

## Italian Populists Scramble in Search of Allies for the European Election

by Gianni Bonvicini

Recent opinion polls indicate that populist parties could end up with at least 20 per cent of the vote in the upcoming EU Parliament elections on 23–26 May.<sup>1</sup> Italian citizens are forecast to make a considerable contribution to this result, and many are expecting 2019 to be a year of key populist victories at the EU level.

Populist parties have already become major domestic actors in practically all EU member states. Italy, Austria, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Finland and Denmark all have populist parties in government or in key support positions within coalitions.

<sup>1</sup> For electoral projection and comments see: Istituto Cattaneo, *Elezioni europee 2019. Terza simulazione sulla ripartizione dei seggi*, 29 January 2019, <https://www.cattaneo.org/?p=5829>; Susi Dennison and Pawel Zerka, "The 2019 European Election: How Anti-Europeans Plan to Wreck Europe and What Can Be Done to Stop It", in *ECFR Flash Scorecards*, February 2019, [https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the\\_2019\\_European\\_election](https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the_2019_European_election).

What unites these parties is a common hope that the EP elections will lead to a substantial change in the political equilibrium across the EU, providing them with new avenues to promote their agendas in Europe.

Despite their political differences and the conflicting national interests they claim to represent, populist parties do share certain ideological affinities: a rejection of cosmopolitan elites and the establishment, fear of "wild" and unregulated globalisation, a disdain for the liberal media and contempt for the "eurobureaucrats" governing the EU.

Within this mix, Italy is today regarded as one of the most eurosceptic countries in Europe. This represents a dramatic reversal in Rome's long-standing reputation as a fully-fledged pro-European member of the Union. One of the six founding members of the EU, Italy has traditionally been at the forefront of pro-integration plans at

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the European level, in cooperation with such strategic partners as Germany and France.

Yet, a series of positions and initiatives taken by the current Italian coalition government have seriously damaged bilateral relations with several member states and France in particular.<sup>2</sup> The government has also made no effort to seek alignments with Berlin, Paris or other countries in view of a re-launching the European project, as has often happened in the past.

This epochal change has a lot to do with the composition of the current Italian government, led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and made up of a coalition between the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*MoVimento 5 Stelle* – M5S) and the right-wing League party.

Both parties can be defined as populist and eurosceptic but with a substantial difference: the League is a strongly right-wing and anti-migrant party, while the M5S has a more ambiguous and volatile nature, and is supported by a mixed left- and right-leaning electorate.

Italy's two governing parties are also affiliated with different groupings in the European Parliament. The League is a member of the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group, which includes Marie Le Pen's National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) and other far-right parties.

<sup>2</sup> On this topic, see Jean-Pierre Darnis, "The Political Rollercoaster of Italian-French Relations", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|14 (February 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10003>.

The M5S uncomfortably participates in the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group, which includes, among others, the hard eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Brexit Party as well as one representative of the extreme-right Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland* – AfD).

With 14 MEPs the M5S is by far the largest group within the EFDD. However, a recent analysis on a statistical cross-section of around 1,500 roll call votes shows that the M5S vote patterns aligned with those of the EFDD group by only 51 per cent. Indeed, votes cast by M5S MEPs had a higher percentage of alignment with other European groups, including the Greens (74 per cent), the Socialists (71 per cent) and even the European Peoples Party (61 per cent).<sup>3</sup>

Over the past few months, leaders of the Five Star Movement have feverishly sought new European allies ahead of the EP election. According to a recent poll, the M5S would gain 21 seats in the next EP, up from the present 14.<sup>4</sup>

After declaring, and then withdrawing, his support for the French Yellow Vest

<sup>3</sup> On M5S voting behaviour see: Istituto Cattaneo, *Verso le elezioni europee 2019. Una relazione paradossale: il M5s nel Parlamento europeo*, 20 February 2019, <https://www.cattaneo.org/?p=5907>.

<sup>4</sup> Opinion electoral polls at national level can be found in the European Parliament website: Kantar Public, *European Elections 2019. Report on the Developments in the Political Landscape*, Brussels, 28 February 2019, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/political-landscape-developments>.

movement, a move that has badly affected French-Italian diplomatic relations, Luigi Di Maio, the M5S leader, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Development, Labour and Social Policies gathered the representatives of four small populist parties in Rome. Held on 15 February, the meeting included parties from Croatia (Zivi Zid), Poland (Kukiz'15), Finland (Liike Nyt) and Greece (Akkel) in an effort to forge a more homogeneous parliamentary group in the next EP.<sup>5</sup>

The challenges facing Matteo Salvini, the undisputed leader of the League party and Italy's second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, are perhaps less daunting, but still considerable.

Several far-right parties allied with the League have a large following and some of them are part of governing coalitions, in Austria and Finland for example. Aside from the well-established link with Le Pen's National Rally, Salvini's strategy is to create a larger and more ambitious group in the new EP.

The League is likely to make big gains in the EP election. According to the aforementioned opinion poll it will move from 6 to 28 seats in the new parliament, boosting Salvini's chances of becoming the leader of the European right. Salvini has even argued that the EP should be given more power since it is the only democratically elected EU institution and the one in which eurosceptics will have the strongest

<sup>5</sup> AFP, "Italy's M5S Forms New Populist Bloc to Fight EU Elections", in *The Local*, 15 February 2019, <https://www.thelocal.it/20190215/italys-m5s-forms-new-populist-bloc-eu-elections>.

voice. His ambition is to unite the EU's usually fractious far-right and the anti EU establishment forces.<sup>6</sup> Not an easy task.

The fact is that the conservative and right-wing camp is highly fragmented. Viktor Orbán's right-wing anti-migrant Fidesz party, which rules Hungary and is still a member of the EPP, has been under the limelight as of late and can serve as an example.

Orbán has declared he has no intention to leave the EPP but has also made no secret of his wish to push the EPP to the right. However the EPP's candidate for the presidency of the European Commission, Manfred Weber, and other EPP leaders have recently attacked Orbán. In particular, they condemned the defamatory campaign he launched against EU institutions ahead of the EP election, calling him to backtrack, albeit, it seems, in vain.<sup>7</sup>

Orbán has traditionally enjoyed the support of several EPP parties, including Italy's center-right party Forza Italia. Yet, in view of recent developments, Orbán's Fidesz party faces the concrete prospect of being expelled from the EPP. Salvini hopes that in this case he could form an alliance with Orbán. However, the Hungarian leader has already declared that outside the EPP his new "political family" could be the

<sup>6</sup> "The Year of Populism: Europe's Right Wing Takes Aim at the EU", in *Spiegel Online*, 4 January 2019, <http://spon.de/afopV>.

<sup>7</sup> Florian Eder, "Manfred Weber Threatens Orbán's party with Expulsion from EPP", in *Politico*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/manfred-weber-threatens-viktor-orban-fidez-party-with-expulsion-from-epp>.

governing Polish party (PiS).<sup>8</sup>

Salvini himself has tried to reach out to the PiS Polish party. In a recent meeting with the leader of PiS Jaroslaw Kaczynski, he called for the creation of a wide right-wing alliance in the run-up to the European election, but PiS is today a member of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. Moreover, if Brexit eventually takes place and the British Conservatives leave the ECR group, PiS, which is forecast to confirm its 18 seats, will become the ECR group's largest national party. Therefore, Kaczynski is in no need to join – or forge an alliance with – Salvini's ENF group, at least for the time being.

The standing of Italy's opposition parties, on the other hand, is far from brilliant. The Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico* – PD), member of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group in the EP, is forecast to fall from the peak of 31 seats it obtained five years ago, to only 14 in 2019.

The new PD leader, Nicola Zingaretti, who won the party's primary election on 3 March, faces the daunting task of reviving the party in a couple of months ahead of European vote.

Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia, which is also in the opposition, is today isolated, as it was abandoned by the League, its long-lasting partner after the last year's national election,

and plays a marginal role inside the EPP. Forza Italia is projected to lose 5 seats, moving from 13 to 8 in the next EP.

Things might change over the coming weeks. At the recent regional elections in Abruzzo and Sardinia, the M5S got a thumping. However, Salvini's League has continued to gain ground. No doubt, even if the EP election is likely to be more centred on European topics than in the past, it will be a crucial test of the level of popular support for the Conte government and its durability. A big defeat of the M5S may even precipitate a political crisis leading to snap elections.

The scarce interest of the Conte government towards Italy's traditional partners might result in a gradual marginalisation of the country, a sort of *political "Italexit"* from the pro-EU core group of states.

Being in the company of nationalistic and populist movements is not in the DNA of Italian politics and might damage not only its credibility, but also its economic and foreign policy, while contributing to a growing political fragmentation of the EU.

All of this would have been inconceivable just one year ago.

15 March 2019

<sup>8</sup> "Orban Says Fidesz May Leave EPP, Look at Poland for Alliance", in *EURACTIV*, 8 March 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1320798>; Eszter Zalan, "Orban Says 'Sorry', EPP Says 'Not Enough'", in *EUobserver*, 14 March 2019.

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