

Berlusconi's antics complicate start for Italy's new leader Meloni

A former prime minister who is used to hogging the limelight could be a challenging coalition partner

Amy Kazmin in Rome 3 HOURS AGO

Silvio Berlusconi was trying to project an image as the elder statesman of Italian politics, ready to guide the rightwing firebrand Giorgia Meloni in forming a new administration, as he eyed a political comeback after sex scandals and financial misconduct charges.

The billionaire tycoon, 86, told a television interviewer before last month's general election that Europe was looking to him and his Forza Italia party to ensure a "liberal, pro-European, Atlanticist government" in Rome, amid fears of an Italian pivot towards Russia.

Yet as Meloni worked to form her government, the former prime minister, who was effectively forced to resign at the height of Italy's 2011 debt crisis, seemed less like a stabilising influence and more an embarrassing uncle out of step with the times.

The three-party coalition, which also includes Matteo Salvini's League, was thrown into turmoil this week when audio recordings leaked of Berlusconi telling party lawmakers of his renewed friendship with Russia's Vladimir Putin. He also defended Putin's invasion of Ukraine and blamed President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for the conflict.

Meloni's opponents pounced, questioning how she could honour her pledge to maintain Italy's support for Ukraine with an ally in thrall of Putin. Others said that Forza Italia, whose second-in-command Antonio Tajani has now been named foreign minister, should be barred from sensitive cabinet posts given their leader's pro-Russian views.

The leak of the recordings came just days after Berlusconi was spotted holding a handwritten note that described Meloni, who leads the Brothers of Italy party, as "domineering, arrogant and offensive".

The two managed to set aside their differences to present a united front to President

Sergio Mattarella, enabling Meloni to be sworn in as Italy's prime minister on Saturday. But the evident tensions highlight the trouble Meloni could have with her attention-seeking coalition partner.



Giorgia Meloni during her election campaign © Alessia Pierdomenico/Bloomberg

Indeed Berlusconi's affection for Putin is neither new nor a secret in Italy. He forged close ties with the Russian leader during his tenure as Italy's longest-serving prime minister. The bond outlasted Berlusconi's removal from the Chigi Palace and the pair kept meeting regularly.

"I literally don't understand how people can be surprised," Pietro Castelli, professor at the Universite Libre de Bruxelles, said of Berlusconi's leaked words. "He's been one of the best friends of Vladimir Putin forever . . . He was one of the main actors of the legitimation of Putin in Europe."

Yet analysts are still puzzling over why Berlusconi, a wily political veteran, would make such comments in front of scores of people, just as the rightwing coalition he began building almost 30 years ago was set to take power for the first time since his resignation.

Giovanni Capoccia, a politics professor at Oxford university, said the drama appeared to be part of an ongoing power struggle between Meloni — whose party won 26 per cent of the vote, making her the undisputed coalition leader — and Berlusconi, aggrieved at being eclipsed and his inability to secure key posts for his loyalists.

“He’s never been the junior coalition partner, he’s always been the leader,” Capoccia said. “Now he has to negotiate from a position of weakness and beg for ministerial positions.”

Berlusconi wanted formal affirmation of his importance with a designation as chief adviser, as well as a loyal ally in the justice ministry. At least one criminal case against the Forza Italia leader, who was convicted of tax fraud in 2012, is still winding its way through Italy’s labyrinthine legal system.



Berlusconi’s affection for Putin is neither new nor a secret in Italy © Giuseppe Cacace/AFP/Getty Images

“Clearly there’s a fight, and it will go on until one of them wins,” Capoccia said. With Berlusconi’s pro-Putin speech, “the message is, ‘if you don’t give me what I want, I’ll make it very hard for you’.”

Berlusconi, who was notorious for holding bawdy “bunga bunga” sex parties while in

power, was also likely chafing at his subordination to Meloni, according to Castelli. “Losing the upper hand to a woman is probably also part of his frustration,” he said.

Meloni was a teenaged activist in Rome in 1994, the year Berlusconi used his vast Mediaset empire as a catapult to take power, after Italy’s post second world war political establishment had been effectively destroyed by a corruption scandal.

Fourteen years later, Meloni, whose fiery speeches and work ethic propelled her up the ranks of the National Alliance, part of Berlusconi’s centre-right coalition, became youth minister in his government.

Since losing power, Berlusconi has wrestled with serious health problems, including major heart surgery in 2016 and a battle with coronavirus. There is regular speculation about the future of his personality-centric party, given the lack of an obvious political heir.

Marianna Griffini, a politics lecturer at King’s College London, said Berlusconi had never reconciled himself to falling off the political stage.

“Berlusconi finds it very hard to retire [to] the elderly man life. He’s always enjoyed the limelight, first as an entrepreneur, then as a politician,” she said. The collapse of Mario Draghi’s government in the summer and the snap elections that followed presented “the opportunity to re-enter Italian politics with a vengeance and to make a glorious comeback”.

However, Giovanni Orsina, author of a book on Berlusconi, said it was still “difficult to understand if there is a political strategy” behind the public leak of his pro-Russian remarks or “other explanations that must be taken into account, like age”.

The recordings were “creating a lot of headaches for Meloni but they’re also creating a lot of headaches for Berlusconi, his party and his partners,” he said. “It’s a lose-lose situation.”

