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Candidate Wants to Represent Expats Like Herself in Rome



Laura Garavini kicked off her campaign in Berlin in mid-March

Italian Laura Garavini has lived in Germany for 20 years, but is running for parliament in Rome, with the aim of representing Italians abroad from London to Vladivostok.

Laura Garavini, 41, has not lived in Italy since she left for Germany two decades ago. But she's hoping to soon have a seat in her native country's parliament, running on the center-left Democratic Party ticket. Expatriate Italians have the right to elect their own lawmakers in Rome, from four "super-constituencies" -- Europe, North and Central America, Latin America and Africa-Asia-Oceania. Some 430,000 Italians live in Germany.

Italians head to the polls on April 14 and 15 to elect a new leader, although Italians abroad must vote by mail ahead of that. Garavini's Democratic Party is headed by Walter Veltroni, Rome's mayor from 2001 to 2008. Veltroni is facing Silvio Berlusconi, who has been Italian prime minister twice. For the past several months, Garavini has been on the road nearly constantly, trying to speak to as many Italians abroad as she possibly can.

DW-WORLD.DE: Your electoral district is fairly large, to say the least. It stretches from Lisbon to eastern Russia. How much have you traveled this week?

Laura Garavini: I made stops in London, Amsterdam, Belgium, France and Germany. Of course, it's not really possible to conduct a traditional campaign when you have such a large area to cover since it's impossible to be everywhere. For my calendar, I've tried to schedule a mix of big cities and smaller locations. That's where my Internet site comes in and allows me to maintain contact to the voters who communicate with me through e-mail. That takes up a lot of energy and time, but it's incredibly important to reach people, either personally or through the Internet.



Laura Garavini

The concerns of Italians living in London must be quite different than the concerns of those living in, say, Istanbul.

Definitely, there are very big differences, which has a lot to do with the historical reasons behind emigration to different countries. For example, at my events in London, I see a lot of people who are part of the "new emigration" phenomenon. That is, highly educated young people who have come to London for professional reasons. On the other hand, there are countries where many of the Italians left Italy in the 1950s or 60s to look for work. That means

the problems they have or policies they'd like to see enacted in Rome are completely different.

You have invested a lot of your own money into this campaign and have a grueling schedule. What motivates you to do this?

I am convinced that in this election Italy is poised on the brink of a new era. With the Democratic Party of Walter Veltroni, Italy has the opportunity to radically modernize itself. We can bring about an economic boom that would also help further social justice. We could help bring more young people and women into the political process and spark a real renewal in the country. I think it's important that one is ready to personally engage oneself in pursuit of this goal. That's why I am a candidate.

Are you also worried that Italy is about to see another Berlusconi era?



Silvio Berlusconi, right, and National Alliance party leader Gianfranco Fini officially launch their election campaign

Unfortunately, there is that risk. That's why it's so important that during these last days before the election, we do everything we can to talk to the people and make it clear to them how much we Italians abroad and those in Italy suffered under Berlusconi. We had to endure embarrassment almost everyday from some stupid joke or gesture he made, such as when he described Martin Schulz, a German member of the European parliament, as a Nazi concentration camp guard. Such things were not only irritating, but they made us feel ashamed.

Berlusconi only pursued policies that were in his own interest or benefited his friends or family. We want to do the opposite. The Democratic Party wants to have a government that is for everybody, bringing the interests of all individuals

to the forefront, not just those of society's biggest winners.

What will your priorities be if you win your campaign?

I want to work on policies that promote the integration of Italians who live abroad. For example, there are already counseling services for Italians throughout Europe. But they're often focused on questions about pensions when they could address a whole range of issues that concern Italians abroad and help the integration process along.

Regarding integration, when one hears about integration problems, Germany's Turkish population is usually the subject. Italians are considered by many as well integrated in Germany. But is that actually true?

One assumes that Italians are well integrated, but in reality Italian children are more often put in remedial education programs than Turks are. The unemployment rate among Italians is double the rate it is among Germans and almost as high as it is among Turks. While integration problems with Turks or other minority groups in Germany is known, it's underestimated regarding Italians.

Are there still prejudices against Italians in Germany?

They do still exist. I am the initiator of a campaign called "Mafia? No Thanks!" I started this campaign for several reasons, one of which was that after the attacks in Duisburg [*Six men were killed last year in what is believed to have been a Mafia-related feud.*] these old prejudices gained new strength. You could read lines in the newspaper such as "where there's pizza, there's the Mafia." Those are, of course, ridiculous stereotypes that have no basis in reality.

You have traveled a great deal and spoken with many Italians who live abroad. Are they interested and excited about this election?



The launch of the "Mafia? No Thanks!" initiative

Yes, in the those places where I've been able to sit down and talk with people, I leave with a very good feeling. At the start of our conversation, they often express their disappointment, saying, "oh, nothing will change, we've heard it all before," and "here we go again, another government crisis." But when you take the time to explain what concrete progress the Prodi government has made in the last two years, and what the Democratic Party has in mind and how serious it is about its goal of national renewal, and then they see me, a young women who has worked for integration for 20 years and started an anti-Mafia initiative. All that helps give people the desire to go out and vote.

Interview: Kyle James