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The rise of Matteo Renzi and Italy's international role

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Nine months after the [last general elections](#), Italy is still searching for political stability and far-reaching reforms. Backed by an uneven and contentious left-right coalition, the government led by Enrico Letta is [living a troubled life](#). It is amidst these uncertainties that the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), the party of PM Letta and the main supporter of his cabinet, will be choosing its new leader in [primary elections](#) due on the 8 December 2013.

According to observers and pollsters, the December competition already has an expected winner: Matteo Renzi, the 38 year-old mayor of Florence. Last year Renzi stood as a candidate for the leadership of the centre-left coalition in the run up to the February 2013 general elections, but lost the ballot to Pier Luigi Bersani. The outcome of the elections was then disappointing for the Democratic Party, which failed to win a parliamentary majority and ended up entering a great coalition with the centre-right. This new candidature to the party leadership should be seen against that background: in spite of Renzi's

begrudging pledges of loyalty to Letta, there are few doubts that his party-engagement is conceived as a first step for a future run for the office of Prime Minister, whenever the occasion will arise.

A charismatic figure, able to attract voters from different sectors of public opinion, and a media darling, Renzi increasingly appears at home and abroad as the emerging personality of Italian politics. Last July, much to the consternation of Letta, [Chancellor Merkel invited him to Berlin for a private talk](#): a rather uncommon occurrence, should one consider him simply as the mayor of a medium-sized foreign city. Former US Ambassador to Rome David Thorne during his office [publicly praised Renzi](#) as a representative of a younger and more dynamic political élite, and his successor John Phillips is reported to be also [well acquainted with the mayor](#).

Renzi is campaigning almost constantly since at least 18 months. His political outlook centres on a confrontational rhetoric of modernization and clear break with the past (his most renown slogan, now partly discarded, promised to 'scrap' the old party establishment); pro-market attitude in economics; a call for state-efficiency and streamlined bureaucracy.

Yet, in spite of his growing political role, Renzi has had until now very few to say about foreign policy, and has seldom entered into details in European matters. His [first national platform](#), of 2011, was composed of '100 proposals': only three of them were (vaguely) foreign policy related. In the keynote speeches of his campaigns the world outside Italy has never deserved more than three minutes time. Something new emerged in his recently issued [platform for primary elections](#), as one of its main sections is dedicated to Europe: as we shall see, however, one can hardly escape, when reading it, an overall impression of woolliness.

The essentials of the mayor's outlook are unsurprising: Renzi is a Europeanist and a 'friend of the United States'. Towards the latter he shows a rather emotional tie. He frequently mentions Robert Kennedy as his political model, and, [when once asked about Barack Obama](#), answered he 'still thrilled' when recalling his handshake with the US President during an international meeting of mayors.

As regards Europe, Renzi's discourse follows two threads. On the one hand he maintains that the EU, which is often seen as a technocratic force imposing plethora regulations and strict controls on national policies, should rather propose a vision to its citizens: namely, the future development towards the 'United States of Europe'. This way Renzi joins an Italian tradition of self-proclaimed allegiance to the ideals of European federalism, and endorses some of its corollaries (he appeals for direct election of EU high offices, more independent powers for the ECB, strengthening the European identity by promoting a '[European Year of Volunteering](#)'). Accordingly, he also argues for a more effective European foreign policy ([he has described Lady Ashton's tenure as 'a disaster'](#)), to be supported on the long run by the establishment of a unified European school of diplomacy.

Yet, this ambitious set of proposals does not appear to be accompanied by any blueprint for implementation: this, at a moment when even more modest projects aimed at progressing towards an economic and monetary union are still deadlocked in Europe. The solution to this conundrum does not come, in Renzi's view, from any co-ordinated [Southern European strategy](#) aimed at revising the EU crisis management. The second thread of his European policy narrative, in fact, foresees Italy (alone?) recovering from its domestic diseases, restoring its international credibility and forcefully putting forward its views in Brussels and elsewhere. No longer should Europe tell Italy what to do, runs the slogan, it is about time 'we' start proposing Europe our agenda. Unsurprisingly, [some observers have found this a rather optimistic scheme](#).

The EU is also blamed for its allegedly weak role in the Mediterranean, which is a crucial topic of contemporary Italian politics. Renzi has recently asked for a shared responsibility in addressing the immigration issue (but does not seem to have commented on the [Eurosur initiative](#)). Responsive to human rights concerns, he has frequently pointed to the uncertain evolution of the Arab Springs, and [appealed for more dynamic European initiatives](#).

Probably the most pronounced discontinuity that can be traced in his statements, as compared to the Italian centre-left tradition, is on Middle Eastern subjects. [In a 2012 debate](#) he pointed to Iran as the 'mother of all challenges' in the area: he did not focus on the nuclear question, however, but rather recalled the 2009-10 'Green Wave' and proposed initiatives aimed at supporting liberalizing forces within the country. On the same occasion he expressed reservations on the Italian approval of the [bid to upgrade Palestine's UN status](#) on November 2012: a rather isolated position in the centre-left, traditionally quite sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

Will there be a Renzi-led centre-left government in the Italian future? Even if this appears as a plausible medium-term prospect, prudence is advisable as always, for too many are the variables at stake. Should one, however, conjecture on the foreign policy of such a government, he/she would probably find few variations to the traditional pattern of Italian foreign policy. A slight pro-Atlanticist swing may be expected, as well as a more careful consideration of Israel's stances in Middle Eastern policy. The assertive attitude in the EU announced by Renzi should be tested on more concrete grounds, and his attentiveness to the political developments of the countries of Mediterranean southern shore is likely to produce above all a considerable amount of multilateral meetings and roundtables, rather than anything else (Renzi's platforms and statements so far fell short of addressing the key issue of the Italian ties to the region in terms of economic investments and energy supplies).

Much ado about nothing, then? Perhaps not. The rather cursory nature of Renzi's international discourse does indeed tell a lot about present-day Italy, and about its international role.

Renzi's own horizon is chiefly *local*. And, however paradoxically, this seems to work as one of his assets. Renzi often cites his successful administrative record as a mayor as a proof of his credibility. His supporters appreciate his distance from 'old politics', as opposed to his closeness to dynamic and successful business sectors. European- and foreign policy is briefly mentioned as a sort of natural by-product of domestic recovery. The latter should come up by force of virtuous commitments and out of any logic of interdependence: subsequently, Italy would 'retrieve' a rather mythical high international status.

The late Berlusconi years seem to have left an obsession with the country's 'reputation': which is a justifiable concern, but also a rather slippery concept. The technocratic experiment of Mario Monti, on the other hand, far from sobering the political climate, has given way to resentments towards 'external constraints' on national policy. As a result, the Italian political debate lacks in most cases a serious consideration of the redefinition of the country's international role and national interest in a changing world. In spite of much modernization rhetoric, the rise of Matteo Renzi does not seem to make any exception to this trend. It appears indeed more apt at reassuring a crisis-ridden country, rather than at addressing its concrete challenges.

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