

# Martin Höpner – Who may become the President of Italy. An ugly letter from Germany

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On 4 October, three German MEPs, Katarina Barley, Daniel Freund, and Moritz Körner, wrote an open letter to EPP President Manfred Weber calling on him to intervene in the formation of the Italian government.

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## The Italian vote

On 25 September 2022, both chambers of Italy's parliament were re-elected in a snap election after the Italian government had collapsed, Prime Minister Mario Draghi had resigned and President Sergio Mattarella had dissolved the parliament – all at the end of July of this year. Political scientists classify the Italian electoral system as parallel voting, which means that part of the seats is allocated according to proportional representation and another part according to majority voting. Where majority voting applies in whole or in part, parties can only be successful as very large individual parties (as in the USA) or as parts of larger associations or alliances (think of France, for example).

In the elections of 25 September, Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* emerged as the strongest force with 26.0%. The party achieved this success as part of an electoral alliance that included Matteo Salvini's *Lega* (8.8%) and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (8.1%), as well as the small party *Noi moderati* (0.9%). With a total of 43.8% of the votes, the alliance had clearly beaten the competing centre-left alliance, which only got 26.1% of the votes. Outside the two big alliances, Giuseppe Conte's *Movimento 5 Stelle* came in with only 15.4% of the votes cast, more than halving the Five Star Movement's result compared to the 2018 elections.

In Italy, no one doubts that Ms Meloni and with her the parties of the right-wing alliance have received a mandate to form a government. Three German MEPs, however, know better. They are Katarina Barley from the Social Democratic S&D Group, who is also Vice-President of the European Parliament, Daniel Freund from the Green Group (Greens/EFA) and Moritz Körner from the Liberal Group (Renew) – not coincidentally representatives of the very parties that currently form the German government.

## What the authors want

In an open letter dated 4 October, the three MEPs call on Manfred Weber, also a German and leader of the Christian Democratic EPP group, to use his power resources to ensure that Meloni is not elected Italian prime minister. Weber should threaten *Forza Italia* with being thrown out of the EPP group if it forms a government with Meloni. The letter is so out of place, strange, clumsy and disturbing that it is worth a closer look.

The open letter (in German) can be found [here](#). This is a fair summary: Ms Meloni's political positions are not in line with fundamental European values. In particular, she denies the most atrocious crimes in European history (this is stated in the first of the six paragraphs). If *Forza Italia* forms a government with her, the result will be an extreme right-wing government. In this case, it (Berlusconi's party) would sacrifice fundamental European values, too (paragraphs 2 and 3). Italy should take Germany as a model, where the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* is excluded from forming governments (paragraph 4). If *Forza Italia* did not follow suit, it should no longer have a place in the EPP faction of the European Parliament (paragraph 5). The EPP must be an essential building block of a firewall against right-wing enemies of democracy (paragraph 6).

## Interference in the democratic process

Among the objections that come to mind here, the strategic one is still the most harmless: During the election campaign, Ms Meloni had clearly toned down her criticism of the European Union and instead presented herself as EU-friendly. Certainly, she may have been deliberately holding back. Perhaps her dislike of the EU runs deeper than she has recently displayed. However, the open letter is an opportunity for more, not less, dissociation. This is because the authors stand not only for their country of origin and their respective party families, but also for the European Parliament as one of the three institutions of Union legislation. It is strategically unwise to increase the incentive for more demarcation before Italy's new government has even been able to present a government program that can be evaluated in terms of its European-friendliness.

The interference in democratic procedures is much more serious. I too believe that politicians should not be prevented from supporting representatives of their European sister parties in election campaigns – how else could the loose European party groupings, in a long process, be condensed into parties in the narrower sense of the word? But election campaigns are one thing, dealing with election results and the processes of government formation that follow them is something else. In essence, three German politicians are calling for the Italian electoral vote to be disregarded. This is intolerable. Any sensible Italian can only indignantly reject the encroachment of the German writers and defend Meloni's democratic mandate. The letter senders thus confirm all popular prejudices about the arrogance of the Germans towards their neighbours.

For political scientists, moreover, it is far from clear whether there is an optimal strategy for combating right-wing populism and, if so, what it looks like: exclude or disenchant through inclusion (see, for example, Hanspeter Kriesi in section 4 of [this article](#)). In Germany, the choice has been to exclude, others have done it differently – think of Austria and Switzerland, the Netherlands, Finland and Denmark ([this study](#) specifically analyses the Scandinavian group of countries). Sometimes this involved participation in government, sometimes it involved agreements to support minority governments. Germany's neighbours have a right to find their own ways of dealing with right-wing parties, without instructions from EU's largest

member state. The Sweden Democrats, by the way, are also becoming a governing party – will Ms Barley and co-authors call for the Swedish *Moderates* to be thrown out of the EPP as well?

### **Italy is not stagnating of its own free will**

The letter of the three Germans also lacks any sensitivity for why the political situation in Italy is as it is. Instead of accusations, one would have wished for a gesture of self-reflection. Recently, Lucio Baccaro [described](#) Italian politics of the past two to three decades [as a permanent state of emergency](#) in which governments of technocrats and cabinets of obscure political newcomers seem to take turns in an endless cycle: from expert government prescribing bitter pills in the form of liberalisation and austerity to anti-elite populism laying the foundations for the next technocrat cabinet – and so on.

This is certainly not only, but also due to the fact that the Italian economy has practically stopped growing since the introduction of the euro. One disappointment therefore follows the next. The EU and especially Germany are not innocent in this. They forced Italy into a fiscal corset that pushes budget policy towards constant primary surpluses. This may be compatible with growth if high current account surpluses are run at the same time. But Italy, unlike Germany, is not in an undervaluation constellation that would make this possible.

As a result, the combination of blocked devaluation and coercion of austerity policies prevents both internal and external demand from becoming growth drivers. Those who want to break the Italian technocracy-populism cycle should consider what European framework conditions would be necessary to help Italy onto a better growth path. And those who want to do so as Germans should first recognise their own contributions to the suppression of Italian growth impulses, i.e.: admit and reflect on their own mistakes. Not a word of this from Ms Barley and her co-authors.

### **An ugly accusation**

As if all this were not enough, the authors crown their presentation with a particularly obscure, even vile accusation without any evidence: Ms Meloni, they say, denies the most atrocious crimes in European history. What the most atrocious crimes in the history of Europe were is beyond question. They were the German crimes of the Nazi era, which culminated in the Shoah. The future Italian head of government, according to the open letter, is therefore a Holocaust denier – anyone who thinks that a different interpretation of this passage of the open letter is necessary, or even possible, please let us know.

In Germany, even more, the denial of Nazi crimes is a criminal offence (see paragraph 3 of [§130 of the German Criminal Code](#)). This lends additional weight to the allegation. Heaven knows what the authors were thinking when they made their accusation (compare it, for instance, with the content of [this long interview](#) that the Israeli newspaper *Israel Haymon* conducted with Ms Meloni). Clearly, three German MEPs are not in control of their speech or their writing. One can only hope that they will formally apologise for their gross failure and that the Italians know that the three authors do not speak for the German people.