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Salvini's very personal defeat

The 'Sardines' thwarted Salvini's plans for Italy's regional elections. The centre-left comes out stronger than before

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The result of last Sunday's regional elections in Calabria in southern Italy and Emilia-Romagna in northern Italy have dealt a blow to Matteo Salvini, the head of the right-wing populist Lega. And the left is now back in the game.

Actually, these two electoral contests ended in a draw. In Calabria the right-wing alliance, which the Lega now dominates, clearly prevailed. Their candidate, Jole Santelli, scored 55 per cent and clearly outperformed her opponent from the centre-left (30 per cent). But in Emilia-Romagna it was the other way round. In the traditional left-wing stronghold and prosperous region, Stefano Bonaccini of the Partito Democratico (PD) remained victorious at the helm of a centre-left alliance with 51.4 per cent, while his rival Luci Borgonzoni was left with 43.6 percent, contrary to polls predicting a neck-and-neck.

For Salvini, however, this draw was a bitter defeat. Previously, he had declared the vote in the northern region to be a decisive election. In the campaign, which he had made a personal priority, he announced time and again that he would liberate Emilia Romagna from the 'reds'. His camp's actual candidate hardly played a role, while Salvini toured the region day after day, amounting to around 200 events. Again and again with the same messages of nationalism ('Italians first!'), xenophobia and opposition to Brussels, Paris and Berlin. Salvini said that in the event of a victory, he would consider the national coalition government under Giuseppe Conte's Five Stars and the PD as completely delegitimised and would demand immediate new elections.

The left and right were in complete agreement that a decisive election was imminent. However, while Salvini played the nationalist card, Bonaccini bet on the regional one. After all, life is good in this prosperous region, which – with Ducati and Lamborghini, with Parmesan and Parma ham – is one of Italy's export champions, with unemployment at

just five per cent and excellent public services for its citizens.

What next for Italy's government

But a swing to the right had definitely been in the air. In the European elections in May 2019, the Lega had risen to become the region's strongest party with 34 per cent, while the right-wing camp was well ahead of the centre-left alliance. It was the 'Sardines' that gave the left the crucial push at the end to avert imminent defeat. The spontaneous movement of four 30-year-olds in Bologna went to the piazza for the first time on 14 November 2019 against Salvini's brute populism, against his 'language of hate', against his racism. And, surprisingly, right at the first flash mob, 12,000 people showed up and demonstrated to themselves and, above all, the world that the left is still alive and that the struggle is not yet lost.

In the end, this mobilisation showed its true power in the rapid increase in voter turnout from 38 per cent in the last regional elections to 68 per cent now – and it was in the left-wing strongholds that the increase was the highest. Moreover, the PD has once again become the strongest party in the region, with almost 35 per cent, after finishing second behind the Lega in the 2019 European elections.

The result strengthens PD leader Nicola Zingaretti, who can now start repositioning the party with, as he sees it, clear left-wing rhetoric. And the result also strengthens the Conte government: Salvini's new election bid has been shelved for the time being. Nevertheless, the coalition remains unstable because, while the PD was able to hold its ground, the Five Stars suffered a devastating defeat. The Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), which had triumphed in the national elections in March 2018 with 32.7 per cent and has been ruling in Rome ever since – first with Salvini's Lega, then with the PD since September last year –, has now plunged to 7 per cent in Calabria and to only 3.5 per cent in Emilia-Romagna.

In March, the M5S wants to draw the conclusions at a party congress. Two camps are facing each other: those in favour of a closer alliance with the PD and those who want to remain neutral as the 'third pole' between the two political blocs of right and left. Moreover, the Five Stars must clarify the question of leadership: Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, advocate of the neutralist 'neither right nor left' course, had declared his resignation last week as 'Capo politico', the political leader of the movement. The outcome of the forthcoming Five Stars clashes will also determine whether the governing coalition can become a real counterweight to the Italian right.



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