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Ideological polarization, policy continuity: back to the majoritarian principle?

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the Italian Politics 2023 special issue gives an overview of the main events characterizing Italian politics during a year of large-scale policy reforms, presidential and parliamentary elections, and the unexpected Russian invasion of Ukraine. The authors pose three questions concerning Italian politics during the year gone by. First, from an institutional viewpoint, they ask whether the revival of majoritarianism as a principle of government formation represents the prelude to a return to enduring party-system bipolarity. Second, from an electoral and public policy perspective, they ask whether the formation of a government led by what many perceive as a radical right party betokens the start of a correspondingly radical shift in Italian public policy. Third, from an international relations perspective, they ask about the extent to which the Meloni government's attitude to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and more generally to Italy's position on the world stage and in international affairs, is likely to differ from that adopted by Draghi. The chapter elaborates on the three questions by tracing how the events of 2022 generated much more continuity than expected.

KEYWORDS
Draghi; Meloni; political change; domestic reforms; international crises

1. Three questions concerning Italian politics

Italian politics in 2022 was, as in many European countries, dominated by efforts to revive economic growth in the aftermath of the pandemic and by the problems posed for the public, the parties and the Government, by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the domestic front, the year began with the re-election of the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, to a second term of office, and ended, following an audacious early general election, with the transfer of power between Mario Draghi and Giorgia Meloni. Consequently, the articles contained in this special issue consider not only the events just mentioned (the re-election of Mattarella and the early general election) but also the attempts at post-COVID recovery (through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and sectoral reforms in areas such as the judiciary). They also consider the steps taken to deal

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with the Russian invasion of Ukraine – in terms of diplomacy, defence, energy supply and the management of migration. With regard to each of these topics, the authors of the various articles consider the decisions made by the Draghi government given the constraints of the country's membership of the European and Atlantic alliance on the one hand and the heterogeneous parliamentary majority supporting it on the other. They highlight the problems bequeathed to the Meloni government. Finally, they assess the degree of continuity and change likely to be manifest in each policy area – this by considering the initial measures taken by the new executive and the positions taken in the past by the leaders of the centre right.

The transfer of power from Mario Draghi to Giorgia Meloni seemed like a major turning point, and to many foreign observers like the change between day and night. As we shall explain in more detail in the next section, such an interpretation is very persuasive given the well-known differences in terms of the backgrounds and personal characteristics of the two Prime Ministers, given the differences in the circumstances surrounding their assumption of office, and given the differences in the ideological profiles of the parliamentary majorities supporting them. Moreover, Giorgia Meloni's assumption of office was in many respects unprecedented; for it was the first time that a woman had taken over the reins of government in Italy. Moreover, she was a woman representing a political tradition established by people who, looking back with nostalgia on the fascist period, had established the Movimento sociale italiano (Italian Social Movement, Msi). In addition, her assumption of office represented the return of majoritarianism as a principle of government formation. This was a principle that had been established in the early 1990s. It had been set aside following the crisis of the fourth Berlusconi government and the formation of the government led by Mario Monti in November 20,211 and had then been impossible to apply following the electoral success of the 'third populist pole' represented by the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s).

The events of 2022 therefore raise three questions for those who study or observe Italian politics: three questions we shall attempt to answer in the sections that follow, drawing on the evidence presented in the articles included in this special issue.

The first concerns the structure of the party system, and whether the *revival of majoritarianism* as a principle of government formation represents the prelude to a return to enduring party-system bipolarity.

The second concerns the polarization of Italian politics and whether dominance of the centre right by Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), perceived by many as a party of the radical right, betokens the start of a correspondingly *radical shift in public policy*, or even a degree of tension between governing majority and opposition sufficiently great as to place at risk the stability of the country's democratic institutions.

The third question is whether, and if so to what extent, the Meloni government's attitude to *the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and more generally to Italy's position on the world stage and within the EU*, is likely to differ from that adopted by the Draghi government.

2. From Draghi to Meloni: the return of majoritarianism

As mentioned, almost all domestic and foreign observers thought that the change of Prime Minister represented a very significant development, if only because of the very different backgrounds of the individuals concerned.

Mario Draghi (born in Rome in 1947) is one of the most eminent representatives of the supranational and cosmopolitan élite. Thanks to the experience he has acquired leading financial institutions, national and international, public and private, among Italian public figures, he is in all probability the one with the highest reputation in the world. Having attended a secondary school, run by Jesuits, in the centre of Rome, he graduated from Rome 'La Sapienza University having written a dissertation supervised by Federico Caffè. This was followed by a PhD at MIT in Boston supervised by Franco Modigliani and Robert Solow, and appointments as professor of economics at a number of institutions in Florence as well as fellowships at several major international academic institutions. From 1980 to 1990, he was an Executive Director at the World Bank and during the following decade, Director General at the Treasury (under governments of both the left and the right). From 2002, he was Vice Chairman and Managing Director of Goldman Sachs and in 2006 was appointed as the Governor of the Bank of Italy by the Berlusconi government. Then, from 2011 to 2019, he was was President of the European Central Bank. In this capacity, his already solid reputation grew even further and he acquired enormous popularity thanks to the decisions he made between 2012 and 2015 (with his public statement concerning 'whatever it takes' and the use of quantitative easing) to protect the European economic and monetary system (Genovese, Schneider, and Wassmann 2016).

Giorgia Meloni (born in Rome in 1977) described herself, in the speech she made to the Chamber of Deputies at the start of the debate on the inaugural vote of confidence in her government, as an 'underdog'. She grew up in the working-class Garbatella district of Rome. At the age of 15 years, she joined the Fronte della gioventù, the youth wing of the Msi, and in the meantime, she took on a number of temporary jobs to contribute to her family's income. She obtained a high-school diploma in languages from a vocational college with top marks but did not continue her studies. From 1996, she was a leader of the students' association and then of the youth organization of Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, An), and finally, leader of the youth organization of the Popolo delle Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL). In the brief legislature that began in 2006, at the age of 29 she was Vice-president of the Chamber, and from 2008 to 2011, minister for youth in the fourth Berlusconi government. From 2013, she was part of the parliamentary opposition, and from 2014, she was the leader of FdI, one of the successor parties to the Msi, founded by veterans of fascism who looked back on the regime with nostalgia. A political force that was marginalized and confined to a political ghetto throughout the 15-year period of the so-called first republic, the Msi acquired some significance in its new guise as An, in the bipolar competition inaugurated by the party-system transformation of the early 1990s. Having decided on merger with Forza Italia (FI) in 2008 to form the PdL, the leadership of An disintegrated and in 2013, when FdI was founded, the political tradition it stood for seemed on the verge of extinction. Giorgia Meloni, however, would lead it to become the largest political party in Italy and 'leader of the Nation' (Vassallo and Vignati 2023).

Besides the considerable differences in the profiles and backgrounds of the two prime ministers, there was also a considerable, and oft-remarked-upon, difference in their ideological outlooks. It is not easy to place Mario Draghi and his government on the left-right spectrum. However, if we assume that the dominant cleavage is currently the one dividing those wanting to uphold *national boundaries* and those in favour of *supranational integration* (Kriesi et al. 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2018), the division between *nationalists* and *globalists*, then Giorgia Meloni and Mario Draghi can easily be located at opposite extremes of this dimension. In any case, voters, including the party's own supporters, perceive FdI as the grouping located furthest to the right in the Italian parliament.

The governments they led, furthermore, came to power on the basis of different sets of political precedents. The Draghi government was the fourth, after the governments led by Ciampi (1993–94), Dini (1995–96) and Monti (2011–13), to be headed by an individual drawn from outside the world of politics. It was one nominated by the President of the Republic to manage a difficult set of circumstances, enjoying the support of a large parliamentary majority thanks to the collaboration of parties normally in competition with one another.

In contrast, the government led by Giorgia Meloni is the latest, after a gap of more than 10 years, in a series of governments whose leaders and supporting coalitions had been presented to voters as such, and whose positions were therefore directly legitimated by election outcomes. This was the case of the first Berlusconi government (XII legislature, 1993–94), the first Prodi government (XIII, 1996–98), the second and third Berlusconi governments (XIV, 2001–2006), the second Prodi government (XV, 2006–08) and the fourth Berlusconi government (XVI, 2008–11).

This sequence had already been interrupted, during a, by the D'Alema and Amato governments (1990–2011) as well as by the technocrat-led governments mentioned above. But from 2013 to 2022, for two entire legislatures, no political grouping identified as such *before* the elections managed to obtain an outright parliamentary majority. Leaders presented to voters as potential prime ministers were forced to take a step back; coalitions were formed between parties that, during the election campaign, had radically excluded such possibilities, considering them politically contrived. This was true of the Letta government (XVII, 2013–14), which took office thanks to an agreement between the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, Pd) and the PdL. It was true of the subsequent Renzi and Gentiloni (2014–2018) governments, which, in the Senate, relied on the support of the Nuovo centrodestra (New Centre Right, Ncd), a group whose members had originally been elected to represent the PdL and who were opposed to an early dissolution of Parliament. It was also true of the governing majorities holding office during the XVIII legislature (2018–22), as these rested on all the possible combinations existing between the M5s and the two other largest parties – parties the Movement itself had vehemently excluded as possible coalition partners: the first Conte government (the M5s and the Lega (League)); the second Conte government (the M5s and the Pd); the Draghi government (the M5s, the Pd and the League).

From this point of view, the Meloni government was no oddity. It revived, after a decade that had ended with the fourth national unity government relying on presidential authority, the principle of government formation on the basis of politically homogeneous coalitions directly legitimated by election outcomes. It therefore brought

a return, in the formation of national governments, to the majoritarian principle that had operated between 1994 and 2008 and that had continued to operate at the level of regional and local councils, where the institutional constraints on political processes are greater. As in the past, the government's formation and the likelihood that it would last for an entire legislature, had been favoured by the majoritarian component of what was a hybrid electoral system, one that translates a relative majority of votes for the winning coalition into an absolute majority of seats (see the articles by Carlo Fusaro and by Luana Russo and Federico Vegetti).

It is important to stress that these arrangements make the reaching of agreements and compromises, in the parliamentary arena, between parties in competition in the electoral arena, unnecessary. These parties, while combining to support the Draghi government, had been competitors in regional and municipal elections and in European Parliament elections and driven to compete with each other in view of the subsequent parliamentary elections. Technocratic governments, or governments led by a technocrat without party affiliations, are justified by the exceptional nature of the situations in which they take office; but they are based on the assumption on the part of the parliamentary groups supporting them that they will be defeated in the event of early elections.

Consequently, when, in July, there was a de facto withdrawal of confidence in Draghi on the part of the M5s, and when the leaders of the Pd asserted that they would be unable to form an electoral coalition with the Movement, it became evident that an already probable victory of the centre right would become a near certainty that the coalition would win comfortable majorities in both branches of the legislature.

3. Reasons for the emergence of *asymmetric bipolarity* and how long it might last

Consequently, the 2022 elections, like the subsequent regional elections in Lombardy and Lazio, took place based on an asymmetric party line-up (Vassallo and Verzichelli 2023). On the one hand, the parties of the centre right were united; on the other hand, their adversaries were divided between the M5s, the Pd (and its minor-party allies), and the so-called 'third pole' consisting of Carlo Calend'a Azione and Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva.

To understand how this state of affairs came about, and what was responsible for it, it is necessary to focus, first, on the 2013 election, when the M5s made its parliamentary debut having won 25% of the vote in the Chamber and 24% in the Senate. To highlight the extent of the change taking place in 2013 as compared to the preceding and the subsequent period with its (*asymmetrical*) return to the past, Figures 1 and 2 show the distributions of seats between parties in the two branches of the legislature from 1996 to 2022. The data refer to the seats won by parties and groups of parties at the relevant elections (also taking account of the party affiliations of the winning candidates in single-member districts) rather than to the composition of the parliamentary groups, as this reflects choices made by winning candidates after the elections and the dictates of the standing orders of the two branches.

In order to make the graphs more interpretable, some parties were placed in the same spaces as those previously occupied by the parties that are not their genuine, or not their only, predecessors. For example, the PdL, emerging in 2008 from the merger of FI and An and dissolved at the end of 2013, is placed in the same box as the one occupied by FI on its

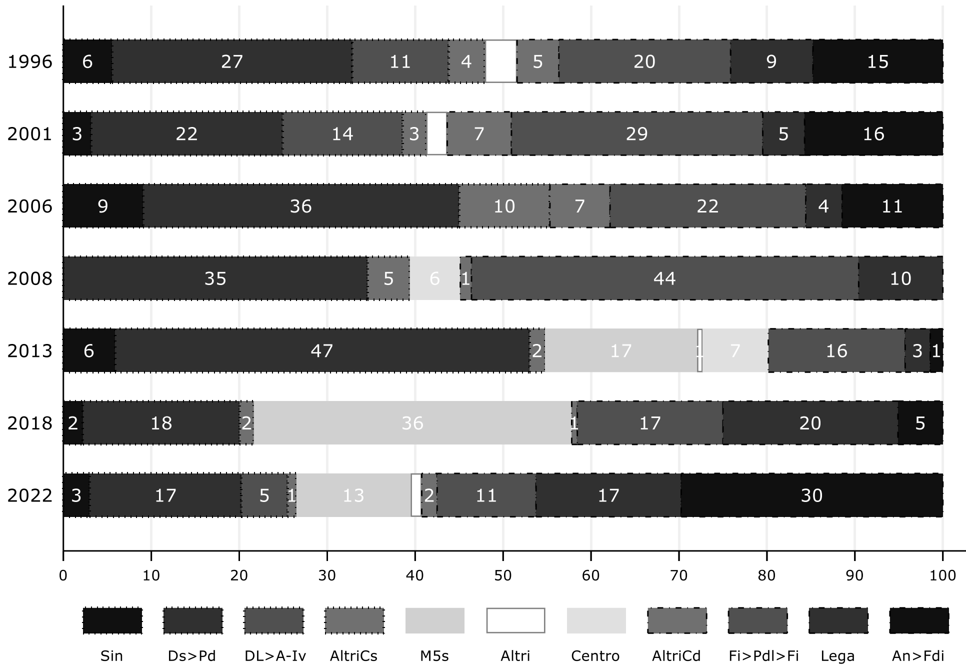

Figure 1. Chamber of deputies. Seats won by parties or groups of parties at general elections 1996 – 2022 (%).

own before 2008 and after 2013. The Pd occupies the same box as the one occupied by the Democratici di Sinistra (Left Democrats, Ds) on their own before 2006, even though it was formed in 2007, also with the contribution of Democrazia è Libertà (Democracy is Freedom, DL). In 2006, the Ds and the DL had presented a joint list, adopting the Ulivo (Olive-tree) symbol for the Chamber and had already formed combined groups in the Chamber and Senate: precursors of the Pd. The Azione-Italia Viva alliance has been placed in the box previously occupied by the DL. The 'left' category includes a multiplicity of forces located to the left of the Pd (such as the Prc, the Pdci, SeL, Si, the Verdi): these are forces that in some cases have been formally allied to the Pd and in other cases not. Overall, the two graphs reveal that the parties clearly locatable in only one of the two areas (identified using a dotted line for one, a dashed line for the other) accounted for increasing proportions of the parliamentary seats, with a peak in 2006. These proportions were then reduced by the growing presence of political actors (identified by the lighter-coloured boxes without any lines) unwilling to take up stable positions in either of the two areas, with a peak being reached in 2018

The election of 2013 – with the explosive emergence of the M5s bringing an end to party-system bipolarity – took place at the end of a legislature that had seen the fall of the Berlusconi government in November 2011. Then, the entrepreneur had been forced to resign due to the scandals (e.g. the 'Ruby' case) associated with his private life and the financial crisis which, in the wake of the global recession from 2007, threatened Italian debt default along with the stability of the European economic and monetary system. The then president of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, had appointed Mario Monti to head

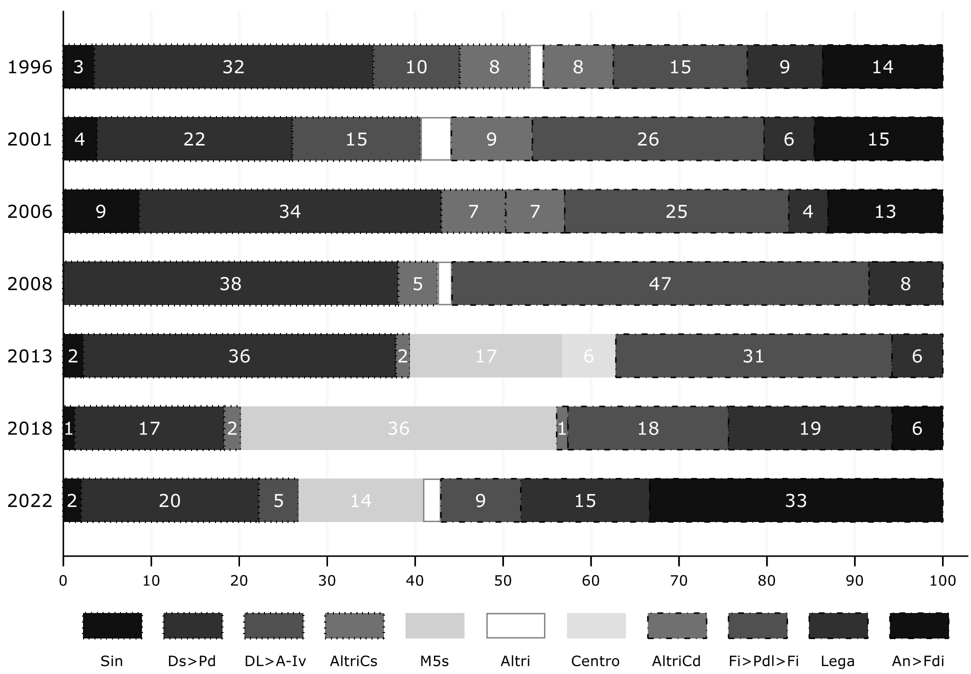

Figure 2. Senate. Seats won by parties or groups of parties at general elections 1996 – 2022 (%s).

what was the previously technocratic-led government before that of Mario Draghi, to respond to the effects of the financial crisis. The EU had insisted on the adoption of austerity measures as a consequence, and Monti's government had been supported by the main parties on either side of the left–right divide. Therefore, the 2013 election, held against a growing wave of anti-political sentiments powered by the unpopular decisions of a technocratic government sustained by a 'grand coalition', created an extraordinary opportunity for the Movement. An anti-establishment formation par excellence and at the time led by Beppe Grillo, the M5s was able to attract disillusioned voters from across the political spectrum, from both the left and the right. Monti had in his turn also contributed to the unhinging of party-system bipolarity; for he had presented his own list – Scelta Civica, or 'Civic Choice' – in coalition with the Unione di Centro (Union of the Centre), a formation led by Pierferdinando Casini that had until 2006 been part of the coalition of the centre right. The two main centre-right and centre-left coalitions won almost equal shares of the vote, which, combined, amounted to around 60%, whereas in 2006, when they had also been tied in terms of support, their combined share had been 98%. The party system was no longer bipolar, but nevertheless, the electoral law then in force meant that the coalition of the centre left obtained a sizable majority in the Chamber of Deputies (Figure 1). The Calderoli law (approved in 2005) provided for a majority bonus of varying size to the most-voted coalition, to ensure that it had 55% of the seats. This provision was, however, applied region by region in the case of the Senate (Figure 2). Therefore, with 29.6% of the votes and only 0.4% points more than the centre right, the coalition of the centre left became the dominant actor in the new legislature in

that no alternative majority could be created in the Chamber, while it needed the support of other political forces to achieve a majority in the Senate.

The Calderoli law was modified by the effect of ruling no. 1/2104 of the Constitutional Court, which found it to be partially unconstitutional, and this was followed by the failed attempt at constitutional reform, promoted by Renzi and Maria Elena Boschi, with its associated electoral law: the *Italicum*. Consequently, yet another electoral system was adopted, a hybrid system similar to the one embodied in the Mattarella law used from 1994 to 2001. In the case of the Rosato law (2017), however, in contrast with the Mattarella law, the proportion of seats assigned using the proportional formula is larger than the proportion assigned to the single-member constituencies.

Consequently, in 2018, there were in the electoral arena three formations of more or less equal size, none of which obtained a majority in either of the two chambers. This gave rise to the above-mentioned series of coalitions consisting of all the theoretically possible combinations of the M5s and the largest parties of the two traditional coalitions.

Party-system tri-polarity and the variety of coalition formulae expressed by governments led to the suggestion that bipolarity was to be considered the transitory phenomenon of a historical period that had come to an end following the 2000s (Capano and Sandri 2022). This perception was given credence by the fact that the parties of the centre right were divided between the governing majority and the opposition both during the first Conte government (2018–2019) and during the Drahi government (2021–22).

However, in the *electoral* area, the centre right had already come together again at the beginning of 2019, when a large proportion of the voters that had abandoned it for the M5s shifted back again, attracted, this time, by Salvini's League. From then until the end of 2022, opinion polls – largely coinciding with the results of the 25 September election – attributed around 45–46% of the vote, with few variations, to the parties (the League, FdI and FI) of the centre right. In essence, from the beginning of 2019, one of the two coalitions had come together again in the electoral arena, having reabsorbed the voters it had lost in 2018 to the M5s. This then triggered a competition *within* the centre right for leadership of the coalition.

The main, but not the only factor making Giorgia Meloni and her party the most credible actors in the eyes of voters on the centre right, was the mistake made by Salvini in the summer of 2019 when he sought to capitalize on the support he had won at the European elections that year by attempting to bring down the Conte government and provoke fresh elections. The voters responsible for Meloni's rise, leaving aside generational turnover, had previously supported Berlusconi and Salvini. These were voters who were obviously *less* attached to their chosen parties than those who had in the past supported An, and they were more likely to live in the North than in the South. It is therefore implausible to suggest that Meloni's voters were people in search of *more radical* or *more extreme* political solutions to their problems than those presented in the past by other leaders of the centre right.

While the centre right reabsorbed those of its traditional supporters who had in the meantime defected to the M5s, the same was not true of the centre left. Voting intentions polls showed support for the M5s remaining stable at around 15% from the beginning of 2020 onwards, meaning that it was a necessary coalition partner if the centre left were to be electorally competitive. On the other hand, the Movement's policy positions, both then and in the past, had sharply divided the traditional components of the centre left

concerning the desirability of an alliance with it. The failure of the envisaged 'campo largo' ('broad field') to see the light of day was not therefore just a consequence of hurried or irrational decisions or of calculations by individual parties concerning the likelihood of maximizing their support in the proportional arena. Rather, it also reflected the objective circumstance that this 'field' is riven by internal divisions that run deeper than those dividing the parties of the centre right. The greater degree of homogeneity of the latter as compared with those of the so-called 'broad field' is apparent if we consider the self-placement of the parties' voters on the left–right spectrum (see the article by Russo and Vegetti). The same conclusion is suggested if we consider the voters' positions on a number of policy issues (Vassallo and Vignati 2023, 237–243; Fonda and Vassallo 2023, 150–154). However, there appears to be no alternative open to the centre left other than bridging these divisions or a lengthy period of opposition both nationally and in most regional administrations.

4. How much polarisation? How much discontinuity?

The asymmetry of the party system, with one of the two traditional coalitions having been reassembled, and the other remaining unstructured, obviously favoured the former. This then raises the questions: Has such asymmetry also led to a *radical shift to the right* in the Government's ideological and programmatic profile? Do the events of 2022 and the contrasting political and professional backgrounds of the two prime ministers suggest that expectations of radical discontinuity arising from the change of government are likely to be fulfiled?

This expectation seems to be given credence by those analyses of the FDI that see it as a party of the radical right (Donà 2022; Puleo and Piccolino 2022; Griffini 2022; Baldini, Tronconi, and Angelucci 2023), if not the extreme right (Ventura 2022). Such a categorization is to some extent justified by the political backgrounds of the party's leaders in the Msi and An and by the positions they took between 2015 and 2021. These made considerable use of the rhetoric dominant among parties and leaders of the populist radical right both in North and South America (with Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro) and in Europe (with the leaders of the Visegrad countries). These were years during which FdI was fighting for survival and seeking to win over voters from Salvini's League. The investigations that place FdI alongside parties of the radical right are, however, based on textual analyses of documents (especially the 'theses' for the FdI congress held in Trieste in 2017) and public speeches, in which it is not difficult to find elements that the literature categorizes as 'nativist', 'populist' or 'authoritarian' (Mudde 2007, 2020). However, leaving aside the uncertainties concerning the definition and measurement of these concepts, the aforementioned analyses tend to overlook the *context* and the political opportunity structures in which the rhetoric has been used. An analysis that contextualizes the development of FdI, on the other hand, suggests taking account of the constraints and opportunities created by electoral competition and the institutional positions occupied by its representatives (Vassallo and Vignati 2023, 251–67).

As noted, FdI's founding in 2013 coincided with the end of a legislature in which all the main parties of the centre right and centre left had come together to support the Monti government. They had thus had to bear responsibility for unpopular

policies such as the Fornero pensions reform and the public-sector pay freeze. In addition, the refugee crisis reached a crescendo between 2013 and 2015 and this would make the issue a salient one for citizens, in turn making it possible politically to exploit public opposition to immigration. In this context, alongside the explosive emergence of the M5s at the 2013 election, there was, in 2014, Salvini's assumption of the leadership of the League and its consequent sovereigntist turn. In short, in Italy as elsewhere, politics was overtaken by a growing wave of populism that sought to draw on and foment attitudes combining Euroscepticism and nationalism with generalized feelings of resentment towards mainstream political parties. Clearly evident in several Western countries, the growing wave reached a height in 2016 with the Brexit referendum and the election of Trump in the United States. In Italy, the referendum held the same year on the constitutional reform proposed by Renzi and Boschi, represented an opportunity to block the hitherto successful attempt of the Pd general secretary to manage the populist challenge by attempting to ride out anti-political protest. At the same time, it represented the precondition for the success of the M5s and the League at the election of 2018.

When, between the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, Giorgia Meloni, Guido Crosetto and Ignazio La Russa founded FdI, they said they wanted to create a party of the 'centre right', one that would be affiliated to the European People's Party, a sort of continuation by other means of the project initiated by the PdL, a party that would be more democratic and pluralistic than the latter. From 2014, however, when Giorgia Meloni took over leadership of the party following the disappointing results of the election of 2013, she embarked upon a very different path. She fought to have the party resume the name Alleanza Nazionale and to readopt the traditional tri-colour flame as its symbol. She reached out to the leaders of the Visegrad countries. Thanks to a combination of fortuitous circumstances, in September 2020, she became the president of the European Conservatives and Reformists, which had been abandoned by the UK Conservatives and was now dominated by the Polish Law and Justice party. Thereby, she was able to gain a hearing in Republican Party circles, then dominated by Donald Trump. She extolled the virtues of Vladimir Putin, took radical anti-EU positions and adopted hostile attitudes towards the French and German governments. The most frequent objects of her ire were the large multinationals, international finance, the 'Lgbt lobby' and the left. However, it was apparent that the competition she was focused on was the one with Matteo Salvini for the support of Italian voters who were already located on the centre right – or else had, as we have said, shifted back to it from the beginning of 2019 – and were open to appeals of this kind.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed this situation to some extent. On the one hand, by generating the dilemma, for both governments and public opinion, that the protection of public health could only be had at the cost of individual freedom and vice versa, it created a division among voters concerning the containment measures. On this issue, Giorgia Meloni and FdI ought to woo those sectors of the public opposed to the lockdown measures and hesitant about the vaccines. But in this case, it became more difficult to offload blame onto the EU, which came across as an institution concerned to protect the well-being of citizens in a cohesive, timely and attentive manner, rather than as a surly auditor. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 made anti-European and anti-globalization rhetoric even less plausible. Even more so because she was the president of

the European Conservatives and Reformists, the FdI leader took a position of staunch support for the Ukrainian resistance.

In the meantime, Brexit had turned out to be a failure, economically and socially, for the UK and a political failure for the Conservatives, who had sought to draw support from it. The defeat of Donald Trump in the US presidential elections, the attack on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 and the former president's false allegations of electoral fraud had undermined the appeal of the populist narratives Trump had championed during the preceding years and which had been borrowed by other leaders in Europe. In this context, with the opportunity to assume the responsibilities of governing appearing to be within their grasp, the leaders of FdI adopted attitudes that were very different from those of the past, introducing large doses of realism into their proposals – as was clear from the programmatic conference held in Milan between the end of April and the beginning of May 2022. This represented the beginning of a transition that took an even more decisive turn when Meloni became Prime Minister. From then on, the European Union and other international institutions, previously condemned as realizing a globalist vision without democratic accountability, became arenas in which Italy (now represented by the Meloni government) could play a constructive role.

Indeed, at least in terms of the public policies covered in this special issue, the elements of continuity between the Draghi government and the government led by Meloni seem, at least to judge from the initial months, far more in evidence than the discontinuities. This is an impression contrasting radically with the one associated with an anticipated 'radicalization'. The latter seems confirmed, if at all, by policies that are mostly of a symbolic nature; in the vehemence of parliamentary exchanges between government and opposition, and by one or two initiatives in the area of law and order (such as the increased penalties for those organizing rave parties) and the control of refugee landings.

Let us consider, first, the policies aimed at post-pandemic recovery and economic growth: the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and the related judicial reform. Implementation of the NRRP implies making resource-allocation decisions, but primarily it involves making organizational decisions that do not readily lend themselves to ideological conflict between left and right. In 2022, debate focused on whether it could be implemented in time to meet EU deadlines. The two governments also focused on the problem of funding those policy areas that had been most directly affected by the international crisis, especially energy, defence and migration.

The Cartabia reform sought to respond to the NRRP commitments concerning modernization of the judicial system and reducing the length of proceedings and introduced a limited reform of criminal proceedings along with changes to the recruitment and careers of justices (Cardone and Santoro). In both areas, Parliament under Draghi had been virtually united in agreeing on the need to accelerate reform aimed at changing the distribution of responsibilities in the judiciary. The Meloni government was supported by parties that wanted both a more authoritarian approach to justice than envisaged by Cartabia, and a reallocation of NRRP resources; but despite this, at the end of 2022, the Government had not changed its policy concerning the reform.

There were also significant continuities in areas of policy related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its effects on energy supplies, growth and inflation.

In the area of defence, the Draghi government sought to promote the organizational modernization of the armed forms and to provide them with more resources, this in line with the policy laid down by the defence minister, Lorenzo Guerini, in 2019 (Coticchia and Moro). On the diplomatic front, it re-emphasized the importance of the trans-Atlantic relationship and the role of Italy in the 'enlarged Mediterranean' (Brighi and Giusti). In both cases, the Meloni government seems intent on following up on the partial changes introduced by its predecessor and indeed to pursuing change even closer to the intentions of Draghi who had been forced to accept compromises thanks to the breadth of his supporting coalition.

Concerning energy policy, the Draghi government acted on two fronts, seeking new sources of gas supply and the diversification of energy sources by encouraging the development of renewables (which would also help to meet targets relating to climate change and the ecological transition). Regarding gas, the Draghi government began negotiations for the signing of a contract with Algeria, to which the Meloni government added a contact with Libya. Concerning renewables, it was only because of the pressure arising from the Ukraine crisis that the Draghi government was able to take really incisive measures, and the current Meloni government has done nothing to water down the electrification plans. In fact, both the area of gas supplies and the area of the energy transition continuity between the two governments seem considerable even though Meloni's is supported by parties less committed to policies to tackle climate change and to realizing the energy transition. Highlighting this continuity, Prontera and Lizzi point out that there are two issues neither Draghi nor Meloni dealt with satisfactorily. One was the legislative complexity creating uncertainty for market operators and causing unreasonable delays in approving the construction of installations. The other was the relationship between the national level and regional and local authorities concerning the development and implementation of policy: an issue that has historically thrown considerable obstacles in the way of developing renewables in Italy.

On immigration, Ceccorulli shows that although migrant landings were an issue during the summer election campaign, Italy's approach to it has changed little. In fact, it continues to be led by impromptu responses to specific emergencies. It is possible that the resumption of arrivals in Italy via the Mediterranean will lead to the emergence of significant differences between the Draghi and Meloni governments in terms of policies to dissuade and prevent migrant landings. Meanwhile, with regard to the reception of Ukrainian refugees, here too, everything suggests that the predominant approach will be one of continuity.

5. The *special relationship* and ties to Europe and the US

The third question posed at the outset – concerning Italy's stance with respect to the international crises of 2022 – cannot be answered by confining attention to the decisions taken hitherto by political leaders and their parties. Such decisions have reflected a greater degree of unity and cohesion than is displayed by the parties' supporters when they are asked to respond to opinion polls. The invasion of Ukraine and the threat posed by Putin's Russia to its neighbouring European countries were met during the year with a strong and united response on the part of EU and NATO member states, and both the Draghi and the Meloni governments supported it without reserve. However, both

initial attempts at justifying the Russian invasion and subsequent criticism of the sanctions imposed on Russia and of the military support given to the Ukrainian resistance found a larger echo among the Italian public than among the publics of other European countries. The analyses that initially became available concerning these attitudes and the factors underlying them provided only a partial explanation of their limited impact in 2022 on the decisions of Parliament and the Government. However, it is likely that they reflect the *special relationship* Italy had with Russia both before and after the beginning of the 1990s when, not by chance, the political changes taking place in the one country reflected the political changes taking place in the other. The *special relationship* therefore represented a long-standing constant, one that survived changes of political actors and regimes, but one that the invasion of Ukraine seems to have irretrievably undermined.

The support of the Italian Government and Parliament for the joint decisions of the EU and NATO leaves unanswered the question of the extent to which this support will persist, and the extent to which the political dilemmas created by the Russian invasion will be reflected in divisions between the parties of government and opposition. After all, for many years, Italy and Russia had common interests in a number of areas despite their differences in other areas. Historically, Italy has sought to develop commercial ties with Russia while maintaining a position of unquestioned loyalty to Europe and NATO. At the end of the Cold War, Italy's foreign policy interests continued to diverge between those pushing in the direction of NATO and those privileging the 'special relationship' with Moscow. Following the political upheavals of the early 1990s, Italy on the one hand took positions that conflicted with Russian geopolitical objectives, as when, for example, it sent troops to the Balkans and established a significant presence in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, several Italian governments sought to strengthen ties with Moscow. Their efforts included those of the second Berlusconi government, with its attempts at the creation of a NATO-Russia Council in 2oo2, and the commitment of the Prodi government to the development of the South Stream gas pipeline that would connect the two countries and be supported by various national champions, public and private (such as ENI).

With the onset of the financial crisis in 2008-2009, relations between Italy and Russia underwent another change. In addition, the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 brought the imposition of international sanctions, which Italy supported and which led to the Russian government suspending the South Stream project. The cooling of relations continued during the latter part of the decade even though a degree of reciprocal influence remained. For example, Italy supported the intensification of cooperation between the EU and the Balkan countries (including the pro-Russian Serbia), but it also supported the NATO membership of Montenegro (in 2017) and of North Macedonia (in 2020).

The pandemic led to further complications in what was now a problematic diplomatic relationship. The 'solidarity' mission that saw several of the Kremlin's men entering hospitals in Bergamo brought embarrassment to several members of the Conte government. In addition, the allegations of spying that led to the expulsion of Russian diplomats and culminated in a series of cybersecurity attacks immediately after the start of the Ukraine invasion testify to the beginning of a new, more hostile, period in relations between the two countries.

Public debate concerning the war was dominated, especially to begin with, by expressions of pro-Russian sympathy. The conflict was also one of the terminology, with the hostile invasion of a sovereign country and the persistent attacks against civilians being referred to, euphemistically, as the 'Ukraine crisis', or generically, as the 'war in Ukraine', so as to reconcile the facts with interpretations according to which 'after all the Russians had good reasons to intervene'. Subsequently, opponents of military support for the Ukrainian resistance drew attention to the economic and environmental burdens and the costs in terms of human lives, expressing, in vague and unspecific terms, the hope that the parties might engage in negotiations.

However, these attitudes were shared by political actors belonging to both the governing majority (within the League and FI) and the opposition (the M5s and the 'radical' left). They are more widespread among centre-right voters than among those voting for the larger centre-left parties (the PD and Azione-Italia Viva) where they are supported by only a minority. All this makes it likely that Italy's support for the European-Atlantic alliance will remain solid and unchanging, while the 'special relationship' with Russia will be frozen for a long time to come. Thanks to a seeming paradox, in the absence of profound, concrete disagreements with the policy of the Meloni government on the part of governing spokespersons from the League or FI, the issue is likely to create deeper divisions in the 'broad field'. This is because the M5s has an electoral incentive to emphasize 'pacifism' and can easily do so as a party of opposition: one not obliged, therefore, to take responsibility for the consequences. This, for the reasons set out above, would be an advantage for the parties of the governing coalition.

6. Conclusion

In 2022, Italy, like other European and Western countries, was obliged to come to terms with the problems of the post-pandemic recovery and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, there were important domestic changes such as a *revival of the majoritarian principle* in the process of government formation. Many observers, at home and abroad, highlighted the risk of *ideological polarization* that they believed would take place with the victory of the centre right and within it of FdI. In this article, we have described the changes in the party system and in the dynamic of political competition that led to a shift away from bipolarity in 2013, which led, in 2022, to party-system asymmetry, with a united coalition of the centre right and divisions among its adversaries (a factor that enhanced the *majoritarian effect* of the hybrid electoral system put in place by the Rosato law).

Against this background, and based on the evidence discussed in the articles that follow, we also show that the Draghi and Meloni governments, though formed in different ways, sustained by majorities with disparate political profiles, led by individuals with different leadership styles, have so far adopted, on many of the most significant issues, policies that have more similarities than differences.

The Meloni government might possibly be debilitated by the massive increase in responsibilities placed on the shoulders of FdI and the sudden change in attitudes they have been obliged to undergo in moving from opposition to government. It might be challenged by shortcomings associated with the fact that the FdI leadership has hitherto been closed in on itself is of small size and

is now called upon to fill numerous high-ranking positions requiring specific skills and governing experience. It might be weakened by the inevitable hiatus between the rhetorical radicalism of years gone by and the realism demanded by the new responsibilities. Such problems explain the various instances of 'stop-and-go' in policy-making. On the other hand, evolution in the positions taken by FdI, if confirmed in the coming years, will raise a question about the nature of the so-called *transnational cleavage* (Hooghe and Marks 2018). Its impact has been very evident in the rhetoric of parties – of the left, of the right or of uncertain location such as the M5s – that can be to varying degrees defined as *populist* – when they have been in opposition. But when they have joined government, the impact of the cleavage has been much less in evidence.

The international ties cultivated by the FdI leader in the past – when Meloni was the leader of a small party that languished in opposition for two legislatures in a row – could be a problem for the new government. Such ties involved hostility towards the French and German governments, alliance with the parties and heads of government of the Visegrad countries, and derogatory statements about the EU. The Meloni government's ambition (one that emerges from the articles in this special issue) is to gain recognition as the leading European country in relations with the 'enlarged Mediterranean', becoming an indispensable actor in the supply of energy from North Africa, so consolidating Italy's economic presence in those countries and limiting the departure of migrants towards Italy's coasts. However, such an ambition cannot be realized if Italy remains isolated in Europe, if it is not recognized as a reliable and loyal ally. It is highly likely that Giorgia Meloni will seek, with some possibility of success, to create a closer relationship between Conservatives and Reformists and the European People's Party (EPP). It is less likely that she will succeed in picking apart the 'grand coalition' between the EPP, the liberals (now Renew Europe) and the Socialists and Democrats, which has always been the EU's centre of gravity. Similarly, she will have to modify her attitude towards the Franco-German axis, unless it comes apart. It is certain that she will have to reflect on the fate of political leaders, like herself (or for example Renzi and Salvini), who have been swept to power on the wave of sudden, large, electoral upsurges, only then to overestimate their power and underestimate the extent of electoral volatility.

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