

Italian foreign minister resigns

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On New Year's Eve, while other European capitals were celebrating the introduction of the new single currency, the euro, in Italy there was only an accentuated silence. No ceremonies were held in Rome, and in contrast to his European Union (EU) colleagues, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi did not consider it necessary to do anything at all to honour the new currency.

All the more louder and vulgar, then, were the public proclamations of opposition to the euro emanating from his rightwing government colleagues, such as Defence Secretary Antonio Martino, Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti or Reform Minister and leader of the Northern League Umberto Bossi. Martino said that the value of the euro had gone down not only against the dollar, but also against the "potato of Macau". Tremonti scoffed, saying he would rather leave the praise about the advantages of the euro to "flag-waving apes, faith-healers, medicine men, and bankers", and Bossi said the euro "made absolutely no difference to him". The queues in front of every ATM machine were, in his opinion, just an "invention of the media".

These utterances led to an open crisis within the government. On January 5 Foreign Minister Renato Ruggiero resigned, after sharply criticising the anti-euro stance of his fellow cabinet ministers, saying he had "nothing in common with this tragedy". Instead of supporting him, Berlusconi claimed Ruggiero was only a "technical functionary", since it was the prime minister who determined foreign policy. The non-party 71-year-old Ruggiero was considered to be a convinced European who served to advertise Italy's international bona fides and provided a counterweight to the nationalist cacophony emanating from Berlusconi and his other ministers. Ruggiero had led the World Trade Organisation for many years, and was brought into the government with the support of President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, as well as Fiat boss Giovanni Agnelli.

In the other EU governments, Ruggiero's resignation—and the anti-euro language of Berlusconi's ministers—unleashed fears that Italy was seriously drifting away from the European consensus. Since Berlusconi entered office last spring the EU has repeatedly conflicted with Rome. Italy refused to participate in the EU project of building the Airbus 400M military transporter, or to agree to a uniform European arrest warrant.

In the case of the transporter, Italy favoured a cheaper variant from US manufacturer Lockheed and thus sought to prove its "independence" from Europe. Above all, the dominance of France and Germany within the EU is a thorn in Rome's side, which repeatedly causes differences and diplomatic irritations. It is clear that Berlusconi's private interests play a major role regarding the European arrest warrant. Legal proceedings are pending against him both at home and abroad, which mainly concern accusations of corruption and falsifying finance records in connection with his media company Fininvest.

Following Ruggiero's resignation, the European government heads

and foreign ministers immediately demanded Berlusconi give a "clear acknowledgement" of support for the European project. This he did, boasting there "was no other country, which was more for Europe". In an interview with the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Berlusconi said he wanted the EU to be a community of values, "a union, which does not have anything to do with nationalism, but which provides an alternative solution to the vision of centralism that is supported by the socialist parties of Europe".

Berlusconi has prevented deputy Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini—as the "natural candidate"—from taking over the foreign minister's post, and for at least the next six months Berlusconi himself will take charge of foreign affairs. Fini, chairman of the rightwing Alleanza Nazionale (AN, National Alliance), is regarded in European political circles as too disreputable, because the AN's roots are in the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI). In 1999, Fini had praised Mussolini as the "greatest statesman" of the 20th century.

Berlusconi also faces pressure from other quarters. On January 7 there was a one-day country-wide strike by all bank employees because of "euro stress", since the punctual distribution and extensive supply requirements of the euro had not been assured by the government, thus creating additional work for bank staff.

Moreover, legal proceedings against Berlusconi threaten to result in a guilty verdict with a possible custodial sentence, causing an even greater scandal.

In the present corruption trial being held in Milan, Berlusconi stands accused of having bribed a judge at the end of the 1980s who had to decide on the privatisation of a state-owned food retail concern. Berlusconi's company was finally granted preferential terms. The co-accused is Cesare Previti, a trusted friend of Berlusconi's for many years and a parliamentary deputy of his party Forza Italia, who was also Defense Secretary in 1994 in the first Berlusconi government.

Berlusconi is utilising the weight of the government machinery to do everything in order to halt the legal proceedings. Amongst other things, he is accused, together with the help of his Justice Minister Roberto Castelli of the Northern League, of intervening directly in the proceedings. Castelli wanted to issue a decree recalling one of the investigating judges, Guido Brambilla, from the Milan court. This would have ended the proceedings, because under Italian law, judges may not be replaced during a trial. By the time new proceedings could be started, the case would have fallen under the statute of limitations, saving Berlusconi. However, the Milan court of appeal has declared Castelli's decision null and void.

In 1994, during his first term in office, corruption proceedings became a stumbling block for Berlusconi, for which he is now seeking revenge through introducing judicial reforms. Milan State Attorney Francesco Saverio Borelli has accused the government of wanting to hobble the independence of the judiciary, rejecting claims that it is "pure coincidence" that the bodyguards afforded to the state attorneys

in the Berlusconi case have been withdrawn. Borrelli was Chief State Attorney in 1992, when corruption proceedings against various politicians and business figures were launched. The work of the pool of judges involved in the “mani pulite” affair (clean hands) led to the fall of the government at that time.

In a newspaper interview, Milan State Attorney Ilda Boccassini confirmed she had not had any armed escort since last September; instead only one police officer was assigned to her protection. She feels her life is in danger, as a result of her continuing investigations against the Mafia.

Consequently, at the beginning of the week, there were protest demonstrations by judicial employees, who Berlusconi derided in his characteristic manner as communists or “red robed” judges.

Berlusconi, whose extensive business interests give him almost monopoly control over the country’s press and broadcast media and make him Italy’s richest man, is systematically trying to eliminate any democratic control of his mafia-like scheming. Meanwhile, the leading politicians in Europe’s capitals close their eyes, or like German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer during his recent trip to Rome, let Berlusconi publicly fuss over him in paternalistic style. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder says there is no “Berlusconi case”.

Much more is still expected of Berlusconi. Every European politician knows that he has still not implemented the social attacks, which he loudly announced. As head of government, he has primarily dedicated himself to his private interests, while up to now, almost nothing can be seen of his “contract with the Italians” or his “100-day-programme”.

This programme consists of continuing the policies of his predecessors in order to meet the agreed Maastricht criteria for European Monetary Union. Crucially, this includes tax and pensions reforms, as well as making the job market more “flexible”. According to Treasury plans, taxes are to be levied at only two rates—22 and 33 percent—providing some 23 billion euros relief, above all for the better off. How the loss of government income is to be financed and/or where savings are made remains unclear.

Drastic changes in Italy’s pensions system and job market have previously always resulted in massive working class protests, leading to government resignations or the government being voted out. Berlusconi experienced this himself in 1994, when his pension plans resulted in an 18-day general strike, leading to his fall as prime minister after only seven months. So far, he has not submitted any plans for pensions or job market reforms.

This is the dilemma his government faces. He has only clung to power through a bizarre mixture of empty promises, nationalist rhetoric and media slapstick—over the past year he spent nearly 20 hours in television appearances.

It has only been possible for him to do this, due to the enormous discrediting of the centre-left opposition. Since 1994, the “Olive tree” (*Ulivo*) alliance—first under Romano Prodi, then under the chairman of the post-Stalinist Party of the Democratic Left and finally under Giulio Amato—had been preparing Italy for the euro with a programme of drastic cuts. These austerity measures meant *Ulivo* lost any credibility in the population and thus opened the way for Berlusconi and his rightwing, or rather fascist, allies.

Of course, his European colleagues know all this, but do not see any other political force at present in Italy capable of implementing these policies and so support him despite all the problems. Germany’s *Die Zeit* newsweekly recently expressed these considerations: “Berlusconi represents the parvenus of Italian society, who want to enrich

themselves by any means; Bossi represents the angry petty bourgeois of the wealthy North; Fini stands in the fascist tradition and its attempt to modernise itself in the third millennium.”

For the working class, this means creating an independent political agency to defend its own interests on a socialist basis along with those of workers throughout the other European countries.

Nothing can be expected from the lefts who are represented in the Olive Tree alliance. The left-liberal *Ulivo* leader Francesco Rutelli has said that the left’s task “is not to give the impression that we would not permit him [Berlusconi] to govern.” Rather, the left needs to revive itself from the ground up, in order to guarantee “that if he fails, we are ready” to continue the previous policy: “The coalition governments I led made a crucial contribution to reorganising state finances...” Rutelli has said.

So far, the Olive Tree has only organised a few protest demonstrations against Ruggiero’s resignation.

The 1997 Nobel Prize Winner Dario Fo has said he cannot understand the left’s opportunism. In light of the seriousness of the situation, the opposition in Italy is behaving as if nothing has happened, he has said. Not even the usual spectacular, but fruitless protest actions have taken place so far. According to Fo, the Greens and the leftwing parties are still on their holidays, and the only “fighting measures” they are prepared to undertake is an appearance on the Maurizio Costanzo talkshow on Berlusconi’s *Canale 5*, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary. “And everyone was smiling and well-behaved, in order to honour Silvio Berlusconi there. It simply tears one’s heart.”

Darkest pessimism and great lethargy have overcome the left-wing intellectuals. The Sicilian writer Vincenzo Consolo, presently living in Milan, says he is experiencing a “sad and depressing Italy”. He attributes Berlusconi’s lack of scruples and decadence to the entire population: “In this country, humane and civil values have been lost. The country is the victim of what Carlo Levi called ‘eternal Italian fascism’”.

Curzio Maltese, one the most important commentators writing in the left-liberal newspaper *La Repubblica*, made a similar prophecy: “The day on which the people switch off the television and fill the streets with protest, will be the beginning of the end for the populist Berlusconi. But that day does not seem particularly close.”

The working class cannot expect any political clarity, let alone determination, from these quarters, if Berlusconi keeps applying the cuts screw and the Olive Tree keeps covering for him.



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