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## **MONTI: NATIONALIST PARTIES TEMPER THE EU IN VIEW OF FUTURE ATTACKS**

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Pro-EU parties should not feel complacent about the nationalists failure to win a majority in the new European Parliament, the former Italian prime minister and ex-EU Commissioner Mario Monti told EURACTIV in an interview.

The election result poses the biggest challenge for the four parties composing the pro-EU majority, Monti said. If they breathe a sigh of relief because of the favourable outcome, populists and nationalists will highly likely get the majority in five years, he warned.

The 76-year-old lifetime senator is well versed in Brussels affairs, having been a Commissioner in the Santer and Prodi executives in 1995-2004.

And when he came back to Brussels seven years later, it was as prime minister of a technical Italian government, called upon to address the ongoing debt crisis and the lack of investor confidence threatening the stability of the country and the euro area as a whole.

The conservative European Peoples Party once again won the most seats in the European Parliament after EU elections on Sunday (26 May) but will face difficulties building a controlling majority as the Greens, the Liberals and the far-right posted big gains, reflecting growing political polarisation in the 28-country bloc.

In comments that may seem provocative, Il Professore welcomed the nationalist threat, saying it gives Europe the opportunity to prepare for withstanding another internal or external attack that may come in the future.

Keeping the EU safe from any potential threat is becoming an essential duty. We need to enter into a mindset of emergency, he said, adding that 2030 seems far away but were already determining with our actions and our inactions the goals we set ourselves for that deadline.

In this regard, the EUs new seven-year budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), will represent the first crucial question that the new EU institutions will have to answer for the next term.

The MFF for 2021-2027 is an acid test: if there is an inertial extension of the previous budget, particularly on the composition of the expenditures, we rid ourselves of any illusions, he said.

But if they want to get serious, there will be important changes.

Monti chaired and gave the name to a high-level group of experts who started a discussion on the

EUs own resources in the last legislative term. Their final report served as the basis for the Commissions legislative proposals for the EUs long-term budget for 2021-2027.

The former Italian Prime Minister recognised that these proposals took into account the general guidelines suggested by the Monti group, in the sense that the EU executive shared the need for a radical reconsideration of what the EU does.

## **Tips to Salvini**

Asked how the election outcome could affect Italys presence and credibility in Brussels, he said the risk of isolation is tangible and made worse by the fact that one of the two ruling parties, Matteo Salvinis Lega, which is hostile towards the EU, made an outstanding electoral performance.

However, I cannot exclude that, building on the success of the elections, Salvini could be more interested in softening the spat with the EU, Monti pointed out.

He said he didnt think Italy was in for a bashing in Brussels. Its still a big EU member and its not in the Councils interest to cut ties with Rome, but rather try to keep alive a dialogue that had become a little tarnished in the last year, he said.

In his view, the Legas strategy could shift from harsh words against Brussels to a search for compromise with EU institutions on the application of existing fiscal rules. It could also seek to work more closely with pro-EU forces on the future orientation of European politics.

When it comes to public finances, Salvini has a choice to make, according to the professor. He could follow a radical path if he were to seek to undermine the very concept of European rules for budget discipline, Monti said.

Or, less radically, he could focus on improving the current Stability and Growth Pact from the quality point of view, pushing for a much-awaited reform that allows more room for expanded growth-oriented public investments, he added.

According to Monti, Italy could also take advantage of the negotiations between the designated Commission president and the governments, where there is a lot of room for trading in combining good portfolios and collaborative high-level politicians from member countries.

I dont have any idea of whatevers inside the governments head, but I think its important to propose a personality capable of dialogue not only with the narrow nationalist representation in the Council but also with non-nationalist colleagues.

Italy needs someone that knows how to negotiate and to avoid unnecessary conflicts, he concluded.

Credibility also will be crucial. Its not a value judgement on the qualities of Pierre Moscovici, but the fact that he was appointed as Economy Commissioner after having been a minister in a government that didnt excel in disciplined management of public finances, had an effect in terms of less credibility.

I think that both quality of the Commissioner and the good chances of passing through the scrutiny of the Parliament will be an asset, he said, highlighting also the ever-increasing role of

gender balance.

Initial battle lines were drawn between member states over who will replace Jean-Claude Juncker as European Commission President on Tuesday (28 May) as EU leaders met to discuss no names, just process, in preparation for a decisive summit in June.

[Edited by Zoran Radosavljevic and Frédéric Simon]

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