

How Mario Draghi Is Making Italy a Power Player in Europe

di Jason Horowitz

The European Union was stumbling through a Covid-19 vaccine rollout marred by [shortages and logistical bungling](#) in late March when Mario Draghi took matters into his own hands. The new Italian prime minister seized a shipment of vaccines destined for Australia — and along with them, an opportunity to show that a new, aggressive and potent force had arrived in the European bloc.

The move shook up a Brussels leadership that had seemed to be asleep at the switch. Within weeks, in part from his pressing and engineering behind the scenes, the European Union had authorized even broader and harsher measures to curb exports of Covid-19 vaccines badly needed in Europe. The Australia experiment, as officials in Brussels and Italy call it, was a turning point, both for Europe and Italy.

It also demonstrated that Mr. Draghi, renowned as the former European Central Bank president who helped save the euro, was prepared to lead Europe from behind, where Italy has found itself for years, lagging its European partners in economic dynamism and much-needed reforms.

In his short time in office — he took power in February [after a political crisis](#) — Mr. Draghi has quickly leveraged his European relationships, his skill in navigating E.U. institutions and [his nearly messianic reputation](#) to make Italy a player on the continent in a way it has not been in decades.

With his friend Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany leaving office in September, President Emmanuel Macron of France facing tough elections next year and the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, struggling to demonstrate competence, Mr. Draghi is poised to fill a leadership vacuum in Europe.

Increasingly, he seems to be speaking for all of Europe.

“The difference is that everybody, when Mario Draghi speaks, knows that he is not just pushing, boosting the Italian interest” but rather the European Union’s, Italy’s minister for European affairs, Vincenzo Amendola, said in an interview.

Knowing full well that Mr. Draghi derived his influence from his international reputation, Mr. Amendola said that given the potential void of leadership in Europe, “you need stable leaders who bring confidence.”

At home, Mr. Draghi’s vaccine gambit in March provided political red meat to an Italian population starved for vaccines and a sense of agency, but it was calculated to improve Europe’s leverage as a whole.

Abroad, his first stop, to Libya, sought to restore waning Italian influence in the troubled former Italian colony that is critical to Italy’s energy needs and to efforts to stem illegal migration from

Africa. He has also not shied away from picking a fight with Turkey's autocratic leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. "With these dictators — let us call them what they are — one must be frank in expressing one's diversity of views and visions of society," Mr. Draghi said.

But it is within European Union that Mr. Draghi has shown that Italy is now punching above its weight.

Last week, Mr. Draghi, who is by turns droll and wonky but always direct, kept the pressure on Brussels when it came to vaccine exports. He referred to "lightweight" efforts in the original contract negotiations with the pharmaceutical companies, and noted that despite its new tough rules on export bans, the European Union had yet to act.

But he also deftly balanced his criticism of Ms. von der Leyen's Commission by defending her after Mr. Erdogan [denied her a chair, rather than a sofa, during a visit to Turkey last week](#), saying he was "very sorry for the humiliation."

In his debut in a European meeting as Italy's prime minister in February, Mr. Draghi, 73, made it clear that he was not there to cheerlead. He told an economic summit including heavy hitters like his European Central Bank successor, Christine Lagarde, to "curb your enthusiasm" when it came to talk about a closer fiscal union.

That sort of union is Mr. Draghi's long-term ambition. But before he can get anywhere near that, or tackle deep economic problems at home, those around him say Mr. Draghi is keenly aware that his priority needs to be solving Europe's response to the pandemic.

Italian officials say his distance from the contract negotiations, which were completed before he took office, gave him a freedom to act. He suggested that AstraZeneca had misled the bloc about its supply of vaccine, selling Europe the same doses two or three times, and he immediately zeroed in on an export ban.

"He understood straightaway that the issue was vaccinations and the problem was supplies," said Lia Quartapelle, a member of Parliament in charge of foreign affairs for Italy's Democratic Party.

On Feb. 25, he joined a European Council videoconference with Ms. von der Leyen and other European Union leaders. The heads of state warmly welcomed him. "We owe you so much," Bulgaria's prime minister told him.

Then Ms. von der Leyen gave an optimistic slide presentation about Europe's vaccine rollout. But the new member of the club bluntly told Ms. von der Leyen that he found her vaccine forecast "hardly reassuring" and that he didn't know whether the numbers promised by AstraZeneca could be trusted, according to an official present at the meeting.

He implored Brussels to get tougher and go faster.

Ms. Merkel joined him in scrutinizing Ms. von der Leyen's numbers, which put the Commission president, a former German defense minister, on the back foot. Mr. Macron, who had

championed Ms. von der Leyen's nomination but quickly formed a strategic alliance with Mr. Draghi, piled on. He urged Brussels, which had negotiated the vaccine contracts on behalf of its members, to "put pressure on corporations not complying."

At the time, Ms. von der Leyen was coming under withering criticism in Germany for her perceived weakness on the vaccine issue, even as her own commissioners argued that responding too aggressively with a vaccine export ban could hurt the bloc down the road.

Mr. Draghi, with his direct talk during the February meeting, tightened the screws. So did Mr. Macron, who has emerged as his partner — the two are dubbed "Dracon" by the Germans — pushing for a more muscular Europe.

Behind the scenes, Mr. Draghi complemented his more public hard line with a courting campaign. The Italian, who is known to privately call European leaders and pharmaceutical chief executives on their cellphones, reached out to Ms. von der Leyen.

Of all the players in Europe, he knew her the least well, according to European Commission and Italian officials, and he wanted to remedy that and make sure she did not feel isolated.

Then, in early March, as shortages of AstraZeneca's Covid vaccine continued to disrupt Europe's rollout and increase public frustration and political pressure, Mr. Draghi found the perfect gift for Ms. von der Leyen: 250,000 doses of seized AstraZeneca vaccine earmarked for Australia.

Ms. Quartapelle, who spoke with Mr. Draghi's diplomatic adviser the day after the shipment freeze, said he told her Mr. Draghi "was on the phone a lot with von der Leyen" and that "he worked a lot with von der Leyen to convince her."

The move was appreciated in Brussels, according to officials in the Commission, because it took the onus off Ms. von der Leyen and gave her political cover while simultaneously allowing her to seem tough for signing off on it.

The episode has become a clear example of how Mr. Draghi builds relationships with the potential to yield big payoffs not only for himself and Italy, but all of Europe.

On March 25, when the Commission became suspicious over 29 million AstraZeneca doses in a warehouse outside Rome, Ms. von der Leyen called Mr. Draghi for help, officials with knowledge of the calls said. He obliged, and the police were quickly dispatched.

In the meantime, Mr. Draghi and Mr. Macron, joined by Spain and others, continued to support a harder line from the Commission on vaccine exports. The Netherlands was against it, and Germany, with a vibrant pharmaceutical market, was queasy.

When the European leaders met again in a video conference on March 25, Ms. von der Leyen seemed more confident in the political and pragmatic advantages of halting exports of Covid vaccines made in the European Union. She again presented slides, this time authorizing a broader six-week curb on exports from the bloc, and Mr. Draghi stepped back into a supportive role.

“Let me thank you for all the work that has been done,” he said.

After the meeting, Mr. Draghi, however modestly, gave Italy — and by extension himself — credit for the steps allowing export bans. “This is more or less the discussion that took place,” he told reporters, “because this was the issue originally raised by us.”