

The External Dimension of Italian Regions: Regions in the European Arena

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Abstract: *The article examines the external dimension of regional action in the case of Italian regions. It addresses some aspects of regional mobilisation at European level, and concentrates on direct presence of Italian regions in the Brussels arena. External regional mobilisation is explained as a parallel to the developments of domestic regional reforms and the strengthening of the Italian regional model that created the conditions for boosting the external role of sub-national entities.*

Keywords: *Italian regions, European Union, external regional mobilisation, regions in the European arena*

Introduction

Italian regions are a case of a typical 'late-comer' among actors in the European arena (Giuliani 2006: 158). According to Marco Giuliani Italy's late-coming was primarily due to the organisation and problematic course of decentralisation which, especially during the transfer of legislative powers in the middle of the 1970s (Act No. 616/1977), was significantly curbed by party-political motivations unrelated to institutional or territorial political demands (as was the case of regions with special statutes). *Top-down* decentralisation efforts did not correspond to local demands but were an expression of the 'logic of national politics' (Baldi 2006: 84). This fact was

reflected in the legislative-competence restrictions placed on regions, which in terms of their role at European level 'gives rise to a hardly resolvable paradox in the case of Italy' (Giuliani 2006: 156). The paradox lies in that on the one hand the legislation made it actually impossible for the regions to engage in external activities while on the other hand the development of communitarian actions and programmes targeted directly at sub-national entities increased their importance and responsibility, and made them partners necessary for their implementation (Giuliani 2006: 156).

Marco Giuliani explicates the position of Italian regions as actors engaged in the performance and creation of European policy through the effect of two 'external' factors (i.e., factors effective outside the arena of the regions themselves) which he considers of major importance. Firstly, there is the long-term but progressing process of decentralisation which peaked in 2001 with the adoption of a constitutional reform introducing quasi-federal regional model. The second factor is the 'transformation of European *governance* into a *multi-level* system' linked to the development of European regional policy which addresses sub-national entities directly (Giuliani 2006: 92). The convergence of these two factors launched, Giuliani claims, 'a fairly strong process of internal transformation which, although it has not reached an institutional translation, it has clearly brought Italian local reality into conditions very different from the past' (Giuliani 2006: 94). The internal transformation primarily involves changes in institutional organisation at domestic regional level. The double effect of these two factors can also be considered determinant in the case of regional mobilisation in the external dimension and proactive stance of regions at European level as preconditions for their greater participation in the phase of ascendancy.¹

This short contribution deals with some aspects of the issue of 'sub-national mobilisation' in relation to European institutions defined by Stefania Profeti as a 'set of activities and initiatives which regions undertake to create direct contact with Communitarian institutions and with sub-state authorities of other countries with the goal of advancing their own territorial interests and influencing decisions which more or less directly affect them' (Profeti 2006: 287). The subject of interest is the question of direct presence of Italian regions as actors in the European arena in relation to the course of the decentralisation process and the strengthening of the Italian regional model. The paper builds on the premise that the mobilisation of Italian regional presence in the European arena occurs in parallel to domestic regional reforms which set the stage for these activities.

Analyses into the scope of regional mobilisation in relation to Brussels help to expound it using hypotheses working with several variables. Firstly, these include analyses building on economic variables which lead to the presupposition that economically developed regions with enough resources will have a tendency to exert themselves as actors in the European arena more than economically underdeveloped regions. Secondly, there is the political-institutional variable which helps to clarify

the influence of the arrangement of relations between the centre and the periphery, i.e., the scope of regional autonomy in relation to central government; studies reach the conclusion that a higher the level of decentralisation helps sub-national mobilisation. Thirdly, experts' attention turns to the role of regional political elites where the presence of actionable elites equipped with the skills to enter a supranational level is a precondition for regional success in this arena (Profeti 2006: 303–304).

The first part of this paper concentrates on the current state into which the long-term reform process involving the strengthening of Italian regionalism has resulted, and especially the conditions set for the functioning and involvement of regions as actors in European policy. Concrete participation of regions and their contacts with Brussels institutions are subject of the second part of the study. Here attention is paid primarily to the direct type of regional presence. Gradual elimination of obstacles at national level is analysed which has resulted in the strengthening of regional autonomy in relation to the central government and in the redefinition of the external role in relation to European institutions.

1 The nature of Italian regionalism and the external dimension of regional competences

The model that came to dominate Italy during its unification and after its completion was the Napoleonic-Savoy model based on political and administrative centralisation refusing any dilution of the sovereignty of central power. A chance to change the territorial organisation of the country came with the end of Fascism which brought a major re-organisation of the political system. Regions, as a new territorial level of administration between the central State and the local level of government represented by municipalities and provinces, were incorporated into the Constitution on 22 December 1947 which came into effect in 1948.

The incorporation of regions into the Constitution and the selected regional model was a result of a complicated political development in the country. While most political parties headed by Christian democrats were in favour of the regions, the communist party advocated centrism and posited itself as the biggest opponent of regionalisation. In 1947 the attitude of PCI changed radically though because after its expulsion from the government it started to realise the possibilities and importance of territorial distribution of political power. The final push for the regions came thanks to the conversion of the communist party and its taking a pre-regional stance which could allow the party to take advantage of its voter support especially in some regions (Fusaro).

Subsequently, it was the fear of strong local and regional governments in the hands of the communists that blunted the regionalist thrust, especially among the

Christian democrats. Thus, the regional model that was established is classified as a weak one (Baldi and Baldini 2008: 78). Regions were indeed incorporated into the Constitution but the central government refused to transfer powers necessary for the fulfilment of tasks clearly vested in the regions by Article 117 of the Constitution. As a result, regions were born as an institutionally very weak level of government, which took its toll in terms of their functioning. Also the first regional elections which were planned for October 1949 were first postponed for a year and then *ad infinitum* (della Porta 1999: 245). Another twenty years passed before the regions actually came into existence.

An exception were five regions with a special statute which were also defined in the Constitution. Their establishment was based on a different logic as their formation reflected the specifics of the regions in territorial, linguistic and ethnic-political terms. These included the two largest Italian islands — Sicily and Sardinia — and border regions where the influence of the regional movements with separatist and autonomist demands were strong. Therefore, in addition to fifteen regions with common statutes the Constitution distinguished regions with a special statute (*a statuto speciale*), which were Sicily, Sardinia, Trentino Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Valle d'Aosta.

Weak regionalism is thus joined with regional-institutional asymmetry. While an asymmetric regional model has persisted as an institutional choice, its weakness has been gradually overcome as a result of a transfer of legislative competences during the 'second wave of regionalisation' falling into the second half of the 1970s, then as a result of administrative and constitutional reform in the 1990s and peaking with the acceptance of a quasi-federal model authorised in a 2001 referendum.

The 1990s are a period of change in Italian policy, driven by a push for political-institutional reforms within 'the Italian transition,' a transition from the First to the Second Italian Republic. Discussions about a reform of regional organisation were launched primarily as a result of the advent of North Italian regional formations of which the most successful was the Northern League headed by Umberto Bossi. A solution to the '*questione settentrionale*' (question of the North in the rhetoric of the Northern League abused by the Centre and drained by the South) is to be, according to the League, the strengthening of regional autonomy leading to a federalist model. At the beginning of the 1990s the term federalism arrived in the national political discourse through the Northern League.²

A major change of the regional model was primarily hampered by the inability of Italian elites to agree on reforms which would take the form of an organic reform of the Constitution; for this reason the ruling left-centrist coalition approached the reform of public administration and administrative decentralisation using the method of 'unchanged Constitution' (*a costituzione invariata*) and in 1997 it adopted the 'Bassanini laws' (named after the minister for regional affairs Franco Bassanini

from DS-Ulivo). An important novelty brought by the reform was the formation of the 'Unified Conference State-Regions-Cities and Local Autonomies' (*Conferenza Unificata Stato — Regioni, Città e Autonomie Locali*) consisting of representatives of regions, provinces and municipalities. They mark a shift in that they provide a new platform for cooperation and negotiations between the central government and regional and sub-regional governments.³

The adoption of the first partial constitutional reform from 1999 was a major advance. The modification of the Constitution brought, first of all, a direct election of regional presidents (who came to be called *governatori*), which creates conditions for the formation of strong regional elites which enter national politics; furthermore, it conferred on the regions the power to create their own statutes. This made it possible for the regions to carry out changes in the organisation of regional government and basic principles for the functioning and organisation of regions, including election rules.

The peak so far of the reform process involving the strengthening of the guarantees for regions' position in the direction of a federation is the 2001 constitutional reform pushed by the centre-left coalition. A confirmative referendum⁴, the first of its kind in the history of the Republic of Italy, was held to confirm the validity of the constitutional law. This referendum confirmed the change of Chapter V of the Constitution. The constitutional text guaranteed the expansion and new division of legislative powers of regions in relation to the State, clarified the conditions of 'fiscal federalism,' highlighted the aspects of asymmetrical regional model by giving the regions with common statutes the possibility to obtain special autonomy and at the same time, through the Bicameral Commission for Regional Issues, opened for regions a new access channel to parliamentary decision-making.⁵

The coming to power by Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right government which included the Northern League as an aggressive driver of the federalist idea entailed in Bossi's project of 'devolution' was another attempt to carry out a constitutional reform; this time it was to finally bring about the federal model. However, Italians refused to approve this controversial reform in the second confirmative referendum which was held in June 2006.⁶

It is Act No. 616 from 1977 that defines the external dimension of regional action as part of the transfer of legislative competences to regions. The Act makes it possible for regions (after a previous consent of the cabinet and in regions which are in compliance with its action) to 'pursue support activities abroad in relation to affairs that fall within their competences' (Bifulco 2004: 95). The minimalist approach to explicating the foreign policy role of regions was supported by the Constitutional Court. Actions going beyond the borders of Italian regions were thus for a long time limited to activities the nature of which did not directly interfere with foreign-policy activities of the State, and were restricted to a cultural-information dimension within

a framework imposed by the State as the monopoly bearer of international commitments (Baldi 2006: 161).

The situation has changed gradually in relation to the adoption of reform measures during the 1990s which peaked with the constitutional reform of Chapter V of the Italian Constitution, which brought further redefinition of the external role of regions. The valid legislation which defined relations to European institutions as international, falling within the exclusive power of the State, was a major obstacle to direct non-institutional regional presence of Italian regions in the European arena and in European policy-making until the middle of the 1990s.

Although informal contacts of regions in the European arena were gradually increasingly accepted by the Constitutional Court and the central government, the first important step was the March 1994 Presidential Decree which distinguished regional activities on the international level from those carried out within the European Union. Thus, regions (even if with limitations) were allowed to establish relations with European institutions without the necessity of obtaining a previous consent of the government. This type of links also included the participation of Italian regional representatives in the Committee of the Regions.⁷

However, the valid legislation did not permit regions to open regional offices in Brussels. This was permitted only with Act No. 52/1996. Unlike regional representations of some other countries that appeared at the end of the 1980s Italian regions were endowed with this important link somewhat later (Baldi 2006: 154–155). Act No. 128/1998 adopted two years later provided for the incorporation of four representatives of regions into the Italian permanent representation in Brussels (ITALRAP⁸). At the same time, it gave regions the power to bring to government's attention issues that they considered to be in their interest and which were to be included on the agenda of the Italian permanent representation (Bifulco 2004: 97–98).

Constitutional Act No. 3/2001 changed the external role of the regions and relations between regions and the EU by modifying Article 117 of the Constitution. Competences related to relations with the EU are listed as part of exclusive powers of the State and also concurrent legislation of the State and regions. Article 117, Paragraph 5 of the Constitution directly introduces the principle of regional participation in decisions 'leading to the creation of communitarian normative acts and (regions and autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano, author's note) are involved in the implementation and execution of international treaties and acts of the European Union with a view to procedural norms defined by the law of the State (...).'⁹ Act No. 131 from 2003 is the law that defined the conditions of regional participation.¹⁰ This legislation was restricted to the conditions for the direct participation of regions while indirect influence, i.e., the ability of regions to influence and contribute to shaping Italy's attitudes at European level on issues concerning regions or

in their interest, has remained practically unchanged and is still executed through the State-Regions Conference (Bifulco 2004: 103–105). Despite criticism concerning the limits and insufficiency of the new changes in terms of strengthening the external-communitarian powers of the regions and especially in terms of the absence of creating true territorial chamber of the parliament, federalised senate, the adopted measures go in the direction of models that correspond to the functioning of member states with federative government (Baldi 2006: 152).

2 Regions in the European arena

Brunetta Baldi distinguishes four various models of regional participation in European policy-making. They are built on two basic aspects. The first is the manner in which regions maintain contact with European institutions; the second is the nature of these relations. The types of regional participation refer to *direct* and *indirect* regional participation. *Direct participation* is the ability of regions to enter into direct relations with European institutions. In the case of *indirect participation* this relationship is mediated by the State; it entails the possibility of regional participation to formulate policy and regions' ability to influence positions of the State in relation to the EU. The nature of the relations is suggested using the definition of *institutional* forms of participation where 'regions are formally represented in bodies (communitarian or national) contributing to European decision-making,' and *lobbying*, if regional participation 'develops through informal contacts and pressure activities aimed at political institutions' (Baldi 2006: 148–149).

	Direct	Indirect
Institutional	Committee of the Regions	State-Regions Conference
	European Commission (committees)	Territorial chambers
	Council of Ministers	
Lobbying	Offices of the regional representation	National networks and associations
	European networks and associations	Relations with national institutions
	Relations with European institutions	

Source: Baldi 2006: 149.

Regional representation in the Committee of the Regions is the expression of direct institutional participation of regions; in the case of Italy it does not represent only the regional level (as is the case of the federative Germany, for example, or the strongly regionalised Spain) but 24 Italian members represent all three types of sub-national units, i.e., regions, provinces and municipalities. The fact that regions

do not enjoy exclusive representation limits on the one hand their significance; on the other hand it is the result of long problematic development of relations between regions and other sub-national units which especially in the 1990s were marked by tensions and competition in relation to the advancement of regional powers (Desideri and Santantonio 2001: 108). In the Committee 14 places belong to regions (5 by the law for all regions with a special statute). Their representatives are proposed by the Conference of Regional Presidents¹¹ which has criticised the distribution of membership and the insufficiency of regional representation on several occasions.

Chiara De Micheli claims that because of the fragmentation of the represented interests the Committee of the Regions is not the favourite institutional link connecting both levels according to representatives of Italian territorial units. Results of an empirical research study show a tepid attitude of most Italian regional representatives to this form of European presence which is primarily due to the competence and institutional weakness of the body as perceived by the regions. De Micheli divides the attitudes of individual regions into three types. The first group includes regions which basically do not participate in the work of the Committee and consider its activity to be inefficient. The second group comprises regions which accept the existence of this institutional forum and participate in its meetings but do not go beyond mere presence and thus do not invest more resources than necessary for this participation. The reason is that they prioritise other types of participation and links to European institutions. The third group includes regions whose relationship to the Committee of the Regions is determined by the opinion that it is not a very efficient institution but they presume an increase of its potential in the future.¹² The attitudes of individual regions can change and develop with changes in representations. Despite the stated limits in the relation of regions to the Committee, De Micheli however argues for positive development according to the actors' statements. While in the first years of the Committee's existence Italians were considered to be weak and not very committed partners because of a high number of absences, a subsequent change lies in their better preparation and efforts to unify positions. Also, they strengthened common platforms creating space for their preparation such as AICCRE¹³, ANCI¹⁴ and Conference of Regional Presidents (De Micheli 2006: 355).

As concerns regional links to the Commission and the Council of Ministers as the two remaining channels offering direct institutional participation to sub-national units, Article 5 of the above-mentioned implementation Act No. 131/2003 provides for the participation of representatives of regions in various forms of governmental delegations (working groups, committees) both in the Council of Europe and in the European Commission. At the same time, it stipulates that in cases of affairs falling within the exclusive power of regions this delegation can be headed by a president of a region (Baldi 2006: 151–152). Because a truly federative model has not been adopted, representatives of Italian sub-national units cannot enjoy the opportunity

offered by the Maastricht Treaty to participate in the meetings of the Council of Ministers instead of a minister of a national cabinet whenever regional affairs are discussed, as is the case of Belgium or Germany.¹⁵

The establishment of regional offices representing the interests of Italian regions in Brussels is the most visible type of building direct contacts of regions with European institutions. Although the legislative change laying ground to this activity was passed as late as 1996, some Italian regions ensured their presence through links to existing regional agencies prior to this. This group included the regions of Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Tuscany and Veneto. After the legislative change other regions established their own representations. Today, this type of representation is used by all Italian regions; those that became active as late as 2000 to 2002 include Molise, Apulia, and Friuli with Campania being the last one (Profeti 2005: 8).

The intensity of activity of Italian regions in the European arena also reveals the different abilities and capacities at regional level. In the case of regional representations differences between individual regions can be found not only in the timing when some regions pushed their actual presence even before the adoption of the relevant law but also in the scope and type of the organisational model or the strategy of regional action in Brussels (Profeti 2004: 14–15). Similarly, their activities also differ in terms of specialised trans-national regional networks and associations. In this respect the active regions include Northern and Central regions (primarily Tuscany and Lombardy).¹⁶

Conclusions

In the case of Italy the entry of sub-national units into the European arena and the mobilisation of regional activity at European level are concurrent with a period of regional reforms and competence-institutional strengthening of the regional model which set the necessary conditions for this activity. The elimination of legislative obstacles originally limiting external regional action through reforms is thus a major internal factor that influenced the functioning of Italian regions at the EU level.

Notes

- ¹ A large portion of existing research into the functioning of Italian regions in relation to European regional policy followed the line of *descending* phase of the policy, i.e., how national and regional actors react and adapt to decisions adopted at European level. Only in recent years has attention shifted to the *ascending* phase of policy, i.e., the issue of participation in European decision-making processes leading to a definition and adoption of such decisions. See Brunazzo, Marco and Simona Piattoni (2008) 'Italy and Regional Policy', in Sergio Fab-

brini and Simona Piattoni (eds) *Italy in the European Union. Redefining National Interest in a Compound Polity*, pp. 51–65 Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. As Marco Brunazzo notes, in relation to regional policy Italy has always been perceived more as a *policy-taker* than *policy-shaper* when ‘the influence of European cohesion policy on national regional development policy was considered to be significantly greater than the influence of Italy on its communitarian definition.’ Current increase in the interest experts take in the ascending phase is primarily related to the ongoing process of ‘growing mobilisation of national and regional institutions at European level,’ which in the Italian context represents a significant shift from the position of ‘significant absence’ to ‘relevant presence’ at Community level. See Brunazzo, Marco (2007) ‘Da ‘policy-taker’ a ‘policy-shaper’: L’europeizzazione della politica regionale dell’Italia’, *Rivista Italiana de scienza politica* 37, 2: 234–235.

- ² For more detail see Vassallo, Salvatore (1997) ‘Il federalismo sedicente’, *Il Mulino* 46, 372: pp. 694–707.
- ³ The creation of the Conference supplemented the existing structure of two bodies: *Conferenza permanente per i rapporti tra lo Stato, le Regioni e le Province autonome di Trento e Bolzano* and *Conferenza Stato – città ed autonomie locali*. For more detail see Gilbert, Mark (1999) ‘Le Leggi Bassanini: una tappa intermedia nella riforma del governo locale’, in David Hine and Salvatore Vassallo (eds) *Politica in Italia. I fatti dell’anno e le interpretazioni*, pp. 161–180. Bologna: Il Mulino. See also Newell, James (1998) ‘L’inizio di un viaggio: passi sulla strada della decentralizzazione’, in Luciano Bardi and Martin Rhodes (eds) *Politica in Italia. I fatti dell’anno e le interpretazioni*, pp. 175–196. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- ⁴ *De iure*, this is an abrogative referendum which the Constitution provides for pursuant to Article 138 in the event that the Constitution or constitutional laws are revised provided that one fifth of members of one of the chambers or 500,000 voters or 5 regional councils submit such a request within three months of the publication.
- ⁵ On the 2001 constitutional reform see Falcon, Giandomenico (2001) ‘Il nuovo Titolo V della parte seconda della Costituzione’. *Le Regioni* 29, 1: 3–12. Also see Baldi, Brunetta (2006) *Regioni e federalismo. L’Italia e l’Europa*, pp. 94–103. Bologna: CLUEB.
- ⁶ On Bossi’s project of devolution see Vandelli, Luciano (2002) *Devolution e altre storie. Paradossi, ambiguità e rischi di un progetto politico*. Bologna, Il Mulino. On the critique of the federal format of the reform see Vandelli, Luciano (2002) *Psicopatologia delle riforme quotidiane*. Bologna, Il Mulino.
- ⁷ Desideri, Carlo and Vincenzo Santantonio (2001) ‘Building a Third Level in Europe: Prospects and Difficulties in Italy’, in Charlie Jeffery (eds) *The Regional Dimension of the European Union. Towards a ‘Third Level’ in Europe?* pp. 107–108, London: Frank Cass. See also Loughlin, John (2001) ‘Italy: The Crisis of the Second Republic’, in John Loughlin (eds) *Subnational Democracy in the European Union*, pp. 224. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- ⁸ ITALRAP – Rappresentanza italiana presso l’Unione Europea; today the expert section for regional policies and structural funds has three members and these representatives are appointed by the State-Regions Conference. See <http://www.italiaue.org/PAGINE/organigramma.asp>
- ⁹ Article 117, Paragraph 5 of Chapter V of the Constitution.
- ¹⁰ See Act No. 131/2003 Electronic version: <http://www.parlamento.it/leggi/031311.htm>
- ¹¹ *Conferenza dei presidenti di regione*.
- ¹² De Micheli primarily includes the central Italian regions (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marche, Provinces of Trento and Bolzano) in this most active group. Their members in the Committee really strive for mutual coordination

and seek to find common positions. De Micheli, Chiara (2006) 'Il Comitato delle Regioni e il caso italiano', in Valeria Fargion et al. (eds) *Europeizzazione e rappresentanza territoriale. Il caso italiano*, pp. 352–353, Bologna: Il Mulino.

- ¹³ Italian section of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR).
- ¹⁴ National association of Italian Municipalities (*Associazione nazionale dei comuni italiani*) which proposes members for the Committee of the Regions representing municipalities.
- ¹⁵ Mario Savino, however, cautions that this attitude of regions to the Council cannot be considered to be 'a mechanism of regional or local representation. Interests that delegates deal with (whether or not they have a regional aspect) are still the interests of the State. Therefore, this is an intra-state mechanism: the composition of the national delegation and the definition of a position which must be defended must be defined in cooperation with the central government in the preparatory domestic phase.' See Savino, Mario (2007) 'Regioni e Unione europea: il mancato 'aggiramento' dello Stato', *Le Regioni* 35, 3–4: 444.
- ¹⁶ Both regions are part of more regional networks and associations. For more detail see Baldi, Brunetta (2006) *Regioni e federalismo. L'Italia e l'Europa*, pp. 168–169. Bologna: CLUEB.

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