

Italy and Russia: New Alignment or More of the Same?

by Nona Mikhelidze

The 2018 parliamentary elections in Italy marked a spectacular victory for populist parties – the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*MoVimento 5 Stelle* – M5S) and the right-wing anti-migrant League party –, reflecting rising nationalist and anti-EU sentiments in a key European country and a founding member of the EU.

The electoral rhetoric of Italy's two populist parties appeared close to Russian desiderata, even a sort of lullaby song for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Moscow has long encouraged nationalist and anti-EU forces in a not so subtle effort to enhance Russian soft power while working to erode trust and cooperation among EU member states.

The ideological affinities shared by Italy's two governing coalition parties – the M5S and the League – with Putin's Russia created much concern among Italy's traditional allies and parties,

particularly in Europe and the United States, who feared that the new Italian coalition government led by Giuseppe Conte would realign Italian foreign policy towards Russia.

Both the League and the M5S have long taken aim at the perceived shortcomings of the EU and its growing intrusion into the domestic affairs of member states. Both have articulated narratives based on a supposed need to “take back” control, exposing the virtues of national sovereignty over those of multilateralism and EU integration.

Another prominent issue concerned migration. The two parties often portrayed the so-called migration crisis as a further demonstration of the inability of the European Union and Italian government to deal with the phenomenon. Moreover, they harshly criticised the failings of the EU and the United States to resolve the conflicts in Syria and Libya.

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The US tended to be described as a great power unable or unwilling to create peace in Syria and more broadly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), while the EU was accused of creating a geopolitical vacuum in the region only to then remain passive in front of the unravelling of Syria and Libya and the ensuing uptake in migratory flows towards Europe and Italy.

Meanwhile, following Moscow's 2015 intervention in Syria on the side of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Russia has been depicted by the League and M5S as a strong and proactive country that is willing to take risks to protect its interests, unilaterally where necessary. In turn, the image of Putin as a courageous and skilful leader has gained currency in Italy (and Europe), particularly among right-wing populists, and is often contrasted with the undecidedness of the EU.

Finally, the EU was also described as weak, hypocritical and biased towards Kiev in dealing with the crisis in Ukraine. Indeed, opposition to the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia emerged as a central component of the political agenda of Italy's M5S and the League, not least in light of the close economic relations between Rome and Moscow.¹

While the electoral success of populist groups in Italy is not directly connected

¹ "Salvini: 'Dal governo toglierò le sanzioni alla Russia. Danno a nostra economia'", in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/?p=4266011>. See also: Elisa Carbone, "Di Maio: 'Stop alle sanzioni contro la Russia'", in *LineaPress*, 28 March 2017, <https://www.lineapress.it/?p=35365>.

to Russia or Putin, these ideological affinities and the increasingly close relationship between representatives of the Russian government and Italian far-right and populist groups have been apparent for some time.

In 2017, the League signed a co-operation agreement with Putin's United Russia party,² with the declared aim to develop business ties and work together within the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. In 2016, one of the leaders of M5S and presently Italy's Deputy Foreign Minister, Manlio Di Stefano, addressed United Russia's party congress claiming that Russia was a "friendly country for the reconstruction of a new multipolar world through the principles of respect of sovereignty".³ In the same speech, he also stressed opposition to the "militarisation of Eastern Europe" and underlined the importance of Russia as a partner in resolving the crisis in Syria and Libya.

Bearing this context in mind, concern about an Italian realignment towards Russia may be understandable. However, one year since the instalment of Italy's new coalition government,

² Max Seddon and James Politi, "Putin's Party Signs Deal with Italy's Far-Right Lega Nord", in *Financial Times*, 6 March 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/0d33d22c-0280-11e7-ace0-1ce02ef0def9>. Subsequently, a memorandum was signed between the youth movements of United Russia and the League. See: Matteo Carnieletto, "Lega e Russia più vicine: siglato nuovo accordo tra movimenti giovanili", in *Il Giornale*, 17 November 2018, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/node/1603492>.

³ "Manlio Di Stefano (M5S) a Mosca per il XV Congresso di Russia Unita", in *YouTube*, 28 June 2016, <https://youtu.be/0Kmq3AONBX4>.

very little seems to have changed in terms of concrete policy decisions. Indeed, on the most crucial issue, EU sanctions on Russia, Italy has twice agreed to the common EU line, consenting in June and December 2018 to the renewal of sanctions on Moscow.

No doubt, Russian influence in Italy remains strong but it has been long before the arrival of the current government. In a political-cultural climate that is more open to the Putin's geopolitical narratives, Italian intellectual and political elites have actively advocated for dialogue and an opening towards Russia. Indeed, there appears to be a growing infatuation with Russia and Putin among certain intellectual quarters in Italy, with some advocating for a Russian pillar in Italian foreign policy, adding to Rome's traditional emphasis on transatlantic relations, Europe and the Mediterranean.⁴

Over the years, the relations between the two countries have remained strong despite Russia's annexation of Crimea and its intervention in Ukraine. Economic cooperation has always been substantial, especially in the energy domain. Hundreds of Italian businesses have carved out niches in the Russian market, including in the banking sector. Moreover, tourism flows from Russia to Italy have increased dramatically since 2009.

It was in 2016, under the centre-left Renzi government, and in the midst

⁴ Nona Mikhelidze, "Italy and Eastern Europe: A Dossier Subordinated to the Rome-Moscow Axis?", in *GIP Policy Memos*, 2017, <http://gip.ge/?p=7691>.

of EU sanctions against Russia, that officials in Rome and Moscow signed deals worth more than 1 billion euro. These involved co-operation in various sectors, including space, energy, shipping and aeronautics.⁵

An uptake in official visits also took place during the subsequent Gentiloni government. Italy's President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, went to Moscow in April 2017, following an earlier visit by the then Interior Minister Marco Minniti. The same year also witnessed visits by Prime Minister Gentiloni and Carlo Calenda, Minister of Economic Development. Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano, for his part, visited Moscow twice in 2017.

The Conte government, like previous ones, has continued to insist on the need for dialogue with Russia and work towards a normalisation of the relationship. In October 2018, during his visit to Moscow, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the League Party, Matteo Salvini, promised to end the sanctions regime against Russia.⁶ Salvini's visit was followed by that of Prime Minister Conte, who also declared that Italy would do everything possible to lift the sanctions, and signed 13 bilateral economic agreements valued at about 1.5 billion euro.⁷

⁵ Sofia Lotto Persio, "Italy Strengthens Russian Ties", in *GTR Global Trade Review*, 21 June 2016, <https://www.gtreview.com/?p=58866>.

⁶ Antonella Scott, "Salvini a Mosca con le imprese: 'Il regime delle sanzioni finirà'", in *Il Sole 24Ore*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2018-10-17/salvini-mosca-le-imprese-il-regime-sanzioni-finira-230550.shtml>.

⁷ "Conte da Putin: 'Sanzioni da superare'. Firmati 13 accordi commerciali Italia-Russia", in *La*

In the same period, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Enzo Moavero Milanesi, met his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, and invited him to participate in a conference on Libya organised in Palermo in November 2018, arguing that Italy and Russia had “a shared vision for the promotion of safety and stabilisation” in the MENA region.⁸

Rhetoric aside, Italy’s present government – like the previous one – has not recognised the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum and Russia’s annexation of the peninsula, continuing to call for the full implementation of the so-called 2015 “Minsk II” agreement. Prime Minister Conte supported Trump’s idea in the summer of 2018 for Russia to be accepted back into the G7, but the Italian government has done nothing to follow up on this idea.⁹

As Minister Salvini argued in October 2018, the Italian government has other priorities, including migration and negotiations with the EU over Italy’s fiscal policy, rather than pushing

Stampa, 25 October 2018, <https://www.lastampa.it/2018/10/24/esteri/putin-riceve-conte-litalia-partner-economico-importante-della-russia-wZ7LvVSGdAoTrFjD0O7KbM/pagina.html>.

⁸ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Minister Moavero to Visit Moscow on 8 October Where He Will Meet His Counterpart, Lavrov*, 5 October 2018, https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/il-ministro-moavero-in-visita-a-mosca-l-8-ottobre-dove-vedra-in-particolare-il-suo-omologo-lavrov.html. Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev eventually attended the conference instead of Lavrov.

⁹ David M. Herszenhorn, “Italian PM Breaks with EU, Backs Trump’s Call for Russia to Return to G8”, in *Politico*, 8 June 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/conte-trump-russia-g8-breaks-with-eu-backs-call-for-to-return>.

for an end to sanctions against Russia.¹⁰ Moreover, Italy’s reluctance to oppose sanctions also touches on Italy’s traditional commitment to the transatlantic alliance and in particular its relationship with the US.

Indeed, during his 2017 official visit in Washington, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the M5S, Luigi Di Maio, reassured US counterparts on Rome’s continued commitment to the EU, NATO and transatlantic unity vis-a-vis Russia, as well as Italy’s participation in military missions abroad.¹¹

All this brings us to conclude that when it comes to Italy’s foreign policy towards Russia there has been no concrete policy difference compared to previous governments. Ideological affinities have so far not translated into a new alignment marked by concrete pro-Russian political decisions in Rome.

However, the upcoming European elections in May could change the picture. If the forces of populism and nationalism make substantial gains, Italy’s coalition partners may perhaps be emboldened to move closer towards Russia. However, since sovereigntists are likely to remain a minority in the next European Parliament, and, in fact, a fragmented one, Italy can generally be expected to continue its

¹⁰ Marta Allevato, “Salvini a Mosca ha spiegato cosa farà l’Italia per fermare le sanzioni alla Russia”, in *Agi*, 8 October 2018, https://www.agi.it/politica/salvini_mosca_russia_sanzioni-4500687/news/2018-10-18.

¹¹ “Di Maio a Washington: ‘Ecco la politica estera di M5s’”, in *Tgcom24*, 14 November 2017, https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/politica/di-maio-a-washington-ecco-la-politica-estera-di-m5s-_3106506-201702a.shtml.

traditional foreign policy orientation, seeking – not always successfully – to balance multiple dossiers and partnerships without breaking with the EU consensus or its traditional alliance frameworks.

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