

## GUEST ESSAY

# What's Happening in Italy Is Scary, and It's Spreading

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ROME — What a difference a few months can make.

Ahead of Italy's election last fall, Giorgia Meloni was widely depicted as a menace. By this summer, everything — her youthful admiration for Benito Mussolini, her party's links to neofascists, her often extreme rhetoric — had been forgiven. Praised for her practicality and support for Ukraine, Ms. Meloni has established herself as a reliable Western partner, central to Group of 7 meetings and NATO summits alike. A visit to Washington, which takes place on Thursday, seals her status as a valued member of the international community.

But the comforting tale of a populist firebrand turned pragmatist overlooks something important: what's been happening in Italy. Ms. Meloni's administration has spent its first months accusing minorities of undermining the triad of God, nation and family, with dire practical consequences for migrants, nongovernmental organizations and same-sex parents. Efforts to weaken anti-torture legislation, stack the public broadcaster with loyalists and rewrite Italy's postwar constitution to increase executive power are similarly troubling. Ms. Meloni's government isn't just nativist but has a harsh authoritarian streak, too.

For Italy, this is bad enough. But much of its significance lies beyond its borders, showing how the far right can break down historic barriers with the center right. Allies of Ms. Meloni are already in power in Poland, also newly legitimized by their support for Ukraine. In Sweden, a center-right coalition relies on the nativist Sweden Democrats' support to govern. In Finland, the anti-immigrant Finns Party went one better and joined the government. Though these parties, like many of their European counterparts, once

rejected membership of NATO and the European Union, today they seek a place in the main Euro-Atlantic institutions, transforming them from within. In this project, Ms. Meloni is leading the way.

Since becoming prime minister, Ms. Meloni has certainly moderated her language. In official settings, she's at pains to appear considered and cautious — an act aided by her preference for televised addresses rather than questioning by journalists. Yet she can also rely on colleagues in her Brothers of Italy party to be less restrained. Taking aim at one of the government's main targets, L.G.B.T.Q. parents, party leaders have called surrogate parenting a “crime worse than pedophilia,” claiming that gay people are “passing off” foreign kids as their own. Ms. Meloni can appear aloof from such rhetoric, even suggesting unhappiness with its extremism. But her decisions in office reflect zealotry, not caution. The government extended a ban on surrogacy to criminalize adoptions in other countries and ordered municipalities to stop registering same-sex parents, leaving children in legal limbo.

It's a similar story with immigration. The agriculture minister, a longtime ally of Ms. Meloni's who is also her brother-in-law, has taken the lead in appealing for resistance to “ethnic replacement.” Hardly averse to the slogan — she used it to successfully oppose a 2017 bill that would have granted citizenship to children born in Italy to noncitizen parents — Ms. Meloni has avoided employing the phrase herself since taking office. But her call for “births, not migrants” expresses the same sentiment, and aggressive opposition to migration has been the centerpiece of her administration. A law passed in April forces asylum seekers to live in state-run migrant centers while their claims are considered — a process that can last up to two years — all without legal advice or Italian-language classes. In recent weeks, Ms. Meloni spearheaded a European Union deal with Tunisia, whose authoritarian regime promotes the great replacement conspiracy theory, to curb migration in exchange for financial support.

As Amnesty International reports, outsourcing repression is not unique to this government: Past administrations built a similar relationship with Libya, and under Italian pressure, a new European Union migration pact strengthens the right of member states to expel asylum seekers. But in Italy, the line is hardening. In June, the authorities impounded two migrant rescue ships that were accused of flouting a new law designed to limit their activities. Legislation passed in February forbids vessels organized by NGOs from conducting multiple rescues, despite repeated cases of the Italian authorities failing to respond to distress calls from imperiled ships. The death toll of people drowning while trying to cross the Mediterranean usually surpasses 2,000 a year. The moves of the Meloni government ensure that people will keep dying.

Journalists, too, are under pressure. Sitting ministers have threatened — and in some cases pursued — a raft of libel suits against the Italian press in an apparent bid to intimidate critics. The public broadcaster RAI is also under threat, and not just because its mission for the next five years includes “promoting birthrates.” After its chief executive

and leading presenters resigned citing political pressure from the new government, it now resembles “Tele-Meloni,” with rampant handpicking of personnel. The new director general, Giampaolo Rossi, is a pro-Meloni hard-liner who previously distinguished himself as an organizer of an annual Brothers of Italy festival. In the aftermath of his appointment, news outlets published scores of his anti-immigration social media posts and an interview with a neofascist journal in which he condemned the antifascist “caricature” hanging over public life.

This is not his concern alone. Burying the antifascist legacy of the wartime Resistance matters deeply to the Brothers of Italy, a party rooted in its fascist forefathers’ great defeat in 1945. As prime minister, Ms. Meloni has referred to Italy’s postwar antifascist culture as a repressive ideology, responsible even for the murder of right-wing militants in the political violence of the 1970s. It’s not just history to be rewritten. The postwar Constitution, drawn up by the Resistance-era parties, is also ripe for revision: The Brothers of Italy aims to create a directly elected head of government and a strong executive freer of constraint. No matter its novelty, Ms. Meloni’s administration has every chance of imposing enduring changes in the political order.

For all its Mussolinian roots, this government is no return to the past. Instead, in galvanizing the political right behind a resentful identity politics, it risks becoming something else entirely: Europe’s future. Conservatives in Britain echo Ms. Meloni’s obsession with favoring birthrates over migration; French anti-immigrant politicians like Éric Zemmour cite Italy as a model of how to “unite the forces of the right”; and even in Germany, the Christian Democrats’ long refusal to consider pacts with the Alternative for Germany is under strain.

Success is hardly inevitable. Ahead of last week’s election in Spain, Ms. Meloni addressed her nationalist ally Vox, declaring that the “patriots’ time has come”; in fact, its vote share fell and right-wing parties failed to secure a majority. Even so, Vox has become an enduring part of the electoral arena and a regular ally for conservatives. Despite their growing success, such forces have for years been painted as insurgent outsiders representing long-ignored voters. The more disturbing truth is that they are no longer parties of protest, but increasingly welcome in the mainstream. For proof, just look to Washington on Thursday.

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