

*Department of Political Science*

*Chair of The Role of Head of State in Foreign Policy (Russian Case)*

**The Russian Aid to Italy during the COVID-19  
pandemic  
and Russian – Italian ties**

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## Introduction: The Global COVID-19 pandemic

### **A General Outlook.**

At the beginning of 2020 the world has seen the explosion of a disastrous pandemic due to a new coronavirus named by the World Health Organisation as COVID-19. The virus originated in the city of Wuhan, located in the Chinese province of Hubei. Despite the fact, it is still uncertain when the first infection started, followed by the spreading of the virus, what seems clear is that this coronavirus originated in bats, which came to contact with humans, highly likely in the animal markets of the city. What is certain though, is the lethality of this new coronavirus (similar coronavirus already appeared in the recent past, as SARS for example), made thousands of victims in China and spread rapidly all around the world. Unfortunately, the virus could expand and move forward because it was unknown to the Chinese and International scientific community and there were very few tools to contain the infections and to treat the patients affected by COVID-19. In the very beginning, the Western countries, the European Union and the United States underestimated the danger of a possible world pandemic and governments attempted to reassure citizens that there were no chances for this virus to come in and cause the same effects it did in the Chinese Province of Hubei, who was forced to lock down the city of Wuhan and close the entrance and exit from it. Scientists agreed with that opinion, claiming the situation in Europe was no comparable to what was happening in China.

Soon, at the end of February the first focus of contagion came out in Northern Italy, one in the town of Codogno, Lombardy and the other in the small town of Vo' Euganeo, near Padua, in the Veneto region. The two towns were put under total lockdown regime as police and military surrounded the towns' border to guarantee that nobody could enter or exit them. However, the very two first "*red zones*" as they were defined by the government provision, did not stop the infection, which kept spreading instead in the following weeks inside Lombardy, Veneto and then propagated in the other regions of Northern Italy. Presumably, the virus came to Italy weeks before the acknowledgment of the Codogno and Vo' cases, even though it is hard to determine the exact date when the virus moved from China to Europe and then to Italy. As the explosion of this pandemic put in serious trouble national governments and the same WHO, a collective response became even harder to be given. Reciprocal accusations of importing the contagion received attention by national and international medias and Italy, as the first European country to be seriously affected by this new coronavirus (quite disrespectful was a French advertisement where a man spits the virus on a pizza), became the unwilling protagonist of headline news around the world. The spreading of the new coronavirus lead to unprecedented decisions and provisions by the Italian government, who initially imposed movement restrictions in the province of Lodi, followed by the restrictions over the whole region of Lombardy and a final complete lockdown in the whole country. Citizens were forced not to move from their houses, except for the hospitals and healthcare system workers; the majority of companies and services closed their factories and continued to work from home. As the virus caused a high number of victims and stressed the capabilities of the Italian

national healthcare system, the government supported the highest level of restrictions in terms of movement, denied the possibility to move from a region to another and recommended Italian citizens to stay home in order to contain the spread of the virus. As the lockdown measures were adopted, eventually the virus reached the other European countries and every nation adopted different solutions to fight the new coronavirus: some followed the example of Italy, others implemented lighter forms of restrictions, some instead refuse to take action against the contagion and fail to contain it. In the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson was infected too and was forced to change his mind on the measures to adopt. A curious case is represented by Sweden, who, in the beginning, seemed to manage the complicated situation, although eventually, the absence of any containment of movement caused an increasing number of cases and suffered a high number of deaths. The United States also failed to implement countermeasures as the Trump administration doubted the natural origin of the new coronavirus; tensions between the US president and Chinese government escalated. As the British Prime Minister Johnson, US President Donald Trump has been expressly criticised, not only by the medias but also from his counterparts, the Democratic party, the Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and former Vice-president and 2020 presidential elections' frontrunner Joe Biden. Despite the setting up of a national task force led by Dr Anthony Fauci, the Trump administration has seemed sceptical toward this new coronavirus and the need to impose strong lockdown measures to avoid the spread of infections over the USA.

Whether because of his personal ideas or because a large part of his voters were against the lockdown of cities and businesses, US President Trump did not agree with the measures Dr Fauci suggested to be implemented, denying though any intention of suspending the task force or firing the former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infection Diseases (NIAID); presumably, the electoral campaign for his re-election put him in a difficult position. Following riots between the African-American community and police due to the murder of a man called George Floyd, moved the attention toward racial domestic issues, ignoring that the virus kept on circulating and infecting people. Skirmish with China did not stop at all, as Beijing at the end of June, adopted reinforcements of its laws over the city Hong Kong, claiming the right to manage domestic affairs and condemning comments of US administration officials as interference in Chinese affairs.

### **COVID-19 pandemic in Italy**

Italy was the very first European country, who was massively hit by COVID-19, despite the virus had been circulating through the whole continent at the time. The Italian government adopted though strict measures to stop the infection and contagion and decided on march 9<sup>th</sup> for a total lockdown. In the beginning, it was seen as a drastic decision and critics came from the opposition parties and business associations; other EU countries postponed the adoption of these measures, although the dramatic escalation of the epidemic in Italy created a sympathetic feeling toward the Italian people. As a result, Italy received a massive help from several countries, not just from its EU partners but also from major international ones as the US, Russia, China and many others. Despite the virus spread and created a world pandemic affecting the whole planet, Italy, from

mid-February to mid-march, seemed to be the only country, after China, who was suffering because of this new coronavirus.

Later, France, Germany, Spain and other EU members adopted severe measures to stop the virus contagion, but waited longer as they were expecting devastating evidence to follow the Italian example. Thus, Italy received a high coverage by international medias, which led to an international campaign to help a rich European country, a member of G7 and NATO, a campaign which can be read as a real geopolitical competition between superpowers, but also a new wave of international aid distribution; indeed, before it was usual for rich countries as Italy and its European partners to provide aid to poor and developing countries or to the ones who were recovering after civil wars or conflicts against neighbours. During this recent pandemic instead, Italy was the one who needed aid and help from its partners and among the donors compared countries, which were used to be aid recipients as for example Albania, Ukraine, Romania or Egypt. Donations are not the only way as Italy also made purchases of masks, gloves, ventilators and further features to use in hospitals, therefore it is important to distinguish between materials sold as regular market operations and the ones given for free. Here is a main distinction between the donor countries: the ones who provided materials through contracts and supplies and others, who donated and some who did both. As the Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio reported on an online assembly with reunited chambers of the Parliament at the beginning of April, supplies were provided by: Brazil, the USA, Egypt, China, Japan, Republic of South Africa, the Philippines, Germany, France and others (over sixty countries in the world).<sup>1</sup> On 18<sup>th</sup> March, a flying bridge from China to Italy was established and cargos left from three different airports (Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen), heading to Rome.

An intense and diplomatic effort was made to catch all these materials, as the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the minister, deputy ministers and the whole staff and diplomatic network of *La Farnesina* exploited all resources to obtain the largest aid from international partners. The Italian MFA also had at some point to unlock some cargos stopped by transit countries: because of the pandemic, or more casually due to misunderstanding, cargos were stopped, although regularly ordered from Italy, in Egypt, in the harbour of Rotterdam, The Netherlands or in Czech Republic; the majority of these cargos contained masks and eventually arrived in Italy. Concerning donations, thus supplies that Italy obtained for free, Foreign Minister Di Maio in front of deputies and senators listed the donor countries and their contributions to the Italian National Healthcare System.

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<sup>1</sup> Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio informs MPs of MFA initiatives and plan during COVID-19 pandemic

<https://webtv.camera.it/evento/16103>

**European Union countries/partners:**

Germany - 75 ventilators + €1 million from Bayer company to region of Lombardy;

France – 1,000,000 masks + 20,000 suits;

Poland - 2,000 litres of sanitising gel

Austria – 3,360 litres of sanitising gel

Hungary - 100,000 masks + 5000 suits

Estonia - 30,000 masks + 20,000

Lithuania - 10,000 masks

Latvia - special thermometers, liquid gel

Czech Republic - 10,000 suits + 100,000 masks. The cargo was stopped by Czech police as it was indicated as an illegal cargo of medical supplies; according to Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, the cargo was unlocked and finally sent to Italy thanks to the direct help of NATO and its solidarity mechanism.

**Non-EU countries/partners:**

Switzerland: 50,000 masks, 10,000 suits

Ukraine:

9 tonnes of liquid gel (5+4)

USA:

100,000,000 million dollars, sum of different activities

Private donors: 17,9 million euros

People's Republic of China:

2,2 million masks + 2,000 kit tests to EU, then donated to Italy

100,000 masks

500,000 gloves

50,000 suits

1,000 tests

Further donations from Chinese provinces and local authorities:

2,000,000 masks + 61 ventilators

In addition, 5,000,000 masks + 96 ventilators from private Chinese donors.

Russia:

On 22<sup>nd</sup> march five humanitarian military flights landed at Pratica di Mare military airport, outside Rome, providing 330,000 masks, 1,000 suits, 10,000 fast tests and two specific machines for analysis, with 100 tests each. Further 100,000 tests, a laboratory for analysis, 3 machines for sanitation of ambientes and means, 3 stations for sanitation of surfaces and several ventilators.

India:

The same day an Air India flight from Delhi landed in Rome with 40,000 masks, 100,000 gloves, 20,000 helmets and 20,000 suits.

Turkey:

Within the NATO solidarity mechanism, on 1<sup>st</sup> April, a flight from Ankara provided 150,000 masks, 1000 suits and considerable quantity of sanitising gel. On 24<sup>th</sup> march the Turkish Red Crescent (a.k.a. the Turkish Red Cross) already delivered 100,000 surgical masks and 20,000 FP2 masks.

Egypt:

On 4<sup>th</sup> April a flight from Egypt delivered 500,000 masks, 300 suits and sanitising gel. Later, two further planes landed in Italy with healthcare disposals as a from Egyptian government;

United Arab Emirates:

10 tonnes of materials (including masks, gloves, suits and gel);

Kuwait:

The emirate of Kuwait donated a sum of \$40 million dollars to the World Health Organisation, who then transferred \$5 million to Italy;

Qatar:

The emirate of Qatar sent 13 planes to Italy to build two field hospitals, one in Veneto, in North-Eastern Italy and the other one in Basilicata, in the South of the country: each of these hospitals can host 500 patients. Further donations from private actors were provided toward Italy;

Taiwan:

500,000 masks;



Vatican City: 30 ventilators donated to the public healthcare structures of the city of Rome;<sup>2</sup>

Further donations from South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam (supplies from both governments and private actors). Besides materials, medical aid to Italy was provided through the help of medical squads sent from several countries to operate in different regions and provinces affected by COVID-19.

EU countries:

Austria - welcomed 11 Italian patients in its hospitals;

Poland – 15 sanitisers operating in Brescia, Lombardy;

Romania – 15 workers operating in Lecco, Lombardy

Germany - a squad of 2 + 2 sanitisers operating in Naples and a donation of 4 ventilators.

In addition, Germany welcomed several patients from Italy in German hospitals, as a total of 22.

Non-EU countries:

People's Republic of China - the very first country to send medical help to Italy in march and in April and the only one who experienced the treatment of this new pandemic. 39 between doctors and nurses, 13 operating in Lombardy, 17 in Tuscany and 9 working along with the Italian Red Cross;

Russia – a total of 104 healthcare operators, 32 doctors and nurses operating in the city of Bergamo, one of the most hit cities by COVID-19 and further 51 sanitisers and 20 assistants;

Norway -19 doctors and nurses operating in the province of Bergamo;

Albania - 29 between doctors and nurses operating in Brescia, Lombardy;

Ukraine - 20 operators, arrived on 4<sup>th</sup> April, landed in the province of Pesaro-Urbino, Marche;

Canada - 12 operating workers in Cremona, Lombardy, who contributed to the building of a field hospital in the city;

Cuba - 52 operators in city of Crema, Lombardy and in Piedmont, North-West Italy;

Tunisia – 7 sanitisers operating in Milan, Lombardy.

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<sup>2</sup> Ricci Sargentini M., Soave I., *Coronavirus, la mappa degli aiuti: ecco i paesi che hanno sostenuto l'Italia*, Corriere della Sera, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020

[https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20\\_aprile\\_09/coronavirus-mappa-aiuti-ecco-paesi-che-hanno-sostenuto-l-italia-12ffb40a-79ba-11ea-afb4-c5f49a569528.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_aprile_09/coronavirus-mappa-aiuti-ecco-paesi-che-hanno-sostenuto-l-italia-12ffb40a-79ba-11ea-afb4-c5f49a569528.shtml)

## 1. Russian Operation in Italy

The COVID-19 pandemic spread in the world since the very beginning of 2020. After China, the second country to be critically hit by this new coronavirus was Italy. Although it is still not clear why Italy was hit so hard and before the other European countries, it is quite evident that the Italian government had to face an unprecedented healthcare crisis and was forced to adopt acts and measures that nobody since 1948, the birth of the Republic, had ever made. Italy, as most of the countries hit by COVID-19, was not ready nor prepared to face such a complicated situation. The national healthcare system lacked experience in handling a devastating pandemic and in mid-February, when the first cases were verified and confirmed as COVID-19 and it lacked the necessary supplies of protection disposals as masks, suits, gloves, sanitising hand-gel, etc.

The Italian government had no other choice left then ordering these supplies from abroad and mainly from China. During the very first weeks of the epidemic, as more cases of infection emerged in northern Italy, some supply orders were postponed or retarded due to douane inspections or police control in transition countries, as the case for a package sent from China heading to Italy and locked by Czech Republic authorities as a suspect illegal items. Similar examples were Egypt and Brazil. It is again important to underline the nature of this supply as donations of supplies for free increased as an unprecedented international operation toward Italy, although countries sent their help mainly through direct expeditions, instead of a multilateral mechanism of aid distribution. This is a further signal of the uniqueness of this unordinary situation as any single country affected sooner or later by COVID-19 has adopted and still is adopting its own countermeasures, but no international organisations helped in significant way Italy or any other nation hit by the new coronavirus. This lack of assistance mechanism underlines the weaknesses of multilateralism and cooperation through international organisations as the United Nations' agencies or military ones as NATO. The European Union itself limited its actions to solicit other member states to provide help to Italy but had no means nor mechanism to act and send supplies.

I already mentioned the unprecedented amount of aid that Italy received as part of purchase orders made from Rome, but also as multiple donations from its international partners from every part of the world. One could argue that beyond this aid, Italy had to rely on its own resources and to start production of its own supplies, so to object the importance of countries' single donations. The government put in charge the Civil Protection Service to control the spread of the virus in the regions and therefore to build a permanent communication channel with the regional authorities and nominated, on 16<sup>th</sup> march, a special Secretary for the epidemic crisis, Domenico Arcuri<sup>3</sup>, who has been and still is in charge for national anti-COVID-19 strategy;

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<sup>3</sup> Vitale G., Chi è Domenico Arcuri, nuovo commissario per l'emergenza coronavirus, La Repubblica, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020  
[https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/03/11/news/chi\\_e\\_domenico\\_arcuri\\_nuovo\\_commissario\\_per\\_l\\_emergenza\\_coronavirus-251007937/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/03/11/news/chi_e_domenico_arcuri_nuovo_commissario_per_l_emergenza_coronavirus-251007937/)

he managed to start a new mask, suit and healthcare materials production, as well as to distribute all supplies that the Italian government ordered and received as donations from partner states. The Secretary has also promoted the realisation of a mobile phone application, *Immuni*, which should trace contagions and therefore to map the spread of the virus in the regions. Even though this digital project began later than expected and was quite little sponsored on the medias, it is a useful attempt, following the successful example of South Korea, to make the virus visible; what made COVID-19 even more lethal indeed, was its own capability to be rapidly transmitted between individuals and few certainties to recognise it. As regional authorities started to provide a daily bulletin of the total number of cases, including heeled patients, deaths and patients in therapy, the number of people infected contained a clear majority of non-symptomatic patients. The absence of symptoms though, cannot exclude the infection, that is why tests are essentially needed and are still the best way to verify the infection and also to count the cases day-by-day.

The events in these months made clear the world is experiencing an unprecedented healthcare crisis and unbelievable facts are happening, something that some months ago would not have been expected. Surely, one of these facts was the arrival of the special healthcare mission to Italy of the Russian military forces in April. It is evident and well-known that Italy is a member of NATO military alliance and a founding member of the European Union and since 2014 and outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, relationships between the Western countries (the USA, Canada, Britain and the EU) and the Russian Federation worsened; the USA pressed for a tough response to the military occupation and following annexation of Crimea (according to the Department of State in Washington, Crimea is still part of Ukraine and the 2014 referendum has no legal meaning nor validity), imposing economic sanctions on Moscow, while Russian President Vladimir Putin answered with a package of countersanctions as well. Since then, no major reconciliation has been made between Russia and the West: United States push for a hard line and a confrontation policy toward Russia, who is still depicted as tyrant and aggressive state, despite former President Obama defined it a 'regional power'.<sup>4</sup> US Congress and main political institution as the Department of State, the Pentagon, not to mention the intelligence community push for confrontation with Russia and no opening by the presidency has been authorised; when elected in 2016, Donald Trump planned to start a reset with Russia as part of a national strategy of containment toward China. However, the Trump administration has little achieved and was instead forced to maintain and to strengthen anti-Russian sanctions.

### **Different views on Russia**

On the European side, the EU member states have different opinions and views towards Russia and their own ties with Moscow: the *Višegrad Group* (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia), the Baltic states and Romania fully support the US line, especially because they fear a Russian attack and still are afraid due to previous occupation by either the Tsarist empire or by the communist regimes installed and controlled

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<sup>4</sup> Miller Z.J., Obama downplays threat from 'Regional Power' Russia, Time Magazine, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2014  
<https://time.com/37120/obama-downplays-threat-from-regional-power-russia/>

by Soviet Communist Party until 1989, while the Western European countries are more eager to dialogue and cooperate with Russia, although bilateral ties has seen through the years some ups and downs and mutual incomprehension of the other side's thoughts. Despite the condemnation of Crimean annexation, Germany, France, Italy and further EU members did not shut down the door to their Russian counterparts because Moscow it is still their main natural gas supplier, a vital energy source, to which nobody of them seems eager to renounce. Italy accepted the realisation of the TAP pipeline that should carry Azerbaijani gas to the south of the country, although there has been quite a harsh debate on this infrastructure and massive disapproval and rebuttal from local population, due to pollution. The Nord Stream 2 project has also rose protests, in this case from Washington towards Germany, as the Trump administration, with the strong support of both chambers of Congress, condemned the realisation of the pipeline in the Baltic Sea, put sanctions on it and accused the *Bundesregierung* (German Federal government) of Angela Merkel of permitting Russia to influence German public affairs. However, Germany seems not to surrender to American pressure on this issue and felt quite bothered by the reprimand of its major partner on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Moreover, Germany and France promoted since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine and the civil war in the East of the country between the central government of Kiev and the separatists Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk a quadrilateral forum, also called the Normandy Four, with Russia and Ukraine that led to the signings of the Minsk and Minsk II agreements. After years of freezing between Kiev and Moscow, the 2019 presidential elections proclaimed Volodymyr Zelensky the new President of Ukraine, a clear sign that the population is demanding the end of this conflict which has been de facto frozen and to come to a new decisive agreement with Russia. This is Zelensky's main goal as the Normandy Four process entered a new phase in December 2019 as French President Emmanuel Macron welcomed the parts in Paris and set the basis for a further dialogue and works for a compromise that could meet the needs and interests of both. The French initiative shall be highlighted as President Macron is seeking to rebuild French ties with Russia and to promote a deeper dialogue between Moscow and Europe; President Macron some months heavily criticised NATO, claiming it came to its mental death. This statement was obviously not welcomed by the White House, as relationship between US President Trump and President Macron after a first very warm phase, led to reciprocal incomprehension. France would like to promote its idea of a European army, an idea that seems quite utopic and not realistic and that would hardly encounter the approval of Germany, French main partner in Europe. A European army would instead please the Kremlin, who seeks European cooperation and to deter NATO pressure on its Western borders; the Kremlin cannot but reject the confrontational policy of Washington and tries to convince Western European partners to open line for dialogue and cooperation.

## **Italy and its continuous relation with Russia**

Among Western European countries, Italy is without doubt the one that pursues a major overture toward Russia, as its exports in the world's largest country has fallen since the Russian countersanctions became operational. Rome is keen on lightening the pressure on Russia and to lift up the sanctions because it considers that they did not produce the expected outcomes; instead a bilateral and perhaps a multilateral dialogue between the Europeans and Russia might lead to a more prosperous situation for both. After the end of the Second World War, Italy joined the Western bloc and became a NATO partner in 1955, although the government never declined talks with Moscow, being aware of the strength of its own national communist party (the former PCI), that turned out to be an indirect way of dialogue between Italy and the Soviet Union.

No matter the colour of the Italian government, no matter what regime was settled in Russia, dialogue between Rome and Moscow has never stopped, especially during Cold War time when the two countries were on contraposition; the iron curtain could not avoid bilateral exchanges as Rome promoted bilateral cooperation through mediators as the Catholic Church and the Chief Executive Officer and President of ENI, Enrico Mattei. While the Vatican played its role as a spiritual institution to protect the Catholics inside the USSR and a bridge between the East and the West (historians underline Pope John XXIII's role during the Cuban missile crisis), ENI and its president launched a new oil and gas provision campaign with the producer countries as Algeria, Egypt, and the Soviet Union as well. What made Mattei's offers attractive and advantageous for the producers (some of them were still involved in their independence process or became independent at the time) was provision of oil and gas between the producers and the company extracting hydrocarbons. At the time, the oil and gas market were dominated by the so called Seven Sisters, who created an oligopoly and excluded smaller competitors. Mattei's role and plays were seen as an unfair way of business by the oil giants, but ENI's strategy encountered the welcome of third world countries and especially the one of Soviet highest communist officials. A further economic actor was FIAT, the famous car producer which established a new factory in the Russian city of Togliatti (named after the former Secretary of the Italian communist party), quite a curious fact when considering FIAT and its models became the icon of the Italian economic boom. In addition, the company and the Agnelli family, who still owns it nowadays, supported steadily the Christian Democracy as the anti-communist main guarantee, even though one could argue that as true capitalist the family's thoughts and beliefs were closer to the small and less relevant Italian Liberal Party, historically eager to support private businesses, cutting taxes and demanding no public intervention in the economy. Among the most influential representatives of the party, President Luigi Einaudi was definitely the key player in the immediate post-war period.

## The Russian army in Italy

As a member of NATO, it has been through the years and still is nowadays quite normal for Italy to have foreign troops on its own soil, mainly American ones, as the United States is the main actor within the Atlantic Alliance (born out of the 1949 treaty of Washington) and therefore, Italy's first military and security partner. It is also necessary to underline that US Navy Sixth Fleet has its own headquarter in Naples; the Mediterranean Sea has quite strategic importance for Washington, although sometimes, it seems that officers in Rome tend to forget about it quite often. During military exercises or even during war operations as it happened in the 1990s in Yugoslavia, Italy played a natural platform for NATO's air forces who went down to bomb Serbia.

Quite unusual instead is what occurred last March as the Russian military operation kick-started and the sanitisers and experts of the Defence Ministry arrived to Italy as bilateral agreement between the Russian and the Italian government, following the explicit request from the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to the Russian President Vladimir Putin. What made the situation this special is that Russian military never operated in Italy or better not in this century, as back in 1908 Russia offered help to Italy when a terrible earthquake hit the city of Messina, in Sicily. Perhaps, an event that would have never happened during the Cold War as Italy's geographical location played such an important role in terms of Soviet containment; sharing the border with the communist bloc gave Italy a strategic role for the Atlantic Alliance. The so-called Iron Curtain indeed, as described by former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a 1946 speech, was an imaginary border from the city of Stettin, on the Baltic sea to Trieste on Italian Eastern border. The videos and the images of Russian military trucks on Italian motorways, heading toward the heavily hit Lombardy region proved the extraordinary nature of this historical moment. In terms of quantity, Russian aid operation might have not been as decisive as others, but it created a momentum and it made without doubt a lot of noise on Italian media and on foreign media.

*But what did the Russian aid consist of?*

On 22<sup>nd</sup> march 2020, seven humanitarian military flights landed at Pratica di Mare Air Force base<sup>5</sup>, outside Rome, providing 330,000 masks, 1000 suits, 10,000 fast tests and two specific machines for analysis, with 100 tests each. Further 100,000 tests, a laboratory for analysis, 3 machines for sanitation of ambientes and means, 3 stations for sanitation of surfaces and several ventilators were part of the cargo. As the planes carried materials, a squad of expert members of the Russian army arrived in Italy: a total of 104 healthcare operators, 32 doctors and nurses and further 51 sanitisers and 20 assistants. Further planes arrived in the following days, as the total number raised to 15. As Italy's foreign minister Luigi Di Maio stated in front of reunited chambers in a conference-call, Russia was one of the countries who provided aid to Italy, materials

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<sup>5</sup> RT, Russian military planes with medics and supply land in coronavirus-hit Italy, 22<sup>nd</sup> march 2020 <https://www.rt.com/russia/483796-russian-military-coronavirus-aid-italy/>

as donations and healthcare personnel such as doctors and nurses, as a squad of specialists sent by Russian ministry of defence; these specialists are experts in fighting infection diseases and in implementing anti-bacteriologic war techniques. The presence of the Russian military in Italy created panic and some dismay among the media and the population, too: after weeks of complete lockdown and negative news on number of contagion and deaths due to COVID-19 led to a general lack of trust, a feeling of despair and uncertainty, thus military trucks might not have been the most reassuring solution for many.<sup>6</sup> Some critics and doubts were raised by opposition parties and MPs. However, the reason why the Russian military squad arrived in Italy is because it is the army in Russia, who takes care of these emergencies and it is the most skilled among public forces that can contrast epidemics; therefore, when it comes to these special operations within Russian borders or abroad, it is the army who takes charge of it.<sup>7</sup>

### **Russian operators in action**

As a result of a common decision between the Italian and Russian authorities, the Russian medical squad moved to the city of Bergamo, Lombardy, which was chosen because one of the most severely hit by COVID-19. Thus, once landed at Pratica di Mare, the Russian vehicles took their way toward Northern Italy, led by the Italian military; images and videos were registered, published on social media, as the presence of the Russian army in Italy raised interest, curiosity and astonishment, too.<sup>8</sup> Sanitisers immediately started their job at nursing homes in the city of Bergamo and in the towns of the province, as hospices were rapidly and heavily attacked by the pandemic. Operators activity consisted, in the very beginning, of entering the homes and sanitise them. On mid-April, as Dr Oliviero Valoti, director of the Bergamo field hospital stated, the Russian personnel contributed to sanitise 66 healthcare residences in the whole province of Bergamo.<sup>9</sup> The following phase saw the Russian specialists assisting patients in the field hospital and working and cooperating along the Italian healthcare operators. The field hospital, a temporary healthcare structure, was built to treat patients affected by COVID-19 (especially intensive and sub-intensive therapy treatment) and was furnished with over 140 places. The Italian personnel expressed its gratitude and pleasure on working with Russian specialists, describing their activities and the difficulty when operating against a common menace.<sup>10</sup>

The Russian medical squad left the city of Bergamo on 7<sup>th</sup> may after Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu announced the departure of the specialists the day before in a conference call. A ceremony at the Excelsior

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<sup>6</sup> “Dalla Russia con amore”: nel team di medici destinato a Bergamo anche militari russi esperti in guerra batteriologica, TgCom24 Mediaset, 26<sup>th</sup> march 2020

[https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/dalla-russia-con-amore-nel-team-di-medici-destinato-a-bergamo-anche-militari-russi-esperti-in-guerra-batteriologica\\_16573710-202002a.shtml](https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/dalla-russia-con-amore-nel-team-di-medici-destinato-a-bergamo-anche-militari-russi-esperti-in-guerra-batteriologica_16573710-202002a.shtml)

<sup>7</sup> Pellicciari I., *Perché il Cremlino ha per ora vinto la gara degli aiuti a Roma*, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di geopolitica, Il Vincolo Interno, N°4 2020, Rome, GEDI group

<sup>8</sup> Ruptly, *Italy: Russian coronavirus response team arrives in Bergamo*, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020, You Tube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0MS36nBdSs>

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/rusembitaly/status/1250836900899885058>

<sup>10</sup> AskaNews, “Coronavirus, ecco dove sono i medici militari russi a Bergamo”, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020 [http://www.askanews.it/video/2020/04/03/coronavirus-ecco-dove-sono-i-medici-militari-russi-a-bergamo-20200403\\_video\\_10292857/](http://www.askanews.it/video/2020/04/03/coronavirus-ecco-dove-sono-i-medici-militari-russi-a-bergamo-20200403_video_10292857/)

San Marco hotel in Bergamo at the presence of Russian ambassador to Italy Sergey Razov and the president of Lombardy region, Attilio Fontana along with the tourism secretary Lara Magoni, secretary of infrastructures and transports Claudia Maria Terzi, secretary for civil protection and territory and the delegate for international relations of the region, Alan Rizzi. The President officially thanked the Russian personnel and ambassador Razov for their job and their help, as Lombardy ended being the region the most suffering of COVID-19 due to its high amount of population and to raising difficulties in handling a dangerous and unexpected pandemic. The ambassador claimed the uninterested nature of this mission as Italian press and some political leaders doubted the words and the aim of the Russian government and suggested the chance of intelligence operations in Italy. The Russian squad contributed in sanitising over one hundred hospices in the province of Bergamo and also in the near province of Brescia, for a total of 1.131 million meters quartered of spaces and over 400,000 meters quartered of streets and open roads. A late telephone call between Italian Defence Minister Lorenzo Guerini and his Russian counterpart, Sergey Shoigu was held to exchange appreciation and thankfulness for the help that Italy received from Russian military.<sup>11</sup> On 8<sup>th</sup> May, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and president Vladimir Putin exchanged a telephone conversation, in which they discussed the healthcare operation of the Russian contingency in Lombardy, evaluated by both as truly successful; in addition, mutual cooperation has been defined important and both leaders agreed on continuing on the basis of the enduring friendship between Italy and Russia, as matters of discussions go from the Libyan war to trade and Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

### **Russian MoD vs La Stampa**

The role of the military became suspect as the national newspaper *La Stampa* published a series of articles written by journalist and contributor Jacopo Iacoboni, who contested the validity and the efficacy of Russian aid. The aim of those articles was to question the will of Russian squad and doubting the nature of the aid. A first response was made by Russian ambassador to Italy, Sergey Razov, who wrote a letter to the Italian newspaper's director, Maurizio Molinari: the ambassador expressed disappointment for what Iacoboni wrote on his articles, published on the newspaper on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> march, claiming a source from Italian officials, presumably the Italian government revealed him that 80% of Russian aid were basically useless. In addition, ambassador Razov reports Iacoboni's suspect that the Russian Federation could have further aims while carrying on these healthcare operations, that is to break the NATO alliance and to discover useful secrets. The Russian ambassador to Italy denies any kind of second aim behind the aid and the military squad operating in the city of Bergamo, Lombardy. Furthermore, ambassador Razov claimed the specialists are the best units of Russia in combating infections and epidemics and the mission to Italy was mutually agreed between the

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<sup>11</sup> Aska News, "I russi ripartono da Bergamo, polemiche placate, molti grazie", 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020  
[https://www.askanews.it/esteri/2020/05/07/i-russi-ripartono-da-bergamo-polemiche-placate-molti-grazie-video-pn\\_20200507\\_01290/](https://www.askanews.it/esteri/2020/05/07/i-russi-ripartono-da-bergamo-polemiche-placate-molti-grazie-video-pn_20200507_01290/)

<sup>12</sup> President of Russia, *Telephone conversation with Prime Minister of Italy Giuseppe Conte*, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2020, President of Russia, Events  
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63320>



Russian president Vladimir Putin and the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte with the important help of the Italian ambassador to Moscow, Pasquale Terracciano and General Luciano Portolano, Chief of Joint Vertex Operational Command, as representative for Italian Ministry of Defence. Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio welcomed along with ambassador Razov the Russian squad at the airport Pratica di Mare, outside Rome. Razov ended his letter stating that Russians are here to help and that friends can be seen in time of need. Iacoboni answered directly to Russian ambassador Razov, defending his job and claiming it was his source, which the journalist defines reliable, to state the uselessness of Russian aid. Moreover, Iacoboni denies to have written about second aim and suspects and that this kind of judgements shall be discussed by readers; Iacoboni defended his job and his objectiveness, affirming he only wrote what the source revealed.<sup>13</sup>

The story does not end there. Further articles were published by Iacoboni and the content did not please the Russian authorities: indeed, the journalist wrote about the possibility of the presence of Russian intelligence agents (mainly the GRU, the Russian military service) among the personnel operating in Bergamo. General Major Igor Konashenkov, the Russian military press secretary, signed a very strong and perhaps even controversial letter to the Italian newspaper La Stampa, published on the official social media accounts of the Russian ministry of defence.<sup>14</sup> The content of the letter was definitely explicit and a tough answer to Jacopo Iacoboni's articles, which General Konashenkov considered a clear attempt to debunk the Russian military assistance operations in Italy and questioning the aim of it. According to Konashenkov, the Italian newspaper and its contributor led an anti-Russian campaign, made of fake news and standard anti-Soviet propaganda to demolish the aid provided to Italy. Moreover, General Konashenkov accused La Stampa of defining Russian aid useless and that its sources, some presumed high Italian government officials, are anonymous, therefore these words might be only rumours and no more than that. La Stampa with the excuse of promoting the freedom of speech and information, contributed to spread unrealistic details on the Russian military mission simply to discredit the Russian Federation. General Konashenkov in his letter highlights that the military personnel are the highest expert force in Russia to handle pandemics and the most prepared and qualified for this issue. Instead, the newspaper spread doubts about the true identity and professionalism of the medical team, asserting among them were infiltrated intelligence agents, looking for secrets to discover. Konashenkov concluded his communiqué with a tough recommendation expressed in latin: "*Qui fodit foveam, incident in eam*" – literally, who digs a grave, ends falling in it. *Bad penny always come back*, as to say, a non-requested advice not to play with fire. Behind those words, many analysts suggested a code message to NATO and Washington, as the Russian military read Iacoboni and La Stampa's articles as an undercover move of debunking the sanitising operations in Bergamo that Russian military carried with the support of the Italian armed forces. Previously, the Russian press agency TASS already expressed similar complaints against the

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Russian ambassador to Italy, Sergey Razov to Italian newspaper La Stampa, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020  
<https://www.lastampa.it/2020/03/26/news/la-lettera-dell-ambasciatore-russo-razov-a-la-stampa-1.38642247>

<sup>14</sup> Russian Ministry of Defence communiqué by words of Press Secretary General Major Igor Konashenkov, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020  
<https://www.facebook.com/mod.mil.rus/posts/2608714436037963>

Italian newspaper, citing Russian ministry of Foreign Affairs' press secretary Maria Zakharova's words: she claimed there was a British company behind those articles and perhaps this is the reason why *Bad penny always come back*, a typical British said, was put at the end of the message.<sup>15</sup>

The renowned newspaper replied immediately to General Konashenkov, affirming that Russian aid was welcomed and the newspaper did not forget to define it as a precious help for Italy in a dramatic and unprecedented situation that occurred in the last months, as it was the one received from any other country. However, the newspaper defended its journalists and claimed they raised legitimate doubts and concerns over the personnel involved in the operations and the presence of Russian intelligence officials; both aspects of the news had to be discussed and scrutinised and La Stampa retained to have done it in a professional way. In the end, the newspaper revealed its astonishment caused by the aggressive response of the Russian ministry of defence to Iacoboni's articles and General Konashenkov explicit insults, hoping bilateral cooperation between Italy and the Russian Federation could continue as the pandemic crisis proved it successfully and so should be in the future.<sup>16</sup>

Solidarity and supportive messages to the newspaper La Stampa came from other Italian newspapers as the well-known *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*; the latter expressed further solidarity to Iacoboni as a defender of the freedom of speech and information. In addition, a message of support came from the mayor of Bergamo, the city in Lombardy heavily hit by COVID-19 and where the Russian medical squad operated, Giorgio Gori, expressed his support for freedom of speech, claiming as well thankfulness to the Russian operators. A late response came from the Italian ministries of defence and foreign affairs, underlining the appreciation for Russian help, but the moral duty to defend the freedom of speech and of information for the press.<sup>17</sup> Iacoboni, though, complained against the government as no words came from the Prime Minister office.<sup>18</sup> Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio confirmed his interest in investigating the personalities among the Russian personnel and whether Russian intelligence agents were part of it or not; Di Maio also claimed though, that the matter was an exclusive agreement between the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the Russian President Vladimir Putin, precisng he was not directly involved in it.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Carrer G., A Mosca si sono incazzati. Ecco la lettera durissima del ministero della Difesa russo, Formiche.net, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020  
<https://formiche.net/2020/04/mosca-lettera-ministero-difesa-russo/>

<sup>16</sup> Reply of Italian newspaper La Stampa to Russian General Konashenkov communiqué, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020  
<https://www.lastampa.it/lettere/2020/04/03/news/le-accuse-di-mosca-e-la-nostra-risposta-1.38672825>

<sup>17</sup> Joint communication of Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence on Russian aid and freedom of press and information, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020

[https://www.esteri.it/mae/it/sala\\_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/nota-congiunta-del-ministero-della-difesa-e-del-ministero-degli-affari-esteri-e-della-cooperazione-internazionale.html](https://www.esteri.it/mae/it/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/nota-congiunta-del-ministero-della-difesa-e-del-ministero-degli-affari-esteri-e-della-cooperazione-internazionale.html)

<sup>18</sup> Rubino M., Vecchio C., 'Russia contro il giornalista de 'La Stampa' Jacopo Iacoboni. Esteri e Difesa: "Grazie per aiuti, ma rispettare libertà di stampa", La Repubblica, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020  
[https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/03/news/iacoboni\\_la\\_stampa\\_russia-253020378/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/03/news/iacoboni_la_stampa_russia-253020378/)

<sup>19</sup> Iacoboni J., Di Maio sul caso degli aiuti da Mosca: "Mi riservo di approfondire chi faccia parte del team russo", La Stampa, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020

## The US authorisation

As the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte requested officially the help of Russian counterparts, Russian president Vladimir Putin accepted the demand from Rome and spotted an opportunity of gaining a positive image of himself and of the country, thus promoting the image of Russia in Italy and perhaps in the West too. However, analysts were quite surprised to see no heavy response or condemnation from the United States and the Trump administration, as government officials are used to do. Some speculated that the Italian government forwarded a request of approval to White House, while others hypothesised a secret agreement between Washington and the Kremlin, as some weeks later a Russian Antonov plane landed at JFK International Airport in New York City, a fact that created astonishment in US public media, in Congress, but more in general important highlights all over the world.<sup>20</sup> In exchange, the Trump administration decided to return the favour and in later may sent a package of aid to Russia, an amount of 200 ventilators as part of a USAID mission; however, US authorities confirmed the requests from the Kremlin.<sup>21</sup> More doubts and concerning came from U.S. General Tod Wolters, NATO Supreme Commander forces in Europe, who confirmed to be monitoring Russian activities in Italy, underlining how Russia managed to insert itself into the European Alliance members' network and also to obscure the NATO assistance to Italy; according to General Wolters, Russia menaced the democratic values the NATO alliance shares within itself and its members and that is the reason why the Supreme Command is paying high attention and strictly observes the Russian conduct and its malevolent influence in Italy.

A response to General Wolters' statement was provided by Italian General Giorgio Battisti, former ISAF Chief of Staff in Afghanistan and NATO Rapid Reaction Squad in Olona and Solbiate: according to him, General Wolters only tried to defend NATO assistance program, nevertheless General Battisti does not fear Russian influence as the Italian military operated alongside the Russians. Besides, Russia was not the sole country providing aid to Italy as several allies within NATO and the European Union and non-European partners sent to Italy materials and machines to contrast the pandemic.<sup>22</sup> It is hard to say whether this exchange could move ties between Moscow and Washington toward a new phase of dialogue and cooperation, but it surely marks the absence of hostility during the COVID-19 world pandemic. In late June, a major scoop from the New York Times asserted that Russian military officials had offered contributions and money to Islamic

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<https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2020/04/16/news/di-maio-sul-caso-degli-aiuti-da-mosca-mi-riservo-di-approfondire-chi-faccia-parte-del-team-russo-1.38726177>

<sup>20</sup> Weisgerber M., Russian cargo plane with medical supplies lands in New York, Policy, defenseone.com, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020

<https://www.defenseone.com/politics/2020/04/russian-cargo-plane-medical-supplies-lands-new-york/164293/>

<sup>21</sup> USAID sta fornendo ventilatori alla Russia, su richiesta Putin, AskaNews, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020

[http://www.askanews.it/video/2020/05/20/usaid-sta-fornendo-ventilatori-alla-russia-su-richiesta-putin-20200520\\_video\\_19555520/](http://www.askanews.it/video/2020/05/20/usaid-sta-fornendo-ventilatori-alla-russia-su-richiesta-putin-20200520_video_19555520/)

<sup>22</sup> Redazione Analisi Difesa, Coronavirus, resta acceso il dibattito sui militari russi in Italia, in Analisi Italia, Analisi Difesa, 18<sup>th</sup> April 2020

<https://www.analisdifesa.it/2020/04/coronavirus-resta-acceso-il-dibattito-sui-militari-russi-in-italia/>

militants in Afghanistan (thus, the Taliban) to fight against the US military forces displaced over there. The Times also affirmed that President Trump was briefed by Senior Intelligence Officials, but made no response nor accused Russia of being guilty of that move. Although the President denied having been briefed by the Intelligence, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi pointed the finger against the White House, denouncing Trump's reluctance to act and to transparency.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, US government seems more keen on criticising China as President Trump and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo attacked Beijing and accused the Chinese government of being directly responsible of the spread of the virus; the US president keeps on calling it the Chinese virus as no matter what the truth on the origin of COVID-19 could be, his national strategy clearly points the finger toward the Dragon. The US administration also condemned the repression of public protests in Hong Kong as the Chinese government slowly attempts to impose national security law.<sup>24</sup>

Sanctions have been proclaimed by the White House, a measure that is going to penalise first of all the city of Hong Kong and its citizens; the Chinese government, however, accused the United States of interference and came to discussion with European countries, especially Britain, stating that the city of Hong Kong belongs to China and no country should tell the Chinese government what to do within its borders.<sup>25</sup> Ties between Beijing and Washington are facing a dangerous escalation, although a growing tension is highly likely to be in the next future. According to China and to the communist party Hong Kong as well as Taiwan is part of the same Chinese nation and Beijing's aim is to reunite completely them to the mainland. The United States have been limiting Chinese ambitions and wish to occupy Taiwan since the end of the Chinese civil war and the birth of the People's Republic in 1949. After a clear defeat, the Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-Shek escaped to the island of Taiwan (previously known as Formosa) and formed a new state ruled by Chinese nationalists; it was Taiwan until the early 1970s who obtained permanent seat in the UN Security Council, along with France, Britain, USA and USSR. The People's Republic never accepted the independence of Taiwan and still this issue is a major cause of diplomatic incidents between China and Western countries, as Taiwan's official name is Republic of China. The US always guaranteed protection and help to the Taiwanese government and there is quite certainty over this commitment and its continuity. The US government never lost a chance to criticise Chinese regime and the several domestic issues Beijing has been facing for years, as the protests of Uighurs in the Xinjiang region or the Tibet.

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<sup>23</sup> Russonello G., Pelosi on Trump and Russia: "This is as bad as it gets, The New York Times, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2020  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/us/politics/trump-pelosi-russia-racist-tweet.html%20->

<sup>24</sup> US condemns China's 'disastrous proposal' on Hong Kong; Pompeo, Reuters, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2020  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-parliament-hongkong-usa/u-s-condemns-chinas-disastrous-proposal-on-hong-kong-pompeo-idUSKBN22Y1SC>

<sup>25</sup> Hong Kong protests: China warns US over Human Rights and Democracy Act, BBC News, Asia, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50584928>

## 2. Russian Geopolitical Interest

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a global healthcare crisis as *SarsCov2* spread sooner or later in every country of the world and in every continent; nobody managed to escape this menace, some have been able to handle and treat it in a proper way, some failed and are still struggling to contain the contagion, the majority of states maintain the highest attention possible as the new opening of borders phase, although necessary, widens the risk of letting the infection in again. Scientists predicted a second wave of infection in September or late in October when temperatures are usually lower and colder and viruses circulate with major intensity among the population. However, tendencies of contagion seem to show that contagion never stopped, especially in those countries where lockdown measures were not respected or applied: the clearest example is the United States, where President Trump refused to lock down the whole country and declared full responsibility on state governors, putting the federal government against local authorities; some of those governors though followed the administration line and let activities, businesses and shops going on. Brazil follows the US as the most hit country by coronavirus in the last months. Brazilian reaction to the epidemic was even lighter and perhaps, more childish than the American one. President Jair Bolsonaro condemned the epidemic as a temporary thing and never acknowledged the need to contrast the devastating effect on the population as he believed it was just a hoax created by the media. Ironically, Bolsonaro ended up positive to COVID-19 twice, but unlike British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who changed his mind and perspective, after being admitted to hospital and treated in intensive therapy, the Brazilian president looks at COVID-19 as a common flu.

The COVID-19 epidemic proved to more lethal and dangerous not just for the countries who did not adopt measures to contain the contagion, but mainly for the largest ones. Indeed, along with the United States and Brazil, the nations affected with the highest number of cases are India, Mexico and Russia, although dynamics follow different directions. India and Mexico, along with other Latin American countries as Colombia, Peru and Argentina are facing an increasing moment of contagion, meanwhile Russia sees its curve slowly downgrading; as in the very beginning, the first cases were concentrated in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, mainly Russian citizens who were infected in Europe and tested positive to COVID-19, the epidemic spread lately in the Caucasus, in the Urals and in Siberia. It took some weeks for the Russian government to admit the public danger the virus was causing, as the Kremlin was focused on international issues.<sup>26</sup> Despite the two major Russian cities kept the highest number of cases, as the two most populated urban centres of the country, government countermeasures did not avoid the virus circulation through the vast regions of the federation. The Republic of Dagestan, in the Northern Caucasus District, suffered a terrible healthcare crisis as the public structures were not equipped to stop the contagion and treat patients.

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<sup>26</sup> Fabbri D., *In viro veritas*, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il mondo virato*, N°3 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

After an open request from the regional government, state authorities sent specialist over to Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital city, to help healthcare personnel in fighting the contagion. The Russian government set its focus on the healthcare crisis, but a total lockdown as in Italy was not adopted as a solution to stop the virus; the quarantine officially started on 28<sup>th</sup> March, when president Vladimir Putin announced his decision on live message from his presidential office at the Kremlin, but Russians were told they were on holiday. All in all, shops and commercial activities shut down, while restaurants and cafes offered a take-away service.

In the meantime, the health ministry implemented the Triple-T: testing, tracking and treatment; the percentage of testing was pretty high and despite a rising number of cases, Russia stood its ground and managed to reduce the damages. Factories were authorised to open, barely after one month of shutdown, while the Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin, tested positive to COVID-19. Despite the concern over the epidemic, the Russian government had to take care of serious issues, for example the oil price and a harsh negotiation with Saudi Arabia; the clear intention of Moscow, was to raise the price again, therefore cutting oil production and hitting the shale oil on the market. Oil represents a major source of profit for Russia and along with gas, a main voice of exports in the economy, that can guarantee domestically investments in infrastructure, services and public utilities. The Russian government attached the rouble to the oil price, so as the oil price drops, the Russian currency depreciates and loses over the US Dollar and the Euro; whenever this happens, the economy suffers the hit. On the other hand, the referendum on the constitutional reform, set for the end of April, was postponed to the last week of June (voters had the right to vote from June 25<sup>th</sup> to July 1<sup>st</sup>), as a consequence of the pandemic. The approval of the constitutional reform was a top priority for the Russian government and a failure could have not been accepted: the yes won over no with a smashing majority, although it is quite clear that Putin's popularity is decreasing and the centralised model of ruling has showed its limits.<sup>27</sup> Regions are demanding more powers and more funds and criticised Moscow quite loudly for not sharing decisions.

### **Why Russia decided to help Italy**

Foreign policy is a key factor for Russian government and it has always been a key point for president Vladimir Putin. It is the government's main tool to play its game in the international arena. When it comes to help partners, Russia only shouts two mottos: award friends and never abandon allies. The way Russia operates in terms of aid dates back to Soviet times and president Putin over the last years reinstalled it vigorously.

Geopolitical goals come ahead of the economic agenda; therefore, the government is ready to pay a price worth it, unlike American way of thinking, traditionally based on a costs and benefits analysis. Russian *modus operandi* reminds of a classical geopolitical strategy, providing aid without return as its aim is to

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<sup>27</sup> Pellicciari I., *Mosca nella tempesta perfetta*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *La Russia non è una Cina*, N°5 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

produce influence over (new and old) partners. Thus, the differences with Beijing methods come out, with the Chinese looking forward to investments in the country subject of the intervention.

Among NATO and EU members, Italy is the nation, who entertains the closest ties with the Kremlin, no matter what leader and government seats in Rome. President Putin over the years enjoyed talks, meetings and views with every Italian Prime Minister holding the seat in Palazzo Chigi, from Silvio Berlusconi (with whom Putin entertains a personal and long-standing friendship) to former European Commission President Romano Prodi, Matteo Renzi, Paolo Gentiloni (now EU Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs) to the current Giuseppe Conte. Italians share a positive view of Russia and almost every party in the parliament approves a constant dialogue with Moscow. Despite right-wing parties affirm being fascinated by Russian presidential political system and aim to build a model with a stronger leadership, left-wing parties claim to fight the right's quest for authoritarianism. However, Italian right-wing parties do not look just at Vladimir Putin as a tough leader, but also at Viktor Orban, Hungarian Prime Minister, a conservative leader who has always expressed his dissent toward a welcoming-migration policy; among European partners, Orban, as well as Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, are seen as models to apply to Italy, according to right-wing leaders as Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni. Nevertheless, when it comes to Italian-Russian ties both left and right agree on the benefits of having Russia as a main partner of dialogue. Back in 2014, at Sochi Winter Olympic Games inauguration ceremony, Prime Minister Enrico Letta, few weeks before the end of his mandate, was the only European leader to participate in a moment when the Ukrainian crisis was at its peak, with President Yanukovich about to be overturned.

As the Council of the European Union set a package of sanctions against Russia after the military takeover of Crimea, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who succeeded Letta as head of government, protested when sanctions were renewed, basically without public discussion among European partners. Therefore, Italy always attempted to maintain open doors to Moscow, even in tough times, such as the following of crisis in Ukraine in 2014. Italy and Russia enjoy a long-standing diplomatic relationship, as Italian diplomats are highly respected among their Russian counterparts and usually get much more attention than fellow Europeans. In the end, Russia keeps an open eye to what happens in Italy and is always ready for talks and opened for requests, even though officially the two put sanctions against each other (Russia adopted in august 2014 countersanctions against the European Union, as a consequence of EU sanctions adopted in July 2014).

## Russia and Europe

### *Historical premises*

Being a large country, the largest in the world so far, is a hard task for the Russian Federation, which is divided, geographically speaking, between Europe and Asia. Despite its size, Russia desperately feels and has always felt as a surrounded geopolitical subject. Some analysts called it the '*Russian surrounding syndrome*', that moves Russia toward further expansion and to push its own borders farther and farther away. As Central Asia is a mountainous region, thus hard to control and to conquer, main focus of the Czar was the Far East and so the Pacific region and Eastern Europe. While the Far East and the Pacific were poorly inhabited territories because of cold temperatures and unfavourable conditions for human life, with no dangerous competitors before the rise of Imperial Japan, western frontier with European kingdoms represented a demanding challenge for the Russian army.

Between the XVI and the XVIII century, Russia faced its decisive step to become a unitary empire, competing in the Baltic region against the kingdom of Sweden and the Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth and in the Black Sea and Caucasus region against the Ottoman Empire, at the time the strongest military power in the Mediterranean Sea and in the Middle East. Fighting against the Swedish and the united front of Poland and Lithuania, the Russians conquered important territories on the east shore of the Baltic Sea, where, at the beginning of the XVII century Peter the Great established the empire's new capital city, Saint Petersburg and the Third Partition of Poland in 1795<sup>28</sup>, assigned large part of the former Commonwealth to the Russian Empire; the western side gained by Kingdom of Prussia, which lately became Russia's feared neighbour and the southern side annexed by the Austrian Empire. In the south, Russia moved forward to the Black Sea, targeting the Ottomans territories. As Catherine the Great became the Empress (*Tsarevna*) of Russia in 1762, the empire entertained several wars against the Turks, who, after the failed siege of Vienna in 1683, slowly went backward and entered a long-standing phase of crisis and military defeats. Russia pushed itself toward the Black Sea and the Balkan peninsula, as the Turkish straits were the last obstacle to reach the Mediterranean: despite being a mainland power, Russia set its focus on an access to the sea, since access to main trade courses both in the Baltic as well as in the Black Sea were limited by the presence of other powers' navies.

### *The Napoleon's Russian Campaign*

Therefore, Europe was the Czar's main aim and concern as no major power represented serious menace in Central Asia or in the Far East: Japan became a developed and competitive military power only in the middle of XIX century, after exiting a very long era of self-isolationism, while Chinese empire was a rather weak state and suffered the Western powers' expeditions along the cities on the coast. A serious trouble were instead the Napoleonic wars, when the French empire led by Napoleon Bonaparte led the military campaign against

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<sup>28</sup> Tuchtenhagen R., *Storia dei paesi baltici*, pp. 58-59, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2008



the Czar Alexander I and the Russian empire in 1812. The battle of Borodino, historically known as the decisive one where Russian troops led by General Kutuzov defeated the French invaders, meant the end of Napoleon's military campaign in Russia and his first overturn as the Corsic was then exiled at the Elba island; later, Waterloo put the Emperor against the wall and the definitive end of his reign. Napoleon bravely submitted almost the whole continent to his military power and before the Russian campaign, the French army was never defeated but the so-called 'General Winter' made the conquest of the vast Russian empire, an enterprise that neither Napoleon could achieve.

### *The Second World War and the German aggression*

As proved again in 1941, when Hitler started 'Operation Barbarossa', the German military invasion of the Soviet Union, Russia is far too large to be controlled and conquered, although during the first months of German initiative, the Wehrmacht marched kilometres and kilometres, until reaching at the beginning of December the surrounding of Moscow; winter then, played its role defending Mother Russia from the aggressive invader, as the massive display of forces on three paths of attack by German army could not take down the Red army resistance. Indeed, the Soviets ended up in May 1945 marching in Berlin and raising the red flag on the Reichstag building. The two historical episodes, which represent glorious moments of Russian history and memory, describe the importance of defending such a large amount of territory and the fragility of the Russian defensive system. As no mountains could shield the empire, the enemy's advance to Moscow was, in both cases, facilitated. This is a further reason why Stalin, after the end of the Second World War, insisted to push the border, that means first line of defence in case of military invasion, to the westward farthest possible: soviet leader feared a German rearmament program and a further military initiative against Russia and managed to install socialist regimes in every country within the imaginary line that divided the East from the West, the 'Iron Curtain'. Nowadays, this geographical area between Germany and Russia, also known as '*Trimarium*', is no longer under control of soviet/Russian troops, but it is home to independent Eastern European countries, who after the collapse of the Berlin wall and the Soviet Union, became gradually members of the European Union and last, but not least NATO countries.

### *Gorbačëv and the USSR dissolution*

The *Perestrojka* process led by the last secretary of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbačëv, accelerated the collapse of the Soviet structure and bloc beyond the Iron Curtain. What is even more surprising is Gorbačëv's decision to withdraw the Red Army from the other socialist countries and dismantle the Warsaw Pact, born in 1955 as counter alliance of NATO. In spite of a wind of change with the image of the people in Berlin tearing down the wall and the collapse of the socialist and pro-soviet regimes followed by first free elections and new constitutions, the Russians did not feel the same. As republics in the Baltic, in the Caucasus and in Central Asia started their independence process, Moscow leadership could barely maintain public order, as Gorbačëv did not manage to handle a complicated situation, facing the conservative wing of the communist

party, which was pushing to keep the USSR alive, while the reformers, led by Boris Yeltsin, the upcoming Russian president, fought for the end of the communist regime and the beginning of a new political process. In 1991, the USSR collapsed and fifteen new independent republics were born. As the former members of the Warsaw Pact approached the West and began talks to join the European Community and the Atlantic Alliance, Russia entered a phase of chaos, uncertainty and instability. Yeltsin attempted to build a more solid relationship with US and European partners but could not defend Russian geopolitical interest.

Moscow lost the Cold War and found itself in a desperate situation under all perspective: the people were astonished by the collapse of communism and lost hope and pride, the government seemed not to know what to do to face the situation, an economic crisis and the war in Chechnya. While the legacy of Gorbačëv in the West is glorious, in Russia the last secretary of the communist party did not enjoy the same appreciation, as the majority converged on the idea that he was not aware of his decisions and did not know what path the country should have followed. Gorbačëv with his political program of reforms, although his aim was to modernise the Soviet Union, not to dismantle it, only accelerated the process of collapse and division. Leonid Dobrokhotov, a former Russian diplomat, claims it is not the Americans to blame, but rather Secretary Gorbačëv. After a private talk with former US secretary of state James Baker, Dobrokhotov tells what happened in 1989, during a meeting between Gorbačëv and US president George Bush and Baker himself, in Malta: the soviet leader told Bush that Moscow was about to dismantle the Warsaw Pact and to withdraw troops from every country's soil. President Bush asked then, if the US should have done the same with NATO troops in Western Europe, but Gorbačëv answered the withdrawal was a unilateral decision of the USSR, it was up to Washington to choose. Baker then asked Gorbačëv how much this move would have costed, but the secretary said there was no cost for it. "*And what about your allies? Aren't you just going to lose them all?*" – asked Secretary Baker, - "*That is possible, but everything that will happen, will be only their business, not ours*".<sup>29</sup> Gorbačëv then, withdrew soviet troops from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania and East Germany (DDR) and simply obtained a verbal promise that these countries would not have been granted the chance to join the Atlantic Alliance.

Unfortunately, *verba volant, scripta manent*, and the absence of a treaty or a new agreement made Eastern European countries free to move westward and become partners of Europe and the USA. Strategically speaking, that was a tragic mistake as Washington exploited this error as a chance to display a larger amount of troops in Western Europe and to let all those Eastern countries, who were coming out a phase of socialism and authoritarian regimes under the control of the Soviet Union, and push on anti-Russian feeling and resentment of these countries to strengthen the military alliance and turning it onto an even more powerful tool in order to confirm its hegemony. In addition, the Eastern European countries, above all Poland and the Baltic republics, prove a more aggressive and tenacious attitude when it comes to military programs and drills

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<sup>29</sup> Dobrokhotov L. N., *Ma quale CIA! A demolire muro e URSS ci pensò Gorbačëv*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 2019, published on Limes, rivista italiana di geopolitica, *Il Muro Portante*, N°10, 2019, Rome, GEDI group

when compared to Western European countries, founding fathers of the European Community (now the European Union) and of the Atlantic Alliance in the post-war period.

### *NATO and the Warsaw Pact*

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, born out of the Washington treaty signed in April 1949, was created as a military tool against the feared expansion and aggression of the USSR; as a consequence, in 1955, Moscow opted to form its own military front, the Warsaw Pact. The USA and the USSR came out as the true winning powers of the Second World War and convened on a substantial partition of Europe, dividing the Old Continent in two main spheres of influence. The Western bloc, led by the US, included defeated Axis powers Germany and Italy: as the former was split into two different states with opposite regimes (BRD and DDR), the latter lost its colonies, Albania and the Istrian peninsula, nevertheless Allies were determined to add Rome to the club as its key strategical position in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea was vital, as beyond Trieste was socialist Yugoslavia, a non-aligned state whose leader, marshal Josip Broz 'Tito', entered in 1948 on a collision course with Joseph Stalin, isolating himself from the Comecon and the socialist bloc.

Italy was run by the Christian Democracy and his then Prime Minister, Alcide De Gasperi, who unquestionably sided with the United States as the Marshal plan was much more needed for Italy to kickstart the reconstruction and modernisation of the country; despite a very popular, well-organised and strong, perhaps the strongest in Western Europe, communist party, De Gasperi secured a place within the Atlantic club for the defeated Italy, escaping what was retained a serious danger at the time, a communist *coup d'état*. The communists clearly contributed to the Liberation of Italy from German military occupation and the fascist regime, not to mention its intense participation in the drafting process of the republican and democratic constitution between 1946 and 1947, but in order to be included in the incumbent military alliance, the Italian government had to exclude the communist party from power, as US officials and intelligence feared the infiltration of the Soviet and saw the likely risk for Italy to fall into the opposite sphere of influence. West Germany, the new federal republic born in 1949, still was militarily occupied by Allies troops and did not join NATO until 1955: the main reason why the Bonn government entered so late was the opposition of the French, who feared the German rearmament as a serious danger for Paris security. In the end, the continuous confrontation with the Soviets, constrained the US to include West Germany inside the alliance, as the Eastern regime, the German Democratic Republic (DDR), born in 1949, was a newly established socialist regime, supported by the USSR, which surrounded the former capital city of the German Reich, Berlin. The city was divided in two areas: West Berlin and East Berlin. While the Eastern side became the capital city of socialist Germany, West Berlin evolved into the last bastion of resistance of the Allies, as in 1948 the Soviets made a bloc of the city which led to the famous aerial bridge to provide goods and medicine to the isolated West side; West Berlin also became an easier way to escape from the DDR and the large amount of people who got away to the West convinced the Soviets to build a wall that could divide the city and impede the citizens to cross the border.

The Iron Curtain, the imaginary line that divided the Western bloc from the Eastern one and defined so by former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a famous speech in Missouri in 1946, was the physical border and the first line of defence for both the Soviets and the Americans. This division lasted until 1989, when the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed and two years later, in 1991, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev announced the break-up of the USSR. Whether the world was a safer place or perhaps, a more predictable one is quite hard to say<sup>30</sup>, but what is pretty evident though, is that this imaginary line has progressively moved and moved eastward. The balance reached at the end of 1940s is now clearly gone and the military *limes* between Russia and the United States is much closer to Russia's vital points and main cities; as the Warsaw Pact was dissolved and the USSR collapsed, Moscow was forced to play defence, in order to secure itself from any possible offensive from West.

### *US & China*

The Cold War established a dual game between the Soviets and the Americans, with few junior partners and competitors, as the southern part of the world, including Africa, South-East Asia and Latin America, entered a lengthened stage of political and economic instability, due to the decolonisation process, thus the independence from European powers and proxy wars between US and the Soviet Union. The most evident example was the Vietnam war, although such direct involvement was a kind of exception, when compared with the multiple attempts of socialist revolution and counter-revolutionary coups put in display, with the highest number of cases in Latin America. The collapse of its long-standing opponent left the United States alone on the top spot as the sole superpower in the world: while the verdict on communism was one of a clear defeat, an hypothesis formulated by political scientist Francis Fukuyama caught on and became more and more popular as the American scholar claimed at the time that history had come to an end. This theory was proved wrong and Fukuyama himself years later corrected his statements: the history continues to run, no matter what events occurred in the world and the rising of China further supports this truth.

The containment of China is now the top priority for Washington and the Pentagon as Beijing claims its quest for global leadership and condemns any attempt to stop the its own expansion, a rise the Chinese government defines unstoppable. Despite Europe's key strategic importance for the United States, US government officials fears more than anything else the Chinese initiative and are keen on containing whatever move the Chinese government does: whether it is about protests in Hong Kong, naval manoeuvres in the South China Sea or an entertainment application for smartphones like *TikTok*, the US government keeps his eyes wide open on the only power likely to compete with the USA for the world hegemony. China is a mainland power, who aims at free access to the sea, a chance the US Navy is focused on not to give: indeed, taking a closer look on the Chinese coast from the Yellow Sea in the north to the Central and South China Sea, Beijing is surrounded by US allies or partners such as the Republic of Korea, Japan and the Okinawa archipelago

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<sup>30</sup> Romano S., *Putin e la ricostruzione della Grande Russia*, pp. 143-144, Milano, Longanesi, 2016

district, Taiwan that is claimed by the People's Republic as part of its own territory, the Philippines and finally, Vietnam. Hanoi cannot be defined a close US ally such as Korea or Japan, although since its independence process completed in 1975 with the annexation of the South by the North, Vietnamese – Chinese ties never consisted of true friendship nor trustworthy. The Chinese authorities did not welcome the unity of Vietnam and had never been enthusiast about Ho Chi Minh and his political projects; it was the USSR, who truly supported the rise of Viet Minh for independence and socialism.

In 1979, between February and March, a war between the two broke out as the aftermath of the Vietnamese military intervention in Cambodia, where Pol Pot, leader of the Red Khmer, was overthrown; China was supporting Pol Pot's regime, who committed genocide against the population and did not accept the Vietnamese operation, which took place in January 1979. Moreover, the Vietnamese government expressed its full support for the Soviet Union as the true leader of the communist countries, a further humiliation for Beijing, who contested Soviet leadership and claimed its own role, that could not be tolerated. The conflict ended with no winner and tensions continued, although after the collapse of the USSR, the Vietnamese economy became more open and started trading with both China and the United States. Curiously, even if Vietnam was a defeat far from being forgotten, Washington positively grasped Hanoi's worry toward its incumbent neighbour and attempts to exploit Vietnamese adversity to Chinese expansion in order to contain Beijing's plans.

### **The new Iron Curtain**

What divides Russia from the NATO countries is a less definite and stable border that goes from the Svalbard Islands in the Arctic Ocean (which belong to Norway) and the Kola peninsula to the East shore of the Black Sea and the Northern Caucasus.<sup>31</sup> It is inappropriate to compare the first subdivision of Europe to the contemporary one, as before several Eastern European countries were led by socialist regimes, under the indirect control of Moscow, which displayed troops on their soil; nowadays, these countries became NATO members so they basically joined the other side and host US military bases. As for its defensive line, Russia can only count on some buffers, which nevertheless, cannot guarantee the same outcome. Exploiting conflicts and tensions in the post-soviet region, such as in Moldova and in Georgia, Russia offered its support to separatist territories, who claimed independence from Chisinau as the case for Transnistria and from Tbilisi for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two little republics, claimed by the Georgian government as part of its territories. In August 2008, as the Olympic Games in Beijing were kicking off, the Russian army intervened in the former Soviet republic and stopped the Georgian offensive, in favour of the two separatist republics, who were recognised as such by Russia, but not from the United Nations, nor from the EU or the USA.

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<sup>31</sup> Petroni F., *La Nuova Cortina di Ferro*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il Muro Portante*, N°10, 2019, Rome, GEDI Group

Russian – Georgian ties entered a freezing step that is still lasting until today, as Tbilisi refused to be within Russian sphere of influence and calls for a European and perhaps, a NATO membership. Russia clearly cannot let that happen as the southern border, in the Caucasus region is pretty unstable: the Nagorno – Karabakh conflict among Armenia and Azerbaijan, started in the 1990s as a consequence of their independence process from the USSR, continues with an *on and off* and sides seemed not willing to sign an agreement or at least, a compromise to stop the hostilities, in spite of Russian efforts to broker a deal between Baku and Yerevan. Furthermore, westward lays one of Russia's historical and strategical rival, Turkey, the heir of the Ottoman empire, a member of NATO alliance, who bases its own strategy on ambiguity. As the Anatolian peninsula is located in what was called at the Roman time, the *Asia Minor* region, Turkey finds itself in a decisive and highly strategic location as it is connected to Europe through the Aegean Sea and the Balkans, to the Middle East at its south – eastern border with Syria and Iraq, while at north and north – east Ankara is projected on the Black Sea and the Caucasus.

As on the northern side of the curtain, the line of defence goes from the Baltic Sea and the border with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Compared with the Soviet time, Moscow used to control a broader area on the Baltic, as the three republics were part of the USSR and Poland was a member of the Warsaw Pact, the Eastern bloc military alliance. Now, Poland along with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are independent countries and members of the Atlantic Alliance; the enclave of Kaliningrad is a further point of contact between the two sides. Despite the strengthening of the contingencies and the multiple collective exercises (Defender Europe was lately cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic), the northern front seems to be quite stable, although accidents might be behind the door. The Arctic represents a future prospect, as main global powers estimate the ice melting and the chance to navigate over those waters, that may become new seaway routes for trade and space to contend and to confront. Right now, Washington is focused on stabilising the containment line, which has been move eastward from the crossing Greenland-Iceland-Britain to the Svalbard Islands and Norwegian – Russian border, close to the Kola peninsula, where the Russian Northern Fleet is located in Murmansk; the Murmansk naval base is home to many Russian nuclear submarines, among them, the Borei-class (project 955), the latest ballistic missile ship.

The central sector goes from Kaliningrad to the city of Sevastopol' in Crimea and it is the crucial one. In this area, three decisive countries are included: Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. The three were previously socialist republics of the USSR and therefore, under direct control of Moscow. The independence process did not cut their bond with Mother Russia, but they followed different paths. Belarus, the white Russia, is so far the only real European ally of Moscow; under the leadership of Alexander Lukashenko, who after the recent contested elections, is facing a serious wave of civil protests, Belarus is part of the Belarusian – Russian Union, a project that should lead to a further integration, less likely to a real union, the two nations. Belarus entered the CIS and the CSTO military alliance; Minsk played also an important role as political mediator between Russia and Ukraine (supported by France and Germany) in the peace negotiations for the war in Donbas,

Eastern Ukraine. Lukashenko aims at reducing Belarusian dependence on Russia, advancing dialogue with China, who aims at investing in the country and perhaps building a hub for Europe, and with the United States, although he expressed no intention to break his ties with Moscow, a decisive partner for Belarus economy.<sup>32</sup> Ukraine proved the fallibility of the new Iron Curtain: the *Jevromaidan* revolution succeeded where the Orange revolution failed, in severing the bond between Kiev and Moscow. Major disorder followed massive protests in the capital city, due to the missed opportunity to sign a trade deal with the European Union; president Yanukovich fled the country in February 2014 and new elections in May were held, as Petro Poroshenko became the new lodger of Mariyinsky Palace. The Ukrainian crisis represents a historical defeat for Moscow because the regime change moved Ukraine on the Atlantic side; Poroshenko signed few weeks after his elections, an association agreement with Brussels and requested the US support to fight the separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, in the Donbas region. Through the years, the war in Donbas progressively froze and no major efforts were made to put an end on it. In December 2019, a summit in Paris was held and organised by French president Emmanuel Macron, along with German chancellor Angela Merkel, the Russian president Vladimir Putin and the newly elected Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to start the negotiations again.<sup>33</sup> The meeting led only to an exchange of prisoners and as a first step to begin a new phase of dialogue, but unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic prohibited further steps forward. Zelensky's aim is to end the Eastern crisis and to overcome reciprocal hostility with his Russian neighbour and to stabilise the border, so the government could promote domestically the reforms voters have demanded to the former actor and comedian, who ironically played the president in a well-known television series.<sup>34</sup> Zelensky is not willing to join NATO, as he is wary of the risk and of the failing strategy of his predecessor; yet, he needs the support of the United States to negotiate with Moscow. The Trump administration though, appeared not keen on helping Kiev in doing so and the telephone conversation between Trump and Zelensky became a domestic scandal in America; in spite of Trump's denial, sources say the White House asked Zelensky to investigate on Hunter Biden, son of Joe Biden, former Vice-president and candidate for the 2020 presidential elections and to condemn the Ukrainian intelligence for interference in 2016 elections, when Trump was elected in spite of all predictions. Trump menaced Zelensky to cut over 400 million dollars in military aid, but the telephone conversation was lately published and Congress started an impeachment procedure against the president, who ended up acquitted by Senate.<sup>35</sup> Russia keeps on supporting the separatists because Ukraine has a significant importance for the Kremlin, not only for historical and religious reasons, but also for strategic and security motives. Putin is well aware that he might be evaluated as the president, who lost Ukraine forever and that would mean a shame on his presidency; however, since the day Ukraine gained independence, the Kremlin

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<sup>32</sup> De Bonis M., *I corteggiatori di Minsk*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *La Russia non è una Cina*, N°5 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

<sup>33</sup> President of Russia, *Normandy Four Summit*, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62275>

<sup>34</sup> Scaglione F., *Qualcosa di nuovo sul fronte ucraino*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *La Russia non è una Cina*, N°5 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

<sup>35</sup> Fabbri D., *La guerra civile tra Trumpiani e Washingtoniani nelle province dell'impero*, 30<sup>th</sup> December 2019, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *America contro tutti*, N°12 2019, Rome, GEDI Group

already lost full control over Kiev, meanwhile in Washington, observers noticed the relevant damage of that loss for Russia.<sup>36</sup> Moldova so far, has played a neutral role as the separatist Transnistria represents a state within the state; to avoid instability, Moldova attempts to dialogue with the West and with Russia as well, remaining land of competition for both.

## **Russia and Turkey**

Back in the centuries, Russia and Turkey used to be enormous empire and fought each other; the Sultan and the Tsar were strategic rivals and the religious component, Christianity against Islam, played an important role in the multiple wars between the two powers. Russia aimed at grabbing Constantinople and the Turkish straits, the entrance to the warm Mediterranean Sea, while the Turks feared the mighty tsarist army and appealed to Britain and France to defend the weakened empire. When the Young Turks deposed the Sultan and entered the war in October 2014 at the side of the central empires (Germany and Austria-Hungary), Russia got a further reason to battle and a chance to finally conquer the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles; in a secret pact signed with the French and the British, the Tsar planned a post-war partition of the Ottoman empire, although the retirement of Russia in early 1918 and the secret bilateral Sykes-Picot agreement made it vain. The Bolsheviks took power through the October Revolution and in 1922 the Soviet Union was founded, as Lenin accomplished its mission to apply Marxism. Some interesting events occurred in Turkey, too, as the rise of General Mustafa Kemal not only avoid a dangerous loss in favour of Venizelos's Greece, but the military victory in late 1922 led to a revision of the 1920 Sèvres peace treaty, restoring the full sovereignty over the Anatolian peninsula, despite the loss of the Middle East and a reverse on the southern border, as Mosul and Aleppo were claimed by Kemal as part of Turkey. The treaty of Lausanne in 1923 was the beginning of a new chapter of Turkish history: in October, Kemal proclaimed the birth of the Turkish republic and promoted several and deep reforms that revolutionised the country. Kemal looked at the Soviet Union as a sincere partner, not only for security reasons, but also because the two states were keen on fighting imperialism. After the Second World War, in 1952, Turkey entered the Atlantic Alliance along with Greece, its rival and neighbour; the US convinced Turkey to join NATO as the USSR represented a concrete menace, according to the republican party (CHP).<sup>37</sup> Turkey is still nowadays a member of the Atlantic Alliance, but Erdogan decided to follow his own way pursuing his aims, without asking for permission. On the one hand, Ankara sides with Russia (and Iran) in Syria and discusses the Libyan issue, denouncing the absence and the failure of the West; on the other hand, though, whenever the US support is required, Erdogan confirms the Turkish membership within NATO. The Turks suspect that Washington was behind the failed coup attempt in July 2016 and the USA is where Gülen lives; the Turkish government has repeatedly demanded the extradition, but the US denied it. Tensions between US and Turkey rose as Erdogan vowed and that is what his intentions really look like, to

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<sup>36</sup> Brzezinski Z., *The Grand Chessboard. American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives*, pp. 92 – 93, New York, Basic Books, 1997

<sup>37</sup> Perinçek D., *La Turchia ha scelto la Russia*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il Turco alla porta*, N°7 2020, Rome, GEDI Group



purchase Russian S-400 air defence system. US government menaced to exclude Turkey from the F-35 military program, as Washington fears that the Russians could learn how to contrast the most developed Western stealth fighter jet.<sup>38</sup>

Russian – Turkish cooperation focuses also on energy, with Gazprom (Russian state-run main gas company) providing natural gas to Turkey through the Blue Stream across the Black Sea. The original project of the South Stream was lately converted to the new Turkish Stream, a pipeline that would transport energy to Europe through Turkey; the new pipeline is clearly a consequence of the Ukrainian crisis and the decision of Moscow to build a pipeline that could bypass Ukraine. Along with the Nord Stream 2 in the Baltic, Turkish Stream represents the southern branch of the gas way to Europe. Russia and Turkey started in 2010 a project to build a nuclear power plant, the first based on the model build-own-operate; despite the 2015 crisis, the project survived and was confirmed by both authorities.<sup>39</sup>

### *The Syrian War*

Russia and Turkey, as a consequence of the involvement of both in the Syrian war, after a dangerous escalation between October 2015 and spring 2016, produced a tactical *entente* to start the transition process to a reconciliation and peace in Syria, where a civil war between the government led by President Bashar al-Assad and rebel groups evolved into a more complicated international scenario, where various regional powers got involved such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Iran and Lebanon and each of them supporting different actors or groups. As Damascus received critical help from Teheran and the Shia Lebanese party Hezbollah, the Gulf monarchies opted to support the opposition to Assad and financed rebel groups to depose the Alawite leader, although at some point the situation had become so chaotic as a radical jihadist group called ISIS, the then Islamic State, which managed to conquer a large size of territory between Syria and Iraq, submitted the people on the conquered lands, imposed the Sharia law and murdered innocent tribes. The Kremlin opted for a military intervention as the Syrian president dramatically requested assistance to defeat ISIS, also known as *Daesh* and at the end of September 2015, the Russian Air Force began a tough bombing campaign against the enemies of Damascus;<sup>40</sup> Moscow then, entered a collision course with Ankara, when in November 2015, a Turkish F-16 fighter jet shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 few weeks after the beginning of military operations. The Turks claimed the Russian jet entered the Turkish air space, Moscow and Ankara, as Russia closed its borders with Turkey, a move to hit Turkish tourism as Russians are among top visitors; in addition, the Russian government ordered the freezing of all developing project with Turkey. The estimated damage was about ten billion dollars, a serious hit as the Turkish economy was not flourish in that period.<sup>41</sup> In spite of support from Western allies, the USA and NATO, Turkey, which was involved in the Syrian scenario too,

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<sup>38</sup> Ottaviani M. F., *S-400 russi in Turchia. Così Putin ed Erdogan sfidano Usa e Nato*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2019, Formiche.net <https://formiche.net/2019/07/s-400-turchia-nato-usa/>

<sup>39</sup> Trenin D., *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?*, pp. 128 – 129, Cambridge, Polity Books, 2018

<sup>40</sup> Trenin D., *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?*, pp. 53 – 56, Cambridge, Polity Books, 2018

<sup>41</sup> Ottaviani M. F., *Il Reis. Come Erdogan ha cambiato la Turchia*, pp. 308 – 309, L'Aquila, Textus Edizioni, 2016

changed its approach toward Russia and asked for reconciliation with the Kremlin as the Turkish President Erdogan visited Russian President Vladimir Putin, apologised for the inconvenient and chose to cooperate with him in the Syrian scenario<sup>42</sup>, along with Iran, the second top regional player involved Syria.

In addition to that, Erdogan received Putin's support when in July 2016 a group of officials of the Turkish army attempted a coup against the President to overthrow him from power. Despite it is still unclear whether behind the coup was Fethullah Gülen<sup>43</sup>, an influential Turkish businessman, owner of several religious school in the country and a former political partner of the president, or somebody else, Erdogan managed to exploit the failed coup to punish all of his opponent and promote a constitutional referendum to transform Turkish political system into a presidential republic. In April 2017, the referendum was approved as one year later, Erdogan was elected President of Turkey, enjoying the benefits from the reforms and his powers strengthened. The Syrian scenario evolved favourably for Assad and Russia as the Syrian Arab Army reconquered large part of its own previous territory, while the Kurds in the north defeated Daesh but had come face to face with Turks, who entered in January 2018 the Syrian border with the military operation *Olive Branch*, officially for security reasons, although the clear goal was to contain the Kurds and isolate the Syrian from the Turkish PKK, the Kurdish political party, labelled by the presidency as an enemy of the state.<sup>44</sup> The military operation in Iraq, '*Euphrates Shield*', had the same aim for Erdogan, as the Peshmerga in northern autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan proved to be open to talk with the Turkish president. However, despite his will to isolate and avoid the union between the different Kurdish groups, Turkey's main aim is to obtain strategical depth in northern Syria and northern Iraq: indeed, the Turks claimed the city of Aleppo (Syria) and Mosul (northern Iraq, conquered in 2014 by Daesh and turned into its Iraqi capital city) as part of the original Turkey conceived by the Founding Father Mustafa Kemal, Atatürk.<sup>45</sup>

### *The Libyan match*

Turkey and Russia cannot be allies, but they can be partners: the *entente* is clearly favourable and useful both for the Kremlin as well for Ankara as the two have developed a mechanism of consultation and in the recent months Putin and Erdogan met several times to discuss moves in Syria and in Libya. The Syrian scenario concerns mainly the province of Idlib where the last resistance to the Assad regime were transferred and where pro-Turkish militants fight as a security guarantee for the Turks as it borders with the region of Hatay; the Russians push for the return of the province under control of Damascus, who is obviously motivated in restoring full sovereignty over a lost territory. The conflict in Libya experienced significant changes in the

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<sup>42</sup> Halpern M., *Hiss and Makeup: Erdogan begs Putin for forgiveness*, Observer, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2016  
<https://observer.com/2016/08/hiss-and-make-up-erdogan-begs-putin-for-forgiveness/>

<sup>43</sup> BBC News, *Turkey Coup: What is Gulen movement and what does it want?*, BBC News World, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2016  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36855846>

<sup>44</sup> Hürriyet News Agency, *Turkey launches 'Olive Branch Operation' against 'PKK threat in Syria'*, Hürriyet Daily News, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2018

<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-launches-major-land-operation-into-ypg-militants-in-syrias-afirin-126031>

<sup>45</sup> Karaveli H., *Altro che Islam. Guardate la mappa per capire la Turchia*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il Turco alla porta*, N°7 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

last months as Turkey entered the match in support of the Government of National Accord of Tripoli (GNA) and its head, Prime Minister Fayed al-Serraj, weakened by the offensive from the Cyrenaica of General Khalifa Haftar, chief of the Libyan National Army (LNA) and leader of the non-recognised of the House of Representatives of Tobruk.

The two factions fought to obtain full control of the country as al-Serraj is the legitimate head of a government born out of the 2015 ‘Shkiraz agreement’ and officially recognised by the United Nations, by the European Union and NATO, while General Haftar, once an officer of Colonel Gaddafi’s army is supported by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In addition, Haftar received indirect support from Russia, as the Wagner Group was deployed in Cyrenaica despite Kremlin’s denial and diplomatic support from France, who in the person of President Emmanuel Macron stressed the importance of a cease-fire and organised a meeting in Paris between al-Serraj and Haftar himself. The United States officially expressed favourable opinion for a common solution and peace in Libya, but decided not to intervene directly nor to facilitate any side in the conflict. As for Italy, the government proved to be caught surprised and unprepared by Turkish move, as the Luigi Di Maio, Minister of Foreign Affairs expressed his rejection for a military solution and demanded his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, to work together for peace talks in the North African country and former Italian colony.<sup>46</sup> Despite the Italian government attempted to settle the Libyan issue in a peace conference in Palermo, Sicily in October 2018, the two sides proved not to be convinced, nor reassured by the Italian initiative and as long as Italy did not provide weapons or furniture to al-Serraj or to Haftar, the two rivals looked for other supporters and suppliers. Rome thought easily to manage to play the role of diplomatic broker between two factions, who both aim at conquering and reunite the whole country, which is *de facto*, a non-state since the collapse of the regime and the assassination in Sirte of Muammar Gaddafi.

As a result of its defeat in the last great war, Italy lost all of its colonies, Libya included, which became an independent nation under a pro-British monarchy. Despite the lost privilege to fully control the land, the Italian government supported the rise of Colonel Gaddafi to power when, in 1969, the *raīs* executed a *coup d’état* against King Idris and became the new Libyan president. Gaddafi was a late representative of Arab nationalism and a supporter of socialism; before him Egyptian General Gamal Abdel Nasser interpreted clearly this previously unknown ideology as the military leader, overthrowing the monarchy in Egypt promoted his vision of Arab countries free from the Western colonising and imperialistic powers (quite significant episode the nationalisation of the Suez canal) and against the Islamist ideology fostered by the Muslim Brotherhood. Gaddafi managed, although with non-democratic method, to gather the different tribes under the control of the state and exploit the immense oil resources of the country; in doing so, the Colonel provoked negative reactions in the Western world, as Libya purchased weapons and technology from the Soviet Union and menaced several

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<sup>46</sup> Didonna G., *Di Maio in Turchia: “Basta interferenze in Libia”*, AGI Agenzia Italia, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2020  
[https://www.agi.it/estero/di\\_maio\\_turchia\\_libia\\_cessate\\_fuoco-6846129/news/2020-01-07/](https://www.agi.it/estero/di_maio_turchia_libia_cessate_fuoco-6846129/news/2020-01-07/)

times the USA and NATO countries. Furthermore, the small Italian community in Libya was forced to leave the country, as officially, the Colonel condemned the Italians as colonisers and aggressors.

Behind the scenes though, Italy gained a veiled partner, who provided Rome with the necessary oil provisions and later signed agreement to contain the migration from central Africa. The Arab spring and the following NATO military operation deposed Gaddafi, who ended up murdered in Sirte, the city where he was born, by the Libyan rebels. The destitution of Gaddafi seriously damaged Italy, as the country is now split into two factions, who are fighting each other to control the territory and restore national unity. However, none of them was capable to prevail and important international players stepped in to support either the Tripoli government or the Tobruk parliament. Despite the call by Prime Minister Sarraj for a ceasefire and general elections in the next year, the scenario appears quite uncertain, but what seems definite is, that Turkey and Russia entered the game and obtained both a significant and determinant role in the Libyan crisis. After the fall of Gaddafi, to which Italy *obtorto collo* contributed under the last Berlusconi government, Rome attempted to support sides, but never made decisions nor commitments that could either promote stability or help one side to prevail on the other. The Italian government, no matter what party leading, always aimed at the United Nations or at its main allies within the European Union or the Atlantic Alliance, even though its voice proved to be not loud enough to be either heard or welcomed. As for today, the Libyan crisis is much more likely to be determined by regional powers as Egypt, who supports General Haftar and the Tobruk assembly, and Turkey, who made decisive moves in favour of the GNA and the weakened Prime Minister Sarraj. Once again, Italy appears too scared or too unprepared to participate and play its game, but doing so, Rome only ended up being excluded from the Libyan match and that means the government might face unfavourable to condition for its own interests such as drilling and extraction activities or the migrating process limitation.<sup>47</sup>

### **Russia and the Middle East**

Russia and Turkey find themselves instead, much closer than before, although they support different sides of the Libyan conflict. However, the presence of both on Libyan soil provides a counterbalance to the Syrian scenario, where Ankara and Moscow promote opposite initiatives and produces advantages for both Putin and Erdogan. Turkey cannot be evaluated as an ally for Moscow as the dual *entente* is a tactical initiative that just increase the influence of both actors in two decisive locations where the main power, the USA, is quite less involved and uninterested to step in; Putin's ambition is not to exclude Washington from Syria or Libya, as the two do not have primary strategic value for Russia, but to promote his vision of world order and global governance.<sup>48</sup> The Russian Federation protested officially several times and frequently confirmed this vision within the UN Security Council, against the Western military intervention in countries ruled by leaders, who were labelled either dictators or rogue state, as the traditional liberal ideology puts ahead the share of

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<sup>47</sup> Fabbri D., *Così l'Italia ha perso il suo estero vicino*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il Turco alla porta*, N°7 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

<sup>48</sup> Sučkov M., *Russia e Turchia, amiche acerrime*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il Turco alla porta*, N°7 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

common values, democratic ones. Moscow claimed the USA and NATO had no right to intervene in the Yugoslavian wars, nor in Iraq against Saddam Hussein (an intervention that was also opposed by France and Germany) or more recently, in Libya and Syria. Already in 2012, as the Obama administration claimed, that whether the Assad regime would have overstepped the red line, US armed forces would have intervened against Damascus.<sup>49</sup> The following year, when the supposed chemical attack in Ghouta, a suburban area south-east of Damascus, controlled by rebels, occurred, the Russian president Vladimir Putin stepped in to broke a deal between the Syrian government and the US administration; in the end, Damascus delivered its chemical weapons to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, who destroyed the arsenal in 2014.<sup>50</sup> And, finally, in September 2015, Russia opted for a direct intervention as the Syrian Arab army was suffering the advance of Daesh and could not bend the other rebel groups; perhaps, Moscow was only interested in defending its naval base in Tartus and the Air Force base in Hmeymin, although one can argue that the effort was worth it, as not only the Syrian government defeated its opponents and gained large part of the lost territories, but also Russia managed to increase its influence in the Middle East and became an even more reliable broker as the Kremlin presented itself opened for dialogue to anybody.

### *Saudi Arabia and Qatar*

With the Saudis, Moscow is keen on discussing energy issues, as Riyadh is a key oil producer, a member of the OPEC organisation and thus, a major player on the hydrocarbon world market. Putin needs to dialogue with Saudi Arabia to maintain a stable level production and when possible, to cut it, as a lower production makes the barrel price soaring. Whereas the US decision to invest in the *fracking* damaged seriously Russian oil production and caused the devaluation of rouble, the Russian currency, the Saudis showed their reluctance to listen to Washington's request to increase the oil production; both Moscow and Riyadh share reciprocal interest in promoting low production and a higher price on the market, as energy profits represent the greatest income for both fragile economies. Russia is also one of top natural gas producer and that is why Moscow promotes dialogue and cooperation with Qatar, too. In late 2016, the Doha's welfare sovereign welfare fund purchased a relevant share of Rosneft, the main state-run Russian oil company and expressed interest in *Novatek*, an independent Russian natural gas producer.<sup>51</sup> Despite different view on the Syrian war, as Qatar supported rebel formations against president Assad, Moscow did not deny its diplomatic support when the emirate was publicly accused by the Saudis to be a state sponsor of terrorism. Whereas the United States pushed the two toward a forced reconciliation, Russia, along with Iran, offered its help to break Qatar's isolation.

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<sup>49</sup> The Telegraph, *US President Obama in 'red line' warning to Syria over chemical weapons*, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2012, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avQKLRGRhPU>

<sup>50</sup> OPCW, *OPCW adopts plan for destruction Syria's chemical weapons programme in the first half of 2014*, [opcw.org](http://opcw.org), 15<sup>th</sup> November 2013

<https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2013/11/opcw-adopts-plan-destruction-syrias-chemical-weapons-programme-first-half>

<sup>51</sup> Trenin D., *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?*, pp. 126 - 127, Cambridge, Polity Books, 2018

Russia enjoys a particular relationship with Israel, too. In the post – Cold war period, Stalin spotted the birth of a Jewish state as a good chance to enter the Middle East game. After the Second World War, Britain and France ended their mandate or protectorate over the contemporary Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Jordan; those territories were annexed to the respective colonial empire with the treaty of Sévres (1920), then corrected by the treaty of Lausanne (1923), as the defeated Ottoman empire was limited to the Anatolian peninsula and lost large part of Mesopotamia and the Arabic peninsula. The immense efforts of the war, the high costs and the pressure of the United States constrained London and Paris to renounce to their extended dominions and gave the submitted people independence and the right to self-determination. Thus, the French government recognised an independent Lebanon and Syria, while the end of the British protectorate saw the birth of the kingdom of Iraq, the Hashemite kingdom of Transjordan (later Jordan) and a big question mark over Palestine. The UN 181 resolution, approved in late 1947 by the General Assembly in New York planned a partition of the land between an independent Arab state, a Jewish state and a status of free and international city for Jerusalem. In the end, the resolution was not applied, nor respected and the Jewish community fought a war against an Arab contingency, supported by Egypt, Syria and Transjordan. In 1948, the state Israel came to life and Soviet leader opted to support the Israeli and Ben Gurion as he thought Israel could have become a Soviet ally and an experiment of socialism in the Middle East; for Stalin, the chance to fill the vacuum the British and the French had left in the region and promote the socialist system of government and to include the new independent countries under Soviet sphere of influence. Ben Gurion though, was not a socialist and did not approve Stalin's plan for Israel. The Jewish statesman clearly looked at the Western democracies, especially at Britain and the USA, despite a large amount of population left the USSR to reach the new Jewish state and become part of it, as the Jews were not immune from political prosecution or social marginalisation even under the communist regime.<sup>52</sup> During the Cold War, the Soviet Union supported Israel's regional opponents such as Nasser's Egypt or the Syrian Arab Republic, under president Hafez al-Assad, father of the current president.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia and Israel went on a reconciliation phase and enjoyed positive ties. Under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Tel Aviv and Moscow promoted dialogue and shared common memory as the Russian leader frequently meets the Russian Jewish community, he visited the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland and opened a Holocaust museum in Moscow. Many of the Russian Jewish emigrated to Israel after the war had fought against the Germans and Russians and Israeli share the memory of an enormous sacrifice because of nazi-fascism crimes; Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu participated at the 2018 9<sup>th</sup> May Victory parade in Moscow. It is estimated that approximately one million Israeli citizens speak currently Russian and since 2008 no visa is required between the two countries.<sup>53</sup> Russia and Israel share defence industrial cooperation, as Israeli technology proved to be quite appreciated by the

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<sup>52</sup> Malaparte C., *Tecnica del colpo di Stato*, pp. 182 – 186, Milano, Gli Adelphi, 2011

<sup>53</sup> Trenin D., *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?*, pp. 88 – 90, Cambridge, Polity Books, 2018

Russian military. From the beginning of the Russian military operation in Syria, bilateral meeting between Netanyahu and Putin occurred more and more frequently, as the Israeli Prime Minister condemned repeatedly the presence of Iranian troops or affiliated militias and Hezbollah, a declared enemy of Israel. In spite of unresolved disputes with the Syrian government, who claims back the Golan Heights, conquered by the Israeli army in the Six Day war in 1967, the Israeli government accepted gradually the Assad presidency under Russian pressure. Therefore, even though Moscow and Tel Aviv might not share the same interests nor plans in the region, they are willing to cooperate and to maintain a positive bilateral relationship.

### *Egypt*

Whereas the Kremlin is not a weapon provider of the Jewish state, Moscow entertains profitable technological cooperation with other Middle Eastern partners such as Egypt, Iran and Turkey. With Cairo, Russia continues its long-standing and efficient military partnership. The Soviet Union financed and supported General Nasser against the aggressiveness of the British-French-Israeli operation in 1956, after the Egyptian leader nationalised the Suez Canal and years later against the Jewish state in the Six Day war. There was no antisemitism nor resentment by the Soviets, but rather a will to prevail over the USA, as Washington did not deny its support to Israel, which became more and more generous after 1967;<sup>54</sup> Egypt and Syria instead, were the USSR's main allies in the Middle East. After the October war in 1973 and the following oil crisis, Egypt under the leadership of Anwar al-Sadat changed its approach toward the Jewish state and with the support of the Carter administration, Cairo signed the 1978 Camp David Accords with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Sadat was assassinated in 1981, but the normalisation with Israel, who indeed gave the Sinai Peninsula back, brought Egypt much closer to the Western bloc and to the US. Already in 1972 though, Sadat demanded the departure from Egyptian soil of 20,000 Soviet military advisors, since his request of broader weapon supply was refused by the Kremlin; Sadat was not a pro-Soviet leader, but attempted to exploit the most favourable conditions for Egypt, hanging in the balance between the two superpowers, ending on the Western side.<sup>55</sup>

Hosni Mubarak, the vice-president, succeeded Sadat after his murder and became the new *raīs*; even though Egypt had taken a major turn toward Washington, under the Mubarak presidency, Cairo purchased Russian weapons such as Tor-M1 and Buk air defence systems, Mi-8 and Mi-17 helicopters and negotiated MiG-29 fighter jet, until the US pressured Mubarak to abandon the project. As General al-Sisi was elected president in 2014, after the previous year's coup, the Russian-Egyptian cooperation has intensified and started joint military and naval exercises and training; Cairo and Moscow side together on the Libyan scenario, where both support General Khalifa Haftar and they both share the importance of fighting international terrorism.

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<sup>54</sup> Mearsheimer J. J., Walt S. M., *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, pp. 25 – 26, London, Penguin Books, 2008

<sup>55</sup> Di Nolfo E., *Storia delle relazioni internazionali. II. Gli anni della guerra fredda 1946 -1990*, pp. 605 -613, Bari, Editori Laterza, 2015

Moreover, in 2016 Russian defence minister Sergey Shoigu defined Egypt as Russia's most important strategic partner in the MENA region.<sup>56</sup>

### *Iran*

The Islamic Republic is a regional partner of Moscow, both are involved in the Syrian match and both support the Assad government. Whereas Damascus is long-standing partner of Russia since the Cold War, Teheran entered the Syrian war to protect a precious ally within the Shia Muslim community; the Syrian president is a representative of the Alawites, a Shiite minority that counts barely for a twelve percent of the Syrian population (ca one million); the Alawites, also known as the *Nusayris*, can be defined more like a sect, that includes in its religious calendar both Christian, Sunni and Shiite celebrations.<sup>57</sup> The Alawite community managed to maintain itself in power in Damascus since Hafez al-Assad, a military commander of the Syrian army, became the Head of state after a coup in November 1970 and in 1973 amended the constitution, inserting a clause that officially separated politics and religion, causing the protest of the Sunni majority. The favourable conditions were created when in 1966 a coup shook the Baath party from the inside and brought to power the minorities such as the Alawites, the Druses, the Ismailis. Hafez al-Assad promoted his vision of socialism and Arab nationalism and fiercely repressed the Sunni insurrection in Syria; like Nasser, he claimed the willingness to build a secular state and stressed the importance of limiting and fighting Islamism, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>58</sup>

Major changes occurred in Teheran when in 1979 the Islamic Revolution took place, overthrew the Shah and put the Ayatollah in power. As in 1980 the war against Iraq broke out, Syria's Assad was the only state to support the Islamic Republic. The Iranian regime supported the Alawite president as well and confirmed the friendship and alliance between the two countries when in 2000, Hafez's son, Bashar, became the new Syrian president. Iran was the first regional power, who intervened to support the Syrian government when in the spring of 2011, civil protests became violent riots and a civil war broke out in the Arab Republic. Syria is a too precious ally for Teheran and guarantees the Iranians strategic depth in the two rivers' region; along with Iraq, whose Shia community represents the majority of Iraqi population and Hezbollah, the *party of God*, in Lebanon, Syria is a fundamental piece of the Shia Crescent. On a regional scale, Teheran's aim is not only to become the hegemon of the Middle East, but also to make the Shia prevail over the Sunnis and the regional opponent such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Iran partners with Russia to support the Syrian regime and to contain Turkish ambitions, although Teheran and Moscow never fell in love with each other. Until 1979, Iran was essentially a US ally under the Shah leadership, but when the Revolutionary Guards brought to power the Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader condemned both the two *Great Satan*: the USA and the USSR. Iran entered a period of isolation and fought a long and draining war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq

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<sup>56</sup> Trenin D., *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?*, pp. 117 – 118, Cambridge, Polity Books, 2018

<sup>57</sup> Bausani A., *L'Islam. Una religione, un'etica, una prassi politica*, pp. 122 – 123, Milano, Garzanti Elefanti, 2015

<sup>58</sup> Negri A., *Il musulmano errante. Storia degli alauiti e dei misteri del Medio Oriente*, pp. 21 – 22, Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2017



that declared no winner, just a high number of losses for Teheran as well as for Baghdad. When Vladimir Putin became the new Russian president, a new chapter between Moscow and the country once called Persia began. Much alike Turkey, according to the Russian vision and plan, Iran is a key player to counterbalance the sole global leadership of the United States. This clearly does not mean that Russia and Iran share the same goals: for example, in Syria they have different plans for the future of Damascus. While the Iranians push Assad to strengthen the Shia alliance, Russia is keen on readmitting Syria to regional dialogue and partnerships, avoiding a new isolation; Moscow would like to limit the Iranian influence over Syria, also because Russia enjoys a good relationship with Israel and would appreciate an opening between the two; in this ending phase of the war though, Russia cannot exclude the Iranian troops and affiliated militia, as they played a fundamental role to maintain the regime alive and still are useful as a military support.<sup>59</sup>

Russia started along with Turkey and Iran the Astana talks, to negotiate a peace for Syria and determining the future of the country; right now, the conflict has not ended yet, but the will of the three was to exclude Washington from negotiations and to discuss the respective sphere of influence. Russia counts on Ankara and Teheran to claim the value of its strategy and prove in front of the US, that the American way is not the only one; however, Turkey and Iran might soon become rivals as they both compete for the leadership of the Middle East. Both are heir of two great empires (the Ottomans and the Safavids) and they both have ambitions to prevail. Russia supported the JCPOA, the nuclear deal agreement signed in 2015 by Iran and the 5+1 UNSC group, despite the Trump administration rejected the accord that his predecessor fostered. Iran and the USA entered a new collision course and Teheran announced its will to work on its nuclear program; Russia instead, insisted on the need to respect and defend the deal, but obtained no success. Nevertheless, Moscow provides Teheran with Russian weapons, including tanks, fighter jets, air defence system, despite bilateral trade started quite late and faced some stop and go.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> De Bonis M., *Mosca e Teheran, la strana coppia*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *America contro Iran*, N°1 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

<sup>60</sup> Trenin D., *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?*, pp. 120 – 121, Cambridge, Polity Books, 2018

### 3. Strategic Healthcare Intelligence

#### A Healthcare Operation

A further motivation to explain the Russian intervention in Italy is a strategic healthcare reason: an operation of strategic healthcare intelligence to acquire vital information on the virus and the epidemic to study its evolution and the methods to contrast it. The Russian healthcare operation in Italy kickstarted at the end of March: whereas Italy was facing its hardest phase of the contagion, the number of cases in Russia was gradually increasing and it was in those days that president Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of the quarantine in the country. Russia answered the request of aid from Italy as Putin discussed the issue on a telephone conversation with the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte; the Russian president spotted a chance to help a partner and friend, who was suffering because of the fast spread of contagion of COVID-19, and the chance to experience directly through healthcare personnel the treatment of patients and the characteristics of the new coronavirus, as a cure, a definite method to treat the disease has not been found yet. Italy was the second country in the world to be massively hit by the epidemic after China: it is still unclear how a rapid contagion could have taken place in the north of Italy and why it began later in other European countries, such as France or Germany.

However, the SarsCov2 has been underestimated by everybody, scientists included, because nobody knew the origin of this virus and the difference with other fellow coronaviruses like the SARS epidemic in China in 2002. The epidemic in Italy was then a chance for Russian experts and scientists to study a bit closer the how the virus hit the population in Northern Italy and whether the virus evolved while being transmitted from an individual to another. Not all scientists agree on the virus mutations, some say it might have evolved, some say it stayed the same as the one that reproduced itself in Wuhan, in the Chinese province of Hubei.<sup>61</sup> What is pretty evident or at least convincing, is the animal origin of SarsCov2, as highly likely the virus was transmitted from bats to human beings. The speed of reproduction and contagion made it even more viral and therefore it moved from one country to another, as the world faces now a global healthcare issue. The pandemic though, raised disputes and controversies among international actors: China was the first country where the epidemic began, but the Chinese authorities acknowledged the problem at least one month late, as the cases jumped in December. Rumour has it, the contagion already started in October, although the Chinese government rejected this allegation: the first verified case, according to Beijing, was recorded in November, so this is official information WHO received from China. The Trump administration demonstrated more than once its suspects over Chinese version on the evolution of the epidemic and the origin of the virus: president

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<sup>61</sup> Il Fatto Quotidiano, *Coronavirus, l'infettivologo Galli dell'ospedale Sacco di Milano: "Evidente che si è evoluto in natura, non è certo nato in laboratorio"*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2020, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/02/22/coronavirus-linfettivologo-galli-dellospedale-sacco-di-milano-evidente-che-si-e-evoluto-in-natura-non-e-certo-nato-in-laboratorio/5714190/>

Trump suggested it was made in laboratory, supported by Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, who pointed the finger against Beijing and WHO, according to them responsible for hiding China's mistakes and failures.<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps, Donald Trump looked for an enemy to blame and to be made responsible for this global healthcare crisis, which occurred in the year of US presidential elections, as the tycoon is running to be confirmed at the White House for a second term. However, despite the president's political and personal reasons, the US government is focused on observing China and maintaining the highest attention on a competitor that has clear ambitions and might exploit the healthcare crisis and the current difficult situation in America, also due to a social clash between the black community and police forces, to move steps forward and carry on with its geopolitical projects. The COVID-19 pandemic did not stop the US-China global confrontation, it is instead the healthcare crisis that has become a further point of clash between Washington and Beijing. The two did not apply a full lockdown as the Chinese province of Hubei was the only one in China to be isolated and in the United States, every single federated state made its own decision, whether to lock down or to adopt lighter measures; a harsh debate put on a collision course the president and the states governors, but in spite of Trump ignoring to respect the recommended basic rules, some governors and local authorities claimed their rights not to wear masks or gloves or to respect any restriction measure as these limitations would be a violation of constitutional rights.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, objective suspects over number of cases in China are still in as the official register is far way too low and unlike the case of Italy, the province of Hubei, where the epidemic was generated, was the only Chinese province to be locked down. Some doubts have also been raised over WHO and its official position: the WHO has been accused by US of having protected China and protests over the too late declaration of pandemic on coronavirus.

The difficulties WHO has faced in managing the situation since the epidemic started at the end of 2019 and the following contagion around the world explains how international organisations present serious handicaps and do not enjoy the sufficient autonomy or attitude to prevail over nation-states; as it came to be more evident day after day, every single country managed the pandemic on its own, with its own solutions and countermeasures. The Italian government hired WHO board advisor and former president of Italian National Institute of Health Walter Ricciardi as a healthcare counsellor to the ministry of Health and to the Italian government, in order to handle an unprecedented crisis that killed over 30,000 Italians.<sup>64</sup> However, critics were raised toward his personality and along with him, several virologists were contested by either politicians or by public opinion. At some point, scientists seemed to be the only, who could be trusted and those who had

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<sup>62</sup> Davidson H., Singh M., Borger J., *Trump claims to have evidence coronavirus started in Chinese lab but offers no details*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/30/donald-trump-coronavirus-chinese-lab-claim>

<sup>63</sup> McGreal C., *'I believe in our freedoms': the governor who resists lockdown and stresses American liberty*, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/21/south-dakota-covid-19-coronavirus-freedom>

<sup>64</sup> Bocci M., *Speranza nomina Walter Ricciardi come consigliere e alle Regioni dice: "No a scelte unilaterali"*, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2020, [repubblica.it](https://www.repubblica.it)

[https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/24/news/coronavirus\\_speranza\\_nomina\\_walter\\_ricciardi\\_come\\_consigliere\\_e\\_alle\\_regioni\\_dice\\_no\\_a\\_scelte\\_unilaterali\\_-249447649/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/24/news/coronavirus_speranza_nomina_walter_ricciardi_come_consigliere_e_alle_regioni_dice_no_a_scelte_unilaterali_-249447649/)

the sufficient and necessary knowledge to face an invisible enemy. Nevertheless, virologists and scientists were not appreciated everywhere, as in the United States, Dr Anthony Fauci, director of National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, who repeatedly had arguments with president Trump, as the Commander-in-chief ignored openly Fauci's recommendations and suggestions and according to the press rumours, the Donald seemed to be on the verge of firing the most famous virologist of America.<sup>65</sup>

### **Russian Intelligence in Italy?**

Suspects over the presence of intelligence officials among the Russian personnel, who travelled to Italy and operated in the province of Bergamo and Brescia in Lombardy, were raised by the Italian press and mainly by NATO highest ranks. Some doubts came also from minority groups of the opposition in the Parliament; everybody noticed that Russia did not send simply a medical squad or a civil protection group of operators, but rather a military contingency with military means of transport, pictured and registered by cameras while running on Italian motorways, heading north from the Air Force base of Pratica di Mare, Lazio. Why did Russia send a military contingency, instead of a civil service body? Was it just to prove the ability of its armed forces, to show the Russian military technology and power? The main reason why the Russian government sent a military squad to Italy is due to the domestic plans of emergencies and the proficiencies of the armed forces, who are entitled to carry on this kind of operations and the ministry of defence developed within its own structure a sector for virology and bacteriology; the Russian ministry of defence has also forecasted the chance of a chemical-bacteriological attack and thus, calculated the proper response and instructed its personnel to prepare to fight and contrast such type of menace. Perhaps, it is also Russian obsession for the defence of its territory, as the country is vast and difficult to protect from external offensive, especially on its Western side, that the Russian military studied possibilities and promoted training and countermeasure plan for such event. Therefore, whereas in the Western countries scientific research is usually a matter for the scientific community and universities, in Russia it is largely promoted by the military.<sup>66</sup>

Almost certainly, among the personnel were Russian intelligence agents, highly likely of the GRU (*Glavnoe Razvedyvatel'noe Upravlenie*, literally the Main Intelligence Directorate), the Russian military service, as intelligence members are included in the military units as a characteristic of the Russian military model organisation; in addition, when it comes to special mission abroad, intelligence agents join the squad, as they are instructed to gather and handle vital data. There is no surprise of a chance of intelligence presence within the contingency that operated in Italy, despite the press tend to picture the intelligence with a touch of scandal; ironically, the media keep on defining the intelligence community with a code name of a fictional character. What is even more surprising is the discussed thesis that claims the attempt of the Russian secret services to obtain important information and details in Italy, yet it is still unclear what kind of secrets the

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<sup>65</sup> Cohen S., *Will Fauci be fired? Trump's growing dismissal of Expert Advice poses new risks*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020, forbes.com <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sethcohen/2020/07/08/will-fauci-be-fired/#7381c863108e>

<sup>66</sup> Pellicciari I., *Perché il Cremlino ha per ora vinto la gara degli aiuti a Roma*, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il Vincolo interno*, N°4 2020, GEDI Group

Russian intelligence should have been looking for, while carrying on with the sanitation of hospitals and hospices in Lombardy. Furthermore, if Russia was interested in discovering news on military development, weapons, exercises whatsoever, why would the Russian government organise an uncovered mission with the auxiliary of national and international media to steel precious information in a NATO country? As the ties between Italy and Russia are evidently good and the two countries share a long-standing friendship, it would be pretty easy to send undercover agents, perhaps in tourist disguise to obtain military information, but somehow mainstream media and the press prefer to maintain their usual suspects. Curiously, at the end of August a French lieutenant-colonel was arrested in Naples, accused of spying in the NATO base for the Russians.<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the Russian squad that operated in Italy was aiming at gathering information on the SarsCov2 and its aggressiveness in the most suffering area of Italy, hit by the virus. Perhaps, the Russian élite unit was looking for some evolution of the virus and study how SarsCov2 attacked human beings; in this case, vital information would be useful to foster the research on COVID-19 and to better defend the Russian population against it. As for now no method has been found to defeat the virus, the vaccine appears to be the only answer to be given. On parallel paths, everybody began research and experiments to work on a possible working vaccine against the latest and lethal virus: as in the United States Donald Trump vowed the chance to achieve a vaccine toward the end of this year, despite harsh critical comments by the Democratic Party, which, through the persons of the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and the former Vice-president and current presidential candidate Joe Biden, accused the president of a failing management of the healthcare crisis and to deliver ordinary propaganda, a British-Italian partnership has been settled, with the university of Oxford studying the process to accomplish this complicated task. Italian Health minister Roberto Speranza stated he hopes that the vaccine would be ready for the end of 2020 or, at least, at the beginning of 2021, as he remarked the importance of the gratuitousness of the vaccine itself;<sup>68</sup> the cure shall be distributed and made available for everybody in Italy, in Britain and in Europe as the highest is the coverage, the sooner COVID-19 would be contained and eventually stopped. First tests of vaccines have already started in Italy, as the hospital Lazzaro Spallanzani in Rome, where the very first diagnosed cases of COVID-19 were found, began at the end of August the experimentation produced by a private company, *Biotech Reithera*, with the support of the Lazio Region and the ministry for Health and Research.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Biet G., *Militaire français soupçonné d'espionnage au profit de la Russie : ce que l'on sait*, 30<sup>th</sup> August 2020, europe1.fr <https://www.europe1.fr/international/militaire-francais-soupconne-despionnage-au-profit-de-la-russie-ce-que-lon-sait-3988528#:~:text=Un%20lieutenant%2Dcolonel%20de%20l,les%20informations%20d'Europe%201>.

<sup>68</sup> Zunino C., *Il ministro Speranza: "Ripartono crociere e fiere. A fine 2020 prime dosi del vaccino"*, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2020, repubblica.it [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/08/06/news/trasporti\\_posti\\_solo\\_a\\_scacchiera\\_anche\\_sui\\_treni\\_locali\\_deroghe\\_per\\_i\\_paranti\\_-263865815/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/08/06/news/trasporti_posti_solo_a_scacchiera_anche_sui_treni_locali_deroghe_per_i_paranti_-263865815/)

<sup>69</sup> Il Sole 24 Ore, *Covid, iniziata allo Spallanzani la sperimentazione del vaccino sull'uomo*, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2020, ilsole24ore.com <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/covid-via-spallanzani-sperimentazione-vaccino-sull-uomo-AD5aNik>

## The Race for vaccine and Russian vaccine

A statement that suggested stupor and astonishment, on xx august, Russian president Vladimir Putin claimed that Russian scientist have finally reached the antidote against SarsCov2, the Russian vaccine, the first vaccine in the world against COVID-19 has been found and produced in its first doses. Putin affirmed that one of his daughters was injected with the vaccine and that after some light fever, she immediately felt good again. The president also declared the vaccine has been called Sputnik 5 as the name of the first artificial satellite sent into space by the Soviet Union in 1957, when the race to space and the competition between the USSR and the USA began. For Putin, the achievement of the first vaccine represents an element of glory and pride for Russia, as the COVID-19 pandemic is a global healthcare danger.<sup>70</sup> The chance to produce the vaccine and to export it is a further possibility for Russia to extend its influence and partnerships, not to mention its positive image on the international arena. Interest for the Russian vaccine has been expressed by Venezuela, Mexico, India and other countries in the world. Moreover, the race for vaccine is a global healthcare challenge that involves main geopolitical power and the victory and primacy over this matter might generate a significant strategic advantage. Perhaps, this is an additional reason, why the Russians sent its personnel in Italy, in order to promote research and obtain fundamental information on SarsCov2; Italy represented the only accessible place where to lead scientific research, as it was not the case for China, who jealously managed the epidemic on its own, with its own resources, with no major aid from partners or allies.

The USA criticised the Russian launch and initiative, as the Department of State claimed the importance of achieving a working and efficient vaccine, not the mere and illusionary awareness to have reached the result in first place; in addition, the US commerce department blacklisted the Russian Health Ministry's Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, the centre that along with the Ministry of Defence's 48<sup>th</sup> Central Research Institute realised the vaccine.<sup>71</sup> The WHO has also proved its doubts and uncertainty over the Russian vaccine, as the international organisation affirmed there is no data about it and yet the vaccine has to be tested and proved efficient. The research for the achievement and the following mass production of the anti-COVID-19 vaccine is an open competition for both private and commercial subjects and public healthcare structures. One cannot exclude that the vaccine could be used as a subject of negotiation between powers; Russia might be interested in offering doses to the West and to the USA, perhaps as a trade goods. The entire chapter might be also an attempt to avoid that China could exploit the healthcare crisis to advance its position and promote itself in the Europe and in other areas of the world; for Russia, a significant advantage on a partner that might become dangerous and difficult to contain over the next years. The distribution of the vaccine may also subtract customers and partners to Beijing and again

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<sup>70</sup> Pellicciari I., *Da Bergamo a Mosca, se il vaccino Sputnik parla anche italiano*. Scrive Pellicciari, formiche.net, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020 <https://formiche.net/2020/08/bergamo-mosca-vaccino-sputnik-parla-italiano-pellicciari/>

<sup>71</sup> Norton B., *U.S. sanctions Russian research institute that developed COVID-19 vaccine*, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2020, thegrayzone.com <https://thegrayzone.com/2020/08/28/us-sanctions-russian-research-institute-covid-19-vaccine/>

favour Russian image in the world. Surely, bilateral ties would once again prevail over multilateral mechanism of alliance and partnership, as the management of the healthcare crisis has proved all the inefficiencies of international organisations and multilateral mechanism of cooperation.<sup>72</sup> In the end, China might find itself in a difficult position, as the scientist community would have not been able to produce a domestic antidote and satisfy protection requirement for an immense population; severe damages might be generated in the economy, as the global healthcare crisis caused a direct and logical economical collapse of the world economy. China may end up to be blamed for the beginning of this cataclysm, despite evidences of the laboratory origin of the virus have not been found yet. As the epidemic was spreading in Italy, the Chinese government sent multiple squad to verify and observe the evolution of contagion, in order to compare it with the events occurred in Wuhan and in the province of Hubei; in March, China seemed to be the only country, who could provide significant aid to Italy, not simply in terms of supplies, but also in terms of acquired knowledges, since the People's Republic hosted the very first contagion. Anyway, Beijing did not exploit this advantage that much and the permanent number of cases casted doubts over the true evolution of the epidemic and the contagion in China.

It seems quite curious that the number of victims is pretty low when compared to the United States, Brazil, Italy and others; it would be offensive to blame China for the cause of the pandemic, as SarsCov2 is a new type of coronavirus never seen before and that needs to be studied by the scientific community, but it is hard to believe to the self-corrected version on the beginning of the contagion and on the real numbers of deaths.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Pellicciari I., *Da Bergamo a Mosca, se il vaccino Sputnik parla anche italiano. Scrive Pellicciari*, formiche.net, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020 <https://formiche.net/2020/08/bergamo-mosca-vaccino-sputnik-parla-italiano-pellicciari/>

<sup>73</sup> Campbell C., Gunia A., *China says It's beating coronavirus, but can we believe its numbers?*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, time.com <https://time.com/5813628/china-coronavirus-statistics-wuhan/>

#### 4. Russians and Italy: A consistent popularity

- *Why is Italy so popular in Russia?* -

##### **Domestic political consensus: the military mission to Italy**

The decision to send military personnel over to Italy was taken from the Kremlin as a direct request of aid from a close European partner, who was caught in the worst healthcare crisis since the end of the Second World War; having already mentioned the geopolitical reason and the strategic-healthcare intelligence operation, the third main motivation for the Russians to aid Italy and enters an unlikely *donors competition*, is domestic political consensus and approval. Therefore, the Russian presidency opted to intervene in Italy with its best elite resources and well-prepared squad to help a suffering country that enjoys a special reputation in Russia. Indeed, Italian culture is highly appreciated in every single aspect of it: from food and wine to the art and cinema, music and theatre, not to mention fashion, design, tourism. President Putin had no hesitation in granting Italy the aid needed because he was sure the Russian population would have understood and agreed with his decision. Italy and Russia are no allies, but Russians look at Italy as a heaven on Earth, an admirable country, a desirable lifestyle, a place where everybody knows how to enjoy life. Perhaps, the image of Italy might be a bit distorted as if the *Belpaese* had no problems, but only virtues and merits; nonetheless, Italian image is highly stereotyped and just for the positive side, as the *beautiful* and the *good* go together with each other and that is why the perception offers such a perfect description of Italy.

Furthermore, in the very first weeks of epidemic between February and March in Italy, Russian mainstream media offered a full coverture of the events, as the Russian citizens became aware of the trouble Italy fell in. In particular, television services advanced a storytelling guided by a sense of pity toward the Italian population, as the rising contagion and the increasing number of deaths, generated deep uncertainty and fear. Clearly, those images and stories from the beloved and beautiful country must have surely created compassion and sorrow for Italy and the Italians in the Russian people, especially for the ones, who visited the country as tourists and learnt to appreciate the traditions, the art, the cities, the sea and the mountains of the *Belpaese*. Promoting a sustaining initiative toward a country that enjoys such attraction and approval in Russia, was clearly a popular decision that could only strengthen the consensus of the president. Criticism toward Vladimir Putin came on the matter of a sustainable geopolitical aid campaign, as for Russia providing help certainly represents costs and some think that Putin's ambitious foreign policy goes beyond Russia's financial possibility. In addition, the recent disputes with the Saudis over the decision of cutting oil production demonstrates that Moscow is not immune from the consequences of its own choices. When in April cases increased as the COVID-19 epidemic spread in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other regions of the immense country, criticism became even more stronger and an autarchic traditional spirit of saving resources pushed



the Russian government to limit further aid to any partners, in order to avoid any other privation for the national healthcare system. In the very beginning, cases were very low and despite the government did not deny the risk of infection, reassurances were made to convince the population that Russia had not entered the pandemic phase yet. The most critical period was without doubt from April until July with the number increasing and reaching a peak of more than 10,000 new cases per day and deaths up over 10,000; at the beginning of September the number reached over 17,000.<sup>74</sup> As in June Moscow and Saint Petersburg opened again main activities with the proper rules and dispositions to follow (wearing masks in closed spaces, sanitise hands with gel or either wearing gloves), the Russian government set a new date for the postponed ‘Victory Day’ military parade, originally scheduled as business on 9<sup>th</sup> May: 2020 marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War against Germany and fascism, a celebration that became even more important since the collapse of the USSR and an initiative that President Putin promoted to unify the Russian people again. In the Russian festivity calendar, aside religious celebrations as Christmas, Easter and so on, the Victory Day represents an essential feast to remember the sacrifice of the over 20 million Red Army soldiers, gave their life to defend Mother Russia from the German invader.

As the USSR lost the highest number of both civilians and soldiers in the Second World War, almost every Russian family has a relative that died in the war and to remember the victims means making every Russian participant of this legacy. The intention of the Russian president is not to delete completely Soviet past, but to select the most important and positive moments to foster the stabilisation of the Russian state.<sup>75</sup> One can argue why Putin refused to pic the October Revolution as a staple or whether to honour the memory and the greatness of Vladimir Ul’janov, better known as *Lenin*, the disciple of Marxism and the leader and father of the revolution: there is no common idea and consensus among the Russians on the October revolution and the legacy of Lenin and Trotsky. The events took place in the far 1917, more than a century ago and Russia experienced the failure of the communist regime. Despite a positive opinion on the Soviet Union and on Soviet leaders, on top of them Joseph Stalin, Putin decided to cancel the anniversary of the October Revolution on 7<sup>th</sup> November and to replace it with a less known episode, the end of the Polish-Lithuanian siege of Moscow, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1612; since 2005, on November 4<sup>th</sup> in Russia is National Unity Day, although very few are aware of the real meaning of this festivity. Putin also attempted to make room for the Gulag victims, celebrating first of all, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the writer of *Gulag Archipelago*, a literary masterpiece on the prison camps in the Soviet Union; Solzhenitsyn himself, expressed positive opinions toward Putin, especially on the war against Chechnyan separatists.<sup>76</sup> A monument in the city of Moscow was dedicated to the Soviet and then Russian author, who in 1970 won the Nobel Prize for literature, but could not receive it, as the regime

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<sup>74</sup> The Moscow Times, *Coronavirus in Russia: The Latest News, September 3<sup>rd</sup>*, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2020, [themoscowtimes.com](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/09/02/coronavirus-in-russia-the-latest-news-sept-3-a69117)  
<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/09/02/coronavirus-in-russia-the-latest-news-sept-3-a69117>

<sup>75</sup> Figuera P., *Nessuno espugnerà la Russia*, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il potere del mito*, N°2 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

<sup>76</sup> TASS Russian News Agency, *What Solzhenitsyn said about Putin, and vice versa*, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2019, [tass.com](https://tass.com/society/1070178)  
<https://tass.com/society/1070178>

prohibited it. In October 2017, president Putin inaugurated a monument to the victims of Gulag concentration camps: the monument was erected on the Akademika Sakharova Prospect and it is called the *Wall of Sorrow*, to remember and honour the prosecuted by the Soviet regime.<sup>77</sup> In the capital city a modern museum dedicated to the Gulag camps was open in 2001 by Anton V. Antonov-Ovseyenko.<sup>78</sup>

## The Constitutional Referendum

Another major point for the President was to hold the referendum on the approval of the constitutional reform that he promoted and that was approved by the State Duma in January. Originally, the popular referendum was set for the 22<sup>nd</sup> April and lately it was postponed, as the Russian government was forced to suspend the vote due to the epidemic of COVID-19. The constitutional reform has a fundamental importance for the president and the Russian government as it brings major changes and updates to the previous text of the Supreme Law, originally drafted in 1993. Nonetheless, the new norms and laws introduced in the reform induce analysts, commentators and press to retain this reform as a draft of a new constitution and perhaps, an attempt to mark a line with the nineties.<sup>79</sup> Having postponed the vote on the reform, the government went for an original voting procedure: the seats kept open for a week, from 25<sup>th</sup> June to 1<sup>st</sup> July and the electronic vote was introduced. The package of reforms included measures as the primacy of Russian law over International law, the importance of religious traditions and the faith in God, confirming the confessional nature of the Russian state, the ban of double passport for presidential candidates, the unconstitutionality of gay marriages or unions. Reforms on political institutions included a major role for the State Duma, as it will have the right to propose a candidate for Prime Minister with the following approval of the president; furthermore, the Council of State becomes officially a constitutional institution. A further amendment gained the attention of national and international media, when in March former Russian cosmonaut and State Duma deputy Valentina Tereshkova proposed the annulment of presidential mandates, thus a chance for the president to run for two more presidential elections. Clearly, this has been read as an attempt of Vladimir Putin to guarantee himself in power, but whether Putin will remain at the Kremlin palace or not, the next years are going to be decisive in the competition inside the institutions or better what would be informally called the Russian ‘deep state’. A younger generation paws the ground and claims its space, while the older ‘ruling class’, composed of managers, influential businessmen and statesmen, members of the public sector and intelligence attempt to defend their position. A major renewal might take place among the state technocracy and the nomination in January of Mikhail Mishustin, former director of Russian Federal Taxation Service, as the new Russian Prime Minister might be a step toward this direction. Quite surely, the Russian political system is going to be shaken

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<sup>77</sup> President of Russia, *Opening of Wall of Sorrow memorial to victims of political repression*, 30<sup>th</sup> October 2017, en.kremlin.ru <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55948>

<sup>78</sup> The Gulag History State Museum, History and Mission, Moscow Department of Culture, 2018 <https://gmig.ru/en/museum/history-and-mission/>

<sup>79</sup> Pellicciari I., *Cosa (non) abbiamo capito del referendum di Putin*. Scrive Pellicciari, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020, formiche.net <https://formiche.net/2020/07/putin-russia-referendum/>

by the exit of this referendum and yet the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are to be calculated; an already suffering economy is going to shrink, despite a rebound is expected to come in 2021. The price of oil has fallen and slowly is growing again, but the Russian rouble has lost much value to US dollar and to Euro. With the vaccine testing going on, positive responses are waited, as the antidote to SarsCov2 might be the turn on for a quicker recovery, although the entire world economy is facing a serious recession and instability.

With the Putin's popularity index decreasing, the COVID-19 pandemic generated more and more uncertainty in Russian society and the government needs to provide solutions and find a way to recover. The restrictions on travel routes limited seriously the development of trade between Russia and economic partners, not to mention tourism, that is why expectations are high on the Sputnik V: the sooner the vaccine will be available for Russian citizens, the faster the population will get covered and manage to protect itself from the contagion. Despite the WHO expects a high coverage not before the mid of 2021, the outcome of scientific research shall provide in every country an antidote to contrast this new menace. In order to restart the international mobility and access from one country to another, a universal cure needs to be found.

## **History and Diplomacy**

Italy and Russia enjoy a very long-standing and old friendship, despite the two nations have never been close allies. In order to provide some clear examples of cooperation and dialogue between Italy and Russia, it is necessary to start from the unification process of the former; although the relationship began much before as Italy was divided in multiple and little states, whereas the Grand Principality of Moscow, emerged in the late XIII century as the major Russian state, conquering the neighbours, after the disastrous Mongol invasion. During the Renaissance, ties and exchanges intensified, as the Vatican State showed interest in approaching the Orthodox Russians and the Republic of Venice pinpointed the principality as a possible trade partner. Italian architects were called to Moscow to realise the projects of the Orthodox churches inside the Kremlin fortress and lately much of the palaces built in the new capital city, Saint Petersburg, promoted by the tsar Peter the Great. In the XVIII century, the Russian empire established permanent diplomatic relations with major Italian states, among them the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Kingdom of Naples and the Republic of Venice, who hosted the very first Russian consulate in the Italian peninsula. As Napoleon conquered Italy and became Emperor of the French, Russia entered the war against the First French Empire in the coalition along with Austria, Prussia and Britain; in 1799, during the Italian campaign, the Russian army entered northern Italy, in support of the Austrians and defeated the French and the republics.<sup>80</sup>

The Crimean War (1853 – 1855) represents one of the few episodes of fight and adversity between the Russians and the Italians. To be more precise, it was a small Piedmont military contingency, sent by the

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<sup>80</sup> De Maio G., Sartori N., *Osservatorio di politica internazionale: Le relazioni tra Russia e Italia*, pp. 5, 2018, Istituto Affari Internazionali (a cura di), 144, Approfondimenti, parlamento.it  
[http://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0144\\_App.pdf](http://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0144_App.pdf)

Kingdom of Sardinia's Prime Minister, Cavour, who exploited the chance to sit at the European powers' table and obtain something in exchange from France. Cavour and the Savoy King, Victor Emanuel II, were at the time planning the expansion of the kingdom at the expenses of the Austrian Empire. The Russians did not recognise immediately the new kingdom of Italy, but signed with Turin (the capital city at the time) a bilateral commercial treaty in 1863. As Germany completed its unification process in 1871 and Bismarck became the Chancellor and the master of European diplomacy, the interests of European powers moved to the Balkans, as the Ottoman Empire, the great sick of Europe was slowly falling apart and leaving space for an open competition. Due to a complex system of alliance that could not simply stand and a failed attempt to move the disputes from the European continent to Africa (the so called 'Scramble'), Europe went inevitably toward a war between its major powers: the rise of nationalism, the race for armaments and the increasing tensions in the Balkans led to the outbreak of an unexpected World War that changed dramatically its own destiny. History officially condemned Germany as the main responsible of the disaster, despite the war started due to a dispute between Serbia and Austria-Hungary; the triple Entente faced the Triple Alliance, although Italy did not enter the war as Austria-Hungary was not attacked first and the Ottoman Empire replaced Rome in the military coalition. Italy never exited the Triple Alliance, which was first signed in 1882, but Rome entered a collision course with Vienna and aimed at conquering those territories the Austrians refused to cede. Despite a positive relationship with Germany, the treaty could not stand the adversities and the Italian government opened to dialogue with France and Russia. In 1909, the King and the Tsar promoted the '*Racconigi* agreement', a non-formal bilateral treaty, but a secret understanding to limit the Austrian expansion in the Balkans; the secret talks shall have guaranteed mutual respect and recognition of Italian interest in Tripolitania and Russian prerogative on the Straits.<sup>81</sup> Russia and Italy fought on the same side, despite the two armies never shared the battlefield, as the Tsar faced the Germans and the Austrian-Hungarians on its western front, while Italy entered the war on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1915, with the aim of grabbing the northern territories under Austrian military control, in order to complete its unification; some historians, indeed, define World War I as the Fourth War of Independence for Italy.

In 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power during the October revolution and the new communist government negotiated a peace treaty with the Kaiser: the Brest-Litovsk agreement ended the war on the eastern front, as Germany aimed at ending the war against the Entente. A civil war between the Bolsheviks and the Tsarist front broke out, as the Red Army led by Lev Trotsky defeated the opponents and completed the revolution; in 1922, the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics was born and Lenin became the undisputed leader of the country. In the meantime, Italy faced a troubling post-war period as the government did not obtain all the promised territories and political instability favoured the rise of the fascist movement of Benito Mussolini, who seized power in October 1922. Curiously, the fascist government was one of the very

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<sup>81</sup> Barié O., *Dal Sistema Europeo alla Comunità Mondiale. Storia delle relazioni internazionali dal Congresso di Vienna alla fine della Guerra fredda. Volume I: Il Sistema Europeo*, pp. 420-421, Milano, Celuc Libri Srl, 1999

first to officially recognise the USSR in early February 1924, few days after the Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald;<sup>82</sup> the Soviets, after the revolution and the civil war, which saw also the involvement of the British and the French in support of the White Army and Poland, ended up isolated from the International community and the Society of Nations, born as the aftermath of the peace process. Progressively, one after another, the European states established ties with the Soviet Union, Germany included, but Stalin, who became the leader due to the death of Lenin, refused to enter the Society of Nations and proceeded on his way of realising socialism within the country, against Trotsky's idea of exporting the revolution abroad. No major contact with the United States, as president Roosevelt recognised the Soviet state only in 1933, after being elected at the White House. As Stalin launched his quinquennial industrial plans to modernise the USSR, Europe was dragged into the worst economic and financial crisis ever by the collapse of stock market in New York: this event, better known as the Black Tuesday, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1929, originated the Great Depression in the United States, with president Roosevelt's New Deal to switch dramatically the sorts of public investments and more in general, the role of the state and federal budget in America.

Europe received a critical hit, too and an already bad performing economy, that still had not recovered from the massive military expenses and debts, set favourable conditions for Adolf Hitler to rise and to be nominated Chancellor of Germany. Hitler's rearmament programs and military ambitions encountered no obstacle from major European powers, as Britain and France attempted to maintain stable and cordial relationship with Berlin, while Italy moved step by step closer to Germany to form a new alliance, later defined the Pact of Steel; the Soviets offered mutual cooperation to sign a counter-attack treaty with the French, to protect Czechoslovakia and Poland, but both Prague and Warsaw seemed not willing to entrust Moscow of their national defence; the Polish felt reassured by the 1934 non-aggression treaty signed with the *Führer* and refused the offer. Unfortunately, the *Appeasement* policy of British Prime Minister Chamberlain did not stop Hitler from further campaigns at all, while Italy could not barely keep up with German initiatives, as the Italian troops, after the victory in Ethiopia and the proclaim of the Empire, were involved in Spain, to support Franco against the republicans, who received military and financial aid from Moscow. The Spanish Civil War ended in the spring of 1939 and as the occupation of Albania was planned and executed as demonstration of force toward the ally, the sign of Ciano, Italy's Foreign Minister, on the bilateral treaty with Germany, compromised the fate of Mussolini and the fascist regime forever. In order to secure himself from any possible attack, Stalin opted to offer a deal to the German government and to sign a non-aggression treaty that secretly included the mutual partition of Poland. The news shocked the world, but on the Soviet perspective, that was the only the way to reassure peace with a turbulent actor about to unleash disaster in Europe.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement has been severely criticised, not only for the partition of Poland, but because it is seen as the act that officially provoked the outbreak of the war; it is for certain a debatable

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<sup>82</sup> Di Nolfo E., *Storia delle relazioni internazionali. Volume I. Dalla pace di Versailles alla conferenza di Potsdam 1919-1945*, pp. 58-59, Bari, Editori Laterza, 2015

issue, although it is hard to retain the Soviets the only responsible for the beginning of the largest conflict of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The USSR stayed out of the war until the German offensive began in late June 1941: the Wehrmacht kickstarted Operation Barbarossa and advanced toward the heart of Russia. Italy participated in the offensive with its own contingency, the ARMIR, sent by Mussolini to flank the Germans: Italian and Soviet (Russian) troops faced themselves at the front, despite the German army led the Axis front against the Red Army. The campaign ended with the most negative turnout and the survivors were forced to retire and get back home. Italy surrendered in September 1943 and found herself split in two: the south occupied by the Allied troops and the north under German control, with a new fascist republican government named the Republic of Salò (or RSI), as Mussolini was forced to take back control, after being freed from prison by German troops. A civil war broke out as the Italians were left abandoned at their destiny due to a war that the armed forces were not prepared and equipped to fight. In Mussolini's calculations, the war would have ended pretty soon, as the outstanding German victories in Poland and France impressed the *Duce*; however, Mussolini failed to read Hitler's mind and to understand what menace the *Führer* represented for peace in Europe and ended dragged in the tragic defeat of the Axis front. The USSR fought back at German aggressors and responded with a counter offensive that led the Red Army to Berlin and to meet the Americans in Germany.

The Allies won the war, but the two major powers found themselves on the opposite sides: Europe and consequently the world were split into two main blocs, the East and the West. Italy benefitted from the economic aid of the Marshall plan to recover from the war damages and joined the Atlantic Alliance on the Western side, while the Soviet Union became the leader of the socialist bloc and the leading power in Eastern Europe. Despite a contraposition that created a permanent tension and multiple risks of escalation toward a nuclear war, Italy exploited its resources to dialogue and cooperate with the Soviet Union: through important and decisive actors the Italian government established positive ties with the Soviets, as FIAT, Italian main car constructor, opened a factory in the city of Togliatti (ironically the name of the Italian communist party's leader) and ENI, state-run oil company negotiated convenient deals to purchase barrels from Moscow. The Vatican State played its fundamental role between the two sides, as the Pope cared for the respect of faith and most important, to dialogue with the USSR. While domestically the Church opposed the communist initiatives and strongly supported the Christian Democracy party, the opening toward Secretary Krusciov offered an assist to the Italian institutions with the president Gronchi, the Prime Minister Fanfani and ENI CEO Enrico Mattei to visit Moscow and the Chairman in 1960, an historical visit to pursue an autonomous foreign policy. Italy never put in doubt its NATO membership, although Rome felt the need to reduce its reliability on Washington and to fulfil its own interests, remaining within the US sphere of influence.<sup>83</sup> To dialogue with the world's second major power meant to widen Italian prospective and role in the European continent. Dialogue and cooperation continued with Moscow, as after the Cuban missile crisis, American-Soviet ties

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<sup>83</sup> Neglie P., *La stagione del disgelo. Il Vaticano, l'Unione Sovietica e la politica del centro sinistra in Italia (1958-1963)*, pp. 89-90, Siena, Cantagalli, 2009

entered the space race and later the US and the USSR began talks to start denuclearisation and the reduction of armaments.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the birth of fifteen different states and the Italian government promoted its ties with Russia with a friendship treaty in 1994 and opened for tourism and bilateral trade. Italy is one of Russia major clients as Moscow provides natural gas as an important source of energy, meanwhile Italian businesses export manufactured goods in the Russian market. Despite the several governments through the years, Italy always believed in the importance of the dialogue and cooperation with Russia. Italy also promoted a distension between Washington and Moscow when Prime Minister Berlusconi organised a meeting at the Air Force base of Pratica di Mare, with US President Bush and Russian president Vladimir Putin. At the beginning of 2000s, the war on terrorism and an open approach from the Kremlin towards the US administration created a constructive climate and a NATO-Russia forum, which favoured a wider sphere of cooperation between former enemies. However, the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance, which welcomed new partners within its ranks and the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic missile treaty in 2002 exacerbated ties between Russia and the West; signed in 1972 by US president Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, the ABMT was one of the staple of the American – Soviet bilateral cooperation on nuclear proliferation and on nuclear disarmament. According to Russian president Vladimir Putin, US president George W. Bush motivated his decision at the time due to a possible Iranian threat and that there was no hostility towards Russia.<sup>84</sup>

In 2002, president Bush and president Putin signed the SORT treaty, a provisional agreement on general reduction that replaced START I and II; in 2010, US president Barack Obama and Russian president Dmitry Medvedev signed in Prague, the New START treaty (also known as START III), which is going to expire on January 2021. Very few has been done to renew the treaty and in addition, the Trump administration announced in August 2019 its withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty, originally signed by US president Ronald Reagan and Soviet Secretary Mikhail Gorbaciov in 1987.<sup>85</sup> The US Department of State motivated its decision due to a clear Russian violation of the treaty, but whether this violation was effective and actually occurred, the unilateral provision looked like a further rudeness toward the Russian government and a code message to China. The Trump administration proved its willingness of constraining China on the negotiations table and to force Beijing to playing open cards. Therefore, Russia finds itself limited by the US-China confrontation and loses its once affirmed priority.

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<sup>84</sup> Stone O., *The Putin Interviews*, episode 2 of 4, 2017, Showtime, sho.com  
<https://www.sho.com/the-putin-interviews>

<sup>85</sup> Press statement of U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, *U.S. withdrawal from the INF treaty on August 2, 2019*, U.S State Department Official Website, state.gov  
<https://www.state.gov/u-s-withdrawal-from-the-inf-treaty-on-august-2-2019/>

## Art and Popularity

### Architecture

Italy gained such a popularity in the world for several reasons: trade, food, architecture, cinema, fashion and passion. Italy is host to several archeologic sites, recognised as world heritage by UNESCO and its cities are visited by million of tourists every year, who enter the museums to worship the paintings and sculptures of Italian artists. Already in the Renaissance, Italian painters, sculptors and architects were celebrities to the European courts. Russia made no exception and despite Moscow at the time was not the capital city of the empire yet, the rulers opted to renovate and garnish the fortress with the Italian touch. The Grand Duke Ivan III called Aristotele Fioravanti, from the city of Bologna to build the Assumption Cathedral, also known as the Dormition Cathedral, within the Kremlin walls, which is now one of the oldest building in the city; the church hosted the incoronation of the Tsar until the XX century. In addition, the church of the Archangel Michael, the official necropolis of the Tsars, was built by Aloisio the New, called by Ivan III: the cathedral was completed in 1508. Aloisio supervised the works for the realisation of the cathedral of Saint Peter in the Vysokopetrovsky Monastery. A further building in the Kremlin complex, the Palace of Facets, east to the Grand Kremlin Palace, was realised in Renaissance style by architects Pietro Antonio Solari and Marco Friasin; the palace hosted gala events at the court and where the Duke welcomed his guests.<sup>86</sup> The same Solari realised the Spasskaya tower, the most famous tower of the Kremlin fortress, the one from which every religious, diplomatic or royal procession started; the tower is also recognisable as the clock tower.<sup>87</sup> Concerning Saint Petersburg, the tsarist capital founded by Peter the Great on the Baltic Sea, it naturally reflects western influences and that was precisely the aim of Peter, to build a modern and European capital city on the model of the western kingdoms; Peter aimed at creating progress and modernising Russia to foster its development and wealth. The Winter Palace, the Tsar official residence, was projected by Francesco Bartolomeo Rastelli, whose father worked in Russia and was officially invited by Peter the Great in 1716;<sup>88</sup> the palace was also the headquarter of the Russian government and lately became the symbolic image of the October revolution, as the Bolsheviks performed the *coup d'état* planned by Trotsky to overthrow the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky, already War minister under Prince L'vov. Right now, the Winter Palace host the famous Hermitage museum. Rastrelli, who was born in Paris, projected the wings of the Gran Palace at the Peterhof, the summer residence of the Tsar on the Gulf of Finlandia, under the commission of the Empress Elizabeth I; the project was initiated by Domenico Trezzini, but it was abandoned after the death of Peter the Great in 1725. Rastrelli's style is defined as Elizabethan Baroque, a late Baroque

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<sup>86</sup> Podshivalova E., *Mosca all'italiana*, Moskovskie Novosti, 28th November 2012, Russia Beyond (article originally published on Rossiskaya Gazeta)

[https://it.rbth.com/articles/2012/11/28/mosca\\_allitaliana\\_19125](https://it.rbth.com/articles/2012/11/28/mosca_allitaliana_19125)

<sup>87</sup> Zubacheva K., *Sei curiosità sulla Spasskaya, la torre più importante del Cremlino*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2019, Russia Beyond, Tourism <https://it.rbth.com/turismo/83749-sei-curiosit%C3%A0-sulla-spaskaya>

<sup>88</sup> Manaev G., *Sette stranieri che hanno cambiato la Russia nel profondo*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2019 <https://it.rbth.com/cultura/83653-sette-stranieri-che-hanno-cambiato>



style that can be observed also in the Catherine Palace, at *Tsarskoye Selo* or in the Smolny Cathedral in Saint Petersburg.<sup>89</sup> Obviously, Italians were not the only artists to be invited in Russia and to be commissioned projects and buildings, but these are clear example of the shared appreciation for the Italian style, as both rulers in Moscow and in Saint Petersburg pushed to build churches and palaces with the Italian touch.

### *Music*

It is no mystery that Russians are in love with Italian music and this love originated centuries ago in the royal courts of the empire: Italian composers were invited at the court to play, as the Italian opera turned to be appreciated by the tsars. Catherine the Great welcomed during her reign Domenico Cimarosa and Giovanni Paisiello to her court; Paisiello became Catherine's daughter music teacher;<sup>90</sup> the passion of Catherine II for napoletana music was object of an exhibition at the Hermitage museum in Saint Petersburg in 2018, co-organised and supervised by the Italian ministry of culture. Another major composer from Naples was Francesco Araja, who is said to have written more than ten compositions for the Russian opera under the court of Anne I; Tommaso Traetta joined Paisiello and Cimarosa at the court of Catherine II.<sup>91</sup> The Empress called the musician Vincenzo Manfredini from Pistoia to teach her son Pavel how to play harpsichord; eventually, Manfredini was recalled in Saint Petersburg at the end of the century by Pavel, who had become the Emperor, and died few months later.<sup>92</sup> More recently, Italian popular music achieved tremendous success among Russians and still Italians wonder why Russians fell in love with Italian music. Everything began with a funny story, in the 1960s, when at the border, presumably Soviet and Finnish soldiers exchanged cigarettes for a cd of an unknown young Italian singer from Rome, *Robertino*, who became a star in the USSR. At the time foreign authors and music were prohibited by the socialist regime, thus the albums circulated illegally.

When in 1983, the Soviet television transmitted for the first time the *Sanremo Music Festival*, the Russian audience literally went mad for it and was absolutely conquered by the Italian music. The Russians experienced for the first time a different kind of music and fell in love with the feeling the Italian music caused: a fascinating world, where people sang and looked happy to spend their life after love, art and music. Perhaps, this a bit distorted image of Italy still persists in Russia and maybe the lack of political content in the songs convinced the Soviet authorities not to ban it; unlike British and American artists, whose songs contained declared protests, Italians sang about emotions and human feelings and managed to reach the audience, despite it is hard to believe that Russians could really understand the meaning of those songs.

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<sup>89</sup> Saint – Petersburg.com, Tsarskoye Selo, <http://www.saint-petersburg.com/pushkin/>

<sup>90</sup> Russia Beyond, *Caterina II sedotta dalla musica napoletana: una mostra-evento all'Ermitage celebra questo legame*, 9th November 2018, Russia Beyond <https://it.rbth.com/cultura/81762-caterina-ii-sedotta-dalla-musica>

<sup>91</sup> Sellitti N., *Quando gli Zar cercavano la musica di Napoli*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2015, Russia Beyond [https://it.rbth.com/rubriche/Mosaico/2015/10/23/quando-gli-zar-cercavano-la-musica-di-napoli\\_533095](https://it.rbth.com/rubriche/Mosaico/2015/10/23/quando-gli-zar-cercavano-la-musica-di-napoli_533095)

<sup>92</sup> Consolato Generale d'Italia a San Pietroburgo, *Pistoia celebra Vincenzo Manfredini, musicista alla corte dello zar*, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2011, [conssanpietroburgo.esteri.it](https://conssanpietroburgo.esteri.it) [https://conssanpietroburgo.esteri.it/consolato\\_sanpietroburgo/it/la\\_comunicazione/dal\\_consolato/vincenzomanfredini.html](https://conssanpietroburgo.esteri.it/consolato_sanpietroburgo/it/la_comunicazione/dal_consolato/vincenzomanfredini.html)

It is no secret that singers like Toto Cutugno, Albano Carrisi and Adriano Celentano are incredibly popular, especially among older generations, and still they get invited to sing. Ironically, Cutugno and other authors became part of a dispute within the Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, as some deputies demanded to insert the Italian singer among agent of the Russian government to promote the war in Ukraine;<sup>93</sup> Cutugno met Russian president Putin once, but claimed he never expressed political opinion or bias toward the Kremlin, unlike his colleague Albano Carrisi, who was actually inserted in the Ukrainian blacklist.

### **Trade and Economic Ties, Tourism**

I already mentioned the importance of the ties established during Soviet times and economic penetration through major players and assets as FIAT and ENI; however, it is important to light the focus on the contemporary bilateral trade and economic relations between Italy and the Russian Federation. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia abandoned the planned economy and replaced it with an open economy. During the 1990s, the country suffered due to a high political instability, the First Chechen War (1994 – 1996) and the financial crisis in 1997-98: the GDP plunged and hyperinflation made the rouble worthless. The major resources of the country were in the hands of few individuals, the so-called oligarchs that seized money and power and became extremely influential. When in 2000 Vladimir Putin was elected president for the first time, immediately he pushed to reform the economy and to nationalise the major oil and gas companies, as revenues from hydrocarbons allowed the Russian government in the early 2000s to pay its former debts; the outbreak of the war in Iraq in 2003 pressed the oil price up and favoured Russian state-run companies' profits. The incomes helped in raising public wages and to modernise infrastructures and promote investments; one can not argue that Russia since the end of the 1990s jumped up and took a major turn, as main indicators increased notably. Russia joined main world economic institutions, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and after a long negotiation process, the World Trade Organisation, attempting to integrate in the world economy and to play its role as it used to be back in Soviet times.<sup>94</sup> Russia also promoted initiatives to form a free trade area within the Eurasian Economic Union and to cooperate with other emerging economies as the BRICS forum, along with China, Brazil, India and South Africa, is held every year in a location of the five countries; matters of dialogue and discussion are the world economy, trade and trade policy, financial markets. Despite its aim to involve more and more actors to the table, Russia is weary of the importance of economic ties with European countries, the United States and Japan, so far, the world richest economies. Russia was introduced in the G7 summit (then G8) and was expelled after the Ukrainian crisis; the G20 has been elected as the favourable platform to discuss issues and to meet with world leaders. Russia is Europe's main natural gas provider, while European economies such as Germany, France and Italy are top exporters to Russia; the

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<sup>93</sup> Moretti C., *Toto Cutugno e l'Ucraina: "Deluso e arrabbiato: da 'Uomo dell'anno' a persona non grata"*, 15th March 2019, [repubblica.it](https://www.repubblica.it)

[https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/musica/2019/03/15/news/toto\\_cutugno-221661003/](https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/musica/2019/03/15/news/toto_cutugno-221661003/)

<sup>94</sup> The World Trade Organisation, Russian Federation, accessions, negotiations and process, WTO official website, [wto.org](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/a1_russie_e.htm)

Ukrainian crisis clearly damaged trade ties between Russia and Europe, despite the gas supplies never stopped. While the Nord Stream 2 project that should carry the gas from Russia to Germany is going on, the original South Stream pipeline has been corrected and will bypass Ukraine; the support of Turkey, who is going to be a transit step, changed the name in Turkish Stream.

### *Italy and Russia*

Italy represents one of Russia's top European partners, since the relationship between Moscow and Rome dates back in time and despite unpleasant episodes and the recent sanctions and counter-sanctions due to the Ukraine dossier, the two countries did not stop trading, although volumes have significantly decreased. In 2019, according to the Italian Trade Agency, Italy has been Russia's fifth supplier and seventh client in the world; total interchange amounted at 20,5 billion euros, with a small decrease of 0,2% than 2018. The Russian imports from Italy amounted at 8,7 billion euros, with an 8,5% increase (4,4% of the market), meanwhile the Russian exports toward Italy fell down to 11,8 billion euros (- 5,8%); the trade balance deficit is about 3,1 billion euros, penalising Italy (general decrease of 31,7%).<sup>95</sup> Top export sectors for Italy in Russia are mechanics, chemical and pharmaceutical industry, fashion and clothing and food and beverages. Main imports from Russia towards Italy are clearly hydrocarbons, minerals, pearls and precious stones; other products like plastic materials, wood and hides have sensibly decreased. The main difficulties are represented by the sanctions that the EU, and so Italy, imposed on Russia and the counter-sanctions on EU food and agriculture goods, which slowed trade consistently and general weak growth and unsatisfying performances from Italian and other European economies. The incomprehension and tensions between Moscow and Brussels are not facilitating bilateral trade nor investments, as China is gaining influence and room in the world's largest country. Since the complications Moscow is facing with Europe, the Russian government aims at expanding its trade routes and promoting not only energy resources, but also agricultural goods (Russia is among world leading wheat producer and exporter, despite a little forecasted decrease<sup>96</sup>) and other raw materials, such as wood and minerals. Whereas Germany and The Netherlands are Russia's European top partners, China is Russia's main trade partner and in Asia, Republic of Korea and Japan follows; yet Turkey is increasing its quota among Russian partners.

As for the bilateral investments, foreign direct investments represent a further staple of Russian – Italian economic ties. According to the Russian Central Bank, who provides data for both stocks and flows, between 2013 and 2019, numbers have faced an irregular course. In particular Italian FDI in flows toward Russia suffered a major collapse in 2015 and in 2017, amounting at the half of 2019 at 276 million US dollars, while stocks are constantly increasing since 2015 and at the same period counted for over 5 billion US dollars.

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<sup>95</sup> Ufficio ICE di Mosca, *Nota Paese Federazione Russa*, pp.19 – 20, 5. Relazioni commerciali

Italia – Russia, February 2020, ICE – Agenzia per la promozione all'estero e l'internazionalizzazione delle imprese italiane

<sup>96</sup> US Department of Agriculture, *Russia: Grain and Feed Update*, Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), 21<sup>st</sup> February 2020, fas.usda.gov

<https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/russia-grain-and-feed-update-14>

As for Russian FDI in Italy, flows in June 2019 were 57 million US dollars, with a significant downturn in 2018; stocks remain quite stable around 2,8 billion US dollars. Main destinations of Italian FDI in Russia are the manufacturing industry (57%), wholesale (22%), real estate (13%); constructions account for 5%, while communications and scientific activities remain marginal.<sup>97</sup>

### *Cuisine, fashion, design and industry*

Starting from the mechanics and machineries sector, it is interesting to provide details on the trends of the different markets in Russia and Italy's main competitors for every of these sectors. Within machinery imports in the Russian Federation, more than 50% of it is employed for utensils and secondly for aerospace and aeronautical industry, as Russia is a well-known military constructor; Italy ranks among top three machinery suppliers of Russia, with China and Germany and its market quota is over 11%. In the automotive sector, Italian cars do not compete with Korean, German or Japanese brands, despite the appreciation for Italian luxury vehicles. The fashion and clothing sector is perhaps one of the most expressive and symbolic of *Made in Italy's* excellences. Fashion and clothing market are constantly growing and Italian brands are present, despite the customer target is medium and medium-high, yet a minority of potential buyers: indeed, Italian firms suffer the competition with China and Bangladesh, who offer cheaper merchandise and are improving the quality of their goods, penetrating aggressively the Russian market. In this sector, distribution is the key factor and China is leading also due to a distributing winning strategy. Selling mechanism are evolving and so is the market, with the increasing success of e-commerce and clothing and accessories franchises; still, mono-brand shops are quite spread, especially in luxury shopping centres. Moscow and Saint Petersburg are clearly the main cities where to sell, but high potential is represented by the regions, still unexplored. Russian imports from Italy in the period January – August 2019 registered 318 million euros, with an increase of 1,6% compared to 2018: Italy is at third place, behind China and Bangladesh, with a 7,3% quota of the market.<sup>98</sup> Even in the shoes and skins market the Italian companies and brands have to face such a powerful competitor as the Chinese, which represent more than half of the market in the Russian Federation; Italy occupies the third place, as Vietnam overtook the *Belpaese* in 2019, with a 11,8% market quota and almost 300 million euros of profits from sale. In the skins market, Italy maintains solidly its second place, but Chinese leadership can simply not be reached. Cosmetics and perfumes are seeing the great transition to the online shopping through different platforms, as franchises registered a loss of 7%. Eyewear market in Russia is almost entirely imported; mainly, glasses are sold in eyewear shops, chemistries, mono-brand shops and online. Italy is among top exporters, with a 10,8% market quota, behind China (27,1%) and Ireland (22,3%). The jewellery market presents a positive pace and Italy competes with China for the second place of the podium, whereas Armenia

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<sup>97</sup> Ufficio ICE di Mosca, *Nota Paese Federazione Russa*, pp. 30 – 31 - 32, 7. Investimenti Bilaterali, February 2020, ICE – Agenzia per la promozione all'estero e l'internazionalizzazione delle imprese italiane

<sup>98</sup> Ufficio ICE di Mosca, *Nota Paese Federazione Russa*, pp. 41 – 42 - 43, 8. Analisi della strategia promozionale e settoriale, February 2020, ICE – Agenzia per la promozione all'estero e l'internazionalizzazione delle imprese italiane

experienced an outstanding boom from 2018 to 2019, gaining over 20% of market quota and more than 160 million of profits. The agricultural and food and beverage market is affected by the Russian counter-sanctions, imposed on OCSE countries since August 2014 on the basis of a presidential decree. Limitations are applied on meats, fruits, vegetables, fish and cheeses; goods have been progressively replaced by other suppliers around the world or by local producers, as the Russian government aims at implementing the import substitution. The Russian market top supplier is Belarus, followed by China, Brazil and Germany; Italy is in seventh place (3%), with a registered profit in 2018 of 868 million euros. Main goods purchased are pasta, wine, olive oil and coffee (roasted): Italy is top pasta, wine and coffee export leader in Russia and competes with Spain to conquer the olive oil market. The furniture market is also an interesting and potential market in Russia. Once again, the People's Republic dominates the scene, with more than 20% of the market quota. Import is easier for Chinese producers and visa procedures are facilitated, when compared with EU ones. Belarus is also growing, despite unable to compete in terms of quality furniture from Western Europe. Italy though, keeps third position with a 9,6% market quota; main initiative is represented by the exhibition “*I Saloni del Mobile*” Milano – Moscow, co-organised by the Italian Trade Agency. The pharmaceutical market has skyrocketed over the last years, passing 20 billion euros. Important contributions came from major international holdings, which invested massively in Russia to promote the research, modernisation and development. Italy takes 5% of the drug market, following Germany and France and 3% of the medical products market, lead by the US, Germany, China and Japan.<sup>99</sup>

Italy is a celebre destination for international tourism due to several reasons, from food to history and museums, art and architecture, the sea and the mountains and Russian tourists make no exception as Italy is their third world destination, after Turkey and Thailand. According to ENIT, the Italian Agency for Tourism, flows from the Russian Federation in the period between 2015 and 2018 increased of almost 70%; moreover, data show how Russian tourists spend consistent amount of money, as 45% of hotels chosen for the resort are luxury and extra-luxury category.<sup>100</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian tourists in 2020 were denied access to Italy and other main European destinations, as EU countries, following the indications of the European Commission, kept the frontiers closed. According to the criteria approved by the Council of the European Union, restrictions were lifted for a small list of countries, including Canada, Australia, Japan and South Korea, whereas countries where cases are still too high (per 100,000 inhabitants and compared to the EU average) as the United States, Brazil, India, México and many others, access is prohibited.<sup>101</sup> The Russian Federation progressively saw its numbers going down, but apparently not enough to agree on a reciprocal

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<sup>99</sup> Ufficio ICE di Mosca, *Nota Paese Federazione Russa*, pp. 59 – 60 – 61 - 62, 8. Analisi della strategia promozionale e settoriale, February 2020, ICE – Agenzia per la promozione all'estero e l'internazionalizzazione delle imprese italiane

<sup>100</sup> Blog Turismo Uniform, *Enit: i turisti russi scelgono l'Italia e il lusso*, 19th March 2019, redazione Blog Turismo Uniform, [blogturismo.uniform.com](https://blogturismo.uniform.com)

<https://blogturismo.uninform.com/enit-turisti-russi-italia-lusso/>

<sup>101</sup> European Council, Council of the European Union, *Lifting of travel restrictions: Council reviews the list of third countries*, 7<sup>th</sup> August 2020, [consilium.europa.eu](https://www.consilium.europa.eu)

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/08/07/lifting-of-travel-restrictions-council-reviews-the-list-of-third-countries/>

opening. Clearly, with the summer season gone, the damage is pretty strong for both, as Russia is also a destination for European tourists, although presumably the European Commission and the Council prioritised the opening of domestic frontiers, excluding the outer space and as a consequence, with a lack of overture, the Russian government preferred to promote domestic tourism and opened in early August toward Turkey and few additional destinations.<sup>102</sup> All in all, all these activities and sectors of the economy are going to be severely damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic and those damages will be calculated at the end of the year. It is quite difficult how negative these indicators are going to be, although the global recession is expected to be very hard.

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<sup>102</sup> The Moscow Times, *Russia to resume flights with Britain, Turkey, Tanzania from August 1<sup>st</sup>*, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2020, [themoscowtimes.com](https://www.themoscowtimes.com)  
<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/24/russia-to-resume-flights-with-britain-turkey-tanzania-from-aug-1-a70972>

## 4.1. Campari in Russia

### *Premise*

To prove how appreciated is Made in Italy in the Russian Federation, I decided to dedicate a small chapter of my thesis to a dossier on a business case of an Italian company that opened its branch in Russia. I chose Campari, as the Campari Group is one of Italy's leading firm in the beverage sector and I personally considered to pick a name from this sector because is one of the most appreciated in the world and a reason why people abroad fall in love in Italy and choose Italy as the holiday destination. As explained in the chapter before, there is a special bond for Russians with Italy and food and beverage make no exception, as the Italian cuisine is well-known in the Russian Federation. Pasta, pizza and other main Italian specialities became popular and appreciated, despite Italian goods tend to be more expensive and match the taste of medium and high consumers. By the way, several restaurants opened in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and found tremendous success, as in the last twenty years the wealth index has increased and people can afford more and aim at experiencing something new and foreign traditions.

I personally interviewed Dr Andrea Bertelli, managing director of Campari Ukraine-channel and customer marketing director of Campari Russia, to get to know the history of this adventure and experience and witness the difficulties and obstacles that Campari faced to affirm its brand and products in the Russian market; in addition, I retain this interview as an interesting perspective for the future trends of this market in Russia and perhaps, a suggestion for investors in the beverage sector. Dr Bertelli told me also about what happened during the quarantine period in Russia and makes a forecast for the upcoming months, which are meant to be tough and during this autumn a recession is expected to occur.

### **History of Campari Group in Russia**

Campari has celebrated this year its 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it is one of the leading alcoholic beverage producers in Italy and in the world, but when did Russia entered the Russian Federation market for the first time? - *"We entered the Russian market only in 2011, a little bit late if compared to the presence of other competitors, who started to sell their products before. In general, among all major active groups in the Russian Federation, the Campari Group was one of the last to step in"*. Dr Bertelli claims that in order to become decisive and stable in the Russian market, the Campari Group needed first to purchase their own dealer, an already existing company, which used to be the official distributor for Campari in Russia. In addition, back in 2011, when Campari entered the Russian market, few months were left before the Russian government could amend for a further time the Federal Law in terms of alcohol regulation, which restricted more the sale of alcoholic beverages in Russia. Campari stepped in during the last months of *'liberalisation'*; curiously, through the years, the 1995 Federal Law has been amended several times in order to put serious restrictions on the

alcohol consumption, a major issue for the population, as the life expectancy due to binge-drinking dropped down in the post-Soviet period.

After purchasing the official dealer company for the Group, Campari had to project an advertising campaign in order to promote its products to Russian costumers, who were definitely new to these beverages, perhaps with few exceptions as for example tourists, who enjoyed them in Italy or in some other holiday destination. Campari found itself inevitably penalised by its delay against its main competitors, within them Martini & Rossi, a celebre and enduring alcohol brand born in Turin and nowadays part of the larger Bacardi Group. *“The Russian market is a quite competitive one and tough to conquer”* – says Bertelli - *“although we offer a wide portfolio of Made in Italy beverages, and among them the Cinzano line and Mondoro, a sparkling wine which is produced in Italy on purpose for the Russian and Ukrainian market (thus, not a global brand) and conceived specifically to encounter the tastes of Russian consumers; indeed, it is an ASTI D.O.C.G., definitely a sweet one.* Dr Bertelli admits, it has not been so easy to meet the consumers’ taste as Russian consumers tend to prefer sweet beverages to sour ones and Campari, as a bitter liqueur encountered major obstacles to make them fall in love with it. Progressively, the Group is introducing little by little, the several brands of Campari (and therefore, Italian) tradition and attempting to meet the taste of clients.

In 2015, the Aperol bitter was finally introduced into the Russian market and immediately received a very positive welcoming, as the Aperol is far less strong than Campari in terms of alcoholic volume of the beverage and its taste is much sweeter; as the Russians, slowly learnt how to do a proper *Aperitivo*, the choice of introducing Aperol earned the deserved success. After the Aperol launch, the Campari Group planes the introduction of the liqueurs included in its own portfolio as the Sicilian Averna, the northern and lighter Braulio, the artichoke-tasting liqueur Cynar, which is going to be challenging because *“Russians are not accustomed to drink liqueurs as digestive drink after dinner in a bar or in a restaurant, this is a habit they lack and it is clearly more part of the Italian tradition”*. Among Campari Group’s brands, there are also further Italian products and international beverages, just as the Skyy vodka, Appleton Estate Rum, Glen Grant scotch whisky and Wild Turkey Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey; however, only Appleton and Wild Turkey are delivered in order to promote the sale of rum and bourbon whiskey, whereas Glen Grant is not part of the portfolio for the Russian market and very few vodka is distributed for logical reasons and difficulties in terms of access to the market, where the top priority for the Group is to promote the Italian brands and the *made in Italy* tradition, that is very popular among Russians. For Russian consumers, *made in Italy* is a synonymous of taste and quality and consequently their attitude is always positive towards Italian products, even though when they do not appreciate them at the first impact, as it happened with Campari; a bitter drink with a diverse tone from a traditional vermouth and a much higher alcoholic gradation. The introduction of Aperol and Cinzano products turned out to be a winning combination for the Campari Group in Russia, as they both truly represent the Italian style.



## **The Future Prospective and the Russian market**

What are Campari's main goals in Russia for the upcoming future? – *“The Sky is the limit!”* – claims Dr Bertelli – *“the Russian market is enormous and heterogenous, we have lots of challenges ahead. We are able to distribute in the whole Russian Federation, and that is a great advantage for us. Doing business in Russia in this sector is not easy at all, as the government sets a strong control over the alcoholic beverages, taxes are very high and as a producer and importer we need a license for everything: a license for importing alcohol in Russia, to distribute alcohol in Russia and for the sale. In addition, the Russian government asks producers to put a univocal tracked code that is registered by the a public informatic system, under control of public authorities. These clearly represents quite relevant costs for the company”*.

In order to promote its business properly in the Russian market, the Campari Group needed to have a physical presence in the country, a general headquarter in the capital city, Moscow, which is evidently the urban centre that attracts the most investments from abroad and where there is the highest concentration of capitals. According to Dr Bertelli, the Russian market offers great opportunities for the Campari Group, as the company itself is evolving and with it, its portfolio, too. The consumption of the Campari products is rising, yet Campari's share in the Russian market is relatively little, if compared to top six international players in the beverage sector, but its target is very high and outcomes might be even better. Campari is a big group and compared to small and medium size businesses gives it much more autonomy in managing its activities; this is the main difference with smaller producers. Usually, little companies begin with a smaller network and quite limited distribution, but this means that also its know-how is necessarily limited. What really makes the difference, is the capacity of the dealer and the building of the client network in the local market. In a market as the Russian one, where the access is not so easy and there is much regulation to respect and fulfil, an efficient dealer can be the key element to be successful.

*What and how the Russian consumers drink?*

It is commonly known that in Russia the alcohol consumption used to be extremely high, as the government already in the 1990s began a battle to reduce it, although the same then president Boris Eltsin used to drink very much and appeared drunk in public and during official meeting, perhaps representing a little bit the difficulties that Russia went through those years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As from the early 2000s the country experienced a consistent economic growth and thus main indicators, including life expectancy and a better nutrition, went up. The consumption of vodka, Russian main alcoholic beverage and product, as people tend to drink less, but drink better. (inserire dati su calo del consumo di alcol in Russia, possibilmente degli ultimi venti anni). Obviously, the consumers tend to have different tastes, depending on their age and habits, as for example Aperol is very popular among a range of people that goes from 18 years old to 35 years old, so it is the privileged drink (as in the cocktail *Spritz Aperol*) among younger generations, nevertheless it gained success among elders, too. Cinzano, with its sparkling wines and the vermouth lines

reaches better the taste of the adults. Sparkling wines are now facing and will face in the future a serious challenge from the local production, mainly in the south of the country, the regions in the Southern Federal District. The production is without doubt increasing and also the quality is improving, as producers have lower costs and taxes to pay, as generally the government attempts to favour the local productions. For consumers, who do not have high expenditure possibilities, these products represent an important fact, as they also can favour their national producers.

For wealthy consumers instead, Russian wines are a further offer that can widen their choices of drinking. *“Russian consumers have evolved their taste and are progressively maturing; perhaps, we could compare Russian consumer to a 18-20 years old boy, who has chance to spend a good amount of money and tends to look for the most expensive bottle available, as the price makes the difference. From time to time though, the boy matures its taste and moves toward a more rational choice; he would then choose not necessarily the most expensive wine, but the one with better quality and perhaps a balanced price. Thus, right now we could say that this boy has become a 30 years old man and he keeps on maturing”*. According to Dr Bertelli, the wine’s main problem is clearly its consistency, as these sparkling wines are meant to be consumed within a short period after the production process, whereas local producers meet broader obstacles when it is about ageing, thus referred to red wines. The local production’s main task is to improve its know-how, but clearly, they have good chances and positive tendency ahead. *“The concrete risk for Italian producers is to lose the market in favour of local producers, who are privileged by the import substitution program promoted by the Russian government, especially on food and beverage”*.

When in July 2014, the Council of the European Union imposed sanction on the Russian Federation due to the annexation of Crimea and the support towards the separatist republics in the Donbas region, Eastern Ukraine, the Russian government through a presidential decree, imposed one month later a package of counter-sanctions toward the European Union member states, including Italy. The counter-sanctions target includes fruits, vegetables, milk, fish, meat and cheese and created serious damage to Italian producers and supported instead, local producers. Consequences might become catastrophic if the counter-sanctions persist and looking at the international scenarios, currently no talks on sanctions removal has been announced or discussed. Exports will not recover from these losses over the last years and non-European supplies or local products are going to favoured. Italian producers need to be supported by the Italian government in order not to be penalised by this political setting; the imprinting as Italian brand can help in this sense, as clearly the distinction looks shiny clear to the consumer. *“As for Campari, our company is partner of Federvini, the Italian official association of wine producers and businesses, and we participated in meeting with the ministry of agriculture, in which the authorities demanded to purchase know-how, in order to improve the production standards”*. The Russian government strongly pushes for the agricultural sector to grow, despite the small percentage for which it incises on Russian gross domestic product. For example, the Russian ministry of agriculture is looking very positively toward the biological market and products.

## Advertising

Main advertising events are realised in bars and restaurants, where Campari is the official supplier and where retailers do have official license; events are organised in order to favour tasting and promoting the products of Campari's portfolio. *“When it comes to distribution, it is important to distinguish between off trade – supermarkets, grocery stores – and on trade – bars, pubs and restaurants. Proportions are quite different when we compare the Russian market and the Italian market, as for the former on trade represents around 20% quota, whereas for the latter it is circa 70%. In Italy, the on-trade distribution prevails because enduring traditions push consumers to have cocktails and the Aperitivo in the bars, along with friends; in addition, the more favourable climate makes it easier even to seat outside, drink and talk all together. In Russia instead, climate is much colder and it becomes unpleasant to spend time outside and drink, except when it is summertime”* – claims Dr Bertelli – *“as Russians lack the bar culture and prefer to consume inside or either purchase bottles at the supermarket and enjoy the moments together at home”*.

### **The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia**

As the quarantine was settled and announced by president Putin on 28<sup>th</sup> March, several commercial activities, bars, restaurants, discos and shops were forced to close. Approximately, these businesses were stopped for a period of sixty days, as first openings in Moscow started in mid-June, with the infection slowly going down. For Campari, damages were quite limited because large part of the supply is distributed off trade, that means that the majority of Campari's products are sold in supermarkets, commercial centres and specific beverage shops, with a small percentage left that is delivered to bars, restaurants, pubs and discos. As far as supermarkets and groceries basically never stopped, just like it happened in Italy, and continue regularly to work and be refilled with supply. In Italy instead, it went the other way round, as the products and brands of the Campari Group are mainly consumed in the bars, in the pubs and other drinking places, as the Italian tradition of *Aperitivo*, pushes the people to gather in these kind of places and drink all together a broad range of drinks and cocktails, from the celebre ‘Spritz’, either Aperol or Campari, to the stronger ‘Americano’ or ‘Negroni’ and ‘Negroni Sbagliato’, with less profits from the distribution in the supermarket, as Italian consumers prefer to enjoy the moment outside and opt for other beverages when going shopping at grocery.

In Italy, due to the general lockdown most of the businesses, including factories closed and thus, the production slowed down massively. Despite this negative limitation, the export of products from Italy to the Russian Federation and the following distribution to the supermarkets and groceries continued, so luckily no major losses came from this voice. As the bars and restaurants gradually returned to the previous ‘normality’, products have been regularly delivered once again, with the worst phase to be officially over. A new lockdown in Russia is unlikely to happen, as the authorities achieved the very first vaccine against COVID-19 and yet frontiers were kept closed: the only openings at the beginning of August, restarted flight connections with

Turkey, a top holiday destination for Russian tourists and few other countries, for example the United Kingdom, although Russian citizens need to apply for a visa in order to travel to Britain.

Campari Group's main concerns on the Russian market are so far represented by a plausible recession in the last months of 2020, yet it is still uncertain how negative this shrinking of the Russian economy will be. However, businesses reasonably, fear a plausible decrease of consumption and savings from customers, who are going necessarily to purchase less quantities and lower their personal budget for their expenditure.

## 5. Russia and Europe

### **A Complicated Cohabitation**

Geographically speaking, the Russian Federation is the largest country on Earth and finds itself between two continents, Europe and Asia, on the Eurasian block and still the discussion on which of those Russia belongs to, is on. Despite the Asian faction, the Russian president Vladimir Putin is quite more pragmatic and although ties with Europe and the US are facing a long phase of incomprehension and tensions, the Kremlin keeps on aiming at dialogue with the West. The strategy involves several actors in order to limit the preponderance of the US leadership: Moscow aims at an international sharing power platform, that is why the Russian government involved Iran and Turkey in the Syrian peace process (or perhaps, the Syrian partition), as the Kremlin exploits the vacuum to play its cards. Russian diplomacy, due to Soviet legacy is quite disciplined, skilled and capable to employ its political weight in the international arena. It is incorrect to talk about a Russian – Chinese alliance, as both denies the term and speak instead of partnership, developed due to an insistent US pressure. Washington is aware that China is the only country with the sufficient potential to attempt the challenge for global hegemony and that Russia has not got enough resources to play this tough game, as its economy is far way too reliant on energy outcomes and profits. However, instead of exploiting Russian awes in the Far East, as the Chinese are slowly penetrating the territory, and cooperating with Moscow, the US government keeps its focus on China containment and adopts any single initiative of disturb to obstacle the Russian Federation, pushing on Eastern European countries' anti-Russian resentment. Presumably, the withdrawal from the INF treaty promoted by the Trump administration in 2019 is a message to China, that hits Russia aside. On the basis of this hypothesis then, the US government attempts to force the Chinese to negotiate and to mutually reduce its nuclear arsenal, not to mention bilateral talks and highlighting Chinese technology and development.

As far as China refuses to play the game at the American rules, the US withdraws from mutual agreements previously signed with their Russian counterparts and indirectly promotes a more anarchic international system of nuclear deterrence. Since the end of the Cold War, nuclear deterrence has led to a higher risk of nuclear confrontation and less international stability: the United States came out as the true winner of a conflict that produced no direct fight between Washington and Moscow, but limited the uprising, coups and war to the so called 'third world', involved by an intense process of political change for several reasons: in Africa and in South-East Asia, nations fought to gain independence from European colonial empires, whereas Latin America underwent a battle against the increasing campaigns for socialism; the US through its intelligence agencies and the military tried to prevent and to stop any socialist party or pro-Soviet formation to govern any single county in the continent, continuing the application of the 'Monroe' doctrine. The military coup that overthrew Chilean president Allende was led by General Pinochet, supported by the Nixon administration, as part of the Condor operation, a series of takeover by militaries in several South

American countries, such as Argentina (1976), Uruguay (1973) and previously Paraguay (1954), Brazil and Bolivia (1964), to prevent the socialist and revolutionary forces to win the elections; in 1967, the Bolivian army on the direct order of president Barrientos and with the support of US intelligence, captured in an ambush and hereafter executed Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the leader of the Cuban revolution, who secretly entered the country two years before to support the local guerrilla and overthrow the military government.

The US government, after the victories of Castro in Cuba in 1959 and the 1962 missile crisis, was determined to deny the USSR a satellite in the American continent, although the militaries supported to stay in power committed brutal crimes and cancel the word democracy for several decades. Vietnam was also part of this strange conflict, where the two superpowers confronted each other in the so called 'proxy' wars. The very first was the Korean war, although historically and strategically it carried a much heavier weight than the highly tv-covered and symbolic conflict in Vietnam. As the Soviets supported the Viet Minh and the North Vietnam in its struggle for national unity, so the US financed the Mujahedin in Afghanistan against the Red Army, who intervened in the Central Asian country in 1979 and sought to defend the communist government in power in Kabul; the Soviets were forced to retire their contingencies in 1989, as part of Gorbaciov's plan of disengagement of armed forces from foreign territories. Afghanistan was then defined the 'Soviet Vietnam', with the Red Army enduring a major defeat by a guerrilla political formation; lately in 1996, the Taliban forces took power and installed an Islamic regime, which was overthrown by the American invasion of October 2001, following the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

The Cold War set fixed rules of confrontation, talks, cooperation and dialogue and perhaps, despite the nuclear danger, the dual reciprocity among Soviets and Americans, created a solid and reassuring equilibrium between the two superpowers, who came out victorious together of the Second World War. The dissolution of the USSR, the political crisis that the Russian Federation faced in its early years and the later rise of China opened an era with no clear rules of engagement and major uncertainty: Russia found itself on an unpleasant position, where it cannot determine the power equilibrium any longer, as the US keep on their hard line and do not make any single concession, with their main focus on Beijing's ambitions and plans. Russia has always felt the pressure from outside and accused the syndrome of encirclement: with its massive size and infinite borders, the Federation strives to maintain itself intact, but needs to keep its eyes open westward and eastward. Moscow aims at creating a multipolar world, where main global powers establish a new mechanism of global governance that includes nuclear deterrence regulation, regardless of a US or Chinese leadership and primacy. The quest for stability is a struggle to survive and to remain upright.

## Ukraine

A frozen scenario is presented by Kiev since the 2014 revolution and the overthrowing process of president Viktor Yanukovich. The clear goal behind the 2013-2014 revolution was to finally execute what failed with the Orange Revolution, so that Ukraine could finally move on the western front and break its ties with Russia, depicted by the revolution leaders as tyrant and violator of Ukrainian sovereignty. President Yanukovich did not sign the EU-Ukraine agreement and for this reason the revolt became a riot and a civil war, where nationalists took major turn and actions in order to provoke chaos. The election of Petro Poroshenko represented a clear confirmation of the protests and political events that occurred between February and March 2014, as the new president showed hostility towards the Russian Federation and asked for US and European aid and military support. The seizure of Crimea was a major element of fracture between Russia and the West: Moscow claimed the citizens of Crimea wanted to join the Russian Federation and a referendum was held with massive win in favour of the annexation. The United States and the European Union firmly refused to recognise the validity of the referendum. However, the real conflict broke out in the East of the country, in the Donbas region, where in the city of Luhansk and Donetsk opposed the outcome of the revolution in Kiev and announced the birth of two independent republics; the two separatists received the approval and support of Russia, yet no one has recognised them as independent states. The Minsk agreements, signed in Belarus with the diplomatic support of France and Germany, settled a compromise for the ceasefire and reunification of the two republics, with a special autonomous constitutional status; however, none of sides respected the agreements and the conflict proceeds on a slow pace with no major negotiation that could finally end the war.

The Normandy summit held in Paris in December 2019 just created the conditions for an exchange of prisoners and the promise to keep on working with this format, as the new Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, elected in April 2019<sup>103</sup>, is determined to solve an unpleasant situation, with the Eastern part of the country shaken by a frozen conflict and no control over the border with the Russian Federation. Ukraine clearly feels the presence of two separatist republics and the help of Russia as a violation of its territorial integrity and national sovereignty, although the former comedian is weary that he needs to talk with his Russian counterpart and enter a new phase that could guarantee more stability. Zelensky is pressured by the electors to solve the crisis in the East of the country, although he is also weary that negotiating with Russia would cause the rage of the nationalists and intransigent opposition leaders. Voters elected a comedian, as Poroshenko alimented anti-Russian rhetoric, but found no solution to the conflict in Donbas. President Zelensky announced the intention of starting a massive privatisation campaign that would centre resources, assets and wealth in the hands of few, rich and influential businessmen.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> President of Ukraine, Biography of Volodymyr Oleksandrovyeh Zelensky, [president.gov.ua](https://www.president.gov.ua/en/president/biografiya)  
<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/president/biografiya>

<sup>104</sup> Datskevych N., *Zelensky office launches large-scale privatisation in Ukraine*, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2019, business, [kyivpost.com](https://www.kyivpost.com/business/zelensky-signs-law-to-launch-large-scale-privatization-in-ukraine.html)  
<https://www.kyivpost.com/business/zelensky-signs-law-to-launch-large-scale-privatization-in-ukraine.html>

Ukraine, like Russia, after the collapse of the USSR, suffered a terrific spread of corruption, that still affects the nation. In June 2020, the International Monetary Fund announced the approval by the Executive Board of an eighteen-month five billion dollars Stand-By-Arrangement, succeeding the previous fourteen-month SBA, signed in December 2018 by former president Poroshenko; the IMF claimed the SBA has the aim of helping the Ukrainian economy through the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>105</sup> No significant support seems to be provided by the European institutions nor from main EU members and yet main benefits from the 2017 Association Agreement have to be seen. Furthermore, since his elections president Zelensky has been pressured by the Trump administration and ended as an unwilling protagonist of a US domestic political scandal: a telephone conversation between Trump and Zelensky has been intercepted and according to the tapes, the US president asked Zelensky to investigate Joe Biden's son and his past in a Ukrainian energy company, menacing the former comedian actor to cut military aid for over 400 million dollars.<sup>106</sup>

The scandal led to an attempt of impeachment by US Congress, although the Senate voted to reject the accusations toward the president. Over the last years, the Ukrainian economy suffered of a bad recession, also due to political events and the war in Donbas, despite GDP started growing again in 2018 and continued in 2019;<sup>107</sup> obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic, as in the whole Europe, provoked serious damages. General outlooks prove that Ukraine's economy can be competitive, although a more stable political situation and a peaceful solution for the East can be the decisive turn. Zelensky also knows that Russia is still an important partner for Ukraine and a reconciliation may help bilateral trade, too. As for Russia, Moscow reacted negatively and aggressively as it felt betrayed, yet the reaction towards the *Jevromaidan* revolution cannot be compared with Soviet times, as there is no doubt that the Red Army would have invaded Ukraine and reached the Polish border. Thus, it is incorrect to evaluate the Russian response as excessive; it might be defined instead, as a damage limitation attempt, as the Kremlin and the ministry of defence are aware of their mistakes when evaluating the political development of Ukraine over the past years. One could argue that Putin may end up condemned for the loss of Ukraine, although a more reflexive and rationale analysis would admit and precise that it already happened in 1991, when Ukraine obtained the independence from the USSR.

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<sup>105</sup> International Monetary Fund, *IMF Executive Board approves 18-month US\$5 billion Stand-By-Arrangement for Ukraine*, Press Release No. 20/239, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2020, imf.org  
<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/06/09/pr20239-ukraine-imf-executive-board-approves-18-month-us-5-billion-stand-by-arrangement>

<sup>106</sup> Michelin F., *Che cosa si sono detti Trump e Zelensky. Il testo della telefonata*, USA2020, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2019,  
<https://formiche.net/2019/09/telefonata-impeachment-trump-declassifica-zelensky/>

<sup>107</sup> OEC, Report on Ukraine, 2018 data, country profile, world, oec.world  
<https://oec.world/en/profile/country/ukr>



## Belarus

On 9<sup>th</sup> August 2020 in Belarus presidential elections were held. The elections saw the president in office, Alexander Lukashenko, defeating the opposition candidate, the human rights activist Svetlana Tikhanovskaya with an overwhelming majority, as the final polls claimed the winner conquered 80% of the votes. The opposition candidate Tikhanovskaya complained against the president and the Central Election Commission, claiming the elections were rigged and falsified, as she stated confidently to have secured a majority of the votes. Before the elections, more than a candidate was denied the race for presidency of Belarus, as Sergei Tikhanosky, the husband of the opposition candidate and Viktor Babariko, a banker and businessman and political opposer to the Lukashenko presidency; both Tikhanovsky and Babariko were arrested by the police, the former officially for participating in an unauthorised mass event, while the latter was accused of illegal financial activities. Babariko was said to be the favourite to beat the long-standing president in office, even though he was not admitted to the presidential elections as an official candidate.<sup>108</sup> A further candidate, Valery Tsepkalo, a former Belarusian diplomat, ambassador to the US and founder and director of the Belarus Hi-Tech Park (a tax and legal regime in favour of IT-business development), was denied the presidential race; Tsepkalo proposed to open the Belarusian economy and to limit presidential terms to a maximum of two. As his candidacy was refused by the electoral commission, Tsepkalo fled with his family to Russia, claiming he feared repression and prosecution from police and state authorities. From his self-exile, Tsepkalo officially announced his support and hope for Svetlana Tikhanovskaya to win the elections and to gather the opposition against president Lukashenko and to start a new era for Belarus.<sup>109</sup>

### *Lukashenko vs the opposition*

The opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya denounced the fraud of last presidential elections, as president Lukashenko was confirmed with 80% of the votes. She eventually fled the country and repaired in Lithuania, where she met delegates of the country, Polish and American. The EU has shown its support toward the protests against president Lukashenko, who faced the opposition and ordered the arrest of several protesters. Few days ago, the other opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova and Maksim Znak were arrested, at least for the latter, as the former is officially disappeared and the Nobel Prize for Literature Svetlana Aleksievich is basically the only free opposition member. Lukashenko, defined by the Western media the last dictator of Europe, seems not bothered at all by the international calls for new and free elections, with the EU institutions and Germany on the first line to promote a turn toward a negotiation. Officially, the Commission admitted it did not want to transform Belarus into a new Ukraine, although the support of Poland and Lithuania

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<sup>108</sup> Jegelevicius L., *Victor Babariko, main rival of Alexander Lukashenko, barred from Belarus presidential election*, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2020, Euronews, Belarus, euronews.com  
<https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/14/victor-babariko-main-rival-of-alexander-lukashenko-barred-from-belarus-presidential-electi>

<sup>109</sup> Tétrault-Farber G., *Self-exiled Belarus presidential contender pins hopes on new 'Joan of Arc'*, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2020, Reuters World News, reuters.com  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-idUSKCN24R0QG>

towards the Belarusian opposition is clearly a move against Lukashenko, who could not but ask the help of the Russians. Russia promised and prepared a police force to intervene in case of necessity, despite the Kremlin keeps on pushing Lukashenko to start dialogue with the opposition; Russia's main interest is to guarantee that Belarus does not slip into Western hands, as it is the only buffer left between the first line of defence and the most advanced NATO outposts in the Baltic republics. The situation is certainly evolving and Russia monitors carefully the events, as Moscow cannot afford to lose a precious ally such as Belarus. Curiously, Lukashenko himself opened to the West and to the US in order to negotiate with Russia better conditions: the two entered on a collision course, as Belarus complained about the increase of oil supplies price. Belarus enjoyed a special regime and price of oil supplies from the Russian Federation and lamented with the Russian counterpart the fact. The Russians though, seen the fall of oil price over the last months, imposed on Belarus a higher price, since the previous one was excessively cheap. Lukashenko started to open talks with foreign leaders to break the Russian pressure and attempting to look for other partners.

On September 14<sup>th</sup>, Alexander Lukashenko visited Russian president Putin in Sochi, as the leaders discussed the recent presidential elections in Belarus and negotiated a loan from the Russian Federation to the Minsk counterparts of 1,5 billion dollars. President Putin affirmed he hoped the loan will help grant the Belarus state a more solid financial reputation; the Russian leader also said the two countries need to work together to restore trade levels, as the pandemic damaged interexchange between Moscow and Minsk.<sup>110</sup> Lukashenko's visit to Russia was meant to confirm the solidity of Russian – Belarusian ties, with the former to defend his legitimacy from the civic protests and the attacks of the opposition and foreign leaders. It is still uncertain whether the Kremlin will keep on supporting Lukashenko no matter what happens in Belarus, although the message from the manifestations in Minsk and other Belarusian cities is a direct request of reforms and change, as the president rules the country since 1994. Lukashenko appears confident and sure he will not need to provide any concession as long as Russia is on his side; however, the Kremlin monitors the situation and takes its time to evaluate a renovation of Minsk's leadership. Quite unlikely Moscow would open to the opposition, as Tikhanovskaya, who became after the elections the most relevant voice of Lukashenko's opponents, already fled the country and moved to Lithuania, therefore siding with the Baltics and the Poles, whereas former establishment figures, such as Igor Leshenya or Siarhej Rumas, the Belarusian prime minister recently fired from Lukashenko, might be expendable for Moscow and open a new political phase for Belarus, maintaining the country on the Russian side.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps, also the name of Babariko might turn into a possible option, as the precluded candidate was for a long period of time at the head of the Belgazprombank, owned by the Russians. Despite the support shown towards Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the European countries and the United States made no big effort to promote a popular revolution and overthrow the long-standing president, as

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<sup>110</sup> TASS News Agency, *Russia to extend \$1.5 bln loan to Belarus*, 14<sup>th</sup> September 2020, [tass.com  
https://tass.com/economy/1200561](https://tass.com/economy/1200561)

<sup>111</sup> Pellicciari I., *Cambiare leader per salvare una leadership. Così Mosca pensa al dopo Lukashenko*, 20th August 2020, [formiche.net  
https://formiche.net/2020/08/mosca-pensa-al-dopo-lukashenko/](https://formiche.net)

domestic issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic represent much uncomfortable problems for the Western leaders. Besides, the precedent of Ukraine is a reminder for the West that a Russian response might be even tougher. Yet is no clear whether the protests would push for Belarus to change side and abandon Russia: instead, the population shows its suffering and sorrow due to years of authoritarianism and lack of political plurality. In addition, Tikhanovskaya herself expressed controversial views on the relationship with the Russian Federation, as she demanded the respect of the sovereignty of Belarus, but assured she is interested in preserving positive ties with Moscow.<sup>112</sup>

### **The Navalny poisoning and Russian Domestic Issues**

On 20<sup>th</sup> August, Russian lawyer, blogger and political opposer Alexey Navalny suffered of a sudden illness on the plane on his way back to Moscow from the Siberian city of Tomsk, end step of the tour of Navalny's political rallies in support of candidates, who are running for either the city council or the governor seat. The blogger started feeling bad and the plane executed an emergency landing at the airport of the city of Omsk. Navalny was immediately transferred in the Omsk city hospital and according to Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh, the blogger and lawyer was presumably poisoned.<sup>113</sup> The news rebounded on Russian and international media and immediately suspects indicated responsibility toward public authorities and the Kremlin. The German government offered its support and to transfer the patient to Germany to guarantee better sanitary treatment, as the Russian lawyer was intubated and moved to the intensive care unit.<sup>114</sup> The Kremlin, through the words of spokesman Dmitry Peskov, remitted the decision, whether to authorise or not the transfer abroad to the Omsk hospital director. Initially, the doctors of the Omsk hospital, where Navalny was admitted, refused to allow the transfer to Germany, due to healthcare reasons and explained that the blogger was not poisoned, but perhaps he only suffered of an eating disorder.<sup>115</sup> Navalny's staff pushed to let the transfer and his wife wrote an official request to Russian president Vladimir Putin to authorise the German officers to enter Omsk and carry the blogger to Berlin. On the following day, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, the doctors officially authorised the transfer to Germany, as a unit of the German Federal Army carried the patient to the *Charité* private clinic in Berlin.<sup>116</sup> Ten days later, on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, the German Federal government stated the experts have found trace of *Novichok* in Navalny's organism; the German authorities

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<sup>112</sup> De Bonis M., Moscatelli O., *La Bielorussia in bilico continua a pendere verso la Federazione Russa*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *È la Storia, bellezza!*, N°8 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

<sup>113</sup> TASS News Agency, *Navalny's plane conducts emergency landing in Omsk over blogger's suspected poisoning*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020, tass.com  
<https://tass.com/emergencies/1191729>

<sup>114</sup> TASS News Agency, *Opposition figure Alexei Navalny hooked up to ventilator, unconscious, says spokeswoman*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020, tass.com  
<https://tass.com/emergencies/1191739>

<sup>115</sup> Litvinova D., AP, *Russian doctors refuse Alexei Navalny's transfer to Germany and say he wasn't poisoned*, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2020, Time Magazine, World, Russia, time.com  
<https://time.com/5882224/alexei-navalny-germany/>

<sup>116</sup> Euronews, AP, AFP, *Alexei has landed in Germany for medical treatment after suspect 'poisoning'*, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2020, euronews.com  
<https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/20/russian-opposition-politician-navalny-in-hospital-for-poisoning>

invited the Russian counterparts to clarify and investigate over the poisoning of the opposition politician. The Italian Foreign Ministry joined the request of Germany and expressed concern over the episode.<sup>117</sup>

A further reprimand came from the US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, who asserted the likely chance of direct responsibility of the Russian government for the poisoning.<sup>118</sup> As for the Russians, Moscow rejected the accuses, claiming there is no evidence of any responsibility and furthermore, the Russian government officially asked the German authorities to examine the results, but no German response was given back yet. Instead, the German government handed Navalny's tests over the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is usually involved in the inspections in war scenarios, as it happened frequently in Syria, since the conflict started in 2011.<sup>119</sup> German specialists at the clinic *Charité* affirmed that Navalny exited the coma and yet they are uncertain of possible permanent damages on the individual due to the gas; perhaps, after a total recovery, the Russian blogger and lawyer will speak and make his point. Thus, who did it? Who did attempt to poison the Russian opposition politician? Was it the Kremlin to poison Navalny? Or perhaps, was it somebody in Siberia, annoyed by Navalny's activities? As a diplomatic dispute between Russia and Germany is taking place, no major responsible has been found yet, although the Western press and the request of an investigation and of clarifying the facts surely point the finger against the Russian president. However, it seems to be a quite foolish move for Putin to attempt to eliminate a political opponent that beyond the clear restrictions, does not meet consensus and became popular due to inquiries on corruption, a problem that Russians are weary of. The episode though, puts much pressure on the Kremlin, despite Navalny is no danger to political leadership of Putin. Navalny already organised public rallies and when in 2017 he attempted to move his rally to the Tverskaya Street, the Kremlin immediately ordered the arrest of his and his fellows.<sup>120</sup>

In addition, it is quite reasonable to think that if the Russian government (including the secret services) really wanted Navalny to be dead, the blogger and lawyer would be highly likely already gone.<sup>121</sup> If the poisoning with the Novichok agent has actually occurred, the damage for the Kremlin could be much higher than expected, as whether it was somebody in Russia or foreign agents to poison the opposer, the failed prevention of the attempted presumed assassination is a let-down for the president and for the secret services, too. It would mean that state institutions do not have control of what happens within the Federation's territory

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<sup>117</sup> Il Fatto Quotidiano, *Alexei Navalny, il governo tedesco: "Avvelenato con l'agente nervino Novichok"*. Von der Leyen: "Spregevole". *Farnesina: "Russia chiarisca"*, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2020, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/09/02/alexei-navalny-il-governo-tedesco-avvelenato-con-lagente-nervino-novichok-von-der-leyen-atto-spregevole-e-codardo/5917941/>

<sup>118</sup> Choi M., *Pompeo: 'Substantial chance' senior Russian officials were behind Navalny poisoning*, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2020, Foreign Policy, [politico.com](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/09/pompeo-russians-navalny-poisoning-411249)  
<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/09/pompeo-russians-navalny-poisoning-411249>

<sup>119</sup> TASS News Agency, *Germany hands over Navalny's test results to OPCW*, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2020, [tass.com](https://tass.com/world/1199097)  
<https://tass.com/world/1199097>

<sup>120</sup> Scaglione F., *Il senso della sfida di Navalny a Putin*, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017, [limesonline.com](https://www.limesonline.com/il-senso-della-sfida-di-navalny-a-putin/99603)  
<https://www.limesonline.com/il-senso-della-sfida-di-navalny-a-putin/99603>

<sup>121</sup> Pellicciari I., *Navalny, ecco cosa (non) sappiamo. Il retroscena bombastico di Pellicciari*, 29<sup>th</sup> August 2020, [formiche.net](https://formiche.net/2020/08/navalny-cosa-non-sappiamo-retroscena-bombastico-pellicciari/)  
<https://formiche.net/2020/08/navalny-cosa-non-sappiamo-retroscena-bombastico-pellicciari/>

and somebody will pay the consequence for this mistake<sup>122</sup>. An interesting hypothesis suggest a rather reverse scenario: on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko, who sees himself tackled from the opposition's protests, announced that the secret services of his country intercepted a conversation between the German and the Polish government, an information that was soon forwarded to the Russian FSB. According to Lukashenko, the content of the conversation would reveal that the Navalny poisoning episode was simply fabricated and the political opposer was not poisoned at all. Lukashenko also claimed, it was a message to the Kremlin, not to intervene in Belarus over the developments of the political crisis.<sup>123</sup> No major Russian confirmation occurred, therefore Lukashenko's statements are the only source that supports this theory, but perhaps the Russian authorities made no obstacle to the ongoing operation and looked favourably the option of keeping Navalny abroad and away from the Russian territory. This theory needs absolute confirmation, as it is no more than a hypothesis, although it draws interesting background to such key international and political affair; evidence to the matter would also determine a direct connection between the presidential elections in Belarus and the attempted suspected poisoning of Alexei Navalny episode. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September, Navalny is dismissed by the *Charité* hospital in Berlin, after a complete recovery from the suspected Novichok poisoning, although a statement by the medical staff claims it is too early to determine whether there will be consequences for the patient's health; Navalny expressed the desire to come back to Russia, as the Kremlin welcomed the news from Berlin and confirmed its approval to the return of the blogger.<sup>124</sup>

### *Navalny's political view*

What is Alexei Navalny's proposal for Russia? He is said to be a criticist of Vladimir Putin, but quite rarely his vision is exposed by the Western media. The Russian blogger talked about corruption in the country and often accused the Russian Prime Minister and former president Dmitry Medvedev to be responsible and held accountable for that. In 2011, the lawyer founded his Anti-Corruption Foundation and lately opened a YouTube Channel that counts several subscribers. Navalny also took aim at Russian foreign policy and Putin's foreign policy, as the blogger claimed attitude towards Ukraine is negative and disrespectful and this is the reason why Ukrainians hate Russians now; according to Navalny, Russia, along with Ukraine and Belarus shall work and coexist together, despite he did not side with the Ukrainian government on the Crimean issue, Navalny did not talk of giving the republic back, saying it is something unrealistic and a referendum shall be held again. Navalny also criticised the military intervention in Syria, claiming it is a waste of money and resources that could be spend on national territory. Radio Free Europe contested to the blogger his open

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<sup>122</sup> Pellicciari I., *Da Navalny a Minsk, Pellicciari svela cosa rischia davvero il Cremlino*, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2020, formiche.net <https://formiche.net/2020/09/navalny-minsk-pellicciari-cremlino/>

<sup>123</sup> TASS News Agency, *Lukashenko says Minsk intercepted chat proving Navalny's poisoning was utter fabrication*, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2020, tass.com <https://tass.com/world/1196947>

<sup>124</sup> Corriere della Sera, *Navalny dimesso dall'ospedale. La Russia: "Può tornare quando vuole"*, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2020, Redazione Esteri, corriere.it [https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20\\_settembre\\_23/navalny-dimesso-dall-ospedale-possibile-recupero-completo-17887330-fd78-11ea-a13a-1a7326323030.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_settembre_23/navalny-dimesso-dall-ospedale-possibile-recupero-completo-17887330-fd78-11ea-a13a-1a7326323030.shtml)

nationalist attitude, as the blogger participated back in 2011 to the 'Russian march', a parade that according to the media, was a gathering of all kind of Russian nationalists: indeed, Navalny did not deny his participation at all and he also joined a campaign to ask for the stop of funding of Caucasian republics, defined a waste of money, too.<sup>125</sup> Often, the Western media represent Russian opposition forces as liberal, although not every of them is against the president or can be defined as such;<sup>126</sup> this is also due to a very low interest in taking a closer look to the Russian political scene, as Putin is somehow always given for granted, whether the president is appreciated or heavily criticised. Navalny also ran for mayor of Moscow in 2013 against current mayor Sergei Sobyenin and attempted to run for president of Russia in the last presidential elections of 2018, but the Central Electoral Commission barred him from the candidacy and the Russian Supreme Court rejected his lawsuit, as Navalny filed a second one against the Supreme Court.<sup>127</sup> However, Navalny is currently the only political leader in Russia to support the homosexual marriage and during the electoral campaign stated he would have abolished the anti-gay propaganda law.

### *The opposition in Russia*

Nevertheless, Moscow and Saint Petersburg are quite isolated realities and enjoy a better status if compared to Siberia, the Caucasus or the Russian Far East; the two major Russian cities entertain directly ties with the rest of the world, especially with Europe and millions of tourists come every year to visit the capital and the city on the Baltic Sea that took its name from the founder of the Russian empire, Peter the Great. Moscow and Saint Petersburg present variety of ethnic communities and therefore, the culture climate is far more open under all aspects. This also means that dissent is much higher and approval toward the government is lower, although it still keeps on a good percentage. The opposition in Russia is very fragmented and regionally divided, this is why Navalny went to promote the candidates of his party in Siberia. Certainly, the Russian political system suffers decades of single-party authority and it did not develop a consistent plural political culture; Russia never experienced a democracy before 1993 and yet the country seems unable to build a consistent and solid democratic system. The opposition forces to the president's party United Russia are far away from the progressive parties the West wishes to represent: both the communist party and the liberal-democratic party are not moderate nor inclined to promote human rights, gender equality or to guarantee equal rights to the homosexuals. In addition, at the State Duma the only determined opposition party is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which claims to be the heir of the Soviet Union Communist Party; the other political formations, such as A Just Russia, Civic Platform led by Russian businessman Mikhail Prokhorov and the Liberal and Democratic Party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, remained quite marginal. Russian

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<sup>125</sup> Herszenhorn M., *5 things to know about Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020, politico.eu <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-alexei-navalny/>

<sup>126</sup> Cucciolla R. M. (Editor), *Dimensions and Challenges of Russian Liberalism. Historical Drama and New Prospects*, Introduction: The Many Dimensions of Russian Liberalism, p. 31, Cham (Switzerland), Springer, 2019

<sup>127</sup> Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, *Russian Supreme Court rejects Navalny appeal on presidential election ban*, 30<sup>th</sup> December 2017, Russia, rferl.org <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-navalny-hearing-supreme-court-election-president/28947265.html>

society proves to be very conservative, as the referendum, that contains reforms like the confessional nature of the Russian state, or the marriage between a man and a woman as the only possible, received a significant approval, with few spaces for the contrary. Thus, it is important to underline that Russia should and could not be compared with Western democracies, as the political and cultural background is definitely different. This obviously does not mean that Russian society will not change in the future, but the opposition, in order to promote a different vision of the country and to reform it, needs to understand the deep roots of Russian society and the needs and requests of the Russian people.

It is no secret that Putin inserted those amendments inside the constitutional reform, not only to conserve his approach to power, both domestically as well as internationally, but also to meet the consensus and the approval of the majority of voters that during the years, voted him and confirmed him over the electoral turns. Putin managed through the years to build a strong consensus among the lower and middle class of the country, social groups that he favoured with reforms, such as the increase of minimum wage and the pension remuneration; the economic model that the Russian president attempted to construct, is based on a state-capitalism and a fight against the so-called oligarchs, who seized natural gas and oil resources, privatised with the support of the Yeltsin presidency. Moreover, Putin made important remarks on the importance of the traditions, the Christian religion, the historical symbols, the role of the Orthodox church and the Russian national pride, as after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the nineties, the spirit of the Russians proved to be defeated, depressed, discouraged and with very little hope and confidence towards the future.

### *North – Stream 2*

The Navalny poisoning episode and the political protests in Belarus against the long-standing president Lukashenko are somehow connected, as they both involve three key actors: the Russian Federation, Germany and the United States. It is no mystery that the German government opted to hospitalise Navalny to give the opposition politician much more visibility than he has in his motherland and what is at stakes between Berlin and Moscow, is the North Stream 2 pipeline, which should carry the natural gas from the Russian harbour of Vyborg on the Gulf of Finland, to the Hanseatic city of Greifswald, in the Mecklemburg – Vorpommern region, north-east of Germany. Clearly, this project, a strengthening of the already existing tube, faces several opponents in the region, such as Poland and the Baltic republics, not to mention the United States, who menaced to impose sanctions on the Russian – German pipeline. The Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel is few time away from the end of her last term as Head of the German government and the pipeline encountered criticism in the public debate: indeed, it is not just the Green party to openly protest and demanding the end of the construction of the pipeline, but also the German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, a member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), affirmed the existing chance of putting a decisive halt to it. (nota) As for the Russians, the Kremlin cannot simply surrender to the pressure from Washington and the Eastern European opposers, both for economic and political reason: Russia is a top natural gas provider and gas profits are a considerable voice in the Russian economy; in addition, president Putin is not willing to stop a project

of which suspension will damage the country and favour the anti-Russian hard-liners. The president's popularity is slowly decreasing and such a humiliation cannot be afforded.<sup>128</sup> The German government is clinched between two fires: abandoning the project would mean a likely tough Russian retaliation, but opting to continue would create tension with its main ally, the USA. Germany finds itself to choose and to defend its reputation, as Berlin seems to have eventually come to learn and experience the importance of geopolitics and why it matters.

### *Domestic coexistence and stability – Moscow against the regions*

Elections in Tatarstan and Siberia, obstacles to Moscow in handling situation. Pandemic federal management of the healthcare crisis decided by the Kremlin. The Navalny case related to the autonomy of local authorities from the central government: can Moscow delegate or does it need to force control and power over regional authorities to assure the national cohesion and avoid new separatism? No Chechen war is expected, but a perhaps an increasing dispute over funds and political and legislative autonomy. Russia is such a large country that includes different communities and ethnic groups and it is unlikely to keep country united if more concessions are given. The central government needs to maintain control over the regions and the autonomous republics. Moreover, as the electoral turn is going to involve almost half of the federal subjects that compose the Russian Federation, some of them are quite interesting cases to look at and to observe. For example, the region of Arkhangelsk in the north-west is going to elect the new governor and a harsh debate over the construction of a landfill generated dissatisfaction, while in Irkutsk region, in Eastern Siberia, saw a major wave of protests, as the former governor, Levchenko, member of the Communist party, resigned in 2019 under pressure of the Kremlin and now United Russia candidate, Igor Kobzev will challenge the communist candidate Shchapov; in the Irkutsk region, a consistent percentage of voters chose to reject the constitutional reform and it is not likely to be an easy score.<sup>129</sup> Novosibirsk, the third largest city of the Russian Federation, is going to elect a new city council and that is where Navalny went to promote his candidates, before leaving for Tomsk and to be hospitalised, after the suspect poisoning. Tomsk is reportedly another city, where Navalny aims to win and to defeat the 'regime'. Tatarstan though, remains the federated subject that more than others, claims its autonomy and space within the Federation. The population is not entirely Russian, the main ethnic group is the Tatar and despite a peaceful coexistence with the Christians, Islam is the traditional religion. Tatarstan never really pursued the independence process from Moscow, although in 1992 Kazan' authorities held a referendum on the region's sovereignty and the following 1994 treaty, which settled privileges and autonomy for the republic on the basis of a capacity of attracting foreign investments and large reserves of petrol. A move that perhaps, was necessary in a time, when the Muslim territories, after decades of silent

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<sup>128</sup> Caracciolo L., *La vera posta in gioco della Bielorussia e del caso Naval'nyj*, Rubrica Il Punto, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2020, articolo originariamente pubblicato su 'La Stampa', limesonline.com

<https://www.limesonline.com/rubrica/lucio-caracciolo-bielorussia-navalny-germania-usa-russia-nord-stream-2>

<sup>129</sup> The Moscow Times, *Russia's regional elections explained*, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2020, themoscowtimes.com

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/09/11/russias-regional-elections-explained-a71414>



cooperation under the communist regime, as with the end of state atheism, a revival of Islam (which saw its main focus in the Chechen conflict) emerged as a serious threat to the stability of the new Russian state, with major consequences in Central Asia.<sup>130</sup>

In 2017 the treaty expired and president Vladimir Putin did not promote any initiative to renovate it. When Putin arrived to power, unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who looked favourably at conceding autonomy to the regions, opted to limit that autonomy and centralise power in the hands of the presidency. As for the Caucasus, the several republics that are part of the federal district, did not cause any major problem over the last years and in spite of the rise of the Daesh in Syria and Iraq, the massive flood of jihadist fighters toward the Middle East basically facilitated the Russian government initiative to keep the region under political stability. Chechnya, which is under the tough control of Ramzan Kadyrov, does not present any further separatist motion; however, as in the entire region, the Muslim republic suffers of a pretty poor economy and low index of development.<sup>131</sup>

### **Future of European – Russian relations**

How are going to evolve ties between the Russian Federation and Europe after the pandemic? Will they improve or worsen? Or, perhaps, is everything going to be the same as before COVID-19 could appear and cause the worst global healthcare crisis of the twenty-first century? It is hard to provide an answer for all these questions and yet the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be declared over, as the virus is still circulating and causing thousands of new contagion cases every day in several countries in the world, Russia and EU members included. However, on the basis of recent events that occurred through this battered 2020, it is useful to recap and sum up the crucial steps over the last years and provide a general overview on Russian – European ties and try to draw a plausible scenario for the very next future. Russia and Europe entertain a complicated relationship and it began centuries ago. Actually, it is a bit improper to refer to Europe as a whole because it was never unified under a single flag and a single nation. No military power or empire succeeded in history to unite the continent, neither the Roman empire nor Napoleon and the French, or anybody else. The European continent experienced a long history of fragmentation, of kingdoms and empires fighting for supremacy and for survival; wars had been fought for territories and for religion, as well as to repeal foreign military invasion from Africa or from Asia, as the Ottoman empire played the role of the menacing power for a long period of time (in 1683 the siege of Vienna ended with the success of the united European and Christian nations against the Turks). Russia is no exception to this history, as the country was involved in several conflicts too, she defended herself and attacked European kingdoms and nations at her borders and conquered vast territories in

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<sup>130</sup> Cucciolla R. M., *Securization of Islam: A Vicious Circle. Counter-terrorism and Freedom of Religion in Central Asia*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:8, 1462-1463, 2016

<sup>131</sup> Moscatelli O., De Bonis M., *Non tutte le Russie sono di Putin*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *La Russia non è una Cina*, N°5 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

the Eurasian continent. In her rise to empire, Russia was forced to battle the Poles and the Lithuanians, as well as the Swedes and the Danes and later became a sort of sparring partner of the Ottomans.

In regards to the Western powers, Russia sought partnerships and temporary alliances to prevent attacks from other kingdoms or nations, although the empire never established permanent friendships. For example, the 1812 French campaign in Russia represented the defeat of Napoleon and the end of the First French Empire and was famously narrated and illustrated by Tolstoy in his masterpiece *War and Peace*, even though decades later Paris and Saint Petersburg found themselves on the same side to contrast German aggressive expansion and ambitions, that eventually led to the outbreak of World War I, whereas the Prussian kingdom, who fought along with Russia against Napoleon, after unification process in 1871 and the end and failure of Bismarck's system of alliance and diplomacy, became at the eyes of the Tsar, a serious danger.

It has been repeated several times that Russia is affected by the encirclement syndrome and despite her large size, her perception has always led to a fear of an external attack. Thus, Moscow always looked at Europe as her Western frontier and observing and monitoring any plausible menace of military attack. Nevertheless, despite political hostility and change of political regime, Russia has always entertained ties with European countries and centuries of interexchange cannot be simply reduced to wars and conflicts. Still nowadays, with ties filled by tensions due to the developments in Ukraine (the revolution, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas), Russia keeps on looking at European countries as partners and hopes to improve bilateral ties. Nevertheless, European countries do have different views on Russia and do not converge towards a common vision: Eastern Europeans, such as the Baltics, Poland, Romania or Slovakia perceive Russia as a constant menace and fear a military invasion, as frequently happened in the past, thus they count on US military support and provide extraordinary assist for the Pentagon to strengthen the contingencies and pressure the Russians, whereas Western Europeans are more open to dialogue and seem to adopt a carrot and stick approach. When it comes to trade and energy, they welcome and listen to Moscow, but when it is about Ukraine or domestic political problems, those countries such as France or Germany do not hesitate to criticise Russia and her methods; Italy usually follows Berlin and Paris, although Rome has never promoted in first place these kind of initiatives. In addition, Western Europeans might not be stressed by Russian next move on the border, however, political elites do not look at Moscow with sympathy, beyond any pressure or forcing from Washington. The Western European society look at the Russian Federation in perfect continuity with the Soviet Union and depicts it as a perfect and reassuring enemy, representing what Europe should never be and an opponent morally inferior to the European democratic culture.<sup>132</sup>A dismiss of US troops from Europe would be ideal and considered the fundamental base for a new approach towards Western Europe, despite Moscow is deeply aware that this is pure fantasy.

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<sup>132</sup> Pellicciari I., *Quel che l'occidente non capisce di Mosca*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2016, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Russia-America, la pace impossibile*, N°9, 2016, Rome, GEDI Group

Yet Russia needs to cooperate with Europe and most of all, she needs European investments, technology and knowledge in order to promote a modernisation of the economy, of services, of industry and more in general, of the country. Moscow must focus herself on dialogue and cooperation, abandoning ambitious project such as the well-known Lisbon – Vladivostok Eurasian space or to create a common platform between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union. Russian approach shall be concrete and realistic, as Moscow finds herself as a minor junior competitor in the global geopolitical competition, with the US – China confrontation to concentrate all the attentions. As the Russian – American tensions pushed Moscow towards China and to promote a Sino – Russian partnership, Beijing seems to be the only option left and might a better alternative than succumbing to Washington, although the People’s Republic has a far more solid economy, a larger population and a territory that is easier to control; indeed, China possesses more resources and even though the partnership has always been presented formally as equal balanced, Moscow is evidently exposed to the risk of becoming a Chinese vassal.<sup>133</sup> Perhaps, a choice to side with China might be seen as necessary in order to contrast the menace from the Atlantic Alliance, the US and Europe, as Moscow like Alexander Nevsky already did when centuries ago he surrendered to the Mongols to prevent the arrival of German crusaders, is better to preserve and save the soul than the body.<sup>134</sup>

As a matter of life or death, Moscow plays its game for survival and what surely needs and wants to avoid is a large-scale conflict with the United States and Europe, as Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union could not maintain the same amount of investments in military spending and research for armed forces modernisation; considering the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance and the rise of the Chinese power, there is no reason to refer to the Cold War and to US-Soviet confrontation and all this elements prove there is no parity between Moscow and Washington.<sup>135</sup> The Pentagon annual budget in 2019, has already overcome 730 billion dollars and the Russian one was only at fourth place on the global military spending chart, even behind the Saudis.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Trenin D., *La Russia non è cinese, ma quando cerca l'Europa non trova mai la porta*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *La Russia non è una Cina*, N°5 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

<sup>134</sup> Trenin D., *Russia*, pp. 5, 184, Cambridge, Polity Histories, Polity Books, 2019

<sup>135</sup> Dottori G., *Guerra fredda 2.0: esiste una minaccia russa alla sicurezza europea?*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2016, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Russia-America, la pace impossibile*, N°9 2016, Rome, GEDI Group

<sup>136</sup> Tian N., Kuimova A., Lopes Da Silva D., Wezeman P. D., Wezeman S. T., *Trends in world military expenditure, 2019*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Factsheet, SIPRI

## Conclusions

### **The Scope of this Dissertation**

The decision to be made on the choice of the subject of a dissertation is obviously influenced by personal interests, curiosity and correlation with the area of studies. I have decided to discuss the Russian healthcare military operation and intervention in Italy during the hardest months of the COVID-19 pandemic, with some focuses on the unprecedented situation that came to be, with the Russian army going up and down through Italian roads and streets and providing a little help to a country, who incredibly found itself undefended and surprised by a danger that was far from the imagination of the people and of the government and politics, too. The COVID-19 pandemic, that still is going on in Italy, in Europe, in Russia and in the rest of the world, opened a new era in our time and is going to change several aspects of everything, politics, economics, social relations and healthcare forever. Despite the expected obstacles in researching elements and sources to provide a detailed description of the events that occurred few months ago, I was convinced of the necessity to address a contemporary issue and matter of debate, discussion and daily information and updating.

I firmly wanted in my final dissertation to insert the country that attracted me and caught my interest so intensively, although at the beginning of this year I presume that nobody expected to see such an impressive, devastating and worldwide spread phenomenon, which affected somehow the life of everybody and forced us behind home walls for almost two months long. I found myself in a uncertain and awkward situation, as I began my curricular internship at the Italian Trade Agency office in Moscow in February and was forced to leave the country and come back to Italy during the toughest phase of the pandemic, as also in Moscow first quarantine measures were about to be applied and the university, where I spent my exchange semester in the capital city of the Russian Federation, the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs university), shut down the campus and immediately activated online lectures and exams. Perhaps, this might be not as interesting as the research and news that I reported through the pages of my dissertation, but as far as I believe that the moment we all experienced over the last months, was something unique and unprecedented, as well as terrible and negative, I retain that my personal story, even if common to many other students, who were spending and experiencing a semester or an internship abroad, is definitely related to the subject of my thesis and could provide a small witness of the extraordinary historical period we are living in.

Nevertheless, despite the dramatic period that was, I was determined to start my research process and provide an interesting matter to be addressed, deepened and discussed, as the Russian operation brought without doubt scholars, analysts, politicians, journalists and common people to question the intention of the Russian government and the nature and importance of Russian – Italian bilateral relationship.

In order to link the two things, I began to analyse the military operation in Lombardy and the main reasons why Russia opted to send a contingency, that is also an elite section of its armed forces, in Italy, where the COVID-19 provoked massive damages and it was actually the second main scenario, where this new coronavirus spread and caused the contagion of thousands of people, with unfortunately one of the highest death rate in the world. Indeed, China was the very first place where the new coronavirus, scientifically denominated *SarsCov2*, was transmitted for the first time from animal (bats) to the human being, although the Chinese government admitted the spread of contagion later than the estimated beginning. Outside the country, no government considered the cross-bordering of the virus and contagion as a serious menace to their population and some limited themselves to stop flights from and to the People's Republic, while others refused the idea and maintain airline connections on. A harsh exchange of accusation and attacks occurred between the United States presidential administration and the Chinese government: the White House repeatedly accused China of being responsible of the world pandemic and to have hidden the real healthcare situation that developed through the months of October, November and December in the city of Wuhan, major urban centre of the province of Hubei. Moreover, the Trump administration openly supported the hypothesis of the virus being created in a Chinese laboratory, in order to spread the contagion in the world. The Chinese government rejected firmly the accuse, as also public opinion in the United States and in Europe in their majority do not believe the idea of the US president. A major clash occurred at the UN General Assembly in New York, during the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary session, as US president Trump delivered, live from the White House, a very short speech, in which he acutely accused China to of maintaining its borders open, in order to let the virus circulating and infect the rest of the world; Chinese president Xi Jinping, who was connected from Beijing, replied, without mentioning the US, mentioning the fallibility of unilateralism and stressed the importance of mutual respect and cooperation between nations.<sup>137</sup> In addition, recent tensions were fomented by the TikTok deal, as the Trump administration, along with other Chinese online applications, ordered the blockade of the download and only opened for a purchase of the services in the United States market by an American tech company.

Yet it is uncertain whether Trump himself is convinced of this theory or perhaps, it is just part of an initiative to promote his term at the White House and obtain the re-election in November presidential elections and in addition, an attempt to stop any possible Chinese activity over Europe in terms of healthcare assistance, as far as China was the first country where the virus spread, but also the very first one to stop the contagion and the epidemic of coronavirus. China is clearly the main target of the Trump administration and from Washington's point of view, Beijing ambitions must be contained and limited. China claims its space in the world and it is an ambitious and growing power, perhaps the only country on the planet that could challenge the US world leadership and hegemony. Without doubt, the US – China confrontation is going to top world affairs news for a very long period of time. However, China has not been the only target of the Trump

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<sup>137</sup> Fromer J., *In speech to UN, Xi Jinping calls for mutual respect and cooperation between nations*, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020, China/Diplomacy, South China Morning Post <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3102446/speech-un-xi-jinping-calls-mutual-respect-and-cooperation>

administration's criticism: the World Health Organisation received severe reprimands from the White House because according to the president of the United States, the international organisation should have monitored China and what was going on in the country with the progressive contagion and instead, praised the Chinese government for its efforts in contrasting the epidemic in the city of Wuhan. Indeed, Donald Trump was not the only critical towards the WHO, as the board itself lately declared the state of world pandemic, suggested useful manners and recommendations to avoid contagion, correcting itself and changing its own mind several times.

In Italy, Walter Ricciardi, representative of his country to the WHO and previously head of the National Institute of Health, was hired as a special advisor to the ministry of health, despite in the early phase of contagion in February, his television appearances caused discussions and quarrels among political parties and within the national press and media. Certainly, the WHO did not raise globally a positive feedback on its evaluations and recommendations, despite the clear difficulties in front of an unknown and highly contagious disease. The outcome of the healthcare crisis surely proves that multilateral mechanisms, especially in the field of state aid, did not work at all, as major international bodies and organisations failed to provide solutions: beyond the WHO, some clear examples are given by NATO, who toughly criticised the Chinese and the Russian aid provided to Italy, but did not provide alternative options and did not help to settle disputes within its members and the EU. It is true that after several meetings between head of state and head of government, EU members agreed within the European Council on the European Commission proposal plan, but no major commitment and immediate aid was given to Italy and other suffering countries like Spain. Aid came instead from other nation-states, EU members who donated or provided healthcare materials, protection tools and etc. Considering the complicated situation Italy found itself in at the end of February, without the help of single partners perhaps damages would have been far way worse and declaration of support do not save lives. Therefore, it is evident that still bilateral mechanism of distribution and delivery of aid works much better than under multilateral schemes. Curiously, Italy experienced an unprecedented situation, as a rich and wealthy country, who received large amount of aid (subdivided between donations and supply contracts) and among donors were 'poor countries', such as Albania, Cuba and others. Usually, aid delivery works the other way around, but the COVID-19 produced interesting scenarios and surprises.<sup>138</sup>

### **Russian military operation in Italy and Russia's main aim**

Following the direct request of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte during a telephone conversation, Russian president Vladimir Putin sent in the end of March a military contingency over to Italy to provide help to the country hit by the coronavirus pandemic. The contingency was made of Russian armed forces most prepared expertise among doctors and nurses to help Italian hospital personnel; as soon as the Russian military

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<sup>138</sup> Pellicciari I., *Guerra (e pace) degli Aiuti nel dopo-Covid-19*, pubblicato in *Dopo. Come la pandemia può cambiare la politica, l'economia, la comunicazione e le relazioni internazionali*, a cura di Alessandro Campi, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino editore, Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020

planes landed in Italy, the contingency defined the area of intervention along with Italian military colleges; the group of experts moved towards the north of Italy and more precisely to the province of Bergamo and lately to the close province of Brescia, in the Lombardy region, the most hit by contagion of COVID-19. Indeed, there is where the contagion in Italy began, as the breeding grounds were the city of Codogno, located under the province of Lodi and the other one in the town of Vo' Euganeo, under province of Padua, in the Veneto region, north-east of Italy. The north is the side of the country where the virus mostly spread, also due to a lack of decision on closing provinces and the regions themselves by region governors and by the government in Rome, too. The very first days of the contagion were very uncertain and provision followed provision until the definitive and total lockdown of the whole country set by the government on 9<sup>th</sup> March, which only ended at the beginning of May.

Russian doctors and nurses' main activities was to help in assistance the patients in the hospitals of the Bergamo province and subsequently to sanitise hospices in the city and in the rest of the province; when finished in Bergamo, the Russian squad moved to Brescia and province and continued its job. At the end of their experience, the Russian personnel sanitised more than a hundred hospices and contributed to the progressive pace and improvement of the patients' treatment, as the lockdown helped to limit hospitals' overcrowding and permitted to interrupt the contagion and cases fell down week after week. The lockdown constrained the people at home, schools were closed and lessons continued online, as also several businesses moved to the online form to promote the so-called *smart-working*; there is no doubt that such a difficult moment, with the distressing sound of ambulances going all over the streets of Italian cities and the images of the army's vehicles carrying the coffins of the dead, created frustration, stress, loneliness and boredom, but perhaps the true values of the Italian people came out and the country overcame the 'phase one', and despite the high number of deaths, could move on and start the opening of factories, shops and other activities. Clearly, the economic damage is definitely a blow to the already stagnating economy and several commercial activities and shops closed, as well as restaurants; tourism and the show business suffered more than other sectors, as for the former foreign visitors were locked out of the country (more in general nobody moved in those crucial spring months) and frontiers opened quite late and only for EU countries, while Arabs, US citizens and Russian visitors are still denied the entry, whereas the latter could not perform, neither work on any kind of project, theatres and cinemas opened again at the end of June and yet the necessity of applying distancing measures, the masks, no contacts and sanitising gels make this activity quite complex.

Overall, the Russian intervention was successful and appreciated by the local population, patients and the healthcare personnel, who received the help and support of the Russian military squad. Thus, what was the aim of the Russian military team and why Russian president Putin agreed without hesitation to send his best and well-prepared armed forces specialists to Italy, where the pandemic was devastating the country? Main reasons to explain the Russian intervention in Italy during the last spring are basically three: geopolitics, domestic political consensus and finally a strategic-healthcare intelligence operation.

Geopolitics matters, it will always matter and it just never goes on holiday, as the Russian government seized the opportunity to widen its influence and to do it in a NATO country: perhaps, it is set to remain an isolated episode, but the images of Russian trucks on Italian motorways surely caught the attention of the media, both national and international ones and it is quite uncommon to see Russian military travelling on their own on the soil of Russia's most undaunted adversary. Indeed, the NATO command in Europe criticised the Russian intervention and expressed its doubts over the healthcare operation the Russian personnel was about to unfold in northern Italy; however, the Atlantic Alliance simply proved its disapproval, without any countermeasure and that also shines a light on NATO's real limits and purpose, as its main stakeholder, the United States, ran over the contagion and found themselves in deep trouble with its own healthcare problem. Perhaps, from the NATO perspective the Chinese squads sent by Beijing much before the Russians could land in Pratica di Mare, should have concerned more the Atlantic Alliance and its military commanders, although here comes another limit of it, as NATO accounts only for the Euro-Atlantic space; however, in order not to compare the two distinguished interventions, the Chinese personnel was not, or at least this is the information of public dominion, military, but rather healthcare personnel involved in contrasting the epidemic in its early development in China.

Russia is clearly aware of the costs of these kind of operations and still foreign aid strategy is a legacy of the Soviet past, when international activity was fundamentally supported by ideological reasons, with the USSR committed to help and promote socialism in the third world countries, who emerged out of a war against European powers to end colonisation or from brutal dictatorship. Nowadays, the Russian Federation lacks an international ideology that could grant such great support abroad and to gather resources and money to provide direct aid, but Moscow rather offers a help as a sign of belief in international cooperation and of self-awareness of its own status of geopolitical power, a status that cannot simply be dismissed from one day to another. The intervention in Italy is clearly a geopolitical move for this reason, as Russia shows she can help and provide aid to her friends, although the very first aim was to gain the trust of the Italians and invite the Europeans more in general to cooperate. For Russia, Europe and Western partners represent important partners, especially for trade as Russia is Europe's main natural gas and also oil provider and trade is vital for the country to obtain technology and direct investments in the regions, to promote the development and the economy, which is, as it is commonly known, far way too reliant on energy profits; Moscow is naturally weary of European countries' wealth, wellness and high quality manufactory, despite the Ukrainian crisis and the continuous incomprehension over the last years surely complicated bilateral ties and trade, too.

Domestic political consensus is also a major reason for the Russian squad to be sent over Italy. The Kremlin opted to answer 'yes' to his Italian counterpart when the request was officially formulated via telephone because such an operation could have certainly encountered the approval of the Russian population, as it is known that Italy is perhaps one of the most popular and beloved country and its consensus is definitely high. An operation of Russian specialists to help the beloved country suffering from this unknown contagion



disease that shocked the world, supported by an intensive and emotional television and media campaign that almost silenced the critical voices towards the outgoing of national resources to fight the contagion in the country, which culminated later than Western European countries. The debate on national resources and funds and their allocation reconnects to the above matter over the capacity to spend money and provide aid to international friends and partners of Russia; nevertheless, critical thoughts might have been more likely to be louder if the aid-recipient country would have been somebody with far less bonds with Russia and its population.

I decided to dedicate an entire chapter to the particular bond that Russian people share with Italy, which goes back in time over the past centuries, when the Moscow principality was expanding and about to affirm itself: the Tsars in the Renaissance called Italian architects to project churches inside the Kremlin and lately, when Saint Petersburg was founded by Peter I, known as Peter the Great, who promoted an intensive program to modernise the country and looked at the European states to empower Russia and requested Italian architecture for the buildings of the royal ruling family of the empire. Peter the Great has also been cited as an inspirational figure, a reformer and a national hero by Russian president Vladimir Putin.<sup>139</sup> Besides, at the royal court, Italian artists, included musicians, playwrights and poets were welcomed and contributed to the development and the study of arts. Politically, the two states, before and after Italian national unification process, enjoyed positive ties and fought against each other in few occasions, such as the Crimean War (when Piedmont government, led by Cavour, sent a small contingency in support of the French army, in order to obtain French diplomatic and military aid against the Austrian Empire, in its fight to free the north of Italy from foreign powers)<sup>140</sup> and during the Second World War, when Benito Mussolini opted to side the German Wehrmacht divisions with an Italian military contingency, named ARMIR<sup>141</sup>; unfortunately, the Russian campaign ended dramatically for the Axis powers and the Italian soldiers, along with their allies, were forced to retire and move backwards (historical events are narrated by former Italian army sergeant of the Alpine division, Mario Rigoni Stern, decorated with the Silver Medal of Military Valour, in his books *Il Sergente nella neve* and *Ritorno sul Don*)<sup>142</sup>. The Italian military campaign in Russia was one of the most terrible defeat in the history of the kingdom and was largely criticised after the war, along with many other Mussolini's initiatives, including the choice to enter the war at the side of Germany. Italy lost the war, became a republic and began a new chapter of its unitary history, as a democracy and a member of the European Community; in 1949, Italy contributed to establish the Atlantic Alliance, born out of the Washington treaty and designed to contain the Soviet Union's expansion in Europe. In spite of its membership and partnership with the USA, Italy maintained ties with the USSR, also thanks to the strongest communist party in Western Europe. In order to balance its top alliance and asymmetrical relationship with Washington, Rome exploited all of its resources,

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<sup>139</sup> TASS News Agency, *Putin names Pushkin, Peter the Great among Russia's national heroes*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019, tass.com <https://tass.com/society/1062357>

<sup>140</sup> Sabbatucci G., Vidotto V., *Il mondo contemporaneo. Dal 1848 a oggi*, pp. 67 – 68 – 69, Bari, Editori Laterza, 2008

<sup>141</sup> Sabbatucci G., Vidotto V., *Il mondo contemporaneo. Dal 1848 a oggi*, pp. 431 – 432, Bari, Editori Laterza, 2008

<sup>142</sup> Rigoni Stern M., *Il sergente nella neve. Ricordi della ritirata di Russia*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008

including the main energy and state-run company, ENI, led by Enrico Mattei and FIAT, Italian top car constructor, which opened a factory in the city of Togliatti<sup>143</sup>, a Russian city that took its name after the secretary of the Italian communist party (PCI), Palmiro Togliatti.

The Vatican also played a fundamental role in unfreezing relations with the socialist bloc leading power, to soften the tensions between the East and the West and to defend the interest of all Christian believers. When the Cold War was over and the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia became a Federation, adopted a new constitution and open its market to the world, abandoning forever the planned economy. Through the terrible nineties and the rising first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Italy continued its positive relationship with Moscow, opening to trade and widening interexchange at all levels. After the end of socialism, many aspects, items and traditions of the Italian culture further penetrated the Russian society and in addition, Italy became progressively a top holiday destination for Russian tourists and still represents a desirable country to move or to buy a house where to spend time to rest from ordinary life. Italian food is perhaps the most popular in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and fashion brands contend the leadership with the French, as luxury clothing in Russia is slowly starting to speak Italian, too. Culture initiatives as the promotion of cinema, theatre and opera and music is a key task for the embassy and the diplomatic bodies of Italy in Russia and are an ideal way to promote the *Belpaese* in the world's largest country, beyond political differences and diverse backgrounds, as a perfect example of cultural cooperation.

The last, but not least reason, why Russia sent its best specialists of the armed forces is a strategic-healthcare intelligence operation, as in the early phase of the pandemic in Europe, the Russian government seized the chance to send units over the battlefield and observe how the enemy was pursuing its fight. As in Russia first cases of COVID-19 were mainly tourists, who came back from Italy or other European countries and contagion still was registered as low, at the end of March, just before the quarantine could be started, a strategic operation to monitor the evolution of the virus and the methods implemented to contrast the contagion and to provide medical treatment to affected patients was definitely necessary and evaluated by the Kremlin as a perfect way to learn and to acquire knowledge on a previously unknown disease; clearly, political calculation was turned to provide a national strategy to stop *SarsCov2* from causing deaths and suffering in Russia. Moreover, the studies on the virus and its plausible evolutions permitted to continue the research on it and to promote the realisation of a vaccine, that could help making the population immune, or at least, be able to contrast the virus when infected. The Russian Federation was the very first country to announce the outcome of its national research project and the realisation of a vaccine, that president Putin named officially *Sputnik V*, remembering the very first satellite launched by the Soviet back in 1957, as a symbol of national conquest and success of scientific research and progress. At the beginning of September, research results and a report

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<sup>143</sup> Centro Storico FIAT, *Uno stabilimento: grande e subito (Togliattigrad)*, 25<sup>th</sup> October 2013, youtube.com <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnqheGzaVzQ>

on the testing on a number of volunteers were published on the British journal *The Lancet*, as Russian authorities affirm the vaccine is effective and in the tested patients, antibodies were developed; the same mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyenin, claimed he was injected with the anti-COVID vaccine and felt overall good.<sup>144</sup> In addition, Sobyenin declared his intention to schedule a massive vaccination campaign in the capital city within the end of the year. Doubts were raised by the WHO, the United States and by the Western countries, who affirmed it might be far way too early to determine the true effectiveness of a vaccine. Indeed, further results will be evident only when a massive vaccination of the population will take place, although if the outcome of the Russian scientific research will be proved successful, Moscow would have certainly scored a big goal. Some foreign countries as India and Brazil have already shown interest in purchasing vaccine doses from the Russian Federation.

The Russian intervention in Italy has thus, also been a strategic-healthcare intelligence operation, despite some raised questions over the true intentions of the Russian government and who really were the specialists sent by Vladimir Putin to the *Belpaese*. Indeed, the Italian newspaper from Turin, *La Stampa*, a celebre press media and of the most enduring ones in Italy, posed serious doubts over the Russian plan and wrote about the chance of having Russian intelligence agencies among healthcare specialist members of the military squad. Furthermore, Italian journalist Jacopo Iacoboni, in an article published at the end of March on the newspaper, mentioned a government source, who revealed the media that Russian aid was basically inconsistent and useless for the requested need. Russian ambassador to Italy, Sergei Razov, wrote a letter to *La Stampa*, affirming the willingness of the Russian government to cooperate and to provide the necessary aid the Italian government had originally demanded on a telephone conversation between the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the president Vladimir Putin and invited the newspaper to provide better details and to look for better sources. The story was not over yet, as when the article about intelligence suspects was published by Iacoboni, General Major Igor Konashenkov, Head of the Press Office of the Russian Ministry of Defence, posted on the ministry's official social media accounts, a harsh letter in which he openly accused the newspaper of reporting a dishonest version of facts and constantly attempting at diminishing and degrading the operate of Russian specialists and more in general, Russia itself. The letter ended with a tough advice, that was inevitably interpreted as a direct menace to Iacoboni and to the newspaper, as they both received immediately the support of fellow journalists and reporters. Iacoboni though, complained against the government since the Prime Minister office and official website did not mention the episode, whereas the ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ministry of Defence published a note, where authorities thanked publicly the aid from Russia, but defended the freedom of press and of thought.

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<sup>144</sup> TgCom24, *Coronavirus, la rivista The Lancet: "Il vaccino russo produce anticorpi"*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020, Tgcom24 Salute, [https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/salute/coronavirus-la-rivista-thelancet-il-vaccino-russo-produce-anticorpi\\_22641209-202002a.shtml](https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/salute/coronavirus-la-rivista-thelancet-il-vaccino-russo-produce-anticorpi_22641209-202002a.shtml)

There is no doubt that Konashenkov's response was far way too hard and definitely unnecessary; however, no major inquest has been initiated by the newspaper and the job done by the Russian squad, despite limited to the areas of Bergamo and Brescia, has been rated successful, by the hospitals where they operated, by the population of the two provinces and by regional authorities of Lombardy. Actually, it has to be said that nobody expected the Russians to save Italy from disaster, but only appreciated the aid received in a moment of sorrow and uncertainty. In addition, it is definitely clear that intelligence officials were among the military and it has been repeatedly said that the armed forces are the better trained body in Russia to take care of this kind of emergencies, and therefore, there should have been no surprise anymore. It seems quite unlikely that Russia shall need such a loud and sumptuous operation to achieve precious secrets in a NATO country on Western technologies and military projects, as far as Italy is no hostile country to Russia and there can be thousand of ways to infiltrate agents and intelligence sources in it.<sup>145</sup>

Russia somehow participated in the donors' competition that came to be as Italy entered the state of pandemic in March. To determine a winner in this competition is a hard task and yet it is even harder to compare the different form of aid provided to Italy. China was the first country to send significant help to Italy, as beyond healthcare materials (masks, suits, gloves, etc.) that in part was already provided before the other way round, the Chinese government sent a couple of medical squad (in two different periods of time) in assistance to healthcare personnel and to observe the ongoing epidemic, basing themselves on the recent experience in the handling of the contagion in Wuhan and in the province of Hubei. However, Chinese personnel is said to be civil and not military and that is an important distinction; in addition, due to a primacy of healthcare crisis, China was the very first country and until that moment the only one, who experienced the epidemic of COVID-19 and thus, who could help Italy in fighting an unknown menace. It would be fair to say that all the aid provided to Italy was somehow fundamental and precious, but it is also fair to admit that the Italian national healthcare system, despite with great difficulty and a very high amount of deaths, resisted the disastrous impact of the contagion and managed to put the situation under control. Therefore, aid from China, US, Russia, Germany, France, Egypt, Cuba, Albania and the many other countries, who supported Italy in a moment, where it seemed to be the next designated target after China of COVID-19. The country caught a massive attention from international media and in many cases, it also suffered of distorted storytelling and shameful episode, just like the French advertisement where a man spits on a pizza, mocking the Italians infected by COVID-19. In the end, every other country ended up with the same conditions and unfortunately, COVID-19 truly became a global pandemic.

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<sup>145</sup> Pellicciari I., *Perché il Cremlino ha per ora vinto la gara degli aiuti a Roma*, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Il Vincolo Interno*, N° 4 2020, Rome, GEDI Group

## **The future of Italian - Russian ties**

Russia and Italy enjoy a long-standing friendship and positive ties, as confirmed by the latest aid provided from Moscow to Rome during the pandemic. Despite plausible different of views on matters, the two countries never hesitated to consult with each other and to cooperate on a wide range of international issues, also due to a well-established diplomatic connection during Soviet times. The state of the bilateral relationship is currently positive and might be even improved, although some obstacles are on the route that connects Italy to Mother Russia. First of all, Italy remains a top US ally in Europe and its geographical position is still pretty relevant from Washington's perspective, not to mention the large presence of US military on Italian soil; in addition, the US Sixth Fleet is base-located in Naples. Italy is then a founder of the European Union and played a key role in forming, along with France and (West) Germany, the basis of post-war European economic cooperation. After the end of the Cold War, Italy joined its partners in contributing to enforce the community and to form the contemporary EU. Recently, debate over Italy's membership and role in Brussels have generated deep criticism and noise among political parties, newspapers and media, especially on the single currency, the Euro. Some of them affirmed the Euro only brought benefits to Italy, others said it became literally a cage for the Italian economy and reduced Italy to a junior partner of Germany. This is no room for discussion on the currency and whether Italy should abandon it or even debate over its membership in the EU, as, unlike Britain, a chance of exit from Europe does not seem plausible, beyond any opinion and vision; parties in the parliament have constantly claimed and proved the willingness of the government to remain loyal to its Euro-Atlantic collocation. Populist parties such as the Five Star Movement and the League have been accused and suspected of pro-Russian ideas and plans to side with Russia, despite no major initiative has been promoted during the first government presided by Giuseppe Conte. As his predecessors, Conte established contacts with his Russian counterpart and so far, after his visit to Moscow in October 2018, he invited president Putin to Italy, a meeting that occurred in July 2019, when the Russian president made visit to the president of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella and to Pope Francis, in the Vatican City.

Scandals that involve political parties with illegal funding activities were born out of judicial investigations that are still going on, and perhaps, when a verdict will be pronounced, further judgements and views might be shared. What is also contradictory, is that main presumed pro-Russian politician, Matteo Salvini, the League's party secretary and former Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, is far from being a true supporter of Russian foreign policy. It is true, Salvini made more than trip to Russia, although his vision is more related to the prestige of the powerful figure of the Russian president and religious affiliation; he also asked for removal of sanctions, applied by the EU Council, as a consequence of the 2014 events in Ukraine. However, Salvini never officially made statements or expressed views on the political situation in Ukraine or condemned the expansion of NATO, nor address the nuclear disarmament matter. His main focuses have always been, trade and export to Russia, as the regions of northern Italy, where Salvini catches a relevant percentage of votes, represent the most productive side of the country and thus, the main exporters from Italy

to Russia. Besides, the former minister has also repeatedly mentioned his support for the United States and the importance of the bond between Washington and Rome.

Beyond business and trade, Italy never attempted to establish a serious geopolitical connection that could be more consistent than an economic partnership and a positive and enduring friendship. Perhaps, Italy lacks the necessary political weight and the willingness to follow this course, but the question is: does Italy really want to move closer to the Russian Federation? And is it really worth it? Presumably, when questioned, Rome would prefer not to answer at all and seat along with both Moscow and Washington, just like former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi did at the 2002 Pratica di Mare NATO summit, but fondness and cordiality are not sufficient to unfold a true strategy.<sup>146</sup> What Italy should do is to maintain a hot line with Moscow, without renouncing to its partnership in NATO and in the European Union: Russia is a fundamental partner for Italy and Rome shall exploit this special bond and the true love that Russian population feels for the *Belpaese*. In order to do so, the Italian government shall determine the extent of bilateral ties with Russia and perhaps, find new channels of cooperation and in general, be more convinced of its scope, aim and means that can be deployed. A broader cooperation would not only increase trade volumes, as the two countries are complementary for export resources (Italy lacks of natural gas and oil, while Russia has a less developed industry and manufactory), but would also increase Italian political figure, as top dialogue partner in Western Europe for Moscow and perhaps further prove to France and Germany Rome's relevance. After the pandemic, there is a chance to set bilateral goals and establish again a broader platform for discussions, from business to tourism (Russian visitors are a precious flow for the Italian economy) and to international dispute settlements, from Ukraine (in the negotiation process started in Paris last year Italy is absent) to Libya (a fundamentally important scenario for Italian national security), nuclear disarmament and global pollution.

Reading its allies' intentions and wisely exploiting vacuums might create more opportunities for Italy. The national debate almost exclusively focuses on the economy and social problems: those two matters are without doubt important, but geopolitics and foreign policy deserve much more attention and discussion, compared to the restricted and élite dimension they enjoy currently. A broader and more intense debate on this range of issues and on the role that Italy should play on the international arena would benefit not only the study of the discipline itself, but it would also fosters Italy's capacities to pursue its national interests and the awareness of its own means and resources, a mental attitude that Rome has lacked for a far too long period of time.

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<sup>146</sup> Silvestri S., *La simpatia non è una strategia: note sul rapporto Italia-Russia*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2016, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *Russia-America, la pace impossibile*, N°9 2016, Roma, GEDI Group

## Russia and its place in the world

As the pandemic affected the entire world and produced a smashing effect on national economies and on the world economy, Russia makes no exception and estimates say that 2020 GDP growth is going to be negative and to drop by 6%, according to the provisional projection of the World Bank;<sup>147</sup> Russian finance minister Anton Siluanov, speaking at a financial forum in Moscow, aside the Central Russian Bank governor, Elvira Nabiullina, claimed the shrinking might be even less than 4%.<sup>148</sup> The economy is likely to bounce in 2021 and in 2022, although the aftermath of the pandemic is going to condition the Russian economy and the other countries' for a period of time. The COVID-19 pandemic is what generally is described by economists as a negative shock that despite not being related to the economy itself, it inevitably caused a terrible recession, due to the stop of several activities and the limit of people's circulation through national territories and from a country to another. The speed of contagion and the facility, with which, the coronavirus moves from individual to individual is unbelievable and in order to stop the contagion chain, government and healthcare authorities were forced to adopt unprecedented and extreme measures, among them a total lockdown, just like what the Italian government did at the beginning of March of this year. The shock has also been very psychical and mental because everybody must carry the weight of a higher responsibility and the conditioning due to the fact that the virus stopped the normal life, from working to partying, international travel, television shows and football matches, live concerts. It has not been simply an economic crisis, as it happened in 2007-2008 with the Lehman Brothers crack, it was something that affected the society as a whole and it is still doing so.

Thus, everybody, governments included, need to find a way to recover from this overwhelming blow and to set the conditions for a new renaissance post-COVID-19, that would mean not only a GDP growth, but also the drop of the unemployment rate and the rise of public and private investments. As Italy pushed among its European partners, for a recovery plan for the whole European Union, negotiations went on in the month of June, with a proposal from the European Commission that counted for over 700 billion euros. A group of member states, named the frugal ones, including Austria and the Netherlands, strongly opposed the Von der Leyen initiative, since the plan consisted of large part of non-repayable funds, and insisted on increasing the loan quota. An animated debate divided the EU, with the Mediterranean countries to push for a consistent and substantial plan and the northern side, including Denmark, Sweden and Finland, defenders of austerity and fiscal strictness, to reject it and Germany to play the referee. After a long negotiation process, a massive recovery plan has been approved by the European Council and state members are required to provide the actuation of investment schedule on a large series of matters, from the environment to the digitalisation of the

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<sup>147</sup> The World Bank, *Russia Economic Report. Recession and Growth under the Shadow of a Pandemic*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2020, 43<sup>rd</sup> Issue of the Russia Economic Report, [worldbank.org](https://www.worldbank.org)

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/publication/rer#:~:text=Although%20forecasts%20are%20subject%20to,%2C%20a n%2011%20year%20low.&text=Some%20positive%20momentum%20is%20expected,in%202022%20to%203.1%20percent.>

<sup>148</sup> Reuters, *Russia's economy to shrink by less than 4% in 2020, minister says*, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2020, Reuters Staff, Business News, [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com)

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-economy-budget-idUSKBN25Z27W>

public administration, infrastructures and public transport networks. In the recent State of the Union, the Commission president Ursula von der Leyen presented the Next Generation EU vision and strategy with ambitious goals and reforms on the above, mentioned sectors; a new migration plan has also been announced, as von der Leyen claimed the treaty of Dublin is no longer adequate to manage migration process towards the European Union.<sup>149</sup> Yet it is still uncertain how this plan will work out and whether member states are going to exploit these resources in a proper way. With the United States heading towards November presidential elections that are going to determine whether Donald Trump will stay at the White House for a second presidential term or be defeated by the Democratic candidate and former Vice-president Joe Biden, the EU faces the challenge of setting the course for the upcoming years to follow and the unresolved Brexit issue, as the negotiation process is still on and a yet a deal between the Brussels and London has to be stricken.

With the continuing circulating virus and the race for vaccine still open, Russia looks at its own business and after having tested the vaccine on a series of volunteers, healthcare authorities are going to further testing and studying, as they expect to provide coverage to the population as soon as possible, absorb the hit and recover from an unexpected recession. The constitutional referendum held in June set a definite win for the Kremlin, who despite the pandemic, managed to hold such an important consultation and achieved a substantial score. The Western media focused mainly on the presidential terms' annulment amendment, that would permit president Putin to run for two further elections and stay in power until 2036, although the reform, which basically drafted a new constitution, contained guidelines for the Russia that is about to come. Russian law will always prevail over international law and strict criteria are to be applied for presidential candidates (for example, they cannot have a double passport), not to mention the confessional nature of the Russian state and the *de facto* constitutional ban on homosexual marriages.

The new constitution also reshapes the political system institutions, as the State Duma is now empowered of nominating and therefore, proposing a plausible Prime Minister to the presidency; until now, it was only the president who could do so and the Duma mainly played a secondary role in the Russian political system. Moreover, a new institutional body is formed, as the Council of State is introduced among the other bodies. The reform has been criticised, even though it passed with a strong majority, with a positive percentage of participants; many elements that were introduced present president Putin's vision for the immediate future and the preparatory work to the succeeding of his. The succession of Putin is an issue that shakes governmental environment and the ruling party, too: indeed, it was former cosmonaut, first woman sent to space and now deputy of the State Duma Valentina Tereshkova, who proposed the discussed amendment on the presidential terms' annulment and it clearly can be read as a message of the old guard towards younger and rising aspiring leaders among the state bureaucracy. Main aim for Putin is to guarantee that the job he has done through these years at the Kremlin could not be simply wasted by inappropriate successors. To assure the stability of the

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<sup>149</sup> European Commission, *State of the Union 2020*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020, ec.europa.eu  
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/strategic-planning/state-union-addresses/state-union-2020\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/strategic-planning/state-union-addresses/state-union-2020_en)



reforms applied, the state capitalism, the investments and most important for the Russian president, the foreign policy that Russia should continue to unfold. Putin arrived at the Kremlin in a very uncertain and chaotic moment of Russian history and needed to restore the Russian pride, the economy and start to play as an influent geopolitical actor; in addition, Putin restored elements, heroes and narration of Russian history, not to mention the definite overcoming of communism, an era that could be defined positive, but over.

The president prioritised the Victory Day to recreate the unitarian spirit that permitted then Soviet Union to defeat the German invader in the so-called Great Patriotic War; the original selection of the past allowed Putin to bury the myth of the revolution and Lenin, limited the role of Stalin to the victory in the war and condemning the crimes of the communist regimes, including the Red Terror and the gulag prison camps. In 2004, the Kremlin cancelled the national festivity of 7<sup>th</sup> November, anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution and replaced it with the National Unity Day on 4<sup>th</sup> November: indeed, on that day, in 1612, the siege of Moscow by the Polish – Lithuanian aggressors was over. Following the end of the siege, the Romanov dynasty came to power and ended the time of troubles and the analogy was drawn in the national debate, as the nineties were generally perceived as a similar period that was finally over and a new consolidation of the Russian state and the power system had been realised.<sup>150</sup> Concerning Russian foreign policy, Vladimir Putin attempted to establish once again Russian influence and role in the world and worked for the realisation of a multipolar system of global governance. According to Putin, there shall be no hegemon in the world, but a mutual cooperation that could guarantee political stability, trade and dialogue, mainly through the UN Security Council; as the heir of the Soviet Union, who contributed to create the United Nations and the contemporary international community, for Russia is important to establish relations and permanent consultations to solve global issues. Putin stresses the importance of a realisation of this multipolar system of international relations and believes that more countries shall be involved into discussion and cooperation process; nevertheless, the concept of multipolarity is born out of the necessity to find stability and the failed integration of the Russian Federation into the Western bloc during the nineties; after the collapse of the USSR, Western powers perceived Russia as an unnecessary partner and as an outsider that could not play the game anymore.<sup>151</sup>

Russia finds itself to play an ambitious role in a much more uncertain world with undefined borders and limits, incomparable with the Cold War international regime; somehow, Russia is still the number three, but outside the top competition between China and the United States. In addition, the country lacks a strong ideology or a message to promote in the world, as far as socialism is basically dead and contemporary Russia is not a union of countries anymore. The Federation inherited a population that is not homogenous, with several minorities within, yet Russia's huge size is unaltered. To maintain the country as one, united, solid and stable an authoritarian and centralised government is required and yet the current stability and geographical outlook

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<sup>150</sup> Roccucci A., *Parole d'ordine grande potenza e terra russa*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *È la storia, bellezza!*, N°8 2020, Roma, GEDI Group

<sup>151</sup> Salacone A. (a cura di), *Così i russi imparano la Russia*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020, published on Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *È la storia, bellezza!*, N°8 2020, Roma, GEDI Group

of Russia looks like a miracle, some might say.<sup>152</sup> Truth is that current borders are the result of a confused process that led to the end of a dead-walking empire, but the Russian Federation is smaller than the Soviet Union and inherited the territories of the Socialist Federative Republic of Russia and no more. The post-soviet space, that includes Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Western frontier appears contestable like never before. The Baltic republics already joined NATO and the European Union, Ukraine through a violent revolution moved towards the West, despite a war is still on in the East of the country, whereas Belarus is ruled by the same president since 1994, although Lukashenko is now contested for the total absence of a change in a Soviet-nostalgic country, which represents Russia's last line of defence from the Atlantic Alliance.

Thus, the encirclement syndrome knocks at the door again and the supreme need to defend the motherland requires its resources, despite the Russian Federation cannot simply afford the expenditures of the US or Chinese military budget. As for its relationship with the number one and the number two, Moscow finds itself in an unpleasant position: the United States look at Russia as an enemy and an existential threat to their national security and despite the several attempts by Donald Trump and his predecessors to open dialogue and cooperate with the Russians, the administration always end up giving up against the pressure of bureaucracy, what Trump tritely calls the *Deep State*, made of intelligence agencies, the Pentagon, the State Department, ministries and lately, US Congress. China welcomed the partnership with Russia, but Moscow is forced to cooperate with Beijing in order to promote its vision because the West refused and keeps on refusing any serious initiative of cooperation. But since Russia does not possess the same amount of resources as the Chinese, Moscow faces the danger of becoming simply a junior partner of Beijing and suffering an economic penetration in the Far East. Perhaps, Russia's main goal in the next future is to survive as it is right now and maintain its integrity and sovereignty, although hope for an improvement with the West shall not be abandoned at all. Mutual cooperation with Europe is beneficial and Moscow is weary of this and in addition, both will be secondary protagonists in the middle of the developing US-China global confrontation, which is destined to be headline of the next future's geopolitics.

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<sup>152</sup> Limes, rivista italiana di Geopolitica, *La solitudine del numero tre*, Editorial Opening, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020, published on *La Russia non è una Cina*, N°5 2020, GEDI Group

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**The Russian Aid to Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic  
and Russian – Italian ties**

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# Summary

## Premise

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the Russian military operation that occurred in northern Italy from the end of March to the beginning of May 2020, mutually agreed by the Italian and the Russian government and that saw the Russian army operating in Italy, a NATO country, for the first time. The intervention was motivated by multiple reasons and confirmed the positive nature of Russian – Italian ties, as this point represents a further initiative of research for this dissertation, as the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Rome is analysed under the political, economic and cultural aspects. A description of major events that occurred in these months is followed by a general outlook on the geopolitical scenario in the world, involving Russia, Europe and the USA.

## COVID-19 pandemic

At the beginning of 2020, the world has seen a devastating pandemic due to the massive contagion of COVID-19, the name that has been given by the World Health Organisation to a new kind of coronavirus, *SarsCov2*, which began to spread over in city of Wuhan, main urban centre of the Chinese province of Hubei, in December 2019. Presumably, it has been established that the virus has been transmitted from animals to humans and due to the unknown identity of this coronavirus, medical authorities in Wuhan were overwhelmed by the outstanding capacity of this virus to infect very quickly the individuals. Despite the lockdown measures in Wuhan and the closing of the entire province, the contagion did not limit to China, but crossed international borders and spread over Europe, although some countries as Italy attempted to stop flight connections from and to China. At the end of February 2020, first sites of contagion were two little centres in Northern Italy, Codogno (in the Lodi province, Lombardy) and Vo' Euganeo (in the Padua province, Veneto), as the contagion ran fast and early victims generated chaos and panic among the population, whereas healthcare authorities and hospitals found themselves unprepared to face such a menace, without the necessary reserves of protection disposals (masks, gloves, suits, etc.). The Italian government in Rome struggled to coordinate with the regions, as red zones were established over the two areas of contagion; however, when the cases skyrocketed, the government and the Lombardy regional government failed to establish a whole limitation zone over the region. On 9<sup>th</sup> March, the Italian government established a total lockdown over the entire country and forced Italian citizens to stay home, with the only chance to get out for grocery shopping.

Progressively, every country in the world came to know the contagion inside its borders and adopted measures to contain the infection, although the worsening of the epidemic in Italy did not move fellow EU member states to apply the same restrictions, as disrespectful comments were raised towards Italians, as many underestimated this severe danger. Nevertheless, the contagion spread also in the rest of Europe and caused terrible damages, as the cases kept increasing and deaths as well. Italy found itself in a unpleasant position, as

it was the very first country in Europe to experience such an epidemic and in spite of gags and indecorous jokes, the *Belpaese* generated a feeling of compassion and pity around itself, as the government negotiated supply contracts with partners in Europe and in the world, with several to provide donations of healthcare disposals, mainly delivered to hospitals and healthcare centres. Important support came in early March from China, the only country, who could really share experience with Italian medicals: as a matter of fact, the Chinese government sent two medical squads in two different times over to Italy, in order to monitor the evolution of the epidemic and compare it with the course it took in Wuhan and in the Hubei province. What happened with these forms of international aid, is that they set a complete new scenario in the history of aid delivery and overturned the countries' roles, as usual beneficiary, poor or developing countries, became donors, whereas usual donors, as Italy, found itself on the other side of the field; indeed, the Italian government received aid, in terms of healthcare materials and disposals and sanitary squads even from countries like Albania, Tunisia, Ukraine and Cuba (who is not new to international healthcare assistance operations, see the Ebola epidemic in Africa, 2014).

### **Russian intervention in Italy**

Among international donors, who provided assistance to Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is the Russian Federation, who became a true protagonist of the aid competition. Following a telephone conversation between the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the Russian President Vladimir Putin, the two leaders discussed the ongoing situation with the worsening of the epidemic and agreed over a form of assistance, as the Italian Prime Minister officially demanded the help of a precious international partner. In the end of March, a Russian military medical squad left Russia heading towards Italy to unfold an unprecedented healthcare operation: top sanitary officials, among them doctors, nurses and virologists, were sent to the 'infected' country, in order to provide assistance and help a partner, who was facing a terrible healthcare crisis. The arrival of the medical squad was welcomed at the Pratica di Mare Air Force base by the Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and the Russian ambassador to Italy Sergei Razov; after coordinating with their Italian army's counterpart, the Russian military convoy headed from Rome to the north of Italy, as in accordance with the Italian authorities, the squad was sent to operate in the city of Bergamo, in the Lombardy region, a province that was critically hit by the fast contagion of COVID-19. More specifically, the Russian doctors, nurses and specialists started from the general sanitation of open and closed spaces in the several hospices in the city and in the province, continuing the operation in the near city of Brescia and province, as at the end of their mission, the Russian military specialists sanitised over a hundred hospices. Rest home centres were particularly infected during the epidemic and were issue of discussion for the press and a further matter of incomprehension between the government and the regions, especially Lombardy.

However, the Russian medical squad also provided assistance to hospitals, where patients infected with COVID-19 were treated, with the hospital of Bergamo to be one of the main battlefields in the region: quite dramatic were the images circulating on the internet and transmitted on television, where army's trucks carried the dead's coffins, to prove how arduous the situation was. The Russian medical squad operated for approximately six weeks in Italy and left the country at the beginning of May, as through the weeks the number of cases dropped progressively and intensive therapies as well, with the government lifting the lockdown measures on the 4<sup>th</sup> of the month; citizens were locked for almost two months at home and yet the debate for the re-opening generated polemics and protests from the opposition parties, as some of them already demanded to lift the lockdown on Easter festivity weekend. The government instead, insisted for a more prudent and cautious line, as also industries and businesses openly asked for the authorisation to restart, as suspension of activities created a terrible damage for the economy. All in all, the entire world found itself on the verge of an economic crisis, as the pandemic involved more or less, every part of the world and the same international institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund confirmed the negative prospects for the rest of 2020.

As for the Russian medical operation, it can definitely be evaluated as a success, as doctors, nurses and specialists were helpful in their service and the healthcare responsible in Bergamo and Brescia appreciated and confirmed the precious service they did, with the population also grateful toward them. Certainly, the Russian operation did not save Italy from the pandemic, nor it made the significant difference to end the contagion, as in the end, the Italian national healthcare system proved to be stable and capable to resist such a terrible shock. It is true that thousands of people lost their lives, as in the rest of the world, and perhaps the government could have been more cautious and wise to expect the arrival of the virus from China sooner or later, although it has to be said that, the scientific community, involving virologists and bacteriologists reassured the population before the epidemic could devastate the north of the country and underestimated the new coronavirus. In addition, the lockdown turned out to be decisive and necessary because a similar contagion in the south of the country would have made much worse damages, as the public healthcare structures are not equipped adequately as those of the north, as a result of a long-term disparity that keeps on penalising Italy and its citizens.

The Russian military operation suggested without doubt a lot of attention, not only by Russian, Italian and international media, but also by analysts, observers and common people. It is not for every day to see Russian army's military trucks on the Italian motorways, as Italy is a NATO member state, a long-standing ally of the United States and looking at the constantly increasing tension between the Russian Federation and the West (US and Europe), perhaps only such a pandemic could set conditions for this formidable event to occur. However, there is no reason to think any major change in terms of alliance and Italian membership within the Atlantic Alliance or in the European Union, as repeatedly the press and the media claim, every time the Italian government interacts with its Russian counterpart, something is going to happen, although Rome

and Moscow have been partners in terms of dialogue, cooperation and bilateral trade for a while, even during the Soviet era. What is definitely interesting and stimulating is to find out why the Russian government, in the person of the Head of State, president Putin, decided to send a special medical squad over to Italy and which reasons are behind the healthcare operation in the *Belpaese*.

### **Russia's reasons**

The reasons are essentially three: a geopolitical move to exercise influence, a domestic political consensus initiative and a strategic-healthcare intelligence operation. Russia, in providing for free a concrete help to a suffering partner of its, played a move that is proper of true geopolitical powers, as Moscow, also due to its Soviet legacy, is clearly weary of the importance of exercising influence, even in a non-formerly ally of its, at a price that simply has to be paid. The Russian government also knows that, unlike in Soviet times, currently it cannot afford an expensive distribution of aid in the world, to countries hanging in the balance, where Moscow can gain more than a simple trade partner. The lack of an official ideology and because of the overall reduction after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 (and it is not only about geographical size), Moscow cannot play the game with the old rules it was accustomed to, but still it attempts to play, in order to be a protagonist on global scenario and gain a larger geopolitical weight. As the presidential decision casted doubts over the chance of conceding strategic resources to a foreign country, the Kremlin cleverly thought about the positive image of Italy in Russia and spotted a chance to prove the proximity of the Russians toward the suffering Italy, as state television transmitted services, describing the critical phase in the country where several visitors from Russia each summer come to spend their holidays in the cities or at the seaside. Russians feel an irresistible attraction toward Italy, as they tend to picture it as a perfect land, a paradise on Earth, with sea, mountains, lakes and fascinating historical cities, full of culture, architecture, sculptures and theatres. The representation of Italy that Russians have in mind is quite distorted as they like to think that Italy cannot have problems and life can only be good, positive and enjoyable as Italians prove they love to live their life with pleasure and style. This is a further explanation in order to understand the reason why the Kremlin considered a popular move to help Italy in such a moment; in addition, a referendum to approve the constitutional reform was scheduled for the end of April, although due to the pandemic, it was postponed to the last week of June. The Kremlin was highly focused on this referendum as it needed a massive approval for a reform that many did not hesitate to define a totally new constitution to finally overcome the nineties and the 1993 text.

Among main new elements, the primacy of Russian law over international law, the confessional nature of the state, the introduction of the Council of State and a general empowerment of the State Duma, as the lower chamber will have the authority to nominate a Prime Minister to be appointed by the parliament and confirmed by the presidency. With an unorthodox voting procedure, as electronic vote was adopted as a solution against the pandemic, the Kremlin obtained a substantial success and approval over its line, despite the president is aware that his popularity is not enough and that is slightly going down. Protests in Siberia, mainly in the Khabarovsk territory, followed by rallies in Tomsk and Novosibirsk proved that regions no

longer support the centralised power structure and claim their autonomy and right to obtain the necessary funds. Further signals came from Tatarstan, the main Muslim republic in the Russian Federation, which also pressured the government to see recognised its status of autonomous federative entity. However, the Kremlin's main concern is the economy and the way to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic shock, already at the beginning of 2020, predictions announced a very small percentage of growth and yet the oil price, to which is connected the rouble, the Russian national currency, fell down and slowly is increasing again, after the successful agreement on production cut with Saudi Arabia and the United States. The pandemic caused a global recession and forecasts say it will take at least two years to completely re-establish the previous equilibrium; in addition, due to the ongoing of contagion, several connections are yet to be activated, as closing frontiers turned to be the safest option for nation states.

The very last reason for which Russia opted to send its best unities of the armed forces over to Italy, is a strategic-healthcare intelligence operation, planned to discover fundamental information on the evolution of the epidemic in Italy. Indeed, as Italy presented itself to be the very second country where the contagion spread after China, the Russian government spotted a chance to observe and collect important data on the field to monitor the healthcare crisis, in order to be ready to face the same development at home, as the epidemic started some weeks later in the Russian Federation, with the very first cases in March represented by tourists, who came back from Italy and other European countries and got infected there. In Russia, the quarantine, officially called a temporary holiday to present it in a lighter form, began at the end of the month, with a live announcement by the president from his office. While shops, factories and businesses were forced to shut down, the medical squad was working and cooperating with the hospitals in the north of Italy and collecting precious information on patients treatment, the clinical management of intensive therapies and study for the research to produce a vaccine, an antidote capable to contrast the coronavirus, so far the only way to stop the contagion, as virologists around the world stated the necessity of this kind of outcome to stop the epidemic. It is quite certain that among Russian officers, there were intelligence officers of the Russian army, sent to collect critical information that might have been turned decisive in the race for the vaccine, as in August Russian president Vladimir Putin claimed that scientists finally produced an experimental version of it, named Sputnik V, on the memory of the very first satellite launched in outer space by the Soviet Union in 1957; the Kremlin's intention was definitely to celebrate and glorify the scientific research, the researchers of the country and the national progress, which, if the vaccine proves to be effective, might generate a sensible international success for Russia, as the USA and Europe are still working on their research projects.

The presence of intelligence agents though, solicited the interest of the Italian press, and more specifically, of the Italian newspaper from Turin, *La Stampa*, one of the most enduring ones in the country, which through the articles of journalist Jacopo Iacoboni, questioned the intentions of the Russian intervention in Italy. Indeed, Iacoboni first advanced doubts over the real help that the Russian medical squad could deliver to healthcare personnel in Bergamo, claiming a government source confirmed the aid provided by Moscow

was essentially irrelevant and eventually made a hypothesis over the possible presence of GRU (military intelligence service of Russian armed forces) agents among doctors and nurses. Iacoboni's criticism provoked first the answer of Russian ambassador to Italy, Sergei Razov, who assured the good will of Russia in providing aid to a suffering country and claimed the press was far way too suspicious over any Russian activity; few days later, the claiming of the presence of intelligence agents solicited the harsh and raging response of the General Major Igor Konashenkov, press secretary of the Russian Ministry of Defence, who repeated the ambassador's words, condemned the allegations and ended the communiqué with an enigmatic ancient Roman said, read as an indirect advice to the journalist and to the newspaper, a menace that could perhaps, be followed by some serious consequence. Immediately, the newspaper defended its reporter and asked for a response from the Italian government, although only a joint statement from the Italian Ministry of Defence and Foreign Affairs that officially thanked publicly the Russian government and the armed forces for the precious aid, but claimed the importance of defending the freedom of thought, ideas and press. No comment from the Prime Minister's office, as the mediatic clash ended very soon after an act of solidarity from the media and press environment toward Iacoboni and La Stampa.

### **Geopolitical considerations**

Russia entertains with Italy an enduring friendship that lasts over decades, political regimes and ideologies, as the fascist regime was one of the very first to recognise the Soviet Union and after the war, Italy was one of the most important over the iron curtain of the USSR, also due to the strongest communist party in Western party and influential actors that made this relationship working, such as the ENI and its president Enrico Mattei, FIAT, who built a factory in the city of Togliatti and the efficient dialogue efforts of the Vatican City, who played the role of the intermediate between the West and the East. When the USSR collapsed, Italy immediately established ties with the new Russian Federation and as a member of the European Union and of the Atlantic Alliance, Rome never hesitated to cooperate and dialogue with Russia, even during hard times, such as the recent Ukrainian crisis in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of civil war in the Donbas region. Despite a positive interexchange volume, Russia and Italy found themselves limited in their economic cooperation, as the EU sanctions caused the Russian countersanctions on food products and the tough US pressure on European allies, does not allow Rome to move forward towards Moscow. However, Russia presents good opportunities for Italy to promote its culture, its manufactured goods and tourism, as explained Russians are definitely in love with the *Belpaese*. On the global scenario, Russia finds itself with few options, as the US and Europe are not open for negotiations and condemn Russian actions over Ukraine and Belarus, where in August massive protests after presidential elections caused the violent response of the police. In addition, the Navalny poisoning episode increased the tension between Moscow and Brussels, with the US government pressuring the Germans to stop the North Stream 2 project in the Baltic Sea. Russia attempts to open to China and side with Beijing in order to give place to its strategy on the international arena, to establish a multipolar system of global governance, although the People's Republic is keen on challenging

the USA on a global scale and Moscow risks to become a simple junior partner of the Chinese. Looking at the next future, with an economy that needs to recover and the quest for Putin's succession, Russia's main goal is to maintain itself intact, avoid regional separatism and defend its sovereignty, being weary of the impossibility to contrast on a wide line the US strategy; Moscow also needs to re-establish positive ties and dialogue with Europe, as European investments, technology, tourism is absolutely needed for Russia to improve its economy and development. As for Italy, Rome cannot renounce to its ties with Russia and needs to continue talks and cooperation initiatives and coordinate a better project in order to exploit such a successful consensus in the world's largest country.