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# One year of the Meloni government: a tortuous but determined path towards Europe.

The first year of the Meloni government has revealed a complex political picture: elements of the nationalist right and centrist and also moderate tendencies have intertwined. The coalition that governs Italy shows its "right side" in policies linked to the family, civil rights and immigration, while its "moderate side" is expressed in international relations, the European sphere and budgetary policies. This political balancing act has created a number of ambiguities. For reasons of state and the quest for consensus, the government walks a tightrope between conservatism and moderation, euroscepticism and integration, identity, and liberalism. But it is difficult to grasp the meaning of these oscillations without understanding the context of the September 2022 elections and the historical context that weighs on the current government.

Giorgia Meloni (*Fratelli d'Italia*, ECR) won thanks to several factors, including some judicious choices on her part and mistakes and divisions on the part of her opponents. However, the victory of the "centre-right" led by Giorgia Meloni was not a plebiscite: it was the victory with the lowest percentage of consensus compared to Silvio Berlusconi, and also the lowest voter turnout. Two fundamental elements played in Giorgia Meloni's favour: the divisions between Enrico Letta's Democratic Party (PD), Giuseppe Conte's 5-Star Movement (M5S) and Matteo Renzi's Centre List; and the erosion of the political credibility of these opponents because of their experience in government, since all three had been Presidents of the Council. Consequently,

Giorgia Meloni was able to present herself to the electorate as the only new political offer, the only female politician with her reputation still intact and, of course, the only possible guarantor of post-election stability. It is not so much the issue of conservatism, Euroscepticism and nationalism that has tipped the Italian electorate to the right over the last two years, but a set of conditions inherent to Giorgia Meloni herself.

Indeed, the leader of *Fratelli d'Italia* spent much of the election campaign assuring international observers and the financial markets of her reliability on foreign and economic policy. In many areas (public finances, energy diversification, the recovery plan and the budget), she claimed a degree of continuity with the previous government of national unity chaired by Mario Draghi. In many respects, therefore, the electoral victory of the *Right* was a "cold" one, resulting from the absence of alternatives, the divisions of its opponents and the lack of political strength of Italy's other leaders. This is the scenario that explains the victory of the centre-right.

On the other hand, if we want to understand the reasons for some of the attitudes of the *Right* in office, we need to look at a more cautious historical dynamic linked both to the political decade that has just passed in Italy and to the political roots of the *Right*.

## THE POST-BERLUSCONI SITUATION

Italy's current political landscape is the product of the Monti government (2011-2013). The technical executive of the Bocconi University

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professor, which enjoyed a strong European mandate to reform the country *oborto collo* in the midst of the sovereign debt crisis, permanently dissolved the bipolarism of the Berlusconi era and ushered in a new political phase. This was the fundamental turning point in recent Italian political history: the economic depression, the delegitimization of the political parties, the feeling of failure and the weakness of the country's political actors (*commissarisazione*) opened the way for the rise of new political forces. Rarely in history has the circulation of political elites been as rapid as it was during the Italian sovereign debt crisis.

From a democratic point of view this renewal was expressed on two fronts: anti-political populism (*M5S*) and nationalism (*Lega, Fratelli d'Italia*). The political system was marked by two main rifts: political palingenesis (*new versus old*) and Europe (*pro-Europeans versus Eurosceptics*). These tensions have led to a polarisation of the consensus and its overflow by the new populist and sovereigntist parties, to the detriment of the governing capacity of the centrist and pro-European parties.

The rise in strength of Giorgia Meloni - and her party *Fratelli d'Italia*, founded in September 2012 shortly before the end of the Monti government - must be seen in this context. From the outset, her strategy has been simple but rigorous, based on consistency, firmness, and expectation: maintaining her stance in opposition without signing any compromise either with the *M5S* or with the left (*PD*), unlike the *Lega* and *Forza Italia*, and counting on the fact that a weakened political system would, sooner or later, offer the opportunity to enter government with a so-called "*centre-right*" coalition.

Over the last two years, since the fall of the two Conte governments (first with the *Lega*, then the *PD*) following the 2018 elections, and as the polls and the prospect of a government of national unity grew, Giorgia Meloni has tried to free herself, not always successfully, from the accusation of leading a party accustomed to cultivating nostalgic sympathies in its *interna corporis* and demonstrating an uncompromising sovereigntist approach. This strategy of "*demarcation*" emerged particularly in the bid to recover the term "*conservative*" to give new

ideological legitimacy to the party of fascist origin and in a soft opposition to the government of union led by Mario Draghi since February 2021, including with a vote in favour of sending arms to Ukraine in 2022.

The development of "*conservatism*" is developing above all in a European perspective, through membership of the European Conservatives and Reformists group (*ECR*) in the European Parliament, where the *Fratelli d'Italia* gained political ground alongside the Poles of the Law and Justice party (*PiS*) on the one hand, and by cultivating a confederal and subsidiary idea of the European institutions, without ever overstepping the mark into extremism and repudiation of the single currency, as the member parties of the Identity and Democracy (*ID*) group in the European Parliament, including the *Lega*, did in the past.

At European level, Giorgia Meloni seems to want to create a conservative pole capable of helping to build an alternative majority to the current one, which includes the Social Democrats (*S&D*), through new alliances with other groups, such as the *EPP* in particular. But this will not be enough to aim, after the European elections in June 2024, for possible participation in a European "*grand coalition*". In many respects, *Fratelli d'Italia* is trying to send the following message to the outside world: *we are pro-Atlantic and accept the European institutions, but without giving in to the dilution of identity and the defence of borders*. In this attempt to walk a tightrope between political reason and anti-establishment, between pragmatism and Euroscepticism, *Fratelli d'Italia's* role within the government has been to try to strike a balance both in terms of legitimacy abroad and credible programmes.

The government is therefore a *Janus* with two faces: one side has become "*Europeanised*", with an ultimately cautious finance bill due to the reaction of the markets, the continuation of the recovery plan without breaking with the European Commission, and a foreign policy in line with its European and Western partners, particularly with regard to Ukraine. On the other side however, the President of the Council's ostentatious support for conservative parties such as *Vox* in Spain, the *PiS* in Poland, and even Viktor Orban's *Fidesz* in Hungary, and the more traditional

protectionist, corporatist, and identity-based declarations of certain Fratelli d'Italia ministers, are still manifest. These discordant voices sometimes need to be rebalanced by the President of the Council herself, but above all by the ministers of Forza Italia, the most moderate and experienced government party. Some see in this attitude a cynical strategy that aims to associate external constraint and internal consensus, and this is probably partly the case, but it is also a reflection of a legacy from the past that has not yet dissolved.

The weight of the previous decade lies heavily on Fratelli d'Italia, a small nationalist, eurosceptic opposition party excluded from power at national and local level. Its leaders grew up in this environment, drank from the fountain of sovereignty and have never been inclined towards centrist compromise. As party leader and President of the Council, Giorgia Meloni has not spontaneously been able to rid herself of this legacy. She cannot really free herself from a political class that has supported her throughout her rise to power. The Meloni government is torn between two fronts - oscillating between nationalism and moderation, with the President of the Council often plugging the gaps left by her ministers who lean too far to the right.

The influence of Matteo Salvini's Lega, a partner whose seats in Parliament are crucial to the government's existence, is significant within the coalition. A party that has always had Eurosceptic and sovereigntist roots, the Lega is a member of the ID group at European level, alongside the Rassemblement National (France) and Alternative für Deutschland (Germany). Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the Lega is one of the European parties closest to Putin's Russia, even if it seems to have evolved as a result of the government's line. On the domestic front, on the other hand, it is exerting strong pressure on the President of the Council in favour of a hard line on immigration and less compliance with European rules on public finances. As a result, Giorgia Meloni might not be able to moderate the government either... even if she wanted to.

However, she has spared no effort in trying to recalibrate the government's policy, working to meet

commitments on public finances, moving towards an immigration policy that is no longer focused solely on rejecting illegal immigration, closing ports and abolishing reception facilities, as Matteo Salvini did (2018-2019), but centred on developing a policy towards Africa, with the support of the European Commission, and a *rapprochement* with its European partners. The President of the Council has skilfully exploited the internal divisions within the Lega, between Salvini's radical wing and the more moderate wing of Giancarlo Giorgetti, Minister for the Economy, who has so far managed to contain the intemperance of the party president.

The death of Silvio Berlusconi has also played into the hands of the President of the Council, as the death of the "*father of the centre-right*" has left Forza Italia without strong leadership, even though the party benefits from the experience of Antonio Tajani, Minister for Foreign Affairs, former President of the European Parliament (2017-2019) and former European Commissioner (2008-2014). The alliance with the government's third force is therefore easier to manage, especially as Forza Italia has no serious political prospects outside the scope of this majority.

### **THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY AND ITALY WITHOUT A RIGHT WING**

However, this situation needs to be seen in the context of the long-term history of the Italian right if we are to better understand the reasons for the Meloni government's ambiguity and even unpreparedness to govern.

In the party republic (1946-1992), the Assembly was dominated by three parties that were to dominate Italian political life for half a century: the Christian Democracy (*Democrazia cristiana*), the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. The post-war "*right*" proved incapable of sustaining intellectual or public pressure on issues of order, preservation, nationalist revival, etc. beyond monotonous journalistic polemics, often devoted to humour for lack of coherent arguments, and constant nostalgic references.

New themes, adapted to the complexity of the post-war world and society, were unable to emerge from such a spectrum and, in fact, the Movimento

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Sociale Italiano (MSI) always remained a small, isolated and inoffensive party. The tendency of the openly profascist wing of the "right" to transfer its own ideological base from nationalism to a European plane could not in itself compensate for this failing, especially in the context of the Cold War. As a result, the post-war "right" consistently lacked effective ideas for a central role in the game of majority and power. The feeling that it was radically impossible to return to a regime inspired by fascism and nationalism remained one of the established points of Italian public opinion. For this reason, the post-war "right", nostalgic for fascism, was relegated to a small political niche. This nostalgia, which was undoubtedly present in significant sectors of public opinion, both bourgeois and working class, beyond those sectors that were electorally right-wing, was based on issues other than purely nationalist ones, such as order, respect for social hierarchies, the absence of strikes, a sense of the state taking precedence over that of the party, the valuing of skills, and so on. This trend led to the electoral success of the "Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque" ("*Front of the Ordinary Man*"), founded in the immediate post-war period, which came to be known as the "*qualunquismo*", the anti-political and movement offensive, rather than a conservative right fuelled by the ambition to govern.

It was only after the surveys of *Tangentopoli*[1] and Silvio Berlusconi's arrival on the scene of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994 that the "right" managed to break out its rut somewhat, but again in an unusual and incomplete way. Silvio Berlusconi, a businessman and media mogul who headed a party he renamed the "centre-right", always presented himself as a moderate and a liberal with populist overtones. He never defined himself as "*right-wing*" and presented himself more as the modernising heir to the anti-communist *pentapartite* system than as a "*conservative*" leader. His allies in Gianfranco Fini's Alleanza Nazionale (AN) abandoned post-fascism in the mid-1990s, especially with the "*turning point of Fiuggi*[2]", and won five ministers in the first government led by Berlusconi in 1994[3]. Gianfranco Fini sat in Silvio Berlusconi's 2nd and 3rd governments from 2001 to 2006 (along with four other ministers from the AN and two, then three

ministers from the Lega) and chaired the Chamber of Deputies from 2008 to 2013. But here again, because there was no ruling class, a tradition of government and political and intellectual qualities, the transformation remained in its early stages. The AN party has always remained subordinate, in both electoral and media terms, to Silvio Berlusconi.

Giorgia Meloni, who was trained during the Berlusconi era and was herself Minister for Youth in the fourth government led by Silvio Berlusconi from 2008 to 2011, lived through this transition between the post-fascist and the pro-European right. When Fratelli d'Italia was born from the ashes of Alleanza Nazionale, Giorgia Meloni inherited a tradition and a political staff that had not grown and matured in the classic circles of conservatism and populism as in other European experiments. Hence the difficulty of building a more moderate and more governmental discourse over the long term, until victory in the 2022 elections.

### THE DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP WITH FRANCE

Political relations between France and Italy have not always been easy, even before Giorgia Meloni took office. On many financial, economic and industrial issues, the two countries have lived for years in a climate of competition and mutual distrust. The political class has always been particularly intolerant of large-scale agreements with Paris, as France has often been perceived as a rival capable of acquiring and controlling major parts of Italy's economic system, banking and insurance sectors. For these reasons, the current right-wing government, which is more inclined towards nationalism than other forces, is wary of a political partnership with Paris. It sees a stronger, more organised country as a threat to Italy's economic and political autonomy.

So it is no coincidence that, to date, the [Quirinal Treaty](#), signed on 26 November 2021 by the heads of state of the two countries, remains a protocol of cordial understanding that has not yet led to the desired enhanced [bilateral cooperation](#), precisely because of the mistrust that reigns between the ruling classes of the two countries.

[1] "Tangentopoli" refers to the system of corruption and illicit financing of political parties (from *tangente*, "bribe" and *poli*, "city" in Greek) at the root of Mani pulite ("Clean hands"), a series of judicial investigations carried out in the early 1990s targeting leading figures in Italian politics and industry. Ministers, elected representatives and businessmen were involved, leading to a political upheaval that saw the demise of the traditional parties and the emergence of new players. For this reason, some observers describe the ensuing recomposition as the transition from a "first republic" to a "second republic" in Italy.

[2] "Svolta di Fiuggi" is the expression used to describe the decision by the Movimento Sociale Italiano - Destra Nazionale (Italian Social Movement - National Right) to officially abandon ideological references to Fascism to qualify as a legitimised political force for government. This transformation was carried out by Gianfranco Fini during a congress held in Fiuggi, an Italian municipality in the province of Frosinone in Lazio, leading to the dissolution of the old party and the birth of Alleanza Nazionale on 27 January 1995.

[3] The first Berlusconi government included five party ministers: for the MSI, Giuseppe Tatarella was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Post and Telecommunications, Altero Matteoli was Minister for the Environment and Adriana Poli Bortone was Minister for Agriculture; for the AN, Publio Fiori was Minister for Transport and Shipping and Domenico Fisichella was Minister for Cultural Assets.

France's first reaction was to show great mistrust towards Giorgia Meloni's government. Indeed, the parties in the Italian coalition government, such as Fratelli d'Italia and Lega, are close to or allied with French parties that oppose Emmanuel Macron. The acerbic statements made by certain French ministers in the days following the inauguration of the new Italian government bear witness to the political friction between the two governments. Tensions erupted over immigration, when Italy rejected the Ocean Viking, an NGO SOS Mediterranean vessel loaded with migrants, which was bound for the French port of Toulon. The diplomatic misunderstanding between the governments, with mutual accusations, caused a great deal of controversy. However, Giorgia Meloni, with the support of Italian President Sergio Mattarella, and Emmanuel Macron have illustrated that they are more pragmatic and moderate than their ministers. The two countries seem to have rediscovered the path of diplomatic détente, at least on European issues. France has supported Italy's proposals on immigration at various European meetings and has contributed to mediation with other countries. The two countries seem to have found greater harmony on economic issues, with improved cooperation on the reform of the Stability Pact and the development of strategic autonomy through European investment in technology and defence.

### THE RIGHT-WING NOW TAMED?

Many international observers feared that, with the victory of the right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni, Italy would go down the road of Euroscepticism and embark on an economic policy that would be unsustainable for the State's finances. One year on, this is not the case. On fundamental issues - the public budget, *NextGenerationEU*, support for Ukraine - Italy has followed European policies without any particular resistance. On other issues, such as immigration, corporatism, green policies and civil rights, the Italian government has remained faithful to its electoral intentions and political identity. However, if we look at the original ideas, and Fratelli d'Italia's track record in particular, we see a significant maturation during the first year of Meloni's government, mainly due to the

limits imposed by external constraints (*financial and European*). Many nationalist and Eurosceptic elements have been set aside, and the executive has integrated European mechanisms and become institutionalised, as the government has abandoned anti-establishment proposals and rhetoric. This process has also been facilitated by the role of Forza Italia, a member of the European People's Party (EPP), and in particular Antonio Tajani.

### SCENARIOS FOR THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

The European elections in June 2024 will be important for three reasons: European integration, although incomplete, is increasingly relevant for Member States, as demonstrated by the Recovery Plan and initiatives in the field of trade and industrial policy; the political balances on which European governance has been based over the past decade could evolve; and ever greater coordination is needed in terms of security and defence, given the war in Ukraine and growing geopolitical tensions in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and, more generally, a strengthening of the political paradigm of national security.

Several political scenarios are possible.

The first is that everything remains as it is, i.e. with a coalition centred on the triangle currently formed by the EPP, S&D and Renew groups, albeit with two possible trends: a greater weight for the EPP in relation to the other two, or a narrower majority due to the growth of the other groups on the 'right' and 'left'. In this case, certain policies, such as environmental and industrial policies, would depend on a political rebalancing with a moderation of the most progressive aspects of these policies.

The second is an extension of the next coalition to the European conservatives or to part of them. This may include the strategy of parties such as Fratelli d'Italia, which are looking for a way to participate in the coming months. In a logic of perpetual negotiation, some conservatives might consider participating in a broad coalition with the centre-right and centre-left, under certain conditions such as reduced economic dirigisme on environmental issues, less emphasis on civil rights and integration.

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The third, and more unlikely, scenario envisages a very significant shift to the 'right' following the elections. In this case, a coalition between the Christian Democrats, the Liberals and the Conservatives, more or less partially, could emerge. This idea is far from certain, given the outcome of the elections in Poland on 15 October, with the defeat of the PiS and the victory of the opposition led by Donald Tusk, former President of the European People's Party (EPP). Clearly, in this scenario, the dark spots in the programme would be greater, precisely because it would mean tackling an unprecedented formula.

What impact will these elections have on Italy?

Firstly, whatever the result of the European elections, it will tell us whether or not the Italian

government majority is still strong after two years in office and what the balance is between its various components. Secondly, it will tell us whether Fratelli d'Italia, possibly together with Forza Italia, will be part of a new coalition in Europe, whether centre-right or extended to include the Social Democrats. If Meloni's party were to join a European "majority", it would be a political consecration for her. And it would give Italy greater weight in the forthcoming negotiations, which are crucial for Europe's economy and security.

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