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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Coronavirus Crisis as Catalyst for EU Legitimacy? Italian Public Opinion and the EU During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: Over the past few years, the EU has been challenged by multiple disintegration forces sustained by a growing number of Eurosceptic citizens. In this critical scenario, Italy has emerged as a relevant case because of its transformation from a leading pro-integration country to a country where EU integration is an increasingly divisive issue. We explore the relationship between Italian public opinion and the EU, with a specific interest in understanding how the coronavirus crisis may affect such a relationship, supposing that our case study may also be revealing as to how a crisis context can produce effects on the popular legitimacy of the EU. We show that in Italy there is demand from some majoritarian segments of society for stronger cooperation in the EU. To explain the apparent paradox of why Italians decreasingly feel that their country benefits from the EU but still want to increase EU cooperation in certain areas, we turn to the argument of the public's instrumental approach to the principle of burden-sharing: citizens support deeper integration to face the costs of the most pressing crises affecting the country and the EU at large.

KEYWORDS: burden-sharing, coronavirus crisis, EU attitudes, Italy, public opinion

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1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the EU has been challenged by multiple disintegration forces (Brexit, the rise of Eurosceptic parties) sustained by a growing number of Eurosceptic citizens. These challenges to the EU process show that nowadays the EU is more dependent on public approval for legitimacy than ever before (Hobolt and de Vries 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2009). In this critical scenario, Italy has emerged as a relevant case because of its transformation from a leading pro-integration country to a country where EU integration is an issue that more and more divides society. In this article, we explore the relationship between Italian public opinion and the EU, with a specific interest in understanding how the coronavirus crisis may affect such a relationship. We examine how Italian citizens perceive the role of the EU in managing the most pressing crises of our times (with a specific focus on the coronavirus pandemic) and the imbalances they introduce, supposing, at the same time, that our case study may be revealing as to how a crisis context can produce effects on the popular legitimacy of the EU. We address the question of the conditions under which Italian citizens would be ready to support greater cooperation to face global challenges. We mainly focus on utilitarian calculation under the assumption that its influence may accrue in crisis situations.

With differing intensity, all EU countries have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. However, Italy found itself in the eye of the storm as one of the most exposed member states and the first country in Europe where coronavirus cases began to surface. Italy is also one of Europe's worst-hit countries in terms of deaths. Due to the severity of the pandemic here, the Italian government was the first in the continent to order a total lockdown during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic and for the longest period of time. The longer-term impact of coronavirus lockdown measures may also make Italy one of the worst hit Eurozone states in economic terms. The European Commission predicted that Italy's debt would jump to 158.9% of GDP in 2020, its highest rate since World War II (it was 134.8% in 2019, the second highest in the EU), mainly as a result of the exceptional measures put in place to fight coronavirus and its effects on the domestic economy and on society. All these problems have distressed a country already hit by the long-term effects of the Great Recession and by slow economic growth (Italy has still not reached the real economic output it had before 2008).

In the article, we discuss how the pandemic may be an opportunity for the EU to increase its legitimacy in Italian public opinion. We argue that the costs of transnational crises for member states, especially for those countries that are most exposed, may produce public demand for EU intervention. The coronavirus crisis has created the ideal conditions under which Italian citizens could be ready to support greater EU cooperation over matters currently subject to the exclusive authority of member states. Also, due to its exposure to multiple crises, based on past studies (Conti et al 2020) we argue that Italy is a country (certainly not the only one) where instrumental support for EU policy intervention is high in this period. This posture is sustained by interest in sharing with the other member states the burden of the imbalances induced by crises. By burden-sharing, we refer to mechanisms of fair redistribution of burdens across EU members states under EU coordination when they are disproportionately affecting only some of its members. In this respect, we show that even in countries like Italy, where support for the EU was at a historic minimum before the onset of the pandemic, in a context like the current one a sense of insecurity and grievance among citizens may turn into demands for EU aid and initiatives.

In the article, we contend the argument, raised in the literature, that the chances that crises may provide a stepping stone to major leaps forward in EU integration through public opinion are remote (de Wilde 2021). In a context where public support for the EU has declined over the years, making it more difficult for European

elites to convince their electorates to support further integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009), we maintain that the challenge of coronavirus might represent an opportunity for the same EU to garner increased trust from the public and to promote itself as chief manager of the response to crises. This is, of course, not easy to attain politically. Although the concept of solidarity is clearly affirmed in the *acquis communautaire* and the Lisbon Treaty (Ross and Borgmann-Prebil 2010), in the EU there is no institutionalisation of internal solidarity equivalent to that present within its member states (Ferrera 2009). Hence, the demand for solidarity might easily be frustrated in the EU because of an institutional failure to deliver it. The efforts made by the EU institutions to find an agreement with national governments on mechanisms to help EU countries weather the coronavirus crisis is proof of the difficulties in creating internal solidarity, but also of its essentialness.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section, we consider challenges to (and opportunities for) EU legitimacy in Italy during the coronavirus crisis, we formulate the working hypotheses that will guide our study and present our data and method. This is followed by two sections dedicated to the analysis of EU attitudes among Italian public opinion in the context of the pandemic. A conclusive section summarises the main results of our analysis and proposes some avenues for future research.

2. Why Italians should support greater cooperation: a framework for analysis

Despite a negative trend in EU support, but in line with our findings on public demand for greater cooperation (see our figure 2 below), in a recent study, Conti et al. (2020) show that the majority of Italians request greater EU authority in crucial policy fields such as immigration and security. These fields have become particularly sensitive in the recent past due to increased numbers of immigrants (with Italy playing the role of transit for migration into the EU) and to Islamic terrorism. The authors show that Italians prefer to pool resources at the European level to manage the most pressing challenges of our days. At first sight, public attitudes towards the EU may appear somewhat paradoxical in Italy. Citizens tend to support more EU authority in policy as well as further EU integration in general, even when there is a negative trend in their EU attitudes as documented above. This is true both with respect to those areas where the impact of crises on the country's interests has been more severe (e.g., immigration, with Italy as one of the most exposed countries) as well as milder (e.g., security where, in the past, terrorist attacks have not touched the country directly). One may logically assume that the same will apply to the coronavirus crisis, which has displayed its detrimental effects on both health security and economic growth in the country.

Hence, from past analyses it appears evident that support for burden-sharing within the EU is highly majoritarian in Italy: citizens in this country want to share the burden of crises-led imbalances among all member states. The level of exposure of Italy to recent crises makes support for burden-sharing in this country appear strongly rooted in instrumentalism. In this light, the decline of general support for EU membership can be interpreted as a sign of disenchantment with EU achievements. Italian citizens evaluate the EU primarily in relation to the costs and benefits for their own country; they focus on the gains that membership is able to produce, possibly in the same way they would consider other levels of government. In some way, this is a sign of progress achieved by European integration, with the EU more pragmatically embedded in mechanisms of popular assessment of its institutional performance and policy output (Conti and Memoli 2015). Italians' longstanding belief that the national system is broken and that the EU's external constraint helps the country to progress (Dyson and Featherstone 1996) has largely been replaced by a more disenchanting cost/benefit analysis. This disenchantment has taken place against a backdrop of economic recession, and a fear of uncontrolled immigration and of terrorism. This evidence shows that, contrary to major assumptions following post-functionalist arguments about the primacy of identity (Hooghe and Marks 2009), especially in times of

crisis, instrumental calculation plays a major role in the explanation of support for the EU (Gomez 2015; Braun and Tausendpfund 2014).

In every political structure, the adoption of burden-sharing measures can be motivated by cost–benefit considerations, or by a sense of solidarity based on reciprocity between the members of that community, or the two logics can be complementary (Thielemann 2012). Beyond calculation, it should be noted that support for burden-sharing is a widespread notion in Italian society, not only with respect to those challenges to which Italy is more directly exposed, but also in more general terms. For example, on the occasion of the bailout loans to Greece that were necessary during the financial crisis to rescue the country from default, the Italian contribution to this joint effort went undisputed: there was no internal opposition to this financial backing (despite Italy also being in a recession) from any segment of society. We take this as evidence of the fact that the notion of EU solidarity among Italians appears not necessarily confined to fields and situations where Italy would maximise its gains from burden-sharing. On the contrary, multiple subsequent crises may have created a more favourable context where the sense of solidarity between EU members has increased as a whole.

In the analysis we argue that, in Italy, public support for EU cooperation largely depends on instrumental calculation and finds a particularly favourable moment during the coronavirus pandemic. Italians largely support pan-European burden-sharing of the challenges and imbalances introduced by different crises. We expect the demand of Italians for burden-sharing to be particularly strong in the context of the coronavirus crisis, a challenge that has not only created a security threat to public health, but also a serious risk for the recovery of the economy.

We test the impact of instrumentalism on retrospective and prospective assessment of EU integration. Indeed, we are interested in understanding how instrumental calculation has impacted the way citizens perceive the EU's past performance and the prospect of enhanced integration. In general, some of the most classic studies in the field have emphasised that citizens make their economic calculus about the gains stemming from EU integration (Gabel 1998; Gabel and Palmer 1995; Mc Laren 2006; Hobolt and De Vries 2016). Beyond pocketbook rationality, people are also supposed to base their EU attitudes on the expected implications for national interests (Banducci et al. 2009; Carrubba 1997; Hobolt and Leblond 2009; Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014). Countries in serious troubles and with social malaise could benefit from EU aid to member states; in these cases citizens might see the EU as a rescuer and 'swallow their national pride' in favour of economic gains (Garry and Tilley 2009: 367; see also Kuhn and Stoeckel 2014; Clements et al. 2014). According to this literature, EU citizens are able to make a rational evaluation of the economic consequences of European integration both for themselves (egocentric utilitarianism) and for their country (sociotropic utilitarianism) (Hooghe & Marks 2009; Serricchio 2012). In the analysis, we refer to two aspects of instrumentalism. We argue that, in the context of the pandemic, as long as it is perceived as improving the interests of their own countries, as well as their own interests, EU integration receives a positive assessment from citizens. Hence, we formulate the first two hypotheses that we aim to test in our work.

H1 – Believing that the EU has given adequate support to their own country during the pandemic positively influences citizens' attitudes to the EU.

H2 – Perceiving that the pandemic has produced costs on their own interests makes turning to the EU for protection more likely.

Instrumental calculation also pertains to the capacity of domestic institutions to manage crises. In general, higher levels of dissatisfaction with national government institutions may favour positive stances towards the EU (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). The ability of the national government to handle the extraordinary pressure of the

pandemic might not garner sufficient trust; in this case it might be considered rational to call on European intervention. We expect that those who were not satisfied with the management of the coronavirus emergency by domestic governing institutions would be more likely to turn to the EU for protection. Thus, we formulate our third hypothesis.

H3 – Believing that domestic institutions are unable to manage the pressure of the pandemic makes turning to the EU for protection more likely.

In the following sections, we explore the relationship between Italian public opinion and the EU, with a specific interest in understanding how the coronavirus crisis may affect such a relationship and under the assumption that our case study may also be revealing as to how a crisis context can produce effects on the popular legitimacy of the EU. To explain the apparent paradox of why Italians decreasingly feel that their country benefits from the EU but still want to increase EU cooperation in certain areas, we test our hypotheses on the public's instrumental approach to the principle of burden-sharing: citizens build a more positive image of EU integration if this is believed to help face the costs of the most pressing crises affecting the country.

From a theoretical point of view, our findings may rejuvenate classical theory on European integration, in which many scholars (Milward 1999; Moravcsik 1993) sustain that the main rationale behind the EU integration process is the rescue of the nation-state from the most pressing problems of transnational scope which the state itself is unable to handle effectively. Classical theory is mainly interested in explaining the decision of national governments to pool sovereignty at the EU level. Through the same lens, we provide justification for the apparent paradox that when EU member states are exposed to crises, their citizens may request EU intervention even if they are sceptical of the positivity of EU membership for them in general. Especially in the case of transnational crises, the ability of the state to handle the most pressing challenges (such as those pertaining to health security, or to an economic recession) might not garner sufficient trust from citizens who turn to the EU for protection. Hence, at least in some countries, the Covid-19 crisis may create an opening for public support for stronger collective European action.

To test our hypotheses, we use data from the IAI-LAPS¹ survey, conducted on a sample of Italian citizens aged 18 and older. Respondents were recruited from a CINT's opt-in panel, using a quota sampling method with gender (male, female), age-group (18-34, 35-54, 55+) and region (NUTS1) as quota control variables. In order to improve the quality of the data, in line with Baker et al. (2010), we removed from the analysis those respondents who completed the interview in less than 50% of the median time spent by the whole sample to take the survey, ending up with 1,562 valid cases. Post-stratification weights based on gender, age-group, region, and educational attainment were applied to reflect the actual demographic composition of Italy's adult population. The questionnaire was administered in Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) mode and centrally managed by the Laboratory for Political Analysis (LAPS) hosted at the University of Siena. The fieldwork took place between 24 and 28 April 2020, two months after the first coronavirus cases were diagnosed and when the country was under full lockdown. Although focusing mostly on foreign policy, the survey also asked questions concerning the perceived impact of the coronavirus emergency and about attitudes towards several actors (including the EU) in the context of the pandemic. The survey was carried out before the EU approved its long-term budget, coupled with NextGenerationEU, the largest stimulus package ever financed by the EU to help rebuild a post-COVID-19 Europe. Accordingly, the survey reflects the situation of the time, before approval of the EU rescue package. It is very likely that the public mood has changed

¹ The survey used in this research was funded by the *Istituto Affari Internazionali*.

substantially since this game changer. Through our analysis, it is thus possible to assess the likely reception of the EU intervention on this occasion, as well as the impact it could make on EU legitimacy in this country.

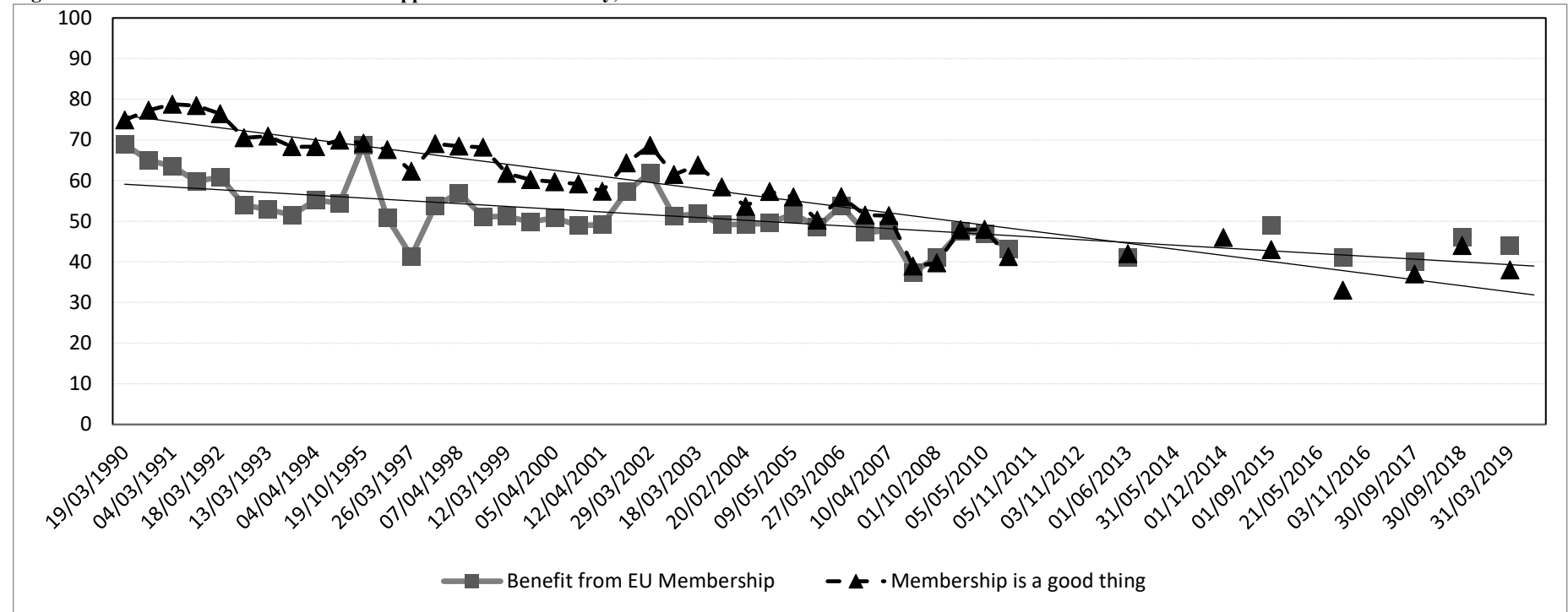
3. Europhilia over? Not necessarily... Tracing Italian public opinion attitudes towards the EU

The explanations behind the long-term negative trend in the attitudes of the Italian public towards the EU have been addressed by several authors. In general, these show that economic concerns and perceived threats to national identity (namely immigration) were the two main determinants behind the rise of Eurosceptic attitudes among Italians even before the multiple crises that have affected Europe in the recent past (Bellucci 2014; Conti and Memoli 2015; Di Mauro 2014; Franchino and Segatti 2019; Quaglia 2011; Serricchio 2012). Indeed, the growing Euroscepticism of the Italian public (even compared to other Southern European countries, see on this point Teperoglou and Belchior 2020) can be first understood in the light of the main policy paradigms pursued by the EU, as these have often appeared to be on a collision course with the national interests of Italians. The competitive pressures induced by the EU through the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and through enlargement to new member states have created concerns within Italian society (Bellucci and Serricchio 2012). Within the Eurozone, member states have lost a great deal of scope for independent action in areas such as monetary policy and trade. This has induced a real paradigm shift in Italy where, for instance, the competitive devaluation of the national currency to make Italian goods more economical, and the gigantic state debt to finance generous public expenditure have become policies of the past, impossible to pursue under the EMU. Moreover, other EU countries – especially in Central and Eastern Europe – have become attractive for business and have induced many Italian entrepreneurs to delocalise to other regions of the EU (in addition to the global trend of business delocalisation to low wage extra-EU countries). Owing to the free movement of people, the number of economic immigrants from EU countries has increased in Italy. Ultimately, under the impact of the multiple (i.e., economic and migration) crises that have affected the EU, all these tensions have been exacerbated in Italy, one of the most exposed countries.

The two lines in Figure 1 show the percentages of people who perceive EU membership as beneficial and think that EU membership is a good thing. These indicators of the Eurobarometer survey point to different dimensions of the EU integration process, such as integration in encompassing terms (membership) and policy outcomes (benefit). Both lines in the graph tend to decline sharply, especially in the crisis years. Despite some fluctuations, the overall downturn is striking, also when considered from a long-term perspective. The association between the two lines appears evident: it shows that the less citizens perceive the EU as creating benefits for their own country, the less they support their own country's membership in the EU. In 1991, 79% of Italians considered their country's membership to be a good thing, but by 2019 this percentage had more than halved (38%). In 1990, 69% of Italians thought their country had benefited from EU membership, while by 2019 this percentage had fallen to 44%. These trends in Italian public opinion appear even more critical when compared to the pan-European tendency. Until the early 2000s, Italy showed higher values than the EU average on both indicators, while by the mid-2010s the situation was completely reversed as European averages were 23% (benefit) and 21% (membership) higher than the Italian averages, respectively (data not shown). This situation and how it has evolved over time prompted authors such as Teperoglou and Belchior (2020) to claim that Euroscepticism has become structural in Italy.

Also in the context of the pandemic, Italian public opinion has shown its critical relationship with the EU. To provide evidence of such a relationship, we use data from the public opinion survey conducted during the first national lockdown by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the LAPS Laboratory of the University

Figure 1 - Trends of indicators of citizens' support for the EU in Italy, 1990–2019.



Source: Authors' elaboration of Eurobarometer (various years) and Parlameter (2015) data. Information not available for some years (the relevant questions were discontinued in the survey).

of Siena.

In order to connect the EU attitudes of the public with the actual context of the pandemic, we took into consideration three specific aspects (figure 2). Firstly, we considered people's evaluation of the response to the coronavirus crisis (EU support to Italy). The item used for this purpose is a question about the adequacy of the EU support given to Italy in this specific crisis². We found that, by the time the survey was carried out, an impressive 79% of respondents gave a negative evaluation of the support given by the EU to Italy (compared to 21% who thought that this support was adequate). Once again, we find evidence of the fact that citizens' expectations were frustrated by the EU's (lack of) intervention, at least in the initial phase of the pandemic. This information reinforces long-term evidence of the rise of dissatisfaction with the EU among Italian public opinion.

Among the likely explanations for this markedly negative assessment, there could be an overestimation by citizens of the capacity and competence of the EU to intervene in crisis situations and in fields that are typically of national competence, such as health. The mechanism of assigning responsibility for outcomes normally relies on the assumption that individuals are able to assess past performance and we are aware that the task of assigning responsibility is complicated in the European multi-level system, in which citizens face the additional challenge of distinguishing between the powers of multiple levels of government. On the one hand, responsibility attribution might be challenging for citizens, since the multiplicity of institutional tiers in European multi-level governance can make the distinction between national or EU responsibility somewhat blurred. On the other hand, national politicians have gradually learned the potential of blame shifting to the EU when citizens are unhappy with outcomes, as a critical assessment of the EU and its blaming can be strategic ways to diffuse responsibility (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). In the end, regardless of whether it is exaggerated or not, citizens recognise the large range of competences acquired by the EU and for this reason they consider the same EU a main target for attributional processes, especially in crisis situations.

Secondly, we examined citizens' evaluation of the impact of the pandemic on the EU itself. We use here the question item measuring respondents' agreement with the statement 'the pandemic has shown the definitive failure of the EU' (EU failure)³. An overwhelming majority agree with this statement (73%), thus confirming the decidedly pessimistic EU posture of Italian citizens (at least in the initial phase of the pandemic).

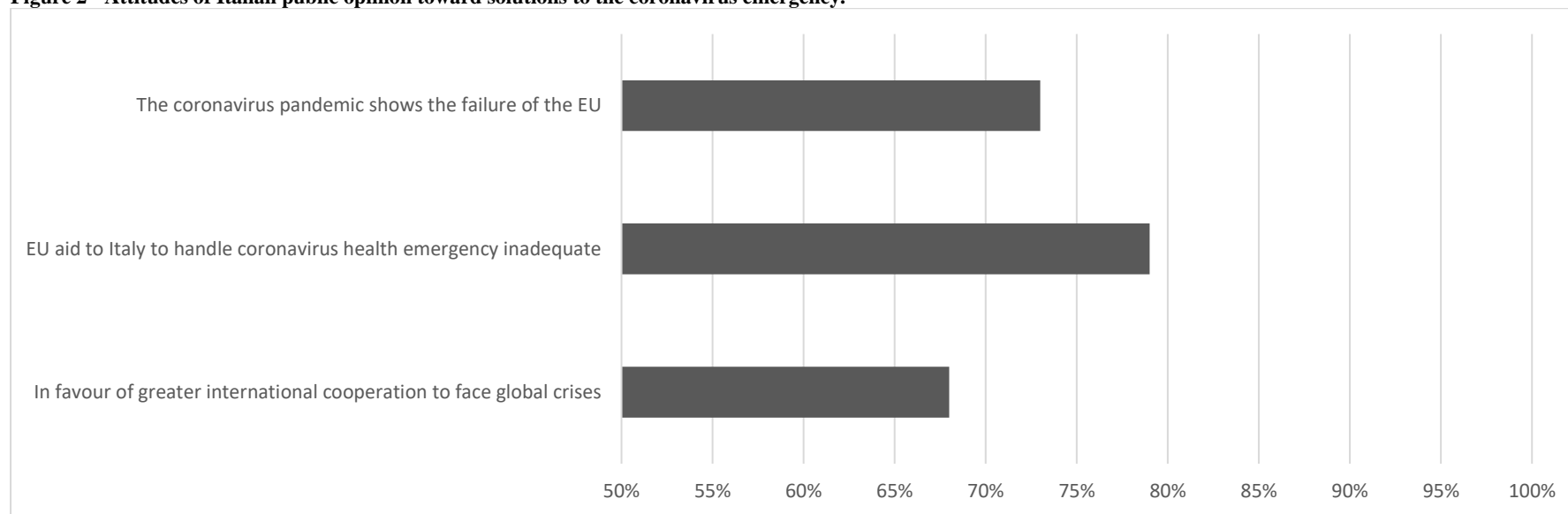
Thirdly, we examined whether Italians would be willing to support greater cooperation to fight against crisis situations. We thus selected from the survey an item asking whether further cooperation between states is preferable in such situations as compared to greater state independence (Cooperation)⁴. In the European continent, citizens certainly conceive of international and European cooperation as being two sides of the same coin. Although not explicitly referring to the process of EU integration, this question can be used as proxy of people's willingness to establish greater cooperation – including EU cooperation – when facing the pandemic as opposed to exclusive national solutions. Interestingly, 63% of citizens declared to be in favour of greater cooperation. When the question specifies 'European cooperation' (not simply international cooperation), the same result is even reinforced, as shown by another survey conducted in the same period (European Council on Foreign Relations 2020) to which Italian citizens responded in even larger numbers (77%) that the pandemic proves the need for greater European cooperation.

² Question's wording was: 'Do you think that the EU has provided adequate or inadequate support to Italy to manage the difficulties due to the recent health crisis of Coronavirus?'

³ Question's wording was: 'Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on the political consequences of the coronavirus pandemic: The pandemic has shown the definitive failure of the European Union'.

⁴ Question's wording: 'According to some, the coronavirus emergency shows the need for greater cooperation between states to face global challenges. On the contrary, according to others, the coronavirus emergency shows the need for greater independence of our state from other states. With which of the two above statements are you more in agreement?'

Figure 2 - Attitudes of Italian public opinion toward solutions to the coronavirus emergency.



Source: Authors' elaboration of data of Istituto Affari internazionali and University of Siena, Laboratory for Political Analysis (LAPS) (May 2020).

The data presented above show a sense of the profound disenchantment of Italian citizens with the role played by the EU during the first wave of the pandemic: its (lack of) intervention was considered a failure by a large majority of respondents. In particular, there was consensus that aid to Italy to face the challenge of the health emergency was insufficient. In our view, this can be seen as evidence of the role assigned by public opinion to the EU as a rescuer and a shield against those challenges that the state has difficulty in addressing and where European-level coordination may produce more efficient responses. Indeed, despite past failure, from our analysis (and in line with other recent works, see Conti et al. 2020) a large majority of Italians appear in favour of greater cooperation between states to fight global crises.

Against this background, we decided to explore whether and to what extent citizens' views about the EU response to the coronavirus crisis (EU support to Italy) actually affect their perception of the process of EU integration (EU failure) and their support for cooperation between states to face crises (Cooperation).

A cross-tabulation (Table 1) reveals that those holding a negative assessment of EU support to Italy are also more likely (79%) to agree with the statement that the pandemic has unearthed the EU failure, than those considering the EU support adequate (52%). On the contrary, those who considered the EU support to Italy adequate (48%) are more likely to disagree with the same statement on the failure of the EU process than those sharing a critical evaluation (21%). Data point to the fact that the unfulfilled expectations concerning EU support to the country translate into a pessimistic prospective assessment of EU integration. The difference between the two groups is statistically significant (Pearson's $\chi^2= 94.1120$, $p<0.001$).

However, when considering views on Cooperation, even if the relationship is still statistically significant (Pearson's $\chi^2= 24.5253$, $p<0.001$), the impact of EU support to Italy is less straightforward. Indeed, among those encouraging further cooperation, the gap between those who consider the support given by the EU inadequate and those who consider it adequate is narrower than that observed for EU failure (65% and 80%, respectively).

Table 1 - EU failure and international cooperation, by perception of EU support to Italy.

<i>The pandemic has shown EU failure</i>	EU support to Italy	
	Inadequate	Adequate
Agree	79	52
Disagree	21	48
<i>The COVID-19 pandemic reveals the need for...</i>		
Greater cooperation between states	65	80
Greater independence of our country from other states	35	20
Total	100	100
N	1231	331

Source: Authors' elaboration of data of Istituto Affari Internazionali and University of Siena, Laboratory for Political Analysis (LAPS) (May 2020).

The above outlined picture indicates that, in the initial phase of the pandemic captured by our survey, this new crisis raised disillusionment about the EU integration project and its ability to effectively address global challenges, something likely to discourage trust in more far-reaching processes of supranational integration. As argued in a recent work (de Wilde 2021), crises may push indifferent people to sway one way or the other and this was also the case in Italy during the pandemic (Bobba and Seddone 2021). Hence, the widespread

pessimism about EU integration in Italian public opinion could be a sign of the fact that the pandemic marked a decline in net support for the EU.

Nonetheless, such disillusionment does not seem to lead to an outright claim for more independence and defence of state sovereignty. As a possible interpretation of this apparent paradox, we propose the argument that the pandemic reveals a form of Euroscepticism in Italy that is conditional rather than principled. On the one hand, there is consensus in the country about the need for greater cooperation and burden-sharing, a stance that implies acknowledgement of a coordination role for the EU. On the other hand, however, the (perceived) failure of the EU to deliver positive gains produces disillusionment in the public that translates into Euroscepticism despite the broad conviction about the need for further EU cooperation and that the state has no future in standing alone to face crises.

Of course, we know that gains are difficult to attain, differences in interest between countries are great, and intergovernmental negotiations on recovery plans are lengthy and oriented to compromise more than to gaining maximisation. In this respect, in the recent past, Italian political leaders have appeared to be influenced more than previously by public sentiment with regard to the EU in their immediate context and have made efforts to be more responsive to (or in tune with) their national public as regards their feelings about European integration and the EU role (Conti et al. 2020b). The Italian government, in particular, has made great efforts to negotiate an agreement on a recovery plan that could help repair the economic and social damage brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. The agreement reached on the EU budget, and particularly on the Recovery Fund, in the summer of 2020 was greeted with great enthusiasm across the broad political spectrum (including shares of the opposition), and by the domestic media, business and unions. This step appears to go very much in the intended direction of citizens' demands; it might well balance out their disappointment in the EU's lack of action in previous months and even work as a catalyst for consensus regarding EU legitimacy within Italian society.

4. Analysis

In order to move from a descriptive to an explanatory analysis, we considered EU failure and Cooperation as dependent variables. Both dependent variables were recoded into dummy variables, with 1 indicating more pro-integration stances (no failure and support for cooperation) and 0 if otherwise.

As to the independent variables of the analysis, we considered a set of factors. For the test of hypothesis 1, we considered EU response to the pandemic, measured by the survey item on the perception of the support given by the EU to Italy, with 1 indicating adequate support and 0 inadequate support. We expect that those who perceive the support given to Italy as adequate will be more likely to hold more optimistic views with respect to the dependent variables.

For the test of hypothesis 2, we considered the impact of the pandemic on the life of respondents in both financial and social terms⁵. The expectation here is that those individuals who have suffered more because of the pandemic should be more willing to look for solutions beyond the state borders, turning to the EU with the hope of improving the status quo.

⁵ Survey questions used: 'To what extent have you and your family been affected by the current health crisis due to the coronavirus, on the financial aspect (question 1)/on the aspect of social isolation (question 2)?' Answers: A Lot/Somewhat recoded as 1=High Impact; A Little/Nothing recoded as 0=Low Impact. Overall, 55% reported a high financial impact, and 74% a high impact in terms of social isolation.

Table 2 - Logistic regression on Disagree on EU failure and Agree on Cooperation.

	Evaluation of the EU after the pandemic (1=disagree on EU failure; 0= agree on EU failure)	International Cooperation (Cooperation =1, States' independence=0)
Adequate support to Italy	2.734*** (0.450)	1.221 (0.227)
High Financial impact	0.464*** (0.0712)	1.223 (0.175)
High Social impact	1.190 (0.206)	1.201 (0.178)
Satisfaction with national government	2.341*** (0.513)	1.934*** (0.367)
Satisfaction with regional government	1.209 (0.199)	1.418* (0.204)
Left	1.078 (0.199)	1.152 (0.242)
Right	0.569* (0.127)	0.704 (0.132)
Not LR	0.981 (0.214)	0.748 (0.142)
M5S	0.646 (0.154)	0.681 (0.168)
PD	1.189 (0.278)	0.780 (0.233)
Lega	0.860 (0.233)	0.733 (0.177)
FdI	0.756 (0.250)	0.859 (0.223)
Abstained/null	0.857 (0.188)	0.819 (0.185)
EU integration is not possible	0.362** (0.113)	0.563** (0.122)
Vote Remain in the EU	4.450*** (1.279)	5.915*** (1.711)
I would not vote	4.567*** (1.846)	2.568* (1.194)
EU impossible # Vote Remain	0.792 (0.284)	0.912 (0.304)

EU impossible # Would not vote	0.442 (0.242)	0.890 (0.476)
<i>Occupation</i>		
Freelance	1.380 (0.355)	1.445 (0.350)
Not permanent job	0.921 (0.255)	1.390 (0.335)
Unemployed	1.004 (0.227)	1.262 (0.250)
Not at work	1.158 (0.227)	1.223 (0.225)
Other	0.982 (0.419)	1.248 (0.432)
Income	0.921** (0.0269)	1.041 (0.0261)
Age	1.002 (0.00555)	1.005 (0.00544)
Woman	0.779 (0.115)	0.646** (0.0881)
<i>Education</i>		
High education	1.140 (0.290)	1.051 (0.206)
University/PhD	1.680 (0.473)	1.496 (0.331)
Observations	1,559	1,557
Mc Fadden Adj. R ²	0.238	0.167

Note:

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Source: Own elaboration of data of Istituto Affari internazionali and University of Siena, Laboratory for Political Analysis (LAPS) (May 2020).

For the test of hypothesis 3, we introduced satisfaction with how the national government managed the pandemic⁶. We expect that those who were not satisfied would be more likely to turn to the EU for protection against the pandemic. We built an index with the average evaluation of different government actors, namely the Government, the Prime Minister and the Health, Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs Ministers (Cronbach's alpha= 0.85). Overall, on a 0-1 scale, answers indicate a medium-to-high level of public satisfaction with the

⁶ The question was: 'In your opinion, in the crisis following the spread of coronavirus in Italy, has the role of the following actors been positive or negative?' Answer options were on a 1-4 points scale, from Very Positive to Very Negative. All variables were recoded into dummy variables, with 1 indicating a positive evaluation and 0 negative.

Italian government (0.6). We also included in the model a variable on the assessment of the role of the Regional President, but we kept it separate from the index measuring the national government evaluation. In Italy, regions hold significant powers, especially in health policy, and their role in fighting the pandemic has been prominent (as well as varied), often giving rise to tensions with the national government. On the whole, Italians appear to appreciate the role played by regional presidents (67%), although there are large variations across geographic areas (from 86% in the north east to 54% in the centre).

In order not to overestimate the impact of instrumentalism, as is customary in this kind of analysis, we introduced some control variables into the models. In particular, we introduced ideology, generally considered a cognitive shortcut for citizens' preferences and attitudes. We operationalised ideology as preferences along the left-right continuum⁷, vote intention and also preferences along the EU dimension of political competition. For the measurement of the latter, in particular, we used two items from the IAI-LAPS survey: the first refers to a question about integrating diversity in the EU⁸ (in the sample, 64% of the population think EU integration is not possible because we are too different). The second item consists of people's willingness to vote for Italy leaving the EU⁹, a privileged platform for right-wing populist Eurosceptic parties. However, since propensity to leave the EU might be dependent on people's underlying attitudes towards integration itself, the above two variables are included as interaction in the models.

Finally, we introduced socio-demographic controls such as gender, age, education and occupation.

Results from a logistic regression analysis (odds ratios shown in the output) confirm the expectation that a positive evaluation of the EU support given to Italy is 2.7 times more likely to convey a more positive image of the EU, all other variables being constant. On the contrary, the same variable does not have a significant impact on the demand for further cooperation. This suggests that Italians welcome greater cooperation regardless of how they retrospectively judge EU performance during the pandemic. Our H1 is thus only confirmed with respect to retrospective assessment of the EU process, not with respect to prospective integration¹⁰.

Similarly, those who think the pandemic produced a high financial impact on their household tend to agree on EU failure but, again, this does not have a significant impact on preferences for cooperation. Conversely, the social impact of the pandemic seems irrelevant in shaping any retrospective or prospective evaluation of the EU. As a result, our H2 can only partially be confirmed and only with respect to retrospective EU integration.

Interestingly, satisfaction goes in the opposite direction to that expected, with a positive evaluation of governing institutions leading to a higher likelihood (2.3 times more) of a benevolent perception of the EU process and a (1.9 times) greater inclination to support further cooperation. This result may suggest a possible spill-over effect of satisfaction from national institutions to EU institutions during the crisis, but more research is needed. It is also useful to note that a positive evaluation of the performance of the regional government is

⁷ Ideology was expressed on a 0-10-point scale, with a further option available to those who do not feel close to any of these sides of the continuum. This variable was recoded as follows: 0-3=Left, 4-6=Centre; 7-10=Right, plus the not attached.

⁸ The survey item was: 'European unification is not possible because we are too different'; answer options range from Strongly Agree to Do Not Agree At All.

⁹ In the survey, the question was asked differently to two halves of the sample, with the first one asked about leaving the EU and the second one about leaving the Euro. Answers revealed not significant differences between the two splits, so the variables have been merged into one. Overall, 46% of respondents would vote for exit (49% if the EU is mentioned, 44% if the Euro is mentioned).

¹⁰ We should also add that the regression analysis has only confirmed the relationship between two variables, but we cannot exclude that the direction of such a relationship could also be reversed. In other words, we cannot exclude that a more positive image of the EU conveys the idea that the EU is acting in the interests of one's own country.

only significant for support for further cooperation. We interpret this result as citizens' increasing propensity to conceive of the response to global challenges under a multi-level governance approach, where the local level shares competencies with supranational institutions. The relationship posited in H3 is thus confirmed but it goes in the opposite direction to that expected.

As to the control variables, with respect to ideological leaning, people on the right tend to hold more pessimistic views about the EU process. Those respondents who consider it impossible to integrate diversity in the EU convey more negative views on both dependent variables, while the opposite is true for those who would vote 'remain' in a referendum on Italexit.

Among socio-demographics, only income and gender play a significant role in the model; in particular, pessimistic views about the EU increase as income becomes higher, while women tend to show lower support for cooperation than men. All other variables do not reach standard levels of statistical significance.

5. Conclusion: the Coronavirus and the EU as a rescuer

This article aims to explain public support for EU integration when exogenous crises severely affect a political community. Our analysis has focused on Italy, a country where public support for the EU has gradually waned, but where there is still demand from some majoritarian segments of society for stronger EU cooperation in the domains most affected by crises (including the coronavirus crisis). To explain the apparent paradox of why Italians decreasingly feel that their country benefits from the EU but still want to increase EU involvement in certain areas, we turned to the argument of the public's instrumental approach to the principle of burden-sharing: Italians support burden-sharing to face the costs of the most pressing crises affecting EU countries. We discussed how this posture is not only associated with the coronavirus emergency but finds its roots in the multiple crises that have affected the EU in the recent past. Of course, burden-sharing requires that people feel part of a broader cohesive group whose members are expected to monitor and mutually support each other. Whereas these are established achievements of the nation state (Rusu and Gheorghiuță 2014), solidarity between member states and the delegation of coordination to the EU imply a trade-off between solidarity and sovereignty. Acting in solidarity with other member states implies that a state gives up some of its independence in domestic decision-making to provide financial assistance to a country in need, allowing the EU to coordinate the joint effort (Hayward and Wurzel 2012). Our analysis of the Italian case shows that Italian society is ready and willing to go in this direction and that the multiple crises affecting Europe may have produced the ideal conditions under which the EU could move a step forward towards deeper integration and more solidaristic integration in the future. We suppose that the negative contextual conditions affecting Italy are common to other countries as well. Although more research is needed, we argue that through a similar mechanism to that in Italy, also in other member states the crisis caused by the pandemic can be conducive to a situation where the EU may accrue legitimacy.

Our study has also contributed to defining Euroscepticism, a conditional posture in Italian society. Here, Euroscepticism is not generated from principled opposition to Europe and to the delegation of sovereignty to the EU. It is the scope of expectations of the EU (a shield against exogenous shocks) and dissatisfaction with the retrospectively assessed outcomes that have created disillusionment within Italian society. Because of the effects of multiple urgent crises, there is an opportunity for the EU to increase its legitimacy: its intervention is perceived as a helping hand that could rescue the nation state from worse scenarios. We take seriously de Wilde's (2021) argument about possible short-term effects of crises on the public mood and the related

tendency of public opinion to rebound after a crisis dissipates. In this perspective, not only the scope of EU intervention but also its timing can be influential factors to assure a boost in EU legitimacy.

The implications of our study for the explanation of public attitudes towards the EU are relevant also beyond the Italian case. In the future, it would be interesting to observe the relationship between support for burden-sharing and support for EU cooperation across countries more and less severely hit by crises, to understand to what extent under crisis conditions, instrumental support for burden-sharing may work as a catalyst for support for EU integration, by means of which the legitimacy of the EU could be enhanced.

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