

European issues
n°666
25th April 2023

Giorgia Meloni's first six months in office

Anna BONALUME

How is Italy faring under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, the first woman president of the Council? As of 22 April 2023, six months have passed since the formation of the new government led by the so-called "right-of-centre" coalition composed of Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Matteo Salvini's Lega and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. It is interesting to observe the "experiment" with this far right (as described by the [Financial Times](#)) which, for the first time since the Second World War, finds itself at the head of a founding country of the European Union and also amidst a new war.

The election of Giorgia Meloni on 25 September 2022 confirmed the rapid reshaping of the Italian political landscape. With the erosion of the consensus held by the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and the decline of Forza Italia, a space opened up for the ascendancy of a conservative right-wing party led by the former Minister for Youth in the Berlusconi government, Giorgia Meloni. Elected with a pro-NATO stance and claiming to be pro-European, after years of pointing the finger at Brussels' technocracy and asserting her closeness to the political and social model represented by Viktor Orban's Hungary, Giorgia Meloni is now trying to make her mark in Europe.

The first 100 days of her government were positively welcomed by the foreign press ([The Economist](#), [Times](#)). The Italian Council President's consistency with her Atlanticist commitment and dialogue with the European Union was noticed as early as 3 November, when she made her first trip outside Italy to Brussels, where she met with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. On 12 December 2022, the Italian Senate voted in favour of continuing military support to Ukraine in 2023.

On the domestic front, however, six months after the government's inception, consensus with the executive is beginning to deteriorate, falling from 50% in October to 39% in March, according to a [SWG poll](#) for the Italian TV channel La7.

On several fronts however great uncertainty remains. They concern the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), European alliances and, above all, on the domestic front, the

management of immigration, a subject that has re-entered the scene in the run-up to the 2024 European elections.

I. THE ECONOMIC FRONT

a – The Recovery Plan

With an overwhelming level of debt, which stood at €2,772 billion at the end of February, 144.4% of GDP by the end of 2022, and a dependence on financial markets, Giorgia Meloni has had to make a forced European conversion. Italy needs Brussels and its funds to cope with rising energy prices (gas) and to implement the [National Recovery and Resilience Plan](#), a programme whereby the government must manage the European funds of the NextGenerationEU plan, i.e. the economic recovery and revitalisation tool set up by the European Union to compensate for the losses caused by the Covid-19 pandemic[1].

Drafted by the Draghi government and approved by the European Commission in June/July 2021, [the Italian NRRP](#) is structured around six objectives and hundreds of interventions in almost all sectors of public life. To secure the €191.5 billion in funding, of which €68 billion has already been received, Italy must meet several quarterly deadlines, over several years, from 2021 to 2026. Despite the urgency of this programme, the Meloni government has experienced setbacks that have jeopardised its completion.

In its March 2023 report the [Italian Court of Auditors](#) points out that "more than half of the

[1] Italy is the programme's main beneficiary.

measures affected by the funding are running late or are still at an early project stage." The insecure status of civil servants, sluggish bureaucracy, the lack of infrastructure and adequate technical staff all contribute to slowing down the implementation of the plan. "The way in which staff dedicated to the NRRP have been recruited with unstable contracts have made it quite difficult for administrations to guarantee the operational continuity of structures that, on the contrary, would need a certain framework of resources for the entire duration of the Plan", reads the Court's report.

The Minister for European Affairs, Raffaele Fitto, responsible for coordinating the programme, [admitted this](#): "As far as the NRRP is concerned, we need to be clear: certain interventions between now and 30 June 2026 cannot be implemented"

Giorgia Meloni has suggested that the Draghi government may be responsible for the current delay in the NRRP deadlines, a situation that casts a shadow on the current executive[2]. This comes despite the flexibility granted by the European Commission, which at the end of March granted a third additional month for the verification of the fifty-five objectives included in the NRRP in the second half of 2022, thus postponing the third aid tranche of 19 billion. By the end of April, the government will have to modify some of the NRRP projects, ranging from justice to competition, that are of concern to the Commission in a bid to catch up with the systemic reforms.

However, the postponements requested by the Italian government are not viable in Italy's current economic configuration, with a growth and debt crisis coupled with high inflation. To date Italy has only spent 6 % of the funds received: of the €191.5 billion NRRP, only 23 billion had been [spent](#) by the end of 2022.

b- Appointments in strategic public companies

Giorgia Meloni's government has been busy making 'political' appointments to five public companies with a particularly strategic geopolitical and economic role. The boards of ENEL, ENI, Leonardo, Poste Italiane and Terna expired at the end of 2022 and the government made its new [appointments on 12 April 2023](#).

ENI's Managing Director Claudio Descalzi was reappointed for the fourth time. First taking his post in 2014 Matteo Renzi's recommendation, Claudio Descalzi has gained Giorgia Meloni's trust in recent months, accompanying her on several trips to Africa to conclude international agreements aimed at diversifying gas supply sources. Under her leadership, ENI has participated in the Magnetic Confinement Fusion project and has moved decisively towards biofuels and renewable energies, committing to decarbonise all of the company's products and processes by 2050. He will be joined by the General of the Italian Tax Police, Giuseppe Zafarana, who has been appointed CEO. The new chair of ENEL, the electricity giant and Italy's leading company, thanks to its turnover[3], is Paolo Scaroni. He is also the president of the AC Milan football team and was CEO of ENI from 2005 to 2014. According to press sources, the appointment of Paolo Scaroni, who has a longstanding relationship with Silvio Berlusconi, was initiated by Forza Italia. Flavio Cattaneo, former vice-president of Italo, a private railway company headed by Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, was chosen as ENEL's chief executive. In the past he has held other positions, for example at Rai and Telecom Italia, and according to press sources he was supported by the Lega.

At the head of Leonardo, the world's twelfth largest defence company specialising in helicopters, aircraft, aerostructures, electronics and cybersecurity, Stefano Pontecorvo has been appointed as chairman and Roberto Cingolani as managing director. Stefano Pontecorvo is a diplomat and was diplomatic advisor to the Minister of Defence between 2013 and 2015. Roberto Cingolani, the former Minister for Ecological Transition in the Draghi government, was also an energy advisor to the Meloni government.

II. THE ENERGY FRONT

a - Gas

Before the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, Italy was the EU's second largest importer of natural gas, on which it was 95% dependent: about 40% came from Russia and 23% from Algeria. The share of gas

[2] https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2023/04/03/meloninon-mi-preoccupano-ritardi-su-pnrr-si-fa-allarmismo_6c09d201-f34f-4c08-becf-908a68bee4f5.html

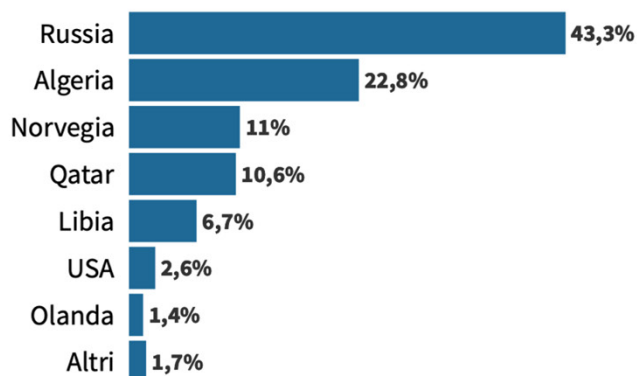
[3] 84.1 billion euro in 2021
<https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/industria-aziende-energetiche-guidano-classifica-fatturato-AEca9JfC>

in the energy mix (42%) was significantly higher than the EU average (24.4%). In 2020, Italy imported 66 billion m3 of gas, tailing Germany[4]. Like the rest of

Europe, Italy has witnessed a significant decrease in Russian gas imports: down 46% since the beginning of the invasion, and down 66% during August 2022[5].

L'origine delle importazioni italiane di gas

I dati sono relativi alle importazioni del 2020



Fonte: Ministero della Transizione Ecologica

YOU TREND

A Flourish chart

Three factors have facilitated this reduction: the opening of the [Trans Adriatic Pipeline \(TAP\)](#) in 2021, increasing imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and increasing Algerian supplies. To further diversify energy sources and reduce Russian imports, and therefore Italy's dependence, Giorgia Meloni is working on building bilateral relations with the Maghreb countries, with the aim of achieving independence from Russian gas between 2024 and 2025, as Claudio Descalzi has stated[6].

The 23 January 2023 visit to Algeria was Meloni's first official bilateral mission abroad to strengthen relations between the two countries in the framework of the "[Mattei Plan](#)" defended by the president of the council, with a view to strengthening the Mediterranean axis to make Italy "an energy hub for Europe". After the start of the war in Ukraine, Algeria became the first supplier of natural gas: the agreement signed between the two countries for "the study and construction of a gas pipeline that will transport gas, hydrogen, ammonia and also electricity" has been added to other agreements in the field of space cooperation and in the automobile, tourism and shipbuilding sectors.

b – Nuclear Energy

In a context in which countries in favour of nuclear energy (France, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) and others opposed to it (Germany, Austria, Spain, Estonia, Denmark, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg and Portugal) face each other, there are signs of a strategic and political rapprochement between France and Italy, which participated as an observer at the meeting in Stockholm on 28 March. After refusing to take part in the meeting organised on 27 February to discuss a pro-nuclear European alliance, Italy has become more open to an energy [that is making a Europe-wide return to grace](#).

The Italian government seems ready to support France's demands to include atomic energy among the green sources, which are considered decarbonised and useful in the fight to combat climate change. In return, Giorgia Meloni hopes for support on the issue of migratory flows and biofuels. Indeed, the Italian government aims to include biofuels among the "zero emission" energies to allow the continued marketing

[4] https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/pub/sen/relazioni/relazione_annuale_situazione_energetica_nazionale_dati_2020.pdf

[5] <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/russia-e-ue-alla-guerra-del-gas-36090>

[6] <https://finanza.lastampa.it/News/2023/01/23/descalzi-eni-italia-azzerera-gas-russo-dal-2024-2025/MzVfMjAyMy0wMS0yM19UTEI>

of internal combustion engine vehicles... even after the planned date of their phasing out in 2035.

As for the use of nuclear energy, Italy ruled it out in a referendum in 1987, shortly after the Chernobyl and Three Mile Island accidents. However, the recent appointments at the head of strategic public companies, in particular Flavio Cattaneo at ENEL and Roberto Cingolani at Leonardo, suggest new openings on this front. It is worth recalling that the former Minister for Ecological Transition in 2021 stated, "*It is certain that nuclear will be there in the European taxonomy of sustainable finance,*" even adding, "*I am absolutely certain that nuclear fusion will be the solution to everything.*"

III - THE MIGRATION FRONT

Regarding immigration, prior to the elections Giorgia Meloni defended the naval blockade as "*the only way to stop illegal immigration*", i.e. a blockade of the ports of one state by the armed forces of one or more other states. She changed her mind about the nature of the blockade and in the government's programme this was described as the "*creation of hotspots in non-European territories, managed by the European Union, to assess asylum applications*".

The issue of migration management remains open and is back on the political agenda. Indeed, after three years of decline in arrivals due to the closure of ports, and then to the pandemic, Italy recorded 105,131 migrants arriving on its shores^[7] in 2022. Between 1 January and 17 April 2023, the number of landings in Italy tripled compared to the same period in 2021 and 2022: to date 34,124 migrants have landed.

What has the government actually done to manage the flows? After an initial clash with France over the non-landing in Italy of the Ocean Viking of the NGO SOS Méditerranée with 234 migrants on board shortly after she took office, Giorgia Meloni had to deal with other emergencies in an attempt to limit rescues and discourage migration. In January, the Piantedosi decree-law, named after the Minister of the Interior, formalised a code of conduct for NGOs, which includes a rule preventing "multiple rescues": once a rescue at sea has been carried out, each vessel is obliged to immediately request a port of disembarkation from the

maritime coordination centre and to go there without delay, avoiding other operations. This decree-law was criticised by the [Council of Europe](#).

Another event that prompted immediate legislative action was the Cutro tragedy. On 26 February, 89 migrants lost their lives in a shipwreck off the coast of Cutro in Calabria. This tragedy rekindled clashes between the majority and the opposition and provoked public indignation, particularly following the statements of the current Minister of the Interior, former head of Matteo Salvini's cabinet (2018-2019): "*Desperation does not justify journeys that put children in danger.*" Following this tragedy, the government approved on 9 March a [decree-law on immigration](#), the "[Immigrazione Decree](#)", which provides for harsher penalties for smugglers, introduces the crime of "*death or injury as a result of illegal immigration crimes*", speeds up the execution of expulsion decrees and [modifies the "special protection"](#), i.e. the residence permit for humanitarian reasons introduced in 2020 by former Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese (2019-2022), who had modified [Salvini's 2018 security decree](#). This is a residence permit for humanitarian reasons, with an assessment of the degree of integration of the person concerned. The decree-law stipulates that the law on flows, the granting of residence permits for work reasons according to a quota system introduced in Italy in 1998 should be planned over a period of three years and no longer set each year^[8].

For the management of migrants, the government declared a state of emergency on 11 April, which will last for six months throughout the country, due to "*the increase in landings and the overpopulation of reception centres*". This procedure allows it, among other things, to mobilise new funding provided by the National Emergencies Fund; €5 million, notably for the management of identification, expulsion and repatriation operations. This decision comes after having sounded the alarm on possible new flows coming from Tunisia, motivated by the economic crisis and the political instability of the country governed by Kaïs Saïed.

On this point, Giorgia Meloni found support from the French president after a bilateral meeting following the March European Council during which Emmanuel

^[7] https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2023/04/12/nel-2022-sono-arrivati-in-italia-105-mila-migranti_60432d86-6966-40c7-aba9-460735dd4b16.html

^[8] <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/notizie/Pagine/Flussi-di-ingresso-e-contrasto-all-immigrazione-irregolare-Il-testo-del-DL-10-marzo-2023.aspx>

Macron recognised that "from Tunisia, the migratory pressure towards Italy and the European Union is increasing" and that there is "a will to act together" between the two countries.

At European level, Giorgia Meloni received the support of her Polish counterpart, Mateusz Morawiecki, at the extraordinary European summit on 9 February, who stated that "the borders must be strengthened and sealed, because the sovereignty of the Member States cannot be threatened". Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer echoed him: "We must end asylum throughout the European Union". Manfred Weber, president of the European People's Party (EPP), insisted on the need to support Italy in managing migration flows and to build EU-funded walls to defend Europe[9].

IV – WHAT EUROPEAN ALLIANCES?

Possible alliances for the European elections in May 2024 are beginning to emerge. At the beginning of January, Giorgia Meloni, Chair of the [European Conservatives and Reformists Party](#) (ECR), her EPP counterpart, Manfred Weber met for the second time. The latter then met Antonio Tajani, Minister of Foreign Affairs, coordinator of Forza Italia (EPP) and author, together with Raffaele Fitto, Minister of European Affairs (FdI, ECR) of the operation aimed at consolidating links between the EPP and ECR.

Giorgia Meloni's objective is clear: to free the EPP from the traditional agreement with the Socialists (PES), the two parties being, to date, the two most important at European level, by attempting to build an alternative that would bring together the right, with the declared political mission of "changing Europe from within".

Many unknowns remain: what do the Poles Mateusz Morawiecki (PiS, ECR) and Donald Tusk (PO), figurehead of the EPP, of which he was chairman until June 2022, think? Indeed, the electoral rivalry between the PiS and the Civic Platform is growing in the run-up to this autumn's parliamentary elections in Poland, in which the two men will be running against one another.

Giorgia Meloni's aims could lead her to make a series of internal changes within the ECR so as to initiate

a "normalisation" of relations with the EPP, but this would require a complete transformation of her party, Fratelli d'Italia, which has far-right roots, into a genuine conservative party. The operation echoes the one undertaken by Silvio Berlusconi in 2007 with the creation of the People of Freedom (PDL), born from the merger of Forza Italia with Alleanza Nazionale (AN), the post-fascist party of Gianfranco Fini and mentor of Giorgia Meloni. The President of the Council could thus finalise this transformation, acceptability and moderation process of her party, which began in August 2022 during her blitzkrieg campaign in the 25 September parliamentary elections. She sought to show that she was an accountable party in the eyes of Europe's leaders. The ECR leader's attempt to assert herself in Europe did not fail to arouse the displeasure of her government allies, Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini, who are used to taking centre stage in politics. However, Silvio Berlusconi's current health problems could lead to internal tensions within Forza Italia: one part of the party could align itself with pro-government positions, under the impetus of Antonio Tajani, while another would be tempted by a rapprochement with Salvini's Lega, himself torn between his extremist positions and the temptation of a more central shift!

What seems clear is the difficulty of realising the project announced in the joint declaration of some fifteen far right or ultra-conservative parties of 2 July 2021[10]. The project to create a "grand alliance" in the European Parliament already seems to be running out of steam. Two years ago, Matteo Salvini's Lega, Jaroslaw Kaczynski's PiS, Santiago Abascal's Vox, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National and Viktor Orban's Fidesz joined forces to criticise the European Union. The latter, wrote the signatories, "continues to pursue a federalist path that inexorably distances it from the peoples who are the beating heart of our civilisation. With this in mind, the most influential patriotic parties on the continent have understood the importance of joining forces to increase their influence in the debates and to reform the Union"

The balance in the Strasbourg Parliament has shifted. Jordan Bardella, now president of the Rassemblement National (RN) in France, travelled to Rome to meet

[9] https://www.corriere.it/politica/23_aprile_17/weber-migranti-intervista-98972c6a-dc86-11ed-a957-6a12e2c879aa.shtml

[10] <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/orban-le-pen-salvini-kaczynski-join-forces-to-impact-on-the-future-of-eu/>

Matteo Salvini and discuss their alliance: they both sit in the Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament, but the meeting was rather fleeting. This group is losing ground: two MEPs from the True Finns (PS) party have just left it, joining ECR for the *"uncompromising defence of Western civilisation and the European security policy architecture"* that it represents. The ID group is the sixth largest group in Strasbourg with 62 elected members, while ECR is the fifth with 66.

Marine Le Pen was clear in her interview on 13 April in *La Repubblica*[11] : she rejected the idea of being called Giorgia Meloni's twin sister, confirmed her "loyalty" to her ally Matteo Salvini and distanced herself from the Italian Council President because of her pro-NATO and pro-European positions, while she herself continues to define herself as "Eurosceptic". These declarations could facilitate Giorgia Meloni's task of attracting new sovereigntist parties in search of unity in the run-up to the European elections, or which would like to leave behind the shadow of alliances with Russia and a less ambiguous foreign policy.

In an international political, economic and social climate of great tension, the first measures of the new Italian government show a form of prudence at economic level, which is essential to obtain financial aid from Brussels. On the other hand, in the application of migration policies aimed at discouraging the arrival and reception of migrants, the government majority's stance is at odds with that of the European Union[12].

In the coming months, it will be interesting to observe whether the disagreements on electoral political strategy in view of the European elections within the governmental majority will not be the cause of new imbalances.

What is the meaning of the approach initiated by EPP President Manfred Weber with ECR President Giorgia Meloni[13] notably regarding migration? Is it intended to undermine a new bid by 'Ursula' in 2024? To undermine the traditional entente between the two main groups in the European Parliament? To foment an 'alliance' that would no longer exclude radical right parties from positions of power?

Will the Lega and Forza Italia accept to submit to the new political influence exerted by Fratelli d'Italia? Can differences on Europe be (re)reconciled?

Political tensions could also resurface over the renewal of military aid to Ukraine or other foreign policies issues. In her attempt to consolidate ECR, will the Italian Council President be able to convince the leaders of other European countries, and in particular Viktor Orban, with whom she has developed a privileged relationship for years, but whose pro-Russian positions are the opposite of her own?

Additional differences could emerge around the issue of immigration management and in particular on the modification of the Dublin Regulation. The adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum is struggling to move forward in Europe: northern countries are concerned about the movement of migrants landing on Italian coasts and islands, while Hungary and Poland are united in refusing any distribution of asylum seekers between Member States.

At national level, it will be interesting to see to what extent promises to reaffirm Europe's Christian identity and prevent "ethnic replacement" are being implemented[14], as defined by the Minister of Agriculture, Francesco Lollobrigida (FdI), likewise measures pertaining to minority rights.

The first economic measures of the Meloni government have been in line with the budgetary and reform demands of the European Commission under the NRRP. However, unlike Mario Draghi, his predecessor, her government has accumulated significant and noticeable delays in presenting the reform plans requested by the European Commission. This could be perceived, in the long run, as a weakness and a handicap.

On immigration, Giorgia Meloni has been more cautious than her predecessors: she has distanced herself from Matteo Salvini's policy of closed ports (which led to several court cases for abduction), while applying very strict measures against NGO rescue operations.

The President of the Council has asserted her ideological positioning by adopting certain domestic policy measures, particularly in the areas of security, food and culture. First, with a bill including a controversial crackdown on rave parties, then with

[11] https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2023/04/13/news/marine_le_pen_meloni_nato_ue-395899767/

[12] For the High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrell, "fortress Europe" is not a solution. "The problem is not to stop immigration, but to manage it, and above all to manage it in a humane way".

[13] <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-meets-president-european-people-s-party-manfred-weber/21440>

[14] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65324319>

the banning of ChatGPT, followed a ban on synthetic meat. In early April, the government introduced a bill to punish the use of English and other foreign words in official communications with fines ranging from €5,000 to €100,000. Finally, in defence of a form of cultural protectionism, she announced the creation of the "Made in Italy High School", which aims to be critical of the more literary and European culture provided by the "classical high school". In recent years, this international culture has been privileged to the detriment of technical and practical knowledge, according to the Minister for Tourism, Daniela Santanche (FdI)[15].

The next few months will show whether the leader of Fratelli d'Italia will be able to solve the problems linked to the stagnation in which the country is floundering. Maintaining the country's Atlanticist stance, despite the tensions within her coalition, and winning the next European elections would allow her to assert her power, benefit from unprecedented political stability and affirm her social project. Other conservative right-wingers in Europe could then draw inspiration from the "Meloni model".

[15] https://www.ilmessaggero.it/politica/news/santanche_giovani_liceo_istituti_tecnici_cosa_ha_detto_oggi_3_4_2023-7325837.html

Anna Bonalume

Journalist, PhD in Philosophy, ENS Paris

You can read all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu/en

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN
ISSN 2402-614X

The opinions expressed in this text are the sole responsibility of the author.
© All rights reserved, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2024

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.