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GENEVA: FROM CERN TO THE ENVIRONMENT, ITALIAN INDUSTRY AND KNOW HOW FOR INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COOPERATION

Interview with Umberto Dosselli, Scientific Attaché at the Permanent Mission of Italy to the International Organisations in Geneva

For over 100 years Switzerland has hosted international organisations: today 22 of them are based in Geneva (8 of which are United Nations agencies), including CERN, the most important particle physics laboratory in the world, unique for its complexity, scientific-technological prospects and potential for industry. Italy, with INFN, participates in its activities at the highest level. The economic return of these activities is important for Italian industry, thanks to the high capacity of Italian industry to take part in the experiments with high technology products. However, the international organisations also offer Italy other opportunities that the Permanent Mission of Italy in Geneva seeks to encourage, fostering communications and supporting national skills and know-how.

What is the scenario in which the Permanent Mission of Italy in Geneva operates?

First of all, we have to make a distinction. The diplomatic networks in Geneva are divided into two spheres: bilateral relations and multilateral relations. And the Italian diplomatic network is obviously organised in this way. Bilateral relations are between Italy and the local host State, and they are followed by the Embassy and by the potential Consulates. In Switzerland the Embassy is in Berne, but diplomacy is also followed by a Consulate in Geneva. Geneva, however, is special because it is the seat of many international organisations, such as the UN, NATO, the Red Cross, CERN, the WMO (World Meteorological Organization), the ITU (International Telecommunication Union), the WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), the WTO (World Trade Organization), to mention just a few. And it is with these organisations that the multilateral relations are conducted. The Permanent Missions, which have the status of embassies, are indeed in charge of the relations between the single countries and the international organisations. Thus, it is the Ambassador who conducts the relations, in our case,

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between Italy and the single international organisations. Some are “technical”, other are scientific and technological relations: my mandate, in particular, in the capacity of Scientific Attaché, is to follow the latter ones. For example, I'm the Italian representative of the finance committee of CERN, while the Ambassador himself and the INFN President are the national representatives on the CERN Council.

For INFN, the most profitable collaboration is obviously the one with CERN.

Yes, INFN is clearly highly focused on CERN. In this case, our task is to check that the cooperation between the two institutions continues as in the past, because relations are really excellent, perfect, I would say. At CERN, INFN is very present at all levels, not only scientific and managerial: it is worth noting, for example, the participation of Italian students, who have success in the international calls because - it has to be said - they are really clever. And we are equally valid in outreach: this year, in the competition addressed to schools, which CERN promotes throughout the world, "A Beamline for School", one of the two winners is an Italian high school.

And then, always linked to CERN, the question of the industrial return is important.

Of course, for Italy, the Industrial return that derives from the CERN projects is a relevant aspect, both for politics and for public opinion. Our country is the fourth contributor to CERN, after Germany, England and France: we therefore expect a return for our companies; the orders have to be consistent with the investment. We also work for this, in order to find the right channels to increase the presence of our industry in the technological projects developed at CERN. This takes place also thanks to the serious and constant work that the ILO (Industrial Liaison Officer) carries out. The next interesting opportunity is offered by the HiLumi LHC project, for which the awarding of the contracts has already begun. From Italy's viewpoint, the coordination with the HiLumi top management is perfect, and the ILO has done an excellent job in identifying the industrial sectors that could be more favourable for the participation of our companies. For example, Italians are very good at developing high-temperature superconductors and, in fact, we have recently been awarded contracts in this sector. HiLumi represents an interesting scientific and technological opportunity, and I'm certain that Italy will play its part well on this competitive international terrain.

In addition to CERN, what other international institutions do you liaise with?

As the Scientific Attaché, I also follow the WMO and the ITU, which are both UN agencies. In addition, I work with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the various organisations that deal with the environment, like the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International

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Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). What I mainly do in these organisations is to maintain contacts with the Italian staff, to understand whether Italy is suitably represented, or if there is discrimination, if we have claims to make or unsolved problems for which a solution has to be found. Then I try to understand whether Italy uses these organisations well. With CERN, coordination is perfect, because an institution like INFN follows it. In the other organisations, this is not the case and the situation is not so clear. I have to understand, for example, if it is possible to promote additional cooperation as well as that already existing with our research institutes, our universities, and so on, and if there is Italian research or technology that can be usefully exploited to develop projects within the international organisations.

What is the situation with the other international organisations?

In the light of the profitable industrial presence in the CERN projects, as the Permanent Mission, we have looked around to understand whether other international organisations could offer good opportunities for Italian industry. I think there are interesting possibilities, we must, therefore, foster the creation of new relationships. This is why we are organising, for the end of October, at the MAECI (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation), a day of contact between the international organisations present in Geneva and the Italian industrial world; to explain the possibilities that exist and how to participate and collaborate.

And as far as concerns the INFN?

I think INFN has certain skills that can also be used in other sectors: I'm thinking of computing, for example. It's a sphere in which INFN excels for what concerns research and development, and it is at the cutting edge, because it's a sector in which it has always been engaged for the intrinsic needs of the activity of particle physics research; computing which can be fruitfully used, for example, in meteorology studies.

In this context, what are relations like between Italy and Switzerland?

Italy has a network of scientific attachés which - I have to say - other countries envy us: it has about 25 scientific attachés in the world who, as I said, are active in the embassies and who follow scientific and technological relations between Italy and the various countries. There are, however, exceptions: one is myself, since I'm not based at the Embassy in Berne but in Geneva. On the other hand, there is no scientific attaché who specifically follows the rest of Switzerland. At present, the MAECI is considering how to deal with this aspect; whether to appoint another person or to expand my own area of competence

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to the rest of Switzerland is being discussed. Certainly, relations with scientific institutes such as the PSI (Paul Scherrer Institut) or the Zurich and Lausanne Polytechnics, with which Italy already collaborates, are interesting for us and they can be further developed.

How do you operate?

We look with attention at the Italian situation and we speak with the national institutions such as the CRUI (Conference of Italian University Rectors) or the research bodies, in order to create new contacts with the organisations in Geneva. This year, in April, an agreement was signed with the WMO, the MAECI and an institute of the CNR (Italian National Research Council) to promote actions aimed at instructing the farmers in the Niger region on how to deal with the effects of the drought. A problem like this has repercussions also on us: improving the living conditions in the Niger region, in fact, also means contributing to mitigate one of the causes that favour the migration phenomenon. Now, however, we are assessing, together with the ASI (Italian Space Agency) and the WMO, the possibility of using satellite data for a constant and complete mapping of the North Pole, with particular interest in the North-West Passage.

In general, we have to make efforts in order to overcome the tendency to consider with interest only relations with Brussels and with the European Union because that is where the funds come from. The international organisations in Geneva, even if they are not the source of financing, can represent an excellent and very effective showcase for presenting their validity at international level. The ITU, for example, is a body that issues standards and exploits this opportunity to "impose" know-how that our industries already have. This certainly represents a good incentive for cooperation.

What conclusions can be drawn?

My experience, after a year as the Scientific Attaché in Geneva, is that Italians have many high-level skills. I therefore believe that there is still room to increase the opportunities for cooperation between our country and the international organisations, and that we can further exploit our resources, that are based on a strong scientific and technological background. ■