

## **Trump is a problem for Europe's most important hard-right leaders**

WHEN UKRAINE'S allies' [military top brass](#) met in London on March 20th to discuss a possible peacekeeping force, one of their number was missing. The chief of Italy's defence staff, General Luciano Portolano, apparently had more important things to do and was represented by more junior officers. His absence was suggestive. The meeting was part of Europe's response to the growing disengagement of America under President Donald Trump. But Italy's hard-right prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, is a friend of Mr Trump, and that has put her in an awkward position.

Mr Trump's re-election initially invigorated the European hard right. The [American president's anti-woke national conservatism](#) chimes with the politics of leaders such as Ms Meloni. Boosted by [Elon Musk](#), a social-media mogul who is the president's ally, it also looked set to help the electoral chances of hard-right candidates. The most important of these is France's Marine Le Pen, who leads polls for the country's presidential election in 2027. (Judges will decide on March 31st whether to block her from running over alleged misuse of European Parliament funds.)

Yet the speed with which Mr Trump has upended transatlantic relations, undermined NATO and distanced himself from Ukraine has discomfited hard-right leaders. It has put Ms Meloni at odds with Italy's partners in the European Union and with other allies. And it has exposed the ambiguous relationship of Ms Le Pen and her party, the National Rally (RN), with their American analogues: French and American nationalism do not always mix.

### **Unfashionably late**

Ms Meloni has made plain her discomfort with Europe's assertive response to Mr Trump. She turned up 50 minutes late for the first Trump-era crisis meeting, organised in Paris by France's president, Emmanuel Macron, on February 17th. Italian officials

said she disapproved of the format, which did not include all 27 EU states. When Sir Keir Starmer, Britain's prime minister, held a broader virtual summit a month later, she waited until the night before to decide to take part.

Last month, when Volodymyr Zelensky was rebuked in the White House by Mr Trump and Vice-President J.D. Vance, Ms Meloni was, conspicuously, the only major European leader not to declare support for the Ukrainian president. On March 12th in the European Parliament the deputies of her hard-right Brothers of Italy party abstained on a motion supporting Ukraine (one voted against it). On both occasions, the reason was fear of upsetting Mr Trump. Ms Meloni has since said she will not contribute Italian troops to a peacekeeping force in Ukraine. Her MEPs did vote for the European Commission's new ReArm Europe programme. But she opposes confiscating Russian assets, frozen under EU sanctions, to give to Ukraine.

For years Ms Meloni staunchly backed Ukraine and condemned Russia. Why the apparent volte-face? Personal resentment may play a part. Before the new American administration took office, Ms Meloni was touted as Europe's "Trump-whisperer". She was feted by America's president as a "fantastic woman" and invited to his inauguration. But that was before Mr Vance bashed Europe at the Munich Security Conference, and before Mr Trump called the EU an organisation "formed in order to screw the United States". Now Europe's initiative has been snatched by leaders prepared to take a more robust line: Sir Keir and Mr Macron, with whom Italy's prime minister has a thorny relationship.

A further reason is that Ms Meloni's coalition is split over how to react to Mr Trump. Matteo Salvini, the leader of the hard-right League party and one of her two deputies, has condemned ReArm Europe and calls the French president "that madman Macron who talks of nuclear war". Though the League has now fallen to single digits in polls, it still commands enough votes in parliament to bring down the government. And in a country with a strong pacifist streak, Mr Salvini seems to have public opinion on his side. A poll this month found barely a third of voters back higher defence spending.

Nathalie Tocci, the head of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, a think-tank in Rome, suggests a more troubling reason. Many originally saw Italy's prime minister as a toxic far-rightist. "Backing Ukraine was a way of gaining credibility, a means to an end. But

now, with a new [American] administration, it works in the opposite direction,” she says. Italy is unlikely to join Hungary and Slovakia among the EU’s pro-Russian Trojan horses, she says. “But nor do I expect Giorgia Meloni to do anything that could irritate Donald Trump.”

For Ms Le Pen the calculation is different, and not only because she is in opposition. Unlike Ms Meloni, the French nationalist leader has never portrayed herself as close to America. Indeed, she and her party have often shown an affinity with Russia. In early 2022, during France’s presidential campaign, Ms Le Pen printed flyers featuring a photo of herself and Vladimir Putin, which were hastily shelved after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On March 12th this year the RN abstained in a non-binding parliamentary vote in support of Ukraine. Until recently, such was Ms Le Pen’s scepticism about the transatlantic alliance that she argued for France to withdraw from NATO’s military command.

This makes it easier for Ms Le Pen to criticise Mr Trump. This month she denounced the “brutality” of his suspension of military aid for Ukraine (since reversed), something Hungary’s Viktor Orban would never do. In this, she is in tune with French public opinion: in a poll conducted in March 73% of respondents said that America is “no longer an ally” of France.

What the party admires about Mr Trump, says a senior RN figure, is not only that he has shown once again how nationalists can win elections. He is also a lesson in political agency in sceptical times: that, once in office, “you can actually do things, and fast.” This is a powerful message for Ms Le Pen’s team in a country perennially hampered by bureaucracy and now burdened with a weak minority government.

### **Leaving early**

Yet Ms Le Pen’s party is torn. Jordan Bardella, her 29-year-old sidekick, travelled to Washington for a recent national-conservative convention, only to quit the event when Steve Bannon, Mr Trump’s former aide, made what looked very like a Nazi salute. Ms Le Pen has not spent the better part of the past decade scrubbing the image of her once-toxic party to have it tarnished again by fascist associations. “Trump is turning into a real problem for Le Pen,” says a French diplomat. In March her popularity dropped by

two points to 34%, according to a Cluster17 poll. (Mr Macron gained five points, to 23%.)

Mr Trump still delights many hard-right European leaders. But for Ms Meloni and Ms Le Pen, the American president could become a serious headache. Europeans don't like him: a tiny 6% of French and 8% of Italians told a poll in March that Mr Trump is "a friend of Europe". The more his blustering brand of nationalism seems damaging to the continent, the more voters in Italy and France may doubt its local versions.