

ITALY ELECTION

Salvini ensures immigration tops poll agenda

Northern League leader's populism lifts party ahead of tomorrow's vote

JAMES POLITI — ROME

Just after the start of one of his final campaign rallies this week, Matteo Salvini lunged into the kind of provocative anti-Muslim pitch to voters that has fuelled his rise in Italian politics.

The leader of the Northern League said he had lost weight while hunting for votes around the country, so would be eating "six kilos of polenta with *ossobuco* [veal shanks]" that night. "I won't say salami or pork because some may get offended. Long live sausage! Long live salami! Long live pork, coppa and pancetta," he told a cheering crowd in the northeastern city of Padua.

After the quip about Muslim pork consumption, he became serious on his plans to rid Italy of illegal immigrants. "Guys, we have imported a few good people," Mr Salvini said. "But there has also been a bunch of delinquents and I want to send them home, from the first to the last. We are packed with drug dealers, rapists, burglars — and the League is the solution."

Italians vote tomorrow in a poll with the potential to cement the EU's economic recovery and political stability — or undermine it. Immigration, along with the weak economy, has dominated the campaign.

Mr Salvini, a 44-year-old former communist from Milan, has forced a political shift towards hardline positions reminiscent of President Donald Trump in the US and Viktor Orban in Hungary, after Italy absorbed more than 650,000 migrants from across the Mediterranean over the past four years.

A similar trend was observed in the French, Dutch and even German elections of 2017, in which a populist threat

forced mainstream centrist parties to harden their stance on immigration.

"Part of the country is worried, alarmed, unhappy — and if there's a political figure able to ride that wave it's Salvini, and others have had to fall in line behind him," says Giovanni Orsina, a political-science professor at Luiss university in Rome.

In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, the 81-year-old media mogul and Mr Salvini's centre-right coalition partner, has called for the deportation of illegal immigrants, while the anti-establishment Five Star Movement demanded a crackdown on charities rescuing migrants from the sea. Meanwhile, the ruling centre-left Democratic party struck a contentious deal with Libyan authorities to keep migrants in north Africa to contain the public backlash.

"I read everyone else's platforms and they are our own," says Susanna Ceccardi, Northern League mayor of Cascina, in Tuscany. "We have imposed our political agenda with the line dictated by Salvini. The League has already won."

In the final polls before a 15-day blackout the Northern League was garnering the support of about 14 per cent of voters — a big rise compared with the 2013 general election, when the party won 4 per cent.

If the centre-right coalition led by Mr Berlusconi wins a majority of seats, Mr Salvini could end up in a position of power, either as interior minister or even prime minister — a scenario that could disturb investors and EU policymakers. If he ends up in opposition, agitating against whatever centrist coalition governs, he will almost certainly have a bigger army of MPs.

Political analysts in Rome say the

Matteo Salvini, addresses a rally in Rome on Thursday during what has been the most energetic campaign of the main parties

REUTERS/ANSA/ALAMY

Northern League leader has run the election's most energetic campaign. "Salvini has really toured Italy, he really made an effort — even in areas in the south where the League has had a presence only recently," says Marco Sossini, an analyst at Teles-A&S.

By contrast Mr Berlusconi has appeared mostly on television and radio. Matteo Renzi, the Democratic party leader, has held fewer events. Among the four main parties, Mr Salvini's verve is possibly only matched by Luigi Di Maio, the 31-year-old Five Star leader, albeit with a softer tone.

Mr Salvini's fiery language may prove too extreme for moderate conservative voters. Last Saturday, in an attempt to cast himself as a defender of Europe's Christian values, he brought a rosary to an event in Milan and waved a copy of

the Gospels as he vowed loyalty to Italy's 60m people. Catholic officials rebuked the stunt: Pope Francis has been a staunch defender of migrant rights.

Other views also seem outside the mainstream, including a vow to take the country out of the euro. While Italians have grown more Eurosceptic, most are not prepared to ditch the single currency — and that forced Mr Salvini to tone down his rhetoric. "Salvini will not blow up the European monetary system," he said in September.

On foreign policy, he has advocated for the EU to drop sanctions on Russia. His views on North Korea have been unorthodox, including a plan to abandon the trade embargo on Kim Jong Un as well as an appreciation for aspects of its totalitarian society.

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One-time leftist forms alliance with far-right

1973 Matteo Salvini born in Milan. Studied history and political science at Milan university from 1992 but dropped out before graduating. A leftwing activist in his youth, he became a member of the Leoncavallo cultural centre, a hotbed of student and worker rebellion against the establishment.

1993 Elected to Milan city council, representing the leftwing of the Northern League

2004 Elected to the European Parliament. Re-elected in 2009 and 2014.

2013 Appointed Northern League party secretary. Places emphasis on Euroscepticism and opposition to immigration, while forming an alliance with European rightwing populist parties such as France's National Front.

2015 Embarks on an effort to spread the Northern League's power and influence southward — making inroads in Tuscany, Umbria and Marche, but also into previously hostile territory in the impoverished Mezzogiorno regions.

testionist abolition, reflecting growing popular angst over globalisation, even though Italy has a trade surplus.

But it is immigration that Mr Salvini keeps coming back to — which takes on a darker tone, given Italy's past history of being under the Fascist regime.

Whereas the Northern League has historically been anti-Fascist because of an aversion to a centralised, authoritarian Italian state, Mr Salvini has courted votes from the neo-Fascist far-right.

To critics, Mr Salvini's style and xenophobic messages have brought an ugly tone to the election. But to his supporters, he is simply the contender with the clearest mission. "He's humble, simple, he likes to fish, he's not snobbish," says Ms Ceccardi. "His idea is to restore dignity to the Italian people."

Additional reporting by Davide Ghiglione

