



Balance of Italy's Political Forces Ahead of European Elections

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The campaign in Italy for May's European elections began with a [conflict about the national budget](#) between the Italian government and the European Commission (EC). Evaluations of the EU forms the dividing line between the main political forces. Opposition parties accuse the government of a confrontational attitude towards EU institutions. The ruling party's leaders hope that before the elections to the European Parliament (EP), more parties similar to them will rise up and that together they will change the balance of power inside the EU. However, the conflicts between Italy and the EC will strengthen irrespective of the election results.

The policy of the [government formed in May 2018](#) by the Five Star Movement (M5S) and right-wing coalition partner Lega (League) has led to conflict with the EC over Italy's aim to tighten migration policy and increase its budget deficit. The government, in implementing such actions, fulfilled party election promises and has gained an advantage in the polls over the opposition. The support for Lega increased from 17% in the elections in March 2018 to 32% now while in the last four months, M5S has maintained about 26%. The opposition Democratic Party (PD) and Forza Italia (FI) had hoped to win over public opinion as a result of the anticipated defeat of the government in the budget negotiations with the EC. However, on 19 December 2018, both sides came to agreement on a reduced budget deficit of 2.04%. This is to be achieved by taxing cars with high CO₂ emissions and reducing the costs of the public administration. The government's concessions also rely on lowering the retirement age to 62 years and not to 60 as planned, and by postponing by a few months the pension reform and start of the first disbursement of funds under its basic income scheme. The debate about the government's achievements in the negotiations with the EC has polarised the individual political parties ahead of the Italian elections to the European Parliament, where 76 seats are up for grabs.

The Main Parties' European Concepts. Lega seeks to expand the Eurosceptic Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) EP faction by attracting members from the group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). A reinforced fraction on some issues could cooperate with the dominant European People's Party (EPP) to limit the influence of the liberals and socialists in decision-making in the EP. Lega's leader, Matteo Salvini, also the current deputy prime minister and interior minister, expects help from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in reaching an agreement between the EPP and the ENF.

Salvini hopes that the implementation of this project will allow the Italian government to continue a restrictive migration policy and to strengthen its voice in the debate on lifting EU sanctions against Russia. However, achievement of these goals is unlikely given the [limited potential of the Eurosceptics](#) and the lack of support from the EPP for Salvini's projects. In addition, a member of the opposition FI launched his campaign in November 2018 based on criticism of the government's European policy. FI Chairman Silvio Berlusconi named the election committee Different Italy (L'Altra Italia). It is composed of FI and smaller parties and represented by EP President Antonio Tajani.

M5S's aims for the created EP faction include opposition to EU austerity policy, pro-European integration, and the single currency, and promotion of ecology. The grouping would attract some from the Greens and European United Left (GUE). Earlier, the party tried unsuccessfully to join both the Greens and Liberals. Obstacles to M5S's EP strategy include the GUE's and Greens' opposition to the Italian government's migration policy and its cooperation with Lega. More likely is the formation of an M5S-promoted faction consisting of anti-system parties, for example, Croatian Živi Žid, Latvian KPV-LV, the Czech Pirate Party, and independent deputies. Such a grouping would have about 40 deputies.

The opposition PD must choose between remaining in the Party of European Socialists (S&D) or cooperating with the faction built by the liberals and French President Emmanuel Macron. Party elections on 3 March hinder the creation of a coherent strategy. The main candidates for leadership are Nicola Zingaretti and Maurizio Martina, who both declare their willingness to cooperate with S&D and Macron. The leader of the liberal group inside PD, Renzi in September signed a joint manifesto with politicians associated with the French president's EU project.

Importance of the European Elections in Italy. The increase in support for Lega as a result of tightened immigration policy came at the expense of FI. The latter party's electorate declined in the period under review from 14% to 9%. If Lega is able to maintain this level of support in the upcoming elections, it could give it leadership of the Italian right. For FI, Lega's main rival, the elections could decide its survival. A poor result may prompt politicians to consider joining Lega, which would strengthen Salvini's position in the government and eliminate Berlusconi from the power struggle. A good result, on the other hand, will enable FI to remain an important player on the Italian political scene and give it a base as a potential partner for Lega if the coalition with M5S disintegrates. Berlusconi has even already offered Salvini the post of prime minister in a future centre-right government, which the leader of Lega rejected, disbelieving his former ally has good intentions.

M5S, which has lost some support to Lega, despite having the most public support, will want to differentiate itself from its coalition partner in the EP election campaign and rebuild its position. M5S is focused first and foremost on the left-wing electorate, which competes mainly with PD. It is, therefore, unlikely that the campaign will lead to conflict in the coalition. M5S and Lega share a common interest in preserving their power and implementing their election promises. Their cooperation is facilitated also by the clear division of responsibilities between the leaders: Salvini is responsible for security while the leader of the M5S, Luigi Di Maio, is focused on social policy.

PD will be able to take up the fight for voters only if the party avoids a split. According to an EMG survey, on 22 November 2018, a hypothetical party with Renzi at the front would gain 47% of PD's electorate. If Renzi is elected to the European Parliament instead, PD would avoid such a scenario by pushing him away from national affairs. In addition, as an important figure in a potential Macron faction, Renzi would strengthen the party's image as pro-EU in the hope of a change in public opinion over potential government failures.

Conclusions. Polls show that the most probable winner of the Italian EP elections will be Lega (28–30 posts), followed by M5S (23–25) and PD (14–16). The likely poorest performer will be FI (8–10). That result would confirm Lega's domination of the Italian right and probably be the end of Berlusconi's political career. For M5S, such a good result could put it in a difficult situation because of the risk of a loss of voters to Lega and a recovering PD.

If the government one year on from its formation can maintain high support, that would strengthen its position in European relations. However, with the EP likely to again be dominated by the EPP, the S&D and the liberals, the future EC will probably be less concessionary in budgetary and migration policies, and the conflict between it and the Italian government could become stronger. This could lead to disagreement inside the Italian coalition, posing a risk of collapse in 2020.

Despite the high number of Lega and M5S MEPs, their delegations stand little chance to play an important role in European politics. Even if Lega expands the ENF, it will remain on the margins of the EP, eventually being significant only in case of disagreement between the EPP, the S&D, and the liberals on single votes. The possible M5S faction would be even more insignificant than the Lega group. FI will remain with the EPP but its influence will weaken as a result. PD probably will join the potential Macron grouping.

The Italian election results will affect the functioning of the ECR faction (of which Polish party Law and Justice, or PiS, is a member). That grouping, weakened by Brexit, will face the dilemma of whether to remain independent or accept Salvini's proposal and conclude an alliance with the ENF. They have a common position on migration policy and a similar vision of the future of the EU, one providing for the strengthening of the national role of the Member States. However, they have fundamental differences in their evaluation of EU–Russia relations.