



**‘FROM
RUSSIA
WITH
LOVE’**

ITALY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF COVID-19

By Ludovica Balducci | Photos by The Associated Press

When it comes to humanitarian crises and disaster, geopolitical games are usually suspended. That has not been the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, the outbreak reignited past discontent in a European Union recovering from a “decade of division,” as *Forbes* magazine described it, caused by the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis and culminated in the Brexit process. In this already fractured context, the spread of COVID-19 has contributed to exacerbating the so-called North-South fracture. This divide has become even more evident now that the EU is working on a unitary economic response to the damage inflicted by the pandemic.

Italy, the first to be hit so violently by the virus, demanded more incisive responses from its “Northern brothers” to the damage to its economy and health system. Unfortunately, when Italy called for rapid intervention and begged for solidarity, the EU was unable to respond quickly and effectively. Rather, European states initially adopted a nationalistic me-first approach that has rendered the ground fertile to the growth of Euroskeptical sentiments. Italy, along with other countries such as Spain, Portugal and France, faced strong opposition from the Netherlands and Germany to the creation of new responses and the sharing of the economic burden the coronavirus has inflicted upon the EU. As stated in an article in *The Guardian*, this debate has “reopened the wound of the Eurozone crisis resurrecting stereotypes of profligate South and hard-hearted North.”

Russia has seized this new opportunity to further its geopolitical goals. Indeed, while European countries adopted nationalistic approaches to fight the outbreak, Russia presented itself as the Good Samaritan, especially toward Italy. Before any other European state mobilized to assist Italy in March 2020, Russia sent aircraft filled with experts and medical supplies. However, what Russia sent was largely useless for treating the virus, and the delivery can be considered Russian geopolitical gamesmanship in the heart of NATO and the EU. According to the *Financial Times*, the Russian move further eroded already weak pro-European sentiments in the face of expectations of solidarity from the EU that had not been met.

In light of this, the question can be asked: What is Italy’s role in Russia’s coronavirus geopolitics? The hypothesis is that Russia is using Italy as a Trojan horse in Europe, taking

advantage of the pandemic and of its already consolidated economic partnership and political influence in Italy. Over the past decade, Russian cultural influence in Italy has gained strength with the creation of Russian cultural institutes and an increase in cooperation and exchanges between embassies and universities in the two countries. Considering this scenario, as it has been argued, the coronavirus pandemic represents a concrete opportunity for Russian soft-power investments in Italy to undermine the EU and try to shift the balance of power further in its favor.

THE NORTH-SOUTH EUROPEAN FRACTURE

The COVID-19 outbreak in Europe has highlighted the notion that Western countries tend to revert to nationalist approaches when under sudden and unexpected pressure. The North-South divide that emerged in the EU when it came to adopting a regional approach to the economic consequences of COVID-19 is not something new. Indeed, the EU that is facing the virus is an EU after a decade of division marked by financial crises, a migrant crisis and Brexit. During all these phases, EU member states have demonstrated a tendency to revert to national approaches when it comes to crises and to privilege national interests over regional integration strategies, as argued by Alasdair Lane in the *Forbes* magazine article, “North-South Divide: European Unity Strained By Coronavirus.” The same is true of the coronavirus outbreak in Italy and other member states. The closing of national borders, the disparities in the measures adopted, the lack of solidarity at the beginning of the pandemic, the absence of “communitarian spirit,” as Italy’s former Prime Minister Enrico Letta said, and the prevalence of a me-first approach have clearly shown the incapacity of the EU to react cohesively to a “make-it-or-break-it challenge,” as argued by Nathalie Tocci, director of the Italian think tank Istituto Affari Internazionali.

Italy was the first EU country hit violently by COVID-19 and instead of receiving immediate support from its European neighbors, doors were shut in its face. In March, Italy desperately called for the European Commission to activate the EU Mechanism of Civil Protection because of its need of medical equipment and personal protection devices. But “no EU nation had responded” to the call, as senior fellow Anton Shekhovtsov of the Free Russia Foundation noted in *The Kremlin’s Influence Quarterly*. Indeed, in preparing for the



Medical supplies are loaded onto a cargo plane outside Moscow in preparation for a flight to Italy in March 2020. The slogan, “From Russia With Love,” is written in English and Italian on the side of the truck.

spread of the virus across the region, every state has privileged its own needs and interests even though this policy approach is completely against the communitarian sense and the foundation of EU values. This reversion to nationalism has had multiple consequences. First, it has contributed to increasing Euroskepticism in Italy, a sentiment already strong in recent years. Second, it has created an opportunity for superpowers such as Russia and China to exercise their soft power over the West. Third, it has allowed the Italian political opposition to inflate the perception of imbalances across the EU. Indeed, as it has been argued by Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission, what certain EU members overlooked approaching the pandemic is that it might pose a “mortal danger to the EU.”

The same approach and lack of solidarity have been evident when responding to the economic damage COVID-19 is causing. While the Eurozone was swept up by the economic damages of the pandemic, government representatives met several times to find a common solution. Italy, followed by 13 other states — among them France, Spain, Portugal and others most affected by the virus — have seen their economies frozen and have called for a cohesive and communitarian response in the form of “jointly issued coronabonds” — a significant rescue fund through which members would share the financial damages of the pandemic. Once again, the door was shut, a decision some

consider immoral and unethical. Since then the EU has changed its me-first approach and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has apologized to Italy, admitting that “too many were not there when Italy needed a helping hand at the very beginning.” But the initial response has already reduced trust in the EU, and many societies — first and foremost the Italians — won’t forget the lack of help. Only time will reveal the depth of the wound.

The reversion to nationalism by some European members has provided other superpowers with a significant opportunity. In particular, Russia and China have seen this inability to react cohesively as an opportunity to challenge Western dominance. Indeed, while EU members were busy adopting nationalistic approaches and failing to appreciate that the handling of the pandemic could shape the EU’s future, Russia was appearing to help the Italian government. Russia identified the COVID-19 outbreak as an opportunity “to strengthen anti-EU feelings and to reinforce the impression that the EU is crumbling,” and to demonstrate that Moscow was able to step in where “the EU and NATO failed” when the virus infected Italy, said Sergio Germani, director of the Gino Germani Institute of Social Sciences and Strategic Studies, in an interview for the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*. Using the slogan “From Russia With Love,” Moscow presented itself as Rome’s lifeline, being — together with China — the first responders to Italy’s desperate

call for help. These actions, together with the initial inaction of the EU, have reinforced Russian foreign-policy thinking that Western liberal democratic systems are unable to respond effectively to certain common threats.

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN ITALY

To understand why Italy is relevant to Russian geopolitics, it is important to understand the existing relationship between Rome and Moscow. For more than 75 years, the two countries have had “positive economic and political relations” strengthened by reciprocal “ideological sympathies,” according to the study, “The Kremlin Playbook 2” by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. A cultural relationship has strengthened in recent years as well.

Economically, Italy is a relevant Russian partner. The Italian energy companies Enel S.p.A. and Eni S.p.A. receive 40% of their natural gas from Russia. Additionally, the banking sector is a crucial pillar of Italian partnerships in Russia. Given the fragility and instability of the Italian banking system, Italy has reinforced its business in Russia. Unicredit and the Intesa San Paolo Group, the two main Italian banks, have significant interests in Russia. And recently the telecommunications industry entered into strategic partnerships with Russia. As “The Kremlin Playbook 2” reports, many high-ranking Russian government officials and oligarchs have made significant real estate investments in central and northern Italy — mainly in Tuscany, Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna. This corresponded with a 25% increase in Russian tourism in Italy in recent years.

The strong economic partnership is reinforced by political cooperation. Italian governments have generally identified Russia as a crucial economic and foreign policy partner, according to “The Kremlin Playbook Part 2.” Although some scholars assert that this partnership is sought only by right-wing governments, lately left-wing governments have demonstrated an interest in a relationship with Moscow. Under the administrations of former prime ministers Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni, Italy renewed significant economic agreements with Russia. Even after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, Italy continued cultivating its relationship with the Kremlin. Political collaboration between Moscow and Rome is marked by the personal friendship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, whose administration built a strong economic partnership with Russia. In recent years, the Lega-M5S government coalition has reaffirmed the importance of Russia as a friend.

The cultural partnership has been cultivated in recent decades, according to the Germani Institute. Russian culture, language and geopolitics have gained significant traction in Italian universities. This has been the case at the University La Sapienza of Rome, where Russia-connected courses have found their place in several study programs, such as linguistic mediation, translation, language and foreign cultures, geopolitics and Russian studies. Many universities began sponsoring cultural exchanges and internship opportunities with Russian embassies and universities, especially the University of Moscow. Moreover, the number of Russian cultural institutes

and associations have largely increased over the past five years.

The scenario emerging from this brief overview of the Russian-Italian bilateral relationship reveals that in the European context, Italy represents Moscow’s most important ally, or its geopolitical pawn. Alternatively, Italy might be a Trojan horse with which Russia can undermine European stability and the Western liberal democratic system, as put forth by the scholar Artem Patalakh in his 2020 paper, “Italy as the Kremlin’s ‘Trojan Horse’ in Europe: Some Overlooked Factors.” The Kremlin’s approach in Italy at the outbreak of the pandemic can be seen as a validation of this hypothesis.

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COVID-19 AND RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICS

At the beginning of March 2020, a tsunami of COVID-19 spread across Italy. The country was not prepared, and the health care system risked collapse. Many factors contributed to the escalation of the virus and the percentage of deaths. First, Italy was the first country to be hit hard by the virus. Second, Italy has the highest number of people over 65 years old in Europe, which, given the characteristics of the virus, has contributed to increasing the number of deaths and the number of those needing intensive care. Third, the coronavirus started spreading in March during Milan Fashion Week, Champions League soccer matches and the 2020 Final Eight basketball games. Visitors arrived from many countries. Fourth, over the past 10 years, the Italian health care system and its capacity have been damaged by defunding and public policy that favors the system’s fragmentation, according to an article in *Health Economics* by George France. Finally, given the initial underestimation of the magnitude of the crisis by central and regional authorities, no preventive approach was undertaken. All these factors strongly contributed to the devastating impact COVID-19 had in Italy. Unfortunately, Italy also had to face that other EU member states did not help when the tsunami arrived.

In March, when the central government realized the threat COVID-19 posed, the entire country was put on lockdown. From Lombardy to Sicily, shops — except grocery

stores and pharmacies — schools, bars, restaurants and other public spaces were closed. The economy was frozen, and people were forced to stay home and allowed out only for specified necessities. COVID-19 military hospitals were built in regions hit the hardest. Meanwhile, it seemed nothing could stop or at least slow the number of cases and deaths. The Italian Army's vehicles were used to transport bodies from Bergamo to other Italian cities because cemeteries were full. As this dramatic scenario played out, Russia stepped in to help. After a phone call between Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Putin on March 21, the Russian president did not hesitate to demonstrate to Italy a solidarity that EU members had not. He sent aircraft filled with supplies to Italy as part of the "From Russia With Love" mission. However, it became apparent that the equipment and materials did not include what Italy needed — ventilators and personal protective equipment for doctors and nurses. Rather, the Kremlin sent experts and instruments for bacteriological disinfection and chemical-biological sterilization.

A close look at the composition, modalities and media promotion of the delivery reinforces the idea that Italy was being treated by the Kremlin as a Trojan horse in the EU. First, as Shekhovtsov suggested, the modality of the delivery was already suspicious: Why was the aid not delivered directly to one of the air bases in Bergamo? They were delivered first to Pratica di Mare near Rome and then sent more than 600

kilometers to Bergamo, a move that was not necessary but was crucial to Russia's strategy. Shekhovtsov also noted that having cargo travel across a NATO country for over 600 kilometers has the effect of impressing the population and gets the local media to promote Russia's Good Samaritan role — given that the same media underlined almost every day how the EU was not helping Italy. Second, as Shekhovtsov wrote, a long cargo trip across a NATO country — symbolic of a conquering force — might have been an image Russia wanted to send to NATO and to the U.S., its greatest competitor in the great power competition. Indeed, Italy has a pivotal role in NATO, given the number of bases in its territory and the numerous missions carried out there. The result was that Russia sent a message to the EU about its willingness to demonstrate solidarity with an ally. At the same time, the Kremlin tried to make it appear the EU and other liberal democracies were incapable of handling the crisis.

A *La Stampa* article argued that Russia's moves were part of a "geopolitical and diplomatic" strategy carried out by the Kremlin to once again challenge the EU and the liberal democratic system as a whole. Indeed, the Kremlin was quick to understand how the indifference demonstrated across the EU to Italy's situation was providing an opportunity to challenge the West. Finally, a third factor has to be considered: the propaganda Russia spread for the operation, which Shekhovtsov suggests signals the Kremlin's geopolitical intentions in Italy. After the phone call between Conte and Putin, the Russian Ministry of Defence sent 18 press releases in three days about Russian's mission to Italy. The "From Russia With Love" slogan was distributed in Russian and Italian, of course, but also in English. Plus, Russia-controlled state media, in particular Sputnik, used explicit anti-EU language with big headlines, such as "EU left Italy practically alone to fight coronavirus, so Rome looked for help elsewhere" and "Watch: Italians praise Russia, deride EU after Vladimir Putin sends in coronavirus aids." Across the international media, the images of the Russian aid delivery projected Russia as Italy's lifesaver.

CONCLUSION

Even though COVID-19 represented the first critical global challenge after World War II, Russia did not miss an opportunity to exploit it to influence the balance of great power competition. Of course, many factors made the COVID-19 outbreak in Europe — and particularly in Italy — appealing to Russia. First, when the virus initially spread in Italy and the Italian government called for help, the other EU members reverted to nationalistic policies. Second, as a consequence of the health emergency, most European economies collapsed — especially in the southern states — and the EU had to find a solution to the economic damage caused by the pandemic. Although in speeches every EU member showed solidarity and expressed grief regarding the Italian situation, the search for a common solution to Italy's economic problems caused a deep North-South fracture. Indeed, while most members called for a joint solution, other countries wanted to keep a nationalistic approach. The fracture grew when certain state leaders appeared to show little



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte arrive at a conference in Berlin, Germany. Putin responded quickly to Conte's call for help battling COVID-19 in Italy.



respect toward the countries suffering the most.

In this scenario, the Kremlin saw an appealing opportunity to expose the fragility of the Western liberal democratic system. While the EU was failing to unite, Russia rushed in to “help” Italy, a country that more than once has adopted an approach to the Kremlin different from that of other EU members. It is not a new hypothesis that Russia might see Italy as its Trojan horse in the EU. This has consequences at the geopolitical level. Why did Russia react so quickly? Why Italy? And why promote the gesture so much? From a geopolitical point of view, Russia wanted to demonstrate how, even if under pressure and facing the same emergency, it was ready to sacrifice itself to help a friend when countries in the EU did not immediately act. In this way, Russia appeared as a Good Samaritan in a country where Euroskeptical sentiment was already well-rooted because of the perception of unequal treatment among EU members. Of course, this geopolitical strategy was revealed in the way Russia promoted the shipment and after it was learned that the equipment and biological experts that were sent were of no use.

Russia’s actions did solicit a European reaction. Days after the Russian delivery, some European states started sending help to Italy and offered to move patients from intensive care units when Italian hospitals were collapsing. Plus, Brussels and NATO countries immediately

identified the Russian move as a geopolitical one. Whether the EU acted out of compassion or in reaction to the Russian actions remains unknown. But the consequences of leaving one of the most important EU members in Russia’s hands was a risk the EU could not afford. To put it in global terms, if the Kremlin strategy had achieved the desired effect, it would have seriously challenged the Western system. To some degree, the pandemic reinforced Kremlin talking points about a reversion of the liberal democratic system — based on cooperation, institutions and solidarity — to a nationalistic approach.

If EU members start privileging economic interests over communitarian ones, Russia will find fertile ground to exercise political and economic influence and try to challenge U.S. dominance in the West. Indeed, the risk is that when one European state, in this case, Italy, turns to Russia and exposes the fragility of the EU, that challenges the consistency of the democratic system in Central Europe. Unfortunately, while facing the pandemic, the West did not provide a strong unilateral response and reverted to nationalistic policies that do not fit into the liberal ideology. In this way, it provided Russia an opportunity to reinforce its position. What remains to be seen is how the EU will manage the second wave of COVID-19 and Russia’s reactions to that. What is certain is that great power competition never stops, even during a global humanitarian disaster. □

Medical staff tend to a patient in the emergency COVID-19 ward at the San Carlo Hospital in Milan, Italy.