

The Risks of growing Populism and the European elections:

A Five Star Digital Populism

Author: Gentiola Madhi



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Gentiola Madhi¹

The Five Star Movement changed the Italian electoral campaign of 2013 through a deep transformation of the national communication system and electoral marketing.

This research aims to analyse the advancement of the Movement in the national elections along with its peculiar strategy to communicate to the population, besides the attempt to identify the potential risks for the prospective European elections. Attention is paid to Beppe Grillo's blog and to his speeches published online in addition to some daily newspapers, where the last ones are essential in denoting an alternative analysis of the reforms advocated by the 5SM.

The Movement's outbreak is a consequence of the current failure of the Italian political parties' system and the failed efficiency of the imposed austerity measures. In the contemporary multi-level governance, domestic inadequacies of a member state are emulated like-wisely at the European decision-making level, bringing up common challenges for the whole Europe.

"We invented fascism, the Christian Democrats, Berlusconi, and now we've even invented Grillo".²

Roberto D'Alimonte

The Italian comedian Beppe Grillo realized pretty early the great power of internet as a strategic communication instrument in the diffusion of his messages as well as the convenience of using such a constructive tool to promote social change and 'to wake up' the citizens against the political elite in power. To some extent, his encountering of the web potential is related to the nature of his satire - characterized by rebellion and incessant attacks against the national political elite - which in turn provoked his exclusion from the television broadcastings.³

The Five Star Movement (hereinafter referred to as 5SM) was founded in September 2009 under Grillo's charismatic leadership and it is a pioneering mass movement that established of an

¹ Researcher at the Institute for Democracy and Mediation
Email: gentiola.madhi@coleurope.eu

² R. Donadio, "The Rise of a Protest Movement Shows the Depth of Italy's Disillusionment", *The New York Times*, 21 February 2013.

³ R. Mackey, "Comedian's Blog Morphs into Major Political Force in Italy", *The New York Times*, 25 February 2013.

internet-based headquarter, which goes along with the country-wide grassroots electorate. The 5SM serves as an online mobilization platform aiming at promoting better welfare conditions, whilst eradicating the current political caste and achieving participatory democracy where the citizen is the core of the ‘new system’.

Acknowledging Grillo’s authenticity and expansive rhetoric, the 5SM’s electoral ‘boom’ was a by-product of the electoral rally called ‘*Tsunami tour*’ – which crisscrossed the main city squares of Italy in 28 days – and the blog-based national campaign, along with the grassroots volunteering activities. Indisputably, the 5SM experienced a raising trend thanks to the “general crisis of the socialization role of the political parties” in addition to “the difference towards the parties and political class in its complexity”.⁴ The stunning debut of this movement achieved around 8 million votes from a disenchanted heterogeneous constituency.

On the one hand, the Italian electoral campaign of February 2013 emphasized the profound makeover of the national communication system and the electoral marketing; the social media carried out the biggest part of the electoral promotion, even if the direct interaction on the web - mostly Facebook or Twitter - between the citizens and the candidates was somehow unmanageable.

On the other hand, this election round reflected the citizens’ condemnation towards the degradation and inefficiency of the current Italian political system that had led to non-functioning governing bodies and high rates of corruption. Keeping present the EU austerity measures with which the country had to comply - along with the high unemployment rate and citizens’ disenchantment - these elections were an important prior test for the European Parliament elections due in May 2014.

This research aims at analysing the advancement of the Five Star Movement in the Italian national elections and its peculiar strategy to communicate to the general population, along with the attempt to identify its future agenda progression, considered to be crucial for the forthcoming European elections. Keeping in mind the 5SM’s internal rule that prohibits its members of the parliament to be interviewed by the journalists – where the latter are usually considered by Grillo as “party megaphones” – a wide-range approach will be used. Attention will be paid to Beppe Grillo’s blog and to his speeches published online in addition to some daily newspapers. The last

⁴ R. Biorcio & P. Natale, *Politica a 5 Stelle. Idee, Storia e Strategie del Movimento di Grillo*, Milano, Feltrinelli ed., 2013, p. 57.

ones are essential for this research as they denote an alternative analysis of the reforms advocated by the Five Star Movement.

The research is organized as follows: firstly, it gives an overview of the peculiar characteristics and political objectives of the Five Star Movement along with its role in the Italian domestic politics. Then, the attention shifts to the forthcoming European elections and the potential expansion of the 5SM within the European boundaries. In brief, the Five Star's outbreak can be described as a consequence of the current failure of the political parties system in Italy and the failed efficiency of the imposed austerity measures. The traditional political parties totally failed to offer citizens an alternative to this web-populism. Being aware of the potential expansion of populism and the populist "debilitating effect" on the well-functioning of the European Parliament's decision-making process, the traditional European political groups should carry on a flexible and cooperative approach in order to provide efficient solutions to the current problems.

From the Blog to the Parliament

On 9 February 2013, the editorial of *Corriere della Sera* entitled "A monarch in the square" attempted to foresee the probability of substantial advancement of the 5SM at the Italian parliamentary elections since the traditional parties seemed to be resigned to Grillo's electoral exploit.⁵ The collective anxiety of the daily newspapers concerned primarily the potential non-governability of the country, once this forecast would have turned true. That was reasoned mainly by the distinctive nature of the populist movements, whose leader generally opted for a direct communication to the general population, refused to mediate with other political components and might enhance a belief that almost all problems could be resolved in a plain manner.⁶

⁵ P. Battista, "Un Monarca nelle Piazze", *Corriere della Sera*, 9 February 2013.

⁶ R. Perissich, **quoted in** S. Romano, "Anatomia del Populismo: Nascita, Evoluzione, Destino", *Corriere della Sera*, 5 March 2013.

According to Guy Hermet, Italy “has transformed itself into the site *par excellence* of populism’s triumph over the classical parties”.⁷ Considering the previous populist experiences of the ethno-regionalist Northern League and Berlusconi’s support for the *laissez faire*,⁸ why Grillo’s 5SM was perceived as a “risk for the national democracy”⁹?

In order to answer this question this research paper will apply a comprehensive approach because it allows understanding the structure of the 5SM, its ideology, as well as its peculiar strategy to communicate to the mass and to exploit citizens’ disillusionment in order to achieve its predetermined goals.

Quoting Paul Taggart populism is “a serve of many masters”,¹⁰ because it is an instrument used by both, left and right wing constituencies, and to populism is endorsed “an essential chameleonic quality that means it always takes on the hue of the environment it occurs in”.¹¹ As a result, populism is not an ideology – that is described as a system of ideas and values associated with a political action; reliably populism is “soulless”¹² or at maximum may be classified as a “lame ideology”.¹³

Referring to the Five Star Movement, it is a real novelty on the Italian and European political arena. It reflects a multiplicity of ideas besides the heterogeneous electorate - coming either from the left or the right wing – and it is classified as an ‘archetypally populist’ movement.¹⁴ Additionally, the 5SM lacks the presence of the characteristic populist equation – where “populism = anti-modernity” - as the movement appeals directly to the ‘net generation’, the ones who are present periodically on the web and are part of today’s modernism.¹⁵ In fact, this movement is born as an internet-based platform that does not require any physical space as a meeting point. Evoking the ‘non-statute’, the headquarters consist in the virtual *beppegrillo.it* blog, which was inaugurated in January 2005. Just two years later Forbes classified it as the

⁷ G. Hermet, *Les populismes dans le monde. Une histoire sociologique, XIXe-XXe*, Paris, Fayard, 2001, p. 396.

⁸ M. Salvati, “I Rischi di Semplificazione Politica nella Nuova Ondata Populista”, *Corriere della Sera*, 16 March 2013.

⁹ Romano, “Anatomia del Populismo”, *op.cit.*.

¹⁰ P. A. Taggart, *Il populismo*, Enna, Città aperta ed., 2002, p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ P. Wiles, “A Syndrome, not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism”, in G. Ionescu & E. Gellner (eds.), *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, London, Macmillan, 1969, pp. 167, **quoted in**, P. Corbetta & E. Gualmini (eds.), *Il Partito di Grillo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013, p. 199.

¹⁴ “Ungovernability wins”, *The Economist*, 2 March 2013.

¹⁵ Corbetta & Gualmini, *op.cit.*, p. 203.

seventh most influential blog in the world.¹⁶ The movement evolved further thanks to the creation of the volunteering *Meet-up* groups, whose activity consists of a combination of online and offline processes of political involvement. This digital platform aims to be a kind of catalyst of proposals or suggestions on specific issues; furthermore, the web is meant to be a bidirectional interaction tool.

Analyzing his role within the Movement, Grillo is a self-declared ‘non-politician’ or a mere “political chief of the movement” and ever since the “*leader is the movement*” itself.¹⁷ However, Grillo’s undisputed authority and personification of the movement is well-known; in fact, the ‘non-statute’ has been written entirely by Beppe Grillo and the co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio.¹⁸ They generated a “political/economic franchise with its own copyright and trademark, a movement rigidly controlled and mobilised from the top”.¹⁹

Moreover, the 5SM’s leader refuses to label the movement as a ‘party’, since it identifies itself as ‘anti-politics’.²⁰ Considering that the concept of ‘political party’ is defined as “any political group identified by an official label, that presents at the elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free) candidates to public office”²¹ and that the 5SM occupies 163 seats in the Italian parliament, isn’t it a party then?

According to Casamassima, the 5SM cannot be considered a movement, since it does not satisfy the primary condition, i.e. a share of a definite objective, and its involvement in various issues makes it act like a political organization.²² Furthermore, movements generally tend to act, not against the overall political class, but precisely on the improvement of determined peculiarities of that single issue.²³ Even if initially the Five Star Movement shared several similarities with protest mass movements like the Indignados in Spain or Occupy Wall Street in the USA, now it

¹⁶ Il blog di Beppe Grillo.

¹⁷ Il blog di Beppe Grillo, “Comunicato Politico Numero Cinquantatre”, 29 October 2013.

¹⁸ G. Casaleggio, “La Lettera dell’Esperto di Marketing e Strategie di Rete”, *Corriere della Sera*, 29 May 2012.

¹⁹ “The Five Star Movement is not Radical – Beppe Grillo is one of Them, not Us”, *The Guardian*, 28 February 2013.

²⁰ Biorcio & Natale, *op.cit.*

²¹ G. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 63.

²² P. Casamassima, **quoted in** N. Dolfo, “Il 5SM è un Partito non un Movimento”, *Corriere della Sera*, 16 April 2013

²³ *Ibid.*

has gone through a transformation process and should effectively be considered a political party.²⁴

The non-identification of the 5SM with a specific political fraction, aims at conveying its distinctive resilient nature – a grass-roots protest movement that is radically different from the ‘others’. This differentiation between the Movement and ‘the others’ in the populist discourse turns out to be self-fulfilling as the prevailing political forces often decide to distinguish a ‘*cordon sanitaire*’ around the populists; and consequently, this approach leads to the simplification of the political debate into “binary oppositions”.²⁵ The 5SM’s achievements rely on the charismatic authority of their leader along with the shared disillusionment, frustration and mistrust of the grassroots electorate in the domestic political caste. The movement’s supports - often called *grillini* (little crickets) - are mostly young people, among 25 and 54 years old, well-educated and mostly unemployed. Stating the esteems, 46% of the supporters come from the left wing, while 39% from the right - *in primis* from the Northern League.²⁶ Moreover, Grillo also managed to obtain votes from usual election refrainers. This constituency is characterized by shared scepticism about the future, and the association of the movement with Grillo’s charisma tolerated up to a certain extent the “by-passing many of the difficulties of complex issues and processes. And in this sense populism closes down the iterative functioning of representative politics”.²⁷ Moreover, this sort of ‘web-populism’²⁸ puts a strong emphasis on the wisdom of the ‘ordinary man’ and the people’s role in this “war of generations”,²⁹ designed for a new political order. This is further reinforced by the movement’s principle that “one is worth one”, as a supreme form of direct democracy.³⁰ The political philosophy of the movement promotes the idea that the “enemy of the people is the political caste” and that the “parties are dead” – the continuous attack against the established political order and elites will contribute to rebuilding the ‘new world’ where “the politician should be considered as citizen’s employee”.³¹

²⁴ Corbetta & Gualmini, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

²⁵ P. Taggart, “Populism has the Potential to damage European Democracy, but Demonizing Populist Parties is Self-Defeating”, LSE European Politics and Policy Blog (EUROPP), 3 January 2013.

²⁶ H. Mahony, “Beppe Grillo – an Italian or European Phenomenon?”, *EU Observer*, 8 March 2013, retrieved on 21 January 2014, <http://euobserver.com/political/119336>.

²⁷ Taggart, “Populism has the potential”, *op.cit.*.

²⁸ Corbetta & Gualmini, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

²⁹ M. Imarisio, “Grillo: ‘E Ora scappellotti a Tutti’”, *Corriere della Sera*, 26 February 2013.

³⁰ G. Casaleggio & B. Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra. Per una Nuova Politica*, Milano, Chiarelettere, 2011, p. 7.

³¹ Il Blog di Beppe Grillo.

This new political order is delineated in the video ‘Gaia: The future of politics’, and it starts with pessimistic forecasts about the near future of the world, ending up with the establishment of a world government thanks to the digital democracy. By 2047, every citizen “has its own identity in the world social network created by Google, called Earthlink”.³² “In Gaia parties, politics, ideologies, religions disappear”.³³

Moving to the analysis of the Five Star’s program, it resembles to “a compendium of mostly well-intentioned aspirations”.³⁴ The “*movement is born with its program; on the contrary it is its program*”, resulting consequently in the creation of a ‘common identity’.³⁵ As reported on the blog, according to the Nobel Prize Joseph Stiglitz this platform does not aim at offering a different growth strategy to the Italians, but rather “an alternative way to live and produce”.³⁶ Supporting the de-growth theory along with the green economy, nothing is said in the program about the Italian foreign or European policy. Symbolized through its logo that includes five stars, the key pillars of the movement are: water, transport, connectivity, development and energy. In reality these macro-themes fall under the public policies sphere - and ensuring a transversal and universal character - the final result is the attainment of a “homogenized and standardized” program both at national and European level.³⁷ Somehow, this “transnational” portrayal follows the principle of ‘think globally, act locally’.³⁸ The Five Star platform resembles a pool of suggestions and this is the outcome of the assembling method used by a web-based system of submitting proposals, thus lacking a logical thread.³⁹ Likewise, there is a lack of coherence besides the unified political line, and this is essentially due to the impossibility to put up with dissimilar social and political profiles of the constituency.⁴⁰ As a result of this heterogeneity persistence, often it is referred to as a ‘*work-in-progress program*’, and being essentially a scheme of “policies and not real politics”.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the Five Star Movement

³² G. Casaleggio, “*Gaia: The Future of Politics*”, Casaleggio Associati, 2008, retrieved on 30 January 2014, <http://www.casaleggio.it/media/video/gaia-il-futuro-della-politica-1.php>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “Ungovernability wins”, *op.cit.*.

³⁵ Corbetta & Gualmini, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

³⁶ R. Mania, “Decrescita ed Energia Verde le Ricette della Grillonomics”, *La Repubblica*, 4 March 2013.

³⁷ Corbetta & Gualmini, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

³⁸ I. Diamanti, “Società e Politica in Europa dopo la Caduta del Muro di Berlino”, *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, nr. 3, 2007.

³⁹ Salvati, “I Rischi di Semplificazione”, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ Corbetta & Gualmini, *op.cit.*, pp. 153-154.

⁴¹ Salvati, “I Rischi di Semplificazione”, *op.cit.*

opted for a ‘small steps strategy’, that would allow them to achieve the anti-establishment platform through the decline of the national complex issues into potentially concrete locally-based actions.⁴²

This simplified platform reflects two crucial political issues: environmental protection or ‘neo-environmentalism’ and the moralization of the political class. Neo-environmentalist issues are shared similarly by other European movements and the ‘No global’ network; additionally, some similarities with the German Green Party were identified. The latter’s focus is embedded in a single issue, meanwhile the 5SM’s determination goes beyond this. The moralization of politics, however, seems much more challenging as it endorses the concept of anti-politics that is quite a characteristic of the populist parties. People have to take back the management of the institutions, to cure democracy and to gain their dignity. Therefore, a shift should occur from the state institutions to the civil society, which according to Katz and Mair stimulates the ‘party on the ground’.⁴³ This new way of doing politics will be achieved - according to the movement - through a class action, which is going to reflect higher rates of transparency of the institutions, an increase of citizens’ participation in reducing privileges as well as in diminishing the distance between people and their representatives.⁴⁴ Such ‘participatory democracy’ is perceived as crucial as it will ultimately provide better quality results. Bobbio states that participatory democracy skips the traditional representative mechanisms and concentrates more on all-encompassing forms of citizens’ participation.⁴⁵

Representing Grillo’s political language through a ‘word cloud’ (Fig. 1), a strong prominence can be easily noticed in the usage of the terms: web, internet democracy and information.

⁴² Corbetta & Gualmini, *op.cit.*, p. 150.

⁴³ R. Katz & P. Mair, *How Parties organize: Change and Adaptation in Party Organizations in Western Democracies*, London, Sage, 1994.

⁴⁴ Biorcio & Natale, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ L. Bobbio, “La Democrazia Deliberativa nella Pratica”, in *Stato e Mercato*, vol. 73, 2005, pp. 67-88.

fact that these measures in theory would enhance a positive growth trend, the extent to which Grillo propels for them is assessed as “protectionist, anti-growth and anti-capitalist to justify markets’ alarm”.⁵⁰

In this “new form of politics” internet is used as a pioneering communication instrument to directly consult the constituency.⁵¹ According to Demos think-tank, Grillo “has [had the ability to] combine medium and message [in order] to create a genuinely novel type of movement”.⁵² Indeed, Grillo conducted a pretty determined national campaign in comparison with his adversaries, aiming at offering the usual abstainers a ‘place where to seek refuge’. The online persuasion strategy led to an electoral campaign 2.0, where the prompt bottom-up mobilization drove the collective action.⁵³ This web-based electoral communication consented quicker and cost-effective actions, which reached instantaneously a wide range of the national electorate. On the other hand, according to Casamassima, this perseverance of appealing continuously to the ‘people of the web’ turns into a mystification, since the citizens make use of the web in the same way as they read newspaper or watch television.⁵⁴ Furthermore, in his blog Grillo never answers his followers comments, thus converting the web into a unidirectional instrument the same as the ‘blamed’ television broadcasters.

In any case, taking into consideration a broadly-shared dissatisfaction - along with the derisory attempts of the political elites to address the economic crisis, the ‘protest votes’ were the only available instrument for the citizens to express their disenchantment whilst somehow being aware of the fact that “the fringe groups are unlikely to govern better”.⁵⁵ Referring to The Economist, the Italians’ votes for this mass movement manifested their wish to say “Basta!”; a protesting emblem with an intention to stop the “sleaze, complacency and lack of opportunity in an arthritic society” and at that moment in time the Five Star Movement was the only available chance that represented and provided an alternative for the Italians.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ “Ungovernability wins”, *op.cit.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² J. Bartlett et al., *New Political Actors in Europe: Beppe Grillo and the 5SM*, London, Demos, 2013, p. 18.

⁵³ N. Dolfo, “Campagna Elettorale 2.0. Affissioni si, ma Virtuali e lo Slogan diventa Tweet”, *Corriere della Sera*, 13 February 2013.

⁵⁴ Dolfo, “Il 5SM è un Partito”, *op.cit.*

⁵⁵ R. Donadio & N. Kulish, “Inconclusive Vote in Italy points to Fragmenting of Political System”, *The New York Times*, 26 February 2013.

⁵⁶ “Ungovernability wins”, *op.cit.*

Nowadays, the overall condemnation for the populism overtaking in the Italian parliament is attained through a general and repeated blame to the Italian political elite – sealed in its own circle of declarations and in the “powerlessness of its fake power” – unable “to realize the momentum when to stand by its own fellow citizens”;⁵⁷ furthermore, the left-wing missed the opportunity to transform itself and to offer an alternative in the Italian political scene.⁵⁸ In addition, the overall process took advantage of the citizens’ transference of ‘politics’ with the ‘political parties’.⁵⁹ Then again, such performance revealed an insufficient understanding of the political machinery and their inadequate leadership competences.⁶⁰

The current domestic vicious circle mirrored itself implicitly in the inaccurate run of the European politics, leading hence to an underestimation of the “euro crisis rational” along with disfiguration of the Italian foreign policy in simple “running of the daily affairs”.⁶¹ In conclusion, the inadequate foreign policy - under the pressure of an electoral campaign as well as of the “purposelessness of the political elite” – defined once more an “Italian issue” within the European family.⁶²

5SM: In Europe for Italy!

As an irony of fate, the highly debated 2014 European elections coincide with 1914’s start of the First World War.⁶³ A hundred years later, Europe still experiences thought-provoking times, dominated by a sort of European fatigue, Euro-scepticism and frustration. Asserting the latest eurobarometer polls, the trust of the European citizens in EU is equal to 42 per cent, whereas the

⁵⁷ E. Galli della Loggia, “Atlante Populista Italiano”, *Corriere della Sera*, 27 February 2013.

⁵⁸ R. Donadio, “Upstart Party in Italy ‘occupies’ a Parliament that is Already Paralyzed”, *The New York Times*, 9 April 2013.

⁵⁹ I. Diamanti, “Bipolarismo Scomparso”, *La Repubblica*, 8 February 2013.

⁶⁰ E. Galli della Loggia, “Cio che il Centro non ha capito”, *Corriere della Sera*, 24 March 2013.

⁶¹ A. Puri Purini, “L’Italia non sprechi con il Populismo la Credibilità riconquistata in Europa”, *Corriere della Sera*, 7 February 2013.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ T. Garton Ash, “2014 is not 1914, but Europe is getting increasingly Angry and Nationalist”, *The Guardian*, 18 November 2013.

trust in their national governments equals only 28 per cent.⁶⁴ When this mistrust is associated to growing unemployment rates, austerity measures and disillusion, a fertile ground sprouts for the upsurge of extremist movements.

19 over 28 EU Member States have been experiencing ultimately an increase of populist movements in their countries. It has been acknowledged that this endemic populism is a consequence of the citizens' frustration against the continuous inefficiency of the public administration, austerity measures along with incessant squandering.⁶⁵ The populist discourse nourishes the anti-politics system, leading to a decline of the policy-making process that turns into "an activity [which] further feeds distrust in the complexity of politics".⁶⁶ As stated by Dominique Reynié, the "European elections have traditionally favoured marginal parties, [...] [as] they are characterized by proportional representation and high level of abstention".⁶⁷

In Italy, the Five Star Movement was initially envisioned as "quite volatile, connected to an exasperation, invective and anger state of mind"; its success was fuelled by the widely shared "spirit of protest" plus the "anti-all mood".⁶⁸ One of the cornerstones of the Movement's electoral campaign was the referendum on the prospect for Italy to exit 'if necessary' from the Eurozone, and the re-appropriation of the monetary and fiscal policies. In their perception, the European integration process symbolizes a noble principle, which is currently deformed, due to "the annihilation of European politics, and their replacement by a banking union, [which] is not what the founding fathers wanted".⁶⁹ Grillo went even further, by stating that the bonds' spread was a 'hallucination' of the banks speculation activity besides the fact that the financial markets are completely disconnected from the real economy.⁷⁰ The intention to vote such kind of mass movement is a clear sign of 'misalignment' of the Italian electorate versus the current political system.⁷¹ Notwithstanding this national malaise, the Italians still consider the Union's role as

⁶⁴ European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 80", Brussels, December 2013, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Salvati, "I Rischi di Semplificazione", *op.cit.*

⁶⁶ Taggart, "Populism has the potential", *op.cit.*

⁶⁷ Quoted in, A. Salles, "Fears of a growing Protest Vote", *Le Monde*, Presseurop, 7 October 2013.

⁶⁸ Battista, *op.cit.*

⁶⁹ Il Blog di Beppe Grillo, "Il M5S alle Elezioni Europee"; R. Dehousse, "Europe at the Polls. Lessons from the 2013 Italian Elections", Notre Europe: Jacques Delors Institute, *Policy Paper*, nr. 92, p. 6, May 2013.

⁷⁰ "Crisi: Grillo: Lo Spread è un Allucinazione Mentale", *La Stampa*, 12 December 2012.

⁷¹ Corbetta & Gualmini, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

quite relevant in generating the expected shift at the domestic level – a “necessary evil”.⁷² Indeed, the absence of faith in the national elites persuades the Italians to perceive the European integration process as an antidote to the national pathologies.⁷³

Howsoever, in the present multi-layered governance at the European level, the Italian populist eruption is not any longer a merely domestic issue. It becomes a ‘wake-up call’ for all the rest of the Union. Guy Verhofstadt immediately acknowledged that the EU leaders had to pay attention to such Italian experience, since the budgetary discipline is a must, and unfortunately it is not a sufficient remedy to the financial crisis.⁷⁴

Once in Parliament, Grillo declared that the Five Star Movement’s intention was to expand, as their ultimate objective is the European Parliament, since “there is a similar need there as, in Italy and because if [they] find some support in Europe, the change will be far-reaching”.⁷⁵ In the 5SM’s covenant ‘Seven Points for Europe’, Grillo compares the current European Parliament to a Grand Hotel, whose members never discuss about Europe, but only about euros.⁷⁶ He brings forward the idea of constructing a European Union which “can explain itself to the citizens”.⁷⁷ Albeit, in his opinion the Movement “has everyone against”, they will manage to review the Union’s rules, as they “don’t like Europe as it is”.⁷⁸ As the 5SM is a “movement of ideas, not of ideologies”,⁷⁹ it will fit “neither right nor left, but above (and beyond)”.⁸⁰

To these populist promises, the Italian president Napolitano advised the country against the propagation of “destructive tendencies towards politics and the public debate [which may cause]

⁷² I. Diamanti, “L’UE è diventata un Male Necessario”, *La Repubblica*, 24 September 2012.

⁷³ I. Sanchez-Cuenza, “The Political Basis of Support for European Integration”, *European Union Politics*, vol. 1, nr. 2, 200, pp. 147-171; M. Ferrera, “Un Italia salvata dall’Europa, ma ancora Libera di danneggiare se Stessa”, in S. Fabbrini (ed.), *L’Europeizzazione dell’Italia*, Rome, Laterza, 2003, pp. 243-254.

⁷⁴ L. Offeddu, “Nervosismo nei Corridoi Europei: ‘Roma rispetti i suoi Impegni’”, *Corriere della Sera*, 27 February 2013.

⁷⁵ F. Sansa & E. Liuzzi, “Beppe Grillo prepares to storm Europe”, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, Presseurop, 20 March 2013.

⁷⁶ Il blog di Beppe Grillo, “L’Europa così Vicina, così Lontana”.

⁷⁷ Sansa & Liuzzi, *op.cit.*

⁷⁸ G. Segreti, “Italy’s Beppe Grillo vows to shake up Europe in May Elections”, *Financial Times*, 1 January 2014.

⁷⁹ J. Hooper, “Beppe Grillo: Populist Who could throw Italy into Turmoil at General Elections”, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2013.

⁸⁰ T. Ciprini, **quoted in** J. Hooper, “Parliamentary Gridlock in Italy as Five Star Movement refuses to make Deal”, *The Guardian*, 15 March 2013.

the break-up of social cohesion and the institutional fabric”.⁸¹ Whereas premier Letta notified the imminent risk of achieving the “most anti-European parliament in history”.⁸² The expansion of populist parties like the French National Front or the 5SM would constitute the “most dangerous phenomenon” in Europe.⁸³ The deputy director of the European People Party’s Center for European Studies Roland Freudenstein reconfirmed the idea that “there is reason to worry” about the escalation of populism in Europe but “no need to panic”.⁸⁴ In his opinion, the difference among the populist parties and the traditional ones consists in the inherited characteristics of each, where the “populists are problem-seekers, not problem solvers”, whereas the European left wing – in D’Alema’s words – emphasized the fact that the traditional parties’ duty resides in providing “arguments and technical solutions to the problems raised by the Eurosceptics”.⁸⁵

According to the latest esteems, the overall number of the populist MEPs that are going to gain a seat in the next European elections is around 200.⁸⁶ In other words, a potential emergence of a ‘collateral effect’ between the main political parties might take place within the Parliament, thus reducing the internal discourse into a mere confrontation of pro- versus anti-European promoters.⁸⁷ This potential scenario certainly would not be beneficial to the European democracy.

However, as Taggart argues, “populism can have significant negative effects on representative politics [and] the demonization of populist parties is self-defeating”.⁸⁸ The risk that this European electoral campaign develops into a battle among Europhiles and Europhobes undoubtedly would be beneficial for the latter.⁸⁹ This is strictly link to the circumstance that the Europhobes take advantage both from blaming Brussels bureaucracy and from the inadequate capacity of the Union to have differently addressed the financial crisis.⁹⁰ Anyhow, if the Europhobes achieve a considerable Parliament’s share in the forthcoming elections – being a

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² L. Davies, “EU must unite Against Sceptics and Populists says Italian Prime Minister”, *The Guardian*, 31 October 2013.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ “EU Parties vow to tackle Far-Right but see ‘No Reason to Panic’”, Euractiv, 28 November 2013.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Bertoncini & Kreilinger, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Taggart, “Populism has the potential”, *op.cit.*

⁸⁹ Quoted in “EU parties vow” *op.cit.*

⁹⁰ Salles, *op.cit.*

heterogeneous group which sometimes has internal contrasting positions,⁹¹ – their incidence in the decision-making process would be somewhat limited and of debilitating nature, not more than that.⁹²

	Electoral Survey				
	8-15 January 2014	25-29 November 2013	2-4 October 2013	10-12 September 2013	Political Elections 2013
Democratic Party	34.2	29.1	32.2	28.5	25.4
Left Ecology Freedom	3.5	4.0	3.8	4.8	3.2
New Center- Right	6.2	5.3	20.0	26.2	21.6
Forza Italia	21.9	20.8			
Five Star Movement	21.2	21.4	20.9	20.9	25.6
Northern League	3.2	4.1	4.5	3.1	4.1
Others	9.8	15.3	18.6	16.5	20.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Survey Demos & Pi, January 2014 (1919 cases)

Referring to the latest Demos’ opinion poll in Italy, the Five Star Movement has an overall national support of around 21%.⁹³ As demonstrated in the table above, in almost a year time from the Italian parliamentary elections, the 5SM has lost around 4% points, establishing itself to a 21% share.

The latest estimates foresee an overall gain of 15 to 20 members for the Movement, over a total of 73 members of the European Parliament (MEP) that are going to be elected in Italy.⁹⁴ Taking into consideration the *sui generis* nature of the Movement, it is difficult to categorize its association to any political group.

⁹¹ Y. Bertoncini, “European Elections: Less Abstention, More Populism?”, Tribune, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2013.

⁹² J. Priestley, “Stopping the Populist advance on the European Parliament”, *Policy Network*, 3 October 2013, retrieved on 22.01.2014, http://www.policy-network.net/pno_detail.aspx?ID=4477&title=Stopping-the-populist-advance-on-the-European-parliament.

⁹³ Demos & Pi, *Stime Elettorali*, 20 January 2014, retrieved on 22 January 2014, <http://scenariopolitici.com/2014/01/sondaggio-demos-20-gennaio-2014-csx-377-44-cdx-333-m5s-212.html>.

⁹⁴ Y. Bertoncini & V. Kreilinger, “What Political Balance of Power in the Next European Parliament?”, Tribune, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2013, p. 11.

It is virtually impossible for Grillo to join the radical positions of the pan-European alliance of far-right parties, since the Movement differs either from the French National Front or the Dutch Freedom Party platform on a crucial issue such like the anti-immigration policy. Moreover, Le Pen declared that Grillo has some difficulties in providing a coherent and global position on European affairs, as his Movement is still lacking a real project on this issue.⁹⁵

Likewise, as the 5SM promotes the ‘green ideology’, suppositions have been made about the potential cohesion with the Greens as a single political group running for May 2014. Since the forecasts predict for the Greens a loss of 2%, it is estimated a total number of 38 MEPs in the next European Parliament formation.⁹⁶ If the Movement joins the Greens, rationally there will be a Five Star’s overpower, and for that reason probable leadership conflicts within the political group.

Meanwhile, referring the parallelism between the Five Star Movement and the German Pirate Party, similar political demands besides the usage of the social media tools have been engaged as to achieve social impact.⁹⁷ The primary difference between these two Internet-based movements concerns the absence of a strong leadership and continuous struggling taking place at the internal level of the Pirate Party. Moreover, the achieved domestic support by the Five Star Movement is not expected to be attained by the Pirate Party in the near future.

So far, the Five Star Movement will run to the European elections alone - under the “Non-Attached MEPs” label - and its political connotation may be evaluated in the aftermath of the elections. The Five Star slogan will be: “*In Europe for Italy!*” and Grillo has already declared that his next electoral comitia tour will be called: “*Te la do io l’Europa!*”⁹⁸ Obviously, emphasis will be given to the promotion of the Movement’s “Seven Points for Europe” among which, one issue concerns the agricultural policy and the rest is dedicated to the economic and financial issues. In fact, there exists a rooted contradiction in the covenant and this is easily noticeable while referring to priority one: the referendum on euro, or priority two: the abolition of the fiscal compact against the introduction of the Eurobonds (priority three).

⁹⁵ A. Bianchi, “Le Pen: ‘Caro Beppe ascoltami’”, *L’Espresso*, 19 November 2013, retrieved on 21 January 2014, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2013/11/19/news/le-pen-caro-beppe-ascoltami-1.141457>.

⁹⁶ Bertoncini & Kreilinger, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

⁹⁷ J. Bartlett et al., *op.cit.*, p. 11.

⁹⁸ “*I’ll give you Europe!*”

In brief, the next European election round presents several challenges to the well-functioning of the EU institutions. Being aware of the fact that the populist movements are taking advantage of the current economic situation in order to reach the European Parliament, it is on the hands of the traditional political parties to demonstrate once more the benefits of keeping ‘healthy’ the Union along with the provision of potential solutions to the present problems. As Barroso stated lately in Milan, the Union should become once more an “object of desire” and the Erasmus generation has the “duty and privilege to stand up for Europe”.⁹⁹

Final Remarks

The Five Star Movement managed to conquer the Italian political scene with its unconventional way of doing politics, an intertwining of traditional populist comitia and internet-based mass movement. Once the 5SM became the real winner of the national elections of 2013, the attention shifted to the conquest of the European election of May 2014, achievable through the usage of same direct communication to the citizens and identical creation of grassroots cells in other countries like Spain or Romania.¹⁰⁰

In fact, this ‘digital populism’ that characterizes the movement relies on the usage of online mobilization platforms aiming at promoting better welfare conditions, whilst eradicating the current political caste and achieving participatory democracy where the citizen is the core of the ‘new system’. Indeed, Grillo conducted a pretty determined national campaign in comparison to his adversaries, aiming at offering to usual abstainers a ‘place where to seek refuge’.

While its outbreak at the domestic level can be described as a consequence of the current failure of the political parties system in Italy and the failed efficiency of the imposed austerity measures, the victory is much more unpredictable at the European level. Obviously, the strategy of the small steps is going to be engaged even in this electoral round. As specified in the covenant “Seven Points for Europe”, the creation of a Mediterranean alliance is the first step towards a potential substantial expansion at the European plane.

On the one hand, the Movement offers a lame national political agenda which in turn consents the participation of a heterogeneous electorate. While on the other, the European agenda is

⁹⁹ B. Severgnini, “Can the European Center Hold?”, *The New York Times*, 2 January 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Sansa & Liuzzi, *op.cit.*

somehow full of contradictions - for instance, the referendum on the permanence in the euro zone versus the introduction of the Eurobonds - and regionalist designs such as the establishment of a Mediterranean alliance versus the European Union.

The non-identification of the movement with a specific political fraction, aims at conveying its distinctive resilient nature – a grass-roots protest movement that is radically different from the ‘others’. The success lies precisely on this distinction along with citizens’ shared disillusionment, frustration and mistrust at the domestic political elite. Moreover, the moralization of politics is accompanied with the typical populist discourse on the right of the citizens to take back the management of the institutions, to cure democracy and to gain their dignity.

Howsoever, in the present multi-layered governance the Italian populist eruption became an additional ‘wake-up call’ for the rest of the Union. The number of populist parties that are going to participate at the European elections this year is rather high. Despite the fact that the 5SM is going to run at the elections under the “Non-Attached MEPs” label, certainly their emphasis will concern the expansion of the movement in other European countries that share the same vision on crucial issues, such as: the referendum on euro, the abolition of the fiscal compact or the introduction of the Eurobonds.

Being aware of the fact that the populist movements are taking advantage of the current economic situation in order to reach the European Parliament - and their presence can hamper the decision-making process - it is on the hands of the traditional European political groups to carry on a flexible and cooperative approach in order to provide efficient solutions to the current problems. The electoral campaign of the traditional parties should highlight the prospective measures that are going to be adopted at the European level, in order to promote growth and employment, rather than blaming the populists. The potential MEPs are advised to spend more time in the social media and try to interact with their electorate, since this is deemed as a further attempt to communicate with the citizens and to ‘hear their voice’.

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