

ITALY'S MULTI-LEVEL ACTION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Strengths, weaknesses and future challenges

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Presentation for the ESI Conference on

COMMUNICATING EUROPE:

ITALIAN PERSPECTIVES ON ENLARGEMENT

Rome, Wednesday 21 – Thursday 22 May 2008

1. The multi-level nature of Italian engagement in the WB

The Western Balkans (WB) can be viewed as Italy's "near abroad" *par excellence*. This is true not just due to our geographical proximity, but also to decades of political, economic and cultural ties, which together make Italy one of the key stakeholders in the region.

Such multi-faceted proximity, although cause of some tensions in the past, was the first reason for the Italian involvement in the Western Balkans since the implosion of Yugoslavia and the collapse of the Albanian state structures. Italy was challenged in many ways by what was happening on the other side of the Adriatic. Humanitarian assistance to the war-ravaged territories involved in the conflict, control of the migration flows –especially from Albania– and fight against regional criminal networks (involved mainly in human trafficking, drugs and tobacco smuggling), were among the first challenges Italy had to face. On the other hand, the new situation on the ground offered a range of opportunities that Italian economic actors were ready to seize.

This has gradually led to the rethinking of the Italian approach to the Western Balkans as a multi-level challenge which required a multi-level response. The peculiarity of the Italian involvement in the Western Balkans since the early '90s was indeed its variety of horizontal tasks and interventions and the vertical range of its actors, in a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. This was effective in many ways in contributing to the political and economic stabilisation of the region, although sometimes there was a lack of coordination among the actors involved and strategic approach from the central level.

2. The problem of coherence and the coordination efforts

The implosion of the Balkans has in the meantime revealed this potential multi-level and multi-stakeholder richness, and it has simultaneously challenged very directly the Italian capacity to perform a coherent and effective foreign policy *tout court*. The different stakeholders and policy makers have often outlined the necessity to commit in a structural way towards the area with a thorough policy that could embrace both the diplomatic and political dialogue, the support to the socio-economic development as well as the fostering of the cultural relations among the two territories. In this sense, the Balkans have represented a laboratory for the interventions of a number of different Italian actors, from the military to diplomacy, from NGOs to local authorities and economic players. From the first military mission “Pellicano” (from 1991 to 1993), to the multinational, Italy-led “Missione Alba” (1997), to the still ongoing KFOR and EUFOR (in which our country is one of the main contributors) Italy has, since the early '90s, translated its commitment and strategic interest in the WB into concrete actions.

At the same time, the Italian civil society and non governmental system reacted to the humanitarian emergency through a plethora of activities of humanitarian relief that progressively turned into socio-economic development projects. A first attempt to coordinate the humanitarian intervention was the “Missione Arcobaleno” in Kosovo in 1999. Moreover, the Italian regions and local authorities became progressively more active in creating relations with their counterparts in the Western Balkans. The activities promoted by the decentralized cooperation, which at a first look might resemble those of the NGOs, have indeed fostered the dialogue among the two sides of the Adriatic sea as well as strengthened the exchanges at various levels. The intensification of the links among Italian and Balkans territories have also paved the way for economic actors such as chambers of commerce and private entrepreneurs, who foresaw, beyond the emergency and the development cooperation needs, the commercial opportunities offered by their neighbours.

The creation of the *Adriatic euroregion*, which entails states and local authorities from the Italian region of Puglia to Albania, could be regarded as an example of a mature form of territorial integration between Italy and the WB, which encompasses a variety of common issues, from fishery to environment protection, from tourism to private sector development. The Italian intervention in the WB could thus be regarded as a multilevel one, both horizontally, as it includes different sectors (economic, cultural, environmental, etc) and vertically, as it involves the State, local authorities as well as the civil society.

Italian institutions soon realized that such a multifaceted intervention needed some kind of strategic direction: this coordination attempt translated into Law 84 of 2001. This latter represents the main financial and strategic tool Italy has developed for the area over the years. One of the main

innovations of this instrument lays in a combination of objectives that range from capacity building to promoting socio-economic development and fostering the European integration process. This integrated effort aimed at bypassing one of the main structural limits of the Italian foreign policy, namely the lack of synergy and of communication among the different levels involved: in this sense, the law provided a legal and policy framework for the initiatives promoted by a number of different actors such as regions, local authorities, non governmental organizations, entrepreneurs associations, chambers of commerce as well as other public and private bodies. From this point of view, Law 84 can certainly be considered as a very peculiar, probably even unique tool within the recent national foreign policy strategy. Independently from its actual effectiveness and sustainability, Law 84 of 2001 can be regarded as an example of mature foreign policy: this experience should not be left to fade away, rather, it should represent a basis to build on for the future.

3. Towards a multi-level strategy to support accession

Italy has been present at all stages of the WB long lasting period of crisis, first, and transition, then, adapting its intervention to the different phases: from the implosion, to which it responded with the deployment of military forces, to the emergency, with humanitarian and reconstruction activities, up to the present phase, that entails supporting socio-economic development and sustaining the EU accession process. Italy should now feel the urgency to move forward to the next phase, one that should focus on giving the decisive momentum to the EU accession process of the WB and, from a rather bilateral perspective, strengthening the economic relations as well as formulating common strategies on transport integration and on energy provision. In this sense, Italian policy makers should now devise a new instrument, a step forward with respect to Law 84, which should provide the strategic framework necessary for coordinating the multilevel action towards the WB by taking into account this new phase's priorities.

Taking into consideration the specificities of past Italian action in and towards the WB, a renewed strategy towards the region should probably include the following components:

a) the starting point is obviously to confirm, in concrete terms, the Italian political commitment to the Western Balkans, assuring continuity to what has already been collected in terms of experience and relations with the partners of the region. To this purpose, it is essential to reinforce the awareness – also among policy-makers - that Italian policy in the Balkans is strengthened by the

variety of actors involved and by the diversity of cooperation channels established through the years.

b) Differently from other European countries, Italy has been reluctant to invest in terms of visibility in the Western Balkans, thus preventing itself from capitalising to the maximum extent the network of relations and know-how built since the early '90s. Here again, a greater awareness of the multi-level nature of Italian engagement is a precondition to reverse this tendency.

c) In the third place, more than other countries, Italy could act as an advocate for their European integration. If this is already true in Brussels, where our government is a usual lobbyist in favour of the Western Balkans, Rome could act as a facilitator *among* the Western Balkan countries, fostering their mutual dialogue and cooperation. Specifically, our government should advocate a regional approach to EU integration, favouring a 'WB Big Bang', as the one in 2004. EU integration should indeed be considered as a historic opportunity to ease the remaining tensions in the region, and not as a source of renewed inimicalities between those who enter the EU before and those entering after.

d) Italy has the right assets to play the role of facilitator and provide a regional approach to the Western Balkans' EU integration. This could for instance be achieved by renewing some existing tools, as the Adriatic-Ionic Initiative, or by establishing a new regular Italy-Western Balkans' Forum, focused on bilateral issues and EU integration. Moreover, Italy should take into consideration the collaboration with the successor of the Stability Pact, the Regional Cooperation Council, in order to foster the ownership of the EU integration process.

e) In order to address the issue of the WB integration in the EU not merely from a diplomatic and political perspective, Italian central and local authorities should re-orient their development cooperation programmes to the region towards an *acquis communautaire*-related capacity-building for the various level of government in the WB. This could reinforce Italy's engagement in support of WB's accession by grounding it in the multi-level tradition of Italy's action in the region.

f) Finally, special attention should be devoted to prevention of the spreading of hostile public feelings against WB's accession. Recent political developments, both in Italy and elsewhere, show how much international relations and foreign policy strategies can be affected by the domestic public opinion's perceptions about issues such as immigration and crime. From this point of view, the WB's accession could very well be the next "top target" for aggressive populist mobilization, after Albania in the 1990's, Islam in the early 2000's, Romania and Roma minorities these days. To prevent this, a strong bipartisan effort to highlight the costs of non-accession - also in terms of internal security - would be of key importance.