CONFRONTATION WITH GERMANY ON THE NORD STREAM 2

It is known that Italy had a categorically negative attitude towards the Nord Stream 2, which would move the physical "leverage" to a supply source further from Italy, thereby increasing the price of natural gas for Italian consumers and leaving Italy at a strategic disadvantage. However, in this context, it is about not countering Russian influence, but

countering German one, i.e. the competition between two major European economies. It is also noteworthy that Italy fully supported Gazprom in the construction of South and Turkish streams, and in 2017, Gazprom and Eni signed a memorandum of cooperation in the construction of the South pipeline project. Today, Italian agenda no longer includes any counteraction to the Nord Stream 2, and if it did, it would be the third "apple of discord" between Italy and Berlin (the two others are distribution of migrants and the Eurozone reform). Italian experts suggest that such "silence" in Italy might be caused by a partnership with Russia, albeit, according to the logic of a socially oriented coalition agreement and an Italian-German confrontation, Italian officials would have to talk about the damages brought by the Nord Stream 2 on the Italian economy on every occasion. Instead, Salvini is working on a Trans-Adriatic natural gas pipeline project that could partially diversify natural gas supplies to Italy from Azerbaijan through Greece and Albania.

Instead, Ukraine needs to develop cooperation with Italian energy companies Eni, Enel, and Edisol without underestimating their influence on decision-making in the country. In 2012, Eni redeemed 50.01% of Zahidgazinvest shares in Volyn to extract shale natural gas (with a total of 9 permits for respective activities); furthermore, as a result of his visit to Italy in 2015, Petro Poroshenko announced that Eni Group intended to expand its investments to Ukraine. However, there has not been any progress since then.

4. EXISTENCE OF VULNERABILITIES IN ITALY, WHICH COULD BE USED BY RUSSIA IN ITS ANTI-UKRAINIAN POLICIES

OPPOSITION TO THE EU SANCTIONS POLICY

While sanctions against Russia were continued by the European Council for another six months in June 2018 (without blocking by Italy), the real threat of their cancellation or mitigation would emerge in December 2018, provided that Italy finds allies among the EU member states for the “Anti-Sanction Coalition,” as Italy became the first country in the European Union, where the issue on lifting sanctions against Russia has become part of the coalition agreement. However, Italian analysts believe that the Government will not dare to “rock the European boat” on its own. Hungary, which has already demonstrated the ability to alienate Ukraine from the Euro-Atlantic dialogue at the highest level, appears to be the first candidate for such an alliance on this issue. Other potential partner countries for Italy could be Greece, Austria, and Bulgaria.

Today, there is a debate in Italy on how many votes are needed to lift sanctions against Russia; while some say that a single vote is enough, since decisions are taken by consensus, others refer to Article 215 of the Treaty on European Union, which states that the introduction (and, logically, the change) of sanction regime requires a qualified majority²¹, i.e. 55% of the member states representing 65% of the population of the European Union.

While even five countries do not collectively represent a qualified majority, the creation of an anti-sanction coalition is seen today as a serious and real threat of lifting sanctions in the eyes of the democratic forces in Italy. Milan-based influential think-tank ISPI reached the conclusion that Italy can block sanctions unilaterally, although with it being a precedent, the legal procedures which would follow such a move are uncertain.²²

CONFRONTATION WITH BRUSSELS

In previous years, the subject of bargaining on the preservation of sanctions within the framework of the European Council was the Italian budget: Italy agreed to extend sanctions in exchange for the EU compromising on the budget of the country having the second largest external debt among the EU member states after Greece. In December 2018, when budget talks took place ongoing again between Brussels and Rome, and the government coalition paradoxically tried to reduce revenues and increase spending, Italy was rather ready to “postpone” the issue of lifting sanctions against the Russian Federation in order to bargain for the budget than vice versa. On the other hand, we can't rule out the possibility that the sharpening of the dialogue with Brussels could lead to the Italian right-wing populist government losing any ability to compromise.

²¹ Fedorova, K. “Sanzioni alla Russia, quanto può cambiare la linea dell'Italia?” *Econopoly*. July 4, 2018. Accessed 8.08.2018. <http://www.econopoly.ilsole24ore.com/2018/06/04/sanzioni-russia-italia/>

²² Eleonora Tafuro, Matteo Villa, Francesco Rochetti. *Fact Checking: Russia e sanzioni*. ISPI. 31 gennaio 2019. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/fact-checking-russia-e-sanzioni-22134>



MARGINALITY OF THE PRO-UKRAINIAN FORCES

While many Italian politicians and intellectuals are not ashamed to openly support Russia or personally Vladimir Putin (41% of Italians like the Russian leader, ahead of Donald Trump (30%) or Emmanuel Macron (26%) and second only to Angela Merkel (46%))²³, it is not fashionable in Italy to support Ukraine, since it does not bring reputation dividends. On the contrary, in Italy, the circle of “friends of Ukraine” is rather marginalized and concentrated mostly on a few Ukrainian studies scholars. As long as the situation with promoters of Ukraine in Italy is unchanged, it will remain a vulnerability that Russia can count on.

4.1. THE POTENTIAL FOR UKRAINE’S JOINT ACTIONS WITH PARTNERS TO COUNTER COMMON THREATS POSED BY RUSSIA

While some countries have already heard an “alarm bell” and understood Russian threat (such as the MH17 catastrophe for the Netherlands, Skrypal poisoning for the UK, the support for Catalan separatism for Spain), in Italy such signal has not yet been heard. It is unlikely that Russia will try to somehow destabilize the friendliest country among all EU member states. However, Ukraine may try to influence the Italian political class, having secured the support of such countries as Spain, sharing migration issues with Italy.

Regarding Italy’s potential partners in the abolition of sanctions, it is important to immediately intensify the activities of Embassies and NGOs in the respective countries, invite journalists from these countries to visit Ukraine and its Eastern regions, organize public events in these countries, inform governments and opinion leaders on the dangers of lifting sanctions without conflict resolution and restoration of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine.

It is also important to remember that openly combining efforts with the US in putting pressure on Italy, in particular regarding maintaining the sanctions against Russia, will have a rather counterproductive effect: while imperialism in Ukraine is primarily associated with Russia, in Italy there is a culture of mistrust towards “American imperialism.” Despite the fact that partner relations between the Ukrainian and American Embassies in Italy have long been formed (for instance, on the same day in May 2018, Ambassadors of Ukraine and the US published articles with arguments on the importance of maintaining the sanctions against Russia), open cooperation, especially with regard to Russian politics, would only convince a large part of the Italian political class that the US is struggling with Russia for spheres of influence. In the same vein, Kurt Volker’s warning that cancellation of European sanctions “will have consequences” was perceived in Italy as an inappropriate threat.

On the other hand, for Matteo Salvini, Donald Trump is an example of a successful and rational politician; therefore, supporting Trump’s sanctions, in particular during a bilateral meeting, could be an important

²³ *Le Firme di Libertates.* “Agli italiani piace Putin.” October 21, 2018. Accessed 24.08.2018. https://www.libertates.com/agli-italiani-piace-putin/?fbclid=IwAR10nBYvJ-CUtb8TRd0534_zRhZoHAZMSLUQGHYw86tEIQhFqOZYx_tze4

argument for Salvini. Trump's former adviser Steve Bannon personally visited Rome during the coalition formation period and provided Salvini with support and advice on who to form a government with. In September 2018, Salvini joined Bannon's Movement initiative aimed at uniting the Eurosceptic and populist political forces on the eve of the elections to the European Parliament and assist them in campaigning; however, such a coalition can only harm Ukraine's interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As relations between the current Italian Government and Russia are not favorable for promoting Ukraine's interests in Italy and the European Union, this in no way means that the Ukrainian state and public diplomacy can make less effort on the Italian direction. On the contrary, Ukraine should realize that turning Italy into a consistent and reliable partner, resistant to Russian influence, can only happen due to Ukraine's long-term and strategic policy towards Italy. Today, it is not about the neutralization of Russian influence in Italy, since relations between Italy and Russia are too well-developed, while Ukraine lacks resources, instruments, and authority in Italy to "expose" Russia before Italian politicians. Therefore, the first priority for now is familiarize the new Italian government with Ukraine and its capabilities, which will increase in the medium term the value of relations with Ukraine and respect for Ukraine's interests. Below is a list of recommendations for urgent steps that Ukraine should take towards Italy.

1. ESTABLISH THE TASK FORCE ITALIA

Ukraine's approach towards Italy should be the same as the approach to the Netherlands on the eve of the referendum on the Association Agreement in March 2016, when the Netherlands have been visited by a record number of Ukrainian government officials, parliamentarians and civil society representatives in a few months. This should be the policy of Ukraine toward Italy on a daily basis. It is essential to establish a motivated team whose main and daily routine would be promotion of Ukraine in Italy, organization of events and conferences, visits of well-known representatives of the intellectual community, cultural and sport figures, trips to the regions, networking, etc. Such a team could be both created within the Embassy's ranks and work autonomously (the Ukrainian Institute to



be launched in Italy could also take on these functions). It is also about significant resource investments, which, in the absence of government funding, should be sought from private donors. Without such a long-term campaign, Ukraine's struggle for the hearts and minds of Italy could be considered a lost cause.

2. BENEFITS ABOVE ALL

Italy is a pragmatic and business-oriented country, where even the process of European integration is explained in terms of benefits and opportunities. Therefore, Ukraine could gain importance in the eyes of the political class in Italy only if it proves the benefits from cooperation and offers more than asks. First, it is about the **Ukrainian market**. Today, Russia ranks 13th among the countries that import Italian goods, while Ukraine is 55th. It's about organizing business forums in different regions of Italy, business tours for potentially interested Italian entrepreneurs, public statement by Italian businessmen who are already doing business in Ukraine, etc. An increase in trade volumes (including the categories of goods that are subject to Russian counter-sanctions) and the effective communication of business success stories is a guarantee that Ukraine will be in the focus of Italian politics. **Ukraine should provide Italy with opportunities to have its own (Italian) success stories.**

It is also vital to find other areas where Ukraine could be useful for Italy. Today, there are at least four obvious options:

1) Counteracting disinformation. An event dedicated to countering disinformation involving Ukrainian NGO StopFake, organized in January 2018 at the Istituto Affari Internazionali think tank, was a great success among the Italian audience. While Russian disinformation is not considered an

issue in Italy, this country has already faced fakes produced by its own politicians (in particular, by Salvini himself²⁴), and therefore, is looking for means to counter them. Further cooperation in counteracting disinformation could be a way to bring Ukraine closer to Italy.

2) Cybersecurity. The Five Star Movement considers cyberspace as a foundation of basic democracy, as evidenced by establishment of the so-called Rousseau Platform to discuss and promote legislative initiatives at the public level. While some Italian observers criticized the system as ineffective and cyber-vulnerable, the cyberspace could be at least an entry point to the Five Star Movement. In this context, alliances with other member states of the EU with a strong cyber background, such as Estonia.

3) Solidarity in the settlement of the migration crisis. Since some illegal migrants use Ukraine as an intermediate point for moving from Turkey to Italy²⁵, a joint Italian-Ukrainian operation to expose illegal migration points with appropriate coverage in the Italian media could position Ukraine as a reliable partner of the current Italian government in pursuit of its key priority.

4) Reform of the energy sector. Italians like to emphasize their close relations with Russia

²⁴ Plucinska, J., Scott, M. "How Italy does Putin's work. Sympathy for the Russian president among many lawmakers and voters is out in the open." *Politico*. Accessed 25.09.2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-election-fake-news-sunday-bufale-misinformation-vladimir-putin-russia/>

²⁵ One of the cases has been recorded here: UNIAN. "A Ukrainian yacht with 70 illegal migrants from Turkey has been apprehended in Italy." 6.07.2018. Accessed 30.09.2018. <https://www.unian.ua/society/10178081-v-italiji-zatrimali-ukrajinsku-yahtu-iz-70-nelegalami-z-turechchini-na-bortu.html>

in the energy sphere, which in reality is rather dependence than partnership. A complete cessation of Russian natural gas consumption in Ukraine could be an experience that would interest Italy.

Moreover, it is also vital to counter the Italian myths that harm Ukraine.

3. COMMUNICATE REFORMS

In Italy, there is a widespread perception of Ukraine as a failed state not worth investing in. Therefore, the promotion of Ukraine's success stories is essential to refute this image. Communicating reforms in such areas as fight against corruption and public procurement, positive changes in the business environment, success stories of other European businesses in Ukraine is particularly crucial. ***It is necessary to bring back to Ukraine the Italian bank UniCredit,*** which left Ukraine in 2016, thus sending a very unfavorable signal about Ukraine to the Italian business environment.

4. DEVELOP INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

It is vital to establish ties with government officials holding key positions in the foreign policy direction of the government of Conte, but at the same time represent the main "think tanks" in both institutions and parties. In addition to a career diplomat, Minister for Foreign Affairs Enzo Moavero Milanese, there are State Secretaries (sottosegretario) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Emanuela Claudia Del Re, Guglielmo Picchi, Manlio Di Stefano (ideologist of the Five Star Movement foreign policy) and the Secretary of the Council of Ministers at the Prime Minister's Office Giancarlo Giorgetti, representing the intellectual wing of the Lega.

5. FOCUS ON THE NORTH

Milan should become the center of Ukraine's activity in Italy along with Rome. While Rome is the capital of the Italian institutions, ***Milan is the heart of the Italian economy,*** and the economy is the engine of Italian politics. It is no coincidence that the Lega Nord started as a party representing the interests (first of all economic) of the Northern regions, while the person who controls the Five Stars Movement, Davide Casaleggio, is a Milanese businessman. The Lombardy–Russia Association founded by the Russians in cooperation with the Lega, which is the mouthpiece of Russian propaganda, also focuses primarily on the North of Italy. Milan should become one of the mandatory destinations for Ukrainian official delegations, but above all for business events and tours of Ukrainian businessmen and civic activists who could represent Ukraine as a country attractive for business. It is also necessary to establish contacts and cooperate with the Italian think tank ISPI (Italian Institute for International Political Studies) that is based in Milan and is reputable in Italian business circles.

6. INTERPARLIAMENTARY COOPERATION

After the March 2018 elections, 90% of the MPs (Democratic Party) who could be called "friends of Ukraine" did not make it to the Parliament. The composition of parliamentary committees was approved at the end of June 2018. Ukraine should take advantage of this window of opportunity to win new partners among Italian MPs. A Task Force Big Three (its activities could also be extended to Germany and France) should be established on the basis of the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Foreign Affairs, and an "storming campaign" should be launched to overwhelm Italian MPs from different parties (especially the Five Star Movement and Forza Italia) with invitations to visit Ukraine (in particular, Donbas); Ukrainian



MPs should visit Italy and its regions themselves, initiate joint events and discussions, familiarize the locals with the basic information on Ukraine (the majority of MPs from the foreign affairs committees of both Houses of Parliament have no experience in foreign policy and international relations). Ukrainian parties should also consider signing interparty agreements with the Italian counterparts as a basis for long-term cooperation.

7. PROMOTE UKRAINE WITHOUT DEMONIZING RUSSIA

The discourse that Ukraine is a defender of European borders and Russia is an enemy does not work in Italy; on the contrary, it reduces the level of trust of the interlocutor and confirms their belief in the bias of the Ukrainian point of view. While Russia has long established partner relations with Italy, in the eyes of its Italian counterparts, Ukraine often has a meager authority and weight. Therefore, Ukraine should first focus on familiarizing the interlocutors with itself, thus indirectly promoting its interests. An example of such non-intrusive promotion is the 1995 advert created by the Corriere della Sera periodical to advertise an encyclopedia (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzloWn1EZn4>). In it, an astronaut suffers an emergency landing and shouts: “Mother Russia!” Then, an elderly woman standing near her house corrects him: “This is not Russia, it’s Ukraine!” At the end of the video, the narrator says that there have been many changes in the world that need to be learned. Quite probably, Ukraine has become an accidental topic in this video, chosen precisely because it was critically unknown in Italy. However, this is a good example of how it is possible to promote the Ukrainian issue today and thus even contribute to potential profits (of publishing houses or TV channels, etc.).

8. USE THE FACTOR OF ANDRIY SHEVCHENKO

This recommendation is so important that it deserves a separate paragraph. ***Italy is a football nation.*** Football here is more than just sports, he is a national passion and a national metaphor: for example, an ideologist of the Lega Nord’s foreign policy explained his role in the party comparing himself to a well-known Italian halfback. Despite the fact that Andriy Shevchenko left AC Milan in 2009, he is still remembered and loved in Italy. According to several Italian interlocutors, if Andriy Shevchenko gave an interview to the Italian TV channel about his sports career and, incidentally, mentioned the conflict with Russia, it would allow to cover an incomparably large Italian audience. With that in mind, Ukraine has no right to not use the “Shevchenko card” at least for the sake of its own soft power in Italy. This also includes the ***“football diplomacy”***: for instance, a friendly game between Ukrainian and Italian national teams could be organized in Ukraine and attended by key Italian officials.

9. COMBINE EFFORTS AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

Since it is often difficult for Ukraine to attract interest towards itself without any assistance, it is worth joining efforts with other countries of the region that also suffered from Russian hybrid aggression: Moldova and Georgia. Romania could be one of the EU member states to join such a partnership. Through joint efforts by the embassies of the three countries, it would be possible to better communicate their position on Russia’s policies in the region.

10. SEARCH FOR ITALIAN PARTNERS

Ukraine should promote its interests in Italy not only through “Ukrainian voices,” but also

with the help of local partners, as Ukrainian representatives themselves are often perceived at best as “a biased side” and in the worst case as “the other side of propaganda.” Among the few organizations that could support Ukraine is the Osservatorio balcani e caucaso²⁶, an analytical and media group working on monitoring and analysis of the situation, in particular, in the countries affected by the EU Eastern Partnership policy. It is also necessary to engage leaders from other EU member states who could support Ukraine, like Bulgarian intellectual Ivan Krastev. Other partner “islands” for Ukraine could be such cities as **Florence** (Tuscany region) and **Bologna** (Emilia-Romagna region) that clearly and unanimously (as well as a part of the Trentino-Alto-Adige region) voted in the parliamentary elections for the center-left camp (Democratic Party) and are skeptical towards Russia.

11. SUPPORT UKRAINIAN STUDIES IN ITALY

Today, separate representatives of Slavic studies (mostly linguistics and history) are the only unconditional sympathizers of Ukraine in Italy able to resist Russian influence at least in the academic discourse. The problem is that some of them have already (Giovanna Broggi) or will soon retire, while the representatives of the younger generation (Massimiliano Di Pasquale, Maria Grazia Bartolini, Alessandro Achilli, Marco Pulleri) are so few that they can be listed by names. Support for Ukrainian studies in Italy, establishment of the Ukrainian institute in the center of Rome is a key to spreading knowledge about Ukraine through teachers and, importantly, through students.

In the current situation, there are cases when even Ukrainian students studying in Italy choose Russian studies due to better career opportunities. The opening of the **Ukrainian House** in Rome should be no less a priority for Ukrainian public diplomacy than the opening of similar institutions in Warsaw and Paris.

12. SUPPORT PROMOTERS OF UKRAINE IN ITALY

Not only does supporting Ukraine not pay off in terms of reputational dividends, but it can also be dangerous. Hence it is crucially important that those individuals who do promote Ukraine’s interests in Italy despite the unfavourable environment feel the support of Ukraine. This support can be provided through symbolic acknowledgements or at least an expressed gratitude.

²⁶ Osservatorio balcani e caucaso. Accessed August 20, 2018. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/>