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Is Italy's right really in decline?

The centre-left alliance has won the local elections in Italy. But it would be too early to speak of an end to the right-wing populist wave

5:0 — this was the catchphrase with which Italy's media described the outcome of the local elections following the run-offs held on 17 October in Rome and Turin. In both cities, the candidates of the centre-left alliance led by the Partito Democratico (PD) triumphed with 60 per cent, while their right-wing opponents remained stuck at 40 per cent.

Two weeks earlier, the centre-left had already won Milan, Naples, and Bologna in the first round with over 50 per cent. The four largest cities in Italy, as well as the symbolically important Bologna, will thus be governed by mayors from the centre-left spectrum for the next five years.

A strategic gamble

This is a great success for the PD and its leader Enrico Letta, who has been in office since February 2021. Letta has focused on sharpening the party's social profile and on forming broad alliances that include the 5-Star Movement (M5S) wherever possible. In Bologna and Naples, among others, this succeeded and secured victory in the first round of elections.

Letta hopes to create a broad-based progressive camp including the Five Star Movement also at the national level. Whether this succeeds now depends above all on the M5S, which is one of the clear losers of the local eletions. Only five years ago, the protest movement launched by comedian Beppe Grillo was able to triumph in Rome as well as in Milan and thus conquer two of Italy's most important city halls. This time, the M5S found itself reduced to the margins, at least in terms of local politics, with miserable results all over the country.

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The other big losers of the election are the right-wing populist parties, the Lega under Matteo Salvini and the post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia (FdI — Brothers of Italy) under Giorgia Meloni.

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They contested all elections in an alliance, also including Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. But Salvini's and Meloni's rivalry had led to the nomination of weak candidates because of reciprocal vetoes.

Moreover, despite having a lot in common — both are friends of Le Pen and Orbán, both rail against the EU as much as against migrants — the Lega and FdI are divided when it comes to national government: while the Lega supports Mario Draghi's government, FdI is the only relevant opposition party in parliament. This was also a handicap in the right's election campaign, as was probably its flirtation with the anti-vaccination movement in a country where 85 per cent of the over-12s are now vaccinated.

Is the right growing weaker?

In this context, some political observers wanted to draw more far-reaching conclusions. The daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, for example, commented on the failures of the Five Star Movement as well as those of the right claiming that: 'The populist wave is weakening and retreating'.

But is this really true? Certainly, Prime Minister Mario Draghi has very high approval ratings. With his soft tone, he appears to be the antithesis of populist politicians like Salvini or Meloni, who fiercely oppose his policies like the introduction of anti-Covid-19 measures in the workplace.

But looking at the elections just held, the first thing that stands out is the extremely low turnout. In Rome, only 40 per cent of citizens went to the polls — ten per cent less than five years ago — and in Turin it was no better. In particular, voters from the outskirts of the city, who had traditionally voted for populist parties in recent years, stayed at home.

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So it is not voter migration from right to left, nor a successful mobilisation of the PD that explains the election result. It is first and foremost the demobilisation on the right and among the supporters of the Five Star Movement.

Therefore, it would be too early to draw conclusions from the local elections for future national scenarios. Furthermore, the following applies here: The Lega and FdI are each at around 20 per cent in the

opinion polls (the PD is at the same level). Together with smaller centre-right partners, starting with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, they still have a good chance of winning a parliamentary majority after the next elections and thus forming the government.

Enrico Letta, head of the PD, is therefore absolutely right when he now speaks of a 'triumph', but at the same time warns against 'triumphalism'. The biggest work in preventing a victory of the populist forces, which are stronger in Italy than in any other country in Western Europe, still lies ahead for the PD and its allies.



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