

ITALY



Italy's multiple populisms facing the Russo-Ukrainian war

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Abstract

Italy has been defined as a laboratory for populism and a “populist paradise.” Indeed, multiple forms of populism coexist in Italy, covering the entire political spectrum. From the “left-wing” Movimento 5 Stelle to the right-wing coalition composed of Fratelli d’Italia, Forza Italia and the Lega, we can be sure that populism is very popular in Italy. We can be equally sure that, over the last few years, all these parties have had links to the Putin regime. Suffice it to mention the decades-long friendship between Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin or the admiration Matteo Salvini, the head of the Lega, has demonstrated for the president of the Russian Federation. However, the Russian invasion and the extensive popular and institutional support evinced for Ukraine in its wake changed everything, leaving populist parties scrambling to review their positions and modify their discourse. In the report, I will examine the ties between the main Italian populist parties (Fratelli d’Italia, Forza Italia, Lega, Movimento 5 Stelle) and Russia and the shifts in their positions towards President Putin in the aftermath of the invasion. Against this backdrop, the September 2022 elections in Italy can be considered as a “test case” to measure the success of the populist parties’ strategies to negotiate the crisis and to shed light on the changing balance of power within the broad populist field.

Keywords: *Italy; Fratelli d’Italia; Lega; Berlusconi; Movimento 5 Stelle.*

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Biancalana, Cecilia. (2023). “Italy’s multiple populisms facing the Russo-Ukrainian war.” In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0022>



Italy as a “populist paradise”

Italy has always been considered a Petrie dish for the study of populism, earning it the rubric of the “laboratory of populism” (Tarchi, 2015). A range of types and forms of populism coexist in Italy. The leading manifestations today are the Fratelli d’Italia (“Brothers of Italy,” FdI), Lega (“the League”), Forza Italia (“Forward Italy,” FI), and the Movimento 5 Stelle (“Five Star Movement,” M5S). Together, these four populist parties garnered 59.2% of the vote in the September 2022 election, attesting to the electoral strength of populism in Italy today. During the election campaign—which took place after the collapse of a two-year grand coalition government that all the populist parties (except for FdI) participated in—the FdI, Lega, and FI campaigned jointly and stormed home to a decisive victory.

The FdI was founded in 2012 but follows the tradition of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), a neo-fascist party founded in 1946 by supporters of the former dictator Benito Mussolini. The FdI made its electoral breakthrough in the 2022 elections, where it obtained 26% and got to the government for the first time, under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni. The party promotes an extreme right-wing ideology based on the Fascist motto “Dio, Patria, Famiglia” (“God, Homeland, Family”). It defends a homogeneous people against everything considered different: e.g., LGBT people and immigrants (especially from Islamic countries). In the same way, it defends national sovereignty against supranational integration, even though its opposition to the European Union can be considered “soft.” It is worth noting that the FdI belongs to the more moderate ECR group in the European Parliament.

Lega, which before December 2017 was known as Lega Nord (the Northern League), was founded in 1991. During the first phase of its existence, it was a regionalist party (Bulli & Tronconi, 2011) that displayed intense ethno-chauvinism vis-à-vis the southern parts of Italy and sought to champion the interests of the north against central political institutions. Since the election of Matteo Salvini as party secretary in 2013, Lega’s hostility to immigration has moved to the foreground. Furthermore, Salvini has forged links with parties of the populist Right, such as France’s Rassemblement National (“National Rally,” RN), with which he shares a form of euro-scepticism and hostility towards the common European currency.

Silvio Berlusconi’s party Forza Italia was founded in December 1993 after the *Tangentopoli* corruption scandals, in which judicial investigations revealed an extensive network of kickbacks for government contracts involving billions of

dollars and thousands of officials, which rocked Italy's political establishment. FI took part in the general elections of March 1994, garnering 21% of the vote and joining the first right-wing coalition in office in Italy since the Second World War. From that moment on, Berlusconi became a permanent fixture of Italian politics. Berlusconi is generally positioned as an example of "right-wing populism" (Fella & Ruzza, 2013). A billionaire media mogul, he entered politics as the consummate "outsider," leveraging his television stations to address his appeals to "the people" in a mode that foreshadowed Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra and Donald J Trump in the United States. In this telling, Berlusconi cast himself as the only true channel of the voice of ordinary Italians (the "common people").

While there is broad agreement that M5S is a populist outfit, its classification as left-wing is contested (Ivaldi, Lanzone & Woods, 2017; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). The M5S was founded in October 2009 by the former comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo. The party made its electoral breakthrough in the 2013 general elections, winning 25% of the vote. Support for the M5S was fuelled by the economic crisis and the de-legitimization of the parties, which allowed Grillo's party to dislodge the bipolar dynamic that had characterized the Italian Second Republic, winning voters across the whole political spectrum (Colloca & Marangoni, 2017). In the 2018 general election, the M5S won the plurality, taking 32.8 % of the vote. It joined the national government as part of a populist governing coalition with Salvini's Lega. In power, the M5S experienced for the first time the constraints of holding office and the need to challenge some of the internal traits it had championed as a long-standing oppositional movement (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2019). When the governing coalition collapsed, the M5S partnered with the leftist Partito Democratico (PD) to form a new government. From 2021 to 2022, the party also participated in the technocratic grand coalition government led by Mario Draghi.

Over the last few years, all these parties have had relationships, including formal links, with Putin's regime. What are the populist parties' relationships with Putin's Russia? How did their positions change after the outbreak of the war? The remainder of the report is organized as follows. After sketching the historical background of the relationship between Italy and Russia, I will examine how the positions of the four main Italian populist parties towards Russia and President Putin shifted in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. In the last section, I will comment on the results of the national election in September 2022. The election can be considered a "test case" to measure the success of the populist parties'



strategies to negotiate the crisis and to shed light on the changing balance of power within the broad populist field.

Italy and Russia: Dangerous liaisons

Italian populists have long been attracted by Vladimir Putin's sovereigntism (an ideology that foregrounds efforts to maintain a nation or political community's sovereign independence). This, in part, reflects a historical ambivalence towards Italy's post-Second World War security arrangements. Indeed, although for different reasons, parties across the political spectrum have been sceptical of Italy's close ties with the United States and its membership in NATO. Pro-Russian feelings and hostility towards the United States persist on the Far Left. And even if vehement anti-communism saw the Italian Right oppose the USSR during the Cold War, this did not translate into enthusiastic support for the United States.

Nowadays, there are two main reasons that Italian populists admire Putin's Russia. First, it is a matter of *economic self-interest*. Italy imports large quantities of Russian oil. Furthermore, companies in the country's north, the historical stronghold of right-wing parties, have firm ties with Russia. Second, there is a *cultural reason*, a sort of elective affinity between the Russian leader and the populist parties. Populists see in Putin the figure of a powerful and authoritarian leader, able to decide and act quickly without the constraints of the checks and balances of liberal democracy. Moreover, while left-wing populist parties have cast their support for contemporary Russia as part of an anti-establishment stance, right-wing populist parties appreciate his defence of Christian values and his opposition to Islamism. Finally, they share criticism towards the European Union and other supranational bodies, which are said to weaken national sovereignty.

However, the Russian invasion and the extensive popular and institutional support evinced for Ukraine in its wake have compelled Italy's populist parties to review their positions and modify their discourse.

The reactions of the four populist parties to the war

Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia: Instrumentalizing the war as electoral strategy

Historically, the Italian Far Right adopted a broadly Atlanticist posture, even

though this coexisted with an impulse to promote a “third way” between the United States and the Soviet Union. In recent years, the second instinct has proved more prevalent, with Giorgia Meloni — the FdI leader and current prime minister of Italy— repeatedly praising Putin. For example, on the occasion of Putin’s re-election as president in 2018, Meloni wrote on Facebook that “the will of the people in Russian elections appears unequivocal” (Meloni 2018). FdI also condemned the economic sanctions imposed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014 as against the Italian national interest.

Nevertheless, of all the parties in the Italian party system, FdI is the least compromised in terms of links to Russia. Indeed, after the outbreak of the war, Meloni firmly condemned the invasion and backed moves to welcome Ukrainian refugees. Moreover, in the run-up to the 2022 elections, which her party was expected to win, Meloni tried to distance the FdI from the positions of its electoral partners (i.e., Lega and FI, see below). Meloni’s aim in this regard was to cast herself before a domestic and international audience as a credible future leader and institutional player. For instance, the party supported government initiatives in favour of Ukraine, including the supply of weapons, even when it was in opposition.

The controversial position of the Lega

Salvini has long admired Putin. In March 2015, he declared, “I believe that Russia is much more democratic than the European Union” (“Salvini, Russia molto più democratica dell’Ue”, 2015). That November, he appeared before the European Parliament wearing a t-shirt¹ bearing the face of Putin and declared: “I would exchange two of Mattarella [Italy’s then-president] for half a Putin!” (Salvini 2015). Then, in March 2018, he tweeted encouragement to Russian voters ahead of presidential elections to cast a ballot for Putin, whom he described as “one of the best politicians of our era” (Salvini 2018).

This admiration has three grounds, one *cultural* (the elective affinity between populists and Putin), one *economic* (defending Italian commercial interests, especially those of industrial firms in the Italian north with significant Russian business)² and one related to *international partnerships*. Moreover, Salvini’s

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1. After the outbreak of the war, Salvini was mocked by a Polish mayor because of that t-shirt (“‘See what your friend Putin has done’: Salvini mocked in Poland”, 2022).
 2. For this reason, Salvini regularly called for the lifting of sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.



connections to Marine Le Pen (they belong to the same populist, Eurosceptic group in the European Parliament) reflect a distinct network of Far Right ties to the Putin regime inside the EU.

Indeed, the relationship between Lega and Russia reflects not merely affinity and mutual appreciation but clear and formal institutional linkages. For instance, in March 2017, the Lega signed a confidential cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia Party. This was part of the Russian attempt to strengthen institutional links with European populist parties. There is also an ongoing investigation into alleged illegal party financing from Russia.

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine unfolded, Lega was in government as part of the technocratic administration led by Mario Draghi since 2021. Despite his former public statements in support of Putin, in the aftermath of the invasion, Salvini wrote that "The League firmly condemns any military aggression, the hope is an immediate stop to the violence. Support to Draghi for a common response of the allies" ("Ucraina: Salvini, Lega condanna ogni aggressione militare", 2022). During an interview with Bloomberg in September 2022, Salvini declared: "My opinion about Putin has indeed changed amid the war, because when someone starts invading, bombing, sending tanks into another country, well, everything changes" (Lepido, Albanese, & Eberhart 2022). Moreover, the party voted for fresh sanctions against Russia and to send weapons to Ukraine, although party leaders expressed scepticism at sanctions arguing they would harm the Italian economy. As for his notorious hostility to people seeking asylum in Italy, Salvini squared the circle by defining Ukrainians as "genuine" refugees (Salvini, *Ucraini sono veri profughi, non quelli col telefonino*, 2022).

Berlusconi and Putin: The once and future friendship?

Silvio Berlusconi has a long friendship with Putin, which began during the media mogul's second stint as prime minister from 2001–06. In 2003, Berlusconi excused Russia's brutal crackdown in Chechnya as "an anti-terrorist operation" ("Berlusconi difende Putin e attacca la stampa", 2003). The two first met at the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001. They met again in the following years, not only in their capacities as heads of government but on a personal basis, often appearing together in public and exchanging expensive gifts. In 2010, Berlusconi declared Putin "a gift from the Lord," (Lombardozzi 2010) and in 2019, Putin returned the favour, describing Berlusconi as "a politician of world stature" (De Feo 2019) In 2015, after the annexation of Crimea, Berlusconi visited Sebastopol with Putin.

Apart from their friendship and a shared self-identity as “strongmen in command,” the relationship between the two is also a matter of economics and diplomacy. Concerning the former, in 2005, Berlusconi’s government prepared an agreement that would have allowed the Russian company Gazprom to resell Russian gas directly to Italian consumers. On the diplomatic front, Berlusconi helped to broker a set of agreements between Russia and NATO after a 2002 summit held in Rome, which created the now-defunct NATO-Russia Council and is considered the high point of relations between Russia and the West.

Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Berlusconi tried to say as little as possible about Putin and did not explicitly condemn the invasion. Only in April 2022 did he say that he was “deeply disappointed and saddened” (Berlusconi alla convention di Forza Italia: “Deluso da Putin. A Bucha crimini di guerra. Spetta a Mosca far tacere le armi”, 2022) by Putin’s behaviour. However, despite the words of criticism, his position remained at first ambiguous. In September 2022, in a TV interview, he said that Putin “was pushed to do this special operation in Ukraine” to “replace the Zelensky government with decent people” (Ucraina, Berlusconi: ‘Putin spinto a inventarsi l’operazione speciale’, 2022) In October, in a leaked audio, he said that he had “reconnected” with President Putin (Berlusconi: ‘Ho riallacciato i rapporti con Putin’. Poi smentisce. LaPresse pubblica audio, 2022). Finally, in February 2023, after a meeting between Meloni and Zelensky, Berlusconi attacked Zelensky, saying that he would have never met him, causing political embarrassment within the coalition (“Berlusconi: ‘Da premier non sarei mai andato da Zelensky’”, 2023).

The Movimento 5 Stelle: Peace, but not at any price

The M5S has its roots in Italy’s leftist social movements (Biancalana, 2020), which were drawn to Grillo’s unvarnished defence of democracy and human rights. Indeed, when Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya was murdered in 2006, Grillo wrote that “Russia is a democracy based on exporting gas and oil. If they didn’t export that, they would go back to being the good old dictatorship of earlier times” (Kirchgaessner 2017). However, the positions of the M5S changed over time, and the party started expressing sympathies for Russia.

For the M5S, Russia appeared to exemplify a robust opposition to the United States and the EU, both of which have been perceived in the movement as harmful to Italy’s national interests. Mirroring the long-standing M5S slogan that it is “beyond Left and Right,” the M5S tried after the Russian annexation of Crimea in



2014 to position itself “beyond Russia and the United States.” In September 2014, Grillo wrote in a blog post that “the M5S is not pro-Russian or pro-American; it is pro-Italian” (Movimento 5 stelle 2014). In reality, with the institutionalization of the party in government and following Russia’s attempt to create links with successful European populist parties, the positions of Grillo—and some of the party’s MPs—became increasingly pro-Putin. For example, M5S condemned the European sanctions imposed on Moscow after the annexation of Crimea. In an interview in 2017, Grillo stated that “Putin is the one who says the most reasonable things about foreign policy. The embargo against Russia costs us €7 billion a year. We are in favour of lifting the sanctions against Moscow” (Picardi 2017). The domestic economic effects of sanctions were likely driving Grillo’s rhetoric, which is clearly focused on the “national interest.” After the 2018 elections, the M5S formed a government with the Lega, which took a similar approach to the Italian national interest, especially concerning trade and economics.

Grillo made no public statement after the February 2022 invasion, although the new head of the party, Giuseppe Conte, condemned it. As part of the Draghi government, the M5S voted for sanctions and to send weapons (albeit expressing doubts about the efficacy and effect on Italy). Finally, in the summer of 2022, a split emerged in the party after an internal campaign to push for an end to Italian weapons supplies to Ukraine, which Conte backed. Luigi Di Maio, the more Atlanticist minister of foreign affairs at the time, left the party saying that “we are compelled to choose which side to take at this moment in history — with the victim Ukraine or the aggressor Russia,” (“Di Maio lascia i 5Stelle: ‘Bisogna scegliere da che parte stare della storia. Alcuni dirigenti hanno rischiato di indebolire l’Italia’”, 2022) and later blamed Conte for “falling for Putin’s propaganda” (Messa 2022). The M5S, currently in opposition to the Draghi government, now opposes sending weapons to Ukraine, a return to its traditional pacifist orientation, which it shares with the Far Left in Italy.

The September 2022 elections: A test case for Italian populist parties

In July 2022 Draghi’s technocratic coalition administration fell apart, triggering early elections in September 2022. Lega, the FdI and FI campaigned on a joint ticket and formed a coalition in government. The FdI topped the polls with 26% of the vote, while Lega and FI won 8.7% and 8.1%, respectively. As a result, an

entirely new balance of power within the right-wing coalition has emerged. In the previous elections in 2018, Lega garnered 17.3% against 14% for FI and 4.3% for FdI. For its part, M5S's share of the vote declined from 32.7% to 15.4%. We cannot say that the results depended exclusively on the parties' positions on the war. However, the issue of Ukraine certainly played some role in voters' minds.

Concerning public opinion, Italians generally blame Russia for the invasion and express support for Ukraine (80% of citizens say they favour welcoming Ukrainian refugees. See Freyrie, 2022). However, there are key differences within the electorate. In late 2022, researchers from the Political and Social Analysis Laboratory (LAPS) at the University of Siena asked voters to nominate who they considered primarily responsible for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some 59 and 54% of those saying they voted for centre-right parties and the M5S, respectively, answered "Russia" (in comparison, 75% of centre-left voters blame Russia for the invasion). Concerning the M5S, 20% of their voters said it was the United States, while 10% said NATO was to blame. From this view, it is the M5S electorate that is the most pro-Russian. Among centre-right voters, 16% said the United States is to blame, while 8% blame NATO. The report also shows that most Italians are sceptical of (or downright opposed to) military support for Ukraine. The most sceptical are M5S voters (60% against) and centre-right (57% against) (Freyrie, 2022).

In conclusion, we can say that populists adapted to the situation, leveraging the issue of the war for their respective ends. As regards the right-wing coalition, Meloni (the leader least compromised by Russian ties) used the war to gain credibility at the international level and to moderate her image to get to the government. Despite their well-established links with Putin and fearing they would cede consensus and international credibility, Salvini and Berlusconi voted in favour of sanctions and the sending of weapons as part of both the Draghi and Meloni administrations, although somewhat less enthusiastically than FdI. They expressed scepticism about these measures, but more in word than in deed, all the while careful not to explicitly support Putin and instead focusing on reasons linked to the economy and peacekeeping. Moreover, all the right-wing populist parties, which typically take a hard line against immigration, welcomed Ukrainian refugees. The M5S leader, Giuseppe Conte, maintained his position against sending weapons and favouring "peacekeeping." The fluid and opportunistic nature of the M5S allowed it to simultaneously adopt positions in line with the Italian Left (anti-Americanism, pacifism) and the Right (defence of the national economic interest).



In sum, the circumstances surrounding the Ukraine war serve to once again demonstrate the ability of populism to adapt quickly to different contexts and to make use of “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak, 2015). This can explain how parties that previously supported Putin adapted quickly to the situation by condemning the invasion and welcoming refugees while simultaneously using peace and national economic interests as discursive reasons for opposing measures against Russia.

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