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The Economic Crisis and its Effects on the Attitudes of Italian Political Elites Towards the EU

Nicolò Conti, Maurizio Cotta & Luca Verzichelli *

Abstract: »Die Wirtschaftskrise und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Einstellungen der italienischen politischen Eliten gegenüber der EU«. The Italian case is an interesting one for the study of the effects of the economic crisis on the attitudes of political elites. The crisis has been an important intervening factor in the process of domestic party system change. The responses to the challenges of EU-led austerity measures have been at the core of the discussion preceding the 2013 elections, whose results marked a turning point for the Italian political system, with protest votes peaking and new populist parties emerging. This article shows that, despite the domestic political turmoil, most of the markers of the traditional support of the Italian political elites for European integration are still unequivocal. These elites appear much more pro-European than the Italian public; even the representatives of the populist parties do not hold radical views that may reverse the past Italian history within the EU. At the same time, however, multivariate analyses of the determinants of elite attitudes show significant party variations. This brings us to speculate on some possible scenarios of gradual departure from the classic elite posture of acquiescence towards the EU.

Keywords: Italian elites, EU, survey, Euroscepticism, crisis.

1. Introduction

In Italy, elite attitudes towards European integration have only rarely been analysed empirically. This has caused an important flaw in the literature, because a central actor of democratic representation and European integration (on the role of elites as engine of the EU process see Lindberg and Scheingold 1970, Haller 2008, Hooghe and Marks 2008) is often missing in research.¹ In the article, we

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¹ Exceptions do exist but they are either not updated to the most recent developments, or they have not been repeated systematically to gauge the dynamics of elite attitudes over

close this gap by matching the analysis of two elite surveys conducted in the past decade with a more recent survey. With the help of these three waves, we can contrast the present attitudes of Italian elites with those that have emerged in the past two parliamentary terms and assess patterns of continuity and change.

Such an effort is motivated by the changes that have recently occurred in this country. Between the general elections of 2013 and the European elections of 2014, Italian political elites have experienced some important transformations, with the emergence of new sizeable parties, a re-alignment of the party system and a broad generational change accompanied by a very significant turnover rate in Parliament, a more balanced gender representation and a pronounced decrease of the mean age of national MPs (Russo, Tronconi and Verzichelli 2014). All these factors have contributed to substantial modifications to the overall structure of political representation at the national level. In light of these important changes, the aim of the paper is to analyse the attitudes of these novel elites towards the EU and to produce a picture that is informed by the most recent developments of the Italian system.

Another important factor that we consider in the analysis pertains to the impact of the economic crisis on the Italian political scene. The economic crisis in Europe has brought evidence to the imbalances among members of the Eurozone. The governments of the weaker economies, in particular, were unable to cope with the crisis and were under pressure from the EU to adopt austerity policies that have proved to be very unpopular among citizens. Although not bailed out, Italy became the object of ‘implicit conditionality’ (Sacchi 2015), as a result the space of manoeuvre in policy-making was severely restricted with significant political consequences at the domestic level. The austerity measures were supported by all major Italian parties who at the time joined a grand coalition. They were also forced to take measures that were in conflict with the policy positions for which they were known before, thus creating disillusionment among their voters and a peak in the protest vote.

Have changes to the party system and to representation altered the traditional benevolent attitudes of the Italian political elites towards Europe? Was the economic crisis a shock determining a major change to these attitudes? Has this turning point marked the end of the traditional elite consensus on Europe? These are the questions at the core of this article. Our analysis is based on the systematic comparison of three surveys of Italian political elites conducted between 2007 and 2014, before and after the outbreak of the economic crisis. For the most part, during this time the members of the Italian parties holding public office remained harmonised with the EU trajectory and showed a cooperative attitude on issues of European integration, reiterating the traditional loyal conduct of the Italian government (see Quaglia and Radaelli 2007). However, Eurosceptical feelings have

time (see Bellucci 2005, Conti 2016, De Giorgi and Verzichelli 2012, Roux and Verzichelli 2010).

become more electorally rewarding in this country and some parties may have become more sensitive to this kind of incentive.

2. The Elite Project of European Integration in Italy. Traditional Views and New Challenges

Studying the effects of the big economic crisis on the attitudes of the Italian political elites is an interesting case in point due to a number of reasons. During the past four decades these elites have always been highly supportive of the process of political integration in Europe. The traditional pro-Atlanticist bloc of parties supporting the governments of the so-called *first republic* promoted the idea of European integration as a “democratic saviour” for the deeply polarised Italian democracy. Over time, this position became increasingly flanked by the left opposition that, since the mid-seventies and the launch of the so-called Euro-communist vision, became increasingly pro-European (Conti and Verzichelli 2012). After disillusionment with the outcomes in Eastern Europe, particularly after the violent repression of the Prague Spring, under this new course a main driver of the left was the idea that a closer Union would favour redistribution of wealth, social mobility and an advanced welfare in all its Member States. As a result of the pro-European realignment of the Italian left, by the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall the whole Italian party system was characterised by diffuse pro-West and Atlanticist positions, while any serious opponent to the integration of Europe or the Common Market had ceased to exist.

Since then, and for a long time, the Italian context proved overwhelmingly favourable to European integration. At the beginning of the nineties, when crucial decisions concerning monetary union and perspective further enlargements had to be taken, pro-Europeanism reached very high peaks within most Italian parties, while Euroscepticism (conditional, not even principled) was confined to the fringes of the political spectrum. Membership of the EU was consensually considered a necessity by the domestic elites, in order to introduce the national economy into the stronger Eurozone and to drive the system to solve its long-standing problems – such as distributive laxity and abuse in the public spending – that were often caused by political clientelism and corruption at home (Dyson and Featherstone 1996, Ferrera and Gualmini 2004). The pro-European views inspired by a converging elite were shared by the Italian public opinion. For a long time Italian citizens proved to be among the most ardent Europhiles in the whole continent (Bellucci and Serricchio 2012). In this respect, it is correct to argue that the elite-mass relationship, at least concerning the position with regard to European integration, was always dominated by a uni-directional driver: the process of European integration was uncontested among the public and its guidance was in line with the notorious elite picture of permissive consensus (Haller 2008). However, during the nineties

some new events introduced uncertainty in the attitudes towards Europe of the Italian elites: the deep transformation of the party system and the collapse of the Christian Democrats, the emergence of the controversial leadership – not always welcome by the European partners – of Silvio Berlusconi, the first time in government of the main heirs of the Communist Party that entered a coalition government (led by Roman Prodi) in 1996 and took Prime ministership two years later (with Massimo D'Alema) deserve to be mentioned.

Beyond the changing format and mechanics of the Italian party system, one main challenge to the unconditional pro-Europeanism of the Italian political elites was the negative financial outlook on the national economy. Due to the incremental costs imposed by Europe on its Member States, especially on Eurozone countries, the deepening of the EU process endangered the stable relationship Italy had enjoyed for long with Europe. In 1996 a “Europe tax” was introduced by the Prodi government to improve the state finances and assure the inclusion of Italy in the first group of states that would adopt the single currency. Other costs of integration in the same years consisted of a set of retrenchment policies aimed at limiting the extremely costly Italian welfare, as well as its heavy and pervasive national public administration (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007). After the adoption of the Euro and the enlargement to include new central and eastern European Member States, the costs of integration definitely started to be perceived as excessive and even to outweigh the benefits. The two processes of deepening and widening integration put unprecedented competitive pressures on Italy, imposing tight constraints on its public finances, transforming the country from a net recipient to a net contributor to the EU budget, and making its goods less economically competitive in the international markets. As a result of recurrent cuts to public expenditures and higher taxation “in the name of Europe”, the pro-European orientations of the Italians started to come into question and between the Maastricht and the Lisbon Treaties a change in popular attitude became visible. At that point, differences started to emerge between the centre-left coalition (more principled in its support for EU integration) and the centre-right (more conditional), while a negative peak was affecting Italian public opinion (Roux and Verzichelli 2010, Serricchio 2012). Party propaganda, especially from the fringes of both the right (Northern League) and left wing (several radical left parties), started to echo the popular unhappiness with the undesired outcomes of integration, in a way not so different from what happened in the same period in other Member States (De Vries and Edwards 2009).

Until 2013, party realignment on EU integration did not entail any crucial turn in the concrete actions of the Italian government (or parliament). Once in public office, despite a more pessimistic public discourse, parties have proved rather impermeable to popular pressures and more influenced by the long tradition of pro-Europeanism of the Italian government, behaving loyally when EU-sensitive decisions had to be taken (Conti and De Giorgi 2011). At a time of uncertainty about the future of European integration, change in the attitudes of

political elites is a particularly relevant subject that warrants attention. In this perspective and considering the current context characterised of both features of continuity and change, our aim is to assess if and how, after the outbreak of the crisis, there has been a change to the traditional pro-European attitudes of the Italian political elites.

3. Symptoms and Assessment of Change in Elite Attitudes

Some events of the 2009-2013 period have deeply changed the political landscape in Italy. Some of these events have to be connected with exogenous factors, in particular with the global crisis. Its effects have been perceived in Italy beginning in 2009, but they have become more evident in the course of 2011, when massive acquisitions of Italian bonds from the European Central Bank were necessary to protect the state debt and the Italian economy from market attacks. At the end of the same year, Silvio Berlusconi resigned as Prime Minister and the new technocratic government led by Mario Monti started a considerable programme of retrenchment and austerity (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2015).

Beyond the impact of the economic crisis, a renovation of the political scene in those years was also caused by endogenous factors: a new wave of political scandals came out involving mainly – but not only – the governing centre-right, the political role of Silvio Berlusconi was severely undermined by personal scandals and some legal actions against him that resulted in a tax fraud verdict in 2013. In this critical context, the general elections of 2013 marked a turning point. In a situation of growing unpopularity of the established parties, a radical internet party named *Five Star Movement* emerged (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2013, Conti and Memoli 2015) and in its first nationwide electoral competition, in a context of party system fragmentation, became the most voted party in the country (with slightly over 25 percent of votes). One year later, on the occasion of the European elections of 2014, the Five Star Movement campaigned against the Euro, in favour of Italy's exit from the Eurozone and the rejection of the major EU financial constraints such as the Fiscal Compact. On the same occasion, other fringe parties (the re-born *Northern League* under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, and the right-wing *Brothers of Italy*) aligned themselves with the Five Star Movement on many European issues. Even Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* started to represent the EU as enemy, with a campaign that made use of such slogans as "less Europe in Italy" and stories of EU conspiracy against Italian interests that encouraged socio-economic panic among voters. It is evident that some parties have made an effort to politicise the EU issue and to build on the emerging division that increasingly separates within Italian society advocates and opponents of the EU. In order to respond to such challenges, the new leader of the *Democratic Party* and new Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, changed his approach too. On one hand, the Democratic Party confirmed its

vocation of pro-European and responsible government party. On the other hand, this posture was accompanied by unprecedented open criticisms addressed to the EU institutions and to the “guardians of austerity” such as the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Matteo Renzi was the only European leader of a large mainstream/government party who could celebrate a very positive electoral result in the 2014 European elections (after a disappointing result for his party in 2013 under a different leadership). This achievement encouraged him to start the Italian Chairmanship of the second 2014 “European semester” reiterating his claims for a different course of European governance. As a consequence he changed the narrative that was traditionally forwarded by the Italian centre-left: instead of the long-standing emphasis on the importance of “vincolo esterno” to ameliorate Italy and harmonise it to Europe, he criticised the receipts adopted by the European Commission to overcome the economic crisis, and he emphasised the need of a reform of the EU institutions and of the rediscovery of the founding spirit of solidarity among Member States (Brunazzo and Della Sala 2016).

We argue that the (critical) positions expressed by party leaders on the perspectives of European integration might differ from the views expressed by individual party representatives serving in public office. The attitudes of the latter reflect specific motivations and calculus: some studies have focused on the policy orientation of these elites and on their socialisation to the European issues while serving in office, others have analysed the propensity of representatives to “go native” European and become more and more responsible and sympathetic with the EU system during their mandate (Scully 2005). In general, parties in central office and party leaderships can be assumed to be more responsive than individual MPs to changes in public opinion and to the economic conditions that shift public attitudes, because the incentives of competition are higher in the electoral arena than within parliament. Hence, despite the general rise in pessimistic views about the EU within the Italian society a consequent decline in MPs’ Europhilia remains a matter of empirical verification.

In the article, we analyse whether support/opposition for the EU process is broad (applying to all dimensions of the EU process), or specific (varying across dimensions) among elites. Through the analysis of the multi-dimensional nature of attitudes, we assess the direction and the overall linearity of elite attitudes, after the recent period of economic recession. We know from an emerging literature that the different dimensions at the core of the discussion about supranational integration are largely independent from each other. The article will examine those dimensions that are at the roots of the European integration process (Bartolini 2005, 211; Best, Lengyel and Verzichelli 2012) and that have been identified as fields where elites tend to offer a variety of attitudes, moulding a very “multi-coloured” set of perceptions and wishes about the future of Europe (Russo and Cotta 2013). These dimensions concern feelings of attachment and identification with a polity, mechanisms of political

representation and democratic control at the European level, policy scope in the European multi-level governance. Previous studies have demonstrated that domestic elites develop a mix of responses to the EU in these dimensions. Only rarely the broad posture on EU integration includes a set of consistent positions in all these dimensions; in most cases the large mainstream develops a variety of positions that are not necessarily that coherent (Russo and Cotta 2013). The menu is indeed rich, and different parties choose different mixes, in line with their own agenda and policy priorities, but also in conformity with their short-term strategies on the domestic scene (Conti 2014, Neumayer 2008).

In the next section we first present some descriptive analyses that document the attitudes of the Italian political elites and how much they have changed over time. In the following section, we discuss some models of multivariate analysis that examine the main drivers of elite attitudes in three dimensions of the EU process. A final section develops some interpretative arguments about future prospects.

4. Poor Evidence of Change

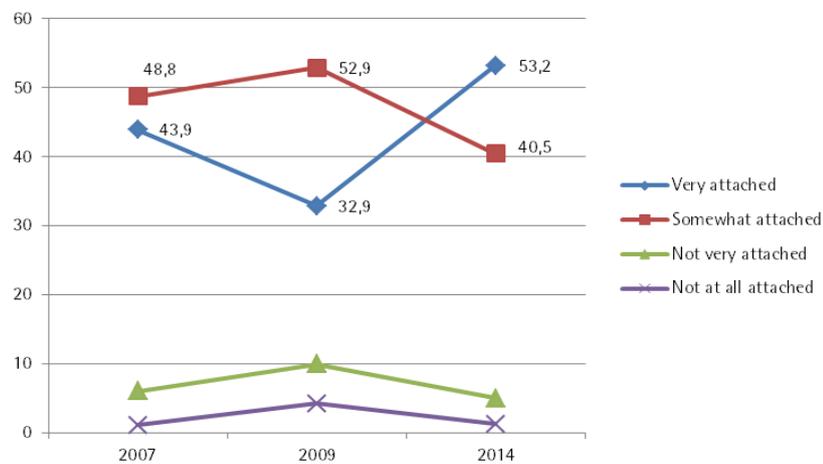
Starting with the emotive component of European identity, it is useful to recall that attachment to the EU has always represented a strong factor among Italian MPs. According to De Giorgi and Verzichelli (2012), this classic measurement of attachment reached a peak in 2007 (92.7%), while the decline recorded in 2009 (85.8%) did not really challenge the long standing positive feeling of Italian elites (Figure 1). In 2014, the same question was asked to a sample of Italian MPs by the ENEC project. In this new wave, 93.7% of the respondents declared that they were (very or somewhat) attached to Europe, and 97.5% that they were attached to their own country.²

The overlap between strong attachment to the nation and strong attachment to Europe, with the two communities not seen as alternatives and with only a tiny minority of respondents declaring that they do not feel very (or at all) attached to Europe, is a distinctive aspect of Italian MPs. The emotive connection with the EU remains impressive, particularly when one considers the difficult times during which the survey was conducted, with the economic crisis hitting the country, the EU imposing heavy constraints on the national government and public opinion showing broad disappointment for EU-led austerity measures. Considering these data in a longitudinal perspective, the only partial de-alignment one can see constitutes an interesting evidence: if the overall rate of “positive” feelings of attachment to Europe remained stable, the respondents who feel “very attached” increased significantly, while those who answered

² For space constraints, data on attachment to the own nation are not showed in the article.

“somehow attached” decreased. Is that proof of growing pro-Europeanism among Italian elites? Not necessarily. This picture reiterates a consolidated pattern established since the beginning of the Italian second republic (Cotta, Isernia and Verzichelli 2005): while the centre-left parties – the post-Christian democrats, the post-communists and some reformists today merged in the Democratic Party – have always held strong positive feelings, inspired by recognised European leaders like Romano Prodi, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and Tommaso Padoa Schioppa, the centre-right parties (supporting four Berlusconi’s cabinets) have always proved less positive. Variations between these different groups appear as a matter of intensity more than of direction. Hence, in a context of diffuse Europhilia, the peaks of “very attached” MPs in Figure 1 reflect the different majorities in parliament (the centre-left held a majority in 2007 and 2014, the centre-right in 2009).

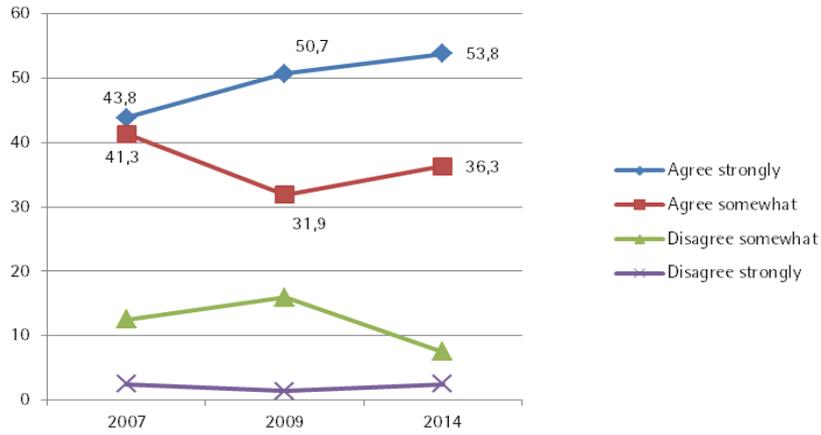
Figure 1: Attachment to Europe of the Italian MPs



Note: The survey question was : “People feel different degrees of attachment to the own country and to Europe. What about you?”

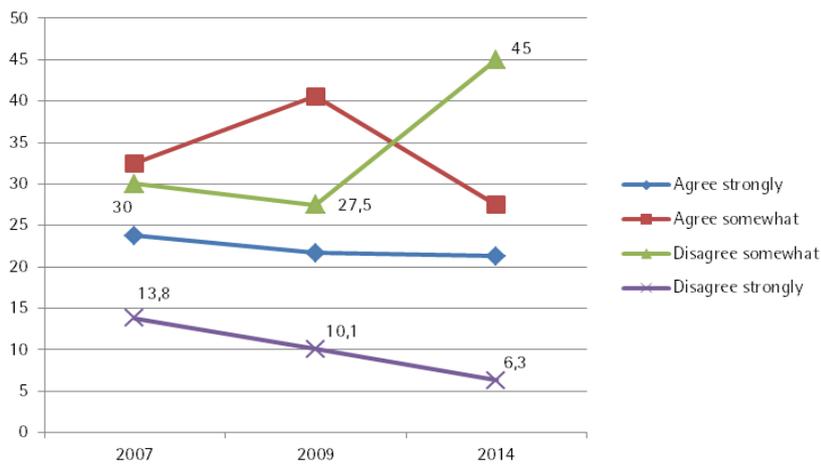
A similar longitudinal trend can be seen when looking at the indicators of the representation component of the EU process. Here the analysis deals with different aspects of integration, such as delegation of sovereignty to the EU and creation of a supranational layer of governance. We expect that the recent experience and outcomes of the crisis may have determined a varying reputation of different institutions, notably the Commission and the European Parliament, as opposed to the national government.

Figure 2: Powers of the European Parliament according to the Italian MPs (2007-2014)



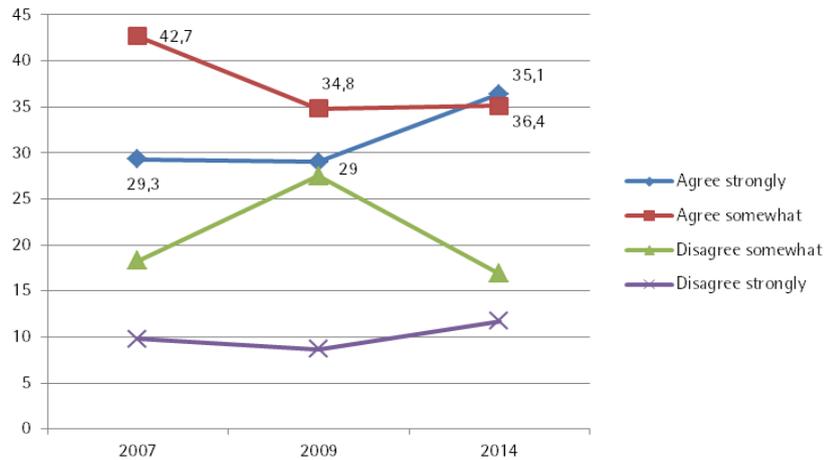
Note: The survey question was: "Do you agree with the following statement: the powers of the European Parliament should be strengthened?"

Figure 3: Role of Member States in the EU Decision Making according to the Italian MPs (2007-2014)



Note: The survey question was: "Do you agree with the following statement: the Member States ought to remain the central actors of the EU?"

Figure 4: Role of European Commission according to the Italian MPs (2007-2014)



Note: The survey question was: "Do you agree with the following statement: the European Commission ought to become the true government of the EU?"

The results shown in Figure 2 (a growing share of MPs supporting broader powers of the EP) and Figure 3 appear in harmony: Italian MPs support the "federal" mode of integration that is forwarded by the EP, more than a central role of the Member States in decision-making. The interpretation of Figure 4 is only slightly more controversial, since the data show a decline of moderate views about the future role of the Commission, and a slight but significant increase of the two polarised views (one strongly supporting more powers for the Commission, another strongly opposing it), in a context of broad support for this institution. Overall, it appears very clear that respondents have less trust in the intergovernmental method than in the supranational one, although it is not equally evident whether this is due to a decreased trust in the national government, or in the governments of the other Member States. Certainly, the Italian political elites tend to support the empowerment of the EP and the Commission, even to the expenses of the national government. The overall picture of a truly pro-European elite, not influenced by any notion of a nationalistic defence, persists in this country: even in the middle of a severe economic crisis and of strict EU-led austerity measures, the preference of the Italian MPs goes to the supranational institutions and to a "federal" (or quasi-federal) idea of Europe. It can be concluded that despite the political discourse often goes in a different direction, the overall view of the Italian MPs has not changed much over the years.

Thanks to other additional questions that have been included for the first time in the 2014 questionnaire, we dispose of other relevant information about the views of Italian elites. Specifically, we found that a majority of Italian MPs

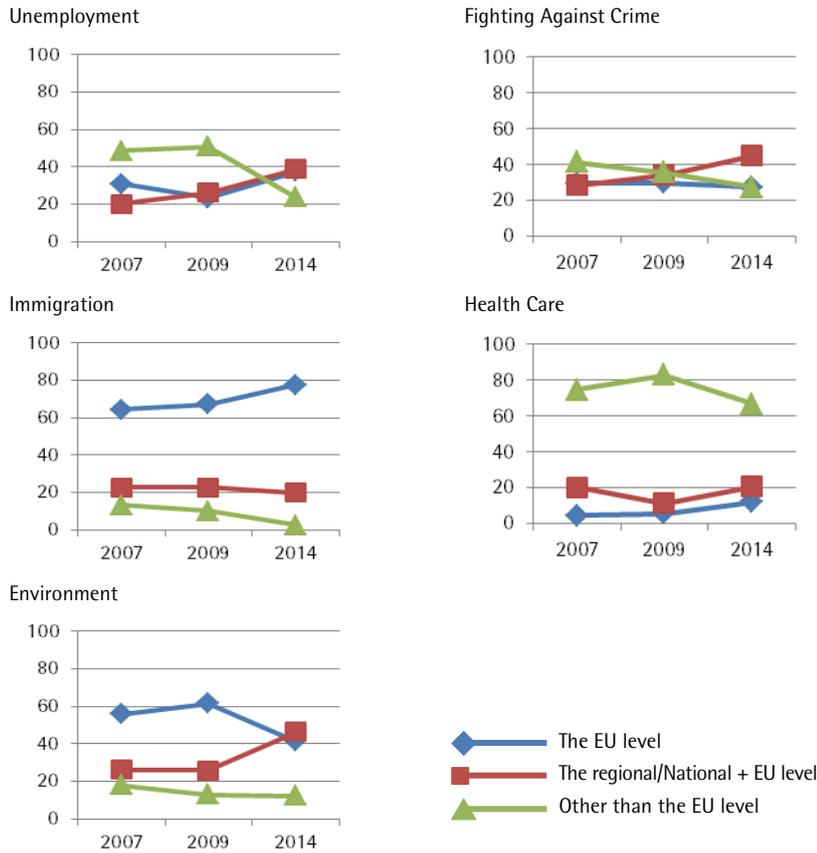
are in favour of a strengthening of the powers of the European Central Bank (52.6% agree strongly or somewhat). Also, they argue almost in same numbers that the most important decisions concerning the EU should be taken by a majority of all European citizens via a European popular referendum (54.3% strongly or somewhat agree). As one can see, these figures reveal a majority in favour of a complete supranational governance system with a strong central bank and greater popular legitimacy. However, the data also suggest that elites are divided: these pioneering proposals to overcome shortfalls in the institutional performance of the EU through empowerment of an independent central bank and direct democracy attract mixed feelings, overall.

Moving to the role of the EU in the field of policy, our aim is to establish whether the Italian MPs support the communitarisation of policies in fields that are very diverse and not yet equally Europeanised. In particular, we focussed our analysis on the following policy sectors: environment, immigration, fighting against crime, financial regulation, unemployment and health care. Despite their differences (especially in terms of current EU involvement), the percentage of respondents who support supranational competence is rather high in all fields (Figures 5 and 6). Support for a widening of the EU policy competence can be found in the economic field (banking and finance regulation), global issues (environment), fields where national sovereignty currently dominates (immigration, fighting against crime, unemployment); the only exception with low support for the EU competence is health care (where the national competence is preferred). The existence of an encompassing orientation to accept the supranational rule is evident when we look at the distribution of MPs who wish a fully Europeanised immigration policy, despite a clear polarisation has emerged in Italy on issues of immigration. More than 75% of the respondents favour a truly European solution, thus showing the limits encountered by any position of total closure like the one publicly forwarded by the radical right Northern League. The 2014 questionnaire included a new question about the preferred level of governance in the field of banking and finance regulation. In this respect, it is important to recall the growing mistrust of people for globalised finance. The conditions dictated by the *Troika*, in particular, have become in many countries (especially of Southern Europe) the target of a growing Eurosceptic discourse (Brack and Startin 2015). Nevertheless, as Figure 6 reports, there is no difference between this item and those discussed above: the large majority of the Italian MPs, including many from the centre-right camp and from the Five Stars Movement, is at ease with the perspective of delegating decision-making power to the EU in this field.

Overall, the data show that the pro-European solutions elicit various preferences across different policy sectors, but the “non-European” solution is always expressed by limited minorities within the Italian parliament. To put it in other words, the solid pro-European belief system of a broad majority of Italian MPs inspires a diffuse preference for a truly EU-centred decision-making. The crisis

seems to only create stronger feelings among the Italian MPs to delegate the guidance of many policy sectors to the EU.

Figure 5: Favourite Level of Competence by the Italian MPs

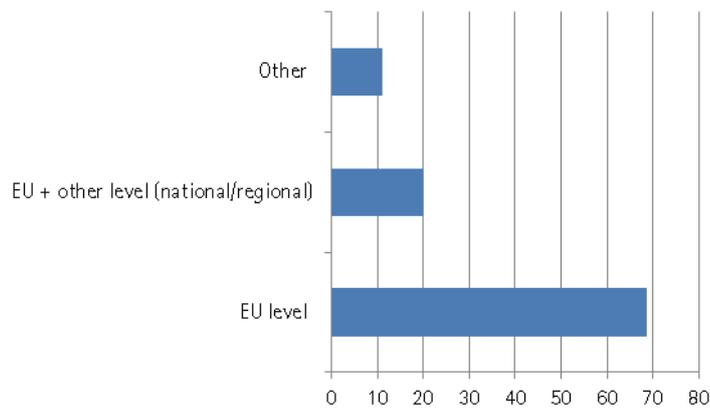


The survey question was: "Policy-making preferences: policies in the * sector should be mainly dealt at...".

Contrary to what has been predicted (Best 2012) and also empirically proved (Real-Dato et al. 2012) in other national contexts, the tendency of the Italian MPs to support the delegation of sovereignty to the EU does not only apply to policy areas associated with a long-term perspective, where the risks of failing to satisfy electoral demands are more limited; it also applies to those policy areas (such as immigration or unemployment) where elites normally prefer to

keep responsibility to carry out voters' demands (the only exception being health care).

Figure 6: Policy making preferences of Italian MPs (2014): regulation of banking/finance sector (2014)



Note: The survey question was : "Policy-making preferences: policies in the banking/finance sector should be mainly dealt at...".

All in all, our descriptive analysis confirms that the basic positions of the Italian political elites regarding the three "faces" of European integration (identity, representation and scope of governance) have not changed significantly over the years. The crisis, or changes to elite composition, may have influenced the discourse of party leaders, but they have not changed the views of political elites so much. On the contrary, the crisis may have worked as a catalyst, convincing the elite members, including those from the non pro-EU parties, that a new supranational coordination in many policy sectors is necessary. It seems that a slogan that could well represent the results of this survey is "another Europe is possible", rather than the "no more Europe" catchphrase that was so loudly voiced in the Italian political discourse in recent times.

5. Looking for Explanations: Partisan Politics and the Crisis

In broad terms, the pro-European character of the Italian elites serving in public office is confirmed by our study. Whereas works on partisan positioning based on content analysis of party manifestos (Conti and Memoli 2014) show differences between fully pro-European and Eurosceptic groups, more limited variations among elite members have been documented by past studies (Roux and

Verzichelli 2010, Conti 2016). In order to understand the causal mechanisms behind such (limited) variations, in this section we analyse three separate dependent variables (indicators) reflecting the dimensions of the EU process that we have considered in this work: attachment to the EU, empowerment of EU institutions, and policy scope. The three dependent variables will be analysed through different multivariate models making use of a common set of independent variables pertaining to partisanship, socio-structural variables, parliamentary experience and timing of the interview. The goal of the analysis is to comprehend the effects of recent changes to the socio-political context in Italy vis-à-vis more traditional explanations of elite attitudes.

Our results are presented in the next three tables. The first models consider “attachment” as dependent variable. As one can see (Table 1), variance for this variable can mainly be explained by partisanship (model I).³ More exactly, belonging to the centre-left camp is a significant determinant of attachment, but the most significant factor (with a negative sign) is belonging to the Northern League. This is not surprising; today the Northern League is a party mainly concerned with issues typical of right-wing radicalism (fight against immigration and defence of traditional values) while its anti-European orientation has also augmented. This posture is confirmed when other variables are introduced in the analysis (model II). Attachment, therefore, has to be reconnected to the classic argument of partisan politics, with the centre-left more identified with Europe and the centre-right, particularly the Northern League, less comfortable with this kind of feeling. The Five Star Movement also shows negative attitudes (although in model II values for this party are not statistically significant). In the end, the centre-left champions attachment to Europe, while the other political groups hold more nuanced positions. However, this should be considered within the context of diffuse positive feelings, as it was documented in Figure 1, and it therefore appears a matter of variation in intensity more than a real split within the Italian political elite. The other variables in the models are not significant: neither the individual characteristics of the MPs nor the time factor⁴ impact elite attitudes in this domain.

³ Building on the results of past research (De Giorgi and Verzichelli 2012, Roux and Verzichelli 2010), we consider partisan variables in model 1 because they have been found to be the strongest predictors of MPs attitudes and we control for the other factors in model 2.

⁴ For the pre/post-crisis differentiation we used a proxy that separates responses in 2007-2009 vs. 2014.

Table 1: OLS Regression with Attachment to Europe as the Dependent Variable. Italian MPs (2007-2014)

	Model I		Model II	
	Beta	Standard Errors	Beta	Standard Errors
(Constant)	3.404***	.085	6.221	11.231
Centre left	.152*	.106	.220*	.144
Centre right	-.177*	.114	-.122	.181
Five Star Movement	-.138*	.184	-.130	.230
Northern League	-.393***	.196	-.363***	.249
Party in government			.116	.124
Year of birth			-.031	.006
Gender			.064	.109
Education			.136	.051
Years as MP			-.114	.013
Post-crisis+			.151	.134
Adjusted R Square	.238		.332	
Anova (sig.)	0.000		0.000	
N	235		235	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

+ Pre-crisis refers to the 2007-2009 waves of the survey and post-crisis to 2014.

Entries are standardized coefficients.

Question: "People feel different degrees of attachment to their region, to their country and to Europe. What about you? Are you very attached, somewhat attached, not very attached or not at all attached to Europe?"

Table 2: OLS Regression with Commission True Government of Europe as the Dependent Variable. Italian MPs (2007-2014)

	Model I		Model II	
	Beta	Standard Errors	Beta	Standard Errors
(Constant)	2.774****	.125	19.452	16.792
Centre left	.264****	.157	.184*	.216
Centre right	-.043	.169	-.073	.264
Five Star Movement	-.300****	.266	-.409****	.337
Northern League	-.263****	.291	-.352****	.372
Party in government			.021	.181
Year of birth			-.089	.009
Gender			.032	.164
Education			-.035	.077
Years as MP			-.114	.019
Post-crisis+			.099	.196
Adjusted R Square	0,271		.342	
Anova (sig.)	0.000		0.000	
N	235		235	

+ Pre-crisis refers to the 2007-2009 waves of the survey and post-crisis to 2014.

Entries are standardized coefficients.

Question: How much do you agree with the following statement: The European Commission ought to become the true government of the European Union.

Table 3: OLS Regression with Policy Scope as the Dependent Variable. Italian MPs (2007–2014)

	Model I		Model II	
	Beta	Standard Errors	Beta	Standard Errors
(Constant)	11.038****	.359	35.920	42.982
Centre left	.150*	.452	.203**	.552
Centre right	-.227***	.486	-.034	.675
Five Star Movement	.097	.765	-.073	.862
Northern League	-.109	.836	-.078	.953
Party in government			-.073	.463
Year of birth			-.057	.022
Gender			.002	.419
Education			.049	.196
Years as MP			-.059	.049
Post-crisis+			.561****	.502
Adjusted R Square	.114		.337	
Anova (sig.)	.000		.000	
N	235		235	

Note: *p<0.10; ** p<0.05; ***p<0.01; ****p<0.001

+ Pre-crisis refers to the 2007–2009 waves of the survey and post-crisis to 2014.

Entries are standardized coefficients.

The dependent variable is an additive index of policy level preferences for the following fields (with the EU level considered as highest value): unemployment, immigration, environment, fighting against crime, health, banking and finance regulation.

Question: "How do you think it would be most appropriate to deal with each of the following policy areas? Do you think that [area] should be mainly dealt with at regional level, at national level, at European Union level?"

Table 2 focuses on the dimension of representation. We have selected the question concerning the prospective role of the European Commission because it offers a larger variation in the positions of the MPs, especially when compared with the positions on the prospective role of the European Parliament (that are instead more consensual). Moreover, as the European Commission is widely considered the engine of supranational integration, empowering this institution would mean a definite choice for a supranational mode of integration (as opposed to the intergovernmental method) and a federal Europe. The table clearly shows that the party affiliation still is the main determinant of individual positions: MPs from the centre-left are more inclined to support a stronger role of the Commission, while the two parties that have more energetically opposed the EU austerity measures after 2011 (the Northern League and the Five Star Movement) are against. As a matter of fact, with respect to the models in Table 1, here we find a clearer pattern of inter-party demarcation on institutional representation in the EU. A polarisation of positions has clearly emerged; the centre-left is again the camp most supportive of the Commission, while the radical parties (Five Star Movement and Northern League) are clearly opposed to it. This tendency may reflect the broad pattern contrasting *responsive* opposition to *responsible* parties of government (Mair 2013). Moreover, it might be evidence of the fact that opposition to the Commission and to its authoritative

decisions has grown among right-of-centre parties, remarkably more within its most radical components but also within its more moderate and government-oriented factions (the coefficients for the centre-right show a negative sign but fail standard levels of statistical significance). The other factors in Table 2 are not statistically significant.

The final empirical test (Table 3) concerns the third dimension of our analysis, the scope of EU competence in policy, measured by an additive index on EU-centred policy preferences as the dependent variable. Here, the dynamics of the pre/post crisis seems to work much more evidently. And it seems to work in the same direction that we have highlighted above: although Europe is often represented as responsible for the worsening of life conditions – particularly during the economic crisis – it is seen by MPs as a solution to many problems. Indeed, a weak relationship with partisanship (with the centre-left camp supportive of deeper EU involvement in policy and the centre-right more sceptical about this solution) can be found, but the inclusion of the time factor in model II waters down this relationship and gives an interesting result: the post-crisis respondents (i.e. the MPs interviewed in 2014) have come to the line of reasoning that a number of policy sectors should be regulated at the EU level (or by a coordinated effort of both EU and domestic institutions). In other words, the answers given after the outbreak of the crisis unveil a new “need of European governance” which is not only perceived by the centre-left MPs, but also strongly felt by members of the other parties as well. This evidence reflects, once more, the moderate and reasoned position of the Italian political elites. Despite harsh confrontation on the EU in electoral campaigns and some unprecedented Eurosceptical statements of the opposition, a large majority of the Italian parliament still puts its hopes onto the EU for the solution of some of the most urging problems.

6. Conclusion. Just Higher Tones?

Although over the past years the Italian context has changed remarkably with respect to European integration, especially as a consequence of a Eurosceptic turn in public opinion, the elite consensus over Europe appears nonetheless to hold. The levels of support for the EU and for deeper integration are still very high among Italian elites, particularly in the domain of policy, determining a preference for the supranational mode of integration and a federal Europe. The emergence of several negative factors, such as the economic crisis, have not impacted party elites holding public office; when they do, they tend to reinforce elite’s support for the EU. This situation has probably created a wider gap than ever before between mass and elites, for the first time in history the latter cannot rely on the permissive consensus of citizens (Hooghe and Marks 2009) on issues of European integration.

In this article we showed that the extent of continuity in the attitudes of political elites is rather impressive. The main differences registered concern the peaks of pro-Europeanism found in 2014, also thanks to the presence of a centre-left majority in the parliament, and the more limited structuring of a Eurosceptical camp that now includes the Northern League and the Five Star Movement. However, even the opposition of these two parties towards the EU appears contingent and not principled, within a context otherwise dominated by optimistic views and limited Eurosceptic voices.

Hence, the crisis seems to have played only a small influence on elite attitudes: the article shows that its impact has not determined greater Euroscepticism by political elites, while a turn to more pessimistic views within public opinion dates from before the outbreak of the crisis.⁵ At this point, it is hard to predict developments of Euroscepticism within the Italian parliament. Most of the efforts to unify EU opponents under a common platform, for instance through a joint initiative in favour of a referendum on exit from the Euro, have failed. It is also true that, if the Northern League and the Five Star Movement increase their popularity among the electorate, the elite consensus on the EU could seriously suffer. At the same time, the attempts of the government to combine loyalty to the EU with voice in support of revision of its current trajectory⁶ could prevent the rise of more Eurosceptical stances within parliament. In any event, the Italian political elite will have to choose between prioritising responsiveness to citizens (and their demands of change) and government responsibility. Although we should expect a growing capitalisation on public Euroscepticism by the radical parties, their ideological differences and lack of capacity to provide alternatives to the status quo may reduce any risk. If the situation described in this article persists, the political discourse on the EU might even become more polarised, but the role and history of Italy within the EU might prove stable.

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⁵ This assertion is confirmed by recent *Eurobarometers* and by the weekly polls of the most recognised Italian newspapers like *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*. On this, see also the websites of two major national pollsters, Ipsos (<www.ipsos.it>) and Demos&Pi (<www.demos.it>). For past analyses, see Conti and Memoli 2015, or Bellucci and Serricchio 2012.

⁶ This finds a clear example in the recent calls of the Prime Minister, Renzi, to re-launch policy convergence within the EU with a reduction of austerity measures.

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Appendix

List of Variables in the Multivariate Analyses

Variable label	Operationalisation
Attachment to Europe	Level of attachment to Europe (4-point scale, very attached=4)
Commission	Agreement with the sentence "The European Commission ought to become the true government of the European Union" (4-point scale, disagree strongly=1...agree strongly=4)
Policy scope	Favourite level of competence in different policy fields (18-point scale, national/regional=lowest value...European=highest value)
Centre-Left	Democratic party, Olive Tree coalition, other minor parties (dummy 0-1)
Centre-Right	Forza Italia, National Alliance, People of freedom, other minor parties (dummy 0-1)
Five Star Movement	Respondent elected in the Five Star Movement lists (dummy 0-1)
Northern League	Respondent elected in the Northern League lists (dummy 0-1)
Party in government	Respondent's party was in government at the time of the survey (dummy 0-1)
Year of birth	Respondent's year of birth (interval scale)
Gender	Respondent's gender (dummy 0-1, male=1)
Education	Highest education degree received by the respondent (8-point scale, none=0...Phd=8)
Years as MP	Years as MP spent by the respondent in the national parliament (interval scale)
Crisis	Pre and post-crisis survey wave (dummy 0-1, 2014=1)