

Agenda. Reform push

Di Maio sets out his vision for a Europe free of austerity

The leader of Italy's Five Star Movement backs lower taxes and higher welfare spending

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In this year's Italian elections, Luigi Di Maio's Five Star Movement wooed voters with promises to raise welfare spending and upend the country's political establishment, policies he says were shaped by growing up near Naples, in a region with one of the highest unemployment levels in the country.

Mr Di Maio, now deputy prime minister, and at 32 one of Europe's youngest front-line politicians, was catapulted to the top of Italian politics when the online protest group fronted by the comedian Beppe Grillo became the largest party in the country. In March's polls, it secured almost a third of the vote, sweeping up support in the poorer south.

Mr Di Maio, who became leader of the party only last year, and who once worked as a steward at Napoli football club, said his own experience helped him understand the region's economic difficulties. "I come from the province of Naples, an area with 60 per cent youth unemployment, with some of the highest cancer index levels in Europe. It

was a very depressed area," he said.

"Between 2007 and 2013 we were totally ignored as a political reality; meanwhile, this project grew in society."

He argues his generation was betrayed by Italy's political establishment: "We had social rights in Italy related to health, welfare, the stability of employment contracts, the right to schooling and training. We had the right to a pension. These rights were sacrificed on the altar of debt, but while they were sacrificed the debt grew".

In July, Five Star formed a seemingly unlikely coalition with Matteo Salvini's hard-right League, with its roots in Italy's northern separatist movement. The alliance, which billed itself as "the government of change", has pushed through a budget of lower taxes and higher welfare spending, but critics fear this will destabilise the economy.

Mr Di Maio said he expected the coalition to last its full term, but that the only way to reduce voters' concerns over migration across Europe, the flagship policy for his coalition partners, was to increase government spending on welfare and investment.

"Today, everyone says that the most important issue is immigration. This is nonsense: all the findings we have tell us the most important issue is work and unemployment," he said. "If today we have six million poor Italians in Italy, this is causing a social tension that also

creates tensions with foreigners; this is inevitable."

He said Five Star was in talks with other parties across Europe about establishing an anti-austerity grouping in the European Parliament. He expects voters in next year's European elections to give the continent's political establishment "a big shake". "There is a political class [in Europe] that in recent years has stuck with [a belief] in austerity policies, which certain individual countries have repeatedly broken," he said.

"It is a political class committed to all this failed economic theory, and they know it too, but they can't allow anyone to violate it because they've somehow supported it for 10, 20 years, for the whole period of the crisis."

The League will be running on a separate platform in the European elections, with Mr Salvini having made overtures to other anti-migration parties across Europe to form an alliance.

Mr Di Maio said he would not say which European political parties Five Star was negotiating with, but that he hoped an agreement would be in place for January or February, before the European elections.

"Many [across Europe] no longer identify with any ideology, neither right nor left. Our new group will keep at its centre expansive policies for work, income, welfare and the environment. These are the principles on which we want to create the new Europe."

Luigi Di Maio expects voters to give a 'big shake' next year to Europe's political establishment

