Italy

Berlusconi the ‘frozen mammoth’ is back

Just as the European Union is getting a fresh injection of energy from the French president, Emmanuel Macron, one of the continent’s old guard is preparing for an improbable political comeback.

Silvio Berlusconi dominated Italian politics from 1994 until 2011 when he was driven from office by scandal. Convicted of false accounting and tax fraud and under threat of expulsion from the Senate, the media mogul had appeared a relic of the past.

But on September 17 he sprang back from heart surgery to announce that he intended to lead the centre-right challenge at the next election, to be held in the first part of 2018. ‘This is like a frozen mammoth being brought back to life,’ commented an Italian political journalist.

Berlusconi is often blamed for pioneering the ‘politics as performance’ style of leadership now used by Donald Trump, but an Italian political commentator remarked: ‘Compared to Trump, Berlusconi is Winston Churchill.’

Under an anti-corruption law of 2012, he faces a six-year ban from elected office. He is appealing to the European Court of Human Rights to challenge this penalty, saying it cannot be applied retrospectively for acts which predated the legislation.

The four-time prime minister may be known abroad for his ‘bunga bunga’ parties, but the Italian elite is more interested in the fact that he is not a Eurosceptic and is now calling for more Europe, not less. This makes his brand less noxious.

Italy has been gripped by a wave of Euroscepticism – according to some polls, as strongly held in Britain as in Italy at the decline of its economy and its once thriving export industries in the face of German competition since it joined the euro in 1999.

The result is that politicians who want to connect to the public have increasingly adopted an EU-bashing tone, a habit which centrists fear may be hard to shake off.

Predicting Italian elections is particulary hard this time, due to the large number of small parties and the rise of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement. However well it does, is unlikely to join any coalition for fear that power would tarnish its insurgent halo.

This creates a logjam in forming a government, but raises the chances of Berlusconi’s revived Forza Italia party being an influential member of future coalitions. His preference is on the right, with the separatist Northern League and the Brothers of Italy, a small off-shoot of the neo-fascists, or failing that, with the deeply divided Left parties.

Could Berlusconi be prime minister at the age of 81? More likely he would be kingmaker, pulling the strings from outside.

That raises one issue: Berlusconi has never hidden his liking for Russia’s Vladimir Putin. In the leaked words of a former US ambassador: ‘It appears that Putin has devoted much energy to developing Berlusconi’s trust’.

Given the intense focus in Washington on allegations that the Kremlin helped Donald Trump to win the presidency, the Putin-Berlusconi link will no longer be seen as an eccentricity.

The security services will be closely watching the elections and beyond for signs of undue Russian influence in Italy.

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