

POLITICO

Matteo Salvini revels in his Sicilian kidnap trial

Italian far-right leader tries to rebrand his court appearance as a ‘festival of freedom.’

By **HANNAH ROBERTS** | 10/2/20, 3:53 AM CET | Updated 10/2/20, 6:42 AM CET



While he was interior minister, Matteo Salvini took a hardline stance on migrants | Alberto Pizzoli/AFP via Getty Images

ROME — Matteo Salvini knows how to turn a crisis into an opportunity.

Supporters of the far-right League leader have descended on the Sicilian city of Catania for a three-day political convention, as his trial for kidnapping opens this Saturday.

The 47-year-old politician faces up to 15 years in jail for aggravated kidnap. The charge dates from last year when, as Italian interior minister, he prevented migrants who had been rescued at sea from disembarking from the Gregoretto coast guard ship for five days.

[Privacy Settings](#)

Salvini says he was defending his country and would do the same again, writing on Facebook: "I go with a clean conscience, with the pride of knowing that I defended the honor of Italy."

The League advertised flights to the "festival" in Catania — officially called "The Italians choose freedom" — urging supporters to book while it was cheap. Activists and MPs from three right-wing parties are scheduled to attend dinners, concerts, exhibitions, debates and panel discussions on pet themes such as immigration, security and the long-touted bridge over the Straits of Messina.

“Immigration has been quite marginal, but with the trial it will come back to the center of public debate, which could help Salvini” — *Lorenzo Pregliasco, pollster*

"Let's make it so my trial on Saturday morning is an opportunity for learning, reflection, ideas and plans for the future of the country, making Catania for these few days the European capital of freedom," said Salvini.

Giorgia Meloni, leader of the extreme-right Brothers of Italy party and an ally of Salvini, said she would be there in solidarity, adding: "A minister cannot be put on trial for doing what a majority of Italians asked — defending the Italian law and defending our borders from illegal immigration."



ALSO ON POLITICO

Matteo Salvini's coronavirus slump

HANNAH ROBERTS



ALSO ON POLITICO

Italian Senate lifts Salvini's immunity for second time over migrant boats

PAOLA TAMMA

While in office, Salvini took a hardline stance on migrants, closing Italy's ports to NGO rescue ships and passing a law allowing vessels to be seized and fined.

Although the League is still Italy's most popular party, its support has slumped to about 25 percent in opinion polls from 34 percent at last year's European elections. Salvini's personal approval rating has dropped 10 points to about 30 percent since last year.

But pollster Lorenzo Pregliasco of YouTrend said that a majority of Italians, including some non-League voters, backed his approach to migration, meaning he could enjoy a bump in support from the trial.

Privacy Settings

Because of the coronavirus, public debate has not centered on issues beneficial to Salvini, said Pregliasco. "Immigration has been quite marginal, but with the trial it will come back to the center of public debate, which could help Salvini."

Jacopo Morrone, a League MP who will be in Catania, agreed the trial could rally support, but denied Salvini was playing the victim card: "We are not looking to benefit from the trial, we want it to end so we can get back to work."

The League leader "is not worried," said Morrone, "but he is unhappy that he is wasting time as leader of the opposition. No one likes a trial, especially one that casts doubt on your work and your efforts."

Salvini's standing may further be strengthened by widespread mistrust in the judiciary dating from the "Clean Hands" corruption investigations of the 1990s that swept away a generation of politicians, Pregliasco said. Some Italians suspect the court cases that have plagued top politicians since then, including Silvio Berlusconi, are politically motivated, he said. Only about a third of Italians have faith in the judiciary, according to an annual survey by Demos.

However, Morrone said Berlusconi's trials involved his business or private life and were "not comparable" to Salvini's case, which regards his work as a minister.

In court documents, Salvini has argued that once the ship docked in port, it constituted a place of safety where it was acceptable to hold the migrants until their redistribution could be agreed with other EU countries. His fellow government ministers were in agreement with his actions, he said.



The head of the Brothers of Italy party, Giorgia Meloni, is supporting Salvini | Tiziana Fabi/AFP via Getty Images

Pierluigi Testa, director of the Rome-based think tank Trinita di Monti, said it was unlikely Salvini would be convicted as he would have received legal and technical guidance from within his interior ministry and from law enforcement "to remain within the perimeters of the law" on his decisions on the migrants.

If Salvini is convicted for more than two years, he would likely be barred from holding public office for six years under the 2012 Severino Act — the same act that saw Berlusconi banned for four years after his conviction for tax fraud in 2013. However, the trial and appeals could drag on for years, which might impact Salvini's ability to lead the League in parliamentary elections scheduled for 2023.

Even if he is acquitted in the Gregoretti case, Salvini has other legal headaches. He could face charges related to two more migrant rescue vessels (the Open Arms and the Sea Watch), for abuse of office over 35 flights on government planes, and an investigation into whether the League sought funding from Russia.

Privacy Settings