

## **A lasting web of exchanges Italy and the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s**

Laura Fasanaro /

Department of Political Science at Roma Tre University (Italy)

East Germany and Italy were both peculiar cases in the Cold War. Similarly affected by structural frailties – weak economies, difficult relations with their respective allies, and mounting social unrest – they had limited leeway in their international relations. Laura Fasanaro reflects on the history and politics of both countries during the Cold War.

Italien und die DDR stellten während des Kalten Krieges zwei Sonderfälle dar. Ähnliche strukturelle Probleme – schwache Volkswirtschaften, schwierige Beziehungen zu ihren jeweiligen Verbündeten und zunehmende soziale Unruhen – wirkten sich auf ihre internationalen Beziehungen aus und überließen beiden wenig außenpolitischen Spielraum. Laura Fasanaro erkundet Geschichte und Politik beider Länder während des Kalten Krieges. Clearly, the German Democratic Republic was the unique case in the Eastern bloc. Its very existence depended on its relationship with the Soviet Union. At the same time, it played a crucial role in stabilizing the Cold War balance in Europe. Domestic and foreign policy, furthermore, were inextricably linked and continuously influenced by intra-German relations. Unlike any other country in the Soviet bloc, the GDR spent half of its life in search of international recognition and the other half looking for international prestige.



Italy's strong ties with the United States, on the other hand, were the result of a repeated choice made by democratic governing coalitions, whose international credibility largely depended on a strong pro-Atlantic stance. Within the Western bloc, this was also a special position: Italy was too weak to act as a 'middle power,' but could determine the stability of the Atlantic alliance in case of a default, or a shift in domestic politics in favour of the Communist Party (PCI). Most importantly, in the 1970s, Italy faced an overlapping series of dramatic circumstances: an unprecedented economic crisis, a striking energy shortage, the spread of political extremism, and two electoral rounds in 1975-76 which put the PCI within striking distance of participating in the governing coalition, and marked the plummeting reliability of the Christian Democrats. These circumstances accentuated Italy's vulnerability and made it inclined to a reactive, rather than pro-active, foreign policy.

In those years, the GDR and Italy were at the same time and in similar ways necessary to their allies, influential in an incidental, rather than a direct way in Europe's Cold War, and dependent on their bigger partners. In the GDR, the SED and the government were aware of these similarities. They therefore assigned Italy an important role in their Westpolitik. The PCI's previous engagement in the battle for the international recognition of the GDR, its influence within the international communist movement, and rising euro-communist tendencies suggested that the SED watch the party's evolution and moves with special attention. It was only the PCI's criticism of Soviet foreign policy at the end of the decade that caused the two parties to clash. Equally relevant was the solid relationship between Italy and the FRG, who were close partners both inside the Atlantic alliance and within the European



Community. The East Germans were aware that the relationship between Rome and Bonn was a cooperative, but also a competitive, one: the Italians, in fact, had not given up their ambitions to expand economic interests in Central and Eastern Europe, in spite of the country's economic crisis and the government's requests for financial backing from its Western allies. Finally, and most importantly, Italy remained steadily committed to détente, mainly because it was the best possible context in which to regain the political initiative. Even when the euro-missile crisis broke out, the GDR was confident that Rome would neither give up détente, nor renounce its Eastern policy.

At the same time, within the leading Christian Democratic party, prominent politicians, such as Aldo Moro, believed that the Middle Eastern crisis could only be faced if Western countries kept the dialogue with socialist countries alive. East Germans took this attitude as an attempt to create a sort of triangular relationship (Dreiecksverhältnis) between Western Europe, the socialist states, and the countries of the Middle East, in order to cope with the endless conflict in the region. East German reports observed Italy's growing independence from the US, the strengthening of EEC institutions, and the reshaping of its relations with the Eastern European socialist countries for specifically regional goals.

After all, what role did the GDR envisage for Italy in its Westpolitik? According to East German views, Italy might become a preferential interlocutor in Western Europe. It had been exploring trade and investments opportunities in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1960s, and had made it a priority to keep the exchange of goods and energy-sources alive. Exchanges with some of the biggest Italian companies

**A lasting web of exchanges**  
**Italy and the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s**



(FIAT, Montedison, and ENI among others), and relevant investments such as Danieli's in Elektrostahlwerk Brandenburg as well as Confindustria's favourable stance on granting credit to Eastern European socialist countries, convinced the East Germans that Italian industry would keep on supporting economic Ostpolitik. Some political analysts even predicted that Italy might be inclined to detach itself from its Western allies to pursue its own Eastern policy. Overall, however, East German expectations exceeded the reality of economic cooperation and the possibilities of commercial exchange.

Italy was also seen as a potential friend within the European political sphere due to its approach to European integration, which defined political integration as a prerequisite for economic integration. From an East German angle this attitude could balance West Germany's ambitions to become the leading power in the EEC: while a supranational Community would represent a challenge for socialist countries in the long-term, it would soften the economic and political weight of the FRG in the medium-term. Similarly, the GDR hoped to find in the Italian government a cooperative partner in those multilateral settings – the CSCE and the UN in particular – where it was looking for prestige.

At the same time, Italy suffered from an inner vulnerability (Labilität) which, according to East German reports, was rooted in a crisis of its ruling class and the contradictions of capitalism. The disastrous image of Italy as a country on the verge of implosion reveals not only the GDR's fears that Italy might fall under increased US control, but also its insecurity about other unpredictable changes such as a possible right-wing revival. And yet, Italy was probably the only Western European



country in which there was a concrete chance for a political shift involving a communist party. But if the success of socialism was still a priority for the GDR, why did the SED step back, instead of supporting the electoral rise of the PCI? Why did the East German government try hard to strengthen relations with such political forces as the Christian Democrats? Why did the GDR promote the expansion of trade agreements and investments with the same capitalist companies they pretended to oppose?

The answer to these questions can be found in the profound contradiction between ideological coherence and political stakes that affected the GDR on the international level. Its priorities towards Italy included building trust, completing the framework for diplomatic agreements, and ensuring a broader market for East German products, as well as securing loans to back East German imports. After all, Brezhnev himself, speaking to the Secretaries of the Communist Parties of socialist countries in March 1975 announced, "We are all, in one way or the other, linked to the capitalist market."

In spite of this essential contradiction, East German analyses were, on the whole, realistic and accurately grasped the complexity of Italian politics and the importance that Italy assigned to international détente. At the same time, the East Germans overestimated their own role in Italy's Ostpolitik and failed to fully understand the importance of Atlanticism in its political and security culture. Eastern politics was not an alternative to Atlanticism, as most SED and government files suggest, nor was the link with NATO merely dictated by Italy's economic and defensive reliance on the US. On the contrary, a solid position inside the Atlantic alliance was



considered by the Italians as a pre-condition for a more dynamic initiative in other areas, including Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, the cooperative attitude of Italian industry, as well as the revival of bilateral relations in the aftermath of the nuclear rearmament crisis and the official visits of Bettino Craxi in the GDR in 1984 and Erich Honecker in Italy in 1985 prove that the web of contacts, information, economic and technological exchanges, investments, credits, policies, and opportunities created by détente across Western and Eastern Europe lasted over time, laying the ground for the EU's later expansion.

Recommended Citation:

Laura Fasanaro, A lasting web of exchanges: Italy and the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s, 01/24/2018, <http://www.berlinerkolleg.com/en/blog/lasting-web-exchanges-italy-and-gdr-1970s-and-1980s> (please add the date of the last call to this page in brackets)