

FUTURE OF EU

Socialists stand behind “their” candidate in Italy elections

By Nathalie Vandystadt in Turin

The family photo was prestigious. As the 27 European leaders were finalising their complicated calculations in Brussels on the Union's future budget, the European Socialists were meeting in Turin, Italy, on 8 and 9 February, to back “their” candidate in Italy's parliamentary elections, Pier Luigi Bersani, threatened by the return of the ‘Cavaliere’ Silvio Berlusconi, who is moving up in the polls two weeks ahead of the election.

“It is obvious that Mario Monti [prime minister of a government of technocrats - Ed] does not have the monopoly on European issues. Unfortunately for him, he is credited with 9% in the polls,” said Bruno Liebhaberg, head of the Scientific Council of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), the Socialist think tank that organised the conference. With the legislative elections of 24-25 February, “Italy is experiencing a special period of democracy so it is normal for there to be a demonstration of solidarity showing that the crisis-related problems Italy is experiencing are also being experienced in most EU states, sometimes in different forms, but necessarily requiring common responses,” said Liebhaberg.

The common enemies are the “mad austerity policy that the right,” in particular German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is forcing on Europe, said a participant,

as well as the escalation of populism in Europe. The immediate stakes are the national elections and then the European elections in June 2014. A “large part” of the European left agrees on the need to present a common candidate for the Commission presidency, elected by the European Parliament, in order to personalise Europe for citizens.

After a first day's work by academics, local elected officials and members of political foundations to examine proposals to “relaunch the Union's political dimension” and regain Europeans' interest, several leaders were set to address the meeting the following day in the Italian city: Prime Ministers Elio Di Rupo (Belgium), Victor Ponta (Romania) and Zoran Milanovic (Croatia), European Parliament President Martin Schulz, head of the S&D group in the EP Hannes Swoboda, and French President François Hollande, via a video message to be screened at the conference.

Several participants pressed for an end to tax competition between EU states, or at least in the eurozone, saying it heightens economic and social inequalities. More generally, there were calls for political, fiscal, economic and social integration. “Only progressive Europeans can put an end to the emergence of populism and the limits of European technocracy,” argued former Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, FEPS president. He

mentioned a number of challenges to be met, including that of restoring the central place of the European Parliament and national parliaments opposite the all powerful European Council (probably through a new treaty).

For political science Professor Luciano Bardi, European political parties suffer from an “organisation deficit”: they are not rooted in society and are incapable of coping with the crisis for lack of real opposition to the Commission. In addition, “the voice of citizens is not heard at European level”.

To counter the UK government's Euroscepticism, Lord Roger Liddle of the FEPS called on Labour to recommend a European tax policy and a strong defence policy.

CHANGE NOW?

In this context, the slogan of the former French candidate – “change now” – resounded in Turin, where the Socialist family, after its victories in France, Slovakia and Romania, is now counting on Italy and even Germany in September.

So how is it possible to justify the signature of an EU austerity budget by the French leader, spokesman for relaunching growth in the Union, in the face of the austerity policies personified by the former ‘Merkozy’ tandem? “This message is clearly still the view of the minority,” observed Liebhaberg. ■

CHEMICALS/REACH

Some progress but still long way to go, says Greenpeace

By Anne Eckstein

Advances have been made since the REACH (registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemical substances) regulation came into force in 2007, but there is still a long way to go, notes Greenpeace, which finds that progress has been too slow. The NGO, which takes note of the report published by the European Commission on 5 February (see *Europolitics* 4581), urges the executive to speed up the process and to make sure that SMEs obtain help coming into the system over the next five years. What is being considered, notes Greenpeace, is a

review of procedures rather than an opening up of the system to significant change. The NGO is concerned that the industry may use this opportunity to try to undermine the binding aspects of REACH by insisting that compliance is too burdensome. That argument is belied, it explains, by the fact that BASF, the largest European chemicals manufacturer, acknowledged in September 2012 that “at the end, it is worth the money”. Greenpeace is critical of the slow speed of the evaluation process and the limited number of dangerous products identified for phase-out each year. These weaknesses need to be addressed to guarantee that chemical substances recog-

nised as dangerous or potentially dangerous are reviewed and eliminated faster and more effectively. The precautionary and substitution principles must be the key objective over the next five years to ensure that REACH achieves its aim of eliminating harmful chemical substances. The NGO calls for an increase in the number of substances placed on the candidate list destined for elimination. It also calls on the European Chemicals Agency and member states to require companies to improve the quality of chemical registration dossiers, to better screen what is placed on the market and identify the hazardous chemicals to prioritise for phase-out. ■