

## ***Federalizzazione dell'Italia: the transition of the Italian political system through the lenses of constructivist institutionalism***

**Yunis Mir, *University of Warsaw (Warsaw, Poland)***

E-mail: [yunismir123@gmail.com](mailto:yunismir123@gmail.com)

<https://www.orcid.org/0000-0002-1380-920X>

### **Abstract**

Italy is a state, standing at the crossroads of federalisation. This article traces the ideational and practical application of the federalisation process in Italy, from the lenses of the constructivist institutional theory by Colin Hay and with the application of process-tracing methodology. The research is concentrated on the critical junctures and the ideas behind each stage of federalisation since the Tangentopoli crisis of the 1990s. The research findings demonstrate that, firstly, federalisation in Italy is an elite-driven process, where the politicians' interpretation of Italian federalism affects the outcome of institutional change. Secondly, federalism is a politicised idea, which Italian society and political elite interpret as "the tool for efficient governance" or "the remedy for corruption". Thirdly, federalism is a supplementary topic in the Italian discourse, which yields ideas connected with economic, social, and political reforms. However, federalism can be used to reinforce the policies from these three layers.

**Keywords:** constructivist institutionalism, Colin Hay's constructivist institutional theory, process-tracing methodology, federalisation, institutional change, Italian federalism

### ***Federalizzazione dell'Italia: transformacja włoskiego systemu politycznego przez pryzmat konstruktywistycznego instytucjonalizmu***

#### **Streszczenie**

Włochy są państwem stojącym na rozdrożu federalizacji. W niniejszym artykule prześledzono ideowe i praktyczne zastosowanie procesu federalizacji we Włoszech, z perspektywy konstruktywistycznej teorii instytucjonalnej Colina Haya oraz z zastosowaniem metodologii *process-tracing*. Badania koncentrują się na krytycznych momentach i ideach stojących za każdym etapem fede-

ralizacji od czasu kryzysu w Tangentopoli w latach dziewięćdziesiątych. Wyniki zrealizowanych badań wskazują, że, po pierwsze, federalizacja we Włoszech jest procesem kierowanym przez elity, a interpretacja włoskiego federalizmu przez polityków wpływa na wynik zmian instytucjonalnych. Po drugie, federalizm jest ideą upolitycznioną, którą włoskie społeczeństwo i elity polityczne interpretują jako „narzędzie skutecznego rządzenia” lub „remedium na korupcję”. Po trzecie, federalizm jest tematem uzupełniającym w dyskursie włoskim, z którego rodzą się idee związane z reformami gospodarczymi, społecznymi i politycznymi. Federalizm można jednak wykorzystać do wzmocnienia polityk z tych trzech warstw.

**Słowa kluczowe:** konstruktywistyczny instytucjonalizm, metodologia śledzenia procesów, federalizacja, zmiana instytucjonalna, federalizm włoski

The Italian political system and its transformations are unique for political analysis and the study of federalism. Symmetrical bicameralism, weak regional representation in the Senate on the one hand, but considerable decentralisation of the state authority and devolution of legislative competencies to the regions – on the other hand. The controversy between the national and subnational levels of governance is inherent in the Italian political system. The ambiguous development of this relationship presupposed the appearance of federal ideas. The difference in social, political, and economic characteristics of the Italian regions prevent this topic from disappearance. Hence, Italy is a unitary state, which has been going through a federalisation process.

This article traces back the process of Italian federalisation with the pursuit to analyse: how the federalisation has been developing and what is the prominence of the process today. The article presents the ideational and practical application of the federalisation process in Italy, from the lenses of the constructivist institutional theory by Colin Hay. Accordingly, the research is concentrated on the critical junctures and the ideas behind each stage of federalisation since the beginning of the 1990s with the assistance of the qualitative **process-tracing methodology**. In particular, this method is applied to analyse the micro- and macro-processes of federalisation and to answer the following **research questions**:

RQ1: What is the pattern of micro-process of federalisation in Italy after Tangentopoli?

RQ2: What is the pattern of the macro-process of federalisation in Italy after Tangentopoli?

There are **two hypotheses** formulated in the research:

H1: The pattern of micro-process of federalisation in Italy is elite-driven, the federalisation reforms are essentially politicised, while federal reforms are not isolated and usually supplementary to major reform.

H2: The pattern of macro-process of federalisation in Italy is non-linear, depending on the success of the major reform.

By answering the above-mentioned questions, it can be possible to analyse the prospects of the federalisation process and probable inferences for the Italian political system.

## Constructivist institutionalist vision of federalisation and the process-tracing method

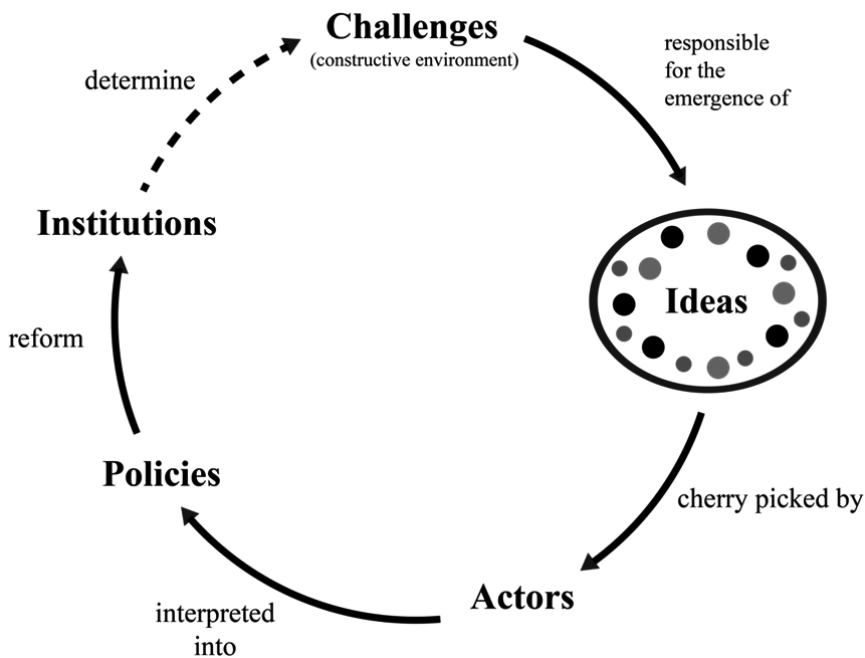
Before turning to theoretical and methodological description, it is vital to articulate the terms *federation*, *federalism* and *federalisation*. The *federation* is an entity that reifies the federal principles such as "*self-rule* of the regions and *shared rule* with the central government" (Elazar 1991: p. 5). It also can be defined as a system, where "the central government incorporates the regions into the decision-making processes, entrenched by the constitution" (King 1982: p. 77). Hence, the decentralisation and the division of competencies between the state and its regions are crucial for a federal state. However, the definition of this concept hardly describes all features of the federal state as the establishment of the federation depends on the particular vision of the national-subnational arrangements. The theory of federation or *federalism* stands behind these arrangements, "advocating federal principles" (Watts 1998: p. 119–120) and articulating the set of ideas on the development of the federal characteristics inside the state. It is important to distinguish the visions of federalism from *federalisation*. The latter characterises the process through which federalist ideas are implemented into the institutions. The subject of the article is the process of implementing visions of federalism into federalisation.

Constructivist institutional theory by Colin Hay is congruent with the analysis of this topic. Hay distinguishes two main sources of his theory: social constructivism and historical institutionalism (Hay 2008: p. 8–10). The former theory brings up the notion that the political realm is the consequence of social mobilisation so that the ideas construct reality (Reus-Smit 2005). However, Hay states that Peter A. Hall's version of historical institutionalism (HI) constitutes the lion's share of his theoretical framework. Correspondingly, HI is concentrated less on the analysis of the institutions per se, but more on the history of their construction and canvasses path dependency of institutional construction, "focusing on socioeconomic development and diffusion of ideas" (Hall, Taylor 1996: p. 10). Another merit of HI is the concept of the critical juncture that reifies "the moments of profound fluidity where important events create the need for institutional responses" (Koppa 2022). In practical terms, these are usually the reforms that considerably influence the subsequent federalisation efforts and establish the dynamic of the process.

Initially, constructivist institutionalism analyses the process of institutionalisation in the political context. Hay takes Hall's idea of institutional path dependency, stating that the process of institutionalisation assures the state of the institution itself (Hay 2008: p. 9). The process, however, is realised by the political actors that are strategic in nature and endeavour "contingent and constantly changing goals" (Hay 2008: p. 8). Dissimilar to rational theories, the actor's interests are not materially constructed. Hay accurately links the theory with the essence of social constructivism, claiming that the environment and ideas influence actors' decisions (Hay 2008: p. 12–13). The actors ideationally interpret the ideas of the policies originating from the society and afterwards, try to implement them into the institutions. As a result, the theory intentionally politicises

institutionalisation, concentrating on the interest of the actors and the environment. Hay's approach includes two main chains of relations: ideational environment and actor's interest on the one hand, and the actor's actions influence on the institutional design – on the other. The first one is the micro-process of institutional change, where the particular institutional path is created. Accordingly, institutional change "is the strategic conduct of the actors in the context" (Hay 2008: p. 9). In the micro-process of institutional change, the actors choose the policy options, based on the idea that they have. *Figure 1* presents the theoretical framework of the micro-process of federalisation based on constructivist institutional assumptions. Actors adopt federalist ideas from the *constructivist environment* of Italian politics. Afterwards, the actors tried to reify their vision of federalism into a particular policy for reforming the Italian unitary constitution. In the end, the reform shaped the political institutions following the federal reform. Thus, the micro-process is *actor-centred*, *politicised*, *ideationally constructed*, and implemented via *federal reform*.

**Figure 1: Micro-process of federalisation.**



Source: author's own elaboration

Essentially, the micro-process of federalisation exists at the moment of critical juncture, which allows the political actor to promote federal change. The macro-process of the federalisation trajectory, though, connects through the critical junctures and

concentrates on the change in the federalisation process, putting it into the broader context. As historical institutionalism is part of new institutionalism, the path dependency wanes and loses its importance in the macro-process. Macro-process of federalisation is unpredictable and politically determined, and the direction of the change is not linear or progressive, it can roll out as well. Moreover, the macro-process does not only involve the critical junctures, because between them there is the process of reform adaptation and implementation, which can also influence the trajectory of the federalisation process. Hence, the macro-process model can be formulated only after the analysis.

For the application of the theoretical framework, a qualitative process-tracing method will be used (Bennett, Checkel 2015; Checkel 2008; Collier 2011). Essentially, this method is focused on tracing the sequences of events that lead to particular developments in the present. The method will be applied from two dimensions. Firstly, the article is concentrated on tracing Italian federalist ideas through the analysis of key federal scholars since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Italian federalism is the basis for the contemporary debates in the state, so analysing federalism will pave the way for analysing the micro- and macro-processes of federalisation. The former will be analysed through the description of particular developments during the critical junctures of federal transition in Italy on the brink of *Tangentopoli*. The applied method will assist in tracing the process of reform creation, juxtaposing it to a constructivist institutionalist vision of micro-processes. The review of academic books and journals will also be used for analysis of the federalisation process in Italy in both dimensions.

## Italian federalism

There are three influential traditions in Italian federal studies. Firstly, there was the idea to create a federation with the leading role of the central authorities, developed mainly by Carlo Cattaneo. His federal vision of unification was based on the idea of liberty. In *Sulla legge comunale e provinciale*, he supported human autonomy, which would result in the emancipation of the regions, allowing their self-determination (Cattaneo 1865; Cattaneo, Bobbio 2010). For him, federalism is a down-top phenomenon (Lis 2022: p. 425). When his ideas were lost in "a battle for unification" during *Risorgimento*, he proposed the devolution of the state competencies to the Italian regions. Cattaneo's thought, albeit, devoted an extremely important role for the central authorities to control the process of federal development. This view of federalism relates to the later theory of *cooperative federalism*, which determines the partnership between national and subnational levels of governance, in pursuit of common ground and more efficient decision-making process (Weiser 2001: p. 664–673), merging in polyphony – "the true sound of federalism" (Schapiro 2005: p. 13–15).

Secondly, as a counterweight to cooperative federalism, there exists the concept of *dual federalism*. The proponents of the idea claim that the interaction between the levels should be a zero-sum game of independent players on the policy issue, leading to a clear distribution of competencies (Greve 2000). Gaetano Salvemini (1955)