

## Russia, Euroskeptic Parties, and Italian Elections

*By Giovanna De Maio*

Russia's political interference in Western democracies exploits key vulnerabilities in European politics that vary from country to country. More recently, Russia has established closer ties with Italy's two main Euroskeptic parties — Lega (former Lega Nord, Northern League) and the Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Star Movement, M5S).

As the Italian national elections approach, it is important to look at the scope and the nature of these ties and evaluate their impact on the Italian electorate. This policy brief helps understand these connections and provides a general assessment of Russia's strategy toward Italy as well as foreign policy goals in light of the upcoming elections.

Russia's political interference in Western democracies has been a hot topic since its hacking and disinformation activities in the 2016 presidential elections in the United States. However, these rather sensational incidents were neither the beginning nor the whole of the story. Russia has long made common cause with Europe's conservatives and populists, exploiting key vulnerabilities in European politics and utilizing a wide set of tools, from the rather standard promotion of political ties to disinformation and illegal cyber-attacks. The means and the scope of its efforts vary from country to country, but they are unquestionably most intense and direct in Eastern Europe.

In Western Europe, Italy is one of the countries where Russia's presence is most obvious, evidenced by the strong personal and business ties in various industrial and energy sectors. Russia's close ties to Italy date back to the early postwar period. The Italian Communist Party was the largest one in Europe during the Cold War and Moscow's main interlocutor, and it was an important political player until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Italy has consistently tried to include Russia in the European security order. For example, it was one of the main champions for the creation of the NATO–Russia Council, founded in Rome in 2002, and when the European Union launched the Eastern Partnership after Russian-Georgian war of 2008, it suggested involving Russia as well, in order for this initiative not to be perceived as anti-Russian. As far as the Ukraine crisis, Italy backed Western sanctions against Moscow. However, at the European Council meeting in December 2015 it opposed their automatic renewal and insisted



for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (of which Russia is a member) to monitor the ceasefire, and it has tried to maintain commercial ties as tight as possible despite the sanctions regime.

Russia pragmatically maintains broad ties across Italy's business and political spectrum, seeking contact with all influential political forces, more or less irrespective of their political inclination; and there remain some significant shared business interests and political ties across the Italian party landscape. But, in a familiar phenomenon across Europe, a partnership has developed more recently between Russia, with its anti-EU agenda, and Italy's Euroskeptic parties. As Italian voters prepare to go to the polls, and with the uncertainty about what governing coalition will emerge afterward, it is timely to look at the positions of the two main Euroskeptic parties — Lega (former Lega Nord, Northern League) and the Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Star Movement, M5S) — regarding Russia, as well as their ties to the country.

Lega and M5S have reciprocated Russia's interest in them for ideological affinities and utilitarian reasons. Ideologically, the parties' anti-EU sentiments, fueled by what they see as encroachment on the country's sovereignty and by their discontent with existing domestic and European policies, especially austerity ones, align with Russia's emphasis on national sovereignty in international politics. Similarly, both parties share Moscow's conservative ideology around issues of immigration and social policies. However, the rapprochement is not only about ideology; both sides believe they have something to gain from cooperation. For Lega and M5S, it is useful to look to Russia to increase their international exposure and their political leverage in the EU. This can also serve Moscow's goals of using these parties as platforms to encourage a greater focus of EU foreign policy on the EU's southern neighborhood rather than to the eastern one.

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However, Russia is not offering any sort of exclusive cooperation with only these two forces for two reasons. First, given the volatility in Italian politics, it is smarter for Russia to keep a broad spectrum of dialogue with all the parties. Second, the foreign-policy programs of Lega and, especially, M5S have been too inconsistent for Russia to rely on; for example, the narrative of M5S has shifted somewhat in recent times. Russia's influence operations are pragmatic and tactical, and they differ from country to country. Its flexible approach means that, while the sowing of domestic political chaos seems to be a central goal for Russia, in the Italian case it prioritizes having a friendly Italy stronger within the EU.

## 5 Star Movement and Lega, Moscow's Allies?

Since its foundation in 2009, the 5 Star Movement has flourished by presenting itself as an anti-establishment, populist force breaking with the international embarrassment of the Silvio Berlusconi years and the unpopular decisions of the government of Mario Monti that implemented painful austerity measures to meet the eurozone monetary demands. A narrative based on restricting the privileges of the “old” political parties and “returning politics to the citizens” has made M5S the most popular political party in the country. Over the last couple of years, it has scored between 25 and 30 percent in opinion polls.

While M5S claims not to have a particular foreign-policy ideology, it consistently promotes a narrow vision of Italy's national interests and criticizes the EU. Its leaders blame the economy's problems since the 2008 financial crisis on the currency union and want to abolish the euro. The party is also rather anti-NATO and calls for a substantial reduction in defense spending. In 2016, it submitted a legislative proposal that would have subjected Italy's membership of the alliance to a biennial ratification by the Italian parliament. M5S has always stressed the importance of Russia as a strategic and economic partner for Italy, and therefore it has opposed the renewal of the sanctions and cultivated official ties with the Kremlin's United Russia party.

Lega, a far-right party formed in 1990 that is popular in the northern industrial heartland, has also been gaining momentum in the polls. While it got 4 percent of the votes in 2013, it has polled around 14 percent during the campaign. Though Lega has historically advocated for the northern regions to secede, in recent years its leader, Matteo Salvini, has moderated the party's position in an attempt to expand its appeal throughout the country. A business-friendly party, it blames EU austerity measures for economic losses recorded by northern small and medium-sized enterprises. In its electoral program, Lega states that it has "always supported Putin's Russia that — differently from other powers — is active to cauterize the Syrian wound from which the tragedy of migration starts and affects Europe and Italy." It also advocates for closer relations with Russia and the lifting of the EU sanctions package against the country. Its traditional anti-immigration narrative has resonated with new audiences as large numbers of refugees and migrants have arrived in Italy in the past few years (According to the most recent reports, the number of migrants reaching Italy rose from 13,000 in 2012 to 181,000 in 2016).

“ *The Lega Nord party advocates for closer relations with Russia and the lifting of the EU sanctions package against the country.* ”

The policy stances of M5S and Lega are quite appealing from Russia's perspective. They support ending the sanctions and a greater geopolitical say for the country in Mediterranean and European affairs. It is therefore not surprising that these parties have developed close ties with Russia, including frequent travels there and appearances on Russian media outlets.

So far, the impact of the pro-Russian narratives promoted by Lega and M5S on public opinion has been quite limited. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that President Vladimir Putin's popularity in

Italy<sup>1</sup> has remained stable over the last two years at a very low level (18 percent). Citizens' attitudes in general match the position of the government. For example, a recent poll showed that 32 percent of respondents want sanctions to be softened and 21 percent want them removed.<sup>2</sup> But these positions are clearly based on the sanctions' impact on the economy rather than on any admiration for Russia, with the business community advocating for the sanctions to be removed. In addition, 77 percent said they want a closer collaboration with Russia on counterterrorism operations, even though they do not agree with Russia's military operations in Ukraine and Syria.

## Ideological Connections to Russia in Lega and M5S narratives

The supporters of Lega and, even more so, of M5S are disillusioned with political institutions. They feel excluded from decisions taken in Brussels and have trouble in recognizing themselves in a "European" identity. This is to a great extent what makes them drawn toward the ideas of cooperating with Russia instead. That said, there is a key distinction to be made between the Lega and M5S here. While Lega's ideological connections with Russia are based on far-right views that overlap with the narrative promoted by other far-right parties in Europe and by some circles within the Kremlin, M5S admires Russia as an example of sovereignty and defending the national interest.

Lega's nationalistic, anti-immigration, and anti-LGBT rhetoric has gained the sympathy of some of the most conservative voices in Russia. In 2014, Gianluca Savoini, Salvini's spokesman and a journalist at the party's now defunct newspaper, La Padania, created the Lombardia-Russia Association in order to "fight disinformation on the Ukraine crisis." It has several times hosted the ideologue of Russian neo- Eurasianism, Aleksandr Dugin, whose traditional-values rhetoric has often been echoed in Lega's platform, and Irina Osipova, the president of

1 "Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia," Pew Research Center, August 2017.

2 Gli italiani e la politica estera 2017, Roma, Istituto Affari Internazionali, October 2017, <http://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/gli-italiani-e-la-politica-estera-2017>.

the Young Italians and Russians Movement,<sup>3</sup> which helped organize Salvini's trip to Moscow in 2014. The honorary president of the association is Aleksey Komov, who is strongly linked with the Russian Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev. Komov is also the Russian and Commonwealth of Independent States representative at the World Congress of Families, a forum created in the United States in 1997 that is comprised of right-wing activists from around the world who defend the "natural family" and oppose LGBT rights and abortion. The fact that Lega invited Komov to speak on these topics at an event organized by the ProLife Association in Verona in 2017 highlights its promotion of Russia as a model of a society based on the "right" traditional values.

M5S's main ideological fascination with Russia relates to its emphasis on national interests and sovereignty over multilateral cooperation. Consistent with its message of burning bridges with the "corrupt establishment," the party sees Russia as an alternative to Italy's existing alliances that have not adequately addressed the refugee crisis, which most Italians regard as an existential security threat. M5S organized at the Italian parliament in 2015 a conference titled "BRICS: challenge to the dollarized world," at which spoke two representatives of the Kremlin's United Russia party: Senator Andery Klimov and Deputy Speaker of the Duma Sergey Zheleznyak (who is on the list of U.S. sanctions). The next year, Manlio Di Stefano, the M5S spokesperson for international relations, addressed the congress of United Russia, saying that Russia is a "friendly country for the reconstruction of a new multipolar world through the principles of respect of sovereignty, self-determination of people, and a fair and balanced globalization model," adding that Italy should not be "a slave" to NATO and the EU. Ahead of attending the

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event, Di Stefano highlighted M5S's opposition to the "militarization of Eastern Europe, the condemnation of the state coup in Ukraine," and he insisted on the importance of Russia as a partner to address the crises in Iraq, Syria, and Libya.<sup>4</sup>

## Utilitarian Ties Between Lega, M5S, and Russia

Lega, M5S, and Russia cooperate because they agree on many things, but also because each has something to gain from doing so. For Russia it is very useful to encourage anti-sanctions forces in the EU and to highlight them on its media outlets. Not only does this increase lobbying for the removal of the sanctions, it also shows the Russian audience that their country is not isolated. And, since austerity and the refugees crisis are paramount issues on the EU agenda, promoting a divisive narrative on these subjects supports Russia's goal to break the union's consensus on foreign policy and to push it to focus more on the southern neighborhood rather than the eastern one.

At the same time, Lega and M5S see cooperation with Russia as adding to their leverage. Specifically, they hope to gain political support, international exposure, and a better bargaining position vis-à-vis the European Union on regarding sanctions, austerity, and the refugee crisis. By portraying Russia as an indispensable partner while criticizing the EU for austerity and lack of attention to the refugee crisis, M5S and Lega send a clear message to Brussels and the other member states: If they not give Italy what these parties ask for (mainly reform of the fiscal parameters and the Dublin regulation regarding asylum seekers), Italy will be ready to look elsewhere for help.

**Exposure.** Lega is a regional party aspiring to broaden its appeal to the whole country. It is no coincidence that it dropped the word "Nord" (North) from its name at the end of last January. M5S was a small political force when it was launched, eager to build its international network. Therefore, both used Russia's help to acquire international visibility. For example,

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni Savino, From Evola to Dugin, in *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle, Lexington Books, July 1, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> "Manlio Di Stefano (M5S) al Congresso Russia Unita "Siamo solo filo italiani" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKmq3AONBX4>.

the political activities of Veneto's regional council (one of Lega's main strongholds) have been covered by Russian media platforms such as RT and Sputnik, which also interviewed local politicians and Lega representatives. M5S has received even more attention from Russian media outlets like Ria Novosti, Russia Beyond (formerly Russia Beyond The Headlines) and Sputnik. Their content was then reposted on Twitter, Facebook, TseTse (one of the independent platforms that publishes the news chosen by the internet users) and sites like L'Antidiplomatico, which delivers the party's foreign-policy analysis, often based on news tweeted by Sputnik and RT.

**Sanctions.** The reason why Lega has been at the frontline in opposing sanctions against Russia lies in the fact that a large portion of its electorate is comprised of entrepreneurs, especially from the north, with strong business ties to the country. For example, the city of Verona, located in the Veneto region, hosts the annual Italy-Russia business forum. In 2017, Lega leader Matteo Salvini participated in the Yalta Business Forum in Crimea, and he also travelled to Moscow to secure a cooperation agreement with United Russia. Lega politicians have showed up at the European Parliament wearing T-shirts saying "NO to sanctions against Russia" and they strongly disagree with the Italian government's position. In their narrative, the people of Crimea decided to join Russia freely, and no one should be upset about this.

Lega has also expressed sympathy with Russia's position on Ukraine. In 2016, for example, Stefano Valdegamberi, a regional counselor in Veneto, proposed a resolution recognizing Crimea as part of Russia, which the regional council approved.<sup>5</sup> Together with Roberto Ciambretta, the president of the council, and Sergio Divina, a member of the Italian senate, Valdegamberi headed a trade delegation to the 2017 Yalta Business Forum, where they met with Sergey Aksyonov, Crimea's prime minister.<sup>6</sup> In a recent interview, Valdegamberi said that in his trip

<sup>5</sup> Sergio Rame, "Il Veneto riconosce la Crimea: è la prima Regione Ue a farlo," *Il Giornale*, May 18, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Marina Tosi, "Valdegamberi. Il Forum Economico Internazionale di Yalta (Crimea): La UE deve riallacciare i rapporti politici e commerciali con la Federazione Russa. Le sanzioni sono un boomerang: indeboliscono ancora di più la nostra economia e il Veneto è tra i primi," Stefano Valdegamberi Blog, April 18, 2016.

to Crimea he had explored business opportunities for Italian entrepreneurs, and that he now understood the "real" political situation of the peninsula.<sup>7</sup>

M5S has also frequently called for the removal of the sanctions, and in doing so exaggerated the scale of harm to the Italian economy. Whereas on the M5S website the losses are estimated at 12 billion euros, the official estimate is 4 billion euros. The Bank of Italy further considers losses in relation to Russia to be also a consequence of the country's economic recession, which reduced demand for imported goods.

**EU Austerity Measures.** The opposition of Lega and M5S to the sanctions on Russia must be seen alongside their deep disavowal of EU policies in general, and of austerity measures in particular. They have gained broad popular support by blaming the EU, and especially the euro, for Italy's disastrous economic situation. M5S's narrative in particular portrays the EU as an old bureaucratic machine that ignores Italy's national interests. Nonetheless, the two parties seem to have given up recently on the idea of Italy leaving the EU or existing international security structures. Viewed from this perspective, M5S's and Lega's pro-Russian narrative can be seen as a bargaining chip that it intends to leverage in order to extract concessions out of the EU on modifying the European treaties, especially where fiscal parameters are concerned.

**Refugee Crisis.** With the increase in number of terrorist attacks in Europe, frequently performed by people who are immigrants or the children of immigrants to Europe, there is a widespread tendency in Italy to believe migration to be the vehicle for terrorists to enter the EU. Lega and M5S repeatedly make this association with the migrants coming from Libya. In light of the difficulties encountered by the government in cooperating with the EU on this issue, both want Italy to engage with Russia in the Libyan conflict and to exploit its leverage on the head of the Libyan National Army, General Khalifa Haftar, as well as on Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to stabilize the country and reduce migration. Recent mediation by Russia between the UN-backed government led by

<sup>7</sup> Author interview with Stefano Valdegamberi, October 2017.

Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and the tribes of the Fezzan region (which support Haftar) shows that it is more than willing to take on this challenge, and its engagement is much appreciated in Italy.

## Russia's Strategy for Italy's Elections

Russia (and the Soviet Union before) has always maintained ties with all Italian political forces, and this irrespective of the political inclination of the party in power. Strong personal and business ties in various industrial and energy sectors are also a living testament to relations between the two countries. Russia is also opportunistic in its decisions about exerting political influence. For example, a 2017 United Russia memorandum shows how fast the party changes its foreign relations strategy. In light of growing anti-Russian sentiment around the world and of the upcoming presidential election in Russia, the party said it would seek no more ties with “right-wing marginal parties whose attitudes do not meet the principles of Russia's foreign policy and contacts with which will damage the country's reputation.”<sup>8</sup>

While Russia provides tacit support for Lega in it calls for the lifting of sanctions, it has so far ignored the party's requests for direct funding. The reason is clear: Lega is not a party with mass political appeal given that its support is concentrated in the northern regions, and it has no chance of winning a parliamentary majority to govern by itself.

The situation is different with M5S. If its foreign-policy program were consistent, then supporting the party would be Russia's best bet to weaken EU foreign policy. Although M5S's poll ratings are still far from the level necessary to win a majority of parliamentary seats on its own, it is currently the most popular party and is likely to obtain at least some ministries in a coalition government or a “cabinet of experts” configuration. This will be especially relevant, among other things, to decisions on foreign policy that the European Council will make — and thus to the sanctions on Russia — and more generally to EU policy toward the country. Russia is aware that

— even if it is part of the next government — M5S's foreign-policy program is subject to changes because of the party's lack of experience, inconsistency in its claims and its unclear decision-making process.

In light of the unpredictability of Italy's electoral landscape, Russia has so far refrained from cooperating exclusively with M5S or Lega, kept good relations with all parties, and renewed its intentions to increase business cooperation. Crucially, it has far more to gain from a strong Italy than from a weak and divided one. Italy is already one of the strongest advocates for the removal of sanctions and one the EU member states most friendly to Russia. It is also one of the strongest proponents of rebalancing the EU's stretched resources and attention more towards the southern neighborhood. Russia stands to benefit from an EU that focuses more on its southern flank, and especially away from Ukraine. Rather than promoting divisive narratives that would weaken Italy, it is therefore far better off keeping good relations with all Italian parties in order to guarantee itself a strong ally and influential interlocutor in the EU and NATO.

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## What to Expect after the Elections

With the exception of Lega's, the electoral programs of Italy's political parties do not make any specific reference to Russia or sanctions. This is a clear sign that they do not see Russia as representing a geopolitical threat to Italy and business as usual with the country will continue. Yet, neither an electoral victory for M5S's nor a strong position for Lega within a right-wing coalition government would directly threaten transatlantic relations. They have no concrete interest in dropping the partnership with the United States, which has contributed for decades to Italy's security and prosperity. Lega's Matteo Salvini

<sup>8</sup> Оюа Churakova, “Единая Россия» не будет дружить с иностранными праворадикалами, Vedomosti, August 17, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/08/17/729817-edinaya-rossiya-ne-druzhit>.

and M5S co-founder Beppe Grillo have expressed admiration for President Donald Trump and praised his views on traditionalism, national interest, immigration, renegotiation of international treaties, and rapprochement with Russia. Whatever the alliance that comes together to form a government after the elections, Italy is quite unlikely to make any significant change in foreign policy. The exception to this, however, would be in the event of a very unlikely a coalition between M5S and Lega. Under such a government, what could be at risk is the relationship between Italy and the EU, and thus the Italy–EU–United States political, economic, and security triangle.

Lega is in a center-right alliance with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) and Noi con l'Italia (Us with Italy). According to the polls, this coalition has 36 percent support among voters. Should it form the next government, it is hard to tell how much Lega could actually impact foreign policy choices because of the political bargains that will be have to be made inside this coalition. Due to its longstanding priorities, Lega is likely to use its leverage more in domestic and economic policies rather than on foreign policy.

As the elections neared and M5S consolidated its nationwide position, its candidate for the post of prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, considerably softened the positions spelled out by Manlio Di Stefano. Di Maio chose Washington as his first foreign destination during the election campaign, and he has been eager to distance himself from the Euroskeptic and pro-Russian platform associated with his party. As he explained, the aim of his visit to the United States was to clarify the M5S's position on the Euro-Atlantic framework and to reassure Americans that it has no intention of withdrawing Italy from NATO or the EU.<sup>9</sup> However, during the same trip, Di Maio also reaffirmed the importance of Russia as a historical partner for Italy from the political and economic point of view. This approach suggests that, in the event of success in the elections, M5S's intentions

are not revolutionary and are quite in line with how previous governments have addressed relations with the United States and Russia.

Right after his trip to Washington, Di Maio rejected comparisons between M5S and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) or France's Front National. He said that the election of a M5S member as vice-president of the European Parliament proved that the party had gained the EU's trust. However, M5S's goal remains to use Italy's political and economic leverage in the EU to modify the treaties and achieve more advantageous economic arrangements. Should this prove impossible, Di Maio stated in a recent interview, the party would, as a last resort, call for a referendum on abandoning the euro.<sup>10</sup>

Not only does the above highlight the volatility in M5S's decision-making and narrative (exposing it as populist party opportunistically seizing upon its constituents' main concerns rather than as an ideologically driven force), this also shows that it needs to present itself as a reliable partner in international affairs rather than as a mere disruptive force.

M5S began as a small anti-establishment party and called for rapid change to Italy's political system that would empower citizens, provide better legislation, and reshape foreign policy. Now, after almost four years in parliament as an opposition force, it may have realized that established mechanisms and institutions take time to change. Thus, the party may not be undergoing so much an ideological shift as a pragmatic assessment of the achievability of its domestic and foreign policy agendas. Confident in its strong position, M5S may also be attempting a campaign tactic designed to increase the party's appeal at home and abroad. Given its uncertain decision-making process and ambiguous positions, only time will tell what M5S true intentions are when it comes to foreign policy.

<sup>9</sup> Luigi Di Maio Facebook Page, November 15, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/videos/1522171214486086/>.

<sup>10</sup> Luigi Di Maio interviewed at *Che Tempo che fai*, November 12, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ckEXRnDlrk>.

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## **About the Author**

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