POLIDEMOS



DAMIANO PALANO
(edited by)

HYBRID ITALY

A Democracy amid Global Disorder

EDUCatt

DOI: 10.69117/POLIDEMOS.21.26.003

Prudence, Pragmatism and the Aspiration for Peace: Interpreting Italian Public Opinion's Mood in a Turbulent World through the lens of Classical Political Realism

ENRICO BIANCHI[1]

Abstract. This article reconstructs the prevailing mood of Italian public opinion on international politics in 2025, drawing on survey data produced by multiple research institutes (including Censis, Eurispes, ISPI-Ipsos Doxa, the European Parliament Eurobarometer, and Polidemos – Ipsos Doxa) which are treated not as a unified dataset but as complementary empirical indicators of recurrent collective orientations. The analysis shows that Italians display widespread anxiety about the international environment, particularly regarding ongoing conflicts and their potential consequences, combined with a notable recalibration of perceived alliances: Russia remains the primary identified threat, but confidence in the United States as a reliable partner has declined significantly under the second Trump presidency. Despite this anxiety, Italian public opinion tends toward neutralist and non-aligned stances on both the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, prioritising the cessation of hostilities over firm alignment with any belligerent party. Support for collective security frameworks (NATO and European integration) is broadly diffused but appears more pragmatic than ideological, and does not translate into a corresponding willingness to bear the economic or personal costs of

[1] Enrico Bianchi, PhD Candidate, Department of Political Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, enrico.bianchi@unicatt.it

military engagement. A persistent and deeply rooted opposition to increased defence spending coexists with aspirations for a rules-based international order and the spread of democracy as guarantors of peace. The article proposes to interpret this overall pattern through the categories of political realism, particularly the tension between realism and utopia elaborated by Edward Hallett Carr in the interwar period. The Italian mood emerges as a form of 'utopian realism': pragmatic and prudential in its assessment of power relations, sceptical of universalistic narratives, and inclined toward burden-sharing and free-riding within collective frameworks, yet simultaneously animated by a stable aspiration for peace that oscillates, at times inconsistently, between active moral commitment and the tendency to withdraw from practical responsibility.

Keywords: Italian public opinion; international politics; pacifism; political realism; Carr.

This analysis draws on survey data produced by different research institutes, over partially overlapping timeframes, concerning the opinions expressed by Italians in 2025 on the turbulent international situation the world is experiencing. These datasets will not be treated as directly comparable in a strict quantitative sense, given differences in sampling strategies, modes of data collection, and question wording. Rather than aiming at statistical aggregation or trend measurement, this essay proposes a reconstructive use of survey evidence. The surveys are thus used not as a unified dataset, but as complementary empirical indicators and as a heuristic device that illuminate recurrent orientations and interpretive frames through which Italian citizens perceive the contemporary international environment. In this sense, they

are used as empirical lenses through which to reconstruct a broadly shared collective orientation, a prevailing mood toward the current scenario. As argued in the conclusions, the overall pattern appears to point to a widespread, and not new, tendency toward 'pacifism' in the face of renewed international conflict, which affects Italy in a relatively indirect yet still significant way. At the same time, this attitude seems tempered and, to a certain extent, complicated by considerations of prudence, disillusionment and self-preservation. This essay therefore proposes to interpret the Italian mood of opinion through some categories of political realism, particularly the tension between realism and utopia emphasized by the classic realist thinker Edward Hallett Carr in the interwar period, when anxiety about war strongly shaped European public opinion.

1. *Italian public opinion on international politics in 2025: between collective anxiety, disillusionment and non-alignment*

Against the backdrop of a volatile international landscape defined by systemic conflicts, trade tensions, and deepening polarization, the Italian public exhibits widespread sentiments of apprehension and disorientation. These trends are corroborated by all major institutional surveys. While concern remains particularly pronounced with regard to domestic issues, especially those related to the economy and climate (Eurispes, 2025), anxiety over the international scenario is also notably high. A survey commissioned by the European Parliament in Autumn 2025 reveals levels of concern that, in some respects, exceed the European average: 83% of Italians report being «highly concerned» about «active conflicts and wars near the European Union» (EU-27 average: 72%), while 76% express concern over

«drones from non-EU countries operating over or near EU countries» (EU average: 60%) (European Parliament, 2025, p. 8), despite the lack of evidence that Italy has been directly affected by this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, although concern about the evolving international environment is widespread, the fear that escalating conflicts may directly involve Italy, while not negligible, appears relatively contained. The prospect of a global conflagration still triggers substantial anxiety: according to the 2025 Eurispes Report, 46% of Italians fear a third world war (Eurispes, 2025). At the same time, a survey published in July 2025 by Censis on the perception of conflicts and rearmament in Italian society shows that respondents estimate, on average, a 31% probability that Italy will be directly involved in a conflict over the next five years, with slight variations depending on age and level of education (Censis, 2025a, p. 9). As a general diagnosis, the 59th Censis General Report on Italian society indicates that 38.8% of Italians believe the world has entered a phase in which relations between major powers are primarily adjudicated through military force (Censis, 2025b, p. 4).

The considered investigations also highlight a significant recalibration of perceived international equilibria, influenced notably by the second Trump presidency. 50% of respondents to the Censis investigation on the perception of conflicts identify Russia as the primary threat, while 23% point to the United States, whose reliability as an ally in the event of a war is, moreover, questioned by 46% (Censis, 2025a, pp. 11-13). Consistent results appear in the ISPI and Ipsos Doxa 2025 survey on Italians and international politics: while Russia is cited as the main threat by 32%, the U.S. is cited by 12%, and notably the net balance between those viewing the U.S. as an ally versus a competitor has plummeted from +47% in the 2020-2022 period

to +19% in 2025 (ISPI and Ipsos Doxa, 2025); the same survey shows that for 54% of respondents, after one year under the Trump administration, the global situation has deteriorated.

Concurrently, the cessation of ongoing hostilities represents the primary source of hope. According to the ISPI and Ipsos Doxa survey (2025), 64% identify peace in an active conflict as the most positive potential event (34% regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, 24% regarding the Middle East, and 6% regarding Sudan), whereas smaller cohorts prioritize improved relations between superpowers (25%), increased European defence spending (8%) and the foreign policy (7%); conversely, 32% of respondents stated that a «stronger economic growth in Europe»[2] would be the most hopeful event. Despite these anxieties, Italian public opinion tends toward relatively moderate stances on current conflicts, prioritizing the termination of hostilities over definitive alignment with any belligerent party. Regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, Censis finds that 33% believe Italy should support Kyiv, 5% Moscow, while 62% favour maintaining neutrality (Censis, 2025a, p. 13). The ISPI and Ipsos Doxa survey (2025) additionally shows that 49% believe hostilities should end even at the cost of Ukrainian territorial concessions. A similar orientation emerges regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: according to Censis, 21% favour siding with the Palestinians, 9% with Israel, while 70% prefer a neutral stance (Censis, 2025a, p. 13).

In this climate of tension, Italians appear sceptical of the nation's capacity to address security challenges autonomously. Censis reports that 65% believe Italy would be «overwhelmed» if it were to fight alone (Censis, 2025a, p. 11). Consequently, a

[2] All literal quotations from texts originally written in Italian are presented in the author's translation.

quite strong confidence in collective security frameworks, particularly NATO and European Union, emerges. According to Censis, 49% of Italians believe NATO should be strengthened, 58% view the establishment of an EU defence system as the optimal solution for national security, meanwhile 22% express a generally hostile stance toward defence policies, stating that they support neither the creation of a 'European army' nor the strengthening of national armed forces, and 8% state that Italy should withdraw from all alliances and rely solely on its own national forces (Censis, 2025a, p. 12). Eurobarometer survey confirms this trend: 67% of Italians argue that the EU's role in security must expand, and 91% believe member states must show greater unity in addressing global challenges (European Parliament, 2025, pp. 12-13).

Beyond aspirations for future developments, the Italian assessment of the current international landscape points toward a perceived political weakness of the EU. The 2025 Censis report indicates that 52.8% of respondents believe that «in a world now dominated by force and aggression rather than international law, the EU will play a marginal role» (Censis, 2025b, p. 3). Naturally, the EP survey provides a detailed analysis of these aspects. According to this data (European Parliament, 2025, p. 11), 67% of Italians believe that «the role of the European Union to protect European citizens against global crises and security risks» should become «more important» (EU-27 average: 66%); furthermore, the same survey (p. 12) shows that 91% of Italian respondents agreed that «EU Member States should be more united in addressing global challenges» (EU-27 average: 89%), and 80% agree that the EU requires more means to confront current challenges (EU-27 average: 73%).

Economic implications and the broader costs associated with increased commitment to defence and security within an

increasingly conflict-ridden global landscape appear to dominate Italian concerns when assessing a more direct and concrete involvement of both society as a whole and individuals. Although a majority of citizens seems to support Italy's participation in the European security framework and advocate for its strengthening, this does not translate into a greater willingness to directly bear the social or personal costs required to advance in this direction. In the July 2025 Censis survey, 26% of respondents stated that rearmament is necessary to ensure peace through deterrence, and 25% expressed a willingness to support cuts in social spending to fund military reinforcement plans (Censis, 2025a, p. 11); however, the general report on 2025 Italian society provided by the same institution reveals a significant collective countertrend: as many as 66% of respondents declared that if rearmament necessitates reductions in welfare spending, it is preferable not to pursue it (Censis, 2025b, p. 12). A clear opposition to increased military spending also emerges from the results of a survey conducted by Polidemos and Ipsos Doxa in autumn 2025: 67% of respondents expressed this view, and, among the 18% who instead declared themselves in favour, 45% stated that they would change their position if such an increase entailed reductions in welfare spending, while, perhaps more unexpectedly, 48% would maintain their approval even in that case (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 23). It is interesting to observe, in this regard, that the same study shows that the propensity to increase military spending is slightly higher among Gen Z respondents, who also appear to be the most inclined to identify in an international system based on effective rules, strong institutions, and the strengthening of democracy the most favourable conditions for the promotion of peace (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 23): it can therefore be hypothesised that this

preference for an international order governed by law translates, among young Italians, albeit to a very limited extent, into a lower opposition to the development of enforcement instruments that may also include national rearmament (Scavo, 2026, p. 36).

In any case, this caution regarding financial commitment to security and defence is coupled with a low willingness to become personally involved in case of conflict. Censis finds that, among citizens aged 18 to 45, only 16% declare a readiness to fight, 39% identify as pacifists, and 26% believe defence should be the sole responsibility of professional soldiers; finally, 19% state they would desert if called to arms (Censis, 2025a, p. 10). Reflecting this sentiment, 42.7% of respondents to the same institution's 2025 general report believe that Italy should not intervene militarily to defend another NATO or EU country if it were attacked (Censis, 2025b, p. 12).

Another particularly significant element concerns the way Italians are responding to the current turbulent scenario from a values perspective, at a time marked by intense debates over the emerging multipolar world order and the crisis of democracies. The general Censis report shows that 38.7% of Italians believe that «democracies are no longer adequate in a world where strength and aggressiveness count more than law and diplomacy», while 29.7% consider autocratic regimes to be better equipped to navigate such a context. The same survey indicates that 55.2% of respondents believe that the future belongs to emerging powers such as China and India rather than to the West (Censis, 2025b, p. 4). A significant degree of anti-Western sentiment in Italian society had already been identified by Censis with its 58th report on Italian society in 2024, which devoted particular attention to what they described as a «drift away from unifying values» (Censis, 2024,

p. 8). According to that report, 70.8% of respondents believed that Western countries seek to impose their political and economic model on others, 68.5% expressed a general lack of trust in the functioning of Western democracies, and 66.3% considered «Western countries (led by the United States)» to be primarily responsible for the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East (Censis, 2024, pp. 7–8).

The picture, in this regard, is further completed and enriched by the report by Polidemos and Ipsos Doxa specifically dedicated to «Democracy and Peace». At a general level, the survey reveals a high degree of distrust in the current Italian political system, which, however, does not seem to translate, at least to a significant extent, into greater openness to authoritarian solutions and a deep distrust towards democracy itself. Indeed, while 53% of respondents believe that Italian democracy functions poorly, only 28% state that they would be willing to live under an authoritarian regime if it proved more efficient, whereas 42%, when faced with this trade-off, would still prefer to live in a democratic society despite its inefficiencies and shortcomings (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 16). Consistently with this pattern, 44% of respondents favour a gradual process of reform and improvement of the country, compared to 35% who instead support more radical solutions (p. 17). Alongside a marked aversion to the political class, the survey also highlights a significant level of distrust in the information system: 68% of respondents agree with the statement that «the news we receive from the press and the media is often intentionally distorted to mislead us» (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 13). This distrust toward actors perceived as institutional or linked to political and economic elites also emerges in the identification of those actors considered most relevant for the construction of peace paths: the highest levels of trust are

attributed, jointly (22%), to NGOs, the Catholic Church, and voluntary organisations, whereas significantly lower levels are assigned to political parties (4%), trade unions (3%), and large companies or multinational corporations (1%) (p. 19). With regard to the strategies considered most effective for promoting peace, the survey results outline two main, partially complementary approaches. On the one hand, an economic and, to a certain extent, liberal perspective emerges, which identifies the strengthening of free trade and economic interdependence as a key stabilising mechanism: 26% of respondents believe that promoting a system of free trade, capable of making war economically disadvantageous, represents the most effective solution for ensuring lasting peace; on the other hand, a more distinctly internationalist perspective takes shape, grounded in the strengthening of cooperation among states, supranational institutions, and international law: 22% point to the reinforcement of the UN and international institutions as the main pathway to stable peace; to these is added a component linked to democratic peace theory, cited by 24% of respondents, according to which the spread of democracy contributes to reducing the likelihood of armed conflict (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 21). Within this framework, a certain degree of distrust toward perceived hegemonic arrangements also emerges, in which one can discern, albeit in a less explicitly articulated form, the same critical attitude toward the West that had surfaced in other investigations: 37% of respondents believe that a more just and balanced global economic system constitutes a fundamental grant for peace, while 27% emphasise again the importance of the effective enforcement of rules governing relations among states (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 21). At the same time, a nuanced view of the relationship between democracy and international

stability persists: while 37% consider a world composed exclusively of democratic states as the most reliable guarantee of lasting peace, 34% believe that the coexistence of democratic and non-democratic systems can also ensure a stable international order (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 22).

2. *Public opinion and international politics in Italy and beyond: a debated and disputed terrain*

In the study of the relationship between public opinion and international politics, several phases can be identified, reflecting shifting scholarly convictions regarding the public's ability to form opinions on international events, traditionally perceived as far more distant from daily reality compared to domestic policy issues.

From the end of World War II to the 1960s, the prevailing view among researchers, primarily in the United States, was summarized in 1992 by Ole Holsti as the «Almond-Lippmann consensus» (Holsti, 1992). This line of thought generally held that the public was poorly informed about international events, leading to perceptions that were unstable, volatile, and lacking in coherence, and thus largely insignificant in governmental foreign policy decisions. With the advent of the Vietnam War and the refinement of polling techniques, the American debate again led to a shift in approach, according to which public opinion is actually capable of forming coherent and justified views on international affairs and is not subject to sudden mood swings without identifiable causes (e.g. Holsti, 1996). Based on these assumptions, researchers began to explore how foreign policy preferences are formed through ideological positioning or social context. Post-Cold War

developments further encouraged studies investigating public consensus regarding, for instance, military interventions abroad. The role of political and media elites, whose relevance had already been highlighted by Shapiro and Page (1988), is highly significant: as citizens often struggle to access rational information independently, these elites interpret and re-transmit external reality, decisively contributing to forge the society's climate of opinion on international matters. The construction of support for military commitment or, more generally, for alternative world orders then often relies on building an effective «strategic narrative» with a contextually grounded and shared storytelling of events (Freedman, 2006; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013). Crucially, this process can be challenged by counter-narratives, which international actors may strategically exploit, particularly within the pervasive and evolving digital environment; consequently, literature on the effects of disinformation and fake news is steadily growing (e.g. Bennett and Livingston, 2020; Arcos, Chiru and Ivan, 2024; Giusti, 2023).

Coming to Italy, studies since the early Nineties have tempered the notion that the country was an exception in terms of low interest in international politics (Bellucci and Isernia, 1999, pp. 446-448). However, this tendency is actually relevant: despite the current global alarm, research by Angelucci and Isernia (2025, p. 241) indicates that, since 1994, the proportion of Italians believing the country should prioritize domestic over international problems has consistently remained above 40%, standing at 50% in 2024.

It is worth noting that, historically, foreign and strategic politics were somewhat marginalized in post-WWII Italian public debate due to overall scepticism about national capabilities and the influence of the two main political cultures, specifically Christian Democratic and Communist,

that preferred to downplay the military dimension (Battistelli, 2004, pp. 69-78). A resurgence of interest occurred with Italy's participation in multilateral missions starting in the early 1990s, which also saw a renewed appreciation for the armed forces (Battistelli, 2004, pp. 121-130) confirmed by recent data (e.g. Eurispes, 2025): this suggests that the general pacifist attitude in the country does not necessarily equate to deep-seated anti-militarism. Additionally, it should be noted that, while there is general and consolidated support for participation in Atlantic and European security frameworks (Battistelli, 2004, pp. 150-157), a non-negligible minority – just over 20% in 2024, according to Angelucci and Isernia (2025, p. 242) – expresses neutralist positions, advocating for withdrawal from all military alliances. Furthermore, the literature seems to confirm that the tendency to oppose increased defence spending is a long-standing one (Battistelli, 2004, p. 131; Coticchia, 2014, p. 59; Isernia, Borri and Martini, 2022).

Considering ideological influence, in the current political scenario Italians on the left show higher levels of Europeanism and internationalism, while those on the right appear more pro-Atlantic but also notably isolationist (Angelucci and Isernia, 2025, p. 243). It should also be considered that deep-rooted and, to some extent, cross-cutting pacifist social movements have been active for decades in the country (Catanzaro and Coticchia, 2018), and historically rooted hostile sentiments towards NATO and the U.S. (Fabbrini, 2002; Isernia, 2006) appear to remain active in certain segments of the population, and may find new vigour given the current transatlantic turbulent climate.

The analysis of the most recent developments adds to this overall picture, largely confirming it while introducing new elements.

Despite general concern, Angelucci and Isernia (2025) confirm a certain detachment from the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine conflicts, with neutrality being the preferred stance in both cases. Regarding the Middle East, a majority of Italians condemn Israeli military actions in Gaza, and across the political spectrum, with only slight majorities in favour of Israeli action among Brothers of Italy and Forza Italia voters, most voters prefer a neutralist position when asked to choose support between Israel and Hamas (Angelucci and Isernia, 2025, pp. 244-246). This reflects what the two researchers describe as «a widespread reluctance to take a firm stance on a conflict perceived as both polarizing and complex» (p. 245), but it should be noted that, for many, neutrality could have appeared to be the most moderate choice when faced with an option – supporting Hamas – that can be perceived as untenable. To a certain extent, this also confirms the tendency to perceive that conflict not as an abstract geopolitical dispute, but as a humanitarian emergency which also has, at least for certain segments of society, a strong moral and symbolic dimension: in Italy, like in many other countries, issues like social justice and anti-racism have fostered the politicization of the Palestinian scenario, fuelling protest movements that have entered into open controversy with the Meloni government, and have so been internalized within the domestic political debate (della Porta et al, 2025).

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, conversely, shows higher levels of polarization, partly because of its more direct consequences for Italy, including European sanctions on Russia, rising energy costs, and the country's involvement in supplying weapons and assistance to Kyiv. According to Angelucci and Isernia's analysis (2025, pp. 246-248), Italian support for Ukraine is nuanced and fragmented: only voters of the Democratic Party (72%) and Forza Italia (52%) show an

absolute majority in favour of Kyiv; neutralist positions prevail among other political groups, particularly among supporters of AVS and the Five Star Movement, while League voters show the highest, though still limited, levels of support for Russia. In European comparison, furthermore, Italians appear, after Hungarians, among the most inclined to favour territorial concessions to end the conflict, to emphasize the economic costs of supporting Ukraine, and to attribute partial responsibility to the West for the outbreak of the war (Moise and Wang, 2025; Isernia, Martini and Cozzi Fucile, 2024; Thomson et al, 2023).

Such polarization can also be related to Italy's direct involvement in the conflict through military assistance and political support, which began under the Draghi government and has largely continued under the Meloni government (Bruno and Fazio, 2024), although frictions on this issue have frequently been observed even within the governing majority. In any case, widespread counter-narratives, high levels of distrust toward political and media institutions, and general scepticism towards national military engagement make it difficult to construct a shared and effective «strategic narrative». This contrasts with the relatively high levels of public support that characterized Italy's participation in multilateral military missions in previous decades, which benefited from their multilateral framework and peaceful and humanitarian purposes (Battistelli, 2004; Coticchia, 2014), a framing that appears more difficult to effectively mobilize in the debate surrounding the Ukrainian conflict. These dynamics likely explain the strategic choice of both the Draghi and Meloni governments to limit the public disclosure of information about the extent of Italian support to Ukraine, often invoking state secrecy or referring the issue to the broader European multilateral framework, and confirms the

traditional tendency of Italian governments to depoliticize international conflicts by minimizing their domestic political impact, preferring to frame them within more abstract categories (Angelucci, Martini and Cozzi Fucile, 2024; Angelucci and Isernia, 2025, pp. 250-252).

Nonetheless, value-based references also appear highly polarized. Although 'peace' is commonly identified as the main aspiration of Italians in international affairs, the term proves again to be highly polysemic in political debate.

It is not possible here to examine the innumerable meanings of "peace" and "pacifism" developed in political thought and practice (e.g. Bobbio, 1979; Bonanate, 1987; Cortright, 2008). It is sufficient to observe that the objective of 'peace' frequently appears in the statements of representatives of different national political lines regarding the ongoing conflicts; however, it is evident that different objectives and policy choices are associated with this term. For instance, while Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has invoked the motto «*si vis pacem, para bellum*» in support of rearmament (Ansa, 2025a), parties such as the Five Star Movement and the League have advanced more traditional pacifist arguments, including the trade-off between military and social spending, to oppose it (La Rocca, 2025; Ansa, 2025b). In the debate on the Ukrainian war, references to a «just peace» appear both within the government (e.g. Open, 2025; La Stampa, 2026) and the opposition, particularly in the communication of the Democratic Party (e.g. Partito Democratico, 2026); more isolationist parties, such as the League, instead emphasize peace primarily as the cessation of hostilities, without addressing the post-war political settlement (e.g. Fanpage, 2026), expressing an orientation that appears relatively widespread among European and Italian public opinion.

The concept of 'peace' therefore confirms its nature as an «essentially contested concept» (Gallie, 1955), whose meaning cannot be objectively determined and is interpreted differently depending on cultural backgrounds, ideological convictions, and political positions. What is certain is that international complexity has forced both the political elite and Italian public opinion to confront deep questions regarding the legitimacy of war, the meaning of pacifism, and the trade-off between a just peace and peace at any cost.

3. *Prudent and pragmatic, but aspiring to peace: Italians as «utopian realists» in the face of the return of war?*

Interpreting the global context through the lens of political realism generally leaves little space for public opinion, except as a constraint or potential support for decisions taken by governments on the basis of interests and security considerations. Classical realist thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau already emphasized that the need to secure public consent could limit the effectiveness of foreign policy in democratic systems (Morgenthau, 1949, p. 160). Likewise, Edward Hallett Carr argued that the belief that a rational public opinion could effectively restrain international conflict – what today might be described as «naming and shaming» – represented one of the main illusions of liberal thought (Carr, 2001, e.g. pp. 32-37).

Carr's reflections, however, are useful for interpreting not the influence of public attitude on foreign policy making, which is not the actual focus of this analysis, but rather the broader opinion mood of Italians in the face of the contemporary international scenario. Although public opinion is far from homogeneous and includes significant

differences stemming, for instance, from political positioning, survey data nevertheless allow us to identify broad attitudes that characterize significant portions of society and actively shape public debate, to which interpretative criteria may thus be applied.

From this perspective, the prevailing mood appears to reflect the tension between realism and utopia which, according to Carr, structurally and inherently characterizes the political dimension. Carr's thought, moreover, developed primarily in the period immediately preceding the outbreak of the Second World War, which, despite his professed realism, the British author was unable to foresee, perhaps remaining trapped in that very tension between recognition of reality, wishful thinking, and ideal aspirations that he himself diagnosed. In any case, his insight on his own time captures structural elements of the relationship between international politics, especially in its conflictual dimension, and the public sentiment, which can provide useful interpretative lenses for understanding the anxieties and hopes that shape Italians' attitude toward the current international scenario.

Among the elements of that sentiment that can be associated with a realist attitude, attentive to the pragmatic evaluation of facts and their consequences, one may identify the distrust toward universalistic narratives and the moral categories of international politics; a reading of the international scenario marked by substantial prudence; and prioritization of self-preservation, which, however, also appears to reflect a tendency to offload burdens and responsibilities.

Distrust toward the Western political narratives, nuanced attitudes toward the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and support for collective security frameworks that often appears more pragmatic than ideological depict a country primarily concerned with adapting to shifting power relations and

perceived threats rather than with their moral or ideological representations, the resonance of which is certainly undermined by the broader climate of distrust, primarily rooted in the domestic context, toward the political and media system that should serve to interpret and convey the complexity of international politics, albeit within the legitimate diversity of ideas and positions. Similarly, the limited willingness to sustain economic and/or personal costs and sacrifices in the name of the security requirements posed by the difficult international context may be interpreted as an expression of that pacifist attitude which Carr, in his 1936 Inaugural Lecture as Wilson Professor of International Politics at the University College of Wales – devoted precisely to «public opinion as a safeguard of peace» – described as a manifestation of the primordial human instinct to «take refuge from the monster in the nearest available cave» (p. 848). It would then reflect the desire of many individuals to «wash their hands of it» when the prospect of war becomes more concrete, an attitude that Carr did not attribute to cowardice but rather to an attempt to evade responsibility (p. 848). This interpretation may also apply to the general support for alliance frameworks such as NATO and the European Union. Beyond the different degrees of support for European and transatlantic integration, there certainly emerges a tendency to favour forms of burden sharing in terms of risks and costs. This tendency may be motivated by a certain inclination toward free riding, demonstrated, for instance, by the deeply rooted opposition to increasing national defence spending, but also by a prudential awareness of the impossibility, for a middle-ranking power, of facing the current scenario and future risks in an atomized manner. Carr's 1936 lecture can help, once again, to highlight a relevant aspect: to what extent would this general attitude, which he defined as the one of the

«collectivists» (Carr, 1936, p. 852), mobilize Italians if a concrete application of collective security were required? In other words, if the ideal support were translated into practice «by the terrible monosyllable "war"» (Carr, 1936, p. 858), what would be the position of Italians, and what that of political parties, including those that most actively support the country's membership in the Atlantic and/or European framework? According to Carr, in the UK of the 1930s the moral support for the League of Nations, widespread especially among intellectuals, would have shattered against its actual implications: indeed, when faced with the prospect of a true military engagement «the man in the street quite firmly put his foot down – so firmly that the avoidance of war became, Covenant or no Covenant, the first preoccupation of every member of Parliament» (1936, p. 858). An indication of how such a reaction might unfold today in Italy, should the activation of these mechanisms be requested, can be found in the previously mentioned survey which shows that 42.7% of respondents believe that Italy should not intervene militarily in defence of another NATO or EU country if it were attacked (Censis, 2025b, p. 12).

Despite these ambiguities, the most evident element in Italian public opinion remains the aspiration for peace. Often this aspiration seems to take the form of negative peace, understood as the absence of war, although some social groups, particularly those mobilized around the Gaza crisis, emphasize elements of positive peace such as equality, rights, and inclusion, reflecting what Norberto Bobbio described as «active pacifism» (1979, p. 56). Moreover, while it is true that Italians appear concerned and sceptical about the ability of democracies and of a rules-based international order to cope with the emergence of a system grounded in power, the results of the Polidemos and Ipsos Doxa survey show that, ultimately,

it is precisely these solutions to which many of them aspire in imagining a more stable and peaceful future.

Overall, the underlying pattern still resembles the form of pacifism described by Battistelli (2004, p. 148) as «coherent in its logic and stable over time», a «value orientation that is translated from time to time into political evaluation» without presupposing an absolute aversion to the use of force. However, this value orientation seems to be translated into practice through at times inconsistent impulses between neutralism and reliance on international alliances, between active moral rejection of violence and the mere distancing from responsibilities, between principled positions and the difficulty of confronting the practical consequences that follow from them.

Carr argued that the most valuable contribution to peace that he could offer was the promotion of a more accurate understanding of international relations and the formation of «a balanced and informed public opinion on international problems» (1936, p. 847). The contemporary international environment indeed demonstrates how public opinion has increasingly become a battlefield for competing narratives and propaganda: the quality of debate on international matters is therefore crucial, although the formation of a well-informed public opinion appears today even more difficult than in Carr's time, who himself identified «power over opinion» as one of the main forms of power, alongside economic and military ones (2001, pp. 120-135). Nevertheless, his notion of utopian realism reminds us that power over opinion is never absolute, as it can be constrained «by the inherent utopianism of human nature», which leads individuals to a natural intellectual resistance against overly aggressive forms of propaganda (Carr, 2001, pp. 129-130). Overt and covert tools for influencing opinions are today deeply

more pervasive and unpredictable than in Carr's time, but his insights can still speak meaningfully to contemporary audiences.

Ultimately, applying these interpretative lenses to the mood of Italian public opinion allows us to observe how, even in the current context, a democratic society may oscillate between the realist recognition of power relations and the idealistic aspiration for peace. It is precisely this tension and ambivalence that seems to characterize the way in which a significant portion of Italian society looks at international politics in a historical phase that, although profoundly different, reproduces, especially in Europe, some of the anxieties and uncertainties that marked the international debate of the period in which Carr developed his reflections.

References

Ancillotti, C., Campati, A. and Montani, E. (2026) 'La democrazia italiana: partecipazione, corpi intermedi, pace', in Polidemos and Ipsos Doxa (eds) *Democrazia e pace: Report Polidemos Ipsos Doxa*. Milano: EDUCatt, pp. 11-24.

Angelucci, D. and Isernia, P. (2025) 'Italian Public Opinion and the Wars', *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 17(2), pp. 237-254.

ANSA (2025a) 'Meloni, la penso come i romani, "si vis pacem, para bellum"', 24 June. Available at: https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2025/06/24/meloni-la-penso-come-i-romani-si-vis-pacem-para-bellum_14d0e11d-3677-4412-a370-d07c790c714e.html (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

ANSA (2025b) 'Salvini, "io tifo per la pace, Macron pensa più a vendere armi"', 24 November. Available at: https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2025/11/24/salvini-io-

tifo-per-la-pace-macron-pensa-piu-a-vendere-armi_ecc84c1a-0342-4581-9459-e888440767e5.html (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Arcos, R., Chiru, I. and Ivan, C. (2024) *Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security*. London: Routledge.

Battistelli, F. (2004) *Gli italiani e la guerra*. Roma: Carocci.

Bellucci, P. and Isernia, P. (1999) 'Opinione pubblica e politica estera in Italia: il caso della Bosnia', *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 29(3), pp. 441-480.

Bennett, W.L. and Livingston, S. (2020) *The Disinformation Age*. Washington, DC: George Washington University Press.

Bobbio, N. (1979) *Il problema della guerra e le vie della pace*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Bonanate, L. (1987) *Né guerra né pace*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Bruno, V.A. and Fazio, F. (2024) 'Italian Governments and Political Parties vis-à-vis the War in Ukraine', in Mihr, A. and Pierobon, C. (eds) *Polarization, Shifting Borders and Liquid Governance*. Berlin: Springer, pp. 265-283.

Carr, E.H. (1936) 'Public Opinion as a Safeguard of Peace', *International Affairs*, 15(6), pp. 846-862.

Carr, E.H. (2001) *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. London: Palgrave (orig. 1939).

Catanzaro, A. and Coticchia, F. (2018) *Al di là dell'arcobaleno*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

Censis (2024) *58° Rapporto sulla situazione sociale del paese*. Available at: https://www.censis.it/rapporto/58-rapporto-sulla-situazione-sociale-del-paese/ (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Censis (2025a) *Gli italiani in guerra: Indagine sulla percezione dei conflitti e sul riarmo nella società italiana*. Available at: https://www.censis.it/gli-italiani-guerra-il-16-pronto-combattere-il-19-diserterebbe-il-26-meglio-pagare/ (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Censis (2025b) *59° Rapporto sulla situazione sociale del paese*. Available at: https://www.censis.it/rapporto/rapporto-2025-2/ (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Cortright, D. (2008) *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coticchia, F. (2014) *La guerra che non c'era*. Milano: Università Bocconi Editore.

Della Porta, D., Mendoza Sandoval, L., Portos Garcia, M. and Stagni, F. (2025) '"Free Palestine!": Protesting Israel's War on Gaza in Italy and Spain', *South European Society and Politics*, 30(2), pp. 227-255.

Eurispes (2025) 'Risultati Rapporto Italia 2025', 29 May. Available at: https://eurispes.eu/news/risultati-rapporto-italia-2025/ (Accessed: 16 March 2026).

European Parliament (2025) *Eurobarometer: EP Autumn Survey 2025, Country Level Results: Italy*. Available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3632 (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Fabbrini, S. (2002) 'The Domestic Sources of European Anti-Americanism', *Government and Opposition*, 37(1), pp. 3-14.

Fanpage (2026) 'Salvini a Zelensky: "Amico mio, stai perdendo la guerra: devi scegliere tra sconfitta e disfatta"', 24 January. Available at: https://www.fanpage.it/politica/salvini-a-zelensky-amico-mio-stai-perdendo-ora-scegli-tra-sconfitta-e-disfatta/ (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Freedman, L. (2006) *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Gallie, W.B. (1955) 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56, pp. 167-198.

Giusti, S. (2023) *Disinformazione e politica estera*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

Holsti, O. (1992) 'Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus', *International Studies Quarterly*, 36(4), pp. 439-466.

Holsti, O. (1996) *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

ISPI and Ipsos Doxa (2025) *Sondaggio ISPI 2025: Gli italiani e la politica internazionale*. Available at: https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/sondaggio-ispi-2025-gli-italiani-e-la-politica-internazionale-225638 (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Isernia, P. (2006) 'Anti-Americanism and European Public Opinion during the Iraq War', in Fabbrini, S. (ed.) *The United States Contested: American Unilateralism and European Discontent*. London: Routledge, pp. 130-157.

Isernia, P., Borri, R. and Martini, S. (2022) 'How Italians View Military Spending', *IAI Commentaries*, 22/20. Available at: https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/c05/how-italians-view-military-spending (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Isernia, P., Martini, S. and Cozzi-Fucile, C. (2024) 'Between Prudence and Selfishness: Pooling the Polls on What Italians Think of the Ukraine War', *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 16(3), pp. 340-352.

La Rocca, M. (2025) '"Basta soldi per le armi", Conte e M5S a Strasburgo contro Rearm Europe', *EuNews*, 11 March. Available at: https://www.eunews.it/2025/03/11/conte-m5s-strasburgo-contro-rearm-europe/ (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

La Stampa (2026) 'Meloni: "Da Mosca richieste irragionevoli. In Ucraina serve una pace giusta"', *La Stampa*, 20 February. Available at: https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2026/02/20/diretta/guerra_russia_ucraina_news_oggi-15515608/ (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B. and Roselle, L. (2013) *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. London: Routledge.

Moise, A.D. and Wang, C. (2025) 'Appeasement or Solidarity? Uncovering the Drivers of European Public Opinion on the EU's Foreign Policy', *European Union Politics*, 26(2), pp. 418-441.

Open (2025) 'Guerra in Ucraina, Tajani: "L'obiettivo è una pace giusta e duratura"', *Open*, 24 September. Available at: https://www.open.online/2025/09/24/guerra-ucraina-tajani-obiettivo-e-pace-giusta-duratura/ (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Partito Democratico (2026) 'Schlein: quattro anni a fianco del popolo ucraino. Per una pace giusta', 24 February. Available at: https://partitodemocratico.it/schlein-quattro-anni-a-fianco-del-popolo-ucraino-per-una-pace-giusta/ (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Scavo, A. (2026) 'Pace e qualità della democrazia', in Polidemos and Ipsos Doxa (eds) *Democrazia e pace: Report Polidemos Ipsos Doxa*. Milano: EDUCatt, pp. 35-36.

Shapiro, R.Y. and Page, B.I. (1988) 'Foreign Policy and the Rational Public', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32(2), pp. 211-247.

Thomson, C., Mader, M., Münchow, F., Reifler, J. and Schoen, H. (2023) 'European Public Opinion: United in Supporting Ukraine, Divided on the Future of NATO', *International Affairs*, 99(6), pp. 2485-2500.

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Tancredi's celebrated maxim in *The Leopard* has long served as the master key to Italian politics: a country where every rupture seems to dissolve into continuity, every revolution into restoration. But does the formula still hold?

Since October 2022, Italy has been governed by the first executive in the history of the Republic led by a party with roots in the post-fascist tradition — an experiment watched with alarm, curiosity and hope across Europe and beyond. Three years on, the balance sheet confounds both the catastrophists and the reassured. The most stable government in decades has completed none of the institutional reforms it promised; yet Italian democracy has quietly shifted — in the governance of dissent, the control of public media, the externalisation of migration, the symbolic politics of culture and memory.

Drawing on original survey research and in-depth analyses of foreign policy, environmental commitments, protest and cultural institutions, this volume charts the transformation of Italian democracy within a world in disorder: multiplying wars, a deepening global democratic recession, a transatlantic alliance in turmoil. Its thesis is captured in a single formula: hybrid Italy — a democracy in which institutional continuity and illiberal drift coexist, and in which Tancredi's maxim now runs in reverse. Everything stays the same, precisely so that things can change.

A book for anyone seeking to understand not only where Italy is going, but what its 'laboratory' reveals about the future of democracy in Europe.

Damiano Palano is Full Professor of Political Philosophy at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. He is Director of ASERI (Graduate School of Economics and International Relations) and Polidemos (Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change). For ASERI, he is also Director of the Master in Advanced Global Studies and Director for the Master in Advanced Public and Cultural Diplomacy for International Relations. His research focuses on democratic theory, populism and the transformations of contemporary political orders.

HYBRID ITALY
A Democracy amid Global Disorder

Damiano Palano (edited by)

EDUCatt - Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario
dell'Università Cattolica
Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione);
librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)
web: libri.educatt.online
ISBN: 979-12-5535-607-3



euro 14,00