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**PHENOMENON OF GROWING POPULARITY
OF RADICAL POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE:
CAUSES AND PROSPECTS**

PART 1

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The collection of articles is based on the results of the project within the framework of the programme of grants named after Jean Monnet (№ 574979-EPP-1-2016-1-RU-EPPJMO-PROJECT). This collection of articles presents the analysis of the phenomenon of growing popularity of radical political movements in Europe in recent years. Contemporary trends in transformation of political systems in the EU countries and rise of radicalism and extremism, proposals of what can be done to overcome the consequences of these processes in the short and long-term perspective as well as their possible impact on the future of European democracies are discussed.

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POPULIST MOVEMENTS IN ITALY

Abstract. This paper delves into the origins of the populist movements in Italy and observes the main populists' representatives in Italy, namely the North League, CasaPound and Five Star Movement.

Key words: Populist movements, North League, Right-wing, Padanian nationalism, Euroscepticism, Anti-globalisation, Regionalism, Federalism, CasaPound, Far-right, Neo-fascism, Ultranationalism, Big tent.

The definitions for populism became numerous as the term itself has assumed, over time, various meanings that are not always negative. In Italy, since the end of Second World War, the term became used in the Italian intellectual circles, mainly by the left, to describe Peronism, thus acquiring a pejorative connotation as a synonym for unrealistic election promises used to win over the electorate¹. Observing the recent literature on the subject, it is possible to note how often populism has been substituted with the term "demagoguery". The debate appears to be particularly vibrant and there were no few attempts at a synthesis that highlights the convergence of the two terms². The populist movements in Europe have begun to propagate mostly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The common element in the diverse social contexts has been the impoverishment of the middle class. Usually, these movements share the premise that politics is something negative and corrupt, an expression of the interests of a privileged group where the people are generically set against this élite. This concept doesn't necessarily coincide with the marxist proletariat, it rather tends to include the myriad victims of the inequities of power; of whom are entrepreneurs, hired workers and the unemployed alike.

One of the principal instruments of consensus in these movements is the schematic and simplistic representation of reality which leverages emotional reactions based on fear and the primordial desire to find a scapegoat, identifiable, for example, in immigrants or the E.U. whom are responsible for a broad sense of discontent. This process of simplification necessitates a charismatic leader, a characteristic which

¹ On this argument see Hermet G., 2001.

² On this topic see Urbinati N. (ed.), 2016.

distinguishes the populisms from the “popular movements” arising in the West in recent times, such as the Indignados or Occupy Wall Street. Consequently, in front of this *reductio*, the people become the natural conduits of wisdom and authentic values. The interests of the common people do not only conflict with the élite, but also with the *intelligentsia* responsible for a parasitic behavior and sophisticated, useless analyses that favor the *status quo*. For these reasons, many of these movements declare the need to transcend the divisions between “right” and “left”, and tend to promote a synthesis that seeks to unite elements of political visions which, historically, are diametrically opposed. In this essay, we will limit ourselves to comparing between three populist phenomena that have recently characterized the Italian political scene: The Northern League, the Five Stars Movement (M5S), and Casa Pound Italia.

The Northern League, chronologically speaking, is the first populist movement to emerge in Italy after the fall of the Berlin Wall³. Initially, some of the important leaders hailed from the militancy in political parties on the left or from the liberal tradition⁴, therefore, antifascism could be considered a founding principal. *Fig. 1*. At first, the Northern League presented itself as separatist movement, having as its targets the parasitism and corruption of Roman power, along with the inefficiencies of Southern statism, to which the laboriousness and the entrepreneurial competence of the North were contraposed. In the attempt to create the iconography necessary for the homeland of the Po Valley, antique traditions, in part pagan and in part Christian, were rediscovered, coinciding with Celtic rituals, the myth of the Po river and the glorious history of Venice -the symbolic capital of the North- thus displaying from the outset the ideological flexibility that would set apart the party

³ The name, Northern League, was adopted in 1996. Before that it was The Po Valley League and during the 80's, the party was a sort of federation of diverse branches representing regional movements of northern Italy, for example, Venetian League, Lombardian League. On this topic see Scaliati G., 2006.

⁴ Il fondatore della Lega, Umberto Bossi, iscritto al P.C.I. tra il 1974 e il 1975 e, in precedenza, militante in diverse formazioni della sinistra radicale. Ugualmente, Roberto Maroni, ex ministro dell'interno, è stato membro di Democrazia Proletaria fino al 1979. Sull'argomento rimandiamo a Scaliati G., 2006.

The founder of the League, Umberto Bossi, joined the P.C.I. as a member between '74 and '75, and, before that, was a militant in various factions of the radical left. Similarly, Roberto Maroni, ex Minister of the Interior, was a member of the Proletariat Democracy until 1979. On this topic see Scaliati G., 2006.

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from the twenties onwards (*Fig. 2*). In the political elections of 1994 the Northern League allied itself with the party of Silvio Berlusconi, Forza Italia, creating a coalition in which were also figured the National Alliance, a formation heir to the disbanded neofascistic party the M.S.I. In the last twenty years, the Northern League had passed nine in government, participating in different coalitions of the center-right led by Berlusconi as prime minister. In this period, the political physiognomy of the party had morphed, becoming ever more visibly rightist.



Fig. 1. The founder of The North League, Umberto Bossi



Fig. 2. The MEP Mario Borghezio during a meeting of the party

Round table 2 in Burgas — Nessebar (Bulgaria)

Since 2014, the Secretary of the League is Matteo Salvini, elected with 85% of the votes of party members. In 1999, before he became Secretary, Salvini was the representative of an inner minority faction, designated the “Po Communists”. This notwithstanding, since 2014, the League has stressed its nationalist characteristics and its ties to traditional values, such as the heterosexual family, Christianity and the Italic Spirit, which are threatened by immigration and the presumed Islamic invasion, forgoing any more distinction between the North and South. While Article I of the League’s charter which augurs the separation of Padania remains in force, Salvini recently affirmed that the League is no longer a separatist party, rather, if anything, it is a nationalist one which replaced the historic slogan “The North first”, with the current one, “Italians First”. With this move the League came closer towards the Italian extreme right, for example Casa Pound and the European right, like *Le Front National* of Marie Le Pen. Since 1994, the League governed, among others, the regions of Lombardy, Veneto and Piedmont; that is the three richest and most populous regions in Italy by GDP.



Fig. 3. The secretary of The North League, Matteo Salvini



Fig. 4. Beppe Grillo, the leader of the M5S

As is well-known, the Five Stars Movement (5SM) was founded in 2008 by the Italian comic and blogger Beppe Grillo. The rapid electoral achievements of the 5SM became the center of political analyses within and beyond Italy. As of now, it is the only protest party in Europe to reach 25,5% of the vote at its first showing in the 2013 political elections, four years after its foundation and additional successes in the preceding local elections. The figure is even more surprising if we consider that the party, at the time, lacked a real and proper headquarters, and that the organizing structure was based on a blog administered by a company specialized in marketing and communications. The electoral analyses agree in asserting that the movement has completed its transition, transforming itself in “a catch-all party” capable of attracting two-thirds of the votes originating from both the center-left and the center-right⁵. The M5S openly proclaims itself as anti-ideological even if at the European Parliament it partakes in the same group as Farage’s UKIP and other nationalist parties. The little-articulated ideology is compensated by the meticulous inner rules that tend to regulate to the last detail the behavior of the members of parliament and place at the center

⁵ In the 2013 elections the 5SM was the party of choice among workers, (40.1%), entrepreneurs and small businessmen (40.2%), professionals (31.3%) and unemployed (42.7%): all categories that were hit hard by the economic crisis; it was relatively weak among housewives (20%) and retirees (11%). Overall, the 5SM’s constituency is younger than the national average and better educated. On this topic see <http://bit.ly/2HS7foL>.

the figure of Grillo. Its program is the synthesis of a series of popular frustrations, coming from diverse political orientations⁶. It's a secular and pro-environment party, anti-corruption, against the privileges of politicians, habitually conspiratorial and apocalyptic⁷ which proposes a horizontal democracy based on web polls, favorable of a Universal Income for citizens and tax-reduction, moderately progressive on gay rights but dithering and fragmented on civil unions, anti-austerity and anti-Europe, anti-America but favorable of NATO. Recently it has acquired a xenophobic and anti-Immigration hue, moving it closer to the extreme right, such as Casa Pound.

Casa Pound Italy is a movement founded in 2008. Officially, its leaders assert that they do not belong to neither the left nor the right, but if we consider their general line of thought, their symbols and slogans, we must, inevitably, conclude that we stand before a neofascistic party. A research by the English think tank Demos, defined Casa Pound as the most ambiguous emerging European populist movement in recent years⁸. Currently, this party is not present in the parliament having not participated in the last elections in all the Italian territory, and nationally it gets 0.14% of the vote. In any case, in some sensitive areas like the municipality of Bolzano, where Italians are a minority, they reach 6.7% becoming strategic for certain alliances and votes. Publicly, the movement declares itself to be anti-violence and to possess Gandhian values while being a victim to the violence of the propaganda of the regime and the radical left movements. One of the leaders of Casa Pound defined the party as a "social association".

From this perspective, its militants aspire to be the representatives of a new pop movement, active in the publishing world, in the production

⁶ For example, in the 5SM the choices of the candidates are regulated through a complex system of voting online by members. Painstaking procedures are envisioned for the eventual expulsion of dissident candidates, group leaders alternate in the Chambers and media appearances of the candidate are subject to the scrutiny of the relevant commissions. For more on the argument see Tronconi F. (ed), 2015.

⁷ Chem-trails, under the skin microchips, Bilderberg Club and Zionist Finance are recurring themes with 5SM deputies. We point to the brief video diffused in 2008 on YouTube by Casaleggio & Associates, "Gaia — The Future of Politics", in which, between 2020 and 2040 a World War is predicted between the Free West and the Obscurantist Orient that should reduce the global population to one billion. On this topic see L'Espresso, 25/10/2016.

⁸ On the argument we defer to Bartlett J., Birdwell J., Froio C., 2012.

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of Rock music and the organization of cultural events, they also manage private TV and Radio channels as well as libraries. If we observe the general message and cultural production of the organization we note that the role attributed to violence as a political instrument changes. On one hand, in fact, there emerges an internal language, usually jargonish and symbolic, directed at the militants which justifies and, at times, exalts violent action. On the other, a more moderate mediatic side appears which belies an awareness and preoccupation on the part of Casa Pound not compromise the public image of the movement and its fragile legitimacy. At the end of the day, the use of violence is justified as a necessary instrument to defend the movement from its hypothetical enemies and physical force is celebrated with its members regularly involved in public brawls. By admission of its own leaders, Casa Pound's following is larger where social discontent exists. For these reasons too, its militants often exhibit pathological behavior and have known criminal records.⁹



Fig. 5 Militants of Casa Pound

Overall, Casa Pound is the most syncretic of the three parties considered here. The references to fascism as a vital force and as an

⁹ In December 2011, a CasaPound sympathizer (renamed by the newspapers 'the Italian Breivik') killed two Senegalese street vendors and wounded three others before killing himself in Florence. More recently, CasaPound was again at the center of the political debate for the aggression by one of its militants against the artistic director of a futuristic festival in Viterbo.

ideal social model are constant. At the same time, Gramsci, Che Guevara and the anarchic songs of De André are held as cultural points of references. The principal cause for discord between Casa Pound and the other Italian extreme right movements lies in its rediscovery of pagan traditions alternative to Christianity, which is considered as an element of the corruption and weakening of the European civilization, similar to Nietzsche's interpretation on the argument. However, while physical force is admired, gay rights are supported. In the movement, there are voices that are pro-environment, anti-capitalist, anti-American, anti-Zionist and pro-Islamic inasmuch Islam is considered an element of social cohesion, especially the Shi'a version which is perceived as more spiritual. Additionally, they are pro-Assad, and look with interest to figures like Putin and Chavez.



Fig. 6. A Casa Pound militant:
"The dead body of your enemy has always a good smell"

Comparing the three factions together, it is possible to affirm that all of them tend to offer a charismatic leadership and to have common enemies, identifiable mainly in Immigrants, the European Union, International Finance, and the bureaucratic system. They also display a certain facility in the mixing of cultural references and diverse traditions and change opinion on important questions, even if these changes do not seem to significantly disorient their respective supporters. Thereupon, they, especially Casa Pound the Northern League, adopt a dual language, aggressive and picturesque if directed at the base, and more moderate

before the media. In the 5SM, this discrepancy is less evident and the language appears more uniform even if the polemic vigor and the efforts to deride the adversary are never secondary. From the ideological point of view, Casa Pound proposes an articulate and Elitist social model which seeks to regulate all aspects of social life through squatting, managing cultural activities, physical training for its militants and the promotion of events of every kind. A limit and a point of force for the Northern League is its rootedness in the territory, in areas that are economically significant in the country. It is difficult, however, given its symbolic apparatus, that it could descend below northern Tuscany. The 5SM appears to be the more fluid of the three. Contrary to Casa Pound and the Northern League, in fact, which don't hesitate to take positions on various issues, the 5SM prefers to direct its attention on matters more topical and behind which there is a sure popular consensus, for example, immigrants, public order, corruption, etc., while remaining evasive and contradictory on more sensitive and divisive issues like civil unions, *ius soli*, legalization of light drugs, and religious matters in general.

All three parties are born as protest movements. Weighing the current approval ratings, only the 5SM can aspire to win the elections, even if the present electoral laws in Italy and its *a priori* rejection of eventual alliances with traditional parties provide concrete limits in the case of a government led by it. If this hypothesis should come to pass, it is presumable that the heterogeneity of its voters and of its electoral program, risks creating strong internal conflicts, highlighting further the oligarchic bent and authoritarian aspirations of the party.

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