

Italy Celebrates its National Day

Judith Harris (June 01, 2014)



On June 2 Italy marked the 68th anniversary of the founding of the Republic with a parade in Rome and the traditional overflight of the Frecce Tricolori military airplanes, which left in the bright blue sky trails of the colors of the Italian flag. Appearing together with Premier Matteo Renzi at the tomb of the unknown soldier at Piazza Venezia, President Giorgio Napolitano spoke movingly of “all the Italian soldiers who sacrificed their life in the service of the nation.” Just a century ago World War One began, and European nations fought each other. Today, said Napolitano, they stand under the same flag.

ROME - On June 2 Italy marked the 68th anniversary of the founding of the Republic with a parade down the Via dei Fori Imperiali in Rome. Despite the generally sober tone imposed by the recession during the national day celebrations of the past few years, the traditional overflight of the [Frecce Tricolori](#) [2] military airplanes was restored, leaving in the bright blue sky trails of the red, white and green of the Italian flag.

Appearing together with [Premier Matteo Renzi](#) [3] at the tomb of the unknown soldier at the [Altare della Patria](#) [4] (Altar of the Fatherland) at Piazza Venezia, [President Giorgio Napolitano](#) [5] spoke movingly of “all the Italian soldiers who sacrificed their life in the service of the nation.”

European togetherness was a sub-theme. Coincidentally the day—a national holiday for Italians—was also the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I.

“Just one hundred years ago the European nations fought ferociously against each other,” said Napolitano. “Today they stand under the same flag,” although, even for Europe, peace is not a given, and “serious areas of tension” exist at the borders of the European Union.

However, the President went on to say, “In the name of their common values of freedom, justice and equality, together the European countries seek prosperity through an unrenounceable passageway of economic, political and institutional integration.”

Ceremony apart, the crucial word was “unrenounceable.” During the just-concluded, noisy campaign to elect Italy’s contingent of MPs to the European Parliament, a significant number of top politicians, beginning with the [Movimento Cinque Stelle](#) [6](M5S) contingent led by Beppe Grillo, made anti-European sentiment a slogan.

Grillo, with 17 EU parliamentarians, moreover just announced a controversial agreement for joint action within the EU Parliament with the populist British party leader Nigel Farage, whose UKIP party will have 24 Eurodeputies. For this Grillo has come under considerable attack from his own MPs, but defends his favoring an alliance with Farage on grounds that, among other things, the UKIP leader has a “great sense of humor.”

The common monetary unit the Euro had been made the scapegoat for the recession, and the boogie man or woman, in this case, has been Angela Merkel. Now that the campaign is over, will that anti-Europe sentiment—implicitly criticized by President Napolitano in his June 2 message to the nation—die down, or grow stronger?

To this there is no easy answer, but Renzi’s Partito Democratico, fortified with almost 41% of the vote, continues to stand for “continuity,” today’s oft-repeated code word for (1) no new elections and (2) no seceding from the EU. Not surprisingly, therefore, when Renzi arrived last week at the first post-election meeting of EU leaders at Strasbourg, the French cathedral city that is the official seat of the European Parliament, none other than Merkel greeted him with a merry, “Here comes the matador!”

By the same token, [Renzi](#) [3] came in for remarkably high praise from the head of Fiat, Sergio Marchionne. After Renzi spoke at the annual Festival for the Economy at Trento, Marchionne pronounced that Renzi’s reform package was “just the agenda the Italy and Europe needs. He said exactly what I wanted to hear him say.”

At the Trento meeting Roberto Napolitano, who is editor-in-chief of the financial daily *Il Sole-24 Ore*, asked Marchionne if there was anything new happening in the Fiat-Chrysler world. Marchionne’s withering response was, “Put that way, it seems like one of those questions that the Italian politicians twist and turn. I’m talking about the old-style politicoes, not the one I heard this morning” [i.e., Renzi].

Even though Renzi has raised such great expectations in great places, the matador is still in the arena, but he too is repeating the current phrase, “We have no alibis.” Renzi’s reform roster continues to include combatting unemployment, boosting the economy and revision of the election law known as the “Porcellum” (pigsty law).

The proposed revision of the latter, accepted last February by former Premier Silvio Berlusconi, is already being revised, however. Present wording calls for a coalition minimum of 37%, but this may be upped to 40%, reflecting fears that a group of minor parties could in practice outflank Renzi’s Partito Democratico (PD). (One wants to ask: why had they not thought of this before?)

Italy’s role in the new Euro Parliament, to be installed in July, is another subject for debate here. If the duo France-Germany was considered dominant, can Italy, third largest, replace the now largely discredited France, as Renzi has suggested? For Niall Ferguson, a British economist at Harvard, this is not a valid question because the French-German duopoly has long since been bypassed for various triangulations.

On the other hand, “If Renzi can successfully exploit his extraordinary success, and bring about a



real modernization of the country, then he will be able to bring the economy back into good health,” said Ferguson. In his important interview in the daily *La Repubblica*—not coincidentally, it ran June 2—Ferguson pointed out that post-election Italy is now in an excellent position to bring about the same sort of reforms that helped bring success to Gerhard Schröder’s Germany at the end of the Nineties.

Ferguson made fairly short shrift of the last month’s successful election showing of the populist parties like Marine Le Pen’s Front National and Farage’s UKIP. “Their showing was important, but let’s not overestimate their impact. They did not win control of the European Parliament, and the various Euroskeptic parties in the diverse countries are not homogeneous.”

In fact, for this very reason Grillo himself risks yet another rash of defections, especially from the anti-racists and pro-environmentalists in his M5S, if he goes forward with his plan to join forces with Farage.

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Links

- [1] <http://iitaly.org/files/mainpicok1401919642.jpg>
- [2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frecce_Tricolori
- [3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matteo_Renzi
- [4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altare_della_Patria
- [5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giorgio_Napolitano
- [6] <http://www.beppegrillo.it/en/>