

“Operation Meloni” – The men behind Italy’s first woman PM

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Marco Morosini¹, 21 January 2023

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The hegemony of the right?

It is wrong to claim that "Italy is moving to the right". It is the parliament and the government that are moving to the right. The far-right coalition of one right-wing and two far-right parties makes up the minority in Italy, securing only 44% of the votes against 49% by the opponents. Though securing only 44% of the votes against 49% by the opponents, the far-right coalition make up 59% of the members of parliament (352 out of 600). Its scores of 44% is even lower than in 2001, 2006 and 2008 (between 47 and 50%). The only reason for this aberration is a new [extravagant electoral law](#). Indeed, the far-right coalition had fewer votes than in 2018 but the percentage of non-voters, on the other hand, rose from 37% to 44%. The real novelty for Italian politics thus lies in the shift of votes within the coalition, i.e. from the Lega and Forza Italia (9% and 8% respectively) to the neo-fascist Fratelli d'Italia (26%). One of the reasons for this shift in votes is Fratelli d'Italia's consistency. This is the only party to have remained in opposition over the last eleven years, which have seen six successive governments. Of the 28 million ballots cast, 1.3 million were blank or invalid (4.5%). Out of 51.3 million eligible voters, only 12.6 million (25%) voted for the far-right coalition and only 7.3 million (14.6%) voted for neo-fascist Fratelli d'Italia. Furthermore, most of the latter have no affinity with neo-fascism. However, despite representing less than one in ten people, neo-fascist politicians and their steadfast ideology will now cement their power in the

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parliamentary majority and the government along with the state television RAI. This will exert far-reaching consequences on laws, language, behaviour and culture in Italy, and possibly beyond.

Good news for women?

Giorgia Meloni, the first female head of government in Italy, brought into power a neo-fascist party steeped in a patriarchal mentality expressed as "God, Homeland, Family". Ms. Meloni is the only woman to reside in the very top leadership of her Fratelli d'Italia party. Only five women belong to the twenty-four executive ranks of the party. Being the most male-dominated and chauvinistic party in Italy, not surprisingly, Fratelli d'Italia has the lowest percentage of women among its members, voters and parliamentarians. For instance, it includes only 4 women in a total of 21 senate members. In parallel, with the ascension of male-dominated parties, the percentage of women in parliament has decreased from 35% in 2018 to 32% today.

In a press communique, Ms. Meloni prescribed to the media and the people that they must address her as "Mister President Giorgia Meloni". Yes "Mister" – as if the male gendering would provide a superior sign of distinction. Ironically, Giorgia Meloni and the famous French novelist George Sand (actually a woman), share not only their name but also the aspiration to be addressed as a man.

The public speech of Giorgia Meloni is hostile to positive gender discrimination in favour of women. In public meetings Ms. Meloni cries out against the "LGBT lobby" and the "gender ideology". Furthermore her party wants to make abortion more difficult. The main duty of women should be to have numerous children, they maintain, in order to counter the ongoing "demographic crisis".

A burst of youth?

By increasing the number of far-right MPs, [Italy's traditional gerontocracy](#) has worsened. Compared to 2018, the average age of elected MPs has risen from 44 to 50 years. Consider for instance Silvio Berlusconi, Umberto Bossi and Ignazio Benito La Russa, the patriarchs of the three right-wing parties. Respectively aged 86, 81 and 75, this grey-haired trio could easily be mistaken for the grandparents of Giorgia Meloni. But today, they are back in the limelight in the parliament, where they have sat for more than thirty years. Once again, Berlusconi is in charge. Armed with his powerful media, this man has largely contributed to Meloni's success, just as he did before with dozens of young women – some of them TV starlets, nude models or routine guests in the "bunga bunga" parties in his villas. Berlusconi knows that his last chance to become president of the Republic is to ["bring the fascists back into government"](#) (*ipse dixit*) while the latter, in exchange, should elect him to the top of the state.

Winds of change?

The far-right coalition (a small right-wing and two far-right parties) is back in power for the fourth time in thirty years, having already governed for a decade under Mr. Berlusconi. The new government will therefore be a restoration of the television tycoon's old regime, except this time, it will be led by Fratelli d'Italia.

In fact, the far-right coalition that has dominated or influenced Italian politics since 1994 has been invented by the three key men of Berlusconi's companies and party, sentenced in total to seventeen years in prison: Silvio

Berlusconi, the marketing chief Marcello Dell'Utri and the neofascist Cesare Previti. Of the three, only Dell'Utri actually served a few years in prison.

Two masterminds: La Russa and Crosetto

There are two masterminds of "Operation Meloni". One is the present Minister of Defense [Guido Crosetto](#) and the other is the president of the Senate, [Ignazio Benito La Russa](#). Aged enough to pass as the father and the grandfather of Giorgia Meloni, both men possess the political culture and experience that Meloni lacks. In 2012, they founded Fratelli d'Italia, embracing the legacy of Italian neo-fascism. Their personal profile and policy proposals smack of rancour. To mask this, they cleverly decided to include Meloni, then 35, in the party's foundation. At first they kept the presidency of the party for two years. But after realising that the weakest figure of the trio could become their asset, the two old male figures retreated to backstage and sent Meloni to the limelight.

One photograph suffices to tell this story. It shows a puny 35-year-old Meloni, smiling, lying down and raised [like a child in the arms of Guido Crosetto](#), a friendly Piedmontese King Kong weighing three times her weight. And the difference in weight between the two is not just physical. Indeed, Crosetto studied economics, has run the family business since the 1980s, has been mayor of a town, and has even been president of an airport. He has been in politics for thirty-five years and was a member of parliament for fourteen years. Above all, Crosetto has previously served as the Undersecretary of Defence (2008-2011) to the Minister of Defence, his comrade Ignazio Benito La Russa. It is therefore not surprising that Crosetto has been active in the business of weapons of war by running the state-owned company [Orizzonte Sistemi Navali](#) in addition to the *Federazione Aziende Italiane per l'Aerospazio la Difesa e la Sicurezza (AIAD)*. And guess what? Crosetto is now Minister of Defence. In politics, Guido Crosetto was associated with the Christian Democratic Party in the 1980s, later becoming a member of Berlusconi's party. Jovial and appreciated by the media but also by his opponents, he is not known for having fascist ideas.

The main architect of the party, however, is 75-year-old Senator Ignazio Benito La Russa, now President of the Senate. He is the patriarch of Italian neo-fascism, and involved in politics for half a century. He is the owner of a law firm and the head of a kind of Sicilian "La Russa clan" that has mixed economic and political power for decades. His father, Senator Antonino La Russa, a former leader of the National Fascist Party and of its successor the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), has also been a member of the clan, as has his brother Romano La Russa, a former member of the MSI and a former MEP. Ignazio Benito (named Benito in honour of Benito Mussolini) is so proud of his collection of fascist memorabilia, including a statuette of Mussolini, that he boasts it in an online video. Some call him "Lucifer" because his appearance and raspy voice are so "evil" that they have become the subject of parodies. La Russa himself plays on this Luciferian cliché, using it to somehow make him appear more sympathetic. His appearance in the film [Slap the monster on the front page](#) (1972) illustrates this well.

More than his words, La Russa's past deeds are matter of concern, because he has been involved in violent neo-fascist activities. Referring to ["Black Thursday" of 13 April 1973](#) (the anti-communist demonstration wanted by

the MSI and La Russa despite the authorities' ban), his comrade Tomaso Staiti di Cuddia stated: "[Ignazio stayed in the shadows, he made others do things](#)". During violent clashes with the police, the neo-fascists devastated a high school and the Student House. Some of them even threw a grenade that killed the policeman Antonio Marino and injured twelve other policemen. For his activism during the turbulent demonstrations of the 1970s (the so-called "[Years of Lead](#)"), some called La Russa "la Rissa" (the fight, in Italian). Indeed, in the 1970s, some MSI activists and sympathisers hunted down opponents armed with spanners, knives or even firearms. Consider for instance their [murder of the left-wing student Walter Rossi](#) in 1977. While Meloni presents herself as a newly blossomed flower, La Russa embodies the deep roots of Italian neo-fascism. His activism began in 1971 in the [Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI](#), the party founded in 1946 by [Giorgio Almirante](#), a former Fascist official and Nazi collaborator, and former editor of the newspaper [La Difesa Della Razza](#) (i.e. *The Defence of the Race*). In fact, La Russa has supported the previous three Silvio Berlusconi's governments and has also served in one of them (2008-2011) as the Minister of Defence. He was thus responsible for the army, the secret services, and a police corp.

Giorgia Meloni

[Giorgia Meloni](#) was born in Rome in 1977, with her only degree being one in languages, obtained at the age of 18. In public she speaks confidently in Spanish, English and French, which is a novelty for an Italian politician. She leads now the government of a G7 country, although she has never led a company, a municipality, a province, a region or an important ministry. During her meetings, she used to shout "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian!". This phrase is now legendary, hammered out in the rap video "[Io sono Giorgia - Remix](#)", viewed thirteen million times. "Giorgia" has become a genuine brand. The slogan "We are Giorgia" appears written on huge signs at her rallies. "I am Giorgia" is the title of her autobiography, with her portrait on the cover. Even on the cover of the party's programme, there is a seductive portrait of her, resembling a fashion magazine. Indeed, Meloni is essentially "fashionable" and was launched on the political market like a kind of "perfume of Italy". She is the very incarnation of the party agenda. Or rather: the other way round. When interviewed about Meloni, her supporters typically say "I like her" rather than "I agree with her ideas".

In a country of voyeuristic males and a celebrity-hungry public, Meloni's success as a young woman with dyed blond hair relies heavily on the dissemination of her photographs.

Every day, the media publishes hundreds of photos provided by her press office that show her in friendly poses, like an influencer, very often with a big smile or in a selfie against the backdrop of crowds at her meetings. Regularly, a dozen photos of Meloni are published on the web version of the main Italian newspaper in the same day. This iconic offensive has succeeded in creating a kind of "Georgia-mania" and gives the impression that Italy is a presidential republic, like France or the United States. But this is not the case, because in Italy the people only elect parliamentarians and not presidents.

Meloni's vision of Italy's future

In debates, Meloni is pugnacious and convincing. Why not give her a chance? To answer this question, it is necessary to look not only at what she wants for the future, but also at her past. In Meloni's future Italy there are words like "nation", "patriots", "defence of the homeland and national borders" against "illegal migrants", "Judeo-Christian tradition" and "Italian pride". Some electoral promises are alarming. Their list includes discouraging abortion and rewarding those who have many children (a policy based on that of Viktor Orban in Hungary), [abolition of the crime of torture](#) because it "prevents officers from doing their job" (in the 1980s, the MSI wanted the death penalty), [introduction of "chemical castration"](#) for the perpetrators of certain sexual violence, fighting ["against the LGBT lobby"](#), [relaxing of restrictions to carry a gun](#), introduction of the principle that ["defence is always legitimate"](#), the implementation of ["naval blockades"](#) against "illegal immigrants" as well as severe [sanctions against NGOs](#) that rescue shipwrecked people (["their ships must be seized and sunk"](#)). She also wants to abolish the citizenship income, a law of the 5-Star Movement that gives a small subsistence to four million poor people, many of whom, according to Meloni, "sit on the couch smoking joints" while providing tax cuts for the richest as well as amnesty for frauds (i.e. "fiscal peace"). Finally, on the big posters of her coalition is written: "Flat tax at 15%", referring to personal revenues.

In Meloni's nationalist-tinged speeches, there is hostility towards weak or different subjects (e.g. migrants, nomads, homosexuals, drug addicts, unemployed), mockery and denigration of opponents and hated categories, tolerance of police violence and armed citizens defending themselves, and mentions of a fight against 'deviance' (in which she includes obesity). Noticeably, she makes no reference to the ecological crisis. [Her virulent speech made on 14 June 2022](#) in Marbella during a meeting of the Spanish far-right Vox party illustrates her positions. But these views have not appeared from nowhere. They are rooted in the neo-fascist culture that forged Meloni. This is why it is necessary to look at her past.

Neo-fascist at fifteen

Meloni grew up in the Rome suburb of Garbatella. Her popular bite and strong Roman accent make her a real novelty, different from the "power-hungry politicians" she has railed against but has been a part of for the past thirty years. Fratelli d'Italia is the latest in a series of names taken in Italy by the neo-fascist MSI party founded in 1946 by former fascist hierarchs. The 19-year-old Meloni [once told in a France 3 television report in 1996](#): "I believe that Mussolini was a good politician, that is to say that everything he did, he did for Italy". She echoed her boss Gianfranco Fini, who had said that "Mussolini was the greatest statesman of the century" (1992) and that it was necessary to create "the fascism for the year 2000" (1988).

For more than seventy years, Italian neo-fascists have paid tribute to fascism and Benito Mussolini. Three of Mussolini's close relatives have been parliamentary candidates with Fratelli d'Italia or one of its predecessor parties: Alessandra and Rachele Mussolini (Benito's granddaughters) and Caio Julio Cesare Mussolini (great grandson). Alessandra Mussolini was a neo-fascist MP for 24 years, declaring herself "proud of the name I bear". Can one imagine three descendants of Hitler elected to the Bundestag in Berlin saying that they are proud of the name they bear?

This cultural environment shaped Meloni from the age of fifteen, when she joined the MSI in 1992. As president of Fratelli d'Italia, now she confirms the continuity of the MSI tradition and her pride in its symbol: the "fiamma tricolore" (the tricolour flame). It was designed in 1946 by the founder of the MSI, Giorgio Almirante, and still appears in the Fratelli d'Italia logo today. ["We need historical awareness", said Meloni, "to inherit a tradition, a culture, an identity and a belonging"](#). To Jewish senator Liliana Segre, a victim of fascist atrocities who once asked her to remove the flame, Meloni replied: "There is no reason to remove the flame. It represents a continuity with the history of a republican and democratic right". This is a peculiar self-denomination if one considers that in the highest hierarchy of the MSI there were war criminals and collaborators of the Nazis, who were responsible for beatings, attacks, torture, murder and an attempted coup d'état ("[Borghese coup](#)").

Let's clarify any misunderstanding: Meloni is not being asked to account for what fascism did a hundred years ago. Rather, she should be asked to account for what neo-fascism is doing today and what it has done in democratic Italy. It is in 2022, for example, that Romano La Russa, a regional councillor and brother of Ignazio Benito Larussa, gives the fascist salute at a public ceremony. Or even worse, it is disturbing to see Donald Trump (instigator of the armed attack on the US parliament) and [Georgia Meloni speaking at the far-right CPAC congress last year](#) if we remember the 1970 coup attempt by former MSI president (1951-1953) Junio Valerio Borghese. The latter was a war criminal, responsible for the massacres and torture of Italians perpetrated by the Decima Mas military unit he created. Sentenced to twelve years in prison, he was shortly thereafter released by amnesty.

In 2012, a mausoleum for a war criminal, former president of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI)

After 1945, Italian war criminals were not punished, unlike their German and Japanese counterparts. Is this some type of omertà (mafia code of silence) that allows Fratelli d'Italia to honour even today a fascist war criminal with a public monument? Indeed, on 11 August 2012, the present [Minister Francesco Lollobrigida](#) inaugurated in Affile (near Rome) the mausoleum "Patria e onore" (Fatherland and Honour) in memory of [General Rodolfo Graziani](#). This was the former viceroy of Ethiopia, Mussolini's minister of war and former president of the MSI (1953-1954). He is thus one of Meloni's predecessors. The mausoleum was desired by Lollobrigida and by the Mayor of Assile, who obtained the public money to build it. The current president of the Senate Russa defended the construction of the monument in a subsequent trial.

Why has this monument, which was virtually ignored in Italy, provoked outrage around the world, from Addis Ababa to [the BBC](#) to the [New York Times](#)? According to historian Angelo Del Boca, the foremost expert on this period, [Graziani was "the bloodiest murderer of Italian colonialism"](#) during the 1935-36 Fascist war against Ethiopia, which killed 250,000 Africans. Thousands of soldiers and civilians were poisoned with the war gases mustard and phosgene, murdered en masse, abandoned on forced marches through the desert or crammed into concentration camps, which were in effect extermination camps. From 21 to 29 May 1937, in the Ethiopian monastery of Debra Libanos, Graziani's troops [massacred more than 1,000 Christians](#) suspected of supporting the Ethiopian resistance. Among those killed were monks, deacons and Orthodox pilgrims.

[A film about Graziani, *The Lion of the Desert* \(1980\)](#), starring Antony Quinn, Rod Steiger and Irene Papas, [tells this story](#). But it was forbidden in Italy. Graziani was listed by the United Nations as a war criminal but Ethiopia's

request for his extradition was rejected by democratic Italy in 1949. In 1950 he was sentenced to 19 years in prison for collaboration with the Nazis, but was released from prison a few months later. This historical insight raises a burning question: if Italian neo-fascism is capable of dedicating a mausoleum to the historical criminal of war Graziani when it is in opposition, what will it allow itself to do now that it is in power?

Manifestations of neo-fascist nostalgia are still with us. In many cities, neo-fascist politicians have named streets and squares after fascist figures, often guilty of unpunished crimes. It was only in 2016 when the big exhibition *Nostalgia dell'avvenire* (Nostalgia for the future, named after the motto of its founder Giorgio Almirante) was held to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the MSI. Today, it is not uncommon to see neo-fascists displaying Roman salutes, symbols of fascism, commemorating the March on Rome or honouring the tomb of Benito Mussolini. The very founder of Fratelli d'Italia, Ignazio Benito La Russa, for example, displayed and [defended the fascist salute in parliament on 13 September 2017](#). At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, he had suggested on social networks to give up the unhygienic handshake to [replace it with the fascist salute](#). Finally, let us recall that in 2008, the election of neo-fascist Gianni Alemanno as the Mayor of Rome was celebrated on the steps of the Campidoglio (Rome's city hall) with fascist salutes, some black shirts and tricolour flags.

The manipulation of words

The Italian right-wingers have succeeded in implanting into the national language a series of word manipulations to their advantage. The most effective of these is the term “centre-right”, coined in 1994 by Silvio Berlusconi for the coalition of his party Forza Italia in collaboration with the independentists of the Lega and [“the fascists” \(so called by Berlusconi himself\)](#). Thanks also to Berlusconi's media supremacy, the term “centre-right” has become rooted in daily language as a means to define the far-right coalition. Moreover, while far-right and right-wing politicians call themselves "centre-right", they scornfully refer to the centre-left as "the left". Also the media and centre-left politicians, on the other hand, call the far-right coalition "centre-right", insofar accepting the political manipulation of the language. As a matter of fact, words like "neo-fascism" and "far right" are now forbidden in the political language.

Another manipulation is the name of the party of Giorgia Meloni. "Fratelli d'Italia" (Brothers of Italy), in fact, are the first words and title of the Italian national anthem which is sung, among other things, in stadiums. The result is that, today, each time the national anthem is sung, the name of a political party is inevitably evoked. This is similar to Berlusconi's operation in 1994, when he called his party "Forza Italia" (Go Italy), appropriating the manner by which crowds cheer Italian athletes in stadiums. The latter were called "gli azzurri" (the azure ones, alike to the “All Blacks” in New Zealand and “les Bleu” in France) until Berlusconi also appropriated the azure colour for his flags, convention sceneries and electoral goods. Moreover, Berlusconi adopted the word “azzurri” for his party. Since then, the MPs of Forza Italia have been called “gli azzurri” in the media.

In the elections of September 25, the Fratelli d'Italia party made a breakthrough. However, there were no scenes of celebration or Roman greetings in the streets. Its president Giorgia Meloni almost disappeared for a while from the media. Having played her part in the limelight, she left the ringleaders of “Operation Meloni” to carry out

their work by choosing and negotiating the new ministers. After all, it took all the expertise of the old right-wing leaders to divide up the ministries and reassure the media, foreign governments and the business community. Letting those with more experience work was a sign of wisdom on Meloni's part that could herald surprises.

The far right that is now governing Italy puts forward words like “homeland”, "nation" and "Italian pride". However, it has not yet clarified why it continues to honour Italy's traitors who collaborated with the Nazi invaders and persecuted the civilian population, killing and torturing patriots who defended the country. The two periods of right-wing hegemony – the twenty years of Mussolini and the very different twenty years of Berlusconi – have damaged Italy and its reputation. If Giorgia Meloni is able to name and condemn the crimes and perpetrators of Italian fascism and colonialism, and especially the post-war misdeeds of the Italian neo-fascism, then perhaps she can attain more credibility in her patriotic ambition.



From left: Giorgia Meloni, Guido Crosetto, Vincenzo Benito La Russa



From left: Giorgia Meloni, Guido Crosetto



From left: Giorgia Meloni, Silvio Berlusconi