

# Italy (Italia)

Italy was one of the six founding members of the European Community in 1957. With a population of 61 million people, Italy is one of the largest countries in the EU. It is situated on the Italian peninsula in southern Europe. It has land borders with France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia. The national language is Italian. Italy has often had a turbulent political culture, yet has succeeded in becoming one of the world's largest economies.

## Recent History

The Italian Republic was established in 1946, after the collapse of Benito Mussolini's Fascist government during World War II. Throughout the Cold War, Italian politics was dominated by the Christian Democratic Party on the right and the Socialist and Communist Parties on the left. There were frequent changes of government and Prime Minister, although the parties involved changed little.

This situation was transformed in the early 1990s following a major political corruption scandal which involved many leading politicians and led to the collapse of the main political parties of the postwar period – the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. Under a new electoral system, referred to as the Second Republic, new parties emerged and the Italian political landscape was transformed. One new political force was a *coalition* of centre-left parties which governed from 1996-2001 under Prime Ministers Romano Prodi, Massimo D'Alema and Giuliano Amato. A centre-left government in 2007, led by Mr Prodi, lost a Senate vote on account of its foreign policy.

The most significant change under the new electoral system was the emergence of a new centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi and his Forza Italia Party. This held power from 1994-96 and again from 2001-06. Silvio Berlusconi returned to power for the third time in 2008, but amid the soaring national debt crisis and following his inability to secure a majority result on the latest budget, he resigned in November 2011. Former EU Competition Commissioner and economist Mario Monti is the current Prime Minister, heading a caretaker government of technocrats which hopes to restore stability to the Italian economy. Elections are expected to be held early in 2012.

## Government Structure

Italy is a parliamentary republic. Executive power rests with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. They present proposals to the Parliament and issue decrees. The Head of State is the President, currently Giorgio Napolitano, who has a mainly ceremonial role, and is seen as representing political unity. The President is elected by an electoral college for terms of seven years. The Italian Parliament has two chambers – the House of Deputies, which has 630 members, and the Senate, with 315 members. They are elected through a system of proportional representation, although six senators are given life appointments. Italian voters also elect 72 MEPs.

Local government in Italy is divided between 20 regions, sub-divided into 100 provinces. There are five regions

which have greater autonomy to reflect their special cultural identity – Aosta, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino-South Tyrol, Sardinia and Sicily.

## Italy and the EU

Italy has a significant position within the EU. The 1957 founding treaty was signed in Rome and Italians have traditionally been strongly supportive of European integration. It has been argued by some people that Italian support for the EU reflects dissatisfaction with the instability of domestic Italian politics. Italy has been at the forefront of all major steps towards EU integration, including the single market, the Schengen convention and the Euro.

However, Italy has occasionally drawn mistrust from its fellow member states. In the build up to the launch of the Euro, there were serious concerns in some quarters that Italy would not be able to meet the convergence criteria set out in the Maastricht Treaty (1992) because of high government debt. Some argued that Italy, along with its Mediterranean neighbours Spain and Portugal, should be left out of the Eurozone because their economies were not strong enough. More recently, there has been debate within Italy itself over whether the country should stay in the Eurozone because of economic problems including slow growth and a lack of competitiveness. These problems became more prominent following the economic downturn, which began in 2008. For other countries that use the Euro, this is a cause for serious concern because it could result in the collapse of the entire Euro project. At the moment, however, the Italian government remains committed to Euro membership.

Italy also caused dismay amongst some members in 2003, when it decided to support the US-led invasion of Iraq, which was opposed by France and Germany. This placed strain upon relations between member states.

## Facts and Figures

- Italy is the world's seventh largest exporter of manufactured goods, with production mainly based in wealthy northern Italy.
- Southern Italy is far less developed, with unemployment as high as twenty percent in some areas.
- Italy has often experienced slow economic growth. Growth was only 1.5% in 2007 (before the global economic crisis began) and dropped to -5% in 2009. In 2010, Italy's economic growth had recovered to 1.3%.
- In 2009, Italy's gross debt to GDP ratio was 115.8%, the second highest in the Eurozone.
- With 1.29 children for every woman aged between sixteen and forty-nine years, Italy has one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe.

### Technical Terms

**Coalition:** a formal agreement between political parties to share power in government.

### Links

- <http://www.governo.it/>
- <http://english.camera.it/>