

Giorgio Napolitano Speaks to the Nation

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In April of 2013 President Giorgio Napolitano had reluctantly agreed to re-election after warring politicians failed to agree upon a successor. Now 89, he told Italians in his ninth and final traditional New Year's Eve address, "I believe I am no longer able to carry out my responsibilities. It is time to return to constitutional regularity. I did my best." At this first formal confirmation of his forthcoming resignation, listeners were deeply moved, but also, judging from talk shows and tweets, surprisingly self-analytical.

ROME - In April of 2013 President Giorgio Napolitano, then 88 years old, had reluctantly agreed to re-election after warring politicians failed to agree upon a successor. Now 89, he told Italians in his ninth and final traditional [New Year's Eve address](#) [2], "I believe I am no longer able to carry out my responsibilities." He is expected to stand down after Jan. 13, when Italy's semester leading the European Union concludes. His re-election at the end of his regular seven-year term had been, he



said, “a constitutional exception, and necessary at that time to give Italy a government. But now it is time to return to constitutional regularity. I did my best in these years of my presidency,” he concluded.

In his 20-minute televised speech he also spoke of the “masses of youth kept out of, or on the margins of, the world of work.” Then Napolitano read from a letter he had received from one young Italian: “‘I believe in Italy, but does Italy believe in me?’” According to Istat, the official statistics-gathering agency, some 44% of Italians between 15 and 35 are unemployed; of these, 39% are under age 24.

Napolitano had done the same the previous year, quoting from dozens of letters he had received at the Quirinal Palace, including one from a former manufacturer whose shoe factory had gone bust, but was “too young for a pension, too old to get a new job.”

As models he singled out such exemplary Italians as the Italian doctor from Emergency who is recovering from the Ebola virus contracted while helping victims in Africa. He also praised Serena Petrucciolo, navy medical officer who helped a Nigerian migrant in childbirth aboard a ship; helicopter Capt. Maurizio Albini for his nighttime rescue of victims of the burning ferryboat “Norman Atlantic”; and astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti, first Italian woman in space; and physicist Fabiola Gianotti, the first female director of the CERN project in Geneva, noted for her work on the Higgs boson.

Not least, Napolitano lashed into the scandal of Mafia links and corruption on high levels in Rome, where exploitation of immigrants was described by one boss in a phone tap as “more profitable than the drug traffic.” Said Napolitano, “We must, all of us together, clean up the rotten and corrosive underworld in our society.” He also rejected any notion of Italy leaving the Euro as “no solution to the crisis.”

In his own year-end homily Pope Francis, who is Bishop of Rome, similarly assailed the scores of Rome’s deeply compromised former administrators, already in prison. Such a situation, said the pope, “calls for moral rebirth, and a renewed commitment to build a more just and caring city.” One must not “force the poor into becoming ‘mafiosi,’” he added.

President Napolitano’s words left many listeners deeply moved, but, as talk show debates afterward suggest, also surprisingly self-analytical, asking themselves where Italian society, and its laws, were directed. As many pointed out, today’s Italy is drastically different from the Italy which first elected Napolitano in 2006. Besides asking whither Italy, there was speculation about possible constitutional changes concerning parliament.

At the same time Napolitano was speaking Beppe Grillo, head of the normally noisome Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), was also holding forth with calls for Italy to quit the EU and a declaration that Napolitano is “co-responsible for the mess [sfacelo] that is Italy.” Most unusually Grillo spoke in a low tone of voice, saying, “We are speaking from PR offices in Milan, in which good spirits conspire, whisper and speak of loyalty and honesty, things outsiders see as revolutionary. We are subversives.”

Subversives perhaps, but also voters for a successor to Napolitano, and Premier Matteo Renzi may have to negotiate with Grillo for a successor to Napolitano. Renzi’s majority Partito Democratico (PD) remains deeply divided, and the other parties insist that candidates not exclusively represent the PD. A broad alliance is necessary: the first three ballots require a two-thirds majority or 672 votes for election, but for the fourth, a simple majority, or 505 votes. The problem is that the ballot is secret, and sharp-shooters can vote against their own party’s candidate; it was this which brought the



standstill resolved only by Napolitano's re-election.

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