



Italy

Italy's Role in the EU

Italy is a parliamentary republic with a head of government - the prime minister - appointed by the president and a head of state - the president. The Parliament is composed of 2 houses: The Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic. The country is subdivided into 20 regions. 5 of these have a special autonomous status, enabling them to pass legislation on some local matters.

Italy's relationship with the EU has deteriorated since an anti-establishment government took the reins in Rome last year. And for Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, that breakdown has coincided with a surge in popularity.

The Italian government's rhetoric against migrants and minorities has legitimised the worst in people. Last summer, within two months of the government being formed, more than 30 racist attacks took place. Many people no longer feel any shame at openly expressing anti-black, anti-Roma, anti-gay ideas. And as we head towards the European parliament elections in May, any thoughts of ardently pro-European pre-crisis Italy now seem unreal.

However, more recent developments on the Italian political scene have already begun to challenge the Coalition Explorer's conclusions – well-grounded at the time though they were. Such is the volatility and unpredictability of Italy's politics today.

Particularly notable given the proximity of the European Parliament election is the government's lack of consistent stance on the major EU-related issues of the moment. While the Five Star Movement focuses on eurozone governance, the League is ramping up its electoral refrain about immigration and asylum. This is no surprise: the compromise that helped form Giuseppe Conte's government has led to an internally weak coalition in which electoral dynamics dominate policy priorities. Following the release of the Coalition Explorer, one of its principal researchers, Almut Möller, wrote: "Italy could well find partners in France, Germany, Spain, and others, since all three policies are generally of strong interest across EU member states." But since then Italy's current approach to EU matters has begun to put at risk its relationship with all three of these countries.

Italy's Immigration Issue

Italy has become one of the main gates of entry into the EU for refugees and undocumented migrants. Between January and the beginning of September 2015, over 121,000 migrants were smuggled by sea or land to Italy.

Between October 2013 and October 2014, the Italian government ran the search-and-rescue operation Mare Nostrum in the Mediterranean Sea. In November 2014, Mare Nostrum was replaced with the EU-run operation Triton, the latter focusing more on control and prevention. In October 2015, the EU began operation Sophia, aimed against human smuggling.

The Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, has repeatedly asked for European solidarity as the inflows continued. In June 2015, he threatened the EU with the provision of Schengen visas to migrants if there was no deal involving other Member States sharing the burden of the refugee crisis.

The government appealed to the regions to host asylum seekers arriving in Italy. Roberto Maroni governor of Lombardy, a northern region of the country, and a member of the anti-immigrant party Northern League member, threatened municipalities accepting migrants with financial cuts. A similar stance was taken by Veneto and Liguria regions' leaders.

Italy has pleaded for distinguishing genuine asylum seekers from economic migrants before they disembark from ships, and has gradually hardened its tone. Even though Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte proclaimed Rome was "no longer alone" after the June summit, his government is increasingly sceptical of the results. The summit called for setting up "disembarkation platforms" outside the bloc, most likely in North Africa, in a bid to discourage migrants boarding EU-bound smuggler boats. However, no deals have been struck so far.

Position of Italy Regarding Other Countries

France

France and Italy are in a diplomatic crisis, provoked by a recent meeting between Italy's deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, and representatives of the French Gilets Jaunes protest movement.

The French-Italian crisis may abate somewhat after the European elections. But it will only be genuinely resolved if there is a change in the ideological complexion of the government in Italy or France, or if the EU is able to offer what the Italian government is seeking: greater flexibility in the domain of economic policy and greater effectiveness in the domain of immigration. Neither are likely any time soon.

The only hope lies in the pragmatism that the European Commission and Italian government put on display during their discussions over Italy's 2019 budget. But that hope should be tempered by an appreciation that populism is just as much about style as it is about policy. That style is provocative, confrontational, abrasive, and popular.

Germany

Germany and Italy are close and built on an excellent foundation: commonalities in their historical development (Germany and Italy are both “young nations”), the two countries’ position today at the heart of Europe and their membership of NATO and of the European Union, the large volume of trade and the broad spectrum of contacts (including culture, tourism, sport, social groups, trade unions). Efforts by both governments to develop common positions on European policy focus on issues of fundamental importance, such as further strengthening the European Union, framing European migration policy or European neighbourhood policy, and EU enlargement.

Government ministers and parliamentarians from both countries exchange views regularly and often meet at international conferences and European Council sessions. Close contacts are also maintained between the two countries’ heads of state. The Villa Vigoni Association on Lake Como is a forum specifically created to promote bilateral exchange, hosting numerous events on political, economic, cultural and scientific issues.

Italy’s Major Problems

Italy’s big lenders have taken a beating over the last 10 years and are already in a weakened state. All of them have big stockpiles of Italian government bonds. If that debt loses value, as it would after downgrades, the banks will suffer losses, eroding their capital.

The banks might then lose the trust of financial markets as investors worry about their solvency. All banks depend on a constant flow of borrowed money that they lend to customers or use to roll over debts. If that cash spigot runs dry — a so-called liquidity crisis — banks can quickly get into trouble. That happened en masse to banks in Europe and the United States during the 2008 financial crisis.

In some areas, the 5Stars and League appear miles apart, especially when it comes to large infrastructure projects. That distance widened after Tuesday’s bridge collapse in Genoa, which killed 39 people and could prove costly for the 5Stars who had a history of opposing plans to overhaul the bridge.

Italy has had more governments than any other big European power since the second world war. Only one government has lasted the full five-year term since 1945. In this election, the number of different possible outcomes and permutations is daunting even for the most dedicated student of Italian politics. Apathy and disenchantment are rife. “I’ve developed a sort of sickness from politics,” said first-time voter Gianmarco Caprio. “Here in Italy we get so much of it — on TV, or just when you hear people talk in a bar, that one can reach the

point of saturation. I've had enough of politics, and of the same politicians that dare to come out and still make the same old populist claims."

One outcome, by no means to be ruled out, would neatly encapsulate the vapidness of Italian politics: if the centre-right wins the lower house but no one controls the senate, the most likely upshot would be to further elections. And political and economic mayhem.

Bibliography

https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_italy_in_the_eu_shared_priorities_provocative_politics

https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-in-brief_en

<https://www.thelocal.it/20180829/analysis-italy-eu-standoff-migrants>

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/country-resource/italy>

<https://theconversation.com/as-eu-stresses-the-migration-crisis-is-over-italy-makes-hundreds-of-migrants-homeless-113137>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/19/italy-war-migrants-fear-civil-rights>

<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/italien-node/italy/227948>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/italy-preparing-to-cause-trouble-for-eu-as-relations-with-germany-sour-a6818341.html>

<https://www.thelocal.it/20190128/italy-row-with-france-is-getting-personal>

<http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/pdf/case-studies/italian-german-relationship.pdf>

<https://www.politico.eu/article/five-looming-problems-for-italys-populist-government-s-5star-movement-far-right-league-matteo-salvini/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/23/business/italy-budget-trouble-world.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/20/six-things-wrong-with-italy>