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Italian politics: The great escape

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The so-called yellow-red coalition government (formed by the 5 Star Movement, the Democratic Party and some other small political parties) has so far been costly for the Democratic Party (PD). When it comes to national parliament voting intention, the PD currently scores 18% (-5%), followed by the 5 Star Movement (M5S) with 16% (-4%), thus lagging far behind the League (33%).[1] To regain electoral support, the PD needs to deliver what is an anti-Salvini coalition and transform it into a coalition that functions properly. Effective economic reforms that both respect the EU parameters and benefit middle- and low-income families are of vital importance. Yet there is also a need for innovative green policies aimed at more sustainable economic development and civil rights reforms, against the diffusion of the intolerance upon which Matteo Salvini has been building a successful political propaganda. Given that these needs are also shared by the M5S, they represent strong common political terrain for a workable political coalition.

The aim of this paper is to offer an assessment of the rollercoasters that characterised the Italian political landscape in 2019, when Italy changed from an unprecedented full populist coalition government, forged upon an agreement between the 5 Star Movement (M5S) and the League, to an even more unthinkable coalition government between the M5S and the Democratic Party (PD). By highlighting the salient moments of the 2019 Italian political scene, this paper will try to assess the reasons behind the PD's decision to form such an unusual coalition. Indeed, no party in the Italian plethora has been more critical of the PD than the M5S. Against this backdrop, given that in recent years the PD has been struggling to maintain support from its traditional electorate, the party needs now more than ever to demonstrate that this coalition is a bold but successful choice for the progressive forces. This paper will therefore not only highlight the PD's big achievements so far, if any, but also how such a coalition could be useful in revitalising the PD. Indeed, going beyond the M5S populist patina, there might be

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1   For updated data on voting intention, see "Poll of Polls", Politico. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/italy/.

room for the PD to find common terrain with its coalition partner and transform an anti-Salvini coalition into a coherent and functioning political cooperation.

Some background information

As a sort of space-time hole, August normally exists to provide the majority of Italians with a well-needed break from any sort of work-related matters. Most notably, any battle in the Italian political arena ceases to be fought, and politics disconnects from "business as usual" to enjoy a couple of weeks' break and to recharge. 2019 was different. From August to September 2019, not only did one of the most unexpected political coalitions break down – that between the M5S and the League – but an equally unexpected coalition developed between the M5S and the PD.

Those who are happy with such an outcome should be thanking Salvini, the leader of the League – one of the most anti-European parties on the EU landscape. Until the moment Salvini demanded a vote of no confidence in the Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte, an agreement between the PD and M5S had been unthinkable. Indeed, when in March 2018, the 5 Star Movement won the national elections (32% of the vote),[2] it was Matteo Renzi, the former secretary of the Democratic Party, who stopped any chances of a coalition with the M5S. With a blunt public declaration and a soon-to-become-viral hashtag #senzadime [withoutme], he ruled out any form of political cooperation between the Democratic Party and the M5S.[3] Not that the M5S was any keener to ally with the PD.[4] Indeed, the M5S had been a ferocious opponent of Renzi's government (February 2014-December 2016) and had campaigned against the 2016 constitutional referendum, which led to Renzi' resignation as prime minister. However, following the election, Beppe Grillo's 5 Star Movement had to find a partner to reach a majority within the parliament and form a government. At the time, the PD seemed the most natural ally, or at least the closest. Indeed, with Grillo excluding any coalition with Berlusconi, it seemed impossible that the League would abandon its historical centre-right coalition with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy to find an agreement with the M5S, as in fact unexpectedly happened. Although it took several months to reconcile the two parties' contradictory political programmes, a coalition government with nationalist and populist features – a combination defined as 'sovereignist' – was formed under the leadership of prime minister Giuseppe Conte.[5] Since then, the Italian political story has

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2   For the electoral result of the March 2018 election, see: https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/.

3   Riccardi, K. (2018),"Elezioni 2018, #senzadime: elettori Pd si scagliano contro l'accordo con i 5 Stelle", La Repubblica, 6 March. Available at: https://www.repubblica.it/speciali/politica/elezioni2018/2018/03/06/news/twitter_senzadime_coalizioni_elezioni-190626615/.

4   Chiaramonte, A. and A. Paparo (2019), "Volatile Voters and a Volatile Party System: The Results", in L. Ceccarini and J. Newell (Eds), *The Italian General Election of 2018*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 247-270.

5   See Contratto di Governo. Available at: https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2018/05/18/governo-m5s-lega-il-contratto-di-governo-versione-definitiva-del-testo/4364587/; Morillas P. and E. Poli (2018), "Why the New Italian Government Puts the EU Reform at Risk", CIDOB Opinión 536, Centro de Estudios y Documentación Internacionales de Barcelona, Barcelona, June; Poli E. (2020) "European Economic Governance and Sovereignism" in S. Griffith-Jones, B. De Souza Guilherme, C. Ghymers Hannot and A. Ribeiro Hoffmann (eds.), *Crisis Management and Democracy Lessons (to be) learned: The case of EU and Latin America*,

ceased to be about the triumph of the M5S or the PD's catastrophic electoral results (18%), the worst in its history.[6]

It became about Salvini and how he managed to transform a regional party, such as the Northern League, developed in the shadow of Berlusconi's Forza Italia, into the League, a national and nationalist party, able to lead the Italian government almost alone. Indeed, following the national elections in 2018, Salvini obtained the majority of his party's vote from the North of Italy. Pushing a campaign based on the fear of migrants, the anxiety of losing welfare, and nostalgia for the past, Salvini attracted both voters that used to support Berlusconi and the electorate of the traditional Northern League. However, he obtained only 17% of the vote – more than Forza Italia (14%) but less than the PD and the M5S. Nevertheless, within a year, Salvini doubled the League's support, also attracting voters from the South of Italy, and attained 33% of the vote at the European Parliament (EP) elections in May 2019. After months of political wrestling with the M5S on several strategic issues, from the construction of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) in Apulia to that of the Turin-Lyon high speed railway (TAV), the striking success of the League at the European elections encouraged Salvini to demand a vote of no confidence in the Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte in August 2019.[7] In Salvini's calculation, this should have triggered a snap election in autumn that, according to the polls, he could easily have won. Yet he failed to take into due consideration the fact that Italy is a parliamentary republic, which formally allowed the M5S and the centre-left Democratic Party to form a new political majority within the parliament and create a new government without the need for new elections. In less than a month, from being the interior minister and one of the most powerful political figures in Italy, Salvini became

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to be published, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; Marangoni, F. and L. Verzichelli (2019), "Ircocervo, chimera o camaleonte? Formazione e prime mosse del governo Conte" in E. Bressanelli and D. Natali (eds), *Politica in Italia. I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni.* Edizione 2019, Bologna: Il Mulino; Kriesi, H. (2018), "The implications of the euro crisis for democracy", *Journal of European Public Policy* 25.1 (2018), pp. 59-82; Fabbrini, S. (2019), "Italy and the EU: A Relationship with Uncertain Outcomes" in M. Kaeding, J. Pollak and P. Schmidt (Eds), *The Future of Europe*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; Fabbrini, S. and T. Zgaga (2019), "Italy and the European Union: the discontinuity of the Conte government", *Contemporary Italian Politics* 11.3 (2019), pp. 280-293; Vassallo, S. and M. Shin (2019), "The new map of political consensus. What is new in the wave of support for the populists?", *Contemporary Italian Politics* 11.3 (2019), pp. 220-235.

6   Pritoni, A. and R. Vignati (2018), "Winners and Losers. Turnout, Results and the Flows of Vote", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 23 (4), pp. 381–399; Pasquino, G., (2019). "The Formation of the Government" in L. Ceccarini and J. Newell (Eds), *The Italian General Election of 2018*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 297-315.

7   Biancalana, C. and P. Colloca (2019), "Il voto per il Movimento 5 stelle: cronaca di un crollo annunciato" in M. Valbruzzi (ed), *L'Italia sovranista e la sfida all'Europa. Le elezioni europee ed amministrative 2019*, Bologna: Istituto Carlo Cattaneo, pp. 190–197; Bressanelli E. and D. Natali (eds) (2019), *Politica in Italia. I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni.* Edizione 2019; Bologna: Il Mulino; Colloca, P. and M. Valbruzzi (2019), "Chi ha vinto, chi ha perso: analisi dei risultati delle elezioni europee 2019" in M. Valbruzzi (ed), *L'Italia sovranista e la sfida all'Europa. Le elezioni europee ed amministrative 2019*, Bologna: Istituto Carlo Cattaneo, pp. 157–166; Valbruzzi M. (ed) (2019), *L'Italia sovranista e la sfida all'Europa. Le elezioni europee ed amministrative 2019*, Bologna: Istituto Carlo Cattaneo; Vignati, R. (2018), "Dal Pd al M5s, dal M5s alla Lega: analisi degli spostamenti divoto" in M. Valbruzzi and R. Vignati (eds), *Il vicolo cieco. Le elezioni politiche del 4 marzo 2018*, Bologna: Il mulino, pp. 185–211.

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a simple senator. Now being in opposition (with popular support of around 32%), Salvini is free to criticise the government for a budget law that was inevitably going to be difficult when passed by the yellow-red government in December 2019. He is also able to enjoy not being responsible for it. At the same time, however, the new yellow-red coalition has also been costly for the PD as it resulted in the former prime minister and PD secretary, Matteo Renzi, leaving the party in September 2019. After pushing for such a coalition to be formed in order to prevent Salvini from taking over the lead of the country, Renzi then decided to leave the PD. He formed a new party called Italia Viva, which positioned itself at the centre of the Italian political spectrum with the aim of taking over some of the more moderate Berlusconi voters and those left-wing supporters who were unhappy about the PD's coalition with the M5S. This incoherent political move has not yet, however, turned out to be winning. Italia Viva is still at 5% and, as the situation currently stands, it is not predicted to grow any further. As difficult as it might be for the PD, Renzi's exit could nevertheless be positive. Certainly, he has been a political heavyweight, whose political intuitions, right or wrong, have been difficult to contain and redirect within the party's general political line.

Strengths and weaknesses of the yellow-red coalition

Although the alliance of convenience made by the two parties has been successful in keeping Salvini away from the government, it is evident that their different political identities make day-to-day political cooperation increasingly difficult. While the PD is deeply rooted in a well-defined left-wing ideological camp, the M5S has a colourful political make-up. It is a fiercely populist movement which reflects both right- and left-wing ideas. When it comes to the socio-economic agenda, the M5S has introduced the so-called 'reddito di cittadinanza', a basic income scheme to fight against the increasing number of Italians living in poverty. In 2019, their number reached 5 million, representing 1.8 million families and 8.4% of Italy's total population.[8] While the basic income scheme does not tackle the sources of the problem, and has not so far contributed to reducing the number of poor people, the M5S has been attempting to introduce more guarantees for workers through the Dignity Decree, and to increase employability by empowering national employment offices.[9] Leaving aside the effectiveness of such reforms, it is evident that their connotations are closer to a traditional progressive agenda. Yet with regard to security and migration, the M5S and 72% of its electorate seem to be more on the right of the political spectrum, as demonstrated by their support for the anti-immigration policies put forward by Salvini when he was interior minister.

Given the undefined nature of the M5S, it is difficult for the PD to predict its partner's political moves, and several areas of friction make day-to-day cooperation quite difficult. Certainly, the M5S has become a more institutionalised party, and since leading the Italian government it has

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8   Le statistiche dell'Istat sulla povertà, Anno 2018. Available at: https://www.istat.it/it/files/2019/06/La-povert%C3%A0-in-Italia-2018.pdf.

9   Merler, S. (2018), "Italy's 'Dignity Decree'", Bruegel, July. Available at: https://bruegel.org/2018/07/italys-dignity-decree/.

abandoned much of its anti-European rhetoric, such as the idea of a referendum for exiting the eurozone. While one of the conditions upon which the new yellow-red coalition was formed was a declared discontinuity with respect to the previous M5S-League government (yellow-green) on European issues, the yellow-red coalition's position on the EU is still ambivalent given that 45% of its electorate, compared with 7% of the PD's, still supports the idea of an 'Italexit'.[10]

Nevertheless, the M5S has accepted the election of PD member David Sassoli as president of the European Parliament, and the appointment of former prime minister Paolo Gentiloni (PD) as European commissioner for the economy. Considering the support granted by the M5S to the new Commission president as well as its attempt to enter a pro-European group after the European elections, the movement can no longer be considered openly anti-European. Granted, such a wind of change is not everlasting, however. As its last political switch demonstrates, having no ideology of reference or a precise political identity, the M5S is able to change its political stance more easily than the traditional parties and PD. This recent – albeit volatile – political turn did not come without losses: in December 2019, three M5S senators decided to abandon the party and joined the League, as they voted against some resolutions discussed within the Italian parliament and approved by the yellow-red majority on the European Stability Mechanism (ESM).

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In this respect, being in a coalition with the M5S is certainly a political gamble for the PD. To this, one must add that the coalition government is not seen positively by the majority of the Italian electorate, who were outraged that a new government was formed between two parties which are very different, and without calling a new vote. This regurgitated the idea, already widespread among Italians, that politicians' primary goal is to keep their power rather than to think about how they can benefit citizens at large. At the same time, the M5S and the PD electorates respectively do not trust the other party's leader. Only 6% of M5S voters trust the secretary of the PD, Nicola Zingaretti, while only 5% of the PD's voters trust the M5S leader, Luigi Di Maio.[11] Against this backdrop, it is evident that the yellow-red coalition has been costly for the PD so far, especially when it comes to national parliament voting intention. The PD currently scores 18% (-5%) of electoral support, and the 5 Star Movement (M5S) 16% (-4%), thus lagging far behind the League (33%).[12] Since there is no magic cure for re-establishing trust in the party and in the government, the PD needs to put forward a set of credible and effective political economic reforms, taking the M5S on board, in order to regain electoral support.

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10 Angelucci, D., P. Isernia, G. Piccolino and A. Scavo (2019), "From one marriage of convenience to another: Will Italy's new M5S-PD government last longer than its predecessor?", London School of Economics. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/09/05/from-one-marriage-of-convenience-to-another-will-italys-new-m5s-pd-government-last-longer-than-its-predecessor/.

11 Ibid.

12 For updated data on voting intention see Poll of Polls. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/italy/.

PD political achievements, losses and current challenges

So far, the biggest PD achievement in the new yellow-red coalition can be said to be its capacity to secure strategic offices such as the Ministry of Economy. Yet this is also very risky from an electoral point of view. For example, the minister of the economy Roberto Gualtieri had to draft the 2020 budget law, and had to increase tax revenues and apply spending cuts to cover the €23 billion needed to avoid an increase in VAT. Although Gualtieri maintains that Italians are paying the price for the economic damage caused by the last government, the introduction of new taxes, even if cleverly labelled as 'micro', will certainly raise social discontent and anger, providing Salvini with room to increase his electoral support.

The political legitimacy of the Democratic Party is linked to the success of the government's budget law in bringing about healthy and balanced economic growth, while respecting the 0.6% structural deficit target for 2020 imposed by the European Commission. This is certainly not going to be an easy target to achieve. Italy's GDP is currently forecast to grow 0.1% in 2019, while its public debt is projected to rise to 136.2%.[13] At the same time, there is no improvement in socio-economic conditions. The number of families in absolute poverty increased from 5.7% in 2015 to 6.9% in 2017, while the proportion of employed persons at risk of poverty has risen continuously, from 8.3% in 2010 to 9.6% in 2017.[14] Against this backdrop, it is absolutely crucial for the PD to bring forward a set of welfare and economic policies that tax the richest and provide assistance to the middle and working class. Despite increased taxes and cuts in public spending, the new budget law provides a set of welfare policies, such as the introduction of fiscal bonuses for families as well as for enterprises hiring young people or opening new businesses in the South of Italy. These reforms should benefit low- and medium-income people.

Another of the PD's achievements is linked to the nomination of prefect and migration expert Luciana Lamorgese as the interior minister. Indeed, the question of migration is very delicate in Italy and was used by Salvini to build on social anger by depicting migrants as the main reason behind Italians' economic struggles. Having a technician rather than a political figure to deal with migration means that someone with hands-on experience might be able to negotiate technical agreements with other European countries, such as the Malta Agreement, which has so far proved to be effective. Certainly, much still needs to be done to solve the migration crisis successfully. This is evident. However, for the time being, migration has ceased to be an everyday topic on the news. This in itself is a significant result, given that the overloads of information and misinformation Italians have received in recent years on the problem of migrants have contributed to increasing the perception that the country has been invaded and left alone to deal with the incoming flows of people.

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13 European Commission data. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-performance-and-forecasts/economic-performance-country/italy/economic-forecast-italy_en.
14 Cesarini Sforza, L. (2018), Poverty Watch 2018 Italy, CILAP EAPN Italia. Available at: https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/EAPN-Poverty-Watch-Italy-EN-FINAL.pdf.

The third, and so far most evident, PD achievement within the yellow-red coalition has been to leave Salvini and the League outside the government. However, this is a short-term success. Indeed, to win the battle against sovereignism in the long term, the PD needs to fight on the political battlefield every day. Yet the party has failed in this. For instance, after half a century of left-wing rule, the central Italian region of Umbria ended up supporting Matteo Salvini's candidate, Donatella Tesei, in the regional elections. Tesei was backed by the far-right Brothers of Italy and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, and she won 57.5% of the vote while the PD and M5S candidate Vincenzo Bianconi obtained just over 37% of the vote.[15] The result was a major blow to the government, but mostly to the PD. While Umbria has only 700,000 voters, it used to be one of Italy's left-wing fortresses. The defeat in Umbria is less related to the coalition with the M5S, and more related to a failure of the previous PD government in the region. Indeed, scandals involving the previous president of the region, Catiuscia Marini, a member of the PD who was forced to resign after being investigated, resulted in voters opting for the radical right. The next regional elections will nevertheless be of fundamental and even vital importance for the PD. These will be in Emilia-Romagna, a historically left-wing stronghold. A defeat of the PD in the region, which is one of the most developed in terms of welfare state and services and which has good economic indicators, could destroy the party's reputation to the point of becoming life threatening. Indeed, the region has always voted for left-wing regional governments since the second world war.

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Recommendations

While Italy's economic situation does not allow the current government to have expansive fiscal policies (Italy still has the second highest public debt in the EU and it has not registered sufficient economic growth to justify more public spending), the PD could win its battle against sovereignism and the League by working towards a reduction of the socio-economic gap. In 2018, 20% of Italians owned about 72% of the entire national wealth. The top 10% (in terms of capital) of the Italian population today possesses over seven times the wealth of the poorest half of the population.[16] Introducing reforms, such as those planned by the government to fight against tax evasion, could be of help. Yet there is a need to restructure and reinforce the Italian welfare system. Some of the reforms of the 2020 budget law go in this direction. However, the PD's political war horse should also deal with the protection of the environment and civil rights. In line with other European countries, many Italian city squares have seen a number of

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15 Sciorilli Borelli, S. (2019), "The Italian regional election that could revive Salvini's fortunes", Politico, October. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-regional-election-umbria-matteo-salvini-league-resurgence/.
16 Oxfam, La Disuguaglianza in Italia: Richezza Nazionale, 2018. Available at: https://www.oxfamitalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Scheda-Italia_Inserto-Rapporto-Davos_2019.pdf.

young people demanding more action to fight climate change in the Fridays for Future Movement. Climate change is an issue of concern for one in five Italians, with an increase of 12% since 2017, but no substantial political parties, including the PD or the 5 Star Movement, have been able to represent the issue adequately.[17] The introduction of a "plastic tax" by the 2020 budget law goes in this direction, as it might lead Italy towards the adoption of a more sustainable economy. Apart for climate change and the environment, where it is easy for the PD to find an agreement with the M5S, civil rights must be central to the PD political agenda and to the process of building a more solid coalition with the M5S. For instance, the majority of the electorate from both parties (84% and 78% of PD and M5S voters respectively) back the freedom of expression and family rights for the LGBT community.[18]

> **Civil rights must be central to the PD political agenda**

Beyond the need to make a workable coalition with the M5S, the development of a new anti-Salvini social movement, called the "Sardines" could foster the political support granted to the PD. The movement is not a party one, but since its spontaneous development, it has gathered a number of people in different Italian cities to protest against Salvini, his hate speech and the rise of racism and xenophobic discourse in Italy. The Sardines could thus represent a valid electoral pool for the party. If the PD is able to mobilise these people, it will have enough support to win the next elections. So far, Politico's Poll of Polls gives the PD a mere 18%, followed by the M5S at the 16%. The League still dominates with 33% of the consensus.[19]

Conclusion

While it is impossible to predict the life of the yellow-red government, and whether this coalition will last longer (or not) than the previous one, the PD's relationship with the M5S is fundamental for it to be able to deliver effective results – which are needed if the PD is to re-establish its political legitimacy.

In this respect, the PD needs to work closely with the M5S on shared issues, building a set of credible political and economic reforms on welfare, the green economy and civil rights, in order to transform a patchwork government, born simply to avoid the League winning the election, into a well-functioning coalition. This is the only way for the PD to defeat Salvini on the electoral battlefield, and not just at the institutional and parliamentary level. Indeed, the crisis of the PD is not directly related to the rise of sovereignism but more to the inability of the party to better interpret changes in Italian society and provide clear and coherent answers.

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17 European Commission (2019), Special Eurobarometer 490, Climate Change.
18 Angelucci, D., P. Isernia, G. Piccolino and A. Scavo (2019), "From one marriage of convenience to another: Will Italy's new M5S-PD government last longer than its predecessor?", London School of Economics. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/09/05/from-one-marriage-of-convenience-to-another-will-italys-new-m5s-pd-government-last-longer-than-its-predecessor/.
19 Poll of Polls, Politico. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/italy/.