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Salvini's last hope rests on building a bridge to Sicily

Fading Italian firebrand pins his election chances on a 3km crossing that's been mooted since Roman times.

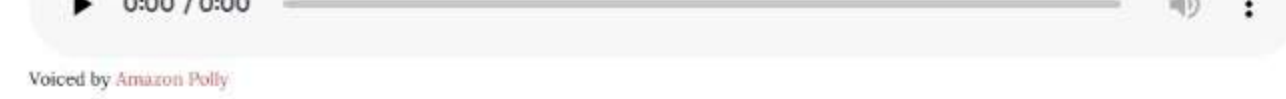
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Matteo Salvini hopes that he can succeed where Benito Mussolini and Silvio Berlusconi failed and launch the construction project by June, reinvigorating his crumbling political leadership along the way. | Filippo Monteforte/AFP via Getty Images

APRIL 25, 2024 8:14 PM CET
BY HANNAH ROBERTS



Voice by Amazon Polly

ROME — In early March, Matteo Salvini climbed aboard a bulldozer to break ground for a new bridge in Lombardy.

The building site was blessed by a priest, before Salvini — Italy's infrastructure minister — reeled off a list of construction projects in the works. If there are any delays, he said, he will pitch a tent in protest himself.

At the top of his list is a far bigger bridge — 3km long — across the Strait of Messina, between mainland Italy and Sicily. The wildly ambitious idea can be traced back to ancient Roman times, when Pliny the Elder described how a floating structure was set up to transfer more than 100 war elephants from the island to the mainland.

Now Salvini hopes that he can succeed where Benito Mussolini and Silvio Berlusconi failed and launch the construction project by June, reinvigorating his crumbling political leadership along the way.

“It is his last stand,” said Pierluigi Testa of the Trinità dei Monti think tank in Rome. “He is trying to associate his name with a grand public work, but it’s a desperate move to distract from internal attacks and get attention.”

Salvini made his name as a far-right firebrand whose strain of anti-migrant euro-skepticism and folksy image earned him a huge popular following. Back in 2019, his League party took a stunning 34 percent of the vote in the European Parliament election.



Over the last five years, Matteo Salvini has been eclipsed by Giorgia Meloni, who led her Brothers of Italy into power at the head of a right-wing coalition in 2022. | Tiziana Fabi/AFP via Getty Images

These days, his group is adrift, polling a meager 8.5 percent in recent surveys, and his own position at the helm is increasingly in doubt.

Over the last five years, Salvini has been eclipsed by the charismatic Giorgia Meloni, who led her Brothers of Italy into power at the head of a right-wing coalition in 2022. He is besieged by internal party challenges and seen as increasingly ineffective inside the government.

The photo call with a bulldozer in Lombardy, in northern Italy, was a foretaste of his grandest plan. A recent attempt to build the Strait of Messina bridge fell apart in 2011 when Silvio Berlusconi's government collapsed, but Salvini has now dusted it off again.

Salvini is pushing to launch the project by June, when the European election will be held that could make or break his leadership of the League.

The timing will be critical. As electoral support for the League shrinks, Salvini's party colleagues are running out of patience. All 15 members of one local party association in Lombardy, a League heartland, resigned in protest last month.

“Salvini singlehandedly rewrote the party's ideology to be nationalist,” said Daniele Albertazzi, professor of politics at the University of Surrey. “It is as if Catalonia autonomists wished to represent people from Madrid. Activists and voters were OK with this, only as long as he was successful.”

In February the party took just 3.7 percent in regional elections in Sardinia. League voters feel betrayed by the party's forays in the previous legislature into two governments, which forced them to make compromises — for example supporting onerous pandemic rules.

The doubters have found their voice. One MEP, Gianantonio Da Re, was recently kicked out of the party after calling Salvini a cretin. But other League members agree with him.

Paolo Grimoldi, a senior party figure and former MP, said that Da Re's only mistake was staying quiet for too long. “When ideas, policies, coherence trustworthiness, consensus and loyalty are lacking, you look for ... scapegoats, excuses, plots, but the disaster is exclusively your fault,” Grimoldi wrote on Facebook.

Sidelined in the infrastructure ministry by Meloni, Salvini took the opportunity to own the Straits of Messina project, which he claims will inject €20billion into the economy, and create 120,000 jobs.

There is significant opposition to the bridge, based on concern about earthquakes and environmental damage. Critics also argue that the two southern regions that will be connected have more urgent needs than being joined by a new road and rail crossing.

During a recent visit to Messina, leader of the opposition Democratic Party Elly Schlein said the project was “anachronistic, damaging and wrong” and was being rushed because of the vote in June. And it is unlikely to impress traditional League voters hundreds of miles away in the north, Albertazzi added.



Matteo Salvini has been openly cheering the prospect of Donald Trump's reelection as U.S. President. | Marco Bertorello/AFP via Getty Images

In a report to Parliament last month, a committee of scientific and technical experts gave a positive view of the plan, but admitted wind and earthquake tests have yet to be done. Many in Italy are skeptical that the bridge will ever materialize.

The bridge seems unlikely to pass the remaining bureaucratic hurdles in time to save Salvini's party at the June EU election. (Even the environmental ministry submitted more than 200 queries about the project). Salvini's back-up plan appears to be to occupy what was Meloni's space on the far-right of the political spectrum.

The Orbán of Italy

Salvini has been openly cheering the prospect of Donald Trump's reelection as U.S. President and sending signals to voters against arming Ukraine, recently causing uproar by celebrating Vladimir Putin's election landslide in Russia.

He has been trying to forge alliances with other far-right parties in Europe, such as Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France and Alternative für Deutschland in Germany. “He is trying to be the leader of the right, the Orbán of Italy,” said Testa, from Trinità dei Monti.

What does Salvini need from the June European election to secure his own position? If the League polls in double figures, Salvini is likely to survive, at least in the short term. But a poor result of less than 10 percent could trigger a leadership contest, or precipitate the formation of a clear opposing faction, Albertazzi said.

Until now, Salvini has kept a firm grip on his party, which is still stacked with his loyalists. But he has been forced to agree to hold a congress of the League membership after the European election.



If he's ousted, Salvini would be left as a lame duck infrastructure minister, cutting ribbons and posing with bulldozers. | Miguel Medina/AFP via Getty Images

That will be a potentially dangerous moment, providing disgruntled party members with a chance to trigger a leadership contest. Even Umberto Bossi, founder of the party, has called for a new leader.

If he's ousted, Salvini would be left as a lame duck infrastructure minister, cutting ribbons and posing with bulldozers. With his authority draining away, it may already be too late to build bridges.