

Italy 2024

## **The beautiful face of neo-fascism in Italy: Giorgia Meloni**

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Article 1 of the Italian constitution, which has been in force since 1948, states: "Italy is a democratic republic founded on labour. The supreme power of the state belongs to the people, who exercise it in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution."

The Italian Constitution has always been the bond that has united Italian society, despite the differences between north and south and left and right. The proud Article 1 has embraced the poor peasants in Sicily as well as the industrial workers in Turin, the intellectuals and the bourgeoisie. For decades, the constitution and the president, who "floated" above the political parties, were the brackets that held the country together in the face of political instability. *Tempi passati?*

In order to change the constitution, a two-thirds majority in the houses of parliament or a convincing referendum is required. This is what the Meloni government wants to achieve. Its project: the prime minister, i.e. the head of government (not the president of the republic), is to be elected directly by the people in future. This would eliminate the function of political parties in Italy. Only the best-known faces would have a chance; it would be the culmination of populism and a major step on the road to autocracy. The argument for this adventure in Italy is the volatility of political parties. And indeed, it is hardly possible to keep track of the rise and fall, the creation and disappearance of parties in Italy. Why is this so? To understand this, it is useful to take a look at history. (The following summary is necessarily abbreviated and excerpted).

In 1991, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) decided to disband, arguing that the upheavals since 1989 meant the end of communism. Although the PCI had been excluded from any national government participation since 1948 due to a US dictate, it was the largest party in the country, with 2.3 million members at the end. Unlike most other communist parties in Europe, the PCI had a strong left-wing Catholic wing, but above all it was not only a party of industrial workers, but also of farmers. And it was involved in governments at local and regional level (e.g. in Sicily there was a coalition between the PCI and Christian Democrats for a short time in the 1960s). The PCI, with its educational and cultural associations throughout the country, was also an important cultural institution. So in 1991 there were 2.3 million members who were suddenly homeless. A social democratic successor party was quickly founded, a minority tried to "re-found" communism, but nothing could fill the void.

In 1992, public prosecutors in Milan began to target political corruption scandals. The actions of the "mani pulite" (clean hands) mostly affected the second largest Italian party, the Christian Democrats, which had been involved in all Italian governments since 1948, as well as the Socialists. The parties collapsed under the flood of proceedings in 1994 and here, too, the traditionally Christian Democrat-oriented electorate (the Socialists played less of a role) was left in a state of great perplexity.

All the newly founded parties from the left to the right could not really replace the traditional party system. This was the ground on which the first populist party, Silvio Berlusconi's "Forza Italia", grew. And grew... The media tycoon used his TV channels in particular and created a model for the populism that followed - from popular to vulgar. From 1994, Forza Italia was in government together with the then already far-right "Lega Nord". Today, Forza Italia has shrunk considerably.

Then came the second wave of Italian populism: the Five Star Movement appeared on the scene in 2009. Led by Beppe Grillo, the great noisemaker who fought against corruption in politics, party politics as a whole and for direct democracy "from below". The movement received 25% of the vote in the 2013 election, but refused to participate in government. It then became the governing party in 2018. Its program included ecological and left-wing projects, including, for the first time in Italy's history, a nationwide citizens' income as basic social security. In the meantime, the stars have lost their shine.

Giorgia Meloni's party did not emerge from a new popular movement, but from a long party history: since the end of the Second World War, Italy had a fascist party, the MSI, which worshipped Mussolini and was always on the fringes of the party spectrum until it dissolved into the Alleanza Nazionale after the collapse of the major parties. This party bid farewell to fascism, was very successful and then merged with Berlusconi's party. The Giorgia Meloni party split off to the right with the "Fratelli d'Italia" in 2012. Here, admiration for Mussolini and Italian fascism was and is openly celebrated. However, this is more likely to be regarded as folklore in Italy.

The party was not successful until 2018 - but Giorgia Meloni was a media darling from the very beginning. Even today, the entire party is tailored to Meloni. In its analysis of the "Fratelli d'Italia" in 2022, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung said: "Without Giorgia Meloni and her ability to act as a popular, determined, consistent leader with a calming effect on at least part of the electorate, the party's success would be unthinkable."

"Fratelli d'Italia" are a unique mixture of personality cult, populism (the popular community against the elites), right-wing extremism, racism, glorification of Italian fascism and anti-democratic attitudes, but also a rationality that impresses voters.

Since October 2022, Giorgia Meloni has been governing at the head of a coalition of the neo-fascist "Fratelli d'Italia", "Forza Italia" and "Lega" parties. Meloni's party became the strongest party with 26% of the vote.

Meloni is pro-European and belongs to the group of states that support Ukraine. On the European stage, it is essentially following Mario Draghi's rational policy, as it is still concerned with the 172.745 billion from the EU's coronavirus fund promised to the country, only part of which has been disbursed so far because the EU Commission considers the backing with concrete projects to be too patchy. But that's not all, the financial police have just arrested 22 thieves who had submitted fake applications - 600 million euros have still been recovered. It is unbelievable. The country urgently needs this support, as it is still suffering badly from the slump during the coronavirus crisis. The country's debt burden has grown to a staggering 150 percent of GDP. The traditional

differences between the regions have not diminished either. While GDP per capita in Lombardy is 38,500 euros per year, in Sicily it is just 17,700 euros. Nevertheless, Italy is the third largest economy in the eurozone.

Things are not looking so good for Giorgia Meloni. The big election promise to block migration across the Mediterranean by blockading ships off the coast of Libya is not working. In 2023, twice as many refugees arrived in Italy as in 2022 - despite the more difficult conditions. And these mean that rescue ships are repeatedly detained or diverted for a very long time with many refugees on board - until a court decides that this is illegal. The Italian government has now concluded an agreement with Albania. Albania is building camps in which the asylum applications of arriving refugees will be examined. But what happens to those whose applications are rejected? Will they have to live in the camps for years, as in Greece? The escape route across the Mediterranean is becoming increasingly dangerous, but it doesn't stop anyone.

Meloni can always be seen at Ursula von der Leyen's side when it comes to agreements with third countries to block refugees - as has just happened with Egypt. She is also creating a stir with the proposal that every refugee arriving in Italy should pay 5,000 euros for initial reception. The Red Cross, Caritas, the citizens of Lampedusa and elsewhere are still doing a great job in their humanitarian efforts towards those arriving - but beyond that, there is little to no state support, no social assistance, nothing. It is the local Catholic aid centers and the left-wing cultural association Arci that offer help.

A second major promise to implement tax relief has just been realized. There are now only three instead of four income tax brackets and the lower to middle incomes will receive tax relief. This project shows what Giorgia Meloni is all about: the "little people" and the middle class. She couldn't care less about the widespread precarity in Italy and the poverty in the southern regions.

This was impressively demonstrated in August 2023, when recipients of citizen's allowance were informed by text message that the splendid life at state expense was now over. The "reddito di cittadinanza" was a key project of the Five Star Movement. It was introduced in 2019 and paid out to three million people who were unemployed or had less than 780 euros a month at their disposal through their own work. Since January 2024, a small number of households have instead received an "inclusion allowance" of a maximum of €500, but only until a person between the ages of 18 and 59 from the household in question who is able to work refuses a job offer.

The precarious workforce, particularly in the south of the country, is dominated by seasonal work in agriculture, gastronomy and tourism, as well as the bogus self-employment of many tradespeople. The coveted jobs in the public sector are also treacherous. One particular practice is the contracts between local authorities and private companies for basic services (water, waste, etc.). The general contractors then conclude contracts with subcontractors, who in turn conclude contracts with sub-subcontractors. Everyone earns from this - and in the end, all that remains for the workers who actually provide the services are mini-contracts - which are nevertheless highly sought after because they offer at least a minimum level of security.

The inactivity rate in Italy is 33.1%, i.e. one third of the potentially active population has no work (while the average inactivity rate in the EU is 25.5%). In addition, the shadow economy is particularly strong in the south. Its share is estimated to be almost 22% nationwide - in the south it is likely to be even higher. The shadow economy means tax fraud, undeclared work, no employee rights and no collectively agreed wages. There is no statutory minimum wage in Italy, only collectively agreed industry wages: employees in tourism are supposed to receive 7.48 euros per hour, in the catering industry it is 7.28 euros and for cleaning staff it is 6.52 euros. However, this only applies to employees with employment contracts.

Although the economy is not looking good overall, voters are still following Georgia Meloni. In the polls, her party is leading with almost 28% (+2% compared to 2022) while her coalition partners are losing. How does she manage this? Even her opponents confirm that she is a master of communication with her self-presentation - after all, she learned from Silvio Berlusconi. And she knows that she has to get a grip on the media and culture in order to be successful in the long term. She is cleaning up the media sector even more radically than Berlusconi once did. The public broadcaster RAI was purged right from the start. There are now no more critical functionaries and journalists there. She has also taken on the most important cultural institutions. She wants to impose a new culture against the rather left-wing cultural tradition in Italy, with a fascist-influenced image of the family at its center.

Georgia Meloni's policies contain all the elements of radical right-wing to fascist programs. The difference to the AfD in Germany is that she is smart. Her projects are often perfectly adapted to the prejudiced opinions already widespread among the people.

In contrast, the opposition still appears paralyzed. The radical left-wing parties that once proudly defended the communist tradition have disintegrated into tiny competing particles. The major social democratic party "PD", which emerged from the ruins of the PCI and left-wing Catholic groups, has not managed to form a relevant electoral alliance in the run-up to the 2022 elections. They were at odds with the Five Star Movement and an electoral alliance with the "Azione" party collapsed after just a few days. This inability was one of the factors that helped the far-right electoral alliance to succeed.

In the current election polls for 2024, all center-left parties together could outperform Meloni's far-right alliance. But this is not very likely. However, they have just joined forces for the regional elections in Sardinia and won quite unexpectedly.

The only ones who immediately put up a fight in October 2022 were the trade unions. They are directional unions in Italy and have a political mandate. The largest of these are the left-wing CGIL, CISL (formerly close to the socialist party) and UIL (more classically liberal). Together they have over 11 million members. CGIL, for example, is the third largest trade union in Europe after the DGB and the British TUC.

In October 2022, CGIL called for protests against the new government. It warned that the government must listen to the people who have to survive on their work and are suffering from the rising cost of living and inflation.

In November 2023, CGIL and UIL organized a general strike.

The unions wanted more investment in education, healthcare and infrastructure instead of tax cuts. The strike was limited to 4 hours by government order. This would not be possible in Germany. However, it is also not possible to call a general strike in Germany.

The trade unions alone cannot end the triumph of the Fratelli d'Italia. It would depend above all on the social democrats. In the past, however, they have repeatedly positioned themselves against CGIL - in an equally failed attempt to distance themselves as far as possible from their left-wing roots. Now, in light of the disaster of the 2022 election, a rethink is taking place. In March 2023, Elly Schlein was elected as the new leader of the party in a grassroots election: she is young, lesbian, articulate, the first woman to lead the party, she is a real challenge - and she is in favor of compromises between the democratic parties in Italy.

Social justice, the climate crisis and precarity are her big issues: "The challenge is to change the neoliberal development model, which has proven to be absolutely unsustainable for people and the planet," she said in her inaugural speech. She continued: "We will be the party that will not rest until the precarization of work is ended, until free internships are abolished, and we will fight for a minimum wage. We will call on all other opposition forces to lead this fight together, to say that below a certain threshold it is not work, but exploitation."

So far, their response has been rather modest. It would be too good if it and all other groups fighting for Italian democracy could succeed in saving Italy from the long-term establishment of neo-fascism.

Read more:

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Fratelli d'Italia, A personalized party between extreme right and radical right, Rome, 2022

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Trade Union Monitor Italy, Rome, 2023

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