

Linking the Diaspora Culturally. Interview with Franco Frattini

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The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs is contributing to the creation of an international "Piazza Italiana", where Italians and people interested in the Italian culture can meet and communicate. Also virtually.

i-Italy recently interviewed Franco Frattini, the Italian Foreign Affairs Minister. We discussed his vision of promoting Italy's "cultural piazza" abroad, a place where Italians meet and communicate with those who are attracted to Italy's multifaceted cultural experience. We also discussed the importance of networking and, therefore, the role of modern technology in helping the diverse realities of the Italian diaspora communicate with each other. The result of this interview is an accurate reflection on that "Piazza Italiana", both physical and virtual, that the Italian Foreign Ministry is helping to create worldwide.

Even though we are talking about culture, we would still briefly like to touch on a political topic. In



your opinion, how important is culture for politics, particularly foreign policy? In this sense, how useful are cultural exchanges?

If nothing else, politics is culture because it is born out of humanity's need for culture. Keeping this in mind, I feel that it is important for those who participate in the political realm to keep it from disintegrating into a form of power that betrays the most admirable as well as the most authentic intentions.

Regarding foreign policy, through its features of inclusivity and impartiality, culture is a formidable instrument that allows the meeting of diverse, sometimes very different, cultures and humanities that can even be in conflict with one another.

In the international field, I often hear discussions of "soft diplomacy" that leave out important cultural characteristics. In Italy, it cannot be emphasized enough that culture needs to become an even greater developmental instrument, together with the overall promotion of Italy throughout the world.

Promoting Italian culture abroad can also be a powerful way to promote our country. What is the Foreign Ministry doing to promote Italy in the world? Have you met with any difficulties?

Promoting Italian culture means promoting not only Italy's image in the world, but also Italy's entrepreneurship. This was already the main characteristic of my former duties in this Ministry under President Berlusconi, to whom we owe the new direction of Italian diplomacy in service of the country's development. I support this new direction so strongly, as you know, that I kept the Foreign Ministry's responsibility for cultural promotion under my direct supervision.

There are difficulties in this mission but, for the most part, they are relative to the particular and difficult economic times that the Western world, including Italy, is undergoing. A strong relationship between culture and development is vital, not just to the key players in the market. Cultural promotion is always in need of more private resources.

On July 31, you signed with Sandro Bondi, the Italian Minister of Culture, the Memorandum of Agreement for the overseas promotion of Italian language and culture. Could you please explain to us what this is?

Minister Bondi and I are on the same political and cultural wavelength. Our perspectives are so well intertwined that they led us to sign an agreement between our two ministries that is, perhaps, the first of its kind. Without a doubt, it is necessary to give an increased unity and efficacy to Italy's cultural policy. The memorandum is actually rather simple; on a monthly basis, the general directors of both ministries will meet to decide on common ways to promote Italian culture worldwide. The Ministry of Culture will follow its vocation as cultural producer; likewise, the Foreign Ministry will follow its vocation as diffuser of culture across the consular network, the embassies, and cultural institutes. The ultimate goal of this partnership is that of providing these activities with better coordination, which will allow us to optimize the network of Italian institutions abroad as an instrument of "cultural diplomacy" —the backbone of Italian foreign policy—also through the use of innovative methods and technologies. The collaboration between the two ministries aims to plan common strategies involving other central and public administrations as well as the private sector in carrying out initiatives and in developing, finally, a combined communication plan.

i-Italy is a network that unites Italian Americans, Italians, and Americans, through the use of the Internet. We are helping to realize the long-dreamt flow of information between these groups. We hope to contribute to a coming together of Italy and the Italian diaspora, both past and present. At the same time, we try to talk to Americans, who love our country, but are often misinformed and think of the Italy of yesterday. We cannot afford to lose the historic legacy of Italian emigration, nor can we lose the resources of the prestigious Italy of today, which is still somewhat unknown. What is the Foreign Ministry doing to promote this "new" Italy on an international scale?

With the advent of new technologies, such as the Internet, we have the power to democratically redistribute the way information and knowledge are accessed. In 2000, I undersigned a law that focused on public communication; this shows, I think, how much I believe in communication, in new technologies as a means to maintain transparency in public administration and help human beings across the planet to unite. The Internet and the World Wide Web are a welcome addition to today's



society.

Sure, things get more delicate when you must represent the complex reality of an entire nation and its changes over the course of history. The Internet gives us immediate access to timely information but it also makes communication timeless and even splits time into fragments that can be reassembled according to the user's whims.

The past and the present communicate in this sphere and in some cases can even negate each other. Today, sometimes truth and information do not coincide, and mass media often risk stripping down the news according to their ideas.

Thus, when you try to tell the history of a nation, it often becomes difficult to preserve the memory while, at the same time, avoiding stereotypes. For instance, I believe that the whole world recognizes Italy's place at the forefront of music and art, but few people know of Italy's scientific, technological, and industrial excellence. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs intends to promote these characteristics through specific programs. As I said before, the network of Cultural Institutes, of embassies, of consulates, and of Italian schools abroad need to join this new mission: to promote the 'new' Italy without letting the 'old' Italy fall into oblivion. The new Italy is the direct consequence of the old, after all.

Would you also allow us a personal question? What rapport do you have with the United States, with the American lifestyle and culture in general? Is there something that we should learn? What did you learn?

I love the United States; I appreciate many aspects of the American lifestyle. Most of all, I have a profound respect for what the United States represents in the eyes of the world. The United States is the country that gave freedom something a meaning that goes way beyond its philosophic concept. The United States is the only country that wrote in its Constitution that every citizen has a right to happiness. The idea of liberty is the American Creed. It appeared in the Declaration of Independence as a natural right and then it reappeared a few years later as a national symbol on the first coins minted by Congress. In 1886, the Statue of Liberty was inaugurated in New York Harbor and it has become an international symbol. Now that Europe has been freed from Nazism and Fascism and the Cold War has ended, the ideal of freedom for the American people has become a symbol of their collective conscience and even a symbol of the United States' mission as keeper of the free world. This is what we all should learn from the United States. It disappoints me that sometimes Europeans forget this or pretend to forget it.

Our readers are Italian, Italian American, and also American, and scattered throughout the United States. They have in common a great love for our country and are, in a certain sense, the bearers of "italicity". Do you have a message for them?

My biggest wish is that this love coincided with an attachment to the Italian language. By preserving our language, by passing it down through the generations, we guarantee the preservation of our sensitivity, of our thought processes, our creativity, and our talent for life—everything that has made Italy unique in the world.

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