



# Putin's Friends?

## The Complex Balance Inside Italy's Far-Right Government Coalition

Raimondo LANZA

### ► Key Takeaways

- Italy's good relations with Putin's Russia have not been the prerogative of a specific party. Political, economic and energy ties developed significantly with center-left and center-right governments alike.
- In line with most far-right parties in the EU, Salvini's Northern League (NL) and Meloni's Brothers of Italy (BOI) developed an appreciation for Putin's neo-conservative regime while criticizing the EU and NATO for damaging Italy's entente with Moscow.
- A potential reconciliation with Moscow goes against Italy's national interest at this point. Russia accounts for only 1.5% of Italy's exports against its Western partners' 80%. Besides, the EU's interconnected gas market requires a coordinated plan to overcome the energy crisis. Finally, the reconquest of Kherson by Ukraine in November makes support for the Kremlin political suicide.
- Meloni's sudden pro-NATO shift has taken much of her electorate by surprise, while support for Ukraine is low in the country. Coalition allies Salvini and Berlusconi are ready to take advantage of this gap to weaken Meloni's leadership. This is typical of Italy's fragile parliamentary democracy. To avoid further disappointing her electorate, Meloni is rapidly satisfying other demands of theirs, on issues such as migration, family values and tax policies.

## Introduction

Italy's new far-right government has been widely perceived as the potential weak spot of the anti-Kremlin European front following Russia's invasion of Ukraine: traditionally pro-Putin politicians such as Matteo Salvini and Silvio Berlusconi are back in power.<sup>1</sup> Yet, after Mario Draghi's hawkish Euro-Atlantic government fell in July and Giorgia Meloni was looking forward to a probable victory, she immediately sided with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in a firm condemnation of Russia.

Meloni's foreign policy shift might look surprising. Ideologically aligned with the far-right, she had always criticized the EU for supporting anti-Kremlin sanctions and NATO's activism in Eastern Europe, while Putin's neo-conservative regime has been a model for a consistent number of her voters. However, Russia was not the only "promised land" of anti-liberalism for Meloni; she created bonds with many European and American conservative parties whose position was not necessarily pro-Kremlin. Furthermore, her fast political rise occurred in exceptional circumstances. Russia, the far-right coveted "geopolitical alternative" to the EU and NATO, has invaded a sovereign country at the heart of Europe, making pro-Putin allusions toxic at government level.

Still, Russia's energy war on the EU is hitting Italy hard: 40% of the much-needed gas came from Russia before the war.<sup>2</sup> In Italian public opinion, the looming economic difficulties are generating fear and a growing desire for peace. As the conflict wages on, support for Ukraine is diminishing: an October 13, 2022 opinion poll indicated that only 43% of Italians supported Kyiv, while the percentage was over 57% in April 2022.<sup>3</sup> The same is true for anti-Kremlin sanctions: if 55% were in favor in March 2022, the percentage diminished to 42% in October.

Meloni is facing a political paradox: she has won the elections at a time when her ideal geopolitical alliances are not a viable option and yet Italians, especially far-right voters,<sup>4</sup> are expressing considerable unhappiness about their country's loyalty to the EU and NATO. For Meloni, this is tantamount to friendly fire from her coalition allies; together with other issues, the widespread indulgence towards Moscow is the perfect instrument for regaining consensus and weakening the prime minister's leadership.

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1. Giorgia Meloni was elected prime minister after her party, Brothers of Italy, won the majority of votes (26%) within a coalition including Matteo Salvini's Northern League, which scored a historic low of 8.7%, and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (8.1%). "Politiche 25 settembre 2022" [Political Elections, September 25, 2022], Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs, September 25, 2022, available at: <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it>.

2. "Relazione annuale, Stato dei servizi, 2021" [State of Services, Annual report, 2021], ARERA, 2021, available at: [www.arera.it](http://www.arera.it).

3. "Il conflitto in Ucraina, Monitoraggio del sentiment dell'opinione pubblica" [The Conflict in Ukraine, Monitoring Feeling of Public Opinion], Ipsos, March 10, 2022, available at: [www.ipsos.com](http://www.ipsos.com).

4. 55% of Brothers of Italy voters are against sanctions—the highest proportion by political party affiliation. "Sondaggio Quorum/Youtrend per Sky TG24: Italiani spaccati sulle sanzioni alla Russia" [Quorum / Outrend Poll for Sky TG24: Italians Split on Russian Sanctions], *Sky TG24*, September 5, 2022, available at: <https://tg24.sky.it>.

What are the reasons behind Meloni's sudden foreign policy shift? What are the political risks vis-à-vis her coalition allies and her voters? How is she balancing this change with other far-right key identity issues? And finally, how is Italy's future relationship with Russia likely to develop?

## Russia as a key partner for left and right Italian governments

Italy's positive relationship with Russia has never been the prerogative of a specific party. Intense economic and political relations with Putin's Russia developed under Italy's right and left governments alike. In 2014, when the EU imposed sanctions on Russia, Italy was the second-largest export partner of Russia in the EU and the third-largest import partner.<sup>5</sup> The sanctions war between the EU and Russia has generated a loss estimated at €3 billion per year for Italian companies since 2014.<sup>6</sup> Domestic support for sanctions quickly vanished in the country, especially as Italian leaders and public opinion realized that the most vocal anti-Russian EU member states, especially in eastern Europe, were not willing to reciprocate Rome's solidarity on the migration crisis, which Italy perceived as its key strategic issue. Only a fraction of the 300,000 migrants who arrived on Italy's coasts in the period 2015-2016 were redistributed in other EU member states.<sup>7</sup>

Favored by Rome's isolation on this topic within the EU, Moscow became Italy's main partner in the migration crisis, as Putin played an active role in the promotion of regime stability in Syria and Libya. In 2015, as a symbol of Russia's strategic importance for Italy, center-left prime minister (PM) Matteo Renzi was the first Western leader to visit the Kremlin after the annexation of Crimea.

The rapprochement continued with the center-left PM and now European Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni, who declared in 2017 that Italy and Russia should continue to cooperate, despite the Ukraine crisis.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, an analysis of Italian prime ministers' speeches since the early 2000s demonstrates that the idea of Italy as a mediator between the West and Russia has been a constant factor.<sup>9</sup> Italy, however, was careful not to alienate its Euro-Atlantic partners and never took a firm pro-Russian stance on a state level.

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5. "Where Does Russia Export to?", The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2014: <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/>; "Where Does Russia Import from?", The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022, available at: <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/>.

6. "Russia, con le sanzioni l'Italia perde 3 miliardi all'anno" [Russia, with Sanctions Italy Loses 3 Billion a Year], *Coldiretti*, April 13, 2018, available at: [www.coldiretti.it](http://www.coldiretti.it).

7. M. Siddi, "Italy's 'Middle Power' Approach to Russia", *The International Spectator*, Vol.°54, 2019, pp. 123-138.

8. "Press Statements and Answers to Journalists' Questions Following Russian-Italian Talks", President of Russia, May 17, 2017, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

9. A. Caffarena and G. Gabusi, "Making Sense of a Changing World: Foreign Policy Ideas and Italy's National Perception After 9/11", *Italian Political Science review*, Vol.°2, No. 47, July 2017, pp. 125-147.

## Moscow's alliance with the far-right since 2014

After the Crimean annexation in 2014, Moscow's state-level relations with key EU partners were compromised. The Kremlin resorted to far-right parties, which proved to be a perfect match; Putin could weaken the anti-Russian front in EU member states, gathering strategic information from benevolent political forces that could, in turn, get financial or political support from Moscow and its propaganda machine.

Regarding their approach to Moscow, Italian far-right parties shared common traits with their counterparts in the EU. They have embraced the Kremlin's narrative that the West is in decay, having abandoned its traditional values concerning religious, family and social issues.<sup>10</sup> They have also found common ground in the critique of Euro-Atlantic institutions. Most EU far-right parties share the desire for their country to adopt an independent foreign policy, outside of the EU and NATO; Russia was presented as the geopolitical alternative.<sup>11</sup>

However, Italy's case is peculiar in two main aspects:

- ▀ The widespread indulgence towards Russia made it less necessary for the Kremlin to meddle in Italian internal affairs. Besides, siding too much with one candidate could alienate the others. In this regard, Italy is like Germany where *Russlandversteher* (literally "Russia understanders") are scattered across different political cultures. That is not the case in France, for example, where the Kremlin could easily pinpoint and support one specific candidate, Marine Le Pen. In fact, unlike in Germany and Italy, Moscow actually meddled in the 2017 French elections.<sup>12</sup>
- ▀ Italy's fragmented political landscape created different potential sparring partners for the Kremlin: the Northern League (NL) and Brothers of Italy (BOI) are both far-right parties and were both fascinated by Putin's narrative.<sup>13</sup>

Support for Salvini boomed in the years 2014–2018, soaring from 6.2% to 34.3% of votes<sup>14</sup> as he criticized EU institutions for their inability to solve the migration crisis and blamed them for the economic damage of the sanctions war with Russia. It was natural for the Kremlin to concentrate its efforts on the NL. In 2017, Salvini signed a

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10. A. Klapsis, "An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin's Russia", *European View*, Vol. 14, June 2015, p. 137, available at: <https://doi.org>.

11. This is true for far-right parties in core EU countries but less so in eastern Europe, where a rejection of globalism and multiculturalism goes hand in hand with a negative attitude to Russia. Poland is a perfect example.

12. A. Shekhovtsov, "Russian Interference, and Where to Find It", EPDE, April 2019, available at: [www.epde.org](http://www.epde.org).

13. The populist Five Star Movement has also been a pro-Russian force on strategic issues, but it should be analyzed separately.

14. "I numeri record della crescita della lega di Matteo Salvini" [The Record Numbers of Matteo Salvini's League's Growth], *Panorama*, May 2019, available at: [www.panorama.it](http://www.panorama.it).

cooperation agreement with Putin's party "United Russia", whereby information exchange on relevant topics was to be reinforced, as well as cooperation on social and economic issues.<sup>15</sup> The NL allegedly received a €65 million loan from Russia in 2018, an accusation denied by Matteo Salvini who, however, has always been unclear about his party's funding.

BOI's position was different. While Putin's Russia has been a model among Meloni's voters and party *nomenklatura*,<sup>16</sup> her smaller political weight somehow preserved her from direct ties with the Kremlin. She has, apparently, not received any financial support from Moscow, and had little personal commitment to Putin's Russia. Symbolically, the two never met.

In relation to the Kremlin, therefore, Meloni was less compromised and, as the Ukraine war started, she could shift to a firm condemnation of Russia. After all, by invading Ukraine, the Kremlin was the first to radicalize its strategy and bring the conflict with the West to a new level.

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## The reasons behind Meloni's sudden shift

Perfectly in line with far-right ideology, on February 8, 2022, Meloni declared that Italy needed "a secular peace with Russia", and accused US President Biden of using "foreign policy to cover up internal problems".<sup>17</sup>

Yet, as Russia invaded Ukraine, she adopted a firm Atlantic stance: on February 24, she immediately sided with the West, declaring that Russia's aggression was "unacceptable" and that it was time to "choose a side", while hoping that the West and the international community would unite to support Kyiv.

Meloni maintained her pro-Ukraine stance during the 2022 electoral campaign and after the election. On September 30, after Putin signed Russia's official annexation of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, Meloni called the preceding referendums in these regions "a farce held under violent military occupation" that had "no legal or political value" and accused Putin of "Soviet-style

15. "L'accordo fra la Lega e il partito di Putin" [The Agreement Between the Northern League and Putin's Party], *Il Post*, March 7, 2016, available at: [www.ilpost.it](http://www.ilpost.it).

16. Pro-Russian Brothers of Italy key members are numerous: regional councilor Maurizio Marrone opened an unofficial consulate of the Donetsk People's Republic in Turin in 2016 and was among international observers suggested by the Kremlin for overseeing Russia's sham referendums in the four Ukrainian territories in September 2022.

17. V. Ricciardi, "Quando Giorgia Meloni stava con Putin" [When Giorgia Meloni Was With Putin], *Domani*, September 14 2022, available at: [www.editorialedomani.it](http://www.editorialedomani.it).

neo-imperialism that threatens the security of the entire European continent”.<sup>18</sup> In her first phone call to Volodymyr Zelenskiy on October 4, she confirmed “full support for the cause of freedom for the Ukrainian people”.<sup>19</sup>

Meloni's sudden shift is due to a mix of factors:

- **Energy and economy.** Concretely, there is little advantage in Italy's rapprochement with Moscow at this point. As of 2021, Russia absorbed about 1.5% of Italy's exports, against 80% for Rome's Western partners.<sup>20</sup> On energy issues, the EU's interconnected gas market makes it impossible for Italy to buy Russian gas while bypassing other EU member states.<sup>21</sup> As well, Draghi actively worked to diversify energy supplies, reducing Moscow's leverage on Italy.<sup>22</sup>

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■ **International responsibilities.** Draghi's firm Euro-Atlantic leadership left no space for ambiguity. Reversing his policies would isolate Italy from the EU and NATO. Political credibility and speculation on Italy's high public debt would only worsen if the country decided to opt out on such a key strategic issue. Also, a pro-Kremlin bandwagon effect has vanished as Russia's military campaign has been far from successful; after the August-September Ukrainian counteroffensive and the reconquest of Kherson in November, Italy's support for Moscow would be political suicide.

- **Internal factors.** Anti-NATO discourse is very common in both the far-left and far-right in Italy, yet the US has more to offer to far-right voters through the anti-liberal and conservative positions most notably held by Donald Trump and the Republican Party. Unlike the far-left, Meloni never adopted anti-American positions, and arguably never believed that Russia was really a viable alternative to the US. In fact, her bonds with American conservatism have grown during the last few years. BOI actively connected with the

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18. “‘Meloni: l’annessione russa non ha valore, Putin minaccia’. Kiev: ‘Grazie per la posizione’” [‘Meloni: Russian Annexation Has No Value’. Kiev: ‘Thank You For the Clear Position’], *Ansa it Politica*, September 30, 2022, available at: [www.ansa.it](http://www.ansa.it).

19. “Zelensky si congratula con Meloni, spero presto a Kiev. Lei: ‘Pieno sostegno a libertà degli ucraini’” [Zelensky Congrats Meloni, Whishing to See Her in Kiev. She ‘Full Support for The Freedom of Ukrainians’], *Ansa it Mondo*, October 4, 2022, available at: [www.ansa.it](http://www.ansa.it).

20. F. Grignetti, “Non ci faremo intimidire da Mpsca abbiamo deciso da che parte stare” [We Will Not Be Intimidated by Moscow, We Decided Which Side to Stand on], *La Stampa*, October 27, 2022, p. 15, available at: [www.difesa.it](http://www.difesa.it).

21. N. Sartori, “Italia Russia, una storia a tutto gas” [Italy-Russia, a Full-Throttle Story], ISPI, October 11, 2018, available at: [www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it).

22. Draghi speeded up the process to reduce Italy's dependence on Moscow. Most notably, Algeria, Italy's second gas supplier, has pledged to increase volumes; a state-level agreement was signed on April 11, 2022 involving Italy's energy company ENI and Algerian company Sonatrach. Liquefied natural gas has also increased its share in Europe's energy mix.

International Republican Institute and with key figures of the Republican Party such as Steve Bannon.<sup>23</sup>

That said, Meloni is in a delicate position. If by siding with NATO she still managed to win the elections, her government stability should not be taken for granted. Not only did she give up a key element of the far-right, but her convinced pro-Ukraine narrative is not widespread in the country.

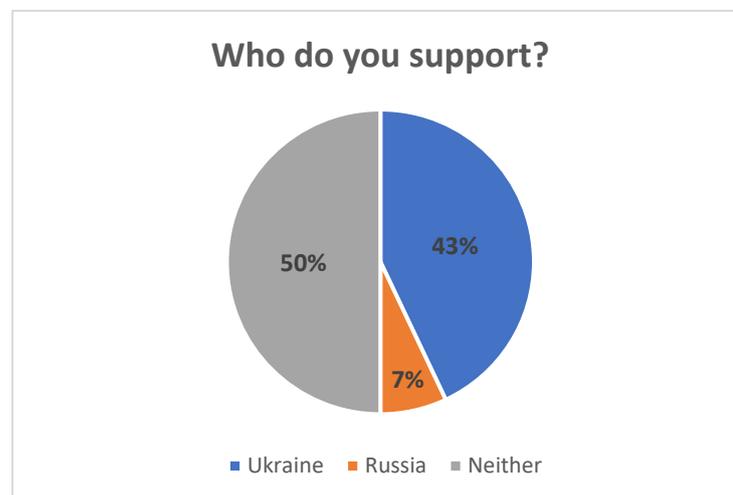
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## Meloni versus her voters

Italian survey center Ipsos<sup>24</sup> has been monitoring Italian feelings about the Ukraine war during the last few months. According to its latest release, published on October 13, Italians are very worried about the consequences of the conflict: only one person out of ten declares not being worried about the current situation. The majority, 55% of interviewees, fear the economic consequences of the war more than its military risks (24%). While very worried about the Italian economy, only 22% believe that sanctions are effective in weakening Russia.



23. F. Bechis, "Meloni l'Americana. Tutte le stelle e le strisce dentro FdI" [Meloni The American. All the Stars and Stripes Inside FdI], *Formiche*, July 25, 2022, available at: <https://formiche.net>.

24. "Il conflitto in Ucraina, Monitoraggio del sentiment dell'opinione pubblica" [The Conflict in Ukraine, Monitoring Feeling of Public Opinion], Ipsos, October 13, 2022, available at: [www.ipsos.com](http://www.ipsos.com).

The prevailing sentiment is “nonalignment”; 50% of Italians do not stand with either Russia or Ukraine; 43% support Kyiv and at least 7% support Russia—but this last percentage could be much larger.<sup>25</sup>

The idea that NATO and Russia share responsibility for what is happening has been fostered by Pope Francis himself; he declared on May 3 that “NATO’s barking at Russia’s doorstep” “facilitated” Putin’s anger.<sup>26</sup> This undoubtedly authorized more space for moderation, especially among Catholic voters who, in turn, are likely to support conservative parties.

According to the Ipsos survey, only one in four Italians supports supplying weapons to Kyiv. The absolute majority (60%) believes that it is necessary to maintain dialogue with Putin. This is an important factor for Meloni; coalition voters in particular, at least on paper, do not agree with her foreign policy shift. This gap opens a new front for Meloni: the risk of “friendly fire” from her coalition allies.

## Meloni against her allies: the nightmare of Italy’s short-lived executives

Those most active in taking advantage of the foreign policy gap between Meloni and public opinion are her coalition allies, Salvini and Berlusconi. They both held ambiguous positions about EU sanctions against Russia and military support for Ukraine well after February 24. As elections approached and opinion polls showed progressive erosion of support for Kyiv, the two leaders alternated declarations of obligatory alignment with NATO and the EU with pro-Russian innuendos.

Salvini repeatedly put forward the idea that sanctions were damaging Italy’s national interest instead of Russia’s.

On September 23, forty-eight hours before the elections, Berlusconi almost justified Russia’s invasion by declaring: “Putin was pressured by the Russian people, by his party, by his ministers to come up with this ‘special operation’ whereby Russian troops were to go in, reach Kyiv in one week, replace Zelensky’s government with a government of decent people [...]. Instead, they found unforeseen and unpredictable resistance from Ukrainian troops who had been empowered with weapons of all kinds by the West.”

It is hard to know if Berlusconi and Salvini believe what they say, but they certainly use the diminishing support for Ukraine as a tool to weaken Meloni’s leadership and push forward their own agenda. The 86-year-old tycoon is keen to secure his media empire and

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25. This perception derives from the fact that 19% answered “Russia” when asked “Who do you think Italians support?”.

26. “Papa Francesco, l’abbaia della NATO alle porte di Mosca...”: le cause della guerra, terremoto globale” [Pope Francesco, ‘the Barking of NATO at the Gates of Moscow...’: the Causes of War, Global Earthquake], *Quotidiano.it Libero*, May 3, 2022, available at: [www.liberoquotidiano.it](http://www.liberoquotidiano.it).

to settle his legal problems,<sup>27</sup> while the NL leader, unhappy about his record-low result in the September elections and fearing the end of his political career, needs to regain voter support.

The dynamic is par for the course in Rome's peculiarly fragile parliamentary system: post-war Italy has had 67 governments in 77 years.

Ultimately, Salvini and Berlusconi have a "personal" reason to weaken Meloni's premiership. Over 50% of BOI's voters in the 2022 elections had backed the NL or Forza Italia in 2018.<sup>28</sup> The two have an interest in getting back their voters by overshadowing Meloni on good results and blaming her for bad ones.

## Meloni maintains her far-right positions on key issues

Given the elevated osmosis of votes among Italian parties in a context of recurrent elections, Meloni will have to take great care to satisfy the demands of her electorate. In fact, one of her first measures as prime minister was to allow a "tax break"—a gift to Salvini's and Berlusconi's voters, traditionally entrepreneurs and not at ease with taxation. She had to accept an NL law proposition raising the cash payment ceiling for Italians from €1,000 to €10,000, a measure that will likely encourage tax evasion.<sup>29</sup>

Meloni is also reassuring her far-right voters that her view on key social issues has not changed. On October 9 she attended a meeting organized by the Spanish far-right party Vox and declared that she was ready to transform far-right ideas into government policies as "our friends in Poland have already done".<sup>30</sup> In fact, Meloni has never wavered in her conservative positions on LGBTQ+ issues and adoption by same-sex couples.

Migration is a key far-right issue on which Meloni has given space to her ally Salvini. The NL leader is currently Minister of Infrastructure, a post that gives him certain control of Italian harbors, which is relevant to controlling the inflow of migrants. Given its importance for far-right voters, migration is likely to be the issue on which Meloni will openly challenge the EU and other member states.

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27. Berlusconi asked for the Economic Development Ministry and Justice Ministry to be allotted to Forza Italia.

28. "28.8% of voters voted for LN in 2018 and 15.3% for FI.", Source: "Elezioni politiche 2022, Report Post voto", Ipsos, available at: [www.ipsos.com](http://www.ipsos.com).

29. M. Giammatteo, S. Iezzi and R. Zizza, "Pecunia olet. L'uso del contante e l'economia sommersa" [Pecunia Olet. The Use of Cash and The Shadow Economy], *Banca d'Italia*, Vol. 649, October 2021, available at: [www.bancaditalia.it](http://www.bancaditalia.it).

30. "En Espagne, l'Italienne Giorgia Meloni défend 'l'Europe des patriotes' lors d'un meeting de Vox" [In Spain, Giorgia Meloni Defends 'the Europe of Patriots' During a Vox Meeting], *Le Figaro*, October 9, 2022, available at: [www.lefigaro.fr](http://www.lefigaro.fr).

Finally, from November 1 non-Covid-vaccinated doctors, whom Draghi's government had banned from working, have been fully reintegrated—a symbolic gift to no-vax voters, traditionally spread among far-right and populist parties.

If Meloni's Atlantism is not in question, her position on EU institutions is unclear; it will be interesting to see how she will further develop it. She has been very critical of EU institutions in the past, most notably for being unable to stop the alleged "Islamization of Europe" during the migration crisis and for following the US in the sanctions war against Russia. Her current position is directed more toward reform of EU rules than open confrontation with Brussels. Before the elections, Meloni declared that there was no "anti-European fringe" in her party.<sup>31</sup> However, a nationalist stance seems to be important for the new prime minister; the creation of the Ministry for Food Sovereignty is highly symbolic.<sup>32</sup> If Meloni's government will not challenge the EU directly, she will probably try to enlarge the principle of subsidiarity, whereby the EU does not act on a specific issue unless its action is more effective than that of a member state.

## Conclusion: Italy as a "Western Poland"?

The management of the energy crisis is the first real test for Meloni's government. If prices remain high, Italy's social stability will be threatened, and public opinion will likely push for a quick rapprochement with Russia in the hope of easing the pressure of energy costs on the economy.

In the medium and long term, the diversification of energy suppliers as well as the transition to renewable energy will be of paramount importance. The sooner that renewable energy increases its share in Europe's energy mix, the sooner Russian fossil fuels, and the leverage that goes with them, will lose their grip on the EU and Italy.

Meloni's transition from opposition leader to prime minister entailed a sudden shift to a pro-NATO stance. That is arguably the price European far-right and populist leaders have to pay if they get elected. Concretely, there is little to no advantage in siding with Moscow at this point. Yet, the prime minister's shift has taken much of her electorate by surprise, while general support for Ukraine is diminishing in the country. Meloni's allies, Salvini and Berlusconi, are ready to take advantage of this gap to weaken Meloni's leadership—which, given Italy's fragile parliamentary democracy, is not unexpected.

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31. C. Cabrejas, "Elections italiennes : 'Giorgia Meloni affirme que son parti n'a pas d'aile anti-européenne'" [Italian elections : Giorgia Meloni States that her Party 'Does Not Have an Anti-European Wing'], *Euractiv*, September 21, 2022, available at: [www.euractiv.fr](http://www.euractiv.fr).

32. The Ministry of Agriculture has been renamed the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry. Its aim is to promote and defend Italian food products and producers from potentially restricting EU rules. In fact, existing certifications (DOP, IGP, etc) already protect Italian food products.

Combining her personal convictions and the need to counterbalance her allies' friendly fire, Meloni is reassuring her voters on other key issues such as patriotism, migration and family values. Even no-vax positions are being reintegrated into political discourse. Italy seems to be following the Polish model: firm Atlantism in foreign policy and conservative policies in domestic affairs. Meloni's position toward EU institutions and key EU partners is not clear yet, and much will depend on how Europe deals with the energy crisis. She will likely push for an enlargement of the principle of subsidiarity within the EU.

Finally, Italy's state-level relations with Putin's Russia will not improve as long as the war continues, and probably not until a power change occurs in Moscow. In all probability, Russia's real strategic leverage on Italy—energy resources—will not be available for Russia's next leader. Putin's nationalistic and conservative regime will likely remain a model for a minority of Italians not at ease with liberalism and pluralism, but much will depend on the results of the war. Meloni will continue to develop alliances with conservative forces in Europe and the USA. A new Russia would pose new challenges and offer new opportunities to Italy and the European Union.

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Italy seems to be following the Polish model: firm Atlantism in foreign policy and conservative policies in domestic affairs

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**Raimondo Lanza** is a political analyst specialised in Russia and the Post-Soviet Space. He holds a MA in International Relations from Saint Petersburg State University. After working in Russia in the private sector, he was recruited as Trade Analyst by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He currently writes for economic institutions and think tanks. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the view of the Italian Government.

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27 rue de la Procession  
75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

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