

**THE EU REGIONAL POLICY AND THE IDENTIFICATION WITH EUROPE  
THE CASE OF ITALY**by **Karl Kössler**Institute for Studies on Federalism and Regionalism,  
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Given the large socio-economic disparities between Italy's North and South it would appear plausible to assume that the country has always been particularly interested in EU regional policies and thus more proactive in this area than member states with less domestic imbalances. In reality, however, Italy was well-known from the outset of these policies until the 1990s for contributing little to the formulation of these policies and for lagging behind considerably regarding the utilization of funds. In those days the country was characterized as a "policy-taker" rather than a "policy-shaper" (Brunazzo 2010:2). This pattern has clearly changed over the last two decades as Italy has opened up to EU regional policies and has, as a consequence, increasingly felt their impact. However, there remains the question of whether and to what extent closer involvement in this policy field has also given rise in Italian regions to a positive perception of EU regional policies and stronger identification with Europe.

**II. THE TRADITIONAL NEGLECT OF EU REGIONAL POLICIES**

The aforementioned failure for many years to take effective advantage of the structural funds was clearly related to the widespread perception that regional policy in Italy is a strictly domestic affair to be handled exclusively with the traditional domestic instruments. Therefore, regional policy was in fact regarded as synonymous with the *intervento straordinario nel Mezzogiorno* (Special Programme for the *Mezzogiorno*, hereinafter SPM). Although the SPM, established in 1950, ran for a long time parallel to EU regional policies, the latter were largely neglected until the 1990s.

Moreover, during this period there was a quite considerable gap between the SPA and EU regional policies with regard to both objectives and principles (Graziano 2003). Whereas at European level the reform of 1988 substantially clarified the objectives, the SPM aimed in very broad and general terms at "the economic and social advancement of Southern Italy."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it did not leave any room for the four principles,<sup>2</sup> which formed after the 1988 reform the cornerstones of EU regional policies. This gap between Italian and EU policies was only closed as Italy started in the 1990s to take towards the latter a more proactive approach. Until then the structural funds had been seen as relatively cumbersome because the SPM offered not only more financial resources but did so also with less stringent management requirements (Spina 2003:266). But during the last two decades European funding has taken center stage in fostering regional development in Italy. In return, this move forced the country to open up to the impact of EU regional policies.

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1. Art. 1 of Law 10/1950.

2. Programming, concentration, additionality and partnership.

### III. ITALY'S TURNAROUND

The abolition of the SPM in 1992,<sup>3</sup> closely related to the modest results achieved and rising anti-Southern movements such as the *Lega Nord*, created a need to reformulate Italy's policy towards the *Mezzogiorno*. Yet this was only one among several internal and external factors that made Italy embrace EU regional policies (Brunazzo; Piattoni 2008). Another significant domestic factor were institutional reforms, above all the so-called *Bassanini* laws,<sup>4</sup> which strengthened the regional and local levels of government. Accordingly, actors from these levels, especially those prepared and eager to act more autonomously from the national government, became more and more assertive and claimed a substantial role in managing regional policies. With its emphasis on the partnership principle EU regional policies provided an obvious opportunity for the involvement of these actors. The arguably most relevant external factors for Italy's turn towards a more proactive approach to the structural funds were the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the anticipated effects of Eastern Enlargement. The Maastricht convergence criteria restricted Italy's spending capacities, albeit not always successfully, and thereby prompted a search for alternative funds. These were found within the framework of EU regional policies. As the EU set out to expand towards Central and Eastern Europe, increasing awareness took hold in Italy that competition for these funds would be ever more intense and require stronger efforts.

The process, which fundamentally reformed Italy's regional policies after the SPM and adapted it to EU requirements, can be divided into two stages (Baudner; Bull 2005). From 1992 to 1996 first steps were taken towards a form of "negotiated programming" which was supposed to involve in line with the partnership principle governmental actors from different levels as well as private actors.<sup>5</sup> Notable progress was made during this period for instance with the creation of necessary legal instruments to coordinate these actors such as "programme accords" and "territorial pacts". However, the reform process at that time still suffered from insufficient planning and coordination, above all by the Ministry of Finance and the Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning (*Comitato Interministeriale per la Programmazione Economica*). The second reform period between 1996 and 2000 then proved much more successful. Crucial to this success was the establishment of the Department for Development Policies (*Dipartimento per le politiche di sviluppo*, DPS) in 1998. Since then this institution has fulfilled several important functions like serving as support structure for the design and implementation of regional development projects and initiating important reforms. Particular significant among the latter was the introduction of specific performance criteria to correspond to EU standards. Even though these measures did not remove at once the prevailing difficulties in taking full advantage of the structural funds, the performance during the planning period 1994-1999 is towards its end already characterized by notable improvements (Spina 2003).

A significant change occurred in the 1990s not only regarding the utilization of European funds but also concerning the process of formulating Italy's position towards EU regional policies. In this process regional actors have played an increasingly important

3. Law 488/1992.

4. The original piece of legislation is Law 59/1997 (*Bassanini I*), modified and extended by Law 127/1997 (*Bassanini-bis*) and Law 191/1998 (*Bassanini-ter*) and implemented by several legislative decrees. These laws empowered regional and local authorities to the maximum extent possible without amending the constitution. A constitutional amendment further empowering these levels of government then followed in 2001.

5. In Law 104/1995 "negotiated programming" is defined as "regulation agreed between public actors or between the competent public bodies and one or more public or private parties for the implementation of various measures, aimed at a single development objective that require a comprehensive evaluation of the activities involved."

role, which has resulted from intensive collaboration with the DPS and other activities at both the national and European level. Apart from its above-mentioned functions the DPS has acted as a remarkable integrating force by facilitating coalitions between national, regional and local governmental and non-governmental actors. It has done so above all within the so-called *comitatone* (large committee), a coordinating body involving the regions, trade unions and employers' associations. Especially the memorandums drafted by this forum in 2001 and 2002 attracted a lot interest and met with a very sympathetic response from the European Commission.<sup>6</sup> Equally at national level, the State-Regions-Conference has become an influential forum to develop Italy's position concerning EU regional policies, which is reflected in several policy documents and working groups dedicated to this issue. That this intergovernmental body has assumed such a role follows primarily from initiatives of the Northern and Central regions. Beyond Italy, increasingly vigorous networking and lobbying of the regions in Brussels is another indicator of a new activism concerning EU regional policies. Since the late 1990s politicians from the subnational level, remarkably also from so far less active Southern regions like Sicily and Campania, started to assume positions at European level, for instance in the Commission for Territorial Policy of the Committee of the Regions (COTER) and the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) (Brunazzo 2006). Roughly at the same time, the regions began to cooperate more intensively with other Italian actors in Brussels such as the members of the European Parliament and the European Commission as well as the country's Permanent Delegation.

#### IV. THE EU, ITS REGIONAL POLICIES AND ITALIANS' IDENTIFICATION WITH EUROPE

As Italy is now after its turnaround during the 1990s much more actively involved in EU regional policies, both regarding its formulation and the exploitation of funds, the question arises whether this significant change has also impacted on public opinion. Traditionally, Italy has been a member state with a particularly favorable attitude towards the European integration project (Comelli 2011:2). As we will see below, this has in the last years changed significantly.

From a general point of view, identification with Europe, understood here as a positive attachment to it, is commonly interpreted as being an effect of three causes: benefits from the EU and its policies (e.g. regional policies), positive experiences in personal encounters with other Europeans (e.g. facilitated by ERASMUS) and active identity formation through collective narratives and symbols (e.g. European anthem, flag and motto) (Roose, 2010:6-8). When it comes to different groups in society, numerous studies have proven that people with higher education, better professional positions and higher income tend to show stronger attachment to Europe:<sup>7</sup> "... the most privileged socioeconomic groups are the most European. Owners, managers, professionals, and other white collar workers are more likely to think of themselves as Europeans than are blue-collar workers or service workers. Educated people, regardless of occupation, are also more likely to see themselves as European, and young people are more likely to do so than older people, as are people with higher incomes" (Fliegenstein 2008:145).

6. See European Commission, "First Progress Report on Economic and Social Cohesion" (2002), at 22.

7. See S. Duchesne and A.-P. Frogner, "Is there a European Identity?", in: O. Niedermayer and R. Sinnott (eds.), *Public Opinion and Internationalized Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), 193-226; S. Dubé and R. Magni-Berton, "How Does Income Influence National and European Identity?", in: D. Fuchs, Dieter R. Magni-Berton and A. Roger (eds.), *Euro-scepticism. Images of Europe among mass publics and political elites* (Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2009) 73-90; R. Herrmann and M. B. Brewer, "Identities and Institutions: Becoming European in the EU", in: R. Herrmann, T. Risse and M. Brewer (eds.), *Transnational Identities: Becoming European in the EU* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 1-23, at 15.

Whereas a considerable amount of studies has been conducted on European identification of socioeconomic groups, differences among regions in this regard are still an under-researched issue. In part, this is also due to a lack of reliable empirical data. With regard to Italy such data illustrating regional differences is neither collected upon Italian initiative nor by the EU. The Eurobarometer surveys typically focus on cross-country comparison and turn a blind eye on subnational entities.

Anyway, data from these surveys may give an idea of the extent to which Italians identify with Europe. Even if the Standard Eurobarometer does not contain a specific question on that issue,<sup>8</sup> questions about support for EU membership and benefits from it are interrelated with positive attachment to Europe. There has been extensive academic discussion about the links between a person's identification as something emotional on the one hand and its opinion about the EU on the other.<sup>9</sup> While it seems too much of a simplification that support is just "another expression" (Bruter 2003:23) of identification, the latter is certainly an integral part of support for any political system (Easton 1975). Quite often, the utilitarian perspective of benefits from EU membership or a specific policy is introduced as a third variable. Even though it seems intuitively plausible that benefits stimulate identification and support, this is not necessarily and generally so. For instance, it has been pointed out that farmers, even though benefitting greatly from the Common Agriculture Policies (CAP), do not demonstrate particularly high levels of identification or support (Risse 2005:297). It is not inconceivable that a similar pattern might also apply to regions benefitting from the EU's regional policies.

In this regard, the Flash Eurobarometer 384 on "Citizens' awareness and perceptions of EU Regional Policy" provides some interesting data.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising that in Italy and other countries, which have a large number of regions eligible for funds under the Convergence Objective, show a higher level of awareness of EU co-financed such projects. In Italy, the proportion of people who have heard about such projects is at 48% much larger than the EU average. But when it then comes to the question, whether these projects have had a positive impact, this is affirmed by only 51% of Italian respondents – less than in any other EU country. With 20% claiming that co-financed projects even had a negative impact, people in Italy are again more skeptical than anywhere else. Moreover, merely 9% of Italians think to have benefited personally, which is again one of the lowest percentages. Thus, notwithstanding the high number of projects and Italians' awareness of them, relatively few people see these projects as having positive effects on their lives. It is true that these data refer to Italy as a whole. But in view of the fact that the bulk of co-financed projects is concentrated in the Southern regions, it seems fair to assume that public opinion about EU regional policy is in this specific part of the country similar to the outcome of this survey or even more negative.

A lack of data concerning the regional level is also a major downside of the Standard Eurobarometer surveys, which measure – if not identification – at least people's

8. There is only the following question: "In the near future do you see yourself as Italian only, Italian and European, European and Italian or European only?" But this question appears to refer rather generally to identity than to identification with Europe, which is a specific issue within the broader discussion on European identity (see J. Roose, "How European is European Identity? Extent and Structure of Continental Identification in Global Comparison Using SEM" (2010) 19 Kolleg-Forschergruppe "The Transformative Power of Europe" Working Papers 1-22, at 5).

9. See for example I. Karolewski and V. Kaina (eds.), *European identity. Theoretical perspectives and empirical insights* (Münster: LIT, 2006); D. Fuchs, I. Guinaudeau and S. /Schubert, "National Identity, European Identity and Euroscepticism", in: D. Fuchs, R. Magni-Berton and A. /Roger (eds.), *Euroscepticism. Images of Europe among mass publics and political elites* (Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2009), 91-112.

10. EC, Flash Eurobarometer 384, 2013.

support and perception of benefits. In this regard, the data of the most recent survey illustrates concerning Italy again some interesting overall trends.<sup>11</sup> As far as the support for membership is concerned,<sup>12</sup> there is an obvious trend of constant decline. While at any point of time between 1973 to 2008 membership was a “good thing” for at least 63%, often exceeding even 80%, this view has since then found much less supporters and reached an all-time low of 39% in 2008. As emphasized above, benefits do not lead directly and necessarily to support and identification, but the three things are certainly interrelated in a more complex way. Thus, it is interesting to look also at survey data on this question. Whereas up until recently Italians had always taken the view that benefits of membership would on balance clearly predominate, the “no benefit” camp has almost prevailed several times since 2008.<sup>13</sup>

To sum up, most recent Eurobarometer data does not give a rosy picture of Italians’ view of both the EU and its regional policy over the last years. Next to a general disenchantment with politics, the economic crisis and its political management, these trends have been attributed to various reasons. One argument claims that with ever tighter European integration the increasing impact of the EU on people’s everyday lives have transformed it in their perception from an idealized abstract entity into an organization with both positive and negative effects (Greco 2006). Another argument contends that the EU has lost among Italians its reputation of epitomizing democracy, stability and prosperity. Traditionally, Italians have associated these characteristics with the countries of Northern Europe and through the alliance with them in the European integration process likewise with the EC/EU. Put simply, involvement in this process was based on the idea “to chain Italy to the Alps, in order not to let it sink into the Mediterranean.”<sup>14</sup> With the EU being regarded by Italians increasingly as not so democratic, stable and prosperous, it has lost part of its appeal Comelli 2011:4).

## V. CONCLUSIONS

For a long time, Italy neglected EU regional policies and focused instead on the SPM as a domestic instrument. Only the obvious failure of the latter prompted in the 1990s in conjunction with other internal and external factors a change towards a proactive approach regarding both the utilization of the structural funds and policy development. In return, the country had to open up to the impact of EU regional policies. This is clearly visible in the content of the fundamentally reformed post-SPM policies for regional development, for which European standards served as the public policy paradigm to follow. From an institutional perspective, the impact of EU regional policies is less clear. In Italy, the partnership principle certainly met already favorable conditions insofar, as continuous subconstitutional and later constitutional reforms have created strong regional actors. These were not only willing but also able to press the national government to grant them more participation regarding the management and development of regional policies. This suggests that the European impact has in this regard acted rather as a catalyst that reinforced domestic institutional change than as a proximate

11. EC, Standard Eurobarometer 80, 2013.

12. “Generally speaking, do you think that (your country’s) membership of the European Community (Common Market) is...?” (last asked in 05/2011). This question was last asked in May 2011.

13. “Taking everything into consideration, would you say that (your country) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Community (Common Market)?” Also this question was last asked in May 2011.

14. “Incatenare l’Italia alle Alpi per non farla sprofondare nel Mediterraneo”, quoted in F. Nucara, “Il leader che volle il suo paese moderno e occidentale. In ricordo di Ugo La Malfa”, Website of the Partito repubblicano italiano, 27 March 2007, <http://www.pri.it/27%20Marzo%20Internet/NucUgoLaMalfaComm.htm>.



cause of this change (Bull; Baudner 2004:1072-1073). Whereas this turnaround has increased the number of EU co-financed projects and public awareness of these, Italians are exceptionally skeptical regarding the general impact of these projects and their personal benefits. Negative public opinion, particularly throughout the last five years or so, seems to prevail also concerning EU membership and its benefits. Still, these trends may only give some idea of possible tendencies regarding Italians' identification with Europe, even more so in different regions. The lack of reliable data with regional focus and the complex interactions within the triangle benefits-support-identification further complicates such an endeavor.

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