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# POPULISM IN ITALY

EXPLORING THE IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF LEGA  
AND THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT

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# Populism in Italy

## Exploring the Ideological Roots of Lega and the Five Star Movement

Luca Manucci

The League (Lega) and Five Star Movement (M5S) are quite different from an ideological point of view, but something ties them together: their populist vision of society. The League is now a classic far right party fighting immigration, the 'cultural hegemony' of the Left, and the economic 'dictatorship' of the European institutions, while claiming to defend the Christian roots of Europe. M5S is a very different type of party, since it lacks a clear ideology and scholars struggle to position it on a classic left-right divide. M5S leaders, indeed, love to fuel the confusion: they claim to be neither left nor right, and to vote in favour of any 'good' law that serves the interests of the people. The two parties, however different from an ideological perspective, have something in common: they often articulate a populist discourse that divides society between the ever-deceived Italian people and the corrupt elites.

They might disagree on what to do with power in terms of policies, but they agree on what power is: direct emanation of the people's will, beyond checks and balances, above the media and the judiciary system. Salvini, the League's leader, often claims that his party wants to give back the power to all Italians, while Beppe Grillo, showman who co-founded M5S, similarly claims that the party's goal is to represent 100% of the Italian people. Uncomfortable questions from journalists are not welcome, other parties are systematically labeled as parasites or relics of the past, and the justice system is often accused of acting in a partisan way. Both M5S and the League propose a populist idea of democracy, at odds with liberal democracy.

However, despite their posture as modern Robin Hoods – or heroes of the common people – these two parties are hardly acting in the best interest of Italians. The League, for example, embezzled €49 million from fake electoral reimbursements. Other recent scandals involving the party have been numerous. For example, Russia is trying to destabilize the European Union by supporting right-wing populist movements, and parties like the League seem to accept that help. Apparently, people close to Matteo Salvini negotiated funds from Putin-aligned oligarchs before the 2019 European elections.<sup>1</sup>

Tellingly, while in government with the League, M5S never questioned the delayed repayment of €49 million of embezzled public funds, first of all to avoid new elections, and secondly to keep attention away from its own shady business. One of the most surprising moves of M5S in recent months is the invention of the “mandate zero”. The party was always against professional politicians and decided that its members could only serve a maximum of two mandates. Suddenly, and with no explanation, the party’s leader Di Maio introduced the idea of a *mandate zero*, de facto allowing the party’s MPs to run for a third mandate. Another distinctive trait of M5S, the live streaming of their meetings, has already been abandoned. Moreover, in 2016, the party conquered Turin and Rome, but the two mayors have been involved in every type of scandal. For example, Turin’s Chiara Appendino faced an embezzlement inquiry, while Rome’s Virginia Raggi has been under investigation for her handling of public tenders, eventually forcing M5S to abandon its commitment to expel officials who came under police inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

The Italian Second Republic, built on the ashes of a political system destroyed by corruption scandals in the mid-1990s, seems to be very similar to the first one. The Third Republic cherished by Di Maio promises to maintain a steady stream of scandals.<sup>3</sup> The League and M5S pledged to bring a new morality against the corruption of the political system, but beyond their different ideologies, they seem to be united by a very opaque management of the *res publica*. However, their voters are convinced that these scandals are the machination of hostile political opponents, conspiracies from the media and powerful economic elites, or excessive naivety from populist politicians, who being “like us” just committed a beginner’s mistake.

## POPULIST DEMOCRACY ITALIAN STYLE: TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE BROTH

The yellow-black government, which is a reference to the colors of M5S and the League, has been a populist experiment that lasted 14 months between June 2018 and September 2019. Initially, M5S was enjoying its shocking electoral result, since it was the strongest party with 32.68% of the votes, while the League had almost half of it (17.35%). However, things changed fast. The presence of Salvini on every mass media, night and day, made him appear as the real kingmaker, surely more than Prime Minister Conte, but also stronger than the other vice Prime Minister Di Maio. Indeed, at the 2019 European elections the League obtained an astounding 34.26% while M5S went down to 17.06%.

Going beyond any ideological differences between the two parties, the contract they signed before forming an alliance seemed to constitute a solid ground for a collaboration. Soon enough the wind changed, the League started flying in the polls, and Salvini thought that it was time to dump his allies and take the power all for himself. However, he did not consider one crucial element: M5S had become the real glue of the Italian political system. Its post-ideological approach made it possible to make a 180 degree twirl and form a government with the League's archenemy: the Democratic Party (PD). Indeed, for Di Maio it does not matter whether his allies are the far right or a moderate left-wing party. M5S goes with the wind, and can turn according to the need of the moment. To avoid new elections, which would have meant a significant loss of MPs, M5S formed another unlikely alliance, this time with the PD.

## THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT: AN EMPTY SHELL

It would be misleading to attribute the failure of the M5S-League deal to a political or ideological cause. It was, mostly, just political opportunism since the proverb "dog does not eat dog" often proves to be false. The two parties show deeply comparable characteristics, and this could explain why they could not govern together. Both the League and M5S use a strongly populist rhetoric. Salvini, like Grillo, claims that to be defined a populist is a compliment for him because it means to be close to the people. For example, Beppe Grillo claims that M5S gave back the country to the common

people and that, for this reason, it cannot have a clear ideological connotation, not even on ethical issues. Indeed, the party's founder Gianroberto Casaleggio was a strong advocate of a depoliticized administration where a direct democracy driven by the internet would replace ideologies and parties. Similarly, Salvini declared that left and right are obsolete labels, and therefore he defines himself as just "Italian".<sup>4</sup> However, the populist idea of the League taps into an ideological core that identifies "the people" with Italians in an ethnic sense, while its attacks against "the elites" cannot have the same targets of the M5S since the League is the oldest political party in parliament, while M5S is the newest.

Therefore, more than their divergences on policy issues, the alliance between the two parties collapsed because they tried to make coexist two types of populism that are incompatible with each other. The only official ideology of M5S is the so-called "common sense", in other words they claim to implement the common good by osmosis, because they "are" the citizens, as opposed to the traditional parties, which constitute a separate caste of professional politicians. Salvini, on the other hand, insists on his slogan "Italians first", and the League's far right ideology is exhibited explicitly. Despite its transformation from a regional movement into a national one, nothing changed substantially: the 'lazy Southern Italian' – the traditional scapegoat – has now been replaced by the *dangerous, different, alien* migrant. M5S changed profoundly as well. It started as a movement focused on the protection of the environment, green transportation, free Wi-Fi, and thorough distrust towards any political party. Eventually, it proved to be an empty shell to fill with any content able to grant the survival of the party itself.<sup>5</sup> Populism and power as an end in itself.

#### THE LACK OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY: THE REFUSAL OF ANTIFASCISM

Populism is often defined as a 'thin' ideology, which is combined with more developed political ideologies such as socialism, nativism, or liberalism. In the case of Salvini, populism goes hand in glove with a nativist vision of society and politics. In the case of M5S, it is hard to give a clear definition of the thick ideology associated to its populist rhetoric. Being a post-ideological party this confusion is not detrimental to the party's success, but one of its keys.

Despite the ideological flexibility of M5S, it would be a mistake to follow their slogan “we are neither left nor right”. In a similar way, it would be wrong to argue that they are *both* left and right. They feature several organizational and structural elements that make them a deeply top-down party that refuses antifascism as a value and chooses many far right parties as allies. The political marriage with Salvini was not merely a convenience one, but showed how much to the right M5S can strategically move. Once antifascism is not one of your values, the limits of ‘what can be said’ collapse, and political options multiply.

It would take too much space to illustrate why M5S is at ease with far right and neo-fascist ideas, so I will present just a selection of paradigmatic elements. The party expressed anti-immigrant positions on many occasions. For example, they accused the NGOs to be “taxis of the sea” and to constitute a *pull factor* attracting more migrants.<sup>6</sup> This is a theory they share with nationalist and far right movements. Moreover, they claimed that these NGOs become very rich by helping migrants and that this process risks exposing Italians to Ebola. Other far right tropes. In 2016, before the alliance with Salvini, Beppe Grillo claimed that it was time to repatriate all illegal migrants in order to protect Italians, something Salvini himself could have said. In 2017, Virginia Raggi claimed that Rome would no longer host any migrant.

The anti-immigrant sentiment is not the only common ground shared by the two former allies. They also refuse antifascism, on the ground that fascism and communism are dead, and therefore antifascism is just a relic of the past. Logically, when the leader of a fascist movement (Casa Pound, the self-defined “fascists of the third millennium”) asked M5S to take position about fascism, Grillo replied “This question doesn’t concern me, M5S is an ecumenical movement.” In 2013, M5S deputy Roberta Lombardi argued “before it degenerated, fascism had a sense of national community (which it took directly from socialism), the highest respect for the state and a will to protect the [institution of] family.” In 2019, M5S senator Elio Lannutti spread classic anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and the Rothschild family. While it is very easy to be expelled from M5S in case of disobedience to the party’s diktat, expressing fascist points of view is never sanctioned. This tolerant approach towards fascism, coupled with other organizational characteristics of M5S,

led some to see in Grillo a new Mussolini.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, when the parliament decided to outlaw fascist symbols, M5S voted against on the ground that it “threatens free speech”. Considering M5S as both right and left, at this point, should sound preposterous.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE SHARED CULT OF THE LEADER

The League and M5S present also other characteristics that belonged to fascism and that are at odds with liberal democracy. For example, both share a strong cult of the leader. His fans consider Salvini as a sort of football hero and call him “capitano”, like the captain of a football team. He took the leadership of the League and brought the party in a new era of social media presence, polarizing and taunting provocations, using an aggressive language and embodying the charismatic leader of the right after Berlusconi had to give up the role. Beppe Grillo is a comedian who knows perfectly how to make thousands of people hang on his lips, yelling “vaffanculo” (f\*ck off) to every politician, party, and journalist. He recently appeared masked as the Joker, claiming that he has no plan, and that he is chaos.

Another worrying sign of populist democracy are the lists of proscription for journalists, that constitute one of the very *raison d'être* of M5S. Since its origin, they collect lists of journalists that they consider “prostitutes” of the political system, and unsurprisingly the party always preferred social media to traditional mass media. The League is also very critical of journalists: Salvini, a professional although not practicing journalist, claimed and that there is a strong anti-League prejudice among the mass media.

#### POLITICAL ALLIES IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

In addition, their political allies in the European Parliament are openly criticizing liberal democracy and trying to impose a populist and far right vision of politics. The League is currently a member of the group called *Identity and Democracy*, together with the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN), and Alternative for Germany (AfD) among many others. The MPs of M5S are now split between the non-inscrits (together with Jobbik, Golden Dawn, and the Brexit Party) and the group

*Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy*, together with the Polish Eurosceptic Janusz Korwin-Mikke, Debout la France, and other far right populist parties.

Finally, both Beppe Grillo and Matteo Salvini publicly praised Vladimir Putin as a role model for European politics. Some of Grillo's lieutenants are vocal supporters of Putin: M5S' spokesperson on foreign policy has praised the shelling of Aleppo as a 'liberation' of the city.<sup>9</sup> Matteo Salvini, beyond taking smiling selfies with Putin and going around in Moscow with a pro-Putin t-shirt, repeatedly endorsed the Russian strongman.

In a book titled "[Populism and Collective Memory: Comparing Fascist Legacies in Western Europe](#)" I claim that Italy is particularly exposed to right-wing populist ideas because it never confronted its fascist past.<sup>10</sup> The country ignores its colonial crimes, exploits the use of the Resistance movement to appear as inherently antifascist, and portrays Mussolini as a 'soft' dictator who had to implement racist and anti-Semitic laws just because of Hitler's insistence. Overall, Italians love to portray themselves as 'good folks'. Populist democracy finds its most favourable habitat in this context: illiberal ideas are not taboo, but rather socially acceptable. In this way, a populist democracy can implement three elements of continuity with fascism: absence of pluralism, of minority rights, and the separation of powers.

Italy experienced populists in power since 1994, when Berlusconi formed a government with the post-fascists of National Alliance and the League itself. Twenty-five years later, we witnessed a fully populist government with the League as leader of the right and M5S as a post-ideological glue that prevents the political system from falling apart. In the meantime, Italy keeps avoiding its fascist past and prefers not to confront unpleasant memories. It would be oversimplifying to claim that the 1930s are back or that fascism has been completely normalized. I am not sure of what will come next, and very likely, it will not be fascism in its classic form. However, by looking at Trump, Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Salvini and Orbán I believe that democracy is evolving in an authoritarian, populist direction.

#### BACK TO THE FUTURE: FASCISM 2.0

in January 2020, there will be regional elections in Emilia-Romagna. Since the return of democracy after World War II, Emilia-Romagna has been administered only by left-

wing parties. Now, for the first time, there is an actual chance for the right to “liberate”, as Salvini claims, a region with almost 5 million inhabitants and traditionally a bastion of the left. Lately, to protest against Salvini, many people started gathering in the squares of Bologna, Milan, and other cities, calling themselves “sardines”, and showing no political banners or flags. As decades of anti-Berlusconism proved, antifascism and an opposition towards Salvini’s nationalism will fill the squares for some time without dealing with the roots of Italy’s lack of memory, its attraction by a strong leader or saviour, and illiberal tendencies.

So far, the Italian left has found no way to react. Salvini leads the narrative, polarizing people’s opinions around topics such as migrants, political correctness, or the boycott of Nutella because it uses Turkish hazelnuts. In the meantime, the deterioration of the Italian public debate keeps unfolding. An example are the anti-Semitic attacks on the Holocaust survivor Liliana Segre, 89 years old, Member of Parliament and vocal supporter of minority rights. She was assigned a police escort because she receives thousands of threats and every time she speaks in public groups of neo-fascists protest against her.<sup>11</sup>

Emanuele Castrucci, professor at the University of Siena, recently posted on Twitter material that can be considered as apologetic of Nazism and praising Adolf Hitler for having fought “against the real monsters that today govern the world”. In the meantime, Salvini refuses to celebrate the day of Liberation from Nazi-fascism, on April 25<sup>th</sup>, a holiday that also Berlusconi disliked because ‘divisive’. Instead, Salvini found the time to speak in Forlì from a balcony where Mussolini himself gave several speeches and from where he attended the hanging of partisans. When confronted about the issue, Salvini claimed that fascism and communism are both dead. While this seems to be the case for communism, fascism seems to be alive and kicking in Italy and right wing populism thrives in a context where the past is conveniently forgotten.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> "Audio Suggests Secret Plan for Russians to Fund Party of Italy's Salvini." *The New York Times*, July 10 2019, by Jason Horowitz. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/world/europe/salvini-russia-audio.html>

<sup>2</sup> "The Five Star Movement is Imploding", *Jacobin*, January 8 2019, by David Broder, available online: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/italy-five-star-movement-matteo-salvini-m5s-lega>.

<sup>3</sup> "Di Maio, oggi comincia terza Repubblica", *ANSA*, May 23 2018, available online: [http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2018/05/23/di-maio-oggi-comincia-terza-repubblica\\_92f4ae1a-37a3-4b43-b07c-947d25087efe.html](http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2018/05/23/di-maio-oggi-comincia-terza-repubblica_92f4ae1a-37a3-4b43-b07c-947d25087efe.html)

<sup>4</sup> "Matteo Salvini : 'Il fascismo è un'idea morta'", *Le Point*, October 16, 2019, by Sébastien Le Fol and Anna Bonalume, available online: [https://www.lepoint.fr/europe/matteo-salvini-il-fascismo-e-un-idea-morta-16-10-2019-2341572\\_2626.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/europe/matteo-salvini-il-fascismo-e-un-idea-morta-16-10-2019-2341572_2626.php)

<sup>5</sup> Manucci, L. and Weber, E. (2017). Where the wind blows: Five Star Movement's populism, direct democracy and ideological flexibility, *Swiss Political Science Review* 48(1), 109-132.

<sup>6</sup> "Cosa c'è dietro la caccia alle streghe contro le Ong che salvano i migranti in mare", *Vice*, April 28, 2017, by Leonardo Bianchi, available online: <https://www.vice.com/it/article/yp7epm/accuse-ong-salvataggi-migranti-mediterraneo>

<sup>7</sup> "Italy's Five Star Movement May Be the Heir to Mussolini's Fascists", *The Atlantic*, August 30, 2016, by Frederika Randall, available online: <https://www.thenation.com/article/italys-five-star-movement-may-be-the-heir-to-mussolinis-fascists/>

<sup>8</sup> "The Five Star Movement is neither left-wing nor antifascist", *Political Observatory on Populism*, August 4, 2017, by Luca Manucci, available online: <https://populismobserver.com/2017/08/04/the-5-star-movement-is-neither-left-wing-nor-antifascist/>

<sup>9</sup> "Italy's Five Star Movement part of growing club of Putin sympathisers in west", *The Guardian*, January 5, 2017, by Stephanie Kirchgaessner, available online:

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/05/five-star-movement-beppe-grillo-putin-supporters-west>

<sup>10</sup> Manucci, L. (2019) "Populism and Collective Memory: Comparing Fascist Legacies in Western Europe", New York: Routledge.

<sup>11</sup> "Italy Has an Intolerance Problem. Does It Still Have a Moderate Right?", *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2019, by Rachel Donadio, available online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/11/attacks-liliana-segre-illustrate-italys-intolerance-problem/601690/>

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