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The 2022 Italian Elections and Gender+ Equality

BARBARA GAWEDA. MARCO SIDDI

The Italian elections on 25 September 2022 saw the triumph of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia (FdI; engl. Brothers of Italy), led by Giorgia Meloni, with 26% of the votes. A month later, Meloni became prime minister, heading a right-wing coalition that also included the leader of the League, Matteo Salvini, and Forza Italia's Silvio Berlusconi as junior partners. The election results were 'historic' in at least two ways. For the first time in post-1945 Italy, a far-right party that is broadly considered the main heir of the post-fascist camp became the largest political force in the country. Founded in 2012 with the declared intent of rebuilding the Italian right, Brothers of Italy shows a clear continuity in key political messages, leadership, and symbols with the post-war Italian Social Movement (MSI, 1946-1995) and its successor, the National Alliance (AN, 1995-2009). Meloni herself had been a member of the MSI youth wing and leader of the AN student movement, before holding the position of Minister of Youth in the last Berlusconi-led government (2008-2011).

Significantly, Meloni is also Italy's first-ever female prime minister. This very fact has led to debate on whether her appointment reflects progress in terms of gender equality in the Italian political system. In her inaugural speech at the Italian parliament, Meloni stated that being the first female prime minister was one of the responsibilities that weighed on her shoulders and cited a few other women that in her view had shown the "worth of Italian women" (Meloni 2022) in the country's history, politics, culture, and science. However, as feminist scholars have noted, Meloni reaps the fruits of a history of feminism that does not belong to her (Mirenzi 2022). Meloni's statements and political affiliation reflect a heteropatriarchal and misogy-

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nistic culture that consistently fought against key feminist demands for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), as well as LGBTQI+ rights.
As Sara Farris (2022) argued, Meloni's female leadership in a masculinist and far-right party reflects a more general European trend (as also in the case of Marine Le Pen in France and Alice Weidel in Germany) and is functional to creating a feminized facade that serves to intercept more votes and make a deeply conservative program more palatable. FdI's main ideology is nationalism, with strong anti-immigration and Islamophobic components. (White) Italian women are central to these politics only as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation. Women's rights feature prominently in the FdI discourse only in the context of vilifying men of colour. Meloni also opposes gender quotas; Brothers of Italy have the lowest percentage of female lawmakers among major parties in the Italian parliament (30%) and no female member of the European Parliament.

Positioning of the FdI on Gender+ Equality

Brothers of Italy benefited from being the only party consistently in opposition to the political and technocratic governments in the crisis-ridden and increasingly volatile Italian political context of the 2010s and early 2020s. Its support rose from 1.96% in the 2013 general elections to 4.35% in 2018 and 26% in 2022. The swift demise of initially popular leaders and movements left and right during the last decade – Matteo Renzi, Matteo Salvini, and to an extent the Five Star Movement – created the conditions in which the FdI could achieve electoral success in 2022. While nationalism, nativism, and xenophobia were central to the party manifestos and Meloni's speeches from the start, a focus on ultraconservative values and on opposing gender equality acquired prominence progressively. The party radicalized its anti-gender position in 2016, when the center-left parliamentary majority approved a law on same-sex civil unions, possibly also in the attempt to draw the support of catholic voters and organizations. A virulent discourse against so-called 'gender ideology' compounded earlier campaigns in favour of 'the natural family based on marriage', traditional values, policies to promote natality, and welfare chauvinism (Donà 2022).
Gender+ equality remained central to the Italian political debate as left and centrist political forces proposed a law (the Zan Bill, named after its main proposer Alessandro Zan) that would have penalized discrimination, violence, and hate speech on grounds of i.e. sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability, equating them with racist crimes. Together with the Vatican and the Italian Episcopal Conference, FdI were among the most vocal opponents of the law, which was eventually rejected by the Italian Senate in an anonymous vote in October 2021 (Feo 2022).
As debates on gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights became prominent in Italian politics and society, opposing discourses acquired importance in the FdI electoral programs. "Supporting natality and the family" was the first of 25 points in the 2022 election manifesto (FdI 2022). The section started with a sentence by ultraconserva-

tive Pope John Paul II stating that the family is the foundation of a "truly sovereign and spiritually strong Nation".

The Post-election Months: First Policy Moves

The first moves of the Meloni-led government are consistent with conservative and anti-equality stances. Meloni renamed the Ministry for Equal Opportunities and Family into the Ministry for Family, Natality, and Equal Opportunities, and appointed an anti-abortion politician, Eugenia Maria Roccella, to lead it. During the election campaign, Roccella – who claims to be a feminist – declared on national television that abortion is "not a right" (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2022). Moreover, the new right-wing majority appointed League party member and former Minister of Family and Disability (2018-19) Lorenzo Fontana, President of the Chamber of Deputies, Italy's third highest-ranking office. Fontana is known for his ultraconservative views on abortion, same-sex unions, and stepchild adoption, as well as for having co-organized the World Congress of Families in 2019.

Meloni's pro-natality discourse is only addressed to white Italian citizens. The government has already shown its anti-immigrant stance through its refusal to let asylum seekers disembark NGO rescue boats. In August 2022, Meloni tweeted a video of a Ukrainian woman raped by an asylum seeker from Guinea in the Italian city of Piacenza, vowing to "restore security" in the country. Despite criticism from the victim herself, Meloni defended sharing the video, in a move that reflected her intention to exploit violence against women to affirm racist and anti-migrant narratives (Torrisi 2022).

In parliament, Meloni openly rejected and ridiculed female grammar forms (provided for by the Italian language), arguing that she prefers to be called *Il* Presidente rather than *La* Presidente. Among the first main policy decisions taken by her government, the scrapping of the citizen's income (a monthly allowance for families and individuals with low income) for those deemed 'fit to work' will likely have negative consequences in terms of gender equality. 56% of recipients are women, which is unsurprising given that less than half of working-age Italian women are employed. Loss of the citizen's income will push women into poverty and force them to accept poorly paid jobs or to remain in situations of domestic and economic violence.

Meanwhile, Meloni has stated that she has no plans to amend Italy's 1978 abortion law, critics fear that she will push for the law to be ignored by exacerbating existing structural difficulties in accessing abortion. According to estimates, seven out of ten gynecologists in Italy are so-called 'conscientious objectors' with the number going as high as 93% in some regions (Torrisi 2017).[1]

Conclusion

In the first months in government, Meloni has toned down criticism of the European Union and tried to pose as a loyal Euroatlantic ally, most notably by contributing military and financial aid to Ukraine, despite having voiced pro-Putin views as recently as in her 2021 autobiography. But she remains "in line with the European mainstream" (Meiler 2023) because Italy cannot afford to alienate its European partners and lose the generous EU financial support it received for its economic stimulus program. While constrained in the foreign policy and economic arenas, the FdI government has focused on its anti-immigration and anti-equality agenda domestically, where it is less likely to cause foreign outcry and opposition. Indeed, while it pursues ultraconservative policies at home, Meloni's party has joined forces with like-minded parties in the European Parliament, in the attempt to mainstream its positions at the EU level. In this sense, the FdI shows remarkable similarities with their Polish Law and Justice European partners, especially on SRHR and LGBTQI+ rights (Gaweda/Siddi/Miller 2022).

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Note

1 According to the 1978 abortion law, doctors, nurses, anesthesiologists, and other medical assistants can declare themselves conscientious objectors and refuse to perform abortions or assist in pregnancy termination procedures.

Neue Menstruationspolitik in Spanien

ANNA E. KLUGE. HANNAH ZAGEL

Im Februar 2023 wurden im spanischen Parlament nach Monaten politischer Diskussion Neuerungen in der reproduktionspolitischen Landschaft verabschiedet. Die Gesetzesreformen, angestoßen insbesondere von der Gleichstellungsministerin Irene Montero von Unidas Podemos und getragen von der aktuell als Minderheitsregierung regierenden Koalition aus der Spanischen Arbeiterpartei und der Unidas Podemos, werden unter dem Label feministischer Innenpolitik diskutiert.
Teil des Pakets ist ein neues Gesundheitsgesetz, das zum einen den bestehenden bezahlten Mutterschutz erweitert und zum anderen einen sogenannten ‚Menstruationsurlaub' (engl: menstrual leave) einführt. In Anlehnung an den Mutterschutz-Begriff verwenden wir im Folgenden den Begriff Menstruationsschutz. Die Idee von Menstruationsschutz ist, dass sich Erwerbstätige mit Menstruationsbeschwerden unter Lohnfortzahlung von der Arbeit freistellen lassen können. In Spanien beinhaltet dies, dass die Menstruationsbeschwerden durch ein ärztliches Attest belegt werden müssen, welches auch die Länge des Menstruationsschutzes bestimmt. Ein voriger Entwurf des Gesetzes hielt als maximale Dauer noch drei Tage fest, in der aktuellen Gesetzeslage ist dies nicht mehr spezifiziert. Das Gesetz soll laut der Gleichstellungsministerin dazu beitragen, die Periode (am Arbeitsplatz) zu normalisieren und Menstruierenden den Druck zu nehmen, unter Schmerzen arbeiten zu müssen. Die Einführung des Menstruationsschutz auf nationaler Ebene ist in Europa bisher einmalig (auf Unternehmensebene gibt es ihn vereinzelt, u.a. in Großbritannien (Levitt/Barnack-Tavlaris 2020)) – historisch frühe Umsetzungen gab es in Russland (1922/31), Japan (1947) und Indonesien (1948), weitere außereuropäische Länder folgten in den 2000er Jahren (Baird/Hill/Colussi 2021). Unser Beitrag verortet den Menstruationsschutz als eine Maßnahme, die zwar mit familienpolitischen Leistungen verwandt, ansonsten aber eher dem breiteren reproduktionspolitischen Spektrum zuzuordnen ist.

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