



POPULISM IN ITALY: THE CASE OF THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT

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CIDOB REPORT
01- 2017

Italians suffer from an inherent weakness: populism. The phenomenon is deeply rooted in the history of the country. In different forms it has been recurring ever since the Fascist project. The current versions of populism, represented by the Lega Nord of Matteo Salvini and the Five Star Movement (M5S) of Beppe Grillo, jointly account for roughly 40% of the electorate.

Looking at the 2018 general elections, the M5S is the most concrete risk of populist drift, more tangible than the anti-European and anti-immigration positions of the right-wing Lega Nord, which grasps *only* 10% of the votes. The latest polls (on March 24th, 2017) show the M5S as the leading political force in the country, with 31% of the preferences and a 5% lead over the ruling Democratic Party (PD). The PD is still recovering from a bloody congress, from which a few secessionist exponents (Bersani, D'Alema, Rossi and Speranza) left slamming the door on Matteo Renzi, who was prime minister until December 2016 and the party's secretary general until February of 2017. In the run-up to the party's primary elections, set for April 30th of this year, Renzi's share of the vote is on the rise, leaving behind the minister of justice, Andrea Orlando, and the governor of Apulia, Michele Emiliano. The ex-premier is likely to grab back the leadership of the centre left. Nonetheless, the challenge of the federal elections would be tough for Renzi, even as newly rehabilitated secretary general of the PD, due to his limited popularity after his (too) recent – and in many ways disappointing – tenure as prime minister.

Conversely, the M5S has not yet been jeopardised by ruinous administrative mandates – the controversial term of its mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, does not seem to count as a discriminating factor. The capital's long-lasting state of decline, fostered by various administrations over time, seems to have contributed to its qualification as a “no man's land”. As a result, the scenario of a *starry* M5S government seems more and more real, with unpredictable consequences for

the country and possibly a new wave of instability. The first measures of a M5S government would be the establishment of a guaranteed minimum income and of a consultative referendum on the euro.

The M5S shows the typical signs of populism (as a synonym for demagoguery, cultural rudeness and inconclusive rebelliousness) that are common in many grass-roots protests. It has a pronounced hostility towards the political class, which it contrasts with the image of the common citizen who makes up for lack of experience with honesty when holding office. It rejects the categories of right and left, which it considers mere expedients to distract people from the real opposition between above (the corrupted ruling class) and below (the virtuous people). It contends that there are simple solutions to complex problems, has a propensity for elementary forms of direct democracy, rejects any kind of political alliance and refuses to organise itself in the way political parties usually do, bending to the will of Beppe Grillo and his charismatic leadership.

Founded to stimulate direct democracy and transparency via the internet, the “each one counts as one” romance of M5S has actually left few spaces for pluralism and internal dissent. Since 2012 more than 60 discordant members have been expelled from the party. Moreover, even if licit from a legal viewpoint, the code of conduct that has been imposed on all M5S candidates in the last round of local administrative elections has been highly contested. The contract binds the elected candidates to consult the guarantor (i.e. Beppe Grillo) on any crucial decision and to pay a penalty of €150,000 as compensation for the damaged reputation of the M5S in the case that the ethical guidelines are not followed.

Furthermore, M5S has recently been accused of being a main source of misinformation and propaganda for the Kremlin. A journalistic investigation has traced the information network of M5S, starting with Beppe Grillo’s blog and social media accounts, to a number of websites managed by the communication company of M5S co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio (who died last year, and was replaced by his son Davide), which developed and controls the technologies for M5S’s internal online voting. The investigation also examined the relationship between M5S and Russia, as many items that appear on web pages linked to M5S were originally posted on websites and newspapers under the control of the Kremlin, such as Sputnik and Russia Today.

Until 2014 M5S’s interest in Russia was minimal and mostly critical. At that time Putin was considered a friend and authoritarian ally of the former prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi. As such he was demonised by M5S. When the first armed men entered eastern Ukraine M5S spoke of an invasion. It accused both the Italian government and the European Union of not taking a firm position against Russia to protect trade agreements on gas supply. Since then, however, things

have radically changed. M5S now demands the immediate removal of economic sanctions on Russia and a referendum on leaving the Transatlantic Alliance (NATO).

As far as Europe is concerned, the movement professes the desire to “stay to change the Union from within”. It is worth mentioning, however, that since 2014 M5S has formed part of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD) with the British far-right UKIP of Nigel Farage, of whom Grillo was early ally. Nonetheless, during the current parliamentary term the 17 MEPs of the M5S have voted more in line with the European United Left (GUE/NGL), the Greens (Greens/EFA) and the Liberals of ALDE than with UKIP. In the early days of January, Grillo activated an online vote on his blog to define M5S’s new alliance strategy and possibly leave the coalition with UKIP, as with the coming Brexit the party will no longer be a member of the European Parliament. ALDE emerged as the favoured option, after the refusal of the Greens to open up to Grillo. However, the attempt of the M5S to join the liberal and pro-European coalition failed. Guy Verhofstadt, head of ALDE, accused M5S of not providing “sufficient guarantees on a common European agenda” and having opposing viewpoints on key European issues, such as the TTIP. Consequently, the M5S came back to EFDD and its ally UKIP, promising to continue its battles against the euro and the Dublin Regulation on refugees.

In comparison to earlier forms of “leaders’ parties” and populism in Italy, such as Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia or Umberto Bossi’s Lega Nord, M5S is difficult to place on the left-wing/right wing spectrum. It proposes traditional left-wing measures such as the minimum income, but then allies with the eurosceptics. The alternation of left-wing and right-wing governments and the European Union used to be considered regenerative for the Italian political system. Now this role is compromised, as M5S aims at delegitimising Europe and the political class as a whole.

The web democracy practiced by M5S has a considerable *selection bias*. It is not representative of the entire country, which has one of the oldest populations in the world and, consequently, a low digitalisation index. Grillo’s blog and the M5S websites use the same Google mechanisms for the analysis of visits. Some commentators suspect that M5S’s political programme is the mere result of an algorithm providing the most trending issues on the internet. Former members of M5S report that the system keeps track of individual votes. This allows it to simulate voting scenarios and possibly to manipulate them. These severe accusations, if verified, could downgrade online voting to a mere formalisation of what Grillo has previously decided. Finally, Grillo himself arises as a very invasive “guarantor”, who – despite never having been elected – is decisive on all party issues, from the coalition at the European Parliament to the referendum on the euro and the construction of the new stadium of AS Roma football club.

