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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
<b>United Kingdom</b>		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
<b>Spain</b>		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
<b>Italy</b>		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
<b>France</b>		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
<b>Germany</b>		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
<b>Hungary</b>		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
<b>Czech Republic</b>		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
<b>Poland</b>		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

# ITALY: POPULIST IN THE MIRROR, (DE)POLITICIZING THE COVID-19 FROM GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION

## Abstract

This chapter focuses on the Italian case, and it addresses two different populist parties – 5 Star Movement and League – that played different roles during the pandemic crisis. Whilst the League was in opposition, the M5S was serving in government. As a consequence the two populist parties developed very diverse communication strategy for handling the crisis. The League struggled to adapt its traditional populist claims to the pandemic emergency, while the M5S in line with other mainstream parties addressed the crisis by emphasising the institutional role played. In general, the COVID-19 outbreak defused the relevance of some populist issues among citizens and within political debate. Specifically, the League was not able to set the agenda or to claim the ownership on any of the issues under discussion, by contrast the M5S had the chance to manage the crisis and preserving its relevance within the political scenario.

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## Introduction

The identification of a pandemic outbreak in Italy at the end of February 2020 was unanticipated. Despite the concern for what was happening in the Hubei province, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was considered a specifically ‘Chinese problem’. This was an incorrect assumption. Even when the first Italian cases were diagnosed, there was still no awareness of the seriousness of the upcoming emergency. Italian politics was unprepared for this shock and consequently had to redefine their strategies. In this respect, being in opposition or in government determined different opportunities and challenges. This chapter investigated the diverse role played by the two most prominent Italian populist parties in the first 4 months of the emergency: the League (Lega) and the Five Star Movement (M5S, Movimento 5 Stelle). The League attempted to adapt to the emergency to its usual populist strongholds. Conversely, the M5S, as a government party, emphasised its responsiveness by appealing for national unity and claiming the ownership for those actions of the government providing direct support to citizens.

## 1. Political context

Italy has been described as the ‘promised land’ of populism (Tarchi, 2015) or as its ‘breeding ground’ (Bobba & Legnante, 2016) because of the durable success of its populist parties. The emergence of the Northern League (LN, Lega Nord) in the late 1980s and the unexpected performance of Berlusconi at the head of Go Italy (FI, Forza Italia) in the early 1990s represented the first steps of populism’s recent history in Italy. The success of the M5S since 2013 has expanded the variety of populism, including parties not belonging to the right. Although in the past, Berlusconi has been described as the champion of the Italian ‘neoliberal populism’ (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), in the last few years, he adopted less populist positions (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018; see also 2019 Chapel Hill expert survey) to the extent of describing himself as the only opponent of the populist threat during the 2018 general elections (Roncarolo & Cremonesi, 2019)<sup>19</sup>. Currently, the M5S and the League are indisputably not only the two most important populist parties but also amongst the main key players in Italian politics. Although in 2018 they supported a coalition government together,

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<sup>19</sup>Notably, a new right-wing party, Fratelli d’Italia (FDI, Brothers of Italy), is probably qualified to be called a populist. However, considering the lesser relevance than of the M5S and the League, it was not included in this chapter because of space constraints.

they are profoundly different in terms of political histories, political programmes and belongingness in varieties of populism.

The M5S was formally founded in 2009 by Beppe Grillo, an Italian comedian, and the late web entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio. The 2013 Italian general election was a turning point for the party. In its first national electoral campaign, it had striking success: Grillo’s anti-political style resonated well with Italians’ deep distrust for the political class. A quarter of Italian voters (25.56%) cast their ballot for the M5S that entered the Italian Parliament as an opposition party. The transformation of Grillo’s movement into a proper institutional political actor was completed during the 2013–2018 legislature. In 2018, the M5S approached the Italian elections as an experienced political party ready to take up posts in government. After the step back of its founder, the M5S party membership formally appointed Luigi Di Maio as the new leader of the movement with full responsibility for leading the party through the 2018 election campaign. The result was gratifying: the party was confirmed as Italy’s most popular with 32.7% of the vote. During this period, the M5S has combined its clear anti-establishment rhetoric with a blurry ideological positioning. Although initially the movement espoused a vaguely leftist ideology (D’Alimonte, 2019: 120), after its success in the 2013 general election (see Tronconi, 2015), the party started to shift its positioning on the political spectrum. The blurring of its left–right positioning has caused several political scholars to describe the party as having a post-ideological profile that is ‘beyond left and right classification’ (Tarchi, 2015).

The League is the heir of the Northern League, an ethno-regionalist party founded by the charismatic figure of Umberto Bossi who promoted secessionist or federalist policies to favour Northern regions (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010). In 2013, major changes in the party organisation led to the appointment of a new leader, Matteo Salvini. This shift at the head of the party entailed an ideological re-definition. Whilst Bossi’s LN was right-leaning and regionally based, Salvini’s League is a staunchly far-right populist party. As the party moved onto the national level, patriotism replaced regionalism, and the European Union (EU) and immigrants replaced Rome and Southern Italians as the people’s enemy (D’Alimonte 2019: 122). The party has increasingly focused on immigration, national identity and law and order issues (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018; Bobba, 2019). This new ideological stance and Salvini’s enthusiastic leadership have been highly rewarded by voters making the league the first party in the centre-right field.

After a brief interlude where together the M5S and The League supported the first Conte government—the honeymoon lasted only 1 year. In August 2019, Salvini withdrew his support—the movement decided to form a second Conte government with the support of the left-wing Partito Democratico (Democratic Party). The COVID-19 crisis finds the two parties in a mirror situation: the M5S is in power but with a low approval rate; the League is instead in opposition but with a growing number of voters.

**Table 4.1 Main Italian political parties (> 5% in the last General election)**

Political party	General election 2018		European Election 2019	
	Vote shares	Seats	Vote shares	Seats
<i>In power</i>				
Five Star Movement	32.7	133	17.1	14
Democratic Party	18.8	86	22.7	19
<i>In opposition</i>				
The League	17.4	73	34.3	29
Go Italy	14.0	59	8.8	7

## 2. COVID-19 diffusion and political measures

In Italy, there was no clue regarding the risk of an actual outbreak of the pandemic, during the *first phase*. The first measures taken by the Italian national government in the prevention of a possible spread of the COVID-19 within the country were issued in January. After the notice regarding a pandemic hitting the Hubei province, the World Health Organization as well as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control put out a warning but still indicated that there is a moderate risk of actual contagion across the European countries. The Italian government reacted through the establishment of a dedicated task force dealing with a possible health emergency<sup>20</sup>. In the absence of full-blown cases, the government's actions focused on monitoring the transport of passengers and goods between Italy and China. At the end of January, after two Chinese tourists in Rome were diagnosed positive to the infection, the Minister of Health disposed the block of all flights from China. Furthermore, since all the (few) diagnosed cases had a strong and direct connection with China, the national government limited the use of diagnostic swabs only to patients who had contact with the Chinese outbreak. Basically, during this pre-COVID-19 phase, the risk of an actual outbreak in Italy was perceived as remote, simply requiring prevention and monitoring.

However, very suddenly, Italy entered a *second phase*, when the presence of the virus was overt and the increasing contagion rates, as well as the pressure on the health system, revealed the very nature of the pandemic risk. It was precisely the absence of recent contact with China that triggered the alarm, when on 21 February, a young patient was diagnosed positive for COVID-19 in a small village, just outside Milan. A few days later, other patients were hospitalised in the nearby area with symptoms consistent with COVID-19; the same happened in a small centre in the Veneto region. COVID-19 was no more a Chinese problem. Because of the identification of two different outbreaks in Northern Italy, the government issued the first of an incremental set of measures aimed to contain the contagion. On 24 February, two red zones limited to the municipalities involved in the infection were identified, and the limitation of movement and the closure of non-essential services were lifted<sup>21</sup>. In about a week, the daily number of infected individuals doubled, and the pressure on hospitals and intensive care units increased leading the government to issue a second set of measures. On 1 March, the red zone was extended including basically most of the provinces of Northern Italy<sup>22</sup>. Considering the increasing pressure over the hospitals and intensive care units, as well as the scarcity of diagnostic swabs and the limited supply of individual protection devices to health workers, the national government on 11 March, 2020, decided to tighten the lockdown measures to all the Italian territory<sup>23</sup>. Particularly, the virus was hitting Northern Italy, but contagion cases were determined all over the country. A nationwide closure was specifically decided to prevent Southern regions—with structural deficits in health facilities—from rising contagion rates. All teaching activities in schools and universities were suspended; and bars, restaurants and shops except for those providing essential services (like food stores and pharmacies) were closed. Ten days later, due to the increasing contagion rate and the response to pressure from unions concerned about the safety of workers, the national government decided to further intensify the lockdown by shutting down all non-necessary businesses and industries.

The *third phase* coincides with the mitigation of contagion, ensuing the lockdown end and the gradual reopening of the economic and production activities within the country. Formally, the closure was expected to end on 13 April, but it eventually came about ending on 4 May. Whilst the movement across regions was still forbidden, citizens were allowed to leave their homes to their visit relatives. Industrial plants, shops, bars and restaurants were allowed to open. Since 3 June, movement across regions was able to return to a semi-normal situation. Whilst schools and universities were still closed,

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<sup>20</sup>All the measures taken by the Italian government are available here: <http://www.governo.it/it/coronavirus> (last access: June 2020).

<sup>21</sup>Decree *Dpcm 23 febbraio 2020*.

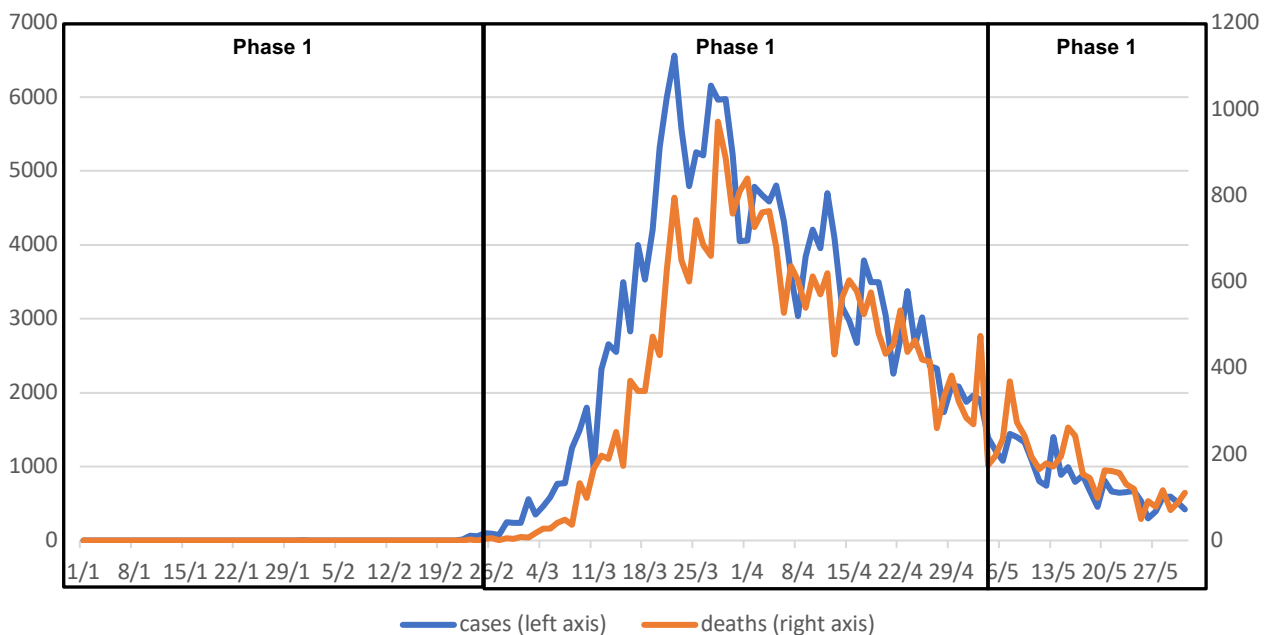
<sup>22</sup>Decree *Dpcm 1 marzo 2020*.

<sup>23</sup>Decree *Dpcm 11 marzo 2020*.



the other activities gradually returned to normal, although limitations concerning social distancing remained.

**Figure 4.1 Daily death toll and new cases in Italy**



Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

Phase 1: pre-Covid-19; Phase 2: spread and containment measures; Phase 3: contagion mitigation

**Table 4.2 COVID-19 pandemic in Italy**

Cases	235,561
Total death	34,043
Total recovered	168,646
Cases for 1M pop	3,896
Deaths for 1M pop	563

Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (update 10/6/2020)

### 3. Populist discourse at the time of COVID-19

The M5S and the League faced the period of the COVID-19 pandemic from opposite institutional positions with different duties and opportunities. As a major government party, the Movement was called to take prompt decisions to respond to the crisis; in opposition, the League continued to criticise the government, although its flagship proposals appeared undermined in a political field entirely absorbed by the health crisis. These two general patterns differently impacted on their populist discourse and on the variation of the key elements within it.

The M5S usually adopts a Manichean vision of society and refers to ‘the people’ as the honest citizens who are committed to fighting the corrupt system. During the pandemic, this view slightly changed becoming more inclusive and less based on divisive issues: all the Italians have to be protected and saved, whereas politics should be united for facing such a situation. This attitude was evident in several Di Maio’s statements highly sympathetic with the Italians: *‘I read you and understand all your difficulties. This damned virus has upset our days, our lives, but we are reacting and this is important. [...] Let’s prove we are a great people’* (Di Maio’s Facebook page, 29/03/20). The crisis also allows the Movement to reiterate the relevance of citizenship income by stating that ‘politics must support its people, starting with the weakest, those who have lost their smiles and suffer for no

faults of their own' (Di Maio's interview, Guerra e Pace, 17/04/20, *TV2000*). The conception of the people of the League is also inclusive. As Di Maio, Salvini also showed empathy with the Italians and has fuelled their pride. However, 'the people' is always defined in contrast with the elites or the outgroups. In these respects, the pandemic crisis did not change much the way the League exalted the sovereignty of the Italian State or his leader claimed to represent and defend Italian people.

Certainly, the arguments used by the League for blaming 'the elites' have changed. Although the targeted elites are still the same—the Italian ruling class and the EU—the list of charges has been updated. The uncertain situation offered an opportunity to blame the government for whatever. Particularly, it is accused of endangering the Italian people by being incompetent in the management of the health emergency: in January, the League protested that Italy had not closed its borders before the outbreak of the pandemic, whilst in Easter (6 April) the stated measures had to be relaxed to allow, for example, people to go to church<sup>24</sup>. Similarly, all the government efforts made for responding to the economic crisis were considered systematically insufficient to portray an argument for individual stories of people in need (i.e. *'I have the mailbox, Messenger, WhatsApp and mobile phone full of messages from Italians—merchants, entrepreneurs, self-employed, freelancers, families and workers in general—who despite government decrees and promises have not yet received a euro refund'*, Salvini's Facebook page, 08/04/20). The second favourite target of the League, the EU institutions, are usually accused of being inadequate and serving the interests of other countries. In the light of the COVID-19 crisis, these charges are specified in the delay of the EU reaction to the pandemic and then shifted especially on the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), claimed as insufficient and unfair, conceived at the detriment of the Italian people (*'ESM approved: outside the law, dictatorship in the name of the virus [...] Since 1989 Italy has paid 140 billion to Europe, now to borrow 35 billion we have to accept a system of a legalized loan sharking system'*<sup>25</sup>). Although anti-elitism is a central feature of the M5S discourse, the targeted elites changed during the crisis. The issue of corruption and the wasting of public funds are temporarily set aside. In the initial phase of the pandemic, Di Maio blamed the international media—one of the long-time targets of the Movement—for creating a climate of fear and hatred towards Italy. Moreover, some critics were moved toward the EU. Unlike what Salvini did (and the Movement too in the past), these are not attacks but rather firm stances on the need for economic and financial aid to resolve the crisis (*'We are a people who have always given to the European Union, now is the time to receive. As Italy today we are fighting a war against an invisible enemy and Europe must help us'*. Di Maio's interview, TG1, 26/03/20). Notably, this attempt at dialogue with an archetypal elite such as the EU is probably strategic, mainly due to the M5S's position in power and Di Maio's role as foreign minister. The need to offer a responsive and effective image determined also the reframe of the M5S's indulgence with anti-science claims. Lining up with the government coalition's partner, indeed, the Movement is committed and supportive of science. Consequently, those formerly labelled as elites—such as experts, pharmaceutical industries and mainstream scientists generally—became swiftly the only trustworthy referents leading the government actions against the virus (i.e. *'There is a scientific committee that will tell the government when we can return to normality'*<sup>26</sup>). This is particularly relevant because, on the other side, Salvini has exploited this populist argument by winking more than once to conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus and effective treatment methods against COVID-19 kept hidden by pharmaceutical companies (Salvini's Twitter account, 05/05/20).

The third element of populism – 'the outgroups' – only refers to the League. The M5S, even when in government with the League, never really developed anti-migrant or discriminatory positions towards ethnic-religious minorities or the LGBT community. By contrast, as containment measures became

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<sup>24</sup>M. Cremonesi, Riaprire le chiese a Pasqua? Tutti contro Salvini (cattolici compresi). *Corriere della Sera*, 05/04/20.

<sup>25</sup>Eurogruppo, Salvini: 'C'è il Mes, così è ipoteca sul futuro'. Meloni: 'Vincono Germania e Olanda'. *Il Messaggero*, 09/04/20.

<sup>26</sup>Di Maio, riaprire? Ce lo diranno esperti. *ANSA*, 01/04/20.

more severe, Salvini insisted on the frame of the ‘uncontrolled immigration’. He counterposed the honest and law-abiding Italian people to irregular migrants and foreign drug dealers, who commit crimes or who continue to land without any health control (*‘The government deploys Army and Police to control and fine Italians, but illegal immigrants continue to land...’*. Salvini’s Twitter account, 27/03/20). This element, particularly in its ‘law and order’ variant, was weakened in the lockdown phase when the entire population was asked to stay at home and, consequently, the volume of common crimes (such as theft, robbery and drug dealing) decreased by 64%<sup>27</sup>.

#### 4. The politicization of COVID-19 issue by populists

The differences in how the two populist parties ‘name, blame and claim’ (Felstiner, Abel & Sarat, 1981) of the health crisis relate mainly to the different roles played within the political landscape.

In the *emergence phase*, precisely when the COVID-19 pandemic appeared just as a Chinese problem, the League immediately recognised the issue as a ground for applying its usual populist rhetoric. The *naming* of the virus points at the risk of contagion and the safeguard of Italian people. However, the League entered the issue in the political debate as one of the political arms to accuse the government. In this regard, it was used to revolve around the immigration problem, emphasising the need to close the border to foreign arrivals (i.e. *‘Given that the Coronavirus emergency unfortunately is still high and concerning, a serious government should INTENSIFY controls on those arriving in Italy rather than proposing a policy for opening seaports’*. Salvini’s Facebook page, 21/02/20)

The M5S, given its role in government, coped with the pandemic emergency differently. The movement and the government as a whole adopted the strategy of delaying the politicisation of the issue by resorting to technical and scientific knowledge. The issue is thus addressed in terms of responsive actions for protecting Italian people from the COVID-19 contagion. The M5S named the COVID-19 issue as political only when the Italians outbreak was identified and the contagion rate certified the seriousness of the epidemic. Confronted with the growing pressure over the health system, the Movement changed its approach by asking other political parties for national unity and justifying the need for severe containment measures adopted as the only possible solution (i.e. *the state in all its parts is working hard to cope with the Coronavirus epidemic. And I believe that in these moments it is necessary to show unity and compactness [...] a politics with sense of responsibility is needed, which must look each other in the eye and think first of all about the interest of the citizens*)<sup>28</sup>.

Lockdown measures contributed to a decrease in pressure on intensive care units and concerns about the endurance of the health system. It is precisely at this moment that the Lega shifted into the *confrontation phase*, blaming the EU and national government for the management of the emergency. As the contagions grew, the short- and long-term consequences of the crisis became increasingly evident both in social and economic respects. The EU is accused of being silent or making vague promises whilst ‘a lot of money is needed, immediately’ (Salvini’s Facebook page 10/03/20). Regarding the national government, the nature of the League criticism is less definite. The seriousness of the pandemic impeded an open criticism over the lockdown measures. Therefore, the field of battle was organised around the economic consequences of the emergency and the lack of adequate economic support for citizens. However, identifying a specific issue on which the League had proved the ownership is difficult. Rather, the party focused its attention on a wide list of claims (and grievances), ranging from the incapability of the national government to provide adequate support for regional health systems to the bureaucratic constraints set by the government measures in support of citizens facing economic difficulties due to the lockdown. Similarly, the government was blamed

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<sup>27</sup>Grignetti, F. Tutti a casa per il coronavirus, crollano i reati del 64%. *La Stampa*, 20/03/20.

<sup>28</sup>Coronavirus, Di Maio: ‘Bisogna mostrare unità e compattezza’. *Adnkronos*, 21/02/20.

for its leniency toward the EU by suggesting its interest in the ESM, perceived as an attempt from the EU institutions to force Italy to austerity policies and reforms (*'If they can find 15 billion for Africa and to Italy they can only say 'Either you get the ESM, putting yourself in a cage, or there is nothing for you'. If so, I understand those mayors who lowered the flag of Europe, of an institution that is proving to be aloof. This is not the European Union, it's the German Union'*. Salvini's Facebook page, 08/04/20).

The *confrontation phase* was instead addressed through a passive strategy by the M5S, having little chance of blaming anyone. The political scope of the measures implemented by the government was weakened and immediately justified by the technical–scientific committee of the Civil Protection Department. However, after the European Central Bank refused to issue extraordinary measures in support of countries suffering from financial speculation due to the pandemic, the M5S—along with other government parties—engaged in a heated debate with the EU institutions that marked the culmination of this phase. Controversies were healed only after the official commitment of the Head of the EU Commission to provide financial assistance to countries, easing the EU financial requirements and launching a series of funding schemes for economic recovery. The opening of the EU on this field, particularly regarding flexibility over the domestic budget, was claimed to be a success for the government and again the M5S has softened its traditional diffidence over the EU<sup>29</sup>.

As pertains to the *managing phase* of the COVID-19 issue, we could identify two different levels of policy interventions. The first one relates to the measures aimed to contain the contagion spread. The second one focuses on the consequences at the economic level. Indeed, the lockdown measures implied a stop to industrial production along with a dramatic fall in consumer spending, determining a negative outlook for the Italian economy with an expected collapse of the Italian GDP for 2020. Gradually, as the contagion rate started to decrease, particularly in Southern regions, the concerns for the health risk shifts on the economic dimension, putting this latter at the core of the political agenda. Besides the support for companies and enterprises, further measures were delivered. Since the beginning of the emergency, the government suspended all ongoing layoff procedures, introducing a mechanism of redundancy funds paid directly with public money. These measures were integrated with actions in support of freelancers and those categories of workers lacking protection. Incidentally, these measures were in line with the cornerstone of the original M5S's policy platform—the basic income. Easily, the party was able to claim ownership. Regarding the League, triggering the politicisation of the COVID-19 emergency becomes quite arduous, and the party failed in getting the ownership of a recognisable topic. Relying on the usual populist claims—blaming migrants and the EU elites—was not sufficient to set the agenda during the health crisis, even less during the recovery phase when policy proposals were under discussion. Lacking a recognisable strategy, except for complaining about the government inadequacy, the League seemed to have partly lost its influence and appeal.

## 5. Conclusion

Understanding whether the COVID-19 pandemic has damaged or rather benefited populists in Italy is not easy. Whilst the League played this game in opposition, the M5S had an essential role in the management of the crisis. Their institutional role entailed a diverse communication strategy for handling the crisis. Whilst the League tried (with difficulties) to adapt its traditional populist claims to the pandemic emergency, the M5S in line with other mainstream parties addressed the crisis by emphasising the institutional role played. Additionally, the media did not offer an easy ground for classic populist rhetoric. The health emergency—meaning the data on contagion rates, deaths and pressure over the system—and the nature of the pandemic did not need any further media logic

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<sup>29</sup>D'Argenio, A., Coronavirus, Von der Leyen: 'La Ue deve scusarsi con l'Italia'. *la Repubblica*, 16/04/20.

elements such as negativity and sensationalism. Consequently, populist claims were dampened and eventually marginalised in media coverage.

Indicators of this shift could be voting intentions in the polls and the relevance that populists had in the public debate and political field, before and after the start of the crisis.

Regarding the polls, the results showed that the League decreased its support during this period (from 32% in January to 27% in May), whereas the M5S has managed to keep its result almost consistent, approximately 15%–16%<sup>30</sup>. Obviously, these results cannot be attributed only to the crisis. Many other intervening factors could have affected it; however, it is a matter of fact that the League in this period, for whatever reason, has suffered a loss of consent. Regarding the political and public relevance of these parties, the evidence discussed in this chapter showed that the League and the M5S have had different reactions to the crisis. The main populist flagships of the League, such as anti-immigration claims or law and order proposals, have been weakened because of the ubiquity of the COVID-19 issue. Salvini tried to politicise the issue, particularly blaming the EU; however, his agenda-setting power has been much less strong than before the crisis. The M5S also modifies its populist discourse, leaving out usual populist topics—such as political corruption, waste of public money or suspicions about science and big pharma—and focusing, instead, on managing and responding to the crisis.

All in all, this unusual crisis did not strengthen populist parties. By contrast, it defused some populist issues in the public opinion and political debate, on which Salvini held ownership. This happened also to the M5S, although in a peculiar way: having to face the pandemic has indeed limited the populist stances of the Movement which, in the face of new, crucial institutional responsibilities, adopted more mainstream positions. Although these changes are certainly temporary, they will likely be the new starting point for a reframe of the populist supply and a redefinition of the Italian political balance in the upcoming post-COVID age.

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<sup>30</sup>Source: [www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/italy/](http://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/italy/)

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