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Catherine Moury & Andrea Pritoni

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Introduction. The post-Berlusconi centre right and the challenge of governing

Catherine Moury ^a and Andrea Pritoni ^b

^aDepartment of Political Studies, Campus de Campolide, Lisboa, Portugal; ^bDepartment of Cultures, Politics and Society, Turin (To), Italy

ABSTRACT

This introduction to the ‘Politics in Italy 2024’ special issue sheds light on the main events that unfolded during the course of the last year. A central focus is on the passing of Silvio Berlusconi, discussing his legacy and the consequences of his death for the Italian party system. This introduction also discusses the extent to which Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) was able to honour its election pledges, and to act in such a way as to draw a clear line of discontinuity with previous governments. Drawing on Peter Mair’s well-known idea that parties in power are torn between responsibility and responsiveness, we explore the factors that propelled the Meloni government in the direction of the former objective. These aspects are assessed against the available empirical evidence presented in this special issue, revealing that despite notable instances of rupture, Giorgi Meloni’s government has largely followed in the footsteps of its predecessors.

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2023 must probably be considered a ‘quieter’ year than those immediately preceding it – years that saw the peak of the Covid pandemic (in 2020–2021) and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (in 2022). However, 2023 was not without political and social events of particular importance either. The first of these in chronological order is the capture of Matteo Messina Denaro, former Cosa Nostra boss, convicted of, among other things, the murders of Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992 and the tragic terrorist attacks of the early 1990s (see the article by Picarella and Sciarrone in this special issue). We should also remember the dramatic sinking of a rubber dinghy – which left Turkey with 180 migrants on board – which occurred on the night between 24 and 25 February, off the coast of Cutro, in Calabria. Just one day later, Elly Schlein won the primaries to become the new leader of the main centre-left party, the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), succeeding Enrico Letta, and thus becoming the youngest general secretary, as well as the first woman, to lead the party (as discussed in the contribution by Bordandini et al.).

Another event that attracted media attention was the hunger strike by Alfredo Cospito, an anarchist subjected to the *41-bis* prison regime. His extreme form of protest,

CONTACT Catherine Moury  andrea.pritoni@unito.it  Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, Lungo Dora Siena 100/A, Turin (To) 10153, Italy

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which began in October 2022 and ended after his sentence was reduced in April 2023, led to a heated public debate about the effectiveness of this regime. A significant event then occurred in the first half of May, when torrential rains caused twenty-three waterways to overflow, flooding several municipalities in the provinces of Bologna, Forlì-Cesena, Modena, Ravenna, Reggio Emilia and Rimini. The issue sparked a wide-ranging debate on climate issues and the prevention of extreme weather events, which are expected to become increasingly frequent (see the article by Pizzimenti in this issue); in fact, in November large areas of Tuscany were also hit by floods.

Continuing with the sequence of events, the most important political occurrence of 2023 was certainly the death of Silvio Berlusconi, at the age of 86, on 12 June. The passing of the Forza Italia (FI) leader and media mogul put an end to a controversial political career, marked by criminal investigations and sexual scandals, but also by a very prominent role in the transformation of Italian politics (see the article by Baldini and Ventura and the next section of this introduction). Towards the end of 2023, on 18 November, another event that shocked Italian public opinion was the discovery of the lifeless body of twenty-two-year-old Giulia Cecchettin, murdered by her ex-boyfriend. This latest femicide received unprecedented media coverage, provoking demonstrations across the country. The issue of women's rights, as well as the role played by the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition, both women, are addressed in Alessia Donà's article.

Finally, in the realm of foreign policy, the most striking event was certainly the one that occurred on 7 October, when Hamas, a Palestinian organization, conducted a series of raids in Israel, killing 1,200 Israeli civilians and provoking a violent reaction on the part of the government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. By the end of 2023, it was estimated that at least 20,000 Palestinians had been killed in the Gaza Strip. The Italian government's positioning in relation to this important international event, and the other main foreign-policy issues addressed by the Meloni government, are described in the article by Fasola and Lucarelli.

2023 also marked the first anniversary of the Meloni government's assumption of office (see the contribution by Cavalieri et al. for a summary). This anniversary confirmed the status of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) as Italy's largest party, while the latter's first year in office saw the approval of a series of important legislative proposals. For example, following the Cutro tragedy, the Government prepared a decree for the management of migratory flows and announced an agreement with Albania (at the time of writing, in February 2024, being examined by the Albanian Constitutional Court) for the management of migration. Echeverría and Finotelli consider the theme in their article in this issue. On the economic side, the most important policies included the end of the so-called '*superbonus 110%*',¹ the repeal of the citizen's income, and its replacement with an inclusion allowance. Equally significant were the refusal to ratify the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the renegotiation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), the approval of the finance law, and the failure to approve minimum wage legislation (see the article by Di Carlo and Simoni). Finally, an important constitutional reform proposal sparked public and political debate: the so-called 'premiership', which would provide for direct election of the Prime Minister.

In this introduction, we reflect on some of these events, the remainder of the article being divided into four sections. First, in light of the death of the FI leader, we discuss the (possible) consequences of Berlusconi's passing for the Italian party system. Second, we draw on the relevant literature to reflect on the willingness and

the capacity of FdI to honour its election promises and to act so as to mark a clear discontinuity with previous governments. These aspects are assessed against the available empirical evidence in the third section, while the final section presents some brief concluding remarks.

The passing of Silvio Berlusconi and the future of the Italian party system

The death of Silvio Berlusconi, which occurred on 12 June, a few months before his 87th birthday, is without doubt the most politically significant event of 2023. As Baldini and Ventura correctly argue in their chapter, Berlusconi has undoubtedly been the most influential individual in Italian politics for the past thirty years, ever since he ‘took to the field’ and effectively revolutionized the Italian political system in January 1994.

Berlusconi was not only an extremely resilient head of government – securing election as Prime Minister on three occasions: 1994, 2001 and 2008 – who transformed political communication in Italy. Above all, he was the founder of a type of political party that had not existed in Italy before (and which one cannot assume will for long survive him²). He was also the element of cohesion of a coalition which – with mixed success – ruled Italy on and off for about thirty years after its establishment and is still at the helm of the country. As regards his various terms of office as Prime Minister, his extraordinary longevity (as well as his exceptional ability to recover following the electoral defeats suffered in 1996 and 2006) did not, however, translate into equally significant government achievements (Capano and Pritoni 2016). He ‘took to the field’ promising a ‘liberal revolution’ and reform of the institutional architecture of the State. However, despite the existence of favourable political circumstances – including the fact that he was both the leader of the governing coalition and the uncontested head of the main party of the coalition – Berlusconi was incapable of following words with deeds. His legacy, in terms of institutional and policy innovations, is therefore limited, especially when compared to other areas in which his political impact was more significant.

Even with regard to his role as a communicator, however strange it may seem to say so, Berlusconi was, in terms of the personalization and spectacularization of politics, more of an accelerator and an interpreter of trends evident in several European democracies from the 1980s and 1990s (Marletti 2010), than a genuine innovator. However, his role as ‘political communicator’ was, from a comparative point of view, certainly an exception in at least one respect, namely, the fact that he was, at one and the same time, both a political leader of the highest rank and the owner of three national television networks. This led some analysts to coin the term ‘television party’ (Novelli 2004) for FI.³

However, Berlusconi’s exceptionalism was shown in all its disruptiveness in relation to his roles as a party builder and coalition – maker (Pasquino 2007). FI, the ‘personal party’ (Calise 2005) *par excellence*, represents what is probably a unique case in the political panorama of Western democracies. It is, in fact, not only a formation over which the founding leader exercised unbreakable political control, a feature that does not significantly distinguish it from several other recent cases among the main European democracies. More importantly, it is a political party whose existence – and especially its financial survival – was inconceivable without the crucial contribution of its founder. It remains entirely financially dependent on his family. The ‘*partito azzurro*’ (‘blue party’)

simply exists – as a complex organizational structure – only because it is financed directly by the Berlusconi family.

However, in relation to his role as ‘maker’ of the centre-right coalition, Berlusconi’s political legacy has been more persistent and profound. First, it was in that capacity that he initiated the processes leading to party-system bi-polarity (Baldini and Pritoni 2022), a change so profound and persistent that it also withstood the (powerful) impact of the political debut of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s) a decade ago (Vassallo and Verzichelli 2023). Secondly, Giorgia Meloni would certainly not be Prime Minister today had it not been for the full *sdoganamento* (literally, ‘customs clearance’) Berlusconi granted to Gianfranco Fini and the heirs of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement, MSI) in the early 1990s.

Of course, for several years before his death Berlusconi was no longer the permanent centre of gravity of the coalition, with the result that first Matteo Salvini’s Lega (League), then above all Giorgia Meloni’s FdI, took the place of FI as the largest party in the alliance of the centre-right. However, his political weight was still very significant: up to the end, although no longer able to determine government policy – which, as has been said, is today firmly in the hands of Giorgia Meloni, the first woman to be Prime Minister in Italy’s republican history – the FI leader still had the power to influence it. Thus it was that, for example, he created quite a few problems for Meloni as Prime Minister, especially in foreign policy (and, even more notably, in relation to Italy’s international position with respect to Russian aggression in Ukraine) (Morini 2023).

In the preceding paragraph, our reference to the Prime Minister’s gender was deliberate. It is in fact interesting that it was a woman – after decades of fruitless attempts on the part of men (the most sensational of which was that of Gianfranco Fini in 2010) – who took over the leadership of the centre-right coalition from Berlusconi. We have not dealt with it so far, and we will mention it only in passing here, but it is well known that the FI leader’s relationship with women was, to say the least, controversial. Consequently, the fact that Berlusconi died just when the two largest parties in Italy came to be led by women – with Giorgia Meloni at the head of FdI and Elly Schlein at the head of the PD – is somewhat curious.

The election of Schlein (discussed in the article by Bordandini et al.) requires some further reflection. For the first time in the history of the PD, the vote among sympathizers reversed the outcome of the vote among party members. A large majority of the latter had voted for Stefano Bonaccini, president of the Emilia-Romagna region. However, sympathizers who voted on 26 February 2023 defied the results of the opinion polls among them, seeing Bonaccini’s candidacy as representing an insufficiently radical break with the party’s recent past, and therefore voted for Schlein, seen as the main standard bearer of change. In addition, the two candidates showed some quite marked differences in terms of ideology, values and strategy. On the one hand, those who voted for Schlein had a markedly left-wing orientation, while those who voted for Bonaccini had more moderate, centrist outlooks. On the other hand, the former pushed for the creation of a solid and enduring alliance with the M5s, with the latter being decidedly cooler towards such a prospect, and indeed more inclined to look to Azione and Italia Viva to broaden the perimeters of the coalition of the centre-left. It is certainly true that intra-party heterogeneity is nothing new in the case of the PD (Natale and Fasano 2017), or, indeed of that of many large parties – of both the centre-left and the centre-right – in Western Europe

(Emanuele, Marino, and Martocchia Diodati 2022). It is, however, equally true that the novelty of the 2023 PD primaries, namely the fact that Schlein became party general secretary ‘against’ the will of the party itself, accentuated the divisions. In short, the ideological outlook Schlein represents is shared with only a minority within the organization that she is now called upon to lead. This immediately placed the new PD general secretary in a difficult position, so much so that her continued leadership of the party could well depend on the outcome of the European Parliament elections in June 2024. A result that fails to meet hopes and expectations could represent an opportunity for her many internal adversaries to attempt to weaken her leadership, if not directly to demand her resignation.

Although the likely longevity of Schlein’s leadership of the PD is (at the time of writing) uncertain, it is nevertheless significant that during 2023 both of the two highest-profile national political roles were performed by women. This is, obviously, an absolute novelty in the history of republican Italy, and could be interpreted as evidence that the traditionally male chauvinist character of Italian politics has been superseded (Donà 2018). Donà’s article shows that, unfortunately, the opposite is the case and highlights the continuing patriarchal nature of politics and policy-making. It is not sufficient, therefore, to be a woman – even if you are the most powerful woman in Italy – to serve women’s interests.

In conclusion, we need to ask ourselves about the most plausible future prospects for a party system that once revolved around the (polarizing) figure of Silvio Berlusconi and is today powered by the clash between Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein. With regard to the future, 12 months ago, Genovese and Vassallo (2023) structured the introduction to the 2023 edition of the ‘Politics in Italy’ special issue around a series of questions, including one relevant for our purposes, namely the future of party-system bi-polarity. In light of the events of 2023, we are able to contribute some additional reflections to the debate.

Specifically, it is plausible that inter-party competition will be restructured on a bipolar basis, although this is unlikely to occur during the first half of 2024. As is well known, the strategic choices of the parties (and, above all, their current leaders) largely depend on the structure of constraints and political-electoral opportunities available. On the one hand, unless there is a re-aggregation of the parties standing in opposition to the centre right, the political system as a whole is likely to be characterized by an absence of effective competition for an extended period. The recent results of the regional elections in Sardinia, held on 25 February, support this suggestion: the victory of Alessandra Todde, backed by the M5s and the PD jointly, was due to the decision of the two parties to put aside their mutual suspicions and formally sign a coalition agreement. On the other hand, while the PD and M5s need to enter into a marriage, if not of true love, at least of convenience within the *campo largo* (‘broad field’) of the centre-left, the nature of the European elections of June 2024,⁴ with a proportional electoral system, will push them in the opposite direction. That is, the parties will seek to emphasize their specificity and what separates them, with the aim of securing the crown of largest party of opposition.

However, the proposed reform of the system of government, which would allow for direct election of the Prime Minister, will presumably also play a role in this context. In fact, the objective of the proposal is precisely to strengthen the role of the Prime Minister

and ensure that future (government) coalitions last longer. Under the proposed new rules, the head of government would be elected for five years in conjunction with the parliamentary elections and the coalition that obtained the most votes would be guaranteed 55% of the seats in Parliament. In the event of their resignation or a vote of no confidence in them, the elected Prime Minister would be replaceable only once, and exclusively by a parliamentarian of the same majority, in order to continue to implement the governing coalition's policies. If that candidate failed to obtain a majority in a confidence vote, Parliament would be dissolved and new elections would be held. If adopted (which is far from certain), this reform would weaken the powers of presidents of the Republic and their role as guarantors. The changes would also make impossible the appointment of so-called 'technocratic' governments, further encouraging the formation of coalitions on both sides and thus strengthening party-system bipolarity.

Brothers of Italy in government: between responsibility and responsiveness, continuity and discontinuity

In addition to the future prospects of the post-Berlusconi party system, further interesting questions concern the retrospective evaluation of the first year of office of the government led by Giorgia Meloni. The theoretical starting point of what follows is that parties – as organizations providing linkage between society and the State – struggle, once in government, to reconcile two increasingly conflicting objectives: responsiveness towards voters, and responsibility (Mair 2009). Within this theoretical framework, responsive governments “listen to and then respond to the demands of citizens and groups” (Mair 2013, 12). In contrast, responsible governments ‘are expected to act prudently and consistently and to follow accepted procedural norms and practices, [...] living up to the commitments that have been entered into by their predecessors in office and abiding by agreements that these predecessors have made with other governments and institutions’ (Mair 2013, 12). In the current political-institutional context, national governments are merely a hub within an increasingly multi-level decision-making process, influenced both by transnational political-party actors and by international bodies of a technocratic nature. In such a context, the tension between responsiveness and responsibility is destined to increase, constituting a real dilemma, to which so-called mainstream parties (oriented to governing) and so-called anti-establishment parties (oriented to maximizing representation) usually give opposite answers. What was it plausible to expect in relation to the governing strategy of FdI?

In the Italian context, the presumable intention of the Prime Minister's party to safeguard its profile as an anti-establishment party, naturally inclined to favour responsiveness to the detriment of responsibility, clashed with a number of objective constraints (of an institutional and other kind). Specifically, both the Presidency of the Republic and the Constitutional Court could constitute significant obstacles. Another important constraint is the growing internationalization of markets and finance: governments that increase deficits and the public debt excessively risk casting doubt on their financial sustainability and the competitiveness of their companies Rodrik (1998); Schmidt (2002), 22–23.

Italy, as a member of the Eurozone, is also bound by European treaties (and related rules) which, unlike other constitutions, are not only particularly constraining, but also

difficult to modify (De Witte 2009). As several scholars have noted, many of the rules of the European Union (EU) are modelled on so-called ‘ordo-liberalism’. This is a German school of thought that argues that the principles of neo-monetarism and supply-side economics (based on internal devaluation, reduction of the public debt and deficit, competition and privatization) should be imposed by constitutional rules enforced by independent institutions (Warlouzet 2019).

The Stability and Growth Pact – which was slightly amended in February 2024, but which maintained the debt and deficit ceilings – is a paradigmatic example of the constitutionalization of ordo-liberalism, as it requires strict management of public finances, control devices and institutionalized sanctions, delegating monetary policy to the European Central Bank (ECB). Furthermore, global and European constraints are interconnected, as Eurozone member states have lost control of the money supply and thus the capacity to give bondholders guarantees that they will be repaid in all circumstances (De Grauwe 2012).

During the sovereign debt crisis, the rules of European economic governance were changed and the EU acquired increased surveillance and enforcement capacity with regard to the implementation of structural reforms (Heins and de la Porte 2015, 3). Particularly constraining is, for example, the European Semester, a period of six months a year during which Member States coordinate their budgetary, macroeconomic and structural policies, promptly integrating EU assessments (the so-called ‘specific recommendations by country’) into their national policies.

Furthermore, European resources – particularly cohesion funds – are increasingly subject to conditionality. In particular, the Eurozone crisis triggered a desire and opportunity, on the part of Germany in the Council, and of the European Commission in more general terms, to use the leverage of cohesion funds to promote greater fiscal discipline and budgetary and structural reforms (Bachtler and Mendez 2020). More recently, in December 2020, member states introduced a provision allowing for the suspension of European funds in cases of systematic violation of the rule of law (Blauberger and Van Hüllen 2021). In addition, the Common Provisions Regulation adopted in June 2021 strengthens the link between the European Semester and Cohesion Policy investments (Kölling 2022).

Even ‘Next Generation EU’, one of the most recent (and most significant) economic policy initiatives of the EU, imposes constraints on member states. In fact, to access funds through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), Member States had to formulate detailed recovery and resilience plans outlining their investment and reform strategies, in line with objectives – negotiated with the Council – relating to climate change and the digital revolution. The new rule-of-law conditionality applies as much to the RRF as it does to ‘ordinary’ EU financing instruments. In addition, the Commission is required to evaluate plans based on their actual contribution to the objectives of the RRF, but also based on whether they address the challenges identified in country-specific recommendations (Schramm, Krotz, and De Witte 2022). Given the large sums of money at stake, in these cases the Commission has considerable means to insist on structural changes, for example in member states’ labour markets and tax systems (Schramm, Krotz, and De Witte 2022).

A final constraint on the Meloni government was the need to retain credibility in the European and international contexts, in order to exercise influence. This need for influence is of utmost importance, given the number of decisions taken by the

European Council and the number of contemporary political problems that transcend national borders. The invasion of Ukraine, but also the challenges posed by new technologies, the pandemic or climate change, are clear examples of the need to collaborate with other countries. Credibility, which in this case means the intention and perceived capacity to respect international constraints and assumptions (Moury et al. 2021), is crucial to the influence and therefore the weight of a country on the international stage. It depends on a number of factors, including the affinity of preferences and values (Zahariadis 2016); the eschewing of excessively radical political positions (Garrett and Tsebelis 1996); the institutional capacity of the State to implement agreements and respect internationally agreed rules (Sacchi 2018). For example, the importance of international credibility was particularly evident in Greece during the Eurozone crisis, when the ‘unorthodox’ behaviour of ministers such as Yannis Varoufakis quickly created distrust among international partners and severely limited Greece’s economic growth (Moury et al. 2021).

FdI, when in opposition, always professed to be more interested in providing voters with representation than in acting in accordance with the responsibilities of governing. In fact, much of the party’s electoral progress in recent years has been due to the claims of Giorgia Meloni and her party colleagues that, unlike their rivals, they behave consistently. Even in the face of notable policy incentives – such as the opportunity to participate alongside the Draghi government in (re)shaping the NRRP – FdI remained staunchly in opposition, thus helping it to consolidate its image as an anti-establishment party, more attentive to the preferences of its voters than to the dubious charms of governing.

However, it is easy to be responsive when you are free of the obligations of accountability. In other words, convincing voters of the validity of one’s policy proposals is easier from the opposition benches, when one is relatively free of institutional and international constraints. However, the situation is different when the anti-establishment party becomes the establishment itself, as happened to FdI with the outcome of the general election of September 2022. In the next section we will analyse these tensions and how the Meloni government has addressed them during the course of its first year in office.

Brothers of Italy from opposition to government

Following the election of 25 September 2022, FdI found itself in government for the first time in its history. Previously, the party had remained in opposition to all the executives of the so-called ‘populist decade’ (Vassallo and Verzichelli 2023): those of Enrico Letta (2013–2014), Matteo Renzi (2014–2016), Paolo Gentiloni (2016–2018), Giuseppe Conte (2018–2021) and Mario Draghi (2021–2022). The transition from opposition to government was not only a sort of stress test for the leaders of the party, suddenly catapulted into roles of absolute responsibility, roles to which – with a few exceptions – none were accustomed; it was also a very interesting case study regarding the dilemma between ‘responsiveness’ and ‘responsibility’ (Mair 2009, 2013). In addition, a related question concerns the degree of continuity or discontinuity of the Meloni government, in its day-to-day activities, compared with its predecessors. Apart from the many political and institutional constraints mentioned in the previous section, expectations were rather clear on this point, so much so that they led some to fear for the stability of Italy’s democratic institutions. On the other hand, it is the first time in the country’s republican

history that the main party of a centre-right governing coalition has been one other than FI (with its more liberal and, to some extent, centrist orientation): a party (FdI) that proudly refers to itself as ‘right-wing’ (as opposed to ‘centre right’). Heir to Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN), itself a successor to the MSI, FdI belongs to the Party of European Conservatives and Reformists. It is a formation which, in the years of its existence, variously supported the Visegrad group, Donald Trump in the United States and Vladimir Putin in Russia. It took positions radically opposed to the European Union and a hostile attitude towards the French and German governments, identifying as the main targets of its daily polemical attacks, the large multinationals and international finance, as well as in the ‘LGBT lobby’ and the left (Genovese and Vassallo 2023, 50). How far have these expectations been transformed into reality?

We are not the first to ask this question. Twelve months ago, in the abovementioned introduction to the previous edition of ‘Politics in Italy’, Federica Genovese and Salvatore Vassallo (Genovese and Vassallo 2023) pointed to the degree of continuity with the Draghi government that was apparent in the actions of the Meloni government during its initial months in office. They thereby suggested a degree of hiatus between words (pronounced in opposition) and deeds (once in office). Twelve months later, we are in a better place to evaluate this gap, thus implicitly providing a (not yet definitive) answer to the questions raised by scholars who have defined FdI as an ‘extreme right’ party (Baldini, Tronconi, and Angelucci 2023; Donà 2022), with ‘populist’ and ‘nativist’ if not downright ‘authoritarian’ (Mudde 2020) tendencies. They expected that the Italy led by Giorgia Meloni would in many respects take a very different, if not diametrically opposed, turn as compared to the direction in which it had been travelling hitherto.

Before focusing on the substance, let us begin with the form. From the opposition benches, Giorgia Meloni had long complained about the decision-making styles of the various governments that succeeded one another during the previous decade. Specifically, the FdI leader contested an excessive use of emergency decrees and votes of confidence, which from her point of view undermined the role of Parliament and constituted an excessive (and unacceptable) imbalance in the distribution of power between executive and legislature. On this point, the article by Cavalieri et al. demonstrates, however, that Giorgia Meloni has ended up adopting the same behaviour that she harshly stigmatized in the past. On the one hand, around 60% of the bills her government presented to Parliament between October 2022 and December 2023 (excluding bills ratifying international agreements and treaties) were proposed decree laws. On the other hand, more than one in two government bills (54%) were forced through Parliament by making them matters of confidence in the Government in at least one of the chambers. Both percentages are perfectly in line with those recorded at the end of the first 14 months by the executives that preceded Meloni’s in the last 10 years.

If, however, we move from form to substance and look at approval of the budget, Meloni has managed, in difficult economic circumstances, nationally and internationally, at least to safeguard some of the policy priorities of the majority she presides over. One cannot interpret differently, the increase in the international aid budget, the greater spending on military and civil defence and, above all, the larger allocations in favour of such relatively small expenditure items as those associated with the ‘family’, ‘old age’ and ‘unemployment’, all aspects on which the centre-right’s election manifesto had focused. In addition, the changes to the NRRP negotiated with the EU and, especially, the

conditions greatly reducing the scope and spending on the citizenship income, are all in line with Meloni's pre-election commitments, albeit in the general context of economic policies entirely consistent with those of previous governments (see the article by Di Carlo and Simoni).

In the area of environmental policies and the ecological transition, the subject of Pizzimenti's article, Meloni had promised during the election campaign to move away from what the centre-right parties had dubbed the 'ideological' environmentalism of previous governments. On this point, empirical analysis confirms that the Government has favoured responsiveness over responsibility. That is, there has emerged a conception of the ecological transition based on the idea that protection of the environment and the ecosystem must not be allowed to stand in the way of development processes and economic growth. It is an idea, moreover, perfectly in line with approaches the centre-right coalition had always taken to the issue. Specifically, during the year the Meloni government was rather critical of the directives and regulations adopted by the EU, and pursued policies and initiatives that clearly departed from traditional approaches to Italian environmental policy, especially in the field of nuclear power. In addition, the executive undertook a substantial revision of the NRRP precisely in reference to issues related to the ecological transition. The only element of continuity with respect to the long-term peculiarities of Italian environmental policy was (unfortunately) the limited attention to security of the ecosystem. This was removed from the NRRP despite the fact that the Prime Minister herself had referred to the need to adopt 'structural' measures in this area, and despite the dramatic events linked to the floods in Emilia-Romagna (in May) and Tuscany (in November).

Migration policies (discussed by Echeverría and Finotelli) need to be considered at some length. Meloni's party had long focused on immigration as one of its flagship policies, with respect to which competition with Salvini's League had been at its most intense. On this point, however, clarification is needed. The trajectory of Meloni's party, in fact, must be re-examined in the medium term, rather than exclusively through comparison of the two months of the 2022 election campaign and the actions taken in 2023. In this regard, FdI's policies have become increasingly moderate with the passage of time. In the collective imagination (and, in all probability, also in the expectations of large numbers of its supporters) FdI would revolutionize public policy on the issue of immigration in order to give effect to the most well-known and oft-repeated slogan of the election campaign, the implementation of an 'immediate naval blockade' to combat illegal immigration. However, we must not forget that from 2021, perhaps due to awareness that assumption of office was drawing closer, the proposals that had originally characterized the party's public discourse were largely blunted. Having said that, a certain hyperactivity and hyper-exposure of the Prime Minister on migration issues was evident. Within the first 14 months of taking office, in fact, the Meloni government legislated with respect to almost all the points in the election manifesto on the subject of immigration. These included border control; the strengthening and prolongation of administrative detention; agreements with third countries; penalizing NGOs; restrictions on the granting of humanitarian protection; the activation and expansion of the *decreti flussi* (literally, 'flows decrees'). However, looking closely at the various initiatives, clear ambiguities

and weaknesses emerge as discussed in the article by Echeverría and Finotelli. It is sufficient to note that the government that was supposed to implement a ‘naval blockade’, approved the most generous ‘flows decree’ since the early 2000s, granting entry to over 450,000 regular migrants for the three-year period 2023–2025.⁵ It also approved (and extended) the state of emergency arising ‘as a consequence of the exceptional increase in the numbers of migrants entering the country via the Mediterranean migration channels’.⁶ If we may be excused the pun, on this point the distance between expectations and reality was also ‘exceptional’. In short, it is not possible to discern any clear discontinuity in the area of migration policies. On the contrary, we would seem to be in the presence of a classic case of ‘much ado about nothing’. The overexposure of the Prime Minister (as well as the hyper-legislative activity of the Cabinet) on immigration actually concealed a series of measures consistent with the way in which the issue had been managed for the previous 20 years. It thus perpetuated a model of ‘reticent openness’ that satisfied no one and created problems, but which no political force, all victims of their own public discourse, was capable of changing significantly.

If we look at social policies – in particular with regard to the gender, family and anti-mafia policies analysed in this special issue – here too we see more continuity than change. On the one hand, the first government led by a woman did not introduce any feminist policies, on the contrary. Alessia Donà, in her article, shows that during her first year in office, Meloni approved a series of measures in favour of the traditional heterosexual family that had several negative repercussions for the circumstances of Italian women. As regards the anti-mafia front, as highlighted by Picarella and Sciarrone in their article, it is possible to discern the straightforward continuation of the tendency to portray the mafia as an ‘absolute evil’, a social and cognitive construction which however stands in the way of innovative initiatives aimed at preventing and changing the socio-economic context in which the mafia operates.

Finally, we see more responsibility than responsiveness, and more continuity than change, also in relation to foreign policy. As already observed with respect to migration policies, in relation to foreign policy Fasola and Lucarelli point out that FdI’s rhetoric had already changed before the election campaign, due especially to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ([Morini 2023]). This led Giorgia Meloni and FdI to move away from their previous sympathy for Vladimir Putin and to express unconditional support for Ukraine and the Atlantic alliance. Whether their conversion was sincere or driven by *Realpolitik*, what matters is that their shift towards ‘responsibility’ was made in anticipation of taking office, rather than once they had done so. During the election campaign, Meloni and her party insisted a great deal on the idea that the ‘national interest’, would be the guiding star of all foreign-policy decisions taken by the new executive. However, the Government has not unequivocally defined either the form or the substance of this Italian ‘national interest’, thereby reconfirming the historical tendency for approaches to foreign policy to be poorly structured. Furthermore – as Fasola and Lucarelli remind us – this (ill-defined) renewal of national pride, combined with a sovereigntist vision of relations with allies and the institutions of the EU, reflects a tendency to link the profile of Italy on the international stage with the personal profile of the Prime Minister. In doing so, however, the Government’s foreign policy actions

again show clear continuity with the past, especially with regard to relations with Europe, Atlanticism and attention to the Mediterranean area.

Concluding remarks

A clear result emerging from the contributions to this special issue is that the Meloni government in 2023 acted to a large extent in a ‘responsible’ way. Even though the new executive kept a number of its main election promises, its actions – at least during 2023 – did not deviate significantly from long-term trends in Italian politics. In short, the first ‘radical right’ government in the country’s republican history acted in substantial continuity with its predecessors, guided by the considerable pragmatism shown on several occasions by Giorgia Meloni. Aside from a number of gaffes, plausibly explained by the lack of experience of party leaders suddenly catapulted into positions of responsibility for which they were in no way prepared, the stability of the country’s democratic institutions does not – at least in the short term – seem to us to be particularly at risk. Nonetheless, Meloni has strategically managed to act responsibly without losing supporters, at least for the time being. At the time of writing, on 19 February 2024, voting intentions polls suggested that FdI was the political party enjoying (by some margin) the highest level of popular support.

What can we expect of the future? As already mentioned, the constitutional reform, if adopted, should strengthen party-system bipolarity. If, as suggested by the literature, radical parties in government tend to lose votes, then we also know that voters usually reward governing parties for favourable economic circumstances. Increased rates of growth might result from the NRRP, which has the potential to reduce geographical inequalities and promote investment. However, for this to happen, the measures will have to be fully implemented, which is anything but certain given the need to spend large sums of money in a short space of time; given the limited administrative capacity of the State, and given the strength of vested interests (Boeri and Perotti 2023; Germano, Montalbano, and Pritoni 2023). This is as much as we shall say. It will be for contributors to subsequent editions of ‘Politics in Italy’, beginning with the one devoted to the events of 2024, to establish whether these future scenarios have come to pass – or not.

Notes

1. Translator’s note: the ‘Superbonus 110%’ is a tax incentive to enable buildings to be made more energy efficient and less vulnerable to collapse in the event of earthquakes.
2. Much will depend on the results it obtains at the European Parliament elections in June 2024.
3. In addition, one should not forget the attempts of other leaders, in Italy and abroad, to emulate him. They, like Berlusconi, have tried to win credibility as famous and powerful individuals who, at the same time, have attempted to sell themselves as the most authentic representatives of ordinary people. In Italy, the role of leader devoted to political overhaul against the mainstream in the name of common sense, has been variously interpreted – with mixed success – by Matteo Renzi (Ventura 2015), Matteo Salvini (Ventura 2019) and, most recently, Giorgia Meloni.
4. Local elections will also be held in a number of municipalities in June 2024 on the basis of a majoritarian electoral system. However, the importance of the municipalities involved in voting (which will include only six regional capitals including Bari, Cagliari and Florence) is

unlikely to be sufficient to drive the two centre-left forces to coalesce in a systematic manner everywhere.

5. Decision taken by the Cabinet on 27 September 2023.
6. Title of the resolution adopted by the Cabinet on 5 October 2023.

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Notes on contributors

Catherine Moury is Associate professor of Public Policy in the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences at Nova University Lisbon, and a visiting professor at the National School of Public Health of the same university. She teaches European politics, public policies, and health policies and conducts research in these areas. Her latest book, *Capitalizing on Constraints: Bail out Politics in the Eurozone Countries*, which has been translated into various languages, was nominated for the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) Best Book Award in 2022.

Andrea Pritoni is Associate Professor of Political Science in the Department of Culture, Politics and Society at the University of Turin. His main research interests are Italian politics, lobbying and interest group politics and comparative public policy.

ORCID

Catherine Moury  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5405-1493>

Andrea Pritoni  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9619-3641>

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