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Article

The many political legacies of Silvio Berlusconi

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Silvio Berlusconi, who passed away at almost 87 years of age on 12 June 2023, had been the most influential personality in Italian politics for the previous 30 years. Italy's longest-serving prime minister since 1945, Berlusconi held office for 3,342 days, in three different periods: from 11 May 1994 to 17 January 1995; from 11 June 2001 to 17 May 2006, and from 8 May 2008 to 16 November 2011. In his second stint in government, he also led the longest-running executive in Italy's republican history (1,412 days).

Berlusconi was the founder (1994) and unchallenged leader of Forza Italia (FI), until 2018 the largest party in the coalition of the centre right. In 2007, in response to the emergence of the Parttito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) in the opposing camp, Berlusconi decided unilaterally to merge FI with Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN) thereby creating the Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL). By the autumn of 2013, when FI was reconstituted, AN had already been reabsorbed by the birth of Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI) in December 2012, an event that took place in part because of Berlusconi's decision not to honour his promise not to run for premier for the sixth consecutive time in the 2013 elections. In December 2013, shortly after the rebirth of FI, Matteo Salvini became leader of the Northern League (emerging as the coalition's largest party in the wake of the 2018 elections). The rest, with the clear victory of FdI (26%) in the 2022 elections (as against 8.8% for the League (Lega) and 8.1% for FI), is recent history, with Giorgia Meloni as premier and Salvini together with Antonio Tajani (among the founders of FI and its vice-president from 2018) serving as her deputies.

These elements, broadly speaking, provide the background against which we will evaluate the immediate legacies of Berlusconi for the Italian political system. To do so, it will be useful to adopt the framework utilized by Gianfranco Pasquino (2007), who suggests that Berlusconi played five main roles: as *party builder*, *coalition-maker*, *institution-builder*, *prime minister* and *political leader*.

We will start from his role as creator and leader of FI, the *sine qua non* of his political career, and more specifically, from his absolute control of two aspects crucial to the life of any party: leadership and assets. In this regard, two significant elements can be noted: Tajani's appointment as FI secretary in July 2023 was followed by a postponement of the congressional assemblies to 2024 (the first aspect); FI's most recent accounts have shown the party's continuing almost exclusive dependence on the personal fortunes of its leader – and his family – (the second aspect). The history of FI, moreover, is closely intertwined with that of the development of bipolar

competition, a development that came to an abrupt halt between 2011 and 2013. This period was initiated with the appointment of a technocratic government supported by a grand coalition and relying on the authority of the president of the Republic, and it ended with the emergence on the national stage of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s). Nevertheless, the forces of the centre right would always try to keep their alliance intact, at least at general elections. In 2022, they would finally return to government as a single coalition, albeit that the distribution of power between its components had changed. In the final part of this section, we will briefly reflect on FI's attempt to find its own distinct political space in the ranks of the Meloni government.

Berlusconi as head of government constitutes the theme of the second section. The focus is on the relationship between his political and institutional endeavours and the phenomena that have been characteristic of Western democracies for several decades, namely, the strengthening of executives and institutional and 'behavioural' personalization (Rahat 2018). This will make it possible to throw light on what, if anything, the governing styles of the prime ministers who have held office since the beginning of the century owe to Berlusconi. Next, we shall consider Berlusconi's role as *institution-builder*. The proposals he advanced as head of government failed to produce any concrete results. The way he conceived and embodied the prime minister's role, nevertheless, conditioned the way the issue of institutional reform has been embraced on the Italian right, as can be seen from the substance of the constitutional reform bill providing for the direct election of the Prime Minister presented by the Government on 15 November 2023. Finally, we analyse the innovations brought by Berlusconi to the field of communication in Italy. The theme of leadership, which touches on all four of the other dimensions, is outlined in the conclusions.

1.

Forza Italia and the centre right

The first question requiring an answer is how to analyse Berlusconi's political legacy for his party and the coalition of the centre right generally. An initial response concerns his seat in the Senate. Adriano Galliani, who had been at Berlusconi's side for more than forty years, from the founding of Canale 5 and AC Milan to his current role as managing director of Monza Calcio, won the seat at the 22–23 October 2023 by-election. If this event is a first indicator of the pervasiveness of the network built by Berlusconi in various communications, sporting, and cultural fields (Newell 2018), then the forthcoming European elections in 2024 will provide the first test of FI's electoral solidity.

In the weeks following Berlusconi's passing, there was much discussion about the existence or otherwise of a hard core of voters willing to remain loyal to a political brand strongly associated with its creator and *dominus*, even in his absence. To understand the nature of this discussion, it is useful to start with FI's organizational peculiarity, confirmed by a recent analysis of personalization in political parties (Rahat 2022). According to this analysis, FI appears to be a clear *outlier* matched only by one other 'personal' party (Geert Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands), and by Adolfo Suarez's UCD in Spain. Personal, or charismatic, parties struggle to survive the demise of their leaders (Knapp 1994; Panebianco 1982). The other examples we have available in the recent history of European democracies are of little use. Indeed, other centre-right leaders who have ruled for more than a decade (such as Charles de Gaulle in France, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, or Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel in Germany) have

done so consecutively and, most importantly, without ever controlling the organization or finances of their parties to the extent that Berlusconi did.

Since its inception, FI has been a *sui generis* entity, founded through the stipulation of a private law contract, filed with a notary along with its first statute. In response to an article by Norberto Bobbio appearing in *La Stampa* in 1994, in which he called FI a 'ghost party', Berlusconi claimed that there existed only two organizational levels in the party, elected members and sympathizers, and that this resulted in the 'elimination of the anachronistic bureaucracy, the old rituals of membership and congresses'.[1] Its nature has changed little since early analyses called it a 'corporate party' (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999; Poli 2001).

FI's statute had always placed national, European and local-level nominations in the hands of Berlusconi who had always been able to decide who would be the party's candidates for elective positions in central and public office, and to effectively marginalize – as happened to Gianfranco Fini in 2010 – those who opposed his decisions. These were often made outside formal political channels, at his private residences in Arcore and Rome.

It was not surprising, then, that a month after his funeral, when the party's National Council met, Berlusconi was posthumously appointed to the position of 'founding president' (with Tajani being appointed *pro-tempore* general secretary until the new party congress). It will be interesting to study the latter, since in the previous 30 years the Berlusconi-led parties had held only three (in 1998, 2004 and 2009), and at all of them Berlusconi's position had been confirmed by acclamation. In October 2023, an amendment to FI's statute confirmed the very close identification between the party and its leader. Article 1 needs no comment:
Art. 1 - Silvio Berlusconi Founding President. The Forza Italia Political Movement is an association inspired and created by Silvio Berlusconi, who is its Founding President. It is on the basis of his teachings, political insights and guidance that FI has developed, has implemented and will continue to pursue its aims, maintaining a central role in Italian, European and international politics.

Berlusconi always made sure to prevent the emergence of alternative political spokespersons who might overshadow him. At least until 2018, when Tajani was appointed vice-president and coordinator of the party, no FI leader had ever enjoyed any political authority that did not in some way derive from that of Berlusconi. The only partial exception is Roberto Formigoni, who – not coincidentally – was assumed to be a possible successor to Berlusconi until his legal difficulties led him to resign as president of the Lombardy region in 2012 (Baldini 2014). In the three elections held under the Mattarella law (in 1994, 1996 and 2001), the party did much better in the proportional than in the majoritarian arena: a vote for FI has always been a vote for the Berlusconi brand. The party's failure to establish a solid presence among the grassroots is further evidenced by its difficulty in producing a political class at the local level. In the thirty years following the introduction of the direct election of mayors, FI held the mayoralty of one or other of the six largest Italian cities (Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, Palermo and Genoa) on only four out of a possible forty occasions. It provided only two of the mayors, serving two terms each.[2] One was Gabriele Albertini in Milan (1997–2006), who later left FI in 2014. The other was Diego Cammarata in Palermo (2001–12). Adding together the four-year terms of the period from 1993 to 2000 and the five-year terms thereafter, we obtain that FI incumbency accounted for around ten percent of the total possible, far below the values obtained by the party in general elections, at least until 2018.[3]

The top-down nature of the party was related to the role Berlusconi always played in appointing people to positions. There were never any established rules governing candidate selection or the delegation of political authority to party organizations on the ground. At least until 2021 (see below), the parliamentary group leaders were always decided by the leader unilaterally; deputies and senators simply ratified them from time to time. Similarly, the policies to be adopted in government (or to be voted on in Parliament when in opposition) were always devised by Berlusconi outside the institutions of the party in public office. To all intents and purposes, the parliamentary party was subordinate to the party leadership. It would be easy at this point to suggest, ironically, that rather than being a party of the elected, FI was a party 'of the chosen one'. One of the factors that contribute to FI's distinctiveness even among personal parties is its 'absolute financial dependence on its founder'. According to a recent investigation, the party's treasurer, Fabio Roscioli, is currently managing a debt of €98 million. The party receives funds from its elected members and representatives (who are supposed to pay about €900 euros a month to the party, though many do not) and from the so-called 'two-per-thousand' arrangements.[4] In 2021 and 2022, these arrangements yielded funds of €563,000 and €581,000 respectively. Such paltry sums are completely inadequate for the purposes of debt servicing, responsibility for which has passed largely to Berlusconi's brother.[5]

In conclusion, scholars have been arguing for thirty years that the party in public office (i.e. in institutions) and the party in central office (at the organizational apex) have been gaining power at the expense of the party on the ground. However, in the case of FI power has always been entirely concentrated in the hands of its leader. Significantly, the slogan adopted for the 1998 congress was, 'Beyond the Plastic Party'. Twenty-five years later, the situation did not seem to have changed significantly.

With regard to Berlusconi and the governing coalition, however, FI is becoming increasingly marginal. Throughout the (almost) ten-year period that Berlusconi had been Prime Minister, FI and the PdL had been the governments' driving forces. Today, with the death of the party's 'charismatic' leader, and in the absence of a clear programmatic profile, the risk is that FI's marginality increases.

Meloni and the other founders of FdI had understood as early as 2012 that Berlusconi's leadership was in decline. Then, they had staked their fortunes on the 'bailout' provisions of the Calderoli law. These incentivized other parties to coalesce with the newly formed FdI in order to win the majority premium reserved for the most-voted coalition; and they would allow the party to enter Parliament even if it won less than 2% of the vote. Although the 8% won by FI in 2022 was decisive in enabling the coalition to win a majority of seats, the number of ministers in the government answerable to Berlusconi reflected FI's electoral weight as a third force. Despite the very small electoral gap between the two parties, its more modest profile as compared to the League is quite evident.[6]

While voting intentions polls, up to the end of the year, indicate a level of support for FdI of around 2 or 3% points higher than that obtained in 2022, FI appeared stagnant at 7%, with a very limited 'mourning effect'. This did not extend beyond a week following the leader's passing, and in any case never exceeded two percentage points.[7] This figure should be understood in the context of the 2022 vote, with respect to which Itanes' post-election surveys have pointed to the permeability of the coalition's parties' electorates, suggesting that there is a significant risk of FI losing votes to its coalition partners. If the crumbling of the so-called 'third pole', and the

marginality of the centrist component of the coalition – the 'We Moderates' list, attracting around 1% – seem to provide some guarantee of resilience of the centre, FI's electoral prospects depend on its ability to present voters with a clear profile distinct from that of its government allies.

In this context, two important observations can be made about the solidity of FI's parliamentary groups (in terms of their compactness and cohesion) and the strategies put in place to establish a new 'post'-Berlusconi identity for the party. In 1994, FI had brought about a significant degree of turnover of membership of the Italian political class, with nine out of ten deputies elected that year lacking any previous parliamentary experience. Following the 2022 election, FI's parliamentary contingent had a larger proportion of representatives with previous parliamentary experience than any other party except the League (Ponzo and Verzichelli 2023). Also interesting is the fact that the parliamentary groups have not undergone any turnover of membership since the start of the current legislature,[8] while in the European Parliament, compared to 2019, FI has increased its representation from seven to eleven MEPs. Overall, these figures suggest the maintenance of, or a slight increase in, the groups' solidity.

The party's new identity however will be a function of the future dynamics and political relationships within the coalition. FI has never really had any distinct factions, due to the leader's dominance. In November 2023, an unannounced seat swap occurred in the Senate between Licia Ronzulli (formerly aligned with Berlusconi) and Maurizio Gasparri (one of the party's most senior parliamentarians), with their roles shifting to group leader and Senate vice president. Some observers suggested that this move, following a similar transition between Alessandro Cattaneo and Paolo Barelli in March 2023, signified the marginalization of the more 'hawkish' component.[9]

In the coalition's internal dynamics, FI has often found itself caught between the prominence of Meloni and the extreme positions often taken by Salvini. Nevertheless, the party has been able to exert influence on some issues, including the reduction in scope of the windfall tax on banks, the extension of (albeit smaller) building bonuses until 2025, and the strengthening of the 'psychologist's bonus'. While these issues are significant, they risk being overshadowed by the broader divergence noted at the end of the year, during the parliamentary deliberations on reform of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). In this instance, FI abstained, while FdI and the League voted against. The extent to which these matters will play a role in the 2024 European elections remains to be seen.

2.

The office of Prime Minister

The success of Berlusconi the politician owed everything to the crisis of the political system that took place in the early 1990s. His prominence came through the creation, as we have seen, of a new party and a new coalition. The entrepreneur-turned-political-leader then translated the legitimacy derived from having created the now-majority coalition in Parliament into a resource for the consolidation of his institutional power 'immediately after the centre-right's victory in 1994, Berlusconi explicitly referred to himself as the "elected" premier' (Calise 2005). Berlusconi's style as head of government represented a departure from the model of *primus inter pares* envisaged by the 1948 Constitution and the practice of First Republic prime ministers, at least until the arrival of the first non-Christian Democratic heads of government:

As early as the 1980s, changes began to be discerned in a variety of fields, from the reorganization of the Prime Minister's office to the increasing autonomy of the executive in the

production of legislation; from the contours of the party system to changes in electoral behaviour. These developments all in various ways reshaped the role and functions of the premier from the point of view of actual practice. The impact on these developments of Berlusconi's decision to join the political fray in the early 1990s is undeniable.

(Musella 2012, 17)

Since the 1980s, therefore, there has been a noticeable shift towards a more central role for the executive, contrary to the Italian constitutional tradition favouring a distribution of power skewed in the direction of the legislature. This trend was notably encouraged by prime ministers such as Republican leader Giovanni Spadolini and Socialist leader Bettino Craxi. In the early 1990s, the process continued with protagonists such as Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, the former governor of the Bank of Italy (whose political roots were in the old centre-left Partito d'Azione), and Giuliano Amato, the former parliamentary secretary to the Prime Minister's office during the Craxi governments (1983–87).

Berlusconi's premiership stands out due to the fusion of government and party leadership roles (Forza Italia-PdL), with Forza Italia being the largest party in the coalition. Additionally, Berlusconi possessed the unique ability to garner widespread personal support; he was the driving force behind electoral mobilization in support of both the party and the coalition, rather than being the recipient of votes cast for either of the latter two. This dynamic influenced power dynamics within the parliamentary majority and the government, both of which remained coalitions marked by various tensions (Newell 2018, 164). Despite internal divisions within his governments, Berlusconi successfully retained control of his parliamentary majorities, facing no challenges to his leadership from either his party or from the parliamentary parties, except for Fini's unsuccessful attempt (Fabbrini 2013, 167).

Simultaneously, especially from 2001, Berlusconi continued and intensified the reorganization of the Prime Minister's office, focusing notably on the secretariat, which had already been a focal point for strengthening Palazzo Chigi in previous years (Calise 2005). Berlusconi also demonstrated his ability effectively to utilize valuable collaborators, particularly in crucial roles like managing relations with the more powerful and therefore more independent Cabinet ministers, with his own majority and with the opposition. A notable example was Gianni Letta, who served as undersecretary to the Prime Minister's office in all four Berlusconi governments. Letta holds the distinction of being the most influential person in that role in the history of republican Italy and, according to Antonio Funiciello, is a unique example in Italy of an American-style Chief of Staff – acting as both a right-hand man and political adviser, blending political and administrative responsibilities. Serving as a bridge to senior civil servants and diplomats, Letta was an extension of Berlusconi's power, never overshadowing and always enhancing it.[10]

A key factor in strengthening the Prime Minister's office since the 1980s has been the utilization of DPCMs (Decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers), administrative acts which, among other things, have been used to reorganize the office. Romano Prodi continued this practice in the late 1990s, and it was carried on by Massimo D'Alema and Amato after him. Upon returning to government, Berlusconi not only exploited and intensified the use of these tools, but also left his own personal mark on the office. This was particularly evident in the 23 July 2002 DPCM, which introduced measures aimed at organizational streamlining through to the expansion of external consultancies, thereby setting the standard for the subsequent two decades (Criscitiello 2021, 182; Musella 2012, 45).

Legislative decrees and decree-laws, considered strategies for governments that are 'constitutionally' (and sometimes politically) weak but determined to pursue their own agenda, began to play a more significant role as early as the 1980s. While the volume of legislative decrees reached an unprecedented level during the centre-left legislature (1996–2001), it was during the second Berlusconi government that decree-laws become the preferred vehicles for the introduction of legislation (Musella 2012, 136).

The heads of government who succeeded Berlusconi, especially after his last term of office ending in 2011, have all followed a similar trajectory despite their differences. On average, there has been a continued extensive use of DPCMs to influence the structure and functioning of the Prime Minister's office. In some instances, this influence has been significant – as it was, for example, during the two Conte governments, while in others, like Mario Draghi's government, it has been less pronounced (Criscitiello 2021, 183).

Even the current Meloni government has seen efforts being made to reorganize the organizational structures supporting the Prime Minister. Meanwhile, key figures, such as Raffaele Fitto, the Minister for European Affairs has played a key role in managing Meloni's interactions with European Union (EU) institutions and parties.[11] However, neither in Meloni's case nor in that of her predecessors, from Enrico Letta to Draghi, has a figure comparable to Gianni Letta emerged. The Prime Minister's office has also recently been the site of a heightened degree of personalization, one drawing attention to ties of 'tribe' (shared political background and experience) or kinship, alongside a certain fluidity in roles. The ad-hoc nature of the organizational structures involved might suggest parallels between Meloni's experience at Palazzo Chigi and that of Matteo Renzi. Both prime ministers have displayed a tendency to centralize functions and powers through the creation of microstructures, leading to a reduction in the significance of establishing collaborative relationships with individual government departments. Especially noteworthy is the intention, in the context of governing the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRPR), to free the Prime Minister's office – as part of an attempt at greater centralization – from the constraints of the Ministry for the Economy and Finance (MEF) that had been put in place by Mario Draghi in line with choices made by other European governments (Acerno 2023).

The Meloni government has also continued the trend towards an increasing use of legislative instruments such as confidence votes, delegated legislation, and decree laws. These tools are used to compensate for the instability of Italian governments but, simultaneously, they tend to diminish the role of Parliament. For instance, one year after assuming office, Meloni had overseen the introduction of 3.9 decree-laws per month – as compared to 3.2 under Draghi, 3.19 under Conte II, 1.7 under Conte I and Renzi, and 1.9 under the last Berlusconi government (2008–2011).[12]

3.

The head of government and associated reforms

The endeavours to strengthen the executive and the role of the Prime Minister did not lead to substantial institutional innovations but rather to the establishment of new practices. In this process, Berlusconi played a significant role, although he demonstrated neither a willingness nor the ability to function as an institution-builder. This observation comes from Pasquino's analysis (for further details, see Baldini 2017; Bull and Pasquino 2007), which highlights numerous contradictions concerning the construction of a political-institutional framework aligned with

the majoritarian model that Berlusconi purportedly aimed to embody. Examples include a reform, ultimately rejected in the constitutional referendum of 2006, which seemed driven more by a quest for greater cohesion among the governing partners than by genuine conviction. Additionally, Berlusconi failed to support referendums (in 1999 and 2000) that could have strengthened the majoritarian dimension of the electoral system. Moreover, in 2005, he approved a proportional electoral law, influenced by opportunistic considerations related to both internal coalition dynamics and the upcoming 2006 elections.

However, a discernible legacy in this realm is the notion that a direct and unmediated connection should be established between citizen-voters and the executive, especially its leader. This idea suggests that such a 'direct' link enhances the system's democratic character. Berlusconi's actions were often informed by the idea, but it was never institutionalized (as it was by de Gaulle in 1962, when he formally included direct election of the president in the French Constitution).

This legacy is currently evident in the constitutional reform bill presented by the Government on the initiative of Meloni and Casellati. [13] The draft proposes a directly-elected prime minister with innovative as well as a number of bizarre elements, but it fails to include measures aimed at streamlining the powers of Parliament, crucial for reinforcing the executive and its leadership. However, the concept of direct election is preserved. This idea has been part of Meloni's and FdI's political agenda since 2013, viewed as a means of fortifying the 'national' executive and so enhancing the nation's strength and safeguarding its sovereignty (Valbruzzi and Ventura 2023). On the other hand, Meloni's current emphasis on restoring 'popular sovereignty'[14] seems to be more aligned with the plebiscitary conception of democracy cultivated by Berlusconi over the years.

The fact that Meloni and a right-wing party other than the one established by Berlusconi took up the mantle of plebiscitary democracy speaks volumes about the weakness of FI since its leader's passing. FI played a marginal role in shaping the project. Taken over by the Prime Minister's office, with the Ministry for Institutional Reform assuming a primarily formal role, the project underwent a significant change (from semi-presidentialism to the directly elected prime minister). This change occurred mainly due to Meloni's acceptance of the need to avoid too drastic a limitation of the powers of the president of the Republic, given the popularity of the current incumbent, Sergio Mattarella. The League and FI secured some adjustments to safeguard their roles as minor parties in the coalition. These include the absence of rationalization elements (e.g. individual confidence in the prime minister or implicit votes of confidence) and provision for the appointment of a second head of government drawn from the same majority in the event that a prime minister resigned.[15]

4.

Political communication

The arrival of Berlusconi-the- communicator was preceded by considerable political change. In the 1980s, the coded and self-referential language used by the political class during the First Republic was challenged by the direct, colourful, and at times profane language of Umberto Bossi and the *leghisti* (Cosenza 2013). New leaders emerged, becoming the public faces of their respective parties: the Republicans Giorgio La Malfa and Giovanni Spadolini, and the Socialist Bettino Craxi. In the early 1990s, the referendum movement led by Mario Segni further emphasized the idea of leadership, this time as the direct expression of the will of the 'people' (Calise 2010). The introduction of the direct election of mayors in March 1993 paved the way for

the political involvement of high-profile personalities drawn from outside the political realm (Baldini and Legnante 2000). All of these developments contributed to the elevation of individuals, emphasizing their images and their communication skills.

The 1980s witnessed a transformation in the media landscape marked by the proliferation of local TV channels and the establishment of the Fininvest networks, which were owned by Berlusconi. In contrast to the previous subordination of media to politics, there was an increasing orientation towards market logics, leading to a growing autonomy of the media (Mazzoleni 1991). These shifts in both political and media spheres also facilitated the emergence of political marketing. The events of 'Mani Pulite', which immediately preceded Berlusconi's political debut, provided an opportunity for an unprecedented 'dramatization' of politics through the medium of television (Marletti 2010, 95).

Berlusconi, the television tycoon, the man of advertising and marketing, was able to make his political debut by capitalizing on the various elements of crisis and the incipient personalization of politics. He made full use of all the available tools, many of which he had had a hand in developing. As Mancini (2007, 114) observed:
He brought into the political arena all those strategies and skills that are typical of the business sector. If he brought these skills, and the people able to perform them, from his own companies (…), his opponents obtained the same skills from the professional market.

Although not to the same extent, the left was also affected by the new practices. In 1999, Massimo D'Alema became Prime Minister, bringing with him a young team of communicators. During Berlusconi's second and third governments, activities related to the development of media strategies were further refined, highlighting how skilful FI's leader was at agenda setting. The areas he especially reinvigorated and strengthened included 'news management', political marketing, and storytelling. The crucial aspect was not merely the use of marketing as a tool, but Berlusconi's approach to marketing, which had previously been unknown in Italy:
Better than proposing to voters the ideas and the issues the party was elaborating, as in traditional Italian politics, and more generally in the traditional idea of politics related to mass parties, he asked the voters what issues and what figures they would prefer. [*Ibid*., 117]

Berlusconi introduced a genuine form of storytelling, defined as a narrative strategically crafted to evoke feelings of identification and approval (Salmon 2007). This approach was cultivated through the use of an anti-political rhetoric (Campus 2006; Pasquino 2004), highlighting the conflict between the new protagonists (the entrepreneur) and his opponents (ranging from established politicians to 'communists') perceived as blocking the road to political renewal. This narrative also drew on a populist portrayal of the self, one's accomplishments, and the most intimate details of one's family life (Ventura 2012).

The break with the styles of communication of the past was radical and far more incisive than the incremental changes immediately preceding it. The transformation also affected the left, now compelled to engage with a new, bipolar, logic of political competition, and gradually to embrace, at least in practice, the new notions of leadership and image construction. However, neither in relation to the former (Calise 2013) nor in relation to the latter or, more broadly, in the realm of communication (Cosenza 2013), did the left manage, even after the foundation of the PD in 2007, to develop its own distinctive profile. The exception was Renzi, who led the PD from 2013 to 2018 and served as Prime Minister from 2014 to 2016. Renzi adopted the strategies of self-promotion previously employed by Berlusconi, adapting them to the integrated media

system where the web and social-media platforms complement traditional media. Through these channels, Renzi, like Berlusconi, became a ubiquitous pop persona. He also incorporated an anti-political rhetoric, building his success around the idea of 'scrapping' the traditional political class (Ventura 2015).

In the second and third decades of the new millennium, it was once again on the right – albeit in the political space occupied by a new, 'radical' right (Mudde 2019) represented by Salvini and Meloni – that Berlusconi's legacy in the realm of communication was most evident. Salvini took the League from four percent of the vote in 2013 – when he became leader – to 34% in the 2019 European elections. The new leader made intensive use of every conceivable media platform, from infotainment to social media to the popular press, blending anger and toughness with a pop profile, in the service of the rhetoric of a radical, populist right. Through obsessive media personalization, he ensured that his own image overlapped with that of his party (Ventura 2019, 320). From the beginning of her leadership of FdI in 2013, Meloni also had heavy recourse to personalization, primarily by making use of infotainment and social media, and later by emphasizing the pop and intimate dimensions of communication (Ventura 2022). Now in government, Meloni continues to utilize a broad spectrum of communication tools and pop politics. Like Salvini and Renzi, Meloni has become a celebrity politician, engaging in an increasingly 'disintermediated' dialogue with Italians who feel 'betrayed' by elites. In the beginning, at least in Italy, it was Berlusconi.

Finally, one might wonder about the significance of the ongoing presence of Mediaset, the television empire owned by the Berlusconi family. Analyses have demonstrated both the enduring influence of television as a source of political information (Bentivegna and Rega 2023) and the prevalence of centre-right voters among those who rely for their political information most heavily on this medium (Prezioso 2023). Over twenty years ago, Ricolfi et al. concluded that between 1994 and 2001 there was a demonstrable impact of television networks on voting. Sometimes this favoured the centre right (especially in 1994). At other times Mediaset's bias towards the centre right was counteracted by the more pro-left stances of the public television networks (Testa, Loera, and Ricolfi 2002). The issue persists, and Mediaset, led by Marina and Pier Silvio Berlusconi, remains a politically relevant entity. On the one hand, Mediast, akin to the days of Berlusconi's conflict of interests, can function as a political actor exerting lobbying power, potentially encroaching on politics. On the other hand, the infotainment system of Mediaset networks has not only embraced a highly polarizing style, similar to other networks, but has also tailored this approach to align with right-wing positions on critical issues such as security, immigration, and Europe. It can be suggested that, perhaps more than other networks, Mediaset channels continue to play a decisive role in the 'polarization' of the Italian media system, despite the founder's passing.

5.

Conclusion

Similar to the Berlusconi persona, his legacy is also a subject of controversy. Above all, it difficult to make the case that he was a genuine innovator as opposed to an actor who merely accelerated trends that had been apparent in European democracies since the 1980s and 1990s, including the trends towards the presidentialization, personalization, and spectacularization of politics. Berlusconi undeniably played a role in the development of 'audience democracy' (Manin 1997, 2014), but he was not the sole contributor, nor did he pioneer it, although he did

hasten its arrival in Italy. Even though party-system bipolarity has been fading for more than a decade now, its emergence owed something to Berlusconi's influence. The question remains whether the right's victory in 2022 will be a precursor to a new phase of bipolar competition.

As for the party, the manner in which, in June 2024, just after the European Parliament elections, it chooses to mark the first anniversary of the passing of its leader, will be crucial for assessing Berlusconi's legacy. As is customary on the eve of elections, the narrative crafted by key spokespersons will position the bar for evaluating the party's performance in the first electoral test without its leader. Although, based on polls in the latter part of 2023, it would be logical to set this bar at seven percent, it might be lowered to mitigate the potentially severe repercussions of a worse performance. Following the European elections, it will be possible to undertake a more informed evaluation of the applicability to FI of the hypothesis that charismatic parties fail to survive the demise of their leaders.

Certainly, it is not possible to pinpoint an institutional legacy in the strict sense. Berlusconi, uninterested in formal institutional structures, believed that his vision of good government could be realized through his personal leadership and his 'direct' relationship with voters. Today, that vision is mirrored in the Meloni reform project, which seeks less to bolster the formal powers of the head of government then to exalt Berlusconi's concept of the leader endorsed by 'the people'. In essence, we perceive a legacy here – that of a 'substantive', rule-disregarding, a-liberal style of leadership, one essentially alien to constitutional thinking and underpinned by the conviction that leaders, 'anointed' by the people, should be left to act relatively free of institutional constraints. Meloni openly acknowledges her support for such a style of leadership, including the illiberal form embodied by a leader she has been seeking to emulate for many years: Viktor Orbán.

Following in the footsteps of Berlusconi, Renzi, and Salvini, Meloni too has embraced the legacy of the celebrity leader – someone powerful yet claiming closeness to ordinary people. In this, a Berlusconian legacy is evident. Besides the inevitable emergence of new forms of communication, the utilization of the staging of political action and the glorification of the image of a leader committed to changing the fate of the country against the mainstream and in the name of common sense, has become instrumental in governance. Throughout his political career, Berlusconi demonstrated how, within a 'media' democracy, celebrity, marketing and storytelling can be crucial for legitimizing a leadership free of the constraints found in constitutional democracies.

In this context, some observers have regarded Berlusconi's leadership style as a role model for other Western leaders, such as Boris Johnson (Newell 2023; Worthy and Bennister 2022) or Donald Trump (Donofrio and Rubio Moraga 2019; Wodak, Culpeper, and Semino 2021). They emphasize the extremism involved in celebrity leadership: the anti-political or anti-establishment and divisive rhetoric; the politically incorrect language and messaging; the confrontational relations with the press. Comparisons with the French president were drawn when Sarkozy held the office (Campus, D. 2010; Ventura 2012) and focussed on criteria like celebrity politics, divisive messages, and simplified language, although the two individuals differed in terms of their backgrounds: Nicolas Sarkozy's party political career and his career in public office contrasted with Berlusconi's background as a media tycoon. Boris Johnson and, to an even greater extent, Trump, seem to align more closely with the Berlusconi 'model', which predates them by over two decades. Capitalizing on crisis situations, Berlusconi demonstrated

a unique approach to politics and a style of leadership that stands out even amid the profound changes underway in contemporary democracies. It was a style of leadership that was eccentric, but that met with significant – albeit potentially fleeting – levels of public approval. Other manifestations, more or less similar, of this leadership style have already emerged, and there may be more to come in a world in which democratic politics is becoming increasingly 'fluid' and contentious.

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Notes

1.

S. Berlusconi, ‘Che cos’è Forza Italia’, in *La Stampa*, 5 July 1994. The idea of abandoning the mass party model was theorized by Giuliano Urbani [(1994)], who took up the ‘In Search of Good Government’ project (with the association of the same name) that led to the foundation of the party’s first local branches, the Forza Italia Clubs, in 1993. A significant innovation was proposed, not only in communicative style but also in terms of means and, more importantly, in terms of aims. The liberal revolution, outlined in what would become the guide for candidates standing in the 1994 elections, was inspired by the legacy of the Reagan and Thatcher era. It promised ‘less bureaucracy, a reduction of the tax burden on citizens, economic deregulation, defence of the market and individualism, budget discipline, reduction of the public debt, and rationalization of welfare, along with injections of managerial culture into the state machine’ (Campi and Varasano 2013). See Orsina (2023) for a more comprehensive evaluation of the social dynamics and numerous limitations of the Berlusconi experience, notably the greater importance of the populist as compared to the liberal component.

2.
Letizia Moratti, mayor of Milan from 2006 to 2011, joined the PdL (2009–2011) but did not join FI until October 2023 when, among other things, she was asked by Tajani to lead a consulting committee in preparation of the congress.
3.
Space constraints prevent us from addressing the changing electoral geography of the party, which it will be possible to analyse more profitably after the 2024 European Parliament elections and (given that the latter will be second-order contests) especially after the general election at the end of the 19th legislature.
4.
Translator's note: These allow taxpayers, when filing their tax returns, to channel 0.02% of the tax they owe to a political party of their choice.
5.
Cf. 'Forza Italia a corto di liquidità: i debiti sono quasi 100 milioni, il tesoriere corre ai ripari con le banche', *la Repubblica*, 24 November 2023, where we read, 'Coming to the aid of the party's meagre finances is the Cavaliere's brother, Paolo. In the guarantees section (pledges and mortgages), it is revealed that those of Forza Italia amount to €7 million, with €3 million issued by Silvio Berlusconi and €4 million by his brother Paolo. These guarantees were deemed necessary "in view of the credit facilities granted by a banking institution" to the party […] In his quarterly report, Roscioli gives assurances that from July to October 2023, "indebtedness to the banks was reduced by about one million euros". From this it can be inferred that, as of today, "liabilities" to the credit institutions amount to €4,642,000. At present, it remains unclear whether the five sons of the former premier have also inherited the party's debts and will take responsibility for them'.
6.
With a similar number of ministries, the League secured the Economy portfolio (Giancarlo Giorgetti) and the appointment, as Interior Minister, of Matteo Piantedosi, an independent technocrat with ties to the party and formerly chief of staff at the ministry during Salvini's tenure in 2018 and 2019. In 2023, in addition to Tajani at Foreign Affairs, Forza Italia had four other ministers, including two with portfolios – Gilberto Pichetto Frattin (Environment and Energy Security) and Anna Maria Bernini (Universities and Research) – and two without portfolios: Paolo Zangrillo (Public Administration) and Maria Elisabetta Alberti Casellati (Institutional Reform and Administrative Simplification). Throughout 2023, Tajani's popularity among ministers significantly exceeded that of his party colleagues.
7.
At the end of 2023, in the average of all polls, FI's support compared to a year earlier rose from 6.9 to 7.1%, *YouTrend/Agi Supermedia: the 2023 of parties*, Dec. 29, 2023, available at:
https://www.youtrend.it/2023/12/29/supermedia-youtrend-agi-fdi-al-288-pd-al-194-2-2-2-2-2/
.
8.
https://www.camera.it/leg19/1083
.
9.
Cf. P. de Caro, 'Forza Italia, ribaltone ai vertici. Gasparri capogruppo al Senato', *Corriere della Sera*, 21 November 2023. Actually, since the departure from the party of the more 'centrist' or 'institutional' component, whose members (i.e. Renato Brunetta, Mara Carfagna and Mariastella

Gelmini) had been Cabinet ministers during the Draghi government, identifying ideological divisions within the party has been quite complex.

10. Interview with Antonio Funiciello, executive, former policy official and then chief of staff to prime ministers Paolo Gentiloni and Mario Draghi, essayist, 1 December 2023 (see also Funiciello 2019).

11. Interview with Luigi di Gregorio, professor of Political Science at the University of Viterbo, communications consultant to the president of the Lazio region, 1 December 2023.

12. 'I numeri del governo Meloni a un anno dalla nomina', http://www.openpolis.it , 25 October 2023.

13. *Disegno di legge costituzionale. XIX legsilatura*, No. 935, available at https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/428967.pdf .

14. See the 3 November 2023 press conference, https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/conferenza-stampa-del-consiglio-dei-ministri-57/24164 .

15. Interview with Prof. Stefano Ceccanti, full professor of Comparative Public Law, former Democratic Party parliamentarian, PD group leader in the Chamber of Deputies' Constitutional Affairs Committee in the 18th legislature (2018–2022), 1 December 2023.