

# Berlusconi and Europe

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16 July 2003

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's start of a six-month stint in the presidency of the European Union has produced a wave of disquiet in the European media. There is hardly a leading newspaper that has not dedicated an article or comment to the subject. *Der Spiegel* came out with a headline "Silvio Berlusconi: The Godfather." *Le Monde* headed an article, "Tailor-made justice, control of the media: The dark side of Italy under Berlusconi." And the *Financial Times* published a comment under the heading "Why Berlusconi could be bad for Europe."

Berlusconi's past is too murky, his involvement in corruption and organised crime too well known, his blend of private and public interests too unabashed, to be simply passed over in silence. The fact that the richest man in Italy personally controls not only the government, but also 90 percent of the private and public media, sits awkwardly with the principles of separation of powers and "good governance" that the European Union officially upholds. This is especially the case when he unscrupulously uses his parliamentary majority to evade prosecution through the court system. There is the additional concern that Berlusconi's presidency could lead to further splits in an EU already deeply divided since the Iraq war.

Berlusconi lost no time confirming these fears. On his second day on the job, he humiliated the European parliament, until then a rather quiet forum for contemplative debates.

After a number of politicians voiced criticisms of Berlusconi's media empire and his interference with the courts, the German Social Democrat Martin Schulz asked outright what was to be expected from the new president regarding European domestic and legal policies. Berlusconi responded with the suggestion that Schultz should take over the role of commandant in a film currently being made in Italy on the Nazi concentration camps. "You would be perfect in the role, Mr. Schulz," he said.

This grubby outburst produced a furious reaction. Parliamentary President Patrick Cox had the remark erased from the minutes—an open reprimand of Berlusconi. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder ordered the Italian ambassador to the chancellery, describing the Nazi comparison "in form and content" as "wholly unacceptable." Schröder demanded a full apology.

Berlusconi did not come to his senses. He declared he had only proposed, in a comment meant to be ironic, an acting role for Schulz. A remarkable irony considering that Schulz's Social Democratic forebears were thrown into concentration camps as opponents of Hitler while Berlusconi today sits in government in coalition with the heirs of Mussolini, Hitler's closest ally. The Italian Prime Minister could not have displayed his arrogance and ignorance of history more clearly.

The German ambassador—likewise summoned to the foreign ministry in Rome—was told that Schulz had insulted the Italian Prime Minister in an unacceptable way and owed him an apology. Obviously, critical questions from an MP are considered *lèse-majesté* within the realm of Berlusconi's empire.

Berlusconi's minions rushed to the support of their boss. The family-owned newspaper *Il Giornale* wrote approvingly: "Very, very good." Northern League Minister for social services, Roberto Maroni, considered

the remark "splendid" and his party colleague and Senate Vice President, Roberto Calderoni, remarked: "At long last one begins to speak out clearly against these left politicians." The CDU (Christian Democratic Party) member of the European parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, also demanded that Schulz apologise to Berlusconi. Pöttering is the chairman of the EVP-faction, which together with the German CDU/CSU is in alliance with Berlusconi's Forza Italia.

Berlusconi telephoned Schröder the next day, and the German chancellor claimed that his Italian counterpart had "expressed his regret over his choice of words and his comparison." This was immediately corrected in Rome. Berlusconi had not apologized, but had expressed his regret, "that someone could misunderstand the content of a joke, that was intended as a piece of irony." The responsibility lay with Schulz, who had provoked Berlusconi and had therefore offended not only Berlusconi, but all of Italy.

Nevertheless, according to Schröder the matter was now closed as far as Germany was concerned. And Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer trivialized Berlusconi's provocation by remarking, "We've all made a wrong step at some time or other."

That is how matters will remain. No one dares to take on the right-wing demagogue from Milan. He is treated as if he were a naughty child, over whom one wrinkles one's nose but otherwise remains silent in the hope that he will soon behave better. "An isolated Berlusconi would turn Europe into an ideological boxing ring between conservative and left governments—a few weeks ago one would have said between the new and old Europe," concluded Stefan Kornelius in the *Süddeutschen Zeitung*, summing up the government's deliberations. "That would break Europe up and the damage would be irreversible. It is therefore better to let Berlusconi judge himself."

The German government already responded to the Iraq war with similar valour. As the initial criticism of US war plans drew increased condemnation from Washington, it decided to remain silent, to flatter the US government and to hope that Bush would "judge himself." Since then, a deafening silence has greeted every breach of democratic rights, the flagrant disregard of the United Nations and the unilateral foreign policy actions of the US. As a result, the most right-wing forces in the US feel strengthened and encouraged to act ever more shamelessly.

The results will be similar with Berlusconi. He has emerged unscathed in Italy—from his attacks on the courts, his use of parliamentary majorities to further his own interests and his purge of public television and cultural institutions. This is the result of the subservience and cowardice of the official opposition, which avoids every open confrontation, even when millions of Italians take to the streets to protest against the government.

When Berlusconi came under attack by the international press before taking over his six-month EU presidency, opposition leader Francesco Rutelli immediately pledged his loyalty. He promised "a loyal collaboration in European matters," emphasizing this with the words: "We must not allow Berlusconi's poor reputation to be turned against Italy." This attitude doubtlessly encouraged Berlusconi in his provocative appearance in the European parliament. The compliant attitude of Schröder and Fischer will have a similar effect.

To directly confront the Italian prime minister's open contempt for democratic rights would undoubtedly result in a crisis throughout Europe, but it would be a healthy crisis. The right-wing and nationalist elements would howl and complain of an attack on national sovereignty and EU rules. The US government would express its concern about observing protocol and defend its Italian ally. But such an initiative would shake up and inspire those across the whole continent, and in Italy in particular, who reject Berlusconi's model for Europe—that is, the vast majority of the population.

It is unnecessary to say that neither the Social Democratic-Green party coalition in Berlin, nor any other European government, would even consider such a response. They prefer to join forces with Berlusconi than to risk mobilizing broad sections of the population. The result is that in Europe the most right-wing forces set the tone, imposing their agenda on the so-called "left" governments. Berlusconi understands this very well. His entire career has, after all, been based on this method. His vulgar provocations arise partly from the calculation that the others will give way.

The cowardly reaction to Berlusconi is not merely the result of character weakness; it has political roots. There may be a number of accidental factors at work relating to the personality of the multimillionaire and media tsar, but there is nothing accidental about his rise to prominence in Italy and the European Union. It says more about the state of Europe than his critics are willing to admit. Berlusconi holds up a mirror to the European Union. His persona reflects in an exaggerated form all of the characteristics that determine the political course of all European governments and the EU as a whole: ruthless egotism, unrestrained enrichment and the rejection of any sort of social responsibility.

According to the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo: Berlusconi "sacrifices the political participation of the citizen on the altar of efficiency." He appeals "constantly to his experience as an employer, i.e., as property holder." However, when one "seeks to run a state or a political institution such as Europe like a company then one has to be able, without great hesitation—and above all free from controls—to make decisions quickly." For this purpose, according to Vattimo, Berlusconi is using his control over the mass media. [1]

There are obvious parallels to the Bush administration. What is spread across a number of shoulders in the US—economic power, political power and the power of the media—is concentrated in a single figure in Italy. The developments in all other European countries are proceeding in the same direction.

In Germany, motivated by the former president of the Association of German Industry (BDI) Hans-Olaf Henkel, *Der Spiegel* magazine undertook a frontal attack on the German constitution. The article met with no real opposition. The magazine announced that the constitution—this "set of rules spoiled by amendments and full of construction errors"—is "responsible for the obstruction of urgently needed social and political reforms." It required "a general overhaul based on economic principles." Consensus—i.e., the balancing of social and political interests—was nothing other than "elaborately organized irresponsibility." Politics meant "causing pain and having to cause pain."

One searches in vain in the *Spiegel* lampoon for concepts such as "democracy" or "basic rights." Instead, the head of the consultancy firm McKinsey is portrayed as an expert on constitutional issues—as if it were possible to transfer the hierarchical structure of a company onto a democratic society.

The so-called "Agenda 2010" programme of the German government is cut from the same cloth. The programme demands massive cuts in the German welfare state combined with tax cuts for the rich—Berlusconi and Bush could not have done it better.

Even the modest demand for an equal workweek in east and west Germany 13 years after the country's reunification, a demand raised

recently by the trade union IG Metall, was greeted with hysterical opposition from the employers camp, the media, the German government and the right wing inside the trade unions themselves. For all of them, it was important to set a precedent. The extension of the European Union to the east is based on the presumption that the existing drastic difference between wages in the east and west remain intact when the borders come down. This is why there could be no concessions made in Germany to demands for more equality.

Also, the timid proposal by a group of intellectuals around the figure of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, for an alternative to the "hegemonial unilateralism of the United States" through a Europe based on the "amelioration of class contradictions" and the "domestication of state force on a world level," met with angry rejection. [2] Habermas's colleague Ralf Dahrendorf set the tone with a hymn of praise to "envious competing greed" and the "insatiable greed to possess and rule." [3]

If the German government was genuinely interested in challenging Berlusconi then it would be forced to challenge its own political line and the prevailing political climate. It is neither willing nor able to make such a move. Nevertheless, Berlusconi presents an irresolvable dilemma.

Under Berlusconi, the subordination of any long-term social perspective to narrow-minded self-interest has reached such a level that it threatens the European Union itself. This was already clear during the Iraq war, when Italy, together with seven other European countries, broke with the common European foreign policy and sided with the US. In addition, Berlusconi heads a coalition with the notoriously europhobic Northern League of Umberto Bossi.

If Berlusconi is annoyed, he lashes out and in the process undermines the European Union. "At best he will be an unpredictable leader at a critical moment for the EU," commented the *Financial Times*. "At worst he could precipitate bitter new quarrels." Any attempt to placate Berlusconi, however, only serves to encourage those right-wing egotistical forces that will even more surely bring about the destruction of the European Union in the long term.

Either way, Berlusconi's presidency is an expression of the profound crisis of Europe on its path to integration. The unification of Europe, which is both politically necessary and progressive, can only be achieved on the basis of a broad popular movement. It is only possible in the form of a social and democratic Europe, which puts the interests of the people as a whole before the profit motives of the superrich.

#### Notes:

1. Gianni Vattimo, "Der Lügenfuchs," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 4, 2003.
2. Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas, "Our Renewal," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 31, 2003.
3. Ralf Dahrendorf and Timothy Garton Ash, "The Renewal of Europe," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 5/6, 2003.



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