

Italy, and why not all political negotiations are equal

Blog post by Senior Associate Roberto Robles, 29 March 2018

Signs are clearly pointing to the two winners of Italy's 4 March election - the Five Star Movement and Lega - being able to work together, and it is looking increasingly likely they will seek to reach some sort of governing arrangement. But, despite successfully reaching an agreement on the speakers for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate last week, they will find that agreeing on a common policy programme will prove significantly more tortuous, and involve compromises between often conflicting and contradicting positions.

Both Di Maio and Salvini, leaders of Five Star and Lega respectively, have clearly expressed their ambition to lead the next government, and neither will easily concede their claim; Di Maio's as the leader of the largest party, Salvini's as the leader of the largest coalition. Despite Salvini stating that the government programme is more important, the question of who leads the government will likely need to be settled before moving on to policy, and may ultimately result in the appointment of a compromise figure.

Both parties will also have to agree on the composition of the government, and this is where Salvini's position is more difficult. Joining a full coalition with Di Maio would threaten the integrity of his pact with Berlusconi, and therefore his claim to lead the largest coalition. Becoming deputy prime minister under Di Maio will be less attractive to Salvini than continuing to lead an electorally competitive centre-right group that could eventually deliver him the premiership. Lega staying outside of the cabinet and supporting a Five Star led minority government may be the only option that preserves the unity of the centre-right.

Ultimately, where Salvini and Di Maio will encounter the most severe difficulties is in negotiating a policy programme for government. Both parties' manifestos were relatively light policy-wise, only really featuring a flat tax for Lega and a universal basic income for Five Star, pledges that are incompatible and have already been dropped for cost reasons. There may eventually be overlap on pushing for changes to labour market laws, and reducing the retirement age, but even on the question of Europe the two parties are far from agreed. A Five Star - Lega deal would have to be limited, short-lived, and full of compromises for two parties not used to leading coalition negotiations. Despite the personal chemistry, and Salvini's assertion that he speaks to Di Maio more often than his mother, the two may find the next set of conversations significantly less familiar.