

FAR RIGHT EYES FIRST GOVERNMENT SINCE SECOND WORLD WAR IN ITALY

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Making a choice: People looking at lists of candidates at a polling station in Milan on Sunday. AP/Alessandro Bremec/LaPresse

Italians voted on Sunday on whether to usher in the country's first government led by the far-right since the Second World War, bringing eurosceptic populists to the heart of Europe.

The Brothers of Italy party, headed by one-time Mussolini supporter Giorgia Meloni, has led opinion polls and looks set to take office in a coalition with the far-right League and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia parties.

Ms. Meloni, 45, who campaigned on a motto of "God, country and family", hopes to become Italy's first woman Prime Minister. Turnout was around 19% by 1000 GMT, according to the Interior Ministry, in line with the last election in 2018.

"I'm playing to win, not just to take part," Matteo Salvini, head of the far-right League, told reporters as he went to cast his ballot. "I can't wait to come back from tomorrow as part of the government of this extraordinary country," he added.

President Sergio Mattarella and Enrico Letta, leader of the centre-left Democratic Party, also voted early on Sunday.

Many voters are expected to pick Ms. Meloni, "the novelty, the only leader the Italians have not yet tried", Wolfgang Piccoli of the Teneo consultancy said.

Brussels and the markets are watching closely, amid concern that Italy — a founding member of the European Union — may be the latest country to veer hard right, less than two weeks after the far right outperformed in elections in Sweden.

If she wins, Ms. Meloni will face challenges from rampant inflation to an energy crisis as winter approaches, linked to the conflict in Ukraine.

The Italian economy, the third largest in the eurozone, rebounded after the pandemic but is saddled with a debt worth 150% of the gross domestic product.

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