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In October 2022, a coalition formed by Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (the leading party), Matteo Salvini's *Lega* and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* won the Italian national elections, taking over from a grand coalition government led by Mario Draghi. While *Forza Italia*, currently led by former EU Commissioner and former President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani, is part of the European People's Party (EPP) and an active member of the pro-European conservatives, *Lega* belongs to the extreme right and Eurosceptic group Identity and Democracy (ID), together with the French *Rassemblement National* (RN) and the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). Giorgia Meloni is the president of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), who are inspired by liberal conservatism, advocate nationalist Euroscepticism and are antifederalist. However, since coming to power in Italy, she has chosen a more pragmatic and cooperative attitude towards the European Union (EU) institutions and promoted a rapprochement with the EPP, in particular by building a special relationship with the current commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, and the European Parliament president, Roberta Metsola.

At the national level, the ruling coalition appears to be internally cohesive enough to securely maintain the continuity of the current government in office. Yet the different approaches to the EU among Italy's ruling parties are generating some tensions during the campaign for the European Parliament (EP) elections and are likely to create even more struggles in the process of appointing the new EU leadership. If *Forza Italia* is keen to support "more Europe", *Lega* is explicitly advocating for "less Europe, more Italy", while Giorgia Meloni's slogan is "Italy changes Europe". More generally, the debate among the political forces will be characterised by a marked polarisation, both in terms of approaches to Europe and internal matters. The most significant confrontation will be between the government leader Giorgia Meloni and the leader of the main opposition party, the centre-left *Partito Democratico* (PD), Elly Schlein, two women whose visions of Europe, political agendas and personal styles are poles apart.

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Campaigns late in coming

Italy's major political parties were extremely late in launching their campaigns for the EP elections, with the presentation of European political programmes and candidate lists coming only at the end of April. This is not unusual. In the first months of 2024, political debate had been catalysed by three regional elections in Sardinia (won by a centre-left coalition) and in Abruzzo and Basilicata (won by the government coalition). Still, the three regional elections were portrayed by national political leaders and media as crucial tests for the popularity of Giorgia Meloni's government on the path towards the EP elections. At the same time, it is clear that political dynamics at the regional and national level remain very distinctive. In particular, Italian regional electoral law, which is based on a majoritarian principle of representation, provides strong incentives for political parties to form large coalitions during the campaign. Italian EP electoral law, meanwhile, is based on a proportional system with a threshold at 4%. Thus, it favours more competitive attitudes among all the parties, which in fact approached the election campaign autonomously.

As far as Italian citizens' attitude is concerned, the April 2024 [Eurobarometer survey](#) reveals a growing interest among Italian voters in the upcoming European elections amidst a delicate political moment at international and national level. A total of 59% of the Italian respondents expressed interest in the June 2024 voting, up by 8 percentage points from the last EP elections in 2019. Nevertheless, the importance of national elections still outweighs the European ones, with 54% of Italians holding this view. Economic issues remain a priority, but security concerns are growing, particularly due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Overall, Italian perceptions of the EU remain negative, reflecting entrenched Euroscepticism, likely fuelled by the political discourse and public debate. Only 45% of Italians consider EU membership a good thing. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising to observe a nationalist and mildly Eurosceptic focus in the campaign so far, represented mostly as an occasion for counting the political weight of individual parties and of their leaders, with only limited attention to EU and transnational topics.

The tone of the campaign was set by the *Fratelli d'Italia* convention in Pescara, on April 27th-28th. On that occasion, Giorgia Meloni's key message to the electorate was to give her the mandate to bring to the EU the same political change that she brought to Italy in October 2022 and send the left-wing parties into opposition at the EU level too. Meloni will lead the *Fratelli d'Italia* list in all five Italian constituencies, but she announced that she would not take the seat if elected. Her candidacy primarily aims to attract as many voters as possible to express their preferences for her party. When announcing her candidacy, Meloni urged her voters to write only her first name, Giorgia, on the ballot paper, "[because I am and will always be one of you](#)", relying on her personal leadership and charisma, but also displaying a populist attitude very much in line with the hard-right political tradition.

Matteo Salvini outlined the *Lega* stance for the upcoming European elections mostly through social media, advocating for a centre-right

alliance while distancing his party from Macron, the left, Von der Leyen and Draghi. He hinted at differing views from *Forza Italia* and Giorgia Meloni. Salvini proposed reinstating youth military and community service, to promote “respect and good manners”. He has also chosen a controversial figure for the EP election, General Roberto Vannacci, who was dismissed from his post by the defence minister due to a contentious book and is [under investigation for alleged racial incitement](#), as the *Lega* lead candidate. The choice aims to revive support amid dwindling popularity, leveraging Vannacci’s celebrity, but also at the risk of generating tensions within the party’s nomenclature and particularly among the electorate in the north of Italy that traditionally voted for *Lega* for its stance on economic matters and less on identitarian aspects.

Antonio Tajani has also expressed his personal commitment to the upcoming European elections, highlighting the importance of preserving the legacy of Silvio Berlusconi and asserting the significance of *Forza Italia*’s role within the EPP. This is reflected in the *Forza Italia* symbol, which displays the words “Berlusconi for President” at its centre and includes the EPP logo. [Forza Italia’s electoral campaign](#) has expressed traditional pro-European conservative values, highlighting how the EU is built on freedom, security and dignity, uniting national identities under Judeo-Christian roots and identity.

As far as the opposition parties are concerned, a rather different choice was made by the PD, which opted for a campaign that does not display the candidates’ faces on election manifestos, aligning with its history of avoiding personalisation. During the launch of the PD’s campaign for the European elections, titled “[The Europe we want](#)”, the party secretary, Elly Schlein, focused on social themes such as public healthcare, immigration, and the minimum wage. She talked about “clean air” and “jobs”, addressing both climate change and social justice. Schlein’s presentation also touched upon many domestic political issues: representation law, “differentiated autonomy”, institutional reforms and premiership, and freedom of the press. Some more controversial foreign policy issues, including the party’s stance on the Russian war on Ukraine, remained somehow side-lined.

The *Movimento Cinque Stelle* launched a citizens’ participation campaign in February 2024 in order to draft its electoral programme for the European elections. Thus, the entire campaign has focused on the message of providing direct involvement for Italian citizens, in sharp rhetorical contrast to Brussels’ bureaucratic elites, and being against providing military support to Ukraine. The party’s leader, former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, is struggling to present himself as the alternative to the current government and steal the role of Giorgia Meloni’s main opponent from Elly Schlein.

The liberal centrist forces of the so-called “*Terzo polo*” represented by + *Europa*, led by Emma Bonino, *Italia Viva*, led by Matteo Renzi, and *Azione*, led by Carlo Calenda, split into two different blocks to run separately in the EP elections, with + *Europa* and *Italia Viva* regrouped [under the *Stati Uniti d’Europa* list](#). Both advocate for a federalist vision of Europe.

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What do the polls tell us?

At the beginning of May, voting intention polls confirmed Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* as the first political party at around 28.5%, followed by the centre-left PD at around 21% and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* at around 16%. The other parties of the government coalition, *Forza Italia* and *Lega*, are expected to score less than 10%. Other political forces that could reach the 4% threshold necessary to gain European Parliament seats according to Italian electoral law are the leftist party *Verdi e Sinistra* and the liberal centre (*Stati Uniti d'Europa* and *Azione*). Giorgia Meloni can still count on a personal approval rating of more than 47% of Italian citizens, even if the general support for the government is declining. Despite the huge gap in terms of predicted election results, the government coalition will survive the European elections with the goal of completing the national legislative term to 2027. As for the forces in the opposition, the PD and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* tried to form a coalition at local level in the last regional elections, but their strategy failed in two out of three cases.

At EU level, a possible alignment of the ECR with the EPP could bring *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Forza Italia* closer along the lines of a cooperative strategy with European institutions, but it would leave *Lega* outside. In fact, *Lega's* allies in the ID group are too extreme to be welcomed in a possible coalition supporting Ursula von der Leyen in a second mandate and Giorgia Meloni has no interest in pushing for an alliance with Matteo Salvini in the EU. The *Partito Democratico*, for its part, has just signed a declaration of the Party of European Socialists that it would not work with radical right forces in the next European Parliament. Therefore, the results of the elections in Italy are likely to have a significant impact on the overall political dynamics and orientation of the next European legislature. In particular, if a stronger right and radical right presence does not necessarily equate to an openly anti-European stance, it is likely to contribute to reshaping the EU from within by normalising right-wing views and pushing the European agenda towards more conservative positions. This shift could impact areas like single market reforms by moving in a more protectionist direction, making the implementation of the Green Deal more difficult, and further pushing the externalisation of migration policies.

Looking ahead: Italian politics and the EU

The Italian government's EU stance will not change dramatically after these elections. Giorgia Meloni will most probably continue to capitalise on her renewed activism in Europe and use it for domestic purposes, especially when it comes to the externalisation of migration management and the firm reaction to the war on Ukraine. She will try to make the most of the election results to secure a major portfolio in the next European Commission and more generally to weigh in on the negotiations for the top positions in Europe. The future of the PD will depend on the outcome of the polls, 20% (and a few points above the *Movimento Cinque Stelle*) being the psychological threshold that will spell victory or defeat and determine the fate of its current leadership and political line. As usual, domestic political matters will dominate the electoral campaign and influence the vote of Italian citizens, and they

will continue to do so until EP elections are Europeanised through the creation of transnational electoral lists and the standardisation of the electoral procedures. At the same time, however, the polarisation of the political debate will place the Italian electorate before very different ideas of Europe, thus making citizens' choices a telling indication of their preferences for the future of the European project.

