

Italian election

Italy's political rivals battle for outsized victory in tiny Molise

Vote in isolated region assumes central role in push to break deadlock in Rome



Italians once joked that Molise did not exist but the tiny region could have a big influence in forthcoming elections © Alamy James Politi and Davide Ghiglione in Montenero di Bisaccia 2 HOURS AGO

On a cloudy, chilly night in a hilltop town in southern Italy, Luigi Di Maio, the 31-year-old leader of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and one of the big winners of Italy's general election last month, was back on the campaign trail.

In Rome, Mr Di Maio has been immersed in fraught negotiations to try to form a government and break [Italy's political deadlock](#), which has now lasted nearly seven weeks with no solution in sight.

But this week he has alternated wheeling, dealing and positioning over alliances with dashes to the tiny southern region of Molise, ahead of regional elections on Sunday that have taken on an outsized national significance.

"We are so close to governing the country, and so close to governing this region," Mr Di Maio told the crowd huddled in the main square of Montenero di Bisaccia, about 10km inland from the Adriatic Sea, on Tuesday. "If you elect a regional president from

Five Star on Sunday, he will have the national government on his side, and we can work together to solve problems. It depends on you, not on us.”

Mr Di Maio is not the only Italian political leader to be assiduously courting the voters of Molise. Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right League, the other big populist winner of the Italian election, spent a full day there on Monday. Even Silvio Berlusconi, the 81-year-old former prime minister and leader of the centre-right Forza Italia party that suffered big losses in the vote, toured the region last week.



Each is hoping that a strong performance in Molise — despite its minuscule population of 300,000 people — could bolster their negotiating leverage back in Rome.

“When two sides of a scale are in equilibrium, even one gramme can make a difference,” said Gianmaria Palmieri, a jurist and the rector of the University of Molise, based in the regional capital, Campobasso. “If Five Star wins, even by just one vote, it would be very significant.”

The stakes are probably highest for Mr Di Maio and Five Star.

In the March general election, Five Star won nearly 45 per cent of the vote in Molise, part of its sweep of southern Italy driven by widespread disaffection with the traditional political class and weak economy.

A victory along those lines would bolster Mr Di Maio's claim to become the next prime minister. But such an outcome is by no means guaranteed, since Five Star tends to perform worse in regional and local elections than it does in national polls.

If Five Star loses the regional vote, Mr Di Maio would be on the defensive and may even have to take a step back from his insistence on the premiership. That could put Mr Salvini's League in pole position in the government talks, especially since another regional election in the north-eastern region of Friuli Venezia Giulia on April 29 is already expected to boost the League.

In Molise, Mr Salvini also hopes his preferred candidates will outperform Forza Italia, so he can consolidate his leadership of his party's alliance with Mr Berlusconi's party.



Sabine Di Pinto voted for Five Star in March: 'Molise didn't even exist but now, see, we do exist after all'

Sergio Mattarella, the Italian president who is refereeing the government talks, has played down the national implications of the regional elections but may struggle to ignore them.

After personally leading two rounds of fruitless negotiations with party leaders, he enlisted Elisabetta Casellati, the Senate speaker, to broker a deal between Five Star and the rightwing alliance comprising both Mr Salvini and Mr Berlusconi. But that effort appeared destined to fall short, leaving Mr Mattarella to ponder his next move — probably to explore a possible tie-up between Five Star and the centre-left Democratic party.

Meanwhile, in Molise, the national political attention has been greeted with a mix of bemusement and pride.

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Because of its sparse population and geographic isolation, Italians frequently joke that Molise is simply a figment of the nation's collective imagination. Internationally, its one claim to fame is that Robert De Niro, whose great-grandparents were born in the region, vowed to move to Molise two days after Donald Trump's election in November 2016 (he is now busy impersonating special prosecutor Robert Mueller on *Saturday Night Live* instead).

“Molise didn't even exist but now, see, we do exist after all,” said Sabine Di Pinto, who is unemployed, voted Five Star in the March election and was in Montenero to watch Mr Di Maio. “There's a battle because the government is not formed and everyone is trying to get votes on their side,” she added.

“I just hope that one-hundredth of the attention that has been poured on Molise will still be there after the election, but I don't have much faith in that,” said Domenico Porfido, a lawyer and city councillor.