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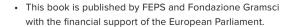D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES

FONDAZIONE GRAMSCI

In the aftermath of the 2008 global crisis, the Italian political landscape has been reshaped by the rise of populist and right-wing nationalist parties and movements. Progressives who have tried to respond to the growing demands for social protection have had to do so in a context marked by exclusionary articulations of ideas of welfare state and public intervention. Together with these changes came radical transformations in the very language of politics, also influenced by the emergence of social media as key channels of communication. In this book, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Fondazione Gramsci present a four-part study by historians and political scientists that seeks to examine these processes in their different dimensions. Centring around Italy, this book stresses the key role that national traditions and national responses to globalisation play in shaping different framings of nationalist and populist discourses. At the same time, its analyses and results speak to broader European concerns. The transformation of the language of politics and the impact of exclusionary anti-establishment messages affect most EU countries and represent crucial challenges for all European democracies and for European progressive forces. Understanding these processes is the first step towards addressing them.

CHANGING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2008 CRISIS
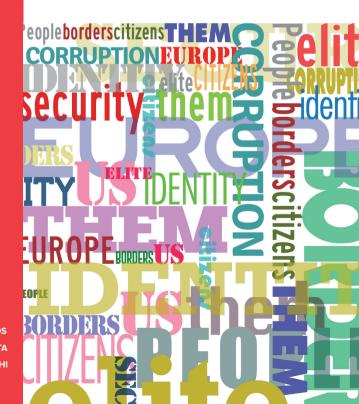
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CHANGING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2008 CRISIS

THE CASE OF ITALY

Giacomo BOTTOS

Eleonora DESIATA

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CHANGING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2008 CRISIS

THE CASE OF ITALY

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Foreword

The global crisis of 2007-2008 represented a major turning point for democracies in Europe and worldwide. As social insecurity increased and confidence in the benefits of globalisation seemed to fade, new demands for protection emerged which established political forces have often struggled to meet. It is in this context that challengers of traditional political parties, sometimes belonging to the nationalist right, sometimes expounding programmes and worldviews that, for lack of a better definition, have been generically identified as "populist", have seen their electoral fortunes soar.

Together with these changes came radical transformations in the very language of politics. Social media have become crucial channels of communication, thereby favouring approaches to the dissemination of political ideas that are both more informal and direct but also increasingly simplistic, fragmented, and often brash and confrontational. It is not just the medium, however, that should be blamed for the new features of today's political messages. The shrinking of the traditional centre-left and centre-right has been matched by an erosion of the ability of traditional parties to build consensus discourses. In their attack on the existing order, challenger parties have adopted an aggressive language among whose tropes figure the exaltation of supposedly uncorrupt national communities imperilled by an invariably hostile outside world, indiscriminate scapegoating of politics and politicians, opposition to international institutions, and even outright xenophobic assertions. As a consequence, progressives who have tried to respond to the growing demands for social protection have had to do so in a fractured and antagonistic context, often

marked by exclusionary articulations of ideas of welfare state and public intervention.

Italy, one of the European countries hit the hardest by the economic crisis, has been particularly affected by the above-mentioned developments. After the collapse, in 2011, of the centre-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi, which was plagued by scandals and apparently unable to respond to the crisis, it fell to a cabinet of "technicians", supported by a cross-party parliamentary coalition, to take on responsibility for a set of harsh austerity measures. The following general elections, held in 2013, saw the extraordinary rise of the populist Movimento 5 Stelle, which scored a surprising 25.5% at its first participation. The refusal by the Movimento 5 Stelle to cooperate with any of the traditional parties paved the way for five years of grand coalition governments led by centre-left prime ministers (Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni), which could not check the anti-establishment tide. By the time of the 2018 elections, the Movimento 5 Stelle had reached 32%, and the extreme-right Lega of Matteo Salvini 17% (from 4% in 2013). After lengthy negotiations, the two parties formed in June 2018 what amounted to the first self-described populist government in one of the founding member countries of the European Union.

It is in this context that the idea for this book came about. The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Fondazione Gramsci joined forces with a view to bringing about a greater understanding of the transformation of the language of Italian politics in the aftermath of the global crisis as a crucial aspect contributing to the rise of nationalist and populist parties, which gained increasing resonance and moved from the fringes to the centre of the Italian public debate. Besides examining the language and communication strategies of the anti-establishment parties, our objective was to understand and gauge the attraction of their nationalist and populist discourses: how did they influence mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties? Did the

latter's reactions emphasise antagonism and resistance or rather adaptation and attempts at stealing the thunder from the new challengers?

In order to achieve these aims, we have turned to the expertise of historians and political scientists who have contributed to a four-part study that seeks to examine these processes in their different dimensions. The introductory chapter prepares the ground for an in-depth analysis of three case studies by discussing not only methodological aspects, but also the various approaches to the populist phenomenon and the complex relations between populism, nationalism and self-described "sovereignism". The introduction also provides historical context on Italian post-World War II politics, thereby showing that recent political developments do in fact draw on different, historically rooted strands of anti-party rhetoric and mobilisation. The ensuing analytical chapters focus on three broad areas – *Democracy and Institutions*, *Boundaries of Citizenship*, *Foreign and European Policy* – and four leading political parties ranging from the right to the left of the Italian political spectrum: the Lega, Forza Italia, the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Partito Democratico. Thus examining both the internal and external dimensions of nationalist and populist discourses, the study highlights the interplay between anti-establishment arguments that focus on a vertical axis, dividing "the people" from "the élite", and others that insist on a horizontal divide between the inside and the outside of the polity, citizens and migrants, the national community and foreign powers.

Centring around Italy, this book stresses the key role that national traditions and national responses to globalisation play in shaping different framings of nationalist and populist discourses. At the same time, its analyses and results speak to broader European concerns. The transformation of the language of politics and the impact of exclusionary anti-establishment messages affect most EU countries and represent crucial challenges for all European democracies and for European progressive forces. Understanding

these processes is the first step towards addressing them. It is with this goal in mind that the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Fondazione Gramsci have decided to promote this study, in the hope that this book can represent a valid contribution to better prepare and respond to a changing political landscape.

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Introduction. On discourse categories and their political use: conceptual and methodological foundations of the study

Giacomo Bottos, Eleonora Desiata, Michele Di Donato and Andrea Pareschi

Once a founding member of the European Communities and, until recently, one of the most Europhile member states, Italy has been harshly plagued by the crises that have asymmetrically affected the vast majority of European countries. These circumstances have seriously affected the legitimacy of Italy's main political parties and even parliamentary institutions, thus opening up new opportunities for "challenger" political forces, whose respective breakthroughs have been part and parcel of the unsettled landscape of Italian politics. Significant struggles among the parties, revolving around the ways of framing and communicating political change, have undergirded the ebb and flow of support for them. New language, interpretative categories and political narratives have entered the public sphere, clashed within it and spread throughout: some of them have even become conventional wisdom among the national population. This study seeks to retrace the transformation of political discourse in Italy between 2013 and 2019, with special reference to how forms of "populism" and nationalism have taken root. It also seeks to assess how established parties such as the centre-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) have reacted to the challenge.

Due to its high debt-to-GDP ratio, Italy faced a dangerously uphill journey through the sovereign debt crisis in the late 2000s and early 2010s. In November 2011, the spread between 10-year Italian bonds and the benchmark German equivalent dramatically reached an all-time high of 574 basis points, prompting the collapse of the Berlusconi Cabinet and the birth of a technocratic govern-

ment. Supported by the mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties, Mario Monti's *governo tecnico* immediately embarked on an emergency austerity-oriented programme. Since 2013, subsequent governments have on many occasions striven to emphasise their credentials of responsibility, while periodically seeking to renegotiate the leeway allowed to them by the architecture of the eurozone. Italy has avoided dependency on bailouts, yet economic recovery has been slow – grounded on unsteady foundations and going unperceived by large sections of the national population – while anti-austerity sentiment has gradually made inroads.

Another theme that has monopolised Italian debates in recent years is foreign immigration. Owing to its geography, Italy has for years been the gateway for the arrival of irregular migrants on European shores. However, circumstances became less tenable when the magnitude of migration flows soared from an average of 25,000 landings in the 2004-2013 period to 170,000 between 2014 and 2016.[1] In October 2013, two migratory shipwrecks caused 400 deaths off the island of Lampedusa and spurred Italy to establish the intensive search-and-rescue Operation Mare Nostrum, which was superseded in November 2014 by Frontex's Operation Triton, focusing on border protection. When in 2015-2016 the issue of immigration flared up in the four corners of Europe, the EU-level response to over 1,000 deaths in further shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea consisted of a military operation intended to target smugglers' routes, Operation Sophia. Between 2015 and 2017, the situation on Italian shores became critical and the number of illegal landings peaked in the early summer of 2017. Meanwhile, the overall failure of attempts to reform the Dublin Regulation in order to ensure a solidarity-based EU response to the migration issue – along with the difficulties faced by Italian local and national institutions in managing the crisis, and a deterioration in the material conditions of migrants – enabled a real spin to be put on an already-heated national debate.

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1   See for instance the data gathered by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI).

Consecutive Italian governments have repeatedly called for European changes of course – albeit with different tones and proposals – in relation to these events, which are often construed as part of a "migration crisis", as well as to the economic crisis. In this respect, they have thus reflected the increasing dissatisfaction expressed by Italian citizens towards the European Union.

In terms of party politics, the emergence of new challengers has shattered what was until 2013 a fairly well-established panorama, in which centre-left and centre-right coalitions, often internally unstable, competed for power in a bipolar system. The Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5S), founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo and widely described as a quintessentially populist party, had its first national breakthrough in the 2013 general election, racking up about one-quarter of the vote. A distant runner-up in the 2014 European elections that were won by the Partito Democratico under the new leadership (and prime ministership) of Matteo Renzi, Beppe Grillo's party prevailed in two municipal elections in Rome and Turin in 2016. In the 2018 general election, the Movimento 5 Stelle topped the polls with one-third of the vote – and a landslide in the South – and formed the largest parliamentary groups in both Houses of Parliament. Even before the political developments of the last two years, the party had attracted much attention from scholars.[2] It is frequently regarded as a near-unique instance across Western European parties, characterised by its almost purely populist traits rather than by any ideological outlook on the traditional dimensions of politics.

Meanwhile, after obtaining 4 % of the vote in 2013 as a part of the defeated centre-right coalition, the Lega Nord (Northern

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2 See: Biorcio, R. and P. Natale (2013), *Politica a 5 stelle: Idee, storia e strategie del movimento di Grillo*, Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore; Corbetta, P. (ed.) (2017), *M5S: Come cambia il partito di Grillo*, Bologna: Il Mulino; Manucci, L. and M. Amsler (2017), "Where the wind blows: Five Star Movement's populism, direct democracy and ideological flexibility", *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 48(1), pp. 109-132; Mosca, L. and F. Tronconi (2019), "Beyond left and right: The eclectic populism of the Five Star Movement", *West European Politics*, 42(6), pp. 1258-1283.

League, LN) – actually the oldest force in the current Italian party system – has been rebooted and revived under the leadership of Matteo Salvini. Born as a regionalist force promoting the independence of "Padania" (the North of Italy), it has been rebranded as the "Lega" and transmogrified into a party building its platform around the motto "Italians first". In the 2018 election, the Lega again participated in a centre-right coalition – achieving 17 % and ultimately overtaking Silvio Berlusconi's declining Forza Italia (Forward Italy, FI) – but it then formed the Conte I Cabinet together with the Movimento 5 Stelle. Since then, Salvini's Lega has risen to lead opinion polls, at the expense of its governing partner too, and to win the 2019 European election with 34 %. The party belongs to the populist radical right party family, merging populist leanings with an even more consequential nationalist (indeed nativist) outlook.[3]

Because of its outcomes and implications, the general election of March 2018 therefore stands out as the landmark moment epitomising a "perfect populist storm"[4] in Italy. Separately, the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega came very close to reaching 50 %. Jointly, they came to give birth to the so-called "Government of Change", the second European government – after the coalition formed by Syriza and ANEL in Greece between 2015 and 2019[5] – entirely composed of political forces usually identified, and even self-identified, as populist.

In August 2019, Salvini's abrupt decision to pull the plug led to prime minister Giuseppe Conte's resignation and provoked a government crisis. After various rounds of talks, a new government involving the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Partito Democratico was

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3 For a recent study, see: Passarelli, G. and D. Tuorto (2018), *La Lega di Salvini: Estrema destra di governo*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

4 Baldini, G. and M.F.N. Giglioli (2019), "Italy 2018: The Perfect Populist Storm?", *Parliamentary Affairs*, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsy052

5 Andreadis, I. and Y. Stavrakakis (2017), "European Populist Parties in Government: How Well are Voters Represented? Evidence from Greece", *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4), pp. 485-508.

formed, with the post of prime minister being retained by Conte. Nevertheless, the two populist parties have not lost their central importance: the Movimento 5 Stelle remains the necessary pivot of any government majority in the current legislature, while the Lega, far from being marginalised among the electorate, could spearhead a right-wing coalition and prevail in a prospective new general election. While the M5S and the PD were engaged in negotiations, party leader Matteo Salvini starkly stated that "the fact that somebody in the corridors of power is deciding in the place of the Italians is a betrayal of the popular will", and he obliquely hinted at some actors "fearing the Italians" and bringing about "a clearance sale of the sovereignty of this country in Merkel's name".[6] Such a discourse resonates with a longstanding narrative on Italian governments allegedly lacking electoral legitimation, as will be developed in further sections.

The aim of this publication is to track how the political discourse of the main political forces within the Italian party system – as represented both by their programmatic commitments and by their streams of communication – has evolved between 2013 and 2019 in the aftermath of the global crisis. Italy is an interesting case study for analysing how "populist" discourse can be framed in different ways. Insofar as one or another variant enjoys special resonance with popular sentiment and ingrained beliefs, it may become hegemonic or at least influence the parties claiming to be "non-populist". These forces may then be compelled to contemplate uneasy dilemmas, either distancing themselves at the risk of appearing "out of touch", or selectively co-opting parts of this discourse at the risk of giving up on principles. With a view to setting out implications which may be of relevance for other European countries, this study does not only focus on the populist connotations of the post-global crisis political discourses, but

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6   La Repubblica (2019), "Governo, Salvini: Ribaltone era pronto da tempo. In caso di voto pronti a manovra epocale", 26 August, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/08/26/news/governo_salvini_ribaltone_era_pronto_da_tempo_in_caso_di_voto_pronti_a_manovra_epocale_-234413216/

also on their nationalist and "sovereignist" traits. Alongside the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle, we examine the discourse of the two major parties that have hegemonised the centre-left and centre-right in recent years – the Partito Democratico and Forza Italia.

In the next section, this introductory chapter offers a quick overview of crucial but often hazy concepts – the first one being populism – and addresses some peculiarities of Italian politics in a historical perspective, so as to point to longstanding roots that have contributed to a fertile breeding ground for the contemporary populist challengers. The final section provides an account of the methodological details of this study, elucidating the selection, collection and analysis of textual data. The second, third and fourth chapters then respectively discuss the transformation of the discourse of the four main political parties in relation to three broad areas: *Democracy and Institutions*, *Boundaries of Citizenship*, *Foreign and European Policy*.

1. Populism, nationalism and sovereignism: A brief conceptual overview of three "spectres haunting Europe"

Categories such as populism, nationalism and sovereignism have become rather ubiquitous catchwords, frequently invoked to depict heads of government or party leaders associated with democratic backsliding or threats to the international order. While nationalism has a long-established and multifarious history as a political doctrine, populism has mainly come to the fore in the last few decades, and it is only in recent years that political sovereignism has been addressed as such. Whatever the abuse or the misuse of these terms, there is little doubt that they refer to core contemporary political actors and trends in domestic, European and international politics.

Observers of "populism" have famously referred to the onset of a "populist Zeitgeist"[7] and to a "populist moment".[8] In the context of European integration, one work has characterised the current phase of Euroscepticism as "a stage where *national interests* take – more than ever – explicit precedence over European solidarity".[9] Furthermore, the extent to which rising challengers have rubbed off on the stances of parties of the traditional centre-left and centre-right represents no novel concern, as regards either populism or Euroscepticism.[10] In addition to this, it can be argued that the possibility of parallel developments of this kind within different political parties – if not inter-party contagion in a strict sense – increases in the enduring presence of favourable conditions. For example, as Rogers Brubaker observed,

> [t]he mediatization of politics and commercialization of the media have also fostered a populist style of political communication that matches the populist style of media coverage of politics: a style characterized by simplification, dramatization, confrontation, negativity, emotionalization, personalization, and visualization.[11]

1.1. *Approaches to the populist phenomenon*

The term "populism" is highly controversial and raises misunderstandings. Within the discourse of political actors themselves, the word is sometimes strategically appropriated by outsiders to seek legitimacy within the political system, but it is more commonly employed as an accusation against political adversaries. In everyday language the term is imbued with a pejorative con-

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7   Mudde, C. (2004), "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition*, 39 (4), pp. 542-563.

8   Brubaker, R. (2017), "Why Populism?", *Theory and Society*, 46(5), pp. 357-385.

9   Vasilopoulou, S. (2013), "Continuity and Change in the Study of Euroscepticism: Plus ça change?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 51(1), pp. 153-168, specifically p. 161 (emphasis added).

10 See for instance: on populism, Rooduijn, M., S.L. De Lange and W. Van der Brug (2014), "A populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in Western Europe", *Party Politics*, 20(4), pp. 563-575; on Euroscepticism, Meijers, M. (2017), "Contagious Euroscepticism: the impact of Eurosceptic support on mainstream party positions on European integration", *Party Politics*, 23(4), pp. 413-423.

11 Brubaker, R. (2017), "Why Populism?", *Theory and Society*, 46(5), pp. 357-385, specifically p. 370.

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notation, making it a synonym of demagoguery. Developing a clear-cut concept of populism in scientific language has in turn led to several definitional attempts. One difficulty in this respect has been that appeals to "the people" belong within the legacy of ideas associated with representative democracy, which blurs the line between normal democratic politics and populist politics.

While there is no complete consensus on precisely what populism is (and is not), over the last two decades growing agreement on some aspects seems to have arisen. First, populism is understood as a phenomenon whose defining features are eminently political. For example, according to the definition given by Acemoglu and his colleagues, populism is "the implementation of policies receiving support from a significant fraction of the population, but ultimately hurting the economic interests of this majority".[12] Besides some obvious examples, however, it is difficult to distinguish between economic policies that hurt a majority of the population and those that benefit it. From the variety of Latin American populism which prevailed between the 1940s and the 1970s to the neoliberal wave of the 1990s, from left-wing and right-wing populist parties in Europe to the further wave of populism of the radical left in South America,[13] the economic policies proposed or enacted by populist forces have been widely divergent.

One political understanding has defined populism in organisational terms, as "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmedi-ated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers".[14] Yet this view pits populism against party discipline, while a charismatic leader is arguably more related to

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12 Acemoglu, D., G. Egorov and K. Sonin (2013), "A Political Theory of Populism", *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 128(2), pp. 771-805, specifically p. 772.

13 Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America", *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), pp. 147-174.

14 Weyland, K. (2001), "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics", *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), pp. 1-22, specifically p. 14.

the success of populism rather than to its presence. Instead, the lowest common denominator of many recent studies lies in their interpretation of populism as a set of ideas, to be found in the programmatic platforms and in the communication of political actors as well as in the minds of individuals. In this vein, two main variants can be highlighted.

Firstly, populism could be a kind of ideology. More precisely, it could be a "thin-centred" ideology[15] to be articulated in synergy with other ideologies, as it only comprises "an identifiable but restricted morphology that relies on a small number of core concepts whose meaning is highly context dependent".[16] Thus, it has once been described as "an ideology that pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous "others" who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights and values".[17] According to what is probably the most famous definition of the concept in political science, proposed by Cas Mudde, populism consists of "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people".[18]

Secondly, populism could be a kind of discourse or a political style. Discursive approaches are rooted in the thought of the post-Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau, who identified a strong potential in the signifier "the people", allowing for the construc-

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15   Freeden, M. (1998), "Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?", *Political Studies*, 46(4), pp. 748-765; see also Stanley, B. (2008), "The Thin Ideology of Populism", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1), pp. 95-110.

16   Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America", *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), pp. 150-151.

17   Albertazzi, D. and D. McDonnell (2008), "The Sceptre and the Spectre", in D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-11, specifically p. 3.

18   Mudde, C. (2004), "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), p. 543.

tion of "chains of equivalence" that link different popular demands and grievances not addressed by ruling elites. Indeed, Laclau ultimately went so far as to equate populism with the very logic of political action. Many scholars following in his footsteps have shed his praxis-oriented perspective, but kept and developed a dense theoretical apparatus investigating the phenomenon through the prism of its articulation of discursive elements in the pursuit of political projects.

The "political style" label suggests higher attention to the performative (i.e. theatre-like) interaction between the populist actor and followers, whereas it is claimed that "discursive approaches still primarily focus on discursive 'content', and see style as secondary".[19] The difference nevertheless appears bridgeable, to the point that populism has been accordingly defined as "the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations",[20] and as "a discursive and stylistic repertoire".[21] Defining features of the populist style have been identified by Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey in appeals to "the people" (against "the elite", or even other groups or institutions); the conjuring-up of a "perception of crisis, breakdown or threat", providing a rationale for swift and sweeping action; and the use of "bad manners", openly spurning political correctness.[22]

As we have suggested, approaches defining populism in terms of political ideology, discourse or style show differences but also commonalities. They are all broadly compatible with what has been termed an "ideational approach to populism"[23] – and all the

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19 Moffitt, B. and S. Tormey (2014), "Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style", *Political Studies*, 62(2), pp. 381-397, specifically p. 390.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 387.

21 Brubaker, R. (2017), "Why Populism?", *Theory and Society*, 46(5), p. 369.

22 Moffitt, B. and S. Tormey (2014), "Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style", *Political Studies*, 62(2), pp. 381-397; for a different set of features, see Brubaker, R. (2017), "Why Populism?", *Theory and Society*, 46(5), pp. 357-385.

23 Hawkins, K.A. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2019), "Introduction: The Ideational Approach", in K.A. Hawkins, R.E. Carlin, L. Littvay and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *The Ideational Approach*

more so since the ideological standpoints of political actors, the discourse conveying their stances and the style by which their messages are delivered do not constitute rigidly delimited spheres. Furthermore, and in more direct terms, "[p]opulism can be both a sincere belief and a style deployed by a politician who is in fact committed to retaining the status quo".[24] In fact, the well-known work by Mudde referred at first to populism as a thin-centred ideology, but then moved on to highlight how the traditional parties would respond to it by incorporating populist rhetoric:

> *When explicitly populist outsider groups gain prominence, parts of the establishment will react by a combined strategy of exclusion and inclusion; while trying to exclude the populist actor(s) from political power, they will include populist themes and rhetoric to try and fight off the challenge.*[25]

An important implication is that populism – as a minimum in the form of populist tropes, which however may influence substantive party stances and citizens' own viewpoints – is deployed at times and to some extent by political leaders and parties belonging to the traditional party families, in addition to those straightforwardly identifiable as populist. In other words, "some political actors shun the repertoire altogether; some draw on it only occasionally or minimally (and may do so even as they criticize others for their "populism"); others draw more chronically and fully on a wider range of elements from the populist repertoire".[26] Hence, in its essence populism could basically be seen as "a property of a message rather than a property of the actor sending the mes-

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to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1-24. For further arguments, see Hawkins, K. (2009), "Is Chávez Populist? Measuring Populist Discourse in Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Political Studies*, 42 (8), pp. 1040-1067; Pareschi, A. and A. Albertini (2018), "Immigration, Elites and the European Union. The Framing of Populism in the Discourse of Farage's UKIP", *Comunicazione Politica*, 2, pp. 247-272.

24 Bonikowski, B., D. Halikiopoulou, E. Kaufmann and M. Rooduijn (2018), "Populism and nationalism in a comparative perspective: A scholarly exchange", *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(1), pp. 58-81, specifically p. 65.

25 Mudde, C. (2004), "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition*, 39 (4), p. 563.

26 Brubaker, R. (2017), "Why Populism?", *Theory and Society*, 46(5), p. 362.

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sage",[27] and there is growing consensus also on interpreting the populism of political actors as a matter of degree rather than an either-or matter.[28]

Whether it is to be interpreted as primarily ideological, discursive, stylistic or all of the above, populism is certainly predicated on an extremely limited number of core categories and ideas.[29] Moreover, the core concepts around which it revolves according to the various definitions proposed – first and foremost "the people", then "the elites" and possibly also the "dangerous 'others'" – are decidedly vague. They therefore act as capacious "empty signifiers", which various political actors can fill with different meanings.[30]

Two related considerations stand out. First, while political scientists adopt "minimal" definitions of populism in that they allow for comparisons across time and space, political forces thicken and sharpen the empty categories of populism on the basis of the pre-existing discourse of the (national) contexts in which they operate. For the purpose of our analysis, then, it is also crucial to uncover how the basic traits associated with populism have been connected with the genetic code of anti-establishment traditions and other pertinent, deeply rooted narratives in Italy. After all, "new meanings [are not] unrolled out of whole cloth", but rather "woven from a blend of inherited and invented fibers

27 Rooduijn, M., S.L. De Lange and W. Van der Brug (2014), "A populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in Western Europe", *Party Politics*, 20(4), p. 564. On this, see also Bonikowski, B., D. Halikiopoulou, E. Kaufmann and M. Rooduijn (2018), "Populism and nationalism in a comparative perspective: A scholarly exchange", *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(1), p. 62.

28 Concerning this point, see Hawkins, K.A. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2019), "Introduction: The Ideational Approach", in K.A. Hawkins, R.E. Carlin, L. Littvay and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1-24.

29 Freeden, M. (2017), "After the Brexit referendum: Revisiting populism as an ideology", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 22(1), pp. 1-11.

30 Finlayson, A. (2013), "Ideology and Political Rhetoric", in Freeden M., L.T. Sargent and M. Stears (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 197-213.

into collective action frames in confrontation with opponents and élites".[31] And in seeking to bring about its "potentially self-fulfilling prophecy", which refers to an allegedly shared vision of the social world while it precisely crafts and spreads such a vision, populism "needs a basis consisting of latent dispositions that are made explicit and sometimes modified within the restraints imposed by their previous structure".[32]

Second, political actors also filter empty signifiers through the thicker systems of beliefs they hold, weaving distinctive ideological threads together with thin-centred populism in their discourse. Accordingly, different varieties of populism emerge. Two main subtypes of the populist phenomenon have been labelled as "exclusionary" and "inclusionary" populism, and have been identified as respectively prevalent in Europe and in Latin America.[33] Relatedly, left-wing populism is argued to be most frequently inclusionary in its outlook, whereas right-wing populism is exclusionary without fail.[34] Questions on the exact nature of the populism-nationalism relationship have recently multiplied, especially since populist radical right parties – which adhere to both populism and "nativism",[35] a hard-line version of nationalism – have magnified their strength across and beyond Europe. Are they conceptually independent from each other, or rather fatally intertwined? And which role do sovereignist claims play?

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31   Tarrow, S. (1998), *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 118.

32   Krämer, B. (2014), "Media Populism: A Conceptual Clarification and Some Theses on its Effects", *Communication Theory*, 24(1), pp. 42-60, specifically p. 47.

33   Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America", *Government and Opposition*, 48 (2).

34   Bonikowski, B., D. Halikiopoulou, E. Kaufmann and M. Rooduijn (2018), "Populism and nationalism in a comparative perspective: A scholarly exchange", *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(1), p. 70.

35   Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America", *Government and Opposition*, 48 (2).

1.2. *Populism and nationalism, populism and sovereignism*

Regardless of the definition adopted, populism is a truly ambiguous phenomenon, able to manifest within extremely different ideological and socio-political contexts.[36] Indeed, populism and nationalism can be closely related. Empirically, this phenomenon has been highlighted by many prominent instances right across the ideological spectrum, ranging from many of the Latin American populisms to the populist radical right.

Conceptually, both populism and nationalism revolve around the notion of the sovereignty of the people. Furthermore, although significant decision-making powers are now entrusted to the supranational level in the EU context, the nation-state remains the main political space for representation, in which populist claims and discourse can be deployed.[37] In this respect, and perhaps precisely for this reason, the "people" evoked by populist narratives are frequently portrayed – more or less deliberately – as nation-based communities.

The two notions of populism and nationalism are hence often conflated by the public debate and the media, but also, at times, by academic literature. As far back as 1969, Stewart defined populism as "a kind of nationalism", while in more recent times it has been claimed that "the people" in populism refers to the ethnos, the culturally or ethnically distinct people, rather than (just) the demos,[38] the sovereign people intended as a community of citizens. Indeed, many contemporary critiques of populism are actually critiques of exclusionary forms of nationalism.[39] In fact, the exclusion of

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36 Katsambekis, G. and Y. Stavrakakis (2017), "Revisiting the Nationalism/Populism Nexus: Lessons from The Greek Case", *Javnost - The Public*, 24(4), pp. 391-408.

37 De Cleen, B. (2017), "Populism and nationalism", in C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 342-362.

38 Jansen, R.S. (2011), "Populist mobilization: a new theoretical approach to populism", *Sociological Theory*, 29(2), pp. 75-96.

39 De Cleen, B. (2017), "Populism and nationalism", in C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

specific socio-economic or ethnic-cultural groups, a characterising feature of much populist discourse, borders on exclusionary nationalism, in that the people-as-underdog – on behalf of whom populist forces claim to be speaking – are depicted as a sub-group of an ethnically and culturally defined nation,[40] leaving everyone who does not fall into this category outside the perimeter of political claim.

However, although populism and nationalism can indeed operate in strong tandem and exhibit "elective affinities", to which we will return, both are also capable of existing autonomously. When paired, their mutual engagement can take a variety of different forms. The relationship between nationalism and populism, rather than a necessary fusion, appears as one of contingent articulation.[41] If, as presented by discourse theory, politics is to be interpreted as a discursive struggle for hegemony – that is, as an attempt on the part of political forces to produce structures of meaning and make their own views prevail – the co-occurrence of populism and nationalism should then be investigated precisely through the prism of the articulation of discursive elements.[42] Populism and nationalism constitute two very distinct ways of discursively constructing the notion of "the people"[43] and claiming to represent them.

Nationalist discourse articulates around the nodal point of "nation", intended as a limited and sovereign community,[44] and defined in exclusive terms, through the horizontal opposition between members and different types of non-members, and between one

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40   *Ibid.*

41   Katsambekis, G. and Y. Stavrakakis (2017), "Revisiting the Nationalism/Populism Nexus: Lessons from The Greek Case", *Javnost - The Public*, 24(4).

42   De Cleen, B. and Y. Stavrakakis (2017), "Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism", *Javnost - The Public*, 24(4), pp. 301-319.

43   *Ibid.*

44   De Cleen, B. (2017), "Populism and nationalism", in C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

nation and the others – an articulation which also shapes the construction of group identity. In this framework, sovereignty is envisaged as the capacity to make decisions without external interference. This idea of nation relies on a shared space (a geographically defined territory) and time (common history, present and future).

From this viewpoint, populist discourse conversely revolves around the nodal points of "the people" and "the élite", antagonistically defined on a vertical axis. This element is particularly and essentially present both in the discourse-theoretical definition of populism and in Mudde's conceptualisation of it as a thin-centred ideology. Populists bring different identities together – all frustrated and endangered by "the élite" – in the "chain of equivalence" symbolised by the "the people".[45]

While acknowledging the conceptual distinction between populist and nationalist discourse, contemporary scholars have endeavoured to bridge the two realms through different approaches. Rather than attempting to disentangle the ambiguity of the populist appeals to "the people" from the nationalist ones, as suggested by Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis,[46] Brubaker[47] has instead proposed embracing – and hence capturing – ambiguity as a constitutive feature of populism itself, and as a resource to be exploited by political actors for the construction of political identity. The frame of reference for populist discourse is, in this respect, understood as an inherently two-dimensional space combining two perspectives: inequality and difference.

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45 See Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (2001), *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, 2nd edition, London: Verso; Laclau, E. (2005), *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso.

46 De Cleen, B. (2017), "Populism and nationalism", in C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; De Cleen, B. and Y. Stavrakakis (2017), "Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism", *Javnost - The Public*, 24(4).

47 Brubaker, R. (2019), "Populism and nationalism", *Nations and Nationalism*, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12522.

On the one hand there is the opposition on the vertical axis between people and élite, separated by power, education, wealth and prestige, while on the other hand there is the dimension building a dividing line between the inside and the outside of the polity.[48] According to this multidimensional framework, "the people" are therefore placed in multiple relations to those on top and those on the outside – in other words, they are constructed not just vertically (as the "ordinary" people, opposed to the élite) but also horizontally (as a bounded community, defined with regard to both those outside the polity and certain other groups inside it). Furthermore, in the populist discourse, vertical and horizontal oppositions are tightly interwoven. Economic, political, and cultural elites can be simultaneously represented as "outside" and "on top", distant from the struggles of ordinary citizens as well as from their culture and way of life.[49]

Efforts to clarify the facets of the populism-sovereignism linkage are more newly bred than evaluations of the populism-nationalism nexus. Neither populism nor sovereignism have spurred traditions of studies as rich and time-honoured as those dealing with nationalism. Yet, as with populism and nationalism, populism and sovereignism have been mostly investigated in parallel by two distinct communities of experts active in different scientific disciplines.[50] Contemporary debates reflect the newness of the challenge, in spite of the oldness of the underlying concepts of "people" and "sovereignty".

A recent analysis centred on British sovereignism has proposed considering its multidimensionality by distinguishing different types, whereby – alongside "economic", "civic" and "cultural"

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48 *Ibid*.

49 Brubaker, R. (2017), "Why Populism?", *Theory and Society*, 46(5).

50 Basile, L. and O. Mazzoleni (2019), "Sovereignist wine in populist bottles? An introduction", *European Politics and Society*, https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632576; Verzichelli, L. (2019), "Conclusions. The populism-sovereignism linkage: findings, theoretical implications and a new research agenda", *European Politics and Society*, https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632585.

variants – a "national" and a "populist" variant of sovereignism appear.[51] Working the other way around, it has been suggested that "sovereignism is one of the recurrent, and core, themes of populism" – given that "[s]overeignty claims pre-exist populism".[52] This chimes with the characterisation of the "sovereign people" as one of the fundamental meanings ascribed to "the people".

In this vein, if a constitutive ambiguity of populism vis-à-vis nationalism originates in the meaning of "the people" as the national or cultural ethnos, then a constitutive ambiguity of populism vis-à-vis sovereignism lies in "the people" as the sovereign demos. The "our people first" discourse employed by many right-wing leaders stands out as a powerful point of joint articulation.[53] And if elements such as the usage of vague first-person plural pronouns, a depiction of politics as a zero-sum game, the mobilisation of in-group vs. out-group mentalities act as "elective affinities" of populism and nationalism and reinforce their joint appeal,[54] as perceptively argued by Bart Bonikowski, then they can plausibly tie sovereignism in as well.

Finally, "the culturally prevailing legal and political fictions of sovereignty as 'one and indivisible'"[55] lend themselves well to sovereignism but perhaps even better to its combination with populist claims: "the people" is "one and indivisible" – and the Italian translation *il popolo* is grammatically singular as well. One need look no further than Article 1 of the Italian Constitution:

51 Baldini G., E. Bressanelli and S. Gianfreda (2019), "Taking back control? Brexit, sovereignism and populism in Westminster (2015–17)", *European Politics and Society*, https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632584.

52 Basile, L. and O. Mazzoleni (2019), "Sovereignist wine in populist bottles? An introduction", *European Politics and Society*, https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632576.

53 Verzichelli, L. (2019), "Conclusions. The populism-sovereignism linkage: findings, theoretical implications and a new research agenda", *European Politics and Society*, https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632585

54 Bonikowski, B., D. Halikiopoulou, E. Kaufmann and M. Rooduijn (2018), "Populism and nationalism in a comparative perspective: A scholarly exchange", *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(1), p. 74.

55 Freeden, M. (2017), "After the Brexit referendum: Revisiting populism as an ideology", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 22(1), p. 8.

the Italian populist radical right regularly cites its assertion that "sovereignty belongs to the people", but just as assiduously leaves out the immediately ensuing words whereby sovereignty "is exercised by the people in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution".

Having concluded this overview of populism, nationalism and sovereignism – and of some conceptually plausible intercon-nections – we point out how an approach centred on discourse analysis serves our research purposes. We are interested in the retention, reproduction and alteration of ideological and rhetorical "building blocks" in the Italian public sphere, some of which have come a long way, while others are presumably going to outlive the political actors currently leveraging them. We thus empha-sise both the dependency of present-day political discourse on past legacies, and the role played by political actors in weaving together the old and the new in support of their goals:

> *Articulation refers to the practice of bringing together pre-existing discursive elements in a particular way in a (hegemonic) bid to construct a more or less novel arrangement of meaning. [...] Whilst any discursive practice draws upon, reproduces and excludes existing elements, the space for agency lies in the selection of such elements, and in the fact that articulations are contingent relations of "no necessary correspondence" and that the process of articulation can radically change the meaning of whatever is being articulated.*[56]

We now first briefly summarise patterns of populist discourse in Italian republican history, and then move on to a presentation of the methodological foundations of our own study.

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56 De Cleen, B. and Y. Stavrakakis (2017), "Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism", *Javnost - The Public*, 24(4), p. 305.

1.3. *The Italian case*

Italy has been referred to as "a country of many populisms",[57] as "the promised land of populism",[58] and as a sort of "laboratory of populism".[59] Indeed, since the early 1990s, many political subjects – from the Lega Nord to Forza Italia, from the Italia dei Valori to the Movimento 5 Stelle – have employed discourse, claims and narratives that scholars have identified as forms of populism.[60] This tendency has its roots in the political history of the country. While the idea of an Italian case with completely different features from the other Western countries is largely misleading, post-war Italian politics has been marked by the imprint of several strands of criticism levelled against the political élite in the name of "the people".[61]

The political configuration of the Italian Republic was greatly influenced by the context of its foundation. Between 1943 and 1945, the collapse of the Fascist regime gave way to the emergence of a democratic system in which mass political parties played a central role. In the context of the wartime "Grand Alliance" between Western democracies and the Soviet Union, anti-fascist cooperation between different political groupings emerged as a keystone of Italian democracy. The cardinal document of the new Italian Republic, the 1948 Constitution, bears the mark of this encounter – or compromise – between the ideals of Christian Democracy and those of the Socialist (PSI) and Communist (PCI) parties. These three parties together obtained around 75 % of the votes at the elections of the Constituent Assembly. For their millions of members, they provided not only a vehicle for participation in the political arena, but also an instrument of acculturation and social

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57 Tarchi, M. (2008), "Italy: A country of many populisms", in D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 84-99.

58 Tarchi, M. (2015a), "Italy: The Promised Land of Populism?", *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 7(3), pp. 273-285.

59 Tarchi M. (2015b), *Italia populista: Dal qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

60 *Ibid*.

61 For a comparison between Italy and France see Diamanti, I. and M. Lazar (2018), *Popolocrazia: La metamorfosi delle nostre democrazie*, Roma-Bari: Laterza.

mobility, as well as the backbone of a subculture around which they could organise their social and communal life.

If anti-fascism was the lodestar of the Italian Constitution, anti-communism soon emerged as a second criterion which distinguished the fully legitimised political subjects from those that, however represented in Parliament, were excluded from the possibility of participating in government. As wartime cooperation was replaced by a cold war between the capitalist and socialist camps, the so-called *conventio ad excludendum* against the pro-Soviet Communist Party barred both the possibility of an Austrian-style long-lasting grand coalition and that of a systematic competition for power. Italy remained a "blocked democracy": firmly in hold of a strong plurality of votes (most often around 38-40%), but never with an absolute majority (50%+), the centrist Christian Democratic Party (Democrazia Cristiana, DC) was left as the kingpin of the political system, while the PCI, which soon outpaced the Socialist Party and established itself as a hegemon on the left wing, was unable to provide a viable alternative for government.

This peculiar situation set the stage for the development of critical currents which historians and political scientists have alternatively branded as populist, anti-political, or anti-party.[62] With its meteoric rise, which brought it to obtain a significant result at the first democratic elections of 1946, the Uomo Qualunque ("Common Man") movement represents an archetypal example of a scathingly critical political discourse – derivatives such as *qualunquismo* (noun) and *qualunquista* (adjective) are still widely used today as pejorative terms for all-round anti-political attitudes. Guglielmo Giannini, the founder of the movement, aimed to represent the protest of the common people against what he described as the encroach-

62 See respectively, Tarchi M. (2015b), *Italia populista: Dal qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo*, Bologna: Il Mulino; Mastropaolo, A. (2000), *Antipolitica: All'origine della crisi italiana*, Napoli: L'ancora del Mediterraneo; Lupo, S. (2103), *Antipartiti: Il mito della nuova politica nella storia della Repubblica (prima, seconda e terza)*, Roma: Donzelli; Lupo S. (2004), *Partito e antipartito: Una storia politica della prima Repubblica, 1946-78*, Roma: Donzelli.

ments of state power on individual freedom and a political system that was out of touch and corrupt. According to Giannini, the fall of the Fascist regime merely brought about a new oligarchy – that of the anti-fascist parties, which he described as factious, greedy, and ready to exploit the naive enthusiasm of the citizens with ideologies that were but a smokescreen for economic interests and a lust for power. Uomo Qualunque distinguished itself for its plain and often coarse language as well as for its call for an apolitical government of experts and technicians.

The movement's success was only temporary. In the polarised context of cold war politics, its outright rejection of the political system seemed to entail a less than resolute espousal of the Western cause, and this led to loss of support from conservative voters who opted for parties that offered more solid anti-communist credentials. While the experience of Uomo Qualunque turned out to be short-lived, the initial success of the movement highlighted one of the ambiguities of the post-war Republic. The legacy of Fascism and the anti-fascist foundation of the new "Republic of political parties"[63] set an insuperable barrier to the representation of the political Right. Despite a few occasional electoral peaks, the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) remained throughout its history a small and generally ostracised force. Alongside this struggling parliamentary Right, however, right-wing opinion survived as an undercurrent, ill-represented in the political system but highly visible in society and capable of exerting a significant indirect influence on politics.[64] Right-wing voters generally prioritised anti-communism and cast their ballots for centrist parties – the DC first and foremost. However, this did not make them less critical of the anti-fascist political system. While not necessarily nostalgic for Fascism, they considered the foundations of the post-war political order to be illegitimate – anti-fascism was seen

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63 Scoppola, P. (1991), *La repubblica dei partiti: Profilo storico della democrazia in Italia, 1945-1990*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

64 Chiarini, R. (1995), *Destra italiana: Dall'Unità d'Italia a Alleanza nazionale*, Venezia: Marsilio.

as a sort of imposture, in a country which had previously adhered to Mussolini's project – and condemned its factionalism, weakness and liability to capitulate to communist pressure.

Mostly subdued until the late 1980s, this strand of opinion would gain centre stage with the fall of the cold war order. With the DC's role as an anti-communist bulwark losing relevance, many of the conservative voters it had been "unnaturally" gathering would finally be free to seek new outlets of representation. Indeed, what has come to be defined as Italy's "First Republic" would collapse in the early 1990s amidst major judicial inquiries that revealed a system of endemic illegal financing involving most of the key political parties. This "great avalanche",[65] however, did not come out of nowhere and was indeed anticipated by a gradual erosion of the popular legitimacy of the political system.

Negative characterisations of the political system as a *partitocrazia*, a regime in which political parties exerted an excessive and illegitimate power, emerged early on from different quarters and even gained academic respectability from influential political scientists.[66] At the same time, however, Italian politics remained remarkably stable, despite the chronically short lifespan of the country's governments. For decades, the DC maintained its pivotal role, while the PCI slowly increased its share of votes and deepened its societal rootedness and its network of local and regional administrations. Most importantly, the country underwent massive economic growth and social transformation which culminated in the so-called "economic miracle" of the 1950s-1960s. While the tortuous inclusion of the Socialists in the government area did not significantly alter this panorama, the social and workers' movements of the late 1960s, on the one hand, and the impact of the global stagflation of the 1970s, on the other, tested the limits of the political system's ability to foster economic prosperity and give full

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65   Cafagna, L. (1993), *La grande slavina: L'Italia verso la crisi della democrazia*, Venezia: Marsilio.

66   Maranini, G. (1958), *Miti e realtà della democrazia*, Milano: Edizioni di Comunità.

representation to this renovated society. In a context of increasing economic difficulties and socio-political tensions, different actors launched their assault on what started to look like a besieged political system. The small Radical Party led by Marco Pannella, in particular, chose referenda as an instrument to overcome political mediation over civil rights but also political issues. Its success in a 1974 consultation on the confirmation of a divorce law that had recently been passed seemed to showcase the breakthrough of a modernised civil society with which the party system struggled to catch up (the DC secretary had led the anti-divorce campaign, while the PCI had been very circumspect in joining the pro-divorce camp). The radicals would then resort time and again to the referendum strategy, most often with far less remarkable results. This was nevertheless part of a very aggressive campaigning style, which saw the small party attack *en bloc* what it dubbed as the "regime of the political parties".

The tendency to lump together different political parties in these attacks was reinforced by the evolution of the system itself. The PCI, which by the mid-1970s had reached around one-third of the votes in regional and general elections, was seeking access to power via an ambitious strategy of cooperation with the Christian Democrats and the other constitutional parties (the so-called Historic Compromise). By 1976, this attempt had given way to a more modest experience of parliamentary support to a government led by the DC. Born in a tense and frenzied climate, marked by the economic crisis but also by the increasing pressure of political violence and terrorism, the so-called "national solidarity" governments seemed to vindicate those who had been denouncing *consociativismo*, i.e. the alleged tendency by the political parties to collaborate in spite of their public antagonism, thereby effectively carving up all parcels of power and depriving citizens of the possibility of looking for an alternative. The experience of "national solidarity", however, was in fact short-lived, despite a non-negligible record of reforms that included the completion of a universal national health service. By January 1979 the PCI

had withdrawn its support to the government, and the Christian Democrats soon reaffirmed their commitment to an anti-communist plank.

In the same period, a different sort of attack against the whole political system came from terrorist organisations such as the Red Brigades, whose kidnapping and killing of the DC president Aldo Moro stands out as the most spectacular and dramatic moment of the Italian crisis, as well as an unsurpassed example of cynical manipulation of the public opinion against the political system via the selective diffusion of the letters Moro was writing from his "people's prison" before being executed.[67] The emergence of this brand of ultra-leftist terrorism compounded the instability and violence that had already been introduced on the Italian scene by right-wing terrorist organisations, which often entertained murky relations with sectors of the secret services. Especially active from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, these groups have been frequently described as the protagonists of a "strategy of tension" aimed at preventing the risk of a political slide to the left.

The 1980s saw the erosion of the legitimacy of the political system advance on the heels of two different phenomena. The more superficial, but also more visible, phenomenon was the emergence of a new, ambitious and ambiguous critic of the party system in the person of the new secretary of the Socialist Party, Bettino Craxi. Himself a product of the very same system, after obtaining the post of prime minister thanks to backdoor negotiations, Craxi displayed a new style: brazen, assertive, keen to stress the role of the executive and to denounce the endless political mediations and the *slow-cracy* which, he said, were hamstringing Italy. Brandishing the proposal of an ill-defined "Great Institutional Reform", Craxi insisted on the need to overcome the sluggish rituals of Italian democracy and to attune to the needs of the "modern" sectors of the economy and society. On a deeper level, post-war equi-

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67   Moro, A. (2008) (ed. M. Gotor), *Lettere dalla prigionia*, Torino, Einaudi.

libria were being called into question by the post-1970s global economic transformation. With the new prominence of market liberalisation in an increasingly de-territorialised capitalist system, the post-war "anti-fascist compacts" looked increasingly imperilled.[68] The political anti-fascism of the democratic parties that had been dominating the Italian political scene had its counterpart in socio-economic projects based on welfare capitalism and faith in the virtues of state intervention. The least one can say is that both features were at odds with the new climate that exalted individual entrepreneurship and saw the state mostly as a resource-wasting machine. The delegitimisation of the political parties and of the welfare state seemed to go hand in hand: the former were seen by the new apostles of unbridled liberalism as corrupt structures which, in a clientelistic fashion, had been trading the resources of an oversized and inefficient welfare state in exchange for votes.[69]

Rather than being the beginning of the story of Italian populism or anti-politics, the upheaval that followed the *Mani Pulite* judicial inquiries of the early 1990s represented the endpoint of a decades-long process of delegitimisation. In the northern part of the country, things had already started to change substantially in the late 1980s, with the first electoral breakthroughs of the autonomist and regionalist movements that would then be federated by Umberto Bossi's Northern League (Lega Nord). In the political discourse of the Northern League, the classic denunciation of the distance between common people and politics and institutions took a new bent as it intertwined with the North-South and periphery-centre cleavages, both crucial to the territorial identity of the movement. "Roman politics", corrupt and parasitic, was opposed to the ethos of the hard-working people of the North. Hostility against Southern Italy, seen as the ball and chain that prevented

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68 Stone, D. (2014), *Goodbye to all that? The story of Europe since 1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

69 Baris, T. (2014), "Crisi del paradigma antifascista e retoriche delle nuove destre tra Prima e Seconda Repubblica", in S. Colarizi, A. Giovagnoli and P. Pombeni (eds.), *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi, vol. II, Istituzioni e Politica*, Roma: Carocci 2014, pp. 437-456.

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the country from catching up with the most prosperous European states, was articulated with arguments that followed closely the narrative about the misdeeds of the dissipative and clientelistic state. At the same time, the Northern League tried to construct new "national" identities along the historical North-South divide, bringing up the idea that the regions north of the Po river could be united in a hypothetical Italian federation, or even form a new independent state. This project was accompanied by some typical features of the anti-elitist movements, starting with the use of a simple and vulgar language in opposition to the *politich-ese*, the complex and convoluted language of politics.[70] The line that separated self-described straight talking from derogatory or even utterly racist arguments was a fine one, which started to be crossed with a frequency that worried many.

The League obtained more than 8 % at the 1992 general elections, the first to take place after the fall of the cold war order, and gathered double-digit percentages in its Northern strongholds. By then, the PCI had disbanded and formed a new Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), aiming to renovate the political culture of the party and salvage it from the fall of international communism. The DC and the PSI would also soon collapse under the blows of the *Mani Pulite* inquiries. As the pillars of the party system fell in a frantic atmosphere — that saw actors ranging from infotainment show hosts to the President of the Republic himself gather in denouncing the ills of the old order and advocating a general reform — even some of the heirs of the established political cultures, starting with the PDS, began to adopt at least part of this rhetoric and programmes. A common narrative, unopposed in the beginning, emphasised the palingenetic effect of the judicial initiative. The idea gained ground that Italy was entering a "Second Republic" — although in fact no constitutional reform was implemented. What changed was the electoral law, as the old

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70 McCarthy, P. (1997), "Italy: A new language for a new politics?", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 2 (3), pp. 337-357.

proportional system, which had nurtured the centrality of political parties, was abandoned in favour of a new one, in which 75% of the parliamentary seats were assigned in first-past-the-post electoral constituencies. The closer relationship between voters and their representatives that was expected to characterise this new system was seen as an antidote to the power of the political parties.

The new electoral law was tested in the 1994 general elections, in which for the first time the competition was polarised between two coalitions, one led by the PDS, the other by a brand-new political figure, the millionaire media-mogul Silvio Berlusconi. The stunning success of Berlusconi's Forza Italia marked the rise of a new style of politics no longer based on structured parties, but centred on public communication and especially TV appearances, and highly personalised. Indeed, Berlusconi's campaigns contributed to diffusion of the image of a prime minister "elected by the people", while according to the Constitution the head of government is nominated by the President of the Republic and approved by the Parliament.

Berlusconi brought to government the anti-political myth of a virtuous civil society opposed to a labyrinthine and parasitic politics. His promise of a gentler, leaner state, fiscally lenient and keen on supporting the autonomous dynamism of the economy, adapted the playbook of 1980s liberalism to the Italian situation. For the first time, it has been convincingly argued, the government explicitly renounced any "orthopaedic or pedagogic" effort to reform, and affirmed that Italian society was essentially good as it was.[71] At the same time, Berlusconi recycled the old tropes of anti-communism in order to stigmatise his adversaries as irreducible enemies of democracy. Anachronistic as it seemed in the post-cold war world, Berlusconi's anti-communism in fact gave voice to a visceral hostility towards the legacy of the Italian Communist Party. Berlusconi vilified the post-communists as the heirs of what had been *the*

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71   Orsina, G. (2013), *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia*, Venezia: Marsilio.

party *par excellence* – the most structured, close-knit, ideologically motivated party, the most statist and the most committed to a radical pedagogic project.[72]

Far from overcoming the shortcomings and divides that had hobbled the post-war political system, the "Second Republic" ended up producing new ones. The major anomaly represented by a party leader (and, over the years, four-time prime minister) that owned three TV channels – as well as newspapers, magazines and publishing companies – contributed to making a mutual legitimisation between the opposing centre-left and centre-right coalitions as good as impossible. Moreover, both coalitions were made up of young and often short-lived political parties, whose claims on power appeared to many as even less legitimate than in the past. With the cold war no longer providing an external disciplining principle to Italian politics, this role was gradually taken up by the European Union, whose guidance nevertheless tended to be perceived as single-mindedly focused on setting budgetary constraints. This proved to be fertile ground for the emergence of a new cleavage, between pro-European forces and a host of actors who, with different accents, stressed the themes of national sovereignty and opposition to a perceived foreign control. In response to these tendencies, the "Second Republic" came to be characterised by a far more active role of the Presidency of the Republic as compared to the past. Building on their institutional legitimisation, presidents Oscar Luigi Scalfaro (1992-1999), Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (1999-2006) and especially Giorgio Napolitano (2006-2015) intervened to chastise the inadequacies of the established political forces while at the same time warning against nationalist and populist solutions.[73] Their active (but constitutionally sanctioned) response to the perceived weaknesses of the political system contributed to upholding some fundamental

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72 Orsina, G. (2017), "Antifascism, Anticommunism, Antipolitics: Delegitimation in Berlusconi's Italy", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 22 (1), pp. 7-26.

73 Giovagnoli, A. (2016), *La Repubblica degli italiani 1946-2016*, Roma-Bari: Laterza (esp. pp. 276-282).

aspects of Italy's domestic equilibria and international choices, starting with participation in the European Union – but could not stave off the increasing instability and fragmentation of the political panorama. Deprived, for better or for worse, of its historical pillars, the Italian political system found itself particularly fragile when the global economic crisis of 2007-2008 hit, raising the stakes across Europe as a whole. It is in this context that new political discourse emerged, in Italy as elsewhere, reinterpreting the themes of the classic Italian populist, anti-political or anti-party critiques.

2. Methodological approach: Data collection and analysis

Multiple sources of data and multiple methods of analysis could be chosen to reconstruct the discourse crafted and disseminated by parties over a given time span. Possible sources include party statements and communiqués, news reports gathered by press agencies, newspaper articles and TV newscasts, leaders' speeches, parliamentary debates, official Twitter and Facebook accounts. The range of techniques with which the textual data gathered through one or more sources could be analysed broadly spans from quantitative, deductive approaches relying on automated coding to qualitative, inductive approaches based on manual coding.

As regards both the collection and analysis of textual evidence, every choice has pros and cons – but these are too manifold to be discussed in detail here. The ideal solution would in fact entail some kind of triangulation. Since trade-offs rooted in constraints of time, labour and other resources interact with the precise aims of a study in determining an appropriate balance in the number and diversification of sources of party discourse on the one hand, and in the usage of more or less intensive techniques of analysis on the other hand, we resort to a goal-oriented strategy.

We anchor the gathering of information in two kinds of textual data, marked by apt similarities and dissimilarities: party manifestos and Facebook posts. Although some minor parties have not been immaterial in contributing to the (re)articulation of public discourse in 2013-2019, we directly consider the four major political forces: the Lega (Nord), the Movimento 5 Stelle, the Partito Democratico and Forza Italia.[74] As for the selection of information, we first identify three broad areas of discourse and policy – *Democracy and institutions*, *Boundaries of citizenship*, *Foreign and European policy* – and reflect on how the concepts we have previously discussed relate to them. Beyond preliminary, deductive insight, our analysis is developed through iterative, inductive coding of the relevant textual data and identification of specific discursive categories, reflecting the different actors' inferred narratives.

2.1. *Textual data on party discourse*

We appraise party discourse on the basis of party manifestos and posts published by official Facebook accounts since, for the sake of our research, the drawbacks of the former are offset by the advantages of the latter, and vice versa. Firstly, we have noticed that populism may be regarded as a prevailingly ideological, discursive or stylistic phenomenon, or as a combination of ideology and discourse. Nationalism may boast a stronger ideological status – albeit still of the thin-centred kind[75] – but we ultimately see no reason why political actors' nationalist and sovereignist statements should be seen in ideological or discursive terms only. Party manifestos are programme documents, in which the parties' underlying ideological standpoints feature comprehensively; the posts published on Facebook fan pages have more to do with the

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74   According to the polls of recent months, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) – another party of the Italian radical right – has also overtaken Forza Italia, which is now declining and confined to about 5 % in terms of voting intentions. Nevertheless, our focus is justified by the relevance of Berlusconi's party over most of the period considered, as the major "established" party of the centre-right and the undisputed pivot of right-wing coalitions until 2018.

75   Freeden, M. (1998), "Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?", *Political Studies*, 46(4).

fast pace of day-to-day communication. Distinct facets are then covered.

A party's electoral manifesto enshrines the stances publicly declared by the party as a prospective programme before a round of elections. It thus represents the key synthesis of what a political force wants its supporters and the wider electorate to believe it stands for. It is driven by strategic aims in addition to ideological perspectives and policy-related considerations, and it is informed by the salience the party wants to attribute to certain issues as well as by the positions it chooses to take. For voters and scholars, party manifestos represent a frequently considered vantage point on party positions. Nevertheless, they have at least two disadvantages as sources of data. Firstly, they are obviously only available at a few points in time, corresponding to national and European electoral campaigns. Secondly, as they result from elite compromise within each party, any analysis of political discourse based exclusively on party manifestos must inevitably assume intra-party agreement — and uniformity of language and framing — as if all parties were equally and indeed wholly united fronts.

In turn, no less than traditional media, the social media are "a site on which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality".[76] Fan pages, specifically, reflect the ways in which organisations and agents wish to portray themselves to citizens. In other words, they work as identity mechanisms,[77] embodying the constitutive messages, narratives and ideas through which the political actors are willing to position themselves within the public debate and the electoral market. Like party manifesto statements, the statements propagated through Facebook fan pages reflect both

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76 Gurevitch, M. and M.R. Levy (eds.) (1985), *Mass Communication Review Yearbook*, vol. 5, Beverly Hills: Sage, p. 19.

77 Milolidakis, G., D. Akoumianakis, C. Kimble and N. Karadimitriou (2014), "Excavating Business Intelligence from Social Media", in J. Wang (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Business Analytics and Optimization*, Hershey PA: IGI Global, pp. 897-908.

ideological and strategic considerations, gauge both issue positions and issue salience, and present unmediated party voices. At the same time, the Facebook page of a party provides continuous interpretation and stance-taking on external events, also allowing variability to be detected in the discourse conveyed on given topics – precisely insofar as the party itself wishes to permit this, for instance by sharing comments made by multiple party figures. Considering the fan page of a party leader is conducive to identification of the main message; considering the fan page of the party itself also reveals whether different blends and shades are added to the main message. It is for this reason that we include both party and leader pages in our data sources.

With regard to party manifestos, we retrieved the documents presented by the four main Italian parties in the run-up to the 2013 and 2018 general elections and to the European elections of 2014 and 2019. Significant variation exists among them. While the Partito Democratico actually presented an independent manifesto of similar size for each of the four electoral rounds, the parties forming the centre-right electoral coalition wrote a common programme both in 2013 and in 2018,, although in 2013 Berlusconi's party – then known as Il Popolo della Libertà (The People of Freedom, PdL) before it was re-established as Forza Italia later in the year – added a preface to it that was signed by its leader, and in 2018 the Lega also delivered an autonomous manifesto. For the European elections of 2014, Forza Italia presented a meagre list of four bullet points, while in 2019 the Lega simply adopted six points commonly agreed by its European-level party, the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF). The longest manifesto was produced in 2018 by the Movimento 5 Stelle, which as a result of online interaction with party activists published hundreds and hundreds of pages divided into 20 policy domains – actually in two versions because, slightly before the national elections, the thematic chapters were substantively amended and increased to 24 in number.

With regard to Facebook content, we gathered large portions of textual data through the Netvizz application: an extraction tool available on the platform, which allows content to be exported in standard file formats from different sections of the Facebook social networking service,[78] mainly from fan pages. The data collection options performable through the application range from page-like networks to page timeline images, to link statistics and page posts.[79] The extraction of page posts was the function of interest for our research purposes. Given the significant amount of extracted data and the limitations that the application poses for large pages (it only allows for the processing of full-page data, including comments files, for pages with fewer than one million comments or likes) we primarily focused on retrieving the content itself of posts for our selected time span, 2013 to 2019.

The technical caveat should nevertheless be made that Facebook content has a very unstable nature. In fact, it has been shown that time decay may account for decreasing visibility and, at times, for the very disappearance of Facebook content,[80] and specifically of single fan-page generated posts. Real-time and retrospective data collection performed on the same pages may therefore yield different results. With regard to retrospective data gathering, loss of data has been found to occur in significantly higher proportions when proceeding manually rather than using an automatic collection tool. This is one of the reasons why we chose to rely on data-gathering software in the first place. However, like any programme that runs through Facebook's Application Programming Interface (API), Netvizz works by retrieving "a maximum of 600 ranked, published posts per year". For most of the official pages and years we examine, such a number of posts per year represents only a part of the total output.

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78 Rieder, B. (2013), "Studying Facebook via data extraction: The Netvizz application", WebSci '13 Proceedings of the 5th Annual ACM Web Science Conference, pp. 346-355.

79 However, in late 2019 – as a response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal – Facebook strongly limited access to its data, which marked the end of Netvizz.

80 Behar Villegas, E. (2016), "Facebook and its Disappearing Posts: Data Collection Approaches on Fan-Pages for Social Scientists", *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 5(1), pp. 160-188.

The possible loss of information could definitely bias research that relies on data crawling. Yet the very fact that the fan pages we consider are large and for the most part tend to have a high posting frequency, while exposing our study to an even higher number of data gaps,[81] also allows us to retrieve large quantities of significant textual evidence. Furthermore, to the extent that political narratives and frames are frequently reiterated in page posts by political actors – in an effort to permeate the online political debate with their own arguments and rhetoric – the actual content gaps are more limited for our purposes than may be expected. Of course, plausible stratagems to actively minimise the loss of Facebook information – like cross-checking automatically-retrieved data with a manual search, or running the data-gathering software on a regular basis and through different logged user accounts[82] – incur the same feasibility trade-offs that we have underscored above.

2.2. *Basic elements of discourse analysis*

The premises underlying our analysis of political discourse have been partly stated in our conceptual discussion, where we have referred to processes of discursive articulation of cultural, ideological and symbolic elements carried out by political leaders and parties, and to how such elements can be used to shape interpretations of the social and political reality. Carrying out a study of discourse implies looking for meaning – that is, investigating the ways in which individuals and groups make sense of the outer world, delving into the cognitive mechanisms of sense-making that allow collective identities to progressively acquire shape and resonance.

In fact, when we refer to political elites, there is a fine line separating the cognitive sense-making that occurs inside their minds

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81   Behar Villegas, E. (2016), "Facebook and its Disappearing Posts: Data Collection Approaches on Fan-Pages for Social Scientists", *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 5(1), pp. 160-188.

82   *Ibid*.

and the framing of events and phenomena that takes place in the public sphere. Given that "the social world is [...] a kaleidoscope of potential realities, any of which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized",[83] political actors continuously engage in framing contests,[84] in which interpretive categories can be mobilised to gather support for particular political goals, to build popular consensus – thanks also to the resonance available through social media – and establish hegemony in the realm of political discourse.

In the words of Lasse Lindekilde,[85] the analysis of discourse undercovers how particular texts either reproduce or challenge the established definitions and understandings of social reality, by applying particular discursive practices and drawing on discourse inherent to the social context of reception of the text. Although discourse can indeed take a variety of forms, we are here especially interested in textual sources.

In order to answer our research questions, the analysis involves three main methodological steps: 1) Extraction of discursive units from the pre-selected parties and party leaders; 2) Textual analysis and selection of relevant discursive fragments; 3) Inductive line-by-line coding of the selected units and construction of specific discursive categories, reflecting the different narratives inferred by actors.

To select relevant evidence from the textual corpora retrieved from the Facebook platform, we proceed in a three-phased way. The first step consists of perusing the published posts we have collected, with a view also to becoming acquainted with recurring

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83 Edelman, M. (1993), "Contestable categories and public opinion", *Political Communication*, 10(3), pp. 231-242, specifically p. 232.

84 Gamson, W.A. and A. Modigliani (1989), "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach", *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), pp. 1-37.

85 Lindekilde, L. (2014), "Discourse and Frame Analysis: In-depth Analysis of Qualitative Data in Social Movement Studies", in D. Della Porta (ed.), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 195-228.

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topics, tropes and arguments. The second step involves identification of the most salient events that occurred between 2013 and 2019 in the three broad domains identified – *Democracy & Institutions*, *Boundaries of Citizenship*, *European & Foreign Policy* – by using in particular the timelines and essays published in the yearly editions of *La Politica in Italia.*[86] Insofar as these circumstances have created significant bones of contention or occasions for dialogue and struggle among political forces, they are likely to have established "critical discourse moments", that

> *make the culture of an issue visible. They stimulate commentary in the media by sponsors and journalists. [...] Sponsors feel called upon to reassert their preferred packages and to interpret the latest development in light of them.*[87]

We thus construct a list of potential "critical discourse moments" for every domain of interest, and devote special attention to the fan-page generated posts published around these respective moments in time.

However, it would hardly be feasible to pinpoint *ex ante* each and every occasion in which a party or its leader chooses to emphasise an issue and take a discursive stance on it. Moreover, there are key topics – such as the controversy over migrants or the relationship with the EU – that tend to ebb and flow in public discourse, but never really disappear from sight. In the third step we therefore assemble for each domain a dense list of keywords, employed to retrieve with greater precision and focus the most thematically relevant Facebook posts between 2013 and 2019 – page by page – within the gathered textual information.

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86 Fusaro, C. and A. Kreppel (eds.) (2014), *Politica in Italia: I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni, edizione 2014*, Bologna: Il Mulino; Hanretty, C. and S. Profeti (eds.) (2015), *Politica in Italia: I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni, edizione 2015*, Bologna: Il Mulino; Carbone, M. and S. Piattoni (eds.) (2016), *Politica in Italia: I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni, edizione 2016*, Bologna: Il Mulino; Chiaramonte, A. and A. Wilson (eds.) (2017), *Politica in Italia: I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni, edizione 2017*, Bologna: Il Mulino; Forestiere, C. and F. Tronconi (eds.) (2018), *Politica in Italia: I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni, edizione 2018*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

87 Gamson, W.A. and A. Modigliani (1989), "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach", *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), p. 11.

Having selected all of the relevant discursive units produced, we then commence disentangling their content. We proceed by performing an iterative, inductive line-by-line coding, outlining the discursive categories employed by each specific actor on the topics of interest. We then take stock of the analysis of the codified units, unfolding the differences and similarities between the coding categories that emerged in the discourse of different political actors, the juxtapositions of different categories and the relationships between them, as well as the linkages between the respective discourses of the various parties within the broader political context of the 2013-2019 time span.

Democracy and Institutions

Giacomo Bottos

1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the attitude towards representative democracy and institutions shown by Italy's main political forces in the 2013-2019 time frame. The conception of democracy is, indeed, a privileged battlefield between 'established' parties and movements keen to employ narratives and discourse considered as 'populist'. It is clearly a manifold issue, involving several aspects, such as the conception of people shown by different political forces, the attitude of these forces towards the elite and political class, towards the political party and the party system as a whole, towards institutions and parliament, as well as towards funding mechanisms and institutional reforms. Understanding the positions taken by political parties on these aspects is extremely relevant in order to be able to define the political parties' identity and narrative. For each of these aspects the discourse of different political forces will be analysed and an attempt made to point out some defining features and to underline relationships and differences.

The first observation to be made is that not every party shows the same level of explicit interest for these issues of representative democracy and institutions. Although the above-mentioned aspects are crucial, the discourse of party representatives and leaders can encompass them in very different ways and measures. For instance, the critique of the party system and political class, and the call for a different model of democracy, is a core issue for the Movimento 5 Stelle, while the Lega shows little interest

for participatory issues and institutional mechanisms, instead articulating a different type of criticism of national and European elites, and framing its discourse differently. At the same time, the discourse of the Partito Democratico and the Popolo della Libertà/ Forza Italia appears to be manifold, partly because of these parties' effort to counter the challenge of other political forces with a variable and mixed strategy of contrast and inclusion of some of these forces' arguments.[1]

The debate on democracy and institutions in the 2013-2019 time frame should be considered by taking into account the historical background outlined in the introduction of this study.[2] Much of the discourse and many of the arguments used by political forces have their roots in a long-standing tendency to delegitimise party politics and the party system. This tendency has indeed been constant in Italian post-war history. Until the 1970s the tendency remained mainly subdued and hidden, but since the 1980s, and more ubiquitously since the 1990s, it has become mainstream in the media and in the political system. This more ubiquitous tendency of delegitimisation came about during the so-called 'Second Republic' – a journalistic expression referring to the period of Italian history that started with the end of the *Mani Pulite* trial in 1994 and with the fall of the main Italian post-war political parties (the Democrazia Cristiana and the Partito Socialista Italiano) or their transformation (the Partito Comunista Italiano changed its name and transformed itself). Between 1994 and 2007 Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the Lega Nord and also some leftist forces and movements often showed an anti-political attitude[3] towards the party system. For example, the concept of the existence of a 'partitocracy', a term expressing the idea of an oppressive power of the parties over the citizens, came into general awareness. Another concept

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1   See Introduction, 1.1.

2   See Introduction, 1.3.

3   See Tarchi M. (2015), *Italia populista: Dal qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo*, Bologna: Il Mulino; Mastropaolo A. (2000), *Antipolitica: All'origine della crisi italiana*, Napoli: L'ancora del Mediterraneo.

which became widespread was that of a clash between a 'legal country', composed of professional politicians and institutions, and a 'real country' composed of ordinary people, workers and entrepreneurs.[4] This kind of criticism towards the political system as a whole was often intertwined with various projects of institutional and constitutional reform. The importance of institutional reform as a topic in Italian public debate has indeed often been closely linked to a widespread perception of the alleged inefficiency, sluggishness and self-referentiality of the existing political system. The issue of a 'great institutional reform' has existed at the centre of the political agenda since it was put there in the 1980s by Bettino Craxi, the secretary-general of the Partito Socialista. Indeed, the topic has been discussed almost constantly ever since. Multiple analyses and projects have been produced, and repeated attempts at reforming the institutional system have been made. These attempts have rarely succeeded, however, partly because of the general atmosphere of mutual delegitimisation between political forces, which has left the political system weak and unstable.

In this context and against the backdrop of the outbreak of the 2007-2008 global economic crisis, a 'second wave' of populism started to grow in Italy – the first being that championed by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord in the 1990s. The crucial figure of this new wave was the comedian Beppe Grillo, who founded the **Movimento 5 Stelle** in 2009. This new populist movement rearranged the classical topics of the anti-political repertoire in a new way, and was able to channel the stream of society's discontent towards the political class. In line with one of the basic features of populist movements,[5] one of the key concepts of the propaganda of the Movimento 5 Stelle has always been the opposition between the people and a "corrupt élite", framed as a "caste", a concept which Grillo extrapolated from the

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4   See Orsina G. (2013), *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia*, Venezia: Marsilio.

5   Mudde C. (2004), "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition*, 39 (4), pp. 542-563.

best-selling book *La Casta*, written in 2007 by Gian Antonio Stella and Sergio Rizzo, two journalists from the *Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy's main newspapers. This book focused on the inefficiencies and 'privileges' of the political elite, and Grillo understood the potential of this concept in order to channel people's growing discontent towards the target of a political elite, portrayed as a separate and parasitic group. This radical criticism was linked with the idea of 'direct democracy', which would enable citizens to join the political debate and take part in the decision-making process without the mediation of political parties.

The position of the **Lega** was different. Set up in 1989 through the merger of several autonomist and regionalist movements from the North of Italy, the Lega Nord united a strong anti-establishment and anti-political discourse, a localist claim and a claim to represent the interests of some of the businesses of the North of Italy. While the Lega initially called for the independence of the North of Italy from the rest of the country, it then tempered its position and called for autonomy and federalism. Started as an outsider movement, the Lega later took part in several governments and became a stable partner of the centre-right coalition. However, in 2012 the party came up against a severe scandal, triggered by an investigation that revealed extensive fraud and the misappropriation of public money by the party's treasurer, Francesco Belsito, in agreement with the party's founder and federal secretary, Umberto Bossi, who was forced to resign. The credibility of the party, whose narrative was partly based on the denouncement of corruption and inefficiency in the 'Roman' political class, was hit hard. After Bossi's successor, Roberto Maroni, resigned on being elected the president of the Lombardy Region in 2013, it fell to Matteo Salvini, who became the secretary of the party in December 2013, to rebuild the party's identity on a different basis. In the years that followed, Salvini undertook a thorough rebranding of the party, repositioning it in order to benefit from the rising wave of anti-establishment sentiment. At the same time, he also shaped the party's discourse differently from that

of the Movimento 5 Stelle. The first important shift with regard to the party's previous discourse was from a localist identity to a national, and nationalistic, one. Alongside this, topics and discourse that were previously features of the extreme right[6] (such as the slogan "Italian first" or the concept of "people substitution") were integrated into the party narrative, putting the issues of immigration and security at the core of the party agenda. Within such a discursive framework, topics related to democracy and participation, and to the institutional structure of the state, are far less crucial than in the narrative of the Movimento 5 Stelle. In the Lega's discourse, a relative lack of interest towards these issues can be linked to a conception of a 'minimal' state and the Lega's focus on defending citizens, who are defined through the exclusion of several categories of non-citizen in relation to external and internal threats. By contrast, the Movimento 5 Stelle has been far more focused on the vertical relation between the people and the elite than on the horizontal relation to 'external' enemies,[7] at least in the first part of the time frame considered in this study. The narrative of the Lega, however, which has become increasingly central starting from a marginal position, is focused on this horizontal relationship.

When Silvio Berlusconi started his political career by founding **Forza Italia**, he emphasised a strong opposition to professional politics, claiming to represent the "real country" as it was, facing the party system and its pretension to educate and correct citizens.[8] Berlusconi also argued that the party system lacked the leadership capacity necessary to make the country prosper. He then governed the country for many years as prime minister (from 1994 to 1995, from 2001 to 2006 and from 2008 to 2011) without completely dismissing the populist features of his discourse – in

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6   See Passarelli G. & Tuorto D. (2018), *La Lega di Salvini: Estrema destra di governo*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

7   See Brubaker R. (2017), "Why Populism?", *Theory and Society*, 46(5), pp. 357-385.

8   See Orsina G. (2013), *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia*, Venezia: Marsilio.

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a similar way to the Lega. When he resigned in 2011 amid the economic turmoil of the eurozone crisis, he paved the way for a grand coalition 'technical' cabinet led by economics professor and newly appointed senator for life Mario Monti. Although Berlusoni's party, Popolo della Libertà – which was formed in 2009 by the merger of Forza Italia and the Alleanza Nazionale – supported the new government, Berlusconi himself repeatedly expressed the opinion that his resignation was the result of a plot, or even a "coup", carried out by European leaders and the president of Italy, Giorgio Napolitano. This opinion mirrored an ambiguous attitude which also continued after the 2013 general elections, when Berlusconi's party joined another grand coalition government, this time led by Enrico Letta. On the one hand, Berlusconi showed willingness to share government responsibilities, contributing to define institutional reforms and write new common rules. On the other hand, however, he often expressed strong criticism towards the ruling elites. In other words, he appeared to swing between pro-establishment and anti-establishment tones.

The role of the **Partito Democratico** was very significant in this context. The PD was established in 2007 from the merger of political forces (the Democratici di Sinistra and the Margherita) that could be considered the heirs of the two main parties of the post-war party system (the Democrazia Cristiana and the Partito Comunista Italiano). The PD could therefore be seen, on the one hand, as the main defender of the role of parties and of their importance in making democracy work. On the other hand, however, this tendency had coexisted with a different one since the foundation of the party – a tendency that focused on stressing the need to find new and different forms of political participation, and that believed the traditional party mechanisms were mostly outdated.[9] At the beginning of 2013, the secretary of the PD was Pierluigi

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9 In the speech Walter Veltroni gave at the former FIAT car factory Lingotto in Turin in 2007 before he became the first secretary of the party, he defined the PD as a "party which doesn't come out of nowhere" and, at the same time "an entirely new party", https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2017/03/10/news/pd-da-veltroni-a-renzi-i-discorsi-del-lingotto-torino-124635/.

CHANGING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2008 CRISIS

Bersani, who had defeated Matteo Renzi in the 2012 primary elections for the premiership nomination. While Bersani could to some extent be considered more keen to claim a significant role for political parties, Renzi, who became the secretary of the party in December 2013 and then the prime minister in February 2014, was more convinced of the need to go beyond the traditional forms of politics. Due to complex internal dialectics, the PD took different positions on these topics during the 2013-2109 time frame considered in this study.

The most important new element in the 2013 general elections (held on 24-25 February) was the success of the Movimento 5 Stelle – which received 25.56% of the vote, although the opinion polls had forecast a result below 20%. At the same time, the result of the centre-right coalition was also better than expected, garnering 29.18% of the vote. Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà recovered part of the consensus it had lost after Berlusconi's resignation as prime minister during the debt crisis. By contrast, the Lega garnered only 4.09% of the vote, in the aftermath of the above-mentioned scandal involving the leadership of the party. It was only after Matteo Salvini became federal secretary in December 2013 that the party started progressively to regain consensus and importance. The result of the PD was far below expectation (the centre-left coalition Italia Bene Comune garnered 29.55% of the vote, only slightly better than centre-right coalition).

The consequences of this outcome were highly significant. Indeed, while in the Chamber of Deputies the electoral law of that time granted a premium to the relative majority party, allowing it to obtain the majority of the seats, in the Senate the mechanism was different. Not having the majority in both houses, the Partito Democratico was forced to try and build alliances with other parties. Bersani made an initial attempt to form a government with the Movimento 5 Stelle but this was unsuccessful because of the total refusal of Grillo's movement to countenance any hypothe-

sis of alliance. Indeed, the M5S considered itself totally opposed to the party system. After the re-election of Giorgio Napolitano as Italy's president, and the resignation of Pierluigi Bersani as the secretary of the party (due to the failure of the attempts to elect two other candidates, Franco Marini and Romano Prodi), the Partito Democratico joined a grand coalition government led by Enrico Letta, together with Berlusconi's party Popolo delle Libertà.

The discourse of the different political forces will be taken into account in the following paragraphs. It will be considered with regard to aspects that are particularly relevant for being able to point out the political forces' positions and narrative on democracy and institutions. The aspects taken into account are the people and the political class; the party system and the issue of politics funding; and institutions and reforms.

2. People and Political Class

2.1. *The people*

According to Article 1 of the Italian Constitution "sovereignty belongs to the people, which exercises it in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution" itself. The first part of this quote is very often cited by forces with populist or nationalistic features, while the second part is equally often omitted. However, the relationship between those two elements – i.e. the popular source of the legitimisation of power and the institutional forms of the exercise of this power – is at the heart of democracy. The possibility of tension, or even a clash, between the "people" and the "forms" and "limits" is what is often envisaged, in different ways, by 'populist' and 'nationalist' forces. First of all, however, the "people" itself can be represented in different ways. A brief account will therefore now be made of how the different forces conceive of it.

In trying to understand the **Movimento 5 Stelle** conception of "the people", the movement's negative consideration of parties and col-

lective organisations should first of all be underlined. By contrast, however, a very positive role is played by the individual 'citizen'. Since political mediation and organisations are negatively considered, the only actor that the M5S considers legitimate to act in the public sphere is the individual. This is a distinctive feature of the Movimento 5 Stelle compared with other types of populism and nationalism: the people are considered as a collection of individuals, rather than as a whole or as a community. This is reflected in the well-known M5S slogan, *uno vale uno* [everybody counts as one]. Nevertheless, since the citizens are considered as individuals and since, as will be shown, they refuse any traditional means of political mediation, they need a tool in order to act collectively and to help them express their will, apart from their "spokesman" Beppe Grillo. This tool is the 'internet' or the 'network' (*rete*), which provides lean organising tools that enable citizens to discuss and decide. The coming of the internet is seen as a revolutionary event, which is set to disrupt societies, institutions and political systems in a radical way. A famous video entitled *Gaia*[10] was produced by Casaleggio Associati, a company founded by Gianroberto Casaleggio, who was both an entrepreneur and a technological guru, and who until his death was very close to Grillo. Casaleggio's role in the origin and development of the M5S is highly disputed. The video portrayed a vision of "the future of politics" which deeply influenced the imagination of the M5S. In this utopian/dystopian future politics, ideologies, nations and every sort of conflict would be overcome by a global digital citizenship that would allow citizens to take decisions by voting on the internet. The task that the M5S attributes itself is to bring about this revolutionary change, in opposition to the existing political system. The M5S itself is seen as an experiment of a new type of politics, which originated from Beppe Grillo's blog. Even after the creation of the M5S, Grillo's blog maintained an important role as a reference point for activists, giving guidance and directions. A post published on the blog on 10 February 2013, before the elections, briefly reconstructed the history of the M5S:

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10   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sV8MwBXmewU.

In 2005 [the blog] beppegrillo.it was born and in a very short time it has become the seventh most visited blog in the world. The blog deals with topics which are interesting for the REAL country, like free information, the green economy and the wastage of the political class. An invitation was launched from the blog to use the platform Meetup: an international tool which has become the first spontaneous aggregative opportunity with social value. After a short period of time, the groups born on the internet launched their challenge to the systems of a collapsing country. The renewal started from below and people started answering. A new critical mass was formed, able to reason on real problems and sustainable solutions. On 8 September 2007 something revolutionary happened: rage and frustration gave rise to a demonstration, organised exclusively on the INTERNET, which had extraordinary success [...]

In 2009 the Movimento 5 Stelle was born in Milan, a political movement based on the internet and on the principle of direct democracy [...] Collective participation is the key of a new way of doing politics, neither right-wing nor left-wing, but forward![11]

Beppe Grillo's blog, 10/02/2013

According to the M5S narrative, the internet enables self-organisation of the citizens, replacing old style bureaucratic political structures and making it possible, in principle, for the citizen to discuss proposals collectively and to participate in the decision-making process. For this reason, the first point in the "Information" section in the 2013 electoral programme of the M5S called for a "digital citizenship of birth and free access to the internet for every Italian citizen".[12] The claim for "direct democracy" has always been one of the core ideas of the M5S, even if its internal praxis has always seemed quite far removed from this goal. Nevertheless, the repeated attempts to create a platform where the activists could discuss and decide (which eventually led to the creation of the Rousseau Platform)[13] were motivated by this issue.

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11 Beppe Grillo's blog (10/02/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/02/m5story.html.

12 https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/materiali-bg/Programma-Movimento-5-Stelle.pdf

13 https://rousseau.movimento5stelle.it.

For Salvini's **Lega**, the people is considered as a community defined on a national basis. This community of people should be defended from the multiple threats coming from outside (immigration) and from the top (European and supranational elites). The national community can be defined in relation to a set of traditions, local identities, values or cultures, which should be defended against homogenisation. This idea was gradually introduced by Matteo Salvini, and progressively replaced the traditional North-South cleavage. At the same time, the previous and the new conception of the Lega shared the idea of a strong link with a defined territory. Some elements of the Lega's new conception of the people can be found as early as in the 2014 electoral programme for the European elections:

> Old ideologies ("left" and "right") have been surpassed and are misleading. The dichotomy is today between globalism and identity. Among the actors of globalism, we include with conviction the European Union. In the name of an egalitarianism passed off as equality, a homogenisation of customs and traditions, of social models, of communication and values is being pursued, aiming to unleash man from his community, from the people he belongs to. Thus, man remains alone: not a citizen any longer, rather a number. A "consumer".
>
> As an answer to this, we strongly reaffirm the founding values of our society, of local traditions, investing in our diversity: linguistic, regional, related to food and wine, cultural and social.[14]

> Lega Electoral Programme - European Elections 2014

The Lega's idea of democracy is expressed in a very clear way in the 2018 electoral programme for the general elections:

> Democracy means government of the people. Its essence is the participation of the people in the government of the community. This essence is clearly expressed by Article 1 of the Italian Constitution: "Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labour. The sovereignty belongs to the people, which exercise it in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution" [...] There is a clear link between

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14 https://leganord.org/phocadownload/elezioni/europee/Programma%20elettorale%20
europee%202014.pdf.

democracy, popular sovereignty and its concrete exercise [...] Nowadays, however, the sovereignty of the people is jeopardised by a manifold series of factors:

- *By certain models of Europe, based on technocrats often imposing their decisions on member states of the Union*
- *By international institutions like the UN and the WTO*
- *By giant sovereign funds, moving thousands of billions of dollars, being able to influence national economies as never before*
- *By the tendency of judges to replace the legislator.*[15]

Lega Electoral Programme - General Elections 2018

As can be seen, the definition of the people and of its democratic power is always accompanied by the definition of a series of threats that could prevent its expression. Rather than focusing on a positive definition of the people and on the means and the concrete forms of the expression of its power, attention is focused on the alleged enemies that could prevent the exercise of democracy. With such a discursive framework, the institutional forms and the checks and balances of democracy could, in principle, be presented as an obstacle to the full expression of the people's will.

For the **Popolo della Libertà** and **Forza Italia**, the people is composed of common people, ordinary men and women, consumers, producers, family members and homeowners. Citizenship is mainly defined not in relation to politics or political participation, but rather to economic activity and the private sphere. Political participation is mainly related to the elections and primarily has the function of defending a certain lifestyle against alleged enemies. According to the narrative of Silvio Berlusconi and Forza Italia, people considered as *moderate* should vote in order to counter and prevent the excesses of other political parties. For Forza Italia, the reason for these excesses is primarily a pedagogical attitude of the political parties towards the citizens, and the parties' willingness to interfere in private activity, for instance introducing new taxes, increasing the role of the state, and asking people for active polit-

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15 https://www.leganord.org/component/phocadownload/category/5-elezioni?download=1514: programma-lega-salvini-premier-2018.

ical commitment. State, bureaucracy and the judicial system are seen as potential threats that could interfere with the activity of the individual, who should be left alone. This conception of citizenship even *de facto* tolerates illegal behaviour like tax avoidance. Berlusconi has always portrayed himself as the defender of this kind of citizen. In 1994 he claimed to have joined politics in order to promote a "liberal revolution", preventing the assumption of power by post-communists, "illiberal forces, tied up together with a past era which was socially and economically a failure", he said in the speech announcing his decision to start political activity.[16] In the introduction to the 2013 electoral programme, it was stated that "we didn't manage to complete" such a revolution mainly because "our institutional system prevents modernisation from happening". Indeed, the inability to deliver the promised reforms is generally justified by the presence of obstacles and adversaries preventing the achievement of these reforms: the lack of power of the executive, the vetoes blocking any attempt at change, the action of a "politicised" judiciary, the hatred of the opponents. By 2014, the Movimento 5 Stelle was also partly identified as a new enemy:

> *Some days ago, I finished reading the speeches which Adolf Hitler made in the 1932 electoral campaign. Changing the time references, anybody would think they were written by Grillo. I am scared of the possibility that Grillo could get the majority. They are a cult. Grillo does not tolerate democracy. We are in dangerous times. We should make this understood to moderate people: they cannot look on silently. They should be responsible for the common destiny of the country.*[17]

Silvio Berlusconi, 01/05/2014

Berlusconi's conception nevertheless faces a double challenge. On the one hand, the Movimento 5 Stelle channels part of the protest vote, exploiting the rage and dissatisfaction related to the economic crisis. On the other hand, within the boundaries of the centre-right

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16   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8-ulYqnk5A.

17   Silvio Berlusconi (01/05/2014), https://www.facebook.com/116716651695782/posts/767960219904752/.

coalition, Forza Italia is challenged by the Lega, which proposed a narrative that also could attract voters in a time of radicalisation.

With regard to the **Partito Democratico**, the people is mostly defined according to the Constitution – which is the reference point. At the beginning of the 2013 electoral programme, the PD stated that "we, democratic and progressive citizens, recognise ourselves in the republican Constitution, in a project of a society of peace, freedom, equality, secularism, progress and solidarity".[18] The PD is generally committed to the defence of institutions and to "responsibility" against the attacks made by other forces. Citizenship is also defined in relationship to labour and civicness. Political participation is praised and positively valued. The concept of a 'popular' politics is opposed to 'populism', which is seen as a threat for democracy.

> We should defeat the ideology of the end of politics and of the extraordinary virtues of a unique man in charge [...] For us, populism is the main opponent of a real popular politics. Over the last year, populism has been fuelled by a financial liberalism, which has left the lower social classes at the mercy of an unregulated market. The populist left promised an illusory protection from the effects of financial liberalism by raising cultural, territorial and sometimes xenophobic barriers. [19]
>
> PD Electoral Programme - General Elections 2013

The idea of a popular politics is defined with reference to the policies that could really deliver protection to the lower classes. Yet the PD considers the promise made by populist forces to be illusory. In addition, a popular politics does not create opposition between an alleged will of the people and the institutional forms that should achieve it.

Citizenship at the national level is generally seen as compatible with multiple levels of identity: local, European, supranational. The

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18   http://www.pder.it/bf/allegati/il_programma_dei_democratici_e_dei_progressisti_38101.pdf.

19   *Ibidem.*

European level is considered as a a necessary horizon of democracy at the national level. A claim for European citizenship can be found in the 2014 PD electoral programme for the European elections:

> *We defend European citizenship because it has a daily impact on many aspects of our lives: state-citizen relationships, times of justice, more modern civil rights, the administration functioning.*[20]

<div align="right">PD Electoral Programme - European Elections 2014</div>

Citizenship is mostly conceived not as the belonging to a fixed national community, but as being part of the country's life through work and participation.

After Matteo Renzi became the secretary of the party and then prime minister, the PD's discourse partly changed. Without dismissing the above-mentioned ideas, a different vision of the people was also sketched. It was a narrative which divided the Italian people between those who are hard-working, who are willing to embrace change, and those who want to block the renewal of the country. This cleavage was clear for instance in the following 2016 Facebook post, where Renzi announced a new programme of incentives for renewable energies:

> *Italy of the future needs new energies [#energienove] [...] and to continue to innovate, putting aside ideologies and giving space to the Italy that believes in itself. In the people not spending all the time complaining but proving themselves concretely step by step.*[21]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 29/06/2016</div>

This juxtaposition between an 'Italy saying yes' and an 'Italy of no' was also used in the constitutional referendum campaign that was held in 2016 to confirm the institutional reform project. The juxtaposition was used with the same meaning, in order to build a cleavage between those people supporting the proposed project

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20 *Ibidem.*

21 Matteo Renzi (29/06/2016), https://www.facebook.com/113335124914/posts/10153929175549915/.

of reform and those not, portrayed as willing to leave things unchanged and static.

2.2. *Political class and elites*

The role of the elites is frequently a core argument within the narrative of populist and nationalist forces. Pitting people or common citizens against elites is often a key feature of the political discourse delivered by movements that tend to present themselves as outsiders and anti-establishment. Yet for other forces too, the issue of the role of the ruling class can be very relevant. Highlighting how the different forces frame the concept of elites or the political class could provide important insight into these forces' vision and discourse.

For the **Movimento 5 Stelle**, the critique of the political class was really a founding issue. The political class has probably always been the main target of the M5S. Representation of the political class is framed mainly through the concept of "caste". The underlying idea is that politicians do not really carry out the task of representing the electorate or of acting in the best interest of the people, but rather systematically behave in the interest of their own profit, aiming to collect benefits and advantages for themselves. This can be seen in the text published on Beppe Grillo's blog in 2013:

> *A social class, according to Marx, is a collection of individuals who share the same relationships with the means of production. Class struggle is usually linked to the conflict between proletarians and capitalists or bourgeoise. Nowadays class struggle has been replaced by caste struggle, by the struggle between the producers of wealth and services and the parasitic classes, the castes. The conflict is no longer clear and simple as it was in the past (proletarian vs. capitalist). The castes are everywhere all around us. They are the cholesterol in the veins and in the arteries of the nation. The castes are linked together building a giant body, a huge social group, which counters any momentum for change [...] The power of castes does not come from the control of the means of production, but rather from that of the means of information. If they did not*

lie every day, they would be naked, their arrogance and useless-
ness would be visible [...] The political caste, the newspaper caste,
the bureaucracy caste, the central public administration caste, the
useless authorities caste, the state-owned enterprises caste, the
concessionaires caste, the caste of people drawing high pensions.
Endless castes constrict the citizen like a boa. The struggle against
the castes is the true political struggle: take back power from those
who use it only to preserve their dominant positions. Italy is a stone
forest where nothing should change and, if it changes, it changes
only apparently, in order to save the "democratic" forces and main-
tain everything unchanged.[22]

Beppe Grillo, 07/07/2013

As can be seen, the concept of caste is broad and blurred. It includes several fields (politics, the media system, finance) and is linked to the idea of parasitism, privilege and exploitation of the 'common citizens'. Special attention is paid to the relationship between politics and the media system. In fact, criticism of the newspapers, television and journalists is a recurrent topic in the M5S narrative. Information professionals are seen as part of the "caste" and play a crucial role in stabilising its power, hiding the alleged reality of the common citizens' oppression. According to this view, politics, media and strong economic powers (for example, multinationals and banks) are deeply intertwined. Conspiracy theories play an important role in the M5S narrative and are linked to a profound distrust of "official" science and experts. A post published on Beppe Grillo's blog during the electoral campaign for the 2013 general elections outlines an alleged conflict crossing many dimensions (politics, information, finance) as an ongoing "third world war":

International finance fights a war for dominance, for emptying
democracies and states. It is a superorganism, which is not account-
able to anyone and which relies on the media, politician-waiters,
governments. The third world war is not taking place on battle-
fields or with bombs, but in the newsrooms, in the TV studios, in
the offices on the executive floors of the banks, of rating agencies,
of corporations [...] Information is the crucial weapon [...] Everybody

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22   Beppe Grillo (7/7/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/07/lotta_di_casta.html.

that doubts the holiness [...] of the system is "anti-", against, out, not global.[23]

<div align="right">Beppe Grillo, 08/02/2013</div>

As mentioned previously, the value of knowledge and competence in politics is downplayed. A recurring idea is that politics should not be considered as a profession, but rather as a fixed-term commitment carried out by ordinary citizens. In order to perform this task no special competence is seen as needed. The common view of the complexity of politics is often considered as artificially created by the members of the political class in order to limit the access to political roles and preserve the power of parties.

For the **Lega**, the criticism of the elites is framed in a different way. While the critique of the corruption and of the inefficiency of the political class was a key element of the party's narrative in the 1990s and partly also in the subsequent decade, the strategy chosen by Salvini was partly different. Indeed, in the first phase the critique of the political class was mostly linked to the traditional localist issue carried on by the party: the alleged corruption, laziness and wastefulness of the political elite was often linked to "Rome" (*Roma ladrona*, "Rome big thief" was one of the main slogans) and to the central state, in contrast with the efficiency and hard-working attitude of the people from the North. This cleavage was also useful in order to express the interests of the entrepreneurship of the North, claiming a reduction of state intervention in the economy. But within Salvini's project of a nationalistic reframing of the party's message, a critique of the political class related to the North-South cleavage could not be used extensively. On the other hand, as was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in 2012 a severe scandal had involved the leadership of the party, compromising its credibility. The argument of the corruption of

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23   Beppe Grillo (8/2/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/02/la_iii_guerra_mondiale_e_in_corso.html.

the political class was therefore hardly usable. In the reframing of the Lega narrative promoted by Matteo Salvini, which focused on issues like immigration and security, the criticism of the national, political class was no longer the key point. However, the critique of the elites continued to play an important role from different perspectives. First of all, there was a shift of attention towards supranational and European elites and bureaucracy, as shown in this post published on Salvini's Facebook fan page just before the 2014 European elections:

> *Against the SOVIET EUROPEAN UNION which STARVES OUR PEOPLE and, at the same time, OPENS the door to the INVASION of the ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS! Dear Brussels bureaucrats, dear Angela MERKEL prepare to clear out because the European peoples will give you on SUNDAY the EXPULSION ORDER![24]*

Matteo Salvini, 23/05/2014

This critique of the supranational establishment is linked to the global-national identity cleavage. Furthermore, there is disapproval of national politicians insofar as they are allegedly detached from their community, being pro-European, promoting global citizenship, immigration, globalisation and cosmopolitan values. Immigration has a key role in this narrative, being seen as a part of a project of people substitution, according to a typical extreme-right narrative framework. National politicians who allegedly cooperate with such projects and with the globalist establishment are considered as traitors of the homeland and of the national interest, and "haters of Italians":[25]

> *Politicians should STOP SELLING OUT Italy. They should protect their boundaries both from illegal immigrants and from goods arriving without control from the rest of the world.[26]*

Matteo Salvini, 11/04/2016

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24   Matteo Salvini (23/05/2014), https://www.facebook.com/252306033154/posts/10152154492188155/.

25   Matteo Salvini (31/10/2015), https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10153349710683155.

26   Matteo Salvini (11/04/2016), https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10153702203068155/

Such criticism is often addressed to single individuals who, within Salvini's narrative, embody this kind of 'anti-national' behaviour – like the president of the Chamber of Deputies from 2013 to 2018 Laura Boldrini or Roberto Saviano, the writer engaged against the Camorra.

> *PEOPLE SUBSTITUTION! Hear what is behind the rhetoric of Boldrini and of our do-gooders. TO SHARE.*[27]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 28/03/2017</div>

In addition, certain experts and intellectuals (usually called "big professors") who oppose the Lega's ideas and projects are often targets of criticism along with politicians. In opposition to these allegedly 'anti-national' figures, Salvini presents himself as close to common sense, using a discursive strategy aimed at presenting specific and very radical political ideas as something acceptable and close to the sentiment of the people. Even if framed differently from the Movimento 5 Stelle, the people-elite cleavage appears to be very relevant for the Lega.

The issue of common sense is also very relevant for Silvio Berlusconi's parties (the **Popolo della Libertà** and **Forza Italia**). His attitude towards the political class and anti-political narratives, like that of the Movimento 5 Stelle, is complex. Having used strong anti-political tones in his career and being the creator of political forces that progressively became more 'institutionalised', Berlusconi's discourse is split. While being part of the political class and supporting several governments, he claims his opposition to "politicians" as an important part of his message, as clearly stated in the following post on his Facebook page, published during the electoral campaign for the 2013 general elections:

> *In my Pantheon there are no politicians. I have never thought of myself as being a politician, but rather an anti-politician.*[28]

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27   Matteo Salvini (28/03/2017), https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10154621259503155

28   Silvio Berlusconi (02/01/2013), https://www.facebook.com/116716651695782/posts/ 51451116858 2993/.

However, the features of this kind of anti-political message should be pointed out and defined. In Berlusconi's narrative, the alleged entrepreneurial skills he possesses and the results achieved in his professional life play a very important role, being presented as a part of his legitimacy. His difference from and opposition to "politicians" is therefore because he has a different expertise, which he says allows him to better solve the problems of the country. In other words, on the one hand, Berlusconi has always stressed his similarities with common people, presenting himself as a self-made man coming from the people, but on the other hand, the ground of his claim to legitimacy is an alleged extraordinary competence, which he says would lead to greater efficiency if he was placed in the proper conditions to act. Another feature of Berlusconi's discourse is his focus on criticising a specific part of the political class that comes from the left-wing parties in Italy. He considers this part of the political class still closely linked to the history of Italian communism, which is portrayed in a very negative light, as an illiberal statist, pro-taxation, anti-business and bureaucratic tradition. There is supposed to be a close connection between left-wing areas and part of the judiciary, which allegedly uses prosecutions and trials to achieve political goals.

> Politicised judges are blinded by a prejudicial hatred: they want me banned and politically dead. I am guilty of being an obstacle that should be removed because, for 20 years, I have been opposed to the seizure of power by a certain part of the left.[29]

Silvio Berlusconi, 11/05/2013

The **Partito Democratico**'s discourse on political class is different from that of the other parties. In the PD's case it was not possible to find a general attack on the political class or on the elite. Looking at the 2013 electoral programme there is a sharp defence of politics:

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29   Silvio Berlusconi (11/05/2013), https://www.facebook.com/116716651695782/posts/5769614923 37960/.

> *The only real answer to populism is democratic participation. The crisis of democracy cannot be fought with 'less', but rather with 'more' democracy.*[30]

<div align="right">PD Electoral Programme – General Elections 2013</div>

There was both a clear awareness of the deep delegitimisation of the political class and of the need to develop a strategy to counter the attacks from the other political forces and rebuild a connection between citizens and the political elite. On the one hand, this strategy was based on renewal of the political class itself: 90% of the candidates to the parliament on the Partito Democratico list were chosen through primary elections, which indeed caused a significant change, giving more young people and women the chance to enter the parliament. On the other hand, as will be seen, institutional reforms were considered a tool to build a new legitimisation of the political class by increasing the efficiency of the political process. They were also considered a tool to reduce waste and give better answers to citizens' needs. At the same time, the roots of this crisis of delegitimisation were also seen in the economic crisis and in the need for protection, which the PD believed should be addressed with policies aimed at creating jobs, improving welfare and countering poverty.

While Pierluigi Bersani and other PD representatives often tried to counter the generalised allegations against the political class raised by the Movimento 5 Stelle, which claimed a different idea of politics, the narrative of Matteo Renzi sometimes used tones which partly recall those of the populist critique. For example, in an eNews, the newsletter Renzi sends out periodically, he replied to Bersani who had criticised an interview given by Renzi:

> *While politics these days is being discussed, we in Florence go on working on administrative activity, doing concrete things [...]*

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30 http://www.pder.it/bf/allegati/il_programma_dei_democratici_e_dei_progressisti_38101.pdf.

> *I was called inappropriate by Pierluigi Bersani only because I invited politics and politicians to hurry up. To stop losing time.*[31]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 15/04/2013</div>

Another example is found in the following Facebook post published in January 2014:

> *The concern of the PD is the Italians not having a job, not the politicians who only care about which seat of power could change. My PD is interested in the problems of Italy, not the self-referential problems of the ruling class.*[32]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 5/01/2014</div>

This was also reflected in a partly different approach to institutional reforms. While the reforms were seen as a tool to strengthen the political system, the narrative used to justify such reforms partly included anti-political arguments.

As has been seen, the cleavage between people and the elite thus became central in the political debate. The challenge to the political class created the need to find new sources of legitimisation. However, this challenge also involved other targets, such as parties and the party system and its sources of funding.

3. Party System and Politics Funding

3.1. *Parties and party system*

Criticism of the *party system* is a classical topic within the Italian anti-political tradition. In some cases, parties are criticised for their alleged consociational tendencies and for preferring behind-the-scenes deals rather than competing openly. This consociation is often associated with corruption allegations. In other cases, the

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31 https://www.matteorenzi.it/enews-366-15-aprile-2013/.

32 Matteo Renzi (5/1/2014), https://www.facebook.com/113335124914/posts/10151964930149915/.

form of the party itself is criticised, and arguments are put forward that different forms of political organisation would be better.

Political parties are the main target of the **Movimento 5 Stelle** criticism, which expresses a radical scepticism towards political ideas and ideological cleavages. These ideas and cleavages are presented as an illusory justification for the existence of the system itself.

Behind the harsh M5S criticism made against the party system there is the underlying idea that political parties are not necessary for democracy. One of the core elements of the M5S conception, along with a long-lasting interest for post-materialist topics like the environment and energy,[33] has always been a deep distrust in representative democracy and political mediation. Representative democracy is seen as outdated: politicians and political parties are often defined as "dead", committed to defending a system which has apparently lost any historical justification as well as the trust of the people, and which does not deliver on the promises that have been made. The image of a clash between citizens and parties was suggested in the following post published on Beppe Grillo's blog during the 2013 electoral campaign, one week before the elections:

> *Surrender now! You are surrounded by the Italian people. Come out with your hands up! No one will touch you. Your time is over, do not use up the good luck you have experienced until now. People in the square talk about you in the past tense, like dead people [...] What is stunning is your foolish stubbornness, your refusal to step aside, as if you were invested with some divine mission [...] The posters in the street with your faces on them seem like fluttering obituaries with just a few touches of colour. You move in the empty squares, in the theatres full of actors, in the TV studios where your employees are interviewed, making promises you will not be able to fulfil, nor do you intend to. Nobody around you has the courage to tell you*

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33   Ignazi P. (2018), *I partiti in Italia dal 1945 al 2018*, Bologna, Il Mulino

that it is over, that it has ended badly. You are a failure from every point of view: economic, social, political.[34]

<div align="right">Beppe Grillo, 19/02/2013</div>

The existence of the system itself is allegedly based on wide-spread lies and corruption, which have contributed to maintaining the political class in a condition of unjustified privilege. These alleged lies and corruption have also deepened the gap between the politicians and the rest of society. This text is part of the post published on Beppe Grillo's blog the day of the re-election of Giorgio Napolitano as President of the Republic – an event judged very negatively by the M5S:

> *After the second world war, even in the darkest moment in the history of the Republic, we never experienced such a sharp counter-position between the corridors of power and the citizens [...] The Movimento 5 Stelle has opened everybody's eyes to the 20-year scam of the parties. But that cannot change the country alone. We need a mobilisation of the people [...] We could either make democracy or die as a country.*[35]

<div align="right">Beppe Grillo, 20/04/2013</div>

The idea of a party system closed in on itself is related to the M5S initial rejection of alliances. After the unexpected result of 2013, the M5S narrative centred on radical opposition towards the party system. Only after the 2018 elections did the M5S form an alliance with the Lega, but in the form of a "government contract", still rejecting the idea of a full political alliance.

As stated earlier, the **Lega** of Matteo Salvini is less interested in the issues related to the democratic participation of citizens. Unlike the Movimento 5 Stelle, the Lega has always been a well-structured party, with a territorial organisation. It is further-more the oldest existing party on the Italian political scene. While

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34 Beppe Grillo (19/02/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/02/arrendetevi.html.

35 Beppe Grillo (20/4/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/04/tutti_a_roma_ap.html.

Salvini carried out a process of centralisation,[36] focusing attention on his personality and creating a new communication structure, known by the media as "the Beast" (controlled by his spin doctor Luca Morisi), which partly overrode party structures, party organisation still remained very relevant. The party was able to count on a rooted network of local administrators, activists and organisers, especially in the North. For these reasons, and for its previous experiences in government, the Lega does not seem be willing to take strong stances against the party system or the political professional class in itself. Moreover, the party has united the anti-establishment attitude with a clear positioning on the left-right axis, being openly a right-wing force.

At the same time, because of the significant role of Salvini and his control of the party, some elements of a 'personal party' model can be found. However, the topic of the role of parties is not particularly relevant in the overall narrative of the party. This is also related to a factor that has already been highlighted: Lega "sovereignism" is far more centred on the contrast of alleged internal and external threats to national sovereignty itself, than on the concrete functioning mechanisms and decision-making processes within the state and democratic system (which remain 'behind the scenes'). Party and institutional issues are considered far from the real problems of people, as shown by the following post published on Facebook by Salvini, where he criticised Matteo Renzi's policies:

> *Renzi's priorities are the reform of the Senate and the IUS SOLI, the fast citizenship for immigrants… Our EMERGENCIES are JOB PENSIONS, FLAT TAX, and helping Italians in difficulties. Everything else comes later.*[37]

Matteo Salvini, 29/09/2015

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36   See Passarelli G. & Tuorto D., *La Lega di Salvini: Estrema destra di governo*

37   Matteo Salvini (29/09/2015), https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10153298097228155.

The main criticism of the party system raised by the **Popolo della Libertà/Forza Italia** is about its fragmentation and ineffectiveness. Silvio Berlusconi claims to have struggled to create a two-party system in order to counter the instability of governments and the leverage of small parties, as these are considered the main problems of the Italian political system. This viewpoint is stated in a Facebook post published during the discussions on institutional reforms in 2015:

> *We have always stated that, since 1948, we have never, as Italians, learnt how to vote. The law which is being discussed in the Senate could be the tool to overcoming this endemic fragmentation of the political framework, which we consider one of the greatest evils of our democracy and which too many times in the past decades has contributed to undermining the effectiveness of government action.*[38]

<div align="right">Silvio Berlusconi, 20/01/2015</div>

Apart from this, Berlusconi is not against the party system in itself. He argues for its restructuring and simplification, while at the same time targeting specific leftist forces.

Generally speaking, the **Partito Democratico** defends the parties as the main way of political participation and as an important element of a democratic system, even if a reform of how they function is seen as necessary to increase internal democracy.

Indeed, in the PD's 2013 electoral programme, the party proposed approving a law regulating the functioning of parties and linking public financing to principles of internal democracy and transparency:

> *A reform of the parties should be approved which, together with the reduction of public funding, would envisage a law implementing Article 49 of the Constitution, granting democracy of and within*

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38 Silvio Berlusconi (20/01/2015), https://www.facebook.com/116716651695782/posts/917737168260389/.

parties, which should reform themselves in order to be a useful tool for citizens and not for particular interests.[39]

PD Electoral Programme – General Elections 2013

According to Article 49 of the Italian Constitution, "All citizens have the right to freely associate in parties, to contribute through democratic processes to determining national policies". Nevertheless, the functioning of the party system has never been regulated by law for a principle of self-determination of the internal organisation of the party. Against the backdrop of the cold war, the parties saw this as necessary. Since then the situation has changed and it is therefore argued that it could be possible to establish such a law. The proposal was thus included in the Partito Democratico programme in order to prevent the possible abuses of public funding, to increase transparency and foster democratic participation. The proposed law was heavily criticised by the Movimento 5 Stelle, which accused it of being a tool to take the M5S off political scene. Indeed, the M5S has always claimed not to be a party and for this reason had refused to adopt a statute. Moreover, the M5S had always been criticised for its lack of internal democracy and transparency. However, the Partito Democratico dismissed the M5S view, claiming the "the law's purpose" was "to guarantee transparency of the internal functioning of parties and participation itself".[40]

Ultimately, the law was never approved because although the Chamber of Deputies approved a bill in June 2016, the Senate never did so.[41] The bill aimed to foster party internal democracy, focusing on the content of statutes, on the access to the lists of members of the party, and on the distribution of financial resources between central and local offices. In addition, it envisaged special regulations on donations over €5,000.[42] Some of the measures

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39 http://www.pder.it/bf/allegati/il_programma_dei_democratici_e_dei_progressisti_38101.pdf.

40 (20/05/2013), https://www.facebook.com/notes/partito-democratico/legge-sui-partiti-non-si-scambi-la-ricerca-di-democrazia-e-trasparenza-per-una-c/10151671470681202/.

41 https://parlamento17.openpolis.it/singolo_atto/42005.

42 https://www.camera.it/leg17/465?tema=disciplina_dei_partiti_politici.

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of the bill were later included in the electoral reform approved in 2017. In particular, according to the new electoral rules, the parties which were willing to participate in the elections had to provide a statute or, at least, a declaration, stating the presence of the minimal requirement of transparency within the party itself.

The issue of participation has always been an important topic in the narrative of the Partito Democratico. In particular, the PD claims to be the party giving more way to democracy and real participation. This is through the tool of primary elections, even if these are the subject of discussion and criticism. For example, the PD claims to be the only party that chose the vast majority of its MP candidates for the 2013 election through primary elections:

> *From parliamentary primaries large victory of young people and women. It was a hard but wonderful bet.*[43]

Pierluigi Bersani, 01/01/2013

The topic of real internal democracy is an issue that is often raised by PD representatives against the Movimento 5 Stelle.

Although the narrative of the Partito Democratico emphasises the importance of the party system for political participation and democracy, the functioning of the party is nevertheless a matter of internal debate. The role of primary elections, the methods of selection of the internal ruling class, the degree of internal democracy and of personalisation of politics are issues that are much discussed within the party. These topics had already been debated during the 2012 primary elections to select the prime minister candidate for the centre-left coalition – the two main contenders being Pierluigi Bersani and Matteo Renzi. Renzi's main catchphrase was the "scrapping" of the "old" ruling class of the party. He thus introduced a narrative based on an old-new cleavage, disintermediation, disruption, a light organisation of the party, a rejection of the traditional ways of selec-

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[43] Pierluigi Bersani (01/01/2013), https://www.facebook.com/127457477096/posts/151449545003370/.

tion and internal dialectics. Bersani, on the other hand, called for a reorganisation of the party in a more classical way. Renzi lost the 2012 primaries but after the resignation of Bersani as the secretary of the PD on 20 April 2013, and after a regency period by Guglielmo Epifani, new primary elections were announced to elect the secretary of the PD. Renzi was again in the running, together with Gianni Cuperlo and Giuseppe Civati. The topic of the internal functioning of the party continued to be debated. Renzi proposed a light model of internal organisation:

> *I want lightness to win within the Partito Democratico. I want the party to be free from some Ministry-like bureaucracies, to be thinking rather than heavy [in Italian there is a wordplay between the words* pesante, *heavy, and* pensante, *thinking].*[44]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 09/07/2013</div>

The tone of some of Renzi's criticism is reminiscent of some of the elements of the anti-political narrative:

> *The secretary should not pass all his time locked up in the party headquarters managing jobs and positions.*[45]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 07/10/2013</div>

The other candidates, especially Gianni Cuperlo, proposed a different idea of the party, stressing the risks related to the excessive personalisation of politics:

> *The logic of the single leader does not work [...] The last 20 years of crisis of Italian democracy have been marked by a leader-centred and plebiscitary conception of political parties. This is the challenge we have to face in the Congress: not only a challenge on a name, but on the words expressing which interests and subjects we want to represent.*[46]

<div align="right">Gianni Cuperlo, 06/09/2013</div>

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44 Matteo Renzi (9/7/2013), http://www.matteorenzi.it/tutti-mi-chiedono-di-candidarmi-cosi-cambiero-il-pd/.

45 Matteo Renzi (7/10/2013), http://www.matteorenzi.it/intervista-a-matteo-renzi-con-me-segretario-del-pd-letta-sara-piu-forte/.

46 Gianni Cuperlo (6/9/2013), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10151670770466896/.

After Renzi won the primaries and became secretary of Partito Democratico, and then prime minister, a long conflict took place between him and the internal minority of the party. On the one hand, he was reproached for leading without taking the different opinions and tendencies of the party into account. On the other hand, Renzi accused the internal minority of standing in opposition and of blocking any decision, and he sometimes showed a lack of respect – for example, calling internal opponents *gufi* [jinxes]. As a result of this prolonged tension, some of the representatives of the internal minority voted against the institutional reforms that were strongly backed by Renzi in the referendum held in December 2016. For similar reasons, a party split occurred in February 2017, bringing about the formation of a new party, Articolo Uno.

Because of this internal tension, it has been difficult for the PD to develop a common view on party functioning and organisation, on the methods of ruling class selection, or on the creation of think tanks and thoughts collectives close to the party.

3.2. *Funding of politics and political parties*

The issue of funding for politics and political parties has long been debated in Italian politics. A referendum held in 1993 abolished public funding for political parties, and the criticism of the excessive costs related to political activity was one of the main arguments used by populist forces. After the 1993 referendum, reimbursement for electoral expenses was introduced, *de facto* replacing public funding. Given that the topic was always handled in a polemic way, it was difficult to address the issue of the necessary funding for democracy properly.

As has been said, when the 2007 global economic crisis erupted, a renewed interest started to spread in the issue of the alleged wastefulness of politics and the costs related to political activity. The topic was crucial within the discourse of the Movimento 5 Stelle right from the start. Since its 2013 electoral programme

there have been calls for the abolition of electoral reimbursement and for the abolition of MPs' pensions, as well as for the reduction of MPs' salaries, and for the prohibition to practise any other profession during a parliamentary mandate. According to the M5S, doing politics with less money or even "without money" would be easy – as the example of the M5S itself shows:

> We want to abolish electoral reimbursements. They tell you that doing politics requires a lot of money. It is not true. We are the living proof! Without money we became the second political force in the country (maybe the first).[47]

<div align="right">Beppe Grillo, 29/01/2013</div>

> Movimento 5 Stelle exists thanks to the active participation of millions of citizens. Doing politics without the intermediation of the parties, without public money, granting the highest transparency in funding sources is possible, it has been shown.[48]

<div align="right">Beppe Grillo, 14/03/2013</div>

In the Movimento 5 Stelle narrative, the issue of politics funding is also related to the link between parties and economic powers. The dependence of parties on private financing could make them dependent on entrepreneurial and, sometimes, criminal interest, but this is not an argument that can be used to defend public funding – which is categorically excluded. According to the M5S, the solution is doing politics with less money. The attempt to reduce the costs of politics is related to the idea that this could help bring politics closer to the needs and to the sentiment of common people. In the M5S narrative, even if the resources are not very relevant that could be saved by cutting the costs related to politics, setting an example is nevertheless very important in order to reconnect politics and citizens. This idea is communicated through a narrative based on 'small gestures'. For example, "restitution days" are constantly emphasised – days when the

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47   Beppe Grillo (29/01/2013), https://www.facebook.com/56369076544/posts/10151236626116545/.

48   Beppe Grillo (14/03/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/03/politica_senza_soldi.html.

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members of parliament give part of their salaries to the state or to a fund supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. These moments are very important in the M5S discourse, as shown in this post by MP Alessandro Di Battista which was published in Beppe Grillo's blog:

> *Movimento 5 Stelle has given back over €1,500,000, saved in just two and half months of legislature and paid into the public debt amortisation fund. If the parties did the same, we would save €40 million a year.*
>
> *Today will be Restitution Day! This means we respect the deals, which means credibility. How could MPs ask for sacrifices from the people if they are not able to do it for themselves (even if true sacrifices are something different, not giving back the money of the community). This also means something else. I work in a shark tank, I live in Montecitorio 16 hours a day and in the corridors of power they call me "Honourable". Earning reasonably and giving back the surplus is fundamental for us, because it helps us not to become detached from reality.*[49]

<div align="right">Alessandro Di Battista, 4/07/2013</div>

Even if the financial impact of these initiatives is very low on the public finances, the coverage of these initiatives in the media is very relevant. The initiative to reduce MPs' salaries by "giving back" part of them is related, on the one hand, to an issue of "credibility" and, on the other hand, to reducing the alleged gap between citizens and "power".

The **Lega** does not stress the issue of funding politics very significantly in its narrative – most likely because the party is quite vulnerable on this. As mentioned before, the investigations and trial involving the leadership of the Lega in 2012 were related to the misappropriation of public funding. Moreover, since the Lega has a strong and widespread party structure, the problem of funding is a thorny issue. Indeed, a huge scandal erupted in

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49 Alessandro Di Battista (4/7/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/07/patti_rispettati_restitutionday.html.

2019 related to alleged Russian financing to the Lega. Generally speaking, the issue of possible foreign funding to the Lega has been discussed repeatedly. Given that the topic is therefore controversial for the Lega, Salvini does not generally include it in his narrative.

The main source of funding for **Forza Italia** and the **Popolo della Libertà** has always been Berlusconi's personal wealth. The "abolition of public funding to parties" and the "halving of the costs related to politics" certainly features in the 2013 electoral programme of the Popolo delle Libertà although the inclusion of such issues in the programme was probably aimed at countering the Movimento 5 Stelle narrative. Indeed, after the approval of the law abolishing public funding in February 2014, which also involved tighter regulations on private financing, Berlusconi complained he could not finance his party any longer, and called for a grass-roots financing campaign:

> *I have always financed Forza Italia. With the new law on party financing I cannot do it any longer. We should build a crowdfunding campaign.*[50]

Silvio Berlusconi, 26/06/2014

Before the 2013 electoral campaign, the **Partito Democratico** defended the public funding of political parties, even if it acknowledged that this public funding should be reduced and made more transparent, within the framework of the above-mentioned proposed law on parties. In general, the issue of reducing the costs of politics is partly taken on by the narrative of the party, but it is included in a more general view of improvement in transparency and efficiency:

> *In the end, although it is not the last of the priorities, politics should regain authority, promote renewal, reduce its costs and its intrusiveness in fields that do not belong to it. For instance, through a*

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50 Silvio Berlusconi (26/0/2014), https://www.facebook.com/116716651695782/posts/760438490 656925/.

> *deep reform of local public services, we need to intervene on a consolidated system of power which fuels the perverse costs of politics. We need sober politics because, if Italians should save money, the rulers should save more. At any institutional level, stipends above the European average are not acceptable.*[51]

<div align="right">PD Electoral Programme – General Elections 2013</div>

Since the 2012 primary elections campaign, Matteo Renzi has proposed a more radical agenda, which is closer to the Movimento 5 Stelle proposal, and which suggests abolishing public funding:

> *Beppe Grillo? He should be challenged, not chased. Abolishing public funding to parties, taking away Rai [Italian public broadcasting company] from parties, eliminating MPs' pensions: these are proposals we launched from our camper [during the primary election campaign] long before his tsunami tour. We should not now be talking about these proposals, we should be implementing them.*[52]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 1/03/2013</div>

After the 2013 elections Pierluigi Bersani tried to build an alliance with the Movimento 5 Stelle, proposing an eight-point programme of government. The third point in this programme was dedicated to the "reform of politics and public life":

> *3. REFORM OF POLITICS AND PUBLIC LIFE. A) Halving of MPs number and elimination of provinces. B) Reduction of stipends of MPs and regional councillors with regard to the emoluments of mayors. C) Reduction of public and public-private companies. D) Reduction of costs of bureaucracy. E) Law on parties ruling internal democracy, code of ethics, access to nominations and financing. F) Electoral law based on PD proposal of two-round majority electoral system.*[53]

<div align="right">Pierluigi Bersani, 6/03/2013</div>

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51   http://www.pder.it/bf/allegati/il_programma_dei_democratici_e_dei_progressisti_38101.pdf.

52   Matteo Renzi (1/3/2013), https://www.facebook.com/113335124914/posts/108394412664250/.

53   https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2013/03/06/gli-otto-punti-di-pierluigi-bersani_n_2817265.html.

After the Movimento 5 Stelle rejected the proposal to form a government with the PD, a grand coalition government led by Enrico Letta was formed after the re-election of Giorgio Napolitano. In his inaugural speech to the parliament, the new prime minister showed his willingness to include the issue of reducing the cost of politics on his agenda as a matter of credibility in the relationship between citizens and institutions:

> In this context the reduction of the costs of politics has become a duty of credibility. Think about electoral reimbursements: all the laws approved on this matter since 1994 have always been hypocritical or unsuccessful. Not real reimbursements but hidden financing. Moreover, the amount was too high, as the Court of Auditors recently confirmed: €2.5 billion from 1994 to 2012, compared with certified expenditure of €0.5 billion. This is only one confirmation that the system should be revolutionised. Let's start from public financing to parties, introducing controls and fines also for parliamentary and local groups, abolishing the law approved in recent years, which is too weak. We should create paths that enable citizens to choose freely, with appropriate fiscal incentives, and that enable them to contribute to the political activity of parties.[54]

Enrico Letta, 29/04/2013

His intention came to fruition with a decree approved in December 2013 and transformed into law by the parliament in February 2014.

The reform abolished electoral reimbursements for electoral costs, replacing the reimbursements with a voluntary system of taxpayers being able to devolve 2 per thousand from their annual income tax return to political parties. Moreover, a system of tax deduction on donations for political parties (with a maximum limit) was also introduced by reform. The idea behind the reform was that of giving back to citizens the freedom to choose which party to finance. Although the complete entry into force of the

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54   Enrico Letta (29/0/2013), https://www.facebook.com/notes/enrico-letta/il-testo-del-discorso-di-presentazione-del-programma-di-governo-fonte-governoit/10152742184625411/.

reform was only planned for 2017, the overall result of the reform was a sharp reduction in the global incomes of political parties, which led to the layoff of many of the parties' employees and to a reduction in political activity. The Movimento 5 Stelle nevertheless criticised the law sharply, arguing it was not a real abolition of public funding, and the M5S thus targeted the delay of the complete application of the bill:

> Letta said he abolished public funding to parties by decree. That is a hoax by Letta and Renzi, pretending to do the things that the Movimento 5 Stelle is doing for real. We gave away 42 million of public funding, of electoral reimbursements we were entitled to receive. They made a decree which will allow parties to continue to fill their coffers until 2018. At the same time, the decree establishes a new type of public funding to parties, which lasts forever, and pays them for political training courses, as well as paying for their office bills and loans. They have changed the electoral reimbursement genetically, paying what should be paid by electors directly, if they believe in a political force. Moreover, they created the '2 per thousand'. They made huge political propaganda about this, but it is a public fund, public money that citizens could give to the state and instead choose to give to the party.[55]

<div align="right">Luigi Di Maio, 15/12/2013</div>

Putting these criticisms to one side, the position of the PD can be seen to change. Starting from the idea of a general reform of the public funding system, providing more control and linking public funding to a law on parties and to requirements on internal democracy, the PD later accepted the idea that removing public funding was necessary to be able to reconstruct the credibility of politics and rebuild a relationship between people and institutions. The question of how to meet the necessary costs in order to make democracy work and in order to grant a relative autonomy of politics with regard to other powers and interests is not addressed in the debate, in which the PD seems partly to accept the premiss of the Movimento 5 Stelle conceptions.

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55   Luigi Di Maio (15/12/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/12/la_mutazione_ge.html.

4. Institutions and Reforms

4.1. *Institutions and parliament*

Institutions are the backbone of the functioning of democracy but are also often the target of attacks from populist forces, which can see them as an obstacle to the expression of the will of the people. Furthermore, parliament can be seen in different ways – as a way to express and give voice to positions previously excluded from the debate or as a means to channel and block the debate according to the will of the 'system' or of the political class.

It is quite evident that the critique of the **Movimento 5 Stelle** is not limited to the parties, but involves also the institutional system itself. Institutions are partly seen as a means used by the parties to safeguard their power. For instance, at least in the first part of the 2013-2018 legislature, a continuous conflict between the president of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini and Movimento 5 Stelle MPs took place on regulatory issues, with a record number of sanctions being issued.

Beppe Grillo's language shows a frequent lack of consideration towards institutions (for example, towards the president of Italy) and a significant use of vulgarity. Political opponents and other parties are nicknamed in a derogatory way, also with sexual allusions. The aim of such language is to appear close to the common people and to express the alleged illegitimacy of political opponents. There is a lack of recognition for the legitimacy of the opposition and for the procedure of political mediation. The M5S sees a radical change as the only viable way to regenerate politics. It was in this way, at least in the first phase of its history, that M5S claimed to represent the will of the whole people against its enemies.

With regard to the role of the parliament, the narrative of the M5S is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, the parliament is theoret-

ically valued as the place where the will of the people can be expressed by the M5S representative. On the other hand, the parliament's role is considered to be lost, since the parties emptied it of its functions and powers. One of the most recurring criticisms is related to the fact MPs are "appointed" by the parties rather than being truly elected. Indeed, under the electoral law that was in force in 2013 (the so-called "Porcellum"), the electoral list was formed by the parties, which also chose the order of election of the MPs. The M5S therefore criticised the impotence of citizens, who were unable to choose their MPs. At the same time, the M5S said the MPs themselves were impotent because they were forced to vote according to the indications of the parties. It thus denounced an alleged situation of "illegitimacy" of the parliament, which would affect its ability to take valid decisions.

The dialectic between the theoretical recognition of the importance of the parliament and the denouncement of the above-mentioned issues has pushed the M5S to use several unconventional protest actions (for example, climbing onto the roof of the parliament or frequently using Facebook Live videos to 'denounce' the alleged violation of the will of the people). It has also pushed the M5S into a permanent conflict with the other parties and with the president of the Chamber of Deputies. A pledge made by Beppe Grillo before the elections – "We will open the parliament like a can of tuna!" – became very famous, and expressed both the will to disrupt the political mechanism and a certain disrespect for the institutional rules. After the election, Grillo wrote a post on the role of the parliament, stating that "the can of tuna is empty":

> *Does the parliament still make sense? Should it be reformed? Abolished? For sure, today it is almost useless. The parliament, the central place of our democracy, is devoid of its role of giving voice to the citizens. It is whispering, wheezing, moaning like a dying body. Journalists listen to it for daily gossip. The MPs appointed by the parties do not represent anybody, nor themselves. They are employees with a very good salary, in charge of pushing buttons on command. Somebody, chosen from among the most loyal, is used*

to tell lies on television. What is the purpose of this parliament? What is the purpose of the election? The parliament is unconstitutional because the Porcellum [the electoral law] is unconstitutional [...] The parliament could close tomorrow and nobody would notice. It is a simulacrum, a war memorial, a smelly grave of the Second Republic. Either we bury it or we refound it. The can of tuna is empty.[56]

Beppe Grillo, 07/06/2013

This kind of declaration has often been greatly criticised for its near-subversive content. At the same time, an interesting element to be noted is related to the conception of the parliament and the role of MPs. According to one of the M5S core ideas, members of the parliament should not "represent" the electorate,[57] being free to play their role according to their own judgment. They should, instead, be considered as 'employees' of the citizens, thus emphasising the binding commitment to the mandate of the electorate. The freedom of the MPs to choose according to their conscience, a principle envisaged by the Constitution, is explicitly rejected by the Movimento 5 Stelle. In the end, the very role of parliament is questioned: the parliament should be replaced in the future through the implementation of direct democracy.

For this reason, one of the main proposals of the M5S since the 2013 electoral programme has been to set a limit of two mandates for MPs and other public representatives (this was bypassed by Luigi Di Maio in 2019 with the proposal to consider the first mandate for local administrators as a "zero mandate").[58] Other proposals are connected with direct democracy: the possibility to vote on proposed legislation through a referendum without a

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56   Beppe Grillo (7/6/2013), https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/06/la_scatola_di_tonno_e_vuota.html.

57   According to Article 67 of the Italian Constitution "each member of Parliament represents the Nation and carries out his duties without constraint of mandate".

58   https://www.corriere.it/politica/19_luglio_22/m5s-maio-presenta-mandato-zero-social-si-scatena-l-ironia-4997a05e-ac9c-11e9-8470-d02c1b58748e.shtml.

quorum (this is now fixed at 50%+1 of the voters), the obligation for the parliament to discuss and vote on laws by popular initiatives, the online publication of every law three months before its entry into force in order to receive comments from the citizens.

While the interest for a participation mechanism is crucial for the Movimento 5 Stelle, this is not of importance within the **Lega** narrative. Instead, the Lega narrative is related to an idea of a minimal state, whose source of legitimacy is to solve a minimum set of issues that are defined with reference to supposed common sense:

> *A parliament looking after electoral law rather than people's jobs and problems sucks.*[59]

Matteo Salvini, 21/01/2015

The core of Salvini's narrative is a strong claim to "recover sovereignty", but this claim is played mostly against external targets, like the European Union or migrants. Very little is said on how this sovereignty should be exercised or how the citizen could participate in decision-making. According to Salvini's vision, the state should, on the one hand, defend the citizen from internal and external threats (crime and an "invasion" of migrants). On the other hand, the action of the state should be limited as much as possible – for example, with reference to taxation:

> *93% of Italian enterprises have less than 10 employees. Among them, two out of three do not have any [...] We need COURAGE, we need a FISCAL REVOLUTION: flat-tax, same level of taxation for everybody at 15%. End the oppression of Equitalia [a tax collecting agency] Italy needs to RUN, not to walk.*[60]

Matteo Salvini, 07/10/2015

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59   Matteo Salvini (21/01/2015), https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10152701927658155/.

60   Matteo Salvini (07/10/2015), https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10153310190103155/.

Sector studies and tax audits are massacring producers in this country. The Italian entrepreneur should be able to WORK without the state bothering him in the company.[61]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 08/10/2015</div>

For the Lega, the task of politics is to solve a minimal set of alleged "problems of the people", limiting intervention of the state in citizens' lives. The discussion on the political and institutional process that could enable this solution remains in the background. For this reason, there is no or little interest in safeguarding institutional equilibria and the balance of powers. This was clearly visible in the behaviour of Salvini as interior minister. His disrespect for the limits of competences related to a specific role, his repeated legally-borderline behaviour, and his lack of institutional attitude and gravitas are all signs of a conception of institutions as a simple means to be used in order to fulfil an alleged people's will. Moreover, showing a completely different attitude from his predecessor, Salvini does not change the communication style and the language he used before. Institutions sometimes seem to become a tool for political propaganda. This could lead, in principle, to a conflict between popular legitimisation and respect for institutions and rule of law.

As can be seen, both the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega, for different reasons, have little interest in respecting or safeguarding institutional mechanisms or representative democracy. This is particularly evident in the formation process of the so-called "government of change" in 2018. The agreement between the two forces is not defined as a political alliance. The government was instead based on a "government contract" signed between the two "political leaders" of the two forces, Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini. Furthermore, the decision to choose a prime minister who claimed to be the "people's lawyer" is highly significant because it shows the intention to deny that the government is a result of political mediation – which is deprecated. The model is, instead, of private bargaining.

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61   Matteo Salvini (08/10/2015), https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10153312374943155/.

CHANGING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2008 CRISIS

In the discourse of the **Popolo della Libertà / Forza Italia**, institutions are conceived, at least on a theoretical basis, as a common framework which should be the result of an agreement between different parties:

> *The government in a two-party democracy is the concern of who won the elections. It should be able to decide and to account for its choice in front of the electors, without shifting responsibility. Institutions are, instead, the patrimony of all cities and of all the political forces representing them.*[62]

<div align="right">Silvio Berlusconi, 11/02/2015</div>

Transforming the institutional framework according to a long-term deal between the main forces is therefore an important goal for Berlusconi. At the same time, in many fields the concrete behaviour of Berlusconi has always been far from respectful of institutions – for example, with regards to the judiciary.

The **Partito Democratico** narrative is meanwhile focused primarily on the defence of the institutions against attacks from other forces, as is clear from the PD's 2013 electoral programme:

> *For us populism is the first enemy of an authentic popular politics [...] The only real answer to populism is democratic participation. The crisis of democracy can be fought with "more" – not with "less" – democracy. More rule of law, a sharper separation of powers, a democracy of equality and the full and correct application of one of the most beautiful and advanced Constitutions in the world.*[63]

<div align="right">PD Electoral Programme – General Elections 2013</div>

At the same time, there is a very clear awareness of the need for a new legitimisation of the institutional system in the face of growing distrust and discontent. This awareness underlies the institutional reform projects pursued mainly by the Partito Democratico in the 2013-2018 legislature.

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62   Silvio Berlusconi (11/02/2015), https://www.facebook.com/116716651695782/posts/930977143603058/.

63   http://www.pder.it/binary_files/allegati/il_programma_dei_democratici_e_dei_progressisti_38101.pdf.

4.2. *Institutional reforms and referendum*

The debate on institutional reforms has a long history in Italy. Starting from the 1980s, a variety of different reform schemes have now been discussed and proposed for more than 30 years. Many attempts at reforming the Constitution have been made, but only a few have been successful. The main reform has been that of Title V of the Constitution, which came into force in 2001. This reform profoundly changed the relationship between the state and the regions, with a sharp shift of powers towards the regions. However, the reform left many issues unresolved and the debate continued over subsequent years. One of the main issues was related to the role of the two houses – the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. According to the Italian Constitution, every law should be approved by both houses (*bicameralismo perfetto*). A rearrangement of the task of the houses and a change in the number of parliamentarians have been discussed in many reform projects. Another much-debated point is related to the powers of the government and the prime minister, and to the government's relationship with the president of the country. There has also been discussion about referendum regulations. The electoral law has been changed many times and has often been discussed together with electoral reforms. In the parties' 2013 electoral programmes, issues related to institutional reforms were mentioned by all parties.

In the **Movimento 5 Stelle** programme, institutional reform questions were tackled in the first paragraph, focused on "State and Citizens". The premiss is that:

> *The present organisation of the state is bureaucratic, oversized, costly and inefficient. The parliament does not represent citizens any longer and they cannot choose the candidate, but only the symbol, of the party. The Constitution is not applied. The parties have replaced popular will, avoiding its control and judgment.*[64]

M5S Electoral Programme – General Elections 2013

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64   https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/materiali-bg/Programma-Movimento-5-Stelle.pdf.

Among the various proposals made, the abolition of provinces could be underlined, as well as the merging of municipalities under 5,000 inhabitants, the elimination of electoral reimbursements, the mandatory teaching of the Constitution with an exam for every person with public responsibility, the limit of two mandates for parliamentarians and for every other public office, the elimination of all pensions and privileges for parliamentarians, the reduction of stipends for MPs, reform of the rules of referenda in order to make them easier, mandatory discussion and vote on laws by popular initiative.

The programme of the **Lega** and the **Popolo della Libertà** is the same because it was agreed within the centre-right coalition. The institutional reform proposal of the coalition was found in the first paragraph of the programme:

1. *Adequate and modern institutions promote the development of the country*
- *Direct and popular election of the President of the Republic*
- *Strengthening of powers of Government*
- *Reform of two-House system, federal Senate, halving of the number of parliamentarians and other elective bodies*
- *Parliamentary regulations revision and streamlining of legislative procedures, with sure times for bill approval*
- *Reorganisation and simplification of legislation*
- *Abolition of provinces with constitutional amendment*
- *[...] Overcoming the internal stability pact.*[65]

PDL Electoral Programme – General Elections 2013

In the **Partito Democratico** programme, there was a paragraph dedicated to institutional reforms, found within the "Democracy" section of the programme:

On the reform of the institutional framework, we are in favour of a simplified and strengthened parliamentary system, with an incisive role of the Government and the defence of the balancing role of the President of the Republic. We will reformulate a responsible and

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65 http://www.pdl.it/speciali/programma-elettorale-2013.pdf.

well-ordered federalism, making local autonomies a strong point of the unitary and democratic framework of the country. Strict rules on conflict of interests, antitrust legislation and freedom of information are needed. We will initiate a reform process granting concreteness and sure times to the constituent function of the next legislature.[66]

PD Electoral Programme – General Elections 2013

As said before, the debate on institutional reform is not a special feature of the time frame considered in this study. Nevertheless, the issue of constitutional reform assumed a central position in the 2013-2018 legislature for different reasons. This was partly because, faced with the rise of the Movimento 5 Stelle, institutional reforms were seen as a means to reframe the citizen-institutions relationship, improving the effectiveness of the state in providing answers to the needs of citizens. Institutional reforms were thus to some extent considered, an answer to the anti-political challenge. At the same time, the tone of the discussion on reforms was sometimes affected by the anti-political atmosphere itself, borrowing some of its slogans and proposals. Indeed, the attempt to tackle the populist challenge was carried out with a mixed strategy of contrast and inclusion of many of the proposals made by the Movimento 5 Stelle. The centrality of institutional reform in the 2013-2018 legislature was also, however, partly due to the very remarkable role played by the president of Italy, Giorgio Napolitano, in promoting the reform process.

In April 2013, after unsuccessful attempts to elect two different candidates as the president of Italy (Franco Marini and Romano Prodi) and in a tense atmosphere marked by instability related to the eurozone crisis, the Partito Democratico asked Giorgio Napolitano to agree to be elected for a second mandate. In his first speech in front of both houses of parliament, Napolitano, who had previously ruled out the possibility of election for a second

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66 http://www.pder.it/binary_files/allegati/il_programma_dei_democratici_e_dei_progressisti_38101.pdf.

mandate, criticised the party system sharply for its weakness. He accepted his re-election on one condition: the full commitment of parties to pursue the reform agenda firmly. Napolitano thus took on a leading role in promoting the institutional reforms process. The grand coalition government, led by Enrico Letta and supported by the Partito Democratico and the Popolo della Libertà, which was formed after the re-election of Napolitano, was partly seen as an expression of the president's will, carrying on the reform agenda. This created a sharp conflict between the Movimento 5 Stelle and Napolitano, whom the M5S saw as the gatekeeper of the party system. Napolitano's re-election was portrayed by the M5S as a desperate move of the parties to "avoid change" and to protect the party system from the attempt of the M5S to disrupt it. The government led by Letta was also seen by the M5S as a confirmation of M5S ideas: a cabinet partly composed of technicians, supported by left-wing and right-wing parties, excluding the Movimento 5 Stelle. In the narrative of the M5S, this seemed to confirm the image of a weak party system committed to defending itself from change. However, this made the stress on the reform process even more central: it was seen by the parties as the means to prove their ability to change.

Even in his first speech in front of the parliament, the newly appointed prime minister underlined the key role of reforms:

> There is a narrow, but possible, way for a radical reform of the institutional and political system. [...] The overall goal is a reform that reconnects citizens to institutions, strengthening the popular mandate of the executive and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the legislative process. The principles that should guide us are those of a "governing democracy": electors should be able to choose their own representatives and to decide in elections the governments and majorities sustaining them.[67]

Enrico Letta, 29/04/2013

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67 https://www.today.it/politica/enrico-letta-discorso-camera.html.

In Enrico Letta's narrative there is a strong link between reform of the institutions, efficiency, the ability to deliver sound politics to citizens and the legitimisation of politics.

For its part, the Movimento 5 Stelle considered this reforming agenda as just a weak attempt of the party system to defend itself. Furthermore, it also strongly criticised the method used to define reforms: a Commission composed of 40 parliamentarians appointed to make proposals.

Initially, the grand coalition government and the common effort to write reform was viewed very positively by Berlusconi, who saw it as the chance to go beyond the long-standing mutual non-recognition and conflict between centre-left and centre-right:

> *This government comes out in an extraordinary historical opportunity. For the first time since 1947 centre-right and centre-left have reached an agreement to form a majority that could potentially approve everything in parliament and support a government that could really operate for the common good. This is the chance to put an end to that civil cold war, to that hard counter-position between centre-left and centre-right. I firmly believe that this is an extraordinary opportunity. Do not waste it. We will do whatever it takes not to waste it. We will support this government and this majority in the strongest and most loyal way.*[68]

<div align="right">Silvio Berlusconi, 21/05/2013</div>

The lack of common mutual legitimisation between the two main coalitions, those of the centre-left and centre-right, has been an issue within Italian politics since as far back as the 1990s. Nevertheless, the attempts to write a common rules framework jointly have repeatedly failed.

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[68] Silvio Berlusconi (21/05/2013), https://www.facebook.com/116716651695782/posts/581062361927873/.

The attempt made by Letta did not succeed either. The reform agenda was carried out with some changes by the Renzi government. The new reform proposal was presented as a law to be approved by the parliament rather than using the Commission method. The main points of the reform were: differentiating the functions of the two houses (while the Chamber of Deputies was to vote confidence to the party and carry out the main part of legislative activity, the Senate was to have a linking function with the regions and local autonomies); changing the distribution of competences between state and regions; and abolishing provinces. Moreover, a strong link between reforms and electoral law was established in the debate. The electoral law proposed by Renzi, based on a majority prize and a possible second round, was called "Italicum" and its rationale was to grant a safe majority for the first party. The underlying idea was to extend the local elections electoral system (for municipalities and regions) to the national level. For this reason, Renzi often claimed he was willing to make the prime minister "the mayor of Italy".

While the contents of the reform were quite similar to those of the discussion during the Letta cabinet, the tone of the debate changed significantly. As previously mentioned, Renzi's discourse often expressed frustration at the slowness of political mediation, and at the complexity of institutional procedures. The reforms had to create a new political system, which would allow quick decisions and efficiency, getting rid of allegedly obsolete mechanisms of politics. The cleavage between 'old' and 'new' was crucial in Matteo Renzi's narrative, often substituting the cleavage between 'left' and 'right'. Doing this, he often borrowed the pattern and styles from the anti-political registry. Some of the keywords used to communicate the highlights of the reforms are: simplification; reduction of the number of politicians; cutting the costs of politics; and elimination of levels of government and of various institutions. The focus was not on the issue of a new legitimisation of institutions, but rather on speed, decision-making and simplification.

The reform process was pursued by including Berlusconi's Forza Italia in the discussion. Renzi made a political deal with Berlusconi called the "Nazareno Pact" (from the name of the PD headquarters, located in Largo del Nazareno in Rome), which raised much controversy.

The Movimento 5 Stelle went through a difficult period in the initial phase after Renzi took office as prime minister, losing part of its electorate – for instance, in the European elections of 2014. The strategy of pursuing institutional reform through a deal with Silvio Berlusconi and, at the same time, absorbing some of the topics of the propaganda by the Movimento 5 Stelle, seemed to work in the short run. However, in the end, the Movimento 5 Stelle started to regain consensus and the deal with Berlusconi came to an end because of the election of Sergio Mattarella as the president of Italy, which came about without the agreement of Forza Italia.

According to the Italian Constitution, if a reform of the Constitution is approved with an absolute majority (and not with a two-thirds majority) a referendum could be required to confirm the reform itself.

This referendum was held in December 2016, after the approval of the reform in parliament. The electoral campaign for the referendum was very tough, partly because of Renzi's decision to announce his resignation if the reform was rejected.

Although all the main parties except the PD were against the reform, Renzi tried to convince the electorate of the Movimento 5 Stelle and of the centre-right parties to vote in favour of the institutional referendum by stressing the anti-political elements of the PD's narrative even more in view of the constitutional referendum:

> *The constitutional reform will also be voted on by millions of citizens who disagree with their parties: the MPs of the Lega and of the Movimento 5 Stelle risk losing their seats and are scared by the perspective of going back to work. When they vote at the referendum, these electors will have to choose between a system costing*

less and working better and the blocked system we have now. This is the most important action of simplification of politics ever made in this country.[69]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 24/05/2016</div>

If 'Yes' wins [the reform is approved] this means fewer seats and smaller salaries for politicians, less power for the regions. If 'No' wins, nothing will change in Italy.[70]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 2/09/2016</div>

On the one hand, the Movimento 5 Stelle denied the effectiveness of the reform on reducing the costs of politics and on speeding up the legislative process. Instead, it focused on the lack of political will from parties. On the other hand, it stressed the issue of self-referentiality of the political class and their lack of accountability as the real problem of the country:

They want us to think that the future of Italy would depend on "governability" [...] But these are disgusting lies! [...] The problem in Italy is not only about the bills they did not approve (conflict of interest, anti-corruption, universal basic income) – and certainly if they did not approve them it is not because of weak government. The problem is about the crappy laws they approved [...] Do you know why the parliament approves so many unfitting laws? Because it does not respond to citizens any longer. This is the point! First with Porcellum, then with Italicum [the journalistic names of two electoral laws] and now with this constitutional reform, the partitocracy [the rule of parties] is transforming our republic into a republic founded on appointments! If the vast majority of parliamentarians are appointed by parties and not elected by the people, to whom will the politicians respond? To the parties, it's obvious![71]

<div align="right">Alessandro Di Battista, 28/09/2016</div>

69   Matteo Renzi (24/5/2016), https://www.facebook.com/matteorenziufficiale/videos/ 101538440 67619915/.

70   Matteo Renzi (2/9/2016), https://www.facebook.com/113335124914/posts/10154097160539915/.

71   Alessandro Di Battista (28/9/2016), https://www.facebook.com/dibattista.alessandro/videos/ 967871323324932/.

Salvini's Lega also denied that the reform could really simplify and reduce costs. Furthermore, it connected the topic with the issue of European elites and the alleged dependence of the Italian ruling class on that of Europe:

> *Renzi's SCHIFORMA [a play on words between "disgust" and "reform"] does not really abolish the Senate, but transforms it into a recreational place for appointed politicians, prevents Italians forever from voting on what is decided in Brussels, and allows parliamentarians to continue changing party without renouncing their seats of power. On 4 December #iovotono [I vote 'No'].*[72]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 17/10/2016</div>

Silvio Berlusconi meanwhile defined the reform as "wrong, poorly written and even dangerous since, together with the electoral law reform, it could cause a shift towards the authoritarianism of one single man, a real dictatorship of the left". At the same time, Berlusconi proposed a different reform based on 5 points:

> *On 4 December everybody should go to vote and vote NO in order to start working on a real reform. We propose a thorough reform, which could really influence the functioning of institutions and their costs, but which could primarily increase and not diminish the sovereignty of electors. This means that the reform should include 1) the direct popular election of the President of Republic; 2) a real cut in parliamentarians, whose number should be more than halved; 3) an imperative mandate, preventing parliamentarians from changing parties unless they resign; 4) the setting of a maximum percentage of tax burden on GDP that any government could levy; 5) a real reform of the regions, which are another huge and costly bureaucracy. These are the changes Italy really needs.*[73]

<div align="right">Silvio Berlusconi, 22/10/2016</div>

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[72]   Matteo Salvini (17/10/2016), https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10154150433423155.

[73]   Silvio Berlusconi (22/10/2016), https://www.facebook.com/SilvioBerlusconi/videos/1320299934670775/.

In the referendum, a large majority of the electorate (59.12%) voted against the proposed reform, leaving the Constitution unchanged and leading to the resignation of Renzi as prime minister.

After the referendum, the debate on institutional reforms was temporarily stopped. The topic was not therefore at the centre of the 2018 electoral debate. Institutional reform was not a central issue even in the government contract signed between the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega or the government formed in 2018. The approach was to refuse general reforms in favour of a pragmatic approach:

> Within the field of the fundamental reform of the institutions it is necessary to adopt a pragmatic and feasible approach, with regards to some limited, timely and homogeneous interventions, by presenting different and autonomous constitutional legislative initiatives.[74]

> Contract for the government of change, 2018

There is one important exception: the issue of the centre-periphery cleavage. After the Constitutional reform of 2001, many competences were moved from the national to the regional level. One of the aims of the institutional reform rejected by referendum was to re-centralise some of these competences. However, since, this attempt failed after the rejection of the referendum, an opposite tendency started, giving powers to the regional level. In 2017, two regions (Veneto and Lombardia) chaired by presidents who were members of the Lega, Luca Zaia and Roberto Maroni, decided to hold referenda to ask for further competences, according to a possibility envisaged by Article 116 of the Constitution (differentiated regionalism). A referendum was not necessary according to the Constitution, as the request for further competences could be made by the regional Council. However, the referendum was used as a tool of political mobilisation within a campaign with strong tones. The request to hold resources collected by taxes mostly on the regional territory was a key point of the campaign

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74 https://download.repubblica.it/pdf/2018/politica/contratto_governo.pdf.

– a request calling national solidarity into question and violating the Constitution.

Within the Lega of Salvini, the request for this kind of autonomy was mainly the expression of the previous territorial claims of the North, related to the historic constituency of the Lega. At the same time this claim was consistent with the idea of "minimum state" outlined before. While it is the responsibility of the central state to provide "protection" against the main alleged internal and external threats and to grant very limited fiscal pressure, every other competence could be moved to a level which is seen as closer to citizens and "territories".

The request for autonomy became one of the issues included in the "government contract", in its chapter on institutional issues:

> *Regarding the issue of regionalism, the commitment will be to set as a priority in the government agenda the attribution to all the regions requesting it, of more autonomy on the basis of Article 116, third subparagraph, of the Constitution, also completing quickly the ongoing negotiations between government and regions. The recognition of the further competences should be accompanied by transferring the resources necessary to exercise the competences autonomously. The increased autonomy should come together with more responsibility on the territory on the fair provision of services for the citizens and on efficacy of the action.*[75]

<div align="right">Contract for the government of change, 2018</div>

This chapter also included the reduction of the number of MPs, the introduction of the imperative mandate, the abolition of a quorum for a referendum, the possibility to hold a referendum to propose a law, and the mandatory discussion by the parliament of draft legislation proposed by the people.

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75   https://download.repubblica.it/pdf/2018/politica/contratto_governo.pdf.

The wording is clearly a compromise between the two forces making the deal. On the one hand, there were measures which were important for the Movimento 5 Stelle related to "direct democracy", cutting the costs of politics and simplification, while the request for "differentiated autonomy" was crucial for the Lega. However, a cleavage between the two forces could also be noted here. While, for the Movimento 5 Stelle, institutional reforms were a tool to implement a different democratic mechanism, for the Lega reforms could be used to reduce the competences of the central state, which the Lega said should only deliver protection against threats – thus minimising other forms of intervention or leaving them to other government levels. This is also mirrored in the proposal for a flat tax. The underlying idea is that of a state which does not act in order to counter territorial and social imbalances and inequalities, but lets the social contradictions grow and then exploits them politically.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has taken into account the attitude of political forces towards several aspects related to their conception of democracy and institutions. An analysis was provided of these forces' conception of people and the political class, of the party system and the funding of politics, and finally of institutions and reforms. Significant attention was paid to the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega, and to their different anti-establishment critiques. As well as the similarities, significant differences were highlighted. For the Movimento 5 Stelle, the critique of the political class and of representative democracy is a core topic, together with the claim for forms of direct democracy based on individuals using the internet, overriding party and institutional mediation. The Lega's "sovereignism" is meanwhile based on a disregard for institutional mechanisms that could potentially put people's will at odds with democracy rules. This is mirrored in Salvini's disregard for institutions. At the same time the idea of sovereignty proposed by the

Lega is an empty one, affirming itself against alleged enemies, like the European Union or immigrants. In the Lega's conception, the state does not act in order to provide a real, social protection to citizens. It rather promotes action with high communicative and symbolic impact, while letting inequalities and conflict grow in society. It is up to the individual to solve them. The success of both the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega is in their expression of a deep distrust towards representative institutions and of an anti-establishment sentiment. This is mirrored in the choice to sign a "government contract" when forming the "government of change", showing a deep misunderstanding of the system of political mediation. At the same time, their identities are profoundly different, as became clear in the last phases of the government experience.

Faced with such a growing delegitimisation of the political system the Partito Democratico, initially together with the Popolo della Libertà/Forza Italia, tried to carry out an agenda of institutional reforms in order to reconnect citizens and institutions. In doing this, the Partito Democratico tried to counter the anti-political sentiment by improving the effectiveness of institutions but, at the same time, it sometimes absorbed some of the elements of the prevailing anti-political culture. Particularly significant is the debate on the abolition of reimbursement for electoral spending and the tones of the discussion on institutional reform which led to the 2016 constitutional referendum. Especially under the leadership of Renzi, the party was particularly keen to use anti-political patterns, such as the cleavage between 'new' and 'old', 'yes' or 'no'. The position of the Popolo della Libertà/Forza Italia was ambiguous. While on the one hand Berlusconi expressed the will to be part of a common design for a new shared framework of rule, he also partly belongs to the anti-political culture.

Looking at the entire 2013-2019 time frame considered in this study, an institutional and party system can be seen with few or no defenders, where the anti-political push is sometimes hardly con-

tained, sometimes accompanied, and sometimes even actively promoted by political forces. The outcome of this process was the creation of a government formed by the alliance of two forces which do not believe in the "democracy of the parties" and which made their fortune through disintermediation and distrust towards institutions.

In the time frame considered, the debate on the crisis of the political system appears to be partly influenced by the agenda-setting of the anti-political forces. Some elements are missing: a global idea on how to regenerate and better rule the party system; and a serious debate on the funding of politics, on the training of the ruling class mechanism, on think tanks and the structure necessary to produce a political culture, and on the lack of support for democratic institutions and culture in the country.

Boundaries of Citizenship

Eleonora Desiata

For the last few years, the discussion on migration has been a visible and crucial theme of the European debate, one that has significantly shaped the opposition as regards the political programmes of the different political forces.

In Italy, an aggressive anti-migrant rhetoric has consistently been a hallmark of the Lega's discourse, allowing the party to exploit this issue to overcome its regional focus and rapidly become a national (and nationalist) force. Despite the vague 'Third-Worldist' orientation of some of its internal segments,[1] the official position of the Movimento 5 Stelle has also generally been critical, especially concerning the European management of the migration crisis, and the work of NGOs engaged in search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

By contrast, the policies carried out by the governments led by the Partito Democratico, and the narratives these governments have employed, have varied over time. A shift in party positions appears to have occurred under the leadership of Matteo Renzi – for example, around the action of Interior Minister Marco Minniti (PD) and the controversial deals struck with Libya in 2017[2] on the subject of immigration.

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1   As shown in Alessandro Di Battista's retrieved posts, further detailed in the following sections.

2   Drawing upon a previous friendship treaty between Italy and Libya signed in 2008, in 2017 Minniti promotes an agreement on the management of immigration and borders between the Gentiloni cabinet and the national unity Tripoli government of Fayez al Serraj. The deal entails the provision to Libya of funding for infrastructure, as well as training services and technical assistance to law enforcement. The arrangement is highly contested by both Italian and Libyan lawyers, especially concerning the violation of human rights. Italy, it is argued, is simply delegating to Libya, and for significant compensation, the illegitimate *refoulement* of migrants. Meanwhile, NGOs and international organisations denounce the inhuman conditions of Libyan detention centres and the violent conduct of the Libyan coast guard. International media, including Associated Press and The New York Times, also denounce and investigate alleged deals with Libyan militia and human traffickers, which the Italian government officially denies.

The discourse on migration can nevertheless be better understood as part of a wider issue – the populist framing of citizenship and rights. The hostile rhetoric deployed against migrants is not only based on a scapegoat strategy, but also on strong material incentives. The underlying but clear idea, expressed in more or less manifest ways by different political forces, is that welfare provisions for Italian citizens are insufficient, and (or perhaps precisely because) too many moral and material resources are being devoted to migrants. Citizenship boundaries are therefore framed as increasingly exclusive and rigid within the populist discourse, which in this respect is articulated according to nationalist discursive categories.

The progressive field, in the meantime, struggles to counter such a powerful and resonating narrative with a convincing alternative.

1. Theoretical Framework

In order to make sense of the populist discourse on migration and citizenship, we must take a step back and first consider the weight of the socio-political elements of cleavage, which shape the configuration of a 'bounded community' of citizens.

Drawing from our empirical analysis, two dimensions seem especially relevant in this respect in the discourse of the two main populist parties:

- an *external* dimension, pitting those who belong in the national community against everyone who is not a member (migrants, foreign political and economic powers, supranational institutions);

- an *internal* dimension, within the national community, characterised by the interaction of multiple divides (socio-economic milieu, North and South, older and younger generations, people and elite).

Brubaker's[3] work appears particularly significant here, as the different forms of Italian populist discourse combine the external and internal dimensions with horizontal and vertical oppositions, in a clearly multi-dimensional configuration of identity-building. In the discourse of both the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle "the people", for instance, are "sovereign" with regard to both non-citizens and some categories of citizens. This discourse bridges the internal and external dimensions of populism and nationalism, building an appeal to material welfare and economic incentives, based on an either/or logic – either citizens or non-citizens, either the common people or the elite. At this intersection, the community that populists claim to represent is the subset of native common people.

Discourse therefore articulates across the constant intersection of two rails. Conceptual ambiguity is fully embraced, strategically deployed according to the contingent circumstances and integrated into a variety of tropes – from a foreign elite trying to exert power over Italian citizens, to a cultural elite of citizens advocating the welcoming of migrants to the detriment of the social rights of the "people" of citizens. "The people" are in fact not simply common or oppressed people, they are always intended as common *citizens*. As argued by Brubaker, this two-dimensional discursive space – both a space of inequality (economic, political and cultural) and of difference (culture, values, ways of life) – allows for the construction of a political identity through multiple lines of conflict.

For the sake of this analysis, we proceed by selecting a list of sub-topics to orient our research of discursive units and cluster relevant keywords. This selection develops along the four main lines of cleavage that, for the parties in question, have the potential to shape the construction of citizen identity and thus the

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3   Brubaker R. (2019), "Populism and nationalism", in *Nations and Nationalism*, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12522.

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populist discourse. This chapter is therefore divided into the following thematic sections: 1. *Migrants & Security*, 2. *Culture and Rights*, 3. *Southern Italy*, 4. *The Role of the State*.

2. Migrants & Security

2.1. *Migration*

The discursive construction of the debate on irregular migrants landing on Italian shores develops along the horizontal cleavage that separates foreigners from natives. Intersecting with the relationship between the status of citizen and individual rights, this cleavage can assume different nuances and intensities, and shape more or less exclusive boundaries of parties' "imagined community".

Despite the overall vagueness maintained on such a consensus-sensitive topic, the **Movimento 5 Stelle**'s position on the subject has mostly revolved around the condemnation of what the party has come to define as a system based on profit and human trafficking, a "scandalous clandestine immigration business".

This lens, not quite as widely used by other parties in the early 2010s, has not only allowed the M5S to carve itself a distinctive discursive niche – distant from the pressures of an ideological positioning that would have been unthinkable for such a transversal political force – but also to intensify its critique of the political system and of mainstream politics, which are allegedly benefitting from a heinous human trafficking business. Even when, on its Facebook page in 2015, the M5S attempts to debunk the fake news that every migrant would be provided with €35 a day for their personal expenses while on Italian soil (thus countering the widespread anti-migrant arguments of the right), it does so to shift the controversy away from migrants themselves (which would require the expression of a specific position on the matter) onto cooperatives and accommodation facilities, allegedly benefitting

from the "business" (which, by contrast, can be straightforwardly condemned by the M5S).

This narrative is so rooted in party discourse that, during the campaign leading up to the 2018 general elections, the Movimento 5 Stelle even accounts for its engagement against the "migration business" as one of the reasons to cast a vote for the M5S.

> In the last five years the Movimento 5 Stelle has worked to dismantle the business that parties and some rotten cooperatives had created on the skin of migrants. We have uncovered many frauds and denounced a number of deals contracted off the books.[4]

> Movimento 5 Stelle, 18/01/2018

Yet, the question of the party's actual stance on immigration gained particular momentum in 2017, when M5S leader Luigi Di Maio described the NGOs engaging in rescue missions in the Mediterranean as "sea taxis".

Although between 2013 and 2017 the M5S had generally remained careful and avoided expressing a clear-cut stance on the issue, the analysis of the party's discursive units show a progressive shift towards more closing positions, exemplified by the "zero arrivals objective" slogan employed since 2017.

> The #ImmigrationProgramme of the Movimento 5 Stelle: objective zero arrivals.[5]

> Movimento 5 Stelle, 19/07/2017

> Italy is not the refugee camp of Europe. Our country has become a trap for all migrants seeking to reach their relatives across Europe: they land in Italy and here they stay. Parties are no longer credible and the European response penalises us: egoism, lack of solidarity, and the relocation mechanism is stuck. [...] The management of

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4   Movimento 5 Stelle (19/01/2018) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10155764316060813/.

5   Movimento 5 Stelle (19/07/2017) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10155254717885813/.

arrivals, the reception, responsibilities and duties must be equally shared among all Member States according to objective and quantifiable parameters, such as population, GDP and unemployment rate.[6]

<div align="right">Movimento 5 Stelle, 21/07/2017</div>

We see here how welfare is integrated into the criterion of the capacity to welcome incoming migrants. In other words, unemployment and GDP reflect the country's potential to help non-citizens – thus, a country such as Italy, facing serious socio-economic hardship, should be less burdened than others.

While cautious on the phenomenon itself, the M5S appears very straightforward in condemning Matteo Renzi and his government's management of the migration issue.

European agency Frontex has confirmed it: the Triton mission wanted by Renzi and the PD provides that all migrants crossing the Mediterranean be taken to Italy. More welcoming of migrants in return for more flexibility on our public finances. In short, we have been sold for 80 euros,[7] and made into Europe's harbour.[8]

<div align="right">Movimento 5 Stelle, 19/07/2017</div>

The new executive's objectives on the subject of migrants are laid out in the "government contract" signed by Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio at the time of the birth of the M5S-Lega government in 2018: easier repatriations, quicker procedures for the recognition or rejection of refugee status, mandatory relocations, more transparency in the allocation of funds for the reception of migrants, instruments of contrast to the "human traffickers' busi-

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6   Movimento 5 Stelle (21/07/2017) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10155254717885813/.

7   The "80 euros" measure is a fiscal provision introduced in 2014 by Matteo Renzi's government, consisting of an €80 monthly bonus in the paycheck of given categories of workers. Here, the M5S is implying that, in order to fund this measure, Renzi's government has agreed to welcome more migrants than would have been advisable, in exchange for economic flexibility from the EU.

8   Movimento 5 Stelle (19/07/2017) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10155255491100813/.

ness", the establishment of traceability measures for mosques and religious ministers, and a revision of the social subsidies system in order to prevent improper uses and guarantee sustainability with respect to Italy's economic situation.

In the summer of 2018, the M5S was faced with its first public relations crisis. On 16 August, the Italian coast guard ship *Diciotti* rescued 190 migrants at sea. The ship remained stuck off the coast near Lampedusa for five days, with only 13 passengers being authorised to disembark for health reasons. On 20 August, under the instruction of M5S Transport Minister Danilo Toninelli, the ship sailed to Catania, but the Interior Ministry, led by Matteo Salvini, did not authorise the disembarkation of the remaining 177 people and called on the other EU member states to assume their responsibility. The disembarkation finally took place during the night between 25 and 26 August. The *Diciotti* case raised much debate in the Italian media and public opinion. While the frequency of Salvini's Facebook posting increased, the Movimento 5 Stelle remained unusually quiet on the matter. Posts on other subjects were published, while the few M5S statements on the hot issue of the moment only chalked the *Diciotti* crisis up to the shortcomings of the European Union.

In the summer of 2019, an even more serious PR crisis struck the M5S. In May, German sea-rescue ship *Sea Watch 3* breached Matteo Salvini's prohibition of navigation in Italian waters, intending to allow the disembarkation of 47 migrants on the island of Lampedusa, on humanitarian grounds. On 12 June, *Sea Watch 3* picked 53 migrants up off the Libyan coast. Two days later, Matteo Salvini declared that Italian harbours were closed.[9] On 29 June, ship captain Carola Rackete decided to breach Salvini's prohibition

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9   In reality, according to Article 83 of the Navigation Code, the Infrastructure and Transports Minister is in charge of declaring the 'closing' of harbours, not the Minister of the Interior. No formal provision was enacted during the Conte I cabinet in this respect. In legal terms, Salvini's "closed harbours" claim rests on his prerogative to deny ships carrying migrants the authorisation to disembark. Its relevance is thus mostly rhetorical, as it makes for a very powerful and polarising mantra.

to dock, which resulted in her arrest and eventual release. The *Sea Watch* case attracted intense media coverage, and spurred Salvini's omnipresence on TV and social media, allowing for the extreme polarisation of public debate. While Salvini jumped at this occasion to obsessively reiterate his "closed ports" message, the Movimento 5 Stelle – embarrassed by an increasingly evident subordination to the Lega – played the legality card and constantly tried to change the subject. The law was thus identified as the main reference point for any judgment on the matter: if NGOs broke the law, they should not be praised as cultural and foreign elites do (thus "mythologising false heroes who break Italian laws")[10] but punished.

At the same time, attacks against the left and moderate forces multiplied, with constant references being made to the PD's alleged collusion with strong powers and its hypocrisy in the *Sea Watch* case.

> *The Sea Watch case has demonstrated that, when it comes to dramas and catwalks, political forces are in the front row staging their shenanigans. But when it's about undercutting strong powers, as in the matter of highway concessions to private actors, the United Party of Strong Powers comes into existence.*[11]

> Movimento 5 Stelle, 30/06/19

> *"The Sea Watch Show" has been a success. Politicians from the left and the right have taken part in it and finally found their part. Had they played in a movie about work, or social rights [...] they would have all fought over the same part: that of the slaves of the system. But "The Sea Watch Show" has provided them with a great opportunity, that of differentiating themselves. [...] That is why professional politicians will never address the causes of migration. [...] One day you are a fascist because you want to stop this heinous business, another day you are a communist because you talk about*

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10 "Il Truman Show dei migranti", *Il Blog delle Stelle,* 7/07/2019, https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2019/07/il-truman-show-dei-migranti.html.

11 Movimento 5 Stelle (30/06/2019) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/photos/a.10151086635140813/10157069215685813/?type=3&theater.

> *disarmament [...] The third you are a dangerous populist because you dare to criticise France and its neo-colonial policies.*[12]

<div align="right">Alessandro Di Battista, 2/07/19</div>

The migration issue is portrayed in a fairly distinctive way by the **Lega**: a narrative so pervasive that it sets a benchmark for the discourse of the other political forces on the same matter.

Matteo Salvini's narrative of immigration is especially pervaded by the rhetoric of invasion. The underlying theory at the root of his claims goes even further, resuming the transnational right-wing myth of ethnic substitution, as the more or less intended consequence of the presence of foreigners on Italian soil. This argument, among several others pertaining to the same topic, is often used as a delegitimising tool against political opponents.

In discursive terms, the Lega's response to the phenomenon of migration emerges from the insistent reiteration of slogans and hashtags pertaining to the idea of expelling migrants (among others) from the perimeter of the national community, both geographically and in terms of identity. It is the infamous *"A casa loro!"* ("Back to their homeland!") rhetoric.

Migrants are also described as responsible for a true "overloading" of Italian cities, neighbourhoods, and even preschool classes, crowding out the local natives.

> *Against the clandestine invasion: in Italy there is NO MORE ROOM for even one immigrant!*[13]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 17/11/2013</div>

> *"My son is 20 months old, this year he should start kindergarten but he risks being the ONLY ITALIAN CHILD in his class. With him, 5*

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12 Di Battista, A. (2/07/2019) https://www.facebook.com/dibattista.alessandro/posts/20907804210 34011.

13 Salvini, M. (17/11/2013) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/photos/a.10151670912208155/101 51803072928155.

Arabs, 4 Romanians, 3 South Americans, 3 Indians, 2 Pakistani and one Albanian. RACISM has nothing to do with it, but we are torn."[14]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 18/09/2013</div>

Preschool constitutes a typical and thus identifiable example of a space in which access directly depends on social policy. In fact, the concept of "crowding out the local natives "recurs as the discourse on migrant presence intersects with that on the costs of social provisions, specifically the cost of those provisions reserved for migrants. At its core is the essence of a real *welfare trade-off* presented to the public: this narrative claims that the state, governmental institutions, even supranational organisations, are ready and keen to devolve conspicuous monetary and material resources to (irregular) migrants, while the Italian poor, the elderly, single parents and so many other fragile native groups, struggle to make ends meet. Why are social provisions so promptly available for *them*, Salvini asks, when Italians in need lack basic welfare, and keep being told that there are not any more resources available? One of the most frequent answers that the Lega's leader provides to this question has to do with his allegations of the "business of migrants" and of the "false altruism" propaganda disseminated by the left. The reason why migrants are so warmly welcomed, he argues, is that they allow for accommodation facilities and left-wing ("red") cooperatives in charge of hosting refugees to benefit from conspicuous European funding, thus increasing their business.

Another interesting and rather pervasive feature of Salvini's rhetoric involves the question of racism. Frequently described as 'racist' against migrants and non-caucasians (also due to the many controversies on party leaders' comments on Africans), the Lega adopts a reversed discursive stance, arguing that 'racism' is instead the posture being perpetrated by the government and by the left, against Italians. "Is it racist to demand basic social and economic rights and benefits for Italian citizens, before turning to

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14   Salvini, M. (18/09/2013) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10151678184428155.

the needs of migrants?", Salvini regularly asks of his followers in his Facebook posts. Hardly so, it is nothing but good common sense, is his answer.

In fact, leading up to the 2018 general elections and to his subsequent appointment as minister of the interior, Salvini raised the spectre of a new, zero-tolerance era of security, fairness and repatriations, accompanied by slogans such as "*#zerotolerance*" and "the free ride is over". He promised the restitution of the rightful and "reasonable" order of things, an order in which – naturally – Italians come first.

Forza Italia was the author during the second Berlusconi government of the Bossi-Fini law of 2002 – alongside the then Lega Nord ("Northern League") and the former "Alleanza Nazionale" extreme-right party. This law regulated immigration in a restrictive sense, with Forza Italia claiming that "savage" immigration inevitably equals higher crime rates. Throughout the time frame considered in this study, Forza Italia's most prominent figures argued that the regulation of landings is the only viable solution to avoid riots and the outburst of ethnic conflicts, and that the European Union should do its part in ensuring the relocation of migrants to other European member states. In several discursive units of 2015, the right wing of the party – in the person of Maurizio Gasparri – firmly criticised the Renzi government for its management of the issue, accusing it of benefitting from "state-funded human trafficking". Here, too, the invasion narrative was used, once again in relation to the question of the public costs of irregular migration.

However, Forza Italia repeatedly makes the distinction between migrants fleeing war or persecution and economic migrants. Again, welfare appears to come into play in party discourse with respect to immigration. The argument is clear: Italy is not provided with the economic well-being and development that would be required in order to offer a future to anyone, other than its citizens. The country's socio-economic hardship does not allow for it.

The negligence on the part of the European Union in leaving Italy alone to face the migration crisis, combined with the inefficacy of national governments in handling the matter and with the unmanageable magnitude of the phenomenon with respect to the country's capabilities, have brought about a situation that can threaten social cohesion, as "Italians have had enough of it". In Forza Italia's discourse, much as in that of the Lega, the idea of a "sellout" of national dignity and stability in the name of pleasing foreign powers is often evoked.

The core of Forza Italia's discursive offensive on the subject of migration is concentrated in the contents produced in 2015, while 2016 discursive units portray a shift towards arguments regarding the costs of managing mass immigration.

> *Sweden expels immigrants, Italy welcomes them in hotels.*[15]

> Forza Italia, 28/01/2016

> *In 2011, the Berlusconi government spent 800 million euros for migrants. In 2016, the Renzi government has spent over 4.2 billion – that is, over 8000 euros per minute!*[16]

> Forza Italia, 20/10/2016

The issue was then less and less approached as the magnitude of the phenomenon decreased – a discursive strategy that marked an opposite direction to that deployed by the Lega over the same time frame.

The question was vigorously resumed during the 2018 general election campaign, with Forza Italia promising restrictive, rapidly executed, policies. After the formation of the Movimento 5 Stelle-Lega executive, from which Forza Italia was excluded, Forza Italia reaffirmed its critical stance against government action, denounc-

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15 Forza Italia (28/01/2016) https://www.facebook.com/ForzaItaliaUfficiale/photos/a.29879217692 9683/662711223871108.

16 Forza Italia (20/10/2016) https://www.facebook.com/ForzaItaliaUfficiale/photos/a.298792176929 683/790563127752583.

ing the "optimistic" estimates of decreased migrant landings divulged by Minister Salvini.

By contrast, the difficulty of analysing the **Partito Democratico**'s discourse with respect to the debate on migration stems from its overall lack of a comprehensive, univocal counter-hegemonic narrative in response to such clear-cut discourses on the delimitation of citizenship.

The PD started in 2013 by attacking the Lega and the centre-right, judged responsible for signing unfair and ineffective measures, and for invoking the reform of the Dublin system, while underlining the hypocrisy of the right with regards to solidarity. The Immigration Forum, an internal discussion organism of the PD, delivered a document in 2013 on the reform of asylum and immigration policies. At the root of its proposal were the notions of integration, peaceful and fruitful coexistence between natives and immigrants, and a social pact, allowing for an equal sharing of rights and duties. The "exclusively securitarian" approach of the Bossi-Fini law was firmly criticised, deemed ineffective and detrimental to the fairness and legality of access. The distinction is made here between immigration policies, which should incorporate criteria of utility for social, economic and cultural development as well as of social sustainability, and asylum policies, which should be based solely on generosity and the respect of human dignity. However specific, this document, produced by a minor party organism and in practice destined almost exclusively to internal debate, did not generate much echo in the media and was quickly dismissed as the party's benchmark position on the matter.

In the time that follows, the Partito Democratico's discursive strategy on the subject of migrants was threefold.

First, the element of humanity was promoted in affirming the necessity to save lives at sea (the party also adheres to commemorations for victims and makes several symbolic gestures) and

stop human traffickers. This element was promoted with decreasing intensity after 2015. It was then promoted again with the first migrant landing crises under Salvini's Ministry. This narrative goes hand in hand with the rhetoric of dialogue between cultures, integration and the revival of international cooperation, particularly with African countries. It is a narrative which remains consistently present over time in the Partito Democratico's discourse.

The second element concerns the specificity of Matteo Renzi's leadership. Already partially critical of austerity policies, as prime minister, Renzi made it a discursive (and political) priority to bring the issue of migration to the European level, denouncing the negligence of the EU in leaving the burden of migration management to Italy, and denouncing the indolence of the other member states in working to reform the Dublin Treaty. Threats were made regarding solidarity contributions within the EU in ways that the threats later deployed by the M5S-Lega government would slightly resemble – although, in the case of the PD, they were not directed at the EU institutions, but at member states failing to do their part on the reception of migrants.

> From 2020 to 2026 the European budget will be in the making: I think that, simply, we should stop giving money to those who violate the rules on migrants, to those who use that money to build walls, and that we should keep it to manage the emergency. Either they start to abide by the rules, or we stop paying, it's very simple.[17]

> Matteo Renzi, 1/07/2017

However, on multiple occasions, and as early as at the end of 2015, Renzi praised his party's success in compelling the Union to finally take direct action on this matter.

The third element of the PD's discursive strategy is one of relative subordination. Following the vehement and constant campaign-

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17 Partito Democratico (1/07/2017) https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/1015495 2927856896.

ing of the Lega (and of the M5S, although in different terms) on immigration, portraying a situation out of control and a constantly deteriorating emergency, the Partito Democratico responded by claiming its own efficiency in reducing the number of landings. Several posts were thus published on its Facebook page, including cards showing data on the decrease in incoming migrants.

Meanwhile, declarations from Renzi himself raised significant controversy, especially when the PD's leader appropriated a traditional right-wing slogan, used among others by the Lega itself:

> *We do not have the moral duty to welcome them [...] but [...] to truly help them at their home.*[18]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 7/07/2017</div>

In this respect, Renzi's discourse on the potential repercussions of the reception of all migrants in need mimics the populist narrative rather faithfully:

> *It would be an ethical, political, social and in the end economic disaster.*[19]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 7/07/2017</div>

During Marco Minniti's mandate as minister of interior, between 2016 and 2018, the PD incorporated a number of more clear-cut stances in its discourse. Landings needed to be reduced by limiting departures from Libya, the party argued, and the European Union had to do its part and relieve Italy – at least partially – of such a heavy burden. The Minniti-Orlando decree, promulgated in February 2017, saw the light with the need to "simplify and accelerate administrative procedures for the recognition of international protection", "optimise identification procedures of irregular migrants", "ensure the enforcement of expulsion, rejection and dismissal provisions", "address with stronger measures illegal

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18   Partito Democratico (7/07/2017), *post published and subsequently erased following controversies.*

19   Partito Democratico (7/07/2017), *post published and subsequently erased following controversies.*

migration and human trafficking".[20] This approach was generally shared by the rest of the party, probably with the only exception of two PD parliamentarians who voted against the bill.[21]

A significant shift in party discourse then occurred during Matteo Salvini's mandate as interior minister. Salvini and the M5S-Lega government were accused of instigating a climate of hatred, making the mistake of portraying NGOs as enemies, and being the actors of a foolish politics on migration. It is interesting to notice how, in a post of 2018 on the Partito Democratico's Facebook page, the trope of Italy being left alone by the EU to face the emergency is called into question by the same PD that had so often evoked it up until that point:

> #migrants: Has Italy actually been left alone? Is it truly the only country in Europe to have taken responsibility for this phenomenon?[22]

Partito Democratico, 13/06/2018

The party kept taking credit for the results achieved by Marco Minniti's Ministry in reducing the number of landings and establishing a dialogue with the countries of departure of migrant ships. This discursive approach indeed reveals how the terrain of political opposition had now become the degree of efficacy of each adversary in reducing the number of arrivals.

Leading up to the European elections of 2019, the PD, led then by Nicola Zingaretti, affirmed that those who arrive "can be an opportunity and an enrichment for Italy", which is why the subject of immigration should be addressed with intelligence and balance.

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20 Partito Democratico (29/03/2017) "Immigrazione: La scheda d'approfondimento", available at: http://www.senatoripd.it/materiali/dossier/il-dl-c-d-decreto-minniti-immigrazione/.

21 Partito Democratico (27/03/2017) "Manconi e Tocci: Perché non votiamo la fiducia al DL Minniti-Orlando", available at: http://www.senatoripd.it/stampa/comunicati-stampa/manconi-tocci-perche-non-votiamo-la-fiducia-al-dl-minniti-orlando/.

22 Partito Democratico (13/06/2018) https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/101559 74378301896.

From the above, it should therefore be noted that no univocal discourse is retraceable for the PD on migration, and the complexity of the analysis increases as we include additional textual units from different prominent party figures. After the formation of the M5S-Lega government, strands of the party began to openly contest Minniti's management of Italy's agreements with Libya on the subject of migrants. To put this differently, the absence of a clear shared party position on the topic at the programme level automatically translated into diverging discursive elements. The absence of a consistent counter-narrative on the progressive side of the political spectrum, combined with the simplicity and pervasiveness of the populist-nationalist message, help to explain how the public debate on the issue of migrants has been able to deteriorate as much as it has.

2.2. *"Italians first"*

A trademark of the **Lega**'s political platform, a key slogan of the small national-conservative party Fratelli d'Italia, and even a symbol formally registered by controversial extreme-right political movement CasaPound, "*Prima gli Italiani*" ("Italians first") is definitely not the invention of Matteo Salvini, but it is with its adoption by the Lega that the message moved to the core of Italy's political debate.

Throughout 2013, one of the slogans employed by Salvini was "our people first", an evolution of the traditional "North first" mantra of the Lega. The "people" were now defined in opposition not to Southerners, but to the Roma and irregular immigrants. Maybe, Salvini argued, it is "less chic and less politically correct" to care for "Italian refugees" than it is to care for migrants. However, "others" should only be helped when all Italians have been helped, and only if there are "room and money left to spare" at that point.

The discursive units from 2014 also show the marked presence of an "Italian first" narrative applied to goods, especially in the agri-

food sector, and specifically concerning the need to defend "made in Italy" production – both internally (against the foreign competition of cheap goods) and externally (in worldwide markets). At the same time, the narrative intensified in its articulation within the migration discourse: countless cases of *welfare trade-off* were being brought to followers' attention at a pace that would characterise the rest of Salvini's communication until 2019. Meanwhile, 2015 was the year when "racism against Italians" started being evoked regularly. A pervasive, predictable, discursive pattern was created: similar news cases were presented on almost a daily basis, controversies were sparked where clear-cut boundaries were identified between individuals who should benefit from certain rights and welfare provisions and those who should not, and the same conclusions kept being drawn over and over again ("saying that Italians should be taken care of first is not racism, it is just good common sense"). The foundations for a deep-rooted, almost automatic, cognitive response to social issues on the part of the electorate were thus laid.

> *Anna from Milan, unemployed mum under eviction. For clandestines everything, for her and her children little or nothing. It's time to stop this crap. TO DEMAND help for our people is a RIGHT, to deny it is RACISM!*[23]

Matteo Salvini, 13/10/2015

One key expression of these messages went on to become a widely used hashtag ("#primagliitaliani") and an official Lega slogan for both the 2018 general election campaign and that of the 2019 European election.

The "Italians first" narrative is significantly present in the **M5S** rhetoric as well, although in a less vocal manner. It is, however, mostly associated with welfare provisions and not usually used in a perspective of opposition towards migrants. Rather, it is used against the category of "strong powers", be they foreign or local.

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23   Salvini, M. (13/10/2015) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10153320075673155.

The underlying idea emerges that Italian citizens, and specifically Italian citizens in need, must constitute the first target of political and governmental action. This discourse is especially employed in opposition to banks, lobbies, large corporations and all other actors perceived as being privileged by mainstream and institutional politics, to the detriment of the everyman.

Nonetheless, welfare, or rather welfare shortages, are indeed presented by the M5S as a strong argument against welcoming migrants to Italy.

> How many clandestines are we able to welcome if one Italian in eight doesn't have the money to eat?[24]

Beppe Grillo, 10/10/2013

The case is regularly made that Italian citizens experience the hardship of a welfare state significantly inferior to European standards.

> It is time to extend a hand to those who have been left behind, as they do all over Europe.[25]

Movimento 5 Stelle, 5/07/2016

In this respect, the M5S discourse interestingly resonates with that of the Lega: until all Italians are provided with adequate social provisions, it would be both unfeasible and unreasonable to try and help thousands of migrants who have just arrived – irregularly – on Italian soil. The right to welfare belongs first and foremost to citizens.

In addition, much in the "sovereignist" and nationalist spirit, the "Italy first" narrative also applies to goods. Italian production, and particularly the agri-food industry, is deemed worthy of continuous, at times fairly protectionist, defence. This stance is especially evident in the M5S discourse – firm opposition to regulations and

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24 Il Blog di Beppe Grillo (10/10/2013) http://www.beppegrillo.it/reato-di-clandestinita/.

25 Movimento 5 Stelle (5/07/2016) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/101 54077276935813.

policies allowing for easy access of cheap, low-quality, foreign goods to the Italian market, which threaten to outcompete local products.

In **Forza Italia**'s discourse, the notion that the defence of borders constitutes a means of defending Italian citizens emerges frequently, and this notion intensifies throughout 2015. Although the "Italians first" narrative is nowhere near as present as in the Lega's discourse, it was incorporated in party discourse – especially on migration – around this same period. Luxury hotels and benefits, it is argued, cannot be granted to irregular migrants, when economic hardship forces Italians to give up their holidays and deprives them of basic rights.

> Of course, Italy has to contribute, but it is unthinkable to send migrants to 4 or 5-star hotels with all sorts of benefits (wifi, tv) without thinking of all the Italians who can't make ends meet and this year have to give up all kinds of holiday.[26]

Forza Italia, 14/05/2015

In 2016, words of praise were used for a mayor who established a priority clause benefitting long-term residents for public housing applications. This narrative was then resumed in 2019, in a critique against the Movimento 5 Stelle-Lega government. The inconsistency of the Lega's "Italians first" slogan was explicitly denounced: it was claimed that, in spite of the government's proclamations, the recently established basic income (literally *reddito di cittadinanza*, "citizen income"), funded with taxpayers' money, would go to immigrants, rather than to Italians in need.

During the first few weeks of the new M5S-Lega executive in 2018, the *welfare trade-off* frame also appeared in the **PD**'s discourse, with very different contents. Although the mechanism worked in a similar way, the line of conflict was here traced not on the basis of

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26   Forza Italia (14/05/2015) https://www.facebook.com/ForzaItaliaUfficiale/photos/a.2987921769 29683/568575366618028.

ethnicity or citizenship – and not therefore along the inside-outside dimension – but within the nation, between people in need and a government that through its policies was making inequality increase.

> *[...] You claim you don't have money for the victims of the earthquake, but you want to allocate 50 billion for the 'flat tax', the shameful tax that takes from the poor to give to the rich. Congratulations, a great change.*[27]

Partito Democratico, 29/06/2018

2.3. *Security*

The **Lega**'s narrative on integration entails persistent references to the climate of insecurity, micro-criminality and violence that the presence of migrants allegedly spawns in Italian local communities. This phenomenon is evoked by Matteo Salvini throughout the time frame analysed and is among the most recurrent themes in his discourse. A crude, violent imagery is built, based on single news stories involving foreign nationals, portrayed as endangering the Italian culture and way of life, the security of citizens and especially the security of fragile social categories unable to defend themselves. The image is also built of foreign nationals endangering the safety of law enforcement workers – the latter being constantly mentioned and praised as heroes fighting to defend the nation despite the constant neglect from governments and mainstream politics.

The image that arises from the combination of such elements is that of towns, cities and an entire country spinning out of control, rapidly falling into the hands of migrants subjugated by their urban guerrillas, while no one – and especially not the government – cares for the safety of "normal", "respectable", law-abiding citizens.

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27   Partito Democratico (29/06/2018) https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/10156011231846896/.

The city is completely IN THE HANDS OF IMMIGRANTS almost always DRUNK.[28]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 24/08/2013</div>

Immigrants who KILL each other with MACHETES in the middle of the street. Africa? No, Bergamo. And an Italian DOCTOR, who had stopped to rescue the wounded, dies, run over by those beasts. Is this INTEGRATION too?[29]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 9/09/2013</div>

Watch and SHARE the history of Angelo, who lives as a prisoner in his own house among refugees who make a mess, walk around naked and spit on the stairs... [30]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 4/09/2015</div>

The terms and expressions employed by Salvini suggest a characterisation of migrants as dirty, almost grotesque, despicable individuals, cherished and unsanctioned by the state, to the clear detriment of the rights and well-being of natives. From 2013 until the beginning of 2018, these ideas of impunity and of collusion on the part of the state allowed the Lega to direct a vehement critique towards the Italian state and to feed into its anti-system rhetoric.

Indeed, this discourse acquired different nuances during the time leading up to Salvini's appointment as minister of the interior and shifted with the formalisation of his role in the first Conte government in 2018, where the predominant narrative became that of radical change, of a turning point in the management of the country's security issues, embodied by the strong hand of Salvini himself.

I am working on a "Security Decree" that will allow, among other things, the asylum requests to be stopped for those who commit a

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28 Salvini, M. (24/08/2013) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10151633668743155.

29 Salvini, M. (9/09/2013) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10151662156678155.

30 Salvini, M. (4/09/2015) https://www.facebook.com/matteo.salvini1/videos/10206373270624207/.

felony, because incredibly enough – except for exceptional cases – the law now allows foreign criminals to keep asking for and receiving "protection" at the expense of Italians. The free ride is over![31]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 25/07/2018</div>

For the **Movimento 5 Stelle**, security constitutes a relevant political topic, but it is articulated through very different lenses. The central arguments of the M5S discourse on this subject appear to be about making infrastructure and buildings safe, protection from natural calamities such as floods and earthquakes, the need for secure working places and the right to a healthy living environment. These have been part of the party's programme since its early days and are amongst the core topics that have remained of the essence in its political proposal throughout the years. Indeed, such arguments go hand in hand with the professed M5S assumption that governments, be they left-wing or right-wing, always tend to foster the interests of the "system" as they prosper on corruption – which is why they allegedly allow large corporations to pollute, to profit from unsafe work, to speculate on economic hardship and to gamble with people's health.

In accordance with the critical role played by the notion of legality in the M5S narrative, security with respect to criminal activity is articulated through frequent attestations of support and solidarity towards law enforcement, portrayed as undervalued by governments and as forced to make unfair cuts in spending and personnel.

In **Forza Italia**'s discourse, the security theme is mainly (if not exclusively) articulated in reference to the question of immigration. Security is linked to three main discursive lines: i) health risks, related to illnesses potentially spread by incoming migrants from underdeveloped countries, ii) street crime, spurred by arrival rates that exceed the country's welcoming and integration capacity, and

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31   Salvini, M. (25/07/2018) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10155941404158155.

iii) terrorism, since, it is argued, many terrorists enter Europe as irregular migrants.

The subject of security is raised especially as a means of underlining the inability of incumbent governments, discursively juxtaposed with the reliable and trustworthy former governments led by Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of Forza Italia. With no strong, effective, governmental action, the burden falls on local administrations and municipalities, as well as on law enforcement, which is deemed understaffed and unregarded by national institutions despite its fundamental, high-risk, work.

Alongside the trope of lighter taxation, the topic of security is deployed as one of the pillars of the right, in a Forza Italia narrative sense. The successes of the Berlusconi governments on the matter are frequently referred to as a term of comparison – specifically with respect to the dialogue with the governments of migrants' countries of origin and transit such as Libya, aimed at preventing irregular migrant landings.

The left, on the other hand, is accused of maintaining a lax stance on security, of having opened national borders to uncontrolled migrant arrivals, and of generating increasing confusion in the migrant identification process, making it much easier for terrorists to blend in and much harder to distinguish rightful asylum seekers.

On the subject of security, the **PD** somehow follows the lead of its populist adversaries who had been raising the question for some time – though with attempts at incorporating the topic in a left-wing perspective.

Long an exclusive prerogative of right-wing parties, the importance of securitarian stances grew in the political discourse between 2013 and 2018 to become one of the most relevant subjects of the electoral debate. It is interesting to note that this occurred despite decreasing crime rates, but in a context of intense media coverage

of crime and insecurity, specifically in relation to the presence of migrants on Italian soil and cases of micro-criminality and violence.

The PD's response in this respect was twofold. On both levels, it had the notion of integration at its root.

First, with Renzi's "for €1 invested in culture, €1 invested in security" slogan: the powerful underlying notion here is that cultural development and integration, and 'classic' security can go hand in hand, and are both equally relevant to the achievement of social peace.

Second, with Interior Minister Marco Minniti's policies and a narrative revolving around the idea that security is a right, of which citizens – and especially the economically and socially fragile – are often deprived. Minniti[32] argues that there is no direct correlation between terrorism and immigration, but that terrorism flourishes where integration is missing. For this reason, he calls for the strengthening of a model of widespread reception for migrants, both among Italian local communities and through increased European solidarity.

2.4. *Citizenship*

In 2017, the Partito Democratico-led government proposed a bill aimed at reforming the process of acquiring citizenship. This was still regulated by Law 91 that was promulgated in 1992 and that establishes the *ius sanguinis* criterion – that is, citizenship being transferred by blood ties. The aim of the bill was to introduce two new ways of acquiring citizenship: the *ius soli temperato* – by which children born on Italian soil from non-EU citizens would automatically become Italian citizens at birth, provided that at least one parent is a long-term EU resident and has lived in Italy for a minimum of five years; and the *ius culturae* – by which citizenship would be

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32   Marco Minniti is not on social media, hence for the sake of this research his declarations are only retrieved from newspaper interviews, press releases and video sources.

granted to children of foreign descent, born either on national soil or abroad, having completed at least one school cycle in Italy.

The proposal provoked a lengthy and controversial debate across the political landscape. While the bill received the support of the left, the right opposed it.

Although integration is indeed a right and positive goal, **Forza Italia** argues, "simplistic automatisms" risk disqualifying the very meaning and value of citizenship. In order to defend Italian identity, it is claimed, the acquisition of citizenship should not be "easy", but should to be conditional on the full and verified acceptance of the democratic principles embedded in the Constitution – as only this can make civil coexistence possible and prevent social unrest. Although the "*ius soli*" bill does not concern short-term residents, most of the discursive units analysed on this matter show references to migration, and its increasing proportions, used as an argument to substantiate the opposition to inclusive policies on citizenship.

Unsurprisingly, the **Lega**'s stance appeared extremely critical of the bill. Although foreigners who are integrated and "work honestly" in Italy were claimed to be appreciated and respected, citizenship is a different matter – it cannot be delivered as a "present", as it is "no amusement park ticket".

The right to citizenship is often characterised in Salvini's discourse as part of the distorted priority system of leftist governments, which allegedly attempt to replace traditional values, but neglect much more pressing social issues.

> *Instead of worrying about gay adoptions and easy citizenship for the children of immigrants, Renzi should think about REFUNDING tens of thousands of SCAMMED Italians!*[33]

Matteo Salvini, 18/01/2016

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33   Salvini, M. (18/01/2016) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10153499336238155.

> *SHAMEFUL!!! With 3 million Italians in poverty and 3 million unem-*
> *ployed, the PD worries about GIFTING citizenship to immigrants!*
> *The LEGA is the only hope! #noiussoli #citizenshipisnotagift*[34]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 15/06/2017</div>

The Lega's 2018 electoral programme therefore included the pro-
posal for more stringent criteria to which naturalisation should be
subject, including an Italian language test and an exam on Italian tra-
dition and culture, as well as the possibility – as an instrument aimed
at "ensuring public security" – to withdraw such citizenship from
individuals "responsible for terrorist acts or apologia of terrorism".

Indeed, citizenship is portrayed not as a right *per se*, but rather as
something that needs to be earned and deserved.

> *I don't wish anyone what this Syrian girl has had to go through. She*
> *definitely deserves citizenship more than many who were born in Italy,*
> *especially some politicians who would like to gift it as a free ticket.*[35]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 20/06/2017</div>

In 2019, a controversy arose between the Movimento 5 Stelle
and the Lega, government allies at the time, on whether citizen-
ship should be granted to Ramy Shehata, a 14-year-old boy, born
in Italy from Egyptian parents, and who thwarted an attack that
would have killed his classmates.

With the Movimento 5 Stelle having adopted a clear position on
the subject,

> *It is time to grant citizenship for civil merits to young Ramy, who,*
> *with his call, managed to warn law enforcement and allow for all of*
> *the kids to be rescued [...]*[36]

<div align="right">Movimento 5 Stelle, 22/03/2019</div>

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34   Salvini, M. (15/06/2017) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10154866703958155.

35   Salvini, M. (20/06/2017) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10154878241923155.

36   Movimento 5 Stelle (22/03/2019) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/326844154634231/.

Matteo Salvini also ended up expressing a favourable opinion on this specific case as well, despite initial hesitation.

In general, the **Movimento 5 Stelle** did not express an explicit position on the subject of acquiring citizenship, until faced with the *ius soli* bill. In explaining its abstention vote on the party's blog, the M5S reiterated its critique of the system of mainstream politics and argued that, given the European implications of granting Italian citizenship, such a significant change in regulation should be preceded by a discussion with other EU member states.

As mentioned, the trope of integration is a very dominant part of the **PD**'s discourse, and thus is present throughout the entire time frame analysed by this study. Already at the core of the 2013 document by the Immigration Forum, it became particularly relevant in the recurring debate over citizenship regulation and specifically the *ius soli*.

With regard to the 2017 *ius soli* bill on the citizenship of second-generation immigrants, Secretary Matteo Renzi wrote:

> *#IusSoli: let us clarify a bill of civility. If a child is born in Italy, studies in Italy, grows up with Italian values, that child has the right to be an Italian citizen.*[37]

> Matteo Renzi, 17/06/2017

3. Culture & Rights

The configuration of identity built by populist discourses is, as mentioned, multi-dimensional. Geographic and ethnic boundaries can be articulated along the external-internal continuum, as lines of division between insiders and outsiders of a national community, but identity-building also occurs along a second dimension – that of the many divides that exist within a country. It thus

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37   Renzi, M. (17/06/2017) https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/10154893514846896.

CHANGING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2008 CRISIS

becomes crucial to explore the elements that, within the same national community, bind certain groups of individuals together and exclude others. In other words, we need to try and understand who, among Italian citizens, is included in the "bounded community" that populist discourse wishes to represent, and on what grounds that line is drawn.

Culture, intended as the combination of shared values and ways of life, is a key element in this respect. Closely linked to culture is then the question of *rights* – the way in which entitlement to rights is identified, the extent of such rights, and the cultural pillars on which these determinations are made, need to be addressed in order to understand how populist discourse defines boundaries of citizenship.

The initial aspect concerns the "common man" narrative.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, mainstream politics is portrayed by the **M5S** discourse as a privileged, corrupt world, far removed from the real struggles of common people. This trope, in many ways similar to that found in the Lega's discourse, is often directed towards the left, and in opposition to the many socio-economic emergencies the country is facing – to which "professional politicians" appear to pay little or no attention.

An interesting cleavage that emerges clearly from the analysis of the M5S discursive units, but that also largely applies to the Lega, concerns the aspect of education, competence and expertise – in this case on a vertical axis. A strong conflict is claimed to exist between the common citizen represented by the party and "big professors and technocrats" who are deemed part of a larger corrupt system of disinformation and manipulation, built to deceive common citizens. However, it should be noted that non-mainstream experts are often exempt from the contempt normally directed towards the cultural elite, and are quoted, interviewed, and employed as tokens of legitimacy in order to corroborate theories supported by the party.

Interestingly enough, a hint of a similar narrative is found in Matteo Renzi's discourse of 2017, as a critique to the radical left concerning his government:

> *What is Left? Holding conferences on 'esodati' or establishing early retirements [...]? Holding conferences on work and whining about globalisation or obtaining 854,000 jobs thanks to the Jobs Act? Who is fighting against precarious work? Those who make erudite analyses or those who concretely allow the increase of stable contracts? Who is defending the weak? Those who allocate 2 billion on peripheries [...] or those who lock themselves up in the salons of their certainties to express a political reasoning that no one follows any more?*[38]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 27/06/2017</div>

Indeed, the **Lega**'s discourse, too, sees a clear vertical conflict between the "common man" and the elite. However, the latter does not equal the political class or a privileged older generation as such. Rather, it is embodied by "radical chic" intellectuals, left-wing educated individuals — be they elected politicians, prominent public figures or simple activists — whose unjust, undeserved privilege is frequently evoked. These elite are exposed as arrogant "big talkers", hypocrite "do-gooders" (*buonisti*), far removed from the problems of common people, occupied with matters of little to no relevance (such as the feminisation of language and political correctness) and more concerned about the well-being of "clandestine migrants" and the rights of unintegrated foreigners than about the serious struggles of their fellow Italians. Although the strictly ideological conflict line remains — derogatory language is still employed against left-wing politicians and activists — the most frequent criticisms levelled by the Lega against its political opponents span the whole spectrum of cultural milieux.

However, the vertical cultural cleavage intersects profoundly with the horizontal dimension of identity-building. The Italian citizen is repeatedly portrayed by the Lega and its leader Matteo Salvini

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38   Renzi, M. (27/06/2017) https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/10154934049291896.

as "decent" (*perbene*), unpretentious, at times unlucky, vexed by political institutions and the media, embedded in a framework of precise traditions and cultural and religious values that need to be defended from both outsider and insider threats. At the same time, the citizens and the country are "sovereign" with respect to the decision-making power of which, the Lega deems, they have been deprived by powers and institutions both within and outside the polity – from Italian political institutions "that would not let citizens vote", and that were very popular during times of institutional crises, to the decision-making prerogatives of the European Union. As mentioned in earlier sections, nationalism does not only permeate the people-elite dichotomy, but is also deployed horizontally in the economic and cultural debate, through frequent references to typical Italian products under threat from foreign ones.

The textual analysis of Salvini's discursive units also provides other interesting findings. Salvini's rhetoric is constantly permeated by the trope of common sense – an ambiguous notion that allows the justification of both the party's conservative positions on, for example, religious symbols and traditions, and the "Italians first" slogan. The spirit of "common sense" and "common people" is then matched by a carefully considered mix of colloquial language, simple and constantly reiterated messages, the reproduction of the same syntactic structures, occasional swear words, and numerous references – either visual or written – to unfancy, ordinary, activities or attitudes and to mainstream consumer products. Alongside the archetype of the charismatic leader and of the strong defender of the nation – widely acknowledged by commentators – Matteo Salvini's persona also embodies a more interesting "underdog" character to which it is very easy to relate. It is precisely the combination between this "loser" element and the idea of a "strong, manly leader" that makes Salvini's persona so effective towards the electorate. This common Italian citizen vexed with the system, and personified by the prototypic example of Salvini, who is both underdog and hero, contains an extraordinary promise of strength and redemption. Popular support, and

the demands of these common citizens, are adopted in this narrative as the one and only legitimating force – and motive – behind the party's political positions and actions.

These are the members of the bounded community that the Lega wishes to represent, entitled to the social rights that pertain to citizens.

Tradition, religion and party stances on ethical issues are also pivotal features in this study.

The **Movimento 5 Stelle** appears overall fairly open and progressive-leaning on demands for furthering rights on ethical subjects (such as advance healthcare directives) on which the M5S supported a law promulgated in 2017, along with the Partito Democratico and the radical left. The lenses of religious values and tradition are not used as a pillar of citizen identity.

However, there is also ambiguity in the party's positions on such matters. Ethical issues do not feature at all in the M5S national electoral programmes of 2013 or 2018. When, after years of discussion, in 2017 the Parliament voted on a law on same-sex civil partnerships, the M5S abstained, after a controversial consultation of its base on its online platform ("Rousseau") in which the majority of M5S activists appeared to be in favour of civil unions.

The "government contract" signed in 2018 with the Lega, the document detailing the political objectives of the soon-to-be "yellow-green" executive, and which includes a section on family law and one on family and childbirth policies, does not contain any hint of ethical matters. Although some commentators have attributed this to the impossibility of finding any middle ground between the more progressive stances of the M5S and the conservative positions held by the Lega, this could also have been due to a purposeful intention of the M5S to keep avoiding a clear-cut positioning on sensitive matters.

The discourse of the **Lega**, by contrast, is very explicit and sets a rather different tone on such issues. The boundaries of citizen identity that the Lega aims at defining are highly influenced by the defence of tradition and religious values. Throughout the time frame considered in this study, references are constantly made in Facebook page posts to religious symbols and practices, and to the legitimacy of their presence in the public sphere, from Nativity scenes and crucifixes in schools, to rosaries and prayers at political rallies. Furthermore, traditional conservative values influence the Lega's stance on ethical issues such as same-sex partnerships.

> *In their private life, everyone is free to be with whomever they wish, but children are born if there are a MUM and a DAD. And this applies to adoptions, too.*[39]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 27/11/2017</div>

The main underlying idea here is that while personal choices are not condemned per se, they must not be condoned by politics and law in ways that would normalise behaviours considered deviant. The only family that politics and law should consider, according to Salvini, is the "natural" one, composed of a mother and a father.

The religious character of the Lega's discourse is also often evoked in relation to the issue of migration. The message is conveyed that "in order to be able to welcome and integrate, we must first be proud of our roots"; "we cannot allow the annihilation and disappearance of our history and traditions".

The question of Islam is also part of in the Lega's discourse, as another element that contributes to the identification of the perimeter of the party's imagined community. "Islamic fanaticism", it is often argued, must be fought relentlessly. In the debate over the enlargement of the EU to Turkey, the Lega argues that Islam permeates and influences Turkish society in ways that are incom-

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39   Salvini, M. (27/11/2017) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10155333732628155/.

patible with Italian and European values and way of life. That is where the line between insiders and outsiders is drawn.

It should be noted, however, that while Christian tradition is deployed as one of the pillars of the Lega's identity-building effort, several controversies have arisen over the years between figures from the Church – especially, but not exclusively, more progressive ones – and the Lega. This internal dimension of conflict, identifying the perimeter of legitimate and illegitimate demands for rights, is thus rather to be interpreted as based on conservative, traditional, exclusionary values, rather than religion or alignment to the Church's positions per se.

Forza Italia, for its part, takes on a somehow moderate rightwing position, which remains generally constant over the years. All initiatives on the part of LGBTQ+ associations and movements as well as of the left are deemed as "propaganda" and are condemned. While surrogacy is vehemently despised and the possibility of adoption on the part of same-sex couples is opposed, on civil partnerships Forza Italia talks about sensitivity and freedom of conscience. In the 2017 vote, several party MPs voted in favour of same-sex unions. On all ethical matters, the party calls for moderation and the need for good sense to prevail over ideology. Indeed, religious convictions and values are evoked as arguments against policy change. References to the "natural family" are frequent, and in 2015 a critique emerged against progressives praising the Pope for his environmentalist words, as – the post reads – one cannot agree with the Pope intermittently, hence the Church's claims on family must be considered relevant as well. For years Maurizio Gasparri, exponent of the right wing of the party, has been among the most proactive figures speaking out on these topics: "marriage is only one, and family is only one", he claims; "Forza Italia is clearly against gay adoptions" and to deny this would "endanger the fundamental principles of our society".

Overall, although Forza Italia expresses fairly conservative positions, typical of a moderate centre-right – despite the more radical stances of some of its members – religion does not appear to feature in its discourse as a cleavage identifying the boundaries of a perimeter of citizenship. The same cannot be argued in the case of the Lega because beyond its conservative stance, which is fairly consistent with the ideological profile and political history of the party, the distinctive feature of the Lega on this subject resides in the mutually exclusive framing of the notion of rights extension. In other words, the willingness – of, for one, the left – to extend certain rights to, for instance, same-sex couples, entails the deprivation or at best the neglect of other rights and categories. This does not only apply to "traditional families", often portrayed by conservatives as threatened by the potential extensions of the rights of same-sex couples. It embodies the idea, largely present in Salvini's narrative, of a factious left that would rather debate and invest in civil rights reforms than social and labour policies. It also embodies the idea of a kind of politics that prefers building an image of political correctness and progressive claims, and that avoids facing the citizens' most pressing struggles.

The **Partito Democratico** expresses a much more inclusive notion of citizenship with respect to its main political opponents. This appears clearly in the discourse around same-sex civil partnerships in 2015 and 2016.

> *We have tied the survival of our government to a battle for rights, calling a confidence vote. It had never happened before, and it wasn't easy now. But it was the right thing. [...] tonight many Italian citizens will feel less alone, more part of a community. Hope has prevailed over fear. Courage has prevailed over discrimination. Love has won.*[40]

Matteo Renzi, 25/02/2016

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40   Renzi, M. (25/02/2016) https://www.facebook.com/matteorenziufficiale/posts/10153613495209915.

Despite the non-negligible issue of the heterogeneity in within-party positions, the PD appears to have maintained a balanced, generally consistent, discursive approach on these matters over the 2013-2018 time frame.

4. Southern Italy

A combination of the **M5S** twofold people-elite opposition with the political line of conflict centred around within-country inequality clearly arises in the discursive units in which the North-South divide is evoked. Widely present in the M5S narrative, hints of this issue can be subtle (the South's interests are never discursively pitted against those of the North as such, and neither is excluded from the perimeter of the imagined community) yet extremely pervasive.

The crucial campaign topics of the M5S clearly speak more to the Southern electorate than to that of the North: mafia and corruption; unemployment; unequal access to welfare, especially for healthcare and education; the centrality of agriculture; the low quality of air and the right to a healthy living environment. Governments, at all levels, which preceded the emergence of the M5S in the political arena, are called out as responsible for the impoverishment and struggles of the South of Italy (in addition to those of the whole country). The elite, in other words, is once again responsible for the inequality among citizens, including between those from the North and the South, and this automatically places the elite itself outside the democratic boundaries of the nation identified by the M5S discourse.

Furthermore, party leader Luigi Di Maio himself personifies a strong appeal to the Southern electorate: a fresh-faced young man from the outskirts of Naples, an outsider to politics, a college drop-out with a history of humble and precarious jobs. Indeed, he is a very different figure from the average politician of his time,

and the right one to deliver a powerful message to a "massacred" South against the oppression from a distant, disrespectful, mainstream politics.

> *The massacre of Southern Italy proceeds at full speed. Look at what is contained in Renzie's decree.*[41]

Movimento 5 Stelle, 23/10/2014

> *This is an insult to Southerners and to democracy! According to Biancofiore (Forza Italia), the Movimento 5 Stelle would win elections in July only because Southerners cannot afford to go on holiday. [...] on 4 March the M5S was voted as the first political force in 16 regions. How's that for only being voted by Southerners?*[42]

Movimento 5 Stelle, 8/05/2018

Ever since 2015, the "from North to South" expression has been frequently employed in the **Lega**'s Facebook posts when the need to bring radical change throughout the country is evoked. Indeed, 2015 appears to be the turning point for Salvini's relationship with Italy's South.

> *Egoistically, I could say: I got 50% in Veneto, I won in Liguria, I govern Lombardia, I've got 20% in Toscana, the Lega counts 300 mayors... I stay in the North and who cares about the others. But I would not be making a smart reasoning. Italy either restarts all together or it goes nowhere.*[43]

Matteo Salvini, 8/08/2015

Before that, in 2014 "Noi con Salvini", a political entity in support of the Lega's leader for Central and Southern regions, came into existence. The reference to the North – a pivotal one for the once-secessionist Lega, which used to centre its political message around the dichotomy between the wasteful South and

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41 Movimento 5 Stelle (23/10/2014) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/photos/a.10151086635140813/10152713881980813.

42 Movimento 5 Stelle (8/05/2018) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10156065667280813.

43 Salvini, M. (8/08/2015) https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10153180169918155.

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the hard-working productive Northern regions – is now fading, ceasing to constitute a key cleavage for the Lega's identification of the boundaries of citizenship. A much resonating narrative, at the same time, has shifted onto the discourse on migration.

In fact, for the 2018 general elections, Salvini ran with a new symbol, replacing that of the former "Lega Nord": it read *"Lega per Salvini Premier"*. For the South, in other words, there was no longer need for debate on whether it should be considered as part of the nation. Instead, North and South were now united under the common denominator of a new set of common enemies: foreign invaders and internal traitors.

It is interesting to note how, over time, **Forza Italia** has presented itself as the only political force actually caring for and interested in the fate of the South. Indeed, this narrative deeply intertwines with the constant criticism of incumbent governments.

> *Forza Italia is and remains the only political movement that has always shown, throughout the years and with facts, a particular attention towards the South.*[44]
>
> Forza Italia, 27/05/2017

> *It is truly paradoxical: the government keeps mocking Italians and Southerners in particular.*[45]
>
> Forza Italia, 10/12/2015

> *The South is not among the priorities of this government, which has once again shown its distance from the real problems of the country and its absolute inability to fix the Italian economy. We hope that the executive will finally realise that it's time to stop with the chatter, the proclamations, the propaganda and electoral bonuses, and to*

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[44]   Forza Italia (27/05/2017) https://www.facebook.com/ForzaItaliaUfficiale/posts/922385464570348.

[45]   Forza Italia (10/12/2015) https://www.facebook.com/ForzaItaliaUfficiale/photos/a.298792176929 683/643358649139699..

> *create a concrete perspective of development and recovery for the*
> *South of Italy, which has been forgotten for way too long.*[46]

<div align="right">Forza Italia, 2/12/2015</div>

The Southern economy is described as "collapsing", and the idea of a "last chance to save the South" is conveyed repeatedly. The divide between North and South, Forza Italia argues, is directly proportional to the decrease in public investment in the South. This, however, does not entail the need for a more interventionist state, and definitely not the need for subsidy-based policies – which, Forza Italia claims, have proven disastrous. Instead, politics must support private initiative, the development of infrastructure and most importantly businesses, which have the ability to generate economic development and employment. This, in turn, can be achieved for example by reducing the "unjust" taxes that penalise Southern businesses, while incentivising new recruitment (especially of younger workers).

While this rhetoric can be found across all of Forza Italia's political course, it has been especially strong since 2015 and was particularly directed towards Matteo Renzi's centre-left government. Always accompanied by considerations of the inadequacy and inability of the incumbent executive, the same leitmotifs were reiterated with renewed vigour in 2018 and 2019, during the Movimento 5 Stelle-Lega legislature.

> *It is not enough to be from the South, fill one's rallies with nice*
> *words and take selfies, to have the South at heart. We are the only*
> *government who put in place policies in support of the South. The*
> *others talk, we have facts!*[47]

<div align="right">Forza Italia, 23/05/2019</div>

In the **PD**'s discourse, the South is present throughout the 2013-2019 time frame in numerous Facebook posts. The need for

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46   Forza Italia (2/12/2015) https://www.facebook.com/ForzaItaliaUfficiale/photos/a.29879217692
9683/640950956047135.

47   Forza Italia (23/05/2019) https://www.facebook.com/ForzaItaliaUfficiale/photos/a.2987921769
29683/1398443606964529.

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development, work and social policies, and legality are often touched upon. Indeed, the Lega's historically antagonistic approach to the Southern question is firmly condemned and the importance of cohesive political action for the whole country is underlined. In the Partito Democratico's contents, the South does not equate to, nor spur the emergence of, any line of conflict with respect to the citizenship boundaries that are discursively identified in this study: not against the institutional elite, as in the M5S, nor against the South itself, as in the "Northern" League of the past. Rather, much like in the more contemporary Lega, the South constitutes a full-right terrain in which to lead the same political battles as in the rest of the country.

Overall, the way in which the South is portrayed by the PD's narrative is well exemplified by this post:

> [...] beautiful and full of potential, which, despite so many difficulties, refuses to surrender to the stereotypes that describe it as a capitulated, hurt region, doomed to backwardness. [...] A story of redemption, pride and freedom.[48]

> Partito Democratico, 24/10/2017

5. The Role of the State

Since its early days, the intersection between citizen rights and welfare has coincided for the **Movimento 5 Stelle** with the call to defend access to common goods, despite and against the market rules of profit. The message is that public resources should be employed to finance the provision of public services exclusively.

However, citizenship in the M5S discourse also resonates with the "citizen spokesperson" (*cittadino portavoce*) narrative – according to which the title of "honourable" (*onorevole*), institutionally

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48 Partito Democratico (24/10/2017) https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/10155 320767696896.

employed for members of parliament, must not be used, as M5S representatives serve as spokespeople of the citizens, and are therefore not to be placed on a higher level than anyone else. Indeed, the analysis of the data collected for this study shows that the vertical dimension of the "people"- elite opposition remains to this day one of the most distinctive features of the M5S discourse. It also shows that this narrative of political conflict articulates along multiple lines. As stated in earlier sections of this study, the anti-elite rhetoric targets first and foremost what is considered to be an old, privileged, corrupt political caste.

With respect to welfare, this entails the notion that the lack in social provisions should be funded by cutting the costs of politics and by fighting corruption and tax evasion, avoiding for example big expenditure on major public works and costly inefficient institutions. Public funds, the M5S argues, should instead be devoted to supporting struggling Italian citizens – which is why the party's elected representatives commit to "giving back to the state" their unspent daily allowance and electoral reimbursements, establishing a highly mediatised annual "Restitution Day" (although controversies on the actual compliance of several members have arisen over time).

Indeed, the role of the state is primarily that of furthering the interests of its citizens, and politics must maintain and cherish a close relationship with the people. However, the M5S almost obsessively claims in its Facebook posts that the Italian *status quo* offers a very different picture – of strong powers, lobbies and banks being cherished above all else, while the common citizen is oppressed by the system and by the sly and dishonest.

> *I must not be afraid of the state. The state must protect me, help me if I struggle, it mustn't choke and squeeze me as it does today.*[49]

> Beppe Grillo, 5/02/2013

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49   Grillo, B. (5/02/2013) https://www.facebook.com/beppegrillo.it/photos/a.371637426544/1015126 6780561545.

The Movimento 5 Stelle declares its objective to be the defence first and foremost of those who need protection from this institutionalised harassment. The idea that has been defined in discourse since 2013 is of an alternative politics (that embodied by the M5S) which "leaves no one behind", thanks to the support of a strong, widespread and networked community of activists.

In the discursive units that touch upon the subject of welfare, tropes of poverty and inequality are very frequent. Pensioners struggling to lead a dignified life and people stealing out of hunger are discursively pitted against the caste of privileges and dishonesty. The "numbers of the catastrophe" of the state of social protection and the job market are regularly presented on the M5S Facebook page, accompanied by a pervasive rhetoric of emergency and of the need to inform citizens, countering state censorship. In fact, other political forces and the PD-led government are accused of "lying deliberately" about socio-economic policies, and of portraying a bright situation which could not be further from the tragic reality of the country. Mainstream journalists and state-funded media are deemed accomplices in this conspiracy and also vehemently criticised.

In other words, the crucial line of conflict internal to the nation is identified between winners and losers of the system. This, in turn, informs the M5S notion of the role of political forces and state institutions.

> Society has become divisive, to use a fancy expression. On one side, those with a pension, who pay the IMU because they have one or two houses, who have been able to support their family, who have been employees their entire lives, often with a few savings. [...] On the other side, those who have literally nothing. Pushed towards emigration. With no job, no home, no income, no family, no hope. The drowned and the saved.[50]

Beppe Grillo, 12/05/2013

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50   Grillo, B. (12/05/2013) https://www.facebook.com/beppegrillo.it/photos/a.371637426544/10151 418179101545.

Yet, the Italian elite – political and cultural – is not alone in being blamed as the cause of such inequalities – European (and global) power centres are also accused. In the M5S discourse, the idea of a bounded community gathered around the concept of national sovereignty emerges clearly in the criticisms against the EU's culture of austerity. In other words, the trope of foreign diktats recurs in the M5S discourse and this greatly overlaps with that employed by the Lega, where the "people" at the core of the populist discourse also coincide with the idea of a national community.

> *Italian politics has sold its soul to the Teutonic devil, in exchange for its own survival at the expense of the community on which it has poured austerity and deflation.*[51]

> Movimento 5 Stelle, 23/07/2013

Although the M5S refutes the idea of an assistance-based approach towards incoming migrants, its position towards the role of the state in the life of Italian citizens appears more nuanced.

> *Our first great task is to give work to the people.*[52]

> Movimento 5 Stelle, 29/12/2013

While on the one hand public services should be better funded, expanded and made more efficient, fiscal pressure should be radically reduced – something that the old mainstream politics has failed to do.

> *With words, they all thunder against taxes, but in practice… they are all the same […]*[53]

> Movimento 5 Stelle, 26/11/2013

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51 Movimento 5 Stelle (23/07/2013) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/photos/a.10151086635140813/10151726780940813.

52 Movimento 5 Stelle (29/12/2013) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/photos/a.10151086635140813/10152072134465813.

53 Movimento 5 Stelle (26/11/2013) https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/photos/a.10151086635140813/10152001362080813.

In its 2018 electoral programme, the Movimento 5 Stelle articulated the key points of its political proposal: the "citizen income" (*reddito di cittadinanza*) and "citizen pension" (*pensione di cittadinanza*), cuts to the costs of public institutions, the elimination of political privileges, and the fight against corruption. However, a number of traditional stances from the Italian centre-right were also included: lower taxes, stronger security measures, and an effort to "stop the migration business" and bring about immediate repatriations of irregular migrants.

For **Forza Italia**, the line of cleavage that emerges in the debate on welfare concerns more a matter of trade-off between different items of expenditure than it does migration. The analysis of party discursive units shows a clear conflict between items such as pensions and tax breaks, and measures such as the basic income. In other words, the construction of the perimeter of citizenship in party discourse revolves more than anything else around the production and distribution of wealth.

The dimension of horizontal within-country conflict also takes an interesting form in Forza Italia's discourse, where hard-working citizens are pitted against the "lazy", inactive ones. Indeed, for several years the party's political platform has mainly targeted the needs of high-end professionals and autonomous workers, categories deemed penalised by leftist governments. This is a narrative largely shared by the Lega. A similar discourse is employed for bank account holders, homeowners and entrepreneurs – all deserving groups allegedly vexed by the state. This critique became especially vehement in 2018, and is particularly directed against the Movimento 5 Stelle and some of its proposed measures, such as the "citizen income". The underlying idea is that of a conflict between citizens who contribute, through their work and their capital, to the economy and to the development of Italian society – and thus should be rewarded and cherished by the state more than anyone else – and individuals who live off someone else's efforts, trying to work as little as possible.

While the state should not interfere with individuals' lives (the liberal matrix generally appears very dominant in Forza Italia) it should strongly support private and entrepreneurial initiative.

Until 2017, the **Lega**'s discourse included numerous mentions of a "thieving, parasitic, shameful" state. As has been seen in previous sections of this study, the "Italian first" rhetoric has been very pervasive in the party's political message. Unsurprisingly enough, its contents on the role of the state appear to develop accordingly.

The state, it is argued, must first of all take care of Italians. This discourse is especially recurrent when subjects such as public housing are evoked. The Lega claims that to help migrants means choosing not to help Italian families, single parents, the unemployed, and all of the "victims" of previous governments and of a public system that have vexed honest citizens and the underdogs for far too long.

To "cede" to this welfare trade-off by leaning towards the well-being of migrants rather than that of natives, "substituting" one political priority for the other, is, according to the Lega's narrative, a clear-cut example of racism against Italians on the part of the state and of the politics which argue for the furthering of migrant rights. This is a trope whose presence has significantly intensified in Salvini's discourse since 2015, feeding the magnitude of the anti-state rhetoric, but also of strictly political antagonism.

In fact, the Lega's anti-immigration and anti-NGO narrative goes hand in hand with the notion that the Italian left exploits the misfortunes of migrants for political gain (thus with a within-polity opposition) and that powerful foreign forces fund the entry of "clandestines" in the country (thus combining the above-mentioned narrative with an additional outside-polity line of conflict).

In the 2013-2019 time frame considered in this study, the burden of costs is also increasingly evoked by Salvini: public money is

being used to sustain unreasonably high living standards for hosted migrants, and taxpayer money is being spent for migrants who commit crimes and are incarcerated, while neglected Italian citizens struggle to make ends meet.

Finally, while the Lega's framing of the state can at times overlap with that promoted by Forza Italia, the Forza Italia focus remains on different social and work categories, whereas in the Lega's discourse, boundaries are drawn based on ethnic and cultural elements, both within and outside the nation.

As the **PD**'s system of political cleavages is built in a much more articulated and complex manner, and identity-building works far less by opposition than it does by incorporation of different stances (deployed according to the specific focus of a given topic), the party's portrayal of the relationship between state and market, and between state and citizens, is not as straightforward. In terms of representation, more than anything the Democrats appear willing to extend their audience, in a way that would make it as inclusive as possible. While the emphasis is maintained on public services and the key importance of a solid welfare system, private initiative and businesses are deemed crucial for thriving economic development, and are thus worthy of lighter fiscal and bureaucratic burdens. Indeed, the state – the PD Facebook posts claim – must take care first and foremost of the most fragile social categories. However, work must be always chosen over providing assistance, as the former allows individuals to reclaim their full dignity.

The relationship between populism and economic hardship, which for the sake of brevity will not be treated in detail here, is especially relevant to progressive mainstream parties as the challenges this relationship poses to a force such as the PD relate first and foremost to a deep legitimacy shortage with regard to their traditional electoral segments.

Although the electorate of the M5S and the Lega is definitely not comprised exclusively of working-class individuals, appeals to welfare incentives and references to struggling Italian citizens certainly wink at the most fragile groups in society. While the PD's adversaries paint the picture of a country ravaged by socio-economic hardship, the PD has on the other hand deployed an all-positive, optimistic, liberal narrative, particularly since the beginning of Secretary Matteo Renzi's leadership in late 2013. This has been the case for subjects such as economic and administrative innovation, environmental issues, institutional reforms and civil rights. However, perceptions of insecurity and economic vulnerability, strongly represented by the discourse of its populist adversaries, have remained strong in the PD electorate.[54] This is a discrepancy – fairly common for parties in office – which has contributed to the polarisation of the political debate between opposing narratives on governmental action. Ultimately, it could be argued that this discrepancy has contributed to the decrease in the PD's legitimacy.

6. Conclusions

This chapter has shown the coexistence of different variants of populism in the Italian political discourse, which appear to diverge in terms of ideological nature (more or less ambiguous) and along the horizontal dimensions of within-nation conflict. The vertical dimension of political cleavage between the people and elite partially overlaps in the discursive contents of the political forces that exhibit a populist setting. However, for the Movimento 5 Stelle, the enemy is the privileged, undeserving, oppressive, dishonest and rich caste, whereas for the Lega it is a more culturally and ideologically defined elite. Indeed, the populist narrative deployed by Matteo Salvini's Lega party contains a strong right-

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54 Fondazione Unipolis and Demos & Pi (2019), *La banalità della paura: Lavoro, percezioni e insicurezze in Europa*, XI Edition, available at: https://www.fondazioneunipolis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Rapporto_Sicurezza_Demos_Unipolis.pdf

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wing, nationalist character. The nationalist connotation remains nevertheless deeply present in the populist narrative of both the Lega and the M5S: on one side, it is corroborated by a right-wing ideological posture; on the other, it based on the idea of the country's socio-economic hardship and the need to reform a corrupt system. Either way, not only is the people-elite dichotomy pervasively present in the discourse of both parties, but the "people" and the "elite" are both defined precisely through the ideas of "nation" or bounded community, as identified by each party. The "people" embody the nation or the community of citizens, the elite is made up of everyone who betrays the nation.

With respect to the boundaries of citizenship, while boundaries are built in a fairly similar manner by the two parties for the world outside the nation, cleavages within the nation are interpreted in rather different ways. The Movimento 5 Stelle appears more progressive than the Lega on ethical matters, and much less indulgent towards the economic elite. On this note, as on many other points touched upon in this chapter, it should be borne in mind that politics (and, specifically, political discourse) is not necessarily met by policies that are consistent with the party's rhetoric, even when the parties that employ it are actually in office.

Although with significant distinctions, both parties appear to be good cases of exclusionary populist forces. For the sake of this chapter's focus on the identification of the boundaries that delimit parties' imagined communities, the distinction between populist and non-populist forces appears rather definite. While Forza Italia sporadically employs elements of the welfare trade-off rhetoric, its discursive units generally show the image of a clearly right-wing, yet not populist, force. For both Forza Italia and the Partito Democratico, which envisages an ever more inclusive electoral audience and a large political platform, the people-elite dichotomy is virtually non-existent. However, sporadic elements of populist rhetoric are found in the PD's discourse too, such as populist tropes being taken up during the critical phase of the

immigration crisis and a people-elite narrative deployed against left-wing intellectuals and critics of the party's social and labour reforms. In other words, the PD's lurches towards populist frames tend to coincide either with its attempts to catch up with populist messages, or with its attacks on political opponents.

Foreign and European Policy

Andrea Pareschi

This chapter reconstructs the recent political discourse in Italy in the broad domain of international relations, which also encompasses the unique relationship linking Italy to the European layer of governance. The chapter first retraces the stances espoused by the four main Italian parties between 2013 and 2019, in order to account for their mainstays and their transformation across time. It then examines the entrenchment of forms of populism, nationalism and sovereignism, also considering how these parties employed such labels to embrace or refuse them. Finally, it addresses the circulation of discursive tropes among the political forces, by reconsidering the differences and the overlaps in their communication.

Certainly, not every discursive similarity depends on cross-party hybridisation: third factors may have pushed different parties towards analogous directions in parallel. After all, a political party's position on a foreign policy issue is a function of multiple drivers, including – alongside other parties' strategies – its own ideological roots, its government/opposition status, the moment of the electoral cycle, and the objective circumstances faced by the country in the context of its geopolitical fundamentals. Still, careful consideration of the sequential evolution of the parties' respective discourses permits these determinants to be disentangled at least in part.

How could populism, nationalism and sovereignism present themselves in party communication on European and foreign policy? In principle, the populist categories may appear to be tools of domestic political struggle, whereas a party's international

approach should be informed by the thicker systems of belief with which populism is combined. Nevertheless, parties and leaders can certainly invoke "the people", or "the peoples" of other countries, evoke a situation of dire crisis or threat stemming from the European or the international arena, or leverage "bad manners" in relation to them.

Furthermore, foreign rulers and other international actors – such as big business – may be depicted as "powers that be" interfering with popular sovereignty. Indeed, at the nexus of populism and nationalism, where the constitutive ambiguity of the former morphs into the latter, the nature of the EU offers discursive opportunities to criticise the "distant" technocratic elites as being simultaneously on top of as well as outside the polity. Nationalist tropes are particularly evident when European elites are linked to rival political parties that are, in turn, claimed to be serving the interest not of the nation but of a foreign group, such as illegal immigrants.

Yet, evoking the national interest does not equate to nationalist communication per se: as already suggested, "most contemporary politics function within a national context, and thus reproduce the tenets of nationalist discourse to at least some extent".[1] In our understanding, nationalism in the domain of international affairs is revealed by a reiterated, hammering recourse to the notion of national interest – especially if interpreted in zero-sum terms – or by insistence on the honour of the nation, or by a particularly intense "othering" of European countries and international organisations. Sovereignism primarily revolves around regular reference to "sovereignty" itself, or to the right of a country to make its own decisions alone.

The chapter is divided into two sections, respectively dealing with the European sphere and with broader geopolitical alignments

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1 De Cleen, B. (2017), "Populism and nationalism", in C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 342-362, specifically p. 350.

and challenges. First, the European layer nowadays plays a part in most domestic political issues: each political party constantly refers to "Europe", purposely linking it to certain issues in line with its ideology and strategies. Second, foreign policy, strictly speaking, involves Italy's relations with world powers; postures towards theatres of crisis like Ukraine, Syria and Libya; consideration of other transnational threats such as terrorism or global warming; views on pillars of the extant international order, starting with the United Nations.

1. Europe and the European Sphere

To begin with, the **Partito Democratico** led in 2013 by Pier Luigi Bersani exhibited in its discourse a deeply committed Europhile stance.

> *Since its origins, Italy has been a strongly pro-European country, more prepared than others, especially in tough times, to renounce something of its own to make the common construction advance [...] Berlusconi was the protagonist of a long governing phase, that was marked by a populism that played with the fire of anti-Europeanism and partly ruined the credibility of our country. In that phase Italy did not take advantage of the enormous benefits stemming from the arrival of the euro, as Germany did, and wasted important years by not making the necessary reforms: thus, it found itself vulnerable when the thunderstorm came.*[2]

<div align="right">Pier Luigi Bersani, 5/02/2013</div>

Accordingly, the 2013 party manifesto began with Europe. "More Europe", indeed "nothing without Europe", was necessary for salvation: "we are Europe, in the sense that [...] the fate of political integration largely coincides with our destiny".[3] Offering justifi-

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2   Pier Luigi Bersani, PD Facebook page (5/2/2013), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/574319099263365/

3   PD party manifesto 2013, p. 2.

cation for "a rational and measured transfer of sovereignty", the PD manifesto situated the party's governing project and revitalisation of the EU within an endeavour "alternative to nationalist, anti-European and populist regressions, that are always incompatible with the roots of a democratic, open and inclusive Europe".[4] The "broken promises" of the euro were deplored, but "responsibility" called for a loyal backing of the treaties and obligations incurred by Italy until their prospective renegotiation. It also called for the necessary steps to be taken towards defence of the euro and towards "federal political and economic governance in the eurozone".[5]

In February 2014 Matteo Renzi, the new party leader crowned by open primaries, sought to capitalise on the momentum by replacing Enrico Letta at the helm of a left-of-centre government. The 2014 European election campaign then revolved around the motto "Europe will change direction", inspired by Renzi's signature slogan "Italy will change direction". The party manifesto framed in smart and in detailed ways the call for EU qualitative leaps addressing employment, economic and social policies and the governance of migration. However, the campaign was extensively based on internal themes, starting with the "80-euro" tax bonus expressly introduced by the Renzi government as a flagship measure.

From then on, the European discourse of the Partito Democratico was increasingly channelled by the agenda of its prime minister, who immediately assumed the six-month presidency of the Council of the EU in July. Openly embracing the European identity, Renzi asserted that Italy would act as a protagonist "in Europe with its head held high and in the control centre",[6] changing itself to

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4   PD party manifesto 2013, p. 2.

5   PD party manifesto 2013, p. 5.

6   Debora Serracchiani, PD Facebook page (21/5/2014), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10152173830651896/

regain the credibility that was instrumental in prompting change in Europe. This narrative was reinforced by extensive reference to his participation in international summits, not least stressing collaboration with his French and German counterparts "in the interest of our countries, but especially of Europe".[7]

> *The European Union does not assign any homework to us. Enough of the constant Italian refrain whereby Europe is depicted as the place where we come to receive our homework. We have no reassurances to give, Italy knows perfectly what it must do and will do it of its own will, for the future of our kids.*[8]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 6/03/2014</div>

As Renzi also stated, "Europe needs to be lively, we respect all the European treaties' constraints but the respect we owe to the founding fathers primarily means making Europe a place of the citizens and peoples, not just of the technocracy".[9] In fact, tugs-of-war with the European Commission on the degree of flexibility granted to the Italian government in its budgetary cycle created recurring strains, once leading the prime minister to affirm that "Brussels is not our master: it can [only] give advice", and that "if Brussels says no to the budget law, you hand it in unchanged and say, 'what a shame, but that's it'".[10] Cracks in the narrative of constructive engagement also concerned the management of migration, from dissatisfaction at the lack of a European response to tragic migrant shipwrecks, to the optimism that accompanied the refugee quota scheme adopted in Brussels in 2015, to its glaring failure epitomised by the Bratislava summit of 2016 amidst national unilateralism. Three quotes exemplify such phases:

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7 Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (15/3/2014), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10152045639461896/

8 Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (6/3/2014), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10152028141216896/

9 Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (15/3/2014), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10152045639461896/

10 Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (16/10/2015), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10153285335221896/

A Europe that tells you everything in detail about how to fish tuna, but looks the other way when there are corpses in the sea, such a Europe is not worthy. It is not enough to have a currency in common. Either we accept to have a common destiny, or we lose the role of Europe.[11]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 24/06/2014</div>

It is a victory for those who, like Italy since day one, call for a common policy, not short-sighted and selfish nationalist isolation. But it is also a victory for those who believe in Europe as a home of values, a community of destinies, a place of hope. We are a people, not just an aggregated mass of statistics. And for this reason we face together [...] the historical problems of our time [...] Italy, the homeland of rights and ideals, will do its part [...] with the pride shown by those who work to save our refugee brothers' lives and to save the European identity.[12]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 23/09/2015</div>

The challenge will come in March 2017, when in Rome we will celebrate the 60th anniversary of the EU: how do we present ourselves in front of our fellow citizens from the whole continent? By explaining that the Europe of the founding fathers has become a boring club of financial rules and technical algorithms? Or by restoring a soul in the European vision? I brought [Merkel and Hollande] to Ventotene to create a path, not to look at the nice view or to eat fish.[13]

<div align="right">Matteo Renzi, 18/09/2016</div>

When meeting Hollande and Merkel after the Brexit referendum, Renzi remarked that unlike the populists "we regard Europe not as the problem but as the solution".[14] However, in time his optimistic posture and the recurrent image of Europe "at a crossroads"

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11 Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (24/6/2014), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10152245427321896/

12 Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (23/9/2015), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10153248630026896/

13 Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (18/9/2016), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10154028526296896/

14 Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (22/8/2016), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10153954941511896/

veered towards harsher tones. For instance, in his chastisement of the member states that did not comply with their commitment to host migrants, the leader of Partito Democratico did not just voice a willingness to deprive them of European cohesion funds, but also responded by bringing up Italy's status as a net contributor to the soon-to-be-renegotiated EU budget.

Defeat in the constitutional referendum of December 2016 pushed Renzi to resign his post of prime minister, where he was succeeded by Paolo Gentiloni, even though Renzi retained party leadership and won a new open primary election in 2017. Nevertheless, throughout this time, failure to disseminate awareness that "Europe really is insufficient in many respects, but [...] the Europe that 'does not act' is the one made up of national governments"[15] kept the Partito Democratico stuck between Europhilia and frustration. In this respect, the unexpected rise of Emmanuel Macron to the French presidency is a case in point. At first, the election of the pro-European liberal outsider was greeted with hope. Later on, some disdain was prompted by the strict view of interest informing the deeds of the French government, as the French border police kept sending back to the Italian towns of Ventimiglia and Bardonecchia – with legally controversial means – thousands of migrants who had attempted to cross the border. In the words of Gianni Pittella, the then leader of the S&D group in the European Parliament, "one is pro-European when he affirms the values on which the EU is founded", not "declarations meant to practise the muscles of the mouth".[16] Yet, Macron retained support among the PD, which cited his public appreciation for Gentiloni in the 2018 campaign.

The 2018 manifesto for the Italian general election was built around "more employment, more Europe and more culture", and

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15   Patrizia Toia, PD Facebook page (6/9/2016), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10153998265571896/

16   Gianni Pittella, PD Facebook page (5/7/2017), https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/10154967933736896/

again depicted the European sphere as the locus of all fundamental challenges, where Italy could and should act within the leading group: "More Europe, and more politics in Europe".

When the Government of Change came to power in June 2018, possibly threatening Italy's participation in the common currency, the party – then led by acting secretary Maurizio Martina, as Renzi had resigned after the electoral defeat – clang to its ingrained pro-European commitment, while criticising its opponents in valence[17] terms on their own ground.

> *Nowadays Italian sovereignty is defended with the euro and with Europe […] Italian savers,[18] firms and families are only defended within the European project, and those in Italy who envisage leaving this field […] risk putting Italy in the worst possible conditions.*[19]

> Maurizio Martina, 28/05/2018

> *The situation is one of unprecedented confusion and paralysis, the sovereignist government is doing an about face across the board and is having its budget law written by Brussels.*[20]

> Antonio Misiani, 17/12/2018

After the election of Nicola Zingaretti as leader of the PD in early 2019, the European campaign proved remarkably polyphonic: key voices, striking slightly different undertones, featured "noble fathers" like Romano Prodi and the head of state, Sergio Mattarella, and also Renzi, notably attacking populism, Gentiloni, emphasising a Europe "that has many knots to untie, but out of which there

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17 "Valence politics" refers to the struggle that takes place among parties not between substantive positions, but in terms of their respective competence and capacity in securing a shared, unequivocally desirable goal.

18 Rhetoric on the protection of (small) savers is widespread in Italian political discourse: see also note 27.

19 Maurizio Martina, PD Facebook page (28/5/2018), https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/10155934003656896/

20 Antonio Misiani, PD Facebook page (17/12/2018), https://www.facebook.com/partitodemocratico/videos/537386463395944/

is only betrayal of the interests of the Italians",[21] Zingaretti himself and many individual candidates.

> *We want to change Europe, the sovereignists want to tear it apart. But without Europe, Italy would no longer have any weight in the world [...] With Europe, we will be stronger to face the global challenges and perils of this age. The Partito Democratico, building on the Socialists & Democrats group, aims to build a large alliance – "from Tsipras to Macron" – to stop the sovereignists, change Europe and bring it closer to the people.[22] Today we face the consequences of wrong choices especially craved by the forces of the European right, which have produced a Europe where the states matter more than common interest [...] The paradox is that sovereignists say they want to change Europe to protect our country, but they would only make things worse: their allies want a Europe held even more hostage by vetoes. A Europe dedicated to economic austerity and absence of cooperation on immigration. Which is the opposite of what Italy needs.[23]*

> Nicola Zingaretti, 23/05/2019

The *pars construens* was again built around the policy proposals in the manifesto, titled "A new Europe" and buttressed by the motto "A Europe that is fairer, greener, more democratic and centred on employment". The symbol included a banner stating "We are European".

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21 "Paolo Gentiloni, PD Facebook page (2/6/2019), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10156771179681896/

22 In this case, "people" results from the English translation of "persone", not "popolo". Indeed, one of the hashtags of the 2019 electoral campaign of the Partito Democratico was #primalepersone, directly opposing the Lega's motto #primagliitaliani.

23 Nicola Zingaretti, PD Facebook page (23/5/2019), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10156747413816896/

Europe was remarkably absent from the 2013 manifesto of the **Movimento 5 Stelle**, although during the campaign Beppe Grillo published a 20-point list including a referendum on the euro. Back then, it was his blog[24] that channelled most party communication on the topic, and it especially targeted the euro through long, scorching posts as well as reported interviews with elite voices criticising the eurozone from diverse standpoints (for instance Alberto Bagnai, then a Eurosceptic economist, Francesco Gesualdi, an activist with internationalist orientations, and Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, the international business editor of *The Daily Telegraph*). Sovereignty concerns held sway, together with hype in anti-establishment tones ("All that the establishment does not say to you: Spread the information!").[25]

> *Financial oligarchies play with governments that are either complai-*
> *sant or directly imposed by them [...] These alchemists of "spread"*
> *evoke a new holy war against "populisms" that are guilty of ques-*
> *tioning an economic architecture built above the citizens' heads, a*
> *profoundly undemocratic act. Poverty and unemployment overflow*
> *everywhere in Europe together with uncontrolled immigration from*
> *Africa and east of the Schengen area [...] Greece has been left to*
> *die by European "brothers", sacrificed on the altar of German and*

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24 On the centrality of Grillo's blog in the development of the party and its discourse, especially in its first phases, see Chapter 2.

25 M5S Facebook page (7/11/2013), https://www.facebook.com/174457180812/posts/101519573680 70813/

French banks wanting their "pound of flesh" back. This Europe is not based on solidarity.[26]

<div align="right">Beppegrillo.it, 17/11/2013</div>

The future of the European Banking Union is decided these days between Brussels and Frankfurt. Another piece of national sovereignty leaves us without having heard the Italians' opinion. What do the Italians matter at this point? The euro has snatched monetary sovereignty from us, the Banking Union will snatch banking sovereignty [...], protection of savings.[27]

<div align="right">Alessandro di Battista, 23/12/2013</div>

For the 2014 European election, the party presented seven uneasily clustering requests: from a referendum on the euro to the adoption of Eurobonds, from the abolition of balanced budgets and the Fiscal Compact to an alliance of the Mediterranean member states and funding to agriculture and breeding for domestic consumption. Different versions expounded the bullet points in more or in less accurate ways, including a misleading assertion whereby "the parties have obligated Italy to adhere to the Fiscal Compact and thus pay 50 billion euros per year to the EU".[28] The hymn adopted by the party, "Fists on the Table", contained verses such as "This sterile union makes no sense / based on finance and debts / where the peoples are numbers", or "This Europe is a Europe that / feeds on the weak's humiliation / through laws of tears and blood / while their bank accounts soar".[29] Party discourse also targeted "Renzie" – a portmanteau for prime minister Renzi and Henry Winkler's Fonzie – as a deceiver, with Grillo even stating once that "the extraordinary thing is that the Italians are always conned".[30]

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26 Unsigned in beppegrillo.it, M5S Facebook page (17/11/2013), https://www.facebook.com/174457180812/posts/10151979561505813/

27 Alessandro di Battista, M5S Facebook page (23/12/2013), https://www.facebook.com/174457180812/posts/10152059755645813/

28 M5S party manifesto 2014, version "Europe in seven points".

29 The official video is still available on the YouTube platform: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHoxkJzwYso, last accessed 14 October 2019.

30 Unsigned in beppegrillo.it, M5S Facebook page (14/3/2014), https://www.facebook.com/174457180812/posts/10152227053580813/

After the election, the hashtag #fuoridalleuro[31] was used to revamp anti-euro campaigning, to gather signatures for a popular law initiative against "these lackeys of Merkel and the ECB headed by Renzie", as "the Italians must be able to decide whether they want to die with the euro in their hands, or leave and take their sovereignty back".[32] Relatedly, Germany was attacked through posts such as "Germany and France *über alles*. Here is how Greece is destroyed",[33] "A European tax: here is the new plan of Germany",[34] and "ATTENTION! THE EURO IS NOT THERE ANYMORE! Here is the new currency". According to Alessandro Di Battista,

> *The euro is a dead weight Italy must get rid of. The reality is, we are slaves to the mark [...] so we must detach ourselves from the central nazism of Germany and of the European institutions, because they want to colonise Southern Europe through their economic policies. Look at Greece, strangled by the troika. I use the term "nazism" not for the German people, but for the institutions that are killing the peoples.*[35]

> Alessandro di Battista, 14/03/2015

Later on, the Movimento 5 Stelle continued to disseminate interviews with international scholars criticising the makeup of the eurozone and the German posture behind it, but introducing their views with sensationalist headlines: "LISTEN TO IT AND SPREAD IT! THE TRUTH ON EUROPE!",[36] "THE OXFORD PROFESSOR DENOUNCES THE GERMAN ECONOMIC DICTATORSHIP. TO BE

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31 Meaning "out of the euro".

32 Unsigned in beppegrillo.it, M5S Facebook page (15/10/2014), https://www.facebook.com/17445 7180812/posts/10152698168100813/

33 Unsigned in beppegrillo.it, M5S Facebook page (12/7/2015), https://www.facebook.com/ 17445 7180812/posts/10153323106095813/

34 Unsigned in beppegrillo.it, M5S Facebook page (28/7/2015), https://www.facebook.com/17445 7180812/posts/10153354272900813/

35 Alessandro di Battista, M5S Facebook page (14/3/2015), https://www.facebook.com/17445 7180812/posts/10153036829930813/

36 M5S Facebook page (30/4/2016), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/ 10153925207865813/

SEEN AND SHARED!"[37] Sovereignty was regularly invoked, for instance when highlighting the reluctance of the "Euro-crooked" Portuguese president to let the Socialist leader António Costa form a government after obtaining a relative majority: "Portugal [...] undergoes the umpteenth imposition of markets and eurocracy over democracy: [...] the euro deprives states not just of economic and monetary sovereignty but, much worse, of political sovereignty, inhibiting democracy".[38]

Brexit handed the M5S another occasion to decry threats against the sovereign people of Britain and to criticise unelected petty politicians,[39] just like the "five presidents" who had co-authored the eponymous report in 2015 and who were all but one spurned by the party as "elected by no one".[40]

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37 M5S Facebook page (16/5/2016), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10153959377625813/

38 Unsigned in beppegrillo.it, M5S Facebook page (26/10/2015), https://www.facebook.com/174457180812/posts/10153529841530813/

39 David Borrelli, M5S Facebook page (1/7/2016), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10154068018910813/

40 In 2015, a document titled "Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union" was jointly issued by the presidents of the Council of the EU, the European Commission, the ECB, the Eurogroup and the European Parliament, becoming known for this reason as the "Five Presidents' Report".

Yet there were novel ingredients, too. First, Grillo's website and voice gradually lost their centrality. Second, uncontrolled immigration was more forcefully added to the discursive toolkit, enjoying a spike in 2017 and regularly allowing blame to be cast on the established major parties thereafter: "ALL THE IMMIGRANTS COME ASHORE IN ITALY BECAUSE OF A DEAL AGREED BY RENZI!",[41] "PROPAGATE ALL OUT THIS VIDEO: BERLUSCONI TRAITOR OF THE HOMELAND! HE PROMISED A HOME AND A JOB FOR ALL THE IMMIGRANTS".[42] Third, the presence of a squad of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) resulted in partial policy-specific diversification of the party message on the EU. Europe was now depicted as the level of governance authorising glyphosate to please the interest of big business, but also as the level enabling new rules on energy labelling and, more fundamentally, as the level providing ammunition for a key party policy, as the following quote shows:

> *Europe imposes austerity? Italy cuts healthcare and small hospitals. Europe asks for a labour reform? Italy [...] transforms the labour market into a competition among precarious workers. If Europe instead asks for more rights for its citizens, then its words remain straws in the wind. For seven years Europe has been asking Italy to grant the universal basic income to Italians who do not reach the minimum poverty threshold but Italian parties continue to repeat that it is not feasible, as if they lived out of the world or simply out of Europe, given that the basic income exists in as many as 26 European countries out of 28.*[43]

Isabella Adinolfi, 12/05/2017

The diversity of perspectives was very much mirrored in the thematic documents composing the 2018 manifesto of the

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41 M5S Facebook page (5/7/2017), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10155204072820813/

42 M5S Facebook page (5/2/2018), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10155819942540813/

43 Isabella Adinolfi, M5S Facebook page (12/5/2017), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10155013313365813/

M5S. Some policy-specific chapters – Agriculture, Environment, Energy, Transport, especially in their non-amended version – prevailingly praised the role of the EU, for instance by emphasising its long-established goal of environmental safeguard and the polluter-pays principle. The section on Taxation regarded the European sphere as the desirable place for constructive action, whereas the chapter on Immigration criticised the weakness of both Europe and Italy from a pro-migrant position, decrying how "the European Union has been described as a stepmother imposing decisions and rules lowered from above without letting the states play any part".[44]

Yet the high politics chapters took diverging lines, with a deeply ambivalent section on the EU added at a later stage. The chapter on Constitutional Affairs criticised the progressive transfer of sovereignty and called for compulsory popular referenda for any future treaty amendment, to prevent the Italian people being stripped of weight; the chapter on Economic Development gave a concise summary asserting that "since the end of the second world war, Italy has connected itself with other European countries through a series of treaties that have produced increasing constraints for the national sovereignty, particularly from the monetary and financial viewpoint",[45] and the chapter on Foreign Affairs demanded radical revision of the treaties in order to overcome the euro "for the good of the adhering peoples", while the amended version of the same document redirected the same sovereignty-based underlying discourse into less unambiguous stances.

After entry into government, yet another layer of criticism was added, revolving around the Government of Change's own struggles with the European Commission and European partners. Thus, the party defended the so-called "People's Budget" through its traditional anti-establishment framing: "These days the Italian

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44 M5S party manifesto 2018, chapter "Immigration", amended version, p. 2.

45 M5S party manifesto 2018, chapter "Economic Development", non-amended version, p. 34.

budget law takes centre stage within European bureaucrats' debate: the law that for the first time is on the side of the citizen [and] does not defend the interests of the powers that be".[46] On the issue of migration, the hard line taken by the government on the *Diciotti* affair[47] and dissatisfaction with the stalemate within the European Council led to strident responses veering towards nationalism, emphasising the Italian contribution to the EU budget and threatening to withdraw it.

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46   Emilio Carelli, M5S Facebook page (17/10/2018), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinque stelle/videos/1190258537780343/

47   We refer to Chapter 3 for more detailed reference to the *Diciotti* Affair.

> *Thanks to the Conte government, there is now a stronger Italy in Europe, an Italy that flexes its muscles in Brussels and gets respect. Maybe in some European capitals the clocks stopped at the time of the governments of the Partito Democratico and Forza Italia.*[48]

> Sabrina De Carlo, 23/05/2019

While prime minister Conte himself repeatedly adopted language centred on "the people", "the elite" and the safeguard of the Italians' interests,[49] messages from party MEPs blended policy-specific references to their EU-level battles with multiple calls to devise a future Europe "of the peoples, not the banks and lobbies". Besides depictions of the Partito Democratico as an anti-people party of the elite and even of the foreign sphere,[50] the European campaign largely revolved around two core proposals easily projected onto the European level: a minimum salary and cutting political expenditure, such as the Commissioners' salaries and the costs of useless European agencies. Each international controversy affecting the Government of Change, be it an attack by liberal MEP Guy Verhofstadt against Conte or heated retorts between Italy and France, was anyway met with heavy flak.

> *EUROCRAT VERHOFSTADT OFFENDS CONTE. The insolence and the arrogance of these Eurobureaucrats has no limits. President Conte*[51] *represents the Italians. Those who represent the interests of some lobby or power group are puppets, and that is not us. This European political class must be swept away.*[52]

> Movimento 5 Stelle, 12/02/2019

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48 Sabrina De Carlo, M5S Facebook page (23/5/2019), https://www.facebook.com/174457180812/posts/10156966613325813/

49 For instance: Giuseppe Conte, M5S Facebook page (25/1/2019), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/294031741470079/

50 M5S Facebook page (12/4/2019), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/2268397643419869/

51 In this context, the title of "President" attributed to prime minister Conte stands for "President of the Council of Ministers".

52 M5S Facebook page (12/2/2019), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/431346547406104/

As to the **Lega (Nord)**, the joint 2013 coalition manifesto called for "More Europe of the Peoples, less euro-bureaucracy". It referred to the Italian national interest on multiple matters, but contained pro-European proposals against austerity – for example, creating Eurobonds and excluding investment from deficit calculations under the Stability and Growth Pact. Back then, the party discourse significantly focused on the concerns of Northern Italy such as agriculture, whether in the constructive tones of the federal secretary and president of Lombardy Roberto Maroni – who once demanded to negotiate directly with the EU Commissioner, since he knew regional specificities – or in starker tones:

> *The agreement reached in Brussels on the common agricultural policy is insufficient in relation to the needs of the European agricultural sector and our country's sector in particular [...] We are a net contributor to Europe, and the North donates between Rome*

and Brussels three-quarters of the taxes citizens pay. Evidently, [...] this government has no weight whatsoever in Europe to enforce our interests.[53]

<div align="right">Roberto Caon, 3/07/2013</div>

Matteo Salvini, who already purported to "fight THIS EUROPE that is a slave to the banks, to finance and to the powers that be",[54] became leader in December 2013, immediately stating at the federal congress the goal

> *to win, to occupy Brussels, to dismantle it and rebuild it afresh [...] To meet all in Brussels, at the headquarters of the monster of wastefulness and financial dictatorship, to take to the streets in spring with all who demand to become again masters of their future, of their currency and of their borders.*[55]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 15/12/2013</div>

In the run-up to the European general election, the party shed its slogan "The North First!" in favour of a "STOP EURO" plank, disseminating an eponymous manual whose subtitle was "How to get out of the nightmare — The truth nobody tells you". On Forza Italia's lack of opposition to the euro, Salvini thus commented: "What a shame, a treason against the Italians",[56] whereas he spurned the Renzi Cabinet as "nothing else than the third Merkel cabinet in Italy, obviously not elected by the people just like the previous ones".[57]

> *This European Soviet Union starves and ruins our folk more and more, while it throws the doors wide open to the invasion of illegal*

53   Roberto Caon, Lega Facebook Page (3/7/2013), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/561972747178989/

54   Matteo Salvini Facebook page (12/8/2013), https://www.facebook.com/252306033154/posts/10151611997088155/

55   Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (15/12/2013), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/638536809522582/

56   Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (11/3/2014), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/678361372206792/

57   Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (19/5/2014), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/710615512314711/

immigrants. The Italian government then does its part and hosts them in hotels at our expense. Dear bureaucrats of Brussels, dear Angela Merkel, prepare to get lost, because it will be the European peoples that will give you an expulsion order next Sunday.[58]

Matteo Salvini, 23/05/2014

58   Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (23/5/2014), https://www.facebook.com/42270396777 2535/posts/712683795441216/

However, the untitled 39-page manifesto was still a convoluted document, caught between nationalist rebranding and a final appeal "For the North, its families, its citizens and its firms",[59] between the temperate language of a former governing party and rough slips; between an autonomous discourse and verbatim quotes from intellectuals; between a tight core message and a mixed bag of amassed arguments.

Thus, while the incipit (reported below) moderately criticised the EU in terms of a democratic deficit, the programmatic document also craved national sovereignty, justified its own pre-eminence over EU law and decision-making powers on extra-EU immigration, and invoked national interests on EU trade policy. Populism spurred a demand to have tribunals deliver rulings "in the name of the EU" rather than "the people" when applying EU law, and there were coarse passages such as a description of "eurocrats", appointed "to mysterious "committees", charged with finding the algorithm of the perfect flush or the ideal fridge".[60] An identitarian thread surfaced – even more than in a 7-page heterogeneous onslaught on Turkish accession – in the other excerpt of the manifesto reported below.

> *Many citizens have started to seriously ask themselves questions on the European construction and especially on the degree of democracy existing within it [...] An honest and unprejudiced debate on Europe and the euro has opened at last. Note that this does not mean, as some political force has recently attempted to make everyone believe, that we are taking the direction of a kind of populism and Euroscepticism opposing Europe tout court: [but] that the peoples of Europe want to be direct actors in the political and institutional decisions concerning them [...] And we are with them [...] Another Europe is possible: the Europe of the peoples and of the Regions.*[61]

Lega manifesto 2014

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59   Lega party manifesto 2014, p. 39.

60   Lega party manifesto 2014, p. 3.

61   Lega party manifesto 2014, p. 2.

Today the dichotomy is between globalism and identity. Amongst the actors of globalism, we firmly include the EU. In the name of an egalitarianism passed off as equality, it is engineering a homogenisation of customs and traditions, social models, communication and values, to unbind the person from his community, from the people he is part of.[62]

Lega manifesto 2014

By 2014, the party had developed rhetoric marked by "bad manners" – against the euro, Merkel and Germany, the invasion of illegal immigrants, Matteo Renzi and the Italian centre-left camp. This was soon to crystallise into a relatively stable discursive arsenal.

One underlying element was a zero-sum view of interests. A top economic spokesman for the party, Claudio Borghi, denounced historical conformity of European politics to German interests and argued that "the tall story of the united Europe [is] a lie because in reality, as there are counterposed interests and separate balance sheets, what is good for Germany will probably be bad for Italy".[63] In Salvini's more direct terms,

If the bankers are happy […] it is an EVIL for us all […] Are the markets and the EU satisfied with Renzi? BAD. Brussels is our PUBLIC ENEMY N° 1: if they are pleased it means that it is BAD FOR US![64]

Matteo Salvini, 3/06/2014

While the axis built with the French Front National enabled Salvini to argue that "the emergency in both France and Italy is to be again the masters in our own homeland",[65] party exponents reacted to the

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62   Lega party manifesto 2014, p. 30.

63   Claudio Borghi, Lega Facebook page (23/9/2015), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/videos/961520523890874/

64   Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (3/6/2014), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/718729791503283/

65   Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (16/3/2016), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/videos/1048863595156566/

Brexit referendum by conveying the "need to destroy this Europe to rebuild another one based on the interests of the citizens",[66] and by affirming that "the bureaucrats of Brussels have lost, the victory belongs to the English people, Freedom, and Democracy".[67] The party leader claimed that "the difference is between the few powerful ones that COMMAND, masons, bankers and lobbies and the PEOPLE, not left and right anymore".[68] Soon afterwards, however, the then president of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini, who had espoused the demographic argument considering immigration as a remedy for heavily declining birth rates, was portrayed by Salvini as the "anti-Italian Left that wants us to be colonised and slaves to the European Soviet Union".[69] The migratory phenomenon itself was qualified as "a genocide", "an attempt at ethnic cleansing, at the mass uprooting of the European citizens and peoples to the benefit of the new slaves".[70]

When European leaders signed the Rome Declaration in March 2017 – to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome and renew their commitment to union within Europe – the Lega staged a protest, lamenting betrayal of the European ideals and peoples and European representation of big business rather than the people. Salvini repeatedly claimed to be European and pro-European while loathing "this Europe", while the Lega wanted "a Europe closer to citizens, a Europe responding to the Italians' needs instead of going on about the centimetres or the millimetres of clams".[71] Indeed, the message was clear that "I DO NOT

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66 Massimiliano Fedriga, Lega Facebook page (27/6/2016), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvini premier/videos/1114608468582078/

67 Filippo Busin, Lega Facebook page (24/6/2016), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/videos/1112815428761382/

68 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (27/6/2016), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/1114497685259823/

69 Lega Facebook page (12/3/2016), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/10463 62175406708/

70 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (18/9/2016), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/1177504875625770/

71 Gian Marco Centinaio, Lega Facebook page (24/3/2017), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvini premier/videos/1379998295376426/

CARE ABOUT THE RULES AND CONSTRAINTS OF BRUSSELS THAT GO AGAINST ITALIAN INTEREST. I WILL EITHER CHANGE THEM OR IGNORE THEM".[72]

> *Does it seem normal to you that Europe does nothing about the INVASION of illegal immigrants, keeps the demented SANCTIONS against RUSSIA (the only power that really fights ISIS) and bankrolls with BILLIONS TURKEY that promises HOLY WARS in our home, and unfortunately then, as [the attack in] London shows, actions of war really happen? Is it POPULIST to assert that this EUROPE has to be OVERTURNED upside down???*[73]

Matteo Salvini, 24/03/2017

Hashtags like #stopinvasione, #bastaeuro and #primagliitaliani[74] were featured ubiquitously in party communication until the 2018 general election. Again, a joint coalition manifesto was presented: this time its third section, titled "Fewer constraints from Europe", emphasised "more politics, less bureaucracy in Europe", "German-style prevalence of our Constitution over EU law (recovery of sovereignty)" and "the safeguard of Italian interests in every context" with special reference to Made in Italy products.[75] However, the Lega also had an autonomous manifesto, "The revolution of common sense", whose fourth section — "Yes to the Europe of the peoples, of peace and freedom. No to the Europe of bureaucrats and speculators" — advocated "a form of free and pacific cooperation among States, having a purely economic nature",[76] listed types of sovereignty to be recovered and openly aired multilateral or unilateral exit from the euro.

> *[The EU is] a gigantic supranational body, bereft of real democratic legitimacy and structured in a tentacular bureaucratic structure that*

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72 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (17/12/2017), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/1666965580013028/

73 Matteo Salvini Facebook page (24/3/2017), https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/10154618612483155/

74 Respectively meaning "stop the invasion", "enough with the euro" and "Italians first".

75 Centre-right coalition manifesto 2018, p. 4.

76 Lega party manifesto 2018, p. 9.

dictates the agenda to our Governments, even to the detriment of the physical and economic safeguard of the citizens of individual member States. We want to stay within the EU only on the condition of renegotiating all the Treaties that pose constraints to the practice of our full and legitimate sovereignty, de facto returning to the European Economic Community preceding the Maastricht Treaty. The euro is the main cause of our economic decline, a currency tailor-made for Germany and multinational firms and opposed to the needs of Italy and small business.[77]

Lega manifesto 2018

In the chaotic days that jeopardised the birth of the Government of Change in May 2018, Sergio Mattarella's caution came under fire: "Mattarella has taken on a great responsibility in choosing not to act for the good of the Italians",[78] "they have not allowed our government to start because the Europe of the powers that be fears us".[79]

By May 2019, following Salvini's vociferous intransigency as the minister of interior against the landing of migrant ships in Italian ports, the Lega had soared in opinion polls: no specific manifesto was prepared, other than six points agreed by its European-level alliance, the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF). Besides espousing democracy, they stressed "the sovereignty of the States and the peoples, relying on collaboration among the nations", without any sovereignty transfer to supranational institutions, and underscored "preservation of the identity of the peoples and nations of Europe", underpinning immigration controls.[80] Salvini's rough communication was deployed both during the campaign and later in the year, in relation to the government's struggle with the European Commission on the budget law.

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77 Lega party manifesto 2018, p. 9.

78 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (28/5/2018), https://www.facebook.com/42270396777 2535/posts/1841040959272155/

79 Armando Siri, Lega Facebook page (30/5/2018), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/videos/1843175072392077/

80 MENF programme 2019.

If the Italians send us to Europe, we will act upon the interests of the Italians and of the Italian firms. Italy is the best country in the world and we have nothing to envy in anyone.[81]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 24/05/2019</div>

On the one side, bureaucrats, bankers, do-gooders, [migrant] boats, on the other side the People and the Common Sense, on the one side the past, on the other side the Future![82]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 23/05/2019</div>

To be scolded by European Commissioners who represent themselves and very few others, this is not respectful. We in Europe give much and receive little. We want to use the Italians' money for the Italians, we ask nothing from others.[83]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 10/06/2019</div>

As to **Berlusconi's political party** – which contested the 2013 general election as Il Popolo della Libertà – the leader's preface to the coalition programme described a time rife with mass distrust and condemned adherence to the "austerity politics imposed by German-centric Europe". It also vowed to "defend, as we have always done, the interests of Italy in Europe".[84] Italian interests remained an important reference point for party exponents also after Berlusconi decided in late 2013 to withdraw support from the Letta Cabinet and to contextually reforge his previous party, Forza Italia (although a right-of-centre splinter broke away to remain in the parliamentary majority and in government).

For the 2014 European elections – in which Berlusconi, convicted for tax fraud, was prevented from standing as a candidate – the

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81 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (24/5/2019), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/2378083032234609/

82 Matteo Salvini Facebook page (23/5/2019), https://www.facebook.com/252306033154/posts/10156635148463155/

83 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (10/6/2019), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/videos/624323148045467/

84 PdL party manifesto 2018, p. 4-5.

party only prepared four meagre bullet points under the telling heading "More Italy in Europe. Less Europe in Italy". The document reprised proposals of the 2013 manifesto – such as common tax and foreign policies, Eurobonds and the abolition of the Fiscal Compact – but also advocated renegotiation of "all treaties signed at European level". Nevertheless, the limelight was on Berlusconi's harsh remarks against Germany and hardened criticism of the EU, presumably driven by electoral tactics.

In 2015-2016 the party discourse on Europe spiked, largely due to intensified migration flows across the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkan Route, recurring budgetary skirmishes between the prime minister and the European Commission, and terrorist attacks that struck major European cities. With regard to immigration, criticism of European absence, indifference or selfishness was voiced. Notably, a lingering tension – somewhat also affecting the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Partito Democratico – distinguished party exponents expecting solidarity in hosting migrants from those not blaming other member states for "protecting their citizens". One politician depicted a Europe historically called to prove "that member States do not only stay together for economic reasons but [...] can also face a tragic emergency in a united way with agreed therapies", but immediately vindicated the "basic principle", with regard to migrants, whereby "the rights of the Italians come first, beginning with the right to security".[85] As for the eurozone, the dramatic days experienced by Greece in mid-2015 led party exponent and economic expert Renato Brunetta to criticise the line taken by the EU:

> *I do not like Tsipras, but if he manages to have the direction of Europe changed, [...] go Tsipras! [...] Germany has yearned to use [the state rescue fund] to save the German and French banks, there is no reason why it cannot be used to save Greece, to save the euro. [...] Enough of this Europe of the bureaucrats, enough of this German Europe. We do not like this Europe. In the latest hours, as we hear, Renzi has been saying so, too. Go, Renzi, wake up, punch the weight of Italy, a founding member of Europe, but not of this German Europe.*[86]

<div align="right">Renato Brunetta, 1/07/2015</div>

However, party exponents also expressed fierce criticism especially aimed at Renzi, decrying his alleged wasted semester of EU

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85 Francesco Paolo Sisto, FI Facebook page (12/5/2015), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/568055096670055/

86 Renato Brunetta, FI Facebook page (1/7/2015), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/587760758032822/

presidency and ineffectiveness in getting the EU and European partners to tackle contemporary crises. Indeed, on multiple occasions Forza Italia explicitly absolved Europe when delivering blows to the allegedly disastrous economic policies of the Italian government. Party exponents additionally claimed that "Renzi has not been elected, he has no democratic legitimacy, so Europe does not recognise him as an interlocutor",[87] to depict the Berlusconi IV Cabinet as the last one actually elected by the Italian population. The main target was the government's competence, in a valence perspective suited to the (then) pivot of the centre-right.

In 2017-2018, in sync with Berlusconi's regained centrality, the underpinnings of what was to be the party's depiction of the state of European integration up until 2019 started to solidify.

> It was meant to be a Europe of the peoples, where national identities would find a synthesis without dissolving in the common European identity [...] A Europe capable of a single foreign and defence policy, a beacon of peace and freedom for all the countries of the world, based on popular sovereignty, lightweight in its bureaucratic makeup. A Europe of opportunities, not constraints. I still believe in this idea of Europe [...] Those who nowadays believe a country like Italy can do without Europe make a resounding mistake. But [so do] those who believe that Europe can be the one of the bureaucrats of Brussels, serving policies that hinder and stifle growth in many European countries. That Europe is not just wrong, it is rejected by the folk.[88]

Silvio Berlusconi, 25/03/2017

In 2018, as has been seen, the centre-right programme demanded "fewer constraints from Europe", expressed hostility towards bureaucracy and pledged to protect the national interest. Forza Italia did not add any manifesto of its own to it. Cloistered away from government after the election, it recast its European dis-

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87   Elvira Savino, FI Facebook page (19/1/2016), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/659496984192532/

88   Silvio Berlusconi, FI Facebook page (25/3/2017), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/883736918435203/

course around the two figures of Silvio Berlusconi and Antonio Tajani, the then president of the European Parliament. Reviving its link with the European People's Party, Forza Italia strived to present itself as a safe pair of hands, questioning the credentials of the Government of Change from a right-wing standpoint — conscious of the need for a future reconciliation with the Lega — and on the very ground of sovereignty and interest.

> WE ARE BECOMING A LIMITED SOVEREIGNTY COUNTRY BECAUSE OF THE SOVEREIGNIST GOVERNMENT. The Budget Law is not there yet. Is the government waiting for Santa Claus to deliver it (with the sleigh, the reindeers, etc.) or is it waiting for Juncker and the oh-so-despised European Commission to have them write it under dictation?[89]

> Mara Carfagna, 17/12/2018

In the 2019 campaign, Berlusconi's top place on the party list was emphasised: unlike the other leaders, he would "remain in Europe to act upon the interest of Italy and of the Italians".[90] "Interest" was also duly stressed in his elaborate preface to the party manifesto, titled "A new Europe, a new West", in relation to the work of party MEPs and to the African and Chinese challenges lying ahead. Berlusconi treated sovereignist forces across the continent with a partly patronising, partly constructive attitude, as he stated the need to unite the European right camp around a "new European sovereignism". Time and again, Forza Italia restated its strategic European goals:

> 1. Lead the European People's Party to be the pivot of an alliance with all the political forces not belonging to the left. 2. Radically change this Europe of the bureaucrats and accountants, and bring it back to the project of the founding fathers, a cohesive and supportive Union of all the European countries. 3. Have a united Europe, with an army and a common foreign policy, to be determi-

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89 Mara Carfagna, FI Facebook page (17/12/2018), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/1287478094727748/

90 FI Facebook page (14/5/2019), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/1391218031020420/

nant in governing the world. 4. Build a Europe capable of reunifying the West, that comprises the EU, the US and Russia, to obstruct the hegemonic project of China.[91]

Forza Italia Facebook page, 10/05/2019

2. Geopolitical Alignments and Challenges

Unlike the EU and its manifold impacts on domestic policy, geopolitical challenges are usually less widespread in party discourse, possibly because foreign policy is a less immediate concern for many citizens than bread-and-butter issues and has a tenuous relationship with the traditionally dominant political cleavages. In comparison to Europe, parties therefore refer less frequently to major powers, theatres of crisis or elements of the international order, with specific topics only retaining salience for brief intervals.

In 2013, Bersani's **Partito Democratico** argued that "in a world in turmoil, peace, cooperation and hospitality must inspire anew the

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91 FI Facebook page (10/5/2019), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/1388271297981760/

political agency […] also in the diplomacy of States".[92] The PD also placed itself "on the side of the struggles of whole peoples for the defence of human rights",[93] and upheld "responsibility" concerning international obligations. When a chemical attack in Syria sparked the possibility of an armed conflict, the party exclusively endorsed committed diplomatic action instead, seeking unity within the international community – possibly with EU involvement – to prevent even more catastrophic scenarios. The party also embraced the UNHCR campaign for World Refugee Day.

Advocating "A stronger Italy in Europe, a stronger Europe in the world", the 2014 manifesto called the EU "to contribute to the preservation of the fundamental principles of democracy, peace and respect for human rights, including the rights of women and children".[94] The PD framed an argument based on fundamental rights to endorse further enlargement; moreover, it claimed "to support those who fight for democracy, social justice, non-discrimination and freedom from any form of occupation in every corner of the world",[95] as well as "to fight against global imbalances and poverty by promoting coherence in development policies, the achievement of the Millennium Goals and of the goals set by the United Nations agenda for the post-2015 period".[96] The other pledge to relaunch Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, however, was linked not just to democratisation and socio-economic development, but also to border controls and the fight against illegal immigration.

In 2015-2016, as was the case for the European sphere, Renzi's involvement in summits took centre stage in party communication on foreign affairs. EXPO 2015, hosted by Milan and centred on food and sustainability, symbolised governmental success in

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92 PD party manifesto 2013, p. 2.
93 PD party manifesto 2013, p. 5.
94 PD party manifesto 2014, p. 9.
95 PD party manifesto 2014, p. 9.
96 PD party manifesto 2014, p. 10.

putting up an event of global relevance and promoting renewed commitment to cooperation. Attention to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 21) in December 2015 resulted in Renzi's remark, upon signing the Paris Agreement in April 2016, that "Italy is back and, thanks to the stability of institutions and to the vigour of the Italians, it is finally acting as a protagonist".[97] The US was noticeably featured in the discourse of the PD during Renzi's visit there in 2016, as he praised creativity and exhibited forward-looking optimism along the lines of "the Italians [are] capable of marvellous things", or "there is a widespread longing for Italy in the world". Although the United Nations represented a regular undercurrent in the party's international discourse – thanks also to consideration of the UN's agencies and goals – the organisation was especially cited in relation to speeches made by the prime minister at the UN General Assembly in 2015 and 2016, as well as in relation to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's visit to the Italian Parliament for the 60th anniversary of Italy joining the UN. On that occasion, Renzi firstly remarked that "if it is true that Italy needs the United Nations, it is also true that the United Nations needs Italy",[98] then focused on Italian engagement in international cooperation and on the initiative of the Blue Helmets for Culture.

The 2018 manifesto restated many of these fundamentals. The 2013 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development was thus invoked with regards to the need for a change of paradigm – linked to climate change and to the Paris Agreement – and in relation to the green economy and economic policy, agriculture, energy policies and transport. Praise for the government's action buttressed a pledge to "gradually raise the level of contributions to cooperation so as to reach 0.3% of GDP by 2020 and in the future to reach 0.7% as established by the UN summit in 2015".[99] Respect of

97   Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (21/4/2016), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10153674839101896/

98   Matteo Renzi, PD Facebook page (15/10/2015), https://www.facebook.com/77034286895/posts/10153283774746896/

99   PD party manifesto 2018, p. 27.

human rights was identified as a priority in dialogues with African governments, though contradiction emerged on how this principle fed into stances on immigration:

> *Mindful of its values and history, Europe has a duty to host political refugees. This is an international right, which shall meet no exception in Europe.*[100]

<div align="right">PD manifesto 2018</div>

> *It is important to guarantee the rights of those who flee wars as much as the rights of those who host [them]: Italy, in this respect, is at the forefront [...], but these two elements must be kept in balance, in the awareness that hospitality finds a limit in integration capacity.*[101]

<div align="right">PD manifesto 2018</div>

As the Syrian crisis re-entered political debate, the elicited party position again privileged negotiations and multilateralism, as also briefly stated in the manifesto with reference to Syria and Libya. Russia was also mentioned more frequently, primarily due to Salvini's dangerous ties, leading to questions as to whether "Italians first" should be interpreted as "Russians first". China emerged in 2019 because of the memorandum of understanding signed by Italy in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative – met with far greater discontent than Renzi's own talks with Chinese counterparts in 2014-2016. In fact, China was seen as a political and economic giant that Italy could only face up to through a united Europe. Finally, the 2019 manifesto reprised previous mentions of a Europe-Africa partnership, lauding High Representative Federica Mogherini for having put the force of Europe "at the service of international cooperation, peace and global security, multilateralism, promotion and defence of democracy, human rights and the rule of law".[102]

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100   PD party manifesto 2018, p. 26.

101   PD party manifesto 2018, pp. 39-40.

102   PD party manifesto 2019, p. 13.

As to the **Movimento 5 Stelle**, neither the 2013 nor the 2014 programme dealt with non-EU foreign affairs. Around 2014, however, Russia already had a foothold in the party's discourse. Attacking Mogherini for allegedly hardening her attitude towards Russia in order to be chosen as the new EU High Representative, a post on Grillo's blog – tellingly titled "The Movimento 5 Stelle is neither pro-American nor pro-Russian, it is pro-Italian" – asked: "Shouldn't Italy defend the national interest first?"[103] This remained the basic posture in later years, with Russia emerging every now and then in relation to the sanctions imposed against it, which the M5S saw as negatively affecting Italian small business. The party also displayed scepticism towards various proposals intended to counter foreign meddling in politics.

> We want a sovereign country, not a country which is a subject to the EU, to the American multinational corporations or Russian gas. This is why, for two years, we have been proposing laws to create this sovereignty, be it food, political, energy or monetary sovereignty.[104]
>
> Alessandro Di Battista, 22/10/2014

China was evoked around 2015, when the Movimento 5 Stelle voiced opposition to the Chinese state being awarded "market economy status" (MES) by the EU.

> Imagine being home, on the couch, with a computer on your lap, and deciding to prevent the European Commission from granting the MES status to China, thus protecting the Italian economy, the Made in Italy and small and medium-sized enterprises.[105]
>
> David Borrelli, 5/05/2016

A very different narration would surround China in 2019, centred no more on calls to "stop the Chinese invasion in Europe" but

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103 Unsigned in beppegrillo.it, M5S Facebook page (4/9/2014), https://www.facebook.com/174457180812/posts/10152606423730813/

104 Alessandro Di Battista Facebook page (22/10/2014), https://www.facebook.com/299413980170673/posts/604548762990525/

105 David Borrelli, M5S Facebook page (5/5/2016), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10153936372675813/

on the opportunities that the memorandum of understanding signed with the Chinese country brought about for investment, the trade balance, firms and workers: "'*Italy first*', in full respect of relationships with our European partners", since "this Government safeguards the Italians, all of them, without exception".[106]

Another undercurrent regarded the Italy-US relationship, which was described from the Italian viewpoint as "allies, not subjects". Tense moments in 2016 included Luigi Di Maio's remark that "the duty of Italian institutions is to defend the Italian people: the decision to let American drones take off from our territory makes us a target of retaliation and military repercussions, which would fall on our folk and our communities";[107] and Di Battista's harsh reaction to the American ambassador's endorsement, prior to the constitutional referendum, of the reform promoted by Renzi.

> *It is a rather coarse and a very serious intrusion, so I would like to remind the American embassy that [...] they are our allies and not proconsuls here in Italy. And [...] that sovereignty belongs to the Italian people, and I would like to ask the ambassador whether he represents the North American people or some interest of some big investment bank.*[108]

<div align="right">Alessandro Di Battista, 13/09/2016</div>

Treaties negotiated by the EU with third countries, specifically the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the US, were also vocally opposed by the party, combining left-wing arguments with "food sovereignty" and anti-establishment sensationalism.

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106 Luigi Di Maio Facebook page (22/5/2019), https://www.facebook.com/522391027797448/posts/2265867123449821/

107 Luigi Di Maio Facebook page (24/2/2016), https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/videos/977251252311421/

108 Alessandro Di Battista, M5S Facebook page (13/9/2016), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10154277494525813/

> *ALL YOU MUST KNOW ON THE TTIP THAT WILL DESTROY OUR*
> *ECONOMY! SPREAD IT AND INFORM! HERE IS WHY THE MOVI-*
> *MENTO 5 STELLE OPPOSES THIS MESS! Be informed meanwhile*
> *that the non-elected prime minister Renzi has given the green light*
> *to all of this in agreement with Merkel. They have not even deigned*
> *to listen to the voice of the citizens!*[109]

<div align="right">M5S Facebook page, 1/07/2016</div>

In 2017, the party launched an online awareness-deepening programme on foreign policy, framing topics in line with the understanding of party exponents like Di Battista and Manlio Di Stefano:

> *We will talk about SOVEREIGNTY, a concept that in the last years*
> *has been forgotten by our political class. About REJECTION OF*
> *WAR, meant as an inalienable right of all the peoples of the Earth.*
> *[...] About OVERCOMING NATO, supporting an arrangement of its*
> *activities in an exclusively defensive perspective [...] About immedi-*
> *ate withdrawal of the SANCTIONS IMPOSED ON RUSSIA, showing*
> *how much they have weighed down Italian small and medium-sized*
> *businesses. About the possibility to expand economic and diplo-*
> *matic relationships to new alliances such as the BRICS, the ALBA[110]*
> *[...], seeing in MULTILATERALISM a new possible world.*[111]

<div align="right">Manlio Di Stefano and Ornella Bertorotta, 25/03/2017</div>

The multifarious 2018 party manifesto thus reflected the continuation of previous trends but also an undeniable degree of intra-party variability. Again, several policy-specific chapters – for example, Environment, Justice, Health, Telecommunications – based assessments on data provided by international organisations, referred to international legal frameworks and to the recommendations made by bodies such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), or praised international conventions. Conversely, the incendiary chapter on Foreign Affairs – massively centred on

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109 M5S Facebook page (1/7/2016), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10154068480570813/

110 ALBA refers to the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America.

111 Manlio Di Stefano and Ornella Bertorotta, M5S Facebook page (25/3/2017), https://www.facebook.com/movimentocinquestelle/videos/10154867019080813/

sovereignty and national interest – fulminated against Western uni-lateralism as the praxis of the recent decades, against the limits to territorial and democratic sovereignty introduced by NATO, and against Italy's (allegedly) exclusive dialogue with the EU and the US.

> *The foreign policy of the Movimento 5 Stelle is based on respect for the self-determination of the peoples, sovereignty, territorial integrity and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the individual countries; on respect for multilateralism, cooperation and dialogue among the populations, and a strict implementation of the principles established by the United Nations Charter.*[112]

> M5S manifesto 2018

> *We recognise [...] the supreme right to the territorial, political, food, energy, cultural and monetary sovereignty of every country; the inalienable right to the defence of its independence by any means [...] We reject any form of colonialism, neo-colonialism or foreign interference.*[113]

> M5S manifesto 2018

> *The starting question [...] concerns the challenges of tomorrow. Can we face them together in Europe? The answer is yes, but as sovereign, free and independent States, able to pursue the national interests in a – finally – multipolar world.*[114]

> M5S manifesto 2018

Again, foreign policy was largely absent from the 2019 European manifesto. Out of 24 party proposals, one advocated full actualis-ation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and another promoted international cooperation to remove the roots of migration: none made the final 10-point list.

For the **Lega** (and Il Popolo della Libertà), the only reference to foreign policy in the 2013 programme pledged to strengthen

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112 M5S party manifesto 2018, chapter "Foreign Affairs", non-amended version, p. 2.

113 M5S party manifesto 2018, chapter "Foreign Affairs", non-amended version, p. 2.

114 M5S party manifesto 2018, chapter "Foreign Affairs", amended version, pp. 2-3.

bilateral agreements to effectively repatriate illegal immigrants and make foreign criminals serve sentences in their countries. The early party discourse included constructive references to the organisation of EXPO 2015, given Maroni's role as the president of Lombardy, but under Salvini's leadership the topic soon receded.

The heterogeneous 2014 manifesto referred to Libya as the "free port of human traffickers", called for wider national sovereignty in managing immigration, and went as far as to mandate refoulement. In fact, the European Court of Human Rights – which had condemned this practice enacted under the Berlusconi IV Cabinet,[115] given the nature of *non-refoulement* as a fundamental principle in international law – was not depicted favourably.

> *Sovereignty is replaced by a governance of universal powers: on the one hand the secular arm, the new Holy Roman Empire having its seat in Brussels; on the other hand the new papacy, the European Court of Human Rights having its seat in Strasbourg.*[116]

Lega manifesto 2014

Furthermore, the manifesto demanded Italian withdrawal from all climate regulation – including the Kyoto Protocol and the "eco-fascist" impositions of the EU – until major powers took on similar commitments. Especially in 2014, China was somewhat included in the party discourse, which claimed to defend Made in Italy products and denounced the clearance sale of the country to the Chinese. The Enrica Lexie case[117] also elicited stark remarks regarding two Italian marines (*marò*) caught in a diplomatic stalemate between India and Italy:

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115   See the case Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy (2012).

116   Lega party manifesto 2014, p. 4.

117   The Enrica Lexie case is an international controversy mainly involving Italy and India, following a shooting that took place off the coast of Kerala in 2012, when two Indian fishermen were reportedly killed by two Italian marines aboard the Italian-flagged commercial oil tanker *Enrica Lexie*. Around 2014, the marines were detained in India amidst uncertainty surrounding the procedures and length of the trial they would face, while the Italian government was attempting to go beyond diplomatic friction by promoting a multilateral solution.

HOW DISGUSTING! Another POSTPONEMENT for the case of the MARINES [...] The Italian government protects every kind of foreigner, but does not give a damn about two of its citizens.[118]

Matteo Salvini, 1/08/2014

Russia had already featured in the Lega's communication by 2014, as the "absurd" sanctions damaging the productive fabric of the Italian economy were contrasted with an attitude of "dialogue, debate and collaboration"[119] with Moscow spurred, as Salvini claimed, by defence of the national interest. Unconcerned by Russian military intervention in Crimea, the party leader argued that only a referendum, allowing citizens to decide – and the country to be pacifically divided into its historically Western-leaning and Eastern-leaning parts – would avoid war.[120] If anything, references to Putin multiplied in 2015: terrorist attacks across Europe prompted scathing retorts among party exponents, who unambiguously embraced a framing of war, depicted Renzi as a coward endangering the Italians' interest, and commended Russia as a bulwark against terrorism.

Europe sleeps, Italy sleeps, this is no talking matter, no time-wasting, we need to attack ISIS, to wipe it from the face of the Earth, to scrap tomorrow morning the sanctions against Russia because Putin was right. I fear that Mogherini, Renzi [...] and this Europe are leading us to suicide. [...] I am worried by those who think of talking with ISIS, so by Europe and Italy: either one side or the other. [...] The do-gooders and the fake pacifists are accomplices of the terrorists.[121]

Matteo Salvini, 17/11/2015

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118 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (1/8/2014), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/746983042011291/

119 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (2/9/2014), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/761802057196056/

120 Matteo Salvini Facebook page (1/3/2014), https://it-it.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/venti-di-guerra-in-ucrainachi-vuole-la-pace-deve-lasciar-decidere-i-cittadiniun-/10151999403578155/

121 Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (17/11/2015), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/videos/984761721566754/

Indeed, Islamic terrorism was forcefully evoked in 2015-2016: repeated endeavours to link the migration influx from the Mediterranean routes with the deadly terrorist threat allowed the party to frame a growing mass concern on the basis of its key issue. Again, it was invasion and war, justifying emergency laws, the monitoring or the closing of mosques — and borders as well.

> *They want to kill us, they come here, we economically support them, we cuddle them and they just want to blow us up! Enough, we have to throw them all out, and to expel with them this government of reckless and cowardly people that has chosen to surrender to the invasion and to endanger everyone.*[122]

> Gian Marco Centinaio, 9/03/2016

Over the same period, Syria (and Libya) were cited less because of Merkel's open door to Syrian asylum seekers — who were undeniably fleeing war — than because of the presence of ISIS, warranting tough international intervention by Italy and the West. At times, the EU was also weaved into the rhetorical bundle, with the Lega bashing a "government of puppets manipulated by Europe and steered for use and consumption by terrorists welcomed with open arms".[123]

> *Europe does not give a damn, the UN does not move an inch… Then, Italy has to behave as Italy: defend the BORDERS and STOP THE INVASION!*[124]

> Matteo Salvini, 21/04/2015

> *Renzi has blood on his hands, as regards both Libya and Italy. In Italy he roots for the criminals and frees them, on immigration he is an accomplice of international terrorism […] Mattarella boasts*

122 Gian Marco Centinaio, Lega Facebook page (9/3/2016), https://www.facebook.com/42270396
7772535/posts/1044553205587605/

123 Gianluca Pini, Lega Facebook page (9/3/2016), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/
videos/1044642498912009/

124 Matteo Salvini Facebook page (21/4/2015), https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/
10152910321963155/

about the leading edge of Italy: either they are crazy or they are accomplices, both Renzi and Mattarella.[125]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 3/03/2016</div>

Arguably, a certain shift in discourse on the UN is symptomatic of an escalation in the "othering" of international organisations. Around 2015, Salvini's party repeatedly suggested that the UN Special Envoy to Libya, Bernardino Leon, had proposed a naval blockade, on which the Lega based an *argumentum ab auctoritate* of sorts disapproving of the government for its disregard of the same proposal when made by the "racist" Lega. Fast forward to 2019, and Salvini's battle in government against NGO ships — dubbed as "pirate ships" that are outlawed and complicit in human trafficking — featured scornful comments on the UN in response to criticism received.

We pay the UN hundreds of millions of euro to have them say to us that we are ugly and bad. [...] Fewer departures of ships mean fewer deaths and fewer costs, let the UN come to terms with it.[126]

<div align="right">Matteo Salvini, 11/06/2019</div>

While the section on immigration in the 2018 party manifesto weighed up hotspots under UN auspices in safe countries near Libya, another section on autonomy depicted "international organisations such as the UN and the very WTO" — alongside "a certain model of Europe", portrayed as technocratic and domineering towards member states, and gigantic sovereign wealth funds — as increasingly endangering the sovereignty of the people.[127] The former section also stated an intention to push countries of origin to accept bilateral agreements on repatriation through economic deals, while abjuring agreements of international aid towards "non-collaborating" countries.

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125   Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (3/3/2016), https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/videos/1040605462649046/

126   Matteo Salvini, Lega Facebook page (11/6/2019), https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/posts/2411424948900417/

127   Lega party manifesto 2018, p. 20.

The manifesto portrayed Russia as a key partner, as well as a part of the Western civilisation, and confirmed the preferential alliance with the US, led by a president pursuing many policies "fully in tune with the Lega's programme and the Italian national interest".[128] Immediately introducing "THE NATIONAL INTEREST AS A KEY PRINCIPLE", the section on foreign policy upheld a precise understanding of it.

> *Italian politics must go back to being inspired not by ideological principles or partisan gains, but by national interest. The first national interest is to preserve one's own sovereignty: sovereignty means being masters in our own homeland and laying claim to the right to build a future for us, sheltered from the most cumbersome foreign interferences. In this sense the projects of "United States of Europe", that would lead to the cancellation of Italian individuality, and all the intermediate steps that expropriate the national Parliament (and thus the national people) of key competences, should not be indulged. The second key national interest is on security, in particular from threats such as terrorism, Islamic extremism, uncontrolled migration flows.*[129]

<div align="right">Lega manifesto 2018</div>

As regards **Berlusconi's party**, beside the 2013 coalition manifesto, the four bullet points presented in 2014 discussed no international topic. During that year the US tangibly appeared in party discourse because of the revelations of Tim Geithner, the former US Secretary of the Treasury, on Berlusconi's downfall in 2011. In fact, until the party leader weaved the US into the core message of Forza Italia's 2019 electoral campaign, the American ally was most intensely (and leeringly) cited in relation to the ending of Berlusconi's premiership – for example, when in 2016 Wikileaks released documents proving that the National Security Agency (NSA) had been spying on him.

> *The wiretapping enacted by the American NSA against the Berlusconi Cabinet is outrageous and tramples on respect for the*

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128   Lega party manifesto 2018, pp. 22.

129   Lega party manifesto 2018, p. 22.

sovereignty of each State. At the same time, it is the umpteenth piece of a puzzle that over the last few years has been recomposing itself, as the wiretapping confirms what we have always asserted: that in 2011 there was a conspiracy of the powers that be, both Italian and international, against president Berlusconi and the government he led.[130]

<div align="right">Gabriella Giammanco, 23/02/2016</div>

The US was also invoked when, after the terrorist attacks of 2015, Berlusconi proposed a solution on ISIS that "President Putin has been promoting for months: an international coalition that, under UN auspices, is to unite Europe, China, Russia, the United States and some Arab countries".[131] However, the main focus here was neither the US nor China – then depicted as a welcome partner against "this ISIS cancer" – but Russia, with a view to demanding its full rehabilitation. Forza Italia's arguments encompassed the impact of sanctions on the Italian economy and damage inflicted on the national interest, which was understood as maintaining a bridging role between the EU-US and Russia, just as Berlusconi had done when he had facilitated a historical *rapprochement* in Pratica di Mare in 2002.

> *The Renzi government cannot bring itself to be on the side of the Italians. This is true on immigration, on the economy and also on the relationship with Russia. [...] Protecting our business and our geopolitical interests is more important than the pats on the back that the prime minister is continuously seeking to obtain from international leaders. Also because those pats are gestures not of regard but of complacency towards someone who always says "yes" even when he should not.*[132]

<div align="right">Luca Squeri, 11/06/2015</div>

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130 Gabriella Giammanco, FI Facebook page (23/2/2016), https://www.facebook.com/1722653962 49029/posts/673589656116598/

131 Silvio Berlusconi, FI Facebook page (21/11/2015), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/637346353074262/

132 Luca Squeri, FI Facebook page (11/6/2015), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/578913865584178/

Putin's line is the one of realism and awareness. He is a Russian patriot who has no hesitation when it comes to defending the rights of his country, but he is a man with a very lucid vision of international relations.[133]

Silvio Berlusconi, 16/11/2016

In 2015-2016, the party discourse also stressed terrorism, Libya and the two marines. Many party exponents adhered to a framing of terrorist attacks as a conflict waged against the West and its civilisation: "the time of fake pietism and fake integration that give the green light to no man's lands is OVER AND DONE WITH",[134] "we cannot fight a war by teaching our youth tolerance in the peripheries, this is no moment for slogans and political correctness".[135] *En passant*, some execrated an "unlawful prime minister who is locked in the corridors of power and so distant from the reality lived by the Italians".[136]

Several voices also crafted connections between terrorists and not just human traffickers, but also the displaced persons boarding the migrant ships. Thus, Libya was linked to condemnation of an impending "invasion", which featured the claim that Berlusconi had been right about what to do with the country – in his pursuit of cordial relations with Colonel Gaddafi for the purpose of migrant flow control – again to deliver blows to the Renzi Cabinet due to his alleged incompetence vis-à-vis Berlusconi.

Even more than the Lega did, Forza Italia similarly weaponised the issue of the two marines to decry the humiliation undergone by Italian honour, dignity and sovereignty, to argue that "since the

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133 Silvio Berlusconi, FI Facebook page (16/11/2016), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/635838326558398/

134 Mariastella Gelmini, FI Facebook page (22/3/2016), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/686386581503572/

135 Luca Squeri, FI Facebook page (23/3/2016), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/687131708095726/

136 Marco Marin, FI Facebook page (15/3/2016), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/682503485225215/

end of the Berlusconi Cabinet, which was the last one democratically elected by the Italians, Italy no longer has a foreign policy",[137] but mostly to criticise the inertia of Renzi's government and the ensuing loss of international reputation.

> *Other initiatives in the supranational organisations can and must be put in place in order to ensure the resolution of this case, which frankly by now provokes outrage [...] We should and could make our participation in all international missions contingent upon the US, Russia, NATO, the UN, the EU helping us solve the case with India.*[138]

<div align="right">Elio Vito, 19/11/2015</div>

This quote epitomises the radical pragmatism displayed by Forza Italia towards the main international organisations in which Italy is involved, including the UN. The same nonchalant attitude also appeared in a call for intervention off the coast of Libya, to block the arrival of illegal immigrants, as shown by the then newly elected president of Liguria Giovanni Toti: "If Europe does it I am pleased, if the UN does it I am even more pleased, if no one does it Italy still has the duty to defend its citizens"[139] and their interests.

Berlusconi's comeback led to the development of a consistent (if basic) rhetorical strategy assigning roles to Europe, the United States, Russia and China. In 2018, anyway, the coalition manifesto again neglected foreign policy, merely alluding to "assisted refoulements" to stop arrivals, agreements with the countries of origin of economic migrants, and a "Marshall Plan for Africa", which the 2019 party manifesto later quantified in tens of billions of euro. As argued in Berlusconi's preface to the 2019 programmatic document, if the inhabitants of Africa could not share Western

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137 Elvira Savino, FI Facebook page (28/4/2015), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/563333460475552/

138 Elio Vito, FI Facebook page (19/11/2015), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/636719166470314/

139 Giovanni Toti, FI Facebook page (18/6/2015), https://www.facebook.com/172265396249029/posts/581586551983576/

living standards in their homeland, they would come to Europe as the consequence of an unstoppable historical law: giving the African youth hope and opportunities "is not only in their interest but also in ours".[140] According to a postscript to the manifesto, the Berlusconi Cabinets had increased participation in peacekeeping missions under UN auspices, in line both with the duty of a great democracy and with its interest in preventing terrorism. Moreover,

> *Berlusconi's foreign policy has promoted legitimate national interest through a foreign policy without hesitation, based on these pillars: close cooperation with the United States; loyalty to NATO and a widening of the alliance; full integration of the Russian Federation into Europe and of Turkey into the West; support to Israel; Euro-mediterranean development; an active role of Italy in peacekeeping missions and in the fight against global terrorism; no subalternity with regard to the European partners; development of commercial diplomacy.*[141]

FI manifesto 2019

3. Conclusions

This chapter has retraced the key elements of the foreign policy discourse of the Partito Democratico, the Movimento 5 Stelle, the Lega (Nord) and Forza Italia between 2013 and 2019, as regards the European sphere and international relations. Its account of the appearance and recurrence of certain elements, the specific topics discussed at particular junctures and the ways in which they have been framed allows the overlaps and distances between the parties to be discussed, especially in relation to the conveyance of populism, nationalism and sovereignism.

The Movimento 5 Stelle exhibited a discourse on Europe that developed earlier and further than its vision of international

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140   FI party manifesto 2019, p. 6.

141   FI party manifesto 2019, pp. 44-45.

affairs. Disapproval of the EU was anchored in sovereignty in connection with democracy concerns, mixing sensationalism and rants against Germany with scholarly sources brought together by criticism of the eurozone makeup. Calling for abandonment of the euro in 2014, the party still pondered it as late as 2018. Alongside big business, the political elites of Italy and Europe were favourite targets, with not only the people but also their interests being invoked quite frequently. If MEPs added policy dimensions to Europe, leading to a more nuanced picture of its opportunities alongside its flaws, every clash with the EU level would still be confronted with rhetorical gunfire. Sovereignty also proved a key category in the global sphere, in terms of autonomy from the main powers and opposition to CETA and TTIP, although the hardline sovereignist vision enshrined in the Foreign Affairs chapter of the 2018 manifesto was offset by references in other thematic chapters, that were more at ease with the organisations and agencies of the UN as well as with the *acquis* of international law.

The Lega shifted its posture in 2013-2014. In transforming from a Northern regionalist party with government credentials to a national-populist force posing as an outsider, it upgraded the virulence of its outbursts, moving closer to the rhetorical style of its new leader Matteo Salvini. Having always counterposed the Europes of "the bureaucrats" and "the people", it regularly invoked the latter – as well as "the peoples" of Europe – while constantly presenting circumstances as dramatic or critical through widespread, unapologetic "bad manners". Yet the Lega's fundamental categories were primarily informed by culturally reactionary substance. In fact, national breakdown was frequently ascribed to the "invasion" of immigrants – at times depicted as "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" of the native population – and to the guilt of elites behaving as "traitors" by pursuing the interests of foreigners and illegal immigrants. The unrestrained espousal of sovereignty and strict national interest contained in the 2018 manifesto suited a party unapologetic about supporting Trump, Putin and Viktor

Orbán, but also increasingly antagonistic towards the shackles of international law and the United Nations itself.

Despite ideological oscillations over the period, the Partito Democratico unwaveringly exhibited an ideal commitment to the European identity and a "nothing is possible without Europe" electoral stance, together with sets of policy proposals actually more peripheral in its ordinary communication. That being said, during the premiership of Matteo Renzi the party's European message relied on his own message, showing at first the optimistic conviction that Italy and the EU should change together, then crude frustration caused by recurrent budgetary tensions and continuing stalemate on the common management of migration. Electoral manifestos largely shunned the category of "interests" – which was only cited by a few party exponents – and the signifier "the people". In its discourse, the Partito Democratico proved the most vocal supporter of international cooperation and the one political force staunchly committed to the UN and international networks alongside the European institutions.

Forza Italia – especially through its leader – also voiced a commitment of sorts to the UN and to NATO, albeit dubiously linked to the inclusion of Russia in the Western bloc, and despite otherwise scarce references to the institutions and laws of the international community (especially on human rights). Moving between the rhetoric of the 2014 European election and an attempted reconnection with the legacy of the European People's Party in 2018-2019, Berlusconi's party seems to have been primarily engaged in chastising the government of the day through a "whatever works" approach that, however, exposed tensions between interest-based reasoning and expectations of European solidarity. For his part, Berlusconi clearly adhered to international relations realism writ large.

Overlaps among political forces clearly existed. The concept of an invasion of migrants – irregular or otherwise – was propagated by

all actors except the Partito Democratico. Sensationalist messages were the preserve of the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Lega, which also relied on swearwords in Salvini's communication, but "bad manners" were also embraced by Forza Italia. Although avoiding such drifts, during tense phases in its European interaction Renzi's Partito Democratico fell back on remarks that are habitually Eurosceptic – for example, bitterly mocking EU regulation of menial details. Furthermore, government-opposition dynamics spurred all governing parties to depict a newly established key role for Italy in Europe, "with its head held high" or not "hat in hand" any longer, whereas those in opposition portrayed them as internationally isolated and incapable of imposing themselves. Finally, amidst either condemnation of "this Europe" or vows to change it, the ritually evoked but never fleshed out tropes of "Europe of the peoples" and "Europe of the bureaucrats" became almost universally accepted. Even the Partito Democratico, which avoided the former – although its advocacy of "a Europe closer to the citizens" may appear to voters just a fainter hue – at times performed its own criticism of bureaucracy and technocracy under Renzi's leadership.

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