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The European Elections in Italy[*]

SUMMARY: 1. The main features of the Italian electoral system for the EU Parliament election. – 2. The electoral campaigns for the EP election. – 3. From Europe towards the Italian results. – 4. The regional effects of the results of the EU elections. – 5. The crises of the "Yellow-Green" Government.

1. *The main features of the Italian electoral system for the EU Parliament election*

In Italy, the elections of the members of the European Parliament were held on the 26th May 2019.

Firstly, the decision of the European Council no. 937 of 2018 should be considered. According to this, 76 seats of the EP were allocated to Italy starting from the 2019 legislature (as we know, the MEPs are 751).

However, as specified by the Court of Cassation on the 21st May 2019, of these 76 European parliamentarians assigned to Italy, only 73 will take over immediately, while the remaining 3 seats will be given only after the UK has effectively left the EU.

This means that if the UK does not leave the EU, Italy will have 73 seats for the entire Legislature.

We voted with the electoral system established by law no. 18 of 1979 (law about the "Election of the Italian members of the European Parliament").

The right to vote is exercised by citizens at least 18 years old, while for candidates, the minimum age is 25 years.

Let's look in more detail:

1) The electoral districts

The Italian national territory is divided into 5 plurinominal districts, in which the seats are allocated in proportion to the population.

Each constituency consists of several regions, according to the following list and graphic:

1. North-western Italy (Valle d'Aosta, Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia): No. 20 seats

2. North-eastern Italy (Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna): No. 15 seats

3. Central Italy (Toscana, Umbria, Marche, Lazio): No. 15 seats

4. Southern Italy (Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria): No. 18 seats

5. Insular Italy (Sicilia, Sardegna): No. 8 seats

Italian electoral districts for the EP election		Seats	Laegue No.	PD No.	M5S No.	FI No.	FdL No.	SVP No.
	I	20	9	5	2	2	2	0
	II	15	7	4	2	0	1	1

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[*] Testo rielaborato dell'intervento svolto nell'ambito della Conferenza internazionale svoltasi a Madrid nei giorni 19 e 20 settembre 2019, sul tema: "*Las elecciones europeas en Italia*".

	III	15	6	4	2	2	1	0
	IV	18	5	4	6	2	1	0
	V	8	2	2	2	1	1	0

Each candidacy can be presented in more than one constituency (i.e. "multiple candidatures").

A total of eighteen lists competed in the European Parliament (EP) elections, as a product of a strongly multi-party format.

2) The voting system

In each list, candidates of the same sex cannot be more than half and the top two candidates on the list must not be of the same sex (i.e. "Equal opportunities").

The ballot paper is unique.

The law provides for a multiple preference vote for the candidates on the same list: each voter can express his/her preference for one of the lists and choose up to three candidates in the same district list, according to the ranking of alternative consents.

This means that, in the case of the expression of two or three preferences, these must be assigned to candidates of different sexes.

If the preferences are not expressed to candidates of different sexes, the second or third preference will be cancelled.

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3) The allocation of seats

The lists that have achieved at least 4% of the valid votes cast at the national level are assigned seats (it means that a national threshold is in force).

The seats are assigned to the lists in proportion to the votes obtained at the national level, with the system of whole quotients and highest remainders (i.e. "Hare method of natural quotients, and the highest remainders").

The seats obtained by each list are then reassigned to the districts in proportion to the votes obtained in each of them.

Once the number of seats on the list in each constituency has been determined, the candidates with the greatest number of preference votes are declared elected).

2. *The electoral campaigns for the EP election*

Despite their purpose to elect a European Parliament, historically the electoral campaigns for the EP had very little focus on European programmes.

For the first time, in 2014, though influenced by the consequences of the hardness of the economic policies imposed to Italy, the electoral campaign was more clearly "Europe oriented".

Specifically, it was the pro-European Democratic Party (PD) led by the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to conduct the electoral campaign in this direction.

In this occasion, the PD's score was also the best result for an Italian party in a nationwide election in the last half century.

After the defeat in the constitutional referendum, Renzi was forced to resign, and his foreign affairs minister Paolo Gentiloni was appointed as the new Prime Minister (in December 2016).

In March 2018 the political elections took place in Italy: the anti-establishment "Five Star Movement" (M5S) led by Luigi Di Maio became the party with the most votes; the centre-right coalition came second (with the best result obtained by the League led by Matteo Salvini) and Renzi's centre-left arrived only third. Nicola Zingaretti became the new Secretary of the Democratic Party.

The result of the general elections was non decisive in establishing the government because none of the political groups or parties obtained the most seats.

Finally, after three months of negotiations, in June 2018, M5S and League formed an unusual government coalition (s.c. "yellow-green government") with Giuseppe Conte (linked to the M5S) as Prime Minister and Di Maio and Salvini as vice-ministers.

Differently from what happened in 2014 (see *supra*), in the 2019 EU elections the Italian electoral campaign was characterised by a strong opposition against the EU financial and economic policies by the "populist" political parties.

In particular, the League focused its electoral campaign on the fight against illegal immigration and on the inefficiency of European policies in this matter.

The safeguarding of the "yellow-green government" and the clash between two governing parties vying for leadership were the principal aims of the other political parties.

The pre-electoral polls suggested that the M5S was on route to be punished by the electorate, while the League appeared to be increasing its consensus. For its part, despite its internal conflicts, the centre-left Democratic Party appeared to slowly recover in the polls, though it was still far from the far-right.

Thus, in the imminence of the EU election, numerous conflicts between the two forces of government began to emerge.

In conclusion, the EU electoral campaign seemed to have contaminated the relationship between the two political parties that composed most of the government.

This confirmed the opinion according to which the campaign for the European elections would be just a continuation of the national political election (from March 2018 and regional elections from last March).

Anyway, in Italy, the voter turnout slightly decreased compared to the previous European elections (from 57.22% to 54.5% of voters) and, albeit slightly, it remained above the European average (50.62% of voters).

(see the diagram below)

Turnout by country

SOURCE: https://election-results.eu/

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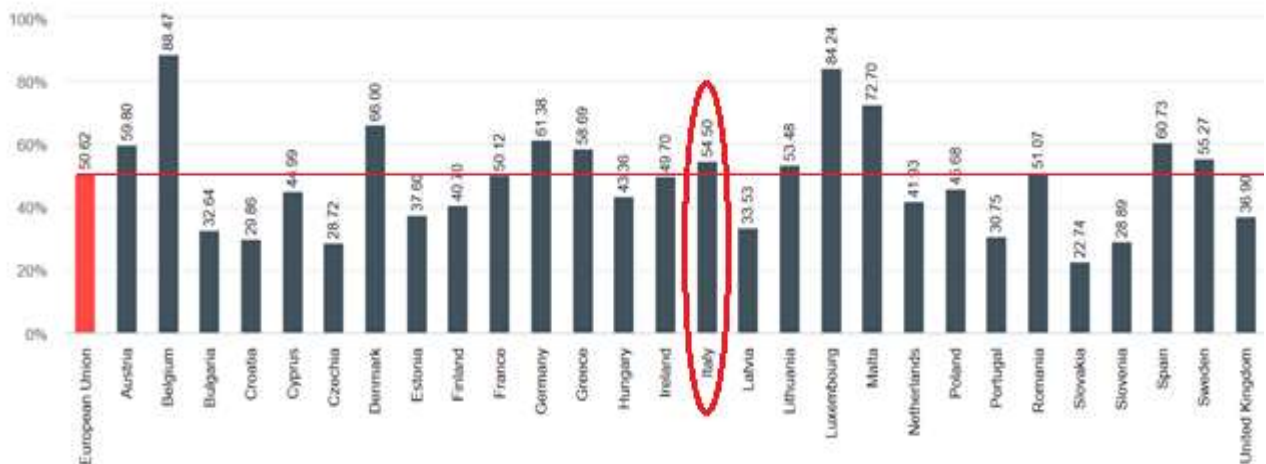
3. *From Europe towards the Italian results*

As we know, at the European level there has been a decline in the Party of European Socialists (with about 147 seats), while the People's party (the EPP) became the first party (with 182 seats) by a wide margin over rivals. The so-called "Sovereign Parties" received only 60 seats.

It means that the next European Parliament will likely be led by a coalition of pro-European forces (including the Social Democrats, the People's Party, the Liberals and perhaps the Green, the Europe of Nations and Freedom).

On the other hand, the far-right block (including the League and France's National Party) gained seats from 2014 but is likely to remain the minority.

European Parliament 2019 - 2024
Constitutive session
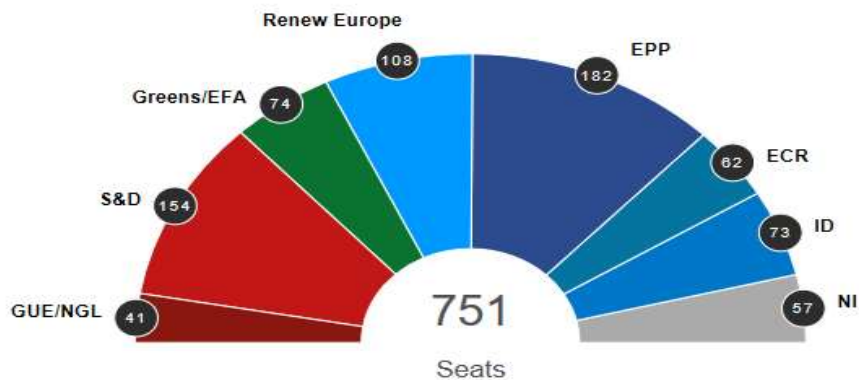
Political groups in the European Parliament
- EPP - Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)
- S&D - Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament
- ECR - European Conservatives and Reformists Group
- Renew Europe - Renew Europe group
- GUE/NGL - Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left
- Greens/EFA - Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance
- ID - Identity and Democracy
- NI - Non-attached Members

SOURCE: https://election-results.eu/

In Italy, the League Party performed even better than expected in the European elections, winning more than 34 percent (the exit polls had estimated the party to reach 27-31 percent).

The second biggest party, the centre-left Democrats (PD), reached 22.7 percent.

The anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), which governed in coalition with the League, took just 17.1 percent.
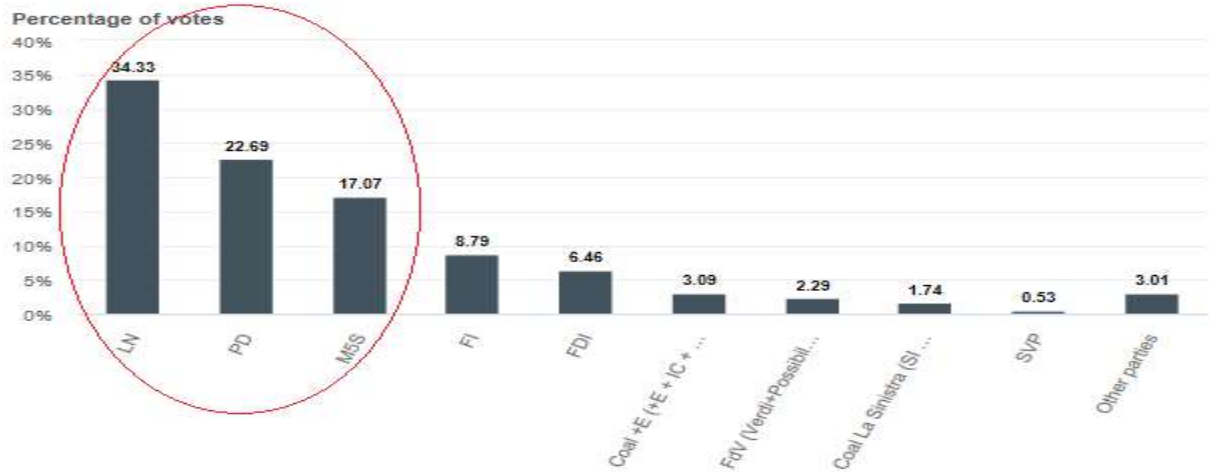
[It should be clarified that I'm going to focus only on the three major political parties].

Results by national party: 2019 - 2024

Italy - Final results

National Parties

LN - Lega Salvini Premier
PD - Partito Democratico (con Siamo Europei)
M5S - Movimento Cinque Stelle
FI - Forza Italia
FDI - Fratelli d'Italia
Coal +E (+E + IC + PDE et al.) - Coalition +Europa (+ Europa - Italia in Comune - Partito Democratico Europeo).

FdV (Verdi+Possibile et al.) - Coalition Federazione dei Verdi (Verdi + Possibile + Green Italia et al.).
Coal La Sinistra (SI + RC) - Coalition La Sinistra (Sinistra italiana + Rifondazione comunista + Altra Europa con Tsipras + Partito del Sud + Transform Itali + Convergenza Socialista)
SVP - Südtiroler Volkspartei (Partito popolare sudtirolese)
Other parties - Other parties

As shown in the graph, the League increased its electoral consensus in an exponential manner compared to the 2014 European elections, the 2018 political elections, and the 2019 European elections.
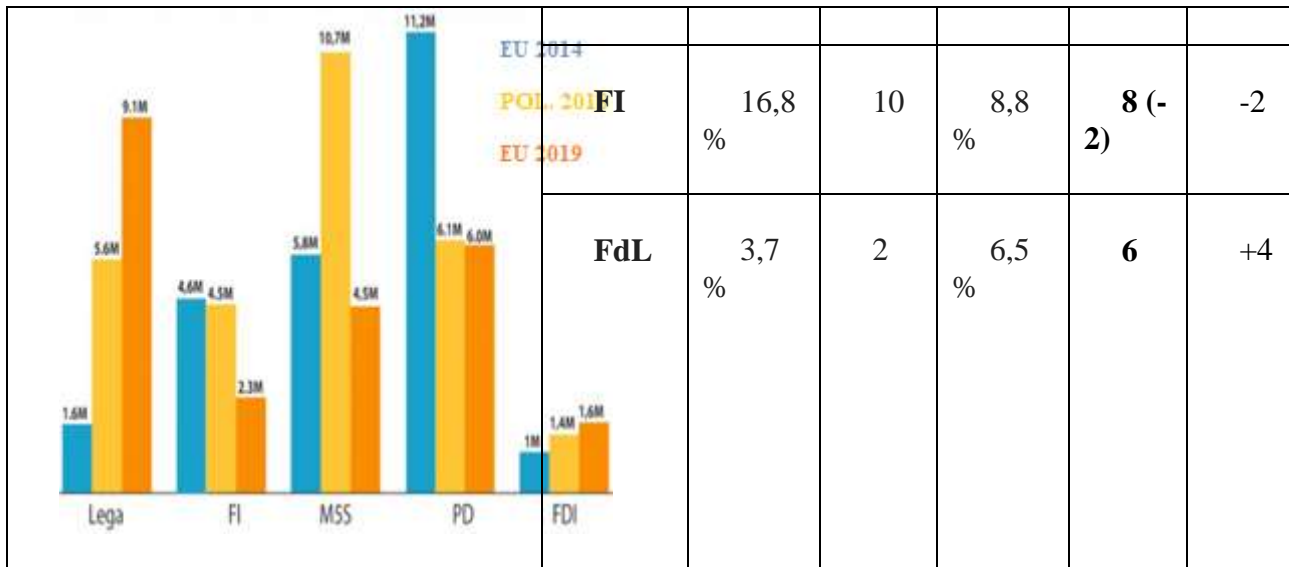
On the contrary, the M5S and the Democratic Party achieved a lower result than in both the 2014 European elections and the 2018 political elections.

More precisely, the League won 29 seats, the Democratic Party 19, the Five Star Movement 14, Forza Italia 8, while Fratelli d'Italia 6 and SVP 1.

Millions of votes		2014	No. seats	2019	No. seats	≠
	Laegue	6,2 %	6	34,3 %	**29 (-1)**	+23
	PD	22,7 %	26	40,1 %	**19**	-7
	M5S	21,2 %	11	17,1 %	**14**	+3

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	EU 2014	POL. 201_	EU 2019		
FI	16,8 %	10	8,8 %	**8 (-2)**	-2
FdL	3,7 %	2	6,5 %	**6**	+4

The League's success in Italy was highly relevant, but much less than in the rest of the EU: in fact at the EU level, the elections were hardly a triumph for the populist parties, since most of the results from the other countries showed the electoral bodies as pro-EU.

It was immediately evident that, without any support from other EU leaders, it would have been impossible to achieve the ambitious objectives to bring about radical reforms of EU rules (in particular, regarding the relaxation of fiscal rules and the new mandate for the European Central Bank…).

Perhaps it's with this in mind that Salvini began to say that he wanted to "change the rules" of the EU from the inside.

Anyway, the "yellow-green" government came to be dogged by markets, due to the fear that the coalition might engineer an "Italexit". This pushed up Italian borrowing costs, but concerns receded thanks to the assurances of the Economy Minister (Giovanni Tria) that Italy would be fully committed to the Euro.

Therefore, the risk of an Italian marginalisation became high, both in the European context and in relations with other European States».

In particular, Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini's MEPs joined forces with anti-immigration parties across Europe to create the biggest far-right group in the European parliament.

Indeed, the attempts of the M5S to rebuild the "Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy" (EFDD) group with the Brexit Party failed, thus the 14 Five Star MEPs are doomed to slip back into the black-hole of non-attached members, as no other parliamentary group has agreed to team up with them so far.

4. *The regional effects of the results of the EU elections*
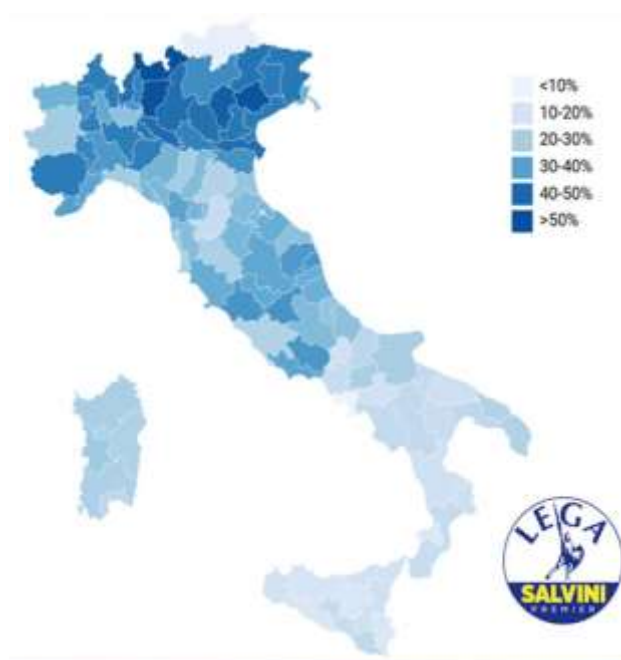
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SOURCE: **https://it.sputniknews**

In regards the results result at regional and local levels of the EU election, an interesting analysis, shows that the League has gained around 41 percent of voters (it means more than a third of votes) in the north (compared to 34 percent nationwide).

In particular, the region in which it was more successful, becoming the top party, was Veneto in the north-east, where it won just under 50 percent.

Therefore, its reach spread toward the centre of Italy, across the traditional "Red zone" (of left-wing supporters between Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna).

The Democrats won in Tuscany (33 percent) and in the northern and centre big cities (as Rome, Florence, Genoa and Turin); while it came second behind the League throughout the north and, in most of the south, it was relegated to third or even fourth place (gaining just 15 percent in Molise).
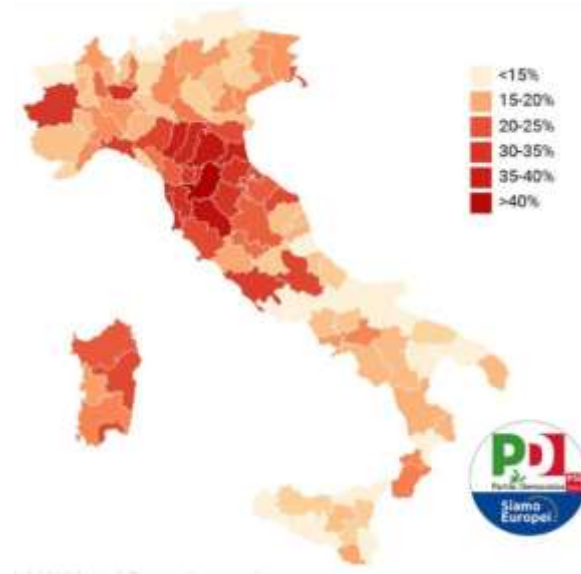
SOURCE: www.youtrend.it

Regarding the Five Star Movement, the party topped 30 percent in some parts of southern Italy (its strongest region was the Campania region, where it won just under 34 percent).
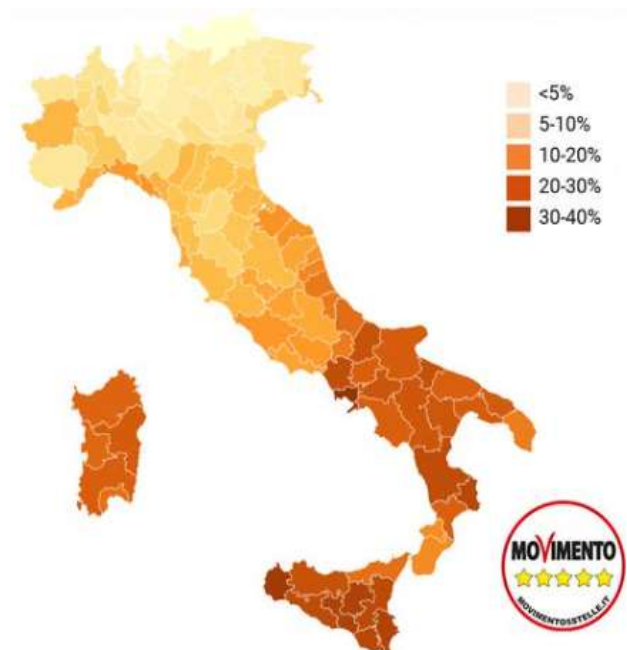
Last but not least, we report below the results, municipality by municipality, of the 2018 Political Elections and those of the 2019 European Elections: the trend is clear, showing the erosion perpetrated against the M5S by the League Party.

From an internal perspective, the results show that after just one year of government, the balance of power between Italy's two ruling parties has been turned around:

- The League doubled its score from last year's 17.35% to 33.6%, while the Five Star Movement crumbled from 32.68% to 16.70%;

- the Five Star Movement was also overtaken by the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), which came out ahead of the anti-establishment party, at 23.5%; and

- the Democratic Party became the second largest Italian party in the European Parliament, bringing 18 seats to the assembly's Socialists and Democrats group – just one seat less than the successful Spanish delegation.

Even though the elections confirmed the positive outlook for centre-right parties, with the League in the lead in the immediate time, Salvini's party decided not to spark a government crisis.

Afterwards, on 16th July, with 383 votes in favour (the majority amounted to 376 seats), the European Parliament elected Ursula Von der Leyen President of the European Commission in a secret ballot.

In this phase an episode occurred that would have proven decisive for the fate of the yellow-green Government and, more in general, for the entire Legislature.

In fact, while the League voted against this candidature, the M5S delegation, on the contrary, voted in favour and gained credibility in the eyes of the EU.

5. *The crises of the "Yellow-Green" Government*

Just a month later, Salvini decided to trigger a political crisis by presenting a motion of no confidence against the President of the Council of Ministers (s.c. "Midsummer crisis").

Various opinions have been given about this political choice: a staple is that Salvini would have attempted to capitalise on his popularity to become Prime Minister, as stressed by Giuseppe Conte in his speech in the Senate when commenting on the government crisis and announcing his resignation.

Furthermore, some opinions maintain that Salvini was led to do this.

It was emphasised that with his aggressive policy, which reached its peak when he expressed his intention to have "full powers", Salvini turned everyone, even his allies and party mates, against himself.

Furthermore, the display of religious symbols on various occasions started to create friction with the Catholic world.

On the international level, the s.c. "Russia gate" was another sign of his weakness.

To all this, like previously said, must be added the non-consent of Salvini's party to Angela Merkel's EU Commission candidate Ursula Von der Leyen.

Salvini, with this in mind, strongly invoked the return to the polls, perhaps underestimating the fact that in the Italian parliamentary system the early dissolution of the Chambers is an exclusive prerogative of the President of the Italian Republic (Sergio Mattarella).

It's possible to think that Salvini's tactical error was to believe that during the month of August his plan would have gone unnoticed.

He also did not imagine that the two contenders to lead the Democratic Party (Nicola Zingaretti and Matteo Renzi) would have lined up together for a s.c. "Red-Green" government.

However, the other parties were aware that returning to the polls would immediately and certainly mean to help Salvini's political purpose and hand over to the League Party (over 35%) the government of the country.

In particular, the surveys still indicate that the PD and the M5S wouldn't have won. In fact, the right-wing coalition between the League, Forza Italia and Brothers of Italy remains in some way the strongest grouping.

Anyway, the country was plunged into a fresh political crisis after Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte quit as head of the ruling coalition.

It was in this delicate moment that, former European Commission President Prodi proposed an alliance called "Ursula majority" for the future government.

The alliance should prevent further participation of the ultra-right in the Italian Government and should make sure this consisted of all those who voted for Ursula von der Leyen a few weeks ago in the European Parliament: this means: M5S, PD and Forza Italia.

This is the present situation.

Finally, another criticality must be mentioned: In fact, it is believed that if we were asked back to vote with this electoral law in force (s.c. Rosatellum-bis), it would be more than likely that the current situation would represent itself or even get worse.

Hence the need to proceed with the umpteenth reform of the law for political elections, but in this way, we are starting a new chapter that must be still fully written.