

Italian elections could hinge on contentious migration debate as far-right banks on backlash

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With Italy's general elections scheduled for March 4, issues surrounding migration dominate, with political observers saying the vote could turn on public reaction to a series of gruesome events in the small central Italian town of Macerata.

An anti-immigration backlash swept through Italy following reports that the disembodied body of Pamela Mastropietro, 18, was found January 31 in two suitcases in Macerata days after she left a drug rehabilitation centre.

It was not clear whether Mastropietro was killed or died of a drug overdose; however, a Nigerian migrant with a history of drug-dealing was arrested in connection with her death, sparking public anger towards Italy's migration policy.

Three days later, Luca Trani, who stood as a candidate for the far-right Northern League in local elections in Macerata last year, confessed to shooting at Africans in the small town. During a 2-hour rampage, Trani injured five men and one woman.

Before his arrest, Trani – with an Italian flag draped over his shoulders – was seen making fascist salutes and shouting far-right slogans, including “Italy for Italians.”

More than 600,000 migrants, mostly from Africa, have reached Italian shores in the past four years, sparking a backlash that fuelled the rise of Italy's centre and far-right.

Most of the migrants arrived by boat from North Africa, particularly Libya. An agreement signed one year ago between Italy and Libya involved Rome pledging to help the Libyan Coast Guard inter-

cept boats and return migrants to the North African country, greatly reducing the influx. However, migrants who remained in Italy found themselves at the centre of a political storm, particularly given fears over Italy's economy with reduced growth and a \$2.8 trillion debt, which represents 135% of the country's GDP.

The Northern League, along with the far-right Brothers of Italy, is part of a right-wing coalition that also includes former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia party. The coalition is banking strongly on an anti-migrant policy paying dividends at the March 4 polls.

Rather than explicitly condemning Trani's actions and moving away from promoting anti-migrant discourse following the Macerata shootings, the Northern League doubled down on its anti-migrant strategy.

“If anyone is to blame, it is the government that has allowed hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants to come here without any limits,” Northern League Federal Secretary Matteo Salvini told Italy's La Stampa newspaper.

He pledged to deport 150,000 migrants in his first year in office, if the party wins the election.

Berlusconi said the coalition would “gradually” repatriate all 600,000 illegal migrants from Italy.

Speaking during a television interview, the 81-year-old former prime minister, who is barred from holding office in the country due to tax fraud convictions, described illegal immigrants in Italy as “living off handouts and crime” and a “social bomb ready to explode.”

“We consider it to be an absolute priority to regain control over the situation,” Berlusconi said.

The polls indicate that the right-wing alliance is poised to secure the largest share of votes, with the ruling centre-left Democratic Par-



Loaded issue. Migrants rest in the waiting hall of the train station in Italy's Bardonecchia, on January 13.

(AFP)

ty, hit by internal rifts and a banking scandal, expected only to come third.

An early February poll by EMG saw the Democratic Party at 23% points, behind the Five Star Movement at 27%. Forza Italia was listed at 16% and the Northern League at 14%, suggesting the overall right-wing coalition would win the largest share of the vote.

The anti-establishment Five Star Movement, which also promotes hard-line immigration policies, is expected to become the largest single party in parliament and the official opposition. However, Five Star Movement policy has always ruled out forming a coalition with traditional parties, meaning it is

unlikely the popular movement would ever enter government in Italy's tricky political system based on coalition building.

However, with 30-40% of voters saying they are undecided, few analysts would predict the election outcome, particularly as so-called shy voters usually break for right-wing parties.

What is clear is that the migrants' issue remains a source of concern

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for many Italians, and the centre-right has agreed to ally with far-right parties to endorse an explicitly anti-migrant election strategy.

Writing for Politico, Ferruccio Pastore, director of the Forum of International and European Research on Immigration, acknowledged that there had been a rise in anti-migrant sentiment across the board in Italy.

“The sense of disillusionment and disorientation caused by a decade of economic crisis... has created fertile ground for this particular strand of fear towards foreigners,” he said.

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Viewpoint



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Italy has fewer migrants now but hateful Trumpian echoes resound

By every calculation, Italy's election in early March will settle nothing. The country may or may not end up with a government straight off after the vote. It could be the populist Five Star Movement or a centre-right coalition composed of the Forza Italia, the Northern League and the Brothers of Italy.

However, having a government is not the same as having governance, a steady hand at the tiller.

For months on end, Italy's hostility to uninvited foreigners has grown unchecked, with animosity towards visually distinct migrants stoked by unscrupulous politicians. The election campaign itself is turning into a free-for-all with outrageous insults, Islamophobia and racial and ethnic slurs serving as policy prescriptions.

This would be deplorable at any time but it's particularly mendacious in 2018 when migrant arrivals by boat in Italy have dropped sharply because of a controversial EU-supported deal executed by Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti with Libya.

The political rhetoric has bloomed, brash and ugly. Last month, a prominent Northern League leader described the 92% ethnically Italian population as an endangered “white race.” Three-time Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has said migrants are a “social bomb ready to explode in Italy.”

The charged rhetoric is starting to have a dangerous effect. On February 3, a drive-by shooting spree in the central town of Macerata

Migration in southern Europe

Number of people arriving by sea



Source: UNHCR, Spain data up to Dec 20, 2017

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targeted African immigrants. The person who confessed to carrying out the attack had been a candidate for the Northern League in regional elections last year. Northern League leader Matteo Salvini responded with a perfunctory condemnation of the violence, preferring instead to indulge in fulminations on “unchecked immigration (which) brings chaos, anger... drug dealing, thefts, rapes and violence.”

For all that the diatribes are in Italian, they sound dreadfully familiar. There is a resonance with another, more consequential and equally ugly election campaign elsewhere in the Western hemisphere not too long ago.

As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump promised to harry back to their unquiet homes migrants of every stripe. These included Syrian refugees because they could be the “ultimate Trojan horse” and Mexican “rapists” and “criminals,” whom Trump said were carrying “tremendous infectious disease” (and drugs). As president, Trump has partially managed to execute his proposed “Muslim ban” on entry into the United States.

But what of Italy? How to explain the surge of hateful commentary in a country that should be gladly contemplating a more than 30% drop in migrant arrivals from 2016? It is easy to see the basis for disquiet. More

than 600,000 uninvited people have arrived in Italy in the past four years and the numbers only started to fall in 2017.

Should Italian politicians be pushing old news rather than the new, changed, more hopeful reality? Yes and no. It's easier by far to bash foreigners than to offer viable policies for the eurozone's third-largest economy.

Here's a dispiriting point that emerges from the way Italy's presumptive leaders are behaving. Memories are short, especially when it comes to one's own hardship. It was not long ago that Italian immigrants to the United States were subject to the same treatment being meted out to African, Muslim and other arrivals to Italy.

A century ago, America was deeply fearful of people they called “dagos” and “wops,” “garlic-eaters” and “spaghetti-benders” from Southern and Eastern Europe. University of Massachusetts history Professor and fourth-generation Italian-American Vincent Cannato said the demonisation was so pronounced that, in 1893, the New York Times was describing Italy as “the land of the vendetta, the mafia and the bandit” and southern Italians as “cutthroats” who sought “to carry on their feuds and bloody quarrels in the United States.”

Three years on from the New York Times' categorisation, the Boston Globe was asking: “Are Italians a menace? Are they desirable or dangerous additions to our population?”

The resonance is striking, just more than 100 years later.

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