

# Italy: Living with Georgia as PM

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**Dave Kellaway reports from Italy on post-fascist Georgia Meloni first hundred days as Prime Minister and looks at the state of the opposition.**

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Just before Christmas, TV news and social media showed scenes never seen in Milan since the war. You saw lines of people waiting in line for food parcels that went around several blocks. More than 4,000 items a day were needed to get survival items in one of the more “prosperous” Italian cities, a symbol of the post-War Italian economic miracle.

## There aren't any poor people today

Tonight a TV programme is going out on RAI3, the third state channel, ironically entitled, “There aren't any poor people today.” It gathers up-to-date official figures showing that there are five and a half million people in absolute poverty and a further eight million eight hundred thousand people in relative poverty. Altogether, this adds up to 23% of the population. Many millions just above these thresholds are at risk of becoming poor and are being hard hit by the cost of living crisis.

Another video from just a few weeks ago featured a young trainee engineer. She had just finished a traineeship but had been offered the princely sum of 750 euros a month for a follow-on job, which she has publicly rejected online. It is quite common, particularly in the South, for people working in hospitality to earn even less than that per month. Often, this is done without a contract and with no security. Another recent report estimated that Italy was losing the equivalent of 1% of its GDP as a result of a “brain drain” of its young graduates who are emigrating.

Against this backdrop, Giorgia Meloni has unleashed an ideological offensive similar to the one we heard at the time of Osborne's austerity offensive. The “strivers, not shirkers” abuse has been translated into Italian as “layabouts who prefer to stay on the sofa all day.” Ministers have denounced graduates for not taking waiter/waitress jobs. The safety net of the Citizens Income program has already been ripped apart. Stricter conditions have been introduced, where you have to accept practically any job, irrespective of your qualifications and skills, and you cannot refuse a job if it requires significant travel.

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Traveling by car has become much more expensive as the government recently reinstated fuel duty. One of the most frequent moans I heard this time in Italy was about the soaring cost of petrol which reached £2 a litre. Public transport for working people outside the big cities is even worse than in Britain. Meloni intends to phase out Citizens Income entirely by 2024, replacing it with payments to employers who hire new employees.



*Poster from left showing how her government is attacking people's living standards*

As David Broder explained in his article in the Nation magazine, the notion that this post-fascist leader is implementing any sort of populist welfare program that some nostalgic fascists might appreciate is far from reality. Indeed, her economic policy is very much in continuity with the last Draghi government. The EU-linked National Plan for Resilience and Recovery (PNRR) has passed through parliament, and both corporations and smaller-scale businesses are very happy with the direction of travel. This plan mostly helps businesses through subsidies and handouts for digitalisation or infrastructure. Tax changes, such as the new flat tax, will disproportionately benefit the hard-right government coalition's social base: small businesses, independent professions, and many self-employed people. Even with a 3% reduction in tax, PAYE payers are still paying more proportionally than the "independents" paying the new flat tax.

Along with neoliberal orthodoxy and continuity, there is room for an ideological offensive to further solidify government support. The ideas of Meloni's party, the Fratelli d'Italia, have been reflected in the names of the ministries. So the word 'Birthrates' has been added to the Equal Opportunity and Families ministry, while the Ministry of Business has the tag "Made in Italy" added just to emphasise nationalist ideology. The Education Ministry includes the words "and merit." This is part of the culture war that Meloni is keen on pursuing. Left-liberal ideology has supposedly occupied whole areas of Italian civil society and must be challenged head-on. Education needs to focus on preparing young people for the job market with fewer humanities and philosophy classes and more science and technology classes. We hear the same refrain from Tories here.

## **The Meloni playbook**

Meloni's playbook says that it's important to use events to start ideological fights. An anarchist named Alfredo Cospito is currently in prison but has been put on the notorious 41-bis regime, which

was set up to limit Mafia bosses' ability to manage their affairs from inside prison. It severely limits contact with other prisoners and even prevents reading books. Demonstrations, some physical attacks on Italian embassies, and scuffles with the police have given Meloni an opportunity to make portentous declarations about defending the "democratic" state against terrorism.

Her justice ministers—from her party—have gone further by accusing the Democratic Party (PD) of bowing down to the mafia. The ministers used state-confidential information to reveal that Cospito had met with a Mafia boss in prison to discuss "campaigns" against 41 bis. The PD MPs had only gone to visit Cospito as a humanitarian gesture and had no knowledge of these meetings. The PD even supports 41 bis. Clearly, using 41 bis against this anarchist, whose external support is a caricature of the Red Brigades base, is entirely wrong. New hard-line measures brandished by the government against "illegal" raves also fall within this drive to increase repressive measures.

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Meloni has received plaudits for her complete alignment with a pro-NATO foreign policy despite her historic dalliance with Putin, who has cultivated material and ideological links with post-fascist and hard right parties throughout Europe. She has differentiated herself from Salvini and Berlusconi, her coalition allies, who even today have a much softer line towards Putin. In this way, she has reassured Western allies that a post-fascist victory in Italy will not jeopardise pro-imperialist stability.

The new prime minister is enjoying a political honeymoon. The very latest polls put her at 30.1 percent, which is 4 points higher than in the September general election. Her allies continue to lose support; the Lega (Salvini) and Forza Italia (Berlusconi) are both at around 7%. Why is she doing so well?

- the relative cohesion of the coalition so far
- the support of business,
- the acquiescence of the mass media - she is now dubbed 'Meloni, the centrist'
- the weakness and division of the official opposition
- and tepid response of the trade union movement, limited to token demos
- she looks like a political change from the cobbled together national unity governments which obscured any differences between parties

We could add some other elements. Meloni looks different from previous prime ministers. She is younger, a woman, and does not speak like the lawyers or professors who normally reach this position. Indeed, her social background is also more modest. Despite being a full-time politician for many years, the fact that her party was not part of the mainstream means people may think she is bringing something new and different. Just like Berlusconi, the Lega, and the Five Star movement before her, at the beginning of their arrival in governments, these new parties and movements benefited from not being like the previous political caste. She has been lucky too, with the relatively stronger economic growth in Italy compared to, say, Britain. Capturing a big Mafia boss does no

harm either.

## **Forces**

However, moving forward, there are bigger problems. If the cost of living crisis gets worse and the economy falters or the pension reforms provoke revolts, she could be in difficulty. The solidity of the coalition helped her get into power, but internal disputes could eventually cripple her. The very success of the Fratelli d'Italia creates problems. Within the coalition, the relationship of forces has completely changed over the last few years. Meloni now has twice the support of the other two partners combined. If the upcoming regional elections in Lombardy and Lazio confirm this tendency, the junior partners might get restless. Paradoxically, greater success for the Fratelli could destabilise the coalition.

One of the institutional changes that the coalition wants to push through is differentiated autonomy. This basically increases the power of the regions and weakens the centre. The real risk is that the richer regions keep a bigger slice of the cake and the poorer South loses more than it already does. People like Salvini and the Lega are enthusiastic supporters of this legislation; he hopes it will staunch its continued loss of votes as he spins it as the road to northern autonomy. Traditionally, of course, fascists and post-fascists are naturally centralists. Hence the possibilities for disagreement on this question are great.

The other big constitutional reform is the proposal for a more presidential republic, with a form of the French model being proposed. Such a radical change requires a bigger majority, and the opposition may find greater unity in opposing it. Both sets of proposals represent the underlying dangers of this government. Capitalist power in Italy has always found the 1948 constitution's excessively progressive values a constraint on its own interests. It would like to restrict some elements in order to carry out structural changes it sees necessary for strengthening its control over society and profit-making.

Sinistra Anti-Capitalista, a revolutionary group in Italy, has defined the government in these terms:

*The real issue is not the exact definition we give to this government (its degree of fascism) - since we are in a very different context to the past. Rather it is understanding how the political forces making up this government are operating in an international situation where the right is in the ascendancy and much of it has fascist aspects. The Fratelli d'Italia and its allies do want to re-invoke the reactionary past. But above all these forces are carrying their classic role of organising the division of the working class through the use of racism, nationalism, reactionary ideology, patriarchy and repression. (Sinistra Anti-Capitalista, 22 Jan 2023)*

## **The opposition**

What is the political opposition to the government doing?

While the new government has been establishing itself, the PD has been consumed with an internal battle over who its next leader should be. It is historically similar in some ways to the British Labour Party since it has influence over the biggest trade unions and defines itself as defending the interests of labour and progressive values. Just like Labour, it is essentially social liberal rather than traditionally social democratic since it has participated in recent governments with the M5S (Five Star Movement) and Draghi and has put itself forward as the best partner of Italian business.

Unfortunately, its subservience to those corporate interests has not brought it many political rewards. It has not recovered from its poor showing in September, declining by another two percentage points to just above 17% in the opinion polls, narrowly overtaking the M5S. Many of its usual voters deserted it at the last election for abstention or to vote for the M5S, who at least seemed to be defending wholeheartedly the Citizens Income, which was a gain for the working class.

After the war, 8% of Italians were members of political parties; today, there are less than 2%. Election turnout has dropped from 90% to 60%. The historical forerunner of the PD, the Italian Communist Party, was the largest mass party in Europe, with several million members and huge political and especially cultural influence in society. The PD has lost 7 million voters over the past 16 years. In 2008, it still had 800,000 members; today, it has around 50,000 to 100,000. When they first opened the election of their leaders to primaries, they got 3 million people to vote; today it will be a great success if they get to a million.

A letter to the *Corriere delle Sera* by a member got to the nub of the problem:

*We are spending weeks talking about nothing: should we change our name? Who should we make an alliance with? All this talk without dealing with the central question: whose side are we on? Are we with the exploited or the exploiters? With the warmongers or the pacifists? With the ecologists or the polluters? Don't they realise Veltroni's (earlier reformist leader) politics of 'but also' is the origin of our problems. And again - we are having primaries open to anybody! How is it possible for the choice of our leader to depend on the votes of people who have nothing to do with us or are even our enemies. Mauro Chiostrì, 14 Feb 2023*



There is a slight similarity to the debate between the Corbyn current and Starmer but in Italy, the left of the PD is softer and less linked to actual struggles. The battle for leadership is between four contestants but is likely to boil down to a duel. On the one side is Elly Schlein who is more green, younger, a feminist, and more liberal on immigration and human rights. She wanted the leadership vote in the primary to be totally online but was defeated. The leftist currents generally support her.

On the other side is Stefano Bonaccini, a two-time governor of the PD stronghold of Emilia Romagna and the favourite. He represents the area and has the support of many local leaders, and he puts himself forward as the leader who knows how to administer and get things done. Like Starmer he is keen on working with business; at a recent conference, he accused his opponents of being scared to utter the word "business." He is supported by the reformist wing and the left-leaning Christian Democrats who came into the PD.

Both do a great deal to change the old apparatus and go beyond the currents. However, this contest has seen the continuity of these currents, which have lined up on one side or the other. The basis of such coalitions is more about making sure your team gets a share of the slots on the electoral lists and other jobs rather than any real political differences. Schlein hopes that while she may be able to pick up votes from the non-members in the primary, she will lose among the membership.

Whoever wins, the key issue for them is to decide whether to ally with the M5S or with the pro-business centrists, which include former PD leader Matteo Renzi. The Schlein people are the most vehemently anti-Renzi and more open to linking up with the M5S, who have made a shift to the left.

Bonaccini is Renzi's old friend, and he is more open to forming an alliance with the centrists, though he won't say much about it right now. Neither side is going to organise any real class struggle in opposition to Meloni. The PD's influence on the major trade union, the CGIL, will also be negative. Winning the top job is not a very secure post; there have been at least eight since the end of the Communist Party!

As for the M5S, Conte has saved it from completely disintegrating. The last election saw it lose half its voters from the previous general election, and over the course of the parliament, many of its MPs went to different parties. Significant leaders like Di Maio split and formed new ones. By focusing on the defence of the Citizens Income, which it had brought in, and distancing himself from the Draghi government it had participated in, Conte managed to stop the slide.

M5S is a peculiar political phenomenon since it regularly shifts from the right to the left and the centre without permanently defining itself. It remains, of course, a party that is pro-bourgeois and pro capitalist but it is a much less reliable business partner than the PD. The tragedy for the left was that its progressive policy stances at different times captured significant layers of voters who saw themselves as left-leaning or progressive. A number of people I know have voted for them. Ill-informed people on the left who dismissed the M5S as some sort of fascist-type group got it completely wrong.

Forces to the left of the PD have struggled to recover the space they had won in the days of Rifondazione Comunista. Today, it barely gets more than 1% in elections. The Union Popolare electoral coalition, led by ex-Naples mayor Di Magistris, was a step forward at the last election as it brought together Poder Popolare (Peoples Power) and what was left of Rifondazione, along with some radical trade unionists. So far, it has been incapable of building an organisation that can bring together class struggle activists in an ongoing way, between elections. You can see this just by visiting its website, which is empty of local activities or discussion, whereas its components do have up-to-date active websites. There is a small minority organising opposition inside the CGIL, and there is a network (Risorgiamo) of activists built up around workplaces such as GKN near Florence, which are fighting to keep their factories open.

As a result, the Meloni government continues to pose a serious threat to democratic gains and working-class living standards.

**Dave Kellaway**

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**P.S.**

• *Anti\*Capitalist Resistance*. 07 Feb 2023:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/living-with-georgia/>

• Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of *Anti\*Capitalist Resistance*, a member of *Socialist Resistance*, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to *International Viewpoint* and *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres*.