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## Italy -- a ne

Thursday, May 1, 2008

Dennis REDMONT

Has Italy's geography changed? Yes, indeed. Is it a center-right boot? Yes, it is, nearly completely. Is it a "neo fascist" boot? No, do not misread it. It is easy to talk with stereotypes. Think how many people misread the result of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) victory when they won 47 percent of the votes last summer that they thought Turkey had earned another five years of stability. Or just think how many people continue to think of G-8 member Italy just as a stereotype – Pizza, Garbage, Alitalia and so on.

### The rehabilitation of fascists:

But the reality is different: In Rome we have the convincing victory for the mayor's office of 50-year-old Gianni Alemanno (by seven big percentage points) a diminutive former neo-fascist (in his youth) who has gone mainstream. But Alemanno has remained a populist by rolling up his sleeves and working in the poor neighborhoods during his campaign, and vowed to cooperate with everyone of the political spectrum. Alemanno is even buddies (from the days he was a center-right agriculture minister) with Carlo Petrini, a center-left luminary, the man who brought his "Slow Food" movement to Turkey and helped fuel its gastronomic Renaissance.

Meanwhile, at the Italian parliament you now have as President Gianfranco Fini, also an heir to the National Alliance, the party that inherited the postwar neo-fascist mantle. But Fini, a former foreign minister (Turkey: remember his frequent visits), has

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buried his origins by, among others, visiting Israel wearing the kippa and humbly visiting the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum. And he is now the nearly anointed heir of (Mamma Mia, says The Economist) the 71-year-old Mr. B., remember him? So of course, at the helm of Italy we now have Mr. Silvio Berlusconi, for the third round, with an overwhelming coalition composed of his own "Forza Italia," National Alliance (Fini and Alemanno), the Northern League (reinforced by a strong election performance) and a Sicilian regionalist whose unlikely name is Lombardo (the name of the northern region around Milan) and wants to change his island to another "Ireland." And speaking of Milan. That city

is also – for mayor – in the hands of a woman well known to the Turks. It is Letizia Moratti, the winning opponent of İzmir and Turkey for the 2015 Expo and World's Fair. Now, the funds will still be flowing. And Milan (Berlusconi's home town) will try to become another Paris where they build Eiffel Towers for World's Fairs. We hope it won't be another Shanghai with much skyscraper construction being the offering due to heavy state incentives projected for the Fair. So for the first time in history, Milan and Rome are in center-right hands. And speaking of construction, real estate and cement, here is another Turkish angle: The owner of Cimentas, which is a subsidiary of its parent company Cementir, Francesco Caltagirone, endorsed the future Mayor of Rome Alemanno two days before last weekend's runoff. Caltagirone, one of Italy's wealthiest men, took a calculated risk, while many other Roman businessmen stayed in the shadows and waited to see if Francesco Rutelli, the old center-left premier and culture minister, would succeed in returning to the mayorship he competently steered from 1993 to 2001. And why is Caltagirone important? Because his son-in-law Pierfranco Casini is head of the small but key moderate party which hopes to hold the balance of power in future political clashes and Berlusconi needs some outside support from the heirs of the Christian Democrats. So is Romano Prodi? Look out Turkey. The former prime minister is busy turning down a proposal by Vladimir Putin, Russia's president to head the South Stream pipeline project bringing Russian natural gas to Europe. Aides suggest the decision is not final from the ex-European Commission president. Russia insists that the South Stream is not a rival to the Turkey-crossing Nabucco pipeline.

So what was the seminal moment that clinched the Rome mayoralty race? Political scientist Sarah Popkin in his book "The Reasoning Voter" argues that most people make their choice on the basis of "low information signaling" – that is stupid things like whether you know how to roll a bowling ball or wear an American flag pin. Not things like John Kerry's windsurfing (too snobbish) or Bill Clinton's fast food love affair, which overshadowed his avoidance of military service.

**The reasoning voters:**

Well, in the case of Rome, the center-left mayor, Walter Veltroni, was busy pouring funds into the new Rome Film Festival, instead of into law and order funds while the city was outraged by the rape and murder of a woman whose husband was a faithful military officer by a Romanian suspect. Rutelli suggested women could wear electronic bracelets to signal "danger" to protect themselves. Alemanno instead said 20,000 immigrants, mostly Gypsies who have criminal records, in camps around Rome must quickly go. And he got the votes for victory. The election of the Rome mayor will long be remembered as a historic event. In fact it may even have an effect on the composition of the new cabinet (sometime before mid-May) when Berlusconi has to balance political allies with even more care than the booters on his Milan football team. But more on that and on foreign policy after kickoff time!

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