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Programma Ponte

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Italy Through the Eyes of an Ambassador

Introduction / Overview

The role of an ambassador is to represent and create a bridge between two entities. For the summer of 2008, ten university students were granted the opportunity to participate in an enriching and educational experience in Rome, Italy to serve as student-ambassadors in a program called “Programma Ponte.” Programma Ponte, created in 1997, is a unique scholarship program that allows qualified Italian-American college students to participate in an intensive summer course of study on Contemporary Italy and European Institutions. The program is made possible through the Association of Italian American Educators (AIAE) as well as many collaborations and sponsorships from various institutions, corporations, and private funding.

A typical day for a “Programma Ponte” student includes visits to European institutions such as the European Commission, The Italian Parliament, leading news-organizations such as ANSA, and prominent labor unions such as CISL. Not only is it a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for students to be able to visit these very important institutions, but it also gives them the opportunity to speak directly with the highly regarded politicians, business professionals, and officials who govern these facilities.

Students also get the opportunity to attend lectures from some of the most educated and informative Italian professors in the country with precise expertise in their teachings. For example, students will learn about the ancient history of Rome, the role and significance of the Mediterranean Union, and the history of the political and social structure in Italy.

Everyday is packed with enriching and educational experiences that are unique from traditional university learning. The lessons are very interactive and hands-on, allowing the students to grasp the concept while providing their own personal input to create challenging discussions between the students and the professor. The Programma Ponte not only allows the students to comprehend the history of ancient and contemporary Italy, but it also provides an understanding and distinction of the similarities and differences that can be recognized between the United States and Italy as well as in relation to the world as a whole.

Geography / A Brief History of Italy

In order to thoroughly understand the development of the political, social, and economic structures that comprise contemporary Italy, it is imperative for one to be briefly familiar with the history and geography of the country- both which are vital elements that help to describe the formation of the modern nation as a whole.

Italy is located in southern Europe. It is a boot shaped peninsula extending into the center of the Mediterranean Sea, northeast of Tunisia. The total land area of Italy is 301,230 square kilometers, which makes it slightly larger in area than the US State of Arizona. About 26% of this land area is arable, and about 9% is permanently devoted to

food crops. The climate is predominately Mediterranean with the frigid Alps to the north, and very hot and dry weather in the southern portion of the country. Most of the terrain is rugged and mountainous with some plains and lowlands along the coast.

Italy as a modern nation began in 1861 with the union of the regional states of the peninsula, plus Sardinia and Sicily, under King Victor Emmanuel II. This quickly evolved into a parliamentary government which ended in the early 1920s with the establishment of a fascist dictatorship by Benito Mussolini. Mussolini's disastrous alliance with Nazi Germany led to Italy's defeat in World War II. His leadership ended in 1944 with the invasion of Italy by the allies toward the end of the Second World War.

With the deposition of Benito Mussolini and the end of the war, a reinstated monarchy briefly replaced the fascist dictatorship, and a democratic republic replaced the monarchy in 1946. After the war, an economic revival followed, and Italy reinstated itself as a free and relatively prosperous European country. Italy became a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) charter member and a member of the European Economic Community (EEC). Italy has also been at leading edge of European political and economic unification. Italy joined the European Union and the Euro Zone recently in January of 1999 which resulted in the creation of a unified currency, the euro, which was shared and used by eleven European member-states at the time. Today the euro is the currency of thirteen European Union countries: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Slovenia and Finland (European Commission).

The European Commission / European Union

The European Commission is one out of three political institutions of the European Union. The primary purpose of the European Commission is to solve larger problems that can not be solved on a national level (trade as an example). The Programma Ponte participants were granted the opportunity to meet with Pier Virgilio Dastoli, the head of the European Commission Representative Office in Rome. In his lecture, Dastoli explains that “the European Commission was created to form a common market with only six countries. To date, there are twenty-seven countries as active members, but it is estimated that within ten to fifteen years from now there will be approximately thirty-five member countries” (Dastoli). Each council (member country) is represented by a minister that serves a term of five to six years. It is important for one to understand that the ministers are considered officials, not political figures because the positions of the European Union are not always necessarily the same as the politics.

To become a member of the European Union, the prospective member-country must abide by all of the common rules, such as respect to all of the twenty-three languages and the protection of human rights. The rules determined by the European Union might create entry conflicts with some countries. A specific example includes Turkey, a country with the legalization of the death penalty. Since the death penalty violates human rights, Turkey would not qualify to become a member at this time.

There are certainly great advantages for a country to join the European Union, such as the promotion of prosperity and stability in struggling nations; it also helps create a universal system that is compatible with all member countries. Although the advantages seem attractive, there are certainly some large-scale disadvantages that

can hinder the strength of and trust in the European Union as a whole. An example of this includes encounters with very large problems that the European Union does not have enough power to solve on its own, such as terrorism. In simple terms, when problems increase, trust decreases.

No matter what position one might take regarding The European Union and The European Commission, it is imperative that one is educated of the functions and purposes of both. Together, The European Union and The European Commission continue to strengthen the majority of European and Mediterranean countries in attempts to unify and create a common purpose- to move forward and build a prosperous future for each and every member country, and to maintain relationships with the nations of the world.

Structure of Government

The structure of the Italian government is that of a representative democracy. The chief of state since May 15, 2006 has been President Giorgio Napolitano. The actual head of government is the Prime Minister, or as titled in Italy, the president of the Council of Ministers, Romano Prodi, since May 17, 2007. Although there might be some confusion when one hears that there are two reigns of power, the Prime Minister definitely possesses more power than the president in the Italian political system. The Prime Minister has a cabinet or Council of Ministers which are nominated by himself and approved by the president. The president is selected by an electoral college to serve a seven-year term. The Electoral College is structured of the two houses of

parliament and fifty eight regional representatives. The prime minister is appointed by the president and then must be confirmed by the parliament.

The bicameral parliament includes a senate and a chamber of deputies, while the judicial branch is a constitutional court composed of fifteen judges. Six hundred and thirty representatives make up the chamber of deputies, in which they serve a term of five years; however, there are no restrictions as to how many terms they can serve in a lifetime. When selecting judges, one third are appointed by the president, another one third are elected by parliament, and the final third are elected by the ordinary and administrative Supreme Courts. The judicial branch operates under a civil law system, a law system that is based on a very detailed set of laws organized into codes (International Business), and legal appeals are treated as new trials. Under certain conditions, there is a system of judicial review which is held by the Constitutional Court (Central Intelligence Agency).

The Programma Ponte visit to the Chamber of Deputies was extremely informative and helped students gain a more in-depth understanding of how the political system in Italy works. Students had the opportunity to have a question and answer session with three of the deputies, including On. Amato Berardi. Berardi explained that the parliament in Italy is different than most other government structures because it is very “hands on and active”. Berardi states, “... in the 1970's, many Americans became interested in the structure of Italian politics and how it worked for this reason” (Berardi). As for criteria, qualifications, and political background that is “necessary” for one to be considered to be a member of the council of deputies, On. Berardi explained that there

are not any real specific requirements; instead, prospective candidates can be nominated based on public service and being active within the community.

The Economy of Italy

Italy is effectively two nations- the modern, industrialized and prosperous North and the poverty-stricken southern half of the country. Southern Italy suffers from sluggish economic growth, illegal immigration, corruption, organized crime, low incomes and high unemployment. While the North has prospered, the South has been persistently affected by these problems.

Italy is a diversified industrial economy; it has approximately the same GDP and GDP per capita as France or the United Kingdom. The difference is that the Italian economy is divided into a highly developed nation in the industrial north, which is dominated by large private companies. In the South, there is a less-developed, welfare-dependent, agricultural economy that suffers from 20% unemployment. This compares to a nation unemployment rate of about 7% which implies even greater differences between Northern and Southern Italy.

Italy has some internal raw material resources, but most of the inputs of raw materials required by the industrial base and more than 75% of energy requirements are imported. For the past decade, Italy has employed a tight fiscal policy in an attempt to meet the financial requirements of the European Economic and Monetary Unions. The Euro zone interest rates have remained modest and Italy has benefited from these as well as low inflation rates. In spite of the tight fiscal policy, Italy has repeatedly failed to remain within the 3% budget deficit maximum specified by the European Union. The

current government has been aggressive in instituting short-term reforms aimed at improving competitiveness, controlling the magnitude of the deficit and generating long-term growth

In attempts to meet the economical standards of the Euro zone and boost economic growth, many trade organizations such as Confcommercio were established to regulate and promote trade, tourism and services in Italy. During the Programma Ponte visit to the office, Professor Gaetano Orrico quotes, "The General Confederation of Trade, Tourism, Services, and SMEs is the largest enterprise- representative in Italy, with over 800,000 members from the trade, tourist, service, and transportation sectors" (Orrico). Dr. Orrico explained that tourism is a huge source of economic revenue in Italy with over four thousand museums, five thousand religious facilities, and over thirty thousand hotels. Based on those statistics and the rest that he provided, it is made clear that there certainly is a huge demand for tourism in Italy.

However, despite organizational attempts, Italy has made less economic progress than some of its European Union counterparts for several reasons. The first being that it has moved slowly in implementing required structural reform. Also, Italy has not reduced its comparatively high tax burden on both individuals and businesses. Because the economy has been soft for some time, the politically powerful labor unions have fought both social security reform and changes that would make it easier for businesses to reduce employment or make changes in job descriptions.

One significant two-day visit for the Programma Ponte students was at the CISL office. CISL is an acronym standing for Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (In English, Italian Confederation of Trade Unions). CISL is a significant Italian trade and

labor union representing various Roman Catholic-inspired group with interests in Christian Democracy. The union was established in April of 1950 and serves as the union headquarters of the National Federation of workers in the food, agricultural, and environmental sectors. Dr. G. Bianchi provided the students with a very detailed lecture about the history of labor unions in relation to Italian history and the distinct differences between the two major unions (CISL and CGIL). Bianchi explains, "The five major points that CISL stands for are: collective bargaining, welfare, job market, political economy, and political problems and relationships" (Bianchi). The two-day visit was most certainly very informative and helpful with the understanding of labor unions in Italy.

Conclusions / Summary

All of the newly-acquired experiences and information about the history and contemporary Italy and European policy allows the student to analytically comprehend, compare, and relate the similarities and differences between the United States and Italy. All of the professors and experts that lectured the students provided very specific examples relating to the United States and Italy. For example, Dr. Semplici discussed the similarities and differences between the health care systems in America and Italy. Dr. Semplici also lectured about the separation between church and state in Italy. In his lecture, he pointed out that the American government addresses God in the vast majority of its entity. For instance, the dollar bill in America quotes, "In God We Trust". However, in Europe the inclusion of church and state is so unheard of that Vatican City was virtually made to be its own city-state for that very reason. The fact that the

professors provided relevant examples helped the students grasp the concept while relating it to their own country- thus truly creating the “ambassador effect”.

With the conclusion of the Programma Ponte program, students now have a new-found and vast knowledge of the major areas of historical and modern Italy. The participants have experienced lectures and visits to some of the most important political, economical, financial, and social institutions of Italy and the world. With a solid understanding of important historical movements leading to contemporary Italy, students can use the knowledge and experiences to enhance and further enrich both their educational and professional careers.

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