

## ROMANIAN-ITALIAN RELATIONS WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION\*

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**Abstract:** *The paper is aiming to analyze the role of the EU in the relationship between Romania and Italy. How do the two countries view their interaction with each other? Does the EU have an influence on the relationship between the two countries? And if it does, to what degree and to what end? The answer to these questions might reveal if anything can be done to improve the quality of the relationship between two countries most similar in language and culture.*

**Keywords:** Romania, Italy, European Union, Migration, Bilateral Relations

The project of political unification of Europe is one of the great ideas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is the result of a process of voluntary integration between the nation-states of Europe. The underlying motive behind European integration has always been peace<sup>1</sup>. Exasperated by the frequency with which the Europeans had gone to war over the centuries, and determined after 1945 to create a permanent peace, several thinkers outlined what they saw as the necessary conditions. It seemed a utopia in the wake of World War II. The European Union represents an ensemble of unthinkable realizations. It is also incomplete, as it is an ongoing project, it is also a promise rich with possibilities, not devoid of obstacles. The EU is the largest space on the planet in which the rights of the person are protected and promoted; in which the death penalty does not exist; in which democracy is the manner of governmental representation of the Member States and of the Union itself. Because it is a democratic space, the Union

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<sup>1</sup> TEU, Art. 3:”1. The Union's aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples”.

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is exposed to criticism. The Union has progressed, gradually, learning from its mistakes, correcting, and improving.

The EU has typical features of an intergovernmental organization: membership is voluntary, the balance of sovereignty lies with the member states, decision making is consultative and the procedures used to direct the work of the EU are based on consent. At the same time, it also has some of the qualities of a state: it has external borders that are harder than its internal borders, there is an EU system of law to which all member states are subject, it has administrative institutions with the authority to make law and policy, the balance of responsibility in many policy areas has shifted to the European level, and in some areas the EU functions as a unit, for example trade. Hix argues the EU possesses all the characteristics of a political system as defined by Gabriel Almond (1956) and David Easton (1957)<sup>2</sup>. Recent research shows there are multiple approaches to understanding the EU<sup>3</sup>.

Understanding the European Union demands more than a review of its legal and political character. We must also understand its people: who they are, how they think of themselves in relation to others, and how they perceive the EU. Europe is a region of considerable diversity: it is divided into more than 40 sovereign states, while its people speak 60 major languages, and belong to several hundred different national groups. Because the lines of states and nations do not always coincide, most European states are multinational, and many of the larger national groups live in two or more states. The exercise of European integration – although it was designed to help Europeans move past their historical suspicions of one another – has made only limited progress in helping build a sense of European identity, or community of the kind discussed by transactional theory. This diversity is the heritage of the repeated reordering of territorial lines in Europe over the centuries, with new patterns of immigration since 1945 adding more variety.

The nature of the relationship between the EU institutions and the member states have heated up as the reach and the membership of the EU have expanded, and as more Europeans have come to feel its influence. Within their home states, they know approximately what to expect from their home governments, but there is much less understanding about the political status of the member states within the EU. The member states of the EU occupy an unusual place in international law; while they are sovereign states, they have also pooled much authority within the EU. Italy is a founding member of the EU. Before becoming a member state of the EU, Romania had

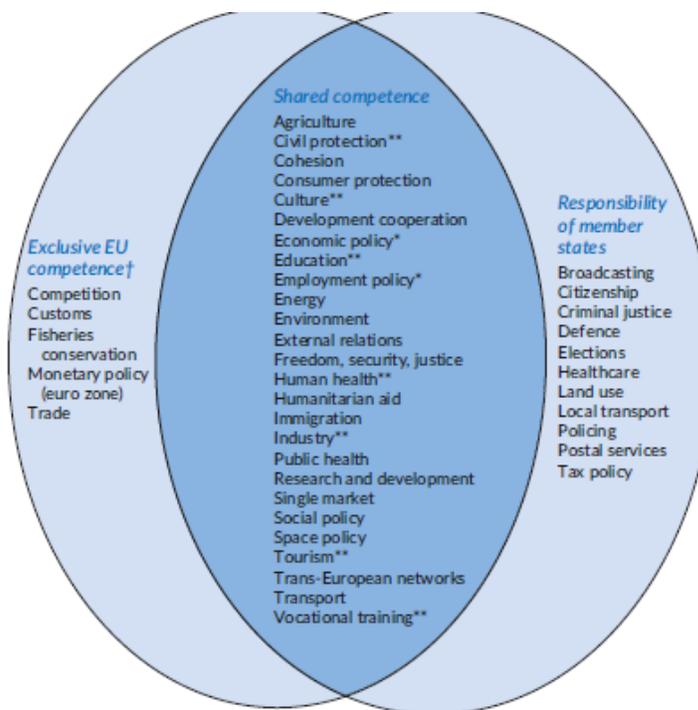
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<sup>2</sup> Simon Hix and Bjørn Høyland. *The Political System of the European Union*, London, Macmillan Education, 2008, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> John McCormick, *European Union Politics*, London, Macmillan Education, 2020, p. 27.

to comply to the Copenhagen criteria<sup>4</sup>. The nature of the relationship between the member states and the EU institutions is complex and constantly evolving, varying from one policy area to another. A good starting point for understanding that relationship is to look at four principles contained in the treaties<sup>5</sup>, specifically the Lisbon Treaty which gives the EU full legal personality: competence, conferral, subsidiarity, and proportionality.

Articles 3 – 6 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU provide what looks like a comprehensive listing of EU areas of competence as shown in Figure 1 (see below).



† EU also has exclusive competence to sign international agreements when provided for in EU law or when necessary to allow EU to exercise its internal competence.

\* EU has some powers of coordination.

\*\* EU has powers to support, coordinate or supplement actions of member states.

<sup>4</sup> An aspirant member state should be democratic, a free-market economy, and willing to adopt the existing body of EU laws and policies and adapt its administrative structures to fit with the needs of integration.

<sup>5</sup> Treaty of Lisbon, Art. 5.

Three different phases can be distinguished in Italy's relation to the making of the Lisbon Treaty: the first semester of 2007, when Italy played the role of the European broker and pusher; the second half of 2007, when Italy joined Poland and others in opposing the new treaty; and 2008, which brought the ratification of the new treaty.

All Western political systems are unique, but some are more unique than others. The Italian form of government may be similar to that of most parliamentary democracies, but in functioning it is fundamentally different, a strange case in the European panorama<sup>6</sup>. The Italian society has seen great change in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, greater than at any time in the previous history of the peninsula. A relatively poor industrializing society suffering the ravages of war in 1945 has become, fifty years later, one of the most powerful and prosperous countries in the world. After 1945, Italy sought to reacquire some dignity on the international level by joining NATO (in 1949) and one of the six countries which launched the ECSC in 1951. Italy's role in the European integration must be considered in the context of transatlantic relations, relations with Russia and the other former Soviet states, and other nearby regions (Mediterranean and the Balkans). Recent research defines the Italy's with the European Union as a "rollercoaster journey"<sup>7</sup>. One cannot get an understanding of the Italian republic without connecting its development and transformation to the process of European integration. Not only was Italy one of the six founding states of the European Union, but the material constitution of Italy has been largely determined by its participation to the European integration project. In the wake of the war, "the national interest" was seen as taboo in Italy's public debate, owing to fascism legacy, and it was replaced with "the European interest" as a guiding principle in policymaking<sup>8</sup>. The Italian people saw a more integrated Europe as following a logical continuum in their history.

The 1948 Italian constitution introduced the novel concept of "limited sovereignty" which has been gradually translated in the policy concept of "vincolo esterno"/"il vincolo Europeo"<sup>9</sup> or external constraints. Italy has seen the European integration project as a condition to modernize the country's economy, society, and state. But it also had to constrain its own sovereignty to keep under control its

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<sup>6</sup> Frederic Spotts and Theodor Wieser, *Italy: A Difficult Democracy: A Survey of Italian Politics*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1986, p. IX-X.

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Mascitelli, *Italy and the European Union: a Rollercoaster Journey*, New York, Nova Science Publishers Incorporated, 2020, p. XVI.

<sup>8</sup> Federiga Bindi, *Italy and the European Union*, Washington D. C., Brookings Institution Press, 2011, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Gianfranco Pasquino, *Italian Democracy: How It Works*, London, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, p. 182.

nationalistic instinct. The “vincolo esterno” worked well for the first decades of the integration, but after the financial crisis of 2008, the generic positive predisposition of Italy towards the EU has moved in the opposite direction. The “vincolo esterno” has become to be perceived, by a growing number of Italians, as an instrument for the country’s domination by the northern member states (Germany in particular), no longer an opportunity for making Italy more like the most advanced European countries. Before the 2008 financial crisis, Italians thought that the EU gives Europeans a stronger say in the world and protects common values such as democracy and cultural diversity, as well as economic prosperity.

Pasquino<sup>10</sup> argues that “The contemporary Italian political debate and the party controversies rotate around four major issues: the Maastricht criteria and the fiscal compact; the loss of sovereignty; Europe not being good to Italy and Italy being obliged to suffer; and, first and foremost, Italy claiming that it is left alone to face the intractable challenge of migration.”

European nation-states perceive immigration as a threat, although Europe’s history is characterized by migration driven by war, imperialism, trade, poverty, etc. The fall of communist regimes in 1989-1991 brought radical changes in human mobility on the continent, as liberalized borders induced population outflows on a massive scale. The integration of immigrants is a state responsibility. Regional integration projects such as the EU transforms immigrant integration. The essential aspects of inclusion or exclusion in a new community for immigrants are legal recognition, social acceptance, and economic opportunity. The European Union has launched strategies of integration for citizens from the member states that have joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Italy and Spain have integration programs that include only nationals from Romania and Bulgaria. One may agree that “through such policies, the principles at the core of the European project, equal treatment and solidarity, are called into question and risk being compromised”<sup>11</sup>. A concise history of Italy’s relationship with migration shows that Italy has been a source of emigration until the 1980s. since then, the reverse applies. It became an immigrant destination due to its economic development. Globalization and multiculturalism create new realities. Italy is considered a “superdiverse” nation<sup>12</sup> which is characterized by an increase of migrants belonging to many nationalities and ethnic groups, speaking many languages and

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> Roxana Bărbulescu, *Migrant Integration in a Changing Europe: Immigrants, European Citizens, and Co-Ethnics in Italy and Spain*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Sabina Perrino, *Narrating Migration: Intimacies of Exclusion in Northern Italy*, New York, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, p. 14.

having diverse past histories, migration paths, and religious beliefs. Migration is also the concept which defines the relationship between Italy and Romania.

Following the events of December 1989, Romania took steps in "returning to Europe" by signing bilateral partnerships with other countries, by applying for EU membership, and by joining NATO in 2004. Good relations with Italy were one of the top priorities for Romania. The bilateral relations between the two countries have grown steadily since 1989, and in July 1991 both countries signed a "Friendship and Cooperation" treaty. In 1995 Romania applied to join the EU. The country has fulfilled, inter alia, the Copenhagen criteria, and became a full member state in 2007. Romania made full benefit of the EU pre-accession instruments by accepting the requirements of EU migration and asylum law and policy as a condition for membership. Besides Spain, Italy is one of the preferred destinations for Romanians driven to migrate due to financial needs.

Romanians represent the largest minority in Italy. It is true a minority community changes the society of the adopting country to a certain degree, and problems may arise. But migration only adds to the social, political, economic conditions of the destination state. In this case, the Italian society is already a historically fragmented country. Acquaviva<sup>13</sup> argues that Italy's power-system, the balance between its political forces, the value system invoked to legitimate the power structure, and the economic set-up until recently and still to some extent today, are a function of her character as a relatively underdeveloped country. In Although it is a "superdiverse" nation, the Italian society has developed a layer of resistance to the inclusion of newcomers. This also applies to the relationship with Romanians. Italian politicians have used minorities as a political leverage. Anti-immigrant sentiment culminated during the general election in 2008. Along with the political scene defined by populism, Italian mass-media has portrayed Romanians as a negative element to their society. The following paragraph illustrates the situation "... a fever induced by the media and the knee-jerk reaction of politicians on the Left and Right led to a series of violent and murderous incidents involving Romanian Roma. (...) The headlines shouted that Italy was aging, Italy was falling down the economic pecking order (indeed it was predicted that Romania would surpass Italy in a decade or so), while a series of public opinion surveys showed that Italians felt like aliens in their "own" piazza"<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Sabino Acquaviva, *Social Structure in Italy*, New York, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Levy, *Racism, Immigration and New Identities in Italy*, in vol. *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Italy: History, Politics, Society* (edited by Andrea Mammone et al.), London and New York, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, p. 51.

The following quote still applies today as it did in 1976<sup>15</sup>: "*The crisis in contemporary Italian society is largely due to its history; a shrewd observer of past events might possibly have been able to foresee much of what is now taking place.*"

In conclusion, what influence does the EU have on the relationship between Romania and Italy? The EU provides a legal and political ground, as both Member States have to apply the European rule of law. But now it offers little else. Lasting change and improvement from the minority-state relations comes with a mentality change which can only happen in its own time. The European Union should accommodate fairer relations among its member states, as it does shape the strategic setting of the European immigration policy and politics. There is the need for a system that requires a higher degree of separation between supranational and national politics and policies.

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<sup>15</sup> Sabino Acquaviva, *Social Structure in Italy*, p. 2.

