

# [***Italy's League party picks a provocative candidate for European Parliament election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BXG-3S81-DYMD-60S2-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

ROME — He was fired by the defense minister after writing a book deemed offensive to women, gays and Blacks. He is under investigation by Rome prosecutors for allegedly inciting racial hatred. He set off a firestorm over suggestions that disabled children be taught separately at school.

And on Tuesday, Gen. Roberto Vannacci, one of Italy’s most experienced army generals, joined Italy’s deputy premier and leader of the right-wing League party, [*Matteo Salvini*](https://apnews.com/hub/matteo-salvini), as the League’s headline candidate for upcoming European Parliament elections.

Salvini’s gamble to put the provocative Vannacci out front for the June 6-9 vote is something of a Hail Mary pass for the League, which has hemorrhaged support in recent years to the more hard-right Brothers of Italy party of [*Premier Giorgia Meloni.*](https://apnews.com/article/elections-voting-italy-matteo-salvini-c251832f5b73063b2e20869a21f92efe)

By taking advantage of the media storm over Vannacci, Salvini is trying to breathe new life into his party, a junior partner [*in Meloni’s government*](https://apnews.com/article/italy-meloni-farright-migrants-2b3fc3bb92058eff65a7b38fa639693c), analysts said.

“Matteo Salvini has a party in crisis,” said Lorenzo Castellani, a professor of political history at Rome’s Luiss university. He noted that the League took 34% of the vote in 2019 European Parliament elections, and today is polling no more than 8%.

“He (Vannacci) has become a media personality whom Salvini is using to try to have some more support, let’s say a few tens of thousands more votes that this general could bring the League,” Castellani said in a telephone interview.

Vannacci’s candidacy has dominated Italian political discourse, headlines and newscasts for days and drew a standing-room only audience Tuesday at Rome’s Hadrian’s Temple, an ancient Roman temple-turned-conference center not far from parliament.

Officially, Salvini was presenting his new memoir-manifesto “Against the Wind: The Italy that Doesn’t Surrender.” But the event represented the first Salvini-Vannacci outing, and Vannacci used it as a campaign stop to outline his views on migration, Europe’s Christian roots and the need to defend Europe’s borders.

He lamented, for example, that the official poster of the [*Paris Olympic Games*](https://apnews.com/hub/2024-paris-olympic-games), an artistic rendering of the French capital, doesn't feature any crosses atop the Hôtel des Invalides. Their absence created a brief controversy last month in France when the poster was unveiled.

“Unfortunately, all these symbols that should inspire us a sense of belonging have been erased, blurred, diluted, almost as to give an image that Europe should look more like a bunch of junk, where everyone is included but no one feels like they belong,” Vannacci said Tuesday.

Vannacci led Italian troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya — and before that in the Balkans, Rwanda and Somalia — and was awarded the U.S. Legion of Merit in 2018 for his leadership against the Islamic State group.

But Italy’s defense minister fired him in August as head of the military’s geographical institute, and later disciplined him, after he self-published “The World In Reverse,” a manifesto in which Vannacci let loose on his beliefs about [*LGBTQ+ people*](https://apnews.com/hub/lgbtq-people), the environmental lobby, multiculturalism and migration.

“Gen. Vannacci expressed opinions that discredit the army, the defense ministry and the constitution,” Defense Minister Guido Crosetto tweeted at the time, announcing disciplinary action against him for having written the book without his superiors’ authorization.

In February, Rome prosecutors opened an investigation into alleged incitement to racial hatred, Italian news reports said. And this week, Vannacci kept the outrage alive, on the left and right, by telling La Stampa newspaper that disabled children should be taught separately in schools.

“This has nothing to do with freedom of opinion, but is offensive to the history and culture of our country,” said Sandra Savino, a regional leader of the center-right Forza Italia in Fruili Venezia Giulia.

Salvini has defended Vannacci’s right to express his opinions and accused the media of taking his comments about disability out of context. On Tuesday, he said he approached Vannacci after the firestorm over his book in the summer, and the two hit it off.

He said he didn’t share all of Vannacci’s ideas, but said Vannacci doesn’t share all of his, either.

Vannacci, for his part, said he knew he was taking a risk by publishing his book, but believed he owed it to his children to speak his truth and now fight in ***politics*** for them.

“I wanted to give them a better future, a better Europe,” he said.

Salvini’s choice has divided the League, with its more center-right base opposed to the more hard-right choice that Vannacci represents.

Castellani, the Luiss professor, said such internal dissent underscored the problems the League is facing and risks that Salvini might be replaced.

“Salvini is creating a media personality, which might be an opportunity for him,” he said. “But a personality is always dangerous because he can become a political adversary, or he can become embarrassing or voters can get bored with him.”

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