

In EU Elections Salvini Triumphs, Di Maio Suffers. So Now What?

Judith Harris (May 27, 2019)



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ROME -- For once all the Italian media, from left to right, concurred. In Sunday's elections in Italy for the EU Parliament, acknowledged as a test for the Italian government itself, Matteo Salvini's Lega doubled its vote of just one year ago while the vote for his governing partner Luigi Di Maio's Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)) was literally slashed in half. In a stunning turn-about Deputy Premier Salvini's right-wing party copped 34.4% of the vote by comparison with its 17% in national general elections held just one year ago. By comparison Deputy Premier Di Maio's M5S slumped from 32.7% to 16.9%.

At just 56%, the Italian turnout was low, especially when compared with the 85.8% of 1979, the first



EU parliamentary election. A surprise was the upsurge of the Partito Democratico (PD), which outpaced the M5S to become Italy's second largest party. Under the guidance of Nicola Zingaretti, the party -- formerly under Matteo Renzi -- won 28% of the vote. As final results arrived Monday, Zingaretti said, "Around the PD we'll build a new left coalition that can contrast the excessive power of the sovereignists... whose nationalist attack is a flop." His goal, he said, is to rebuild a center-left front including the Greens and Emma Bonino's renovated Radical party, +Europa, which won 3%. Unlike in Germany, where the youth vote boosted the Greens into a significant force, Italy's Greens copped only 2.29% of the vote.

In other results Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia won only 8.7%, down 5.3% from just a year ago, while Giorgia Meloni's far right Fratelli d'Italia moved up by 2% to 6.4%. But neither made the headlines. A sampler of those of the most influential dailies:

- . Il Sole 24 Ore (financial daily): M5S collapses; Partito Democratico (PD) outdoes the M5S 22.2% to 18.3%
- . Il Fatto Quotidiano (left-leaning): Salvini commands
- . Corriere della Sera (Milan, moderate): The Lega soars, the PD beats the M5S
- . La Stampa (Turin, moderate): Upside down: Boom for the Lega, M5S collapses.
- . La Repubblica (Rome, center-left): Black shadows loom

By "Black shadows," La Repubblica was insinuating that Salvini's Lega casts a storm warning of black, as in neo-fascism. The influential Turin daily La Stampa's subhead, intimating that the hard part for Salvini begins, now warned that, "The Captain in a test for success" (a reference to Salvini's nickname Il Capitano).

The Lega's political results have ambiguities, however, as was spelled out in a front-page Corriere della Sera editorial by Massimo Franco: "Despite the Lega's terrific success, it seems to indicate an Italy that is perhaps less populist and less sovereignist than predicted." (Sovereignist meaning nationalist and anti-EU). Although Italy offers the European Parliament a "Euroskeptic profile," says Franco, Salvini's embrace of populism appears somewhat "tired," and the notion that Italy may quit the EU seems already "redimensioned."

In fact, to date Salvini has not, as was widely predicted, indicated his intention to bring down the government, to opt for new elections in September, nor to oust Giuseppe Conte as premier. For the moment Salvini seems to demand only that the existing government settle down to business and adopt his primary goals: (1) the flat tax for everyone, which he believes will relaunch the economy; (2) the "security" bill that would block migrants and punish rescuers in Italian waters who try to disembark them in Italian coasts; and (3) passage in September of Italy's budget, under serious attack by the EU commission for the country's overwhelming debt.

Premier Conte, who represents the M5S, appeared ambivalent about the future, telling the press, as early results showed the mammoth Lega victory, "I have my own style, I am not going to sit still and let myself be massacred. If we can go forward, great, otherwise I will take draw my conclusions." Already, however, his fellow party member Di Maio had drawn his conclusions. Speaking at a press conference today Di Maio did not appear overly exercised. Asked if he would resign as head of his party as a result of the shellacking taken by the M5S, Di Maio replied that he would not: "We went in together for victory and we still stand together when we don't win." He said he had spoken with both



Grillo and the PR guru whose father helped invent the M5S, Davide Casaleggio., "Neither asked me to resign," said Di Maio, who also reiterated the projects his party planned to continue to support.

The results have international implications. The American Steve Bannon constantly promotes Salvini as the most influential politician in Europe, placing Italy in pole position for a shift to the hard right, an individual to be emulated even more than Marine Le Pen in France. On that international front just as his party's triumph appeared clear, Salvini appeared on national TV in front of a bookcase which invited, from some, sympathy, and from others, mockery. Close-up's of the bookcase revealed on its shelves a baseball cap showing Donald Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again," and, nearby, a photograph of Vladimir Putin.

Hard by was a picture of Christ. While campaigning on nationwide TV Salvini had waved a rosary in his fist and said that the Madonna would help bring him to victory.. Many commented that his action in the photo, which went viral, was Salvini's bid for the votes of those soured by Pope Francis's position. However, once his victory was in hand, Salvini backstepped, holding up a rosary and giving thanks, not to the Madonna, but to God. "I thank Him who is up there, Him who does not help Matteo Salvini and the Lega, but helps Italy and Europe to rediscover hope, pride, roots, work, and security. And therefore I never entrusted the Immaculate Heart of Mary to a vote."

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Of particular interest was the relative success of Europa Verde, which attracted one out of every 10 voters, akin to the Greens' presence in Germany. With almost 9%, Emma Bonino's +Europa fared almost as well. Both these votes suggest that Italian youth abroad were in good measure responsible.

Trailing far behind their positions in Italy itself were Berlusconi's Forza Italia (6%) and Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (2.5%).

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