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Where is Italy heading?

While many are looking to Eastern Europe with concern, in Italy an unholy far-right alliance is forming to take over the government

Since February 2021, Mario Draghi, former President of the European Central Bank, has led a government in which almost all of the Italian parties are represented. They range from the right-wing populist Lega Nord and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia to the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, the moderately left Partito Democratico (PD) and the small radical left list Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal). The only significant opposition force facing this government is the post-fascist party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy).

This government emerged as a 'negative' emergency coalition. It owes its existence to the fact that – with the pandemic and Italy's involvement in the implementation of the Next Generation EU programme worth €191bn –, the majority of the parties preferred a nearly-all-party government to a snap election. Moreover, considering the current polls, some parties also felt apprehension at the prospect of new elections. It is clear that this emergency government is a purely interim solution that will end, at the latest, with the next regular elections in February 2023.

No other Western European country has such a strong populist right as Italy. Its pioneer as undoubtedly Silvio Berlusconi, who with his Forza Italia dominated the right-of-centre political segment between 1994 and 2018 and gave legitimacy to populism in the country. His variant of populism was less marked by xenophobia and strident nationalism than by fair-weather promises such as 'a million new jobs' and 'less taxes for all'.

Throughout all these years, Berlusconi has been able to rely on two junior partners: on the one hand the Lega Nord, which aggressively represented the interests of the rich northern regions against the central state and the south; and on the other hand the political heirs of Italian fascism, who emphasised nationalism and law and order. Berlusconi's list still dominated the 2013 elections with almost 22 per cent, but the 2018 elections brought about a reversal of the balance of power in the right-

wing camp. The Lega Nord's share shot up to 17 per cent, while Forza Italia fell to just 14 per cent.

The rise of the bad-weather populist right

Above all, the rise of the Lega was because of a radical change in the party under its new boss Matteo Salvini: Instead of remaining regionalist, it now adopted an ultra-nationalist stance ('Italians first!'). It also campaigned aggressively against immigration, which it branded as an 'invasion', and likewise against the EU and the euro. The Fratelli d'Italia positioned itself in a similar way. In the years of deep economic and social crisis, Italy had experienced a transition from Berlusconi's fair-weather populism to an aggressive bad-weather populism.

Salvini in particular then used his year in government in 2018–2019 to boost his popularity as interior minister with overly tough measures against immigration ('closed ports'). This resulted in the Lega earning a sensational 34 per cent in the 2019 European Parliament elections, while the Fratelli d'Italia rose to 6.4 per cent.

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To this day, these two right-wing populist parties have been able to maintain their aggregate strength. This remains the case despite the fact that the Conte II government (a coalition of Five Star and PD) steered the country through the pandemic rather well, and despite the prospect that Italy will receive recovery aid of €191bn from the EU over the next few years.

The only new element is the balance of power between Lega and Fratelli d'Italia. The 'Brothers of Italy' have experienced a steady rise since 2019 under their young, popular leader Giorgia Meloni. She received another boost in February 2021 when Salvini's Lega decided to support the Draghi government, while Meloni's party remained in the opposition and can now monopolise this role. The two parties are now tied in the opinion polls, at 20 per cent each.

Despite all the competition between them, it can be taken for granted that in the next national elections by 2023 at the latest, they will run again as an alliance. Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which has slipped to between seven and eight per cent, will also enter the race. Now and again there is even talk of a merger between Lega and Forza Italia. And

Berlusconi in particular would have few scruples about selling his Forza to Salvini's Lega if, in return, the latter were to make him the next Italian president in spring 2022. In any case, Italy faces a very real risk of being governed in the future by ultra-nationalist forces whose counterparts in Europe are Orban, Kaczyński, Le Pen, and Wilders.

The Five Star Movement's many faces

The political force that has shaken up Italy like no other over the past decade is undoubtedly the Five Star Movement (M5S). Founded only in 2009, under its charismatic leader Beppe Grillo the movement has focused primarily on sharp criticism of the 'political caste' of the traditional parties and on the promise of direct democracy even within its own movement, which was to be organised primarily online. The Five Star Movement already managed to achieve 25 per cent in the 2013 elections, and then in 2018 became the strongest force with almost 33 per cent; furthermore, it also formed the largest parliamentary groups, with 225 of the 630 MPs and 111 of the 315 senators.

In the following two years the movement formed a coalition first with the right-wing populist Lega, then with the moderately left-wing PD. Since its founding, the movement had wanted to be 'neither right nor left', and it had indeed succeeded in attracting voters from all political camps. But in the transition from opposition to government, that logic reached its limits, and the M5S paid a heavy price. It quickly slipped in the opinion polls and now ranks only between 15 and 17 per cent. At the same time, it lost 94 of its 336 parliamentarians through resignations and exclusions in all political directions – from the left to the far right.

While in opposition, the protest movement had experienced an enormous upswing because of its antagonism against the 'old' politics. But when it entered government a twofold weakness became apparent: It had neither an internal compass nor a transparent organisational structure. It preached grassroots democracy – and yet in reality Beppe Grillo continually acted as a dictatorial leader.

The Partito Democratico has also experienced its share of dynamism and upheaval.

This weakness was supposed to be overcome after the failure of the Conte government in February 2021. Conte himself – up until then not a member of the M5S – was to have become the new chairman and in fact transform the movement into a party. At the same time, the M5S wanted to position itself as a force of the centre-left with a distinctly ecological-social profile. This also included forming a stable

alliance with the PD as a counterweight to the Italian right.

In June 2021, however, Beppe Grillo and Giuseppe Conte clashed – not because of substantive differences, but solely over the question of power, which brought the M5S to the brink of a split. Conte claimed sole responsibility for leading the movement, while Grillo wanted to continue to play a central role in its decisions as a 'guarantor'. In the end, the split was averted for the time being and Conte largely prevailed. But it remains to be seen whether the compromise will also work in everyday politics. Ultimately, this depends on whether an alliance of left-of-centre parties can emerge that will be competitive against the strong right.

The Partito Democratico's factionalism

The Partito Democratico has also experienced its share of dynamism and upheaval. After Renzi's 2018 election defeat, in which the PD had shown a historically poor result with 18.7 per cent, the party allowed itself a one-year interregnum before electing a new party leader, Nicolà Zingaretti, by primary election in March 2019. Zingaretti attempted to unite the divided PD, to modernise it and to shift its focus a bit further to the left.

However, there was hardly any time for the process of organisational and programmatic consolidation, as the change from the opposition to the government bench took place in late summer 2019. Instead of pushing ahead with the realignment of the PD, the task was now a matter of forging a reasonably functioning government alliance with the M5S and, at the same time, to cope with the split from Matteo Renzi's new party, Italia Viva.

The Conte II government, which was originally motivated by efforts to block Matteo Salvini's path to the seat of government at Palazzo Chigi, soon faced its real test with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Conte II government led the country through the 2020 crisis with great determination and a great degree of unity in particular, and enjoyed very high approval ratings from the population. However, this did not translate into greater approval of the parties supporting it.

When at the end of 2020 Matteo Renzi began sawing away at Conte's chair for personal rather than substantive reasons, it was Zingaretti in particular who campaigned massively for Conte, though ultimately in vain. Zingaretti's actions were based on the idea that only through a strategic alliance between the PD and the M5S would it be possible to stop the march of the right-wing and right-wing populist parties in Italy. This course encountered the resistance of a smaller but strongly

opinionated inner-party faction, which led Zingaretti to throw in the towel, exasperated, in the spring of 2021.

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The new leader of the PD was former Prime Minister Enrico Letta, who in 2014 had been rudely pushed out of office by Matteo Renzi. This time, as soon as he was elected to office, he changed the leadership of the party and parliamentary groups. However, he consistently continued the course begun by Zingaretti of raising the party's profile and moving strategically closer to the M5S.

Italy's future is full of uncertainty

Whether this will also bear the desired fruit depends to a large extent on whether the transformation of the M5S from a populist movement into a party capable of forming alliances is successful. The upcoming local elections next autumn will be the first important test. In big cities such as Rome or Turin, however, it has not been possible to agree on jointly supported candidates. One thing is certain: The alliance sought between PD and M5S is extremely fragile and susceptible to breaking down.

The Italian party landscape is characterised by a high level of dynamism unlike in any other Western European democracy. It remains to be seen whether the M5S will manage the shift from a populist movement to a real party, and whether a strategic alliance between the PD and M5S can be formed. It is equally unclear whether in the right-wing camp the sharp rise of Giorgia Melloni's post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia will continue to put pressure on and push Salvini's Lega further on the defensive, while Lega currently tries to be both a ruling and an opposition party.

The rivalry will intensify, not least because the so-called 'white semester' will begin in September: That is, no more parliamentary elections may be held six months before the election of the president in spring 2022. This will significantly reduce the governing parties' impetus for coalition and greatly increase their willingness to improve their images. How long Draghi will manage to hold all opposing parties together in some constructive way under his government is an open question.



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