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Can Super Mario save Italy?

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Incoming Italian prime minister Mario Draghi: "ideologically, there is very little between blind faith in the superior abilities of a Super Mario and the cult of the Nietzschean Übermensch"



By [Vittorio Bufacchi](#)
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Opinion: everyone seems to agree that incoming prime minister Mario Draghi's mission is to save Italy, but save it from what exactly?

This is the question everyone is asking - and not just in Italy. After [Giuseppe Conte's](#) precarious coalition government [faltered](#) a few weeks ago, when a very small but numerically still significant political party pulled the plug on his premiership, [Mario Draghi](#) was invited to form Italy's 67th post-war

government.

Draghi is not an elected politician, nor a member of any political party, but he knows his way around political circles. He cut his teeth as executive director of the [World Bank](#) between 1984 and 1990, and as governor of [Italy's Central Bank](#) from 2005 to 2011, before being elected president of the [European Central Bank](#) from 2011 to 2019. It was during his period at the ECB that the Eurozone experienced [its most severe crisis](#), catapulting Draghi to the forefront of European and global financial affairs. His audacious policies to rescue the euro met with almost universal appraisal.

From RTÉ Radio 1's Morning Ireland, Aengus Cox reports on Mario Draghi's legacy after 8 years at the ECB

No one can question Draghi's credentials, and knowhow. He is also highly respected in Italy and abroad. Not many people outside of Italy can name a single Italian prime minister since [Silvio Berlusconi](#), but everyone has heard of Draghi. That counts for something. In the toxic quagmire of Italian politics, being globally respected and having one's authority widely recognized is a considerable advantage.

While Draghi is a formidable figure, there is something deeply troubling about his nomination as Italy's Prime Minister. His government is Italy's fifth 'technocratic government' in the last 30 years. A technocratic government is a government led by a nonelected technocrat, with a cabinet made up of a mix of

political figures and technical experts. The others technocratic governments were led by [Carlo Azeglio Ciampi](#) (1993-4), [Lamberto Dini](#) (1995-6), [Mario Monti](#) (2011-13) and the outgoing Conte (2018-21).

From RTÉ Radio 1's This Week in 2018, Rome-based journalist Paddy Agnew on Giuseppe Conte and Italy's populist coalition

The problem is not Draghi, but the idea of a 'technocratic government'. Many commentators refer to Draghi as 'a safe pair of hands' or Italy's saviour. [Matteo Renzi](#), the man responsible for the current political crisis when his party [Italia Viva](#) pulled out of Conte's coalition government, went as far as to say that "Draghi is the Italian who saved Europe, and I think now he is the European who can save Italy".

Everyone seems to agree that Draghi's mission impossible is to save Italy, but save it from what? It would appear that the answer is to save Italy from itself and, more specifically, from its political class and its democratically elected representatives. This is worrying, because the choice of a technocratic government reflects a fundamental lack of trust in the democratic system. By opting for yet another technocratic government, led by yet another non-elected political figure, the potential long-term damages to Italian democracy are considerable.

There is a very simple reason why technocratic governments are a bad idea.

When politicians are replaced by technical experts, politics becomes redundant. This is sending out the wrong signal, and it could even be the beginning of the end for a democracy. Why bother with elections at all, and political parties, when we have experts? Who needs politicians when their job can be done better by non-politicians? There lies autocracy.

For the sake of Italian democracy, one can only hope that this will be Italy's last technocratic government.

Technocratic governments delegitimise democratic politics and should be avoided at all costs in a country that has had a history with fascism. Democracies are messy, and often inefficient, but the alternative is much worse. Taking the easy option of opting for a technocratic government only reinforces a view made popular by [Mussolini](#) in the 1920s, when he proclaimed that "democracy is beautiful in theory; in practice it is a fallacy". That is why technocrats should not replace politicians and experts should not replace political parties.

The democratic process requires patience, and trust. Today, and not for the first time, the Italian people blame democratically elected politicians for all their woes, and are seeking a quick solution to all their troubles by investing in the powers of a strong, authoritative figure. Ideologically, there is very little between blind faith in the superior abilities of a Super Mario and the cult of the Nietzschean [Übermensch](#).

Is there an alternative to Draghi's technocratic government? Yes, a snap election. It may not be what people want, especially during a pandemic, but democracy doesn't come down to what people want or what is convenient. The trust in elected officials in a democracy must always be engendered and reinforced, whatever it takes. And that includes having a snap election.

From RTÉ One's Six One News in 2015, Mario Draghi defends ECB role in Ireland's bailout programme

On this issue, Italy can learn something from Spain, two countries that share a common history of fascism. When Spain faced a political stalemate in recent years to find a working majority to form a government, it had the political maturity of not opting for experts to take over the political process. Instead, Spain held elections in 2015, 2016, and twice in 2019. Elected politicians eventually found a way to work together to form a government.

Italy's first technocratic government in the early 1990s, under Ciampi, was presented as an exceptional measure to deal with an unprecedented crisis, but now technocratic governments are becoming the rule. This is a worrying trend, which undermines trust in democratic procedures. Perhaps in Draghi's capable hands, Italy faces a less uncertain future, possibly even a brighter future. But for the sake of Italian democracy, one can only hope that this will be Italy's last technocratic government.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of RTÉ

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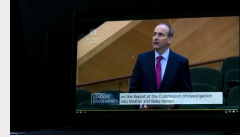
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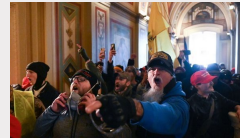
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