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Between Regional Elections and Italian Leadership: Giorgia Meloni at the European Crossroads

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- ▶ The regional elections in Sardinia and Abruzzo gave initial mixed signals, but ultimately confirmed the strength of the Centre-right coalition
- ▶ However, the Italian Right is in difficulty, as it maintains a blatant ambiguity between the anti-European, pro-Trump and pro-Putin positions of Matteo Salvini's Lega, and those lately increasingly pro-EU, pro-NATO and pro-Ukraine support against Russia of Prime Minister Meloni.
- ▶ The possibility of Meloni being involved in some form of support for Ursula von der Leyen's re-election as President of the European Commission makes it even more necessary to clarify these ambiguities.
- ▶ The European elections in June 2024 could also be decisive in determining Italy's future position in European and international politics: Meloni holds all the cards to decide how to proceed.

Two regional elections of national and possibly EU-significance

Despite the fact that they affected only a limited proportion of the electorate, two recent regional elections have dominated Italian political news in recent weeks. The reason for this interest is that, over and above the regional data, the two polls also provided very useful elements in terms of possible future developments in the Italian political balance at both national and European level.

The first of the two elections was held on 25 February 2024 to renew the regional parliament and appoint the new president of Sardinia, and surprisingly saw the victory of Alessandra Todde, supported by a centre-left alliance of the Partito Democratico and the Movimento 5 Stelle. Although only 1,600 votes ahead, Todde beat the centre-right candidate, Paolo Truzzu, the mayor of Cagliari. The defeat of the candidate expressly wanted by Giorgia Meloni and backed by all the parties of the current majority supporting her government led many to speculate that the great consensus in favour of the Italian Prime Minister was perhaps beginning to fray and that the centre-left had found a way to break the long series of electoral debacles suffered in recent years.

As a result, all domestic attention was focused on the next regional elections in Abruzzo, which took place on 10 March, just two weeks after the Sardinian elections. In Abruzzo, the centre-right majority supported the outgoing regional president, Marco Marsilio, who was elected for a first term in 2019, while all the opposition parties supported the joint candidate, Luciano D'Amico. Unlike the Sardinian vote, however, the Abruzzo election confirmed the electoral trend of recent years, with the candidate of Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia party winning with almost 43,000 more votes than D'Amico and being re-elected as president of the Abruzzo region.

The Italian Right after the two regional elections

The vote in Abruzzo may seem to be a return to normality, but in fact the double regional vote offers several points for reflection on the possible future development of the national political balance. Firstly, on both occasions just over half of those eligible to vote turned out, meaning that those who will govern the two regions for the next five years will do so with the approval of barely one in four voters. The fact that the opposition parties are even less popular than Meloni's party does not automatically mean that Italian voters approve of the current government.

A second relevant element concerns the results of the individual parties within the centre-right coalition. While Meloni's party continues to enjoy the greatest consensus in this policy area, as it has for several years, it is the Lega, Matteo Salvini's party, that is steadily losing votes, mainly to Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia. If the centre-right coalition confirms its victory over the other opposition political forces, it is also true that it is mainly Meloni who is benefiting from the voters' appreciation of the government's work, largely depriving the Lega of its consensus. Salvini, who won 27.5 per cent of the vote in the 2019 regional elections and as much as 35.3 per cent in the European elections of the same year, fell to just 8.1 per cent in the 2022 national elections and again to 7.6 per cent in the last two regional elections of 2024. Even Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi's party, rose from 9.4 per cent in the 2019 European elections to 13.4 per cent in the last regional elections, outperforming the Lega by almost six percentage points.

It is likely that these circumstances could also have an impact on national politics, although it is not easy to predict how. It is certainly striking that, of the three parties in the governing majority, just 18 months after the national vote in 2022, the one that is losing the most consensus is the Lega, the most avowedly

Eurosceptic and ambiguous movement on Putin and Europe's position on Ukraine, while the ones that are gaining support are Fratelli d'Italia and Forza Italia, which from the start have taken a clearly pro-European and pro-Atlantic line. The image of US President Joe Biden affectionately embracing Giorgia Meloni during an official visit to Washington on 1 March 2024 alongside a G7 meeting further confirmed the evolution of the foreign policy line followed by the Prime Minister, who in February 2020 still called Donald Trump 'a model' for the Italian Right and invited Steve Bannon, the architect of Trump's 2016 election campaign, as a guest of honour at her party's convention.

Giorgia Meloni torn between Euro-conservatives and Eurosceptics

The closeness to European Commission President von der Leyen and to the European People's Party in Brussels are all indicators of Meloni's ongoing change of course on the European and international scene, and this change seems to be rewarding him at the ballot box for now. On the other hand, Salvini remains tied to his more or less expressed sympathies for Trump (whom he recently congratulated on his victories in the conservative party primaries ahead of the US presidential elections in November) and Putin (who will certainly not be displeased by Salvini's recent words on the death of the Russian president's opponent Aleksey Navalny, who commented that "it will be the judges who will shed light"). Equally solid is the link with the European Parliament's Identity and Democracy group, of which the Lega is a member in Brussels, along with Marine Le Pen's French Rassemblement National, the Belgian Vlaams Belang, the Austrian FPÖ and the German AfD. The aim of this positioning is to try to gather the votes of all those dissatisfied with the EU in the run-up to the European elections in June 2024, but so far this strategy, which has seen Salvini, for example, spearhead the Italian 'tractor protest' against Brussels' agricultural policy, has not yielded great results. The feeling is that although the two are part of the same domestic majority, Meloni is managing to capitalise on all the positive assessments of the government, while Salvini continues to lose support. Salvini therefore finds himself in a vicious circle: he must try to distance himself from Meloni's political line, but not too critically so as not to jeopardise the stability of the government of which he is a minister, but to do so he would have to further strengthen his sovereigntist and anti-European positions, which would increase the distrust of the main European chancelleries, which instead currently find in Meloni a much more reliable partner for dialogue.

Although no one in the majority officially admits it, all this poses a problem for the Italian government. Indeed, it is unclear how much longer the centre-right majority can claim to be united and cohesive when two of the three parties have explicitly pro-European positions, declare themselves staunch allies of NATO and in favour of extending military aid to Ukraine, while the third is a solid ally of the most bitter opponents of Macron in France and Scholz in Germany. There is an old saying in Italy: *"Dimmi con chi vai e ti dirò chi sei"* – Tell me who you go with and I will tell you who you are, meaning that the companies you choose say a lot about who you are and how you think. So far, Meloni has come a long way with Salvini, clearly benefiting her own personal consensus in Italy and beyond. As she prepares to support from the outside a possible re-election of Ursula von der Leyen as European Commission president after the June vote - assuming that a sufficient majority is formed to confirm her - Meloni will sooner or later have to clarify whether she intends to lead her party definitively towards purely Euro-conservative positions along the lines of the EPP, leaving Salvini with the banner of 'national pride' in an anti-NATO and anti-EU vein, or whether she prefers to remain in the ambiguity of a middle ground, suspended between Victor Orban and Donald Trump on the one hand, and Ursula von der Leyen, Manfred Weber and Joe Biden on the other.

In any case, it is a complicated situation for the centre-right majority: internally, its parties promise to remain loyal to their alliance and that the stability of the government is not in the slightest question. However, the differences on European and foreign policy cannot be ignored for long and continue as if nothing had happened. Sooner or later, European or international dossiers will be on the table of the government in Rome and it will not be possible to maintain the current ambiguities. It will be necessary to choose between Meloni's position and Salvini's, because the two are clearly incompatible. How this will affect the life of the government is unclear at the moment, but it is worth pointing out that some journalistic analyses are already predicting a possible government reshuffle after the European vote, in the event that the aforementioned divergences turn out to be irreconcilable. In the worst-case scenario, one could even imagine Meloni threatening to dissolve parliament early in order to attract more Lega voters unhappy with Salvini's current performance. Certainly, Meloni enjoys an advantageous position that allows her to choose the strategy to follow, also because the divisions in the opposition do not pose a threat to the stability of the government, at least for the time being.

The crucial test of the European vote

The forthcoming European elections will also be crucial from this point of view: the proportional system in force allows all parties in the race to measure their 'specific weight' also against the other coalition partners. Should Meloni once again win the majority of votes from conservative Italians and should the centrists of Forza Italia establish themselves as the second-largest party within the centre-right, the Lega and its secretary Salvini would also suffer a heavy defeat within the majority. If the Prime Minister were also to succeed in his attempt to have von der Leyen reappointed as head of the Commission in the next European legislature, the split between the two leaders of the Italian Right would become clear: it will be interesting to see whether Salvini will still be willing to remain in the government or whether he will try to regain at least some of the lost votes by going into opposition. The European elections could also say a lot about the future European positioning of the Italian Right. It is actually true that in recent years the Italian Right has identified itself very strongly with the current positions of the Lega: Catholic ultra-conservatism, fierce criticism of the EU, proximity to Trump and even suspicions of hidden funding from Putin's Russia. The forthcoming European elections could therefore finally clarify whether the Italian Right of the future will continue to follow this strategic line, or whether it will veer towards the typical positions of pro-Atlantic European conservatism, which at the moment Giorgia Meloni seems to have firmly embraced. Both Italy and the EU would certainly benefit.



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