

Eleonora Poli

European Sovereignty

Commentary on the Findings
of the Survey in Italy

EUROPA

FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG

SOVEREIGNTY – AN AMBIVALENT CONCEPT

The concept of European sovereignty, like that of sovereignty in general, has negative overtones for the majority of Italians who, as the IPSOS survey highlighted, would seem not to fully understand the term. There is nothing random about the fact that European sovereignty in Italy is frequently viewed in terms of the imposition of rules working against people's interests, with 64 % of Italians seeing it as bound up more with the ability to impose one's interests than in governing for the common good.

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly played a part in this. According to a Università di Siena and Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) study carried out in November 2020, [56%](#) of Italians would vote against a referendum on Italy leaving the European Union. By contrast, in spring 2020, in the midst of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, a climate of profound insecurity, together with a [slow response by the European institutions in Italy's aid](#) and that of other hard-hit nations, 44 % of Italians were in favour of EU membership against 48 % in favour of Italexit. Whilst the data gathered in November 2020 was generally positive, showing an improvement in Italian trust in European institutions, the figures are still low compared to 2017 when 61% were in favour of remaining within the EU.

At this juncture the lack of support for European sovereignty is to be explained by limited pro-European sentiments fre-

quently accentuated by sovereignist parties such as Lega and Fratelli d'Italia. These parties have built their electoral strategies around a supposed top-down relationship between the 'elite' and the 'people' and [collusion](#) with Brussels bureaucrats depicted as immoral and self-serving. If the supporters of these parties necessarily see European sovereignty as extremely negative, those who do not support them also view the term sovereignty negatively as linked to 'sovereignism'.

Effectively, as the survey made by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean Jaurès highlighted, there is nothing random about the fact that the concept of sovereignty is seen as politically right wing in the Italian political context. In Italy, and in the European Union in general, sovereignist parties have built their political agendas on nationalism, 'muscular' political action and forms of economic protectionism. In effect, it is the theoretical definition of sovereignism which best fits the way sovereignty is viewed by the Italians, as based on nationalism (58 %), power (46 %) and protectionism (26 %). This explanation to some extent converges with the statistics showing that only one Italian in three (35 %), and the under 35s or those with a left-wing political orientation in particular, have a negative vision of the term 'sovereignty' in general in which it is seen as associated with the right. Effectively the majority of those voting for and supporting Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, and thus without a negative vision of sovereignty/sovereignism per se, are over [35](#).

In conclusion, in Italy, support for European sovereignty is handicapped by a mistaken understanding of the term sover-

eignty and by a growing anti-European feeling. Whilst, in the second half of 2020, Italian perceptions of the EU were much improved as compared to the first half of the year, Italy remains one of the EU's eurosceptic nations and the 2020 data, in the midst of the pandemic, saw numbers of those not believing in the EU and thus in its sovereignty, growing.

DISTRUST TOWARDS BRUSSELS

The Covid-19 crisis, a general feeling of insecurity and uncertainty regarding the future amongst Italians and also Europeans, and the form taken by this in various spheres both economic and social, is in itself an explanation for demands for greater European and national sovereignty. As the study makes clear, Italians are less supportive of European sovereignty than other Europeans, above all Eastern Europeans who have high approval levels. This trend is bound up with both a misunderstanding of the term sovereignty in Italy, as we have seen, but above all with a general feeling of distrust of European integration.

Eastern European nations would seem to be less subject to this distrust because they still consider themselves to be 'net' beneficiaries of European Union membership. For the Italians, the eastwards expansion of the European Union has meant some of the [European structural funds](#), as well as private investments from Germany in particular, shifting away from the south of Europe in an eastwards direction to countries seen as in greater need of regional development funds but also more dynamic in economic terms, given their low manpower costs as compared to Italy and other Mediterranean nations. Furthermore, whilst benefiting from the single market and freedom of movement, many Eastern European countries are not part of the Euro bloc and thus enjoy monetary policy independence. In addition to the economic benefits, the desire by the people of these nations for greater European sovereignty is also explained by the EU's projected influence. Many Eastern and Central European nations – formerly part of the Soviet block – fear Russian interference and see the EU and NATO extremely positively in security terms.

These internal and external, economic and security, considerations are not always clear cut in the case of Italy which has faced two economic crises and an unprecedented immigration crisis over the last ten years, crises in which the European Union's response has frequently been perceived as inadequate or overly severe. This has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis whose economic and social repercussions are being felt across Europe, but especially in Italy, as one of the first countries to have been struck by it. In this case, too, the European response did come, with the NextGenerationEU plans being the most glaring example. However, the European institutions' delayed response and an initial perceived [lack of solidarity](#) by certain member states to Italy is difficult to forget.

Whilst trust in the European institutions has considerably weakened in recent years, Italians supporting greater European sovereignty do so in the belief that the EU needs more tools and greater financial means to face up concretely to

global and internal challenges and provide more incisive political responses. The European Union comes across as better able to manage problems of an international nature with Italy being seen as having limited ability to act. Effectively, as the IPSOS study has highlighted, Italians see Italy as too weak to compete on the international chessboard with great powers like the United States and China and, as the figures collected by Istituto Affari Internazionali and Università di Siena show, Italians see greater international co-operation ([68%](#)) as the best way of managing global threats rather than greater national independence (32%).

On the other hand, the pandemic has prompted a recognition of the importance of the role of national institutions in planning the country's economic and social life, above all at times of crisis in which rapid and effective action is called for. The extreme decentralisation of the Italian civil service, with the regions responsible for a multiplicity of tasks, led to initial mismanagement of the vaccination campaign, with the central government making a more efficient job of it. Greater national sovereignty would thus seem to be crucial to resolving internal matters, thereby tidying up the country's regional economic and social diversities, which have not facilitated effective pandemic management.

Certainly, despite greater faith in the national government, the Italians are aware that the ability of the European Union to tackle global challenges is greater. For this reason, it would seem that the desire is for greater integration with consequent sharing of risks, duties and advantages. Practically speaking, this implies a reform of EU treaties and a new, more democratic and accessible institutional framework and this cannot be achieved in the short term. However, what has happened since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis and NextGenerationEU, and also with the centralised management of vaccinations by the European Commission, would seem to be moving in the direction of a sharing out of risk and the acquisition by European institutions of greater decision-making and also economic and financial autonomy. For the Italians these are the first steps on the road to greater European strategic autonomy which does not automatically mean greater sovereignty. It presupposes a capacity for independent action by the EU both externally and internally, on the strength of greater internal unity, robust political and democratic structures, clear objectives and resilient national institutions.

MULTILATERAL SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES

In a highly conflictual global arena in which new geopolitical alliances and interference by certain regional powers is testing the resilience of the multilateral order sorely, the European Union must aim for greater strategic autonomy with which to relaunch its role. One of the prerequisites is certainly resilient and effective internal governance capable of restoring people's trust in the common project where this is lacking. For this reason, relaunching the economy and, in particular, according to [67%](#) of Italians, the health sector via the production of medical-health related goods and the agri-food sector, is of key importance. The economic crisis triggered by the

Covid-19 pandemic has already had a direct effect on the incomes of [one in two Italians](#). For this reason economic recovery remains a key issue which is directly bound up with Italians' attitude to the European Union. The NextGenerationEU launch has injected fresh trust into European institutions, as the 12 % increase in pro-European sentiments recorded in Italy from [March to November 2020](#) makes clear. Defending European values is also an important element. Effectively, for [81%](#) of Italians, if the European Union is based on specific norms and values, such as respect for the rule of law, human rights and democracy, it must ensure that these are respected in all its member states, including at the cost of imposing sanctions or suspending funds. As far as security against terrorist threats, but also climate change and pandemic response are concerned, solutions to these global problems must take the form of international co-operation.

Whilst Italians are aware that there is no guarantee that multi-lateral solutions will reflect Italian interests as against those of the other member states, a more co-ordinated internal co-operation would give the EU greater weight in the international arena and increase its chances of making its presence felt in international forums. Furthermore, as far as the EU's co-operation with other countries is concerned, it would seem increasingly clear that, in a world in which the rules of the liberal and multilateral system are waning together with American hegemony, co-operation between countries with similar values in institutional and political terms is easier and less burdensome. Whilst, in real politik terms, co-operation with non-democratic nations on specific matters remains essential, it is important that the EU remains loyal to its founding values. For this reason, for example, [61%](#) of Italians agreed with the statements of Mario Draghi, Italian prime minister, after "SofaGate" when he called Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a dictator whose values are alien to European ideals but with whom we must co-operate all the same. This despite the fact that, after Draghi remarks, Italy's economic interests and investments in Turkey may be at risk.

As far as defence is concerned, whilst the EU cannot do without its historic alliance with the United States and NATO, its greater autonomy should start precisely with reducing investment fragmentation in this sector via the creation and development of co-operation clusters on key technologies to reinforce defensive capabilities within the [EU Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, the European Defence Fund \(EDF\) and Permanent Structured Cooperation \(PESCO\)](#). The majority of Italians believe that foreign security and defence policies should be less offensive than defensive, as regards European borders and *modus vivendi*. This is a clear response by Europeans to a situation in which the crisis of multilateralism and former President American Trump's isolationism for the whole of his mandate have to measure up to more expansive policies by countries such as China, Turkey and Russia, which are expanding their control to the east and south of Europe. For this reason the EU should be capable of more autonomous action, from the starting point of neighbouring regions such as the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean – strategic areas for Italy – where it might be able to exert greater influence not only via economic type agreements but also with soft power tools which pressurise countries to comply with

adequate rule of law and respect for human rights standards. Losing all influence in the regions bordering the European Union means not only losing economic and commercial interests but also exposing European borders to risk and thus reneging on the wellbeing and protection promises made to European peoples.

MORE DECISION-MAKING POWER AT BOTH NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL

60 % of the Italians interviewed for the survey conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean Jaurès aspired to greater European sovereignty and 71 % were also in favour of greater national sovereignty. The political message to be inferred from this is that – conflicting sentiments towards the European Union and only 45 % of Italians seeing European sovereignty as a good thing notwithstanding – the Italians are aware that strengthening European and national decision-making powers is crucial for Italy. Certainly, NextGenerationEU is fostering a positive change of perspective as regards the European Union but not only that. The current government, under Mario Draghi, has succeeded in shaping a coalition between extremely diverse parties some of which have powerfully anti-European pasts, Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega in particular. Whilst Movimento 5 Stelle abandoned its more Eurosceptic identity some time ago in favour of an increasingly moderate *modus operandi*, to the extent of supporting Ursula Von der Leyen's candidacy as president of the European Commission, Lega has, in recent years, been the Italian Eurosceptic hard core. In primis, on immigration related matters, where Lega feels the European Union has deserted Italy and, secondarily, as regards Italy's belonging to the Euro zone. With the approval of the NextGenerationEU and Lega joining the governing coalition, much of its anti-European rhetoric has been, if not entirely set aside, at least markedly toned down. The arrival of NextGenerationEU funds, and the greater faith in European institutions by some Italians recorded towards the end of 2020, have certainly impacted on the rhetoric of all the Eurosceptic parties and the Lega above all. On the other hand, for progressive forces, the message which needs to get through is that Italian faith in the EU and national institutions will depend on two factors: the ability of the Italian government, formed by a majority of pro-European parties, like Partito Democratico, Liberi e Uguali but also Forza Italia, to spend European funds effectively in such a way as to stimulate unprecedented economic growth flanked by the ability of European institutions, above all the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, to exert greater sovereignty more efficiently. To date, for example, if the centralisation of vaccine purchases by the Commission has been viewed positively, delays in deliveries are in any case perceived as unjustifiable inefficiencies. Furthermore, the capacity of the European institutions to sanction behaviours violating the rule of law are also important factors affecting the EU's credibility and that of the progressive pro-EU parties. In conclusion, building wide ranging trust in the EU requires both the government and the European institutions to deliver adequate responses. Greater sovereignty also means greater responsibility to European peoples.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY HAS MORE ACCEPTANCE

Italians would seem to understand, and thus support, European strategic autonomy to a greater extent than its sovereignty. 60 % are in favour of greater European sovereignty but more than half of the population views European sovereignty negatively. Effectively, in its current configuration the European Union is a complex and peculiar international body of states without its own sovereignty, as its legitimacy is not based on a founding moment of popular consent. At present, greater European sovereignty would be possible only via a review of the European community treaties, which is currently neither conceivable nor feasible. The most realistic scenario is greater foreign policy autonomy via a consolidation of reinforced internal co-operation. This is none other than a functional path in the direction of greater European sovereignty which will, however, need to be achieved one step at a time, bringing Europeans with it in a stable and lasting way. NextGenerationEU, the sharing of economic risk, the centralising of the vaccination campaign: these are all EU steps in this direction, but value consolidation is also needed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Eleonora Poli, Senior Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Roma

IMPRINT

© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021
Dept. for Global and European Politics
Hiroshimastraße 28, 10785 Berlin, Germany

Responsible for this publication in the FES:
Dr. Ralf Hexel | European Integration / Sovereign Europe

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works. Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. This publication is printed on paper from sustainable forestry.