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WORLD

Italian Right Is On Course to Win Elections

Exit poll points to victory for Giorgia Meloni's right-wing alliance as Italy and Europe confront a worsening economic downturn



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ROME—Italians elected a right-wing coalition to lead the country, according to an exit poll, choosing an untested leader who will confront Europe's gathering economic downturn and energy crisis resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Giorgia Meloni is favored to become Italy's new prime minister after her Brothers of Italy party won the biggest share of the vote in Sunday's parliamentary elections, according to an exit poll released by Italian national broadcaster Rai. She would require approval from junior partners in her coalition to assume the role.

Ms. Meloni's party won about 24% of the vote, while her wider right-wing coalition won around 43%, according to the exit poll. Their largest opponent, the center-left Democratic Party, won roughly 19%, the exit poll showed. Preliminary results are expected in the coming hours.

Italy's electoral system, which strongly favors parties that run as part of a coalition, is

expected to help the right to an ample majority in both houses of Parliament. The Italian election is the first big test of the European Union's political cohesion as it confronts Russia's attempt to redraw the continent's post-Cold War order. Russian President Vladimir Putin's restriction of natural-gas deliveries has sparked an energy-price crunch that, combined with other inflationary pressures, is expected to push much of Europe into a recession this winter.

Italian voters have, however, shifted toward parties with clear pro-Western stances, according to exit polls, while parties soft on Russia have performed poorly compared with the previous national elections in 2018, despite their efforts to court popularity by questioning Western sanctions on Moscow and resisting military aid for Ukraine.

The likely right-wing government will face difficult decisions over how to protect Italian households and businesses from sky-high prices for electricity and natural gas. Italy's parlous public finances allow limited scope for fiscal largess. EU governments have so far struggled to agree on a collective intervention to tackle energy costs.

Italy's high government debt of roughly 150% of gross domestic product, combined with its weak long-term growth record, makes it vulnerable to bond-market selloffs if investors lose confidence in the soundness of Rome's fiscal policies, and dependent on the European Central Bank to keep its bond yields stable. ECB support has typically been conditional on Rome following cautious budget policies and enacting economic overhauls aimed at improving growth.



Aware that any adverse reaction by bond investors could further hurt Italy's economic

outlook, Ms. Meloni has sought to reassure financial markets that a government led by Brothers of Italy would seek to maintain fiscal discipline. That constraint could leave limited scope for the radical tax cuts that some in the right-wing coalition want.

Like elsewhere in Europe, energy bills and the cost of living will be the most urgent issue for Italy's next government. Ms. Meloni has vowed to act quickly to help Italian households and businesses, but also to avoid a spending spree that further raises Italy's significant national debt.

Brothers of Italy and its allies want the EU to impose a cap on the price of natural gas and to decouple gas and electricity prices, said Giovanbattista Fazzolari, a senator and close aide to Ms. Meloni.

Increasing public spending to address the energy crisis "should be the measure of last resort," Mr. Fazzolari said. "We want to intervene on pricing. If the European Union continues, irresponsibly, to fail to act, the Italian government should proceed on its own."

Some EU officials have viewed Ms. Meloni's rise with trepidation, fearing that Italy could become a less cooperative member of the bloc at the same time it faces severe economic and security crises. But many observers in Rome say Brothers of Italy is aware of how limited Italy's room to maneuver is, given its economic fragility and need for good relations with other major actors in Europe and the West.

"Meloni knows she needs international backing to lead the country," said Lorenzo Pregliasco, a political scientist and founder of opinion-polling company Quorum/YouTrend.

For Italy, the EU's third-biggest economy, Sunday's results, if confirmed, mean that the right would take power for the first time since 2011, after more than a decade of eclectic, often short-lived coalition governments.

The outcome, if confirmed, is a personal triumph for 45-year-old Ms. Meloni, who has sought to end Italy's recent history of technocratic governments. Ms. Meloni was the only major party leader to stay out of the bipartisan coalition supporting Italy's departing prime minister, Mario Draghi. Her support has benefited greatly from being Italy's only opposition. Her challenges will include sustaining that support in power, in a country where voters can become disenchanted with incumbents quickly.

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