

Between far-right politics and pragmatism: Assessing Fratelli d'Italia's policy agenda

*Fratelli d'Italia is set to lead Italy's next government following the party's victory in the 2022 Italian general election. Drawing on recent research, **Gianluca Piccolino** and **Leonardo Puleo** assess what the party's policy agenda may look like once it enters office.*

The success of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) in the Italian general election marked several firsts for Italy. Fratelli d'Italia is both the first far-right party and the first with a female leader to emerge as the largest party in an Italian election. The 26% of the vote the party won and the declining support of its two main allies – Matteo Salvini's League and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia – mean Fratelli d'Italia's leader, Giorgia Meloni, is set to become the first female Prime Minister of Italy, at the head of the most right-wing government in the country's history.

In [a recent study](#), we assess how Fratelli d'Italia since its foundation in 2012 has crafted a populist platform based on anti-establishment grievances. The party rapidly radicalised following its foundation, embracing a full-fledged far-right platform with authoritarian and nativist positions. Despite this intense ideological rebranding, the party has exhibited remarkable continuity in terms of its political elites. The overwhelming majority of Fratelli d'Italia's representatives were socialised within two predecessor parties, the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano and the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale.

In the Italian context, post-fascist elites have already been involved in several Berlusconi-led cabinets that have been in power since 1994. Fratelli d'Italia are far from political novices and Meloni has completed all the *cursus honorum* of classical parties: moving from the youth party branch to the premiership. This embeddedness within the traditional boundaries of the Italian right is testified by [electoral flows](#). Fratelli d'Italia's growth is mainly linked to the erosion of the support the League received in 2018 and to the return of those on the right who had previously backed the populist Five Star Movement during its phase as a 'catch all' party.

Fratelli d'Italia's evolving policy platform

Like many [other right-wing populist parties](#) in the past, as the prospect of governing the country became realistic, Fratelli d'Italia was faced with the question of whether to maintain its radical agenda in opposition or embrace a more respectable platform. In relation to the economy, the party appears to have distanced itself from the welfarist agenda it presented in the [2018 general election](#). In the [2022 manifesto](#), which was far more focused on concrete policy stances than abstract idealisations, the party's economic policies largely overlapped with those of its allies, focusing on non-proportional tax schemes (e.g. a flat tax rate), establishing a small state, and creating incentives for business.

With respect to immigration and the EU, Fratelli d'Italia has moved away from the more radical positions it held in the recent past. The 2022 programme made no mention of 'national preference' – i.e. giving priority to Italian nationals in the provision of social services – despite supporting this principle four years ago. While the party's programme articulates a strict approach to immigration, at the same time there is a broad commitment to promoting "the social and working inclusion of foreigners".

The same applies to the EU. In 2018, Fratelli d'Italia asked for a "re-discussion" of the euro and the European Fiscal Compact. These stances are somewhat blurred in the 2022 manifesto, which envisages a relaunch of the European integration project, defined as an ambiguous "Europe of the fatherlands, founded on the interest of the peoples and able to deal with the challenges of our time".

However, several other positions signal the persistence of the party's strong anti-establishment rhetoric. Fratelli d'Italia is the only major party that has not been part of the Italian government over the last decade and it clearly aimed to exploit this as a strength over its competitors during the 2022 election.

The 2022 manifesto also proposes the creation of a committee of investigation into the management of the Covid-19 pandemic "as well as adverse reactions to vaccines", an evident nod to conspiracist voters. If the new government encounters difficulties in delivering on its rather ambitious economic platform, it is likely it will attempt to implement stricter measures on cultural and social issues as an alternative. This could

include new measures on LGBTQI+ rights, strengthening religious values within the education system, and gender equality.

Foreign policy

In the leadup to the 2022 election, Meloni used foreign policy as a tool to reassure international actors and the economic establishment of her suitability for the role of Prime Minister. She consistently reaffirmed her [support for Ukraine in the ongoing war with Russia](#), committing to both arms supplies and sanctions against Russia. This differentiated Meloni's party from both Lega and Forza Italia, which have gradually become more sceptical about military support for Kyiv.

Nevertheless, on several occasions Fratelli d'Italia appeared to deviate from this path of respectability. The most blatant example was the party's MEPs voting against a European Parliament resolution in September condemning the Hungarian government for [the erosion of democracy in the country](#). It is no coincidence that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki were among the few European leaders to [warmly congratulate Meloni for her result](#). Similarly, in the last week of the election campaign Meloni reaffirmed [her support for the Spanish party Vox](#) – perhaps the foreign party with which Fratelli d'Italia maintains the strongest ties.

The fascist legacy

Finally, yet importantly, the heritage of Fratelli d'Italia's fascist legacy cast a shadow over the party's campaign. Meloni was keen to [reaffirm her detachment from fascism](#). She cited the fact she had not opposed a highly symbolic statement made during a state visit to Israel in 2003 by Gianfranco Fini – then leader of the Alleanza Nazionale and Italy's Deputy Prime Minister – that the racial laws introduced by fascism were part of "[the absolute evil](#)" of the Holocaust.

In the past, the image of Fratelli d'Italia has been marred by episodes of local leaders making positive statements about the old regime or being linked to the rituals or paraphernalia of fascism. Similar incidents resurfaced [during the 2022 election campaign](#). While Fratelli d'Italia cannot be labelled 'neo-fascist' and its leadership have never expressed an intention to reverse the process of detachment from the party's fascist heritage, at the same time there has been a degree of tolerance shown toward these views in the interests of maintaining the support of some of its base.

The evidence from the 2022 manifesto and campaign of Fratelli d'Italia thus does not allow unambiguous answers on the trajectory of the party. Rather than moderating its overall platform, Fratelli d'Italia seems to have discarded its most controversial positions without abandoning its markedly right-wing profile. Currently, the party's approach is close to the 1990s '[winning formula](#)' of the Italian radical right, who combined neoliberal economics with nativist and authoritarian positions.

Italy and the EU

The key showdown for Meloni – and the country – will inevitably arise when setting Italy's new relationship with Brussels. Meloni's first cabinet will undoubtedly be some distance from the Franco-German axis and it may also struggle to build strong ties with the other southern European governments. Should we, therefore, expect Italy to join the ranks of the most Eurosceptic governments of eastern Europe?

Although Fratelli d'Italia could give in to the temptation to team up with these governments, who are undoubtedly more similar in ideological terms than the governments of western Europe, Meloni is well aware of the economic pressures facing Italy. It is unlikely she will choose to jeopardise funds coming from Brussels under the framework of the NextGenerationEU initiative, of which Italy is the largest beneficiary. This above all else is the factor that could lead Meloni to pursue a more cautious approach in office, with a robust dose of pragmatism.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Vox España \(Public Domain\)](#)
