



Blog No: 34
03.10.2022

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Government change in Italy may lead to a big discussion on the European Unions future. One that the EU desperately needs if it wants to avoid disfunction and disintegration.

Giorgia Melonis victory in Italys parliamentary elections on 25 September has raised questions about EUs future coherence with its third largest economys government becoming overtly Eurosceptical. Labelling Melonis party *Fratelli dItalia* populist[1], nationalist[2], or even post-fascist[3] may be an easy way to de-legitimize its views on EUs reality, but it will not halt discussion on EUs future which is urgently necessary if the Union does not want to implode under the pressure of its own contradictions.

Melonis rise to power has all the chances to turn into epochal event in European politics as Italy,following Sweden of several weeks ago, may join the illiberal bloc of Poland and Hungary causing tensions that cut through the heart of the continent[4]. Obviously, as balances of power between political parties change inside several European countries, the big discussion will also have effects at the European level. And being left or right-oriented is not the key point here.

Putting aside specific and complex internal factors that brought Meloni to power, it is worth noticing that her sceptical view of Brussels-led Europe may be seen as a part of a very old discussion between two alternative and mutually exclusive visions of Europe:

federal and functional.

Melonis criticism of EU officials[5] does not seem to signify any new quality for EU-related discussions, that is to say, a preparation of an Italian exit from the EU, since Meloni herself defines the future ruling party as mainstream conservative[6] just as Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland and Viktor Orban of Hungary do. All three leaders of governments labelled as far right populists never overtly opted for their countrys future out of the EU. Hence, their scepticism is targeted on specific laws, institutions, and political practice established and pursued by EUs administrative center Brussels rather than on the idea of a united Europe as such. And, as expressing those postulates leads to winning elections in several European countries, they may be seen as a legitimate part of discussion that enjoy a major popular support.

The big question behind Melonis victory is: in what kind of EU do we want to live? And it is this question that has not been discussed in the post-Maastricht EU at the conceptional level. During the last optimistic 30 years, mainstream political elite of virtually all EU countries lived in a Fukuyamist paradigm[7], seeing the EU as a civilizational climax and discussing basically the technical aspects of a future EU seen as a prototype of a unified European continental federation. The functionalist discourse was labelled obsolete and retrograde and any hesitation of the governments to transfer sovereign competences to Brussels was berated as nationalistic. But limiting the discussion to the only one canonical paradigm seems counterproductive: instead of making EU stronger, it makes it internally and externally weaker and simply smaller with the United Kingdom first reaching the point of not seeing its future inside an organization which tends not to help national governments but to replace them.

Discussion between federalists and functionalists is a philosophical, if not an ideological one, thus it is impossible to say which vision of Europe is the right one, but one cannot ignore the fact that Brussels-oriented centralization encounters explicit opposition expressed by the election results in several EU countries such as Poland, Hungary, Sweden, and Italy. This means that the path and the aim proposed by the European (Union) Commission stands in opposite to the democratic choice of at least some of European nations especially that the Commission and its policy is widely seen not as an impartial referee, but as a player in one of the national teams, a lobbyist of German interests[8].

That is why seeing Melonis victory through the Eurosceptical lens leads to a false perspective: when she talks against surrendering to the bureaucrats in Brussels[9], she really means them and not the idea of united Europe as such. If there is no democratic majority for federal Europe in Italy or Poland, it is an obvious fact that has its causes and consequences, one of them being the need for a discussion on those bureaucrats functions and competences. At the end of the day, if the EU wants to keep its democratic nature, it should stay evident that the people are allowed to change their bureaucrats and not vice-versa.

Italys election and government change may be one of the last opportunities to restart the teleological discussion within the EU to understand where we are going and keep the EU big, strong, and attractive to partners, especially those in its direct neighbourhood. The alternative is to transform the EU into a decadent, xenophobic, and dysfunctional quasi-empire led by alienated bureaucrats crushing all signs of opposition for the sake of their own ideological visions. Avoiding that is currently a central task for nations comprising the EU.

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***Photo: Claudio Peri/EFE*

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[1] La nuova stagione populista dopo le elezioni del 25 settembre (la Repubblica)

[2] Derrière Giorgia Meloni, les nationalistes à la conquête du pouvoir en Italie (lefigaro.fr)

[3] Elections en Italie : une victoire historique pour Giorgia Meloni et lextrême droite (lemonde.fr)

[4] Italy election: Voters poised to elect Meloni, far-right Fratelli d'Italia (The Washington Post)

[5] Italy voters shift sharply, reward Melonis far-right party - World News (hurriyetdailynews.com)

[6] 5 things to know about Giorgia Meloni - frontrunner in Italian election (trtworld.com)

[7] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992.

[8] Why German Chancellor Scholz's larger EU bid is doomed to fail (trtworld.com)

[9] Europe Looks at Italys Giorgia Meloni With Caution and Trepidation - The New York Times (nytimes.com)

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To cite this article: Jakub KOREJBA. 2026. "GIORGIA MELONI AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE - 03.10.2022." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Blog No.2022 / 34. October 03. Accessed November 22, 2026. https://www.avim.org.tr/Blog/GIORGIA-MELONI-AND-THE-FUTURE-OF-EUROPE-3-10-2022

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