



From Movement to Party. MeetUp groups, Policies and Conflict in the Organisational Development of the Italian Five Stars Movement (2008-2014)

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FROM MOVEMENT TO PARTY. MEETUP GROUPS, POLICIES AND CONFLICT IN THE ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ITALIAN FIVE STARS MOVEMENT (2008-2014)

by Giuseppe Ieraci and Ruggero Toffoletto

The Italian party system has gone through radical changes in the last two decades (Ieraci 2014), and the novelty of the Five Stars Movement (5SM) added new matter. The almost simultaneous launch in 2008 of the *Partito Democratico* (PD) on the center-left, as a rally of former *Democratici di Sinistra* and *Margherita*, and of the *Popolo della Libertà* (PDL) on the center-right, as a rally of former *Forza Italia* and *Alleanza Nazionale* opened the era of the Italian bipolarism. The appearance of the 5SM in this unstable scenario has had the feature of a sudden outburst characterized by a rapid electoral growth. At the 2013 national elections, the 5SM gained 25.5 per cent and 109 seats in the *Camera dei Deputati* (Lower House) and 23.8 per cent and 54 seats in the *Senato* (Upper House). This extraordinary success raises a central question. Has the 5SM transformed from being a movement of opinions and political positions mainly channelled through the web to becoming a properly organized and institutionalized political force? More simply, has the 5SM become a *political party*? To answer this question, this article proposes an analysis of the policy issues debated by the MeetUp groups and of the organisational developments of the 5SM from its origins as a movement to a party organisation after the 2013 national elections. The main source of the research was the web and MeetUp portal, which have been since its origin the two main channels of diffusion and of rootedness of the 5SM in Italian public opinion and eventually in the Italian electorate. The MeetUp groups are analyzed with respect to two main features: firstly, we will try to outline their organisational chart and structure, pointing out their diffusion on the national territory and their membership (Section 1); secondly, the content of the debates in the MeetUp groups is investigated in the attempt to outline the policy preferences of the 5SM (Section 2). Finally, in the Section 3, some considerations will

be advanced concerning the process of institutionalization of the 5SM, that is its apparent transformation into a normal party.

The scope of this research article is twofold. Firstly, it has a descriptive meaning and it aims at presenting a collection of data concerning the organisational adaptation of the 5SM and its policy preferences during the crucial phase 2008-2014 (respectively, Sections 1 and 2). The perspective here adopted follows the tradition of the a-theoretical, and interpretative case studies which are of great relevance in the progress of the comparative politics and of the comparative method as stated by Lijphart⁽¹⁾. Such studies are preliminary steps towards the formulation of hypotheses and theory, because they provide the necessary data to build up concepts and theory resorting to induction.

Secondly, a theoretically grounded interpretation of the organizational transformation of the 5SM is advanced. Since the seminal work by Eldersveld, recently recalled by Bolleyer and by Ignazi & Pizzimenti⁽²⁾, the dilemma between the central drive for power and opposing local demands has been conceptualized as a dichotomy between hierarchy and stratarchy. As we shall see (Section 1), the diffusion of the MeetUp groups in Italy and the deliberate absence of any intermediate organisational level between the groups and the leadership correspond to two typical features of a stratarchy, namely the interplay of the basic units (MeetUps) and their relative degree of autonomy. Nonetheless, the 5SM retains some at least a hierarchical trait as it will be argued later. The definition of the movement “National policy” for instance was definitively elaborated by Beppe Grillo and eventually flew in the Florence Charta (see Section 2). According to Panebianco⁽³⁾ one way of evaluating the institutionalization of a party is to look at its map of organisational power and at its propensity to make organisational changes in response to external pressures or to various sources of stress. The map of the organizational power helps to clarify the hierarchy/stratarchy dilemma. Nonetheless, the institutionalization of any organisation refers to more

⁽¹⁾ Arend LIJPHART, *Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method*, in «American Political Science Review», 65, 1971, pp. 682-93.

⁽²⁾ Samuel ELDERSVELD, *Political Parties. A Behavioural Analysis*, Chicago, Rand McNally, 1964; Nicole BOLLEYER, *New Party Organization in Western Europe: of Party Hierarchies, Stratarchies and Federations*, in «Party Politics», 18, 2012, pp. 15-36; Piero IGNAZI and Eugenio PIZZIMENTI, *The Reins of Intra-party Power in the Italian Political Parties (1990-2011*, in «Italian Political Science Review», 44, 2014, pp. 223-45.

⁽³⁾ Angelo PANEBIANCO, *Political Parties. Organisation and Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988 (Engl. trans. of *Modelli di partito*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1982).

analytical dimensions⁽⁴⁾, among which the internal and external dimensions are particularly relevant in the case of the political party. *Internal* institutionalization concerns the degree of complexity of any organisation. Division of labor, clear cut and specialized roles, expectations about the performance of these roles, and regularized patterns of recruitment to roles⁽⁵⁾ are among the main features of internal institutionalization. *External* institutionalization concerns not only the degree of differentiation of the organisation from its environment and how well-bounded it is⁽⁶⁾, but it encompasses as well the systemic relationships of the organisation in its environment. In other words, the external institutionalization addresses the relationship of any organisation with the other organisations in its system. This approach implies that the study of the organisational transformation of a movement/party should take into consideration both the changes in its relative complexity (internal institutionalization) and the modification of the pattern of relationship of the movement/party with other organisations and institution in its environment (external institutionalization).

This research will focus on the two dimensions (internal and external) of institutionalization of the 5SM according to two underlying hypotheses. Hypothesis 1: The integration of the 5SM into the parliamentary arena generates a conflict between the “movement” (MeetUps) and the “parliamentary party” (newly elected MPs) which is highly destabilizing and might eventually reverting the movement into a proper political party with organizational complexity. Hypothesis 2: The struggle for the affirmation and the establishment of the 5SM in the parliamentary arena will affect the consolidation of its internal lines of authority, favoring the emergence of an identifiable and hierarchical leadership.

The MeetUp groups. Regional diffusion and organisational impact on the 5SM

The history of 5SM has been strongly characterised by the public

⁽⁴⁾ Nelson W. POLSBY, *The Institutionalization of the US House of Representatives*, in «American Political Science Review», 62, 1968, pp. 1441-68.

⁽⁵⁾ *Ivi*, p. 1145.

⁽⁶⁾ *Ibid.*

action of Beppe Grillo and by the sometime unveiled influence of Gianroberto Casaleggio⁽⁷⁾. Casaleggio Associati, the digital marketing and network company founded by Casaleggio himself, took over the organisation of Grillo's tours around Italy and issued his publications⁽⁸⁾. The launch in 2005 of a *Beppe Grillo Blog* on the web was an immediate success, with over two hundred thousand visitors and over a thousand posted comments within a few days of its existence. It was during this phase that Grillo and Casaleggio launched the MeetUp project later described⁽⁹⁾. To a certain extent, Grillo and Casaleggio developed a very successful franchise system⁽¹⁰⁾ designed to offer a platform for the launch of a political movement and eventually of a political party.

Before the debut in the electoral arena, the web and the MeetUps portal offered to the 5SM the main channel of political confrontation and of political mobilization. Normally, the access to the MeetUps is free and open, although some of them require a formal membership in the movement. Each MeetUp has one organiser, who acquires through payment a license to open the group and de facto controls and filters the access to the MeetUps. The organiser may coordinate more than one MeetUp group and he/she establishes the access criteria to the groups⁽¹¹⁾.

⁽⁷⁾ Fabio BORDIGNON and Luigi CECCARINI, *Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo Shakes Italian Politics*, in «South European Society and Politics», 18, 2013, pp. 427-49; Piergiorgio CORBETTA and Elisabetta GUALMINI, *Il partito di Grillo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013; Rinaldo VIGNATI, *Beppe Grillo and the Movimento 5 Stelle: a Brief History of a 'Leaderist' Movement with a Leaderless Ideology*, in Filippo TRONCONI (ed.), *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. Organisation, Communication, and Ideology*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, pp. 9-28.

⁽⁸⁾ Roberto BIORCIO and Paolo NATALE, *Politica a 5 stelle. Idee, storia e strategie del Movimento di Grillo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2013.

⁽⁹⁾ Damien LANFREY, *Il movimento dei Grillini tra Meetup, metaorganizzazione e democrazia del monitoraggio*, in Lorenzo MOSCA and Cristian VACCARI (eds.), *Nuovi media, nuova politica? Partecipazione e mobilitazione da MoveOn al Movimento 5 Stelle*, Milano, Angeli, 2011, pp. 143-66; Maria Elisabetta LANZONE, *Il Movimento Cinque Stelle. Il popolo di Grillo dal web al Parlamento*, Novi Ligure, Epoké, 2015.

⁽¹⁰⁾ R. Kenneth CARTHY, *Parties as Franchise Systems. The Stratarchical Organizational Imperative*, in «Party Politics», 10, 2004, pp. 1-24.

⁽¹¹⁾ Any citizen can start a MeetUp group, provided that he/she registers on the MeetUp portal (unless he/she is already a member of the 5SM). There is a relatively simple, three step procedure to follow: create the page through the website <http://www.beppegrillo.meetup.com/>; create; pay the platform license (at the cost of USD 14.00 per month); register the organiser's name at <http://www.beppegrillo.it/meetup/members.php> and be awarded the "Beppe Grillo" tag. The MeetUp social networking portal was launched in 2002 by Scott Heiferman and it is copyright protected. It was used in 2004 by Howard Dean in the Democratic primaries to the nomination for the elections to the USA Presidency. Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio simply registered the 5SM in the MeetUp portal and they do not collect the cost

The MeetUps are here analytically surveyed at the regional level. Table 1 exemplifies the framework adopted in the investigation and the findings with regard to the Region Friuli Venezia-Giulia. For each of the twenty Italian regions, the provincial sub-units were taken into consideration, and the number of MeetUp groups in each province was recorded. Other gathered data at the provincial level were the number of registered members of the various MeetUp groups (third column in Table 1), the number of organisers (fourth column), co-organisers (fifth column), assistant organisers (sixth column), and of event organisers (seventh column). As later pointed out, organisers, co-organisers and event organisers constitute the basic core of the movement's organisation at the provincial level. The last column in Table 1 lists the issues dealt with by the MeetUp groups, as can be derived from the titles and the descriptions provided for each MeetUp group. The information collected in Table 1 was acquired resorting to, i) canonical search engines in the web, ii) Beppe Grillo's blog⁽¹²⁾, and iii) the list of the existing MeetUp groups⁽¹³⁾.

Although each MeetUp group is conceived as a free forum of discussion, it is as a matter of fact regulated by the four already mentioned roles of the organiser (who acts as the equivalent of an administrator in a blog or in a social forum), of a co-organiser (a deputy administrator), one or more assistant organisers and some event organisers. Apart from the organiser, who opens the group and therefore fully administrates it, the other roles are not necessarily prescribed. Assistant organisers, co-or-

of the license.

⁽¹²⁾ Cfr. Beppe Grillo's Blog, Find your city, <http://www.beppegrillo.it/meetup/>.

⁽¹³⁾ See http://www.meetup.com/beppegrillo-533/pages7Elenco_Meetup_presenti/.

Table 1 – Organisational Complexity and Policy outlines of the 5SM. An Example of the MeetUps articulation (Friuli Venezia-Giulia 2015 updating)

Provinces	MeetUp Groups	Members	Organisers	Co-Organisers	Assistant Organisers	Event Organisers	Issues debated by the MeetUp Groups
Trieste	6	1,596	7	12	13	7	Freedom of information - Active community - Zero waste - Trieste Five Stars Civic List - Renewable and alternative energy - De-growth - Gruppi d'Acquisto Solidale (GAS)* - Sustainable development - Beppe Grillo - Free Internet access for citizens - Direct and active democracy - Politics and activism - Local Politics - Five Stars municipalities - Legality - Environment - Water - Five Star Movement - No TAV protest.
Udine	23	1,158	22	21	0	13	Beppe Grillo - www.beppegrillo.it - Environment and ecology - Renewable and alternative energy - Local Politics - Direct and active democracy - FS Municipalities -FS Civic List - Zero waste - Five Star Movement - Regional elections 2013 - Social equality - Water commonweal = Public water - Legality and bottom-up democracy - Environment and Territory - Facilities for citizens - PROMOTE OUR QUALITY OF LIFE - Waste of public money - Freedom of information - Job - Energy conservation - Inclusive society - Social policy - No high salaries and gold retirements.
Gorizia	5	615	2	3	3	1	Freedom of information - Direct democracy - Five Star Movement - Beppe Grillo - Zero waste - Renewable and alternative energy - Environment - Water - Local politics - Free Internet access - Regional elections 2013 in Friuli Venezia Giulia - Politics and activism - De-growth - Five Stars Civic List - Legality.
Pordenone	14	1,273	14	16	16	7	Beppe Grillo - Alternative energy - Environment - New urbanism and sustainable development - Local politics - Web and technology - www.beppegrillo.it - Change the politics way to grow up - Active democracy - Clean politics - Separate collection of waste - Participation - Politics and activism - Citizens' rights - New ideas and changes for the public asset - Public health - Book crossing - Policy for the sustainable development - Equality meritocracy environment job health - Improve our territory management - Freedom of information - Five Star Movement - Zero waste - Development and protection of local activities - Fair trade economy - Spread of Five Star Movement - Youth employment policies - Needs of territory.
Total	48	4,642	45	52	32	28	

[Source: Our own elaboration]

ganisers and event organisers are relatively independent one from the other and they are not structured in any hierarchy or subordination of positions⁽¹⁴⁾. This arrangement of roles in each MeetUp group could be therefore conceived as a staff unit attached to the organiser, who holds a significant share of responsibility and organisational power over the group.

Table 2 summarizes all the findings at the regional level. The number of MeetUp groups is obviously not fixed during the time, because some of them may have closed down and new ones are continually generated, but at the end of 2014 it was possible to count 1,886 active MeetUps in all Italy. Their numerical distribution roughly corresponds to the percentage distribution of the population in Italy. For instance, in Lombardia (the most populated Region in Italy with about 10 million of inhabitants) there are 210 active MeetUps, corresponding to 11 per cent of the total. Similarly, Sicilia, Lazio, Campania, Toscana, and Veneto count varying percentages around the 10 per cent threshold. The percentages of group members follows quite precisely the same pattern of distribution and it reflects the electoral strength of the 5SM.

The MeetUps portal of the 5SM offered a powerful mechanism of channeling social demands and public opinions to the apex of the movement. This way of shaping the public domain as in a process of bubbling up of demand and positions helped the establishment of a connection between the civil society and political domain⁽¹⁵⁾, particularly after the 5SM descended into the political arena. The MeetUps favor the direct involvement of the citizens in the political debate without filters or the mediation of a professional political class. Secondly, the MeetUps function as loci of public confrontation at the local and provincial (if not municipal) levels, they often become involved in problem solving and in the search for political responses.

The set-up of the MeetUps platform is instrumental to the establishment of a direct and active democracy, which the 5SM is trying to implement within the boundary of its own membership. For instance, both the candidacies to the Presidency of the Republic in January 2015 and the candidacies to any elective political office were submitted to the

⁽¹⁴⁾ This evaluation is based on random interviews of some organisers and other participants in various MeetUp groups.

⁽¹⁵⁾ According to Mary KALDOR and Sabine SELCHOW, *The 'Bubbling Up' of Subterranean Politics in Europe*, in «Journal of Civic Society», 9, 2013, pp. 78-99, the 5SM and similar political movements in Europe played an important role in bringing to light a flow of «subterranean politics in Europe».

Table 2 – MeetUp distribution, membership and “leadership” in the Italian Regions (2015 updating)

Regions	N. of MeetUp Groups	%	N. of Members	%	N. of Organisers	%	N. of Co-Organisers	%	N. of Assistant Organisers	%	N. of Event Organisers	%
Abruzzo	58	3	2,884	2	52	3	59	2	4	0	6	1
Basilicata	29	2	2,129	1	22	1	20	1	-	0	2	0
Calabria	112	6	8,121	4	104	6	112	5	24	2	24	3
Campania	153	8	16,598	9	128	8	107	5	70	5	17	2
Emilia Romagna	77	4	10,864	6	64	4	75	3	100	7	61	8
Friuli Venezia-Giulia	48	3	4,642	3	45	3	52	2	32	2	28	4
Lazio	177	9	15,058	8	162	10	211	9	160	11	97	13
Liguria	73	4	9,343	5	65	4	82	4	58	4	24	3
Lombardia	210	11	22,842	13	175	10	264	11	215	15	121	17
Marche	73	4	5,252	3	63	4	71	3	48	3	3	0
Molise	10	1	1,109	1	9	1	31	1	3	0	8	1
Piemonte	58	3	9,048	5	51	3	137	6	97	7	30	4
Puglia	195	10	13,913	8	174	10	213	9	127	9	21	3
Sardegna	53	3	6,451	4	47	3	144	6	56	4	7	1
Sicilia	226	12	19,683	11	203	12	306	13	84	6	57	8
Toscana	150	8	16,214	9	137	8	242	10	209	15	58	8
Trentino-Alto Adige	13	1	1,102	1	13	1	13	1	12	1	2	0
Umbria	46	2	3,825	2	43	3	69	3	31	2	74	10
Valle d'Aosta	2	0	264	0	2	0	-	0	4	0	-	0
Veneto	123	7	12,848	7	115	7	131	6	83	6	92	13
Total	1,886	100	182,190	100	1,674	100	2,339	100	1,417	100	732	100

[Source: Our own elaboration]

web. Beppe Grillo resorted to the web even as an instrument for calming down controversy and conflict inside the movement, as in the recent cases of various MPs being expelled from the movement after a popular consultation on the web⁽¹⁶⁾ or, more recently, for exercising pressure for the resignation of an elected 5SM's mayor in Campania for alleged contact with the local criminality. Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the 5SM lacks any apical leadership and that its organisation – if any could be given – should be represented as a horizontal flow of interdependences among equally relevant units. For this purpose, Figure 1 introduces a hypothetical organisational flow chart of the 5SM, where Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio occupy an undeniable leadership position.

The establishment of the 5SM in the two Houses of the Italian Parliament after the 2013 elections and the consequent organisation of parliamentary groups created a potential cleavage between the movement as expressed on the web and its newly arisen institutional form – an aspect which we shall address later. The 5SM's parliamentary groups in the *Camera dei Deputati* (Lower house) and in *Senato* (Upper house) immediately gained the front stage in the aftermath of the elections, because of a lack of a clear majority in the Upper House which increased enormously both the blackmail and coalition potentials⁽¹⁷⁾ of the 5SM's parliamentary groups⁽¹⁸⁾. Beppe Grillo has been since trying to keep a grasp on the movement with some difficulties. (At the end of 2014, 9 members of the Lower House and 17 Senators had left the 5SM.) He led the 5SM delegation which was consulted by the President of the Republic for the nomination of the Prime Minister (*Presidente del Consiglio*) after the election according to the Italian Constitution. He banned the party members from participating in any TV program and he systematically used his blog and the web to condition the action of the 5SM's MPs. This attitude has been widely criticized⁽¹⁹⁾, because it would infringe the 5SM's fundamental

⁽¹⁶⁾ Maria Elisabetta LANZONE and Filippo TRONCONI, *Between Blog, Social Networks and Territory: Activists and Grassroots Organization*, in TRONCONI (2015 ed.), pp. 53-74.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Giovanni SARTORI, *Parties and Party Systems*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

⁽¹⁸⁾ On the MPs of the 5SM see Luca PINTO and Andrea PEDRAZZANI, *From 'Citizens' to Members of Parliament: the Elected Representatives in the Parliamentary Arena*, in TRONCONI (2015 ed.), pp. 99-126.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Rosanna DE ROSA, *The 5SM in the Italian Political Scenario*, in «Journal of Democracy». 5, 2013, pp. 128-40.

principles of democracy and equalitarianism expressed by the slogan “*uno vale uno*” so often recalled by Grillo himself in his blog⁽²⁰⁾. Grillo has not hesitated to dictate the party policy line through his blog and he has even opened the proposal and drafting of the bills to be introduced by the 5SM in Parliament to the participation of the movement members through the web.

We have attempted to show this top-down control in the flow chart of Figure 1. The autonomy of the MPs has been heavily questioned by Grillo, who proposed a reform of article 67 of the Italian Constitution which establishes that the MPs shall not be bound by any instructions and shall not receive a binding mandate. Nonetheless, the 5SM’s MPs have sometimes ignored the leader’s dictations and this attempt to defend their autonomy has from time to time brought about attrition and conflict with Grillo. It soon became clear that the institutionalization of the 5SM, that is its penetration into the political and representative institutions, would have transformed radically the relationship between the leadership and the base of the movement. To respond to these changes, in November 2014 Grillo submitted to the members of the movement a proposal of constitution of a Directorate of five MPs (Alessandro Di Battista, Roberto Fico, Carla Ruocco, Luigi Di Maio and Carlo Sibilia) chosen by himself and Casaleggio. The proposal was approved by 91.7 per cent of the participants through a referendum on the web. The tasks of the Directorate are to be a point of reference for the initiatives coming from the base of the movement, to act as spokesmen/women of the 5SM and to deal with the press, finally to coordinate the action of the MPs in the institutional arenas. The Directorate has revealed to be extremely influential and conditioning in its first year of life. It is drawn in dashed line in Figure 1 to render the idea of its flexible and moveable placement in the organisation and its capacity to act at several levels. Although the aim of the Directorate is to facilitate communication between the MPs and the leaders, its institution raised some objection among the 5SM’s parliamentary groups because of the limitation on their initiative that is imposed through its “directives”.

The lower part of the flow chart of Figure 1 shows the ramification of the base of the movement, there can be seen the articulation of the MeetUp groups. Although – as already said – affiliation is not mandato-

⁽²⁰⁾ «One is worth one [*Uno vale uno*] means democracy, it means that we decide together, it means that there is room for the participation of all and that nobody acts for the others or counts more»: <http://www.beppegrillo.it/listeciviche/liste/conversano/uno-vale-uno.html>.

ry in order to participate in the MeetUp groups, these are mostly composed of members of the movement, beyond occasional web visitors and sympathizers. Apart from its impact as an organisational constraint, the MeetUps platform is of considerable importance in the definition of the policy profile of the 5SM and, broadly, of its ideology. We will turn to this aspect next.

The main policy outlines of the 5SM

The rally of the Five stars civic lists in Florence (8 March 2009) and the launch of the Florence Charta marked the beginning of a new and more political phase of the movement. The Florence Charta encompassed the following policy areas⁽²¹⁾:

- Free and costless use of fresh water (against the government's project to privatize the supply and provide it at a market cost)⁽²²⁾;
- Urban public transport (against any project of privatizing the sector);
- Defense of the environment;
- Supply of clean renewable energy;
- Commitment to sustainable development.

Notwithstanding the fact that Grillo tried to disguise as long as possible and as emphatically as possible the political switch of the movement⁽²³⁾, the Florence Charta and the subsequent official birth of the 5SM proclaimed in Milan by Grillo on 4 October 2009⁽²⁴⁾ were unmistakable signs of the debut of the movement in the political arena.

In the database created for the purposes of this research and exemplified by the case of Friuli Venezia-Giulia in Table 1 (see eighth column), we collected some basic information about the policy issues debated by the participants in the MeetUp groups in the 20 Italian regions. Each

⁽²¹⁾ The program of the 5SM is available on Grillo's blog: www.beppegrillo.it/listeciviche/la-carta-di-firenze.html.

⁽²²⁾ Policies implementing the distribution of costless and public water should be completed by the installation of sewage plants where missing, if necessary subsidizing the private sector for such an installation.

⁽²³⁾ The Florence Carta and any following constitutive documents of the 5SM were defined by Grillo and Casaleggio as "*Non Statuto*" (Non-Statute). See <http://www.beppegrillo.it/iniziativa/movimentostelle/Regolamento-Movimento-stelle.pdf>.

⁽²⁴⁾ BIORCIO and NATALE (2013), p. 96.

MeetUp group is identifiable by the title of the guested discussion. Such title clearly indicates the content of the discussion, although it obviously does not allow to go into an in depth analysis of the articulation of the debates. Methodologically, it was assumed that each MeetUp title reveals the policy issue at stake. These policy issues were gathered in classes according to their similarity and compatibility, through and inductive and incremental sequence of collection of their occurrences. Eight major classes of occurrences emerged, in relation to the following policies: A. Environment and Energy, Waste and Water; B. 5SM and its Leadership; C. Civicness; D. Local government and the 5SM; E. Participation Internet and E-democracy; F. Labor policies, Development and economic issues; G. Wi-Fi, Information, fairness; H. Rule of law and Social justice; I. Public transport and infrastructures; L. Wealth, National Health System. A ninth category was created to collect the residual debated topics (M. Other). The total number of the occurrences of policy issue in the nine classes was 4,298. This total number of policy issues does not obviously correspond one-to-one to the total number of MeetUps at the regional level (which are 1,886, see Table 2) because most MeetUp groups debate a plurality of policy issues and topics and this generate a multiplication of the occurrences in the classes. The findings of this content analysis are shown in Table 3.

Our survey confirms that the environmental issue (A. in Table 3), in its various forms, occupies the core of 5SM overall policy proposals, together with an emphasis on action against corruption and on the involvement of citizens in a new conception of politics (C. Civicness). Transparency, honesty and meritocracy in the process of political recruitment and the emphasis on the accountable behaviour of the institution's incumbents are the strongholds of the 5SM's new conception of politics⁽²⁵⁾. Indeed the eight main identified policy areas match the goals listed in the national program of the 5SM and publicly stated in the Florence Charta. A great deal of the MeetUp debates (A. = 24 per cent) focus on issues strictly related to environment. In 2006 a government decree set the conditions for the privatization of the distribution of water and for the management of the aqueducts. The decree had encountered strong opposition

⁽²⁵⁾ See also Nicolò CONTI and Vincenzo MEMOLI, *The Emergence of a New Party in the Italian Party System: Rise and Fortune of the Five Star Movement*, in «West European Politics», 38, 2015, pp. 516-34; Pasquale COLLOCA and Piergiorgio CORBETTA, *Beyond Protest. Issues and Ideological Inconsistencies in the Voters of the Movimento 5 Stelle*, in TRONCONI (2015 ed.), pp. 195-212.

Table 3 – Issues debated by the MeetUp groups at regional level (Content analysis)

Regions	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	L	M	TOT.	%
Abruzzo	34	17	15	10	23	9	9	10	3	1	6	137	3
Basilicata	10	9	9	4	4	4	1	2	1	2	3	49	1
Calabria	57	34	19	24	20	11	8	9	7	2	30	221	5
Campania	53	34	28	17	25	21	11	10	4	6	31	240	6
Emilia-Romagna	64	64	40	15	27	12	18	6	3	3	12	264	6
Friuli Ven.-Giulia	44	32	17	11	13	7	13	8	1	2	5	153	4
Lazio	82	66	41	18	34	20	25	21	10	4	21	342	8
Liguria	68	43	19	17	23	13	18	17	7	3	16	244	6
Lombardia	127	115	58	35	39	31	41	17	15	17	29	524	12
Marche	37	40	21	20	8	14	6	9	3	1	18	177	4
Molise	21	15	4	11	6	4	3	2	0	0	7	73	2
Piemonte	61	42	27	20	18	19	18	10	6	4	8	233	5
Puglia	72	35	30	14	13	15	21	13	11	8	39	271	6
Sardegna	44	55	31	21	14	18	11	8	3	4	22	231	5
Sicilia	76	41	44	37	18	41	21	17	5	9	59	368	9
Toscana	82	40	35	30	21	36	26	7	9	5	31	322	7
Trentino-Alto Ad.	13	9	7	4	3	2	3	4	1	2	3	51	1
Umbria	21	11	11	8	6	6	3	4	1	1	15	87	2
Valle d'Aosta	2	4	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	12	0
Veneto	73	37	22	31	12	23	20	7	6	10	58	299	7
TOT.	1,041	743	481	347	328	306	276	181	96	84	415	4,298	100
%	24	17	11	8	8	7	6	4	2	2	10	100	

Legenda: A. Environment and Energy, Waste and Water; B. 5SM and its Leadership; C. Civicness; D. Local government and the 5SM; E. Participation Internet and E-democracy; F. Labor policies, Development and economic issues; G. Wi Fi, Information, fairness; H. Rule of law and Soc. justice; I. Public transport and infrastructures; L. Wealth, National Health System; M. Other.

[Source: Our own elaboration]

from the ecologists and other radical movements in Italy. Eventually, an abrogative referendum was held in 2011 and the decree was canceled by a landslide majority of 95.8 per cent of the votes. A similar controversy has been conducted for years with regard to waste management and the location of landfills and incinerators. The 5SM has led the popular protest against the building of incinerators and in favor of waste recycling and reduction under the slogan “*rifiuti zero*” (zero waste). A third theme to be noticed in the wider sample of the issues under A. is alternative energy, and in general all the topics related to the ecological and environ-

mentally friendly production of energy. The occurrences related to the debate around the civil society and the new forms of involvement of the citizens in politics (C. Civiness), against corruption and in search for a new conception of the public good, are 481 (11 per cent). This is a second major theme in the MeetUps. Moreover, it could be strongly connected to the debate over participation in democracy (E. = 8 per cent), which is conceived by the 5SM as direct democracy without the medium of the representative institutions. In the vision of the 5SM, this conception should be enhanced by resorting to the web and any possible form of E-democracy (mainly popular referenda on the web, and primaries for the selection of candidates to the posts).

Sustainable Development and labor, with a specific focus on youth unemployment, and support for small enterprises (F. = 7 per cent), and Information and Free Internet access (G. = 6 per cent) are two more relevant topics in the debates. It is nonetheless likely that the actual content of the debates concerning the 5SM itself and its leadership (B. = 17 per cent) and once again the movement and its action at the local level (D. = 8 per cent) may partially overlap A., C. and E. therefore reinforcing the overall policy profile of the movement⁽²⁶⁾. The findings show evidence of a movement focusing on specific ecological issues (water, waste and energy), although combined with frequent references to sustainable growth and even de-growth. The references to infrastructures are often negative, as warnings to the potential ecological impact of the transport networking (wheel transport as a primary source of pollution) and to its objectionable role as a factor of economic development. Secondly, democracy is conceived in terms of participation and direct involvement of the citizenship with the help of internet and of the social networking. Finally, the 5SM is pro-active in favor of social rights and the rule of law, although Beppe Grillo and the 5SM MPs have often proclaimed their hostility to the immigration policies and their skepticism with respect to the UE.

We are hence left with a political movement that haphazardly combines leftist and rightist themes in its ideological profile, but which somehow seems indifferent to the traditional left-right cleavage, and therefore the 5SM seems like a «political laboratory»⁽²⁷⁾. As a leftist movement, the

⁽²⁶⁾ Other significant themes debated by the MeetUp groups are: Rule of Law and Social Justice (H. = 4 per cent of the occurrences), Public transport and infrastructures (2 per cent) and Wealth and the NHS (2 per cent).

⁽²⁷⁾ Ilvo DIAMANTI, *The 5 Star Movement: a Political Laboratory*, in «Contemporary Italian

5SM adheres to the principles of direct and participatory democracy⁽²⁸⁾.

It has inherited the tradition of the environmental movement in Italy, but at the same time that of the post-Marxist tendencies that emerged after the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party in early 90's. These political forces have occurred intermittently on the Italian political scene and have failed to take root, in part as a consequence of the recent reforms of the electoral law which penalize small and protest parties. In short, the 5SM has become the container of these trends, which it does not trouble itself to mediate or synthesize politically. Reflecting on this, it could be sustained as an hypothesis that the recent success of 5SM among the Italian electorate is probably due to its chameleon-like ability to accept any instance and political position, as long as it conflicts with the establishment and is compatible with the guidelines drawn by the Florence Charta. As a rightist movement, on the other hand, the 5SM is hostile to the capitalist development model. The banking and financial systems are seen as two evils and as the triggering factors of the contemporary economic crisis. In addition, the EU and the processes of globalization are seen as threats to national sovereignty and, more generally, as the causes of the loss of identity of the political communities and of the decline of legitimacy of democracy. It is quite clear that the main channel of integration of these disparate trends is the web and of course the Meet-Up networking. The latter makes the manifestation of the most diverse positions possible, without political mediation. The MeetUp networking has been well apt to take up in Italy the social protest which remained without representation as a result of the polarization of the competition policy between PD and *Forza Italia*.

From Movement to Party?

If the outlined policy profile of the 5SM does not allow us to align it clearly on the left-to-right dimension of the political space, and if it maintains the typical features of a political movement towards which

Politics», 6, 2014, pp. 4-15.

⁽²⁸⁾ According to a recent survey, the 5SM's parliamentary group shows a clear leftist ideological orientation, and the rejection not only of an oligarchic but also of a 'leaderistic' conception of the party (Arianna FARINELLI and Emanuele MASSETTI, *Inexperienced, Leftists and Grassroots Democrats: A Profile of the Five Star Movement's Mps*, in «Contemporary Italian Politics», 7, 2015, pp. 213-31).

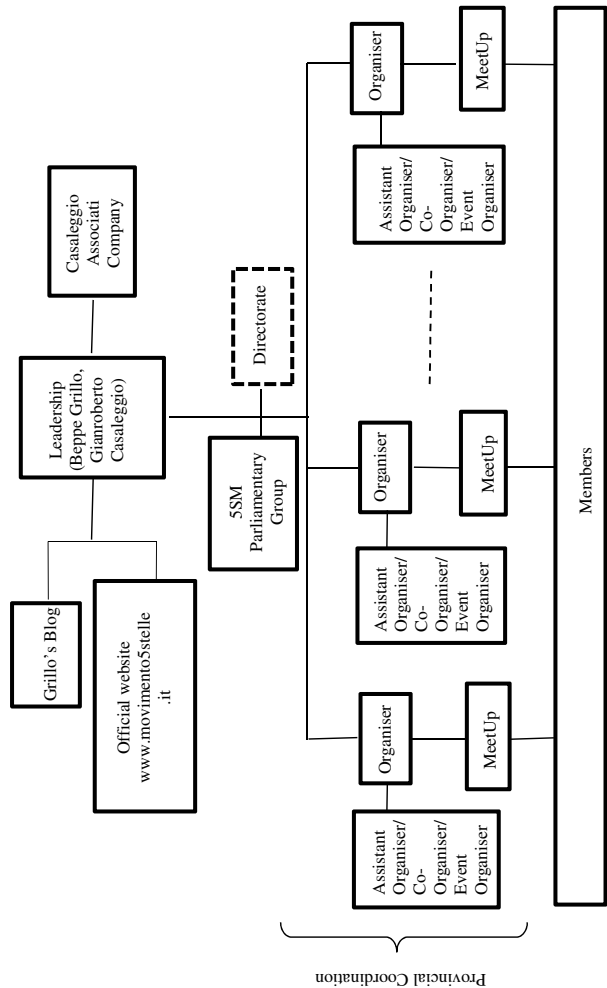
many trends converge, it remains to be seen whether there has or has not been any noticeable internal organisational transformation since it has entered the political competition and gained such a parliamentary weight. The grafting of the party parliamentary group between the leadership and the base of MeetUp groups helped to transform the movement at the organisational level and above all it has shifted the balance of power within the movement. Is the 5 Stars *Movement* now a *Party*?

As a party, the 5SM presents its own candidates in identifiable electoral lists and it joins the electoral campaign. The 5SM has probably never fully shown the typical features of the social movement described by Della Porta and Diani⁽²⁹⁾ as networks of interactions mainly informally based on share of beliefs and solidarity that mobilize on conflictual issues through various forms of protest, because its activity has been mainly confined to the social networking on the web⁽³⁰⁾. Moreover, as has been pointed out by our Hypothesis 1, the national electoral success of 5SM has determined the growing frictions between the leadership of the movement (Grillo) and the parliamentary groups. One of the main reasons for these conflicts during the 17th Legislature has been the obligatory transfer of a part of MP'S salaries to the fund for the support of small businesses, as expected according to the statute of the 5SM. The MPs accused of misbehavior were subjected to the judgment of the movement's member on the web and eventually expelled. There were sometimes controversial cases, which raised the suspicion of an instrumental use of the web by Beppe Grillo against some disloyal MPs, and which showed evidence of Beppe Grillo's efforts to subject the parliamentary groups to his control using the web as a pressure tool against the MPs. Secondly, another reason for conflicts between the parliamentary groups and the leadership of the movement was provided by the repeated attempts of the center-left governments after 2013 to obtain the support of the 5SM on specific issues, even without fully integrating the movement in the government majority. These attempts have become more frequent since Matteo Renzi won the leadership of the Democratic Party and became Prime minister in February 2014. These situations have created sharp contrasts between the leadership of the movement and the parliamentary groups, and Grillo and Casaleggio have recurrently resorted to the web

⁽²⁹⁾ Donatella DELLA Porta and Mario DIANI, *I movimenti sociali*, Rome, Carocci, 1997.

⁽³⁰⁾ The 5SM's members do not receive a party affiliation card, nor are they compelled to pay for the membership, but a username and password are provided to have access to the web platform.

Figure 1 – The Organisational Chart of the 5SM (2015)



[Source: Our own elaboration]

promoting consultations and campaigns to restrict the autonomy of the parliamentary groups in the two Houses and subject them to their control.

Although the members of the Directorate (see Figure 1) always denied being established as a party leadership, and they particularly emphasized their informal role of coordinating the initiatives of the MPs, there was no denying that this office gained growing visibility over time and it intercepted the leadership's exercise of influence over the parliamentary groups and the membership. There is enough evidence to question whether the 5SM was going through a process of gradual normalization and institutionalization⁽³¹⁾.

Some hierarchical elements of the 5SM impact on the horizontal diffusion of the groups on the territory limiting their autonomy. Referring to the main dimensions of the dichotomy hierarchy/stratarchy⁽³²⁾, the allocation of competence and resources (locus of power) and the centre-periphery relationship (integration of the local units), the 5SM shows a hierarchical distribution of the power, which poses the leaders in indisputable dominant roles. The finances of the movement are shared but their control is centralized and subdued to a centralized strict regulation. On the other hand, both the candidate selection and the membership are highly decentralized. However, there have been cases of Beppe Grillo's direct interventions on the selection of the candidates and of conflicts which opposed Grillo to the selected candidates and eventually even to the elected incumbents. In sum, the degree of autonomy of the local units (the MeetUps) is questionable, particularly because of Grillo's ability to use his blog and in general the web to influence the debate and the positions expressed by the MeetUps. After the 2013 elections the movement was changing and assuming new organisational features which were transforming it into a complex "organisation" and possibly into a political party. What is the degree of consolidation of this new formation that is its level of institutionalization?

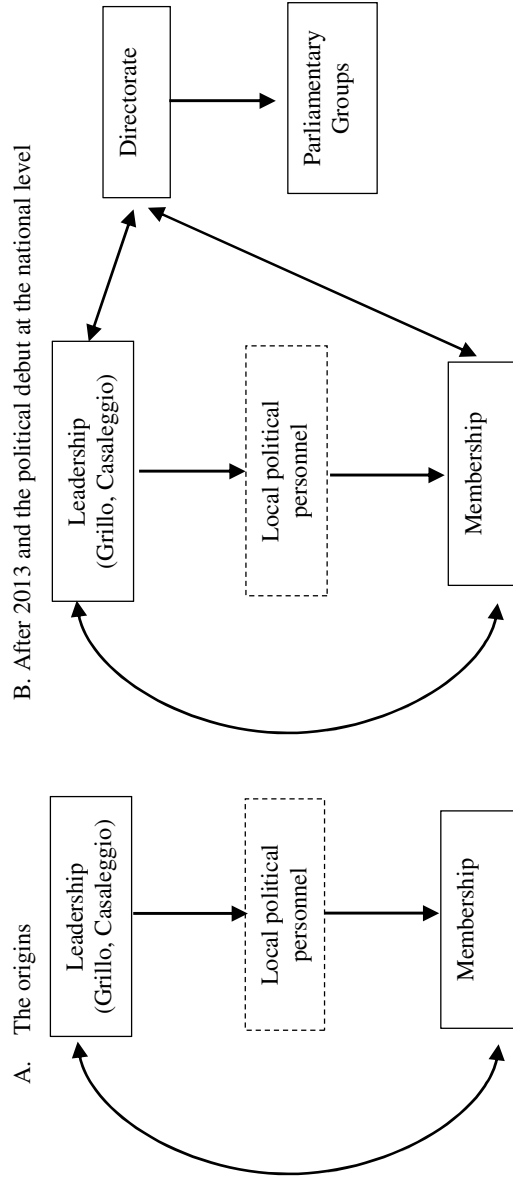
Figure 2 synthesizes the major *internal* organisational transformation of the 5SM since its origins and subsequent to its entering the national political arena in 2013.

It is possible to underline a recent path of organisational development of the 5SM (after the 2013 elections) in comparison with its origins.

⁽³¹⁾ Fabio BORDIGNON and Luigi CECCARINI, *The Five-Star Movement: a Hybrid Actor in the Net of State Institutions*, in «Journal of Modern Italian Studies», 20, 2015, pp. 454-73.

⁽³²⁾ ELDERSVELD (1964); BOLLEYER (2012).

Figure 2 – The Internal Organisational Transformation of the 5SM



[Source: Our own elaboration]

This shift from the original pattern (A. in Figure 2) to the present situation (B. in Figure 2) reveals a relatively low degree of “organisational stability”, defined as the capacity of any organisation to preserve its internal line of authority. This instability is typical of any process of a party internal institutionalization and it is particularly significant in the case of a transformation of a movement into a party, as a consequence of the trespass of the institutional threshold (Hypothesis 1). If one observes the internal situation of the 5SM in 2013 it could be noticed that, firstly, although the movement completely lacked any central organisation or bureaucracy (a Secretary or Presidency and a relative offices), the Directorate was challenging the original leadership. As such, this newly established leadership tried to assert its autonomy from the charismatic leadership of Grillo and Casaleggio. The MeetUp network, as a kind of base and membership of the movement, maintained its independence but Grillo’s and Casaleggio’s original capacity of exercising influence upon it was now reduced by the visibility and action of the Directorate and of the parliamentary groups. Secondly, the debut of the movement in the national political arena raised two issues, that of the funding of the movement and that of its ideological and programmatic coherence. With regard to the former, the 5SM refuses public funding and any donation is voluntary, as established by the “Non-Statute” of the movement. This situation was not conducive to the strengthening of the parliamentary leadership (Directorate) and still offered to the original leadership great opportunity of conditioning. Grillo and Casaleggio often emphasized the need for compliance of the parliamentary groups to the statutory laws of the movement and to its ideological profile. Alleged defections from this compliance by the MPS of the movement, now embroiled in coalition politics in the parliamentary arena, were used by the two founding leaders to manipulate the attitudes of followers and members of the movement towards the MPs. This tactic from time to time resulted quite effective in influencing the conduct of the parliamentarians in the institutional arena.

The consolidation of the Directorate as a new leadership of the 5SM points out the external dimension of the institutionalization of the party (Hypothesis 2). The 5SM has indeed crossed the executive threshold and it is now deeply involved in the negotiation and trade-offs with the other parties in the parliamentary arenas. The *external* institutionalization of the 5SM, as a parliamentary party, is bound to interfere with its *internal*

dynamics of institutionalization. According to the stated Hypothesis 2, the struggle for the affirmation and the establishment of the 5SM in the parliamentary arena will affect the consolidation of its internal lines of authority. The 5SM seems indeed at the moment a hybrid form between a movement and a party⁽³³⁾. Like the former, it still exhibits a badly defined organisational structure. To some extent, the use of the web to coordinate the action of its participants, that is the quest for visibility and controllability of the action and goals of the movement that the use of the web should ensure, could be considered as a functional equivalent of the actions of direct protest performed normally by any movement. At its origins, the 5SM was characterized by the horizontal display of the MeetUp groups, and by the direct link of this display with the leadership of the movement. The debut in the national political arena has nonetheless drastically modified the original pattern. The MPs had to search for coordination of their action in institutionalized parliamentary groups and to relate with the other groups in the parliamentary arena to perform in an effective way. Therefore, whilst the web has been an immediate tool of control and coordination of the movement at its origin, it now shows its limitation when confronting the parliamentary groups whose action in the institutional arenas escape the members' scrutiny. A parliamentary group may exploit the formal roles and resources attached to its position in the institutional arenas and, in other words, it may gain growing autonomy from the movement membership. The external dynamic of institutionalization bears on the internal one.

This perspective therefore reveals two sources of conflict for the 5SM. Firstly, already at the beginning of the 17th Legislature (2013) and after the Centre-left coalition government led by E. Letta (PD) sworn in on 28 April 2013, there appeared to be a conflict between the institutionally-embedded components of 5SM (the parliamentary groups) and its charismatic and virtual leadership (B. Grillo *in primis*). The government coalition based on "broad agreement" (*larghe intese*) and led by E. Letta was immediately opposed by Grillo and Casaleggio, who feared the attempts by the PD to convince some MPs and Senators of the 5SM to support the coalition. These tactical moves challenged the cohesion of the parliamentary groups of the 5SM, which seemed from the beginning on the verge of collapse. Secondly, the 5SM had to face a typical challenge to any protest movement that crosses the executive threshold.

(33) Herbert KITSCHOLT, *Movement Parties*, in Richard S. KATZ and William CROTTY (eds.), *Handbook of Party Politics*, London, Sage, 2006, pp. 278-90.

Once fully integrated in the institutional decision-making arena (e.g. the cabinet-legislature system), any such movement can no longer limit its action to raising the public protest and to the desecration of power, but it is forced to make proposals and therefore to take part in policy-making. This implies assuming accountability for the measures undertaken or backed, or even for the visible opposition against the government policies. In other words, the 5SM has become accountable for its choices in the parliamentary arena and a negative attitude (“Nay” to everything emanating from the “Old establishment”) will not pay in the long run.

Conclusion

The dichotomy movement versus party might offer some insight for a provisional prediction of the future evolution of the M5S. If the 5SM retains its movement features, that is if its extra-institutional components (the blogs and the MeetUp groups, the resort to the web in various forms) and Grillo’s leadership prevail over the institutionally-embedded parliamentary groups, it could be likely that the followers of the 5SM will experience a “shift of involvement”⁽³⁴⁾ and a partial retreat into the private sphere, or they will find refuge in political apathy. Politics is frustrating when hardly any goals are achieved. However, this seems not to be the case, particularly after the 2018 elections (18th Legislature) and the subsequent formation of a new coalition government between M5S and North League. The Directorate did gain influence and the parliamentary groups have gradually managed to establish their autonomy from Grillo and Casaleggio. The Directorate was supposed to function as a stronghold of the base of the movement on the parliamentary groups. It should have secured the compliance of the MPs to the policy lines dictated through the web by the followers and participants to the movement, therefore it would have been instrumental to the exercise of the leadership of Grillo and Casaleggio. Nonetheless, during the 17th Legislature the Directorate organized the leadership of the parliamentary groups and it offered to the latter an opportunity to differentiate themselves from the movement and to gain autonomy in the interplay with the other groups in the parliamentary arena. The fact that two of the members of the Directorate have raised to political leaders of the M5S should offer some evidence of this trend. L. Di Maio was proclaimed as “political leader” of the M5S

⁽³⁴⁾ Albert O. HIRSCHMAN, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982.

in September 2017 and he is currently deputy Prime Minister, while R. Fico was elected President of the Lower House of the Italian parliament in March 2018.

The full transformation of the movement into a party, whatever form it might finally assume, is difficult to predict now and it would open further questions. Moreover, it is awkward to imagine the outcome of this internal struggle between the founding leadership of the movement and the institutionally-embedded groups represented by the Directorate of the 5SM and now by political leaders. After Grillo's announcement of his withdrawal from the political front, a new conflict for the organisational power inside the 5SM was triggered by the governmental proposal in January-February 2016 to legally recognize any civil partnership (*"unioni civili"*) including the homosexual ones. The conflict created an opposition between the parliamentary groups, which were apt to support the governmental proposal, and Casaleggio who was against it. The *casus belli* was offered by the attempt of the government to speed up the legislative procedure by resorting to the selection and aggregation of the thousands of amendment presented by the oppositions in the Upper house where the government majority runs short. Although provided by the standing orders, the selection of the amendments (*"kangaroo procedure"*) is a procedure scarcely used in the Italian legislative system. The Senate parliamentary group of the 5SM offered initially to support the governmental request for the *"kangaroo procedure"* and to back the law proposal on the civil partnerships, but Casaleggio and Grillo opposed both the suggested legislative procedure and the law proposal.

This case is further evidence of the struggle for organisational power within the 5SM, which was restrained in the first three years of political activity of the movement in the national institutional arena. The original charismatic leadership is now facing the challenge of the institutionally-embedded leaders. The new leadership that will eventually emerge will have to assert the priority of some organisational goal over the ideological aims, which is a typical dilemma of any complex organisation⁽³⁵⁾. Moreover, the more the 5SM is dragged into party politics, as in the above case of the civil partnership law and particularly in the new political phase inaugurated by their win at the 2018 elections, the more it risks becoming the target of the same criticisms directed against the old establishment, namely to have deserted the public interest in favor of

⁽³⁵⁾ PANEBIANCO (1988).

selfish interests. The anti-politics feelings and the delegitimizing attitude of the public opinion against party politics would soon affect the 5SM too. How would the 5SM-*party* react to the anti-politics rhetoric? How would the new organisational leadership combine the needs for the tactical choices in the realm of party and coalition politics with the impulse for the achievements of the new politics?