

FEMME FASCISTA

How Giorgia Meloni became the star of
Italy's far right

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About a month before Italy's disastrously inconclusive March elections, Giorgia Meloni, the flaxen-haired leader of the far-right Brothers of Italy party, stood in the gusty winter wind to kick off her campaign in front of the crowd that had gathered in Latina's Piazza del Popolo. At her side was Rachele Mussolini, a local candidate for her party who just happens to be the granddaughter of Benito Mussolini. Meloni took Mussolini's granddaughter's hand in hers and raised it in the air. "We want to win back this symbolic place in the history of the Italian right," Meloni yelled over raucous applause from the packed piazza.

The town of Latina, about 45 miles south of Rome, was hardly a random choice from which to inaugurate the short campaign season for Brothers of Italy, which was born from the ashes of the post-fascist Socialist Movement, an organization it has hardly deviated from in either policy or ideology. Nor did Meloni arbitrarily choose the woman she shared the platform with. In 1932, Benito Mussolini founded this town as a bastion to fascism. Originally called Littoria, the dictator envisioned it as a place for sophisticated northern Italians to settle *en masse* in southern Italy without having to integrate or actually live among the



southerners, who were mostly farmers and peasants. Mussolini, who was born in the north, also wanted to ingratiate himself with southerners who viewed their northern compatriots with skepticism. He did so by literally draining the swamps along the seaside, eradicating malaria and building dunes in order to create large swaths of new property near Rome. His aim was to bolster his base around the Italian capital, and from there, to expand the New Fascist Roman Empire across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

Mussolini's brand of fascism appealed to those who wanted to eradicate old institutions. He spoke of overthrowing the "elites" through a mix of nationalist and social policies, adopting an "Italy first" mantra. He appealed to lower- and working-class voters by promising to repair Italy's failing infrastructure, much of which had been heavily damaged during World War I, and by pledging to develop the grain market so the country could produce its own bread and pasta. To underscore his ambitions, Mussolini created neighborhoods and even entire towns that would serve as long-standing monuments to fascism. In the capital, he built the Esposizione Universale Roma (EUR) neighborhood. Now one of the city's poshest residential addresses, it still boasts fascist facades.

By 1945, Mussolini had been executed and fascism defeated, yet monumental towns like Latina still stand. It has of late been affiliated with organized crime and international terrorism (Anis Amri, the Islamic terrorist who killed a dozen people with a truck at a Berlin Christmas market in 2016, lived here). In the center of town, Latina's city hall is set in a tower facing the Piazza del Popolo. At its base is an inscription beckoning peasants to "look at

the tower rising above the plains as a symbol of Fascist power." As the backdrop for Meloni's speech, the imagery was picture-perfect.

Since first entering politics as a high school student, Meloni has become one of the most successful female politicians in Italy. Born in 1977 in Rome, she grew up in the middle-class neighborhood of Garbatella to parents who had emigrated to the capital from Sicily and Sardinia. She speaks with an authentic rolling Roman accent, which endears her to the working class, and studied journalism at university, which trained her to be comfortable on camera. In the run-up to the election, Meloni aired relatable two-minute TV spots designed to appeal to working women, mothers, and fascists. In one advertisement, she stands in her kitchen preparing a caprese tomato and mozzarella salad, talking about how Italy should not import foreign foods; in another, she weeds her vegetable garden and discusses how bad the EU has been to Italian farmers. Throughout her campaign, she managed to feminize an ideology traditionally known for its misogynistic leanings. Mussolini wanted women to stay home and have babies. Meloni still wants Italian women to procreate, but she also believes that they should be part of the workforce.

Meloni's success is due in large part to former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, head of the center-right Forza Italia party. In 2006, when Meloni was serving as a city councilwoman in Rome, Berlusconi tapped her to be the deputy vice president in the parliament. A few years later, he named her his Youth Minister, making her one of the first women—and the youngest person ever—to hold the office. Though hardly a pawn for the elder statesman, she certainly holds the party line when it comes to his ideals, especially around nationalism and

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anti-immigration. Moreover, the two share an affinity for Italy's most notorious leader. Berlusconi has often compared himself to Mussolini, and at a 2013 ceremony for Holocaust Remembrance Day he commented that the dictator should be remembered for his positive record: "The racial laws were the worst fault of Mussolini as a leader, who in so many other ways did well."

This view may seem niche, but there is still plenty of public sympathy for Il Duce, as Mussolini liked to be called. Last summer when a mountainside forest containing 20,000 fir trees that Mussolini had planted to spell out "DUX" (Latin for "Duce") was partially burned in a wildfire, Mussolini's other granddaughter, Alessandra Mussolini, Rachele's sister and an elected parliamentarian, pleaded with the government to replant the forest. When the center-left administration refused, citing a law that prohibits anyone from touching fire-burned land for five years, an extreme-right political party intervened. On a Monday afternoon in early spring, more than 200 members of Casa Pound, which won around 8 percent of the vote in a municipal Roman election last year, traveled two hours northeast of the capital, hiked up the mountain, and replanted thousands of trees by hand in defiance of the law. This happened in the open, but no one stopped them or uprooted the replanted forest.

In Mussolini's hometown of Predappio, a village of about 6,000 people in the north of the country, people still regularly lay flowers at the dictator's family tomb. Every Oct. 28, a small gathering of neo-fascists in black shirts makes its way down Predappio's main street to commemorate the fascist march that took place that day in Rome in 1922. Fascism is illegal in Italy, but historical reenactment of fascist events is not, nor is the sale of Mussolini memorabilia. Local stores across Predappio still make a killing selling Mussolini souvenirs, which include aprons and potholders with his

bald-headed image, as well as bottles of wine with his face on the labels. In 2017, a center-left coalition in the Italian Parliament pushed legislation that would make giving the fascist salute and selling far-right trinkets illegal, but the bill stalled in the senate and has since been forgotten. For a period of time, Mussolini wine was even sold in the Autogrill rest stops along Italy's national highways, but complaints to the tourist board put an end to that.

This interest in Mussolini is not a revival. Polls consistently put his postmortem approval rating at 20 percent nationwide, and the numbers climb much higher among those affiliated with the right. It is common to hear both

THIS YEAR, MELONI GOT INTO AN ARGUMENT ON A POPULAR MORNING TV SHOW OVER RUMORS THAT PRINCESS ELSA FROM FROZEN MIGHT BE A LESBIAN

young and old Italians curse his decision to follow Adolf Hitler's lead, but it is just as common to hear people of all ages credit him for some of the surviving national infrastructure. He wasn't afraid to tear down relics of Roman antiquity to improve a city, and when the state-run trains run on time, which they seldom do, you can always bet someone will make a reference to Mussolini.

All of which makes it acceptable for a politician like Meloni, who embraces extreme nationalism and a desire to promote the "purity" of Italian culture, to hold public office. She never has to qualify or apologize for her particular

brand of politics. She can stand onstage with a Mussolini because those who support her know exactly what she represents. Moreover, they feel less and less like it's something to hide.

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Over her political career, Meloni has been able to slalom a fine line between stoking fear and national pride. She dabbles in anti-Europe and anti-gay banter, which plays well to the "Italy first" sentiments of her far-right constituency. She opposes citizenship for children of immigrants, and supports incentives to grow Italy's declining birthrate. Since Berlusconi opened the door to national politics for her, Meloni has veered further right. In 2016, she vocally opposed the recognition of civil unions for same-sex couples during a referendum. The law passed, but Meloni, an unmarried mother of young children, became a strong voice against same-sex couples having children through what she called "uterus-for-rent" schemes, such as surrogacy or adoption. To demonstrate what she believed traditional families are supposed to look like, she attended a "Family Day" rally in Rome heavily pregnant with a toddler in tow. While the Catholic Church would have preferred that Meloni be accompanied by a husband, they embraced her support just the same.

Italy is notoriously misogynistic, falling far behind other European countries in the World Economic Forum's gender report, and Meloni's unusual ascent might be attributable in part to the fact that she is not a feminist. She believes women should be rewarded for bearing children, and supported a disastrous campaign to encourage women to have babies that included an hourglass and the tagline "Beauty is ageless, but fertility isn't." Earlier this year, she got into a heated argument on a popular morning television show over rumors that Princess Elsa from the Disney film *Frozen* might be a lesbian.

During a one-on-one interview with a female host who clearly didn't find the question important, Meloni broke down in tears contemplating the possibility that the movie might dissuade her daughters from wanting to marry a prince.

Meloni's views on gender and marriage, however, don't get as much airtime as the issue that is currently mobilizing her base and stoking populist flames around Europe. At the February rally in Latina, Meloni told the crowd what it wanted to hear. Latina is one of the hundreds of Italian cities designated to resettle some of the thousands of migrants and refugees who have landed on Italy's shores in recent years. Since the last national election five years ago, more than 600,000 mostly sub-Saharan African economic migrants have traversed the Mediterranean to enter the country illegally. "If we need to do a naval blockade, we will do a naval blockade. If we need to dig trenches, we will dig trenches," Meloni said from the square where Mussolini held his rallies. "No one enters Italy illegally, and those who already have will be sent home." The crowd erupted in cheers.

The vast majority of migrants arriving in Italy come from the coast of Libya, a former Italian colony that still has deep ties to Rome. When Berlusconi was in office, he found a kindred spirit in that country's flamboyant dictator, Colonel Moammar Gadhafi. In exchange for migration control, Berlusconi invested millions in Libyan infrastructure, mostly train tracks and roads. At a time when the West was distancing itself from Libyan policies, Berlusconi allowed Gadhafi to pitch massive Bedouin tents in Rome's palatial parks when he came for bilateral meetings, and once set him up with an audience of hundreds of young Italian showgirls, who were treated to a lengthy speech on the merits of Islam. In 2010, shortly before Gadhafi was deposed and killed, the back pages of Libyan passports

carried a watermark with Berlusconi's face on them, to thank him for his support.

Local Libyan militias now generate billions by running a massive trade in human smuggling. Even though Italy is not the nearest safe port for rescued migrants (Malta and Tunisia are much closer), it is where they are all brought. Increasingly, asylum-seekers are picked up by Italy-funded Libyan Coast Guard boats on their way to Europe and shuttled back to Libya, where human traffickers entice them to try crossing again. Meloni is a staunch critic of Italy's policy of delivering anyone rescued at sea to Italian soil, and has attacked nongovernmental organizations that help migrant boats in distress. "Without us, Italy risks becoming Europe's refugee camp," Meloni railed on the campaign trail. "I want zero migrant landings, zero illegal immigration, and zero immigrant quotas."

Frustration with unchecked migration has proven to be a powerful tool for the center-right coalition that Meloni's party formed with the former Northern League (now just called the League) and Forza Italia, the political party still very much run by Berlusconi, its founder. The coalition has pushed for the mandatory deportation of people who enter the country illegally, regardless of whether they have a valid asylum request. While campaigning, League leader Matteo Salvini promised to expel 600,000 people if he were to win power. Meloni agreed, and added that she would force incoming migrants to first register through a "hotspot" on the African side of the Mediterranean, where they would be vetted. These "hotspots" do not yet exist, which is part of why desperate migrants and refugees have no choice but to enter unlawfully. Furthermore, such proposals are in blatant defiance of EU human rights legislation, which guarantees anyone who lands on European soil the right to request asylum. Yet for the far right, checks on immigration are the best way to safeguard "Italianness."

Racist fearmongering has long been a favored pastime among Italy's right-wing politicians who warn of "the threat of invaders" from "black Africa" seeking to "turn Europe black." This rhetoric harkens back to at least World War II, when Mussolini described African-American soldiers as savages who would "rape and ravage" white Italian women. In the past five years, the most blatant racism in Italian political life has targeted Cécile Kyenge, a Congolese woman who immigrated to Italy in 1983 to attend optometry school. She stayed on after graduating, and, under the center-left government of Enrico Letta, became Italy's first black minister in 2013. Since she had emigrated to Italy legally on a student visa and got her

PUTTING A FEMALE FACE ON THE FAR RIGHT IS INCREASINGLY COMMON WITHIN EUROPEAN POPULIST PARTIES

Italian citizenship through proper channels, Kyenge was considered the perfect pick for Minister of Integration.

Whenever Kyenge led a political rally, however, those who opposed her chanted slurs and threw banana peels at the stage. Roberto Calderoli, a leader within the then-Northern League and a member of the European Parliament, was rightly attacked for comparing her to a primate. "Fair enough that she is a minister but perhaps she should be one in her own country," he said at a Northern League political rally before the 2013 election. "At least I console myself when I am surfing the web and I see all the photos of the government. I like animals and when I look

at Ms. Kyenge, I simply cannot help thinking of how she resembles an orangutan.” Meloni has never been as openly racist, but she has said of Kyenge, one of her few female colleagues in government, that she “represents foreigners, not Italians.” To deflect accusations of racism, in the 2018 election the League supported Toni Iwobi, a 62-year-old candidate who emigrated from Nigeria legally on a student visa in the 1980s and worked his way through the system to gain citizenship and start a successful tech company. The accusations of racism continued, but armed with Iwobi, the party now had a response. “How can we be racist, when we have a black candidate?” Salvini often asked.

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Months of far-right dog whistling came to a head on Feb. 3 of this year, just weeks before the national election. Luca Traini, a 28-year-old former candidate for the League, wrapped an Italian flag around his neck and went out hunting African migrants in Macerata, a small town in central Italy, to avenge the death of an Italian woman who had escaped her drug rehab program and ended up dead and dismembered, allegedly at the hands of an African immigrant drug dealer. Traini randomly shot six African migrants—none fatally—before ending his spree in front of Macerata’s own fascist monument, where he got down on one knee and raised his arm in a fascist salute before turning himself over to police.

Traini’s shooting spree quickly became a focal point in the election. The left used it as an opportunity to warn against the resurgence of far-right parties. Anti-fascist and anti-racist marches were held across the country as a way to protest the growing popularity of the Meloni-Salvini-Berlusconi coalition. On the other side of the political divide, Meloni and her party faithful used the tragedy to underscore the perceived danger of uncontrolled migration

and the “invasion” of “potential terrorists” into the country. To them, Traini, who had a dog-eared copy of *Mein Kampf* in his house, was a hero who had been failed by the center-left state, forcing him to take matters of justice and personal safety into his own hands. Several far-right parties even paid his legal bills.

“Unfortunately it is a fact that illegal immigrants produce illegal immigrants,” Meloni said when she visited Macerata. “It is also a fact that ensuring the safety of Italians in the face of terrorism and the invasion of illegal immigrants should be a priority in this country, but instead this [center-left] Parliament has made it a priority to discuss fascism and racism that no longer exist today.” In the lead-up to Election Day, she went so far as to hold rallies in immigrant neighborhoods, reading foreign-sounding names on doors out loud to show that “Italians no longer live in this country.”

As the campaign wound down, Meloni’s rhetoric intensified. About a week after the Macerata shooting, the Egyptian Museum in Turin started offering two-for-one entrance fees to Arabic speakers, intended to diversify crowds. In response, Meloni staged a protest, calling it a blatant threat to Italian nationalism and claiming it “discriminated against Italians” in favor of Muslims. Carrying a “No Islamization” banner, she was joined by dozens of followers as she railed against the “racism in Italy—against Italians.” When museum director Christian Greco came out to address her and the protestors, their videotaped exchange showed Meloni accusing him of “inviting illegals to steal our culture.”

Similar to Marine Le Pen, France’s own far-right female politician, who is a close ally of the League’s Salvini, Meloni has been strategic in using her gender for political gain. Along with Frauke Petry and Tatjana Festerling in Germany, and Beata Szydło in Poland, Le Pen and Meloni belong to an elite club of far-right female politicians in Europe hewing close to tra-

ditional values. Putting a female face on the far right is increasingly common within European populist parties, and often ends up pitting gender against race and ethnicity. In Germany, the AfD party has sponsored anti-immigration ads showing pregnant women under the slogan “We’ll make our own Germans,” and others in which women in skimpy beachwear tout “bikinis over burqas.” Le Pen, while distancing herself from overtly racist views, has nonetheless taken a hard stance against allowing foreigners the right to vote, and has called for the “de-Islamization” of France. Giorgia Meloni is a new phenomenon in Italy, but she is also part of a larger political movement that aims to broaden the far right’s appeal and challenge accusations of misogyny.

When Italy’s March elections finally took place, there was no clear-cut winner, but Meloni rightfully felt victorious. The populist Five Star Movement, which is neither right nor left leaning, won the most votes as a single party, and the center-right coalition prevailed, claiming the largest collective number of votes, though not by a wide enough margin to form a stable government. Meloni’s party won just under 5 percent of the total vote. Traini’s rampage ultimately helped the right, as their poll numbers climbed in the wake of the shooting. Many months have passed since the election, and none of the leading parties has been able to form a coalition. The Italian

president now has two choices: call new elections or assign a technocratic leader to run a grand coalition of all parties.

Meloni is in a position of power. With the near certainty of new elections before the end of the year, the center-right coalition needs her support if they hope to govern. She has enough leverage to keep that coalition intact, or, if things don’t go her way, to make it collapse. Two months after Italy’s election, a breakdown in talks among the leading parties, including her own, has given way to speculation about new elections. In early May, Brothers of Italy’s polling numbers were consistent with its performance in the March vote, which will keep Meloni in the game. But even if she doesn’t earn a spot in the incoming government, there will be many more opportunities for her to expand her reach and build her staying power. Though no one in politics is scandal-proof, Italians tend not to take personal or even business scandals into account in the voting booth. Since he was last in power, Berlusconi has been convicted of tax evasion and abetting underage prostitution; he now seems to be even more popular than he was before. As for Meloni, she checks a lot of boxes for the Italian right: She’s a mamma, she’s anti-immigration, and she’s smart. And perhaps as importantly, she’s one of the youngest leaders in a country that never sends its politicians out to pasture. ●