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THE CURRENT: What's on the agenda for Italian Deputy PM Salvini's US visit?

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PITA: You're listening to "The Current" from the Brookings Podcast Network. With us today is Giovanna de Maio, a visiting fellow with the Center for the U.S. and Europe here at Brookings. Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini is visiting the U.S. this coming week for some high-level meetings.

Giovanna, what can you tell us about the agenda for Salvini's visit and what he hopes to accomplish while he is here?

DE MAIO: Salvini's agenda has not been disclosed yet. He is probably meeting with the attorney general or with the acting secretary for homeland security. His high-level meeting could be with Vice President Mike Pence and it would be quite a timely meeting because of the progress that has been made, both in the U.S. and Italy, as far as the fight against illegal immigration is concerned -- that the U.S. has just signed an immigration deal with Mexico and Salvini has pushed forward his second security decree that will increase the penalties for NGO ships rescuing migrants at sea and wishing to harbor in Italian ports.

Salvini's visit follows the one of Prime Minister Conte in July, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Moavero in January, and the other Vice Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio -- he is also minister of economic development -- that happened at the end of March. So, this is an official meeting, but it also has symbolic meaning, because this time, Salvini is presenting himself as a widely supported leader after the European elections produced good success for the League in Italy, which got 34 percent of preferences. So, Salvini could be, actually, a potential candidate for prime minister in Italy sooner than later.

PITA: The League, Salvini's party, had recently won the largest share of the vote in the EU parliamentary elections, and there's also the new restrictions, as you mentioned, on the ships rescuing migrants out of the Mediterranean. What sort of additional background can you give us on what's happening in Italian politics right now ahead of this visit?

DE MAIO: Salvini's League victory to the European election was particularly overwhelming, especially in comparison to the government ally, which is Five Star Movement. And this has created a lot of instability and uncertainty within the Italian government itself because the campaign tones were overheated during the past few weeks. And so, Salvini's victory has cleared a lot of questions on the stability of the Italian coalition government. And some people also thought that Salvini could have pulled

the plug of this government and probably created a new government on his own, probably with the help of Fratelli d'Italia, which is another far-right party.

And the background in this case, in relevance with the visit to the U.S., is particularly interesting because of two reasons. First of all, Salvini's League and Five Star Movement have had quite a bit of disagreement towards how to tackle some foreign policy issues that raised concern in the U.S. I'm thinking about China, for example. Italy's government signed a memorandum of understanding with China on the Belt and Road Initiative that raised concern in the U.S. And on this point, this initiative was pursued by the minister of economic development, which is led by Five Star Luigi Di Maio, but Salvini had basically opposed the signing of this memorandum of understanding, highlighting dangers that could have come for Italy's security and strategic assets.

And the second reason is that Salvini's background on an approach to foreign policy is particularly aligned with and draws a lot of inspiration from President Trump's "America First" policy. And this creates a lot of friction with the Five Star Movement and it creates a lot of uncertainty in terms of balance of power within the European Parliament.

PITA: That sort of gets the other question I was going to ask you about the context from the U.S. side. Within the last month, the White House has also hosted both Polish President Andrzej Duda and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Meanwhile, Salvini is not expected to meet with Trump himself. Should his visit be seen through that lens, of the administration's friendly relations with right-wing and nationalist populist governments within Europe?

DE MAIO: For sure. The Trump administration has not shown a friendly attitude towards the European Union itself and major European Union member states by endorsing some views, such as sovereignty views of the representatives from Poland or Hungary, but also, in this case, Italy, even if Salvini is not supposed to meet with Trump himself. These kind of meetings between Orban and Trump, Duda and Trump, but also in this case, Salvini and probably Pence, highlight and amplify the message that comes from a sovereignty's approach to foreign policy. And it looks like the U.S. endorses this kind of approach and that creates harm to the European Union itself, specifically as far as security and common global challenges are concerned.

PITA: What do you think is sort of one of the most important things that people should recognize about these meetings? Maybe something that might be overlooked in the common coverage?

DE MAIO: It's important, I believe -- something that has not been stressed enough is the League's and Salvini's ties with U.S. far-right circles. It's important to recall Salvini's links with Steve Bannon and Steve Bannon's endorsement of Salvini's campaign in the idea of creating unity between sovereignty and nationalist parties all over Europe. But it's important to look at the base and the political culture that Salvini's visits in the U.S. means with these circles and the message that is promoted through highlighting this sort of ethno-nationalism and also conservative values that are highlighted in many circles.

It's important to recall Salvini's closeness to the World Congress of Families that has been sort of a celebration or festival that is held in Verona every year and celebrates the traditional family and basically opposes abortion rights or LGBT rights. So, it's important not to underestimate the power of certain messages, especially when they occur on high-level meetings.

PITA: Lastly, what's next for Salvini after these meetings here conclude?

DE MAIO: So far, Salvini has denied any intention to leave the government coalition and trigger a new election. At the same time, having an endorsement from the United States is particularly important for Salvini's leverage in the European Union context. And specifically, he intends to promote himself as the leader of a sovereignties front. So far, he has failed in this goal. He has not managed to bring together the French Marine Le Pen or Viktor Orban.

At the same time, he has proved to be quite a powerful leader in the Italian context. In one single year, he was capable of building up consensus and double the percentage of people who voted for him. So, he is quite a charismatic figure. And he has a great communications team, he's always constantly campaigning, and he's probably about to get more consensus in Europe as well.

PITA: Alright. Giovanna, thank you for being here and explaining this.

DE MAIO: Thank you.