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Speakers: Justin O. Frosini, Adjunct Professor of Constitutional Law, and Gianfranco Pasquino, Senior Adjunct Professor of European and Eurasian Studies, at Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy

Chair: Professor Erik Jones, Director of European and Eurasian Studies, Professor of European Studies and International Political Economy at Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy

**“Emilia-Romagna: A Setback for Salvini or a Comeback for the Left?”**

*SAIS Europe Faculty Members Discuss the Consequences  
of the Regional Elections in Emilia-Romagna*

The election in Emilia-Romagna on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2020 became one of the most significant regional elections in recent Italian history with wider connotations across Europe. Professors Frosini and Pasquino joined Professor Jones in discussing why this election was so important and what it means for Italy’s political parties and processes.

**Why were these elections touted by some as the most important elections of the century in Italy?**

As Professor Pasquino elucidated, the significance of the Emilia-Romagna election stems from both the region’s past and Italy’s present. Like its neighbour Umbria, Emilia-Romagna has been governed by left wing politics since World War II, previously by the Italian communist party and later by the centre left (most recently led by the ‘Partito Democratico’ (PD) or Democratic Party). This makes the region and its neighbours a key part of the Italian left-wing heartland during a time where traditional left-wing political support is in crisis across Europe. In Umbria’s preceding 2019 regional elections, this heartland was reduced as the region voted for the first time for the centre right coalition led by the ‘Lega Nord’ under populist leader Matteo Salvini. Therefore, this election represented the first time the political left has faced a serious challenge from the right in Emilia-Romagna, and so Salvini campaigned heavily, framing this election as himself, the Lega and populism against the current government. The final result reflected this battle but concluded with the PD’s Bonaccini winning 51% of votes against 44% for the Lega’s Borgonzoni.

**To what extent was this election about the growing strength of Salvini and weakness in the Italian ‘left’, or part of the wider anti-establishment movement across Europe?**

While Salvini attempted to paint this election as an opportunity to critique the national government, Professor Frosini argues that the election was ultimately won by the past five years of good governance under Bonaccini’s administration. Therefore, he contends, the election proved to be less about the strength or weakness of each movement or the wider European context than people expected.

Frosini further highlights that the election result could, in fact, be an opportunity for the traditional European establishments. One of the issues facing Italy is that while many regions receive EU funding, many do not spend it efficiently, or at all. Emilia-Romagna has the highest and most efficient utilisation rates of EU money across Italy, and arguably this was instrumental in the good governance that underpinned Bonaccini's successful campaign.

### **What happened to the 5 Star Movement and what will this mean for national politics?**

A further key factor in this election has been the virtual disappearance of 'Il Movimento 5 Stelle' (M5S). Following the previous disappointing vote in Umbria, M5S made a conscious decision to not campaign strongly in the Emilia-Romagna election, which Frosini and Pasquino both critique as a misjudgement. However, both argue that there is no evidence this signifies a lack of longevity in the current national coalition (PD and M5S). Neither party would benefit from a collapse of the government. Nonetheless, the public's continued frustrations with previous M5S governance, exacerbated by Lega rhetoric, mean this election could still signify a continual decline for M5S.

### **What do the higher participation rates in this regional election tell us?**

This election saw a 29.9% increase in participation to 67.7% which many interpret as a sign of the rise of civil engagement movements, such as the anti-right-wing 'Sardines' from Bologna. However, as Frosini notes, while the Sardines did have had an impact, this should not be over emphasised as the previous election was anomalously low in terms of participation as the 2014 election came during an era of corruption scandals and voter apathy.

### **How have demographic differences been seen in the results of this election?**

As in elections playing out across Europe, the centre right gained ground in rural areas of the region while the cities, Bologna, Modena and Ravenna, remained centre left. This follows the trend across Europe of the perceived alienation of rural voters whose challenges are not prioritised. However, a more detailed look at the electoral map shows a majority for the centre left in eastern Romagna, while the western side of the region, Emilia, voted for the centre right. Pasquino argues that Bonaccini was able to maintain support in the rural areas of Romagna by focusing on engaging with their concerns.

Professor Jones' closing remarks, remind us, that it is these elections, not national elections, that define the policies that impact citizens day-to-day lives through schooling, hospitals and local transport. It seems this fact was not lost on voters in Emilia-Romagna.