

Berlusconi plans to stand in European elections

By Guy Dinmore in Rome

Silvio Berlusconi is not giving up. Despite a conviction for tax fraud and a ban on him running for office, the billionaire leader of Italy's centre-right is said to be planning to register as a candidate for European elections and campaign on an anti-German platform.

Renato Brunetta, parliamentary leader of Forza Italia, told the Financial Times that Mr Berlusconi would take his case to appeals courts in Italy's five constituencies if he were prevented from running in the May polls.

The likelihood of Mr Berlusconi getting his name on the ballot paper is widely dismissed by his centre-left rivals, but there is little doubt that the 77-year-old veteran of numerous campaigns will be pulling the strings from behind the scenes in what could be a trial run for general elections in Italy.

Mr Berlusconi lost his final appeal against a conviction for tax fraud involving his Mediaset company last August and was expelled from the senate in November, prompting him to withdraw Forza Italia from Prime Minister Enrico Letta's left-right coalition.

The wheels of Italian justice spin slowly and it is only on April 10 that a

Milan court is due to decide whether Mr Berlusconi will serve his one-year sentence under house arrest or through community service. Either way, an anti-corruption law passed by Mario Monti's former government bans certain categories of convicted criminals, which includes Mr Berlusconi, from holding elected office for six years.

Asked how Mr Berlusconi could run an election campaign under such conditions, Mr Brunetta waved his smartphone and, alluding to the Soviet era of underground dissident publications, replied: "The internet is the modern *samizdat*."

"With Berlusconi all things that generally appear normal are not normal," Mr Brunetta added, explaining that for many Italians his criminal conviction by courts perceived to be acting out of political bias only enhanced his image as a victim.

Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor who among others in Europe

undermined Mr Berlusconi until he was shunted out of office in late 2011, is now in the media mogul's sights.

"In May we will attack a Germanised Europe," said Mr Brunetta, an economist, denouncing Germany's poli-

cies with its large current account surplus that he said were enriching northern Europe at the expense of the south.

"Populism in Europe is the toxic fallout from Ms Merkel," he said, attacking what he called the Calvinist mentality of the German chancellor - "if you [southern Europe] are in crisis then it is your responsibility".

Mr Berlusconi's lasting influence on the Italian stage was confirmed last month. Matteo Renzi, the reformist leader of the centre-left Democrats who has his own ambitions to run for prime minister, broke what amounted to a taboo by reaching out to his party's long-time enemy and forging an agreement on a new electoral law.

The law is making its way through parliament and, as it stands, would guarantee a majority of 52 per cent of seats for the winning party or coalition taking at least 37 per cent of the total vote. If that threshold was not reached, a second-round run-off would be held.

Recent opinion polls point to a close contest between centre-right and centre-left coalitions, with the Five Star Movement trailing in third place.

An Ipsos poll this week gave Mr Berlusconi's coal-

ition a first-round victory with 37.9 per cent, boosted by a decision by Pier Ferdinando Casini to take his small Catholic UDC party out of a centrist alliance with Mr Monti and rejoin Mr Berlusconi's coalition after a long and bitter rupture.

Mr Brunetta, who says Mr Letta is leading a "zombie government", is among hardliners in Forza Italia calling for general elections to be held in May, in parallel with the European polls, once the electoral reform is passed. Others in the party are more inclined to wait another year.

One problem facing Forza Italia is the likelihood, barring intervention by the European Court of Human Rights, that Mr Berlusconi must find and groom a replacement candidate to run for prime minister.

One answer was parked outside parliament yesterday in the form of a large camper van bearing a poster of Mr Berlusconi and his daughter Marina with the slogan: "The liberal dream continues."

Antonio Nachira, a pro-Berlusconi activist who is touring Italy to promote Marina Berlusconi's candidacy, said he met the 47-year-old chairwoman of the family's Fininvest holding company and "saw in her eyes great strength and charisma".



Silvio Berlusconi: rivals dismiss his poll prospects

