



EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

The Italian Elections of 2022: what do they mean for the EU?

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Summary

As was widely predicted, the Italian parliamentary elections have resulted in a resounding victory for the right. The largest party within the right-wing coalition is Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), with its well-known post-fascist roots. This paper discusses the likely consequences of this development for Italy and for the EU.

The paper briefly analyses the electoral results, the most remarkable aspects of which are Fdi's rapid rise to predominance and the record combined score for the radical right parties Fdi and *Lega*. It outlines Fdi's underlying ideology, including the party's ambiguous relationship to fascism. Setting the party in its international context, it relates Fdi to a wider tendency of 'radicalizing conservatism' in developed democracies. The paper further discusses some key domestic and European-level policies that an Fdi-led government is likely to pursue. At home, a return to stricter rules governing immigration is likely, combined with conservative social policy. At the same time, domestic policy will likely be tempered by the international situation. Likewise, the ongoing economic and geopolitical crises, along with the necessity for the Italian government to adhere to the criteria for the disbursement of Next Generation EU funds mean that immediate clashes with the EU are unlikely. But Fdi is set on renegotiating those criteria, and its fundamental vision for the EU remains that of 'a Europe of nations', which if fully implemented in the current context would lead to the bloc's disintegration. In the medium term an Fdi-led Italy will seek opportunities to obstruct European integration and cooperation.

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The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author.

1. Background and electoral results

The coalition supporting Mario Draghi’s government of national unity collapsed in July following the departure of the ‘Five Star Movement’ (5SM). The ensuing early elections resulted in a clear victory of the right-wing coalition including Giorgia Meloni’s party ‘Brothers of Italy’ (*Fratelli d’Italia*, FdI), Matteo Salvini’s League (*Lega*), and Silvio Berlusconi ‘Go Italy’ (*Forza Italia*, FI). The right holds a majority of seats in both Chambers of Parliament and will form the government in the coming weeks. As the leader of the largest party in the coalition (and in the country), Meloni is highly likely to become the next Italian PM, the first woman in history to hold the position.

The historic center-right coalition of Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia*, Salvini’s *Lega* and Meloni’s FdI, complemented by a small centrist list (‘We Moderates’) obtained about 44% of the votes and is now dominated by the hard right – *Lega* and FdI. Its main rival, a center-left coalition including the *Partito Democratico* (19%), a common list between Greens and *Sinistra Italiana*

(‘Italian Left’) (3.5%), and the liberal centrists of ‘More Europe’ (2.8%) reached only 26%. The 5-Star Movement obtained over 15% and the centrist-liberal list *Azione/Italia Viva* slightly less than 8%. The elections were marked by the lowest-ever turnout in Italian postwar history, 63.9%. Full results are reported in Table 1, while Figure 1 shows a graph of the composition of the new parliament.

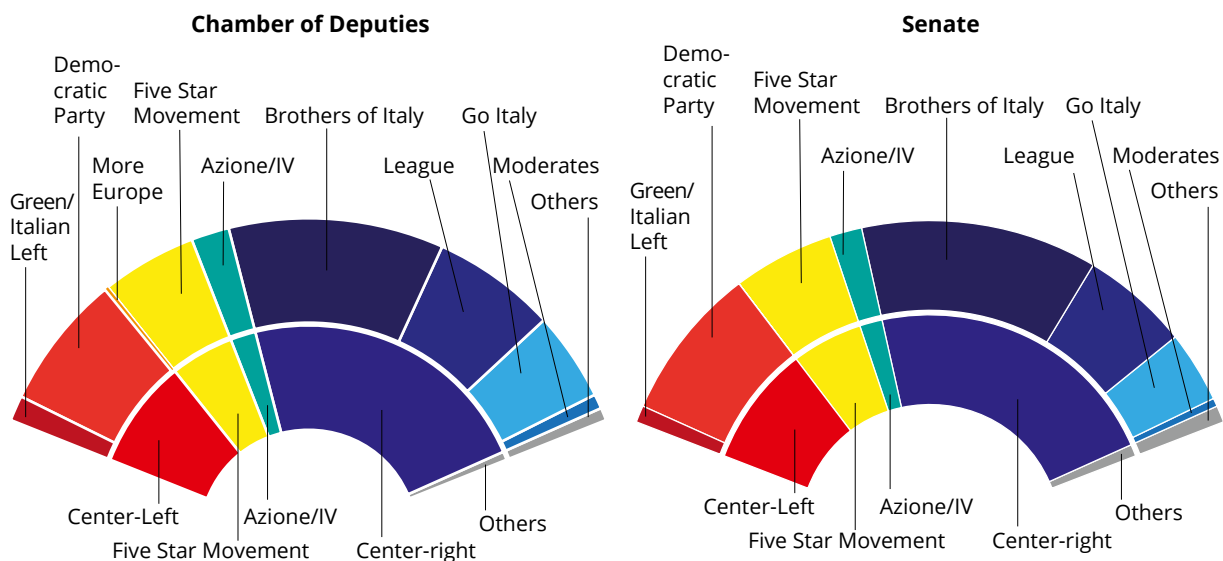
About one third of MPs are elected in single-member constituencies via first-past-the-post and two thirds via proportional representation in small districts. As the table shows, this electoral system turned the vote percentages into a clear majority for the right: 238 seats (59.2%) in the Chamber of Deputies, and 115 seats (57.5%) in the Senate. The center-left only obtained 84 and 44 seats respectively, the Five Star Movement 52 and 28, the centrists 21 and 9. Some smaller parties were penalized by the electoral thresholds in the PR part of the system, obtaining seats only in the majoritarian part of the system or being excluded altogether.

Table 1. 2022 Italian parliamentary elections. Votes and seats by party and coalition.

| Party/coalition | Chamber of Deputies | | | Senate | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| | Vote % | Seats | Seat % | Vote % | Seats | Seat % |
| Brothers of Italy | 26% | 119 | 29.8% | 26% | 66 | 33% |
| League | 8.8% | 67 | 16.3% | 8.9% | 29 | 14.5% |
| Go Italy | 8.1% | 45 | 11.3% | 8.3% | 18 | 9% |
| Moderates | 0.9% | 7 | 1.8% | 0.9% | 2 | 1% |
| Center-right | 43.8% | 238 | 59.2% | 44.1% | 115 | 57.5% |
| Democratic Party | 19.1% | 69 | 17.3% | 19% | 40 | 20% |
| Green/Italian Left | 3.6% | 12 | 3% | 3.5% | 4 | 2% |
| More Europe | 2.8% | 2 | 0.5% | 2.9% | 0 | 0 |
| Di Maio’s list | 0.6% | 0 | 0 | 0.6% | 0 | 0 |
| Center-Left | 26.1% | 83 | 20.8% | 26% | 44 | 22% |
| Five Star Movement | 15.4% | 52 | 13% | 15.6% | 28 | 14% |
| Azione/IV | 7.8% | 21 | 5.3% | 7.7% | 9 | 4.5% |
| Others | 6.9% | 6 | 1.5% | 6.6% | 4 | 2% |

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Figure 1. Seat distribution in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.



At 26%, Meloni's FdI is the clear winner of this election. In the previous parliamentary elections, in 2018, FdI received only 4.4% of the vote. Having remained in opposition throughout the last parliament – first to a 5SM/Lega government, then to a 5SM/center-left government and finally to the Draghi government – FdI experienced a dizzying rise in the polls. By contrast, her two main allies, *Lega* and *Forza Italia*, suffered a clear defeat. This was predictable in the case of *Forza Italia*, which has been in a slow but steady decline for some years. The debacle experienced by *Lega*, on the other hand, was unexpected, at least in its dimensions. At less than 9%, it received little more than half its 2018 score. *Lega's* electoral defeat looks even worse if one considers the party's remarkable rise in the polls to above 30% in 2018–2019, and its 34.3% in the 2019 European elections. This poor result could well lead to an internal challenge to Salvini's leadership in the coming weeks.

Given the electoral system's bias in favour of larger coalitions, the failure of the center-left to unite in an electoral alliance certainly contributed to this result. Over recent months, a PD/5SM coalition ran in several local elections and seemed likely to be formed at the national level too. However, Five Star's defection from the Draghi government rendered that option politically impossible. The

PD probably carries some responsibilities for failing to nurture this prospective coalition before events led to Draghi's fall. The Five Star Movement split over Draghi's environmental policy between a pro-government wing, led by Foreign Minister Di Maio, and a more radical wing led by ex-PM Giuseppe Conte. Shortly afterwards, the latter left the government coalition, leading to the fall of Draghi's government and early elections. The ensuing rift between the PD and the Five Star Movement led the former to refuse any alliance with Five Star – even a 'technical' one to support each other's candidates in marginal districts. The PD bet on Five Star fading into political irrelevance after the split – and lost.

At the same time, the PD did not manage to form a political front clearly characterized by the intention to continue Draghi's legacy of Europeanism and pro-growth policies. Throughout his tenure as PM, Draghi has had a high approval rate among Italian electors, but his most loyal supporters did not manage to capitalize on it in these elections. The PD's attempt to form a coalition with pro-Draghi centrist parties failed over personal and political disagreements. At the same time, the PD allied with a small radical left list that consistently opposed Draghi. In addition, Draghi himself declared that he would, in any case, not accept to be reappointed as Prime Minister.

Hence, the center-left entered the electoral competition divided: PD and allies, the Five Star Movement, and pro-Draghi centrist lists. Under the current electoral system, this strategy was highly likely to lead to defeat. In particular, the PD suffered losses both to its left and to its right. Against the expectations of many, the Five Star Movement obtained a surprisingly positive result, in particular in the southern Italian regions where more people had benefitted from the social policies introduced by the Conte governments. Even though the party did not repeat the strong electoral performance of five years ago (when it was the country's largest party with 32.7% of the vote), Conte consolidated the party's appeal by positioning it clearly on the left and defending its record in government. The centrist list *Azione/Italia Viva* also had a respectable showing, attracting votes from the PD rather than from the right.¹ The PD, in contrast, had a disappointing result, following which Party Secretary Enrico Letta announced a party convention that will replace him as leader.

2. Fratelli d'Italia's 'neo-fascism'

The most remarkable – and novel – aspect of these elections is the score of radical right parties. Together, FdI and *Lega* obtained more than 35% of the vote, a result with few (if any) precedents for the radical right in parliamentary elections in Western Europe. And what has attracted most attention is the prominent position of FdI, a party which has its historical roots in post-war neo-fascism.

Conscious of the scrutiny elicited by her party's rise in the polls, Meloni has adopted cautious tones in recent years. During the electoral campaign, Meloni endeavored to enhance her credibility with international allies and the financial markets by giving public declarations of loyalty to Italy's traditional alignments and signaling fiscal moderation. She recruited as candidates several conservative politicians and civil society representatives with a different political background to hers. This strategy seems to have paid off for now: the markets have not panicked. The yield of the Italian 10-year treasury bond – a key indicator

of the cost, to the Italian government, of borrowing money on the financial markets – rose by about half a percentage point between Friday and Tuesday, from 4.2% to 4.75%; a rather moderate increase.

But what is the real nature of FdI? The historical roots of FdI in the neo-fascist movement of the past decades are real. Meloni herself spent many years as an activist in the youth association of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), the neo-fascist party founded in 1946 by veterans of the interwar Fascist regime. The MSI changed skin in 1994, when it morphed into 'National Alliance' (AN), moderated its stance in various respects (even accepting anti-fascism as a 'necessary historical step for the restoration of democracy in Italy after the Fascist regime') and was a core participant in the Berlusconi-led center-right alliance. In 2008, Berlusconi's FI and AN merged in a single conservative party called 'People of Freedom' (*Popolo della Libertà*). FdI was created in 2012 by ex-National Alliance politicians, led by Meloni herself, who believed that their political identity was being diluted in Berlusconi's new vehicle.

'Meloni insists that FdI "handed fascism over to history" – a formulation that many consider too ambiguous to show clear distancing.'

This political trajectory partially explains Meloni's and FdI's ambiguous attitude towards fascism. Recently, when asked whether she could consider herself *anti*-fascist, Meloni simply answered 'no'. FdI has kept in its logo the three-color flame, symbol of the old MSI. Despite calls to remove it in order to demonstrate an unambiguous break with the neo-fascist tradition, Meloni refused to do so, stating that her party is 'proud of its symbol'. Meloni insists that FdI 'handed fascism over to history' – a formulation that many consider too ambiguous to show clear distancing. At the local level, journalists have documented that some FdI local cadres and members express neo-fascist

¹ See SWG, *Radar. Speciale elezioni 2022* https://www.swg.it/pa/attachment/6331dfecce935/Radar_speciale%20Elezioni%202022,%2026%20settembre%202022.pdf

views while others have ambiguous relations with neo-fascist groups.² Whenever an example of such behaviour gains media visibility, Meloni is quick to issue a public rebuke. Recently, she reacted to the display of neo-fascist symbols in a public party meeting in a town near Rome with an embarrassed public condemnation, dubbing those involved ‘pantomime nostalgics’ and ‘traitors to the party’.

‘These ambiguities are by no means unique to Italy. Very similar dynamics have emerged in other Western European democracies.’

These ambiguities are by no means unique to Italy. Very similar dynamics have emerged in other Western European democracies. With a new FdI-led government, they are likely to continue, and perhaps become more frequent. It is unclear whether they will encourage violent extreme right groups, but Meloni is likely to crack down on any such developments because they would weaken her politically. The most likely effect of the new government in this respect is not violence but normalization. The mainstreaming of radical right (not necessarily neo-fascist) ideas, slogans, and language is a process that is advanced in many Western democracies on both sides on the Atlantic, and that goes hand in hand with the rise of radical right parties and the radicalization of some mainstream ones. Italy is no exception, and FdI’s electoral victory is likely to have the same effect.

3. ‘Radicalizing conservatism’: more Orbán than Mussolini

Keeping all this in mind, the core ideology of Meloni’s party likely lies elsewhere than in nostalgia for interwar fascism. Indeed, at least since the Brexit-Trump 2016 watershed, Meloni has been riding the wave of what can be called ‘radicalizing conservatism’— a phenomenon that is observable elsewhere in the EU, in other democracies in the West and beyond. While national specificities exist, this political current can be broadly defined by

its devaluation of liberal constitutionalism and in particular checks on executive power; by its social conservatism and nativism, which leads proponents to oppose immigration; and by its opposition to European integration.

Donald Trump’s election to the US Presidency and the developments following the Brexit referendum have led to the more extreme, nationalist wings of the US Republicans and the British Conservatives taking control of those parties. Most Republican politicians have refused to condemn the insurrection of January 6, 2021 or distance themselves from Trump, even though the Congressional Committee tasked with investigating the events has unearthed evidence of the former President’s direct involvement in it. Trump, with his continuous attempts to aggrandize the power of the executive and reduce its accountability, has replaced Russian President Vladimir Putin as a more presentable political model for many radical right European parties. And though the phenomenon is less intense than in the US, signs of executive aggrandizement and impatience with checks and balances have emerged in the UK too, mainly as a consequence of the Brexit process and the ensuing political polarization. A project to curb the powers of the UK Supreme Court is in the pipeline after the latter annulled two important governmental decisions aimed at excluding Parliament from important deliberations on Brexit. New legislation has brought the Electoral Commission, once independent, under executive control. The independent Committee on Standards of the House of Commons has also been threatened with partisan reform.

In Hungary and Poland, Viktor Orbán’s and Mateusz Morawiecki’s governments have pursued a systematic dismantling of liberal democracy, reducing judicial independence and engaging, in a fight with the EU on the role of supranational law in domestic court rulings. In the case of Hungary, the process of ‘democratic backsliding’ is so advanced that independent organizations which assess the state of democracy around the world as well as, most recently, the European Parliament, have defined the country as an

² See, for example, Paolo Berizzi, *È gradita la camicia nera* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2021).

‘electoral autocracy’.³ In April, Viktor Orbán’s party *Fidesz* won its fourth election in a row since 2010. The OSCE reported that there was a ‘pervasive overlapping of government and ruling coalition’s messaging’; that ‘lack of transparency and insufficient oversight of campaign finances further benefited the governing coalition’; and noted the ‘bias and lack of balance in monitored news’.⁴

All these parties, with the partial exception of the UK Conservatives, support traditional social policies. In the US, a Supreme Court including six Republican-appointed justices (of whom three were appointed by Trump) out of nine overturned the long-standing *Roe v. Wade* precedent, clearing the way to the illegalization of abortion. The Hungarian 2012 constitution, introduced by *Fidesz*’s supermajority, states that human life is constitutionally protected from the moment of conception. In Poland, recent legislation has restricted the legality of abortion only to cases of rape or when the health or the life of the mother is in danger.

All these parties are against immigration, or at least accept only immigration that responds to specific cultural criteria. In the US, the Trump presidency introduced extremely strict immigration policies, especially to block immigration from Mexico and Central America. In the UK, a negative preference for free movement and the rights it conferred to EU citizens, rather than the positive preference for a specific type of immigrants, seems to have driven much support for Brexit. ‘Uncontrolled immigration’ from the EU was construed by some of the architects of Brexit as the cause of a ‘population crisis’ that was submerging British public services to the detriment of autochthonous Britons, and this drove much of the support for Brexit.⁵ Theresa May’s and Boris Johnson’s Conservative governments were receptive to these views. Orbán has made clear his government’s

preference for a ‘culturally compatible’ immigration—i.e. from European and Christian countries—over immigration that is ‘incompatible’ with Hungarian national culture. Like Orbán, the Polish government rejected asylum seekers coming from the south and the east of the Mediterranean during the 2015 migrant crisis but has welcomed many more Ukrainian refugees fleeing from Russian invasion.

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These, and not historical autocracies, are the models that inspire Meloni’s politics, and that she openly endorses. FDI is not alone in this respect. Radical right parties across Europe make increasing reference to Trump and Orbán. Their illiberal reforms and the distortions of democratic competition they support do not seem to concern radical right leaders such as Marine Le Pen or, indeed, Meloni. Like Le Pen, Meloni has repeatedly met with Orbán in recent years to discuss common strategies, and she enthusiastically applauded his latest electoral victory. Both Le Pen and Meloni consider Hungary a democracy and see Orbán’s electoral victories as entirely legitimate. Meloni reiterated that same position during the debate on the European Parliament resolution on Hungary mentioned above, to justify her MEPs – just like those from Salvini’s *Lega* – voting against. To defend her position, Meloni argues that equally legitimate ‘different models of democracy’ exist in the West and the East of Europe. Repeating a commonplace of Eastern European illiberal parties’ propaganda, Meloni maintains that the

³ See the press release on the 15 September 2022 resolution of the European Parliament at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>.

⁴ Hungary, Parliamentary Elections and Referendum, 3 April 2022: Election Observation Mission Final Report’, 29 July 2022, available at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/523568>

⁵ One survey fielded in the wake of the Brexit referendum showed that 23% of Leave voters did not support letting EU citizens already resident in the UK stay. See British Future, *Report of the Inquiry into securing the status of EEA+ nationals in the UK*, December 2016, page 10, at https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/EUNationalsReport.Final_12.12.16.pdf

difference in question should be imputed to the fact that ‘the West left those countries under the Soviet yoke’, and that ‘we should now give them a hand’—presumably by accepting their increasing autocratization.

‘As recently as 2019 Meloni openly supported the ‘great replacement’ theory of ethnic substitution [...]’

In February, Meloni spoke at the CPAC conference of the US conservative movement, where Orbán speaks regularly, and where figures such as Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis receive adoring support. After reiterating her support to Ukraine, Meloni touched on the ‘culture wars’ that, with national specificities, characterize all Western democracies. According to her, the strategy of the ‘global left’, hegemonic in ‘mainstream media’ and cosmopolitan elite circles, is to ‘destroy national identities’ based on Christianity, the traditional family, and traditions such as Christmas. The final goal is to equalize everybody in an undifferentiated mass in which national and cultural differences are erased. Mass immigration is part of the strategy, according to this account, since it contributes to the building of a post-national world. As recently as 2019 Meloni openly supported the ‘great replacement’ theory of ethnic substitution, that is, the idea that the replacement of native Europeans by immigrants is orchestrated by ‘international speculative financiers’ such as George Soros.⁶ Various versions of this theory have been adopted in the universe of the radical right across different Western democracies, from French presidential candidate Eric Zemmour to Fox TV anchor Tucker Carlson in the US and the followers of QAnon, a conspiracy theory which originated in the US but has since spread around the world. Orbán, too,

has supported the idea of the ‘great replacement’. In September 2021 he organized an international summit in Budapest ‘on demography’ that saw the participation of ex-US Vice President Mike Pence, former Australian PM Tony Abbott, and French radical right figures such as Eric Zemmour and Marion Maréchal. The participants discussed abortion, immigration and LGBT rights in the context of fighting ‘Europe’s demographic decline’.⁷

4. Implications for rights, immigration, and autocratization

The ongoing economic and geopolitical crisis will likely induce a Meloni-led government to avoid sharp policy turns in the short term. However, Meloni’s positioning of FdI in the rising current of radicalizing conservatism is likely to have policy consequences in terms of rights and immigration. An openly illiberal turn along similar lines to Orbán seems however less likely, at least in the immediate future.

The Meloni government is unlikely to keep most of its promises in terms of economic and social redistribution. It will probably manage to tighten considerably the criteria for receiving the ‘citizenship universal income’ introduced by the Five Star Movement in 2018, but most of its economic and social policies, in particular their proposed tax and pension reforms, would probably entail excessive costs for the current state of Italian finances.⁸ However, the new government will certainly enact restrictive policies on immigration and shelve the liberal proposals that have been discussed recently on citizenship and the civil rights of minorities. On immigration, a return to the draconian policies of 2018–19 (when Salvini was Interior Minister) – for example preventing the disembarkment of immigrants coming from the southern coast of the Mediterranean – seems

⁶ Francesca Bernasconi, ‘Meloni: Soros complice di piano per destrutturare la società’ [‘Meloni: Soros is an accomplice of a plan to destructure Italian society’], *Il Giornale*, 19 June 2019, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/meloni-soros-complice-piano-destrutturare-societ-1713380.html>

⁷ Jen-Baptiste Chastand, ‘A Budapest, Viktor Orban organize un sommet international du “grand remplacement”’, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/09/23/a-budapest-viktor-orban-organise-un-sommet-international-du-grand-remplacement_6095789_3210.html

⁸ The published program of FdI, like that of most other Italian parties, is vague on the costs that their proposed reforms would entail. One estimate puts the total cost (over several years) at €160–210 billion. See C. De Blasi, ‘Il Programma di Fratelli d’Italia’, at <https://www.liberioltreillusioni.it/libera-mente/post/il-programma-di-fratelli-ditalia>

certain. Meloni also proposes the creation of EU-managed triage centers for immigrants and refugees in North African countries, and the easier repatriation of illegal immigrants and foreign criminals. Meloni's government will block proposals to regularize immigrants who find employment – an initiative supported by the left and centrists alike – and impose restrictive conditions for naturalization, including for children of immigrants born in Italy. Even though no such proposal is present in her party's program published before the elections, in the past Meloni repeatedly proposed to welcome immigrants from Venezuela as these are 'Christian', and in many cases 'of Italian origin'.⁹

On other social issues, stasis is more likely than restrictive reform. Meloni has declared that she would not abolish the right to abortion, but would reinforce the rule on the provision of 'alternative options' to women who want to interrupt their pregnancy.¹⁰ The right-wing coalition opposes same-sex marriage but has no explicit plans to review the existing law on civil unions, which protects basic rights of same-sex couples. At the same time, policies to support families will likely be restricted to traditional families only.

Regarding potential autocratization, the right did not obtain the necessary supermajority (66% of seats) to change the Constitution unilaterally. Any formal constitutional amendment will therefore require either the agreement of the opposition or will be subject to a confirmatory referendum. Before the elections, Meloni declared her intention to introduce a semi-presidential system, and FdI has formally proposed a bill of constitutional reform to that effect. This is not *per se* illiberal. And it is not new: the same reform was endorsed by the center-left in 1997.

Meloni and her party have proposed to discuss constitutional changes with the opposition in an

ad hoc parliamentary committee. However, given its current crisis, the PD is unlikely to agree. Any attempt to act unilaterally on the part of the government would certainly rally all the opposition parties against it. 5SM leader and ex-PM Giuseppe Conte, for example, has made perfectly clear that any attempt to erode constitutional checks and balances following the Hungarian example will meet with uncompromising and vocal opposition. The PD, which will soon elect a new leader, will most likely take the same position. Given the gravity of the economic and geopolitical situation, the new government is unlikely to open this domestic front of conflict—at least in the short term.

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5. Euroscepticism and international alignment

Meloni's support for Ukraine and NATO against Russia seems sincere, and might even create tensions with Salvini and Berlusconi, who have explicitly supported Putin in the past and oppose sanctions. The 'full support to European integration' that the right coalition declares in its joint program, however, should not be taken at face value.¹¹

Indeed, over the last few years, the fault lines on Euroscepticism have shifted. After the Brexit referendum, several European radical-right parties, including France's *Rassemblement National*, flirted with, and in some cases openly advocated, exit for their country. Marine Le Pen's defeat in the 2017 French presidential elections, however, quickly

⁹ 'Elezioni, quando Meloni diceva: "Ci servono immigrati? Prendiamoli in Venezuela, sono cristiani e di origine italiana"', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 25 August 2022, at <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/08/25/elezioni-quando-meloni-diceva-ci-servono-immigrati-prendiamoli-in-venezuela-sono-cristiani-e-di-origine-italiana-il-video-del-2018/6774168/>

¹⁰ It is worth noting that in Italy more than 70% of doctors refuse to practice abortions for reasons of conscience (with peaks beyond 90% in some regions). See ANSA, 'In Italia 7 ginecologi su 10 sono obiettori', 1 August 2022, at https://www.ansa.it/canale_saluteebenessere/notizie/sanita/2017/02/22/aborto-in-italia-7-ginecologi-su-10-sono-obiettori_8e057fe0-efcf-4305-8c87-26a6bf6a946c.html

¹¹ See full text at <https://www.open.online/2022/08/11/elezioni-politiche-2022-programma-per-italia-centrodestra/>.

showed that those who support exiting the EU aren't necessarily backing a winning horse. This would be the case especially for Eurozone countries that, like Italy, are currently grappling with high public debt/GDP ratios (150.8% in December 2021, according to the National Statistics Institute).

Consequently, radical right parties in most member states no longer seek to break up (or break from) the bloc but rather to hollow it out, turning it into a much looser community of nations. A 'Europe of nations' is an old theme for some currents of the European right, but in today's conditions, its implementation would entail significant *disintegration* of the bloc. Marine Le Pen's preferred EU reform, for example, would strip the Commission of all powers, turning it into a 'secretariat of the Council'.¹² But an EU where nation-states decide everything is an EU which will decide virtually nothing of consequence. The Italian right's claim to support a 'more political and less bureaucratic EU' can be interpreted in the same vein.

The EU's current international political conjuncture has two essential characteristics. One is that the bloc's level of political and monetary integration would render its break-up very costly. At the same time, the EU's influence and cohesion as an independent political actor is increasingly threatened by external and internal enemies. In this context, a generic commitment to a 'reformed EU' means little. Under current conditions, 'fully supporting' European integration would mean – at a minimum – supporting the abolition of individual member states' veto power; encouraging robust responses to the Hungarian and Polish government's challenges to the rule of law and the EU legal system; holding firm on the Northern Ireland Protocol, increasingly jeopardized by the British executive; advocating integration in sectors such as health policy; and pushing for full implementation of the Digital Markets Act.

On most of these issues, the record of *Brothers of Italy* (as well as *Lega*) is literally the antithesis of being 'pro-integration'. In fact, *Brothers of Italy's*

views are much like those of other Eurosceptic radical-right parties. Meloni is the President of the supranational European Conservative and Reformist Party, which includes the Polish Law and Justice Party, which has long challenged the EU legal system, as well as openly Eurosceptic radical right parties such as Vox, in Spain, and the Sweden Democrats.

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In 2018 Meloni proposed a constitutional reform to eliminate the supremacy of EU law. In these past weeks of electoral campaigning she repeatedly asserted 'Italy's right to defend her national interest' including by securing a 'different balance' between EU and national law. But such 'differentiation' is impossible in rule of law matters without threatening the EU's very foundations. Establishing the *general* principle that national law can take precedence over EU law in matters of EU competence constitutes an existential threat to the EU legal system and by extension to the EU itself.¹³ Member states would be free to pick and choose which parts of EU law to apply, which would disrupt the functioning of the single market and create legal uncertainty. This issue is central in the dispute with the UK government on the Court of Justice of the EU's role in Northern Ireland, and it is an important dimension of the conflict on the rule of law between the Commission and the Hungarian and Polish governments.

Meloni's government is unlikely to provoke a clash with the European Commission immediately. At

¹² See, for example, <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/election-presidentielle-2022/news/marine-le-pen-veut-faire-de-leurope-une-association-des-nations-libres/>.

¹³ See, for example, R. D. Kelemen, 'Is differentiation possible in rule of law?', *Comparative European Politics* 17 (2019), 246–260.

stake is the disbursement of the remaining tranches of the €191.5bn of Next Generation EU (NGEU) funding, of which only about €45bn has been paid so far. The right's coalition manifesto states that the new government will renegotiate the criteria for disbursing the fund, which is earmarked for specific investments and reforms of the Italian state and economy. The European Commission, while open to justified marginal tweaking of the agreed criteria, will not agree to a wide-ranging renegotiation. Even if the new Italian government in the end renounces a broad renegotiation of the NGEU funding package, it can be expected to take every possible opportunity to side with those forces, internal and external to the EU, that want to hollow out the bloc.

6. Conclusion

The likely Eurosceptic turn of the Italian government comes at a moment in which key forces supporting continental integration are weaker than in the recent past. The EU showed considerable cohesion in its reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic and to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Since then, however, French President Emmanuel Macron – a key promoter of integration – has been weakened by the failure of his coalition to obtain a parliamentary majority. Germany,

threatened by dependency on Russian gas probably more than any other EU country, has just entered recession. Despite polls showing that about 70% of voters favour support to Ukraine even if this means reduced energy consumption, and despite Chancellor Scholz's declarations in favour of deeper continental integration, these conditions may induce the government to return to a narrower view of the national interest. Replacing Draghi's pro-EU administration with Meloni's Eurosceptic one will increase the likelihood of a period of stagnation, in which progress on EU integration on fiscal and other matters will be slowed or halted, and old divisions will return.

The next few years will likely be decisive: a peace settlement in Ukraine and a diminished Russian threat would probably usher in a period of growth, and a victory of the Democrats in the 2024 US Presidential elections would bolster pro-integrationist forces in the EU. Conversely, a protracted or escalating Ukrainian conflict would perpetuate difficult economic conditions and drive further polarization in European electorates, while a Trump (or DeSantis) victory would further embolden internal and external enemies of European integration, which will now include the Italian government.