



PERSUADED BY HISTORY BUT NOT YET READY: ITALIAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE 2004 EU EASTERN ENLARGEMENT

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Persuaded by history but not yet ready: Italian perspectives on the 2004 EU eastern enlargement

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About REWEU

The project (Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU) The project is focused on the commemoration of the 2004 “big bang” EU enlargement on the occasion of its 20th anniversary in May 2024. Through the combination of local, national and international public events, collection of historical memories and narratives, studies on impacts of 2004 enlargement, costs of non-enlargement and role of women in the process, as well as exhibitions and media articles, the project contributes to wider contemporary efforts of EU memory politics. The project focuses on eight selected EU countries, four from the older EU Member States which were part of the Union’s decision-making processes leading up to the big enlargement (Belgium, Finland, Greece and Italy) and four newly acceding countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland). The project is funded by the European Union through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) under the European Remembrance strand.

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Introduction

“Approval for enlargement cannot be granted until the strengthening has been decided and initiated”.² With these words, in February 2000, then-President of the Italian Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi addressed one of the classic dilemmas of the European project: the trade-off between deepening integration and expanding the number of member states.

The systemic changes of 1989 had made the need to strengthen the political structures of the European Economic Community (EEC) even more apparent, paving the way for a Union that was not solely focused on creating a common market. At the same time, they marked the triumph of the Western political and cooperative model, of which the EEC—alongside NATO—was one of the most successful expressions. In other words, the end of the Cold War seemed to demand both a renewed push for European unification and an opening to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs), which were embarking on a path of democratic and economic transition.

Thus, the old dilemma resurfaced, albeit in a novel form. Unlike candidates from previous enlargements, the CEECs were characterized by significantly lower levels of development, weak institutions, and the legacy of a decades-long collectivist economy. For the first time, the impact of admitting a group of states on the functioning of the organization would not only be quantitative but, above all, qualitative.

Germany, determined to create a zone of stability and security along its eastern borders, became the main advocate for CEEC accession. The United Kingdom also emerged as a strong proponent, though for a very different reason: to dilute

² C. A. Ciampi, *Approfondire e allargare l'Europa*, in *Rivista il Mulino*, n. 2, 2000.

supranational integration into a broader community that was more economic than political.

Italy did not hesitate to lend its support to the initial EU initiatives aimed at fostering domestic reforms in the CEECs. This stance aligned with the dialogue and cooperation projects that Rome had been promoting in the region since 1989, including the Central European Initiative (CEI). Over time, the CEI came to include five countries (Austria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland) before eventually faltering. However, Italy's diplomatic activism remained strongly focused on reforming European institutions. Since the adoption of the Single European Act, these institutions had fallen short of the expectations of governments seeking to push for deeper integration—a goal only partially addressed by the Maastricht Treaty.

These were the premises on which Italy's positions regarding the major Eastern enlargement were built. Initially welcomed by the country's elites for its historical significance, the enlargement quickly turned into a challenge to the reform trajectory pursued during the 1990s, which culminated in the failure of the European Constitution. It was a challenge that Italy faced by accepting the inevitability of history, advocating for the strengthening of the EU, and attempting to influence the enlargement process based on its political and economic interests.

This contribution reconstructs, in its first part, the evolution of the Italian approach through an analysis of the positions held by the governments in office from 1992 to 2001, and the public debate involving media and civil society. The second part presents the evaluations of the main benefits and costs attributed to the enlargement process in Italy and the related political-diplomatic initiatives the country sought to pursue. The third and final part describes the support for enlargement expressed by Italian public opinion during those years.

1. Italy's Approach to Eastern Enlargement

Since the European Council meeting in Rome in October 1990, Italy has expressed its support for strengthening political, economic, and cultural ties with the CEECs, approving the initiation of negotiations to finalize association agreements with Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. This marked the first step toward the 2004 enlargement.³

In the following years, however, Italy's attention to EU enlargement seemed secondary compared to other major issues concerning the integration process. Foremost among these was the launch of the Economic and Monetary Union

The prospective accession of Eastern European countries was widely portrayed as a victory of democracy over authoritarian regimes, the end of an era of East-West competition, and the long-awaited achievement of continental peace.

(EMU), whose Italian participation (initially uncertain) required significant financial and 'deepening' diplomatic efforts, which became the central theme of public discourse on Europe. Concurrently, the country was navigating the early years of its transition from the First to the Second Republic, following corruption scandals that had dismantled an entire political system unable to withstand the indirect effects triggered by the end of the Cold

War.⁴

In this context of profound change, both domestically and internationally, the prospective accession of Eastern European countries—now free and on the path

³ M. Neri Gualdesi, *L'Italia e gli allargamenti dell'Europa*, in S. Pons et al. (eds.), *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi. I. Fine della Guerra fredda e globalizzazione*, Carocci, Roma, 2014, p. 324.

⁴ A. Varsori, *Dalla caduta del Muro di Berlino a Tangentopoli: la dimensione internazionale della crisi della prima repubblica*, in S. Pons et al. (eds.), *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi. I. Fine della Guerra fredda e globalizzazione*, Carocci, Roma, 2014, pp. 220–222.

to democratic transition—was widely portrayed as a victory of democracy over authoritarian regimes, the end of an era of East-West competition, and the long-awaited achievement of continental peace. This narrative, shaped by the dominant interpretation of the end of Europe's bipolar system, was bolstered by Italy's deeply rooted pro-European sentiment, which, despite some variations, was widespread across the national political spectrum and prevalent among the population.⁵ The EU was deemed ready to welcome Eastern countries to “respond to the expectations of European peoples who had long been denied their historical and cultural roots”⁶ and achieve “the ultimate goal of this process, which is, ultimately, European peace”.⁷

1.1 Italy's Key Concerns: Institutional Reforms, Geographical Balance and Economic Implications

Beyond a certain "end of history" rhetoric and the enthusiasm spurred by the 1989 conjuncture, Italy's position was, in reality, more nuanced and cautious regarding an enlargement lacking prior progress in integration, an appropriate geographical balance, and greater consideration of its economic implications. This stance, although partially evolving over the years and with changes in government during the decade from 1993 to 2003, retained some consistent elements.

From a historical perspective, Italy's enthusiasm for the accession of new members to the European Economic Community (EEC), and later the EU, diminished over time. While the first enlargement in 1973 was promoted by Rome to counterbalance the Franco-German axis with the United Kingdom's entry, and

⁵ M. Piermattei, *Le culture politiche italiane e il Trattato di Maastricht (1992-1994)*, in «Officina Della Storia», 2011; L. Verzichelli, N. Conti, *La dimensione europea del discorso politico in Italia: un'analisi diacronica delle preferenze partitiche (1950-2001)*, in M. Cotta et al. (eds.), *L'Europa in Italia: élite, opinione pubblica e decisioni*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2005.

⁶ These are the words of Giacomo Stucchi, President of the XIV Committee on EU Policies, delivered during a hearing on the future of the EU at the Chamber of Deputies, *Indagine conoscitiva*, Camera dei Deputati, XIV Legislatura, March 7, 2002, p.7.

⁷ Ciampi, *op. cit.*

the enlargements of the 1980s (Greece in 1981, Spain, and Portugal in 1986) were encouraged to create a geographically more Mediterranean Community (despite some economic losses), the enlargements completed (Finland, Sweden, and Austria) and anticipated in the 1990s met with greater coolness from Italian governments.⁸

The reasons were manifold. First, the results of the long period of institutional reforms inaugurated by the Single European Act (SEA) in 1986, and continued with the Maastricht (1992) and Amsterdam (1997) Treaties, were deemed insufficient. Since the SEA, the approved revisions had failed to meet Italian expectations, which aimed for significant integration deepening through supranational modifications such as expanding EEC/EU competencies, enhancing the European Parliament's powers, strengthening the Commission, recalibrating state votes, and extending qualified majority voting within the Council.⁹ Hence, starting with the accession of Austria, Finland, and Sweden in 1995, Italian governments linked the issue of enlargement to the need for institutional reforms to avoid compromises "likely to severely affect decision-making efficiency and, ultimately, the future development of European integration".¹⁰ This position was strongly reiterated in anticipation of a 25-member EU, as early as the Essen European Council (December 9-10, 1994), where the Pre-Accession Strategy for the CEECs was launched:

"In view of these countries' future accession to the Union, the work of the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference should aim to redesign the Community's internal

⁸ A. Landuyt, *L'Italia e l'allargamento ai PECO*, in A. Landuyt, D. Pasquinucci (eds.), *Gli allargamenti della CEE-UE: 1961-2004*, vol. I, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2005, p. 61.

⁹ A. Missiroli, *Allargamento, riforme istituzionali e difesa comune*, in R. Aliboni et al. (eds.), *L'Italia nella politica internazionale*, IAI-ISPI Yearbook 2000, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2000, p. 273; L. Dini, *Il programma di presidenza dell'Unione Europea*, in *Rivista il Mulino*, n. 2, 1995, p. 49.

¹⁰ *Negoziati di adesione: questioni istituzionali. Elementi per la posizione italiana*. Note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Informal European Council of Joannina, March 26-27, 1994, p. 1, in Archivio storico diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Historical Diplomatic Archives, ASDMAE), fond DGAP I, folder n. 4, 1994.

framework to create the essential prerequisites for the new enlargement. The time remaining before this event should be used effectively to identify the conditions that will allow an orderly development of this process without undermining the Union's decision-making mechanisms.”¹¹

The same objectives were central to the Italian Presidency's program at the start of 1996, which bore the “greater responsibility” of opening the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) to revise the Maastricht Treaty. The aim was to manage the changes required by the arrival of new members with a “long period of gradual adjustment”.¹² The ensuing negotiations fell short of Italian expectations, and the lack of innovations in the Amsterdam Treaty led Italy, France, and Belgium to issue a joint declaration included in the agreement's final text to clearly emphasize their position regarding the dilemma of deepening versus widening:

“On the basis of the results of the Intergovernmental Conference, the Treaty of Amsterdam does not meet the need, reaffirmed at the Madrid European Council, for substantial progress towards reinforcing the institutions. Those countries consider that such reinforcement is an indispensable condition for the conclusion of the first accession negotiations.”¹³

This pattern repeated itself in subsequent attempts to reform the EU, from the Nice Treaty to the drafting of the European Constitution, signed in Rome on October 29, 2004, but never enacted due to the negative outcomes of referenda in France and the Netherlands. Within the centre-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi and among opposition representatives, the importance of institutional changes under discussion at the European Convention—“conceived precisely with

¹¹*Relazione con i PECO, strategia di preadesione. Elementi per la posizione italiana*, Note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the European Council in Essen, December 9-10, 1994, p. 1, in ASDMAE, fond DGAP I, folder n. 2, 1994.

¹² Dini, *op. cit.*, p. 49-50.

¹³ *Declaration n. 6 by Belgium, France and Italy on the Protocol on the institutions with the prospect of enlargement of the European Union*. For an analysis of the limits of the Amsterdam Treaty from the Italian perspective, see the work of the diplomat Maurizio Massari, one of the negotiators of the Italian delegation to the IGC, *L'Europa di fronte alla sfida dell'allargamento*, in *Rivista il Mulino*, Vol. 46, n. 5, September-October, 1997, p. 930.

enlargement in mind”—was central.¹⁴ There was a general consensus on the potential repercussions of a failure to enact these reforms, despite disagreements over which reforms to implement. As summarized by opposition deputy Lapo Pistelli: “Since enlargement cannot be suspended, either we proceed with rule reform, or if enlargement takes place without such reform, we will not be witnessing a new association of Europe, but the beginning of its implosion”.¹⁵

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The second source of Italy’s concerns was the geographical direction of enlargement, which, following the 1995 accessions of Austria, Finland and Sweden, would continue to shift the Union’s balance northward, specifically increasing the presence of Germanic-area countries at the expense of Mediterranean ones. This shift had a

consequent impact on the priorities of the European political agenda. For member states like Italy, France, and Spain, future challenges to Europe’s stability and security were expected to arise from the southern front. For this reason, it was considered essential to “maintain a parallelism between the attention and resources allocated to the CEECs and those directed toward the countries of the Mediterranean basin”,¹⁶ as emphasized by the Barcelona Process,¹⁷ initiated in 1995. This position materialized diplomatically in the promotion of an inclusive approach to accession negotiations, aimed at avoiding delays in the entry of

¹⁴ Senato della Repubblica, XIV Legislatura, 3° Commissione permanente, *Indagine conoscitiva sul futuro dell’Unione europea*, 4° Resoconto stenografico, session of Friday, October 26, 2001, p. 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Politica Mediterraneo dell’Unione. Elementi per la posizione italiana*, Nota del Ministero degli Esteri per il Consiglio Europeo di Essen, 9-10 dicembre 1994, p. 1, in ASDMAE, fond DGAP I, folder n. 2, 1994.

¹⁷ Landuyt, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-64.

countries such as Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Romania, whose inclusion would ensure greater geographical balance (see chapter 2 for further details).

The third issue animating the national debate concerned the economic implications of enlargement. Initial fears about the impact on the EU budget, the reduction of cohesion funds allocated to Italy, and the consequences of the CEECs' entry in areas such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and immigration gradually gave way to a greater focus on the advantages that opening the single market to the new member states would bring to Italy's economy.¹⁸ Notably, Italy was the second-largest trading partner of the CEECs after Germany, holding "particularly high" market shares in Slovenia and Romania and maintaining a significant presence in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary (further elaborated in chapter 2).¹⁹

1.2 The Positions of Italian Governments

Based on these premises, the stance of successive Italian governments did not undergo radical shifts, though some differences are discernible. The first Berlusconi government in 1994, established during a challenging phase of political system reorganization and fiscal consolidation, exhibited an unprecedented scepticism toward deepening European integration, which extended to the enlargement process.²⁰ The subsequent technocratic government led by Lamberto Dini showed a commitment to European issues more aligned with Italy's

¹⁸ Dini, *op. cit.*, p. 50; Massari, *op. cit.*, pp. 930-932; L. Leante, *Allargamento a Est: prospettive di un'Europa diversa*, in *Rivista il Mulino*, n. 1, giugno 1995, pp. 28-46; F. Prausello, *Le conseguenze economiche dell'allargamento*, in A. Landuyt, D. Pasquinucci (eds.), *Gli allargamenti della CEE-UE: 1961-2004*, vol. II, Il Mulino, Bologna 2005, pp. 967-986.

¹⁹ Massari, *op. cit.*, p. 935; For an overview of the state of economic and trade relations between Italy and the CEECs on the eve of enlargement see G. Massimiliano, *Paesi dell'Europa centro-orientale, Italia e allargamento*, in *Affari Sociali Internazionali*, n. 3, 2004, p. 74; A. Majocchi, *L'integrazione economica dei paesi dell'Europa centrale e orientale: il ruolo delle piccole e medie imprese*, in A. Landuyt, D. Pasquinucci (eds.), *Gli allargamenti della CEE-UE: 1961-2004*, vol. II, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2005, p. 1035.

²⁰ Landuyt, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

historical pro-European stance, albeit without abandoning concerns about a rapid enlargement—both regarding the safeguarding of the reform process and the associated economic costs. It was under the centre-left governments between 1996 and 2001, headed by Romano Prodi, Massimo D'Alema, and Giuliano Amato, that the government's approach began to display greater optimism toward enlargement. This shift was partly driven by political considerations²¹ and partly by the growing economic and financial interests Italy was developing in the candidate countries.²² The second Berlusconi government, however, marked a return to less pro-European positions, reflected in a more subdued commitment to institutional reforms, overtaken by what was described as a “new European course for the country.”²³ This approach embraced a teleological vision of the EU focused on economic and market aspects, a minimalist institutional architecture, and an inseparable alignment with the United States and NATO.²⁴ The explicit defence of national interests, combined with a renewed critical narrative against the EU's

The explicit defence of national interests, combined with a renewed critical narrative against the EU's “interventionist” policies began to raise doubts about the advantages and costs of enlargement, doubts that resonated with some representatives of the industrial and economic sectors.

²¹The efforts that Romano Prodi, as President of the European Commission (1999-2004), later invested in the enlargement process are confirmed and motivated by his own words: “From the very first days of its work, this Commission has always considered enlargement a top priority. Enlargement is, in fact, the exact measure, the concrete proof, and the historic responsibility of Europe, its powers and duties, its potential and ambitions. With enlargement, that is, with the unification of the continent, a chapter of Europe's history is effectively closed, and the foundations are laid to build its future” (Speech by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, November 13, 2001).

²²Landuyt, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

²³Ibid., p. 72.

²⁴S. Giusti, “Verso una razionalizzazione dell'allargamento?”, in A. Colombo, N. Ronzitti (Eds), *L'Italia e la politica internazionale*, IAI-ISPI Yearbook 2002, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002, p. 98.

“interventionist” policies —characterized by constraints and economic parameters— began to raise doubts about the advantages and costs of enlargement, doubts that resonated with some representatives of the industrial and economic sectors.²⁵ For instance, Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti remarked that enlargement was “no longer a moral duty following the fall of the Wall but a necessity for market expansion”,²⁶ while Culture Minister Giuliano Urbani underscored the failure of the deepening-enlargement nexus, advocating for the reinforcement of intergovernmental processes over community-based ones:

“Let’s be clear, the idea that the Union’s enlargement and the expansion of the powers of community institutions could go hand in hand is an irresponsible myth. Even now, with 15 member states, the functioning of these bodies is complex; when there are 25 or more, it will become a puzzle. Therefore, it is precisely the enlargement process that makes strengthening the Council and the rotating Presidency an unavoidable issue. We need a Europe that makes fewer common decisions and entrusts them to direct relations between national governments.”²⁷

The differing degrees of support for European integration between centre-right and centre-left parties had similar repercussions on Eastern enlargement. While the Berlusconi governments never formally questioned the enlargement process, they exhibited greater scepticism within a majority supported by parties holding heterogeneous positions on European issues.²⁸

1.3 Media and Civil Society

The narrative presented by the media regarding enlargement aligned with political priorities and positions. Initially, it embraced the rhetoric of a pacified Europe, finally free to unite, before shifting toward an account of developments viewed

²⁵ Landuyt, *op. cit.*, p. 73-75.

²⁶ G. Radice, “Politica europea ambigua, siamo poco credibili”, *Corriera della Sera*, September 9, 2002.

²⁷ *Urbani e Tremonti: in Europa, più potere agli Stati nazionali*, in *L’Unità Europea*, July-August, 2002, p. 15.

²⁸ Giusti, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

through the lens of Italian interests. Articles highlighted the preliminary need for reforms,²⁹ calls to ensure geographical balance and inclusivity in the process,³⁰ and analyses of the expected economic impacts, both positive and negative.³¹ Overall, media coverage of the topic was limited, confined primarily to the timely reporting of decisions arising from European Council meetings.³²

More consistent and in-depth attention and activism came from certain civil society actors, including Confindustria, federalist movements, and the think tank and research centre community. The stance of Confindustria, the most significant association representing industrial interests, reflected an understandable interest in the expansion of the single market and the opportunities it could bring. Its assessment relied on optimistic predictions from numerous studies, which led industrial representatives to state on the eve of enlargement that “the opportunities will far outweigh the sacrifices.”³³ However, this was not an uncritical endorsement. Italian entrepreneurs, along with the governments, advocated for the pre-emptive need for institutional reforms to ensure the EU (and its market) functioned effectively, demonstrating an acute awareness of the challenges posed by competition and market dynamics.³⁴

The activism of federalist movements, particularly the European Federalist Movement (MFE), played a significant role in fostering debate within civil society ahead of enlargement, through publications, seminars, and meetings.³⁵ The

²⁹ M. Caprara, *Ciampi ai Paesi fondatori dell'Europa: riforme entro il 2003*, Corriere della Sera, November 30, 2002.

³⁰ R.E., *Dini: un'Unione europea aperta a tutti*, Corriera della Sera, July 22, 1997; F. Debenedetti, *Europa dell'est e del sud*, La Stampa, November 12, 2002.

³¹ F. Podestà, *“Italia solo vantaggi dell'allargamento”*, La Stampa, October 21, 2002; E. Singer, *Europa, appello di Prodi sull'allargamento*, La Stampa, October 24, 2002.

³² Landuyt, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

³³ F. Podestà, *“Italia solo vantaggi dell'allargamento”*, La Stampa, October 21, 2002. V. anche F. Podestà, *“Con l'allargamento ad Est basta aiuti di Stato”*, La Stampa, June 15, 2002.

³⁴ Landuyt, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

³⁵ In December 1999, the opening editorial of *L'Unità Europea*, the monthly publication of the MFE (Movimento Federalista Europeo), issued a stark warning: “Either the Union will establish a federal

central point of the MFE's perspective was the primacy of institutional reforms over enlargement, which it deemed inevitable yet perilous if not preceded by adequate integration deepening. While theoretically aligned with Italy's official stance, this position underscored the urgency of a treaty revision with a federalist focus. The MFE did not shy away from openly criticizing the Berlusconi government's actions, especially during the 2003 European Convention, when some of its ministers expressed preferences for a more intergovernmental Constitution.³⁶

The debate also saw contributions from Italian think tanks and research centres most attuned to European issues, such as the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), which enriched discussions with analyses and insights. Reflections on enlargement were articulated in a joint document on the future of the EU, prepared ahead of the Laeken European Council (December 14-15, 2001), and presented in a parliamentary hearing on October 26, 2001.³⁷ Beyond the typical Italian concerns about enlargement without integration deepening, the consensus on the accession of new members was summarized by Rosa Balfour of the Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI) as follows:

“[...] it can be affirmed that, in general, enlargement is beneficial. The balance between costs and benefits is substantially positive for Europe as a whole and for Italy. The most recent studies confirm that, overall, the country will benefit from new markets for Italian products and investments. Moreover, the growth forecasts for candidate countries are higher than the European average. The more

political identity before enlargement, or the risks of its dissolution will become uncontrollable” (n. 310, p. 2).

³⁶ *L'Italia contro la federazione europea*, in *L'Unità europea*, March 2003, pp. 1-2; Publius, *Con la nuova politica europea di Berlusconi l'euroscetticismo entra nel cuore dell'Europa*, *Lettera europea*, n. 22, February 2002.

³⁷ *Indagine conoscitiva sul futuro dell'Unione europea*, Senato della Repubblica, XIV Legislatura, October 26, 2001.

problematic areas of enlargement, in fact, have a lesser impact on Italy compared to other Union members.”³⁸

Finally, among the voices of civil society, it is essential to highlight the mediating role played by the first non-Italian Pope of the modern era, John Paul II. The Polish Pope's public interventions and his active role in the collapse of communist regimes contributed to raising public awareness about the situation in Eastern European countries. This, in turn, bolstered Italian citizens' support for their transition toward democracy and a united Europe.³⁹

2. Italy's Assessment of Eastern Enlargement

2.1 Benefits and Positive Implications

Beyond the affirmation of stability in Eastern Europe with positive repercussions for European security, Italy's assessment of the benefits stemming from the EU's enlargement to the CEECs predominantly emphasized economic factors. As previously noted, Italy enjoyed excellent economic relations with many candidate countries. It ranked as the second-largest trading partner of the Czech Republic after Germany, maintained a positive trade balance with Poland (exporting more than twice as much as it imported), and had approximately 280 companies operating in Slovakia.⁴⁰ Trade levels were also satisfactory with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and even more so with Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, where numerous small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) had invested and begun outsourcing, exporting the production model typical of Italy's industrial districts in the north of the country.⁴¹ On this basis, the inclusion of the CEECs into the single market would have further enhanced trade levels, while simultaneously increasing

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁹ L. Accattoli, *Il Papa all' Europa: allargati verso Oriente*, *Corriere della Sera*, June 21, 1998.

⁴⁰ Massimiliano, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

⁴¹ Since the mid-1990s, several businesses from northeastern Italy made significant investments in the Timisoara region of Romania. See Majocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 1035.

opportunities for investment and outsourcing for Italian companies.⁴² These opportunities extended to sectors complementary to productive industries, such as infrastructure and energy, exemplified by the Italian company ENEL, which had already been involved in hydroelectric projects in Bulgaria.⁴³ The majority of studies agreed in predicting positive effects on Italy's economic growth, estimated at approximately half a percentage point of GDP annually.⁴⁴

2.2 Costs and Main Risks

Conversely, the potential costs of an inadequately prepared, managed, and balanced enlargement were assessed as significant. Foremost among these was

A preference for a unified Europe through a federal structure was not predominant among the CEECs, where alternative, less structured, and more flexible models of union appeared more compatible with their reluctance to cede newly regained national sovereignty to Brussels.

the risk of paralysis in EU institutions due to incomplete institutional reforms. As previously illustrated, deepening integration was central to Italy's demands, which focused on fundamental issues for the effective functioning of European architecture. Failure to achieve objectives such as reducing unanimity in favour of qualified majority voting, recalibrating the voting weight of member states to avoid excessive bias toward smaller countries (and the formation of blocking minorities that could impede decision-making), and

restructuring the Commission—no longer composed of one commissioner per state—would have rendered the enlargement problematic for the Union's

⁴² E. Riva, *L'allargamento ad est farà bene alle imprese*, La stampa, October 14, 2002.

⁴³ Landuyt, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁴⁴ M. Nava, *L'allargamento dell'Unione Europea: questioni finanziarie, di competitività e di crescita*, in *L'industria*, n. 2, April-June 2004, p. 226.

future.⁴⁵ The belief that reforming the EU would become more challenging after enlargement was rooted not only in the complexities of intergovernmental negotiations involving more national interests but also in an often implicit assumption regarding divergences over the ultimate goal of the European project. A preference for a unified Europe through a federal structure was not predominant among the CEECs, where alternative, less structured, and more flexible models of union appeared more compatible with their reluctance to cede newly regained national sovereignty to Brussels.⁴⁶ This perspective partly explains Italy's evolving stance on differentiated integration. Traditionally wary of proposals for a multi-speed Europe, fearing exclusion from the leading group, Italy—spurred by enlargement—began to view flexibility mechanisms favourably as a means to avoid institutional deadlock and to establish a more advanced political nucleus (corresponding to the Eurozone).⁴⁷ The proposal advanced by Foreign Minister Beniamino Andreatta in October 1993 to create a more integrated group composed of the six founding states and Spain, and the subsequent Italian-British initiative at the Copenhagen Summit to initially associate the CEECs in political and security dialogues, exemplified this approach: consolidating a vanguard group and proposing alternatives to full membership.⁴⁸

The economic dimension was not overlooked in the evaluation of enlargement costs. While the benefits gradually became evident and widely accepted, early analyses offered less optimistic assessments of the cost-benefit balance, particularly when comparing southern European countries with those in the

⁴⁵ Massari, *op. cit.*, p. 930; *Riflessioni italiane su allargamento UE*, Note, in ASDMAE, fond DGAP VI, folder n. 36, 1997.

⁴⁶ Giusti, *op. cit.*, p. 94. For insights into the potential effects that enlargement could have on the nature of the European project, see J. Zielonka, *Europe Moves Eastward: Challenges of EU Enlargement*, in *Journal of Democracy*, n. 15, vol. 1, 2004.

⁴⁷ Massari, *op. cit.*, p. 935; Landuyt, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁴⁸ Gualdesi, *op. cit.*, p. 325; Leante, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

centre and north.⁴⁹ Two specific areas elicited more concerns than reassurances regarding the CEECs' accession: cohesion funds and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The lower levels of development and the agricultural focus characterizing the new members' economies were expected to have an unprecedented impact on CAP financing through the EU budget, whose national contributions and strengthened own resources were subjects of constant negotiation tensions.⁵⁰ In this context, the increased burden as a net contributor to the budget weighed on Italy's assessments, although the anticipated CAP reform also suggested potential positive outcomes, given the modest benefits the policy had historically provided to Italy's agricultural sector.⁵¹ Regarding structural policies, Italy recognized that growing regional disparities would reduce the proportion of EU funds allocated, particularly to the poorest southern regions.⁵² This trend, while politically and economically concerning, was long perceived as irreversible and compounded by the historically suboptimal utilization of structural funds.⁵³

Regarding immigration from the new member states, prior to 2004, this issue was not considered a significant problem for Italy's labour market or social welfare system. This contrasts with the subsequent years, when fears of the "Polish plumber" and welfare shopping permeated national debates. Italy was initially

⁴⁹ P. C. Padoan, *L'Italia e l'allargamento dell'Unione europea ai PECO*, CESPI, Ministero degli Affari esteri, April, 1997; *Le prospettive per l'economia italiana in un anno di grandi cambiamenti in Europa*, in *L'Italia nella politica internazionale*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, SIPI, Roma 1994, cited by Gualdesi, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

⁵⁰ Prausello, *op. cit.*, p. 975; Massari, *op. cit.*, p. 930; about CAP see also G. Laschi, *L'agricoltura: un tema fondamentale dell'allargamento*, in A. Landuyt e D. Pasquinucci (eds.), *Gli allargamenti della CEE/UE 1961-2004*, vol. I, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005, pp. 61-75.

⁵¹ *Riflessioni italiane su allargamento UE*, Note, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁵² Dini, *op. cit.*, 50.

⁵³ L. Mechi, *Abilità diplomatica, insuccessi economici, progressi amministrativi. Appunti per una storia dell'Italia e dei fondi strutturali*, in P. Craveri, A. Varsori (eds.), *L'Italia nella costruzione europea: un bilancio storico (1957-2007)*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2009, pp. 187-210.

only moderately exposed to migratory flows from Eastern Europe,⁵⁴ which even led some voices to advocate for an immediate opening of borders.⁵⁵

Finally, among the negative consequences that enlargement seemed to pose for Italy was the issue of regional imbalances within the EU, increasingly oriented toward a northeast axis at the expense of the Mediterranean and Balkan dimensions. As previously highlighted, this concern was prominent at the governmental level, leading to initiatives such as the Barcelona Process and positions aimed at ensuring an enlargement process that was “as unified and inclusive as possible.”⁵⁶ Specifically, this entailed not privileging the four Visegrád

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Group countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary), as advocated by Germany, to the detriment of other candidates. Since the Essen European Council, Italy had sought—with partial success—to invite Cyprus, Malta, and Turkey alongside the CEECs.⁵⁷ These efforts continued in 1997, opposing the Luxembourg Summit's decision to selectively open accession negotiations (a proposal from the Commission

supported by Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) exclusively with countries meeting the Copenhagen criteria (Cyprus, Estonia, Czech Republic,

⁵⁴ G. Gabrielli, L. Andria, *Allargamento ad est dell'Ue e flussi migratori in Italia: valutazioni a seguito dei più recenti dati ufficiali*, in *Rivista Italiana di Economia, Demografia e Statistica*, Vol. LVIII, n. 1-2, January-June, 2004.

⁵⁵ T. Boeri, *Non chiudiamo la porta ai lavoratori dell'Est*, *La Stampa*, February 20, 2004, p. 2; *Indagine conoscitiva sul futuro dell'Unione europea*, Senato della Repubblica, XIV Legislatura, October 26, 2001, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Massari, *op. cit.*, p. 936.

⁵⁷ Lettera del Presidente del Consiglio Silvio Berlusconi al Cancelliere Federale della Germania Helmut Kohl, in ASDMAE, fond DGAP I, folder 2, 1994.

Poland, Slovenia, Hungary) while leaving others (Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia) at risk of “dangerous sentiments of political marginalization.”⁵⁸ This objective was ultimately achieved in 1999 at the Helsinki Summit, where, spurred by the Kosovo War, a decision was made to accelerate enlargement by opening negotiations with all candidate countries, including Malta.

2.3 Italy's Special Attention to Candidate Countries

Within Italy's broader perspective of opportunities and risks, particular attention was devoted to specific countries. Slovenia was one such case, owing to historical, geographical, and economic ties. The conclusion of Slovenia's EU association agreement in 1996, after two years of Italian vetoes related to Ljubljana's refusal to recognize the property rights of Istrian exiles, marked a turning point. This issue was resolved thanks to Spanish diplomatic efforts and U.S. pressure on Italy to unblock Slovenia's EU and NATO accession processes.⁵⁹ With this obstacle removed, Italy began fostering strong bilateral relations with Slovenia, supporting its accession to NATO to ensure the continuity of the Alliance's north-eastern borders and to the EU to safeguard the economic and financial interests of SMEs that had invested across the border. Similar economic and geopolitical considerations characterized Italy's approach toward Romania and Bulgaria, which it sought to include in accession negotiations.

Italy's commitment to strengthening the Mediterranean dimension was evident in its support for Cyprus's accession, which it pursued—despite challenges—in conjunction with improving Greek-Turkish relations and advancing Turkey's 1987 EU membership application. From Italy's perspective, dialogue with Ankara was essential to develop a “healthy and structured” relationship that did not preclude

⁵⁸ L. Dini, *Allargamento dell'Unione europea: metodologia negoziale e strategia di pre-adesione. Posizione italiana*, in ASDMAE, fond DGAP VI, folder n. 36, 1997; L. Dini, *Europa, integrare l'Est senza creare altri muri*, in *Corriere della Sera*, August 22, 1997.

⁵⁹ Gualdesi, *op. cit.*, note 41, p. 327.

the (remote) possibility of Turkey's future EU membership.⁶⁰ This objective, while ultimately unattainable, saw a minor success in 1999 with Turkey's recognition as a candidate country.

3. Italy's Public Opinion on EU Enlargement

During the years when the issue of enlargement to the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) became increasingly prominent in both European and national public debates, Italy continued to exhibit strong Europeanism, a legacy of the functional and uncritical support for the integration project that had characterized the country from its outset. At the same time, it was precisely in the 1990s that Italian public opinion began to shift, revealing the first cracks in support for the EU. This shift was driven by the economic sacrifices demanded by successive governments in preparation for the country's entry into the EMU.⁶¹

3.1 Limited Knowledge, Good Support

Despite widespread Europeanism, by 2004 the knowledge Italian citizens possessed about the EU, its institutions, and its policies was below the European average (scoring 4.44 on a scale from 1 to 10).⁶² Moreover, the absolute majority of Italians were unaware of the exact number of member states. An analysis of Eurobarometer data further highlights the limited awareness Italians had of the major enlargement. Just months before the accession of the new member states, only 1% of Italians could correctly distinguish member states from candidate countries, and only 8% were able to clearly identify the latter.⁶³ This lack of

⁶⁰ *Riflessioni italiane su allargamento UE, op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁶¹ For an overview of the decline in Italian support for the EU, see R. Balfour, L. Robustelli, *Why Did Italy Fall Out of Love with Europe?*, IAI Commentaries 19 - 48, Istituto Affari Internazionali and The German Marshall Fund of the United States, July 2019.

⁶² European Commission, *National Report Italy*, Standard Eurobarometer 61, European Union Research Group EEIG, Spring 2004, p. 41.

⁶³ European Commission, *Enlargement of the European Union*, Flash Eurobarometer 140, Gallup Europe, March, 2003, p. 18.

awareness was primarily due to a poorly developed public debate, largely confined to academic and elite circles, and the marginal visibility European issues received in the media (50% of Italians believed that mass media covered the EU too infrequently).⁶⁴ Nonetheless, Italian support for enlargement gradually increased over time.

After the Maastricht Treaty, a sense of dissatisfaction with unfulfilled reforms spread throughout Italy, reinforcing the belief that before moving forward with enlargement, it was necessary to focus on strengthening European integration. By 1995, Italy was among the countries most supportive of deepening the EU (68%), alongside France and the Netherlands, while showing a more cautious stance toward future enlargements (only the 16% of Italians surveyed considered enlargement a priority for the EU's next steps).⁶⁵ In 1999, enlargement was not considered a priority by 54% of Italians, although 31% supported it—a figure that nevertheless marked an increase compared to previous years.⁶⁶ By the following year, 43% of the Italian public expressed support for the accession of new member states, a percentage higher than the EU-15 average of 38%.⁶⁷ In 2002, Italians continued to demonstrate a favourable attitude toward enlargement, with over 70% supporting the accession of some or all candidate countries, while only 7%

⁶⁴ European Commission, *National Report Italy*. Standard Eurobarometer 61, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁶⁵ European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 43*, Directorate General X, Autumn 1995. p. 23.

⁶⁶ European Commission, *Eurobarometer*, Report number 50, Directorate General X, March 1999, p.33.

⁶⁷ European Commission, *Eurobarometer*, Report number 53, Directorate General for Education and Culture, October 2000, p. 55.

were opposed.⁶⁸ By the first half of 2004, 55% of Italians favoured enlargement, compared to 25% who were against it.⁶⁹ Among those considered the EU ready for enlargement, in March 2003 the majority were young people (15-24 years old) accounting for 53%, compared to 35% of those over 55.⁷⁰ By the autumn of 2004, 61% of Italians viewed future EU enlargements positively, compared to a European average of 53%. In contrast, only 22% of Italians were opposed, a significantly lower figure than the 35% opposition recorded across the EU.⁷¹

Concerns and fears related to enlargement were, nonetheless, present. The foremost concern was the risk of EU decision-making paralysis (70%) if the necessary institutional reforms were not implemented.

3.2 More Opportunities Than Concerns

In weighing the costs and benefits of enlargement, Italian public opinion strongly leaned toward the latter. According to 73% of respondents, the accession of new member states was seen as the outcome of a natural process of historical and cultural reunification with the rest of Europe.⁷² An even higher percentage (85%) believed that enlargement would culturally enrich Europe, while a significant majority (83%) maintained that a Union composed of 25 member states could play a more prominent role on the international stage.⁷³

⁶⁸ European Commission, *Rapporto Italia*, Eurobarometer Special Bureaux, EORG EEIG, 2002, p. 5.

⁶⁹ European Commission, *National Report Italy*. Standard Eurobarometer 61, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁷⁰ European Commission, *Enlargement of the European Union*, Flash Eurobarometer 140, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁷¹ European Commission, *Rapporto Nazionale Italia*, Standard Eurobarometro 62, TNS Opinion & Social, Autumn 2004, p. 34.

⁷² European Commission, *Enlargement of the European Union*, Flash Eurobarometer 140, *op. cit.*, p. 54-55.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75, 43.

On the economic front, many citizens emphasized the opportunities for investment and the expansion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) into new markets (89%), whereas only 31% feared that enlargement would increase unemployment rates.⁷⁴ Additionally, 71% believed that a larger EU would be better equipped to address environmental challenges and combat pollution.⁷⁵ Relatively few Italians were concerned about potential downsides: 27% thought Italy's influence in Europe might diminish, 35% feared that a larger Union would be more disconnected from its citizens, and 28% anticipated negative consequences for welfare standards.⁷⁶

Concerns and fears related to enlargement were, nonetheless, present. The foremost concern was the risk of EU decision-making paralysis (70%)⁷⁷ if the necessary institutional reforms were not implemented. This was followed by worries about the potential relocation of businesses to countries with lower production costs (65%), although this concern was less pronounced in Italy than the European average (72%).⁷⁸ Furthermore, 58% of Italians believed that the accession of new member states would exacerbate difficulties for Italian farmers.⁷⁹ A comparable share (59%) expressed concern over the potential increase in drug trafficking and organized crime, which they feared could negatively affect the EU's internal security.⁸⁰ In contrast to other European countries, migration was not perceived as a pressing issue in Italy (12%); Italian citizens were instead more focused on broader economic challenges such as inflation (45%) and unemployment (34%).⁸¹

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 58, 68.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 48-49, 52, 70-71. This represents the lowest percentage recorded among the 15 EU member states in March 2003.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 50-51.

⁷⁸ European Commission, *National Report Italy*. Standard Eurobarometer 61, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 23.

One of the most divisive issues for Italian public opinion was the question of the costs of enlargement. According to 52% of respondents, these costs were expected to be very high, while 48% believed they would be manageable and offset by the benefits of new member states' accession.⁸² Finally, 75% of Italians believed that alongside enlargement, the EU should develop an alternative form of relationship with neighbouring countries, particularly those in the Mediterranean and Balkan regions, which would not necessarily involve full membership. This view was also shared by citizens of Greece, Spain, Ireland, Austria, and Germany.⁸³

Conclusions

When history takes a certain direction, it is very difficult to alter its course, and almost impossible to stop it. The history of the EU's eastern enlargement is no exception to this simple observation. The changes brought about by the end of the Cold War created the conditions that made the accession of new countries possible, while the deterioration of security in Europe during the 1990s accelerated a process strongly supported by Germany, the United Kingdom, and the European Commission within the Union, and by the United States externally. For Italy, which had been committed to strengthening European integration since the mid-1980s, the choice between deepening and widening the Union was only an apparent dilemma. For nearly all the governments that led the country between 1992 and 2001, enlargement was considered "a historical priority and an objective to be pursued without hesitation."⁸⁴ Yet, the political and diplomatic action undertaken shows how Italy leaned toward the first option, judging it essential to

⁸² European Commission, *Enlargement of the European Union*, Flash Eurobarometer 140, *op. cit.*, p. 44-45.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

⁸⁴ *L'allargamento dell'Unione e il rafforzamento istituzionale*, Telegram signed by Ministry of Foreign Affairs Secretary General Umberto Vattani, in ADSMAE, fond DGAP VI, folder n. 36, 1997, p. 2.

safeguard the viability of the European project. As then-President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi stated:

“Reflecting on the dual task of 'deepening' and 'widening,' one asks: does one of these tasks take precedence, temporally or logically, over the other? I am convinced that if enlargement is initiated without achieving strengthening, we risk losing the united Europe we aspire to create.”⁸⁵

However, lacking the strength to interrupt the systemic changes underway, Italy chose the (inevitable) path of pursuing both the reform trajectory initiated at Maastricht and the enlargement process, fostering the idea that the two “far from being irreconcilable, mutually reinforce each other and can and must be pursued in parallel.”⁸⁶ Events, as we have seen, unfolded differently. The impetus to strengthen the EU's supranational architecture, in line with Italy's vision, lost momentum over time, largely due to the slowing of Franco-German willingness and persistent British resistance. The outcomes achieved at Amsterdam and Nice thus fell short of expectations, while the date of accession for the new member states drew ever closer. Faced with these developments, Italy sought to influence the results and methods of enlargement in line with its economic and political interests. It aimed to ensure greater geographical balance in a Union increasingly skewed toward Central and Northern Europe at the expense of its Mediterranean and Balkan dimensions and to promote an inclusive negotiation process that would not leave any candidate country behind. It is through this lens that we must interpret Italy's eventual support for the accession of countries such as Cyprus, Malta, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia.

⁸⁵ Ciampi, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ *L'allargamento dell'Unione e il rafforzamento istituzionale*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

On the institutional reform front, the establishment of the Berlusconi government in 2001 marked a departure from the country's traditionally pro-European stance, further dampening already weak hopes for a significant leap forward for the EU. These hopes were definitively dashed with the failure of the European Constitution in 2005.

From an economic perspective, Italy's assessment of the benefits and costs of enlargement largely tilted in favour of the former. There were concerns about the impact the new member states might have on the EU budget and certain policies, such as the Common Agricultural Policy and structural funds. However, the advantages of opening new markets for national trade and businesses convinced both political and entrepreneurial circles to view the expansion of the single market with optimism.

Media coverage of the enlargement process was inconsistent and was overshadowed by other major EU topics deemed of greater interest, such as the launch of the Economic and Monetary Union. As a result, outside of small circles of experts, academics, and federalist groups, the public debate on enlargement was superficial. In a society characterized by a rhetorical form of Europeanism, majority support for the accession of new countries eventually emerged, albeit unaccompanied by a solid understanding of the issue among citizens.

In the end, the accession of ten new member states in 2004 occurred in the scenario Italy had sought to avoid from the outset: an enlargement without the necessary and preliminary deepening of integration. This outcome, beyond the dynamics described, can also be attributed to the post-1989 rhetoric that pushed for a rapid reunification of the continent, conflating the concept of Europe with

that of the European Union. Many politicians—including Italians—became ensnared in this narrative.⁸⁷

Today, as the EU looks toward future enlargement, particularly to the Western Balkans, Italy remains one of its most ardent supporters, driven by motivations similar to those that prompted its efforts in the late 1990s for a more balanced and inclusive enlargement. The key difference lies in the now lukewarm conviction that this should be preceded by treaty reform—a view shaped by the awareness of the current lack of a shared political will among the 27 member states. This, indirectly, underscores the foresight in Italy’s approach to the deepening-widening dilemma.

⁸⁷ Giusti, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

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