

THE ITALIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE EU IN 1999: A DISTRACTED FRAMING OF POLITICAL REALITY

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In this paper the Italian section of the international research on media coverage of the EU in the 1999 European elections is presented. The monitoring of Italian media coverage in 1999 has showed a strong national political and media space, and a very weak European one: the Italian media coverage and political debate had a «domestic» quality, and some important national events darkened the European issues. Nevertheless, the Kosovo war and the eventual peace process was an important issue for it was a good occasion for reporters and commentators to connect some European issues with it, thus creating a link between the Kosovo crisis and other European problems, such as the European Parliament elections.

0. Introduction

Here we present the Italian section of the international research on media coverage of the EU in the 1999 European elections. The «European» frame in Italian media is virtually missing, and it can only be perceived in a strong *national-domestic* framing, that is, European issues are relevant only if they involve Italian issues as well. This *nationalisation* of European issues in Italian media coverage emerges both from the analysis of the electoral period and from the analysis of the European conferences period, while for the «current news» period the «Europe frame» is mostly absent. It is quite interesting that in the era of globalisation or, at least, internationalisation of economical and political issues, the Nation-state is still so predominant within the media discourse on Europe and European Union. Even when Italian television programs deal with European «cultural» issues, what we face is a «European cultural and identity construction», as they tend to determine a wider European cultural/historical construction, something like a «invention of tradition». But again, this «tradition construction» is based on *imagined* and *local* European cultures, thus contributing to produce a «we/them» rhetoric.

Interestingly enough, while in the last years the «euro-scepticism» has turned into a sort of «euro-enthusiasm», this «European» rhetoric which has characterised Italian political and (partly) social discourse has not been echoed by the media. Indeed, not only does the media coverage continue to ignore European Union and its institutions (even with Prodi as the Chairman of the

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Commission), but it frames every European issue within a domestic and *local* context. In other words, the general Italian «euro-optimism» has not been supported by the media.

As we shall see later, the monitoring of Italian media coverage in 1999 has showed a strong national political and media space, and a very weak European one.

I. The Italian context

I.1. The national media landscape

Italian media landscape is a very composite one. The last decade has marked an important turning point for both the press and the electronic media.

In early 90's the investigations of public prosecutors of the parties' corrupt practices broke apart the old establishment and Italy's political system is now undergoing a deep institutional and moral mutation that has been defined as a «passage from the First to the Second Republic».

The victory in the 1994 general elections of a media tycoon, Silvio Berlusconi, opened a series of unprecedented issues on the mixture of private and public interest in the information domains.

Though Italian economic system has been characterized for decades by an extensive state participation, in the field of media the state no longer holds a radio and television monopoly (from the 1990 Broadcasting Act). The liberalization of the telecommunications services is in act, following EU policy.

The «political revolution» that started in 1992 and led to the dismissal of the old political class had an impact also in the press precincts. Italy's journalism, traditionally subservient to the political parties, began to franchise from the political allegiance and to take sides with the critics and with public opinion in the country. The print media distinguished in the 1994 campaign and in the Berlusconi government months for their resistance to the tycoon's political words and deeds. With the Center-Left governments (Prodi, D'Alema and Amato), though, the press aligned to the government positions, with the exception of such «opposition» newspapers as *Il Giornale* and channels as Italia 1 and Rete 4 (a part of Berlusconi's media group).

Most Italian daily newspapers are owned or controlled by a small number of publishing trusts: Carlo de Benedetti owns *La Repubblica* and 12 local newspapers; RCS, controlled by Gemina Spa, a financial trust gathering several interests but with Fiat in a leading position, owns the

major Italian daily *Il Corriere della Sera*; the Fiat group directly owns *La Stampa*; the Industrialist's Association prints *Il Sole - 24 Ore*.

The traditional publishing houses that made their money out of printing activities (Mondadori, Rizzoli) have in recent years given in to the pressure of financial capital coming from non-publishing operations. This is due to financial reasons (the sector is now a gold mine, thanks also to the connection with the booming advertising industry), but also to the attempt to influence public opinion and the political arena.

As far as television is concerned, the main broadcasters are Rai (public service) and Mediaset (the former Fininvest, commercial television).

Rai is a publicly owned company, governed by a board appointed by the speakers of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate. It enjoys the financial privilege of getting its income from both the household licence fee and advertising.

The Berlusconi broadcasting empire epitomizes the deep change undergone in the past 20 years by Italy's television system. When speaking of the commercial networks, one automatically thinks of Berlusconi's channels. Though the offer of Mediaset channels (Canale 5, Italia 1 and Rete 4) is quite biased towards entertainment and advertising, in January 1991 the three commercial channels inaugurated a regular daily news service, thus presenting themselves as key information outlets, in competition with the previous monopoly of public television.

The stepping of Berlusconi in the political arena in 1994, as leader of a political party (Forza Italia), and then as Prime Minister, raised the issue of the incompatibility between his business activities and interests and political and institutional responsibilities. The harsh political debate is still alive, after the 1999 European elections and the 2001 political elections, and still continues to focus on the demand for new warranties against concentration of television channels and against the conflict of interests.

The rationale behind Italy's eccentric conduct in the media domain lies in its unique political environment. Economy, media and politics have always been closely associated in Italy: the domestic media are connected with political establishment and the parties have always been extremely sensitive on communication issues. In these last years, though, politics have gradually lost the previous central and «necessary» character it had in the country's life, and the new wave is now characterized by «market logic». Between industrialists, parties and communication institutions new balances are being established. The basic model is, however, still that of «imperfect exchange», but now the politician is losing primacy to the economic entrepreneur, and the media see their role re-valued. This transition is all but painless, and politicians still try to lead the game.

I.2. The media coverage of European affairs

The outlets considered for the study are the two major evening television news bulletins: TG1 and TG5. TG1 is traditionally the most popular evening bulletin, broadcast by the first national channel, Rai Uno, which is the public channel enjoying the highest audience share; TG5 is a «last comer» of the commercial Canale 5, but it has conquered an audience rating that at times beats the competitor TG1.

If «European identity» can be considered as a «social construction», it is also true that we can consider national mass media as an important factor in the construction of an «idea of Europe», given their cognitive symbolic function of «defining the situation» and «producing representations» concerning Europe in itself and its individual Nation-States.

In this sense, the so-called «media reality» can be considered as a «European media reality», produced and re-produced by the media discourse concerning European issues (whether in positive or negative perspectives).

The way Italian media cover European events - and the debates to which they give life - contribute to create a sort of «European agenda setting», which during the last years has changed both in a quantitative and in a qualitative way.

As to the European Union, in mid-90's the Italian image in Italian media was that of a «peripheral» and somehow «deviant» country; the so-called «Euro-scepticism» was quite strong in media representations, and it followed a widespread sensation of «fragility» within the European Union.

Media discourse contributed to create a true new vocabulary, by using the «Euro» prefix in connection with negative terms, thus producing such negative lexical forms as «Euro-scepticism», «Euro-fragility», «Euro-trick», «Euro-inflation», «Euro-farce». This new vocabulary was the result of the negative perspective from which the European Union process was seen: from the great project of a «bridge between cultures», Europe was seen now as an *economic* entity, and Italy's fears as to the admittance in the «Euro-club» were strong. Maastricht's obsession, «two-speed Europe», «First-class» and «Second-class» European members... these issues formed the main media European agenda in mid-90's, at the same time underlining the lack of a true «European identity», leaving aside the «contractual» idea of a monetary union.

At the end of the decade, with the success of Prodi's government in assuring Italy the «pole position» among the main countries of the Union, the greater confidence in the European Union is

registered by the media, which do create a true «European agenda» formed not only by the economic issues (Maastricht), but also by the social-cultural integration ones (Schengen).

In the very last years the «European media reality» is a very complex one, where the issues range from the EMU to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), from the problem of unemployment to the common foreign policy and immigration and security policy. Somehow, European Union conquers an institutional profile: the representation and the framing of the European issues and events is now constructed within a «global» perspective, rather than within a «local» one. It is also very interesting the way the European Commission has become a major issue in Italian media coverage, partly due to the strong «personalization» of at least one of the Italian commissioners, Emma Bonino. Her visibility has reached such a high level that she was one of the candidates for the Italian Presidential elections, and she had an impressive success at the June 1999 European Elections.

II. The Media Framings

II.1. The 1999 European Campaign (monitoring period: May 30th - June 12th)

The period of the analysis has been almost completely obscured by the Kosovo war, though some of the issues regarding the conflict had a direct connection with European issues, as we will see. Another tragic event in Italy contributed to obscure Europe issues in the media and in public opinion: the return of terrorism in Italy. The killing of Massimo D'Antona, a close collaborator of Labour Minister Antonio Bassolino, was vindicated by the Brigate Rosse, the terrorist group of the so-called «lead years». Another main event in Italy was the election of the President of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who made his inaugural speech a few days before the monitoring was made. Nevertheless, Europe does not appear as the major issue in our analysis; following a tradition of Italian media, the coverage of European political and cultural issues was definitely short-breathed.

Thus, the major issue of the monitoring period is the Kosovo war and the eventual peace process. This theme is of a particular importance, for it somehow takes for granted the secondary role of European Union in the process. The main actor is NATO (that is, US), and a key role is taken by the Russians. This situation shows the subsidiary role of Europe as an institutional Union, in a context in which a European country is at war.

Nevertheless, the peace process is an important issue for a second reason: it is a good occasion for reporters and commentators to connect some European issues with it, thus creating a

link between the peace process and other European problems, such as the European Parliament elections. It is also a good occasion to improve Italy's role within the European Union.

With the war going to the end, the media debate regarding European issues is focused on the beginning of a new period: the reconstruction - both in the material and in the moral sense. Both TG1 and TG5 report the speeches of major Italian politicians, who assure Italian and European commitment to reconstruct the countries of the war and to help the peoples involved.

Thus, the main European issue becomes the European Union and its Common Foreign Policy, its relations with US and NATO and its position towards human rights and Kosovo refugees. The idea of a «European identity» is set, and this «identity» is to be found, according to the journalists, just in the post-war role of European countries. Interestingly enough, the issue of EU expansion into Eastern Europe is implicitly raised, but always in a subtle way, without any explicit position.

As far as the question of the refugees is concerned, it is interesting to note the particular treatment TG5 dedicated to it. TG5 is commonly known to be a little «melodramatic» for certain aspects, but with the issue of the Kosovo refugees this «melodramatic» perspective is particularly obvious. The Canale 5 evening news bulletin somehow constructed a serial «story», an instalment a day, by focusing on the sensationalist and «passional» elements of the reports. With an accurate narrative construction, very close to the semiotic construction of the passions, a story has been told about the personal events of the refugees, thus focusing on the pathetic aspects of their tragedy.

If the war continued to be the major issue, it is also true that the elections became a major issue. The main aspect, and surely the most obvious one, is the continued attention to domestic politics: European elections were but the occasion to debate about domestic political games and strategies, with no attention for European policies at all. There is not a television news regarding any European policy: the debate is completely focused on the alliances and the conflicts between the several parties in Italy.

TG1 remarked every evening this situation, by underlining the lack of European issues in the political and media debate.

Again, TG5 adopted a «popular» approach to the issue, by focusing on the several aspects of the «political spectacle». Its reports made a large use of leader personalization, and also underlined the «pop» aspects of the elections, such as such bizarre as the candidates coming from the showbiz, or the sport world, a.s.o.

European elections have been darkened by the fear of abstensionism: a large number of TV reports was dedicated to this phenomenon. The exit-polls in Great Britain, Holland and Denmark depicted the large slices of non-voters in those elections, provoking a great alarm in Italian political and media debate. The issue became an important one, with all the major politicians expressing their fears. As a bizarre aspect of this problem, TG5 proposed the connection between the weather forecast and the previsions of abstensionism.

Another important European issue was the Belgium dioxin scandal, which was connected with European policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP): in reporting the news from Belgium (and from Italian import/export companies) a clear «us/them» rhetoric was constructed, where «them» were Belgian exporters and politicians. Economy was not such an important issue, but the evening television bulletins reported obsessively the oscillations of the Euro, establishing connections between the single currency and the different situations which made the Euro fluctuate.

In conclusion, the data collected in the first monitoring period show that Italian media coverage of 1999 European elections is characterised by a strong *national* communicative and political space (and a weak *European* communicative and political space), resulted in a sort of «nationalisation» of European political and campaigning issues (see table 3): the national events are much stronger than the EU ones (the election of the President of the Republic, the return of terrorism, a.s.o.), and the electoral campaign has a strong domestic character. Indeed, the European elections are but the occasion for Italian parties to test new strategies within the domestic political space, thanks to the proportional system.

II.2. The European Conferences (Tampere - Oct. 1999; Helsinki - Dec. 1999)

Even the European conferences have been covered by Italian Media within a strong *national* frame, especially with reference to one of the greataest «moral panics» of Italian media: the immigration «menace». The Tampere European conference, at least in the Italian media coverage, is somehow the «dark» counterpart of the issue of migrants and refugees that we have seen during the first monitoring period. In the latter case, the war refugees allowed the Italian media to show the «good side» of Italian (and European) migration policies, with a strong melodramatic flavour. In the former case, migrants are seen as a «problem», a «menace» for «Fortress-Europe», especially for

Italian boundaries, which are the frontier between the «non-European» and the «European» political, geographical and cognitive space.

II.3. European current news (monitoring period: 15th-28th November 1999)

If we consider that in the «normal» monitoring period (November 1999) TG1 and TG5 reported only 18 European-related stories (22% of the total monitored stories [80] - see table 1) it is easy to understand the scarce and weak importance of European events in Italian media. The findings follow the normal trend of Italian media: in more general terms, Italian TV programming pays little attention to European affairs. The main type of European-related programmes which appear on the Italian channels is the magazine format, showing mainly geographical, cultural and (sometimes) historical aspects of a European country or region (thus achieving, at least in their media discourse, the local-national level of European formation much discussed at the political level). The cultural/historical issues show a strong articulation in defining a «European cultural and identity construction», as the comments in the programmes underline the importance of the local European cultures within a wider - not specified - European culture. Accordingly, the cultural/historical re-construction of the countries showed contributes to determine a wider European cultural/historical construction, something like a «invention of tradition».

III. Conclusion

Italian media coverage of European elections has been heavily characterized by a «national» perspective, focusing on domestic political affairs rather than European issues and policies. The electoral appointment served as a pretext to test domestic political balances, and it is quite enlightening that the major television news bulletin (TG1) repeatedly stressed this point. Somehow it can mean that a true European political integration is still far from being accomplished, at least as far as the media discourse is concerned. According to an established «media logic», the two outlets we considered - at different degrees, of course - underlined the «spectacular» implications of the campaign, without focusing on the important social and political issues the Kosovo war and the role Europe played in it raised.

All three monitoring periods show that TG1 is much more keen to cover European affairs than TG5 (see table 2), but in both cases there is not evidence of a particularly «colourful» language

(with scarce use of war, sport or entertainment metaphors): indeed, Europe is not the core of Italian media's (and audiences') concerns.

Even so, the analysis of the campaign monitoring period shows that media coverage of European issues is still focused on certain sensationalist aspects of EU: from this point of view, the Belgium dioxin scandal can be considered as paradigmatic of a way of reporting European issues. A «pollution» and «contamination» alarmism eventually roused, and - interestingly enough - this is probably the only European issue which covered the «everyday life» aspects of «European culture», such as food habits and consumption.

If a «European rhetoric» is emerging in Italian media, then this is a typically «media rhetoric», basically made of scandalistic aspects and provincial attention to the «local» implications of European events. Moreover, according to this «media logic», European issues are framed into a spectacular framework which privileges passional and emotional aspects of the coverage. In the particular Italian case, symptoms of a «personalization» of European leadership can be found in some examples of the coverage of such European leaders as Prodi or Bonino.

The «European media reality», as it is framed by the two Italian outlets analyzed, is still a reality to be fully *constructed*, and probably the first steps of this construction are represented by the main event of the period, the war in Yugoslavia, which most outlets appropriately referred to as a «European internal conflict».

Moreover, this analysis confirms the trend of the last years (see I.3.): press and television are developing a «European discourse» which tends to include institutional issues, but it is quite obvious that the major issue is still the economic one. A social integration - not to speak of a cultural one - is simply not part of the «European discourse» and «rhetoric», and the media are contributing to construct a more realistic image of EU, with its ambiguities, its uncertainties and its shortcomings. The coverage of the Kosovo war has been a sort of test, and we can now draw at least two main conclusions.

First, if Europe is, according to several commentators, an «imagined community», then we can say that the media European rhetoric offers us a quite different image: Europe is a community *to be imagined*, with an identity still to be constructed.

Secondly, if we can speak of a «Fortress-Europe», the capability of this «fortress» has still to be proven. The traditional European fear of the «Other», which, for example, Edward Said described as «orientalism», consists of a collective notion which identifies «we», Europeans, against «those» who are not European. If this rhetoric can be found in the political (and even everyday) discourse, in the media it is at least more subtle. Somehow, the media debate on

European issues is more critical as far as the existence of a European *union* is concerned, though there is more agreement as to the importance to reach it.

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Appendix

Tables

Table 1. Number of news items per period

Period	Frequency	Percentage
Elections	38	47.5
Conferences	24	30
Current News	18	22.5
Total	80	100

Table 2. The news items in the two news outlets

News Outlet	Frequency	Percentage
TG1	54	67.5
TG5	26	32.5
Total	80	100

Table 3. European campaign: national and international matters in the news

	Frequency	Percentage
National matters	26	68.4
European matters	9	23.7
Both	3	7.9
Total	38	100