EUROPE 18.04.2019 | Tobias Mörschel

The Democratic Party's comeback

Italy's political left is back from its post-Renzi sabbatical – with a new leader, fresh ideas and a more open political concept

Read this article in German.

Following its resounding defeat in the early parliamentary elections in March 2018, we didn't hear much from Italy's Democratic Party (PD) for some time. The PD allowed itself a year-long sabbatical to lick its wounds. Now, though, the time for introspection and self-flagellation is over. On the anniversary of its election defeat, the PD is seeking to get back on the front foot and position itself as a strong opposition party and a serious alternative to the current government chaos.

One year ago, the PD and its primary candidate, Matteo Renzi, received just 19 per cent of the popular vote. The winners were the populist left-wing Five Star Movement (M5S) with almost 33 per cent and the nationalist right-wing Lega under Matteo Salvini. The latter even increased its vote share by 12.5 per cent compared with the previous election and almost drew level with the PD. After some back and forth, these unequal partners, the Lega and M5S, ultimately formed Europe's first pan-populist government, united by a keen sense of how to generate attention and steer public discourse with topics such as a strict anti-immigration stance, a flat tax or a basic income.

The popularity of the government remains unbroken even though the balance of power between the coalition partners has shifted in the meantime, with the Salvini's Lega now clearly dominating. However, the government's actual political successes have been rather thin on the ground: European porcelain has been shattered *en masse*, the Italian economy is continuing to fall behind and there's a real risk of recession.

And yet we didn't hear almost anything from the opposition so far. That's all set to change under Nicola Zingaretti. He was elected as the new Democratic Party leader in an open primary in which more than 1.6 million Italians participated. Winning 66 per cent of the ballots cast, Zingaretti easily defeated his competitors, interim PD leader Maurizio

Martina and Roberto Giachetti, a close acolyte of Renzi.

Zingaretti's calm political style

The 53-year-old Zingaretti comes from a modest social background and began his political socialisation within the ranks of the Italian Communist Party. Although he has yet to hold national office, he made an impression as a local and regional politician with the ability to win elections – even in difficult times. In 2008, he was elected President of the Province of Rome on the same day as the left was defeated in municipal elections in the capital. In March 2018, he was re-elected Governor of the Lazio Region at the head of a centre-left alliance while the national elections proved so disastrous for the PD.

Zingaretti is not an egomaniac like Renzi, but more of a soft-spoken man, arbitrator and mediator. He prefers getting things done behind the scenes to banging the drum on social media. As the head of his party, he sees himself as a 'leader' rather than a 'capo'. These characteristics are urgently needed if there's to be any hope of reuniting the PD, which found itself increasingly divided under Renzi, and turning Italy's highly fragmented political left, into a strong political force. Zingaretti's calm, matter-of-fact demeanour is a welcome contrast to the increasingly shrill tone in Italian politics. But whether that will help him to make headway with the voters remains to be seen.

In any case, if the PD succeeds in outperforming M5S, the message will be clear: Italy's left-wing opposition is back.

After all, as important as style may be, it's no substitute for content – at least in the longer term. Zingaretti needs a develop his profile if he wants to communicate to the electorate what the PD stands for under his leadership. In his first weeks in the job, Zingaretti has proved to be a smart mover. His ecumenical approach to reconciling the party and unifying the left-wing camp has already begun to bear fruit. Innumerable meetings have been held to find common ground and rebuild some of the trust that has been lost.

Zingaretti is also turning his back on Renzi's political stance, which was very much inspired by the Third Way. Instead, he's seeking to shift the PD's profile cautiously but firmly to the left. The party is returning to previously neglected topics of inequality, injustice, poverty and (social) division.

The PD's road ahead

Alongside unification and the realignment of its programme, Zingaretti's third big task will be to open up his party to Italy's highly lively and diverse civil society. In the first few days after his election, Zingaretti met with the chairs of Italy's national trade union confederations. He's looking to rebuild the relationship between the unions and the PD that was ruptured by Renzi's reformism. He also intends to move the party's headquarters, currently located near the Trevi Fountain in the tourist heart of Rome, to the outskirts of the city where people the PD is supposed to represent actually live.

Following a long period of stagnation, recent opinion polls put the PD at over 22 per cent, even placing them ahead of M5S in some surveys. However, immediately after Zingaretti took up his new position, the left suffered another historic defeat in the regional elections in Basilicata, losing to a right-wing alliance after more than 20 years in power. Yet that result can hardly be blamed on Zingaretti. His first big test will be the European Parliament elections on 26 May.

The complex balancing act of drawing up the party list was completed last week without incident, as Zingaretti presented a broad range of candidates. Women make up the majority of the list, while one-third of the candidates are not PD members. This is one of the ways in which the party hopes to open itself up to society.

Nobody expects the PD to repeat the result achieved in 2014, when Renzi gained almost 41 per cent of the vote and opted to interpret this as an endorsement of his policy of national renewal – a move that ultimately led to the disastrous 2018 election. The PD's main aim will be to overtake M5S and become the second-largest party after Salvini's Lega. It remains to be seen whether M5S really is a movement of five stars or something more like five comets burning up in the atmosphere. In any case, if the PD succeeds in outperforming M5S, the message will be clear: Italy's left-wing opposition is back.



Tobias Mörschel
Brussels

Tobias Mörschel heads the EU Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Brussels, Belgium.