

European interview

n°97

27th February 2018

“Will there be a parliamentary majority after the election on 4th March in Italy? This is the question to beat all questions”

1. Until now the main polls have indicated that no party would be in a position to form a government coalition after the election, will the severe swing to the right taken by the campaign over the last week prove this forecast wrong?

Yes. Clearly the centre-right coalition seems to be surfing on a positive dynamic. But we should take note here. The most recent polls published prior to the ban on their publication reveal that there is a major share of the electorate which is undecided or tempted by abstention. Moreover, we should distinguish between the percentage of votes won in the proportional vote and the number of MPs and Senators who are elected in the single list one round majority vote (36% of them). Specialists say that the centre-right coalition will have to win 40% to win the absolute majority of seats in both chambers, whilst taking a most of the seats in the majority single round, notably in the South where the result will be played out between the centre-right and the Five Stars Movement (M5S).

2. The coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi and Forza Italia is credited with 35% in the most recent polls. How can this return to the political arena by Berlusconi and the Italian right be explained?

The 2018 version of Silvio Berlusconi is nothing like the man we knew in 1994. Of course, although ineligible, he has a high profile in the campaign. He is trying to assert himself in the coalition which has helped to create that rallies his party, Forza Italia, the Northern League, led by Matteo Salvini, the Brothers of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni, a far-right party and a small party

of centrists. To do this he is taking advantage of his TV channels and his hard core of voters, who are prepared to follow him to the very end. But the polls credit Forza Italia with 16% more or less. If this proves to be true on 4th March, it will be the worst score achieved by Forza Italia since its creation nearly 25 years ago. The centre-right as a whole, (a little worn out in Berlusconi's case), seems to be the alternative to a centre-left legislature. From 2013 to 2018 there have been three governments led by men from the Democratic Party, each with his own style, and sometimes with high tension running between them: Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni. At the same time, the Quirinal Palace, the seat of the presidency of the Republic, was occupied by Giorgio Napolitano, and now Sergio Mattarella, also classed as centre-left. Berlusconi and the centre-right are therefore opposition forces that have a powerful electoral base in any case in the north of the country, not really in the big cities, but rather the small and medium sized towns and rural areas. We might almost say that the northern part of the country is anthropologically against the left, even if this were to be moderate. And for the former Silvio Berlusconi is still a reference.

3. Forza Italia is now maintaining an extremely right-wing discourse. In the hypothesis in which it would be able to form a government, might we foresee it moderating its discourse as it comes under pressure in office?

The unknown that lies before us will indeed be the attitude adopted by Donald Trump, if we recall the difficulties experienced at the G7 in Taormina (26th and 27th May last), notably regarding the climate

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– which Undoubtedly yes, because there are moderate elements within Forza Italia. Berlusconi signed a highly critical programme of the European Union with his partners. But he went to see Jean-Claude Juncker in Brussels, as well as his friends in the European People's Party (EPP) to explain to them that they should not be worried and that for example he would respect the commitments to consolidate public accounts, notably to reduce the enormous public debt. But will he be able to impose a more moderate orientation, whilst support to the Northern League and the Fratelli d'Italia is forecast to rise sharply within the electorate and that they will not just sit back and let things happen? Nothing can be certain.

4. In 2013 the Democratic Party won 40%, far ahead of the Five Stars Movement; now Matteo Renzi hopes to win more than 20% - is the centre-left coalition in office being sanctioned?

Yes. The centre-left has made a great many reforms on multiple issues. And this has caused discontent, both on the right and the left. Hence the creation of the coalition Free and Equal, rallying various elements on the left of the left, including former Democratic Party members, who want to bring Matteo Renzi down politically. This man, after his hour of glory, (with his party he won 40% of the vote in the European elections of 2014) is detested - because he wanted to bring in fast, cavalier style reform, because he personalised and advertised his work excessively in a provocative, slightly populist style, with his aggressive attitude towards his rivals, whom he frequently humiliated turning them into intractable enemies. Economic growth has recovered, jobs have been created, but the Italians do not see this. However, they feel growing inequality of all kinds and the spread of poverty. Moreover, this government is pro-European in a country that is leaning towards Euroscepticism, and it has been blamed for allowing the influx of migrants, which is leading to fear, rejection, xenophobia and racism. Finally, Italy continues to be typified by a monumental crisis of trust that is crystallising more over the teams in office than the forces of opposition.

5. The Northern League is due to win high scores in the north of the country, whilst the Five Stars Movement is said to be the leading party in terms of voting intentions. The number of undecided just two weeks before the election is still high. Can either of these parties come to office on 4th March next?

Not the Five Stars Movement, no. It is the leading party in the polls. But it is isolated. Its young leader Luigi Di Maio is perfectly aware of the risks of erosion mid to long-term that this isolation implies. This is why he is trying to change M5S's DNA. He wants to show that it is a responsible, credible party and is quick to say that a convergence of programmes might be found after 4th March if no one wins the absolute majority in Parliament, thereby breaking with the M5S's hostility towards all other parties. He has pointed to two potential allies. Free and Equal on the one hand, which is arguing over this option - between those who do not rule it out and those who are rejecting it. The Northern League on the other hand, says it is committed for the time being to its centre-right coalition. What will happen after 4th March if there is no clear majority? The Five Stars Movement will try to offer its services. But to do this it has to have enough seats, which is far from being a given. Neither the Northern League nor the M5S will have a majority of MPs and Senators and the other parties will especially come to agreements between themselves to avoid this scenario.

6. How should we analyse the success of the discourse put forward in the campaign, notably by the Northern League and even by the Five Stars Movement. Can we speak of "Italian populism"? Is it specific? What would the various differences be?

Italy is a laboratory for populism. There are several types of this that are thriving on the economic and social situation, as well as on widespread mistrust, which is vertical towards the political classes and all of the elites, and horizontal - emerging in the fear of the other, starting with the foreigner, but also of the neighbour, as witnessed in the opinion polls. To this we have to

add discontent about Europe and concern about Italy's future, as it faces a wave of immigration (more than five million people who are legally established – four times more than in 2001, as well as hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants), migratory flows and refugees who are landing on the peninsula's shores.

There is the "businessman" populism, that of Berlusconi, ever present, albeit weakened, which preceded that of Donald Trump. In the beginning, at the turn of the 1990's, there was the Northern League, the regionalist expression of the wealthy part of Italy, which no longer wanted to be burdened with the South, and not without creating internal tension, it has now become a populism of the far right, a kind of National League, as sociologist Ilvo Diamanti says. Italy has also given rise to an unidentifiable type of populism in the typology of European populism, that of the 5 Stars Movement, which is neither on the left nor right, also ecological, a "catch-all", combining democratic horizontality via the internet, and the verticality of its leaders, who ultimately still have absolute pre-eminence. Finally, Matteo Renzi has also tried out another type of populism, that of the government – a centrist populism, a formula that is being copied almost everywhere, which helped him win the primary as the secretary of the Democratic Party in 2013 and which he used when he was president of the Council from 2014 to 2016. Renzi was not and is not just a populist. It would be absurd to summarise him as this. But he played a great deal on this aspect and still sometimes tries to use it, even if, during this campaign, he has rather more played the card of the man of experience, one who is sensible.

7. The League continues to put forward the idea of a referendum on exiting the euro. To what extent is Euroscepticism gaining ground in Italy and for what reasons?

The rise of Euroscepticism has been the major historic change in Italy. This country, which for a long time was one of the most Europhile, notably in the 70's and 80's, started to doubt Europe as of the 1990's. This simply worsened after the financial, then economic crisis in 2008 and with the mass arrival of migrants. Europe has been blamed for Italy's economic recession, and

for the downturn in its social situation. A major share of the Italians believes, and they are not wrong, that Europe abandoned them, whilst migrants have landed and continue to land, at a slower pace over the last year, following measures taken by Paolo Gentiloni's government, and notably by his Home Affairs Minister, Marco Minniti. The Italians' attachment to the euro was the lowest in all of the euro area countries last year: 45% against an average 58% in the euro area. Nostalgia of the Lira is quite widespread, for example amongst small businesses which benefited from its competitive devaluations. Several parties have made criticism of the European Union and the euro their main political strategy. This is the case of the League, the Brothers of Italy, the 5 Stars Movement and some of the Free and Equal. During the campaign the first two of these continued to move in this direction, whilst the 5 Stars Movement has moderated its position somewhat, with Luigi Di Maio declaring to be pro-European, saying that he would only consider a consultative referendum on the euro, which has been an M5S priority to date, "as a last resort". Some Italian observers see the proof in this that Europe is now an inevitable constraint. I am not so sure however. If these parties were to decide the orientation of the future government, it would create a great deal of tension within the European Union. Only the Democratic Party and the Emma Bonino List, allied to the latter, have symbolically called for Europe più (more Europe), and clearly defend pro-European positions, in the knowledge that within Forza Italia there are also some pro-Europeans, who are making their voice heard, but who are not high profile, since they are allied to sovereigntist parties.

8. The shooting in Macerata shows that tension is running high in Italy, with the migrant issue highlighting a real split in society. Are there two irreconcilable Italy? How has the migrant crisis affected the relationship Italians have with Europe?

The migrant issue has played and still plays a fundamental role in the development of Italian Euroscepticism. Italy has a great historic tradition of deep political division that in the past may have given the idea that it is a country on the verge of civil war

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(in reality kinds of civil war took place in parts of the peninsula after the First and Second World War). We just have to think of the antagonism between the fascists and anti-fascists or between the communists (Italy had the biggest communist party in Western Europe) and anti-communists. Now, all of the polls show that migrants and also legal, and even more so illegal immigration, are causing fear, tension, rejection, xenophobia and racism. This is reflected in verbal or physical attacks. These responses are in the minority, but they are growing. This is all the more the case since the parties on the right, the Northern League, the Brothers of Italy and openly neo-fascist groups, justify these, throwing the blame on the presence of migrants and immigrants and on the centre-left governments. The right is developing outrageous, demagogic, simplistic proposals regarding migrants and immigration in the name of security and the defence of Italian identity. As for the 5 Stars Movement, it is denouncing what it is calling the "immigration business". However, we must not deny other realities. Many legal immigrants have found their place in Italy (especially since the deadly demographic decline of this country makes their presence vital in many professions and activities). The number of mixed marriages (between Italians and foreigners) is rising. Many, notably Catholic, associations are working towards their integration. This said, problems arise and have not been settled. Italy, which is a largely Catholic country, has always had Jewish and Protestant minorities, has to learn to live with two other religions now, Orthodox Christian and Islam. The centre-left wanted to reform the law governing access to citizenship with a *jus soli* and it failed. The right-wing and M5S do not want this. Might we say that there are two irreconcilable Italy? I do not believe this is so. After the Macerata shooting, fascist groups demonstrated their support to the author of the attack. The left of the left protested against this, denouncing fascism and racism. There have been incidents. The Democratic Party has preferred to call for calm by organising a major national anti-racist demonstration on 24th February. There is certainly a danger of radicalisation – which is more or less under control for the time being. One thing is certain, it is that Italy will now be a country with a good share of foreigners on its territory and they are here to stay (at present 8% of the population) and that the country must settle the issue of their integration.

9. If the Council swings to the right on 4th March next, might the new situation in Italy change the present situation in Europe?

Everything depends on the government that emerges after the vote. If the centre-right has an absolute majority, the executive will oscillate continuously between sovereigntist and pro-European positions. Everything will depend on how the ministries distribute the seats between the parties' representatives. The President of the Republic will place all of his weight on the maintenance of a pro-European attitude. But the government may engage in "cabotage" and Rome's credibility will be damaged. I do not believe in the totally Eurosceptic scenario, hence a government comprising 5SM, Northern League, Brothers of Italy with some representatives of the Free and Equal. They are not forecast to win enough seats to comprise a majority, and an alliance like this would be politically risky for all of its components. There will be no majority, but there will be a government, but which one? A Democratic Party-Forza Italia coalition government, despite the denials on both sides at the moment? Or a government led by a prestigious personality, who is possibly not directly political, supported by the Democratic Party and Forza Italia? In both of these scenarios, Rome would maintain a pro-European policy. But these executives will be censured by the sovereigntist and anti-European forces or an expert, who would criticise the forfeiture of democracy by the change in direction by Forza Italia, which would be breaking its electoral alliance.

10. Could Italy for example be an opponent to the reform of Europe as put forward by Emmanuel Macron and supported by Angela Merkel in her coalition agreement? Might there also be a rapprochement, notably regarding migratory issues with the government led by Sebastian Kurz or the Visegrad Group?

If there is a centre-right government some of its members will try to impede the attempts to reform on the part of the French President and they will be tempted to converge over migratory issues with the

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Austrian executive and the Visegrad group. But on the first point more than the second, this will cause tension within the parliamentary majority - if there is one. Because this is the question of questions for the time being. And so if that is alright with you, let's see what the ballot box says!

Interview with Marc Lazar

university professor at Sciences Po where he heads the History Centre. He has been the chair of the School of Government at the Luiss-Guido Carli University of Rome since 2010.

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