



February 13, 2019

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Love Triangle

Italy, France, and Germany Ahead of the European Parliament Elections

By Emily Hruban

In mid-January, two of the European Union's largest economic powers met in Aachen to commit to closer cooperation and continued friendship. The treaty signed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron strengthened the two nations' economic and security partnership, solidifying both the Franco-German alliance and their commitment to deeper European integration. The two nations promised to "enhance cooperation in European policy with the goal of strengthening the unity, performance, and the cohesion of Europe, and at the same time keeping this cooperation open to all member states of the European Union."¹

Friends in Yellow

As Macron and Merkel reaffirmed Franco-German friendship, Macron's critics in Paris have been flirting with France's neighbors to the south. In October, Marine Le Pen, head of France's National Rally, or *Rassemblement national*, (formerly the National Front) held a press conference with Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini. Salvini proclaimed, "Europe's enemies are those cut off in the bunker of Brussels [...] The Junckers, the Moscovicis, who brought insecurity and fear to Europe and refuse to leave their armchairs."² Le Pen added that they did not want to fight against Europe itself, "but against the European Union that has become a totalitarian system."³ Salvini's The League, or *Lega*, party shares right-wing values with the *Rassemblement national*, and the two parties have publicly supported one another in past years and elections.

Last month, the target of Salvini's ire shifted from the European Union to French leadership. He offered support to the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement in France, calling the protesters "honest citizens who protest against a president who governs against his people."⁴

Italy's other deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, also stepped into the fray. Last month, Di Maio attacked France's involvement in Africa, claiming it was responsible for current migration flows into Europe. On February 5, Di Maio voiced his support for the *gilets jaunes*, traveling to France to meet with the movement's organizers and their candidates

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in the upcoming European Parliament elections. He later tweeted, “the winds of change crossed the Alps.”⁵

Di Maio heads Italy’s anti-establishment Five Star Movement. He was critical of right-wing leaders across Europe during the Italian elections in 2018 but managed to build a coalition in Italy with the right-wing Lega, finding common ground on issues from limiting migration and deporting thousands of migrants to universal basic income.

Likewise, the Five Star Movement espouses some of the same values as their populist counterparts in France. On both sides of the Alps, populists agree that they want the elites out of power and their governments to focus on national interests over European ones.

Serious Consequences

French leadership has attempted a variety of responses to Rome’s romance with French populists. First, Macron argued that Salvini and Di Maio should not be taken seriously, since Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is his counterpart in Rome.⁶ However, the Italian Prime Minister himself has been critical of Paris in recent weeks. Conte expressed concern about the newly-signed Aachen Treaty, particularly a passage in which France and Germany pledge to support Germany’s bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Conte complained that “they are only thinking of their national interests,” and that Italy no longer wants to be treated like a “poor relation.”⁷ The seat, he reasoned, should go to the European Union as a whole, not to one specific member.

Recently, Paris has taken a more serious approach. After Di Maio’s meeting with the *gilets jaunes*, France recalled its ambassador to Italy. The move sent shockwaves. The last time France’s envoy to Italy was recalled to Paris was 1940, when Mussolini was in power in Rome.

However, it is unlikely that this approach will be particularly successful. The Italian government will not respond to a diplomatic slap on the wrist the way that officials in France or Germany might. Their Eurosceptic platform means that these attacks on Macron and the EU are expected and welcomed by their supporters at home.

A New Europe?

Italian leaders’ overtures with *Rassemblement national* and the *gilets jaunes* demonstrate how connected populists are becoming across Europe. Voters caught between this budding populist romance and Merkel and Macron’s attempts at closer ties will be asked to participate in one of the most critical European Parliament elections ever this

May. Current polls suggest the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedoms alliance, which includes France’s *Rassemblement national* and Italy’s Lega, may pick up 25 seats in the upcoming election – almost doubling their presence in the Parliament.⁸ Although the populists will by no means win a majority, or even plurality of the votes, their opposition will become more credible and powerful if their presence increases.

With Brexit approaching in March, Germany, France, and Italy will soon be the European Union’s three largest economies. With their combined populations of over 209 million, they will also make up almost 50 percent of the EU’s post-Brexit population. This moment calls for greater unity, but the current reality portends further divisions, which will have major implications for the future of the European Project.

Endnotes:

- 1 <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/997532/1570126/c720a7f2e1a0128050baaa6a16b760f7/2019-01-19-vertrag-von-aachen-data.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.france24.com/en/20181008-le-pen-salvini-brussels-bunker-european-elections>
- 3 <https://www.france24.com/en/20181008-le-pen-salvini-brussels-bunker-european-elections>
- 4 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/01/08/keep-yellow-vest-revolt-france-warns-italy-populist-ministers/>
- 5 <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/luigi-di-maio-fuenf-sterne-bewegung-trifft-in-paris-auf-gelbwesten-vertreter-a-1251751.html>
- 6 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/29/france-and-italy-war-of-words-steps-up-as-elections-approach>
- 7 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-pm-germany-france/italy-pm-raps-france-germany-for-hypocrisy-on-europe-idUSKCN1PJ0G0>
- 8 <http://europeelects.eu/ep2019/>