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From Albertini to Anti-Europeanism: Shades of Euroscepticism in Italy

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Introduction

Italian pro-Europeanism dates back to the aftermath of World War II, when anti-fascist intellectuals such as Mario Albertini, Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi encouraged the idea of a federation of European states.1 In particular, in post-war Italy, Albertini associated the need for federalism to political forces and their incapability of offering adequate responses to social needs. He also argued that federalism was the rightful alternative of standing up for national identity without resorting to force.2 In this respect, national communities were to be replaced with a pluralist and federal European community.3 But Italian Europhilia was not only a result of intellectual thinking dating back to the 1940s. Traditionally, Italians have always been considered to show great enthusiasm towards the idea of a European community. Regarding Euroscepticism as such, the very first traces of Euroscepticism can be traced back to the decline of the “permissive consensus”,


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which began to dwindle after the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1991. During that time, the EU’s growing ambitions for major political integration was harshly criticized mostly by radical right wing parties. Nevertheless, the Italian public opinion remained mainly pro-European to the point that EU institutions were even considered able to enhance national economic welfare and political stability more efficiently than the national government was able to propose. From the 1990s to the 2000s, trust in the EU and its institutions was consistently above 60 per cent. Yet, such expectations appear to have been substantially reduced by the current crisis, which negative consequences have been coupled to austerity policies and internal political instability. While the Ministry of Economy and Finances defined Italian’s current recession as being worse than during the Great Depression, since 2012, politics in Italy has been particularly unstable, due to a turnover of four different governments and two parliamentary compositions in only 3 years. Hence, both the economic crisis and the institutional instability have contributed to the increased disenchantment in the country, not only towards Italian institutions but even towards the EU. Today, any postulation of further political and economic integration is perceived as an European austerity dictat, the European Fiscal Compact is holding Italy’s economy back from recovering and is held responsible for the surge of mass unemployment and the worsening of many negative effects caused by the crisis.

This sudden emergence of anti-Europeanism in Italy however is also reflected in the change of views of Italian people between 2000 and 2014: for instance, while in 2000, 53 per cent of Italians were confident in Europe, in 2013 the level of support fell to 30 per cent. Moreover, between autumn 2013 and spring 2014, the number of people thinking that Italy would be better off outside the EU in-
creased by 9 per cent, reaching a new high of 45 per cent. Conversely, the share of people believing that Italy’s future would be worse without the EU shrank by 10 per cent points, rating slightly below the EU average (40 per cent).

The extent of such disenchantment towards the EU has certainly been amplified during the recent European Parliament electoral campaigns, when Euroscepticism became the most electorally rewarding strategy as anti-EU populist discourses have been used by the majority of the parties to raise electoral support. In this respect, the aim of the paper is to analyse the rationale behind the parties’ use of eurosceptic ideas and anti-EU political campaigns enacted during the recent EP elections in order to evaluate whether the traditional Italian tendency of appeal towards European federalism possibly has come to an end. Nevertheless, before analysing the level of anti-Europeanism manifested by political parties during and in the aftermath of the electoral campaign, the next section will provide a definition of euroscepticism within the Italian panorama.

Varieties of Euroscepticism

Generally, euroscepticism has a subjectively constructed nature and its meaning is determined by cultural and regional idiosyncrasies, which encompass anti-European ideas, europhobic principles or simple criticism towards some of the EU institutions or policies. The seminal work of Szczerbiak and Taggart develops a distinction between ‘principled (Hard)’ and ‘contingent (Soft)’ euroscepticism. The former is defined as “principled opposition to the European Union and European integration as currently conceived,” the latter as the embodiment of “concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas leading to the expression of qualified [yet not principled] opposition to the EU,” reflecting “a sense that ‘national interest’ is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory.” However, such a definition seems to provide a too strong division between the two groups, which is hardly applicable to reality. Hence, in order to distinguish the rationale behind eurosceptic attitudes, it is easier to adopt a working definition and differentiate between eurosceptic parties, which either antagonize the EU per se or rather eurocritical, so being critical towards the EU institutions. Eurocritical movements stems out of the eurosceptic wave, but differently from mainstream euroscepticism, they criticize some of the European institutions, without however running a political

14. Szczerbiak and Taggart (eds.), “Opposing Europe?”
campaign that favours a demolition of the EU. They rather argue that the EU’s current model is no longer acceptable and needs to be changed for the sake of its own legitimacy in the future. Therefore, the opposition to the EU can derive from either a strong scepticism towards the common project as a whole, or it can simply feature a form of disapproval towards some of the European institutions.

Although mainstream scholars have underlined how eurosceptic ideas are normally embodied by anti-establishment parties, and anti-EU ideas are generally more shared by centre-right parties, during and in the aftermath of the last EP elections, even more traditionally considered Europhil left wing parties such as PD (Partito Democratico) more or less adopted radical anti-EU discourses aimed to foster their legitimacy among citizens disenchanted with the EU. At the same time, the majority of political groups structured their communication strategies through the use of populist rhetoric to gather support from disillusioned and angered citizens. Moreover, anti-EU discourses developed by Italian parties showed a high level of selectivity, in the sense that they tended to antagonize the EU on the basis of centre/periphery dichotomies. In this respect, Germany is identified as the main supporter of European austerity policies. The more German chancellor Angela Merkel insists on the European Fiscal Compact, the more resentment towards Berlin and Brussels spread through the country. For instance, during his short presidency, former Prime Minister Enrico Letta urged Germany to spur economic growth in Europe rather than being “left alone in a desert and watch the rise of anti-European sentiments in neighbouring countries.” Anti German rhetoric became very prominent during the parties’ electoral campaigns. While Five Star Movement leader Beppe Grillo offensively insulted Angela Merkel and German EU Parliamentary president Martin Schulz during the party’s electoral campaign rallies, Forza Italia’s leader Silvio Berlusconi during

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18. Dehousse, “Europe at the polls.”


his party’s campaigning went so far in claiming that for Germans, concentration camps had never existed.\(^{21}\)

Hence, it is possible to identify four main tendencies within the Italian selective and populist anti European bubble. First, some parties such as the Northern League (LN) based their electoral campaigns on forms of euroscepticism. Second, the new anti-establishment group Five Star Movement (M5S), formed by party leader Beppe Grillo in 2009, rather used eurocritical discourses. The third tendency however was that even some mainstream parties developed some anti-EU arguments in order to raise electoral support or maintain legitimacy. For instance, during and in the aftermath of the electoral campaign, Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (FI) and Renzi’s Democratic Party (PD) respectively adopted rather opportunistic eurosceptic and eurocritical behaviours. Although the majority of the parties used eurosceptic discourses for rather opportunistic reasons as an aim to foster their electoral consensus and to seek national legitimacy, only LN and M5S entered the EU Parliament as anti EU parties. Indeed, in the aftermath of the elections, the more moderate parties FI and PD ended up in allying with mainstream Europhile groups such as European Popular Party (EPP) and Social and Democrats (S&D).

**Italian Parties behaviours within the European Parliament Electoral Campaign**

Since 1979, EP elections have registered a progressive decline in participation rates, even though the latest elections however broke this trend registering a plus 0.9 per cent increase in participation. Compared to 2004, Italian turnout to the EP election has fallen from 73.1 per cent to 58.7 per cent.\(^{22}\) This would suggest that in theory 2 out of 5 Italians had decided not to vote.\(^{23}\) As already mentioned above, while disenchantment spread around society and disaffection increased critical attitudes towards the EU, political campaigning this time concentrated more on supranational European issues. The European discourse was rather associated to anti-EU ideas and criticism towards the integration project used by political parties to gain support at the national level. However, in the aftermath of the elections, both Italian political parties, the Five Star Movement and the


Northern League, finally decided to join anti-EU political groups within the EP. This reflected their willingness to work together with other foreign anti-EU parties such as British UKIP or the French Le Front National and to actively pursue anti-EU policies.

**Eurocriticism Vs Euroscepticism**

Before the EP elections, the most representative eurosceptic campaign was put forward by the Northern League (LN). In the 1990s, the LN developed into a separatist and xenophobic party but was substantially not an anti-European political party. On the contrary, the EU was normally depicted as a political platform for Northern aspirations towards greater regional independence and economic efficiency. Nevertheless, in the late 1990s, when popular resentment over EU affairs began to emerge, the LN increasingly adopted anti-European stances, turning into today’s most eurosceptic party in Italy.

For instance, during the recent EP electoral campaign, the newly appointed LN’s head, Matteo Salvini, compared the EU to a “gulag” where common citizens are subjected to a sort of Brussels dictat and are unable to decide about the future of their countries. While attacking austerity policies, the party’s “Stop the Euro” tour proposed a national referendum to decide whether to withdraw from the Eurozone. However, since members of the party declare that the LN is not an anti-EU party, its anti-euro and anti-EU campaign might have merely been a political strategy of boosting its decreased political legitimacy. In the aftermath of the 2013 national elections, the LN lost over 1.5 million votes obtaining only 4.1 per cent of the vote, from the 8 per cent it has obtained in 2008.24 The party’s legitimacy has been badly affected by the recent scandals involving its former president, Mr. Umberto Bossi, together with his incapacity to enforce fiscal federalism.25 Nevertheless, the Northern League’s euroscepticism and its anti-euro and anti immigration agenda found a valid counterpart in the French party, Le Front National, led by Marine Le Pen. Just before the EP elections, the French party, experienced an unprecedented electoral success, getting 25 per cent of electoral support during local elections in France. LN and FN were even planning to form an Eurosceptic right wing coalition (the European Alliance for Freedom, EAF), which could have transformed both EU policies and politics inside the European Union.


EU. Other members of such a group would have been the Dutch PVV led by Geert Wilders, second force in Holland, the Austrian FPO party and the Flemish Vlaams Belang party. Nevertheless, the parties failed to create a political group at the EP by missing the necessary two legal thresholds (normally a group must have 25 MEPs from at least 7 member states). This was a blow to the Northern League, which with only 6 per cent of the votes and 5 seats, can only play a marginal role as a ‘non attached member’ in the Parliament. In this respect, its anti-European stances will hardly have any impact on European policies.

In regard to the other Italian Eurosceptic party, the Five Star Movement (M5S) has become one of the currently most important eurocritical movements at the European scene. Building its EP electoral campaign around several anti-EU arguments, the Five Star Movement used populist rhetoric to leverage on widespread social discontent with the Fiscal Compact and the euro, gathering support from electorates’ conviction of the desperate necessity to change the model of the EU. For instance, the party defined Europe as an expensive, large and inefficient bureaucratic organization that does not represent its people. The party’s European agenda consisted of seven points that included a referendum on the euro and an immediate abolishment of the Fiscal Compact, which were both held responsible for the downfall of the Italian economy. According to the Five Star Movement, a coalition of Mediterranean economies would turn out to be an alternative to the German dictator, that rather favoured the necessities of Northern countries. Using a populist dialectic, the Five Star Movement’s electoral campaign was rather unorthodox and organized mostly around theatrical plots (under the title “I’ll give you Europe”) interpreted by one of Italy’s popular comedians and the party’s leader Beppe Grillo. While party’s supporters had to buy a regular ticket to attend such shows, the Five Star Movement mobilized the vehicle of theatrical competences of its charismatic leader for boosting propaganda. In such shows, the euro was depicted as a monster haunting Europeans and the EU Parliament as a useless and undemocratic institutions wasting citizens’ money while shuttling between Brussels and Strasbourg.

However, when the Five Star Movement was launched in 2009, its initial political agenda did not reveal a clear strategy on EU issues. In this respect, like in the case of the LN, the rise of eurocritical discourses within the agenda of the Five Star Movement might well be related to simple strategic motives for gaining political legitimacy. During the 2013 national elections, for instance, the Five Star Movement, standing as a single party, obtained proportionally more votes (25 per cent) than PD. Grillo therefore expected Italian President Giorgio Napolitano to give his party the direct leadership of the country, but the latter opted for PD and its coalition, which received electoral support of 29 per cent. If the Five Star Movement had become the most voted Italian party in the European Parliament, and giving them a first place finish in front of the PD, it would probably have had enough legitimacy to ask for new national elections. In this respect, its eurocritical electoral campaign remained strongly anchored also to the party interests in boosting its legitimate power in Italy’s political arena.

Under the slogan “Vinciamo noi” (we will win), the Five Star Movement even expected to win the election. Nevertheless, the results surprisingly turned out to be a great disappointment, crawling behind the PD, its greatest rival, by nearly 20 per cent. With 21 per cent of the vote at its first EP electoral campaign, the Five Star Movement however cannot really be considered a “loser”. In order to actively participate in decision-making processes at EU level, the Five Star Movement would have to join a pre-existent political group. The party’s activists were asked to vote on line and 78.1 per cent of them (23,192 out of 29,584 preference votes) agreed on allying with the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) group, championed by Nigel Farage rightwing and eurosceptic UKIP (24 seats). With 17 seats, the Five Star Movement was set to play a key role within the anti-EU coalition. As one of its first successes, for instance, it managed to change the group’s name from EFD to EFDD standing for Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, including their own original idea of direct citizens participation to political decisions and control over elite policies. Still, there were deep ideological differences among EFDD member parties. Eurosceptic and radical anti-EU visions sustained by other groups members such as the Nigel Farage’s anti-EU

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party UKIP, for instance, were not directly shared by M5S. Signs of clashes between eurosceptic and eurocritic positions already had emerged in a vote in the European Parliament in September 2014 when the Five Star Movement opposed a draft proposed by UKIP on the general EU budget for 2015. The UKIP had demanded to cut all the expenditure that does not bring direct benefit to Great Britain, which was objected by members of the Five Star Movement. Ideological divergences were also noticeable in the scarce level of internal cooperation (45.39 per cent) registered in the group, the lowest among all European coalitions. As many had predicted, UKIP was not able to withstand the many divergences within the group and dissolved itself on 16 October 2014 after a Latvian MEP left the group, resulting in a great setback for the Five Star Movement. The group is now reconstituted, however its stability is very precarious as it has the smallest required amount of member states to stay inside the EU Parliament.

Europhile or not Europhile? Anti-European ideas among Italian mainstream parties

Although not completely sharing anti-EU visions, Forza Italia also placed its campaign on the wave of “selective euroscepticism” in order to attract as many voters possible in a short time and to overcome its loss of legitimacy as a result of Berlusconi’s judicial turmoil. Forza Italia’s political campaign concentrated on re-establishing a stronger Italian role in the European decision-making process. Slogans such as “More Italy in Europe, Less Europe in Italy” were fuelled by anti-German and anti-austerity rhetoric. Silvio Berlusconi even raised the issue of leaving the eurozone and blamed anti-Italian bureaucratic elites inside a Germany-dominated EU for having forced his governance to end in late 2011. Forza also evoked the possibility of a German exit should Berlin refuse to support plans for reforging the European Central Bank or to stop the harsh austerity measures which were badly affecting the country. The relationship between Berlusconi’s party, Forza Italia, with the EU appears to have increasingly deteriorated. According to Philippe Ridet, a correspondent in Italy for Le Monde, 54 per cent of the FI party members are eurosceptic or use strong eurosceptic discourses. Neverthe- less, FI is not eurosceptic per se, it is rather opportunistic as its campaign was not so much concentrated on the need to completely abandon the EU. It was rather based on populist rhetoric in highlighting the need for Italy to pursue its self

41. Ridet, “L’Italie prête pour les élections.”
interests. This is particularly evident for the fact that FI in the end, as expected, joined one of the most Euroophile mainstream groups, the European Popular, together with Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), one of the most pro-European German parties and the French Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). In a nutshell, by maintaining both anti- and pro-EU discourses, FI’s ambiguous position is the result of a catch-all political strategy to boost electoral support. Since July 2014, FI has always been loyal to EPP. In 98 per cent of the cases, FI agreed on monetary and financial issues while it only disagreed on issues related to foreign and security policies. This data is particularly astonishing when considering that EPP is considered to be one of the main sustainers of EU austerity policy.

Italy’s mainstream centre-left party PD built a political campaign, which was based, even if indirectly, on anti-EU rhetoric. Indeed, the party could not directly criticize the EU for several reasons. First of all, it was leading the new Italian government and thus, it was in charge of implementing those austerity policies, which were deemed to have reduced Italian welfare. Second, Italy, in the aftermath of the EP election, was due to take the six months rotating Council Presidency. On the other hand, the party could not be pro-EU, as it needed to foster electoral consensus not only for winning seats at the EP, but also to foster its national legitimacy as the leading Italian party. This was especially needed since the Prime Minister and party leader Matteo Renzi took over the position of the former Prime Minister Enrico Letta, without a proper election.

In this respect, the PD campaign was indirectly eurocritic. For instance, by enforcing numerous austerity and fiscal reforms, the party could not adopt an anti-austerity rhetoric. Hence, its campaign highlighted that such reforms were necessary not because Europe was asking for reforms, but because Italian citizens were asking for them. In this respect, Italy would not simply follow lecturing neither from Berlin nor Brussels. Such a campaign created a sort of contraposition between Europe and PD, as it highlighted how the European institutions, differently from PD and the Italian government, were not engaging with the development of the country and the future of its citizens. Secondly, it also outlined the need for Italy to pursue its own development within Europe and to play a more central role in the EU decision making process.

PD electoral campaign resulted to be very effective as the party registered a landslide historic win, obtaining 41 per cent of the vote. Yet in the aftermath of the elections, the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi appears to be adopting a rather schizophrenic approach towards the EU. On the one hand, he maintained that

under his leadership, Italy would use its six-month long EU presidency to push for the establishment of a United States of Europe. This claim reflects rather Europhile federalist principles, such as those developed by Mario Albertini and Altiero Spinelli, which are hardly compatible with the electoral campaign and the idea that Italy should pursue its own way within the European system. On the other hand, his choice of supporting Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Policy and Security Policy can be hardly reconciled with the need to promote Italian interest. If so, Renzi’s government should have rather preferred to run for other positions such as the economic and financial one, which could potentially have benefitted Italian economic growth, enabling the country to constrain German influence over European economic policies. Instead Italy went for the most prestigious yet, probably less utilitarian policy area. Again, this may reflect a Europhile instinct of the party, which is pursuing a stronger political rather than economically strategic role within the EU. As far as economic and fiscal reforms are concerned, in the aftermath of the elections, Matteo Renzi has continued to underline that nobody had the right to treat other states “like scholars,” arguing that Italy should not accept any instructions from the EU. On the other hand, however, PD Members of the European Parliament appear to not be pursuing anti-austerity policies. For instance, EP Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs head by PD member, Roberto Gualtieri, has recently sustained the necessity for Member States to pursue their EU economic policy reform and that fiscal consolidation should continue. In this respect, the Italian government, led by PD, while maintaining the contrary, seems determined to bring about further political integration, which is hardly compatible with any lowering of austerity policy and EU institutional and political power over Italy.

Is the traditional Italian option for European federalism still consensus in Italy?

The austerity measures that have frustrated many Italian citizens are partially blamed for the scourge of mass unemployment and a growing tendency of people believing that the country would be better off without the euro. Euroscepticism has been boosted by gathering hostility towards the single currency, blamed for...
the economic crisis in the first place. Many citizens have become more resentful towards the most powerful European states, who are believed to be the true rulers of a union in which Italy plays a minor role and is left alone. However, despite the general perception of the EU’s incapacity of tackling the crisis and fostering social welfare, Italian europhilism has not been completely destroyed as in 2013 since only 1 per cent of the Italians actually wanted to leave the EU.47 This shows that although many Italians might still see themselves as European citizens, they want a different Europe, acting more flexible and less focused on austerity.

Social discontent towards the European project has been certainly channelled by political parties. Indeed, the “Eurosceptic offer” within Italy has increased over the past five years from around 16 to more than 50 per cent, and the EP electoral campaign was mainly based on anti-European resentment. Yet, parties might have well used eurosceptic anti-Germany discourses in an opportunistic manner, to acquire political legitimization. Indeed, in the aftermath of the election, only the Northern League and the Five Star Movement appear to be pursuing their anti-EU positions. Nevertheless, eurosceptic and eurocritical parties might not be able to effectively pilot a transformation of the EU institutions. LN is indeed standing as a single party while the anti-EU European Parliamentary group EFDD of Five Star Movement was not even able to overcome the divided political stances among its group members after only four months. Instead, mainstream political groups such as FI and PD, which based their political agenda on the need for Italy to play a stronger role within Europe and against Germany, are currently supporting further European integration. Nevertheless, to reverse Italian growing dissatisfaction towards the EU performance, the parties have no choice but to promote further reforming of those austerity and institutional policies deemed to affect Italian welfare. Indeed, to be effective, the European integration project needs to be supported by the citizens.

Abstract

Euroscepticism is far from being a new phenomenon and largely predates the outbreak of the financial crisis. Indeed, the disturbing detachment between European citizens and European Union (EU) institutions has been a central issue of the European public debate over the last two decades, in which popular and government support for European integration has steadily decreased among the majority of Member States (MS). Initially however, Italy rather stood out as it followed an opposite trend within the European growing eurosceptic panorama. Inspired by the likes of Italian pro-European federalists such as Mario Albertini or Altiero Spinelli, Italy was considered to be one of the most pro-European Member States in the Union. Yet, the Great Recession and the euro area sovereign debt crisis resulted in the rise of new anti-establishment and anti-European movements all around the MS, including Italy. To date, with only 34 per cent of the Italians still trusting the European institutions, Italian pro-Europeanism à la Albertini suddenly seems at stake.48

Résumé

L’Euroscepticisme est loin d’être un phénomène nouveau et il est largement antérieur au déclenchement de la crise financière. En effet, le détachement inquiétant entre les citoyens européens et les institutions de l’Union européenne a été une question centrale du débat public européen au cours des deux dernières décennies, pendant lesquelles le soutien populaire et gouvernemental à l’intégration européenne a constamment diminué dans la majorité des États membres. Cependant, initialement l’Italie se distingue parce qu’elle a suivi une tendance inverse dans le panorama eurosceptique croissant en Europe. Inspirée par des personnalités fédéralistes pro-européennes italiennes telles que Mario Albertini ou Altiero Spinelli, l’Italie a été considérée comme l’un des membres de l’Union les plus pro-européens. Pourtant, la Grande Récession et la crise de la dette publique de la zone euro ont entraîné l’apparition de nouveaux mouvements antieuropéens contre l’ordre établi dans les États membres, l’Italie incluse. À ce jour, avec seulement 34 pour cent des Italiens qui font encore confiance aux institutions européennes, le pro-européanisme italien à la Albertini semble soudain être en question.