Italy Setting Trends in the European Radical Right: The Success of Fratelli d'Italia

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Fratelli D'Italia (FdI), Italy's leading Populist Radical Right (PRR) party, has become a model for far-right movements across Europe following its success in the Italian elections in 2022. The party was extremely successful in presenting itself as a novelty within the context of radical right populism. Its main tenets – the fight against the generalized political Left and its 'dangerous ideologies,' against change and diversity, and the worship of security as the solution to all contemporary challenges – appealed to the Italian public

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The party has managed to capitalize on the deep discontent, distrust and nostalgia of much of the Italian public from North to South. With FdI in power, its discourse now translates into concrete reactionary policies undermining human rights and the rule of law in the country. Furthermore, Meloni's increasing influence and sympathy at the EU level generates understandable concerns about the precedents that this influence might create and its implications for EU governance.

Fight Against Mainstream National Elites: The Failures of "la Sinistra"

Why is Fratelli D'Italia considered a Populist Radical Right party? It is a nativist party, which means that its ideology considers the Italian national identity as a single, strictly homogeneous Italian community sharing a common history, specific cultural heritage, and traditional values. Its discourse centers around a clear distrust of the national mainstream elites. This includes being hostile towards a generalized 'Left' (la Sinistra), seen as incompetent, corrupt, disinterested, and detached from the everyday struggles of the average Italian citizen.

According to the party, the generalized 'Left' has contributed to the radicalization of society with the creation of 'dangerous' ideologies such as wokeism, the politically-correct-ideology, multiculturalism, and what they define as 'ideological environmentalism' and 'extremist LGBTQ+ ideology.' They also argue that mainstream elites have 'Europeanized' Italy, giving up national objectives in the name of supranational interests at the EU level.

It is important to underline that while FdI has gained influence and popularity at the EU level – through efficient networking among the PRR parties and increased popularity within EU institutions such as the European Commission, whose president has shown some affinity with Prime Minister Meloni and her agenda – it still continues to express hostility towards 'Europeanization,' framing it as a threat to national interests, which it declares as its priority.

Follow the Leader

The hostility towards mainstream elites also extends to the central government and its bureaucracy stated as ineffective, inefficient, and slow. In response, the Fratelli D'Italia party suggests a more 'efficient' alternative: presidentialism, which would allow the direct election of the Head of State, giving the president a worryingly strong claim to democratic legitimacy. Experts have shown how presidentialism reinforces practices glorifying a single leader, known as 'personalismo,' which is common in Latin America. Studies have also highlighted how presidentialism and its heavy reliance on the personal qualities of one political leader can be risky and lead to highly unstable democracies.

Change and Diversity as Threats

Deep distrust is also directed at minorities in the country, and people who appear to be diverse are often labeled as 'immigrants.' Fratelli D'Italia uses the term 'immigrant' to refer to racialized individuals and groups, particularly those of African and Middle Eastern origin. As a result, they

categorize not only people who are immigrants, but all those who look like them.

It is thus essential to understand that the threat described in FdI's discourse on immigration is not migration itself, but rather the diversity and 'otherness' it represents. Migration is instrumentalized to justify hostility towards the Other: the concern is not the movement of people, but the potential or existing diversity that comes with it.

In April 2023, at the congress of the Italian Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions, the current Minister of Agriculture, Francesco Lollobrigida, made a deeply unsettling statement, saying, "Italians are having fewer children, so we are replacing them with someone else," referring to the children of foreigners. He continued, "Yes to helping births, no to ethnic replacement." His statement echoes the white supremacist theory of the Great Replacement, which falsely claims the existence of a secret plan to replace white people through immigration, a narrative that was used to commit horrors against racialized and discriminated people throughout history.

Fratelli D'Italia's rhetoric clearly echoes that of fascist Italy, and similarly, its ideology fears diversity and change, symbolized by the figure of the person on the move, the foreigner. It reveals a profound nostalgia for an imagined past where diversity was absent. This fixation on the foreigner as a threat to the nation has clear consequences provoking public hostility towards migration, which is then translated into increasingly repressive policies.

Amongst other human rights violations against migrants and Italian nationals, the Fratelli D'Italia's government introduced the Cutro decree, a policy that cancels the right to special protection for migrants. This includes those who are seriously ill, vulnerable, or at risk of being exposed to violence and torture in their countries of origin.

Worship of the Security God and its Disciples, Police Forces

The Fratelli D'Italia party emphasizes security in its discourse and actions. When adopting one of its security decrees, Giorgia Meloni thanked the government "for the work you do every day to defend (…) security, freedom, and, in my view, without security there is no freedom, there is no economic growth, there is no social protection." Security is presented as a solution to all contemporary challenges: in a world of volatility and instability, a promise of security and protection might sound particularly appealing.

Meloni's government is setting a trend by using crisis rhetoric to legitimize exceptional measures in the name of security. The mentioned security decree has been considered problematic by many political analysts. In Italian law-making, a legislative decree allows the government to use legislative power during crises and emergencies, a power generally reserved for the Parliament in democracies.

In the name of security, Meloni's government has increased punishments for some crimes and established new ones—such as criminalizing the organization and participation in roadblocks, a clear move designed against protest

actions by climate groups. Simultaneously, it has allocated 1.5 billion euros to the armed forces, police, and firefighters, while cutting university funding in a country where research, and more generally education, are already severely underfunded.

Proud Reactionaries: A Model within Europe and Beyond

Fratelli D'Italia and its members have succeeded in framing reactionism and right-wing extremism as a source of pride. Their discourse has helped further legitimize reactionary rhetoric based on racist and sexist beliefs in the name of 'tradition,' as well as preserving 'true national values.'

FdI's populism has been commended as a model by some PRR parties' leaders, such as Chega's Andrè Ventura, and far-right populist leaders around the world, including Argentinian President Javier Milei and Indian PM Narendra Modi, have also expressed their support for Prime Minister Meloni.

At the EU level, Fratelli D'Italia's leader Meloni has worked to create alliances, despite her skepticism towards the European project, by engaging with its most authoritative governments like Viktor Orbán's. This has effectively legitimized the endorsement of such regimes in the European Union. These practices may set precedents that EU institutions might regret in the near future.

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Note: This contribution stems from a blog post part of a series on the rising populist radical right. It has been edited by Robin Stähli.

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