

Pointing to the right



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Last week, almost on the eve of the Italian elections, the President of the European Commission was delivering a speech and the media asked a question on whether there are concerns about the Italian elections

President von der Leyen replied that whatever democratic government is willing to work with the EU, obviously they will be working together. However, the President warned Italy of consequences should they veer away from their democratic principles and reminded the audience that they have the tools at their disposal; a reference to the suspension of EU funds to Hungary to primarily address the judicial independence and anti-corruption reforms.

Unsurprisingly, both Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini reprehended the statement of the President of the EU Commission on their social media pages and accentuated that Brussels must not interfere to influence the outcome of a general election, as Member States are sovereign to choose their governments. Obviously, their supporters came out in droves on the social media criticising the President's statement in support of their political idols. Personally, I would have avoided such a statement ahead of a general election. The reaction of populist politicians to such a statement is clearly visible on the wall.

Needless to say, the President of the European Commission is also the guardian of the Treaties, and the EU Commission is obliged to include the necessary safeguards. Nonetheless, the statement was untimely, as it is more opportune to wait for the outcome of a general election. Normally, once the new members of a democratically elected government begin interacting with their European peers, while they attend for their official meetings in Brussels, the undiplomatic narrative subdues. Indeed, I remember the first meetings attended by Luigi Di Maio in his capacity as Foreign Affairs Minister of Italy, and the political narrative and demands changed a few months down



Far-Right party Brothers of Italy's leader Giorgia Meloni speaks to the media at her party's electoral headquarters in Rome

the line. However, the context was different. It was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine.

Undoubtedly, there are two different realities when dealing with local politics and Eurocrats. Similarly, the negotiations around the table consist of multiple compromises. Understandably, Italy is not Greece, and the political leaders of the former are cognisant of their political and economic leverage, especially in the euro system. Certainly, the new government will be under pressure to deliver on their promises. In Europe, including in Italy, the cost of living spiralled out of control and people are feeling the pinch on their pockets and falling into destitution. Obviously, the narrative that the EU sanctions damaged the EU more than Russia has become seemingly true. On the other hand, the EU is currently positioned on a different political trajectory, especially when negotiating with Member States, and this might bring a difference in the behaviour of those pulling the string in the Berlaymont and EEAS buildings.

Clearly, the European Commission is not able to throw

their weight around the newly elected Italian government, and there are profound considerations to factor in before taking any hasty political decisions. Also, there are growing concerns in Brussels, perhaps by France and Germany, that a new populist front is forming and that could block EU decision-making. Here, we have a situation where the balance of power within the EU could easily shift. Indeed, it is not in the interest of Member States to push Italy to join the likes of Hungary and Poland. A populist faction can delay several negotiations that require unanimity voting in Council including in Common and Foreign Security Policy. In fact, the current crises require flexibility and rapid responses to counter the effects resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly in the realm of energy security to deal with both the energy crunch and the energy inflation. To make matters worse, media reported former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi saying that Russia had been pushed into the war on Ukraine. And given that Forza Italia is essentially part of the coalition government that

Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia need to consider, the comments of Silvio Berlusconi are certainly of great concern to Brussels and the Western allies.

Surely, Italy would need to compromise to work with the rest of the Member States, and the European Commission would need to tread with caution, otherwise the economic consequences can further damage the European continent. The heightened political platform of the newly elected Italian government relates to the anti-immigration policies. Indeed, the media reported Giorgia Meloni's statement to use the military navy to push back migrant boats before they enter Italian waters, or they arrive on Italian soil. Let's not forget that Italy manages a project relating to the Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya, which funds pertain to the EU Trust Fund for Africa. As part of the project Italy supports the Libyan Coast Guards the Libyan Coast Guard and Port Security. I am positive that the European Commission through DG NEAR is guarding the spending of the funds in the most effective manner.

Moreover, one of the most important EU military operations, EUNAVFOR MED Irini, is situated in Rome and there are countless positive externalities that benefits the Italian navy through this operation including superior aerial surveillance and maritime coordination.

Those in Malta celebrating the victory in Italy must bear in mind that any extreme decisions taken within the Italian political context, might affect us directly. What disturbs me most, though is the fact that the EU institutions are inundated with nationalities other than Maltese. Normally, when governments turn difficult, particularly with countries like Italy – I remember Conte's government – the backroom deals are not that transparent. Surely, the texts on the table would require thorough scrutiny before agreeing to anything. However, the equilibrium of the text is always in favour of the bigger Member States. Sincerely, I hope that such backroom deals would not impact Malta negatively.

We have now entered a different territory, and the political dimensions both in Italy and in the EU warrant granular analysis, especially for those projects managed by the Italian government in partnership with the EU Commission. We must not be naïve. The Maltese government must ensure that the Maltese interests are safeguarded when dealing with the EU Institutions through its interlocutors and diplomats abroad.

Certainly, Italy cannot take unilateral decisions and pull out of any multilateral agreements at the detriment of other Member States. Essentially, agreements and compromises produce suboptimal outcomes when negotiating in Council, and each Member State safeguards its national interests. However, the national interest must always reflect and align to the European values, which values are sealed in the charters and treaties that all Member states signed up to. Otherwise, we are going to witness the beginning of the fragmentation of Europe Union, which would create a vacuum that is further exploited by populist parties. And that is the end of the peace we have taken for granted all our lives!

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