



NIAS-Europe Studies Brief

Euroscepticism Transformed: Italy's Meloni Seeks to Reform the EU from Within

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Euroscepticism in Europe

Since the 2008 financial crisis, there has been a rise in Euroscepticism within the European Union (EU), which has coincided with European integration.* With the victory of the far-right party in Austria (Freedom Party) in 1999, Eurosceptic parties have increased from 15 per cent to 35 per cent in 2020.¹ Initially, due to the negative connotations of the term, Eurosceptics preferred to call themselves “Euro-realists,” and they fiercely opposed the idea of an “ever closer union.”²

In their 2002 working paper on *The Party Politics of Euroscepticism in EU Member and Candidate State*, Taggart and Szczerbiak urge for a distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism. They argue that hard Euroscepticism “is where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived.”³ On the other hand, soft Euroscepticism “is where there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy area/s lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that ‘national interest’ is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory.”⁴ With soft Euroscepticism there is not an opposition to the elites or the establishment of the European Union. It is more of a reformist approach to the functioning of the European Union. However, it is still against the idea of “an ever closer union,” of greater integration through widening (accepting more countries as member states of the European Union) or deepening (handing over national sovereignty to the European Union). Yet, it is more subjective and pervasive; if EU policies change, then the stance taken by the soft Eurosceptics is also likely to change.

Today, the idea of Euroscepticism is attributed more to right-wing populists, and it is spread across the populist spectrum. Euroscepticism and populism are often interlinked with one another—ideologically and empirically. Eurosceptics believe that European integration will undermine national sovereignty. They also believe that the elite within the European Union lack transparency in their transactions, are wasteful and that the EU is a “neoliberal organization serving the business elite at the expense of the working class, responsible for austerity and driving privatization.”⁵ This description matches closely to

* The essay is based on a presentation made at the first “NIAS-KAS Annual Conclave on Europe,” organised by NIAS Europe Studies in collaboration with the Delhi office of KAS. Views expressed in the brief are author’s own and do not represent any institute.

¹ Jon Henley, “Support for Eurosceptic Parties Doubles in Two Decades across EU,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/02/support-for-eurosceptic-parties-doubles-two-decades-across-eu>.

² European Center for Populism Studies, “Euroscepticism,” European Center for Populism Studies, accessed November 20, 2022, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/euroscepticism/>.

³ Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak, “The Party Politics of Euroscepticism in EU Member and Candidate States” Opposing Europe Research Network, Sussex European Institute, 2002, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=sei-working-paper-no-51.pdf&site=266>.

⁴ Taggart and Szczerbiak.

⁵ European Center for Populism Studies, “Euroscepticism.”

the definition of populism by Cas Mudde, where populism is described as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”⁶

However, in recent times, a transformation in the approach to Euroscepticism is evident. Rather than taking an anti-institutional position, though it is still present in the rhetoric used by right-wing populists, there is an increasing trend towards reform from within the institution. This could have resulted from the tedious Brexit negotiations or a movement towards radicalising democracy, an approach usually attributed to left-wing populism. Right and left-wing populists equally defend democracy and advocate for a ‘radicalisation’ of the liberal-democratic regime's ethno-political principles based on “liberty and equality for all.”⁷ Chantal Mouffe argues that to move towards a more just society, it is essential to give up the liberal-democratic institutions and build a new political community. She suggests that despite the negative association brought by the neoliberal social order to the democratic values of equality and popular sovereignty, they are still central to any democratic regime. However, the political institutions of the liberal democratic order are seen as inseparable from the capitalist mode of production, and it is this inextricable relationship between the political and economic institutions of liberal democracy, which is contingent on several historical factors, is irrelevant today. Thus, radical democracy seeks to recover and deepen democratic values while challenging the post-democracy order.⁸

Democratic Deficit in European Politics

Democracy is a key ‘signifier’ in the left-wing populist strategy. The resistance to the oppressions of the neoliberal order is not unruly but is expressed as democratic demands that the people are subject to even in the hegemonic neoliberal order. Even within the liberal democratic order, different hegemonic formations may occur by changing the discourse. This offers a differentiation between a hegemonic transformation and a revolutionary rupture—where a transformation changes the discourse within the political institutions and a revolution tears apart the political regime in favour of a new one. The aim of populists, therefore, is not to rupture the pluralist democratic social order, only to radically reform it. To do so, there is a need to rearticulate the relationship between liberalism and democracy such that democratic values are foregrounded instead of liberal ones.

Populism considers itself as an extension of democracy. Populist parties seek to address the alleged democratic deficit within the European Union. They believe that “EU institutions and their decision-making procedures suffer from a lack of democracy and seem inaccessible to the ordinary citizen due to their complexity.”⁹ Therefore, they argue that the EU institutions lack democratic legitimacy, which Collantes refers to as the invocation of the sovereignty of the people against the ruling elite that serve as an obstacle to authentic, full and true democracy.¹⁰ Accordingly to Collantes, in the first decade of the 21st century, populism was viewed mainly as an anti-liberal ideology. It was aligned with communist and fascist ideologies predominant in 20th-century Europe, which opposed liberal democracy. With the end of the Cold War, communist and fascist regimes disappeared from the political scenario in Europe. The criticisms of liberal democracy still prevailed across the political spectrum but were limited to flagging

⁶ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

⁷ Chantal Mouffe, “Radicalizing Democracy,” in *Mouffe, C. (Ed) For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), 39–58.

⁸ Mouffe.

⁹ Luca Mancin, “On Chantal Mouffe’s ‘Democratic Agonism’ and EU Democratic Deficit,” European Center for Populism Studies, May 7, 2022, <https://www.populismstudies.org/on-chantal-mouffes-democratic-agonism-and-eu-democratic-deficit/>.

¹⁰ F. Xavier Ruiz Collantes, “From Populism to Democratic Legitimism: Towards a Radical Reconsideration of Populism as a Political Category,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2021.1949161>.

democratic deficits. Collantes argues that it is because of these democratic deficits that liberal democracy is forced to defend itself as a genuine democracy.¹¹

Democratic legitimacy is seen as a reflection of populism, and the aim then is to transform the political institutions through a “deepening of democracy.”¹² In short, populist actors are not against the institutions of the European Union based on the ideals of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, but instead, they claim that they are against the expropriation of these fundamental values by the corrupt bureaucratic oligarchs in Brussels. A balance between hard and soft Euroscepticism, as defined by Taggart and Szczerbiak, is evident in this context. It is not just the change in policies that are required, but a replacement of the elites by “true representatives of the people” who will then be responsible for making these policies in the European Union.

Hard Eurosceptic Parties in European Politics

Over the past decade, Euroscepticism among populist parties has been understood in terms of hard Euroscepticism. This has been characterised by a feeling of being betrayed by the elite in Brussels, mistrust of the European institutions, and the need to leave the supranational organisation. The larger public sentiment whipped up by the Eurosceptic right-wing populist parties is to regain control from the European Union.

The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020 has largely culminated in these sentiments. The process was not easy, and it was tedious on both sides. The Brexit referendum was held against the backdrop of the 2015 migrant crisis. It was led by Nigel Farage, formerly of the right-wing conservative UKIP party. The anti-immigration discourse ranged from accusations that British money that could be better spent on the National Health Service in the UK was being spent on asylum seekers entering Europe to claims that the immigrants will take away the jobs from British citizens. Such rhetoric was used to drive an anti-EU movement. The referendum held in 2016 favoured the Brexiteers by 52.1%, and withdrawal negotiations were initiated. It took four years for the United Kingdom to finally leave the European Union, with several withdrawal agreements brought forth by Prime Minister May being rejected by a vast majority. Even today, several issues pertaining to the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the case of fisheries remain unsolved.

The Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party was recently warned by the European People’s Party (EPP) over the Polish National Court’s ruling that sections of the EU treaties are incompatible with the Polish Constitution. Rulings such as these challenge the key tenet of European integration, thereby escalating the dispute over the rule of law between Brussels and Warsaw.¹³ It follows the Eurosceptic sentiment perpetuated by the Law and Justice Party in Poland since 2005. Poland has been opposing the liberal democratic values of the European Union for long, thereby jeopardising the sanctity of the EU institutions. The Party has been described as an exasperating and uncompromising member of the European Union, as it has continually tried to exude the predominance of the Polish judiciary over the EU’s Court of Justice.¹⁴

Similarly, a hard Eurosceptic stance has been taken by Hungary’s Fidesz Party. Under its

¹¹ Collantes.

¹² Mouffe, “Radicalizing Democracy.”

¹³ Georgi Gotev, “Poland’s PiS Party Is Pushing the Country towards EU Exit, EPP Warns,” *Euractiv*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/polands-pis-party-is-pushing-the-country-towards-eu-exit-epp-warns/>.

¹⁴ Jon Henley and Christian Davies, “Poland’s Populist Law and Justice Party Win Second Term in Power,” *The Guardian*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/14/poland-populist-law-and-justice-party-increases-majority>.

premier, Viktor Orbán, Hungary also adopted an anti-immigrant stance to the extent that it built walls at its borders with Croatia and Serbia.¹⁵ It, too, has begun to question the primacy of EU law.¹⁶ Further, Central European University was forced to move out of Hungary, causing great concern to the European Parliament, due to which Fidesz was suspended from the European People's Party in 2019.¹⁷

The National Front in France (now known as the National Rally) is an extreme right-wing party established in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen. After a decade of maintaining a low profile, the party gained prominence in the 1980s as people became frustrated with mainstream parties. The National Front's policies to restrict immigration, restore the death penalty, and incentivise employers to hire French citizens over other nationalities gained traction with the people. In the late 2000s, the party also pushed for exiting the European Union and bringing back the Franc as its currency.¹⁸

Similarly, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany shares an anti-immigrant, nationalist stance with calls to abandon the Euro. Launched in 2013, it challenged the large-scale bailouts of countries hit by the eurozone crisis. AfD has warned that if the EU continues pushing for an "ever closer union" with increased centralisation, it will lobby to pull Germany out of the European Union.¹⁹

Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S) is a coalition of anti-establishment parties. It was formed relatively recently in 2018 and has all the components of traditionally right-wing populist parties in Europe, such as the anti-EU rhetoric calling for the renegotiation of EU treaties, opting out of the Euro, "a reduction in Italy's contribution to the EU budget, and the cancellation of €250bn of Italian government debt."²⁰

Despite a strong anti-EU sentiment amongst the populist parties in Europe, there has been a tendency for these parties to seek reform from within the European Union, which portrays itself as the personification of the values it upholds—democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Since most right-wing populist parties in Europe still see themselves as democratic representatives of the people, they wish to retain the establishment of the European Union, but replace the elite who run it, renegotiate its treaties and policies, and seek to regain their national sovereignty to a great extent.

Changing Perspectives of Euroscepticism among Right-wing Populists

After the Eurozone crisis, several right-wing populist parties emerged in Europe, giving rise to an even sterner Eurosceptic stance, with some even threatening to leave the European Union. Even today, Brussels speculates that these right-wing populists are rooting for the EU's

¹⁵ European Commission, "Migration: Commission Refers Hungary to the Court of Justice of the European Union over Its Failure to Comply with Court Judgment" (European Commission, November 12, 2021), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5801.

¹⁶ European Commission.

¹⁷ Jennifer Rankin, "Viktor Orbán's Party Suspended from Centre-Right EPP Bloc," *The Guardian*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/20/manfred-weber-calls-for-freezing-of-hungarian-partys-voting-rights>.

¹⁸ Jessica Phelan, "How Far Has France's Far-Right National Rally Come in 50 Years?," *Radio France Internationale*, October 8, 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20221008-how-far-has-france-s-far-right-national-rally-come-in-50-years>.

¹⁹ BBC News, "Germany's AfD: How Right-Wing Is Nationalist Alternative for Germany?," February 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37274201>.

²⁰ Antonio Benasaglio Berlucchi, "Understanding the Populism of the Five Star Movement – and Its Continuity with the Past," *LSE Blogs* (blog), August 26, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2021/08/26/understanding-the-populism-of-the-five-star-movement-and-its-continuity-with-the-past/>.

disintegration. Statements such as “UKIP will start by retrieving our democracy from Brussels”²¹ or equating EU membership to colonialism²² fuel the speculations made in Brussels. Today, right-wing populist leaders and parties are no longer the anomaly. Populist governments in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Sweden, France, and Spain, among others, openly claim to be illiberal democracies. The right-wing populist parties in Europe share a common ideology and rhetoric that they use to mobilize the people. Scholars term it international populism. Kuyper and Moffit state that “international populism occurs when populist actors in one nation-state, claiming to represent ‘the people’ of their state, seek to construct alliances, allegiances, and affinities with populists in other nation-states (and/ or those populists’ constituencies and audiences), without claiming to represent ‘the people’ of those other states.”²³ This phenomenon is noticed chiefly among EU member states where the populist parties share Eurosceptic, anti-EU, and anti-Brussels rhetoric in their performance of populism.

These populist parties share beliefs on issues such as immigration, gender ideology, and Euroscepticism. They associate themselves as democracies, just not liberal democracies, and it is in this way, they deviate from prototypical European values. They claim that, as exemplified in Mudde’s definition,²⁴ the will of the people should no longer be represented by the elite. According to them, these elites ought to be replaced by populist leaders who come from the people, understand the needs of the people and would better represent them. They do not wish for the European Union to disintegrate but, at the same time, demand a renegotiation of its treaties and policies, especially those aimed at greater integration.

The shift in traditionally hard Eurosceptic parties is not to soften Euroscepticism but work towards a balance where they wish to be the foundation of the European Union that is largely based on democracy, but at the same time, hope for lesser intervention in national matters by Brussels. France’s National Front is one such example, where former leader Jean Marie Le Pen was a hard Eurosceptic and lobbied for France’s exit from the EU. In 2011, his daughter Marine Le Pen rebranded the party and did away with its roots, including de-demonization and disassociating her father from the party.²⁵ In 2018, Marine Le Pen, changed the name of the party to National Rally (RN) and advocated that France does not require the EU in its present form but it requires a progressive substitution in the form of a “European Alliance of Nations”²⁶

Sweden is another example where there has been a rise in right-wing populism, witnessed by the victory of the Sweden Democrats (SD) in September 2022. The SD’s views are similar to other right-wing populist parties’ Eurosceptic approach, whereby they are exclusionary rather than anti-democratic. Its brand of illiberalism is a backlash against liberalism on an ideological basis rather than adopting a disruptive aspect of illiberalism.²⁷

Similarly, in Spain, Vox is identified as a right-wing anti-immigrant party that defends Spanish

²¹ Karine Tournier-Sol, “Reworking the Eurosceptic and Conservative Traditions into a Populist Narrative: UKIP’s Winning Formula?,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 53, no. 1 (2015): 142.

²² Tournier-Sol, “Reworking the Eurosceptic and Conservative Traditions into a Populist Narrative: UKIP’s Winning Formula?”

²³ Jonathan Kuyper and Benjamin Moffitt, “Transnational Populism, Democracy, and Representation: Pitfalls and Potentialities,” *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* 12, no. 2 (2020): 27–49.

²⁴ Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist.”

²⁵ Phelan, “How Far Has France’s Far-Right National Rally Come in 50 Years?”

²⁶ Pablo Castillo-Ortiz, “Le Pen’s New EU Rhetoric Masks Same Old Ideas,” *EU Observer*, April 2022, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/154771>.

²⁷ Orlaith Rice, “Sweden Democrats: Another Win for Right-Wing Populism and Illiberalism in Europe?,” *The Loop: ECPR’s Political Science Blog* (blog), 2020, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/sweden-democrats-another-win-for-right-wing-populism-and-illiberalism-in-europe/>.

nationalism and traditional conservatism. However, Vox does not identify itself as extreme. It states that it is ideologically radical and does not go against the central tenets of democracy. At the same time, like its other right-wing populist counterparts, Vox finds itself at odds with the ideas and values of liberal democracy, the rule of law of the European Union, and the rights of minorities.²⁸

The idea of radicalising democracy, as described by Chantal Mouffe,²⁹ remains central to the shift in Eurosceptic parties. They no longer identify themselves as hard or soft Eurosceptics, as defined by Taggart and Szczerbiak.³⁰ Instead, they seek to reform the European Union from within. To do away with its decision-makers, renegotiate the founding treaties and develop a new 'Europe' that caters to the nation-states constituting this supranational organisation. This has been witnessed in full form with the recent election of Giorgia Meloni in Italy. Meloni is known to be a hard Eurosceptic advocating Italy's exit from the Eurozone. However, since she was elected prime minister, Meloni's rhetoric has drastically toned down, with her supporting the EU's position against Russia in the Ukrainian war. Meloni has called for upholding democracy in Europe while challenging the rules of the European Union that have failed.

Euroscepticism Transformed: Meloni's redesigned position on Euroscepticism

As Italy voted for its new Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, from the far-right populist party, Mario Draghi, the outgoing prime minister, warned that "we have a certain vision of Europe. Our allies are Germany, France, and the other European states that uphold the rule of law." "Our choice of partners should be based on the interests of Italians—not just on ideological grounds."³¹ Meloni's supporters from across Europe celebrated her win. Spain's Vox Party congratulated her victory, stating that this was "the path of a new Europe of free and sovereign nations." Her supporters from Hungary and Poland also praised her victory, highlighting their "common vision and approach to Europe's challenges."³²

There is a perceived threat of the type of Euroscepticism adopted by Meloni and her party. Voters of the right-wing, Eurosceptic populist party and the Five Star Movement (MS5) have characterised Meloni as "too populist and anti-immigrant."³³ Recently, Meloni opposed the EU's financial sanctions on Hungary and Poland over issues related to the rule of law. Additionally, Italy is the European Union's third-largest economy and second-most indebted member state. Its "unsustainable" debt is at risk of a similar crisis to Greece's in 2012.³⁴ It has been speculated that due to the ideological difference between Rome and Brussels, the recovery and resilience plan negotiated by the former prime minister could fall through. The reforms Brussels demanded from Italy to access the €200 billion in EU funding could pose a new

²⁸ Andrés Santana et al., "The Radical Right Populist Vox and the End of Spain's Exceptionalism," *The Loop: ECPR's Political Science Blog* (blog), 2020, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/the-radical-right-populist-vox-and-the-end-of-spains-exceptionalism/>.

²⁹ Mouffe, "Radicalizing Democracy."

³⁰ Taggart and Szczerbiak, "The Party Politics of Euroscepticism in EU Member and Candidate States."

³¹ Benjamin Dodman, "A 'Seismic' Shift: Will Meloni's Italy Turn Its Back on Europe?," *France 24*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220928-will-the-new-far-right-government-of-italy-s-meloni-turn-its-back-on-europe>.

³² Dodman.

³³ Valentina Saini, "Beyond Salvini: The Rise of Eurosceptic Giorgia Meloni," *EU Observer* (blog), September 8, 2020, <https://euobserver.com/eu-political/149336>.

³⁴ Anita Pratap, "How Italy under Giorgia Meloni Can Create Problems for EU: The Far Right Leader's Policies Could Lead to an Illiberal Europe," *The Week*, October 9, 2022, <https://www.theweek.in/theweek/current/2022/09/30/how-italy-under-giorgia-meloni-can-create-problems-for-eu.html>.

battleground.³⁵

Scholars have argued that Meloni's agenda is to "push towards a 'sovereigntist' Europe."³⁶ They claim that such a project rejects the values of the supranational organisation to restore more power to the EU member states. As such, this 'sovereigntist' approach threatens European integration. Other scholars have argued that in the past Eurosceptic parties did not know what they expected from 'Europe.' They were against increased integration of the European Union but did not provide an alternative to it. Today, however, Eurosceptic parties know that they want a Europe of sovereign nations³⁷—one where the member states have a more significant say vs the technocratic approach taken thus far by the elites in Brussels.

Giorgia Meloni leads the Brothers of Italy party, founded in 2012. However, the party has its roots in the 1930s Mussolini fascist era.³⁸ The party identifies with the European Conservatives and Reformists Group that opposed European integration, beginning from the Treaty of Rome in 1957.³⁹ The far-right leader was expected to adopt a fascist take on populist politics. On the contrary, since her election as Italy's Prime Minister, Meloni has gone to great lengths to assure Brussels that she is in favour of European integration and is pro-NATO. This assurance was pertinent to soften her image in light of the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war.

During her 2022 campaign, Meloni repeated several times that the Brothers of Italy party does not have an anti-European view.⁴⁰ She reaffirmed that they aim to reform the European Union from within. She called for a "leaner EU than can live and work within its means to tackle shared challenges, including 'less centralism, more subsidiarity, less bureaucracy, and more politics.'"⁴¹ She underlined the need for more "unity in diversity", emphasising that her government would respect the rules of the EU while simultaneously working towards changing those that did not work.⁴²

At her swearing-in ceremony, Meloni assured that her right-wing coalition party would not stand in the way of EU integration and "would work with other member states in a 'pragmatic and non-ideologic' way and would protect 'freedom and democracy.'"⁴³ Further, in her address to the European Parliament, Meloni condemned all forms of extremism. At the same time, Meloni responded to the threat of a looming *Italexit*, stating that she is "what British people would define as an underdog" and pledged to "work to surprise everyone once again."⁴⁴ Closing her address, Meloni urged that "the EU must not be an elitist circle with first class and second class members, for us it is the home of the peoples of Europe . . . which will help us face the

³⁵ Alice Tidey and Vincenzo Genovese, "Here's What a Meloni Government in Italy Could Mean for the EU," *EuroNews*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/09/26/heres-what-a-meloni-government-in-italy-could-mean-for-the-eu>.

³⁶ Dodman, "A 'Seismic' Shift: Will Meloni's Italy Turn Its Back on Europe?"

³⁷ Dodman.

³⁸ European Conservatives and Reformists Group, "Fratelli d'Italia - Italy," European Conservatives and Reformists Group, 2020, https://ecrgroup.eu/ecr/party/brothers_of_italy.

³⁹ Alexander Brotman, "Giorgia Meloni and the New Face of Euroscepticism," *Geopolitical Monitor* (blog), September 27, 2022, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/giorgia-meloni-and-the-new-face-of-euroscepticism/>.

⁴⁰ Dodman, "A 'Seismic' Shift: Will Meloni's Italy Turn Its Back on Europe?"

⁴¹ Benjamin Fox and Roberto Castaldi, "Italy Will Be 'Reliable' EU Partner, Says PM Meloni," *Euractiv*, 10/25/2022 edition, accessed November 20, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/italy-will-be-reliable-eu-partner-says-pm-meloni/>.

⁴² Fox and Castaldi.

⁴³ Silvia Sciorilli Borrelli, "Giorgia Meloni Vows to Work with EU in First Address to Italian Parliament," *Financial Times*, October 25, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/a66585d2-7c35-4835-b7ba-9cf12000b3f3>.

⁴⁴ Sciorilli Borrelli.

challenges that member states could hardly face individually.”⁴⁵

Overall, there is a perceptible shift in the ideology of the Brothers of Italy coalition and that of Prime Minister Meloni. Her staunch Eurosceptic stance has softened while maintaining her policies on immigration, gender ideology, and democracy. She still aligns with populist parties such as Fidesz and Law and Justice. However, as they have changed their approach to the EU, so have the Brothers of Italy. Like other Eurosceptic parties in the EU, they are no longer for the disintegration of the EU and instead, call for a transformation of the functioning of the organisation. This transformation includes greater sovereignty to the member states, halting any EU plans towards a political union. On the one hand, these member states are in a constant state of confrontation with Brussels on varied issues relating to the rule of law, and on the other hand, they aim to uphold the values of democracy within a ‘Europe of Nations’ that they wish to create.

Conclusion

The stance adopted by Eurosceptic parties in the first decade of the new millennium, which largely pointed in the direction of EU disintegration, has evolved. Rather than limiting themselves to the definitions and categories put forth by scholars on hard and soft Eurosceptics, right-wing populist parties today are re-considering their perception of European integration. In this dynamic environment, with war at its doorstep, even hard Eurosceptic countries understand the need for unity in numbers. Tackling Russia is not going to be a single nation’s job. The repercussions of the war are now way beyond what was imagined. This unity in numbers can only be achieved by adopting an international approach to populism, which is what has been done by populist parties within the EU. This was witnessed most recently with the populist parties of Hungary, Poland, and even France celebrating Giorgia Meloni’s win in Italy.

Though Meloni was known for her hard Eurosceptic stance calling for Italy to exit the eurozone, this approach has since softened. At her address to the European Parliament as Italy’s prime minister, she assured the EU leaders that her government would not stand in the way of European integration but would persevere to protect democracy and freedom in the Union. However, it would be naïve to perceive that the Italian prime minister has shed off her Eurosceptic or populist ideology. Meloni’s predominantly male cabinet is a mix of populist and non-populist politicians. In crucial ministries such as Banking and Finance, Meloni has chosen candidates who identify themselves as pro-European; however, Defence, Industry, and the Interior ministries are filled with candidates from Meloni’s party, the Brothers of Italy.

European right-wing populist parties are still against the idea of an “ever closer union”—giving up more of the nation’s sovereignty towards a European political union. This ties largely with the idea of a lack of democratic legitimacy. They invoke the need to regain sovereignty from the European Union while maintaining the democratic institutions of the supranational organisation. They aim to create a “Europe of Nations”, a reformed European Union that focuses more on upholding the values of democracy without compromising on the integrity, values, traditions, and goals of individual member states. Thus, we see a transformed Euroscepticism that balances hard and soft Euroscepticism.

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