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CHAPTER I

The Italians and the EU

40% of Italians consider their country's EU membership positively compared to 37% of the sample who hold a neutral opinion, and a further 15% who judge it negatively.

An estimated 41% of the Italian interviewees also believe that Italy has benefited from EU membership. Although this figure represents the relative majority of the Italian sample, it is also the lowest percentage recorded across the EU, after Hungary.

A possible explanation of this ambivalent evaluation can be explained by the fact that 55% of Italians believe that national interests are not taken into account in Brussels.

This reflects the general lack of trust affecting politics, especially on a national level. 76% of the sample claim to not trust political parties, 67% the Italian Government and 65% the Italian Parliament. Now, this distrust has extended towards the EU. Those having no confidence in the European institutions grew from 36% to 47%, overtaking the percentage of interviewees who have trust in the EU.

The low level of confidence is, in part, a result of the lack of understanding of the EU. 66% of the sample admits to not understanding how the European Union functions. This is followed by misinformation, as demonstrated by the replies to questions related to the EU budget. The relative majority of the Italian sample has no idea where EU money is spent and the second most common reply is towards administration. The European sample considers administrative and staff expenses as the main expenditure of the EU.

Nevertheless, a majority of Italians consider that the EU should take decisions with regards to most policies, rather than let national governments decide on their own.

Italians want the EU to decide on a wide range of sectors, from inflation to crime and from immigration to foreign affairs. Also, policies usually considered as a national competence, such as healthcare or unemployment, are increasingly seen as an EU prerogative, although still by a minority of the sample.

It is important to note that Italians prefer a European management of all the policies they consider as priorities for their country, in particular, immigration, crime, energy and the internal market.

Foreign affairs and defence are not included among the top priorities; however, an overwhelming majority of Italians are in favour of common European decisions rather than national ones in these fields.

The Russian-Georgian conflict in summer 2008 highlighted the role played by the EU in foreign affairs. The European Union is, in fact, considered by the relative majority of the Italian and European sample as the main actor in the resolution of the crisis.

Italians see the historical enlargement of the EU in 2004, when ten new countries especially from the former Soviet bloc joined the EU, as positive. According to the relative majority of the sample, Europe has benefited from this enlargement. However, Italians express a negative opinion over potential further enlargements with 42% of the sample being against and 39% in favour of these. On the other hand, the majority of respondents in the European Union are in favour of further enlargement.

CHAPTER II

Reactions to the economic crisis

The financial and economic crisis has strengthened the Italians' conviction that economic decisions should be taken at EU level, rather than by the national government. The percentage of those in favour increased from 53% to the current 60%.

The difficult economic situation is well understood by Italians, who increasingly consider the economy among the top challenges facing the country. However, fighting inflation remains priority, due to the fact that the poll was carried out in October 2008 when statistics indicated a steady increase in prices.

The euro remains one of the culprits for the perceived inflation. 57% of the sample believes that their own purchasing power has dropped in the last five years, and therefore since the introduction of the common currency.

Moreover, 87% of the Italian interviewees consider the cost of living in Italy as too high. Another relative majority (48%) is convinced that the euro did not improve the financial stability of the country.

Nevertheless, the euro remains a point of reference for a growing number of respondents. Italians identify the European Union in the common currency. And an increasing majority (61% of the sample) favours the European Monetary Union.

Regarding the economic situation, Italians are pessimistic in their forecast on a national, a European and a global level. Those who are critical about the EU economy almost double from 46% to 82%.

Despite these gloomy forecasts and the prevailing pessimism, there is optimism with regards to personal financial situation. Indeed, one in five believes that, within a year, their personal economic conditions will improve in spite of the bleak economic trends.

On the other hand, pessimism remains strongly rooted in some parts of the population, and 17% of the interviewees state that, in order to have a better future, emigration would be a viable option for their children. Citizens sharing this idea are more numerous in certain Eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria or Romania. However, in Britain also, 49% of the sample would advise their children to migrate.

As for globalisation, Italians continue to believe that it mainly represents a threat to national companies rather than an advantage. However, they acknowledge the role of the EU as a shield against the negative effects of globalisation.

CHAPTER III

Social issues

58% of Italians consider that the quality of life in Italy is lower than the EU average. One of the reasons for this criticism stems from a strong condemnation of their country's welfare policies. 69% of the sample is not satisfied with the Italian management of inequality and poverty. 80% criticises the Italian public administration, in comparison to 55% on an EU level.

Employment is another reason of concern, with 86% of the interviewees being sceptical about the current Italian situation, and a further relative majority (45%) foreseeing it to worsen.

Even if the fight against unemployment remains among the top priorities for the country, Italians are sceptical about their government's ability to improve the situation. 70% consider the current unemployment benefits as not sufficient. As a consequence, the figure for those favouring EU management of the fight against unemployment has increased.

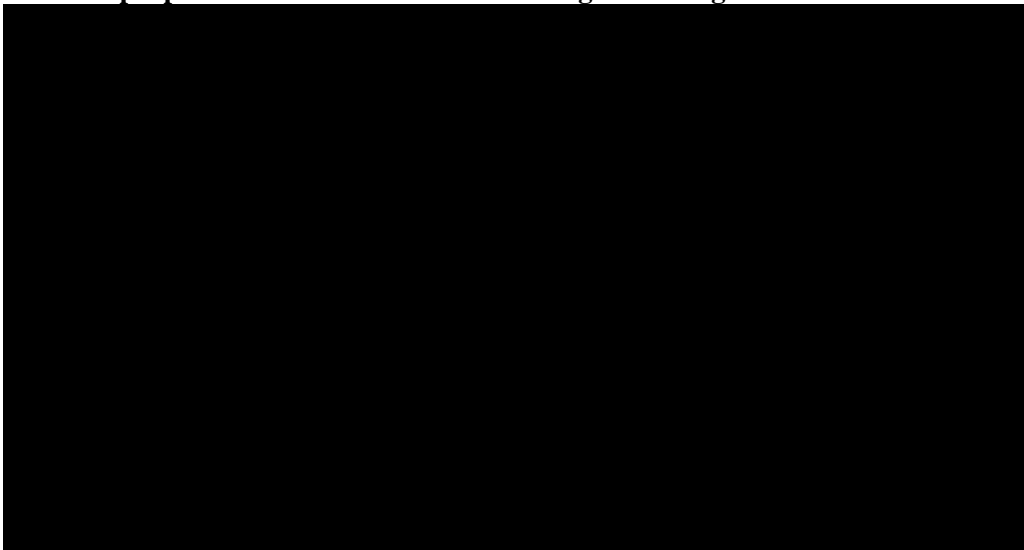
Italians are also very sceptical about pensions (74% of respondents are not satisfied), healthcare (59%) and housing policies (84% consider houses to be too expensive).

As a result of extensive media coverage, education is becoming a priority among Italians, although it remains mainly a national issue.

Immigration is also a concern, as 59% of Italians believe there is little intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in Italy. 37% think instead that there is no problem in regard to this matter.

Only Danish respondents showed a higher level of concern (63%) in relation to intercultural dialogue. Among the EU States most accustomed to immigration, in the UK, the majority (56%) believe that different cultures and religions coexist in Britain without major problems.

Tab. 1: How do you judge the relations in your country between people from different cultural or religious backgrounds or nationalities?



Confronting immigration related concerns is a clear priority for Italians, who consider that this should be the first policy to be developed at EU level in order to strengthen the EU itself. The number of Italians supporting European-level management of immigration has also grown to 68%.

CHAPTER IV

Environment and energy

71% of the Italian sample believes their national environmental situation to be dire. This is the highest percentage of sceptics among the EU countries, after Greece (76%). The elderly in Italy (74%) underline the bad state of the environment more than the youth (63%).

The situation does not conjure up a positive forecast for the future, as one-third of the sample considers that conditions will worsen. Only 20% of the sample shows optimism.

With these preoccupations, Italians therefore strongly support a European management for the protection of the environment. However, only 2% of the sample considers this issue as a priority, giving more importance to the economy, inflation, security, unemployment, taxes, immigration, healthcare, education and the fight against terrorism.

Nor is energy among the top priorities with only 3% citing it as among the main challenges facing the country. However, the issue is perceived as less marginal than the environment, due to high energy prices that directly affect everybody – indeed 77% of the sample maintains they are too high in Italy. 75% believe that in other European countries energy is less expensive.

As a consequence, Italians are clearly in favour of a more important role for the EU. Energy is perceived as the third top priority, after the economic issues, which Europe should confront to enhance its image. Moreover, 65% of the sample believes that decisions regarding the field of energy should be taken at EU level rather than by national governments.