

What Is the True Face of Giorgia Meloni?

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Since Giorgia Meloni took office as Italy's prime minister, her metamorphosis into a more moderate and pro-Western leader has gained her international credibility. But how can this image be reconciled with her government's identitarian profile, hard line on immigration, and crackdown on civil rights? Political communication scholar Giorgia Bulli has the answers.

Antonio Contini: When Giorgia Meloni became Prime Minister in October 2022, she outlined a very conservative programme. Is she keeping her promises?

Giorgia Bulli: The first few months of a government are symbolically very significant to evaluate its actions. The first thing to observe is to what extent the executive is pursuing the election manifesto of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) now that it is in power.

Another thing to watch out for is how popular the policies at the centre of the government's action and communication are with public opinion. In the first few months, the hottest topics have been immigration, security and labour policies. Right from the start, Meloni made a clear break from the social policies of Giuseppe Conte's government. This was apparent in the suspension and later scrapping of the "citizens' income" [a monthly allowance for households and individuals with low income or unemployed].

Immigration is an issue that unites the centre-right, especially Fratelli d'Italia and the Lega (the League). The Cutro disaster and its management in terms of communication (not going to the place of the tragedy, and later organising a symbolic Cabinet Meeting of Ministers in Cutro) have represented a source of criticism against the government. On the other hand, with the subsequent "Cutro Decree", the government reiterated its firm stance on migration, leveraging the intransigence that has always characterised Italian right-wing parties.

So there has been continuity with the electoral promises on both immigration and employment policies.

Recently, Meloni has been pushing for a controversial EU pact with Tunisia to stop migratory flows. How does this move fit into her narrative?

The agreement with Tunisia, at a time when its coasts have become points of departure for significant migratory flows, has been presented by Meloni as a symbol of the double track on migration policies: closing irregular flows and opening, through a new decree, regular migration channels.

In the government's narrative, the disregard for the human rights of migrants in Tunisia, as well as in Libya, is silenced or reduced to the need to curb illegal migration, the smuggling business, and the uncontrolled action of NGOs in the Mediterranean.

What other issues have been discussed the most in the first few months of the Meloni government?

It is more difficult to form an opinion on other issues because they do not have as much symbolic

exposure. One of these is the management of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). The media have been highlighting the challenges met in managing these funds, and should the government prove incapable of doing this effectively, it will have problems with the electorate and local politicians.

The judiciary is another issue that has been in the news. For example, the debate around Article 41-bis [the “hard prison” regime, imposing near-complete isolation upon a detainee] has revealed the government’s law-and-order approach.

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An issue with higher symbolic power is that of civil rights. The decision to stop registering children of same-sex parents or with surrogate mothers, as well as the debate on the “womb for rent”, evidence the continuity between the promises made in the electoral campaign, the identity of right-wing parties, and the actions of the Meloni government. The draft law defining surrogacy as a “universal crime” goes exactly in this direction.

It is also worth asking how much the co-existence between the three parties forming the centre-right coalition – the most right-wing executive in recent decades – may generate internal competition. Obviously, Meloni does not want these tensions to surface, but she has not always managed to do so.

Fratelli d’Italia stood for election for the first time in 2013 obtaining 2 per cent of the vote. Nine years later it won the election with 30 per cent. What explains this rapid rise?

Various things have contributed. Some say it is the position that Fratelli d’Italia has taken within the Italian party system by consistently being in opposition, criticising the government for bypassing parliament during the pandemic, and stressing the need to go to the polls during the many government crises of recent years.

A second factor has been the ability of Giorgia Meloni to channel protest into a sovereigntist dimension. Her cordial relationship with Mario Draghi has also smoothed her entry into the EU scene.

Other aspects of Meloni’s success as a politician have to do with her ability to champion traditional values, presenting herself with her identity as a woman, politician, and mother (as in the [video that went viral](#)). In the eyes of her electorate, the fight against political correctness – not only by the radical Right in Italy but also in many other countries – has been important.

Finally, the deterioration of Matteo Salvini’s leadership of the Lega, and the weak electoral campaign of the centre-left contributed to Meloni’s rise.

Have extreme right-wing organisations such as CasaPound and movements that exploited citizens’ anger against the pandemic and vaccination policies also played a role in the growth of Fratelli d’Italia?

There is an entire galaxy of right-wing groups and extreme right-wing movements active in the world of Italian politics, and the criticism of Giorgia Meloni about her unwillingness to use the term “anti-fascism”

highlights how there is still a political subculture that she has to speak to. This is not because all of Fratelli d'Italia's voters belong to it, but because that subculture serves in maintaining a strong identity profile.

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The Lega's identity profile has vanished with the passing of the years, and the party has gone through a clear transformation from localism to nationalism. Meloni wants to avoid this happening to Fratelli d'Italia, even at the cost of maintaining ambiguous positions on Liberation Day on 25 April 1945 [now an annual public holiday], emphasising instead her attachment to the values dear to the militants of the radical right, as seen on the 50th anniversary of the Primavalle fire [an arson attack in which a young militant of the neo-fascist MSI and his 8-year-old brother lost their lives in 1973].

Yet, during the electoral campaign, Meloni moderated her attitude towards the past. She changed her cultural references and often cited Margaret Thatcher, almost leaning toward the English model of a great conservative Right.

It is true that Meloni softened her tone during the electoral campaign so as not to alarm the electorate about the prospect of an extreme right-wing government. But Meloni knows perfectly well that setting up a single conservative party is not a viable strategy. Political operations such as the birth of the Partito Democratico (PD) or Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (an attempt to create a new shared home for centre-right Forza Italia and right-wing Alleanza Nazionale) are struggling or have failed. In the identity profile that Giorgia Meloni wants to maintain, one must always be able to distinguish what Fratelli d'Italia is, and likewise what the Lega and Forza Italia are. Since the election victory, Fratelli d'Italia has skilfully interpreted the role of guiding party within the coalition, conceding their share to its allies while maintaining the leadership.

On an institutional level, how is Giorgia Meloni handling communication? It seems like in Europe she is trying to embody a presentable conservatism and be a supporter of NATO, maintaining a hard line against Russia in contrast to other European leaders.

Meloni has been able to manage her political communication in a way that satisfies the EU and, as we have seen most recently, also the US. The prime minister has had her anti-European and anti-NATO phases, but she has never exposed herself as much as Salvini in getting close to Putin, and she has not resorted to radical slogans such as "No to the European Union" and "out of the Euro". This has allowed her to reclaim a pro-NATO stance more credibly than Salvini, and all in all today she is perceived as a pro-European leader.

However, at the national level, Meloni seeks to satisfy the expectations of her electorate and of public opinion, exploiting those issues that are easier to communicate in a personalised, attention-grabbing, and identitarian way.

All of her social media videos follow the same pattern, with the prime minister speaking in the first person and emphasising the incisiveness of her political action. This strong personalisation sometimes risks getting mixed up with the management of communication at government level.

How long this dual communication strategy can last will perhaps only become clear in a few years.

Can this identitarian but reassuring communication contribute to breaking the taboo of a

systemic alliance between the moderate and radical Right in Europe?

Here talking of Meloni's leadership is not enough because each European country has reacted differently to the advance of the radical Right. In Austria, the FPÖ has worked several times with more mainstream right-wing parties. On the other hand, Germany still has a cordon sanitaire around the AfD, as does France around the Rassemblement National.

The refusal to create electoral pacts, however, does not mean that there is no appropriation of the issues of the extreme Right by the more moderate parties who hope to gain votes. In other cases, such as in Denmark, radical right-wing parties have given external support to the government, influencing policy but without entering a coalition. In each country, these dynamics depend on both the political culture and the parties' decisions.

The Italian opposition must commit to reconciling environmental issues and economic growth. This is one of the greatest challenges to the Left's identity, which must include more than just civil rights issues.

For this reason, I do not see a Europe-wide break of the taboo. Italy has always been a laboratory from this point of view. Silvio Berlusconi had already experimented in allying himself with Alleanza Nazionale and with the Lega Nord [the forerunner of the Lega], two parties that were very difficult to bring together. So Alleanza Nazionale had access to government immediately after its evolution from the neo-fascist MSI.

Italy was also a laboratory in 2018, when it saw the first cooperation between two completely different populist parties, the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5S). Given this history, what happens in Italy cannot always be compared with what happens in other European countries.

Although his party's electoral appeal has waned over time, Silvio Berlusconi had until the end an enormous influence on the right and on Italian politics in general. Now that he is gone, how will things change?

It is too early to say what effect Berlusconi's passing will have on the Italian Right. Much will depend on the government's performance over the coming months, at least until the EU elections in 2024. On that occasion, it will be possible to understand how much Forza Italia still enjoys the support of centre-right voters, and how much the right-wing traction of the governing coalition is appreciated by the people.

Which aspects must the Left in Italy and Europe work on to stop the advance and success of the right?

The government could make mistakes. The debate on institutional reforms is dangerous for the coalition, so it is not certain that Meloni really wants to get involved in this in the first few years. She could also slip up on issues such as economic indicators and management of the PNRR.

Then there is the issue of cohesion within the coalition. Salvini is risking a lot in his personal competition against Giorgia Meloni. Furthermore, the Lega contains different political realities. One of them is still deeply connected with the cultural and productive dimension of northern Italy, another with Salvini's

leadership and communication.

In Europe, the question is related to the central themes in the coming years. One of these is the green transition and the fight against climate change, to which the Left must make a clear commitment. Above all, the opposition must commit to reconciling environmental issues and economic growth. This is one of the greatest challenges to the Left's identity, which must include more than just civil rights issues.

The Left must be able to interpret the worries of that part of the electorate that has turned towards the Right because there it has found reassurance that high levels of welfare will be maintained, even if this involves restricting welfare rights to Italians only. Part of the Left's electorate considers right-wing policies when it sees its own financial stability declining.

So immigration has also become a sensitive discussion for the Left, which must escape the dichotomy between the right-wing policy of complete border closure and the framing of migratory flows as beneficial to the country because this narrative is not working at the moment. The Left needs to promote a more European management of immigration. Only this way can it find a way to challenge the Right, including in terms of communication.

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