

Italy's Election and the Rise of Hard Right Conservatism

by Andrea Dessì and Vassilis Ntousas

Should the polling prove accurate, Italy will soon be governed by its most radical right-wing government since World War II. Come 25 September, a coalition of political parties – dominated by the hard-right and anti-migrant Brothers of Italy party (*Fratelli d'Italia* – FdI) and Matteo Salvini's League (*Lega*) – appears poised to secure a clear, if not resounding, majority in parliament. This will return Italy to a right-wing government, the first since Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right coalition collapsed amidst the risk of Italian bankruptcy back in 2011.

Despite its neo-fascist roots, heading the polls with about 25 per cent of the vote is Giorgia Meloni's FdI, the frontrunner to become the country's first female premier and first far-right head of government in Italy's Republican history.¹ Salvini's League and Silvio

Berlusconi's Go Italy (*Forza Italia*) party are the other major members of the right-wing coalition, whose impact if elected will reverberate far beyond Italy. For Europe, the polls are another indication of the spread of hard-right conservatism, following the French National Front's electoral gains over the past few years and the recent victory by the Sweden Democrats this September.

Italy's populist laboratory

Italy's political landscape has been transformed since the collapse of the Berlusconi government in 2011. During this time, the country became something of a laboratory for new forms of left and right-wing populism

d'Italia", in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 31 August 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216>. Also see, Amy Kazmin and Giuliana Ricozzi, "Hard-right Giorgia Meloni's Rise from Rough Streets to Cusp of Power in Italy", in *Financial Times*, 6 September 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/530de94d-6aef-45d7-aa8e-a1211284745c>.

¹ For more on Meloni's hard-right views and neo-fascist roots see, Alessia Donà, "The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: the Case of Fratelli

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that subsequently held parallels across Europe and beyond, including the United States and Brexit UK.² Berlusconi himself can be given some credit for such developments. It was Berlusconi who introduced a new style of politics during his almost two decades at the helm of the Italian centre-right, exploiting his media empire to promote more direct forms of messaging with the public while flouting established political etiquette and introducing a more critical rhetoric towards Brussels – a tactic soon adopted by other leaders.

Berlusconi's style mixed demagoguery towards Europe with a kind of neo-populist approach to everyday politics and the public. This style was eventually outmatched by new parties, however, most notably the traditionally Eurosceptic and anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle* – M5S), presently led by former premier Giuseppe Conte. Founded in 2009, the M5S would emerge from the blogosphere to become the second most voted single party in the country's 2013 national elections. Building on its electrifying promises of change through direct, citizen democracy and anti-elitist rhetoric aimed at both the Italian establishment and the Brussels "bureaucracy", the M5S introduced Italy to modern-day populism and eventually became Italy's first political party in 2018 (33 per cent), the last time

² See for instance, Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "If Berlusconi is Like Trump, What Can America Learn from Italy?", in *The Guardian*, 21 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/5b8ez>; Rachel Donadio, "Berlusconi Was Trump Before Trump", in *The Atlantic*, 13 April 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/berlusconi-italy-trump-president/587014>.

Italians went to the polls.

While the M5S would siphon some support from the centre-left coalition led by Italy's Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico* – PD), it was Berlusconi's party that suffered the greatest electoral decline. This would provide an opening for the M5S, but also for the young and ambitious Salvini, who outdid his old coalition ally by shifting the League to the Eurosceptic and nationalist right, while championing the populist and anti-migrant cause in Italy and Europe.

By 2018, Salvini's League became the third largest party (17 per cent), joining the M5S (33 per cent) in an uneasy populist coalition until 2019. Then, in September 2019, the M5S shifted its alliance to the PD (19 per cent), forming the second Conte Cabinet, which excluded the League and other right-wing parties and remained in power until February 2021.

As Italy's President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, picked Mario Draghi to head a new national unity government in 2021, the small FdI party chose to remain in opposition. Led by the charismatic firebrand Meloni, who shared much of the League's conservative and anti-migrant sentiments as well as the Eurosceptic tendencies present within parts of the broad and variegated M5S, the FdI secured the limelight as the only party in opposition, benefitting from an accelerated normalisation process after years of being relegated to the far-right fringes of society.

Draghi's coalition collapsed in late July, abruptly abandoned by Salvini,

Berlusconi and Five Star leader Conte, parties that looked nervously at Meloni's rise. Today, the FdI is polled as Italy's first party, expected to capture about 25 per cent of the vote, an impressive growth from the 4 per cent secured back in 2018. This places the FdI well above its coalition partners on the right, with Salvini's League polled at just over 10 per cent and Berlusconi's Go Italy party standing at about 8 per cent.

Unsuccessful efforts by the PD to create a parallel centre-left coalition gave a solid advantage to the right-wing bloc. This dynamic was further reinforced by the unravelling of the PD's alliance with the M5S, and the M5S's own internal implosion, as a number of its parliamentarians have created their own centrist grouping (polled at under 2 per cent) allied with the PD-led centre-left block.

Collectively the right-wing block is polled at 47 per cent, while the smaller centre-left coalition dominated by the PD stands at 28 per cent. The M5S, meanwhile, is polled at under 14 per cent, while a new centrist coalition led by former minister Carlo Calenda stands at about 7 per cent.³

While the results appear to be a foregone conclusion, approximately 40 per cent of the Italian electorate has yet to make-up their minds as to which party to vote (or whether to vote at all),

³ For a collection of the most recent election polling from 9 September see, "Gli ultimi sondaggi prima dello stop delle rilevazioni in vista del voto", in *Ansa*, 10 September 2022, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2022/09/09/sondaggi-youtrend-fdi-al-253-pd-al-212-m5s-138-lega-129_ac21e2fd-f0ba-4609-b429-9751cfe4ad95.html.

an element that has been bounced upon by the left-wing block to make a case that an electoral surprise could still be in the making come 25 September.

Winter is coming

Whichever government is elected, the first priority will be that of contending with an array of internal problems: the cost-of living crisis, surging inflation and spiking energy prices, as well as debt sustainability, all of which are expected to worsen in the coming months. Most importantly the new government will need to oversee the continued expansion and implementation of the EU recovery plan negotiated by Draghi and thereby ensure that Italy continue receiving billions in post-COVID funds provided by Brussels.

In this context, the country's international credibility, a long-term challenge for Italy given its history of political instability, will be of uttermost importance.⁴ While no other leader comes close to Draghi's stature, campaigning by the right-wing coalition has not helped reassure partners. Confusing – if not contradicting – economic platforms and repeated promises of expensive tax cuts and pension increases have already rattled markets and European allies alike, particularly given Italy's significant debt to GDP ratio. Calls to renegotiate Italy's EU recovery plan, or expectations for more flexibility on fiscal policies from Brussels in response to the energy and inflation crisis, are

⁴ Andrea Dessì, "On the Brink: Mario Draghi and Italy's New Government Challenges", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 21|07 (February 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12818>.

adding to this unease in Brussels.

Meloni has offered controversy and reassurances in equal measure during the campaign, striking a difficult balance between efforts to reassure Italy's traditional allies (and markets) while not deviating from her hard-right, conservative rhetoric. Tainted by controversy due to her neo-fascist roots, Meloni has tried to dispel warnings that her victory would indeed revive Italy's fascist past. At the same time, she adamantly refused to eliminate the tricolour flame in the logo of her party, a carryover from the neo-fascist party formed shortly after the end of World War II.

In this regard, the FdI leader has been careful to downplay her previous anti-EU stance, while repeatedly reaffirming Italy's full alignment with NATO and the transatlantic alliance, emphatically promising continued support to Ukraine if elected. Yet, at a recent campaign rally, she also warned that "if I win, for Europe, the fun is over. [...] Don't let Brussels do what Rome can best take care of, and don't let Rome alone take care of what it cannot solve on its own".⁵ Such rhetoric is a throwback to old populist and nationalist characterisations of the Union: positive for assistance and funding but negative when it comes to political or fiscal commitments and responsibilities.

Another element to consider is that of government stability and therefore

durability. Salvini and Meloni are glued together by the pursuit of power, but diverge on key policy questions, from the best means to tackle migration to the issue of public debt. In the middle stands Berlusconi's party, which is now playing the role of institutional guarantor in the coalition, a striking shift if one recalls the legacy of his demagoguery against Brussels and his tainted reputation in Europe back 2011. Most recently, Berlusconi even warned his coalition partners that he is ready to defect should the future government adopt too much of an anti-European slant.

Yet, the greatest danger lies not in the right-wing bloc's differences but on their points of convergence. Both Meloni and Salvini have expressed their intent to promote elements of a radical right agenda, ranging from a harsher stance towards migrants to criticism of abortion and gender rights and the more general promotion of nationalist Christian-conservatism within Italy and Europe. Despite moves to normalise their image, there is a real fear that the alliance will embolden other far right forces across the continent as well.

Irrespective of this history, continuity vis-à-vis Russia's war of aggression is to be expected, albeit at a rhetorical level and perhaps behind the scenes a Meloni-led government could be less harsh on Russia in public and less trusted by its European counterparts. Indeed, while Meloni has been careful to emphasise support for Ukraine, including in terms of military support and sanctions on Russia, the policies of her two coalition partners are harder to discern. This is particularly true when it

⁵ Federica Pascale, "Italy's Far-Right Meloni Tells Europe 'Fun Is Over'", in *Euractiv*, 13 September 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1807715>.

comes to Salvini's League, which since 2019 has repeatedly been accused of receiving funding and political support from Russia.⁶ Relations between the League party leadership and the Russian Embassy in Rome for instance, or the still active political deal between the League and Putin's United Russia party, have only fuelled these concerns.⁷

The links between former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, Meloni and Salvini are also worthy of mention as they reflect a still existing galaxy of right-wing conservatism and illiberal nationalism that extends across the Atlantic as well, and is intent on a political comeback.⁸ Indeed, another element of unity across the right-wing block is their shared support for the transatlantic alliance, but here too there are significant differences compared to Draghi, given Meloni and Salvini's close ties to the Trump-dominated Republican Party.

⁶ See for instance, Alberto Nardelli, "Revealed: The Explosive Secret Recording that Shows How Russia Tried to Funnel Millions to the 'European Trump'", in *BuzzFeed News*, 10 July 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/salvini-russia-oil-deal-secret-recording>.

⁷ "Report of Salvini-Russian Ambassador Dinner Sparks Rumpus", in *Ansa*, 31 May 2022, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2022/05/31/report-of-salvini-russian-ambassador-dinner-sparks-rumpus_9696c41b-fa9d-4280-bd69-1599202d445d.html.

⁸ Jason Horowitz, "Steve Bannon's 'Movement' Enlists Italy's Most Powerful Politician", in *The New York Times*, 7 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/world/europe/italy-steve-bannon-matteo-salvini.html>; Silvia Sciorilli Borrelli, "Steve Bannon: Italian Experiment 'Will Change Global Politics'", in *Politico*, 23 September 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=967911>.

Turning to Europe, it is also worth recalling that Meloni is president of the European Conservatives and Reformists party. This grouping features the participation of avid far-right and conservative parties, such as the Swedish Democrats, the Polish governing Law and Justice party and Spain's Vox, all of which are witnessing increases in popular support. These parties have benefitted from a slow process of political normalisation amidst general trends of political apathy among the public and atrophy among established parties.

As Europe and the world looks on, Italy's political setting is again confounding global opinion. The rise of the conservative right, if polls prove accurate, will undoubtedly prove impactful for Italy's domestic setting. This will also be true in light of Meloni's somewhat clientelistic approach to politics. Her untested qualities of leader are matched by the inexperience and lack of qualified personnel to fill key posts in any future-administration, a further element that seems to point to a somewhat tumultuous start of the government, particularly when it comes to parliamentary politics.

While it is likely that the new government will not make significant deviations on key foreign policy dossiers, it can be expected to embrace a more confrontational stance and rhetoric with Brussels, while looking more favourably on the right-wing conservative axis in Europe and the US. This is why, beyond the soon-to-arise questions concerning government longevity and stability, the biggest question for Italy's likely next

government is whether and to what extent its willingness to engender policy change in Italy will simultaneously end up endangering the country's political standing and credibility in Europe as well.

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