



Sex, lies and wiretaps

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While the Italians are preoccupied with tapping scandals this summer, it seems Turks are also in a hysteria about talking openly on the phone nowadays

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The "Sounds of Summer" these days in Istanbul and Rome are of two governments trying to save themselves from judges or prosecutors, and of voters enjoying the juicy tidbits of the Powerfuls' conversations published in the media of Turkey and Italy. Permatanned, ever-smiling Silvio Berlusconi, 71, may have succeeded in clearing up the garbage from the streets of Naples as promised last weekend, but he still has not succeeded in sweeping away the "dirt" that is poisoning his government. He too, like Turkey's government, was elected on a comfortable majority this year. Berlusconi's efforts to get pretty actresses jobs at Italy's state broadcaster RAI have sparked a corruption case which has now been taken up by Rome prosecutor this month.

The dangerous blonde: In a phone call with the head of television fiction films at the national broadcaster (and co-accused in the case) which was widely printed in Italian media, the prime minister begs for an attractive blonde to get a role: "This one has taken it into her head that I hate her and I am blocking her career, so do me this favor because she is getting dangerous." Berlusconi's wiretaps also show him promising that RAI executive he would look after him once he retired to the private sector, thus opening the prime minister to charges of corrupting public officials. Through his political office and his media empire (three private tv networks), the prime minister holds sway over 90 percent of the country's television and thus he can help what he called his "little butterflies," a squad of young ladies he knows who have striking TV presence. Italian media have delected in printing the leaked telephone conversation (never denied by the Berlusconi defense team), while the international press have portrayed him as "acting like a sultan in his private harem" or Italy's "go-go granddad." Other examples abound: In September 2003, halfway through his second term as prime minister, Berlusconi went on all Italian TV channels to sell his plan to reform Italy's pension system. (That's because Italy is the "oldest" country in the world with more pensioners than teenagers.) Shapely Virginia Sanjust di Teulada, introduced the TV program to viewers over the state network, Rai Uno. What followed was a thank you note from the prime minister, an invitation to lunch, a diamond bracelet present and a promotion and a salary increase for her husband, a secret service officer, according to court documents. There are many more prurient conversations, some of them unpublished, but which circulate in media circles which are probably doctored fakes. But this material does have some political impact. Among the first bills to be drawn up by Berlusconi's new government after its April victory was one that would limit telephone tapping by police and impose jail sentences on editors who published the intercepted conversations. Critics say whatever the merits, the aim is to stop leaks which embarrass the prime minister. The fact is that Italy has the world record of wire taps per capita, something like 300,000 a year, authorized by judges. Periodically people clamor for a stop to this, but it continues. Even further, some secret service dissidents had set up their own network of wiretaps and a mass trial of these freelance wire tappers from Telecom Italia may bring 9,000 plaintiffs into a stadium, including representatives of an Arab financier, star football players and other public figures who were recorded unknowingly.

A lumbering justice system: Why do judges order wire taps in Italy? Prison time is sometimes all too brief, so the impact of a quick jail stay and a wait for a trial (sometimes over 10 years!), is the only way the lumbering justice system can show its muscle. So how has the political system reacted? A leader of the opposition

Massimo Donadi, defends the judges, arguing the transcripts are of legitimate public interest and ought to be published. Donadi asked provocatively: "What if Bill Clinton had made Monica Lewinski a minister in his government?" This was a reference to a former Italian beauty queen who is now, at age 32, the minister of equal opportunities in the Berlusconi government.

Italians and Turks: Help is on the way in any case. A new bill passed by the chamber of deputies and waiting for final confirmation in the Senate will now "protect" the top four posts in the Italian state: president, prime minister, president of the chamber of deputies and the president of the senate, from any prosecution during their term. With the Berlusconi government's comfortable majority, this should not be too much of a trouble and it will also protect Berlusconi from half a dozen other pending prosecutions and trials.

So, while the Italians are preoccupied with tapping scandals this summer, it seems Turks are also in a hysteria about talking openly on the phone nowadays. Maybe the Italians should think that they have a "soul brother" at the other end of the Mediterranean where the walls have just as many ears.

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