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Author

Ciulla, Alice

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Italy, Trump, and the Global Right: A Populist Transatlantic Alliance?

ALICE CIULLA
University of Roma Tre

As Donald Trump reentered the White House in January 2025, his rhetoric, policies, and the very discourse he represents are likely to further energize populist movements worldwide. Writing from Italy, one often feels as if living in a laboratory where political ideas are tested, and successful experiments eventually spread elsewhere. Italy, now ruled by a right-wing coalition, has a long history of experimenting with populism, beginning in the 1990s with the rise of media mogul Silvio Berlusconi—whose political style prefigured many aspects of Donald Trump's engagement. [1] This, alongside the role Italy had during the Cold War, has made the country a vital case study for understanding the trajectories of populist movements globally.

Italy's political landscape is now characterized by the prominence of right-wing populism, represented at the government by Giorgia Meloni. Meloni, the country's prime minister and president of the European Conservative and Reformist group. Because of her role in Europe, she may become one of Trump's key European interlocutors in the coming years.[2] Her government—which includes the League's Matteo Salvini, formerly at the forefront of Europe's anti-immigration stance as the Minister of the Interior and now serving as Minister of Transportation—embraces policies in line with Trump's platform on domestic issues (foreign policy, on the contrary, is hard to compare). The domestic issues where Trump's and Meloni's governments align are security, migration, and border control, with both emphasizing stricter measures and a tough stance on these fronts.

Meloni's visit in January 2025 to Mar-a-Lago, where she met with Trump to discuss the liberation of Italian journalist Cecilia Sala, who was incarcerated for twenty-one days in Iran, further highlighted the growing ties between the two leaders. While the visit was framed as a diplomatic effort to secure Sala's release, it also underscored Meloni's strategic positioning as a key European ally of Trump. The meeting reinforced

the perception that Italy, under Meloni's leadership, could play an increasingly prominent role in shaping transatlantic right-wing populist narratives and policies.

Reinforcing Populism and Euroscepticism in Italy

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the convergence of nationalism, the ongoing immigration "crisis," and the exclusionary rhetoric it has fuelled in Italy and the United States has become more pronounced. While the 1990s witnessed the rise of Berlusconi's populism, it was the 2007–2008 financial crisis that gave rise to Eurosceptic sentiments, which over time became increasingly intertwined with anti-immigration rhetoric—especially after 2018 with the emergence of the first populist government formed by the League and the Five Star Movement (M5S). These parties have embraced nationalist and anti-immigration policies, many of which echo Trump's "America First" exclusionary rhetoric, with M5S party leader Luigi Di Maio famously describing migrant rescue ships as "taxis of the sea."[3]

While populism has redefined political landscapes, it has also fundamentally altered the treatment of minority communities in Italy. The exclusionary aspects of these populist ideologies—ranging from racism to xenophobia—target migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities, portraying them as "outsiders" whose presence threatens the nation's cultural integrity.

Both Italy and the US share a critical characteristic as receiving countries for immigration. Although the scale of migration differs—Italy has historically received far fewer migrants than the US—both countries have used immigration as a political tool. In Italy, the challenge of migration has been framed as a constant "emergency," a rhetoric employed by political leaders and the media to create fear and uncertainty. While the US often addresses immigration through a focus on border security and enforcement, Italy's "emergency" narrative has been particularly potent in invoking images of waves of migrants arriving by sea, with politicians and the media portraying these arrivals as crises that demand immediate, drastic intervention. This has fostered a climate of racialization, where migrants are often viewed as threats rather than contributors to the nation's well-being.[4]

The right-wing populist movement in Italy has thrived on fearmongering about immigrants, especially those arriving from Africa and the Middle East. Trump's rhetoric, which frames immigration as a national security crisis, will likely provide further justification for Italian leaders to pursue stricter immigration controls and exclusionary policies. This shift could have devastating consequences for migrant communities in Italy, which are already grappling with systemic discrimination, limited social mobility, and marginalization. Migrants, who have historically contributed to the economy and cultural fabric of the nation, risk being further marginalized and demonized under the influence of populist leaders who adopt Trump's divisive language.

The Influence of Trump's Rhetoric

Perhaps the most profound impact on Italy of Trump's election will be on the cultural and social fabric of the country. The US president's incendiary rhetoric on race, immigration, and national identity has found a receptive audience among Italy's far-right movements, which view immigrants as threats to national unity. The League and Brothers of Italy, in particular, have adopted Trump's rhetoric, framing immigration as a danger to Italy's cultural and economic stability.

This divisive discourse not only fuels hostility toward migrants but also deepens social divisions within Italian society. Immigrant communities—whether North African, Eastern European, or sub-Saharan African—are increasingly subjected to hate speech, violence, and discrimination. The rise of populist rhetoric, which portrays migrants as "outsiders," has made it harder for these communities to integrate, while also marginalizing other minorities, such as the Roma, LGBTQ+ individuals, and religious minorities.[5]

Trump's framing of immigration in stark "us vs. them" terms mirrors the rhetoric used by Italian right-wing parties to push for more restrictive immigration policies. As Italy grapples with growing debates over immigration from Africa and the Middle East, Trump's language may embolden Italian populist leaders to adopt even harsher measures, intensifying political and social tensions. Immigrant communities and progressive groups could face heightened hostility and marginalization, while the normalization of inflammatory political rhetoric may contribute to growing divisions within Italian society. [6]

As nationalist movements gain momentum, Italy may see an uptick in hate speech, political violence, and social unrest, particularly in regions with active far-right groups. These developments could create a climate of fear and division among Italy's diverse populations. On the other hand, Trump's rhetoric could also inspire progressive movements in Italy to strengthen their advocacy for civil rights, racial equality, and immigrant integration. Intellectuals, activists, and civil society groups opposing populist nationalism may form stronger coalitions to defend democratic values, challenge rising authoritarianism, and protect Italy's liberal democratic traditions.[7]

Conclusion: A Transatlantic Populist Axis?

The resurgence of Donald Trump to the US presidency has profound implications for Italy, a country where populist politics have long shaped the national discourse. As Meloni's government consolidates its position domestically and within Europe, her ideological and political alignment with Trump could deepen transatlantic ties within the global right-wing populist movement.

Yet, this alliance is not without contradictions. While Meloni shares Trump's stance on migration, security, and national identity, her approach to foreign policy—especially regarding European integration and relations with Russia—could create divergences. Moreover, Italy's role within the EU places it in a delicate position,

balancing nationalist impulses with the realities of European governance. The much-publicized meeting between Meloni, Trump, and US vice president J. D. Vance in April—held just two weeks after the so-called "Liberation Day," when sweeping tariffs on European Union imports were announced, subsequently revoked, and then threatened again at even higher levels in May—underlined Meloni's limited influence in transatlantic affairs.[8] Meloni neither holds the capacity to alter the course of US presidential decision-making nor possesses the mandate to negotiate on behalf of the EU as a whole. Notably, the visits by Trump and Vance to Rome were primarily linked to developments within the Vatican, following the death of Pope Francis on April 21. Both attended the late pontiff's funeral, and what lingered most vividly in the public memory was the image of Trump and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky together in St. Peter's Basilica rather than any substantive talks with the Italian government about tariffs or other policy matters.

Moreover, the election of Pope Leo XIV—an American—suggests that those looking to Rome for strategic relevance may need to shift their gaze from the Italian government to the Vatican as a key player in international politics.[9]

Ultimately, Italy's trajectory in the coming years will test the durability of populist alliances in a rapidly shifting global order. Whether the Trump-Meloni connection translates into lasting political influence or encounters structural limitations remains an open question. What is certain, however, is that Italy will continue to be a critical case study for understanding the evolving dynamics of nationalism, populism, and democracy in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 Giovanni Orsina, *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia* (Marsilio, 2013).

2 Alessia Peretti, "ECR Official Calls Meloni Trump's 'Natural Interlocutor' in Europe," *Euractiv*, November 7, 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/ecr-official-calls-meloni-trumps-natural-interlocutor-in-europe/

3 Di Maio used the term in a post on Twitter. See "Migranti, Di Maio: 'Ipocrita chi difende le ong,' Replica Saviano: 'Cerca voti di chi li vuole morti,'" *La Repubblica*, April 23, 2017, http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/04/23/news/di_maio_saviano_ong-163704617/

4 Frederica Genovese and Salvatore Vassallo, "Ideological Polarization, Policy Continuity: Back to the Majoritarian Principle?" *Contemporary Italian Politics* 15, no. 2 (2023): 124–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2023.2193463

5 Maria Ivana Lorenzetti, "Anti-Immigration Rhetoric in Italy and in the USA: A Comparative Perspective," in *Euro-American Relations in the Age of Globalisation: Risks and Opportunities*," ed. Massimiliano Demata and Marco Mariano, Special Issue

of *De Europa: European and Global Studies Journal* (2020): 97–121. https://www.collane.unito.it/oa/files/original/e64ab4d8c3ebc32dea5fcbf47a095df3.pdf

6 Alessia Donà, "The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: The Case of Fratelli d'Italia," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 27, no. 6 (2022): 775–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216

7 Marco Clementi, David Haglund, and Andrea Locatelli, "Making America Grate Again: The 'Italianization' of American Politics and the Future of Transatlantic Relations in the Era of Donald J. Trump," *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 3 (2017): 495–525, https://www.jstor.org/stable/e48504689

8 Anthony Faiola and Ellen Francis, "Europe Pins Trade Hopes on Italy's Meloni, Its Trump Whisperer," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/04/16/meloni-italy-eu-tariffs-trump/

9 Sarah Rainsford, "Italy's Meloni Ready to Help if Vatican Agrees to Trump's War Mediation Plan," *BBC*, May 20, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd7ggg9j1v0o

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