
“The high road: Europe and Italy’s role in the world” is a unique essay which explores and analyses, with a comprehensive approach, the political experience of the President of the Republic of Italy, H.E. Giorgio Napolitano, one of the leading actors of the Italian, European and international panorama.

In this intensive conversation with the Italian journalist and opinion leader Federico Rampini, President Giorgio Napolitano describes his point of view on the main European and international issues. The European project is seen as the guiding light for those states which, after the Second World War, chose the path of reconciliation and integration; for Italy, in particular, Europe represents the main reference point in the context of international relations.

The introduction is focused on the personal political experience of President Napolitano, recalling his adherence to the Italian Communist Party, the evolution into the so called “Eurocommunism” until the full support to the European ideals and principles. At the same time the preface presents a deep analysis of the most important and significant foreign policy choices made by the Republic of Italy after the Second World War.

It is therefore my honour and pleasure to present the introduction to “The High Road” in such a prestigious magazine as “Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review”. I am sure that this document will be of great interest not only to foreign policy analysts and researchers, but also to students and young readers who want to deepen their knowledge on the process and values which led to the European Union and on Italian history.

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The High Road: Europe and Italy’s Role in the World

Giorgio Napolitano

(A conversation with Federico Rampini)

My conversation with Federico Rampini and my answers to his questions and promptings reflect my seven-years (2006-2013) as President of the Italian Republic, an intense and intensive experience, both domestically and in the international sphere. Under the Italian Constitution, drafted between June 1946 and December 1947 in a country newly liberated from fascism, the

Head of State is a “non-executive” President. This principle was confirmed in later decades through the analysis and interpretation of the Constitution, by political practice and in the decisions of the courts – all of which have shown Italy’s founding charter to be a live constitutional instrument proof against every challenge and test.

The Italian President, therefore, has no powers of government but does have precise functions sanctioned by the Constitution – including that of representing Italy in international life but doing so alongside and in agreement with the government; and with respect for the executive’s powers of decision, underpinned as they are by the confidence of Parliament, both in foreign policy and over security and defence.

So, without any confusion or duplication of powers and responsibilities (except for a handful of cases of friction and disagreement in the last few decades), the President of the Republic is both participant and co-protagonist in a close network of relations, ranging from contacts with the heads of foreign diplomatic missions, whose credentials he accepts, to meetings with the Heads of State, whom he receives in Italy and who, in turn, receive him during State or informal visits abroad.

There are therefore a large number of meetings with an international focus – and this has certainly been the case during my term of office. I have had 112 meetings in Italy with foreign Heads of State, plus many more with government and embassy officials; and I have made 75 visits abroad, including some at the invitation of international organizations such as the United Nations, NATO and the European Parliament.

The initiatives and events organised to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Italian Unification, culminating in the grand celebrations held in Rome on 2 June 2011, offered a special opportunity for such meetings. Also of special significance were the annual “United for Europe” gatherings of the eight “non-executive” European Presidents, following a tradition inaugurated by my predecessor Carlo Azeglio Ciampi with his then colleagues.

I mention this institutional framework and my own personal experience in order to clarify that the judgements and views expressed in the following pages are based on the exchanges and discussions, both public and private, which have been the core of my international activities between 2006 and 2013, and on the detailed analysis done both in advance of and after each meeting.

I should add and underline that these activities have brought me into close contact with many key international actors, with whom I was thus able to

develop important personal relationships. It may therefore be of some interest, if I provide some examples and recall some of the events which have held, for me, a special personal and emotional significance. Take, for example, the way my first seven-year term began and the way it ended.

It began – on 21 May 2006, just a few days after my inauguration at the Quirinale – with a visit to the island of Ventotene for a ceremony to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the death of Altiero Spinelli. The ceremony was a fitting tribute to a man from whom I had learnt a most valuable lesson both in ideals and in behaviour.

I am referring here to a distant time in my own political and cultural life, a period (from the end of the 1960s) described as the “European apprenticeship” of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). During those years the PCI shifted from a negative and suspicious view of the nascent European Community to the realization that the Party should not cut itself off from the integration process begun by Italy (with Alcide De Gasperi) and the other five “founding-countries”.

I took part in that evolution within the PCI with wholehearted commitment, though not as directly as figures such as Giorgio Amendola and Nilde Iotti, who experienced it at first hand through their election to the Strasbourg Assembly in 1969. A decisive inspiration to me in this was my personal relationship with Altiero Spinelli (who was elected as an independent Member of Parliament in the PCI group in 1976) and the insight this gave me into his own experience and thinking (about which I wrote in 2007 in a volume of essays, entitled *Altiero Spinelli e l'Europa*).

So it was with heartfelt emotion that, in the clear light of that May morning in 2006, I spoke in Ventotene of Spinelli's ideals and struggles in the following terms: “This is the richest legacy on which our younger generations can draw for their moral development and in their actions, as they look to the future.” I still believe that today. Indeed, I am more than ever convinced of the truth of that statement when I witness how diminishing knowledge and understanding of the European “project” among large sections of citizens and voters has given rise to a growing lack of trust in politics, in democracy and in a common future.

My seven years in office ended on 24 March 2013 with a pilgrimage to Sant'Anna di Stazzema – the scene, towards the end of the Second World War, of one of the worst Nazi atrocities in Italy. I made that pilgrimage, as President of the Republic, with Joachim Gauck, President of the Federal

Republic of Germany. We paid joint tribute to the memory of the victims – defenceless people of all ages, children, entire families. And in that tribute, as we two Presidents embraced and in turn embraced the inhabitants of that small village – the survivors of the massacre and the descendants of the victims, all of them humble and hard-working people – we keenly felt the spirit, and the fullest and highest significance, of European unity.

Overcoming deadly and aggressive forms of nationalism: that was the goal which Altiero Spinelli had taken to heart when, from the island where he was held prisoner, he envisaged the shape of a new Europe. A goal which encompassed rapprochement and reconciliation between nations and peoples whose mutual hostility had dragged Europe, not once, but twice in the 20th century, into the abyss of two increasingly devastating world wars. A goal, therefore, of peace and cooperation, above all between France and Germany, as the essential political framework for a process of European integration inspired by something more than purely economic principles. Europe was not born – and even less today can it be confined – within a purely economic dimension.

That is what we felt, my friend and colleague, Gauck, and I, in the hills of Sant’Anna di Stazzema. And that is why that day seemed to me an ideal final point of arrival after those seven years during which much of my work, both at home and abroad, had been inspired by European ideals and convictions.

I would also like to add that, in watching Germany’s President pay tribute to the tragic victims of the forces of war and oppression unleashed by Nazism in every corner of Europe, I was reminded of the unforgettable and exemplary image of Chancellor Willy Brandt when, himself previously exiled as an opponent of Nazism, he fell to his knees, deeply moved, before the monument to the victims of the Warsaw ghetto.

Brandt’s life and ideas have always, and increasingly, acted as a beacon for me, from the first time I met him until the day, much later, when we discussed the Italian left and its relations with Europe’s Social Democrats. That conversation took place on 9 November 1989, the day which, through a strange coincidence and an unexpected acceleration of history, also witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall.

My mind went back to that magical moment, that personal conversation with Willy Brandt, when I was invited to Berlin’s Humboldt University in 2013 to open its annual “Willy Brandt Lectures” with a talk on Europe. At the University, I once again met Egon Bahr, one of the most eminent and faithful of the *Ostpolitik* Chancellor’s pro-European aides. The last time we had met had been at Brandt’s funeral service at the old *Reichstag* building in Berlin in October 1992 – a moving and emotional occasion for both of us.

Readers will wonder why I keep going back to events which occurred in the distant past when talking about those that took place just a few years or even a few months ago. Well, that past laid the foundations for the way in which I was to fulfil my international responsibilities as President. In performing those duties I of course respected fully and exclusively the tradition and vision of Italy's role and interests in foreign affairs and the international arena.

My many years of experience in international affairs – albeit some of them in party-political roles, though not when I was Speaker of the Italian Chamber of Deputies or chair of the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee – have meant that I have always felt at ease and was never the least uneasy, when finally I came to represent my country, the entire country, in Europe and throughout the world as President of the Republic.

I was able in effect to pick up, uninterrupted, my friendships and collaboration with people I had first met 20 years before, such as the Presidents of Austria, Heinz Fischer, and of Israel, Shimon Peres. And right from the start I found I had much in common with a far younger generation of pro-Europeans. People like Bronislaw Komorowski, who had become President of Poland following the great tradition of *Solidarność*, whose most eminent representative, in terms of European sensibility and culture, Bronislaw Geremek, I had first met and admired in the 1980s.

Or Danilo Turk, President of Slovenia until 2012 and an expert of the Italian School of international law. Turk worked with me and the new Croatian President, Ivo Josipović, in paving the way for a new era of reconciliation and cooperation in the Adriatic to ease the terrible tensions inherited from the events of World War II in the Balkans. My meetings – not only at the highest institutional levels but also with ordinary people – in Trieste in 2010 and in Pula in 2011 were, and are, among my most vivid experiences in the process of European enlargement and unification.

The unique relationship which developed between me, as President of the Italian Republic, and Pope Benedict XVI, until his resignation in February 2013, also had its roots in that European journey towards unity. Our friendship arose from an immediate, shared interest in getting to know and understand each other and in comparing views and opinions on issues with which we were both engaged in our respective roles.

Of those themes, Europe soon emerged as being of paramount interest. We agreed on the decisive role of integration and unification and of our continent's potential contribution to positive developments in global affairs, starting with the search for a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East.

Spending time in the Pope's company was a new experience for me, made all the more rich and stimulating by the cultural breadth and depth of his personality. But our uncommon trust and fellow feeling cannot be explained simply in terms of personal affinities. What drew us together was the core common backdrop to our lives, both of which had been stamped by the events – events both great and terrible – of the 20th century.

Events which our two countries, Germany and Italy, had, more than any others, experienced in all their drama and trauma right up to the middle of the last century. As individuals, both Joseph Ratzinger and I had drawn from that common experience a drive and determination to identify with the vision of a new, united Europe; and to continue to cherish and pursue that vision even after we had reached positions of the highest responsibility, as leader of the Catholic Church and Head of the Italian State.

This warm and profound relationship between President and Pontiff was also, of course, hugely important in further strengthening the substantial and mutually respectful collaboration between Church and State in Italy. I mention this relationship here not so much as an element of the international policies which I pursued as President but as a core factor in the cohesion of Italian society, a cohesion which must constantly be strengthened and renewed. We have now embarked on the same path with the new Pope, Francis.

That Europeanism which, since the 1950s, has been a key element of Italy's presence in and contribution to international affairs, has at the same time always been inseparable from another cardinal feature: our friendship and alliance with the United States in the broader framework of transatlantic relations. In my experience during my first seven year term as President, these two strategic axes of policy have continued to be as inseparable as they were for the previous three decades.

In 1978, when I was able to pay my first visit to the United States, I did not limit myself just to presenting the political situation in Italy, in which the views of the left were then finding their rightful place. Speaking in some of the most prestigious American universities and opinion-forming institutions, I acted as standard bearer for a vision of a European community which was becoming ever more inclusive and assertive; a Europe which was also starting to develop a more autonomous profile on the international scene but without calling into question its historic ties with the United States. That mission was a far cry from the kind of anti-Americanism which was then still rife among the left wing opposition in Italy.

The vision I set out was perceived at the time – given my position as a senior figure in the Italian Communist Party – as a kind of “Eurocommunism”, a

movement in which the more thoughtful and open-minded political and cultural circles in the United States showed a keen interest. Just as they showed a keen interest not so much in the day-to-day workings of Italian domestic politics as in the singular reality which was the PCI. During my most recent visit to the United States – a State Visit in February 2013 – somewhat to my surprise, I encountered echoes of that interest and memories still live of the role I played in the 1970s and since.

I have gradually gained a deeper and richer understanding of the history and ideals underpinning the relationship between Europe and the United States, of their common roots and of their shared belonging to the “West”, as the heart of democracy. Indeed, I can claim a certain coherence and consistency of understanding, strengthened as it was by the revisions and changes in the cultural and political landscape which I witnessed in the lead-up to the historic turning point of 1989. That continuity, and other fruitful experiences, served me well in the fulfilment of my duties and in the contribution I made, during seven years as President, both on the European political and institutional front and in European-American relations.

One such experience which I like to recall is my participation, in the 1980s and '90s, in a series of twice-yearly events in which the Aspen Institute brought together a small selection of European parliamentarians and a larger group of US representatives and senators to focus on the development of East-West relations in those crucial years.

Another truly formative experience was my ten years, from 1984, as a member of NATO's Parliamentary Assembly. That role taught me a great deal about defence and security issues and brought me into contact with colleagues – Europeans, primarily, and left-wingers in particular, Germans, British and Spanish – whom I would meet later in my career in various roles and on different occasions.

The many experiences and influences I have recalled in these few pages eventually converged in the relationship which developed, at the highest level, with the US leadership: between the President of Italy and the President of the United States. I followed Barack Obama's emergence and election as leader of the United States closely, with fitting institutional neutrality but with personal enthusiasm and hope. The relationship which has grown between us has reached a level of consideration, trust and mutual confidence – and, in human terms, of real friendship - which I could never have foreseen. After all, we come from very different generations and backgrounds. That those differences were not an obstacle, but rather acted as a stimulus, shows how important – in relations between countries and between their leaders – are such affinities of approach and attitude, of ways of thought and