

The case of Fratelli d'Italia: how radical-right populists in Italy and beyond are building global networks

*With several parties in Italy competing on the right and far right, **Valerio Alfonso Bruno** and **James F. Downes** look at the recent growth in support for Fratelli d'Italia. They argue that this party is building domestic support, along with a network of contacts of likeminded populist radical-right actors globally, which demonstrates the increased mainstreaming of populist radical-right ideas in liberal democracies.*



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Recent commentary on Italian politics has tended to focus on the electoral 'rise' of the populist radical-right League ('La Lega') under the charismatic leader and former deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini. Their electoral success has been primarily based on Salvini's personality and leadership, alongside its effective use of social media and the party's ideological rebranding. The party's profile has often at the expense of its right-wing electoral competitor, the national conservative 'populist' party Brothers of Italy ('Fratelli d'Italia' – FdI).

In contrast to Salvini's League Party, Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the FdI Party (founded in 2012), has constructed her political project by patiently building a well-structured political machine alongside an important network of relations, both at the national and international level.

Domestic level: Meloni is 'eating up' Berlusconi's Forza Italia

Fratelli d'Italia is a nationalist conservative and Eurosceptic political party. It was established in 2012, in disagreement with 'Il Popolo della Libertà', guided by Silvio Berlusconi, who had agreed to support the [technical executive led by Mario Monti](#). While the roots of La Lega are in Northern Italy (originally, a secessionist party), FdI's roots are in Rome and are clearly post-fascist.

In early 2018, after the general elections in Italy, the FdI was polling on average between 4% and 5%. Thus, the situation of the party was precarious and uncertain. In particular, the controversial decision by Matteo Salvini to form a government with the Italian 5-Star Movement (M5S) led by Luigi Di Maio could have potentially led to devastating consequences for both Meloni and her party, as the FdI and Berlusconi's Forza Italia were completely cut-off by the coalition government. However, Meloni demonstrated on that occasion her persistent personality. Perhaps judging that this coalition government would last only for a short period of time, Meloni resisted entering into agreement with it. Today the situation is completely different. The FdI has grown exponentially, with the [latest polls](#) in Italy giving FdI around 12% of the vote.

Furthermore, in the last few months, the public image of Giorgia Meloni has also undergone a process of increased visibility and her Fratelli d'Italia Party has taken off in Italy. This trend will most likely continue in the near future, as much of the electorate of Forza Italia has gradually been eroded and absorbed by the FdI. Two key factors can explain these trends, namely: (a) former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's unwillingness to find a real political 'heir' for his party; and (b) the political ties and administrative structure of the two parties.

With the electoral base of Forza Italia becoming increasingly weaker, both the League and Fratelli d'Italia will most likely benefit from this pattern of volatility. Consequently, we should expect to see [a continued exodus of MPs](#) from Silvio Berlusconi's Party to FdI in the coming months. Moreover, the FdI is now arguably a significant political force in Italian politics. Giorgia Meloni will not sit quietly in the shadow of Matteo Salvini, with party competition between both right-wing populist parties likely to heat up further. This has important implications for the future of right-wing party competition in Italy alongside the shift of Italian voters towards right-wing populism.

Global networks: building relations with the radical right internationally

After the regional elections held in Italy at the end of January, FdI leader Giorgia Meloni flew to Washington DC, [invited by members of the United States Congress](#), to attend the traditional two-day National Prayer Breakfast, a strictly behind closed doors event, ending with Trump's speech. The leader of the FdI took advantage of it to build a network of transnational relations with a diverse collection of leaders from far-right, nationalist and conservative parties.

Previously, Giorgia Meloni had already 'welcomed' in Rome some of the most controversial political leaders of the far right, at the Grand Hotel Plaza, for the second ['National Conservatism Conference'](#). This was an international event conceived by the Edmund Burke Foundation. Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán, Marion Maréchal (Marine Le Pen's niece) and UK Conservative MP Daniel Kawczynski were there, together with some key conservative thinkers, including Israeli philosopher Yoram Hazony, author of [The Virtue of Nationalism](#) (2019). Matteo Salvini was surprisingly the great absentee of the event, announcing he would not attend only at the very last moment, potentially unhappy with Giorgia Meloni's increasing political activism in Europe and the United States.

Implications beyond Italy

Whilst Italian politics has shifted increasingly towards the right, important developments have occurred at the [international level](#). The case of Fratelli d'Italia makes clear that a number of European populist radical-right parties now are seeking to build global networks and ties, including in the United States. The influence of the contemporary radical right now extends across the globe and must be taken seriously by policy makers.

More concerning for the future of liberal democracy is the increasingly 'blurred' ideological line within contemporary Conservative parties over [key issues such as immigration](#) and nationalism. Traditional centre right Conservative parties have become increasingly anti-immigrant and started to mimic the rhetoric and discourse ('mainstreaming' effect) of the populist radical right in a number of countries. Recent cases of this 'mainstreaming' effect can be seen particularly in Central-Eastern Europe (Hungary and Poland) alongside Western Europe (in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands) and in the United States with President Donald Trump.

Therefore, the greatest threat to liberal democracy in the long-term is likely not just to be the electoral 'rise' of these populist radical-right parties, but the 'mainstreaming' and legitimisation of radical-right discourse by 'mainstream' parties globally.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of Democratic Audit.

About the authors

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