

# Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni, Strong Women

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In Europe, three women are emerging as rising leaders in their countries' party systems: in Germany, Alice Weidel for Alternative für Deutschland, Marine Le Pen in France with Rassemblement National and, on the other side of the Alps, Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d'Italia. The precise characterisation of these parties raises serious problems that have given rise to scientific controversy and political debate: should they be described as fascist, post-fascist, far right, radical right, national-populist or national-conservative? Similarly, are these three women similar or alike, do they have analogies or simply homologies? In an attempt to provide some answers to these questions, we shall examine the case of the two most important of them, Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni, sketching out the reconstruction of two paths that are both parallel, as Plutarch would say, and also, at times, closely intertwined.

The Rassemblement National has become the leading political party in France: its president, Jordan Bardella, won 31.3% of the vote in the European elections, 33.4% in the first round and more than 37% in the second round of the legislative elections in 2024; as for Marine Le Pen, she chairs the largest political group in the National Assembly and is the main opponent of President Emmanuel Macron. Giorgia Meloni is both the leader of her party, which obtained 26% of the vote in the 2022 elections, up from 4% in 2018, and 28.7% of the vote in the European elections, and the President of the Council of Ministers, who enjoys a high level of popularity according to the polls.

Despite their age differences - Marine Le Pen was born in 1968 and Giorgia Meloni in 1977 - they have undeniable points in common. They both became involved in politics at a very young age,

influenced by their families: the French woman's parents, especially her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and the Italian woman's mother, who was a member of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI).

Marine Le Pen joined the Front National, founded in 1972 and led by her father, at the age of 18. The party was clearly on the far right, bringing together anti-communists and anti-Gaullists, former supporters of the Vichy regime and Marshal Pétain, admirers of fascism, traditionalist Christians, racists and anti-Semites. The party experienced significant growth from the 1980s onwards, when left-wing politician François Mitterrand was President, making the fight against immigration its main battle-horse. From the age of 15, Giorgia Meloni was active in the MSI's youth movement, Il Fronte della Gioventù. Unlike Marine Le Pen, who studied law and became a lawyer, her real school was the party that formed her.

The MSI, which appeared in 1946, quickly established itself as the most important far-right party in Europe, serving as a model for all the parties in this political family, starting with the Front National and Jean-Marie Le Pen. Le Pen borrowed the MSI logo, a tricolour flame, to make it the emblem of his own party, which received financial support from its Italian counterpart.

The young Meloni made no secret of her admiration for Mussolini, notably in an interview given to a French television channel in 1995. Subsequently, she partly followed the transformation of the MSI into the Alliance Nationale in 1995 after the collapse of the traditional parties and the entry into politics of Silvio Berlusconi in January 1994. She embarked on a political career that saw her hold several important posts, including the vice-presidence of the Chamber of Deputies from 2006 to 2008 and Minister for Youth in the Berlusconi government from 2008 to 2011. In 2013, she was also one of the founders of a new party, *Fratelli d'Italia*. Gradually, she distanced herself from Fascism, strongly condemning Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws of 1938 while equating anti-Fascists and Fascists, who, in her view, were all fighting for an ideal.

Marine Le Pen took over from her father in 2011, and she too, in small steps, differentiated herself from him, particularly on the issue of anti-Semitism, which she refutes. Nonetheless, in the great continuity of the history of the far right in France, she affirms the pre-eminence of the French over foreigners, what she calls national preference, in the face of what she describes as the flood of immigration that is endangering France's identity. This nationalism, which is not expansionist but defensive in the face of hated globalisation, vilified migratory flows and Islam, and this nativism, are found almost identically in Giorgia Meloni. This has led both parties and their leaders to oppose the European Union and, following Brexit, to want to leave it and abandon the euro. Both will abandon these plans after the failure of the Brexit and in view of the very pragmatic attachment shown by the French and Italians to Europe and even more so to the single currency.

Fratelli d'Italia and the Rassemblement National therefore have easily identifiable antecedents: fascism for the former, the extreme nationalist right for the Rassemblement National. But these

two parties, which were, to use classic distinctions, far right-wing and therefore determined to overthrow democracy, including by violence, have transformed themselves, not without difficulty, into radical right-wing parties. The Rassemblement National and Brothers of Italy are endeavoring to demonstrate that they are responsible parties of government, which does not prevent them from sometimes returning to their protest dimension. But their "de-demonization" strategies, as they are known in France, have worked. In fact, they have renounced the use of physical force, respect democratic institutions while being tempted to shake them up, in particular with their harsh criticism of the judiciary and the media which are not in their favor, and their deliberate desire to break what they call the cultural hegemony of the Left, which is what Giorgia Meloni is energetically working towards.

In France, if they win the presidential election in 2027, for example, Marine Le Pen or Jordan Bardella are determined to use all the great powers given to the head of state by the Constitution of the Fifth Republic. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni would like to initiate a major constitutional reform that would introduce the election by universal suffrage of the President of the Council of Ministers, who would have greater power than the President of the Republic, who is still elected by Parliament.

These two women also have a more or less pronounced populist dimension, since they castigate the elites or part of them, praise the "common sense" of the people, and present themselves as anti-systems, or as the Italian said, an underdog. They claim to embody the general will which, in their view, should be expressed without any hindrance, particularly from judges. However, there is a recurring tension between, on the one hand, this aspiration to inspire the people gathered behind them and, on the other, their positioning on the right as opposed to the left, which, de facto, amounts to admitting that the left is present within these same people. Be that as it may, in these evolving parties, the legacy of the past - nationalism, nativism, xenophobia, racism, even anti-Semitism - is far from having been totally repudiated or disappeared. This working progress makes Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni look like matryoshkas, those Russian dolls that fit into each other: here, each of these dolls evokes the different political identities they have adopted over time...

Finally, Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni are two women who, on the one hand, face political opponents who, with the exception of the Italian leader of the Democratic Party, are men, and who, on the other, have had to impose themselves in their own very masculine, macho and virilist parties. Although far from being feminists, especially in the case of Giorgia Meloni, they draw strength and prestige from their status as women and use it as a political resource. Marine Le Pen, for example, has taken great care in her communications to present herself as a normal woman, a mother who loves cats, in order to give her party a reassuring appearance. Giorgia Meloni puts a lot of emphasis on her youth spent in a popular district of Rome to appear as a woman of the people.

Yet there are differences between Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni, and they are not insignificant. Quite the contrary, in fact. The most striking difference concerns the war in Ukraine. Giorgia Meloni has continued the policy initiated by Mario Draghi when he was President of the Council from 2021 to 2022 after the outbreak of war by Russia: supporting Ukraine and sending arms. She does not take into account Matteo Salvini's League, one of the three parties that make up the right-of-centre coalition she leads, which is pro-Russian and in favour of peace whatever the price Kiev might pay for it, and the important Italian pacifist current that overlaps with the League, the opposition 5-Star Movement and a large component of the centre-left Democratic Party. Marine Le Pen, who is very close to Vladimir Putin, has resigned herself to condemning the Russian aggression but is in favour of opening peace negotiations as soon as possible. Giorgia Meloni is in favour of NATO. She is pursuing the traditionally pro-Atlantic foreign policy of the Italian Republic, while Marine Le Pen wants to leave NATO's integrated command in the name of national independence, even if she has postponed this objective until peace has been established in Ukraine.

Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen are euro-critics, but not in the same way. The former knows that Italy needs the European Union, which is providing it with considerable and essential funding under the Next Generation EU program. It intends to reach agreements with the European People's Party on two priority issues: tougher policies to combat illegal immigration and the scrapping of the Green Pact to combat global warming. She would like to break up the unity of the coalition in the Parliament between the EPP, the Socialists, the Liberals and the Greens to push Europe further to the right, which she hopes would give national sovereignty more room to manoeuvre. In other words, Giorgia Meloni wants to reorientate EU policy, not break it up, which puts her at odds with the Trump administration. Marine Le Pen does not want any compromise with the other political parties and is critical of Giorgia Meloni for seeking agreement, including with the President of the European Commission. She claims to want to reduce the European Union's powers to a minimum. This is one of the reasons why the Rassemblement National members of the European Parliament belong to the Patriots group, while the Brothers of Italy members sit in the European Conservatives and Reformists group.

Similarly, while Marine Le Pen is interested in the new American administration for its nationalism, the affirmation of national sovereignty, its anti-migrants policy and the fight against wokism, she is showing a certain caution, for two reasons. Firstly, because French public opinion overwhelmingly rejects Donald Trump for his policies, but also because of France's deep-seated anti-Americanism. Secondly, because tariffs would penalize the French economy and hit part of her electorate. Giorgia Meloni is extremely close politically and ideologically to Donald Trump, to Vice-President Vance, with whom she has said she shares much of the iconoclastic comments he made in Munich in February 2025, and to Elon Musk, who fascinates her. She hopes to play the go-between between the White House and Brussels in order to demonstrate that she is indispensable and thus strengthen her position. However, the US President's stance on the war in Ukraine, his threats to tax imports into the United States and his open hostility to the European

Union are putting her in a difficult position, as they run counter to her policy since 2022 and the interests of both her voters and her country.

On economic matters, Marine Le Pen uses rhetoric favoring a state policy of "social chauvinism", even though one voice, and not just any voice, that of the party president, is heard proposing aid to businesses and seems increasingly to accept a certain economic liberalism. Fratelli d'Italia is endeavoring to reconcile liberal measures (particularly in favor of businesses) with the defense of Italian interests, of this "Made in Italy" constantly promoted by Giorgia Meloni. Because of the voting system, Giorgia Meloni leads a right-wing coalition. Despite the differences in the political system and electoral law, representatives of the French right and Jordan Bardella within the Rassemblement seem to want to draw inspiration from this Italian model. For the time being, however, Marine Le Pen continues to pit the people against the elites and rejects any union of the right, believing that she will win alone.

While both women are fighting Islam, Marine Le Pen is doing so in the name of the Republic and secularism, two notions that are in fact antagonistic to her policy of closing the door to immigrants, of establishing a hierarchy between "native French" and "paper French" (foreigners who have obtained French citizenship) and of national withdrawal. As for Giorgia Meloni, who is close to Viktor Orban and Trump in this respect, she continually invokes her trilogy: God, family, homeland. Marine Le Pen does not share this national conservatism.

Finally, Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni are in different situations. The former, convicted by the courts of misappropriation of European public funds, is awaiting the outcome of her appeal to find out whether she will be able to stand as a presidential candidate in 2027. The second dominates her coalition, is high in the polls and has established herself as a real political leader in Europe and around the world. At European and international level, the leadership that Marine Le Pen once exercised is now largely eclipsed by that of Giorgia Meloni.

All these differences simply confirm a political reality based on historical experience: nationalisms, by their very nature, may converge on certain goals, but they diverge fundamentally because they seek above all to promote the interests of their countries. And there is no shortage of areas of disagreement between France and Italy. In other words, the Rassemblement National and Fratelli d'Italia, like all their mutual allies, were making electoral progress and spreading their ideas in their respective societies. But their rise is proving resistible, not least because they are struggling to unite and act in concert.