Research Article

Euroscepticism between Populism and Technocracy: The Case of Italian Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle

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Abstract

This paper analyses the digital communication of Italian parties Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle during their campaigns for the European Parliament elections (January-May 2019). We focus on the Italian case as it is representative of a generalised shift in European public discourse towards an overt delegitimation of the European project and its re-imagination. In the Italian case, Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle, which were in a Government coalition for fourteen months, have been instrumental in Italy's shift from a strong Europhile country to one of the most Eurosceptic. However, while Lega has definitely aligned itself with a strong right-wing populist agenda, Movimento 5 Stelle has promoted a populist technocratic vision of democracy. Our analysis shows that the articulation of Eurosceptic discourses from both parties by and large reflects the two stances above with Lega's messages (primarily produced by its leader Matteo Salvini) characterised by a 'hyperled' style of communication and stronger nativist elements (for example the appeal to an ethno-centric and 'sovereign' idea of Italy) than those of Movimento 5 Stelle, which instead relied on a 'horizontal' communicative style. However, our data also shows that the delegitimation of Europe in both parties occur along a similar domestication of European affairs into the national political agenda and the call for a reformed Europe along nationalistic logics which both parties claimed to champion.

Keywords

Support for the EU in Italian public opinion has plummeted in the last decade (and even further in the Covid-19 crisis) to around 30 per cent, one of the lowest rates among the EU27 (Eurobarometer 2019; Demos 2018). The transformation of the Italian public opinion from largely Euro-enthusiastic to being increasingly critical towards the European Union (EU) has been a complex phenomenon. While several EU crises have contributed, on the one hand, to a substantive Europeanisation of the Italian political debate, on the other they have shifted the discourse from a 'permissive consensus' model (Ferrera 2003) to one based on the logics of 'emergency' and technocracy that have enabled some political actors to capitalise on forms of Eurocriticism for political gain (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014).

Italy's experience is representative of an increasing EU-wide disillusion/disaffection with the European project as well as of a generalised shift in public discourse towards its overt delegitimation and its re-imagination along *sovereignist* and populist logics (Zappettini and Krzyzanowski 2019; Zappettini 2020; Zappettini and Bennett, 2022). EU-rope has been increasingly mobilised by self-claimed 'anti-politics' parties such as *Lega* and *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) which have embodied distinct forms of *populist* and *technocratic* Euroscepticism rooted in very different ideological and historical roots. Crucially, the performance of such discourses has combined and compounded to sustain a critical juncture as M5S and *Lega* entered a Government alliance (from June 2018 to September 2019) during which the 'European question' was often at the centre of Italian domestic politics. In particular, the 2019 European elections campaigns in Italy saw the culmination of a series of financial and migration 'crises' that had often pitted Italian and EU institutions against each other and that were indeed one of the reasons for public opinion shifting towards 'alternative' parties such as M5S and *Lega* in the 2018 Italian general elections (Baldini and Giglioli 2018). Although the Italian context may be regarded as *sui generis* due to specific contingencies (migration and economic crisis and the critical juncture of Lega and M5S entering a coalition government), the merit of focusing on the Italian case lies in the contextual examination of Eurosceptic discursive shifts, performed via nativist and technocratic populism, at a larger European level where we have seen similar trajectories for example in France and Germany (with *Front Nationale* and *AfD* respectively) as well as in Spain (where the emergence of *Podemos* shares many traits with that of M5S, see Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2018). In this sense, this study contributes to the large academic debate on populism and Euroscepticism (for example Pirro, Taggart and van Kessel 2018; Mudde 2007) and the resurgence of right-wing populism as a Europe-wide phenomenon (Wodak 2015; Pelinka 2013). More specifically, our findings corroborate existing work on the domestication of EU politics and the mobilisation of Eurosceptic narratives (for example Trenz and de Wilde 2009; Caiani and Guerra 2017) from the specific viewpoint of the Italian case.

This article focuses on how *Lega* and M5S have discursively enacted their Euroscepticism from *distinct nativist and technocratic populist stances* by examining their mediatised communication in the specific context of the 2019 European elections campaign. Our approach to the analysis of Euroscepticism, populism and technocracy is primarily one of *mediated discursive performance* (Ekström, Patrona and Thornborrow 2018). Concurring with Trenz and de Wilde (2009), we believe that to make sense of Euroscepticism one needs firstly to understand how Eurosceptic narratives are mobilised, framed and amplified in the public sphere by political actors and media alike and how propositional and stylistic elements combine to construct meanings contextually (Ekström, Patrona and Thornborrow 2018) within the affordances enabled by new media (KhosraviNik 2017; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017; Baldwin-Philippi 2018).

Our study addresses the question: *how has Euroscepticism been performed and with what differences (if any) by Lega and M5S?* which we operationalise as follows: The first section unpacks conceptualisations of Euroscepticism, populism/technocracy, and digital media politics, offering a selected overview of the relevant academic literature. The second section provides a historical contextualisation of the rise of *Lega* and M5S as driving actors of a

major change in Italy's public attitudes towards the EU. The third section introduces the dataset that we subsequently analyse in the fourth section and conclusions are drawn.

EUROSCEPTICISM AS ANTI-POLITICS DISCURSIVE PERFORMANCE: POPULIST AND TECHNOCRATIC STANCES

In line with Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008a) we interpret Euroscepticism as a spectrum of stances *vis-à-vis* the EU dynamics of integration. Eurosceptic discourses can thus be articulated to different degrees along the soft/hard continuum with, at one end, 'contingent or qualified opposition' (Taggart 1998: 366), supporting for example a stronger intergovernmental rather than a supranational approach to European integration, and at the other end, a principled resistance to any pursue of the European project (see Caiani and Guerra 2017). As it is 'largely dependent on domestic contextual factors' (Taggart 2006), Euroscepticism has also been seen as instrumental in the emergence of new political formations, especially protest movements, as they try to differentiate themselves from the more established parties (Taggart 2006). The last decade's dramatic increase in popularity of many peripheral and populist parties all over Europe has indeed occurred, albeit not exclusively, through the mobilisation of Eurosceptic agendas and on the back of responses to the Eurozone crisis that have exacerbated specific cleavages on the European question. So, while Euroscepticism and populism can be treated (conceptually at least) as distinct phenomena, the two have often co-emerged and worked in tandem (Mondon and Winter 2020), especially since populist and Eurosceptic voters' attitudes often coincide (Rooduijn and van Kessel 2019). Of course, one limitation to this argument is how one defines populism. We refer to populism as a signifier that denotes particular aspects of social and political reality and that derives its meaning(s) and normative inflections from the context within which its discourses are performed (de Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018). Our contention therefore is that a strong correlation between Eurosceptic and populist sentiment can be asserted insofar as the political/discursive mobilisation of EU-rope enables the performance of reactionary, destabilising, anti-elite and anti-establishment narratives (Trenz and de Wilde 2009; Rosanvallon 2008; Laclau 2005; Canovan 2005).

In the last two decades populist anti-politics emerging on the back of different European crises has taken different discursive forms which are partly contingent on individual domestic factors. Largely speaking, on the one hand, we have seen reactionary programmes consolidating around *nativist* and *sovereignist* projects in the far-right tradition of strong leadership and 'law and order' agendas (for example Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland). This phenomenon has been widely scrutinised (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017; Mudde 2019; Froio and Ganesh 2019; Forchtner 2020). On the other hand, we have seen the rise of what Mair (2002) calls 'procedural populism' against the backdrop of a general decline of West European traditional mass parties understood as intermediaries between the citizens and public policies. In this sense, technocracy can be seen as a form of populism that, while rejecting traditional left/right ideologies and relying on narrative of de-politicisation and distrust of party systems, emphasises unmediated and partyless representation based on procedures, efficiency, meritocracy and transparency (for example Caramani 2017; Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2018). Although ideologically distinct from nativist populism, 'technocratic populism' (Drápalová and Wegrich 2020) retains key populist core elements which recombines rhetorically with other discourses. Typical claims of 'techno populists' will involve: anti-party politics as an end to the 'corrupt' system; the adoption of efficient and 'apolitical' management strategies and technologies; and the detachment of the executive leader (Drápalová and Wegrich 2020). In contrast to the right leaning populism that recognises a strong leader and conceptualises of the people primarily in nativist forms, technocratic populism focuses on economic and political definitions of popular sovereignty (Mény and Surel 2000) and derives its legitimacy from

expertise and knowledge in problem solving as well as claims of direct (i.e. politically unmediated) representation of citizens (Fischer 2009).

Trading on the definitions provided above, both Lega and M5S largely fit the characterisation of populist parties with the former relying primarily on nativist instantiations of populism and the latter on a technocratic populist vision of society. In turn, as mentioned, both Lega's and M5S's populist narratives have been mobilised in Eurosceptic terms. For such narratives to be made salient in the public sphere, a dynamic and multi-actor process of communication is obviously necessary. As pointed out by Trenz and de Wilde (2009), Caiani and Guerra (2017) and Zappettini (2021), one could hardly underestimate the role played by the media in the formation of public opinion and in the reverberation and amplification of Eurosceptic narratives in public discourses. As political communication has increasingly digitalised, public platforms such as social media have been appropriated by political actors at both top-down and bottom-up levels to either promote (or challenge) specific messages/ideologies (Chadwick 2013; Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback et al. 2016). At the same time, social media have been deployed as a strategic tool by political actors not only in the contingencies of specific campaigns but also to manage their own public identities/personas (Krzyzanowski and Tucker 2018). In this sense, the mediatised reorientation of political communication around new political actors or political personalities acquires also ideological significance. Within this context digital media with their capacity to interact with systems of news, information, and government are capable of stimulating growth in 'ideological entrepreneurship' as well as affecting how people identify with political discourses and ideologies (Finlayson 2020).

Our approach to the analysis of Euroscepticism and populism is thus primarily one of *mediated discursive performance* (Ekström, Patrona and Thornborrow 2018). We interpret Eurosceptic/populist communication as the combination of interrelated discursive dimensions involving both *form (style)* and *content (proposition)* (see Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann et al. 2018; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017; Block and Negrine 2017). What defines a Eurosceptic/populist discourse could thus be pinned down to the interplay of a number of propositional and stylistic elements including: an ever present appeal to *the people*; rhetorical, emotional, identitarian constructions ('us versus them'); abrasive, impolite, colloquial/trivial, 'politically incorrect' vocabulary; and so on. Not all of these features need to be present in a politician's communication for their discourse to perform a Eurosceptic stance. As pointed out by Ekström, Patrona and Thornborrow (2018) rather than an association of form and content established *a priori*, we see the two dimensions emerging in mediated and contextualised performances whereby specific semiotic resources (shaped, in turn, by specific media affordances enabled by specific technologies) are being mobilised by political actors as meaning-making devices designed to attune with the target audience. For example, for a member of the public to be able to identify with a particular message and to positively perceive the speaker as 'saying like it is' not only must linguistic/discursive repertoires be shared between the two but the resemioticisation and reproduction of a proposition/discourse must be enabled by some mediated interaction (for example 'likes' on social media). Similarly, the *topicalisation* of discourses must be seen as driven by contingent communicative purposes. In this sense the discursive arena emerging around European elections is particularly interesting as public opinion tends to see elections for the European Parliament (EP) as 'second order' elections (Reif and Schmitt 1997) and often, rather than focusing on European issues, such electoral campaign tend to be instrumentally mobilised by national parties to recontextualise domestic issues and to channel 'protest' votes (Marks and Steenbergen 2004).

A HISTORY OF LEGA AND M5S'S EUROSCEPTIC AND POPULIST DISCOURSES

Lega

Founded in 1991 through the merging of several separatist movements in Northern Italy, over the past decades *Lega Nord*[1] has established itself as one of the most successful parties in Europe (McDonnell, 2006) and, to date, is the oldest group in the Italian Parliament having been one of the major political players in the collapse of the so-called First Republic and a regular member of the Centre-Right coalitions during the Berlusconi era (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010).

Now consistently aligned with a (far) right populist ideology, *Lega*'s discourse has conveniently adapted to identify and construct new political enemies and allies. Building on strong regionalist a separatist ideologies (Newth 2018; Cedroni 2007), the early *Lega*'s discourse under the leadership of his founder Umberto Bossi capitalised on mobilising much public sentiment around the 'Northern question': the growing economic and social gap between a wealthy North and a much less developed South. This discourse involved a strong (and racist, see Spektorowski 2003) antagonisation between *Padania* (*Lega*'s mythical 'homeland' of Northern Italy, see Newth 2019) and *il meridione*, typically reified as Southern 'lazy' immigrants (to the north of the country). The slogan *Roma Ladrona* ('thieving Rome'), a metonymical reference to the Italian government and more generally to the supposedly unequal taxation system that would favour backward Southern regions at the expense of the industrious Northern economy, embodies this juxtaposition. Throughout this early phase, the party's stance on Europe was articulated through a precarious discursive balance between portrayals of Padania with a European vocation, if only in economic terms, and equally stymied by the EU institutions in its federalist ambitions (Huysseune 2010). Until 1990s the party shared a pro-European platform with all the other Italian political groups. However, after 1998 and well before Matteo Salvini was elected *Lega*'s leader in December 2013, the party underwent a radical ideological turn, embracing an explicit anti-European stance which paved the way for further radicalisation under Salvini's leadership (Vampa 2017). As under the new leader *Lega*'s propaganda focused on attracting votes from Southern Italy, the discourse zeroed in on a new set of 'enemies' encapsulated by *EU-rope*, namely the banking system and the Euro currency, *clandestini* (illegal immigrants), and general liberal/progressive values such as LGBT rights often perceived as associated with/pushed by the EU. In short, in Salvini's populist narrativisation, Brussels substituted Rome as the antagonist of *Lega*'s interests, and nationalism became the new regionalism as the party turned to 'nativist' claims (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018).

This discursive shift coincided with the end of Berlusconi's government in 2011 and the construction of the grand coalition supporting the technocratic government of Mario Monti (November 2011-December 2012) that many voters saw as the EU's technocratic ruling *by proxy* and of which *Lega* became the main opposition party in Parliament by championing a new populist and sovereignist agenda. In this sense Euroscepticism helped shift *Lega*'s discourse from a narrative of regionally focused interests and the delegitimation of the Italian state (as incompatible in its North/South divide) to one of nationalist propaganda (Bulli and Tronconi 2011) that would often represent Italy at loggerheads with the EU and strategically allied with other far-right/nationalist European parties (for example Marine Le Pen's *Front National*, Dutch *PVV* and recently Viktor Orbán's *Fidez*).

It is especially since *Lega* came into office in 2018, and in the context of a series of European financial and migration 'crises', that Salvini's discourses consolidated right-wing, ethnocentric and Eurosceptic positions around the promotion of 'Italians/Italy first'[2] and the safeguard of Italy's borders, mobilising much public frustration and resentment against Brussels, advocating, for example, welfare policies that would protect 'national culture' and reject foreigners *per se* (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018) in a battle over cultural identity (Ganesh and Froio 2020). *Lega*'s emphatic defense of Italian identity escalated into

the policy of '*porti chiusi*' when, in his office as Minister of the Interior in 2019, Salvini prevented NGO ships rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean from docking into Italian ports.

Salvini's role therefore has been instrumental in transforming *Lega* from a fringe, regionally-based party to a coalition member in Italy's previous Government and the largest party in the 2019 EP election. Salvini's personalisation of politics and his rise as a 'digital leader' has occurred through an active digital mediatisation of his own political persona on social media including Twitter where he has over one million followers (this has also been supported by the instrumental work of a digital propaganda apparatus known as *La Bestia*). The campaign for the EP election was no exception as it was part of a highly mediatised strategic communication plan, running over social media platforms (the manifesto itself was an 18-minute video message streamed on Facebook).

M5S

Explicitly embracing the label of a movement and rejecting that of a political party, M5S was officially created in 2009 under the leadership of Italian comedian Beppe Grillo. Gaining much popularity in public opinion, especially during the years of opposition to the Berlusconi's final government and paradoxically in reaction to Monti's technocratic government, by 2019 M5S had become the most important political force in the Italian Parliament (Baldini and Giglioli 2019). While there is much agreement on M5S's innovative appropriation of the internet, as the first mainstream party operating exclusively online (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2014), its ideological profile has been much more debated and difficult to define.

M5S's anti-corruption and anti-establishment discourses have been differently seen as both right-wing and left-wing examples of populism. To some, M5S is following in the steps of previous anti-political movements such as the Northern League (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013; Albertazzi and McDonnel 2015). Others who refer to Laclau's theorisation of populism see M5S as a potential emancipatory force capable of re-inserting 'the people' into political action (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017). The M5S has thus quite a unique history and place within the Italian political system. While, in many respects the M5S is rooted in an aspirational *technocratic* form of governance (Bertsou and Caramani 2020) which emphasises technical expertise from 'ordinary' citizens, as opposed to 'professional' politicians, selected by a 'neutral' and meritocratic process, its discourses also feature some obvious forms of traditional populism (for example reference to *la casta* to indicate the ruling class, see Musso and Maccaferri 2018; Franzosi, Marone and Salvati 2015; Biorcio and Natale 2013). The nature of M5S's populism is therefore embedded in its critique of the Italian political system as ruled by elites and in the need of restoring the exercise of democracy into the hands of citizens/people, whom *la casta* have deprived of their sovereignty, through direct and deliberative democracy by taking advantage of new technology and the internet (Musso and Maccaferri 2018). The idealisation of the citizen-empowering potential of the Internet that would result in effective solutions to the 'problem' of politics is, as Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti (2018: 140) put it, 'the most evidently 'technocratic' aspect of the Movement's ideology'. Developed around the exponential growth of the internet as a space of 'unmediated communication', the role of the internet has often been mobilised in M5S's discourse to promote the idea of citizenship as widespread 'communities of practice' where everyone can be an expert and exercise specific *techné* (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2018).

In many respects, such approach to direct democracy and political renewal has driven M5S's stances on EU-rope towards more 'strategic that ideological' forms of Euroscepticism (Franzosi, Marone and Salvati 2015). M5S topped the 2013 Italian elections on the back of an electoral manifesto that, while making no specific reference to Europe and focusing instead on local or national issues and the promotion of bottom-up policy processes, saw Beppe Grillo's delegitimising in his blog what he regarded as the EU corrupted and bureaucratic elites that 'had betrayed the European dream'. Significantly Grillo made clear

his support for a referendum to revert to Lira and to leave the Eurozone (Musso and Maccaferri 2018: 15). Such endorsement was formalised in the manifesto for the 2014 European elections in which the M5S would be the second largest party and which would subsequently see it joining Nigel Farage's Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy EP group. While M5S's has formally reverted its positions on Europe under the leadership of G. Di Maio by committing to reforming 'Europe from inside', its Eurosceptic vein remains, and it is primarily driven by domestic socioeconomic utilitarianism which interprets EU issues in terms of their repercussions and consequences for Italian citizens. To some extent, M5S's Eurosceptic discourse is a sort of 'indirect' or perhaps 'reluctant nativism', in which the criticism of the EU constitutes a 'scaled' up replication of the electorally successful condemnation of the Italian political system at an upper level.

Another implication of M5S's ideological approach to 'direct democracy' has been its communication strategy which has primarily relied on the movement's and Grillo's own blogs as they are seen as 'alternative' to mainstream media. Grillo's social media accounts have been used exclusively to repost entries on his blog while the M5S's Twitter and Facebook accounts have been primarily (but not exclusively) been used to repost entries from the blog. Not only is M5S's social media presence less prominent than *Lega*'s but it has also been more 'diffused' across key party figures in contrast to Salvini's hyperleadership style (Gerbaudo, 2018). While Grillo remains a pivotal figure in M5S communication, different M5S leaders have been communicating key messages through different channels at different times and through different voices. For example, entries on the official blog feature a variety of authorship in a communicative style that is meant to reflect M5S's self-perception as a horizontally structured movement rather than a traditional vertically organised political party. Furthermore, alongside Grillo, who remains a pivotal figure in M5S communication, different leaders/spokespersons, such as DeMaio and DiBattista, have been instrumental in reverberating and in some cases also counter posing Grillo's message.

With specific relation with the 2019 European election campaign, the M5S saw a reasonable posting activity on their Twitter account (@Mov5Stelle), albeit with limited engagement on European themes, while the official party's blog and that of Grillo's showed a higher engagement. The Twitter account of Luigi De Maio showed virtually no post related with the campaign topics while Di Battista's Facebook account, although only engaging sporadically with European themes, was notably polemically intense when it did so.

DATASET AND ANALYSIS

For our analysis we initially compiled a corpus of data by scraping different communicative channels (for example social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and the two parties' official websites) between 1 January 2019 and 26 May 2019 as this timeframe effectively represents the most intense campaign period. The nature of multichannel digital communication is such that in most cases messages tend to be cross posted across different platforms performing reciprocal hyperlink functions. For example, most of Salvini's tweets represent 'soundbite headlines' hyperlinking to radio and TV interviews, press releases or speeches that are also distributed on *Lega*'s and Salvini's Facebook pages. Similarly, Grillo's tweets exclusively link to his blog. For consistency, we therefore focused on Twitter where we conducted an advanced search using the equivalent Italian terms for the keywords: EU, European Union, European elections, Brussels, Euro, Europe(ean) for all tweets posted during the timeframe by the accounts indicated in Table 1. In addition, we scraped:

- entries (N=35) on the official M5S's blog (https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it) filtered by same keywords as above;
- a set of entries on an aggregation page (https://www.leganord.org/eventi/europee-2019) dedicated to promotional material released by Lega for the 2019 European elections (including leaflets, videos and re-posting some of Salvini's Tweets and Facebook posts).

Table 1. Details of Twitter data analysed.

Account	Twitter Handle	Tweets retrieved
Matteo Salvini	@matteosalvinimi	N=158
Lega Salvini premier	@LegaSalvini	N=38
M5S	@mov5stelle	N=79
Beppe Grillo	@beppe_grillo	N=31

Our analysis was concerned with both the *topicalisation* of messages on specific platforms (how for example they were made 'newsworthy' in a tweet) and with the *articulation* of discourses in the text, speech and/or images they linked to. Our analysis was therefore guided by a Critical Discourse Studies *multilevel approach* (see Zappettini 2019) aimed at identifying: a) key discursive frames and themes; b) argumentation strategies (for example de/legitimation) and c) modes of realisation, enactment and discursive performance that would qualify as Eurosceptic and populist in virtue of the discussion of such concepts outlined above. All extracts presented in this article have been translated by the authors from the original posts in Italian.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The key discursive themes emerged from our analysis are summarised in Table 2. Overall, our findings point to both Lega and M5S's discourses aiming at an overarching delegitimisation a*nd reimagin*ation of *the EU project*. While Lega's responses primarily relied on *nativist performances of populism*, M5S's Euroscepticism rested on *technocratic forms of populism* as we discuss in detail below.

Table 2. Lega/Salvini and M5S/spokespersons' key discursive themes.

Lega and Salvini's key discursive themes	M5S and its spokespersons' key discursive themes
Delegitimation of the EU multicultural and federalist projects primarily predicated on: · Arguments of loss of cultural identity · Economic and sovereignty discourses · *victimisation* of Italy (representations of Italy as 'controlled by Brussels' and losing out in the European 'zero-sum game')	*Delegitimation* of the EU federalist project and EU institutions primarily predicated on: · Anti-politics and anti-elite discourses · Representations of 'bad capitalism' and 'hegemony of banks' · *victimisation* of Italian citizens
Promotion of nationalist and ethnocentric responses ('Italians first') to the current economic, political and cultural 'crises', for example by calling for: · reverting to a 'Europe of peoples' (emphasising Lega's alliances with other Eurosceptic/ far-right parties) · reverting to an EU intergovernmental set up with new power symmetries	Scaling up M5S's 'technocratic' domestic approach to a European level, for example by calling for: · the abolition of Strasbourg Parliament and, more generally, against the privileges of the EU 'caste' · bottom-up approaches/direct democracy (for example European referendum) relying on new technologies to voice European citizens neglected by the EU's bureaucratic model
Representations of Lega as a *capable* actor vis-à-vis other national and European actors Reclaiming *Italy's centrality* inside/outside the EU project	Representations of M5S as a *capable* actor vis-à-vis other national and European actors Reclaiming *Italy's centrality* inside/outside the EU project

Lega and Salvini's nativist populism

Lega's and Salvini's overarching discursive frames revolved around the re-imagination of the EU-ropean status quo, its dismantling and reformation in nativist and sovereignist terms. Rather than a rejection of the European project *tout court, Lega*'s Euroscepticism was therefore aimed at normalising the party's stances on immigration, the economy and conservative social values while reclaiming distinct remits of governance and identities for Italy and Europe. Within this framing, different discursive logics were identified.

The victimisation of Italy

The *victimisation* of Italy as politically and economically dependent from and vexed by the EU power was a frequent theme in Salvini's discourse and was primarily achieved through representations of the country as 'controlled by Brussels' and losing out in the European 'zero-sum game' and on antagonistic representations of Italy versus the EU and some member states. In some cases, such *arguments of power asymmetries* were predicated on the EU's bureaucracy and single market rules: 'Lowering corporation tax is the only way to let companies breath. Europe must let us work' (Twitter 20 May 2019) and 'our farmers and

fisherman [are] SLAUGHTERED BY EUROPEAN RULES' (Twitter 18 May 2019) while is some other cases the discourse portrayed Italy as ostracised by a Franco-German alliance: 'Enough begging the French and the Germans. We are ITALY' (Twitter 20 May 2019).

In this respect, Lega's discourse often rhetorically appealed to economic nationalism as a way to address Italy's perceived disadvantaged status: 'I WANT HUGE TRICOLORS ON MADE IN ITALY PRODUCTS! Eating and drinking Italian is good for your health and our jobs, let's defend our products tooth and nail and let those in Brussels eat their RUBBISH!' (Twitter 25 May 2019). Standing up to Brussels was also argued from a political perspective around the question of remits of power: 'In Europe they have understood that today in Italy there is a GOVERNMENT, not a branch of theirs. And we won't go begging anymore. In the elections on May 26, Italy will RISE AGAIN!' (Salvini's Facebook post, 18 March 2019).

The 'question' of cultural identity and Europe of peoples

Representations of a *cultural identity crisis* and the *construction of moral panic* around the alleged loss of identity were also quite conspicuous themes in our Salvini/*Lega* dataset and they clearly tie into previous exclusionary and xenophobic discourses as well as being driven by the contingent political debate over migrants arriving in Italy from the Mediterranean. For example, several Tweets and posts appeal to stop the invasion of *barconi* (dinghies, boats) and reject '4B Europe' (referring to a mix of enemies via the alliteration *burocrati, buonisti, banchieri and barconi*: bureaucrats, goodies, bankers and boats). Salvini often appealed to an ethnocentric and Christian-rooted idealisation of Europe resentfully noting how Europe's departure from its 'traditional' values had been paving the way for the Islamisation of the West. Tweeting on the eve of election day, Salvini invoked the *trope of Islamic invasion* to warn: 'We don't want to end up like Sweden, this is not integration! NO TO EURABIA' (see similar messages in electoral posters 'STOP invasion' and in @LegaSalvini, 12 May 2019 'Let's save Europe or our children will be living in an Islamic country'). In various instances of communication Salvini raised the question of reclaiming 'traditional' identities variously qualified as European/Italian/Christian, blaming European institutions for not 'PROTECTING identity, history, tradition and rights [from] Islamic extremism and fanaticism' (Twitter 8 April 2019) and for not defending Europe's own borders (Twitter 10 January 2019; see also videos posted on Lega's aggregation page). In a similar fashion, *Lega*/Salvini's campaign blamed the EU for pushing liberal values at the expense of traditional ones attacking for example the EU's Commission 'mad' support for Roma's entitlement to council housing (Twitter 15 May 2019) or advocating a reverse of current regulations that have displaced the central role of families with children in favour of LGBT rights (Tg2 and Twitter 10 January 2019).

Reclaiming Italy's centrality

In response to the above economic, political and cultural 'crises' *Lega* and Salvini delegitimised EU federal ideas as 'crazy' and advocated instead a reformed 'Europe of the peoples' (see Zappettini, 2020) in which Italy would join like-minded partners and 'take back' a prominent role in a 'different' Europe. *Lega* communication was thus aimed on the one hand at highlighting strategic alliances with other nationalist parties such as the Polish *PiS; Danks Folkeparti* and *Front National* and on the other hand at pushing the propaganda of Italy 'rising again' (*l'Italia rialza la testa*). Reclaiming a centrality for Italy within such 'different Europe of the peoples' was a recurrent campaign message which often drew from imaginaries of an Italian 'glorious past'. Therefore while *Lega*'s Euroscepticism clearly rejects transnational and progressive elements of the European project it still relies on its intergovernmental and zero-sum set up to be able to reclaim a centrality for Italy through a nostalgic longing for a 'golden age' which in many respects is reminiscent of similar discourses of 'greatness' and 'clout' typically invoked by nativists: 'Italy is the engine of the European Renaissance. If Europe regains its original vision … it will be safe' (Interview with RTL 10 January 2019); 'Italy matters again in Europe' (Twitter, Rai Povera Patria 25 January

2019); 'Europe is … Leonardo Da Vinci, it's us. On 26th May let's go and take Europe back' (Twitter 18 May 2019).

Lega as an agent of change

Most of these Eurosceptic discourses therefore seem to be enacted from an ambivalent insider/outsider position. Unlike for example the Leave campaign in Brexit, here Italy's 'greatness' is claimed back *inside* rather than *outside* Europe, albeit through an 'alternative' imaginary in which Salvini portrays himself as a reformist of Europe by advocating a leading role for Italy ('we're taking common sense to Europe'). In this respect our interpretation is that *Lega*/Salvini's messages were to a large extent driven by the political convenience of legitimising *Lega* on the domestic political stage as a capable and firm actor vis-à-vis other national and European actors, thus not only reclaiming Italy's cultural, political and economic centrality but also himself and his party as agents of change at a wider level: 'On 26th May with the vote of many Italians we will have the mandate to CHANGE Europe too, after Italy' (Twitter 28 January 2019); 'Some say Italy needs "more Europe". I think "more Italy" is needed in Europe. I want to defend my country and Italian interests' (Twitter 20 May 2019; La Quarta Repubblica).

'Common sense' style

Salvini's and *Lega*'s communication relied conspicuously on the overarching *'Buonsenso in Europa'* ('common sense in Europe') slogan which was multimodally reproduced in videos, TV and radio adverts and other promotional material. For example, all radio/TV campaign adverts scripts begin with the simplistic incipit 'common sense mode ON' before advertising specific policies or claiming specific achievements. As discussed above, the slogan was also invoked to advocate a 'different' Europe reformed along *Lega*'s domestic political agenda. Through the *'buonsenso'* trope Salvini was also able to present himself as both determined and reasonable. His communication appeared thus aimed at a dual construction of himself as a strong or hyper leader (a patriotic defender of right-wing values who was often addressed as *captain* in public comments and encouraged to 'carry on' and 'not to give up') but also an approachable people's man, or 'one of us'. This enactment occurred for example through the use of selfies, by sharing some elements of private life, for example posts on daily meals and food preferences; through certain lexical choices such as addressing the audience as *amici* (friends), greeting them with *bacioni* (big kisses) and other colloquial expressions or practices (for example capitalisation for shouting). Salvini's Euroscepticism appeared mainly performed through, on the one hand, a calculated balance of drumming up nativist themes and claims of standing up for Italians to (non-Italian) 'enemies', what Bracciale and Martella (2017) refer to as the 'Champion of the people' role performance, and on the other hand the rhetoric of moderation (*buonsenso*), every day familiarity and mundanity, or the 'man on the street' (Bracciale and Martella, 2017). For example, during rally held in Milan on 18 May 2019 with other European nationalist parties leaders, Salvini, wearing a rosary and invoking the Virgin Mary, was asked by a journalist whether any extremists were attending. He reassured his interviewer that the crowd was rather made up of 'mothers, fathers and disabled' claiming: 'we are extremists of common sense' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cF3Pez4OK0). With some audience, the *buonsenso* trope might have helped toning down the contradictions of *Lega*'s Euroscepticism that while accusing the EU institutions of not acknowledging identities seems to overlooks the different value that Salvini places on different identities through the exclusionary ideology of 'Italians first'.

M5S technocratic populism

Although compared to Lega and Salvini, the 2019 European elections campaign played a relatively marginal role in M5S's official communication and that of its spokespersons, our analysis suggests that the party overall performed styles of populism and Euroscepticism

which share several elements of similarity with, but also partly differentiate from, Salvini's/*Lega*'s discourses.

Anti-politics and anti-(EU) elites

While, similar to *Lega*/Salvini, the need for reforming EU-rope in more nation-centric terms was a theme frequently adopted by M5S, such arguments did not necessarily appeal to the 'Europe of peoples' trope and were realised in a communicative style that, unlike that of Salvini's was less centred on 'hyperleadership' and personalities. However, while explicit nativist/ sovereigntist discourses (such as *Lega*'s antagonisation of Italians and migrants) were absent in our dataset, populist themes were clearly underlying M5S discursive framing of European institutions, with typical 'elite vs ordinary people' and 'EU = waste of money' arguments as exemplified by the following: 'President Junker earns more than 27K euros per month. Mogherini 25,845,35, vice-Presidents 25,852,26 while all the other commissioners 22,852,26 euros per month: an insult [lit. slap in the face] for the over 100 million poor people in Europe' (Twitter 17 January 2019).

Anti-political and anti-elite arguments were mainly predicated on representation of empowered citizens. M5S often rhetorically called for 'more power to the citizens and less to the bureaucrats' (Il blog delle stelle 4 June 2019) and on policies proposing to abolish the 'privileges' of the EU 'caste' which effectively replicated at a European level the party's very same stances adopted in the domestic political context. These discourses included: the abolition of the Strasbourg parliament, the reduction of the total number of MEPs ('cutting parliamentarians') and of MEPS' costs ('cutting parliamentarian's salaries') and MEPs' vitalizi/life-long pensions: 'Thanks to M5S the EU Parliament is cutting pensions: now it's time to cut the privileges' (Il blog delle stelle 26 April 2019).

In keeping with the anti-corruption theme, M5S EP2019 campaign called for the introduction of a law preventing corrupt candidates running for Parliament: 'EU manifesto of M5S: Euro-ASBO and clean Parliament' (Il blog delle stelle 22 April 2019). The 'domestication of Euro politics' here is achieved via the invocation of *clean*, a reference to the judicial investigation into political corruption *Mani Pulite*/Clean hands trials held in Italy in the early 1990s', and to '*daspo*' (a ban similar to English ASBO which in Italy applies to violent football supporters).

Scaling up technocracy to a European level and claiming Italy's centrality

In a few cases, M5S arguments appealed to general ideals of social justice and to the vision of a more equal, pan-European rather than a strictly nationalist conceptualisation of society, for example by advocating the introduction of a European minimum wage and the application of stringent environmental policies. These proposals were often characterised as *lotta* (struggle/fight) or *battaglia* (battle), and *bene comune* (common good) thus resonating with a Left-wing vocabulary. In this sense, while in Salvini's/*Lega*'s discourses one can recognise an exclusionary dimension of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), M5S discourse was more oriented towards a 'technocratic' inclusionary understanding of the people/citizens. Nonetheless, a number of instances suggest a less benevolent stance towards the EU through arguments that, while still appealing to the ideal of social justice, also relied on the ambivalent characterisation of citizens, whom M5S claimed to fight for, as Italian/European (often incompatibly so). In a few cases arguments of social justice drew from the anti-elitist *trope of waste of money* to support the idea that citizens (inferable in a larger sense) are losing out in the European democratic system: 'The first reform that Europe needs is social justice. There can't be first and second class citizens. There exist too many privileges and waste, that must be erased to give resources back to citizens' (Twitter 9 January 2019).

More frequently however M5S messages portrayed the party as a national paladin capable of defending Italian interests in Europe '[we are] going to Europe to negotiate the rights of the Italians' (Il Blog delle Stelle 21 April 2019). In many respects our analysis found that M5S's messages echoed closely *Lega*'s reformist and nationalist themes (albeit void of

xenophobic elements) pivoting on reclaiming a centrality for Italy through a re-imagined Europe: 'we must save Europe from itself' (Blog delle stelle 19 June 2019); 'In Europe to truly matter again' (Blog delle stelle 20 June 2019).

This ambivalent message about the interplay of European and national remits of solidarity and exclusion, akin to the historical discursive trends of the far-Right parties in France or Italy (Lorimer 2020), characterised M5S discursive performance throughout the whole electoral campaign. In most cases, therefore the discourse appeared driven by both *narratives of continuity* with the EU in which Europe and Italy were constructed as compatible entities and by *narratives of rupture* portraying Italy and Europe in a zero-sum logic in a manner closer to the Salvini/*Lega* discourse: 'If we don't fight, we go back to the past. And we can no longer afford a Europe that slaughters Italian citizens as it has done so far' (Twitter 10 April 2019).

Communicative style: changing Europe from the inside/outside

Linguistically, both narratives of continuity and rupture also relied on spatial and temporal metaphors of Europe (McEntee-Atalianis and Zappettini 2014) in which, for example, Italy was represented on the one hand at the *core/centre* of such European space with M5S performing a leading role ('change Europe from the inside', Twitter 11 February 2019, and 'take Europe into the future', Twitter 10 April 2019) while, on the other, Italy was perceived as coming from the 'periphery' to change Europe's current economic policy ('move into Europe', Twitter 23 April 2019). Similarly to *Lega*, M5S's Eurosceptical discourses seemed therefore enacted from an European insider/outsider position (see above) but, unlike Salvini/*Lega* discourse where the victimisation of Italy revolved around a renewed nationalistic pride, M5S predicated the defence of Italy through a supposed unbiased/technical argument: Italy demands 'respect' because it is a net-contributor of EU funds (Il Blog delle Stelle 6 April 2019). Indeed some key themes of M5S European campaign appealed to the notion of Italy being marginalised by the EU and the need to reclaim what the party sees as the country's dignified and leading role. This discourse is clearly inferable for example from an article on M5S's blog titled 'The crazy plan of EU hawks: to cut European funds to who doesn't accept austerity' (Il Blog delle stelle 6 February 2019) which is illustrated by a vivid vignette of a giant foot about to step over Italy and crush it. In this respect, our interpretation is that M5S discourse, albeit more nuanced or perhaps 'reluctant', features a form of Euroscepticism that is conceptually similar to Salvini's/*Lega*'s positions and that like *Lega*/Salvini's discourses discussed above (and arguably in virtue of their alliance in government) saw M5S calling for reforming Europe along ambivalent national and European logics. The key discursive driver of *change*, encapsulated in the *#ContinuareXcambiare* and *#cambiamolainsieme* (Let's change it [Europe] together) slogans, reflected both such national and European dimensions. Overall, these discourses sought to represent M5S as the main actor of policy changes/proposals initiated at a national level and then 'scaled up' to a European level:

Cutting down on waste is not just a symbolic gesture, but a concrete action to free resources that can be utilised to improve the citizens' quality of life. We are doing it in Italy and we will do it in #Europe as well. (Twitter 11 February 2019).

It is within through this discursive framing that M5S portrays itself as a new non-political 'technocratic' force but also as, for instance, 'the most productive' party in the Europen Parliament (Il Blog delle stelle 20 May 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis has focused on the discursive enactments of Euroscepticism in Lega and M5S communication during their campaigns for 2019 EP elections. We examined the Italian case primarily for the rapid escalation of Eurosceptic discourses fueled by the two parties in the last few years but also as these two political actors represent interesting variants of nativist and technocratic populism performed through 'hyperled' and 'horizontal' styles of communication. At the wider European level, the rationale for our study is provided by the representativeness of Italy as a country were such populist patterns have been mobilised along Eurosceptic trajectories.

Our analysis has suggested that Lega and M5S shared several discursive themes, in particular the antagonisation between Italy and EU actors of which Euroscepticism was a 'logical' discursive by-product. Along this framing, Salvini/Lega's Euroscepticism was performed conspicuously through ethno-centric and 'sovereign' ideas of Italy, and its *renaissance*, and in reaction to scenarios of a pan-European cultural identity crisis brought about by migration and liberal values typically associated with the EU. By contrast M5S's discourse was predicated on a 'post-modern' antagonisation between the elites of 'traditional' political systems (*the caste*) and people/citizens whereby M5S effectively replicated at an European level the same 'anti-politics' and technocratic discourses that have characterised its domestic policies, especially the galvanising argument of neglected (Italian) citizens' rights (although, interestingly, questions of representations and democratic deficit, which often dominate European elections, were notably absent). In a similar vein, although along a different *us versus them* cleavage, Lega's campaign drummed up historical anti-migration and 'law and order' themes by projecting them onto the European 'issue of migration' to advocate its 'Italians first' propaganda through strategies of 'moral panics'. Our analysis has therefore suggested that while both parties' Eurosceptic stances were performed through calls for a reformed Europe, which both parties claimed to champion through their policies, they were driven by domestic political convenience and imagined along strict national logics. While Lega and M5S often depicted themselves as renovating forces in/for Europe, such claims were often realised through ambivalent representations of themselves as European insiders/outsiders and, in the case of M5S, of Italian and European citizenships that left the 'European question' unanswered. Moreover, MS5's discourse showed a mixed use of technocratic, populist and social themes. Whilst on the one hand it criticised the EU for its inefficiency and organisational structure from a business or managerial perspective, on the other hand it often drew from themes of social justice and national/European solidarity.

These seemingly conflictual discourses reflect in fact the ambiguous and inherently contradictory nature of technocratic populism. In the Italian case such discourses arguably co-emerged for political convenience and were subject to the fleeting dimension of the Lega/M5S coalition. In general terms, our study points to Euroscepticism as a complex phenomenon that relies, inter alia, on different discursive performances. The Italian case has shown how distinct nativist and technocratic forms of populism have co-emerged and evolved along parallel discursive trajectories while, at the same time, being performed from separate stances and being not only politically domesticated but also seized for re-imaginative projects of Europe. The specific history and contingencies of the Italian case including the context of production of the discourse analysed (for example social media and the EP campaign) as well as the usual limitations of interpretive studies (for example no empirical insights on audience reception) do not allow us to generalise our findings but we invite responses and 'notes comparison' in the spirit of enhancing the academic debate on the legitimisation of EU-ropean integration.

Although it is beyond the scope of our analysis, we will conclude with some speculative discussion of the larger dynamics at play and future prospects for different forms of Euroscepticism. The mobilisation of Eurosceptic sentiment in Italian public opinion has clearly

continued to gain some traction since May 2019. Far from settling the question of the relationship between Italy and Europe, the promotion of a technocratic resolution of the European crisis, albeit with very different models, forced Italian populist parties to reopen such question and to make important ideological and political choices. As in the case of Brexit, the European elections campaign was never about Europe but rather about a nation 'reckoning with itself' (O'Toole, 2019). For a while, rather than existing in an oppositional relation, both populist nativist and technocratic discourses coexisted, combined and compounded on the Italian stage to sustain a critical juncture in which Euroscepticism instrumentally served 'anti-politics' parties. However, at the 2019 Italian elections for the EP, the first populist coalition government in Western Europe had its first important electoral test. The enduring disputes between government allies M5S and League for Salvini Premier ultimately would lead to the collapse of the first Giuseppe Conte Cabinet and only two months after the EP elections to the formation of a new coalition executive, this time between the M5S and the Democratic Party. To a certain extent, the discursive performance of both populist forces in the European campaign predicted this outcome. In a way, the return of Lega to the opposition and the institutionalisation of the M5S within the new 'red-yellow' coalition confirm the historical Italian tendency to politically and ideologically 'read' the EU exclusively from a national perspective.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The original official party name was *Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania* (Northern League for the Independence of Padania). During the 2018 general election, the party rebranded itself as *Lega*, an umbrella which includes sister organisations *Lega per Salvini Premier* and *Noi con Salvini*. As from 3/8/2020 Lega per Salvini Premier has superseded all others denominations. For convenience, our paper refers to Lega.

[2] Compared to other parties, Lega voters are those who most identify with 'being Italian' and the least with Europe (Demos survey, December 2018).

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