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ITALIAN IDENTITY BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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Abstract

The paper deals with the topic od tradition and modernity in Italy with respect to the division of the country to rich North and poor South. After decades this division is persistent more than it had been expected. There were many regimes (monarchy, republic, fascism) and political and development strategies trying to come to terms with it; however, it is working, causing crises and sometimes taking the forms of semi-separatism or open separatism movements aiming at the political and territorial dismemberment of the country. Even the fact that Italy is the firm part of the Euroepan Union has not released the tensions between developed and underdeveloped parts od the state. Hence the Italian identity is stigmatized by this situation since regional or local affiliation is sometimes much stronger than the national one and people in the North do not feel often to be of the same origin like their Southern countryfellows.

Keywords: Italy, modernity, tradition, Risorgimento, identity

"We built Italy, and now we must build Italians," the words that crowned in a peculiar way the process of unification of Italy. This thought – believed by many to be true to this day, as these who follow it support the argument that Italians still have to be built – is a perfect expression of the problem of Italian identity, or rather of the problem of its lack. Once the unification had been completed, Italy materialised on the political map of Europe as a fairly large state. Yet from its earliest days, the Italian state ran into a major obstacle resulting from the lack of historical tradition to refer to in order to build the *ethos* of the state. For before the nineteenth century there had been no form of statehood on the peninsula that Italy would be the

direct successor of. The newly established state brought an entirely new phenomenon: with no history, tradition or common values and culture. The problem with the non-existent Italian nation was even worse, as it was only to crystallise around the unified state. The founders of Italy believed the new state to be the nation-forming factor; to perform the task of creating the Italian nation properly, the state was forced to restrain and discipline various particular and regional interests. An Italian was primarily to be an Italian, and not a Roman, Genoese, Milanese, Piedmontese, Venetian, Tuscan or Sicilian.

"The young Sabaudian monarchy," wrote Simona Colarizi, an Italian historian, "lying on the fringe of the Olympus of the powers that be, assumed the physiognomy of a liberal state on the road to democracy: there could be no other way. Liberals and democrats were those Italians who fought for the birth of the state, and it was the liberal values that its institutional constitution was based on."[1] Italy was the work of the *Risorgimento*: a major nineteenth century ideological and political movement that aimed at the unification of territories inhabited by Italians into a single state. The establishment of the new state was based on the political structures and institutions of the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont, which made the postulates of the *Risorgimento* its official political programme. Yet the goals of the *Risorgimento* went beyond purely political matters: the goals encompassed also quick development of a modern and progressive society in Italy. Unfortunately, to quote Stanley G. Payne, "after 1860 much of this task turned out to be put off into infinity, while many patriots considered the new Italian system – oligarchic, elitist, and economically tight – a pathetic decay or betrayal of high aspirations."[2] The Italian state was dominated by the elite composed of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy of the North, which disregarded and held in contempt the poor South of the country. Constitutional monarchy was unacceptable for the republican faction, whose great political and intellectual leader, Giuseppe Mazzini, was forced into emigration. A fairly tight system of power, which lasted until the First World War, was developed with election rights enjoyed only by those who could meet the high property qualifications. The country's economy was weak, and even despite an acceleration of the modern industrialisation processes in the 1890s, Italy was up to the First World War a predominantly agricultural country, much poorer than other West European states.

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1 Simona Colarizi, *Storia del novecento italiano* (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2000), 6.
2 Stanley G. Payne, *Il fascismo* (Roma: Newton & Compton Editori, 1999), 69.

The problems related to the lack of common national identity among the inhabitants of the young state were quick to surface. Many of them were only, in the words of Colarizi, "Italians on paper",[3] as they felt no marked change in their social and political status, treating Italy with the same indifference they exhibited towards the Habsburg, Bourbon or papal rule. National culture was being born in pain. Moreover, the scope of its impact was highly limited. This was caused partly by the high level of illiteracy and partly by the lack of a common language. Many inhabitants did not speak Italian but a variety of dialects, while so-called "high society", the royal family included, spoke French. It is generally believed that Italian was not established in its capacity of the commonly used language until the 1960s when it spread thanks to the television.

Attempts were made to use the development of colonial empire to make up for lack of success in internal policy, yet even those plans failed. France beat Italy subjugating Tunisia in 1881. Italians were only successful with founding small colonies in Eritrea and Somalia. An attempt to subjugate Ethiopia ended in a disgraceful defeat at Adua (1896) – the only victory of African troops over European armies in the nineteenth century. "In consequence," as Stanley G. Payne rightly noticed, "Italy could not become Europe's 'sixth power', and was left with the role of a country similar to Spain, Greece or Portugal, only slightly larger."[4] The general spirit improved slightly after the victory in the Turkish war (1911–1912) that gave Italy Libya and several islands in the Aegean Sea.

In May 1915, Italy joined the Entente in the First World War, and benefited from the conflict: the Conference of Versailles gave Italy Trento, Trieste, Upper Adige, Istria and Dalmatia that had previously been under Austro-Hungarian rule. Consequently, the war became a kind of next stage of the *Risorgimento*, and it resulted in taking over territories believed to be Italian. Nevertheless, Italy did not receive Fiume (Rijeka), which resulted in resentment throughout the country and withdrawal from the Peace conference.

In 1919, Italian political stage saw the appearance of the fascist movement led by a former socialist, Benito Mussolini who made skilful use of frustration in the society caused by hard economic conditions and not entirely satisfactory results of the war. It was commonly believed that the

[3] Colarizi, *Storia del novecento italiano*, 6.
[4] Ibid.

Italian victory was "crippled" (*vittoria mutilata*). Fascism was spreading fast. After the March on Rome (28 October 1922), the fascists seized power, and Mussolini assumed the post of the Prime Minister. The triumph of fascism put an end to the liberal period in the Italian history, which had begun with the establishment of the state. Now the state abruptly entered a new era.

The first years of Mussolini's government marked the state with a specific semi-dictatorship. The Prime Minister led a multi-party government, with only three other fascist ministers. The new cabinet did not seem very different from the previous ones. New qualities were beginning to appear, however. In November 1922, the Parliament granted Mussolini the right to rule by decrees for a year, which was to help to ease economic problems. A month later, the Fascist Grand Council (*Gran Consiglio del Fascismo*) was established; formally, it was the managing body of the fascist party, yet the Council's prerogatives went much further. The Council began to influence directly the policy of the state, and in 1928 it became an official organ of the state and eclipsed the parliament. In January 1923, the party's *squadri* were turned into voluntary national security militia (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*), which became a state institution. Mussolini's government scored certain economic and social successes, and was especially praised for the introduction of peace in the country. Little wonder that its authority was on the rise, and the National Fascist Party (*Partito Nazionale Fascista*, PNF) enrolled new members by thousands. Towards the end of November 1921, the Fascist Party had nearly 300,000 members to reach 5 million in 1943.[5]

A major crisis followed the kidnap and later murder of a socialist MP, Giacomo Matteotti, by fascist thugs on 10 June 1924. The connections of Matteotti's killers with high-ranking government officials were disclosed. Even though personal involvement of Mussolini has never been proved, he was definitely responsible politically. This is what the outraged general public believed, as it turned away from the head of the government. Opposition MPs withdrew from the works of the parliament and, following Roman plebeians from the fifth century BC, announced "Aventine secession". Fascists found themselves deep in defensive, and Mussolini himself believed in the possibility of being dismissed. Much like in 1922, the final decision was up to the King. Yet, despite numerous incentives, the politically apathetic Vittorio Emanuele III decided not to step in again.

[5] John Pollard, *The Fascist Experience in Italy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 62.

After some time, convinced that he was no longer in jeopardy, Mussolini began his counteroffensive. On 3 January 1925 he delivered his famous address to the Parliament, announcing a sudden political turn. Twenty-six months after the March on Rome, Mussolini proclaimed "complete power for complete fascism", which was tantamount to transition into full-fledged dictatorship. What is more, he assumed personal responsibility for the Matteotti murder, speaking swaggeringly that "if fascism has become a criminal association, then I am the leader of this criminal association."[6] For the first time, the police was ordered to arrest a group of political opponents, and opposition MPs who wanted to return to the Parliament were not allowed to.

Soon, the role of the Parliament was reduced only to approving governmental decrees. In the election of 1929, the voters received only one list, which they could support or reject. Eventually, it was supported by almost all voters. A decade later the parliament was dissolved, and its capacity of political representation was taken by the nominated Chamber of Fasces and Corporations (*Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni*). Mussolini consolidated vast power in his hands. In addition to being the Prime Minister he presided over eight departments. He became *Il Duce* – the infallible leader of fascism and Italy. The slogans: "The Duce is always right" (*Il Duce ha sempre ragione*) and "To believe, to obey, to fight" (*Credere, obbedire, combattere*) became official slogans. Both the legal and educational systems were fully fascistised. In 1926, after three unsuccessful attempts at Mussolini's life (in one of them he suffered a slight nose wound), all political parties save the PNF and all non-fascist trade unions were declared illegal.

Duce announced that the Italian state was totalitarian (*stato totalitario*). The fundamental principle of such a state was "nothing against the state, nothing outside the state, nothing without the state."[7] A leading fascist philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, wrote that "for fascism, everything is in the state, and nothing human or spiritual may exist or have any value outside the state. In this sense, fascism is totalitarian, and a fascist state provides the synthesis and unity of all the values: it shapes, realizes, and develops the entire life of the nation."[8] Fascism thus primarily attempted the consolidation of

[6] Quoted in Payne, *Il fascismo*, 126.
[7] Quoted in Karl Dietrich Bracher, "Totalitarismo", in *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, vol. VII (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1984), 721.
[8] Giovanni Gentile, *Che cosa è il fascismo* (Firenze: La Fenice, 1925), 37.

the state, and then its transformation towards totalitarianism. The nation and the national identity were important – true, yet they could develop only within the framework of the totalitarian state. The omnipotent state referred to the ideas of national solidarity and tolerated no political, social, class or professional conflict, hence the corporations that became its basic structure. Those accused of anti-state and subversive activity faced a special tribunal, whose decisions were secret, and sentences severe, especially after the reinstitution of the capital punishment in 1927.

The totalitarian concept of the state was combined with the quest for the new, powerful national identity of Italians. The tradition of ancient Rome became a great myth that was to support the national identity. The Italian nation was announced the inheritor and continuator of the Romans, and if it was so, greatness and grandeur had to be its appointed lot, so the nation was to strive to develop its own empire. "Latinity," wrote Paolo Viola, "became something akin to a civil religion, whose task was to reinforce the efforts of the Italians to regain the greatness that was their due."[9] The moment of assuming control over the country by the fascists was considered the beginning of the new era: the Fascist era (*era fascista*).

In 1933, Germany fell under the sway of Adolf Hitler, who had always had much respect for Mussolini and considered Duce his political master. Mussolini was gradually warming to Hitler. But still in the 1920s he refused to send Hitler his autographed photo, and later – in private circles – frequently referred to the German nazism as a "parody of fascism". In the second half of the 1930s the Duce was forced to count with Hitler, especially as the dynamics of the Third Reich greatly exceeded the capacity of Italy. The two countries under two variations of fascism kept converging. Yet in this frame, Mussolini sadly found himself to be in an increasingly greater degree the *dictator minor*, as the role of the *dictator maior* was reserved for the German *Führer*. In 1938, under the influence of Hitler, Mussolini announced the concept of "Italian racism", which was accompanied by the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation.

Envying Germans their conquest, while he himself could boast only of conquering Ethiopia (and not without a great effort) in 1936, and eager to participate, together with Germany, in the new division of the world to make reference to the imperial tradition of ancient Rome, Mussolini made Italy join the Second World War in June 1940. While Italian soldiers fought

[9] Paolo Viola, *Il Novecento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), 96.

bravely at the fronts of the First World War, now they displayed utmost military awkwardness and lack of commitment to Mussolini's war, which was not theirs. For this reason Italy's martial involvement was a huge succession of defeats: a fact that shook the fascist regime and made the Duce lose his authority. On 25 July 1943, the Fascist Grand Council resolved to strip Mussolini of his power. Following this change, King Vittorio Emanuele III had him arrested and the post of the Prime Minister entrusted to Marshal Pietro Badoglio, whose government opened negotiations with the Allies and later declared war on Germany. Confined in the mountain resort of Gran Sasso in the Apennines, Mussolini was rescued in a spectacular raid of German troops operating on Hitler's personal order and commanded by Colonel Otto Skorzenny. After the Duce had been brought to Germany, on 17 September 1943, fulfilling Hitler's command, he announced on Munich radio the dethronement of the Sabaudian dynasty and the establishment of the Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana*). Fully under German control, this bantam puppet state with its capital in the town of Salò situated over Garda Lake in northern part of Italy was controlled by German troops. After a time the Italian fascism was returning to its republican roots which was to be reflected in the new name of the party: Fascist Republican Party (*Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, PFR). At the same time Mussolini returned to highly leftist slogans, advocating "socialisation of economy" which practical establishment in the Salò Republic was forestalled only by the Germans.

The history of the Salò Republic turned out to be an episode of less than two years. Towards the end of April 1945, when Germany was certain to lose, Mussolini escorted by an SS squad attempted to flee to Switzerland. On 27 April, the column was stopped at Dongo, close to the Swiss border by the Italian partisans. Dressed in German officer's uniform Mussolini was identified and arrested. The next day, the Duce was executed at Como together with his long-time mistress, Claretta Petacci, who chose to die by his side. On 29 April, their bodies, hanging by their feet, were publicly displayed in Piazzale Loreto in Milan. This kind of macabre spectacle was a fascist invention: they did the same in the recent past with the bodies of captured partisans. There came the time for revenge.

The end of the Italian dictator was a tragic one, yet so was the fate he had prepared for his nation, bereaving it of freedom for many long years and engaging it in the anguish of war. Mussolini's mistake was not copied in Spain by his protégé, General Francisco Franco who – capable of saying

"no" to Hitler – not only survived the war unscathed but also managed to remain in power for decades, not unlike another disciple of the Duce: António Salazar in Portugal.

Fascism made its mark – clear and permanent – not only on the Italian state but also on the entire Italian national conscience, which it distorted through its manipulations. An eminent Italian philosopher of liberal predisposition, Benedetto Croce (who went through a period of fascination with fascism, as he believed it to have some points in common with liberalism) expressed a highly controversial opinion while speaking in front of the Legislative Assembly in September 1945: "From 1860 to 1922, Italy was one of the most democratic countries of the world, since its development was non-ruptured and generally fast progressing on the path of democracy, naturally democracy of liberal style, as each true democracy is."[10] Thus Croce expected that the post-war Italian state will be a simple continuation of the pre-1922 Italy, and considered the fascist period an interruption of the natural historical continuity – a certain ellipsis in the history of the country. Disregarding the opinion that the pre-fascist Italy was a blooming democracy, a theory that cannot stand up to the facts, Croce was mistaken in two matters. Firstly, in suggesting that fascism was an episode of little consequence and a taxing historical blunder whose experience can be fairly easily overcome, and secondly, in preaching to bridge the gap between the pre-fascist period and the post-fascist future – which was an act impossible to accomplish as post-war Italy had to become an entirely new political entity. The formula of a liberal pre-1922 state was strongly discredited. There was a rather common opinion that the helplessness and errors of liberal system as well as its misalignment to the real needs of the nation provided the climate for the rise of fascism. After the war, Italy thus had to take shape following a double negation: rejecting both fascism and the model of the state that preceded it.

In the referendum of 2 June 1946, Italian citizens supported republic rejecting monarchy. At the same time the elections to the Constitutional National Assembly, a body that was to work out the constitution formula for the new, republican Italy, were held. Three parties, namely Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC), Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI), and Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, PSI), obtained together nearly 75 per cent of votes. For many

[10] Quoted in Paolo Alatri, *Le origini del fascismo* (Roma: Editori Laterza, 1956), 163.

years, until the late 1980s, these three parties were the leading actors of the country's political stage and they were decisively influencing the face of Italy.[11]

The Constitution of 1948 was to be a powerful contradiction of the fascist period. The memory of Benito Mussolini's dictatorship resulted in the weakening of executive powers and the strengthening of legislative. However, the parliament and cabinet system could not pass muster in a country famous for its hot temper, where the people treat politics as a highly emotional game. The consequence was the weakness of Italian government. No control could be exerted by the president, as his prerogatives mostly consisted of purely representational functions.

Throughout Europe, Italy was perceived as the country of chaos and lack of stabilisation. The most representative example was lack of stable ruling coalitions. Cabinets changed as if in a kaleidoscope, so that an average Italian government remained in force no more than ten months. Yet, any new government did not differ much from its predecessor, as it was composed of the same factions, and frequently shared ministers with them. Political games began to be the new reality, existing for their own sake. This resulted in a progressive alienation of politics and its severance from society. Political practice of republican Italy strongly reinforced the political parties. They began to take primacy over state institutions – a phenomenon that has developed at such a scale nowhere else. A condition favourable for this was the fact that no political formation obtained sufficient electoral support to govern independently. Even an alliance of two parties would not suffice to form a government. Governmental alliances had to encompass multiple players – four or five as a rule. In Italy, the decision about the shape of the government and both its programme and personal facet – which is of fundamental importance for democracy – was not made when it should have been, that is during the election, but at the forum of post-election bickering between the elites of the leading parties. The vote decisive for the matters of the state was in fact cast by party secretariats operating beyond civic control. This resulted in the hegemony of parties in Italian politics, this peculiar promotion of parties being achieved at the price of deforming democracy. Even academic constitutional law textbooks, which cannot be held frivolous, have always devoted much space to the question of

[11] See http://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/i/italy/italy-constituent-assembly-election-1946.html (last accessed on 11 January 2010).

partocracy (*partitocrazia*).[12] Partocracy, whose fullest manifestation was to be the Republic of Italy, was considered a degenerated democracy. Political parties, having taken over sovereign rights belonging to the nation, made sovereign decisions about the course and the future of the state, nominating head posts in all institutions by the virtue of nomenclature arrangements. The phenomenon, to quote Leopoldo Elia, "of a party occupying the state" became a highly negative political phenomenon specific to Italy.[13] Andrea Manzella, in turn, spoke of "partycratic state".[14]

As could easily be guessed, Christian Democracy became the symbol of partocracy, as from the end of the war to 1994 it formed the core of all the Italian cabinets. What can be perceived as a paradox, the accusation of partocracy was put forth against Christian Democrats even by their allies, who not only felt perfectly at ease in the thus formed mechanism of control of the parties over the state, but who were also capable of drawing appropriate profits from this situation. The leader of the Italian Republican Party (*Partito Repubblicano Italiano*, PRI), Giorgio La Malfa recognised that "Christian Democracy became identified with the state", and added that it was "sufficient to think of the nature of the control of Christian Democracy over the life of the entire country – the banks, RAI [public TV and radio – M. B.], public institutions – to understand that the manner of voting in the elections depends on these power structures and on this unusually powerful nomenclature."[15] He was supported by the leader of the liberals (*Partito Liberale Italiano*, PLI), Renato Altissimo, who claimed that "Christian Democracy, with the mere 30 per cent of votes ensured 90 per cent of power."[16]

Only on rare occasions did the Christian Democrats rule single-handedly as a minority cabinet. Government alliances, which connected Christian Democrats to the parties of the so-called "constitutional arch" (*arco costituzionale*), that is the republicans, liberals, social-democrats, and the strongest faction in this group, namely, socialists, were a rule. Because of the continuous changes at the top and frequent breakdowns of the cabinets, Italy became legendary for its lack of political alternatives.

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[12] See *Diritto costituzionale* (Napoli: Edizioni Simone, 1992), 95.
[13] Leopoldo Elia, "La peculiarità e l'evoluzione del sistema italiano riguardo ai partiti politici", in *Sindacato e sistema democratico* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1975), 178.
[14] Andrea Manzella, *Il parlamento* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1991), 58.
[15] Quoted in *Przegląd Międzynarodowy* (Polska Agencja Prasowa), 30 August 1991.
[16] Ibid.

New governments, as has already been mentioned, were practically in the same political fashion as the old ones. Petrification of the governing political system favoured corruption, which eventually turned out to be the decisive factor behind the political change of 1990s. Here one ought to pose a question about the sources of this lack of political alternatives and no change of political elites, astonishing in a democratic system. The answer seems relatively easy: any potential change in Italy was blocked by what is frequently referred to as "the C factor", namely the presence of the Communist Party – the strongest communist party of the Western world – which for many years was believed to be a formation working against the system, that is questioning the foundations of the state's constitution and calling for radical changes. Until 1989, which brought about the decay of global communism, Italy, as Giorgio La Malfa rightly noticed was a "front state".[17] In other words, it was a Western democracy most threatened by communism. "We had," continued La Malfa, "a system with an opposition so radical that it could only be sentenced to remaining outside of the system."[18] This resulted in no possibility of a left-wing opposition to the governing system, with even lesser option for a rightist opposition as the Italian right wing was represented by a formation of fascist provenience, i.e. Italian Social Movement – National Right Wing (*Movimento Sociale Italiano – Destra Nazionale*, MSI-DN).[19]

Thus the political stage of the country was dominated by the fundamental opposition of two huge parties, each of which represented approximately 30 per cent of electoral votes: the eternally governing Christian Democrats and the Communist Party – always in opposition as lastingly subjected to the operation of the specific *conventio ad excludendum*.[20] For nearly five decades major groups of electorate followed negative – and not positive – motivation in their political behaviour, voting not "for" but "against". Many of the votes cast for Christian Democrats did not support their programme but were just an opposition against communism. The situation

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[17] Giorgio La Malfa and Giuseppe Turani, *Le ragioni di una svolta* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer Editori, 1992), 1.

[18] Ibid., 55.

[19] See Piero Ignazi, *Il polo escluso. Profilo storico del Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1989); and Marek Bankowicz, "Faszyzm w życiu politycznym powojennych Włoch", in *Rozvoj české společnosti v Evropské unii*, vol. III, ed. Jakub Končelík, Barbara Köpplová, Irena Prázová and Jiří Vykoukal (Praha: MatfyzPress, 2004), 197–210.

[20] Cf. Pietro Scoppola, *La repubblica dei partiti. Evoluzione e crisi di un sistema politico 1945–1996* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1997), 425.

in the Italian party system was referred to as an imperfect two-party system (*bipartitismo imperfetto*).[21] The essence of the imperfectness of the Italian two-party system was that the two big parties mentioned above did not alter in government. The deadlock in the system of power and no exchange of the state's ruling class brought about numerous negative phenomena, including the partocracy mentioned above, as well as corruption and the obscure connections between the politicians and the world of organised crime, i.e. the mafia.

Despite all this, it is to be remembered that post-war Italy achieved major economic progress, becoming one of Europe's most powerful economies. The standard of life improved greatly, especially due to the impressive economic boom of 1950s and 1960s, generally referred to as the "economic miracle" (*miracolo economico*). The crisis in politics, a phenomenon fairly permanent, was in a way mastered and separated from the life of the society and from economic processes which followed their own course. Giulio Andreotti, one of the leading politicians of post-war Italy, who served seven times as the Prime Minister, claimed that Italians found a method of governing in crisis, and as a consequence there appeared the phenomenon of "stable instability".[22] The situation in the country was perfectly portrayed by the French press: the headline over a description of contemporary Italy went "But it does move!" (*Eppur si muove!*). In this context, the words attributed to Galileo received a new significance, meaning that despite all the limitations, crises and trouble Italy does move forward.[23]

In 1989, Central and Eastern Europe was the stage of the famous "autumn of the nations", in whose consequence the world communist system fell. Everything suggested that this fact should lead to certain processes and changes of values within PCI, yet not deep enough to allow speaking about any fundamental turn. Only few believed that soon a radical political change would take place in Italy. Since 1956, Italian Communists heeded no commands issued by Moscow; they did away with the principle of unity of the world's communist movement, working out the idea of the "Italian path to socialism". This standpoint and at the same time the party's independence found their expression, for instance, in PCI's support

[21] The first to use this term was Giorgio Galli, who used it for the title of his book, *Il bipartitismo imperfetto. Comunisti e democristiani in Italia* (Bologna: il Mulino 1966).
[22] Giulio Andreotti, *Governare con la crisi* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1991), 421.
[23] See Janina Zakrzewska, *Ustrój polityczny Republiki Włoskiej* (Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1986), 14.

of the Prague Spring of 1968 and subsequent determined disapproval of the military intervention of communist states in Czechoslovakia.[24] In 1970s, under the leadership of Enrico Berlinguer, the PCI clearly chose the strategy of Euro-communism: an attempt to reconcile the traditional ideals of the communist movement and the requirements of parliamentary democracy and free market economy. At that time Italian Communists were already openly criticising the so-called real socialism, acknowledging that Soviet Union and other communist countries perverted Marxism, in whose name these states imposed highly repressive dictatorships. This resulted in what Paul Ginsborg, a British historian specialising in Italian affairs, called "atrophy of Italian communism".[25] Yet, the PCI – less and less communist in its programme and political line – retained its historical name.

Nevertheless, the 1989 fiasco of communism both in its capacity of a system of government and an ideology posed a certain challenge for Italian communists, as it forced them to look for a new identity in the changed reality of the world. The view that the communist collar was more and more oppressive and restrictive for the party and for that reason should be done away with gaining grounds. In 1990, during the extraordinary congress of the PCI a decision to terminate the 69-year-long history of the party and to reject Marxist and Leninist heritage was reached.[26] PCI was replaced by the Democratic Party of the Left Wing (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*, PDS), which defined itself as a democratic party working on the grounds of reformist socialism. The orthodox wing of the old Communist Party, which never came to terms with its dissolution and considered such a step a "political treason", formed a group under the name of Communist Refoundation Party (*Rifondazione Comunista*, RC) which later – a fact worth emphasising – did not undergo political diminution and was always capable of securing parliamentary representation, though markedly smaller than that of the PDS.

The events of 1989 made many observers of the Italian political stage put forth a theory that, with the communists facing the trouble caused by

[24] See Paolo Demartis, "PCI e Cecoslovacchia: la forma e la sostanza", *Mondo Operaio* (January–February 1989): 15–18.

[25] See Paul Ginsborg, *L'Italia del tempo presente. Famiglia, società civile, Stato 1980–1996* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), 293–309.

[26] See the documents of the nineteenth Congress of the PCI, and especially the programme presentation of the then leader of the party, Achille Occhetto, entitled "A new beginning: the constituent phase of a new political formation", *The Italian Communists* (January–March 1990), 100–59.

the need to transform their identity, Christian Democracy would continue its hegemony in the state and dictate political conditions in Italy for decades to come. It was said that Italy would move from "imperfect two-party system" to the system of a single dominant party. Yet these forecasts never came true.

The wave of major corruption scandals in 1992–1993 led to the political "earthquake". The media announced corruption and fraud with the involvement of the leading representatives of the political class nearly every day. There was a time in 1992 that prosecution conducted inquiries against every third member of the parliament, including five party leaders, four former Prime Ministers, and many members of former governments. The parliamentary election of March 1994 wiped nearly all the previous political establishment from the political stage. Changes of party names and symbols, e.g. in 1994 Christian Democrats reformed into Italian Popular Party (*Partito Popolare Italiano*, PPI), were to no avail, not unlike the removal of the most disgraced politicians. The voters, disgusted with the vastness of disclosed corruption, staked especially on *Forza Italia* (FI), a formation set up two months before the elections by the billionaire tycoon Silvio Berlusconi; they also supported the forces enjoying the opinion of anti-system parties like the Northern League (*Lega Nord,* LN) using federalist slogans and not excluding the dissolution of the Italian state, and the National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*, AN) based on the neo-fascist MSI-DN. Post-communists were the only party of the traditional system to survive politically, yet this was possible only due to the fact that with no participation in central authorities they were safe from major scandals. Berlusconi achieved a success unprecedented in a state with established democratic regime. He made a party which after but two months of existence won the election with the highest share of votes (21 per cent) and the largest number of MPs.[27]

The elections of 1994 are considered a turning point opening a new period in the history of Italy. This found reflection in the naming convention: it was said that the First Italian Republic was replaced by the Second Italian Republic. This naming convention, however, was exaggerated and did not find support in facts. Although parties that had governed the country

[27] Interesting material on the establishment of *Forza Italia* and the campaign ran by the group before the elections of 1994 can be found in Emanuela Poli in the book entitled *Forza Italia. Strutture, leadership e radicamento territoriale* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2001), 43–71. See also Ginsborg, *L'Italia del tempo presente*, 538–56.

continually since the end of the Second World War were removed from the government, despite many attempts no significant constitutional changes were effectuated, and therefore the system remained what it used to be.

In the 1990s the cracks in the construction of the Italian state appeared for the first time on such a scale that was major and perceptible. The danger of Balkanisation of Italy due to the multiplication of internal conflicts and emphasising the opposition of individual parts of the state began to loom large. This process was related primarily to the activity of the ever more influential Northern League, which joined the club of the most important participants in Italian politics. The League called in question the integrity of the state as well as justification and advisability of further continuation of the Republic of Italy in its present form.

The Northern League, as Umberto Venturini correctly remarked, is the "most controversial political party of Italy".[28] The formation dates back to 1979, when unknown to anyone would-be physician, Umberto Bossi, established North-Western Union of Lombardy for Autonomy (in Italian – UNOLPA), which was soon transformed into Lombard Autonomist League (*Lega Lombarda*, LL) that was eventually replaced by the Northern League in 1991.[29] Bossi's grouping started as an organisation gathering Lombard separatists. The more moderate ones spoke of the need to ensure broad autonomy for Lombardy within federalised Italy, while the radicals openly put forth their idea to dissolve Italy and establish independent Lombardy. Bossi himself kept on playing angles and changing his mind, including either federalist or independence slogans into his programme. The League recognised as its patron Alberto da Guissano, a knight whose forces defeated the armies of Frederic Barbarossa at the Battle of Legnano in 1176. The ancient event was to be the source of *ethos* for the Lombards – a nation separate and clearly distinct from Italians. Later, the Celtic origin of Lombards was strongly emphasised.[30] This was accompanied by the feeding of the antagonism between the North and the South. Nowadays, the League proclaimed, the Lombard nation is forced to defend its own history, culture

[28] Umberto Venturini, "A Biographical Profile of Three Emerging Leaders: Mario Segni – Giorgio La Malfa – Umberto Bossi", *Italian Journal. A Bi-Monthly Digest of Italian Affairs* No. 2–3 (1992): 15.

[29] The genesis and operation of the Lombard Autonomist League are appropriately characterised by Daniele Vimercati in the book entitled *I lombardi alla nuova crociata. La Lega dall'esordio al trionfo* (Milano: Mursia, 1990).

[30] See Guido Caldiron, *La destra plurale* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2001), 62–63.

and language, and social and moral values in the hard strife against the aliens, including Italians, especially those from the South. For that reason, the national identity of the Lombards must be stirred up so as to develop among them a sense of community on one hand, and a feeling of otherness – if not superiority over aliens on the other. One of the League's manifestos said: "It does not matter how old you are, what you do and what political tendency you follow. The only thing important is the fact that you are – that we are – Lombards."[31] Here we deal with a specific sacralisation of the Lombard nation, considered in plain words better than others. Ostensible manifestation of hostility towards outsiders brought the charges of racism against the League. In his analysis, Luigi Manconi referred to the League's activists as to the "entrepreneurs active in the field of intolerance".[32] Bossi realised that his faction was perceived as racist and populist. "They say," he wrote in his autobiography, "that I am closely related to Jean-Marie Le Pen, and that the League is the voice of the racist Lombardy."[33] He would, however, stalwartly oppose such a classification, claiming that he turned the attention to the rights of Lombardy and its people not for racist or populist but for federalist reasons, for it was the federalism that formed – he believed – the core of the League's programme. Moreover, Bossi disagreed with analogies made between him and Mussolini. He would argue that the similarities were none, especially that unlike Mussolini who "marched on Rome" he would lead a "march from Rome".[34] His "march from Rome" was to be the symbol of the federalist and decentralist option of the League.

The League has always been perceived as a group making reference to the regional nationalism, criticising what they believed to be the centralised Italian state and its institutions, controlled by, to quote verbatim, "Roman parties".[35] It was not, however, only an anti-party and anti-institutional group; it went further: it was an anti-system formation, if not an anti-state one. It did postulate, as has been mentioned above, abolishment of Italy by breaking the country into independent regions.

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[31] Quoted in Ilvo Diamanti, *La Lega* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 1993), 56.

[32] Luigi Manconi, "Imprenditori dell'intolleranza", in *I razzismi reali*, ed. Laura Balbo and Luigi Manconi (Milano: Rizzoli, 1992), 82–87.

[33] Umberto Bossi and Daniele Vimercati, *Vento dal Nord. La mia Lega, la mia vita* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer Editori, 1992), 143.

[34] Daniele Vimercati, "La storia", in *La Rivoluzione. La Lega: storie e idee*, ed. Umberto Bossi and Daniele Vimercati (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer Editori, 1993), 109.

[35] See Gianni Statera, *Come votano gli italiani. Dal bipartitismo imperfetto alla crisi del sistema politico* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer Editori, 1993), 52.

The League's radicalism climaxed in mid 1990s. On 15 September 1996, in Venice, in the presence of 20,000 supporters, Bossi announced the independence of Padania: a new sovereign state to encompass northern and central Italy, namely the Aosta Valley, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli – Venezia Giulia, Liguria, Lombardy, Marche, Piedmont, Tuscany, Trident – Upper Adige, Umbria, and Veneto. Neither the Padan State nor any other political construct of a similar character has ever existed. The name of Padania was devised by Bossi himself, as he assumed that there exists historical, cultural and socio-economical identity of the "people of the Po valley".[36] The Padanian Declaration of Independence was modelled on the 1776 American Declaration of Independence. "We, the nations of Padania," it reads, "solemnly announce: Padania is a federalist, independent, and sovereign Republic."[37] After the declaration, the Italian flag went down the mast and was replaced with the green and white flag of Padania. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, then the President of Italy, warned Bossi that although the Italian state guaranteed its citizens freedom of speech, it could not tolerate illegal acts. A criminal case against Bossi and other leaders of the League was considered. It was finally rejected as the support for independence of Padania turned out to be marginal (only 7 per cent of Italian citizens declared support for the idea of independent Padania). With the passage of time, the initiative turned into a political peculiarity. After a few years the Northern League underwent another political evolution, calmed down, and without official repudiation of the idea of independent Padania, began announcing that it actually would aim at the federalisation of Italy. What is more, the political success of the League was over, as it went down in the polls. Progressive weakness of the League enforced both smaller dynamism in its operation and decreasing the radicalism of professed views. An expression of this moderate strategy was the League's participation in the Berlusconi's governmental alliance in 2001.

The League persistently maintained that the political system of Italy is based on the exploitation of the North by the South. The rich and industrious North produces the decided majority of the GNP, which to a great extent is wasted by the poor and lazy South. Why is it so? The League's answer is simple: because the state is governed by Southerners connected to the mafia.

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[36] See Bruno Vespa, *La sfida* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer Editori, 1998), 254.
[37] Quoted in Miłada Jędrysik, "Narodziny Padanii", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 16 September 1996.

Turning the attention to the strangeness between the entirely different Italian North and the Italian South, the League touched a real problem. Exposing it, it could count on being understood and, what follows, many supporting votes in the north of the country where – following the League's opinion – people began to be accustomed to the idea of dismemberment of Italy, and if it did occur, they considered that their standard of life would greatly improve nearly automatically.

A research recently conducted in Italy proved that if the South became a separate country, it would be the poorest EU state in terms of *per capita* GDP – unemployment in the region is the highest in the EU. On the other hand, the North would stand a realistic chance to obtain the title of the EU's richest state. It is a fact that there is an economic gap between the two halves of the country; this fact disgraces the Italian state, which for decades either did not want or was simply unable to bridge this gap.

Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, an Italian analyst, is right to notice that one of the key reasons for the success of the Northern League had its source in the fact that the Italian state has never solved the national question.[38] This was manifested in the lack of ability to unite really North and South, because the economic, social, cultural, and mental differences between these parts of the country are very drastic. In effect it may be considered amazing that they remain within the same state organism. Beyond doubt, the question considered here is the gravest disgrace of Italian statehood.

Summing up, the ideology and operation of the Northern League reflect the basic tragedies of Italy, whose roots reach back to the period of the country's fragmentation. For the League referred to the separatism, always present on the peninsula, which was hostile to the heritage of *Risorgimento*: the nineteenth century movement of restoration and unification of the country. That sort of separatism continues to exist and from time to time still makes itself known. In the 1990s a sufficient space opened for separatism in connection with a marked crisis in Italian national identity. For centuries Italy was divided, both politically and culturally. The unified Italian state originated fairly recently, only in the latter half of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century, the powerful impact of integration processes in Europe, globalisation and supra-national

[38] Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, "Leadership, Ideology, and Anti-European Politics in the Italian Lega Nord", in *Challenges to Consensual Politics. Democracy, Identity, and Populist Protest in the Alpine Region*, ed. Daniele Caramani and Yves Mény (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2005), 115–16.

economic and financial mechanisms, as well as the influence of mass culture and prevalence of consumer lifestyle strongly influenced the decaying of traditional myths and national values. This process was especially visible in Italy, where the state's founding myth proved rather weak.

The example of the League kindled the imagination of other Italian separatists, who wanted to follow the path it provided. Supporters of the restitution of the Republic of Venice turned up and hung their flags on the Doges' Palace. In Rome, the aficionados of the restitution of the Papal States, with the Pope being its king and sovereign, began to be active. The voices of enthusiasm for the Kingdom of Sicily and the Bourbon Dynasty were heard, while Sardinia disclosed ranks of advocates of the island's independence. None of these movements, however, became popular; they have never gone beyond the role of political curiosities, not even venturing into the margins of true politics. Yet politics, and especially that of the time of crises and turning points, provides numerous examples of curiosities suddenly turning into significant facts that influence the course of history.

Some time ago, Pietro Scoppola remarked that "there is a paradox in the history of the republic: normally, the sense of citizenship and the group identity related thereto are reinforced by a democratic system; the implementation of civil, political, and social rights consolidates the common sense and perception of belonging. Yet in our country, after fifty years of democracy, national identity enters a crisis".[39] Various drawbacks of Italian democracy, such as the weakness of state institutions and lack of efficiency, failure to bridge the division between the North and the South, partocracy, clientelism, and corruption turned out to be highly destructive for the national conscience, as they alienated the state from the society and strengthened the conviction that it is an alien structure. Democratic and republican post-war Italian state wasted its opportunity to play the role of the factor finally and irreversibly reinforcing national identity. Gian Enrico Rusconi went even further in his radical diagnosis, when he warned that the "nation may cease to exist".[40] These opinions were formed in the heyday years of the political crisis of the 1990s, the crisis that shook the foundations of the state. It was feared that many people might reject Italian national identity for a local or European identity. While the Northern League and other political initiatives of similar character promoted the first trend, the die-hard

[39] Scoppola, *La repubblica dei partiti*, 528.
[40] Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Se cessiamo di essere una nazione* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1993), 7.

Eurocentrists suggested the latter. The most pessimistic predictions did not come true. There has been no *finis Italiae*, which does not, on the other hand, mean that Italian national identity came victorious from the dire straits, coping both with the separatism and with the demise of the party system.

At present, Italians still must struggle with the question whether they indeed are a nation, and if so, whether they still should be one. Although the majority gives a positive answer to this question, this majority includes a large number of those who first define themselves in the categories of regional or local affiliation, and only later in the categories of national affiliation. The Italian regional variety is incomparably greater than in any other European country.[41] Ernesto Galli della Loggia noticed another factor here, "the weak Italian national awareness, i.e. the insufficient awareness of the fact that Italians are to be a nation and the rare situations when they do manifest their being a nation, is a central and highly significant fact for the contemporary Italian identity".[42] If it is so, then the task of building the Italian nation has indeed not yet been accomplished.

[41] Cf. Saverio Vertone, ed., *La cultura degli italiani* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1994), 93; Salvatore Sechi, ed., *Deconstructing Italy: Italy in the Nineties* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 3.
[42] Ernesto Galli della Loggia, *L'identità italiana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1998), 157.