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Erin Lindsay

Cardozo International & Comparative Law Review, eflindsa@law.cardozo.yu.edu

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Politics and Policy of the Falling Birth Rate in Italy: Predictions and Concerns

By: Erin Lindsay



The birth rate in Italy had been a topic of concern for the past couple decades, making it a source of conversation and debate among political parties and candidates in Italy. With the election of a new Italian government and the prediction of Giorgia Meloni being Italy's new prime minister, how Meloni and her party have spoken of and plan to tackle the falling birth rate is a discussion occurring around the world.[1] The falling birth rate was concerning to country leaders prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but statistics show that the Italian birth rate has fallen even more since the virus first struck the country.[2] The most recent calendar year of 2021 was marked by another decline in birth rate with only 399,431 births, which is the lowest yearly rate seen since the unification of the country in 1861.[3] Because of this continued decline, population growth in large Italian cities, as well as in small towns and villages has been a major goal for the Italian government in recent years.

There have been attempts by both governmental and non-governmental entities to increase the birth rate.[4] For example, employees of businesses in Cartigliano have been encouraged to have children through new employee benefits offering to cover the cost of childcare and nursery school so that at least this financial obstacle is not a barrier to those employees who would like to have children.[5] Seeing as cost and financial insecurity is often a deterrent from many

commitments in life, especially the high cost of raising children, employer benefits like these have a chance of lessening that financial fear some aspiring parents may have, even if just by a small margin. Another attempt at not necessarily raising the birth rate, but raising the overall population residing in Italy, is the trend of Italian villas that need renovations being sold for one euro.[6] Part of the deal with these one-euro villas is that the buyer must renovate the property within a couple years, which the towns hope will attract more people to these low populated areas.[7]

The newly elected political party in Italy is one of the more far right governments that the country has had in recent years.[8] Some have even stated that this government is the most far right an Italian government has been since the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini.[9] As previously mentioned, some predict that the new prime minister of Italy in this far-right government will be Giorgia Meloni,[10] the leader of the Brothers of Italy party.[11] Meloni is known to have been a prior supporter of Mussolini, which is one of the driving forces raising concerns about the policy changes that she and this government may attempt to make.[12]

At times, Meloni has also been compared to former President Donald Trump, sparking fear that she may enact policies similar to the Trump Administration, especially seeing as several known Trump allies have openly expressed their support of Meloni.[13] Critics of the Meloni and Trump comparison have noted that Meloni is different from Trump in some key ways, such as that she comes from a working-class background and is female, so she has faced struggles throughout her life that Trump did not experience.[14]

Meloni has voiced her concerns with the low birth rate and does intend to amend policies accordingly to encourage growth of the population and increase the birth rate.[15] She believes that the birth rate dilemma is at a point where government intervention is needed.[16] Meloni discusses increasing the birth rate “as a way to talk about Italians being proud again — being patriots who prosper and multiply.”[17] Though Meloni speaks hopefully about increasing the birth rate, this desire to increase the population through increased birth rate does not translate to a desire to increase the population through immigration.[18] She has made statements regarding immigrants replacing Italian workers with “cheap migrant labor.”[19] She has also spoken against immigration, stating that, “immigration ‘deprives nations and people of their identity.’”[20] The National Office to Combat Racial Discrimination even wrote a letter to Meloni requesting that she “moderate her at-times inflammatory language on Muslim immigrants and to avoid racist comments.”[21]

Because of her history of racist comments and her known perception of immigration, there is valid concern that Meloni may make some anti-immigration policy decisions. This would be quite a change for Italy, seeing as the current governing statute on Italian immigration law and policy, the Italian Immigration Act of 1998,[22] has not been amended since 2014.[23] Because politicians do not always practice what they preach,[24] though, it will largely be a waiting game to see what Meloni actually attempts to do and, further, what she succeeds at putting into action during her time in office.

This concern regarding Meloni’s political agenda is, of course, still pending that Meloni is appointed as the next Prime Minister of Italy. Regardless of if Meloni is the next prime minister, this is still a very far-right Italian government, so it will be interesting to see how things play out as recommendations and decisions are made regarding the falling birth-rate, immigration, and population growth in Italy.

Erin Lindsay is a Staff Editor at CICLR.

[1] David Leonhardt, *The Politics of Grievance*, New York Times: The Morning (Oct. 6, 2022), https://messaging-custom-newsletters.nytimes.com/template/oakv2?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20221006&instance_id=73852&nl=the-morning&productCode=NN®i_id=170732586&segment_id=109138&te=1&uri=nyt%3A%2F%2Fnewsletter%2F0dffe0b2-0603-53c0-8e35-9024fbf3f51a&user_id=689a1c22d87cdc1e4c5860105c95a11a [https://perma.cc/H5RE-TBEC].

[2] A.F. De Rose, F. Ambrosini, G. Mantica & C. Terrone, *Impact of COVID-19 on birth rate trends in the Italian Metropolitan Cities of Milan, Genoa and Turin*, 198 Pub. Health 35, 35-6 (2021).

[3] Francesco Zecchini & Gavin Jones, *No more bambinos? Italy’s firms move to tackle child birth crisis*, Reuters (June 2,

2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/no-more-bambinos-italys-firms-move-tackle-birth-crisis-2022-06-01/#:~:text=Italy%20saw%20just%20399%2C431%20births,by%20253%2C000%20to%2059%20million> [https://perma.cc/BG4Z-6SDD].

[4] *See id.*

[5] *Id.*

[6] Joey Hadden, *A town outside of Rome is selling neglected homes for a little more than \$1 – but buyers must commit to renovating them within 3 years*, Insider (Aug. 23, 2021), <https://www.insider.com/italy-town-maenza-selling-one-euro-houses-near-rome-2021-8> [https://perma.cc/FXZ4-ES2W].

[7] *Id.*

[8] Leonhardt, *supra* note 1.

[9] Andrew Desiderio, *'Reason to worry': Italy's Meloni holds a mirror to Trump's GOP*, Politico (Sept. 29, 2022), https://www.politico.com/news/2022/09/29/italys-meloni-trump-gop-00059363?te=1&nl=the-morning&emc=edit_nn_20221006 [https://perma.cc/4XED-2B84].

[10] Leonhardt, *supra* note 1.

[11] Desiderio, *supra* note 9.

[12] Leonhardt, *supra* note 1.

[13] Desiderio, *supra* note 9.

[14] Leonhardt, *supra* note 1.

[15] *Id.*

[16] *Id.*

[17] *Id.*

[18] *Id.*

[19] *Id.*

[20] Desiderio, *supra* note 9.

[21] U.S. Dep't of State, Bureau of Democracy, Hum. Rts., & Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 89 Italy Human Rights Reports 2015 § 2(a).

[22] *Unofficial translation in English of the Italian version of the Consolidated Immigration Act*, UNHCR:Refworld (June 26, 2014), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/54a2c23a4.pdf> [https://perma.cc/5HSH-925D].

[23] *Guide on Italy Immigration Laws*, Immigration Italy (Aug. 9, 2022), <https://immigration-italy.com/guide-on-italy-immigration-laws/#:~:text=types%20of%20visas-,Types%20of%20residence%20permits%20under%20Italy%20immigration%20laws,the%20residence%20by%20investment%20visa> [https://perma.cc/9BSN-X76E].

[24] Desiderio, *supra* note 9.