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[Nicola Chelotti](#)

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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Chelotti, Nicola (2010) *Italy seen through British eyes: a European middle power?* [Modern Italy](#), 15 (3). pp. 307-322. ISSN 1353-2944

DOI: [10.1080/13532944.2010.490340](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2010.490340)

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/53482/>
Available in LSE Research Online: October 2013

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Italy seen through British eyes: a European middle power?

Nicola Chelotti

This article offers a report on the British perceptions of today's Italy and Italian politics. Employing a number of sources (parliamentary debates, governmental documents, newspaper articles and elite interviews) it argues that Italy is not perceived as a great power within the European system nor it is viewed as a peripheral actor. Rather, it suggests that Italy seems to have finally found in the post-Cold War scenario its proper role – a European middle power, with important responsibilities within its regional sub-system. A frequent request, and expectation coming from British politics and society is that Italy should take on more international responsibilities, even in the defence field – as the different readings of Italy's role and leadership in Afghanistan and Lebanon reveal.

However, Italy's ability to play this role is believed to be hampered by several factors: its uncertain political situation, its unwillingness to engage in military operations, its reluctance to respect international commitments and its structural economic problems. As a result, further possibilities of cooperation with other international partners as well as its potential autonomous action on the international stage are, in several cases, precluded. Moreover, if the relations between Italy and the UK are certainly described as good, and Italy is seen as a reliable partner, the nature of the co-operation between the two countries is often considered to be feeble and resting on short-term common interests and strategies.

Keywords: Foreign policy, middle power, military missions abroad, Berlusconi

Introduction

Relations between Italy and the United Kingdom (UK) have traditionally been very intense, and the positions taken by the UK on European affairs have often proved of crucial importance for Italy. It is reported, for instance, that the role played and the support provided by the UK was decisive in the campaign for the unification of Italy. During Garibaldi's *Spedizione dei Mille*¹, British watercrafts were moored into the harbour of Marsala to deter Bourbon ships and to monitor the progress of the Italian revolutionary's military operations. At times, however, the relationship between the two countries has been more complex. Indeed, the link between part of the British political establishment and the Italian fascist regime was more intricate and subtle than one would expect. The *Duce* was very popular in the UK during the 1920s and then future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was reported to have said: 'If I had been an Italian I am sure that I should have been wholeheartedly with you [Mussolini] from start to finish in your triumphant struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism' (quoted in Villari 1956: 43). Of course, there have also been moments of tension between both nations. In 1985 while holding the Presidency of the European Council, Italy's prime minister, Bettino Craxi,

decided to launch an intergovernmental conference to reform the Treaty of Rome. The initiative met with the fierce opposition of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher (Dinan 2005: 107-108).

Despite past tensions, cooperation between both countries is clearly well-established nowadays. Between 2007 and 2008, high-ranking Italian government representatives met with their British counterparts, outside European institutions and events about 25-30 times. Since 1993, the British Council and the British Embassy in Rome organise an Anglo-Italian conference on a yearly basis in Pontignano, near Siena, where politicians, diplomats, businessmen, academics and other opinion-makers from both countries convene and debate for three days. Overall, the relations between Italy and the UK are embedded in a very dense network of multilateral institutions, including all the major international organizations. Even cooperation in defence matters is intense and advanced both within and outside the EU framework. In terms of both countries economic ties, the relationship can be considered quite solid as well. The volume of trade between Italy and the UK has grown steadily over the past ten years. However, among Italy's major trading partners, the UK still ranks well behind France and Germany. For the UK, Italy ranks even lower, ninth to be precise, behind not only Germany and France, but also smaller countries such as the Netherlands, Ireland and Belgium. The trade balance in 2008 is in favour of Italy by almost 4 700 million pounds out of a total exchange value of £ 23 336 million.ⁱⁱ

This article analyses British perceptions of Italy, Italian politics and Italy's role on the international stage. Can Italy be considered a major power within the European regional sub-system? How does Italy exercise its influence and power? These questions are particularly relevant given Italy's fear of being excluded from restricted, formal or informal, circles where decisions are taken and power is exercised. Every time the leaders of France, the UK and Germany have gathered to discuss EU affairs, Italy has reacted with resentment and criticism and warned against any attempt to create a 'core group' or *directoire* to run Europe (Hill 2004: 147), especially one that does not include Italy itself (Gegout 2002). In this respect, investigating the expectations and perceptions of Italy held by British elites and society appears to be particularly important.

The article is organized in four sections. The first examines the debates as well as written answers, reports and research papers in the British Parliament in two selected periods. The second examines the documents on foreign and defence policy produced by the British government. The third investigate the perceptions of two British national newspapers, the *Guardian* and the *Times*. The fourth section provides the results of a few in-depth interviews conducted with some members of the British elite. The

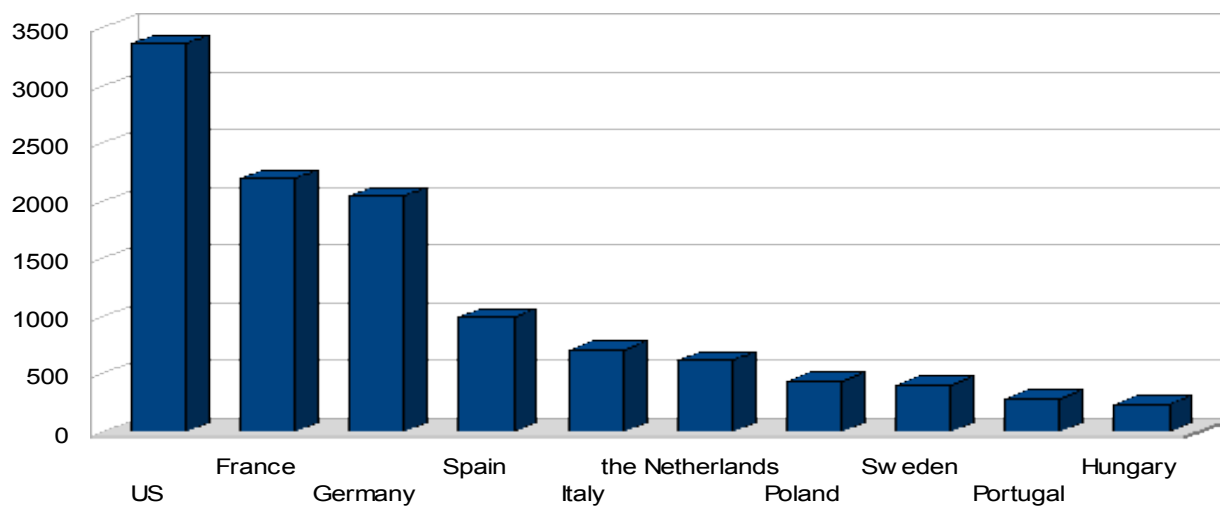
final section summarises the findings and draws some conclusions about Italy's role on the international stage.

Parliament

A search on *Hansard* (i.e. the House of Commons [HoC] and House of Lords [HoL]) for the key words 'Italy' and 'Italian' running from 1 July-31 December 2002 and 1 July-31 December 2006 yielded 712 results, with an appreciably higher frequency in the 2006 period during the Prodi-led centre-left coalition's first six months in office (432 mentions vs. 280).ⁱⁱⁱ A comparison of the number of mentions of Italy with that of other countries offers a first indication of the degree of interest that British Members of Parliament (MPs) have in Italy and Italian politics. As Figure 1 shows quite clearly below, Italy does not appear as a minor or as a peripheral partner for the British Parliament. Nevertheless, it does not receive the same attention as other European countries – such as France, Germany and even Spain^{iv} (let alone the United States). British Members of Parliament (MPs) seem to consider Italy neither a small nor a great power. Rather, these raw, quantitative data suggest that the level of coverage and interest Italy receives in the British Parliament can be likened to that of a European middle power^v.

Figure 1

**Cross-national comparison of the number of mentions in the British Parliament
1 July - 31 December 2002 and 1 July - 31 December 2006**



Source: *Hansard*, House of Commons and House of Lords, available online at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>

In most cases, however, Italy was mentioned in a purely factual manner. Only in 109 of the 712 cases recorded above Italy was mentioned in a value-laden context and virtually none of these 109 mentions dealt directly with Italy. They all refer to Italy within wider discourses. In other words, in the timeframe selected, neither a debate, a speech nor a committee in the British Parliament had Italian politics or policies in the heart of their discussions. The only exception is a detailed report by the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Lords on the Committee’s visit to Italy. Its objective was to study how Italy supported and protected its cultural heritage in order to acquire useful information to be introduced in the British debate and eventually into law. References to Italy are made primarily for reasons of domestic (British) politics. One can distinguish three cases. In the first, Italy is mentioned as a positive or negative ‘model’ in a certain policy area. When committees discuss a particular bill to adopt, or a particular reform to undertake, references to the best/worst practice (or simply to some existing models) are frequently made. This type of mention, as shown by Table 1, took place 26 times. In the second case, Italian politics or policies are mentioned 30 times as a term of ‘comparison’.

Table 1

Context in which mentions of Italy occur in the British Parliament

	Model	Comparison	Other usages	Total
Number	26	30	53	109
Percentage	23,9%	27,5%	48,6%	100,0%

Source: *Hansard*, House of Commons and House of Lords, online at:

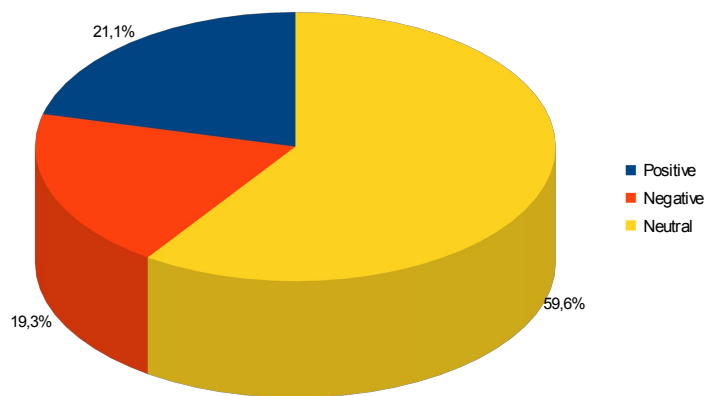
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>

In the first case (model), Italy is mentioned merely in passing within the context of a discussion over the weaknesses and strengths of a particular policy. Whether the reference is positive or negative largely depends on the partisan preferences of the MP in question. In the second case (comparison), the reference to Italy is more systematic, i.e. placed in contexts suggesting a common reading on how much importance British MPs attach to Italian political or policy experiences. ‘Comparisons’ are made with reference to the most disparate topics: from GDP growth to the level of business taxation; from the net contributions to the EU to the level of investments in Burma; from unemployment to investment rates.^{vi} Italy is used as a term of comparison roughly as often as Germany, France and the US, while Spain and Japan are mentioned less frequently. The third category, ‘other usages’ include those cases in

which mentions refer to some actions, both domestic and foreign, taken by the Italian government. Also in these cases, the main context remains that of British politics. MPs, in other words, are interested in the significance that those Italian actions have for the UK, adopting thus domestic lenses for their evaluation. Finally, as shown by Figure 2, 23 mentions of Italy had a positive connotation, 21 a negative one, while 65 (corresponding to 59.6% of the total) were neutral.

Figure 2

Percentages of positive, negative or neutral mentions of Italy in the British Parliament



Source: *Hansard*, House of Commons and House of Lords, available online at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>

It is only when British MPs refer to Italy as a ‘model’ that positive or negative images are most often evoked. Positive mentions have been made in the House of Lords in relation to anti-smoking measures (*Hansard*, 19 November 2002), the Italian government’s support of Ferrari’s (industrial) activities (*Hansard*, 23 October 2002) and, on several occasions, the Italian system of support for victims of human trafficking. With regard to the latter, in the Joint Committee on Human Rights (*Hansard*, 26 June 2006), Baroness Stern said: ‘Can I perhaps bore you by talking about Italy again! Obviously, Italy is not a Paradise, but certainly there was a lot to learn that was extremely positive’. In the same meeting Ms. Andrew (a Counter Trafficking Development Officer) added: ‘That was one of the reasons why we cited Italy as having a model of best practice’.^{vii}

The House of Lords considers Italy to be a negative model for what concerns its regulation of stem cell research, which it perceives as combining ‘strong condemnation’ with ‘permissiveness’ (*Hansard*, December 2002). In the House of Commons, Dr. Desmond Turner (Labour) judged the Italian regulation of in vitro fertilisation as faulty: “[T]he Vatican position is that human life starts at the moment of fertilisation ... That creates a great cultural limitation on what can be done, and for a long time Italy was totally unregulated and had no legislation on in vitro fertilisation. The consequences of that were some awful practices, including one man’s threat to perform human cloning. Finally, Italy legislated, but its legislation ... was very imperfect” (*Hansard*, 3 July 2006). British MPs also paint a gloomy picture of the Italian economic situation: Italy is seen as one of the ‘worse’ (*Hansard*, HoC, 18 November 2002) or ‘sick’ (*Hansard*, HoL, 27 November 2006) economies of Europe, with a huge public debt, high unemployment, (*Hansard*, HoL, 15 November 2006), and with some ‘eccentric’ politicians who go as far as making the ‘hilarious’ suggestion that, to cope with its difficult economic situation, Italy ‘should go back to the lira’ (*Hansard*, HoL, 12 October 2006). Italy’s method of the deploying troops in its military missions abroad and particularly its rules of engagement have also received criticism. What is worse is that those rules are also assumed to reflect the level of Italian commitment to NATO. As put by Lord Astor of Hever, a few allies ‘deliberately choose to deploy their troops only in low-risk areas, jeopardising the success of the entire mission. In particular, the caveats imposed by the Governments of Germany, France, Spain and Italy are hampering NATO’s overall efforts. These nations’ troops have been acting in national interests as national armies’ (*Hansard*, HoL, 30 November 2006; see also HoC, 22 November 2006). Several other MPs were ‘profoundly disappointed’ by the Italian government’s refusal to commit troops to those areas of Afghanistan ‘where they are most needed’ (e.g. *Hansard*, HoC, 30 November 2006; HoL, 5 December 2006).

What emerges from these debates is the expectation, and the request, that powers such as Italy should play a bigger role in the international system, contributing to commit military troops to monitor critical international situations and to answer the peacekeeping calls of international bodies. For the same reasons, the Italian initiative in Lebanon (summer 2006) was praised by British parliamentarians. Several MPs indeed ‘regretted’ and criticised their government for not taking part in that mission thereby losing influence (*Hansard*, HoL, 5 December 2006 and HoC, 6 December 2006).

Frames and Sub-Frames

This section examines the types of frame within which Italy or Italian policies are mentioned. As shown in Table 2, a review of the 109 mentions reveals that political frames (47 mentions) prevail

over the social (33) and economic (29) ones. A diachronic examination suggests that British MPs appeared more concerned about the Italian economy in 2002, when Berlusconi was in power, than in 2006.

Table 2

Frames of mentions of Italy in parliamentary debates

	<i>Economic</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>Total</i>
2002	20	17	13	50
2006	9	30	20	59
Percentage	26,6%	43,1%	30,3%	100%
Total	29	47	33	109

Source: *Hansard*, House of Commons and House of Lords, available online at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>

A closer scrutiny of the three frames discloses some additional information about British perceptions of Italian political life. Within the political frame of Table 3, British MPs seem to pay attention only to what Italy does on the international stage and are not in the least concerned with domestic politics. Thus, Italian military operations abroad received 18 mentions (16 of which concern Afghanistan and Lebanon), Italian positions and actions within the EU received 20 mentions while the remaining 8 mentions pertained to various diplomatic initiatives.

Table 3

Sub-frames of mentions of Italy in parliamentary debates

<i>Primary Frame</i>	<i>Sub-frame</i>	<i>No. of Articles</i>
Political + Economic + Social	EU	32
Political	Italy in the EU	20
Political	Military operations	18
Social	Human trafficking	12
Political	Diplomatic initiatives	8
Economic	Public debt and SGP	7
Economic	Investments	6
Social	Road safety	5

Economic	Bad economic situation	5
Social	In-vitro fertilization	3
Social	Immigration	3
Economic	Protectionism	3
Economic	Business taxation	2
Economic	Growth	2
Social	Cultural heritage	2

Source: *Hansard*, House of Commons and House of Lords, available online at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>

Social issues are mentioned mostly in a ‘model’ context – that is, as a term of reference for domestic (British) legislative purposes. In this respect, Italy’s support of the victims of human trafficking received 12 mentions and road safety policies 5 mentions, while in vitro fertilization and immigration policies received 3 mentions each. Finally, the economic frame confirms the negative picture of Italian economy drawn above: British MPs made seven negative remarks about the level of Italian public debt and the risk of breaching the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). The Italian precarious economic situation was mentioned five times while on three other occasions Italy was criticised for its protectionist policies. In conclusion, one should point out that the European dimension is very relevant: in 32 cases (29.4% of the total) British MPs mentioned Italy or Italian politics when it was in the larger context of the EU. Moreover, Italian activities within the EU result to be the single most mentioned item in parliamentary debates.

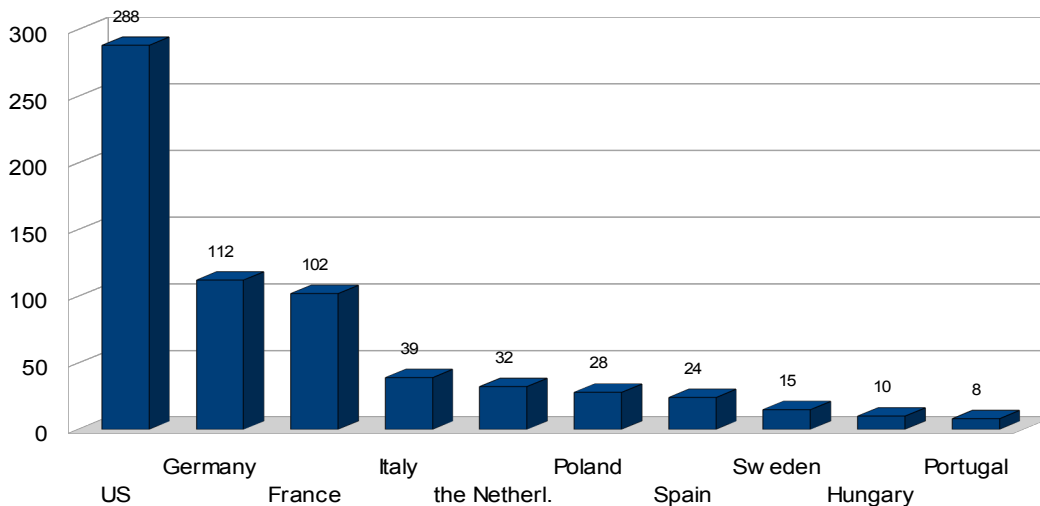
Government

To identify the British government’s perceptions of Italy and Italian foreign policies the annual departmental reports of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) between 2002 and 2009 were examined together with the March 2008 and 2009 papers on National Security Strategy (*Security in an Interdependent World* and *Security for the Next Generation*). Figure 3 shows the number of times Italy, as well as other states, are mentioned in the fifteen government documents examined. These data reveal again that, in the UK, Italy is not perceived as a small, ‘minor’ partner nor as a fundamental ally. Indeed, although Italy results as the fourth most cited country (among our sample) – the references to Italy being 39 (25 in the FCO reports, 12 in the MOD ones, and twice in the security strategies) both Germany and France (let alone the US) appear a much

more relevant ‘reference point’ for British policy-makers (112 and 102 mentions, respectively). In other words, a quantitative assessment of the FCO and MOD reports suggests that, to the eyes of British government officials, Italy is close to the rank of a European middle power.

Figure 3

Number of mentions received by various states in government documents



If we examine the context and the content of the governmental references to Italy, a similar perception of Italy and Italian politics (Italy as an European middle power) can be drawn. In the British government documents selected for this analysis, Italy is most often mentioned as a player in international organisations such as the G8, or as one of the participants in the *Organisation Conjointe de Coopération en Matière d'Armement* (OCCAR), the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan or the Contact Group in Kosovo and in the Western Balkans. In order to put the net contributions of the UK to EU funding into context, and to assess its relative trend over the years, one FCO report (2005-06: 49) significantly compares it to that of France and Italy.

In the early 2000s, the relationship between the two heads of governments, Silvio Berlusconi and Tony Blair, appeared particularly strong. At the UK-Italy summits, they expressed, among other things, their common support for the interventions in Iraq and in Afghanistan, their shared interests in the negotiations on the future of Europe and Turkey's accession to the EU. The two leaders were also the originators of the so-called ‘Letter of the Eight’ on 30 January 2003, which expressed support for US policy towards Iraq (Kampfner 2003: 249-52). Following American pressures, moreover, Italy and the UK jeopardised EU unity on the issue of the International Criminal Court in 2002 (Thomas 2009).

Even though these instances coined by Smith (2005) as ‘promiscuous bilateralism’ did not produce enduring alliances or collaborations in European or international affairs (O’Donnell and Whitman 2007), and even if some diplomatic eyebrows were raised in the UK regarding Italy’s failure to respect its Gleneagles aid pledges and its role in the preparation of the 2009 G8 summit (Andretta and Chelotti 2010), British policy-makers surely regard Italy as one of their major political partners within the EU. Italy’s importance for the UK seems to stop here since no other Italian foreign policy action is mentioned. France and Germany are perceived differently since their foreign policy actions are frequently illustrated and their relevance assessed. France is mentioned as working closely with the UK in several areas, e.g. the 2005 Anglo-French initiative of organising a first ever pan-African ministerial meeting in Nigeria to debate practical measures to reduce crime in Africa (FCO 2008-2009: 34) or the 2009 bilateral initiative at the UN aimed at developing a more effective approach to UN peacekeeping. In the defence field, the EU Battlegroup Initiative is referred to as primarily a British-French-German initiative (FCO 2004-2005: 72). On the issue of the reform of the UN Security Council, which has seen Italy and Germany divided, the British government is on Germany’s side (Hill 2006) since it encourages the expansion of the number of permanent members to include four or five more countries, including Germany (UK Cabinet Office 2008: 48).

In his memoirs, Chris Patten, a long term British politician and former European Commissioner for External Relations (1999-2004), strongly criticises Italian foreign policy, especially under the Berlusconi government. He defines Italy’s 2003 presidency of the EU as ‘eccentric’ and full of Berlusconi’s ‘flirtations with political incorrectness’, characterising Berlusconi’s position on Russian policy in Chechnya and the Yukos affair as ‘toe-curling embarrassing’ and ‘extravagant’. Patten dismisses Italian foreign policy to such an extent that, in a passage where he nevertheless criticises all the major member states’ positions on European foreign and security policy, he rhetorically asks: ‘Does it matter much what Prime Ministers Berlusconi or Balkenende think outside Italy and the Netherlands?’ (Patten 2005: 128; 203-4; 254). The documents examined reveal that the level of cooperation the UK enjoys with France and Germany in two other issue-areas is also particularly significant. The first is the question of Iran, in which France, Germany and UK, the so-called ‘big three’ or ‘E3’, play a key role together with the other ‘3’, i.e. the US, Russia and China. The second is EU affairs in general. A sort of *European directoire*, always feared and condemned by Italy, would therefore appear to exist. The term ‘E3’ appears 33 times in the fifteen government documents examined. Finally, the FCO uses the term ‘major global players’ to indicate only the US, Japan, Germany and France (FCO, 2003-04: 22).

The Press

This section examines British media coverage of Italy by two major newspapers, *The Times-Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*, associated respectively with the Conservatives and with Labour.

The analysis covers the periods ranging from 1 July - 31 December 2002 and 1 July - 31 December 2006 and was carried out through a *Lexis-Nexis* search of articles containing the words 'Italy' and/or 'Italian'. As shown in Table 4, the search yielded 9742 articles, over two thirds of them (69.3%) in *The Times*. Only 730 articles however were retained for this analysis, i.e. those in which Italy was mentioned in a value-laden context.^{viii}

Table 4

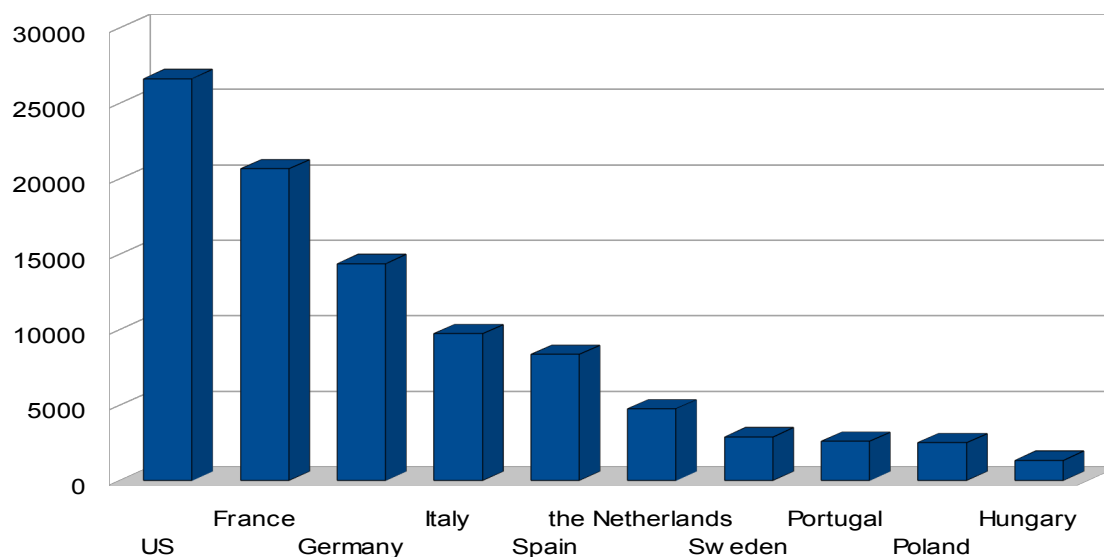
Number of newspaper articles containing the terms 'Italy' or 'Italian'

	July - December 2002	July - December 2006	Total	Relevant Articles
<i>The Guardian</i>	1185	1802	2987	273
<i>The Times</i>	3349	3406	6755	457
Total	4534	5208	9742	730

Before moving to the analysis of the images of Italy contained in the British press, it should be pointed out that a comparison with the results generated by a similar search conducted for other countries reveals that Italy ranks fourth in terms of coverage by *The Guardian* and *The Times*, well behind the US, Germany and France, but still ahead of Spain.

Figure 4

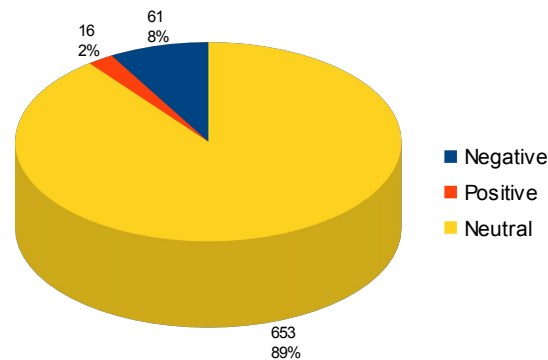
Cross-national comparison of the references in the British press



In order to offer a more accurate evaluation of British media perceptions of Italy, the 730 articles retained were classified according to the positive, neutral or negative connotation of their references. Not surprisingly, given that newspapers (and especially the British ones) have a factual approach, the context of the great majority of the relevant articles (89%) was neutral, and their tone was on the whole dispassionate (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Percentage of neutral positive and negative images of Italy in the British press



Despite the overall neutral media coverage, Italy was portrayed in a clearly positive light in sixteen articles, seven of which referred to the Italian mission in Lebanon. Both the determination showed by the Italian government under those circumstances and its subsequent adoption of international leadership were highly praised. The situation in Lebanon was tense and since the response of the international community was slow and uncertain, Italy took the lead ('When Rome Leads' was the headline of an article in *The Times*, 26 August 2006). Thanks to this 'very bold' (*The Guardian*, 1 September 2006) Italian initiative, an international peace-keeping force between Lebanon and Israel was set up and the risks of war reduced (*The Times*, 26 August 2006). *The Guardian* attributed the merit of the initiative to the Prodi government: 'Italy's offer of up to 3000 men, Romano Prodi's sensible way of trying to rebuild transatlantic bridges without emulating Silvio Berlusconi, may have struck a competitive chord and helped overcome the doubts in Paris' (*The Guardian*, 25 and 28 August 2006). Not surprisingly, playing "the role of catalyst and facilitator" in order to produce "political energy around a particular issue", accepting international responsibilities and revealing "some degree of entrepreneurial and/or technical leadership" are characteristics inextricably linked to many definitions of a 'middle power' (Cooper 1997: 9; Chapnik 2000).

On the other hand, the number of negative mentions was quite significantly high in comparison to the positive ones, reaching the total number of sixty-one articles. One recurrent negative images (5 mentions) concerned the Italian commitment, or lack thereof, to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. In this case, Italy was criticised for the same reasons the Lebanon campaign was lauded: a reluctance to deploy military force and to assume responsibilities in that context. Both the conduct of the Italian government and that of Italian troops on the ground were stigmatised. Italy however was not alone. Germany and France were also subject to the same harsh scrutiny. As stated by *The Guardian*, these states, ‘have sent troops to Afghanistan not to fight, but to play out a charade of solidarity ... If the West fails, a heavy responsibility will rest with Germany, France and Italy, which pretended to be willing to contribute yet refused to act with conviction’ (11 September 2006). *The Times*’ criticism was only marginally milder: ‘NATO is beset by problems of its own. On paper its forces may look strong, but the Italian, French, German and Turkish contingents in Afghanistan are shy of fighting, reluctant to go south, and governed by their own unilateral rules of engagement prioritised by force protection concerns’ (11 November 2006). Negative images are also associated with the depressed state of the Italian economy, which is often criticised for its structural difficulties and lack of reforms (8 references),^x the problems deriving from the very high level of accumulated public debt, the risks of breaching the rules of the SGP (8 references)^x and its level of protectionism and state intervention in the economy (7 references).^{xi}

The most recurrent negative image concerns Berlusconi and his singular political-judicial situation (18 mentions). The founder of *Forza Italia* has been described as a ‘scoundrel’ (*The Guardian*, 18 November 2006,) and as an ‘arch-manipulator of everything manipulable’ (*The Times*, 16 July 2006). Indeed, Berlusconi’s tinkering with the judicial system to escape prosecution has been a favourite target of the British press. *The Guardian* (22 November 2002) wrote that: ‘Berlusconi’s extraordinary takeover of the Italian state reached a new point this month when the legislature passed a law transparently intended to invalidate serious charges against the prime minister and his associates’ while *The Times* (17 October 2002) ironically lamented that the UK ‘cannot boast corruption on the grand scale they do in Italy, where the Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, is charged with bribing a judge, and trying to change the law so that he can influence who presides over his trial’. The overall judgment could not have been any sterner: ‘Berlusconi has, despite his reformist rhetoric, done more to protect himself and his business interests than to liberalise its public sector’ (*The Times*, 16 September 2002) and, Italy is ‘worse led today’ than it has been ‘for a quarter century’ (*The Times*, 30 October 2002).

The judgement of Prodi's government, instead, has been more positive. Romano Prodi has been defined as 'austere and dour' (*The Times*, 13 October 2006), and his Minister of Finance, Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa as 'capable' (*The Times*, 27 October 2006). In foreign policy, his government's activism in the Middle East has been praised both with respect to Lebanon (*The Guardian*, 28 August 2006) and Iran where, according to *The Times*, it 'has made clear that it wants a bigger say than its predecessor' (1 September 2006). *The Guardian* has also praised the government's position vis-à-vis Washington. While the Berlusconi government was said to be 'still bound by the old instinct of subservience to Washington' (12 November 2002), Prodi has instead positioned Italy 'as an ally of the US, but not as slavish as his predecessor' (28 August 2006). The two British papers however did not expect the Prodi government to be able to accomplish very much in terms of implementing reforms, reducing the public debt, or modernising the country, given its slim majority and the heterogeneous and 'shaky' coalition on which it rested (*The Guardian*, 21 September and 19 October 2006). As *The Times* put it, the Prodi government would probably be 'content, to borrow from the British political lexicon, to be "in office but not in power"' (27 October 2006).

Analysing the primary frames^{xiii} and sub-frames more in detail, more information can be provided. As shown in Table 5, the most recurrent one is that of the EU: in the 138 cases wherein Italy was mentioned, it was done so in relation to the social (3), economic (57) and political (78) aspects of the EU. The European dimension is thus very relevant, and strictly connected with Italian politics and policies. Indeed, almost one time out of five in which an article on Italy appears in the British press, the context is that of the EU. Moreover, Italy's activities within EU institutions are also monitored (63 articles). Within the political frame, Italian foreign policy received, more or less, the same amount of attention as domestic politics. The fifth most frequent political sub-frame (9,3% of all articles) concerned Berlusconi's political and judicial problems. The British media's interest in Berlusconi and his personal vicissitudes is confirmed, besides the well-known covers of *The Economist*, by the fact that between 1 June 2001 and 31 October 2007, Berlusconi was mentioned 3001 times in *The Guardian* and *The Times*, while Prodi was mentioned merely 1661 times, albeit he was highly visible, for a couple of years, as President of the European Commission. Concerning foreign policy, the mission to Lebanon was mentioned in 40 articles either within the sub-frame of 'diplomatic initiatives' (24 times) or 'military operations' (16 times).

Within the economic frame, 136 articles (corresponding to 18.6% of the total) were devoted to the Italian 'private sector', particularly the activities and difficulties of Fiat, Alitalia, Telecom and ENI. More articles on these themes appeared in *The Times* than in *The Guardian* (108 vs. 28). The remaining

articles within the economic frame deal with the ‘public sector’ and economic policies and depict a consistently negative image of the Italian economy. The list of faults ranges from excessive state intervention and protectionist tendencies (52 articles) to the amount of public debt (44 articles) and from the absence of structural reforms (17 articles) to the low growth rate (14 articles). Finally, the social frame received the least amount of attention. Most of the articles within this frame covered religion, immigration, and crime issues whereas both educational and environmental policies surprisingly received little or no attention.

Table 5
Most frequent sub-frames of the images of Italy in the British Press

Primary Frame	Sub-Frame	No. of Articles	Percentage of total
Political + Economic + Social	European Union	138	18,9%
Economic	Private Sector	136	18,6%
Political	Italian Domestic Politics	95	13,0%
Political	Diplomatic Initiatives	81	11,1%
Political	Berlusconi	68	9,3%
Political + Economic	Italy in the EU	63	8,6%
Economic	State Interventionism	52	7,1%
Economic	Public debt and GSP	44	6,0%
Social	Criminality	34	4,7%
Political	Military Operations	25	3,4%
Political	Fight Against Terrorism	24	3,3%
Social	Immigration	22	3,0%
Social	Religion	20	2,7%
Economic	Economic Reforms	17	2,3%
Social	Social Model	15	2,0%
Economic	Growth	14	1,9%
Political	Defence	12	1,6%

British Elites

Nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the British elite were conducted in the fall of 2007^{xiii}. The interviewees included four scholars (experts in foreign and security policy), two people from the FCO, two MPs and one Trade Union official. The questions posed aimed at assessing their

perceived importance of Italy. All the respondents thought Italy was an important partner for the UK but not as important as France or Germany. Rather, Italy was often compared to Spain. There is a distinct view that tends to separate the 'Big Three' ('the driving seats', in the words of one academic) from the two European 'middle powers' (i.e. Italy and Spain). Even if the relations between Italy and the UK are described as good, the nature of their cooperation was often considered to be feeble and resting on short-term common interests and strategies. For instance, Anglo-Italian initiatives launched in the defence field (e.g. a joint document on European defence and security presented in October 1991, a plan for setting military convergence criteria for the ESDP in 1999) were built around the common willingness to mediate between EU and NATO demands (Foradori and Rosa 2007) rather than on a similar reading of international politics. This is considered to be one of the reasons why an Anglo-Italian alliance to counterbalance the Franco-German one within the EU has never really materialised. Furthermore, one of the main weaknesses the interviewees found in Italian foreign policy is its political vulnerability and lack of reliability. The uncertain political situation, the unwillingness to participate fully in military operations (with the exception of Lebanon), and the reluctance to respect international commitments are all factors mentioned as major British concerns. All these elements hamper opportunities for Italian cooperation with other international partners as well as its potential autonomous action on the international stage. As a result, also because of the constant lack of resources, Italy is often seen as unable to play a major role internationally or within the EU. Italy, however, is seen as a potential 'major soft power' because of the strength of its culture and perceived neutrality, especially in the Mediterranean area and in the Arab world.

Conclusion

This article offered a portrait of British perceptions of Italy and Italian politics based on an analysis of parliamentary debates, governmental documents and newspapers articles. Italy is perceived as a significant actor in international affairs and an important ally in the European context. It is one of the most mentioned countries in UK debates and discussions, and it is a constant point of reference for British politics. When terms of comparison are requested (by MPs) or provided (by governmental sources), Italy is one of the few states that seem to count in British eyes. There is also a frequent request and expectation, coming from British politics and society, that Italy must take over more international responsibilities, even in the defence field – as the different readings of Italy's role and leadership in Afghanistan and Lebanon reveal.

On the other hand, it is not possible to conclude that Italy is seen as a major European power; both a quantitative and qualitative assessment of the data collected reveal that British politics and society pay much more attention, and attach much more importance, to other European countries, particularly Germany and France. To this extent, few Italian political initiatives are mentioned and evaluated *per se* and in most cases they are used as terms of references in the context of debates on British domestic politics. Moreover, the Italian economy is constantly depicted as being in decline: recurrent references to the Italian public debt, Italy and the SGP, its interventionist policies, and its slow growth rate convincingly illustrate this point. In other terms, after a long search for its proper role in international relations, swinging from great power's aspirations to small power's limitations, Italy seems to have finally found, in the post-Cold War scenario, its proper role – a European middle power with important responsibilities within its regional sub-system (Santoro 1991; Belloni and Morozzo della Rocca 2008; Coralluzzo 2008).

Notes

ⁱ The ‘Expedition of the Thousand’ is the crucial military campaign that in 1860 overthrew the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and permitted the union of southern Italy with the northern part and the Kingdom of Sardinia.

ⁱⁱ HMRC, Overseas Trade Statistics, available online at:

http://customs.hmrc.gov.uk/channelsPortalWebApp/channelsPortalWebApp.portal?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=pageImport_ShowContent&id=HMCE_CL_001141&propertyType=document.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data compiled from Hansard House of Commons and House of Lords, available online at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>. The two periods chosen correspond to two different Italian majorities: a centre-right coalition in power from June 2001 to May 2006 and a centre-left coalition that ruled from May 2006 to January 2008.

^{iv} One of the reasons behind the relative high number of mentions of Spain is the fact that Spain held the Presidency of the EU in the first semester of 2002. Although the period covered here is the second semester of 2002, a good number of parliamentary debates still dealt with what the working of Spanish Presidency. This seems to be confirmed also by the fact that Spain is the only country that recorded a higher number of mentions in 2002 than in 2006.

^v The concept of ‘middle power’ is highly ambiguous and several approaches have been suggested to define its role (Chapnik 1999). For the purposes of this article, the term is used with essentially a hierarchical flavour: ‘middle power’ is a relative concept, and the aim of the paper is to assess, quantitatively and qualitatively, the importance that British politics and society attach to Italian policies and politics. In other words, this paper analysis whether Italy is considered by the British parliament, government and press as a major, middle or minor European power when compared to other countries.

^{vi} For instance, Mr. O’Neill, Labour Party, reports (*Hansard*, HoC, 18 November 2002) that ‘low interest rates ought to be an incentive to businesses to borrow to invest, but sadly ... we are not investing ... France, Germany and Italy, with which we must compete and catch up, are still committing more to investment than us’.

^{vii} In a discussion on people trafficking in the House of Lords (*Hansard*, 2 November 2006), the Earl of Sandwich stated: ‘My Lords, does the Minister agree that the Italian Government are much more experienced ... in protecting those victims of trafficking who need a period of reflection when they are arrested?’. See also *Hansard* (HoL, 23 July 2002, 11 July 2006 and 19 December 2006).

^{viii} Also excluded were articles dealing with tourism, Italian cuisine and restaurants, sports, arts, exhibitions, and fashion.

^{ix} Here are some examples: ‘Undoubtedly, the pace of reform in ... Italy is too slow’ (*The Times*, 17 November 2002); ‘One only has to remember the tale of Telecom Italia – in which Pirelli took effective control of the company without ever paying for a majority of the shares – to remember the pyramid structures that make governance in Italy a joke’ (*The Guardian*, 23 December 2002); ‘What Italy needs today is competition, privatisation of grossly inefficient state-sponsored utilities, deregulation of the financial system and changes in labour laws. Such reforms can be hard to implement even in a booming economy. In a stagnant or declining one, they will become impossible’ (*The Times*, 27 October 2006).

^x ‘[Italian] public finances are in such a parlous state that commentators are openly pondering whether Italy might have to leave the euro-zone and resolve its problems through devaluation’ (*The Guardian*, 21 September 2006). *The Times* also pointed out that Italy managed to bring its debt within the prescribed limits to enter the euro ‘only by using accounting tricks’ (22 October 2002) and ‘with the help of some creative accounting by the Government’s number-crunchers’ (23 December 2002).

^{xi} ‘In Britain, they [entrepreneurs] find the doors open. In France, Italy and elsewhere, this is often not the case ... Abertis’s troubles [a Spanish construction-to-services company which attempted to buy the Italian partner Autostrade] reflect a growing belief among Spanish firms that Italy is a waste of time, requiring them to send lawyers to fight political foes rather than concentrate on new businesses’ (*The Guardian*, 13 December 2006).

^{xii} In terms of frames, 360 articles were devoted to political issues, 248 to economic matters and the remaining 122 to the social domain.

^{xiii} The interviewees included four scholars (experts in foreign and security policy), two people from the FCO, two MPs and one Trade Union official.

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