

Italy: Analysis of the Key political trends at the national level in the aftermath of the Regional Elections

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Executive summary:

- The 5-Star Movement's plummeting voter support, growing internal tensions, and leadership void have come to a head as the party prepares to hold its conference after months of deadlock to prevent a split. Under these circumstances, the 5SM remains the main source of instability for the national coalition Government, especially ahead of crucial votes on a number of divisive initiatives sponsored by the Democratic Party.
- Fratelli d'Italia seems to be the only party consistently on the rise across the country. Party leader Giorgia Meloni's strategy to present herself as a reliable and effective decisionmaker operating within the existing institutional framework rather than trying to dismantle it seems to be paying off. However, a traditional nationalist-conservative party can arguably only go so far, and its rise might actually end up playing into the hands of its centre-left opponents.
- As it often happens when the party faces a setback, Lega's performance below expectations in the latest regional elections reignited an internal debate about its political positioning. However, Lega remains the largest party in Italy and Salvini's leadership remains undisputed for the time being.

1. 5SM's very low performance and internal turmoil

After winning a staggering 32% of the vote in the 2018 general election and becoming the senior stakeholder in both the Cabinets headed by Prime Minister Conte, **the 5-Star Movement has experienced a steep decline** in virtually all following elections, culminating in its very low performance in the September 2020 regional elections. This latest setback in the 5SM's downward spiral has further fuelled **the party's internal turmoil, with the spectre of splintering off into multiple entities looming increasingly large**.

5SM has struggled to define a coherent political identity since its foundation: this was probably one of the reasons of its rise over the last decade, as the two coalitions (centre-left and centre-right) which had alternated in power since the Nineties were increasingly perceived by the electorate as equally responsible for pushing a neoliberal agenda and presiding over Italy's economic decline and 5SM attracted disaffected voters from both sides. Once in power, however, portraying themselves generically as the "*anti-establishment*" party ceased to be an asset, **particularly as the policies advocated by Lega (on immigration as well as on the independence of the Bank of Italy and the relations with the EU) triggered a new political polarisation**. While Lega, Fratelli d'Italia (on the right) and the Democratic Party (on the left) were solidly on one side of the argument on all these issues, 5SM was not able to reconcile its diverse factions virtually spanning the whole political spectrum and ended up embracing the policies of whoever its junior partner in Government was at any time (first Lega, then PD). Although every election (European, national regional/local) features different factors at play, this is a common thread running through 5SM's poor showings over the last 2 years.

The 5SM's current predicament is compounded by the party's long-lasting leadership void. Former 5SM leader Di Maio resigned as far back as January 2020. Since then, Deputy Minister of the Interior Crimi has been in charge as interim 5SM leader with the purpose of guiding the party to its conference, initially scheduled for March 2020 but postponed indefinitely ostensibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The press is now reporting that **the 5SM is considering holding its party conference on 7-8 November**, but the very fact that a political

party which has made digital democracy a core pillar of its political platform chose to push back the election of its new leader for so long points to **profound disarray within its ranks**.

Most recently, **this crisis was further exacerbated by a highly-publicised spat between the 5SM and Davide Casaleggio**, the owner of the party's online platform underpinning the voting system used by 5SM activists for primaries and political decisions. In particular, in a controversial blog post Casaleggio insinuated that the 5SM turned into a traditional party concerned with keeping its power and privileges, at odds with its founding principles, especially the broad participation of its activists in decision-making. Casaleggio arguably has a point, which is perhaps most poignantly demonstrated by the 5SM's recent decision to renounce two of its core tenets, namely self-imposed term limits and the ban on electoral alliances with establishment parties.

Under these circumstances, it appears evident that **the 5SM is the greatest source of instability for the national Government and its unity is bound to be put to the test when Parliament votes on somewhat divisive initiatives sponsored by the Democratic Party in the upcoming weeks**, including immigration reform and the ESM.

2. Fratelli d'Italia is on the rise – but it can only go so far

By contrast, right-wing **Fratelli d'Italia seems to be the only party consistently on the rise across the country**, though with varying degrees of success in different areas. This is a key development to watch with potentially significant long-term implications. Fratelli d'Italia went from winning 4.3% of the vote in the 2018 general election to **now being polled at around 15% and vying with the 5SM for the position of Italy's third-largest party**. This party came out significantly stronger out of the latest regional elections, not only because it gave a sizeable contribution to the centre-right coalition in terms of votes won, but also because a Fratelli d'Italia candidate for Regional President succeeded in flipping Marche, a leftist stronghold, for the first time in history in one of the few uncertain races in this round of regional elections, whereas the Lega candidate leading the centre-right coalition failed to do the same in Tuscany, another traditional turf of the left.

In this context, **Fratelli d'Italia leader Giorgia Meloni has been trying to raise her profile as a reliable player operating within the bounds of accepted practice and institutions**, thus becoming a more "respectable" or "politically correct" alternative to Salvini. **Meloni was recently elected Chairperson of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party**, eschewing the nationalist populism of the Identity and Democracy Party, which instead includes Lega. **Meloni's strategy seems to be paying off, since according to the latest opinion polls, she is the second most popular political leader in the country** behind Prime Minister Conte.

On several occasions, **Meloni has been explicit about her ambitions to become the leader of the centre-right coalition** by overtaking Lega in terms of voter support. Upon closer inspection, **her plans might end up playing into the hands of the Democratic Party**. In fact, **Fratelli d'Italia is essentially a traditional nationalist-conservative party whose appeal can arguably only go so far**. Until now, Meloni has succeeded in matching the all-time high reached by its predecessor Alleanza Nazionale, which peaked at 15% of the vote in the 1996 general election, but it is worth wondering how further Fratelli d'Italia can progress. As the Democratic Party seems to be in the process of achieving its goal of re-establishing a two-coalition system, both by drawing back voters it had lost to the 5SM and by effectively preventing the rise of Renzi's Italia Viva, **Fratelli d'Italia appears to be a much preferable opponent than Lega**. While still perhaps damaged at least to a certain extent by its autonomist legacy centred around northern Italy, **Lega presents the Democratic Party with a much more**

daunting challenge than other right-wing parties, insofar as its platform has often proven appealing to working class voters.

3. Lega's internal debate

Despite underperforming in the latest regional elections, **Lega comfortably remains the largest party in Italy**. As much as Fratelli d'Italia has grown in terms of voter support, Lega is still by far the party carrying the centre-right coalition. Similarly, any speculation of Veneto Regional President Zaia, who won a third term in a landslide in the latest regional elections, potentially unseating Salvini as Lega leader rests on fragile grounds. Suffice it to consider that although his personal electoral list won 44.6% of the vote vis-à-vis Lega's 16.9%, both his voters and candidates running as part of his list are virtually all Lega members and supporters, who in a general election would cast their ballots for Salvini's party. If anything, Zaia's resounding victory confirmed his political clout at the regional level and gave momentum to his autonomist agenda at the national level, but his exclusive focus on Veneto throughout his career makes him an unsuitable leader beyond his geographical scope anyway.

Nonetheless, **Lega's performance in the latest regional elections reignited an internal debate which routinely arises every time the party faces a setback**. As already happened in the past, **Lega Deputy Secretary Giorgetti, as well as a number of other moderate party officials, called into question the Lega's political trajectory, advocating for a realignment closer to the political centre**, so as to play a more prominent role in European institutions, dispel any pro-Russian and anti-euro prejudice against the party, and restyling Lega's image as an establishment-friendly party capable of governing the country without causing alarm among allies and on financial markets. Still, **for the time being Salvini's leadership and Lega's core ideology remain for all intents and purposes undisputed**, but it is worth wondering if Fratelli d'Italia's rise, which is partially chipping away at Lega's electorate, will contribute to nudge the party in a more moderate direction to broaden its appeal for centrist voters and facilitate its government activity should the centre-right coalition win the next general election.