

Shot by Both Sides: The War in Ukraine, Italy, and NATO's Strategic Communications Challenges

Aurelio Insisa

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, war in Ukraine, Italy, NATO, disinformation, misinformation*

About the Author

Dr Aurelio Insisa is Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of Hong Kong.

Abstract

The war in Ukraine has sparked an intense public debate in Italy over NATO's objectives and activities. A significant minority of the Italian public considers the alliance at least partially responsible for the conflict. Early analyses of the public debate over the conflict focused on the influence projected by the Russian state and state-adjacent actors in Italian media and politics. This study shifts the focus towards the interests and agency of Italian actors critical of NATO. It frames criticism of the alliance in mass media and social media as the result of deeply rooted resentment against an organisation perceived—both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum—as a sinew of a network of 'foreign' institutions considered responsible for Italy's socio-economic decline. From these premises it examines how pacifist and 'geopolitical' critiques of NATO have affected the alliance's capability to perform strategic communications

in the country. These findings, in turn, suggest the need for renewed attention to how NATO strategic communications could engage domestic audiences of member states.

Introduction

NATO has provided political support and practical assistance to Ukraine through the Comprehensive Assistance Package since the earliest stage of the conflict sparked by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹ In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the alliance has helped coordinate Kyiv's request for assistance and supported allies in the delivery of humanitarian, non-lethal, and financial aid, while ammunition and military equipment have been provided by individual allies.² Beyond supporting Ukraine, NATO has articulated a multidimensional response to Russian actions. It strengthened the defence posture on its eastern flank in the immediate aftermath of the February invasion.³ It has devised a fundamental shift of its defence and deterrence posture; it has countered Russian disinformation over the alliance's role in the conflict; and it has managed the Kremlin's threatening rhetoric over the use of weapons of mass destruction in order to avoid escalation.⁴ NATO's response exemplifies the alliance's strategic communications (SC) approach—one that is 'based on values and interests' and that holistically 'encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.⁵ A critical objective of NATO SC since the new phase of the conflict has been to deter Moscow from expanding its threats to member states of the alliance. This effort requires, beyond the effective targeting of Russian elite audiences, a continuing

1 NATO, 'Relations with Ukraine', 8 July 2022.

2 Raluca Csernatoni, 'Is NATO Doing Anything for Ukraine?', *Carnegie Europe—Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, 1 September 2022.

3 NATO, 'NATO's Eastern Flank: Stronger Defence and Deterrence', July 2022; NATO, 'NATO's Eastern Flank: Air Domain', April 2022.

4 NATO, 'NATO's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', 1 September 2022.

5 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO StratCom CoE, 2019), p. 46.

engagement with the domestic audiences of the individual members over the alliance's activities since Moscow's full-scale invasion. NATO SC is most effective when its domestic audiences understand the values informing and shaping the alliance's approach to deterrence, and when they gain full awareness of the wide range of tools, including military ones, it uses to reach this objective.

Evidence from polls suggests that a significant minority of the Italian public has not responded positively to these efforts. The Italian technocratic government led by Mario Draghi from February 2021 to September 2022 unequivocally sided with Ukraine from the early stages of the Russian invasion in February 2022. Under the Draghi government, Rome provided political and (limited) military support to Kyiv while firmly condemning Moscow's invasion. Yet, the EU Eurobarometer poll published in May 2022 shows a more nuanced picture. The poll found that 21 per cent of Italians do not consider Russian authorities 'responsible first and foremost' for the conflict, and 34 per cent disapprove of 'financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine'.⁶ Crucially, 57 per cent of the Italian public are dissatisfied with NATO's reaction to the conflict.⁷ This position was confirmed by a separate YouGov poll conducted in May covering 17 European states, which showed that 19 per cent of Italians place equal blame for the conflict on Russia and NATO, while another 14 per cent place the blame either entirely on NATO or 'more [on] NATO than [on] Russia'.⁸

Early analyses of the Italian information environment did not focus on the scepticism of such a significant minority of the Italian public over the Euro-Atlantic response to Moscow's aggression. Instead, these

6 EU Directorate-General for Communication, '[Flash Eurobarometer 506: EU's Response to the War in Ukraine](#)', May 2022, pp. 14, 27.

7 Ibid., p. 19.

8 YouGov, '[Support for Ukraine Is Strong in Europe, but Nations Are Not As United As It Looks](#)', 5 May 2022.

analyses generally focused on Russian ‘propaganda’,⁹ and specifically on its pervasiveness within Italian mass media and social media.¹⁰ This approach has coalesced into a linear three-stage narrative. According to this narrative, in the first stage, before the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia successfully infiltrated the country’s politics, society, and economy. In the second stage, both Italian and Russian actors operating within a corrupted Italian information environment disseminated pro-Russian narratives. As a result, in the supposed third stage, a sizable portion of Italian public opinion, disoriented by the magnitude of the crisis, embraced Moscow’s justifications for the conflict and condemned the US and NATO. This linear narrative is not without merits. It builds upon a growing body of literature, comprising both academic research and journalistic investigations,¹¹ as well as judicial inquiries,¹² that since the mid 2010s have provided evidence about the impressive extent of the Kremlin’s influence operations in the country. It also casts a light on the presence, at least in the early months of the current phase of the conflict, of both Russian officials (such as Foreign Minister

-
- 9 Italian national mass media consistently use the term ‘propaganda’ with a strong negative connotation implying malign intent and the dissemination of wilfully false content. For an SC-perspective on the meaning of propaganda, see: Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), pp. 44–46; James P. Farwell, *Power and Persuasion: The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), pp. 23–35.
- 10 Giovanna Faggionato, ‘[In Italia non si riesce a fermare la propaganda del Cremlino](#)’ [The Kremlin’s Propaganda in Italy Cannot Be Stopped], *Domani*, 16 March 2022; Hannah Roberts, ‘[Infowars: Putin’s Propaganda Permeates Italian Media](#)’, *Politico*, 20 May 2022; Gian Luca Atzori, ‘[Troll de guerre](#)’, *Il Tascabile*, 16 March 2022; Simone Fontana, ‘[Dentro i gruppi Facebook italiani che amano Putin e fanno disinformazione sulla guerra](#)’ [Inside the Italian Facebook Groups Who Love Putin and Disseminate Disinformation about the War], *Facta News*, 14 April 2022.
- 11 Luigi Sergio Germani and Jacopo Iacoboni, ‘Italy: Is the Russian Turn Reversible?’, in *The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses 2.0: Russian Influence in Greece, Italy, and Spain*, Alina Polyakova (ed.), (Atlantic Council, 2017), pp. 11–19; Heather A. Conley, Donatienne Ruy, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers* (CSIS, 2019), pp. 57–68; Massimiliano Di Pasquale and Luigi Sergio Germani, *L’influenza russa sulla cultura, il mondo accademico e sui think tank italiani* [Russia’s Influence over Italy’s Culture, Academe and Think Tanks] (Istituto Gino Germani di Scienza Sociali e Studi Strategici, 2021); Gianluca Paolucci and Jacopo Iacoboni, *Oligarchi: Come gli amici di Putin stanno comprando l’Italia* [Oligarchs: How Putin’s Friends Are Buying Italy] (Bari: Laterza, 2021); Vittorio Malagutti and Carlo Tecce, ‘[Manager di Stato, imprenditori, diplomatici hanno spianato la strada a Putin in Italia: Ecco i loro nomi](#)’ [State Managers, Businesspersons, and Diplomats Paved Italy’s Way to Putin: Here Are Their Names], *L’Espresso*, 4 March 2022.
- 12 Monica Serra, ‘[Caso Moscopoli, va avanti il tira e molla sulla rogatoria: L’inchiesta rischia l’archiviazione](#)’ [Moscowgate, the Tug-of-War on the Letter Rogatory Continues: The Judicial Inquiry Risks a Dismissal], *La Stampa*, 1 March 2022; ‘[Spionaggio, la Cassazione conferma: “Walter Biot ha ceduto informazione segrete ai russi”](#)’ [Espionage, the Supreme Court Confirms: ‘Walter Biot Provided Secret Information to the Russians’], *La Stampa*, 8 April 2022.

Sergey Lavrov and the ministry's spokesperson Maria Zakharova) and of controversial figures in the Russian nationalist media landscape (such as Vladimir Solov'yev, Nadana Fridrikhson, and Aleksandr Dugin) in the raucous infotainment shows popular on Italian TV channels.¹³ Yet, such a linear narrative has also relevant limitations. Firstly, it frames the motivations of Italian actors criticising NATO mainly in transactional terms, reducing them to 'Russian agents'. Secondly, it conflates expressions of support for the Kremlin's operations in the Italian media with the Italian public's scepticism towards NATO. Thirdly, it feeds the perception that severing the channels of Russian influence through sanctions and counter-intelligence operations will be sufficient to eventually win back public opinion.

Concentrating on the Kremlin's projection of influence and on the pervasiveness of Russian 'propaganda' alone fails to provide the necessary diagnostic tools to understand the challenges that NATO SC faces in Italy. This study aims to address these issues across four sections. The first surveys the root causes of the Italian public's hostile views of NATO as the result of a convergence between a wider backlash against the sinews of globalisation, on one side, and domestic historical grievances, on the other. The second section examines how, prior to the February invasion, multiple dynamics of Russo-Italian interplay challenged the credibility of NATO SC in Italian constituencies across the political spectrum. The third section investigates the articulation of criticism targeting NATO in the Italian media. It covers the public debate over the conflict, from the beginning of the crisis in February 2022 to the end of the so-called 'second phase', coinciding with the exhaustion of the Russian offensive in the Donbas and the beginning of the Ukrainian counter-offensives between August and September 2022. Within these sections, this study sketches a concise 'history of the present' covering the evolution of the Italian public's perceptions of NATO and Russia, one rooted in

13 Jonathan Lis, 'Bennett Says Putin Apologized over FM Lavrov's Nazi Comments', *Haaretz*, 2 May 2022; 'Solovyov, Fridrikhson, Dugin, Zakharova: Chi sono i volti della "propaganda russa" nei talk show italiani su cui indaga il Copasir' [Solovyov, Fridrikhson, Dugin, Zakharova: These Are the Faces of 'Russian Propaganda' on Italian Talk Shows Who Are Being Investigated by Copasir], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 9 May 2022.

the context of Italy's economic decline and political dysfunctionality.¹⁴ It does so by applying historiography's focus on 'contextualization, causality, attention to change over time, focus on large social groups, myth-busting and awareness of issues in language and representation'.¹⁵ The conclusion sums up findings and outlines their implications for the alliance.

Italy's Long Winter of Discontent

The annual report on the 'social situation' of Italy released by the authoritative centre for sociological studies CENSIS at the end of 2021 provides a snapshot of the socio-economic discontent, and consequent lack of trust in national and supranational institutions, that enveloped Italian society on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The report depicted a society 'escaping into irrationalism' in the aftermath of the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, a society where 11 per cent of Italians consider vaccines against the new coronavirus 'not effective', 6 per cent are convinced that the earth is flat, 20 per cent are convinced that 5G is a 'tool to control people', and an astonishing 40 per cent believe in conspiracy theories of 'ethnic replacement'. The explanation provided by CENSIS for these results is worth quoting here:

The irrationalism manifested in our society is not simply a pandemic-related distortion. It has deep socio-economic roots, and it follows a trajectory moving from resentment to psychic sovereignism [*sovranoismo psichico*]. It is now evolving, turning into a great refusal of the rational discourse [...] of those tools that we previously used to build our progress and welfare: science, medicine, drugs, technological innovations. This shift is occurring because we have entered a cycle of diminishing returns in social investments that has sparked a vicious circle: low

14 Michelguglielmo Torri, 'La storia del presente: Una nota metodologica' [The History of the Present: A Note on Methodology], *Nuova Rivista Storica* [New History Review] 97 N° 2 (2013): 607–32.

15 Juan Cole, 'Blogging Current Affairs History', *Journal of Contemporary History* 46 N° 3 (2011): 658.

economic growth, diminishing tax revenues, consequent triggering of a public debt spiral, widespread social discontent and the rejection of the rational paradigm.¹⁶

One data point sums up the magnitude of the country's economic decline and its impact on Italian society: the country is the only EU member state where salaries have decreased since 1990, recording a 2.9 per cent contraction.¹⁷ While the deep-rooted causes of Italy's economic decline are to be found in the country's inability to adapt to the new global economy that emerged in the 1970s, the effects of this systemic failure fully appeared only in the 1990s, when more imposing international constraints and conditions for competitiveness in global markets began to stifle local small and medium enterprises that had been the main drivers of Italy's post-WWII economic growth.¹⁸ This predicament, in turn, left the country severely exposed to the exogenous shocks that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the 2000s and the 2010s: Italy's entry into the Eurozone in 2000, the impact of China's access to the WTO since 2001, the global financial crisis of 2008, and the Eurozone crisis of 2011.

Changing demographic patterns in the country in the last twenty years have further fuelled an acute sense of unease among the Italian population, contributing to a wider backlash against globalisation. The country has faced the return of historically high rates of migration in the twenty-first century, especially among its younger citizens, due to depressed salaries and a mismatch between preferences in academic education and the needs of the domestic job market.¹⁹ Yet Italy has also simultaneously

16 CENSIS, '[La società irrazionale](#)' [The Irrational Society], 3 December 2021.

17 Openpolis, '[Quanto guadagnano in media i cittadini europei](#)' [How Much European Citizens Earn on Average], 13 October 2021.

18 Emanuele Felice, *Ascesa e declino: Storia economica d'Italia* [Rise and Decline: The Economic History of Italy] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), pp. 315–16, 358.

19 See Fabio Berti and Marco Alberio, 'Italiani che lasciano l'Italia: Le nuove emigrazioni tra continuità e cambiamenti' [Italians Who Leave Italy: The New Emigrations between Continuity and Change], in *Italiani che lasciano l'Italia: Le nuove emigrazioni al tempo della crisi* [Italians Who Leave Italy: The New Emigrations in a Time of Crisis], Marco Alberio and Fabio Berti (eds), (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2020), pp. 7–29.

transformed into a multi-ethnic society, as the number of foreigners resident increased fourfold between 2002 and 2020, reaching 8.8 per cent of the population.²⁰ The socio-cultural disorientation caused by these trends, in turn, has morphed within many segments of Italian society into widespread interest in conspiracy theories of ethnic replacement which offer self-absolatory and easy-to-grasp tools to rationalise the country's twofold demographic challenge. Within this context, Italy's own forefront position in absorbing rising migratory fluxes from Northern Africa has had a compounding effect on these demographic anxieties. The country's geographic location and the inadequacies of the EU Dublin Regulation for asylum seekers, in particular, have left the Italian society and state to bear the brunt of new migratory waves arriving from Northern Africa.

Three decades of socio-economic decline rooted in the systemic inability to adapt the country's economy to the challenges of twenty-first century globalisation, coupled with rapid demographic changes, have thus created a breeding ground for widespread resentment against national political institutions, but also against allied countries, the EU, and international institutions. These political actors are perceived as sinews of a globalisation process that has left Italy not only weaker and poorer, but also devoid of its 'national character'. NATO has been widely considered as one of the sinews of such a 'system' to be contested. An example of this common frame of interpretation was provided two days after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine by the MP and former minister of health Giulia Grillo of the populist M5S, the party most voted for in the 2018 general elections. Grillo stated:

A part of the [Five Star] Movement, being anti-system, was against everything that was part of the [...] pre-constituted order, of what was there before [us]. And it was necessary to at least question it. It was something in the soul of the Five Star Movement. Atlanticism—the role of Italy seen as

20 Francesco C. Billari and Cecilia Tomassini, *Rapporto sulla popolazione: L'Italia e le sfide della demografia* [Report on the Population: Italy and the Challenges of Demography] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021), p. 120.

secondary, subaltern to the US—was questioned too. It was a position that we abandoned when we started to rule, because this is how foreign policy works, you need to stay continuously within the tracks, you can't just switch tracks from one government to another.²¹

Grillo's reductionist definition of Italy's alignment with the NATO alliance and the US—a position known as 'Atlanticism' (*atlantismo*)—as a condition of subalternity vis-à-vis Washington should not be dismissed. Her statement does not simply reflect the 'anti-system' backlash exploited by populist parties in the 2018 parliamentary elections. It embodies instead a widely shared, popular understanding of Italy's Cold War and post-Cold War history. On the left, such views emphasise Italy's NATO membership as the decisive factor that prevented the major opposition party, the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI), from gaining power through democratic means—a predicament that turned Italy into a 'blocked democracy' until the end of the Cold War. More importantly, Italy's membership in NATO is perceived across the entire political spectrum as evidence of a wider process of elite capture by Euro-Atlantic interests and institutions that constrains the country from pursuing a national-interest-oriented foreign policy—a narrative embraced and amplified by the populist parties that emerged on the centre of the Italian political stage in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. These popular understandings are based on historical and political realities: first, Italy's status as a defeated party with limited foreign policy agency after the end of World War II; second, the country's laborious process of European integration after the Maastricht Treaty, characterised by a gradual loss of national sovereignty to the EU supranational institutions. Yet, the limitations of these perspectives remain glaring. They fail to capture the complexity and the ebb and flow of the bilateral relations between Rome and Washington during the Cold War and since its

21 Lorenzo De Cicco, 'Russia, Giulia Grillo: "Nel M5S mettevamo in discussione la Nato: Governare ci ha fatto cambiare idea"' [Russia, Giulia Grillo: 'In the Five Star Movement We Questioned NATO: Ruling Changed Our Minds'], *La Repubblica*, 26 February 2022.

end,²² thus depicting Rome as a subaltern actor²² with no agency. They also gloss over, if not distort, the critical role that EU supranational institutions have played in sustaining the Italian economy, while relieving Italian parties and civil society from their responsibilities in failing to ‘promote regulatory and redistribution policies that, while beneficial to their electoral constituencies, are compatible with allocative efficiency’.²³

The pervasiveness of these anti-American and anti-NATO perspectives is one of the lasting legacies of the massive cultural influence that the PCI maintained over Italy throughout much of the Cold War era.²⁴ As the historian Silvio Pons notes, since the early years of post-war reconstruction, the PCI resorted both to an ideological form of anti-Americanism, which functioned as a tool of mass mobilisation and as a gluing factor for post-fascist communist identity, and to a pro-Soviet version of pacifism as a means to project its ‘social influence’ well beyond the perimeter of the Italian left.²⁵ Against this backdrop, one must consider also the emergence of historiographical, journalistic, and judiciary investigations that proved the involvement of state and state-adjacent actors close to or within Gladio (the Italian section of NATO’s covert Stay Behind

-
- 22 See Ennio Di Nolfo, ‘La politica estera italiana tra indipendenza e integrazione’ [Italian Foreign Policy between Independence and Integration], in *L’Italia repubblicana nella crisi degli anni Settanta: Tra Guerra Fredda e distensione* [Republican Italy in the Crisis of the Seventies: Between Cold War and Détente] (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003), pp. 17–28; Leopoldo Nuti, *Gli Stati Uniti e l’apertura a sinistra: Importanza e limiti della presenza americana in Italia* [The United States and the Opening to the Left: Importance and Limits of the American Presence in Italy] (Bari: Laterza, 1999); Massimo De Leonardis, ‘La politica estera italiana, la Nato e l’Onu negli anni del neo-atlantismo’ [Italy’s Foreign Policy, NATO and the UN in the Years of Neo-Atlantism], in *L’Italia e le organizzazioni internazionali: Diplomazia multilaterale nel Novecento* [Italy and International Organisations: Multilateral Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century], Luciano Tosi (ed.), (Padua: Cedam, 1999), pp. 201–34; Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Italy in International Relations: The Foreign Policy Conundrum* (Palgrave, 2017).
- 23 Andrea Lorenzo Capussela, *The Political Economy of Italy’s Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 175.
- 24 Since the immediate post-WWII era, a virulent strain of anti-Americanism built upon a supposed contraposition between a ‘materialistic’ American culture and a ‘spiritual’ European identity was present also within the Italian far right. This particular strand of anti-Americanism, however, never played a relevant role in the evolution of the Italian mass society of the second half of the twentieth century, given the fringe status of far-right culture and movements during the Cold War. See Gregorio Sorgonà, *La scoperta della destra: Il Movimento sociale italiano e gli Stati Uniti* [The Discovery of the Right: The Italian Social Movement and the United States] (Rome: Viella, 2019); Meindert Fennema and Christopher Pollmann, ‘Ideology of Anti-Immigrant Parties in the Europe Parliament’, *Acta Politica* 33 No 2 (1998): 111–38.
- 25 Silvio Pons, *I comunisti italiani e gli altri: Visioni e legami internazionali nel mondo del Novecento* [The Italian Communists and the Others: Visions and International Ties in the World of the Twentieth Century] (Milan: Einaudi, 2021), p. 144.

networks) in the country's dark history of domestic terrorism between the 1960s and the 1980s.²⁶ The belated revelations of these events to the Italian public contributed to sustaining a popular culture inclined to read Italy's contemporary history and current events in international politics through conspiratorial, anti-American, and anti-NATO lenses. Specific incidents related to the extensive US military presence in Italy and firmly impressed in the national consciousness—such as the 1985 Sigonella Crisis and the 1998 Cavalese cable crash, as well as the NIMBY and pacifist protests against the installation of ground stations for the US military communications satellites Mobile User Objective System in central Sicily in the early 2010s—have kept the flames of anti-Americanism and anti-NATO sentiment alive. As a result, a sizable portion of the Italian public perceives the transatlantic alliance purely as the military dispositive of an American political and economic hegemony that, in turn, sustains a globalisation process in which Italy emerged as a net loser.

Three Dynamics of Russo-Italian Interplay

Against the backdrop of socio-economic anxieties that have emerged in the last three decades, the unfolding and flourishing of Russo-Italian relations at multiple levels—bilateral, political, economic, and cultural—have played a critical role in exacerbating negative perceptions of NATO as one of the sinews of a perceived 'system' of institutions responsible for the Italian decline. Three dynamics will be examined here to better understand this development. First, Italian–Russian relations at the state level; second, the use of Russian state narratives by Italian political actors to gain electoral advantage; and third, the attitudes of the Italian epistemic communities focused on foreign affairs and security policy towards Russia.

26 Davide Conti, *L'Italia di Piazza Fontana: Alle origini della crisi repubblicana* (Milan: Einaudi, 2020) [The Italy of the Piazza Fontana Massacre: At the Origins of the Crisis of the Republic]; Mirco Dondi, *L'eco del boato: La strategia della tensione 1965–1974* [The Blast's Echo: The Strategy of Tension, 1965–1974] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).

In their *longue durée* analysis of the bilateral relationship between Italy and the Soviet Union/Russian Federation, Natalizia and Morini note that Rome tends to cooperate with Moscow when it perceives a stable international order, but is generally inclined ‘to align with a major ally [...] and to assume a competitive posture’ when facing ‘a global crisis’.²⁷ Focusing exclusively on foreign policy alignment, however, provides only a partial picture of the bilateral relation. Fair-weather policies towards Russia created pattern dependency, as shown by the evolution of Italian energy policy in the twenty-first century. Even though Rome aligned with the Euro-Atlantic consensus over the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, foreign policy environments did not fundamentally alter the bipartisan consensus over Russia’s status as a low-level threat to national security, which emerged in the mid 2000s.²⁸ As a result, Italian executives prior to the Draghi government failed to diversify access to energy sources, leading the country to depend on the import of Russian gas.²⁹ Data recorded at the end of 2021 show how, just two months before the beginning of the invasion, 39.4 per cent of Italy’s gas imports (amounting to 28.3 billion cubic metres) came from Russia.³⁰ Italy’s challenges in remapping its energy imports, historically high energy prices as the conflict entered the summer of 2022, and the prospect of an energy embargo from Russia provided powerful arguments for those advocating an opportunistic departure from Euro-Atlantic unity over sanctions against Moscow. This predicament contributed to damaging the perception of NATO, or, more precisely, of Italy’s international alignment, among those segments of the public less engaged

-
- 27 Gabriele Natalizia and Mara Morini, ‘Sleeping with the Enemy: The Not-So-Constant Italian Stance towards Russia’, *Italian Political Science* 15 N° 1 (2020): 54.
- 28 Francesco Olmastroni, ‘The Alleged Consensus: Italian Elites and Public on Foreign Policy’, *Italian Political Science Review* 47 N° 2 (2017): 147–82.
- 29 Elisabetta Brighi, *Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and International Relations: The Case of Italy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 140. While the liberalisation of the EU energy market created an incentive to foster dependence on the lowest bidder, the decision to underestimate the national security implications of this choice was purely driven by domestic politics. Furthermore, mitigation actions against a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine were devisable prior to the conflict. See Ettore Bompard, Andrea Carpignano, Marco Erriquez, Daniele Grosso, M. Pession, and Francesco Profumo, ‘National Energy Security Assessment in a Geopolitical Perspective’, *Energy* 130 (2017): 149–51.
- 30 ENEA, *Analisi trimestrale del sistema energetico italiano: Anno 2021* [Quarterly Report on the Italian Energy System: Year 2021] N° 1 (2022), p. 40.

with domestic and international politics and most affected by a sharp rise in utility bills.

The second dynamic of Russo-Italian interplay concerns the resonance of Russian narratives within large segments of the Italian electorate through the mediation of local political parties. Examining this dynamic requires a brief detour into the evolution of Russian foreign policy. Vladimir Putin notoriously vented his grievances against Europe's post-Cold War security order and NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe in a speech delivered at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.³¹ Following Putin's Munich speech, Russia's contestation of the Western-led security order was primarily directed against post-Soviet states either belonging to or oriented towards Euro-Atlantic institutions. This shift resulted in cyberattacks against Estonia in 2007, the war against Georgia in 2008, and the illegal annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas in 2014. The Kremlin's new assertiveness in foreign policy was coupled with what Conley and Ruy describe as a form of 'strategic conservatism' that is 'defined in opposition to Western ideals of pluralism and liberalism, and in defense of Russian actions and the Putin regime'.³² While it is 'domestically rooted within Russia', the Kremlin's strategic conservatism has been also 'customized internationally', turning into a 'marketable philosophy' designed to provide 'ideational parity with the West'.³³

In the wake of the havoc left by the Eurozone crisis on Italy's domestic economy and society, Russian strategic conservatism found fertile ground among the country's right-wing political environments. Following the demise of the liberal-conservative personalist project of Silvio Berlusconi in the early 2010s,³⁴ the two major parties on the right, the League

-
- 31 Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 56–57. For a sympathetic view of Russia's 'neo-revisionist' turn around 2007, see Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (St Ives: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 19–37.
- 32 Heather A. Conley and Donatienne Ruy, *The Kremlin Playbook 3: Keeping the Faith* (CSIS, 2022), pp. 5–6.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.
- 34 Elisabetta Brighi, "'One Man Alone'? A Longue Durée Approach to Italy's Foreign Policy under Berlusconi", *Government and Opposition* 41 No 2 (2006): 278–97; Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Berlusconi 'The Diplomat': Populism and Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 58–59.

and Brothers of Italy (FdI, Fratelli d'Italia), embraced both Russian (strategic) conservatism and the mystique of the political persona of Putin himself as ideational tools in their political struggle against the EU supranational integration, the centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), and 'globalist elites'. In particular the League, led by Matteo Salvini, was at the forefront of this process, going beyond the mere rhetorical support shown by FdI.³⁵ Beyond Salvini's own stunts, such as sporting a T-shirt with Putin's face at the European Parliament in 2015,³⁶ his party signed a cooperation agreement with the United Russia (Yedinaya Rossiya) party in March 2017,³⁷ and lobbied for the recognition of the so-called 'People's Republics' in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the lifting of the EU sanctions imposed over the illegal annexation of Crimea.³⁸ Especially throughout the second half of the 2010s, the Italian right's love affair with the Putin regime played a critical role in the construction of an illiberal, populist, and right-wing worldview receptive of Russian narratives over NATO, thus expanding scepticism over the value of Italy's alignment with the alliance to new constituencies.

In fact, Russian narratives have continued to resonate also within Italy's diminished left-wing constituencies—highlighting the 'strategic' character of Russian conservatism. Fringes of the Italian far left have consistently shown sympathy for the Putin regime and its confrontational foreign policy against Euro-Atlantic institutions—either due to a naive form of Soviet nostalgia or, more often, because they see in Moscow

-
- 35 Alberto Magnani, 'Alla ricerca dell'uomo forte: Perché la politica italiana è innamorata di Putin' [Looking for the Strongman: Why Italian Politics Is in Love with Putin], *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 19 March 2018. See also: Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon and Oxford: Routledge, 2017).
- 36 'Salvini in Parlamento europeo con la maglietta di Putin: "Una risposta agli eurocretini"' [Salvini at the European Parliament with a Putin T-Shirt: 'An Answer to Euro-Imbeciles'], *Corriere della Sera*, 8 March 2017.
- 37 Emanuele Lauria, 'Il giallo dell'accordo tra la Lega di Salvini e il partito di Putin' [The Mystery of the Agreement between Salvini's League and Putin's Party], *La Repubblica*, 28 February 2022. In contrast with Salvini, who has maintained an ambiguous position over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, FdI's leader Giorgia Meloni has steered her party towards an unequivocal condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a firm commitment to NATO since the earliest stages of the conflict.
- 38 Gianfrancesco Turano, 'Ambasciatori improbabili, affaristi e fascisti: La galassia dei sostenitori italiani di Putin' [Dubious Ambassadors, Wheeler-Dealers, and Fascists: The Galaxy of the Italian Supporters of Putin], *L'Espresso*, 23 July 2019.

an improbable ally in their own ‘anti-imperialist’ and anti-capitalist struggles.³⁹ Moscow’s justifications for the intervention in Ukraine in 2014, centred on the ‘defence’ of Russian-speakers from Western- and NATO-supported Ukrainian ‘neo-Nazis’, have not been easily dismissed by Italians on the left who have been socialised in the politicised cult of the partisan resistance (la Resistenza) against Nazi-Fascism during World War II.⁴⁰ Similarly, Moscow framed its military support for the Assad regime in Syria as a response against jihadist groups that emerged from a failed Western attempt at regime change.⁴¹ This framing has appealed to the many people who participated in the peace protests against the US invasion of Iraq in early 2003—perhaps the last moment when the Italian left was capable of tapping into popular sentiment of local masses and mobilising them,⁴² but it also resonates with criticism of NATO’s intervention against the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011.

Both conservative and ‘anti-imperialist’ Russian narratives found a receptive audience among the eclectic electorate of the most-voted-for party in the 2018 general elections, the M5S. This predicament reflects the party’s ideological inconsistency, mixing positions in line with Western European libertarian left movements together with right-wing populist themes.⁴³ As previously mentioned in this study, scepticism towards NATO has been ingrained in the party’s DNA since its early days. The alliance has repeatedly been the subject of harsh criticism by the party’s

39 Taras Bilous, ‘A Letter to the Western Left from Kyiv’, *Open Democracy*, 25 February 2022; Stefano Cappellini, ‘La sinistra anti-NATO: Più Pilato che Marx’ [The Anti-NATO Left: More Like Pilate than Marx], *La Repubblica*, 17 March 2022; Dimitri Deiolanes, ‘Ora la guerra di Putin divide anche la diaspora comunista nel mondo’ [Now Putin’s War Divides the Global Communist Diaspora Too], *Il Manifesto*, 27 May 2022.

40 See Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria: La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* [The Memory War: The Resistance in the Italian Political Debate from 1945 to Today] (Bari: Laterza, 2005).

41 Roy Allison, ‘Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis’, *International Affairs* 89 No 4 (2013): 795–823; Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia’s Intervention in Syria* (RAND, 2019).

42 See Simona Colarizi and Marco Gervasoni, *La tela di Penelope: Storia della Seconda Repubblica* [Penelope’s Web: The History of the Second Republic] (Bari: Laterza, 2012), p. 158.

43 Pasquale Colloca and Piergiorgio Corbetta, ‘Beyond Protest: Issues and Ideological Inconsistencies in the Voters of the Movimento 5 Stelle’, in *Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement: Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, Filippo Tronconi (ed.), (Abingdon and New York: Routledge: 2016), pp. 195–212.

founder, former leader, and current ‘guarantor’, Beppe Grillo.⁴⁴ Like the League, the M5S translated a receptiveness to Russian narratives into direct engagement with Moscow, especially after 2017.⁴⁵ The event that best exemplifies the amicable relationship between Moscow and Rome under the two M5S-led executives of Giuseppe Conte (the first with the League and the second with the centre-left PD as respective junior partners) is the controversial ‘health diplomacy’ operation conducted by the Russian army on Italian soil during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, which was also the subject of an investigation by the parliamentary committee for intelligence.⁴⁶ The operation, code-named ‘From Russia with Love’, played an important role in bolstering favourable perceptions of the country among the Italian public at a moment of *perceived* international isolation when Italy became the first Western country to face the pandemic.⁴⁷ Indeed, a poll published by the Pew Research Center at the end of 2020 showed record-high rates of support for Russia in the country—a trend contrary to those of all the other major Western and East Asian countries surveyed.⁴⁸ M5S supporters too were thus provided with pro-Russian narratives that diminished the value of NATO for national interest and private welfare.

The third dynamic relevant to understanding critical attitudes against NATO in Italy relates to the country’s epistemic communities concerned with national security and international politics. Starting in the early post-Cold War era, professional networks active in Italian academia, think

44 Grillo has generally attacked NATO by posting opinion pieces by M5S members and public figures close to the party on his personal blog, for years the most followed blog in Italy. See [‘M5s, il deputato Di Stefano sul blog di Grillo: “Nato mette a rischio l’Europa, ridiscutere la presenza dell’Italia”](#) [Five Star Movement, MP Di Stefano on Grillo’s Blog: ‘NATO Endangers Europe, It Is Necessary to Discuss Again Italy’s Membership’], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 12 January 2017; [‘M5S, sul blog di Grillo attacco al vertice Nato e al G7 in difesa di Cina e Russia. Di Maio: “Posizione personale.”](#) [Five Star Movement, Attack against the NATO Summit and the G7 to Defend China and Russia on Grillo’s Blog. Di Maio: ‘Personal Position’], *La Repubblica*, 15 June 2021.

45 Jacopo Iacoboni, *L’esperienza: Inchiesta sul Movimento 5 Stelle* (Bari: Laterza, 2018) [The Experiment: An Investigation into the Five Star Movement], pp. 156–65.

46 Luca Roberto, [‘Per il Copasir l’indagine sulla missione russa in Italia non può considerarsi conclusa’](#) [Copasir Does Not Consider the Investigation over the Russian Mission to Italy to Be Over], *Il Foglio*, 1 April 2022.

47 Dario Cristiani, ‘Russian Motives behind Helping Italy’s Coronavirus Response: A Multifaceted Approach’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17 N° 47 (2020).

48 Christine Huang, [‘Views of Russia and Putin Remain Negative across 14 Nations’](#), *Pew Research Center*, 16 December 2020.

tanks, and media have been responsible for articulating the vested interests of a range of local political and geo-economic actors that supported Italy's engagement with the Putin regime. These same professional networks have simultaneously contributed to the popularisation and legitimisation of pro-Russian arguments via their role in higher education and their divulgatory work in local media. The history and articulation of these networks have been painstakingly reconstructed by Di Pasquale and Germani in a recently published report.⁴⁹ Here, it is worth noting that the two analysts distinguish between two milieus within Italian pro-Russian epistemic communities. The first is that of the so-called 'neo-Eurasianists' (*neo-eurasianisti*), which has its origins in a group of far-right intellectuals and activists who in the early 1990s embraced Russian Eurasianism as an ideology of resistance against liberal democracy and globalisation.⁵⁰ After decades at the fringes of Italian politics, culture, and academia, Italian neo-Eurasianists eventually entered the mainstream as the conflict in the Donbas began. They have forged ties with Salvini's League, established a presence on national media, and made inroads on social media.⁵¹ The second, more important milieu identified by Di Pasquale and Germani is the so-called *Russlandversteher* (German for 'Russia-sympathisers'). This term labels a diverse group of 'advocates of a more moderate pro-Russian orientation' who came to 'dominate the media and the Italian academic discourse on Russian and post-Soviet affairs, as well as over other critical foreign policy issues', while at the same time struggling to accept the sovereignty and agency

49 Di Pasquale and Germani, *L'influenza russa*.

50 On Russian Eurasianism, see Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, DC, and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

51 Italian Neo-Eurasianists are usually identified in the national public debate as 'red-browns' (*rossobruni*), an umbrella label that in recent years has come to identify any kind of intellectual and/or political convergence between the far left and the far right. Originally used in relation to Strasserists and German National Bolsheviks in the interwar period, the 'red-brown' label was eventually adopted to describe the Belgian political theorist Jean-François Thiriart, the Italian Marxist philosopher Costanzo Preve, and Italian fringe far-right groups involved in political terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the so-called 'Nazi-Maoists' (*nazimaoisti*) and Terza Posizione, as well as contemporary Lilliputian parties on the far left such as the Partito Comunista of former Italian MP Marco Rizzo. See Andrea Daniele Signorelli, 'Rossobruni' [Red-Browns], *Il Tascabile*, 4 July 2017; Matteo Pucciarelli, 'Rossobruni, sovranisti e "non allineati": Le improbabili convergenze tra estrema destra e sinistra in vista delle Politiche 2023' [Red-Browns, Sovereignists and 'Non-Aligned': The Unlikely Convergences between Far Right and Left in the Build-Up to the 2023 Elections], *La Repubblica*, 3 June 2022.

of the other post-Soviet states.⁵² In contrast with the neo-Eurasianists, *Russlandversteher* generally do not directly criticise NATO and the EU, or question Italy's participation in these institutions. Rather, they have systematically adopted Russian strategic narratives on European security and have contributed to their dissemination on mainstream media.⁵³

Within this second milieu, it is worth singling out the magazine *Limes* (Latin for 'limits', 'borders'), founded in 1993 by former PCI member and journalist Lucio Caracciolo. Since the 1990s, *Limes* has been shaping the Italian public debate on foreign policy, spearheading what Brighi and Petito define as a 'renaissance of geopolitics' in post-Cold War Italy.⁵⁴ As the two scholars note, the magazine has championed and popularised a strand of geopolitical *Realpolitik* (defined by Brighi and Petito as '*Realgeopolitik*') that provides, 'at a very low intellectual cost', a 'loose but politically relevant link between theory and practice' for Italian diplomats and policy-makers.⁵⁵ The magazine has done so while maintaining an editorial line vague enough to 'fit different political agendas at different times and for different purposes', turning into a forum where 'left-wing post-communist contributors [stand] side by side with figures from right-wing, conservative and military backgrounds'.⁵⁶ For these reasons, *Limes* has become a popular and credible source among audiences on both sides of the Italian political spectrum. To audiences on the left, the magazine's *Realgeopolitik* outlook provides a validation of traditional leftist critiques of the foreign policy of liberal democracies and in particular of the US, centred on imperialism, the extraction of natural resources, and the control of infrastructures and strategic geographical features. To audiences on the right, the same analyses provide instead a merciless diagnosis of Italy's position in international politics, as well as a map for pursuing the country's own, neglected 'national interest'. The outreach and the influence of the magazine should not be underestimated. The first issue published after the beginning of the Russian invasion of

52 Di Pasquale and Germani, *L'influenza russa*, p. 11.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–31.

54 Elisabetta Brighi and Fabio Petito, 'The Renaissance of Geopolitics in Post-1989 Italy', *Geopolitics* 16 No 4 (2011): 819–45.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 840.

56 *Ibid.*

Ukraine, for instance, sold 150,000 hard copies (astounding numbers for the Italian editorial market).⁵⁷ To these numbers one must add online subscriptions and a presumably higher number of soft copies illegally downloaded on the internet—a common issue given the popularity of digital piracy in Italy.

Down the years *Limes* has adopted a *Russlandversteher* line—though one cloaked by the logic of the magazine’s own strand of *Realgeopolitik*. It has popularised Kremlin narratives that delegitimise the statehood of post-Soviet countries, thus indirectly justifying a Russian sphere of influence in other post-Soviet states and sponsoring the emergence of a ‘Euro-Russian’ security condominium. Caracciolo and the magazine’s regular contributors have played an active, though cautious, role in this effort.⁵⁸ Yet, the dissemination of such Russian narratives has been primarily achieved through editorial choices, mainly by regularly publishing articles by pro-establishment Russian authors—even including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.⁵⁹ In doing so, the magazine has remained wilfully oblivious not only to the Kremlin’s playbook for foreign influence, but also to Italy’s own fragile societal resilience against influence operations by foreign actors. *Limes*’s consistent tendency to portray transatlantic relations as a zero-sum conflict for the survival of a US ‘empire in Europe’, in which Italy is relegated to a bleak condition of subalternity,⁶⁰ has further bolstered *Russlandversteher* opinions and sceptical attitudes towards NATO in the country.

-
- 57 Associazione Italiana Editori, Il mercato del libro nei primi quattro mesi del 2022 [The Book Market in the First Four Months of 2022], 22 May 2022, p. 33.
- 58 Lucio Caracciolo, ‘Le sciabole dello zar’ [The Tsar’s Sabres], *Limes*, 22 May 2008; ‘Eurussia il nostro futuro?’ [Eurussia, Our Future?], *Limes*, 28 April 2009; Pietro Figuera, ‘L’Italia può e deve aiutare la Russia a rientrare in Europa’ [Italy Can and Must Help Russian Re-Enter Europe], *Limes*, 5 March 2019.
- 59 Sergey Lavrov, ‘Il mondo visto dalla Russia’ [The World Seen from Russia], *Limes*, 2 February 2016. See also the many monographic issues focusing on Russia and the post-Soviet space: ‘L’Ucraina tra noi e Putin’ [Ukraine between Us and Putin], *Limes*, 16 April 2014; ‘La Russia in guerra’ [Russia at War], *Limes*, 18 December 2014; ‘Il mondo di Putin’ [Putin’s World], *Limes*, 4 February 2016; ‘Russia-America, la pace impossibile’ [Russia-America: The Impossible Peace], *Limes*, 6 October 2016.
- 60 See ‘L’Europa tedesca, incubo americano’ [The American Nightmare of a German Europe], *Limes*, 8 June 2017; Dario Fabbri, ‘Così gli Stati Uniti attaccheranno la Germania’ [This Is How the United States Will Attack Germany], *Limes*, 8 June 2017; ‘L’Europa non è europea’ [Europe Is Not European], *Limes*, 15 May 2019; Dario Fabbri, ‘Europa, perla dell’impero americano’ [Europe, the Pearl of the American Empire], *Limes*, 15 May 2019; Fabio Mini, ‘Siamo servi di Serie B e non serviamo a niente’ [We Are Second-Class Servants and We Are Good for Nothing], *Limes*, 6 June 2018.

The Production and Reproduction of Criticism Targeting NATO in the Italian Media

Italy's national TV news broadcasting and newspapers broadly and unequivocally condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in their coverage of the earliest stages of the Kremlin's 'special military operation'. Yet, the same national media still found ways to disseminate narratives criticising NATO's supposed 'responsibility' for the beginning of the largest land war in Europe since World War II. They have done so mostly through commentaries and interviews in printed media and through talk-show debates during prime time. This development was the result of a widely shared editorial approach aiming at raising engagement with domestic audiences by staging a contraposition between a 'pro-Ukraine' camp and a 'pacifist' camp. To enable this contraposition, the national media pitted professional figures possessing actual expertise on international politics against a diverse range of intellectuals and public figures who possessed virtually no professional expertise on Russia, Ukraine, or European security. This contraposition was designed to allow local audiences to identify the former with the national 'establishment', mainly because of their professional affiliation, and the latter as quixotic figures ready to 'speak truth to power'. A majority of these quixotic figures had a personal history of leftist militancy and activism, as in the case of the renowned classicist Luciano Canfora, the philosopher Donatella Di Cesare, and the famous journalist Michele Santoro.⁶¹ Others, however, presented their critiques of NATO to the general public through the prism of academic objectivity, as in the case of sociologist Alessandro Orsini, who briefly rose from obscurity to media celebrity status in the first weeks of the conflict.

The content of critiques targeting NATO at this stage echoed those same Russian grievances that have taken centre stage in the Kremlin's political communication since Putin's 2007 Munich speech. They echoed perceptions of a Western 'betrayal' of 'pledges'—none of them

61 Concetto Vecchio, 'Da Rovelli a Canfora, i teorici del "né-né": "L'Europa si pentirà"' [From Rovelli to Canfora, the 'Neither-Nor' Theorists: 'Europe Will Regret It!'], *La Repubblica*, 13 March 2022.

possessing *de jure* value—made to the Soviet leadership during the critical 1989–91 period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the USSR. These critiques, however, mostly focused on (1) how NATO enlargement to include the former Warsaw Pact member states and the Baltic republics established an inherent threat to Russian security; and (2) how the alliance’s continuing existence constitutes an obstacle to the emergence of a more effective security architecture in Europe. While such issues have been the subject of extensive academic debate,⁶² criticism of NATO enlargement in the Italian national media expectedly lacked any nuance or contextualisation, and conveniently avoided mentioning both Russian domestic political and cultural drivers, on one side, and Central and Eastern European countries’ agency, on the other.

On 27 February, the fourth day of the invasion, the then chief correspondent in Moscow for the Italian national public broadcasting company RAI, Marc Innaro, stated during a prime-time in-depth show:

Maybe Europeans suffer from a colossal lack of historical memory, [from a lack of] understanding of the deeper dynamics that Russia has suffered [...] in the last thirty years. One can just look at the geographical map to realise that after the dissolution of the USSR, [the side] who expanded was not Russia, but NATO.⁶³

62 On the issue of Western pledges to the USSR over NATO enlargement, see Mark Kramer, ‘The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia’, *Washington Quarterly* 32 No 2 (2009): 39–61; Marc Trachtenberg, ‘The United States and the NATO Non-Extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?’, *International Security* 45 No 3 (2021): 162–203. On the impact of NATO’s enlargement on US–Russia relations, see Charles E. Ziegler, ‘A Crisis of Diverging Perspectives: U.S.–Russia Relations and the Security Dilemma’, *Texas National Security Review* 4 No 1 (2020): 11–33. For a synopsis of Mearsheimer’s popular argument against NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe written in the aftermath of the invasion, see John J. Mearsheimer, ‘[John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis](#)’, *The Economist*, 19 March 2022; for a rebuttal, see Adam Roberts, ‘[Sir Adam Roberts Rebuffs the View that the West Is Principally Responsible for the Crisis in Ukraine](#)’, *The Economist*, 26 March 2022.

63 Valerio Valentini, ‘[Il PD denuncia la propaganda pro Mosca in RAI](#)’ [The PD Denounces the Pro-Moscow Propaganda in RAI], *Il Foglio*, 27 February 2022. Similar pro-Russian reports, in this case from the ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ puppet state, had been broadcast by RAI in the period leading up to the invasion. See: ‘[Il Donbass spiegato al TG1](#)’ [The Donbas Explained to the TG1], *Il Foglio*, 15 January 2022.

Similarly, in an interview with national newspaper *La Stampa*, former prime minister Massimo D'Alema (the first and only former-communist prime minister of Italy) argued that 'the theme of Russian security had never been dealt with seriously' prior to the invasion of Ukraine. D'Alema continued by outlining only two possible options: either the inclusion of Russia in a 'NATO that would change its nature' or a wholly new European security architecture.⁶⁴ Another former leader of the Italian centre left, Pierluigi Bersani, criticised the proactive role of the EU, arguing that it should not act in a manner similar to NATO when dealing with Russian security aspirations in Europe.⁶⁵ By emphasising NATO's supposed 'alien' character vis-à-vis the EU project, this line of criticism published early in the evolution of the conflict established an interpretative frame that fundamentally distorted perceptions of the alliance's values and role and provided arguments for Russian apologists.

Criticism of NATO in the Italian national media, however, did not concentrate solely on its post-Cold War enlargement and proximity to Russian borders. It also focused on its engagement with Ukraine in the period between the events of 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022. Some of the harshest criticism targeted at the alliance, in particular, concerned the aim and impact of the military exercises that NATO held together with Ukrainian armed forces in 2021. As Kubai explains, the shift in the number, scale, geography, types of scenario, and identity of third parties invited to join NATO's military exercises is the result of a deterrence strategy fashioned in response to Moscow's own military activities since 2014, as in the cases of Russia's Zapad military exercises held together with Belarus in 2017 and in 2021.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, NATO's attempts at deterrence via military exercises were easily distorted and presented to the general public as evidence of the alliance's provocative

64 Fabio Martini, 'D'Alema: "Questa aggressione è un crimine ma sulla Russia errori dell'Occidente"' [D'Alema: 'This Aggression Is a Crime but the West Made Mistakes on Russia'], *La Stampa*, 26 February 2022.

65 Concetto Vecchio, 'Ucraina, Bersani: "Non mi piace la Ue solo con l'elmetto. Si spinga sul negoziato"' [Ukraine, Bersani: 'I Don't Like This EU Equipped Only with a Combat Helmet. Let There Be a Push for Negotiations'], *La Repubblica*, 3 March 2022.

66 Danylo Kubai, 'Military Exercises as a Part of NATO Deterrence Strategy', *Comparative Strategy* 41 N° 6 (2022): 155–61.

stance vis-à-vis Moscow. The sociologist Alessandro Orsini, for instance, stated on national TV channel La7 on 10 March 2022:

I would like to say that my argument cannot be understood if certain information is kept unavailable in Italy. NATO conducted three massive military exercises with war scenarios in Ukraine. It conducted one in June 2021, called Sea Breeze [...] NATO conducted another massive military exercise in July 2021, called Three Swords, then it conducted another massive military operation in September 2021 called Rapid Trident. When it conducted the one in September 2021, Putin came close to shooting NATO ships and said: 'You must stop, because you are bringing this situation to a point of collapse.'⁶⁷

The snippet containing this statement and uploaded on the YouTube channel of La7 reached 1.2 million views in July 2022. Particularly interesting is the conspiratorial tone of the statement, which highlights a fundamental problem for NATO SC. Relying on the ignorance of an Italian public generally uninterested in international politics and oblivious to the scope and modalities of NATO exercises, Orsini presented the alliance's three exercises conducted with Ukraine as secretive manoeuvres carefully designed to provoke Russia and push Putin to war. A few days later the renowned theoretical physicist and science communicator Carlo Rovelli rehashed Orsini's argument on the pages of Italy's newspaper of record, the *Corriere della Sera*, in an opinion piece of his own. Rovelli wrote:

The prospect of NATO nuclear missiles in Ukraine terrorized the elite in power in Russia. Do you think it is weird? Did NATO conduct military exercises in the Black Sea facing Russian

67 'Ucraina, il Prof. Orsini avverte: "Sta per scoppiare un'altra guerra in Georgia"' [Ukraine, Prof. Orsini Gives a Warning: 'Another War Is Erupting in Georgia'], *La 7*, 10 March 2022.

bases last year to promote détente? This does not justify anything at all, but it helps us understand. In order to avoid Soviet missiles in Cuba, the United States was ready to wage nuclear war.⁶⁸

These critiques, which, for large swathes of the Italian public, possessed a common-sense character, squarely ignored the fact that Ukrainian aspirations to join the alliance had been repeatedly met with firm opposition by NATO member states since the Bucharest summit of 2008.⁶⁹ More importantly, these critiques of NATO failed to mention how Ukraine's own prospects to join the alliance had become non-viable after the events in 2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea, given that states with territorial disputes are not allowed to join the alliance.⁷⁰ Ironically, just a few months later, Italian apologists for Russia were eventually contradicted by Putin's own depiction of the invasion as a revanchist endeavour aimed at retaking control of lands that historically belonged to the tsarist empire.⁷¹

As the Russian 2022 invasion entered its 'second phase' in April after the failure to capture Kyiv, criticism of NATO changed accordingly, now being framed within the wider narrative of a US-led 'proxy war' against Russia that hurt Italy's national interests and security. NATO was now indicted as an obstacle to the resolution of a conflict that could supposedly have been close to reaching its end—if only Western weapons had stopped arriving in Ukraine. For instance, Fabio Mini, a retired general of the Italian Army and former commander of the KFOR mission in Kosovo, who is one of *Limes's* most renowned authors, argued in the national newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* that the conflict was 'an open war waged by the US against Russia with supplementary tools such as the rest of NATO and the European Union'.⁷² Beyond the talking

68 Carlo Rovelli, 'Ecco perché penso che mandare armi all'Ucraina sia un errore' [This Is Why I Believe It Is a Mistake to Send Weapons to Ukraine], *Corriere della Sera*, 15 March 2022.

69 Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, pp. 57–58.

70 NATO, 'Study on NATO Enlargement', 5 November 2008.

71 Andrew Roth, 'Putin Compares Himself to Peter the Great in Quest To Take Back Russian Lands', *The Guardian*, 10 June 2022.

72 Fabio Mini, 'Nyt, Biden e gli O07: Il gioco delle parti "fa bene" alla guerra' [The NYT, Biden and the O07s: A Role Play 'Benefiting' the War], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 7 May 2022.

points of the chorus of anti-NATO voices in the national media, there is one event that clearly shows the structural challenges that the alliance continues to face in the Italian information environment. On 6 May, Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated at a Chatham House event that ‘to stop the war between Russia and Ukraine ... the minimum step should be the restoration of the situation as it was before the full-scale invasion’.⁷³ A newswire by ANSA, Italy’s main news agency upon which most national newspapers and media companies rely, ambiguously reported Zelenskyy’s statement by explaining that the Ukrainian president was ready to start peace talks ‘without the retrocession of Crimea’.⁷⁴ On 7 May, the day after Zelenskyy’s interview, NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg gave the following view on the evolution of the conflict in an interview with *Die Welt*:

Ukraine must win this war because it defends its territory. NATO members will never accept the illegal annexation of Crimea. We have also been opposing Russia’s control over parts of the Donbas region in Eastern Ukraine. The allies support Ukraine’s sovereignty and its territorial integrity in relation to the recognized borders. We will support Ukraine as long as Putin will continue the war. Ultimately, however, it is up to the government and the sovereign people of Ukraine how to design peace. We cannot decide this ourselves.⁷⁵

Most Italian media, however, interpreted Stoltenberg’s statement in light of the ambiguously worded ANSA newswire, presenting it as evidence

73 Chatham House, ‘War on Ukraine: Volodymyr Zelenskyy’, 6 May 2022.

74 ‘Zelensky apre a pace con i russi senza restituzione Crimea’ [Zelenskyy Opens the Door to Peace Talks with the Russians without the Retrocession of Crimea], ANSA, 6 May 2022.

75 Christoph B. Schiltz, ‘Deutschland hat eine Führungsrolle’ [Germany Has a Leading Role], *Die Welt*, 7 May 2022.

that NATO itself was coercing Kyiv to continue fighting.⁷⁶ *Il Fatto Quotidiano* published for instance a grotesque front page with a photo montage of Biden and Stoltenberg gagging the Ukrainian president, titled ‘NATO against Zelensky: “Crimea Is Ours”’.⁷⁷ While this front page reflected the broadly anti-establishment editorial line of a newspaper that is the unofficial house organ of the M5S, it is telling that even other national newspapers that have consistently expressed support for Kyiv and endorsed Euro-Atlantic measures taken in the aftermath of the invasion, such as *La Stampa*, disseminated the same interpretation of the event. The diverse range of sources involved is evidence that the malaise of the Italian media cannot be simply explained by Russian ‘influence’ over the country’s media system.⁷⁸ Rather, it is a symptom of scarce professionalism within the workforce, little familiarity with foreign languages and foreign media, and a consequent reliance on a narrow range of sources. The new framing presenting NATO as ‘an obstacle to peace’ was evident also in the response that the *maîtres à penser* of the Italian ‘peace camp’ gave to Finland’s and Sweden’s requests to join the alliance, a coordinated move that was immediately framed as a NATO provocation aimed at further raising tensions with Moscow.⁷⁹

While public figures in the pacifist left and *Realgeopolitik* analysts led criticism of NATO in the Italian mass media, no public figure from the radicalised environments of the Italian populist right emerged in the national debate. To provide an accessible term of comparison, there

-
- 76 ‘Il delirio mediatico tutto italiano su Zelensky, il Segretario Generale della NATO e la Crimea’ [The All-Italian Media Delirium on Zelensky, the NATO Secretary General and Crimea], *Valigia Blu*, 9 May 2022. See also Luciano Capone, ‘Zelensky vuole cedere la Crimea e la Nato glielo impedisce: Ma solo in Italia’ [Zelensky Wants to Cede Crimea and NATO Forbids Him to Do It: But Only in Italy], *Il Foglio*, 10 May 2022.
- 77 *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (@FattoQuotidiano), ‘PRIMA PAGINA Nato contro Zelensky: “La Crimea è nostra” [FRONT PAGE NATO against Zelensky: “Crimea Is Ours”], *Twitter*, 8 May 2022.
- 78 Francesca Sforza, ‘La NATO corregge Zelensky: “La Crimea è incedibile” [NATO Corrects Zelensky: “Crimea Cannot Be Ceded”], *La Stampa*, 8 May 2022.
- 79 ‘Metropolis/71 – Ucraina, Caracciolo: “Perché Finlandia e Svezia nella Nato sono un problema” [Ukraine, Caracciolo: “Why Finland and Sweden in NATO Are a Problem”], *La Repubblica*, 13 April 2022; ‘Finlandia e Svezia nella NATO, Di Cesare: “La chiamo annessione” [Finland and Sweden in NATO, Di Cesare: “I Call It Annexation”], *La7, YouTube*, 23 May 2022; Davide Falcioni, ‘“La Finlandia nella NATO è una provocazione alla Russia”, dice il generale Bertolini’ [“Finland in NATO Is a Provocation against Moscow”, Says General Bertolini], *Fanpage.it*, 12 May 2022. Despite the possibly deceptive moniker, *Fanpage.it* is one of the most popular no-paywall internet media platforms in Italy, with 8.5 million followers on Facebook and 2.8 million subscribers on YouTube.

was no Italian Tucker Carlson.⁸⁰ Unable to gain traction in the national mass media, because of the awkward repositioning over relations with Russia of the two main political parties on the right—Giorgia Meloni’s FdI and Salvini’s League—in the aftermath of the invasion these environments have articulated instead their own anti-NATO narratives over the war, mostly on social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram.⁸¹ Far from the (relatively) sophisticated arguments proposed by the ‘peace camp’ and by Italian geopolitical analysts, their criticism of the alliance generally relied on Russian disinformation, such as the supposed presence of covert NATO troops, bases, and even ‘bio-laboratories’ throughout Ukraine.⁸² More importantly, these environments have framed opposition to NATO as part of a wider, long-term ‘popular struggle’ against ‘corrupt’ international and Italian democratic institutions—a ‘struggle’ that had already intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸³ Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume the emergence of two separate, fully distinct discourses in the Italian information environment. In the absence of quantitative studies on the phenomenon, a cursory assessment of social media and ephemeral websites suggests that, mainly through snippetisation of content produced on mass media, narratives critical of NATO from the pacifist left and from geopolitical analysts do reach populist right-wing environments, which, in turn, have occasionally used them to provide their opinions with a veneer of legitimacy in the struggle against the perceived *pensée unique* within Italy and the EU.

80 Daniel W. Drezner, ‘Tucker Carlson’s Bizarre Theory of the War in Ukraine’, *Washington Post*, 3 May 2022.

81 Giuliano Foschini, ‘Quel filo che lega partiti e opinionisti al network della propaganda russa’ [That Thread Connecting Parties and Commentators to the Russian Propaganda Network], *La Repubblica*, 21 May 2022; Monica Guerzoni and Fiorenza Sarzanani, ‘La rete di Putin in Italia: Chi sono influencer e opinionisti che fanno propaganda per Mosca’ [Putin’s Network in Italy: These Are the Influencers and Commentators Who Disseminate Propaganda for Moscow], *Corriere della Sera*, 5 June 2022.

82 Simone Fontana, ‘Dentro i gruppi Facebook italiani’: ‘Non ci sono prove che l’acciaieria Azovstal di Mariupol nasconda un “bio laboratorio” e una base Nato’ [There Is No Evidence That Mariupol’s Azovstal Steel Plant Hides a ‘Biolaboratory’ and a NATO Base], *Facta News*, 14 April 2022.

83 Atzori, ‘Troll de guerre’.

Conclusion

As in other European liberal democracies, the war in Ukraine has been a catalytic event that forced a reckoning over international politics and regional security among wide segments of Italy's politically inactive population, in a manner similar to how the COVID-19 pandemic put public health policies and state surveillance at the centre of the public debate. From this perspective, the war in Ukraine can also be understood as a critical juncture that opened a window of opportunity to shape perceptions of NATO's role in European and Italian security. This window closed as the conflict lengthened in the summer of 2022. The public debate shifted to the impact of rising inflation in European countries, the effectiveness of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, the weaponisation of energy supply to Europe by the Kremlin, the fall of the Draghi government in July, and the electoral campaign for the general elections held in September, won by the right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni's FdI. In this scenario, it is reasonable to assume that the narratives and frames that took hold at the beginning of the conflict will continue to affect popular understandings of Italy's position and NATO's role in the new regional security order that will eventually emerge from its termination.

Beyond the direct impact of the Kremlin's influence operations, the previous sections of this study have identified a set of drivers that shaped public opinion against NATO and challenged the alliance's successful implementation of SC in the country, which are summed up as follows:

- a unidimensional popular understanding of the country's post-WWII history hostile to NATO
- a deeply rooted strand of pacifism historically constructed in direct opposition to the US and consequently to NATO itself
- a string of executives who fostered Italy's energy dependence on Russia

- widespread popular resentment against Euro-Atlantic institutions scapegoated for a thirty-year socio-economic decline exploited by populist parties
- the opportunistic embrace of the Kremlin's narratives by major right-wing and populist parties that have dominated domestic politics since the 2010s
- the staying power of epistemic communities who have seen engagement with Moscow as a bulwark against Euro-Atlantic institutions and the US
- a conformist media market that fosters engagement through polarisation and facilitates misinformation.

Unfortunately for NATO, the sources of SC challenges identified here are the consequences of structural issues that have their origins in Italy's contemporary history and socio-economic decline. Consequently, NATO's options to mitigate what ultimately amounts to a scapegoating of the alliance in future scenarios similar to the current war in Ukraine—namely in the case of security crises affecting the European regional order but not perceived as existential by the Italian public—are severely limited. After all, the alliance cannot directly shape the information environment of a member state. One of the few avenues available to NATO in this context is to improve SC localisation. This shift would require crafting timely SC capable of addressing criticism and distortions emerging from the country's highly contested information environment. In particular, the case study discussed in this article suggests greater effort in communicating the history of the alliance, the rationale and mechanisms of its enlargement, and the scope and motivation of its military exercises. Yet, given the structural origins of these challenges, a more refined approach to SC localisation could provide tangible benefits to NATO only if national and EU institutions are capable of both addressing long-standing issues of socio-economic cohesion and committing to improve public literacy on international politics and security affairs, and are willing to do so.

Bibliography

- Allison, Roy, 'Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis', *International Affairs* 89 N° 4 (2013): 795–823.
- Associazione Italiana Editori, *Il mercato del libro nei primi quattro mesi del 2022* [The Book Market in the First Four Months of 2022], 22 May 2022.
- Atzori, Gian Luca, 'Troll de guerre' [War Troll], *Il Tascabile*, 16 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Berti, Fabio, and Marco Alberio, 'Italiani che lasciano l'Italia: Le nuove emigrazioni tra continuità e cambiamenti' [Italians Who Leave Italy: The New Emigrations between Continuity and Change], in *Italiani che lasciano l'Italia: Le nuove emigrazioni al tempo della crisi* [Italians Who Leave Italy: The New Emigrations in a Time of Crisis], Marco Alberio and Fabio Berti (eds), (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2020), pp. 7–29.
- Billari, Francesco C., and Cecilia Tomassini, *Rapporto sulla popolazione: L'Italia e le sfide delle demografia* [Report on the Population: Italy and the Challenges of Demography] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021).
- Bilous, Taras, 'A Letter to the Western Left from Kyiv', *Open Democracy*, 25 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Bolt, Neville, and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO StratCom CoE, 2019).
- Bompard, Ettore, Andrea Carpignano, Marco Erriquerz, Daniele Grosso, M. Pession, and Francesco Profumo, 'National Energy Security Assessment in a Geopolitical Perspective', *Energy* 130 (2017): 144–54.
- Brighi, Elisabetta, *Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and International Relations: The Case of Italy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013).
- _____, "'One Man Alone'?" A Longue Durée Approach to Italy's Foreign Policy under Berlusconi', *Government and Opposition* 41 N° 2 (2006): 278–97.
- _____, and Fabio Petito, 'The Renaissance of Geopolitics in Post-1989 Italy', *Geopolitics* 16 N° 4 (2011): 819–45.
- Capone, Luciano, 'Zelensky vuole cedere la Crimea e la Nato glielo impedisce: Ma solo in Italia' [Zelensky Wants to Cede Crimea and NATO Forbids Him to Do It: But only in Italy], *Il Foglio*, 10 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Cappellini, Stefano, 'La sinistra anti NATO: Più Pilato che Marx' [The Anti-NATO Left: More Like Pilate than Marx], *La Repubblica*, 17 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Capussela, Andrea Lorenzo, *The Political Economy of Italy's Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- Caracciolo, Lucio, 'Le sciabole dello zar' [The Tsar's Sabres], *Limes*, 22 May 2008 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- CENSIS, 'La società irrazionale' [The Irrational Society], 3 December 2021 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Charap, Samuel, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria* (RAND, 2019).
- Chatham House, 'War on Ukraine: Volodymyr Zelenskyy', 6 May 2022 [Accessed on 10 November 2022].
- Colarizi, Simona, and Marco Gervasoni, *La tela di Penelope: Storia della Seconda Repubblica* [Penelope's Web: The History of the Second Republic] (Bari: Laterza, 2012).
- Cole, Juan, 'Blogging Current Affairs History', *Journal of Contemporary History* 46 N° 3 (2011): 658–70.
- Colloca, Pasquale, and Piergiorgio Corbetta, 'Beyond Protest: Issues and Ideological Inconsistencies in the Voters of the Movimento 5 Stelle', in *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement: Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, Filippo Tronconi (ed.), (Abingdon and New York: Routledge: 2016), pp. 195–212.
- Conley, Heather A., Donatienne Ruy, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers* (CSIS, 2019).
- _____, and Donatienne Ruy, *The Kremlin Playbook 3: Keeping the Faith* (CSIS, 2022).
- Conti, Davide, *L'Italia di Piazza Fontana: Alle origini della crisi repubblicana* [The Italy of the Piazza Fontana Massacre: At the Origins of the Crisis of the Republic] (Milan: Einaudi, 2020).
- Cristiani, Dario, 'Russian Motives behind Helping Italy's Coronavirus Response: A Multifaceted Approach', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17 N° 47 (2020).
- Csernatoni, Raluca, 'Is NATO Doing Anything for Ukraine?', *Carnegie Europe—Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, 1 September 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

- De Cicco, Lorenzo, [‘Russia, Giulia Grillo: “Nel M5S mettevamo in discussione la Nato. Governare ci ha fatto cambiare idea”](#) [Russia, Giulia Grillo: ‘In the Five Star Movement We Questioned NATO. Ruling Changed Our Minds’], *La Repubblica*, 26 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Deirolanes, Dimitri, [‘Ora la guerra di Putin divide anche la diaspora comunista nel mondo’](#) [Now Putin’s War Divides the Global Communist Diaspora Too], *Il Manifesto*, 27 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- De Leonardis, Massimo, ‘La politica estera italiana, la Nato e l’Onu negli anni del neo-atlantismo’ [Italy’s Foreign Policy, NATO, and the UN in the Years of Neo-Atlanticism], in *L’Italia e le organizzazioni internazionali: Diplomazia multilaterale nel Novecento* [Italy and International Organisations: Multilateral Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century] Luciano Tosi (ed.), (Padua: Cedam, 1999), pp. 201–34.
- Di Nolfo, Ennio, ‘La politica estera italiana tra indipendenza e integrazione’ [Italian Foreign Policy between Independence and Integration], in *L’Italia repubblicana nella crisi degli anni Settanta: Tra Guerra Fredda e distensione* [Republican Italy in the Crisis of the Seventies: Between Cold War and Détente], Agostino Giovagnoli and Silvio Pons (eds), (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003), pp. 17–28.
- Diodato, Emidio, and Federico Niglia, *Berlusconi ‘The Diplomat’: Populism and Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- _____, *Italy in International Relations: The Foreign Policy Conundrum* (Palgrave: 2017, ebook edn).
- Di Pasquale, Massimiliano, and Luigi Sergio Germani, *L’influenza russa sulla cultura, il mondo accademico e sui think tank italiani* [Russia’s Influence over Italy’s Culture, Academe and Think Tanks] (Istituto Gino Germani di Scienza Sociali e Studi Strategici, 2021).
- Dondi, Mirco, *L’eco del boato: La strategia della tensione 1965–1974* [The Blast’s Echo: The Strategy of Tension, 1965–1974] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).
- Drezner, Daniel W., [‘Tucker Carlson’s Bizarre Theory of the War in Ukraine’](#), *Washington Post*, 3 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- ENEA, [Analisi trimestrale del sistema energetico italiano: Anno 2021](#) [Quarterly Report on the Italian Energy System: Year 2021] N° 1 (2022) [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- EU Directorate-General for Communication, [‘Flash Eurobarometer 506: EU’s Response to the War in Ukraine’](#), May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- _____, [‘Standard Eurobarometer 92: Media Use in the European Union’](#), November 2019 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- ‘Eurussia il nostro futuro?’ [Eurussia, Our Future?], *Limes*, 28 April 2009 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Fabbri, Dario, [‘Così gli Stati Uniti attaccheranno la Germania’](#) [This Is How the United States Will Attack Germany], *Limes*, 8 June 2017 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- _____, [‘Europa, perla dell’impero americano’](#) [Europe, the Pearl of the American Empire], *Limes*, 15 May 2019 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Faggionato, Giovanna, [‘In Italia non si riesce a fermare la propaganda del Cremlino’](#) [The Kremlin’s Propaganda in Italy Cannot Be Stopped], *Domani*, 16 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Falcioni, Davide, [‘La Finlandia nella Nato è una provocazione alla Russia’, dice il generale Bertolini’](#) [Finland in NATO Is a Provocation against Moscow’, Says General Bertolini], *Fanpage.it*, 12 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Farwell, James, *Power and Persuasion: The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012).
- Felice, Emanuele, *Ascesa e declino: Storia economica d’Italia* [Rise and Decline: The Economic History of Italy] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018).
- Fennema, Meindert, and Christopher Pollmann, ‘Ideology of Anti-Immigrant Parties in the Europe Parliament’, *Acta Politica* 33 N° 2 (1998): 111–38.
- Figuera, Pietro, [‘L’Italia può e deve aiutare la Russia a rientrare in Europa’](#) [Italy Can and Must Help Russia to Re-Enter Europe], *Limes*, 5 March 2019 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- ‘Finlandia e Svezia nella Nato, Di Cesare: “La chiamo annessione”’ [Finland and Sweden in NATO, Di Cesare: ‘I Call It Annexation’], *La7, YouTube*, 23 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Focardi, Filippo, *La guerra della memoria: La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* [The Memory War: The Resistance in the Italian Political Debate from 1945 to Today] (Bari: Laterza, 2005).

Fontana, Simone, 'Dentro i gruppi Facebook italiani che amano Putin e fanno disinformazione sulla guerra' [Inside the Italian Facebook Groups Who Love Putin and Disseminate Disinformation about the War], *Facta News*, 14 April 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Foschini, Giuliano, 'Quel filo che lega partiti e opinionisti al network della propaganda russa' [That Thread Connecting Parties and Commentators to the Russian Propaganda Network], *La Repubblica*, 21 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Freedman, Lawrence, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Germani, Lucio Sergio, and Jacopo Iacoboni, 'Italy: Is the Russian Turn Reversible?' in *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 2.0: Russian Influence in Greece, Italy, and Spain*, Alina Polyakova (ed.), (Atlantic Council, 2017), pp. 11–19.

Guerzoni, Monica, and Fiorenza Sarzanini, 'La rete di Putin in Italia: Chi sono influencer e opinionisti che fanno propaganda per Mosca' [Putin's Network in Italy: These Are the Influencers and Commentators Who Disseminate Propaganda for Moscow], *Corriere della Sera*, 5 June 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Huang, Christine, 'Views of Russia and Putin Remain Negative across 14 Nations', *Pew Research Center*, 16 December 2020 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Iacoboni, Jacopo, *L'esperimento: Inchiesta sul Movimento 5 Stelle* [The Experiment: An Investigation into the Five Star Movement] (Bari: Laterza, 2018).

'Il delirio mediatico tutto italiano su Zelensky, il Segretario Generale della NATO e la Crimea' [The All-Italian Media Delirium on Zelensky, the NATO Secretary General and Crimea], *Valigia Blu*, 9 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'Il Donbass spiegato al TG1' [The Donbas Explained to the TG1], *Il Foglio*, 15 January 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Il Fatto Quotidiano (@fattoquotidiano), 'PRIMA PAGINA Nato contro Zelensky: "La Crimea è nostra"' [FRONT PAGE NATO against Zelensky: 'Crimea Is Ours'], *Twitter*, 8 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'Il mondo di Putin' [Putin's World], *Limes*, 4 February 2016 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Kramer, Mark, 'The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia', *Washington Quarterly* 32 N° 2 (2009): 39–61.

Kubai, Danylo, 'Military Exercises as a Part of NATO Deterrence Strategy', *Comparative Strategy* 41 N° 6 (2022): 155–61.

Laruelle, Marlène, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, DC, and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

'La Russia in guerra' [Russia at War], *Limes*, 18 December 2014 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Lauria, Emanuele, 'Il giallo dell'accordo tra la Lega di Salvini e il partito di Putin' [The Mystery of the Agreement between Salvini's League and Putin's Party], *La Repubblica*, 28 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Lavrov, Sergey, 'Il mondo visto dalla Russia' [The World Seen from Russia], *Limes*, 2 February 2016 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'L'Europa non è europea' [Europe Is Not European], *Limes*, 15 May 2019 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'L'Europa tedesca, incubo americano' [The American Nightmare of a German Europe], *Limes*, 8 June 2017 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Lewandowsky, Stephan, and Sander van der Linden, 'Countering Misinformation and Fake News through Inoculation and Prebunking', *European Review of Social Psychology* 32 N° 2 (2021): 348–84.

Lis, Jonathan, 'Bennett Says Putin Apologized over FM Lavrov's Nazi Comments', *Haaretz*, 2 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'L'Ucraina tra noi e Putin' [Ukraine between Us and Putin], *Limes*, 16 April 2014 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'M5s, il deputato Di Stefano sul blog di Grillo: "Nato mette a rischio l'Europa, ridiscutere la presenza dell'Italia"' [Five Star Movement, MP Di Stefano on Grillo's blog: 'NATO Endangers Europe, It Is Necessary to Discuss Again Italy's Membership'], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 12 January 2017 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'M5S, sul blog di Grillo attacco al vertice Nato e al G7 in difesa di Cina e Russia: Di Maio: "Posizione personale"' [Five Star Movement, Attack against the NATO Summit and the G7 to Defend China and Russia on Grillo's Blog, Di Maio: 'Personal Position'], *La Repubblica*, 15 June 2021 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Magnani, Alberto, 'Alla ricerca dell'uomo forte: Perché la politica italiana è innamorata di Putin' [Looking for the Strongman: Why Italian Politics Is in Love with Putin], *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 19 March 2018 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Malagutti, Vittorio, and Carlo Tecce, 'Manager di Stato, imprenditori, diplomatici hanno spianato la strada a Putin in Italia: Ecco i loro nomi' [State Managers, Businesspersons, and Diplomats Paved Italy's Way to Putin: Here Are Their Names], *L'Espresso*, 4 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Martini, Fabio, 'D'Alema: "Questa aggressione è un crimine ma sulla Russia errori dell'Occidente"' [D'Alema: 'This Aggression Is a Crime but the West Made Mistakes on Russia'], *La Stampa*, 26 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Mearsheimer, John J., 'John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis', *The Economist*, 19 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'Metropolis/71 – Ucraina, Caracciolo: "Perché Finlandia e Svezia nella Nato sono un problema"' [Ukraine, Caracciolo: 'Why Finland and Sweden in NATO Are a Problem'], *La Repubblica*, 13 April 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Mini, Fabio, 'Nyt, Biden e gli 007: Il gioco delle parti "fa bene" alla guerra' [The NYT, Biden and the 007s: A Role Play 'Benefiting' the War], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 7 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

_____, 'Siamo servi di Serie B e non serviamo a niente' [We Are Second-Class Servants and We Are Good for Nothing], *Limes*, 6 June 2018 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Natalizia, Gabriele, and Mara Morini, 'Sleeping with the Enemy: The Not-So-Constant Italian Stance towards Russia', *Italian Political Science* 15 N° 1 (2020): 42–59.

NATO, 'NATO's Eastern Flank: Air Domain', April 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

_____, 'NATO's Eastern Flank: Stronger Defence and Deterrence', July 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

_____, 'NATO's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', 1 September 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

_____, 'Relations with Ukraine', 8 July 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

_____, 'Study on NATO Enlargement', 5 November 2008 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

'Non ci sono prove che l'acciaieria Azovstal di Mariupol nasconda un "bio laboratorio" e una base Nato' [There Is No Evidence That Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant Hides a 'Biolaboratory' and a NATO Base], *Facta News*, 14 April 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Nuti, Leopoldo, *Gli Stati Uniti e l'apertura a sinistra: Importanza e limiti della presenza americana in Italia* [The United States and the Opening to the Left: Importance and Limits of the American Presence in Italy] (Bari: Laterza, 1999).

Olmastroni, Francesco, 'The Alleged Consensus: Italian Elites and Public on Foreign Policy', *Italian Political Science Review* 47 N° 2 (2017): 147–82.

Openpolis, 'Quanto guadagnano in media i cittadini europei' [How Much European Citizens Earn on Average], 13 October 2021 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Paolucci, Gianluca, and Jacopo Iacoboni, *Oligarchi: Come gli amici di Putin stanno comprando l'Italia* [Oligarchs: How Putin's Friends Are Buying Italy] (Bari: Laterza, 2021).

Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

Pons, Silvio, *I comunisti italiani e gli altri: Visioni e legami internazionali nel mondo del Novecento* [The Italian Communists and the Others: Visions and International Ties in the World of the Twentieth Century] (Milan: Einaudi, 2021).

Pucciarelli, Matteo, 'Rossobruni, sovranisti e "non allineati": Le improbabili convergenze tra estrema destra e sinistra in vista delle Politiche 2023' [Red-Browns, Sovereignists and 'Non-Aligned': The Unlikely Convergences between Far Right and Left in the Build-Up to the 2023 Political Elections], *La Repubblica*, 3 June 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Roberto, Luca, 'Per il Copasir l'indagine sulla missione russa in Italia non può considerarsi conclusa' [Copasir Does Not Consider the Investigation over the Russian Mission to Italy to Be Over], *Il Foglio*, 1 April 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Roberts, Adam, 'Sir Adam Roberts Rebuffs the View that the West Is Principally Responsible for the Crisis in Ukraine', *The Economist*, 26 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Roberts, Hannah, 'Infowars: Putin's Propaganda Permeates Italian Media', *Politico*, 20 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

Roth, Andrew, 'Putin Compares Himself to Peter the Great in Quest to Take Back Russian Lands', *The Guardian*, 10 June 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].

- Rovelli, Carlo, 'Ecco perché penso che mandare armi all'Ucraina sia un errore' [This Is Why I Believe It Is a Mistake to Send Weapons to Ukraine], *Corriere della Sera*, 15 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- 'Russia-America, la pace impossibile' [Russia-America, the Impossible Peace], *Limes*, 6 October 2016 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Sakwa, Richard, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (St Ives: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 'Salvini in Parlamento europeo con la maglietta di Putin: "Una risposta agli eurocretini"' [Salvini at the European Parliament with a Putin T-Shirt: 'An Answer to Euro-Imbeciles'], *Corriere della Sera*, 8 March 2017 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Schiltz, Christoph B., 'Deutschland hat eine Führungsrolle' [Germany Has a Leading Role], *Die Welt*, 7 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Serra, Monica, 'Caso Moscopoli, va avanti il tira e molla sulla rogatoria: L'inchiesta rischia l'archiviazione' [Moscowgate, the Tug-of-War on the Letter Rogatory Continues: The Judicial Inquiry Risks a Dismissal], *La Stampa*, 1 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Sforza, Francesca, 'La NATO corregge Zelensky: "La Crimea è incedibile"' [NATO Corrects Zelensky: 'Crimea Cannot Be Ceded'], *La Stampa*, 8 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Shekhovtsov, Anton, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon and Oxford: Routledge, 2017).
- Signorelli, Andrea Daniele, 'Rossobruni' [Red-Browns], *Il Tascabile*, 4 July 2017 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- 'Solovyov, Fridrikhson, Dugin, Zakharova: Chi sono i volti della "propaganda russa" nei talk show italiani su cui indaga il Copasir' [Solovyov, Fridrikhson, Dugin, Zakharova: These Are the Faces of 'Russian Propaganda' on Italian Talk Shows Who Are Being Investigated by Copasir], *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 9 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Sorgonà, Gregorio, *La scoperta della destra: Il Movimento sociale italiano e gli Stati Uniti* [The Discovery of the Right: The Italian Social Movement and the United States] (Rome: Viella, 2019).
- 'Spionaggio, la Cassazione conferma: "Walter Biot ha ceduto informazione segrete ai russi"' [Espionage, the Supreme Court Confirms: 'Walter Biot Provided Secret Information to the Russians'], *La Stampa*, 8 April 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Torri, Michelguglielmo, 'La storia del presente: Una nota metodologica' [The History of the Present: A Note on Methodology], *Nuova Rivista Storica* [New History Review] 97 N° 2 (2013): 607–32.
- Trachtenberg, Marc, 'The United States and the NATO Non-Extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?' *International Security* 45 N° 3 (2021): 162–203.
- Turano, Gianfrancesco, 'Ambasciatori improbabili, affaristi e fascisti: La galassia dei sostenitori italiani di Putin' [Dubious Ambassadors, Wheeler-Dealers, and Fascists: The Galaxy of the Italian Supporters of Putin], *L'Espresso*, 23 July 2019 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- 'Ucraina, il Prof. Orsini avverte: "Sta per scoppiare un'altra guerra in Georgia"' [Ukraine, Prof. Orsini Gives a Warning: 'Another War Is Erupting in Georgia'], *La 7*, 10 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Valentini, Valerio, 'Il PD denuncia la propaganda pro Mosca in Rai' [The PD Denounces Pro-Moscow Propaganda in Rai], *Il Foglio*, 27 February 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Vecchio, Concetto, 'Da Rovelli a Canfora, i teorici del "né-né": "L'Europa si pentirà"' [From Rovelli to Canfora, the 'Neither-Nor' Theorists: 'Europe Will Regret It'], *La Repubblica*, 13 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- _____, 'Ucraina, Bersani: "Non mi piace la Ue solo con l'elmetto. Si spinga sul negoziato"' [Ukraine, Bersani: 'I Don't Like This EU Equipped Only with a Combat Helmet. Let There Be a Push for Negotiations'], *La Repubblica*, 3 March 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- YouGov, 'Support for Ukraine Is Strong in Europe, but Nations Are Not As United As It Looks', 5 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- 'Zelensky apre a pace con i russi senza restituzione Crimea' [Zelensky Opens the Door to Peace Talks with the Russians without the Retrocession of Crimea], *ANSA*, 6 May 2022 [Accessed 10 November 2022].
- Ziegler, Charles E., 'A Crisis of Diverging Perspectives: U.S.-Russia Relations and the Security Dilemma', *Texas National Security Review* 4 N° 1 (2020): 11–33.