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The Geopolitical Importance of Eastern Europe for the European Union and Italy

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Abstract

The paper focuses on two major geopolitical topics at the dawn of the 21. Century and in the eyes of the Italian state: (1) the enlargement of the European Union and (2) the boiling pot in the »Balkans«. Italy's strategic position relative to the Balkan Peninsular makes Italy NATO's »aircraft carrier« in the Mediterranean and a potential watchdog of the Balkans. During the Serbian-Croatian conflict and the long Bosnian crisis, NATO bases in Italy played a key military role. The Italian air force also provided logistical support, although this support was discreet, mainly to avoid a political backlash within Italy given Catholic pacifism and opposition from the ex-communist voters. Italy might be tempted (and the signs are present at the political level) to cast itself in the unusual role of a medium regional power. This would, however, force it to tag along with the USA's influential geostrategies in Eastern Europe; it is paradoxical that this line should be followed by the first Italian government guided and supported by the descendants of the Communist party. If these predictions should come to pass, the inter-Mediterranean dialogue would be sidelined to declarations, tourism and commerce.

Keywords: political geography, geostrategy, Eastern Europe, Italy, The Balkans

Introduction

Over the last ten years the term *international community* has gained currency—at least in the media and international relations—in the context of finding solutions for international problems and crises. Within a phase of geopolitical transition, the period between the war against Iraq in 1991 and the intervention in Kosovo in 1999 saw a shift away from the need to legitimize international military operations through the UN stamp of approval to their justification on »humanitarian grounds«.¹ Some have detected in this shift a confirmation that the declared equality of the states in the Westphalia System is merely a »functional fiction²—in reality there exists a pyramidal hierarchical structure,² governed by a »holy alliance« of powerful nations and international organizations,³ which operates as a world government.

The geopolitical dynamics of crisis situations reveal four essential elements in the operation of the current world order: stability, the territorial containment of conflicts, economic globalization, and Western-style democracy.⁴

In the hierarchy of the world hegemony, the USA occupies the apex of the pyramid. It is the world political and economic leader. It controls the skies and possesses most of the military force used in international police actions. In world politics and in military operations, the United States can almost always rely on unconditional support from Great Britain, and together the two play a preeminent role within NATO. France has also taken on a role on the political world stage as a permanent member of the Security Council with veto rights, but it has greater margins for geopolitical maneuvering within the European Union. In this context France's strategies overlap those of Germany, a country that is still forced to operate essentially at the economic level and only cautiously on the political level. The dynamics of post-Iron Curtain Europe have,

¹ F. Eva, »International boundaries, geopolitics and the (post)modern territorial discourse: The functional fiction,« in *Boundaries, Territory and Postmodernity*, ed. D. Newman (Ilford, UK: Frank Cass, 1999).

² J. Agnew and S. Corbridge, *Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory and International Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1995).

S. Strange, »Territory, state, authority and economy: a new realist ontology of global political economy,« in *The New Realism: Perspectives on Multilateralism and World Order*, ed. R. W. Cox (London: Macmillan and United Nations University Press, 1997).

J. Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998).

³ D. Zolo, *Cosmopolis. La prospettiva del governo mondiale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995).

R. Falk, *Per un governo umano* (Trieste: Asterios Editore, 1999).

⁴ Eva, *op. cit.*

however, shown the beginnings of an independent German foreign policy (with occasionally worrying outcomes, such as the hasty and autonomous recognition of Croatia in 1991).

In terms of geostrategy, geographic position is still relevant. In a world that has been sped up by the media and computers, the exchange of goods and the movement of people still take place in »real« time. In addition, Kosovo demonstrated that airborne military technology is insufficient to control territory and that troops on the ground are still needed.

The Role of the European Union and Italy

In developing their geopolitical strategies, states take into account their location and draw upon their own cultural values, viewed as lifestyles and symbolic points of reference. In conceiving its strategy for Eastern Europe, Germany sees itself in a central position. As regards the southern banks of the Mediterranean, Italy and other southern European nations occupy a special position. It is no exaggeration to say that the Nordic countries do not entirely manage to fit in with the Mediterranean's, and this can be seen as one of the many elements that contributed to the stall in the integration process outlined in 1995's Barcelona Declaration. This declaration was a significant and ambitious statement of political will that could have had major socio-political consequences in the signatory countries of the southern Mediterranean and at the level of international relations.⁵ It should be pointed out, however, that the differences in wealth between the northern and southern banks of the Mediterranean show no signs of diminishing and that this difference is expected to increase from 1:10 to 1:20 by 2010.⁶ From the geopolitical standpoint, since 1995 the Mediterranean situation has remained substantially at a standstill, with no feasible way of implementing the process called for in the Barcelona Declaration having been found—the reason partly being that it relies too heavily on senior officials, experts, and ministers for its implementation.

Other European countries have, however, seen greater dynamism and/or a greater need to get involved. An event of great geopolitical importance for Europe occurred in 1997, with the acceptance of the candidature of five Eastern European countries (Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and

⁵ R. Gillespie, *The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership* (Ilford, UK: Frank Cass, 1997).

⁶ World Bank, 1992.

Slovenia) and Cyprus for admission to the European Union. Turkey, which has now been on the waiting list since 1964, only managed to have its agreement on customs union with the EU renewed. Besides yet another rejection for Turkey, this time there was the added insult of Cyprus's acceptance as a candidate, which it sees as (geo)political interference in a contentious and yet-to-be-resolved situation.

Since then relations between the European Union and Turkey have been heading in uncertain and uncharted directions. When the cold war ended, Turkey's role in the strategy game of the eastern Mediterranean might have appeared less important, since the danger of a Russian attack decreased significantly. However, the presence of oil reserves in the Caspian Sea and in several republics of ex-Soviet central Asia has brought to the fore the need for the transportation (by means of pipelines) of methane and oil to the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The entire area has, however, proven to be geopolitically unstable and even a powder keg for armed independent uprisings. Turkey's geographic position therefore once again makes the country vital for both NATO and the EU.⁷

Nevertheless, in the absence of a major military threat, such as that once posed by the USSR, good relations between Europe and Turkey are less crucial; on the one hand Turkey's stability and military reliability are held in high regard, but on the other, relations between the two are less courteous because of Turkish violations of human rights and the methods it used in dealing with the Kurds. Current geopolitical conditions and the different relationships that individual EU countries have with Turkey mean that European diplomatic strategy pulls in different directions, but moves towards the future admission of Turkey to the EU nevertheless have become significant.

The United States appears to have a clear political and military geostrategy as regards Europe and the Mediterranean—that is, extend its own and NATO's influence eastward to fill in the gaps left by the collapse of the former Soviet Union as quickly as possible. To achieve this the US must rely on support from Europe. Eastern European countries are not all equally dependable, however. Each is facing the transition from a state-controlled economy to capitalism with varying degrees of success. Their acceptance into the EU must, therefore, be a gradual process. Candidates must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, as has been demonstrated by the long drawn out talks over the years of admissions to both the EU and NATO.

⁷ S. Manor, «Ankara guarda al greggio asiatico», *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 4 August 1998.

There are basically two criteria for evaluating and accepting new member states (these are expected to be formalized by 2000–02) plus one tacit condition:

1. an irreversible commitment to capitalist economics, guaranteed by regulations and laws and demonstrated by the existence of specific economic indicators
2. the established operation of Western-style parliamentary democracy, demonstrated by the tension-free change of governments

There can, however, be no mistaking the tendency of the EU to favor relations with countries whose social and cultural practices (and per capita incomes) are comparable to those of its existing members.

The third (tacit) criterion appears to be »border stability.« None of the countries whose candidacy has been accepted (Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia) have, or potentially have, dangerous border conflicts that could involve the rest of the EU. Cyprus may be a real geopolitical problem, but geographically it is far from mainland Europe and also an island, a feature that simplifies the territorial containment of conflicts. The inclusion of Cyprus in the European Union could also be a source of some satisfaction for Greece, given its opposition to certain ideas, such as the inclusion of Turkey and relations with the areas of Macedonia in the ex-Yugoslavia. It should also be mentioned that there have been some important developments in relations between Greece and Turkey. Reciprocal offers of aid after the recent earthquakes and the exchange of visits by ministers both indicate that something is in the air. Greece has certainly not failed to notice its secondary strategic importance compared with Turkey. Likewise, it has had to come to terms with the substantial inefficacy of its opposition to the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

From the point of view of the territorial containment of conflict, the EU does not look favorably on the fact that if Turkey were to become a member state, the Kurdistan problem would automatically become an »internal« matter, obliging it to assume diplomatic responsibility for it. Added to this, if the Kurds became European citizens it would be necessary to ensure their freedom of movement within the EU. Germany would not be overly happy about this, but for Italy and Greece it would mean a significant fall in the arrival of clandestine immigrants to their shores. Added to this is the fact that such an extended Europe would border directly onto the hottest areas of the Near and Middle East (Iraq, Iran, Syria, and the former Soviet Caucasian Republics) and place

it in the immediate vicinity of Jordan and Israel/Palestine. These potential dangers would slow down the process of integration, but it would seem that this path has already been taken. The more active relations between Turkey and Israel during the second half of the nineties might act as a further element to favor broader cooperation with Europe.

The five countries whose admission has been temporarily postponed (Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria) complete the picture of Western Europe's obvious push eastward. This push is given impetus by the NATO-Ukraine military agreement and the opening of the so-called »partnership for peace« to Croatia in May 2000.

Russia does not see this expansion in a particularly favorable light, and it is no longer possible to ignore Russia's views. President Putin's firm grasp on the reins promises greater internal economic and political stability for Russia. But it also points to the recovery of the country's international role, the geopolitical fallout of which remains to be seen. If the ability to resist international pressure is any measure of power, Russia's military action in Chechnya and its substantial imperviousness to the outcry of the international community demonstrated a significant recovery of strength.

A further sign of Eastern Europe's importance can be found in the decisions made at the Madrid Summit of 8–9 July 1997, when NATO was expanded through the inclusion of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, while Slovenia and Romania were placed on a waiting list for inclusion. President Clinton, during a visit to Bucharest, stated that »Romania is one of the strongest candidates.⁸ The disagreement between the nine countries in favor of the immediate inclusion of Romania and Slovenia, and the five opposed (three are undecided) was resolved by the United States exerting its role as the undisputed leading nation and objecting. »In a military alliance, discipline prevails,« stated Clinton, whose position was supported by the British Prime Minister, who said, »NATO is not a political club.⁹

Among its various decisions, the Madrid Summit set up the Mediterranean Cooperation Group, the aim of which is to strengthen dialogue between NATO and countries in the Mediterranean. This underscores the fact that the Mediterranean is regarded as important from the point of view of security, but less so from the point of view of overall political strategy. NATO's determination to

⁸ A. Geroni, »Clinton in Romania: la NATO vi aspetta,« *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 12 July 1997.

⁹ M. Cerretelli, »Slovenia e Romania, si vedrà nel '99,« *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 9 July 1997.

push itself eastwards is decidedly stronger than its push to go south. Given the large overlap between NATO and EU members, differences in the priority of objectives might be attributable to the influential presence of the USA in only one of the two bodies.

A new development in the field of common defense agreements was the formation in 1998 of the Multinational Peace Force of South-East Europe (MPFSEE) by the ministers of defense of Italy, Greece, Albania, Romania, Turkey, Slovenia, and Macedonia. Once more it is worth noting the predominantly European-Balkan interest in the territory concerned and Turkey's involvement for its military reliability. It is significant that delegations from the USA, NATO, EU, and OSCE were present at the ceremony.¹⁰ The Kosovo crisis, however, shows very clearly that this kind of lower-level strategic agreement carries insufficient weight to influence complex geopolitical dynamics.

The standstill in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership project, the signing of the expansion of NATO (and the agreements with Ukraine and Croatia), the decision regarding the future admission to the EU of countries interested in military partnership, and the setting up of the peace force in the Balkans (in Bosnia and Kosovo) all underscore the leading role of the USA and its capacity (or power) to direct far-reaching geopolitical strategies in which it has an interest and to wash its hands of (or even obstruct) those in which it does not.

Since the end of World War II, the United States' role in the Mediterranean has been supervisory and regulatory. And with the United States now the sole world superpower, this is more the case today than ever. It is directly involved in the southeastern Mediterranean area (the Israel-Palestine issue), but since it greatly fears so-called Islamic fundamentalism, it moves very cautiously where the Islamic world is concerned and views geopolitical initiatives in which it neither plays the leading role nor is directly involved, such as the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, with a degree of distrust.

A priority of both the United States and the European Union is the spread of the capitalist economy, through which both are able to maintain their hegemonic role and derive benefits for their own economies. In terms of potential markets, the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe are both of interest to them, but greater familiarity with the cultures and customs of Eastern Europeans makes them preferred partners in plans for the rapid development of trade.

¹⁰ *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 27 September 1998

This imbalance may, however, be »neither appropriate, nor justifiable«¹¹ if it leads to Europe limiting its own geopolitical action and strategic subjection to the USA.

Political stability (in whatsoever form) is a prerequisite for the development of economic systems. Not being a military body, the EU uses agreements and economic understandings to achieve its objectives—it is prepared to formally recognize as equal those countries with which it enters agreements in the belief that the outcome of economic cooperation is democracy and stability. The USA, on the other hand, has always coupled military strategy with economic strategy to guarantee the stability needed for its economic interests.

World's instability zones

Since the capitalist consumption system burns considerable quantities of fuel, it must have guaranteed supplies of oil and methane. To date, the southern Mediterranean and Arab countries have answered this need but at a price (oil shocks, confrontation with OPEC, fluctuating oil prices, and so on) and of an ongoing involvement in maintaining political stability in the production areas. The availability of oil from the Caspian Sea has created new prospects and has reinforced the eastward push of the USA and Europe.

Of course, for the moment it cannot be claimed that the so-called stability factor has been satisfied. There are at present conflicts around the Caucasus area (both to the north and south), where present (and projected) oil pipelines pass. But it nevertheless appears that Europe and the USA believe they can obtain more lasting and manageable results in this area than in others. In any case, almost all the existing pipelines are operating and any problems that may emerge will concern those yet to be built, particularly as regards their course.

Despite its economic difficulties, Russia is stable. Its oil companies were therefore allowed to take part in plans to extract oil from the Caspian and Kazaki oilfields, alongside a large contingent of US and EU companies. Since he is a guarantee of authority and decisiveness, Putin must be regarded as a positive element, despite the formal and predictable calls from the international

¹¹ G. Lizza, »L'Europa tra regionalizzazione e globalizzazione,« *Geografia della nuova Europa*, ed. G. Lizza (Turin: UTET, 1999).

community for the respect of human rights in Chechnya and elsewhere. Apart from anything else, peace in Chechnya would be very useful for guaranteeing the security of present and future oil pipelines. Russia has everything to gain from presenting itself as a stable nation, capable of controlling the territory through which the pipes to carry the black gold can be calmly plan. Given the geopolitical difficulties surrounding the sections through Iran, Georgia—through Armenia, which is in conflict with Azerbaijan—or Kurdistan, the Russian path is the most secure; and this goes a long way to calming any voices that may be raised against Putin.

Although still unstable, the Caucasus area would appear to frighten the West less than groups of Islamic fundamentalists or uncontrollable states, such as Iraq, Iran, Syria, or Libya. Integrating all the countries lying between Europe and the Caspian Sea as quickly as possible through economic and/or military agreements is becoming a priority that will most likely guide future US and EU diplomacy and geostrategy. Integration and counting on Turkey as an ally therefore remain essential. It is thus better to turn a blind eye to the undemocratic attitudes of powerful Turkish generals (the ban on the Islamic party, for example), the government's alliance in May 1999 with the extreme right »Grey Wolves« party to form a new government, and the methods used to repress Kurdish revendication.

From the point of view of the distribution of military power, there can be no doubting that at present there is an imbalance in the USA's and the West's (NATO) favor. This imbalance will continue at least until such a time as other military powers emerge, either for the first time (China) or again (Russia). This imbalance in military strength reduces the likelihood of the use of large-scale military force (following the Gulf War, the mere threat of military force could be enough) and encourages a policy of territorial containment of crises. This was the case in the bloody internecine war in Algeria, as well as the situations in Cyprus, Chechnya, and Caucasus, as well as with the plight of the Kurds and so on. It was also true of the tragic ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, even if the bombing of the Serbia and Yugoslavia was required. From the perspective of territory, the conflicts in the Balkans were contained within borders and acceptable limits that allowed the rest of Europe to go about its economic business without any great disturbance.

The expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe and the stated desire to redefine the role of the organization to make it a tool for »spreading Western

values of democracy and market economics¹² and to enlarge »the zone of direct Western political values«¹³ are important geostrategic factors that increasingly underscore the leading role of the USA. The role of NATO—political and not purely military—is becoming more important in Europe. It is no coincidence that, to better infiltrate the area, the idea of the immediate inclusion of Albania and Macedonia in the organization was mooted, and that Kosovo has essentially become a »protectorate« overseen by the NATO countries on behalf of a UN that, in the final analysis, is only involved to cover a military operation instigated by others.

Turkey's role as a reliable ally was given further prominence by Greece's stand against the bombing of Yugoslavia and its support of its Orthodox Christian Serbian brothers.

Conclusion

International relations commentators often criticize the EU for its inability to formulate a unanimous and influential foreign policy. But it is difficult for it to be anything other than what it is, and not only because the EU lacks true political unity and adequate institutions. Europe is essentially a society,¹⁴ and this is both its strength and weakness. It is a force based on an ability to invent Utopias and set itself objectives,¹⁵ and this is probably part of the reason that the EU is so attractive, as evidenced by the numerous requests for membership. New members imagine that union can be established without any party dominating, despite the geopolitically strong positions occupied by the established members. To date, the widening of the EU has taken place through candidates moving into line with the EU before their actual membership. Despite the fact that economics cannot replace political vision and that privileged positions do exist, in effect the European self-construction process leaves many doors open. The most commonly perceived weakness of Europe, on the other hand,

¹² S. Erlanger, »A historic day for European geopolitics,« *International Herald Tribune*, 12 March 1999.

¹³ J. Fitchett, »NATO moves eastward,« *International Herald Tribune*, 13–14 March 1999.

¹⁴ Levy, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ C. Cerretti, »Un'idea di Europa,« in *Geografia della nuova Europa*, ed. G. Lizza (Turin: UTET, 1999).

is its inability to construct itself as a political entity and operate with a common foreign policy. But not everyone shares this negative view.¹⁶

World political dynamics are increasingly moving towards world government, economic globalization, and efforts for rapid and »efficient« resolution of conflicts. The cultural influence of the US superpower in the formulation of future policies is very strong. And it is in this light that the proposals to reform the Security Council and the increasingly active and interventionist role of NATO should be seen.

Regarding the internal dynamics behind the political construction of the EU, comments by the German foreign minister, Fischer, gave new impetus to the debate on the future of Europe. After a decade dominated by armed conflicts and discussion of appropriate intervention, politics has again taken the upper hand and the largest and most authoritative states—France and Germany—have regained their guiding role. For the moment, Italy remains in a supporting role, but this was not the case in recent military operations, this representing a significant new development.

Its strategic position relative to the Balkan Peninsular makes Italy NATO's »aircraft carrier« in the Mediterranean and a potential watchdog of the Balkans. During the Serbian–Croatian conflict and the long Bosnian crisis, NATO bases in Italy played a key military role. The Italian air force also provided logistical support, although this support was discreet, mainly to avoid a political backlash within Italy given Catholic pacifism and opposition from the ex-communist voters.

As regards Albania, Italy organized a number of operations (Pellicano 1 and 2, and Arcobaleno), but more with socio-economic ends and more with a local policing role than fully fledged territorial occupation. The main objective was to filter and slow down the flow of immigrants to Italy by encouraging internal stability through economic aid. As the decade progressed, however, the crisis in the Balkans saw Italy became increasingly involved. The Italian military gained clout internationally, which resulted in increasing decision-making and command responsibilities in joint operations with NATO.

The Kosovo crisis revealed an Italy consenting to NATO strategies and one that was decidedly useful at the level of military support. It was an Italy—of politicians and citizens—increasingly disposed to overlook Article 11 of its constitution, which rejects war as a means of resolving conflict. The bombing of Iraq in 1991, performed under the authorization of the UN, set off a sponta-

¹⁶ Levy, *op. cit.*

neous wave of strikes in Italy. The same did not occur in 1999 following bombardments instigated by NATO without the UN stamp of approval. On the other hand, its geographic proximity and the proliferation of Catholic and lay non-government organizations that support solidarity saw the Italians providing aid (machinery, food, medicines and money) to the affected populations parallel to the detachment of Italian soldiers and Carabinieri in international policing operations in Bosnia and Kosovo.

One commentator has discerned a partial difference between the Italian and German positions during the Kosovo crisis and has interpreted this as a sign of future autonomy in the area of foreign policy.¹⁷ But this is possibly a somewhat rash interpretation, perhaps the result of the commentator's distant position (Texas). In concrete terms, it is significant that Italy has exclusive military responsibility over a part of Kosovo, this placing it on the same level as the USA, Great Britain, and France (the customary international watchdogs), as well as Germany, which for the first time since World War II is being permitted to dispatch a sizeable military force outside its borders. Given its strategic location relative to the Balkans, in an attempt to emerge from its decades-old position on the military sidelines, Italy might be tempted (and the signs are present at the political level) to cast itself in the unusual role of a medium regional power. This would, however, force it to tag along with the USA's influential geostrategies in Eastern Europe; it is paradoxical that this line should be followed by the first Italian government guided and supported by the descendants of the Communist party.

If these predictions should come to pass, there would be another compelling reason for special treatment for Eastern Europe, while the south and inter-Mediterranean dialogue would be sidelined to declarations of principle and subject to the fickle dynamics of tourism and commerce.

¹⁷ Stratfor's Free Kosovo Crisis Center, Stratfor Inc., 504 Lavaca, Suite 1100, Austin, TX 78701.
<http://www.stratfor.com/kosovo/crisis/>, Stratfor Global Intelligence Update, May 3, 1999.

Geopolitični pomen Vzhodne Evrope za Evropsko zvezo (EU) in Italijo

Povzetek

Prispevek obravnava dvoje aktualnih geopolitičnih vprašanj na prehodu v 21. stoletje skozi prizmo italijanske države: (1) širitev Evropske zveze na vzhod in (2) žarišče evropske nestabilnosti - Balkan. Diskusije o organiziranosti EU in širitvi Evropske zveze so vzplamtele po govoru nemškega zunanjega ministra Joschke Fischerja leta 2000. Po skorajda desetletju oboroženih sponadow in umirjanju le-teh s prisilnimi sredstvi, je v ospredje ponovno stopila politika. Največji in najbolj vplivni državi evropskega kontinenta - Francija in Nemčija - sta vzeli ponovno vajeti v roko. Trenutno je Italija v vlogi »stranskega igralca«, čeprav je bila v devetdesetih letih aktivni in enakovreden član vojaških misij na Balkanu. Geostrateški položaj Italije je pripomogel k temu, da je ozemlje države postalo »letalenosilka« evropskih in NATO interesov v Sredozemlju. Italiji je poslej namenjena vloga skrbnega opazovalca dogajanju na njej sosednjem, s konflikti prepreženem polotoku. Čeprav je bila vloga letalskih sil Italije zaradi pacifistične nastrojenosti italijanskega katoliškega prebivalstva ter nasprotovanja močne levosredinske opozicije v posredovanju na ozemlju bivše Jugoslavije omejena, se zdi, da Italijo mika prevzeti vlogo čuvaja na Balkanu. Izziv, postati regionalna supersila, se zdi sedanjemu vodstvu - naslednikom nekdanjih komunistov, zares vabljiv. V kolikor bo ta usmeritev prevladala bo zavel nov veter v odnosu Evropske zveze do držav nekdanjega komunistične vladavine v Vzhodni Evropi in na Balkanu. Dialog med državami Sredozemlja, ki je nekaj časa obetal uspehe in ga je Italija usmerjala, bo za nekaj časa odstavljen na stranski tir, oziroma mimo deklaracij in turističnega pretoka ne bo prišel.