

The greatest show on Earth

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Capitalism's final frontier

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Russia under pressure SMEs revolutionary road

The strength in numbers



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The author of this article is the outstanding promoter and head of an Italian holding – a pyramid of SMEs – which is disrupting the traditional industrial strategy and the usual rules of public procurement.

It was a shining moment of creativity, and working on a plan for the Colosseum's artistic lighting was the perfect spark. Perhaps because of its rich history as an engineering and architectural marvel. Perhaps because when we are hyper focused on executing a specific schedule, our minds are in a goal oriented tunnel. Insights and life altering surprises often strike when you step back, stop over thinking, and allow room for the unexpected. Fresh ideas and models can rarely be found in the mild, self restrained cultural climate where we spend 99% of our life.

This public work of great international prestige was awarded to two SMEs from our group, who prevailed in a competition that included two major French multinational giants and one of Italy's major companies, Edison. Proof that when you combine quality and experience, you can respond to calls for tenders regardless of size and turnover. So, let's say it's the sum of the factors that ultimately yields the result. As such, the lighting of the Colosseum, so spectacular, has been a masterpiece within a masterpiece, a worldwide wonder. And that begged the very question: How to transform a glorious adventure into a valid model for the future?



In the mythology of the open market, the large devours the small. Nowhere has this seemed more inevitable than in public procurement, the vast machinery through which states build their tunnels, light their monuments and wire their cities. Here the entry ticket is the size scale: a balance sheet deep enough to absorb risk, a portfolio of completed works thick enough to satisfy a tender committee, a roster of certifications few individual firms can assemble alone. For the small and medium sized enterprises – the bulk of Italy's industrial fabric – the door usually stayed shut, while contracts flowed to national champions and foreign conglomerates who read Italy's tender notices better than many Italians.

There was an air of inevitability about the outcome. Yet, it was a fictional assumption. Easy to prove wrong. Few plant engineering institutions currently command widespread credibility. None have tried to revolutionize the way this is understood and chosen before it is delivered. It is an ambitious undertaking, and one that could radically change this industry once it succeeds. Trying to change the way that plant engineering firms grasp their competitiveness is an eminently daunting endeavor. It requires changing how we experience the reality of competition. But like it or not, that is the only game in town.

So, my flash of inspiration became the planning of a stable consortium with a deliberately plural name – “We, the plant engineers” (*Noi Impianti*) – built around a single arithmetical assumption: if no Italian SME is large enough to compete alone, then the right number



of them, properly combined, can compete against any one. Yet, be aware: the real novelty is the nature of partnership – firms harmonize within an operating system holding their references, quality and know how in very high regard. This is not a metaphor but a legal and digital architecture designed to convert fragmentation – long treated as Italy's industrial weakness – into a competitive asset. It means it's ushering in an era of platform entrepreneurship, a set of specialists.

Assembled in less than its first full cycle of activity, *Noi Impianti* is not only a network, but an ecosystem. As such it's difficult to classify by usual parameters. Through its integration is a pillar of digital connectivity. It's a plant engineering platform. It's an infrastructure contractor. It's a services provider. As of spring 2026 the consortium brought together roughly ninety member firms, drawn from every region and organized by what each one brings to a bid. At the core of the network more than half the member firms hold the qualification without which no business may execute public works of any significant value in Italy (the so called SOA attestation). Around this nucleus orbit the specialists who make a complete tender possible: various suppliers and producers of advanced components for the building systems (from cables to producers of ventilation and cable management systems, switches and switchboards, etc.); numerous engineering and design practices; and a dedicated branch for various services, including quality certifications. The mix is deliberate, because a modern public works contract demands all of it at once – design, execution, supply and compliance – and no single

SME has ever fielded the full sequence by itself.

The resulting scale is not trivial. From its beginning, member companies have collectively posted combined revenues of more than €700 million in 2024 – assembled not from one single balance sheet but from dozens, which is precisely the point. Individually, many turn over a fraction of the threshold procurement officers instinctively look for; some sit at or below the two million euro mark that defines the backbone of our reality. In a sense, they sit in the middle of transactions. Aggregated, they constitute a contractor with the financial weight, geographic spread and technical depth of a major group – without any of them surrendering their independence. Each company that is excellent in its own field creates the greater group, entirely at the top of its game.

As no precedent exists, as it's so distinctively Italian, if you want to fully comprehend why such a structure is necessary, look at the SOA system, a qualification regime that in this form operates almost nowhere else in the world. SOA (*Società Organismi di Attestazione*) are private bodies, themselves authorized and supervised by the national anti corruption authority (ANAC) whose sole function is to certify that a construction firm is fit to bid for public works. Any company wishing to compete for public works worth more than €150,000 must hold an SOA attestation. The certificate verifies a firm's economic solidity, its equipment and its qualified personnel, and it is granted only against a documented history of comparable work. It is valid for five years, with a mandatory review at the third, and it is almost always paired with ISO 9001 quality certification.

Illumination project for the Colosseum.



Newly completed tunnel in Gravina, Puglia.

Crucially, the attestation is not generic. It is broken down into categories – the *opere generali* (OG1 through OG13, covering everything from buildings to roads, bridges, power and telecommunications networks) and the *opere specializzate* (the OS categories, from electrical and mechanical systems to restoration). Then, when it comes to each work, attestations split into classes that rise from a few hundred thousand euros to the open ended top tier reserved for the largest contractors. A firm may bid only for what its categories and classes permit. This is what makes the Italian system unusual. Most European systems assess a bidder tender by tender; Italy front loads the judgment into a standing, third party attestation that functions as a national passport for public works. The intent is admirable – it screens out the unqualified and underpins a meritocratic selection – but its effect on the small firm is brutal. Each category and class must be earned, documented and paid for, and no individual SME can plausibly hold the full spread that a complex contract requires.

This is the constraint *Noi Impianti* was engineered to dissolve. Rather than ask each member to climb the wall alone – a mission impossible – the consortium lets them pool their attestations so that the network, collectively, covers from start to finish the access chain to the tender. A firm that holds a high OG category can

tribute it; another brings a specialized OS; a third adds the design capacity, a fourth the certification – and the combination satisfies the tender committee where no single member could. Because the structure is a stable consortium rather than the temporary joint venture that Italian firms have traditionally cobbled together for a single bid, the member is not a subcontractor working beneath a prime contractor. Each member is the contractor.

The mechanism that holds this together is a system – fittingly for a venture about systems. *Noi Impianti* operates through an integrated digital platform – networked, simplified and guided – in which as many as a hundred economic operators can combine for a given tender, in real time and on transparent terms. Participation is open and effectively unlimited, without the constraints that would force a firm to abandon its own business to join. Each can find its own space, adding to its original potential. As such this level integration does not erase each other's autonomy.

The timing is not incidental. In today's public procurement market, SOA attestation alone is a precondition, though not a sufficient one: taking part in tenders implies demonstrable merit based award criteria grounded in further references and in the professionalism of the firms. Italian public tenders have shifted de



cisively away from the old race to the lowest price and toward the most economically advantageous tender, where technical proposal, design and required know how weigh as much as the price. That shift fits perfectly what a federation of specialists can offer: depth, references, and a credible answer to every technical requirement. It also rewards self improvement – the more a member can demonstrate, the more the whole network gains. Then comes the asset no multinational can replicate – capillary presence across the whole national territory – employees, vehicles, warehouses and components in every region. As geography still matters, the resulting economic competition becomes a national strategy. As such, I call it model Italy.

The argument would be merely elegant, were it not for the results already achieved. In about a year of activity the consortium has already secured contracts worth more than €60 million and opened worksites worth more than €50 million, while procedures worth more than €250 million remain ongoing and awaiting their outcome. The consortium has meanwhile recorded a steady upward trend in membership, rising to 98 from the 8 founding members of mid 2024.

Yet, the strategic reading of these numbers goes beyond the building systems trade. It prompts a value chain that describes the full sequence of activities the

network undertakes to create, produce, market, deliver, and support. Every step is designed to add value. Some 95% of Italian companies turn over no more than two million euros a year. These firms are the country's industrial backbone, and also its most exposed flank – too small, to contemplate the digital and energy transitions alone, too easily relegated to subcontracting for whichever multinational wins the prime contract. A model that lets them aggregate without dissolving, compete without being acquired, and grow without losing their identity is therefore not a niche commercial arrangement but a question of economic sovereignty. Yet, a formula proven at home that could, with the backing of the wider system, be exported into the European market, where the same fragmentation and the same giants are at work. In a procurement world built for the happy few, *Noi Impianti* is a wager that the many – organized, certified and pooled – can hold their own. So far, it is paying off.

Members meeting in Rome



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NOI IMPIANTI



"Italy's small and medium-sized firms are the backbone of its economy, yet the rules of public procurement were written for giants. The consortium Noi Impianti has turned that logic on its head — pooling credentials, references and reach so that dozens of micro, small and medium-sized firms in the building-systems sector can bid, and win, against the big corporations and the multinationals. It may be a template for Europe."

Giuseppe Iacolino - Founder

**Consortium of SMEs, suppliers
and designers building, managing
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