

Salvini's Lega Soars in Abruzzo Regional Vote

Judigh Harris (February 11, 2019)



Claiming almost 28%, Deputy Premier Matteo Salvini's right-wing Lega triumphed in Sunday's vote in the Abruzzo Region, in what is seen as the walkup to the EU vote March 26. The big loser: Luigi Di Maio's Five Star Movement (M5S), with under 20%.

ROME -- Pollsters had predicted that Deputy Premier Matteo Salvini's right-wing Lega would triumph in Sunday's vote in the mountainous Abruzzo Region in Central Italy, and so it has, dominating a center-right coalition that included Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers from Italy). The turnout of 53% lagged slightly below that of the previous regional election. Together this rightist trio, ousting a center-left coalition, claimed a total of 48% of a vote seen as the walkup to the forthcoming European Parliament election. To take place in Italy on Sunday, May 26, that vote will involve the 400 million citizens of all EU 27 member states.

On its own the Lega copped 27,5% of the vote, striding ahead, or, better, trampling the Five Star Movement (M5S) headed by Salvini's fading partner-in-government, Luigi Di Maio. The M5S shrank to below 20%, meaning that it lost half of its 40% vote in the Abruzzo during the elections for Parliament a year ago. In the Abruzzo election In the coalition Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia won only 9% even though he personally campaigned there. Still, "The Abruzzo confirms once more that the center-right is the natural majority among the voters," said Berlusconi Monday.

The trio's center-right list was headed by Marco Marsilio of the otherwise miniscule Fratelli d'Italia. "Victory!" exclaimed Meloni Monday, "an historic day for our party." As if echoing President Donald Trump, she added, "Now the most important challenge begins -- to make the Abruzzo great again!" Tweeting his thanks, on Monday Salvini wrote, "I'm tougher than the attacks, lies and polemics, so back to work tomorrow."

Di Maio will be hard pressed to reclaim the votes so speedily shed. Last year the M5S won 300,000 votes, or almost 40%; it now has 116,000, losing almost two-thirds. By its forcibly imposing the themes of race and security into the government agenda, said an angry Giorgio Trizzino, M5S member of Parliament, from the outset the Lega methodically and even "scientifically" compromised the pluralist, social-minded and tolerant identity of the M5S.

Some observers here say that his anti-establishment party, created only a few years back by comedian-cum-politico Beppe Grillo, had absorbed a good many left-leaning voters, who now are alienated by the rightist shift within the government provoked by Salvini. Originally the M5S was brought about in reaction to the evident corruption in high places (a former mayor of Rome will shortly be on trial for corruption), and to what is called here, as well as elsewhere, by "the elite." For decades after WWII the Christian Democratic and Communist parties ruled Italy, replaced in the Nineties with Silvio Berlusconi leading the center-right and, on the center-left, the Partito Democratico, which now lies in splinters.

So now what? Even though Salvini, Berlusconi and Meloni together would have sufficient votes to take control of the Italian government, at present this appears unlikely, at least until after the May 26 EU election. "This election changes the Abruzzo but not the government," said Salvini. "This is the alliance and so it will remain."

Other serious consequences are already visible, however. Salvini has openly supported completion of the high-speed rail link between Lyon and Turin (the TAV), which governing partner Di Maio adamantly opposes, but this vote may force Di Maio to back down. Another crucial issue is migration: Salvini is notoriously, openly hostile to migrants, and faces possible trial for having refused to allow migrants aboard a ship to disembark in Italy last summer, contravening the law of the sea. Until now the M5S has sought a way to protect Salvini from that trial: that policy may now change. Not least, Di Maio, backing the yellow jackets in France, has already strained relations with that country, which just withdrew its ambassador to Italy. Will Salvini repair that breach?

Still, the M5S can strike back. According to the daily Corriere della Sera Monday, "Today's collapse of support for the M5S can bring just two results: either a renewal of their leadership class on the



national level, or ever more bitter attacks on its ally, such as voting for authorization to proceed against Salvini" in the pending judicial actions against his refusal to allow the migrants on the ship to disembark last summer. "The choice is limited: this could lead to the fall of the government and to the return of a movement of opposition," the Corriere editorial comment concluded.

One small consolation: the far-right Casa Pound claimed less than 1% of the Abruzzo vote.

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