

Economy. Levies threat

EU counts on Meloni to avert White House tariffs

'With any important decision that affects Italy and Europe, Giorgia Meloni will have the chance to be heard'
Once shunned Italian leader now seen as 'communication channel' to new president

AMY KAZMIN — ROME

During Donald Trump's first term in office, Italy's Giorgia Meloni was a fringe far-right politician who ardently admired the US president but wielded little clout at home — let alone in Europe.

Now, European leaders are counting on Meloni — a "fantastic woman", according to Trump — to persuade the US president to hold back on his threat to hit the EU with tariffs to force it to spend more on defence and American energy.

The Italian prime minister was the only EU leader present at Trump's inauguration on Monday, highlighting her ideological and personal affinity with him — just weeks after dining with the Republican at Mar-a-Lago to secure his support for a prisoner swap with Iran.

"Europe is in a state of terrible weakness and is very afraid to lose the protection of the United States, and very afraid that Trump can do something that is very damaging to Europe," said Giovanni Orsina, a political scientist at Rome's Luiss University.

The same European establishment that once shunned Meloni for being a dangerous extremist now seemed to have pinned its hopes on her as its

"communication channel" to Trump, Orsina said.

Beyond the potential trade war, European leaders fear Trump could strike a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin over Ukraine's fate without any heed to the continent's security concerns and abandon Nato allies who fail to increase defence spending.

Italy is especially vulnerable to Trump's ire on that count as it failed to meet the Nato defence spending target of 2 per cent of GDP in 2024. But the US president has so far overlooked Rome on this issue, telling reporters on Monday that "Spain was very low" and threatening to impose tariffs on the alliance's biggest laggard on military spending.

Trump has said Nato's new spending target should be 5 per cent of GDP, a difficult goal for countries such as Italy, France and Germany whose economies are barely growing and which are struggling to rein in public spending and debt. Meloni's supporters say her "privileged relationship" with the US administration gives her a better chance than any of her EU peers to make the case against tariffs and other punitive measures.

"With any important decision that affects Italy and Europe, Giorgia Meloni will have the chance to be heard," said Lucio Malan, a senator from her right-wing Brothers of Italy party. "The voice of Italy will be heard . . . that is something."

But Meloni could still struggle to act as Europe's interlocutor with Trump, said Beniamino Irdi, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

"It's unclear how much interest Trump has in cultivating a real relationship with Europe," Irdi said. "He has always had a tendency to prefer bilateral relations with nation states that actually have the authority and power to make things happen."

Meloni's contacts seem to have paid off even before Trump's inauguration. After seeing the Republican in Mar-a-Lago earlier this month, she secured the release of an Italian journalist from Iran. In return, Italy released Mohammed

Abedini — an Iranian national who was sought by the US for allegedly smuggling drone technology to Tehran.

The prisoner swap has boosted Meloni's approval ratings — now higher than when she took office more than two years ago. "By having the guts to go to Trump, she expressed real leadership and effectiveness and this was absorbed by public opinion," said Lorenzo Pogliasso, founder of YouTrend, an Italian pollster.

Brothers of Italy has long cultivated ties with US Republicans and the Trump world, with Meloni attending the National Prayer Breakfast during the first Trump presidency.

In 2018, Trump's "America first" ideology, Steve Bannon, was the main attraction at the party's annual political festival in Rome. In 2023, US billionaire and tech mogul Elon Musk was the top guest. He and Meloni have since forged strong personal and political ties, with her government pursuing negotiations with his SpaceX company for secure military communications.

Stefano Stefanini, Italy's former ambassador to Nato, said that in the months ahead, Meloni could probably play a "useful softening role" in her talks with Trump on Ukraine and security, including trying to persuade him to accept a more gradual increase in defence spending.

"There is no way Italy is going to spend 5 per cent of GDP on defence," he said. "Italy might reach 2 [per cent] or even 3 per cent, and she might get away with it convincing Trump that Italy — as well as other European countries — are moving towards the target gradually."

But on issues such as a ceasefire deal between Russia and Ukraine, it was unclear to what extent the US president would listen to her, Stefanini said.

"There is no evidence . . . of any foreign leader who really had influence on Trump's decisions."

Per evitare i dazi decisi dalla Casa Bianca l'UE fa affidamento sulla Meloni

