

Italian politics

Revulsion at Ukraine war ends Rome's old amity with Moscow

Italy's tough new approach to Russia marks one of the biggest foreign policy shifts in Europe in years



Italian prime minister Mario Draghi has described the invasion of Ukraine as a profound assault on European security © FT montage/AP

Amy Kazmin in Rome 10 HOURS AGO

The year after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi travelled to the peninsula to visit Vladimir Putin. The two drank a 240-year-old bottle of wine taken from a Crimean winery and prized by Kyiv as a Ukrainian national asset. Back home, Berlusconi endorsed the annexation, criticised EU sanctions against Moscow and praised the Russian president's leadership.

Though Berlusconi was by then out of power, the [trip](#) reflected the Italian political and business elite's strong ties with Russia — and Rome's traditional sympathy for Moscow in its fraught relations with the EU.

But Italy has displayed no such solicitude for the Kremlin since the February 24 invasion of Ukraine. Under Italian prime minister Mario Draghi, Rome has taken a hard line against Russia, while Italian companies remain silent over punitive sanctions on Moscow.

Analysts say Italy's tough new approach — prompted by the invasion and public horror at the brutality of Russian forces — marks one of the biggest foreign policy shifts in Europe in years, alongside Germany's recent defence strategy overhaul.

Rome had western Europe's warmest and longest-standing ties with Russia and has in the past been accused by European diplomats of impeding tougher EU responses to

MOSCOW'S aggression.

Now, under Draghi — a former European Central Bank president who has described Russia's invasion as an attack on the post-second world war multilateral order — it has turned on its old friend.

“That softness on Russia that used to make Italy eccentric, or out of touch with the European mainstream, is gone,” said Stefano Stefanini, Italy's former ambassador to Nato. “There is a profound adjustment in the way Italian foreign policy is looking at Russia now. Draghi deserves credit for carrying it out, but it will outlast him.”

In December, the Italian leader played down the risks of an invasion of Ukraine, stressed the importance of engagement with Putin and warned that sanctions would hit Italy harder than other EU members, given its dependence on Russia for 40 per cent of its [gas imports](#).

But since February 24, Draghi has described the invasion as a profound assault on European security, praised Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's courage and resistance, and helped devise tough [sanctions on Russia's central bank](#) that froze much of Moscow's \$643bn in foreign currency assets.

Italian authorities have [seized superyachts](#) and beachfront villas worth more than €1bn from Russian oligarchs — a shock to those who expected their ties to influential Italians to protect them from state action.

Draghi, who has expressed revulsion at the violence inflicted on ordinary Ukrainians, has also warned Italians to prepare for sacrifices, saying in April: “Do we want to have peace or do you want to have the air conditioning on?”

Rome has pledged not to oppose a Russian energy embargo if the rest of the EU agrees, and Draghi told an Italian newspaper recently that he now agreed with those who call talking with Putin “useless and a waste of time”.





The Scheherazade, thought to belong to a Russian oligarch, docked at a Tuscan port. Italian authorities have seized yachts and villas worth more than €1bn from wealthy Russians © Federico Scoppa/AFP/Getty Images

Italy's television talk shows still give plenty of airtime to Moscow sympathisers — Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov even made a live appearance on Sunday night on the country's largest private broadcaster, owned by Berlusconi.

But a recent survey by the Milan-based Institute for International Political Studies found that nearly 61 per cent of Italians blamed Putin for the war, while 17 per cent blamed Nato and 17 per cent were unsure.

Even Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's populist League and longstanding Putin admirer, has distanced himself from the Russian leader and laid flowers outside Ukraine's embassy in Rome in a show of concern.

Italian business leaders — who [met Putin via video link](#) to discuss strengthening ties even as Russian troops massed on Ukraine's border a month before the invasion — have kept silent on the EU sanctions against Moscow, a sharp contrast to their complaints over sanctions in 2014. Many Italian companies are seeking to wind down their Russian operations.

“Something irreversible has happened,” said Nathalie Tocci, director of the Institute of International Affairs.

Italy's ties with Russia date back to the cold war, when Italian businesses, led by state-controlled energy company Eni and automaker Fiat, set up in the Soviet Union. As home to western Europe's largest Communist party, Italy saw itself as a bridge between Moscow and the rest of the west.

Relations deepened after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s as more Italian businesses, including leading banks, moved into the market, Russian appetite for Italy's luxury goods soared and new Russian entrepreneurs invested in Italian assets. As prime minister, Berlusconi championed a Nato-Russia Council to reduce

friction with Moscow over the western alliance's expansion into former Soviet bloc nations.

More recently, Moscow forged links with Italy's two biggest populist parties, Salvini's League and the Five Star Movement.

But strains in relations were emerging even before the invasion, Tocci said. Moscow's perceived involvement in Italy's domestic politics raised hackles, while the security establishment was unhappy with Russia's ambitions in Libya, the former Italian colony where Rome's strategic concerns include energy and immigration.

Analysts warn that Italy's resolve against Russia could erode once Draghi's term ends, especially if ordinary Italians pay a heavy price for the Ukraine conflict and the cost of living emerges as a main domestic political issue in the 2023 elections.

"It will become a matter of how the sanctions impact the Italian economy," said Giovanna De Maio, a visiting fellow at George Washington University's Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies. "If the war continues, it's going to be hard for whoever is in power to keep a very strict line."

But most analysts feel the invasion has irreversibly damaged Italian business confidence in Russia, which would trigger a sharp rollback in commercial ties and weaken the old pro-Russia constituency.

"The moment the war stops, the escalation of sanctions will stop, but the trend towards lessening dependence on Russia will not change," Stefanini said. "Big companies like Eni are accepting the reality. There might or might not be a gas embargo but, if you look at winter 2024 or 2025, gas and electricity will not come from Russia."