

Brief /5 – 2024

Russian Gas and the Fight for the Italian Right: Implications of Meloni and Salvini’s Russian Energy Policy in the 2024 EU Parliamentary Elections

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Maggio 2024

The views expressed in this document are solely those of the author and do not reflect the official position of CeSPI.

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Introduction

On 8 and 9 June 2024, the Italian public will elect its tenth delegation to the European Union (EU) Parliament.¹ Based on public opinion polls, a record 67% of EU citizens plan to vote in the 2024 parliamentary elections, a 9% increase from the previous election turnout in 2019.²

In Italy, the most salient political questions to potential voters involve the state of the nation’s economy, access to jobs and public healthcare, and the fight against domestic poverty.³ Within the broader context of Italian popular interest in the elections, these various issues coalesce to make the health of the national economy the primary concern for many Italian voters.


¹ Italy has 76 Members in the European Parliament (MEPs), the third most in the European Union following Germany (96) and France (81). Elections are split between five regional constituencies in Italy (Northwestern, Northeastern, Central, Southern, and Insular). In accordance with EU electoral law, Italy must use a proportional electoral system, allocating MEP seats equivalent to the proportion of the vote received by each political party in a given regional constituency. It is important to note that Italy uses a preference system of voting, allowing voters to indicate a first, second, and third preference for candidates. Once the different numbers of seats are allocated to different parties, the candidate with the highest number of preference votes is elected as an MEP: “2024 European elections: National Rules,” European Parliament, last modified March 26, 2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/754620/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)754620_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/754620/EPRS_ATA(2023)754620_EN.pdf).

² “One year ahead of European elections, citizens are aware of EU’s impact on their lives,” European Parliament News, last modified June 6, 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230605IPR94301/one-year-ahead-of-european-elections-citizens-aware-of-eu-impact-on-their-lives>.

³ European Parliament News, “One year ahead of European elections, citizens are aware of EU’s impact on their lives.”

An important facet in maintaining this national economic fitness is natural gas, which accounts for nearly half of the country’s overall electricity generation.⁴ An energy source essential to domestic infrastructure and industry, natural gas is also a vital asset to Italian objectives on the international stage; in recent years, Italy has indicated a political desire to become an energy hub capable of increasing exports to other EU countries and North Africa.⁵ However, there is a fundamental security issue impeding this international economic agenda: Italy’s historic reliance on Russia for gas imports amid the ongoing war in Ukraine.

QA12. Would you say the actions of the EU have an impact on your daily life? (%)



	EU27	IT
Total 'Yes'		
Age		
15-24	70	59
25-39	74	63
40-54	74	66
55 +	68	55
Difficulties paying bills		
Almost never/ Never	73	62
From time to time	68	61
Most of the time	68	47
Likelihood to vote in the next European elections		
Likely	76	70
Not likely	61	48

Source: Footnote 2

Within this current political context, the central element at the heart of the tension between Italian economic and international security objectives is the will of the Italian people, as expressed through their vote in the upcoming EU parliamentary elections. Consequently, Italian political leaders involved in the EU parliamentary campaign will aim to win over voters with their opinions and rhetoric on these issues. Will the 2024 EU parliamentary campaign strategies related to the issue of Italian energy policy toward Russia have implications for the European Union as a whole? This question is explored in this paper.

To analyze this question, I focus on the evolving political relationship between Italian President Giorgia Meloni, leader of the conservative Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) party, and Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure and Transport Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing

⁴ Natural gas will continue to play an important role in energy-related economics in Italy in the years to come, as the country is currently decreasing its usage of coal: “Italy Natural Gas Security Policy,” International Energy Agency, last modified October 18, 2022, <https://www.iea.org/articles/italy-natural-gas-security-policy>.

⁵ Francesca Andreolli, Francesca Bellisai, Massimiliano Bienati, Giulia Giordano, Michele Governatori, and Davide Panzeri, “Energy Without Russia: The Consequences of the Ukraine war and the EU Sanctions on the Energy Sector in Europe” in *Country Report Italy, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung - Politics for Europe* (2023): 9, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/20542.pdf>.

populist party Lega per Salvini Premier (often shortened to Lega). Given their prominent roles in the current conservative-led Italian government as well as their leadership of parties interested in electoral success in the EU Parliament, the political dynamic between these two popular and polarizing figures will likely shape the makeup of Italy's MEP delegation. In this paper, I argue that the rhetoric of Salvini may push Meloni further to the populist right on energy issues related to Russia in the upcoming EU parliamentary elections, should Meloni not be convinced to join the European People's Party (EPP); I also argue that, should more candidates supporting this right-wing energy policy get elected as MEPs this June, the EU economic sanctions against Russia have a greater likelihood to become softer as a result of the shifting economic priorities of the EU Parliament.

I develop my argument in seven parts. First, I outline the theoretical framework for my argument, Walter Lippman's public opinion theory. Second, I discuss the current political relationship between Meloni and Salvini within the context of Russian foreign policy. Third, using public opinion theory as a framework, I analyze Salvini's foreign policy strategy in the upcoming 2024 EU parliamentary elections, as related to the issue of energy policy toward Russia. Fourth, I analyze Meloni's foreign policy strategy toward Russia in the upcoming elections in the same way. Fifth, I theorize about the implications of these campaign strategies on EU foreign policy toward Russia. Sixth, I explore the broader implications of my argument on the EU parliamentary elections and the war in Ukraine.

Public Opinion Theory

To analyze the implications of Meloni and Salvini's energy policy toward Russia in the upcoming parliamentary elections, I use Walter Lippman's public opinion theory as a framework. I choose this theory, as it provides a lens through which politicians create a political environment suitable to their electoral ambitions through rhetoric and issue framing. This method of analysis has a ubiquitous application to democratic campaigns in general, which fundamentally rely on a candidate's access to relevant information and use of that information in politically favorable ways; more importantly, the theory allows for the focused analysis of the campaign strategies of Meloni and Salvini, as the agenda of both campaigns are formulated through information gathering and subsequently disseminated to the public, leading each candidate to frame the same issue in two diverse ways. Given that the overarching objective of each strategy is to convince voters to support candidates at the polls in June (and, thus, to signify their public opinion electorally), public opinion theory is a useful theoretical framework to analyze this issue.

When approaching my research question, I also considered both defensive realism and Brian Arbour's theory of candidate-centered campaigns as theoretical frameworks. Both of these theories provide analytical lenses into the foreign policy implications of Meloni and Salvini's campaign strategies related to Russian energy policy, but are limited in their application to the issue as a whole. First, defensive realism states that under an anarchic international political order, states enact moderate policies to maintain a defensive posture on the world stage.⁶ Both Meloni and Salvini's approaches to Russian gas policy signify shifts to more moderate stances more supportive of the defense of Ukraine. Therefore, defensive realism can explain why both

⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

leaders are adjusting policy preferences in the current geopolitical environment; however, defensive realism is limited in its application to the EU parliamentary campaign, as it approaches the issue through the lens of assumptions about international politics that do not necessarily reflect the personal assumptions underpinning Meloni and Salvini's campaign strategies. In this way, the theory fails to account for the personal choices and decisions made by each candidate during the campaign, which is a central element in the study of campaigns and their implications. Conversely, Brian Arbour's theory of candidate-centered campaigns analyzes how the personal characteristics of a candidate (including their strengths and weaknesses, personality, and likability) affect the success of their campaigns.⁷ Both Meloni and Salvini use their platforms as prominent conservative Italian politicians in order to shape the rhetoric of their EU parliamentary campaigns. As a result, there is an inevitable focus on their individual personalities in campaign discourse (especially in the case of Salvini through his populist rhetoric), which in turn has an impact on the reception each candidate receives from prospective voters in the elections. However, this theory is also limited in application to Meloni and Salvini's Russian energy policy as these policies do not materialize in an ideological vacuum of the personal political preferences of each leader, but, rather, their policies are formulated through each one's conception and response to the political world around them in real time. Unlike the theory of candidate-centered campaigns and defensive realism, Lippman's public opinion theory is able to analyze the personal and geopolitical considerations which are central to Meloni and Salvini's policies *together*.

In his 1922 seminal work *Public Opinion*, American political journalist Walter Lippman asserts that humans are unable to interpret the complexities of the modern world accurately.⁸ This creates a "pseudo-environment" in which everyone has different thoughts, feelings, and emotions about the various phenomena that occur on a global scale, all of which depart from the objective reality of events.⁹ As a result, the people with access to the most information, namely those with decision-making powers in government, subjectively interpret these phenomena and disseminate the resulting pseudo-reality to the public through mass media and communication, impacting public opinion.¹⁰ This subjective interpretation often serves the political interests of these powerful decision-makers, thus swaying public opinion in their favor.¹¹

Applying Lippman's theory to the present-day context highlighted by the prevalence of complex means of communication such as social media, the Internet, and television news, clearly the press and the general public also play an increasingly important role in public discourse today. However, the ease of communication on these platforms simultaneously allows politicians to convey their political messages in original ways. Considering that they hold the political power which grants them access to the greatest amount of available information as well as popular platforms to amplify their opinions, politicians still occupy the communicative position outlined in Lippman's theory. Operating from this contemporary application of Lippman's theory of public opinion, I analyze the 2024 EU parliamentary campaign messaging of both Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini concerning energy policy to Russia and its implications on the EU.

⁷ Brian Arbour, *Candidate-Centered Campaigns: Political Messages, Winning Personalities, and Personal Appeals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁸ Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), 30.

⁹ Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 15.

¹⁰ Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 266.

¹¹ Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 21.

Current Relationship between Meloni and Salvini

The political relationship between President Giorgia Meloni and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini is complex, fluid, and multifaceted. Domestically in Italy, they lead two different conservative political parties, the Fratelli d'Italia and Lega per Salvini Premier. These two right-wing political parties, along with the center-right Forza Italia, constitute the current center-right coalition which secured an absolute electoral majority in both congressional houses during the 2022 Italian general election; Meloni serves as the head of this coalition as Prime Minister of Italy and Salvini is a high-ranking member within the coalition as Deputy Prime Minister.¹² In these domestic capacities, Meloni and Salvini often work together to shape policy advancing the political prerogatives of the center-right coalition. For example, prior to the 2024 EU parliamentary elections, both leaders supported and campaigned for agreed-upon nominees of the center-right coalition for the five regional elections in Italy in 2024.¹³

Despite their political relationship within the context of Italy's center-right coalition, Meloni's policies and rhetoric, which are becoming increasingly aligned with moderate conservatism, often differ from those of Salvini, which remain further to the right of the European political spectrum.¹⁴ Given the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, recently the issue of Italian foreign policy toward Russia has been a primary point of contention amid this emerging ideological rift between Meloni and Salvini.

Politically supportive of the international maintenance of peace, especially through the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Meloni has become gradually more committed to the political prioritization of aid and potential military assistance to Ukraine.¹⁵ She has been critical of Putin, especially in the wake of the death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny,¹⁶ putting the political impetus on the Russian president to foster peace in the area.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Salvini's Lega has long had diplomatic ties with Russia, formally beginning with the party's 2017 agreement with the United Russia party closely affiliated to Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹⁸ In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there have been popular calls by leading politicians in Italy for Salvini to end his relationship with Putin and

¹² Stefano Fella, "Italy: 2022 general election and new government," House of Commons Library, last modified December 8, 2022, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9629/>.

¹³ Carlo Ghirri, "2024: a politically pivotal year," ItaliaOggi, last modified December 29, 2023, <https://www.italiaoggi.it/news/2024-a-politically-pivotal-year-2622190>.

¹⁴ Meloni's shift toward more moderate viewpoints, broadly speaking, reflects a belief in the role of the moderate right in her domestic electoral success in 2022, something which is discussed further later in the article: Alessia Peretti, Sarantis Michalopoulos, and Simone Cantarini, "EU, US elections widen Italy's Meloni-Salvini ideological rift," Euractiv, last modified March 13, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-us-elections-widen-italys-meloni-salvini-ideological-rift/>.

¹⁵ Giorgia Meloni, "President Meloni's press statement in Kyiv," Italian Government, last modified February 24, 2024, <https://www.governo.it/it/node/25076>.

¹⁶ Tommaso Ciriaco, "Meloni corregge Salvini su Russia e Navalny: 'No a tentennamenti'. E il leghista diserta l'Aula," La Repubblica, last modified March 20, 2024, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2024/03/20/news/meloni_corregge_salvini_russia_navalny-422339625/.

¹⁷ "AULA, Seduta 266 - Consiglio europeo, Comunicazioni Meloni: approvate risoluzioni di maggioranza e parti dell'opposizione," Camera dei deputati, last modified March 20, 2024, <https://webtv.camera.it/evento/24900>.

¹⁸ The original intent of this agreement was to foster economic relations between Italy and Russia as well as increase Russian access to the Council of Europe, which defends human rights on the continent: Federica Pascale, "Salvini under pressure to show cancelled deal with Putin's party after Navalny remarks," Euractiv, last modified February 21, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/salvini-under-pressure-to-show-cancelled-deal-with-putins-party-after-navalny-remarks/>.

publicly condemn Russian actions in the war¹⁹ (namely by Elly Schlein, Matteo Richetti, and other members of the opposing center-left coalition, who initiated an unsuccessful vote of no confidence against Salvini on 4 April 2024).²⁰

Up to now, Salvini has rhetorically avoided both this public disapproval as well as any overt show of political support for Russia amid the ongoing conflict. Instead, the leader of Lega maintains a stance that both Italy and the EU need to defend Ukraine in order to realize a lasting peace.²¹ This sentiment, however, comes in the face of Lega's continuing diplomatic ties to the United Russia party amid ongoing criticism and calls for formal cancellation of the agreement.²² As a result, within the context of Italian foreign policy concerning Russia, the perception of Salvini's pro-Russian political leanings has created a tension in his political relationship with Meloni, herself becoming more moderate and supportive of Ukrainian efforts. Given their parties' adversarial competition for seats in the upcoming EU parliamentary elections, the electoral campaigns of these two political leaders provide a lens through which to explore Italian and EU policy toward Russia.

Salvini's Foreign Policy Strategy

Similar to many other current populist leaders, including Donald Trump, Marie Le Pen, and Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini frames his policy preferences in a way that simplifies "the political space with direct and ordinary language."²³ Using his increased access to relevant information as well as his popular platform as Italy's Deputy Prime Minister, he employs this rhetorical style across communication mediums (namely through social media) to change the pseudo-environment perceived by the Italian and general populace in politically favorable ways. This individual rhetoric both influences, and is influenced by, the discourse of these other like-minded populist leaders, namely Trump, creating a transnational right-wing populist narrative that finds a wider audience of voting adherents.²⁴

One primary way in which Salvini focuses this populist rhetoric is foreign policy toward Russia, specifically related to the economic impact of the war in Ukraine on Italy and the EU. Despite Lega's ongoing diplomatic relationship with the United Russia party, Salvini has condemned Putin's actions in propagating the war in Ukraine, publicly supporting EU military and humanitarian aid to Kyiv; he even went so far as to help organize a G7 conference in Milan in

¹⁹ Pascale, "Salvini under pressure to show cancelled deal with Putin's party after Navalny remarks."

²⁰ "Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini survives no-confidence vote," EuroNews with AP, last modified April 4, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/04/04/italian-deputy-prime-minister-matteo-salvini-survives-no-confidence-vote>.

²¹ Hannah Roberts, "Italy's Salvini says West should rethink sanctions for Russia," Politico, last modified September 4, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-salvini-says-west-should-rethink-sanctions-for-russia/>.

²² Giovanna Vitale, "Richetti: 'Salvini mostri la disdetta dell'accordo con Putin o si dimetta. Meloni in imbarazzo, vuole far slittare la nostra mozione,'" La Repubblica, last modified March 25, 2024, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2024/03/25/news/salvini_putin_accordo_dimissioni-422371536/.

²³ Sertan Akbaba, "Re-Narrating Europe in the Face of Populism: An Analysis of the Anti-Immigration Discourse of Populist Party Leaders," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 3 (2018): 203, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26469851>.

²⁴ Akbaba, "Re-Narrating Europe in the Face of Populism," 213.

early April 2024 to discuss “Ukrainian [economic and infrastructure] reconstruction.”²⁵ These actions indicate an overall political commitment by Salvini and Lega to support the necessary political steps to reach a peaceful resolution in the conflict, a position he has publicly affirmed throughout the 2024 EU parliamentary and Italian regional election campaigns.²⁶ In this way, Salvini’s Lega candidates in the 2024 EU elections can provide assurances to voters that they will endorse pro-Ukrainian foreign policy measures, a sentiment supported by a large majority of the Italian electorate.²⁷

However, Salvini has formulated his foreign policy toward Russia within the broader political purview of the nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric he has long propagated throughout his time as the leader of Lega. Specifically, he has outlined the political relationship between the current war in Ukraine and the economic hardship facing Italy and the EU, calling for foreign policy measures toward Russia to be more conducive to the cultivation of economic development. For example, Salvini asserted, “Do we have to defend Ukraine? Yes. But I would not want the sanctions to harm those who impose them more than those who are hit by them.”²⁸ Salvini, thus, uses simplistic populist rhetoric to link foreign policy to economic issues more salient to voters in Italy,²⁹ creating an alternative political pseudo-environment for those voters. As a result, the electorate sees the war in Ukraine through a new lens, altering public opinion on the conflict and, consequently, their potential voting preferences in accordance with Lippman’s theory.

A central facet of Salvini’s foreign policy toward Russia, as examined through this nationalist economic lens, is the economic sanctions regarding Russian gas exports. Considering Russia’s weaponization of natural gas diplomacy as a means of power projection, the EU placed economic sanctions on Russian exports in 2022.³⁰ However, given Italy’s historic reliance on Russia for gas imports, these sanctions are counterproductive to overarching conservative Italian objectives of making Italy an energy hub in the near future.³¹ Salvini’s employment of populist rhetoric linking this economic issue to broader EU security policy toward Russia presents an overarching foreign policy strategy for Lega that may attract Italian voters in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Under Lippman’s theory of public opinion, Salvini uses this issue linkage to simplify his controversial relationship with Russia into a foreign policy strategy incorporating the most salient issue to Italian voters: the domestic economy.

²⁵ “Salvini reiterates: ‘The agreement with Putin has been cancelled,’” Agenzia Nova, last modified April 4, 2024, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/Salvini%2C-the-agreement-with-Putin-was-canceled%2C-I-had-respect-for-him-until-the-invasion-of-Ukraine/>.

²⁶ “League at Navalny rally, Italy to help peace says Salvini,” AnsaEnglish, last modified February 18, 2024, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2024/02/18/league-at-navalny-rally-italy-to-help-peace-says-salvini_f3ac1c40-60b4-4933-a0fa-f17bad78ed91.html.

²⁷ European Parliament News, “One year ahead of European elections, citizens are aware of EU’s impact on their lives.”

²⁸ Roberts, “Italy’s Salvini says West should rethink sanctions for Russia.”

²⁹ See Footnote 2 for further context.

³⁰ “EU sanctions against Russia explained,” European Council, last modified April 9, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>.

³¹ Andreolli, Bellisai, Bienati, Giordano, Governatori and Davide Panzeri, “Energy Without Russia,” 9.

Meloni's Foreign Policy Strategy

Conversely, President Giorgia Meloni's foreign policy prescriptions have become increasingly moderate, marking a departure from the right-wing views of Salvini's Lega in favor of those more representative of the moderate supporters of the Italian center-right coalition.³² In this way, under Lippman's framework of public opinion, Meloni has altered the political pseudo-environment surrounding the FdI to become more aligned with the mainstream political establishment in Europe (namely European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen), while also maintaining traditional right-wing conservative values.³³ This political maneuvering has led her to become less eurosceptic and more internationally collectivist in foreign policy within the EU context, allowing her to work closely with other European leaders on key issues.

Within the context of the current war in Ukraine, Meloni has pledged military and economic support to the conflict. In a 24 February 2024 speech given at a G7 meeting in Kyiv, she asserted, "Ukraine's security and Europe's security are one and the same," necessitating a concerted international effort to foster peace rather than a Ukrainian surrender.³⁴ Through this framing of the issue, Meloni has advanced the ideas of "economic cooperation" and "cooperation on critical and energy infrastructure" between Ukraine and the EU as mutually advantageous for both parties' security and economic prosperity.³⁵ Economically, Meloni's pledge of support has not only played out through the Italian government's full support of the EU's 2024 aid package to Ukraine, but also through Meloni's energy policy since the outbreak of the conflict in 2022.

Meloni's center-right government has been at the forefront of the European effort to reduce Russian natural gas imports to combat aggressive Russian energy diplomacy and leverage politics. Enhancing the constraining effects of the EU's economic sanctions on Russia, Meloni's Italy reduced Russian natural gas consumption by 18.6% in 2023, above the 15% reduction stipulated by an EU emergency regulation in August 2022.³⁶ Despite Russian gas constituting 20% of Italy's electrical energy in 2021,³⁷ Italy's gas import reductions imposed by Meloni, combined with the EU's economic sanctions on Russia, have not led to economic decline in the Italian economy as a whole; instead, "the Italian economy has grown by 3.8% since 2019," which is "twice as much as the French economy and five times more than the German economy," according to Jörg Krämer, the chief economist at Commerzbank.³⁸ This favorable economic situation has allowed Meloni to engage in international economic policy placing Italy as an important international investor, especially in the EU and North Africa.

³² Meloni has indicated that this more moderate group of political supporters was crucial to her domestic electoral success in Italy: Dario Fertilio, "Salvini loses ground but remains a real danger for Meloni," *ItaliaOggi*, last modified March 12, 2024, <https://www.italiaoggi.it/news/salvini-perde-terreno-ma-resta-un-autentico-pericolo-per-meloni-2628268>.

³³ Bede Romano, "Giorgia Meloni-Ursula von der Leyen – Le ragioni di una frequentazione," *Il Sole*, last modified January 27, 2024, <https://bedaromano.blog.ilsole24ore.com/2024/01/27/giorgia-meloni-ursula-von-der-leyen-le-ragioni-di-una-frequentazione/>.

³⁴ Giorgia Meloni, "President Meloni's press statement in Kyiv," G7 Meeting, Kyiv, February 24, 2024.

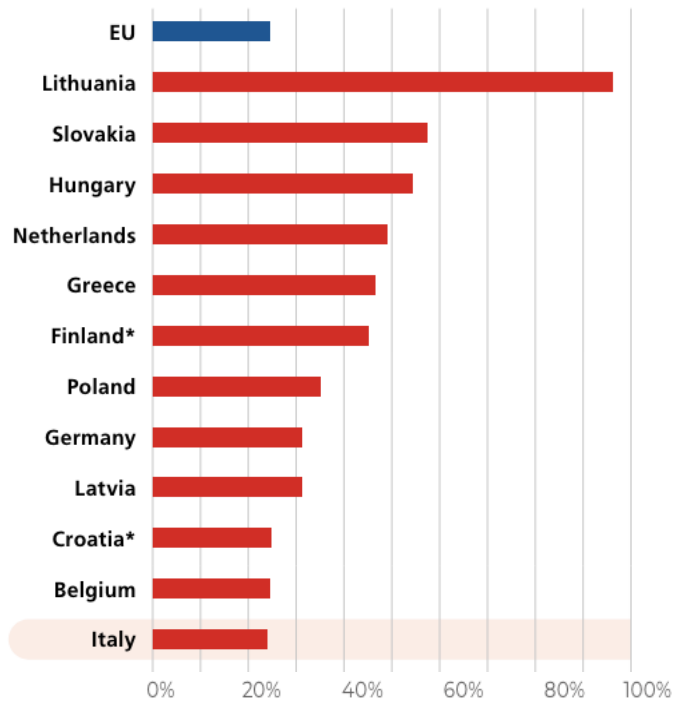
³⁵ Meloni, "President Meloni's press statement in Kyiv."

³⁶ Andreolli, Bellisai, Bienati, Giordano, Governatori and Davide Panzeri, "Energy Without Russia," 6.

³⁷ Andreolli, Bellisai, Bienati, Giordano, Governatori and Davide Panzeri, "Energy Without Russia," 4.

³⁸ Nicholas Martin, "Will Italy replace Germany as Europe's economic powerhouse?," *DW News*, last modified April 3, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/will-italy-replace-germany-as-europes-economic-powerhouse/a-68711740>.

Imports from Russia in gross available energy, EU, 2020



Source: Eurostat, Including estimates for non-reported data for countries with*

Source: Footnote 5

As a consequence of this national economic growth related to energy policy toward Russia, Meloni has been able to separate the issues of the economy and the war in Ukraine. Instead of linking them together as Salvini has, Meloni has pledged that Italy is doing all it can for Ukraine from an economic and national security perspective, while also limiting the effects of reduced Russian gas imports so as not to have an adverse effect on the health of Italy's national economy. Consequently, within the context of the EU parliamentary elections in Italy, Meloni aims to cultivate public opinion regarding the war in Ukraine and the national economy (in which energy plays a significant role) which are largely independent from one another in the pseudo-environment of Italian voters; this issue separation is aimed at her active pursuit of EU foreign policy prioritizing Ukrainian security through a combination of economic means, the principle among which is the sanctions and import reductions on Russian natural gas.

Implications of Both Strategies on EU Policy Toward Russia

Considering the difference between Meloni and Salvini's energy policy toward Russia within the context of the EU parliamentary campaigns, it is important to explore the potential implications of both campaign strategies on each other as well as EU policy toward Russia as a whole. Using Lippman's theory of public opinion, Salvini's and Meloni's policies toward Russia influence the pseudo-environment of each other, as the rhetoric from both leaders does not occur in a vacuum but rather builds off of, and responds to, the rhetoric of the other person. Therefore, the political

milieu in which Italian voters operate is one of two primary competing opinions, necessitating a political response and subsequent voting preference from voters.

Historically, populist leaders have found electoral success through indirect influence, which pushes extreme ideas to the mainstream, rather than through direct influence, or the acquisition of the requisite representative majority in government to enact change directly through legislation.³⁹ Should Salvini be able to convince voters of the interconnectedness of energy policy toward Russia and the Italian economy, the Identity and Democracy Party (the right-wing EU parliamentary group to which Lega belongs) may receive higher representation in the EU parliament, promoting their eurosceptic views supportive of softer foreign policy toward Russia. Given the political salience of the nation's economy to Italian voters, the amplification of these right-wing voices has the potential of being a useful "propaganda missile" for Salvini, allowing him to accuse Meloni of betraying the conservative economic values central to the agenda of the center-right coalition in Europe.⁴⁰ Currently, there is a political struggle between the right-wing Identity and Democracy Party and the more moderate, politically popular European People's Party (which is led, in part, by Ursula von der Leyen) to attract Meloni's FdI candidates for the EU parliament to join their respective political coalitions.⁴¹ Whether or not Salvini's issue linkage finds a popular audience of voters may determine if indirect influence from the populist, eurosceptic right pushes Meloni's foreign policy toward Russia in a direction that prioritizes energy and the national economy, rather than an unwavering support of Ukraine in the current conflict.

If Salvini were to realize this indirect influence on Meloni and others in the EU Parliament, the implications on potential changes to EU foreign policy toward Russia could be drastic. The Parliament's oversight of the budget and the international responsibilities of the European External Action Service likely would become stricter, prioritizing policies advancing EU economic growth, as opposed to prioritizing the imposition of sanctions solely aimed at constraining Russian resolve in the war.⁴² In such cases in which the sanctions on Russia were counterproductive to the cultivation of European economic growth, Lega delegates in the EU Parliament would prefer legislation salient to the majority of Italian voters concerning the health of the Italian economy as fostered through EU policy.

Conversely, should Meloni find success in repudiating Salvini's issue linkage between Italy's economic health and EU energy policy toward Russia, she will likely further promote her more moderate conservative viewpoints, possibly deciding to have the FdI leave the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) party for the moderate center-right European People's Party. To this end, it is important to consider two primary elements.

First, when assessing the likelihood of Meloni's potential shift in energy policy toward Russia, it is important to consider her current role as the Italian President. Evidently, being the head of state of one of Europe's main economic and foreign policy players goes hand-in-hand with a broad audience unavailable to most other candidates or parties vying for parliamentary seats; in

³⁹ Rosa Balfour, Laura Basagni, Anne Flotho-Liersch, Paola Fusaro, Laura Gelhaus, Laura Groenedaal, Denial Hegedus, et al., "Divide and Obstruct: Populist Parties and EU Foreign Policy," German Marshall Fund of the United States (2019): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21237>.

⁴⁰ Ghirri, "2024: a politically pivotal year."

⁴¹ Max Griera, "Italy's centre-right wants Meloni in EPP," Euractiv, last modified March 7, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/italys-centre-right-wants-meloni-in-epp/>.

⁴² "EU sanctions," European Union External Action Service, last modified October 7, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-sanctions_en.

addition, it comes with the domestic responsibility to represent a diverse national electorate, adding certain internal political considerations that both influence and constrain the exercise of foreign policy toward Russia on the EU level. Meloni has clearly indicated the importance of these moderate conservatives in Italy to her domestic electoral success, diminishing the likelihood of a considerable shift to the populist right in the upcoming EU parliamentary elections.

Second, in early April, news of a potential criminal scandal between Ursula von der Leyen and Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla concerning European COVID-19 vaccinations created a tension between Meloni and von der Leyen (who belongs to the more moderate EPP).⁴³ Meloni has remained “on good terms” with von der Leyen, indicating the potential for a political alliance with the EPP after the June elections.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the potential of this alliance leading to the FdI’s amalgamation into the more moderate EPP for the June elections seems increasingly unlikely in light of the political fallout from the Pfizer scandal.

In the event of either her moderate shift to von der Leyen’s EPP or her steadfast political association with the ECR, Meloni would likely continue to promote her pro-Europe, pro-NATO, and pro-Ukraine foreign policy in an EU parliamentary environment which largely welcomes such policy preferences.⁴⁵ As a result, from both an international security perspective in Ukraine as well as from a domestic economic perspective in Italy, voters in the EU parliamentary elections would likely see further emphasis on the domestic policy preferences they see at home in the international context of the EU Parliament. Whether or not Meloni can realize this maintenance of the domestic political status quo abroad depends on her ability to create a political pseudo-environment that overcomes the indirect influence of Salvini’s populist issue linkage.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Italian public will decide the makeup of its delegation to the EU Parliament on 8 and 9 June 2024, determining the likelihood of the propagation of Lega’s populist issue linkage between the energy policy toward Russia and the health of Italy’s economy or the elevation of the FdI’s moderate conservative policies more supportive of the defense of Ukraine through the implementation of energy-related sanctions. In either case, the political pseudo-environment created by the interconnected political rhetoric of the two parties’ leaders, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, will influence Italian public opinion and, therefore, likely have an effect on voting preferences at the polls in June. Using their access to information related to the conflict in Ukraine and their popular platforms as prominent Italian politicians, both Salvini and Meloni will paint two pseudo-realities of the conflict leading up to voting day, one in which the war in Ukraine is linked to economic issues and one in which assistance to Ukraine is a separate political priority in and of itself.

⁴³ Thomas O’Reilly, “Italian PM Meloni Facing Fallout of Pfizergate Investigation,” *The European Conservative*, last modified April 3, 2024, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/italian-pm-meloni-facing-fallout-of-pfizergate-investigation/>.

⁴⁴ O’Reilly, “Italian PM Meloni Facing Fallout of Pfizergate Investigation.”

⁴⁵ Griera, “Italy’s centre-right wants Meloni in EPP.”

Operating within the same political environment, these policy preferences will affect one another, creating the possibility for Meloni's policies to maintain their moderation, potentially as a part of the broader agenda of the European People's Party, or become increasingly aligned with the more extreme right coalition affiliated with Lega, increasing the likelihood of EU energy policy softer on Russia. In this way, the political relationship between Salvini and Meloni concerning EU energy policy toward Russia is a consequential lens through which to analyze the 2024 EU parliamentary elections as a whole, presenting policy implications worthy of future scholarly analysis after the Italian electorate demonstrates its voting preferences this June.

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