

Giorgia Meloni's Italy and Europe: Ambitions and Realities

by Nathalie Tocci and Leo Goretti

In autumn 2022, the electoral victory of the right-centre coalition led by Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI, Brothers of Italy) and the subsequent establishment of her government caused scepticism and apprehension among international commentators. Concerns stemmed not only from it being the first administration in the history of post-war Italy whose majority partner, FdI, is rooted in the post-fascist tradition; more concretely, the inclusion within the coalition of parties such as Matteo Salvini's *Lega* (League) and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (Come on Italy), which had entertained political and personal relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia prior to the invasion of Ukraine, raised doubts about Italy's continuing support for Kyiv and the Western coalition. In reality, unwavering Atlanticist and pro-Ukraine views were repeatedly voiced by Meloni during the election campaign already, and – apart from a few unfortunate remarks by single individuals – this stance has been unambiguously upheld by the new government since it took office, as

sealed by the Prime Minister's visit to Kyiv in February and to Washington in July 2023.¹

A more complex picture emerges regarding relations with the European Union and European partners. Historically, in the post-war period, European integration has been a crucial dimension of Italy's foreign policy, along with Atlanticism and strong support for multilateralism. Rome was one of the founders of the European communities, and European integration was long seen by ruling and opposition parties alike as key to Italy's economic, cultural and social modernisation. Since the 1990s, however, criticism of the European project began to emerge in Italy, especially among the new centre-right parties, which developed a so-called "Euro-realist" approach when in government, whereby Italy's national

¹ Nona Mikhelidze, "Italy's Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 23|06 (February 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16643>.

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interest would not necessarily coincide with deeper European integration.² Outright Euroscepticism became more apparent since the Eurozone and migration “crises” of the 2010s, leading to the emergence of so-called “sovereignist” narratives depicting the EU as an “antagonist”, which found resonance especially among populist parties.³ This narrative, however, lost momentum as a result of the unprecedented level of funding granted to Italy through the NextGenerationEU programme in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the aftermath of the 2022 election, managing relations with Europe was thus a crucial task for the newly elected Italian government.

Meloni the Eurorealist

Against this backdrop, Meloni's approach to Europe was centred on the vindication of Italy's “national interests” but within the framework of European integration and with a self-declared ambition to play a protagonist role. In the run-up to the 2022 election, FdI's electoral programme jettisoned some populist tones of the past (especially regarding the euro). Instead, the emphasis was placed on the need for Italy to “return as a protagonist in Europe” and to “relaunch the system of European integration, for a Europe

of homelands, founded on peoples' interests”.⁴ In a similar vein, in her inaugural address to the Chamber of Deputies, Meloni stressed the desire for Italy to stand “with head high” in Europe and the other international fora, “with a constructive spirit, but without subordination or inferiority complexes”. The emphasis on the “national interest” was accompanied by the acknowledgement of “a common European and Western destiny” – as well as of the importance of a frank dialogue within the European institutions, taking a “pragmatic” approach.⁵ As a matter of fact, Meloni's first mission abroad as Italy's prime minister was to Brussels.

In its first months of government, the Meloni administration adopted a Eurorealist stance in line with that of previous centre-rights governments from the early 2000s. While expressing a strong preference for an intergovernmental view of Europe, the Italian government acted within the framework of EU rules and governance. Meloni tried to bring forward, with mixed results, the Italian point of view on the main issues under discussion in European fora – from energy to migration. In terms of economic policy, despite a few contentious measures, the 2023 budget law on the

² Lucia Quaglia, “The Role of Italy in the European Union: Between Continuity and Change”, in *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (August 2007), p. 133-148, DOI 10.1080/14613190701414426.

³ Fabrizio Coticchia, “A Sovereignist Revolution? Italy's Foreign Policy under the ‘Yellow-Green’ Government”, in *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (December 2021), p. 739-759, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00259-0>.

⁴ Fratelli d'Italia, *Il programma. Pronti a risollevar l'Italia. Elezioni politiche 25 settembre 2022*, August 2022, point 25, https://www.fratelli-italia.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Brochure_programma_FdI_qr_def.pdf.

⁵ Italian Government, *President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Address on the Government Programme*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21000>.

whole met Brussels' expectations.⁶ The management of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan funds and related reforms was instead more troubled, marked by sluggish implementation, delays and subsequent requests for revision by the Italian government.⁷

Migration and the economy: Dark clouds ahead

One year after the establishment of Giorgia Meloni's government, dark clouds are gathering on the horizon of Italy–EU relations. In the realm of policy, Rome is faced with increasing challenges, although these have often been concealed, belittled or even denied in the past months. This is especially true for two key areas: migration and the economy.

On migration, while unauthorised arrivals to Italy through the Central Mediterranean route were soaring, in June, Meloni tried to put on a good face by declaring that Europe was eventually addressing the external dimension of migration, which according to her had previously been "unthinkable".⁸ However, as the agreement reached

between the EU and Turkey in 2016 at the height of the "migration crisis" shows,⁹ there is actually nothing new in this approach. For many years now, the Union has systematically failed to address the migration issue in a holistic way – that is, considering the internal, external and border management dimensions together – and has instead tried to shift the responsibility onto countries of origin and transit through a transactional approach – with the latter being called upon to keep, readmit or repatriate migrants in exchange for economic support.¹⁰ Agreements reached on paper, however, amount to very little when the counterparts do not duly implement them. The memorandum of understanding between the EU and Tunisia signed amid great optimism on 16 July seems to be a case in point: arrivals from the North African country to Italy increased by almost 60 per cent in the eight weeks after the agreement, while a group of members of European Parliament who wanted to monitor the situation in the country was recently refused entry.¹¹ The reality is that Meloni is focusing on the external dimension of EU migration policies because, while migration flows are on the rise under her government, Italy has so far failed

⁶ Nicoletta Pirozzi, "I rapporti Italia-Ue", in Ferdinando Nelli Feroci and Leo Goretti (eds), *L'Italia dal governo Draghi al governo Meloni. Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2022*, Rome, IAI, January 2023, p. 25-31, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16471>.

⁷ Giuseppe Fonte, "Italy Struggling to Meet Reform Policy Targets Agreed for EU for Post-COVID Funds", in *Reuters*, 8 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italy-struggling-meet-reform-policy-targets-agreed-eu-post-covid-funds-2023-06-08>.

⁸ Italian Government, *President Meloni's Doorstep Following the European Council Meeting of 29-30 June*, 30 June 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/23062>.

⁹ European Council, *EU-Turkey Statement*, 18 March 2016, <http://europa.eu/!Uv88TM>.

¹⁰ Luca Barana and Asly Okyay, "Shaking Hands with Saied's Tunisia: The Paradoxes and Trade-offs Facing the EU", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 23|40 (August 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17362>.

¹¹ Alessandra Ziniti, "L'intesa flop con la Tunisia, sbarchi aumentati del 60%. Salvini: è un atto di guerra", in *Repubblica*, 14 September 2023; Lisa O'Carroll, "MEPs Refused Entry to Tunisia Two Months after Signing of Migration Deal", in *The Guardian*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/zq9me>.

to achieve anything on the internal dimension. This is true even for the bland agreement on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum reached at the Justice and Home Affairs Council in early June, which – in spite of Meloni's failed mediation efforts – has been strongly opposed by her supposed allies in Poland and Hungary.¹²

If the Italian government has already failed in migration policy, the key area of economic policy looks increasingly troubled too. Having very little fiscal room for manoeuvre, Italy is unable to benefit from any relaxation of state aid rules; hence, Rome supported the establishment of a new European sovereignty fund as the backbone for an EU-wide industrial policy.¹³ Many member states are sceptical,¹⁴ though, and Italy's apparent troubles in spending existing NextGenerationEU funds provides a very good argument against it. Indeed, for the time being, ambitions for a new fund have been scaled back drastically, with a "platform" on strategic technologies being established instead. Added to this are the dilemmas in the negotiation of the new Stability and Growth Pact. Germany, in particular, is stonewalling on the

¹² "Meloni 'Not Disappointed' with Poland, Hungary over Migrant Deadlock", in *Ansa*, 30 June 2023, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2023/06/30/migrants-meloni-not-disappointed-with-poland-hungary_ec2352bb-02d2-4860-97bc-04780f6d58ba.html.

¹³ Italian Government, *President Meloni's Introduction at Her Press Conference following the Special European Council Meeting*, 10 February 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21805>.

¹⁴ Jan Strupczewski, "Seven EU Countries Oppose New EU Funding as Response to U.S. Subsidy Plan – Letter", in *Reuters*, 27 January 2023, <http://reut.rs/3Jgftt6>.

European Commission's proposal, which would significantly benefit Italy by bringing greater flexibility to the old rules. Indeed, Italy's priority should be the creation of a common front along the lines of the Commission's proposal, which may well include member states such as Spain and France. But some postures of the Italian government are instead weakening Italy's credibility and negotiating strength: so far, it has been unable to compose an internal quarrel over the ratification of the European Stability Mechanism (already ratified by all other Eurozone states), while its campaign for excluding certain types of public investment from EU deficit targets is unlikely to be successful. There is a real risk that, in the end, the new Pact will be well below Italian expectations and needs.¹⁵

Italy's true national interest: A stronger Europe

The coming months will most likely see Meloni intensify her efforts to prepare the ground for a change of majority at the European level after the June 2024 election, working towards a coalition inclusive of conservative and nationalist forces. However, the political cohesion of a supranational alliance between movements, leaders and governments whose watchword is the vindication of their respective national interests "first and foremost" would be likely put to the test over and over again. Even domestically, in the run up to next year's European

¹⁵ Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, "L'incrocio pericoloso fra legge di bilancio e riforma del Patto di Stabilità", in *AffarInternazionali*, 29 August 2023, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=104942>.

Parliament elections, Meloni now faces increasing opposition from within her own government, pushed to run a populist-nationalist race against Matteo Salvini. Whatever affinities European conservatives and nationalists may find in the realm of values, the extent to which they would be able to find common ground on issues pertaining, among others, to migration – as has already been evidenced in the past months – or economic governance seems uncertain, to say the least.

There's the rub: an international context riven by multiple crises and increased competition, even assuming that one follows the logic of merely protecting the national interest, for a country like Italy – with the second-highest government debt-to-GDP ratio in the European Union and the highest old-age dependency ratio of all EU member states¹⁶ – the priority should be further promoting European integration, advancing Italian demands in a frank and constructive manner within strengthened EU fora and institutions. National ambitions must always confront international realities. An overestimation of one's own means, any attempts to water down the system of supranational governance, or a resurfacing confrontational attitude would damage not only the European project, but Italy first and foremost.

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¹⁶ Eurostat, "Government Debt Down to 91.2% of GDP in Euro Area", in *Euro Indicators*, No. 83/2023 (21 July 2023), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/2-21072023-ap>; Eurostat, *Half of EU's Population Older than 44.4 Years in 2022*, 22 February 2023, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230222-1>.

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- 23 | 43 Tiziano Breda, *Can Regional Governance Help Safeguard Guatemala's Democracy?*
- 23 | 42 Nathalie Tocci, *Bipolar, Multipolar, Nonpolar All at Once: Our World at the Time of the Russia–Ukraine War*
- 23 | 41 Matilde Biagioni, *China's Push-in Strategy in the Arctic and Its Impact on Regional Governance*
- 23 | 40 Luca Barana and Asli Selin Okyay, *Shaking Hands with Saied's Tunisia: The Paradoxes and Trade-offs Facing the EU*
- 23 | 39 Maria Hadjipavlou, *The Exclusion of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Cyprus Peace Negotiations: A Critical Perspective*
- 23 | 38 Michelangelo Freyrie, *Italy Punches Below Its Weight on the European Defence Fund*
- 23 | 37 Luca Cinciripini, *The Arctic within EU Strategies: A Renewed Centrality*
- 23 | 36 Karim Mezran and Alissa Pavia, *Giorgia Meloni's Foreign Policy and the Mattei Plan for Africa: Balancing Development and Migration Concerns*
- 23 | 35 Andrea Dessì and Akram Ezzamouri, *Meloni's Visit to DC: Beware of Europe's Smokescreen on Tunisia*