

Monthly Report on Italy

in collaboration with

LUISS CISE
Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali

Foreword

Italian politics has always been an arcane subject. A handful of specialists and enthusiasts love to talk of its Machiavellian intricacies for hours on end, but most people, especially north of the Alps, not only do not understand it, but see no reason why they should care to understand it. Today there are at least three reasons why they should. First, in Italy the crisis of the political establishment that is now evident in many advanced democracies has begun a quarter century ago. This means that the country is further down the road of the democratic malaise – it is a laboratory and a bellwether. Second, Italy is the first country from within the historical core of the European community to be governed by anti-establishment parties. Third, its politics represents the greatest threat to the stability, or possibly even the existence, of the common European currency.

Founded in 2010 in a University that has a very strong international vocation, the LUISS School of Government aims at easing the connection between Italy and the world outside it. It aims at preparing the future Italian public elite to the complexities of an ever more integrated planet, and at providing first-class education to non-Italian students in Italy's capital city. SoG professors have often helped non-Italian journalists and newspaper readers understand Italian politics. Thus it seems only natural to me that, also in preparation of the coming European elections, the LUISS SoG should offer a monthly report on Italy that provides an interpretation of the country's recent political events, and makes an educated guess about what happens next.

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1. Politics and Policy

a) Government

Italy's coalition government, composed of the Five Star Movement (5SM) and the far-right League, clashed with Brussels in the last two months for proposing to sharply increase government spending on welfare while also cutting tax. The European Commission said last month the plans were so serious a breach of its budgetary rules that it had "no alternative" but to ask that they be redrawn.

"We are not betting on Italy being 'too big to fail'," Mr Di Maio, Deputy Prime Minister for the 5SM said in an interview with the Financial Times in early November. "We believe in the fact that we can greatly reduce public debt with an expansive budget. I am convinced that we can change the rules on austerity and investment, and we can strengthen the European Union and the Eurozone to do good from the point of view of social rights."

The answer to Palazzo Chigi was given by Mário Centeno, the President of the Eurogroup, who said to ministers at the meeting held on 4 November that Italy would have to "co-operate closely with the Commission in the preparation of a revised budgetary plan that is in line with our fiscal rules".

The Eurogroup also published a statement stressing the need for a new spending plan, saying that "sufficient debt reduction" was an "integral part" of the bloc's rules.

However, Rome's government initially refused to rewrite the plans or to deal with Brussels' remarks, ignoring the deadline of 13 November to adapt the Budget Law to the European Commission's recommendations. Giovanni Tria, Italy's Finance Minister, promised the budget "will not change" and that there is "neither conflict nor compromise" with the Commission, but "there will be a constructive dialogue" he stated after the Eurozone ministerial meeting in Brussels. Despite these statements, the clash on the deficit budget between Italy's government and the Eurozone authorities intensified.

On 21 November the European Commission rejected the Italian budget law and opened an infraction procedure. The European Commission set in motion a disciplinary mechanism, known as an "excessive deficit procedure", that is intended to put pressure on Italy to scale its deficit back.

In following days the coalition government stood united in negotiating with the European Commission. Interviewed on the budget deficit target, Deputy PM Salvini stated: "I think nobody is fixated on this, if there is a budget which makes the country grow, it could be 2.2 percent or 2.6 percent," alluding to the possibility of scaling down the spending envisaged by the Budget Law. A statement confirmed a few days later by the Minister of Economy and Finance Giovanni Tria.

Hence, after a few weeks' stand-off between the Commission and the Italian government, and uncertainty on financial markets with interest rates on government bonds reaching their highest level in recent years, in the first week of December the two parties began to negotiate to find a deal on the budget deficit. The Prime Minister's Office at Palazzo Chigi redrew the law before its approval by Parliament, decreasing the budget deficit in order to avoid sanctions from the EU and financial disarray on the markets.

On 19 December the Commission and the government agreed on a final draft of the Budget Law which established to: postpone the launch of a "minimum basic income programme", a priority for deputy prime minister Luigi Di Maio and his Five Star movement. It will be rolled out during 2019 rather than in January; delay unwinding part of previous pension reforms by a year; introduce a safeguard clause to increase VAT (tax rises would kick in if Italy's budget numbers are worse than expected in 2020 and 2021) and an additional safeguard: Italy will freeze €bn of planned expenditure in the 2019 budget. The money will be released if the deficit target is on track. On 30 December the Budget Law was approved by parliament.

The Budget's approval could be met by a dual political reaction. On the one hand, the Italian and the international financial establishments will be satisfied at the U-turn on the deficit – from 2.4 to 2% of the GDP. On the other hand, in the coming months supporters of the governing parties might show disappointment in the government's failure to quickly and fully fulfill all the electoral promises. However, support for those parties will also be conditioned by both the effectiveness of the opposition parties and the global economic trend.

In broader terms, the Italian government is adopting a dual strategy. On the one hand, there was no clean break with European institutions. In fact, the government has eventually stricken a deal with the Commission. This diplomatic solution helped reduce market volatility on government bonds. On the other hand, at home the two populist forces are delivering a euro-sceptical message, blaming the EU for its "intrusion" into national politics and depicting financial markets as populated by "speculators" who are making profits at the expense of ordinary Italians. Furthermore, the coalition is arguing that Conte's government achieved a 2% budget deficit rather than the 1.6% planned by the former center-left government led by Paolo Gentiloni. Di Maio and Salvini are using these claims to defend government policies and convey the impression that they are delivering on their electoral promises. In the meantime, they promise that things will get even better after the majority now governing in Brussels is defeated at the coming European elections.

b) Policy

Meanwhile, in terms of policies, some tensions have arisen in the relationship between the 5SM and the League. Infrastructure and environmental policies have become a bone of contention within the government. The 5SM aims to stop the project for the high-speed railway (TAV) between Turin and Lyon, while the League supports the realization of new infrastructure. In Turin, a municipality governed by the 5SM, 40,000 people, unaffiliated to political parties, gathered spontaneously to support the TAV project. On 3 December all the Italian industrial and small business associations met in Turin to express their support for the TAV and to spur the government to invest more in infrastructure. The "società civile" (civil society) of Northern Italy is showing some signs of impatience toward the 5SM and its NIMBY policies. After the protest Salvini confirmed the support of the League for the building of the high-speed rail link.

A second source of friction came up on waste disposal. In recent days, in Campania, a region in the South, some waste was burned by citizens to tackle waste mismanagement. The government is divided: Di Maio aims to improve waste disposal by increasing the level of recycling, Salvini rejects Five Star's environmentalism and supports the building of new incinerators, most of them to be located in the North.

Moreover, in November the Parliament approved the Security Decree (decreto Sicurezza), envisaged by the League in order to give more protection to Italian citizens against crime and illegal immigration. The confrontation between the two parties on policies seems asymmetrical. While the 5SM in general does not contest the League's proposals, Salvini and his team question Five Star policies. The leader of the League is achieving good results on immigration and law and order policy, but he is worried about economic development and particularly the cost of the Reddito di Cittadinanza, the universal income for the unemployed which is the main proposal of the 5SM. Giancarlo Giorgetti, the League's undersecretary in the Prime Minister's Office and the main political advisor to Salvini, expressed his concerns at the 7 billion euros allocated for the Reddito di Cittadinanza by the Budget Law and stated he would have done more on cutting taxes for small-medium size enterprises if there had not been the Five Star welfare policy to fund.

In broader terms the coalition seems solid in its discussions with the European Union and the two parties have come together to limit the redrafting of the budget and the deficit reduction demanded by Brussels. However, significant differences at policy level are coming to the fore between the two parties in

government. Many issues have divided the League and the 5SM in recent weeks. The League represents an electorate mostly located in the North, with the most productive regions of the country, mainly concerned at achieving cuts in taxes and bureaucracy and seeing infrastructure development. The 5SM has most of its support in the south where unemployment remains high and poverty is more widespread. This southern electorate is demanding more substantial welfare policies to tackle unemployment and low salaries such as the *Reddito di Cittadinanza*, a form of income for the unemployed as envisaged by the 5SM.

In the end, who has obtained more at policy level? The League got its tax cut on small and medium enterprises, a tighter immigration policy and the security decree to improve public safety. While the Five Stars Movement has less to show: *reddito di cittadinanza* will start later, on reduced funding, and the Dignity Decree, the labor market reform approved in the summer and drafted by Di Maio, is not paying off in terms of employment.

c) Opposition

The Democratic Party (PD) called its party conference for January 2019. The three strongest candidates are Nicola Zingaretti, Marco Minniti, and the current secretary Maurizio Martina. Zingaretti is the President of the Region of Lazio, the region which includes Rome, and he is considered the candidate of renewal after the defeat in the 2018 general election. He is backed by the former Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and the former minister Dario Franceschini, one of the most influential party members in Parliament. Marco Minniti is the former minister for internal affairs in Gentiloni's government and he is backed by the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Martina joined the race, aiming to consolidate his own position within the party and its officials and moving the democrats toward the centre.

However, in the second week of December Minniti announced that he was dropping out of the race. The reason for his withdrawal was the unexpected lack of support from Matteo Renzi. Rumors in Rome and Florence suggest the creation of a new moderate-centrist party by Renzi, who would leave the Democratic Party, or the possibility for Renzi himself to join the race for the position of party secretary or, more likely, to involve in the race a less well-known politician from his inner circle. Furthermore, Italian newspapers are reporting that Carlo Calenda, the former minister for Economic Development, is planning to start a new pro-European movement led by himself. The Democratic Party is facing a fratricidal struggle among its factions and leaders and the possible outcome might be a split of the party into two or three new political groupings in the next few months. Such an outcome would weaken the centre-left even more by breaking it into small parties with precarious leadership.

As for Forza Italia (FI), Silvio Berlusconi is still playing on two fronts. The party is voting with its former ally the League on some issues, while it is formally in opposition to the government. Berlusconi is opposing the policies proposed by the 5SM, but FI is softer in opposing the League's proposals. Berlusconi has not excluded the possibility of recreating a centre-right coalition with the League and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) if snap elections were to be held.

Moreover, Berlusconi is still joining the alliance with the League at the local level. In the next local and regional elections, which will be held in the first half of 2019, it is very likely that Forza Italia (FI) and Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) will be allied with the League in order to win as much electoral competitions as possible. A scenario which makes a clean break-up of ties among center-right political forces in the following months implausible.

In broader terms, the opposition provided by the traditional parties is divided and weak. The strategy to contrast populist parties has proven ineffective after the Conte government came to power. Indeed, the polls shows that in the last few weeks both FI and PD are still losing support, though to a lesser extent. For this reason, too, a snap election in the coming months seems unlikely.

d) The Head of State

During the critical stand-off with the European Union on the budget deficit, the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, worked behind the scenes with pro-European technical ministers to ensure that deputy prime ministers Salvini and Di Maio accepted negotiating with the commission.

The head of state used his year-end televised address to issue recommendations and reprimands to the governing coalition, calling for measures included in the 2019 budget to be “verified attentively”, also given the lack of parliamentary debate caused by the need to curtail the legislative procedure in order to approve the Budget Law within the end of the year.

Moreover, the President expressed the same concerns as the European commissioners about the impact of populist economics on Italy’s debt, the highest in the euro area in real terms. “The high public debt penalizes the state and citizens, and sets a heavy burden on the future of young people,” Mattarella said.

To relieve the populists’ pressure on the European Commission, Mattarella stated that “Italy has chosen to invest and to live its own future in the European dimension.”

Although constitutional doctrine considers the President of the Republic a “neutral power”, in the last decades the Quirinale has become increasingly influential. In particular, Mattarella showed his muscles in May 2018 when he refused to give the euro-sceptical Paolo Savona the post of Minister for Economics and Finance, appointing Giovanni Tria in his stead and appointing Savona Minister for European Affairs.

Thus the President manages significant powers. His duties include ensuring a balanced budget, with adequate funding for new laws; he names the prime minister, appoints ministers on the premier’s suggestion, and dissolves parliament. Furthermore, the Head of State guarantees the respect of international commitments.

If in the following year the governing coalition were to collapse, the President would be pivotal for forging a new political order, by either appointing a new government or allowing a snap election. His pro-European and moderate positions must be taken into account in the case of a cabinet reshuffle, too. In that event, it would be difficult to appoint radical euro-sceptic figures.

e) Future

For the moment it is likely that the coalition resists, at least until the European elections of May 2019. Political incentives for the two governing forces to return to the polls before the European elections are still scarce. Nevertheless, economic growth is slowing down and the careful balance of different policies between the two parties is at risk. Indeed, as the Budget Law shows, the coalition is designing “micro-policies” in order to realize all the electoral promises of both parties in its very first year. The problem is that, owing to the EU constraints and despite their breaching, an excessively modest budget is available in order to implement in full all the measures set out in the coalition’s agreement. The government is trying to do a little of everything, but the risk is to implement over-ambitious reforms, which might become ineffective due to the lack of an appropriate level of public funding.

For these reasons, the two parties cannot afford to remain together in government for too long. The prospect of a new recession and probable policy failures might speed up their separation after the European elections. In particular, as the polls show, for the League a snap election might be particularly attractive because Salvini’s party is polling around 31% and the recomposition of the centre-right coalition, with Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia) and Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d’Italia) as junior partners, could get more than 45% of vote, gaining an absolute majority in Parliament. Furthermore, a prolonged period in government might weaken the possibility for the two populist parties to draw on different electorates and to make themselves

distinguishable in the eyes of the voters. The various opposition parties might take advantage of policy failures and the juxtaposition of populist messages. Indeed an early vote scenario could shape a new bipolar political system between the League and the 5SM, shoving the PD into a corner and reabsorbing the other centre-right parties into a coalition led by Matteo Salvini.

Furthermore, Salvini is moving south. He has recently visited Naples and other major southern cities in order to erode the consensus of his ally, the 5SM. Some policy proposals of the League, such as increasing public expenditure on infrastructure and recruiting more police officers, look to the “Meridione” or south, which is suffering high unemployment, poor infrastructure maintenance, illegal immigration and criminality. It will be interesting to monitor the shift of voters from the 5SM to the League in the southern regions. The latter could become a real national force and it could contest with its ally the position of the “leading party” in the country. If this happens at the European elections, which have always had an influence on domestic politics, it might trigger a call for snap elections or most likely a Cabinet reshuffle in favor of the League.

To conclude, many unpredictable factors will influence the duration of the populist government, but it seems very likely that it will not last in its current form for the entire legislature.

f) Forecasts

Probability of snap elections:

Elections before or together with European Elections (by the end of May 2019): 10%

Elections between Q3 2019 (autumn) and Q2 2020 (spring): 50%

Election after 2020 or at the end of the legislature (2023): 40%

The most likely scenario is snap elections within a year after the European elections. The changing balance of power in Brussels and the possible imbalance within the coalition might accelerate the return to the polls. This scenario will become more likely if the League gains broad support (over 30%) and the 5SM loses votes (25% or below) in the polls. The relationship between the two parties would be reversed from March 2018, when the 5SM got 32.5% and the League slightly under 18%, with the League becoming the main partner and the 5SM the junior one. In this case, it would be more likely to have a reshuffle to rebalance the coalition within the Cabinet or an acceleration towards early elections. The hypothesis of a cabinet reshuffle was not excluded by the Prime Minister Conte in the end-of-the-year press conference. Conte said he could not rule out a government reshuffle if the decision was "shared" by the two government partners.

2. Public Opinion Trends

a) Polls

Nine months after the Italian general elections held on March 4, and six months after the inauguration of the Conte government, the scenario of voting intentions outlines a continuing honeymoon period between voters and the new executive. Overall, the proportion of Italians willing to vote for one of the two parties in government reaches almost 60%, while it barely reached 50% at the time of the elections. Despite criticisms in the national media and the tensions with Europe, the government seems to enjoy the support of public opinion – we will see below some possible additional explanations for this. Conversely, opposition parties have either registered a significant drop in terms of support (Forza Italia) or are unable to take advantage of the difficulties faced by the government (Democratic Party).

A comparison between actual electoral results and the most recent polls highlights two remarkable elements. First, the two government partners are not experiencing the same trends. In fact, the League managed to substantially double its share of support, with growth that goes well beyond simply picking up voters that have quit its former centre-right allies, while the 5SM is in sharp decline (it has lost more than 6 percentage points, which means an almost 20% drop). So, it seems so far that Salvini's party is capitalizing on the experience in government, while Di Maio's party is paying a high cost for ruling.

Secondly, an element should be underlined which is too often overlooked in surveys – namely, the estimated turnout. As we can see, recent survey estimates place the average turnout around 63% – a drop of 10 percentage points compared to March 4. This means that – if we look not at the percentage of those expressing a valid vote intention, but to the whole electorate – on the one hand, the decline of the 5SM is even more pronounced (-30%), but on the other hand, the growth of the League (and of the centre-right overall) is more contained. Therefore, the increase in support for the government is in fact simply confirmation of previous support: from 36.5% to 37.4% in the whole sample (including undecided voters and abstentions). This basically means that the increased support for the government registered in polls has to be interpreted as a consolidation of the government area (but with a declining 5SM and an expanding League) vis-à-vis a demobilization of the opposition.

Tab. 1 – Vote intentions based on most recent surveys, and comparison to March 4

	Recent polls	March 4 elections
League	32.9%	17.3%
5SM	26.3%	32.7%
PD	17.6%	18.7%
FI	8.7%	13.9%
FDI	3.8%	4.4%
+EU	2.5%	2.6%
LeU (MDP and SI)	2.1%	3.4%
PAP	2.0%	1.1%
Turnout	63.1%	72.9%

b) The Conte cabinet and the political agenda

Now, where does this continuing popularity of the Conte government come from? Let us look at an empirical analysis. A CISE survey conducted immediately before March 4 showed that League and M5S supporters had significant shared preferences on some key issues. It seems that the success of this government can so far be attributed to its ability to put precisely those issues at the centre of its political action. In particular, the reduction in the retirement age, the introduction of a basic income, the limitation on the arrival of refugees, the attempt to make EU economic policy more flexible, and the decriminalization of force used in self-defense are all goals which are shared both among voters for the government parties and in the electorate at large (including other parties), which might explain why this government is currently in the position to enjoy consensus also from citizens who did not cast their vote in its favor on 4 March.

Finally, our data also suggest some issues which have not been fully exploited yet, but which might in future guarantee a further share of support for the government (i.e. fighting tax evasion); and a possible explanation to the more cautious behavior with respect to the flat tax and the exit from the EU or the Eurozone, which seem to be less widely supported ideas. However, in the next few months, with the approval of the budget bill and the discussion concerning retirement reform and basic income, we will see some key developments in terms of the credibility of this government.

Tab. 2 – Support for selected political goals among the whole electorate and among League and 5SM voters

	Whole electorate	5SM voters	League voters
Reduce pension age	80%	84%	90%
Introduce a basic income for those living below the poverty line	73%	83%	71%
Limit the number of refugees	80%	83%	96%
Fight tax evasion	86%	82%	90%
Make EU economic policy more flexible	76%	79%	77%
Keep tax progressivity	74%	76%	50%
Decriminalize force used in self-defence	69%	70%	82%
Stay in the EU	66%	61%	42%
Stay in the Euro	61%	56%	38%

(source: CISE survey, March 2018 – 1,000 CAWI interviews)

3. Foreign Policy

In autumn 2018 domestic and international attention focused on Italian political dynamics. The controversial interaction between the yellow-green government and the European Commission to some extent overshadowed the foreign policy dimension of the country. It can be argued that the ongoing controversy between the Italian government and the EU absorbed most of the country's political and diplomatic resources and impacted also on dossiers and negotiations which go beyond Italy-EU relations.

The decision of the League-5SM not to redraft (at least until now) the budget and not to give up on the most controversial priorities (citizen's income, pension reform and, to some extent, the establishment of a flat tax) has increased the tension with the European Commission and also with the traditional partners, namely Germany and France. As a consequence, the Conte government has decided to counterbalance its isolation by enhancing dialogue with other "critical voices" inside the EU. In particular, Deputy PM Salvini has held bilateral talks with Hungarian PM Viktor Orban and with the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. The attempt to create an alternative group of countries resulted in very poor outcomes for at least two main reasons: first of all, central European countries proved to be very reluctant to support the Italian request to redraw European rules concerning migrants and asylum seekers; secondly, those same countries (along with other northern Europeans) showed no or very little understanding for the Italian divergence from EU fiscal standards, adopting a position which was a lot stricter than that of France and Germany (and even of the EU Commission). The failure to build a coalition of nationalist countries increased the country's diplomatic isolation. Frustration at the country's stalemate is expected to drive a re-connection between the Italian government and the Commission and a partial rapprochement between Italy and its traditional partners (especially Germany).

The peculiar position taken by the Italian government towards the EU can also explain Italian initiatives towards the US and the Russian Federation. Relations between the Italian government and the US administration are relatively positive, especially after the visit of PM Conte to the US in July this year. Now Italy is capitalizing on US support and especially the endorsement given by the US administration to the Italian government concerning the management of the Libyan crisis (see below).

Full convergence between Italy and the US seems, however, very unlikely for at least two reasons: the first one is that Italy cannot become the States' Trojan horse in the EU and has a strong incentive to find a *modus vivendi* with France and Germany and this despite the internal problems that both Merkel and Macron are facing in their countries; the second reason is related to the fact that Italy, as an adaptive middle power, has a strong interest in engaging in the multilateral system. The yellow-green coalition has displayed a certain degree of dissatisfaction with a number of multilateral agreements/dossiers: in recent days, the Global Compact on migration has been approved by the UN without Italian support. Apart from a few exceptions (the Global Compact did not gain the support of the Italian government owing to domestic political reasons but also for a number of critical "technical" points), Italy will be reluctant to follow the unilateralist line embodied and promoted by the US administration.

Relations with Russia are even more complex and controversial. In late October PM Conte paid tribute to Vladimir Putin in his official visit, which followed previous visits by Matteo Salvini and Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi. The Italian commitment to dialogue with Moscow is a permanent feature of its foreign policy. It can be argued, however, that the yellow-green coalition looks at Moscow as a partner not only to increase trade and business, but also to counterbalance its isolation at European level. Russia is also considered a gateway for Italy to play an active role in the Mediterranean, where Russian troops and diplomacy are now a key and permanent presence. The most significant and effective limit on Italian policy towards Russia is provided by the sanctions adopted by the EU: despite the convergence with Germany on

the importance of activating a new channel of dialogue with Moscow, the EU position is strongly influenced by the hardliners of the Visegrad Group and the Baltic members.

Last but not least, a key indicator of the Italian performance in the international arena is its activism in the MENA region. Italy plays a key role in the process of stabilisation in different countries (Italy has a leadership position in Lebanon, where an Italian general is the head of the UNIFIL mission). The most important and controversial priority for Italy is, at the moment, the stabilisation of Libya. Over the last month Italy has been the pivotal player in the negotiations on Libya's future, acting as a bridge between Libya's strong man - General Khalifa Aftar - and the UN-supported but weak leader Faye al-Sarray. At the Palermo conference held on November 12 and 13, Italian diplomacy succeeded in building consensus on the stabilisation process designed by the UN and to promote a new compromise between the Libyan fractions.

Recent developments confirm that the foreign policy of the "odd couple" 5SM-League is an articulated mix of new ambitions and traditional priorities. The renovated activism on Libya is significant in this perspective: it is in line with a consolidated priority of Italian foreign policy, yet, at the same time, the yellow-green coalition has stressed the importance of the Italian leadership in the MENA region also to counterbalance the French influence in the area. Emphasis on the rejection of the established international (and European) order is a fundamental component of the new government's narrative, as confirmed by the dialogue between the Italian political forces and the EU authorities. Other regional files provide additional evidence of the Italian ambition to play a different tune: e.g., Interior Minister Salvini's recent declarations on the terrorist nature of Hezbollah during his visit to Israel (12 December). In conclusion, it can be argued that the Italian foreign policy of the next months will be characterized by the coexistence between continuity and rejection of the established international order. In particular, the leading political forces are expected to affirm the right of "self-determination" and the rejection of the existing rules, without the real intention to deny the existing order.

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