

## Giorgia Meloni's Italy between Trump and Europe: Fateful Choices Ahead

by Maria Luisa Fantappiè, Leo Goretti  
and Filippo Simonelli

The priority should be “preventing divisions within the West and the transatlantic alliance”, while “rooting for” this or that side would not be helpful: it is thus that Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni commented on the spat in the Oval Office between President Volodymyr Zelensky and Donald Trump,<sup>1</sup> and by extension, between Washington and Europe. In the aftermath of the clash, while most European leaders openly supported Zelensky, Meloni’s reticence was notable. The choice was tough. Siding with Zelensky would jeopardise Meloni’s aspiration to become the go-to EU leader for Washington. And yet, siding with Trump would lay bare a lack of commitment to Europe and especially the defence of Ukraine, for which Meloni had previously shown constant support.

<sup>1</sup> Italian Government, *Statement by President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni*, 28 February 2025, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/27780>.

At the ensuing London Summit on Ukraine, Meloni couldn’t hide her discomfort.<sup>2</sup> The resolve of European leaders – spearheaded by the French president Emmanuel Macron and the UK’s Prime Minister Keir Starmer – in advocating for a strategic Europe seemed to shelve Meloni’s carefully crafted plan to leverage her bilateral ties with the Trump administration to bolster her role in Europe – even at the cost of fragmenting its unity. Meanwhile, at home, her junior coalition partner Matteo Salvini openly sided with Trump, in an attempt to present himself as an alternative to Meloni and to win consensus among that sizable chunk of the Italian public opinion who wants to see an end to the war in Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> Ansa, “Vertice sull’Ucraina, Meloni: ‘No a Occidente diviso. Trump-Zelensky? Tifoserie non utili’”, in *Sky TG24*, 2 March 2025, <https://tg24.sky.it/mondo/2025/03/02/vertice-londra-ucraina-news>.

*Maria Luisa Fantappiè is Head of the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Leo Goretti is Head of the Italian Foreign Policy programme at IAI. Filippo Simonelli is Junior Researcher in the Italian Foreign Policy programme at IAI.*

### *Meloni's 'pragmatic radicalism'...*

Before the crisis between Washington and Kyiv broke out, Meloni's pivot to Washington looked like a potentially successful gamble. In January, the Italian Prime Minister was the only EU head of government to be invited to the inauguration ceremony in Capitol Hill<sup>3</sup> – a visit that she brandished as a success at home and in Europe.

Meloni's popularity in Washington should not be surprising. In her two years in government, she has finely balanced moderation and radical stands<sup>4</sup> – somehow turning into a new global model for the right in power.

At home, she slammed critics from the progressive camp who called her a fascist and a danger to Europe.<sup>5</sup> Through persuasive communication, Meloni emphasised her distinctive character: that of a self-made, hard-working mother<sup>6</sup> and a carefully dressed woman prime minister, in stark contrast with the male-only line up of Italian political leaders in the past eighty years.

<sup>3</sup> Francesco Bortoletto, "The List of Attendees at Trump's Inauguration Is (Almost) All Far-Right", in *Eunews*, 17 January 2025, <https://www.eunews.it/en/?p=416562>.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Goretti and Filippo Simonelli, "Italy's Foreign Policy in 2023: Challenges and Perspectives", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 24|01 (February 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18059>.

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Saviano, "Giorgia Meloni Is a Danger to Italy and the Rest of Europe", in *The Guardian*, 24 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/macy5>.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Dodman, "Mother, Italian, Christian: Giorgia Meloni, Italy's Far-Right Leader on the Cusp of Power", in *France 24*, 24 September 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220924-mother-italian-christian-giorgia-meloni-italy-s-far-right-leader-on-the-cusp-of-power>.

Meloni played the wolf and the lamb, depending on circumstances. In dealing with international leaders, she stayed truthful to Italy's past as a founding member of the EU and NATO. In the eyes of her domestic constituency, instead, she hinted at a fundamentally nationalist agenda and a transactional approach to multilateralism and world politics. "Italy will make its voice heard loudly [in Europe], as is appropriate for a great founding nation", Meloni summed it up in her first speech as Prime Minister in the Italian Parliament.<sup>7</sup>

A clear set of hierarchies underlie Meloni's foreign policy. Interests come before values, national interest ahead of European integration and multilateral consensus, personal relations prior to institutional channels, economic growth before climate imperatives. Short-term deals, expendable at the domestic level, are prioritised over long-term solutions. The list goes on, summarised under the vague umbrella of 'pragmatism' – meaning everything and its opposite. It is a model that does not deliver global solutions, but works just fine to remain in power. Indeed, unlike Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz, Meloni was one of the few EU leaders whose party increased its votes in the 2024 elections. Her perceived stature grew so much that she was called "the most influential person in Europe".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Italian Government, *President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Address on the Government Programme*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21000>.

<sup>8</sup> Aitor Hernández-Morales, "The Most Influential Person in Europe", in *Politico*, 10

Meloni's 'pragmatic radicalism' may certainly have an influence beyond Italy, within that nascent global network of radical-right leaders in government, who are not only ideologically close, but who are also mutually learning the best practices to stay in power. Yet, Meloni may offer the radical right inspiration in terms of leadership and government practices, and concurrently succumb to that very same model she is trying to build.

### ... and Italy's structural ills

To an extent, Meloni may be playing bigger than she can handle. There is the rub: Italy's structural problems – which, far from being this or that government's culprit, date back at least three decades – are multifold, and destined to aggravate in the coming years. Standing at 136 per cent, Italy has the second-highest ratio of government debt to GDP of the whole EU,<sup>9</sup> which is set to increase further in the coming years. The country's economic growth is sluggish – estimated at 0.7 per cent in 2024<sup>10</sup> – and, most importantly, primarily driven by the massive investment (totalling 194.4 billion euros) provided through the EU-funded Recovery and resilience plan,<sup>11</sup> which however is due to fold in

December 2024, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-nightly/2024/12/10/the-most-influential-person-in-europe-00193536>.

<sup>9</sup> Eurostat, "Government Debt at 88.2% of GDP in Euro Area", in *Euro Indicators*, 22 January 2025, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-euro-indicators/w/2-22012025-ap>.

<sup>10</sup> European Commission DG Economy and Finance, *Economic Forecast for Italy*, 15 November 2024, [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/node/304\\_en](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/node/304_en).

<sup>11</sup> European Commission website: *Italy's Recovery and Resilience Plan*, [https://commission.europa.eu/node/29923\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/node/29923_en).

2026. From a longer-term perspective, demographic trends place substantial constraints on the country's economy: an ageing population will require increasing public expenditure for both pensions and healthcare for the next ten to fifteen years.<sup>12</sup> As a result, due to its limited fiscal space, Rome will necessarily have to maintain a constructive dialogue with Brussels and its European partners, looking for EU-wide forms of investment and financial support.

Rome's limited capabilities are to be accounted for not only at the macroeconomic level, but also – somehow consequentially – in the diplomatic and security realms. Compared with France, Germany and the UK, Italy's diplomatic network has fewer offices abroad, lower personnel and lower financial endowments.<sup>13</sup> Staffing shortages especially entail constraints on the time and attention that can be dedicated to individual foreign policy files, making it hard to translate any grand visions outlined at the political level into a comprehensive and actionable strategy.

In a similar vein, based on NATO figures, Italy's defence expenditure as a share of GDP was at 1.49 per cent in 2024, much lower than the UK's 2.33 per cent, Germany's 2.12 per cent and

<sup>12</sup> Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, *2024 Ageing Report: Italy Country Fiche*, 16 January 2024, [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/82b762d7-21ce-4992-aa97-888fd2c66205\\_en](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/82b762d7-21ce-4992-aa97-888fd2c66205_en).

<sup>13</sup> Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Annuario statistico 2024*, December 2024, [https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ANNUARIO\\_STATISTICO\\_2024\\_integrale\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ANNUARIO_STATISTICO_2024_integrale_WEB.pdf).

France's 2.06 per cent.<sup>14</sup> Italy's difficulty in meeting the 2 per cent threshold of defence expenditure established at the NATO level more than ten years ago puts the country in a difficult spot vis-à-vis its transatlantic allies – even more so at a time when the White House is expected to call for an upward revision of its allies' commitments to collective security.<sup>15</sup>

### *The inescapable choice between Trumpism and multilateralism*

To be sure, Meloni's special relationship with Trump may bring about short-term leniency on specific issues such as tariffs or Italy's inadequate defence spending that does not meet NATO requirements. These immediate gains, however, will hardly be a panacea for Italy's structural ills; they are instead likely to undermine Italy's long-term strategic interests, which are firmly rooted in Europe. Sooner or later, bandwagoning at all cost with the US and its radical actions against European unity and the multilateral system, rather than 'make Italy great again', would do more harm than good to a declining Rome.

Italy has been among the staunchest supporters of multilateralism in its various shapes since the end of the Second World War, and not by chance. Actively promoting initiatives within

the UN framework, being one of the initiators of the EU integration process and one of the most active participants in multilateral military operations abroad, Italian governments have consistently supported – and leveraged – multilateral institutions<sup>16</sup> and European integration to bolster the country's prestige as well as to overcome its structural problems, trying to justify through this activism some freeriding on global common goods such as collective security within NATO.

As Washington seems to recede from its global commitments – Trump's disengagement from Ukraine is a case in point – other countries must take their share of responsibility. For European countries, this means defending those common goods – including collective security – that guaranteed their postwar prosperity and their values.

Meloni is now walking a tightrope. Hesitant to take sides, the Italian Prime minister is pleading for the unity of the West within the Atlantic framework and calling for joint meetings between Washington and Europe.<sup>17</sup> Amidst an unprecedented security crisis looming over Europe, however, these appeals ring hollow. Meloni's reticence has already been called out by Macron, who

<sup>14</sup> NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, 17 June 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_226465.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm).

<sup>15</sup> Lucy Fisher, Henry Foy and Felicia Schwartz, "Trump Wants 5% Nato Defence Spending Target, Europe Told", in *Financial Times*, 20 December 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/35f490c5-3abb-4ac9-8fa3-65e804dd158f>.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanna Antonia Fois and Fabrizio Pagani, "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing? Italy's Policies toward International Organizations", in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2008), p. 75-88, DOI 10.1080/13545710701816844.

<sup>17</sup> "Meloni a Consiglio Ue, ribadirà necessità unità di Europa e Usa", in *AskaneWS*, 5 March 2025, <https://askanews.it/2025/03/05/meloni-a-consiglio-ue-ribadira-necessita-unita-di-europa-e-usa>.

expressed his hopes for “a strong Italy that acts alongside France, Germany, in the concert of the great nations”,<sup>18</sup> after the example set by former Prime Minister Mario Draghi.

The Trump administration's unilateralism and disregard for Atlanticism are piercing the veil of Meloni's 'pragmatic radicalism', forcing the Italian Prime Minister to show her true intentions. As the transatlantic bond is weaker than ever and the fate of Ukraine uncertain, Meloni is called to make a fateful choice: engage Washington to the benefit of Europe, or bet on her ideological proximity to the US radical right, threatening the cohesion of the EU; bolster her credentials as a star of the international radical right or acknowledge that Italy has much to lose from a global (dis) order based on strength only. It is, after all, also a choice between Meloni and Italy: furthering her status as Washington's whisperer in Europe or the strategic interest of her country. A tough call for a declared nationalist.

*10 March 2025*

<sup>18</sup> “Macron: “We Need a Strong Italy Alongside France and Germany””, in *Agenzia Nova*, 3 March 2025, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/macron-we-need-a-strong-unity-italy-alongside-france-and-germany>.

## Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti ([l.goretti@iai.it](mailto:l.goretti@iai.it))

- 25 | 11 Maria Luisa Fantappiè, Leo Goretti and Filippo Simonelli, *Giorgia Meloni's Italy between Trump and Europe: Fateful Choices Ahead*
- 25 | 10 Alessandro Marrone, *A Three-year War and Four Lessons for Europe*
- 25 | 09 Raffaele Piras, *Another Transatlanticism Is Possible: Europe's Moment in Latin America amid Trump's Return*
- 25 | 08 Riccardo Alcaro, *Trump's Call with Putin Raises Great Concerns, Few Hopes*
- 25 | 07 Emanuele Ballestracci, *The European Screening Mechanism and Its Implications for Chinese FDI*
- 25 | 06 Filippo Simonelli, *The Mattei Plan One Year On*
- 25 | 05 Amjed Rasheed, *The New Syria and the Regional Balance of Power*
- 25 | 04 Milica Pejanović-Đurišić, *How Technology Can Empower Women Peace Mediators*
- 25 | 03 Matteo Bursi, *A Tough Opponent for Trump: Inflation*
- 25 | 02 Riccardo Alcaro, *Trump First, America Second*