

# THE ITALIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: AN “ABNORMAL” SEMESTER?

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On 1 July 2003, Italy assumed for the seventh time the presidency of the European Union. The previous Italian presidency was held during the first semester of 1996 under the leadership of Romano Prodi. For various reasons, which will be explored in the first section of this chapter, the role of the presidency of the EU has been of great political importance not only in Europe but also on domestic and international levels. Every member state has, in its own history, experienced an EU presidency that was more or less successful and that helped build its European reputation. Beyond producing effective reports, the previous six Italian presidencies contributed to the construction of the image of a country that, although politically weak, identified strongly with the values and objectives of European integration. The 1996 presidency, marked by salient issues such as the start of intergovernmental negotiations that led to the Treaty of Amsterdam, growth and employment, and preparation for monetary union, had even managed to increase Italy's European credibility.

The 2003 presidency evolved in very different conditions, largely linked to the political anomaly embodied by Silvio Berlusconi. Domestic Italian politics had already worked their way onto the European agenda during the discussion of a “European arrest warrant,”

which was blocked for a long time by the Italian government in an attempt to exclude corruption from the list of prosecutable crimes; it has yet to be translated into Italian law. Another instance was the campaign launched by Italian newspapers close to the prime minister against Romano Prodi for the sale of the agro-food business SME and for the acquisition of Telekom Serbia. It is not surprising, then, that the chancelleries and newspapers across the EU were worried about the risk of a Europeanization of the conflict of interest that has characterized Italian politics for some time. At the end of April 2003, the cover of the liberal British weekly *The Economist* claimed that “Berlusconi cannot speak for the European Union: he is not fit to lead Europe,” while the German *Der Spiegel*, in a prominent story, called the prime minister “the Godfather.” Many conservative newspapers focused attention on ethical issues, on the anomaly of the conflict of interest that was still unresolved, or on the law approved by Parliament to guarantee immunity for holders of selected offices. It was unprecedented for European public opinion to debate and evaluate whether a rotating president was fit to represent Europeans.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, the second risk was an Italianization of European politics in the wake of the personal confrontation between Romano Prodi and Silvio Berlusconi, both sitting presidents and key political adversaries in Italy. The Italian semester raised two other motives for unease linked to this crucial phase in EU history: first, the divisions caused by the war in Iraq, which saw Italy align itself with the United States and Great Britain against two traditional partners, France and Germany, and, second, the commitment to bring to a positive conclusion the work of the Intergovernmental Conference that was to examine the draft Constitution prepared by the European Convention.

For many reasons, then, the Italian semester appeared as a veritable challenge for Berlusconi, surpassing by a wide margin the difficulties that are normally expected during a European presidency. Nevertheless, in the face of rampant skepticism, fed by an erratic Italian foreign policy, amateurism, and continuous improvisation at the top levels, the presidency also offered the Italian prime minister an opportunity to gain European legitimacy. It was a difficult challenge but not an impossible one if addressed seriously, that is, by respecting the European rules.

Informed by these premises, the following discussion is divided into three sections. The first briefly traces some of the key points from the conceptual literature on the European presidency. The second describes some of the events that highlighted the semester. Finally, the third section analyzes the government’s performance in a few key areas of particular importance for Italy.

## **The Rules for a European Presidency**

The presidency of the European Council (and of the Council of Ministers) has been defined as, “one of the central institutional actors in the negotiating game of the Union.”<sup>2</sup> A European presidency is always a bearer of expectations and demands that involve both particular and general interests of member states, including those of the incumbent. For this reason, the member state directly involved tries to draw the greatest advantage from “its” semester.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, European governments have looked to the presidency as an ideal opportunity to gain some recognition and political prestige among not only its domestic public but also its European partners, and on the international level as well. However, in order to be credible, the commitment must respect a range of unwritten rules; above all, the constraints that characterize a presidency do not allow for partisan preferences or unilateral positions. Whether it is a large or small state, the mark of success for a presidency is judged by whether it assumes a leadership role, as well as its capacity to mediate diverse interests. Certainly, priorities are largely determined by the European agenda, by proposals put forward by the Commission, and, often, by unexpected factors. Even if the presidency does not have formal powers to propose initiatives, this does not mean that it cannot influence the setting of priorities and exclude or even block some issues in relation to its own socio-economic, geo-strategic, or constitutional preferences.<sup>4</sup> In any case, by definition all presidencies are interested in success and, therefore, in creating its necessary conditions. This rational attitude is particularly true for governments that assume the presidency for the first time; normally, they seek to assume the role of “good European,” avoiding risks that might lead to a bad reputation. This tendency was witnessed in the recent cases of Britain and Sweden, two countries normally lumped in the group of Euro-skeptics.

One of the most important issues in a European presidency is the capacity to manage, in an extremely brief period of time, a European agenda that is always richer and more complex and that has significant co-ordination costs, especially for smaller member states. Additional challenges may be found in bringing to a conclusion issues left open by the previous presidency or in having to respond in a timely fashion to new problems. It is expected that the presidency assumes, in concert with the other institutions, a pro-active role in the overall leadership of European affairs. The presidency, then, must take into account the institutional, geographic, and political balance that has been the basis of European integration; hence, the importance of the capacity for leadership, mediation, and aggregation among the different institutions

and member states. Beyond ideological differences, the president of the Council, as head of one of the two branches of the European executive, must work in concert with the president of the Commission to avoid damaging the overall reputation of the Union. In a decision-making system based on qualified majorities, yet still imbued with the culture of unanimity, the Council presidency's mediation is a fundamental condition for the construction of consensus. More recently, as a result of institutional reform in the Treaty of Nice, it has become apparent that it is harder for the incumbent to mediate among different member states while protecting its own interests. It is this series of challenges that led the Seville summit of the European Council (June 2002) to approve a reform of the presidency that would see the election of a president for a mandate of two and a half years that was renewable only once. The proposal was essentially presented anew to the work of the Convention and was part of the constitutional draft considered by the Intergovernmental Conference that opened in Rome in October 2003.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the presidency assumes an increasing list of tasks related to the external representation of the EU, especially in the areas of the European Common Foreign and Security Policy, defense, justice, and home affairs (terrorism, immigration, crime, human rights), and in multilateral negotiations (G8, WTO, UN). It is generally accepted that the incumbent will privilege some issues that have traditionally been priorities in its own foreign policy. However, the presidency must always act in concert with the other partners and the supra-national institutions for strictly political reasons (that is, the strategic interests of the other member states) and for institutional balance, and simply because of a division of powers with other institutions (namely the Commission).

### **An “Abnormal” Presidency**

As predicted, blunders, misunderstandings, polemics, and even diplomatic incidents marked the Italian presidency, which generated a great deal of discontent in various European capitals and within the arena of public opinion. Let us examine some of the salient events and controversies.

#### *The Anti-Prodi Campaign*

If, as we have seen, one of the main priorities of a European presidency is to reinforce the prestige and, indirectly, the general interests

of the member state holding it, then Berlusconi did not take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the presence of a fellow countryman at the head of the European Commission. Romano Prodi, interested in preserving his institutional neutrality, initially offered a cease-fire that aimed to guarantee collaboration between the two presidencies in the name of common interests. However, this was interpreted as a sign of weakness and, therefore, as a golden opportunity to erode the Ulivo leader's image not only domestically but also in Europe at the expense of the Commission. The *Cavaliere* Berlusconi did not spare any attacks on his adversary, beginning with various campaigns led by his own newspapers against the president of the Commission: the first attacked Prodi's role in the sale of SME and the Cirio affair, and then his acquisition of Telekom Serbia. It is difficult to find a precedent for this in the history of the EU.

A number of other episodes besides these campaigns made clear the difficulties that Berlusconi faced in assuming his institutional responsibilities in the EU. A few examples will suffice to underline this point. At the opening of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC), which was the first summit of the semester, the prime minister ignored all protocol and did not give the floor to Prodi. The French and German delegations protested against the slight, and Berlusconi was forced to have the president of the Commission give the concluding remarks as "a sign of respect." Prodi was accused by Palazzo Chigi of "foul play" and of striking a low blow against the prime minister after he distanced the Commission from Berlusconi's comments on human rights in Chechnya during an EU-Russia summit. Forza Italia called for him to resign so that he could conduct a proper election campaign. Another confrontation emerged when Prodi entered into the domestic fray with the publication of a political manifesto calling for the unity of the left in the 2004 European Parliament elections. The initiative, deemed inopportune by the center-right in the European Parliament but legitimate by the center-left, was heavily criticized by the Casa delle Libertà. It was seen as an unacceptable interference in domestic affairs and led to more calls for Prodi's resignation in the middle of the Italian semester. Prodi, who had not bothered to inform other members of the Commission, saw it simply as a personal reflection on the immediate challenges facing the Union.

### *The Institutional Crisis*

The semester began with a sensational political and diplomatic incident. On 2 July, while presenting the program for the Italian presidency before the European Parliament, Berlusconi deeply insulted

Martin Schulz, the German MEP and vice-president of the Socialist parliamentary group. Responding to Schulz's questioning on the anti-immigration policies of his coalition partner, Umberto Bossi, as well as on the immunity law then being approved in the Italian Parliament, the international rogatory being blocked by Justice Minister Castelli, and on his own legal problems, Berlusconi called Schulz a "Nazi prison guard." The outburst unleashed an institutional storm. Enrique Baron, the head of the Socialist group, argued that Berlusconi had started a crisis by offending Parliament. Pat Cox, the president of the European Parliament and member of the Liberal group, declared his support and sympathy for the German MEP and claimed that a "sense of grave offense was felt by all parliamentarians when hearing Berlusconi's words." Later that evening, after Vice-Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini had distanced himself from Berlusconi's actions,<sup>6</sup> the prime minister apologized: "This morning, in the face of grave accusations and provocation, I did not respond to words such as 'mafioso,' 'thief,' 'Godfather,' and calls for me to be sent to the gallows. I replied to Schulz, who made me smile, and I replied with an ironic joke. I am sorry—it pains me, and I ask forgiveness. But we will not succumb to the usual ploy of the left to make a big deal by using this event against me, the country, or even you."<sup>7</sup> The European Socialists considered Berlusconi's apology too vague. In addition to insulting the victims of fascism and Nazism, Berlusconi's comments were seen as an insult to the very principles of democracy. In the absence of a formal apology, the Socialists intended to have the matter at the top of the agenda at the extraordinary EU Council, that is, the one that would open the IGC on the Constitution.

It was inevitable that the episode would have diplomatic repercussions. German Chancellor Schröder demanded, on the same day, a formal apology, and the Italian ambassador in Berlin was summoned by the German government when Berlusconi refused. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer added: "It is obvious that Berlusconi should apologize for the sake of German-Italian relations." But the apology never arrived. Rather, the Italian Foreign Ministry summoned the German ambassador to complain of the "grave and unacceptable insult to the prime minister's dignity and that of Italian and European institutions." It was only after being summoned to the Quirinal Palace by the president of the Republic that Berlusconi was able to re-establish contact with Schröder, who could now call the matter closed.

However, the episode was reopened soon after by the Undersecretary for Tourism, the Northern League's Stefano Stefani, with an open letter in his party's daily newspaper, *La Padania*. In addition to unkind jokes at MEP Schulz's expense, Stefani said: "We know the

Germans well—these stereotypical blondes with ultra-nationalist pride,” who “noisily invade our beaches”; and he proposed to subject them to a “rightful and necessary intelligence test.”<sup>8</sup> As might be expected, the undersecretary’s blunder had an immediate impact in Germany, including the cancellation of the chancellor’s traditional holiday in Italy.<sup>9</sup> Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, probably thinking about the 10 million Germans tourists who visit Italy each year, was forced to enter into the fray and called Stefani’s remarks gratuitous, claiming that they did not represent the opinion of the Italian government. Nevertheless, the entire mess with the German government had a paradoxical effect. It drew attention away from the real accusation made by the German MEP: that Berlusconi used his parliamentary majority to put himself above the law.

### *Chechnya and Human Rights*

In addition to encouraging the stabilization of the Balkans, the Italian presidency considered giving “concrete content” to relations with the Russian Federation as a foreign policy priority. The EU-Russia summit was held in Rome at the beginning of November, and once again the prime minister, in the guise of European president, caused a political scandal during a press conference. When asked about the situation in Chechnya, Berlusconi acted as legal counsel for Russian President Vladimir Putin. He argued that the human rights abuses by the Russian troops cited by the press, various governments, and international organizations were the stuff of make-believe. There was no reason to worry, he continued, as 80 percent of voters in a referendum had decided “democratically to be part of the Russian Federation.” It was a situation analogous to the one in Italy where, according to the prime minister, “85 percent of the press was opposed to or criticized the government in power.” As for the case of the petroleum company Yukos and its jailed chief executive, Mikhail Khodorkovski, considered by the EU as a negative step in the development of a favorable climate for investors in Russia and criticized by the US government, Berlusconi saw it simply as “the will to maintain the rule of law and market freedom.”<sup>10</sup>

The European authorities present at the summit tried to restore a serious tone to the discussion in the midst of general astonishment. While Prodi took his distance and expressed the Union’s continuing concern for the Chechen situation, EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana repeated the importance of the respect for the rule of law in the Yukos affair. EU Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten also complained

about the Italian prime minister's statement. He claimed: "If we all agree on a position, we must defend it."<sup>11</sup> In Brussels, the General Affairs and External Relations Council criticized the handling of the summit. Many European ministers were demonstrably irritated by the fact that, contrary to majority positions established during the preparatory meeting, the summit's final communiqué left out key points on Chechnya and the Kyoto protocol while emphasizing "common values." Minister Frattini had to reassure his colleagues by claiming that, in any case, the EU position remained unchanged.

Nonetheless, in the wake of the summit, the European Parliament approved a resolution presented by the PPE, the Socialists, the ELDR, Greens, and Communists that deplored the "statements made by the incumbent president of the European Council at the end of the EU-Russia summit in which he expressed his personal opinion with regard to the state of human rights in Chechnya and democracy in the Russian Federation." It went on to say that the Chechen conflict "could not be explained merely as a war against terrorism." The European Parliament highlighted on numerous occasions the violation of human rights in Chechnya and the lack of a political route to peace. The Human Rights Committee published, on the same day, a report on the situation in Chechnya in which it referred to summary executions, torture, and the disappearance of numerous individuals.

There was no lack of harsh reaction in the European press. "An embarrassment for Europe" was how *Le Monde* described Putin's visit to Rome and Berlusconi's remarks. It added: "The head of the Italian government, who will preside over the EU until the end of the year, does not present the position of the members of the Union; and the positions he defends embarrass us." It also took issue with the governments of the member states that did not stigmatize Berlusconi's comments in order to avoid bothering the Kremlin leader. For the *Financial Times*, Berlusconi acted like Putin's personal adviser, undermining European unity. *El Pais* underlined the end of European consensus on Chechnya, while *Le Figaro* described the Italian prime minister's press conference as an "astonishing and surrealistic happening." It is worth noting that the program of the Italian presidency aspired to a Europe that was a "factor for democracy, peace, and well-being in the world, confirming its vocation to systematically promote the values of democracy, freedom, and the respect of fundamental rights."

### *Sharon's Wall*

Another crisis occurred in mid-November 2003, during the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon with Berlusconi in his role as president of

the EU Council. The presidency program highlighted “the timeliness of consolidating relations with Israel in the hope of wider and more structured reciprocal collaboration.” It also recalled the initiative by the Italian government—“widely supported most recently by the G8”—for a plan to reconstruct the Palestinian economy. However, in a visit to the Middle East in mid-June, Berlusconi had refused to meet Yassir Arafat, the president of the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli government saw in Berlusconi its closest European ally and greatly appreciated his position, which was contrary to that of the EU. On 17 October 2003, a declaration at the end of a meeting of the EU heads of state and government encouraged Arafat and the Palestinian Authority to “take immediate energetic measures” against terrorism; however, at the same time, it claimed that the security wall being built by Israel rendered peace with the Palestinians impossible. It would “run the risk of prejudicing future negotiations, making it materially impossible to realize a solution based on the co-existence of two states.” A few days later, the General Assembly of the United Nations condemned the construction of the wall with only four contrary votes: Israel, the United States, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia. Criticism also came from Pope John Paul II: “The Middle East does not need walls, it needs bridges.” Nevertheless, the Israeli government ignored the statements made by the international community and reaffirmed its intention of going ahead with the construction of the wall.

Beyond the tensions stemming from Israel’s continued disrespect toward the EU, the meeting between Sharon and Berlusconi was conditioned by the results of a Eurobarometer poll on the dangers to world peace.<sup>12</sup> Israel was cited by 59 percent of respondents as a major threat to peace, followed by Iran, North Korea, and the United States (with 53 percent), Iraq (52 percent), Afghanistan (50 percent) and Pakistan (48 percent). At the same time, 81 percent of Europeans polled wanted the EU to assume a major commitment in the peace process in the Middle East, with Greeks (90 percent) and Italians (89 percent) registering most favorably. With respect to these survey results, it needs to be recalled that the Israeli government had refused to accredit the EU’s special envoy to the Middle East, Ambassador Marc Otte, an act deemed unacceptable by Brussels.<sup>13</sup>

The survey, denounced by Israel as an anti-Semitic attack, put European officials in an embarrassing position, starting with the Italian presidency. A press release by Palazzo Chigi stated that the Italian prime minister had made known to Sharon that the survey questions were “misleading,” adding that he was convinced that the opinions expressed in the survey did not reflect the position Europeans held on the question of Israel. The close political harmony

between Sharon and Berlusconi was revealed by the press release after the Rome meeting. It affirmed, among other things, that “Israel has the right to employ whatever measures necessary for the security of its citizens against terrorist attacks,” including the construction of the wall. The Israeli leader asked Berlusconi to assume the defense of Israel against further anti-Semitic attacks; Berlusconi confirmed that he would continue his policy of “moderation and balance” toward the Middle East and that he would challenge with the “utmost diligence” anti-Semitic sentiments.

### **The Semester Agenda**

The Italian presidency based its mandate on five main themes: the Intergovernmental Conference; “Economic Europe”; progress toward the “Grand Europe”; Europe’s presence in the world; and citizen security. Three of these themes directly involved the Italian government. Economic Europe held out the possibility of additional financing for grand but long dormant infra-structure projects, which had been part of the center-right government’s program. The Grand Europe theme referred primarily to the strengthening of Mediterranean relations in light of the upcoming eastward enlargement. Finally, citizen security dealt with two issues of central importance to Italy: terrorism and immigration.

#### *The Intergovernmental Conference (IGC)*

While the handling of an IGC represents one of the most important responsibilities that might be assumed by a member state, the Italian case was especially important, as it was to consider approval of a constitution drafted by the European Convention. It is worth noting the novel features of the Convention in terms of both representation and its method of work. The Convention brought together, in public meetings held from February 2002 to June 2003, government representatives from the member and candidate states, delegates from national parliaments and from the European Parliament and Commission, and observers from other EU institutions. The various proposals were considered on a consensual basis through a deliberative process. There is no comparison, then, with the usual IGC composed of diplomats and government experts, leaving citizens in the dark and deciding by unanimity.

Guided by the Italian government, the IGC’s work began, unlike previous occasions, with a constitutional project centered on the

construction of a supra-national democracy that could evolve along one of two possible scenarios: either the IGC accepted the draft, offering only minor amendments, or the governments could decide to substantially change the delicate balance that had been reached in the Convention. The second possibility would set off a crisis without precedent in the history of European integration, putting in danger enlargement and the proper functioning of the institutions. Making matters worse would be the unstoppable wave of Euro-pessimism that would surely result.

The IGC opened in Rome on 4 October with a special summit of the heads of state and government, followed by a meeting of ministers of foreign affairs. From the start, the dissent of various governments that was heard during the Convention made its way to the negotiating table: the inclusion of Europe's "Christian roots" (Poland, Spain, Ireland, Italy); the definition of "qualified majority" (Spain, Poland); the composition of the Commission (the smaller member states); the powers of the European minister of external affairs (Britain); and defense policy (Spain, Britain). All member states, with the exception of Germany, declared themselves as decisively opposed to the Convention's federalist proposal to concentrate legislative powers for various policy sectors in a single Legislative Affairs Council. As noted by Mendez Vigo (PPE), one of the European Parliament observers to the IGC: "There is a sense of frustration because the spirit of the Convention has been lost, and I fear that all of the issues will be reopened to debate. The presidency has already collected more than 150 amendments, and the worst thing is that they all aim to weaken the constitutional text."<sup>14</sup>

At the regular summit held in Brussels on 17 October 2003, the points of contention remained firm and the passive stance of the Italian government became a cause for concern. Commissioner Michel Barnier deplored the fact that the IGC had simply "summarized national positions without starting discussions." Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, speaking to reporters, was heavily critical of the Italian government's method of work, stating "Today's meeting didn't present any real added value" and "Nothing new or, even less so, innovative, emerged from today's discussion, even if the presidency claims to have discovered differently." For his part, Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt expressed his frustration with the organization of the debate, calling the Italian approach "sterile."<sup>15</sup> The Italian negotiators, in an attempt to prevent the IGC from becoming an unmanageable auction and to regain control of the situation, drafted a document to present to a "conclave," or informal meeting, of foreign ministers prior to the December European Council. This

meeting would have been the last opportunity during the semester to reach a political agreement on the future constitution.

The conclave, presided by Foreign Minister Frattini, met at the end of November in Naples to discuss proposals prepared by the Italian presidency. The meeting was still feeling the repercussions of the prior meeting of the Ecofin Council, held a few days earlier, at which the European economic ministers decided with a qualified majority to suspend the Commission's sanctions against France and Germany for violating deficit targets. Spain, the Netherlands, Austria, and Finland had voted against suspension. To the surprise of many, the conclave was able to untangle a number of important institutional knots. On the question of the size of the Commission, the larger member states did not oppose the idea of having a single commissioner for each member (instead of a Commission for 15 members), nor of raising the minimum number of MEPs for small states from four to "five or six." The agreement on a Commission of 25, each with the right to vote, rather than the 15 in the Convention draft, served to temper testy relations between large and small member states. Moreover, the Italian presidency was able to satisfy the British demand to maintain veto rights in fiscal and social policy matters. Negotiators from the Italian Foreign Ministry, then, had been able to find pragmatic solutions to key issues.

The most controversial problem remained the voting system in an enlarged Europe. Spain and Poland confirmed their opposition to the plan for a double majority—50 percent of member states, representing 60 percent of the Union population—called for by the Convention. Increasingly isolated in their position, the two governments stated their support for the formula established in the Treaty of Nice, which was much more favorable to their interests.<sup>16</sup> The Italian presidency did not see the need to prepare an alternative formula, given that the majority of member states supported the Convention formula, seen as "simple, efficient, and transparent."<sup>17</sup> This generated severe criticism from the representatives for Berlusconi's close ally, Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar.<sup>18</sup> The United Kingdom, ever faithful to its tradition of pragmatism, proposed to simply drop the question from the Constitution until the provisions in the Nice treaty expired in 2008. The apparent passivity of the Italian negotiators led the European Parliament to seek its own solution by approving, with a large majority, a resolution that would have given more weight to Spain in exchange for support for the double majority. Nevertheless, on the eve of the semester's last summit, the Italian prime minister, whose position on the division of powers within the Union was increasingly closer to that of Schröder and French President Jacques Chirac, stated that he preferred

“not having an agreement at the imminent European Council in Brussels rather than a compromise that would have rendered the EU ungovernable.”<sup>19</sup> Spain and Poland were isolated more than ever as five of the six founding members (France, Germany, and the Benelux) threatened to form a hard core that would go ahead with integration if a veto were to be used on the Constitution.

The hopes of drafting a European Constitution during the last Council of the Italian semester foundered on the issue of a double majority voting system. Total disagreement on this issue made the European Constitution simply an unrealizable project. Berlusconi, who “had never seen so much applause for a European presidency that had achieved results that were not entirely positive,” had three alternative proposals at the eleventh hour: retain the Nice agreement (contrary to the views of a large majority); continue with Nice until 2014; defer a decision until 2009.<sup>20</sup> The prime minister did not express a preference for any of the three. The “grand solution” or “miracle” that Berlusconi claimed he had in his pocket never materialized. France and Germany opposed any suggestion of a deferral that would have left the Nice provisions in place. Spain and Poland (which was not yet a member of the Union) were contrary to any form of double majority. Despite the failure on the Constitution, Berlusconi highlighted with great emphasis the results of his presidency, pointing out the four months of toil he had had to endure. As a consolation prize, he was able to bring to Parma the headquarters of the European Food Safety Agency at the expense of Spain (Barcelona) and Finland (Helsinki).<sup>21</sup>

At the summit press conference, Chirac appealed to the founding members, repeating his call for strengthened co-operation among a “pioneer group” of member states who wanted to accelerate integration in some sectors. Berlusconi, however, immediately expressed Italy’s opposition to the proposal. Nevertheless, consensus was reached “beyond all expectations” on a common defense policy: Britain, France, and Germany signed an agreement calling for structured co-operation.<sup>22</sup> In practice, this means that some of the 25 members of the Union will more rapidly adopt agreements in the area of defense and will commit to reciprocal protection. However, the alternative proposed by Italy eliminated any reference to “mutual defense” and, above all, emphasized that any commitments made by the member states must take into account “commitments assumed within NATO, which remains the basis for collective security.” It has yet to be decided where to locate the European headquarters, with Germany, France, and Belgium vying to host it, while the United States remains reticent over the issue. Moreover, the British position

is unchanged despite its opposition to qualified majority voting for foreign policy.

### *Economic Europe and Transportation Networks*

The Italian program for the presidency promised maximum attention to the pursuit of the objectives set out in the Lisbon Strategy, which aims to give Europe the most competitive economy in the world by 2010. The banner “Economic Europe” was to include all of the major issues on the agendas of member states: modernization of labor markets, promotion of entrepreneurship, creation and diffusion of knowledge and innovation, and sustainability of pensions. The central point in this strategy was public investment, aided by the appropriate European financial institutions, especially the European Investment Bank. It relied heavily on the development of trans-European transportation networks (TEN) that were hoped for by the Union.<sup>23</sup> Along these lines, it is worth recalling that in the 2001 election campaign, Berlusconi had promised to bring forward a plan of “great works”: from motorways to ports, from airports to the famous bridge across the Strait of Messina. The realization of such projects has encountered continual financial and even administrative obstacles that have been difficult to overcome.

In practice, the Italian presidency included among its priorities the European Initiative for Growth, which was prepared by the Commission in the wake of the “Van Miert” report requested by the Salonica summit (June 2003) and which was to be discussed at the December 2003 Council meeting.<sup>24</sup> However, it seemed as if the Italian presidency wanted to take credit for the initiative; its Web site declared, at the end of the October Council in Brussels (16–18 October 2003), that “the Initiative for Growth promoted by the Italian presidency has received the full support of the heads of state and government.” At the press conference concluding the meeting, Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti claimed that “the Italian presidency has defined the technical and financial instruments that allow for words and research to become deeds.... It was the Italian presidency that presented the Initiative for Growth to the European Parliament. It was then examined in the Ecofin, and we thank the Commission for its support.” In his second appearance before the European Parliament, Berlusconi stated: “The Italian presidency had launched the Initiative as a priority at the start of the semester, and the Commission has supported and taken on this issue.” Prodi’s ironic response was that “the new baby has been well received, and the number of fathers is multiplying.”

### *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership*

The relaunch of Euro-Mediterranean co-operation was one of the priorities of the Italian presidency. The platform was the two-day Euromed ministerial meeting that brought together in Naples delegates from 37 countries. However, the meeting opened without the head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, who refused to attend in protest of Italy's supposed pro-Israeli position. Vice-Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini, in a prior visit to Israel, had said that the security wall under construction in the occupied territories was an "act of self-defense." A spokesperson for EU Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten said that Moussa's decision was "directed at Italy and not the European Union," while Minister Frattini once again repeated the EU's opposition to the construction of the wall. The meeting closed with two concrete results: the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly, a permanent consultative forum (with 240 parliamentary representatives from 37 countries), and the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, whose location has yet to be chosen (Rome is a candidate). On the other hand, the decision to create a Euro-Mediterranean bank, based in Naples, which the Italian government had proposed was postponed.

### *Security and Immigration*

The Italian presidency gave a strong commitment to strengthening the "security of European citizens" with a discourse that centered on three objectives: the war on international terrorism, transnational crime, and illegal immigration. The means to achieve this included the re-enforcement of EUROPOL, the constant and co-ordinated control of external borders, the definition of common rules for political exile, the intensification of collaboration with countries of origin and transit of migratory flows, and an improvement in co-operation of member states with respect to visas.

It is widely known that the question of immigration has occupied a central position on the political agenda of the Berlusconi government. It has been characterized by an ongoing polemic with Umberto Bossi's Northern League, especially after the National Alliance presented a legislative bill that aimed to give immigrants the right to vote in local elections. Other divisive issues include the call for the resignation of Interior Minister Giuseppe Pisanu for not applying the Fini-Bossi immigration law, as well as Bossi's statement of the "need for bombardments of immigrants that land on our shores."

Paradoxically, a few short weeks before the start of the semester, while the number of illegal arrivals was increasing, Berlusconi said he was convinced that Italy could contain the phenomenon because the situation in Italy was “probably the best in Europe with respect to the overall number of immigrants and their percentage as part of the total population.” The problem, then, was not high on the list of the government’s worries. Nonetheless, in the weeks that followed there were more than 100 deaths of illegal immigrants, and even more were lost in the Sicily Channel and off the shores of Lampedusa. Minister Pisanu held that it was the responsibility of Europe and Africa “to co-operate intensely to regulate migration and to battle the organizations that ruthlessly exploit the clandestine immigrants so as to bring an end to this enormous tragedy.” This required an acceleration of the development of European policies, from a European quota on family reunifications to the “Neptune” project for the shared patrol of borders.

The issue was addressed at the European Council in December. The Commission proposed the creation by 1 January 2005 of a European agency to manage operational co-ordination of borders. In addition, on the basis of a feasibility study carried out by the Commission, the Union adopted a package of measures to combat illegal immigration along maritime borders. With respect to helping countries trying to stem migration flows from their borders, the Italian government convened a meeting of the “Dialogue 5 + 5” group (Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Morocco, and Mauritania for the Maghreb countries; Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, and Malta for Europe) to discuss general principles on future security and co-operation in an area of strategic importance. The meeting’s final declaration emphasized the “importance of having the EU complement its enlargement with a parallel effort to attend to the countries of the western end of the southern coast of the Mediterranean.” However, the Italian presidency was not able to successfully conclude negotiations for the creation of a common regime for political exiles.

## Conclusion

The Italian semester, which had started with a political crisis and was marked by many incidents (such as the conflict with Prodi and the start of an inquiry by the European Parliament into freedom of the press in Italy), ended in a spectacular debacle. Despite the frenetic work by officials in various ministries, especially Foreign Affairs, the lasting impression is that of failure. The political qualities and personal

leadership necessary to carry out a successful presidency were missing under Berlusconi. What was defined by the prime minister, in the wake of the December Council, as “a triumph for Italy” was instead one of the most serious crises in the history of the EU. In short, the Italian presidency confirmed the most dire predictions, giving credence to arguments in favor of a more stable presidency. A final point for reflection is that the three protagonists of European paralysis—Berlusconi, Aznar, and Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller—were all promoters of the “Gang of Eight” letter in support of the Iraq war that has deeply divided the Union.

— Translated by Lynn Mastellotto

## Notes

1. In an interview with *Il Foglio* prior to presenting the Italian presidency program to the EU, Berlusconi provided a harsh reply to critics of the Italian semester in the foreign press: “No one is in a position to give moral lessons to the Italian government.... I cannot recall another incoming presidency that has received as much attention as the Italian one has in recent days.... The dignity and full representativeness of the Italian government in fulfilling its European duties is beyond discussion for all serious and objective people, that is, for the majority of observers and actors in European politics. *Il Foglio*, 1 July 2003.
2. O. Elgström, “Introduction,” in *European Union Council Presidencies*, ed. O. Elgström (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.
3. F. Morata, “Il Consiglio europeo,” in F. Morata, *L’Unione Europea* (Rome: Ed. Lavoro, 1999), 213–230; F. Attinà, “Il Consiglio dell’Unione e il Consiglio europeo,” in *L’Unione Europea, Le istituzioni e gli attori di un sistema sovranazionale*, ed. S. Fabbrini (Bari: Laterza, 2002), 103–125.
4. J. Talberg, “The Agenda-Setting Powers of the Council Presidency,” in Elgström, *European Union Council Presidencies*.
5. Convenzione europea, *Progetto di Trattato che istituisce una Costituzione per l’Europa*, <http://european-convention.eu.int/bienvenue.asp?lang=IT>.
6. Fini was quoted as saying: “Berlusconi was seriously provoked, but he unfortunately fell into a trap. No accusation can justify the epithet of ‘Nazi prison guard’ against a political adversary. I do not share Berlusconi’s obstinacy in defending his choice of words; it would be much better if he apologized.” *La Repubblica*, 3 July 2003.
7. Striking an ironic tone, Berlusconi added: “There have been light stories on the Holocaust in Italy for years now because Italians know how to laugh when faced with such a tragedy, joking to overcome it.” In a later meeting of

- the Council of Ministers, he said: "I bit my tongue when I looked at myself in the mirror ... it would have been much better if I had cut it off. But I just could not keep quiet in the face of those accusations. It was a prepared attack, and my response was supposed to be just a joke; instead, it has unleashed the wrath of God." *La Repubblica*, 2 and 4 July 2003.
8. According to Stefani, Schulz "probably grew up amid noisy belching contests after gargantuan beer-drinking sessions and huge helpings of fried potatoes." *La Padania*, 4 July 2003.
  9. Prodi tried to repair matters by inviting Schröder to the opera at the Arena in Verona. Berlusconi had first agreed to take part but then decided not to, for fear of protesters.
  10. At the end of his statement, Berlusconi turned to smile at the Russian leader and said, "I will send to Putin a bill for €1 for lawyers' fees delivered but not requested." *La Repubblica*, 6 November 2003.
  11. *Le Monde*, 7 November 2003.
  12. [http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/flash/fl151\\_iraq\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/flash/fl151_iraq_full_report.pdf)
  13. *El Pais*, 15 November 2003.
  14. *El Pais*, 15 October 2003.
  15. *La Repubblica*, 18 October 2003
  16. The Treaty of Nice allocated 27 votes apiece to Spain and Poland (each with a population of 40 million), while granting 29 votes to Germany (82 million), France (59 million), Italy (57 million), and Britain (58 million).
  17. Germany was willing to deal with the Spanish requests and offered to raise the population threshold to 66 percent. The result would have allowed Spain to retain the veto power it had acquired at Nice. However, if this had been the case, Belgium was prepared to demand the abolition of unanimity for a range of issues (taxes, exile, immigration, judicial co-operation, police, etc.).
  18. *El Pais*, 29 November 2003.
  19. *La Stampa*, 7 December 2003.
  20. *Corriere della Sera*, 14 December 2003.
  21. The Agency's headquarters in Parma will have a budget of €40 million and will initially employ 225 people (this will increase to 330 in three years).
  22. For Berlusconi, the agreement would "allow for a complete collaboration with NATO and would certainly please our American friends." Moreover, he affirmed that "this agreement alone guaranteed success for a European Council meeting." *La Repubblica*, 14 December 2003.
  23. Corridor 5 (Trieste-Lubiana-Budapest-L'vov-Kiev) was important "for its role as the northeastern pathway that crossed through Italy." Over 63 percent of the goods, representing 57 percent of GDP, that traveled through this corridor did so on Italian territory. Corridor 8 (Bari-Durazzo-Skopie-Sofia-Burgas-Varna), "linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, could bring benefits to the South."
  24. High level Group on the Trans-European Transport Network Report; [http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/ten/transport/revision/hlg/2003\\_report\\_kv\\_m\\_en.pdf](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/ten/transport/revision/hlg/2003_report_kv_m_en.pdf).