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Populism and pandemic in Italy

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POPULISM AND PANDEMIC IN ITALY

*Paolo Emilio Landi**

Salvini, from Sweatshirt to Spectacles

In August 2019 at Papeete Beach in Riccione, Matteo Salvini, surrounded by semi-dressed, sweaty youngsters, asked for “full powers”. This sounded like a possible authoritarian turn in Italian democracy.

His party was at that time, according to the polls, the most popular in Italy by far, hitting 36% popularity. This was due to extremely aggressive propaganda. As Minister of the Interior, he travelled the country while always combining official meetings with political rallies. The preferred targets in his speeches were immigrants, NGOs helping migrants on the Mediterranean (those he calls ‘Sea Taxis’) or those asking for policies to regulate migration and the labour market. In this field, his trademark slogan was: “Closed ports! Italians first!”.

With the help of his aggressive propaganda team ‘The Beast’, paid for by the Ministry, he flooded social and traditional media with images of himself wearing sweatshirts with logos or slogans. Each rally a new sweatshirt or uniform would appear: that of a fireman, a worker, a

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policeman, etc. This imitated the technique Berlusconi employed in the '90s where, instead of sweatshirts, the Forza Italia leader wore hats. On Twitter, Salvini would share images of his Nutella breakfast with his fans, or post a photo of his relaxed, post-coital expression as he lazed on a bed with his girlfriend. His message was clear: I am one of you.

On international matters, he was (and is) a convinced Eurosceptic, probably because he almost never attended a committee during his years as a European parliamentarian. His slogan was: "Europe is useless".

This mechanism, exhausting for us journalists and, I guess, for him as well, did pay a huge dividend. But when his popularity was at its peak, his own hubris punished him. After his call for "full powers", his fictional character met reality on 20 August, the day that Prime Minister Conte resigned. Within a few weeks, Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), the other populist group that was losing favour, formed a coalition government with Partito Democratico (centre-left) and Liberi e Uguali (left). In a typical Italian twist, the Prime Minister was once again Giuseppe Conte. Historically, Italians are individualists and anarchists. Allergic to the rule of the law, they are also allergic to anyone who claims full power. This paradox rescues our democracy.

With less funds and less power and less visibility, Salvini tried to keep up his aggressive propaganda on migration but new events followed.

The fascist party of Fratelli d'Italia (FdI, named after the first words of the national anthem), led by Giorgia Meloni received funds and advice from the international sovereigntist network guided by Steve Bannon. FdI, started to erode the power of 'The Captain' (Salvini's nickname among his fans) from the right side of parliament. The two joined forces but tried to maintain a distinct identity. Salvini is a federalist, Meloni a nationalist.

Then came COVID-19. While Salvini was buzzing doorbells at the homes of immigrants, asking why they sell dope (this actually happened

and was documented on film), the virus spread in Lombardy and Veneto, the two wealthiest regions of Italy, both guided by presidents belonging to his party (Lega – Salvini Premier), but with different economic visions, especially on the European Union.

The populist movement, based on the channelled and often induced aggressive sentiment towards an enemy (immigrants for Salvini, the elite for MS5), found itself deprived of its usual targets.

The issue of immigration disappeared from the front page, overwhelmed by news of the number of those infected and dying. Some seasonal immigrants, mainly deployed in agriculture, did not arrive in Italy to help with the harvests, while some others decided to flee the infection by going back home to Romania, for example.

The other populist party, MS5, diminished in visibility during the common government with Lega per Salvini Presidente. Overwhelmed by their ubiquitous partner, they lost most of their appeal. Ideologically-based on an opposition attitude epitomised by the slogan ‘Vaffanculo’, they found themselves in a difficult position when they entered the decision room. Their leader - the young, poorly educated, and inexperienced Di Maio - claimed to have “abolished poverty”. He said these exact words from the balcony (!) of Palazzo Chigi, the residence of the Prime Minister, when he introduced the reddito di cittadinanza (minimum salary), a distribution of cash that did not produce the expected results: abolishing poverty and creating jobs. Their slogan ‘Uno vale Uno’ (‘One equals One’), their idol, (direct democracy through the web), was clearly rendered useless when faced with complex decisions. In addition, switching partners in the government (while cashing in the dividends of some important ministries, like the Foreign Office) harmed the pure image of the movement that purported not to care about power. Di Maio was forced to leave the movement leadership in January 2020, replaced by a lesser-known character.

COVID-19 affected MS5 as well. The despised “elite of the professors and specialists” became the oracle from whose lips all Italians expected information, warnings, and reassurance. And this is somewhat logical: when you have cancer you trust a specialist, not information gathered on Facebook. During the last years, the anti-vax movement, supported by Movimento 5 Stelle, claimed that vaccines would cause autism (based on a false report found on the web). During the pandemic, they briefly went silent. Yet, during phase 2, from beginning of May, they joined the delirious international conspiracy movement.

The European Union is usually targeted by populists with a view to justifying our national faults. On this occasion, it helped those countries harshly hit by the pandemic. The European Central Bank has put means to face the economic crisis on the table. The same can be said about the European Commission. It is true, in this tragic time, that the critical difficulties in the Union’s decision-making system have been revealed more than ever, yet it’s hard to say that Italy has been abandoned by the EU, as populists claim. This was another weapon taken from the populist arsenal.

In an attempt to maintain a Eurosceptic attitude, both Salvini and M5S claimed that Italy should refuse the ESM (European Stability Mechanism) funds, 35 billion euros to be spent on the health system, with no other conditions, and at an extremely low rate. The question is still open as MS5 blocks the government’s resolution.

In time of emergency, especially in Phase 1, a leadership is much needed and well accepted by the population. Italy being the first in line to face the unknown, Giuseppe Conte made difficult decisions that probably saved many lives. His popularity increased, with Italy having seen his resilient and responsible side. Other than some isolated cases, people did respond maturely to the lockdown and the infection curve did decrease.

All these factors also meant a significant decrease of consent for the populist parties: according to polls, at the end of May, Lega was at 26%, M5S at 16% and FdI at 15%.

But, they still have more than half of the popular vote and we are now approaching to Phase 2.

Glasses and Rosary

Religion and popular superstition played a great role during the first part of the pandemic.

During the state of emergency, Italian TV Day was punctuated by morning mass with Pope Francis at 7:00 am and the COVID-19 press conference at 6:00 pm.

One of the most iconic images from this pandemic is the one of the Palm Mass celebrated by Pope Francis in the empty St. Peter's square. Over 6,380,000 people witnessed the mass virtually, while, in comparison, the 2019 Easter Mass was seen by only 2,300,000 people. The same happened the following week when, for the first time, the Via Crucis was not celebrated near the Coliseum. In addition, Pope Francis's early mass was broadcast every day by RAIUNO, the state's own broadcasting company. TV2000, the Vatican television station, saw a huge increase in audience. Once again, the same occurred with radio broadcasting prayers and rosaries. Paradoxically, a largely secularised country found itself in need of Christian reassurance: Church closed – TV on. Religion took the stage, and it came to the attention of the sovereigntists.

The Roman-Catholic Church, on this occasion, conscious of its pivotal role, used all its means to meet the needs of believers, also indulging in those celebrations which are less digestible to the rest of the Oikumene: in Turin the ostension of Sindon was promoted on TV, and in Rome Pope Francis restored the *Indulgentia Plenaria Urbi et Orbi* (Plenary Indulgence for All).

On 19 April 2020, Father Lino Viola, a catholic priest, was celebrating mass in his little church of Gallignano, a small village 70km east of Milan, when the carabinieri entered the building. There were some 13 people in the church. Asked to stop the mass, the priest refused from the pulpit. When the carabinieri kindly tried to convince him to talk to the local mayor over the mobile phone, Father Lino went on with the service after stating “This is an abuse”.

This scene, filmed by one of the believers, went viral. For having infringed the DPCM (prime minister decree), the carabinieri fined the priest 680 euro and each attendee 280 euro. The faith community sympathetically decided to contribute to the payment, while the local bishop reproached the priest for breaking the rules imposed by the law and shared by the Catholic Church. Matteo Salvini commented asking for the reopening of churches at Easter (as did Trump). Luckily, no one agreed.

Although all faiths agreed to oblige the request to stop any public religious celebrations, Father Lino had touched a nerve: can a State, in the case of an emergency, limit the religious freedom of its citizens? Is there a scale of value between the Constitutional Rights? Is a community’s right to physical health contingent on its spiritual health, and the right to worship and attend a mass?

The answer to these questions is yes, according to the Constitutional Court. But this limitation must be temporary and proportional to the emergency, say the judges. The policy targeted to limit the spread of the pandemic is not a violation of the Constitutional Right stated in Art.19, where the freedom of belief is limited only by the “buon costume” (morality).

Yet, this issue of liberty of religion and its supposed infringement became a new battlefield for the populist. As Mussolini knew perfectly, one doesn’t achieve any power in Italy if one does not have an agreement with the Catholic Church, or at least with its people. This is

why, in 1929, Mussolini agreed to make the Catholic Creed the State religion almost 60 years after the Pope excommunication from the Italian Kingdom.

There is no room for such a pact with a pope such as Francis, he is too liberal and ecumenical. Salvini therefore decided to join the more fundamentalist part of the Roman-Catholic Church by holding and kissing the rosary during public rallies and speeches, claiming to rely on the help of the Holy Virgin for himself, his party, and the nation.

The Vatican supported the lockdown as a necessity. Most protestant and evangelical churches switched to streaming worship, conducting bible studies and radio meditations via Zoom. Notably, the Baptist churches of Lombardy (the region more affected by the pandemic) recorded worship with the participation of pastors and believers from different communities of the region. The edited versions broadcast via the Web on Sundays reached large audiences and gave a vibrant image of a church in prayer, notwithstanding the imposed social distancing and the tragic events in hospitals.

To regain popularity, the Lega party leader tried to ride the spiritual and emotional wave during the first part of the lockdown, even reciting the 'Eternal Rest' prayer on television during a talk show. On this occasion, Salvini changed his previous style, discarding the sweatshirt and donning eyeglasses to give him a more educated and professional look. This 'conversion' in both religion and personal style is part of a wider plan.

There is a transnational, conservative, Catholic network working against Pope Francis based in the US. The same group which claims that the pandemic is a divine punishment, claims that the Pope's actions and beliefs are a betrayal of the real faith. It pours dollars into European right-wing parties, as proven in a journalistic investigation by Report on RaiTre. Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni are also funded by this movement. Their aim now is to look more reliable.

In early May, the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI) strongly suggested the reopening of churches and allowing of funerals. Prime Minister Conte agreed to a protocol with the Roman-Catholic Church and with the other faiths. From 18 May 2020, churches have been unlocked under strict rules, just as in the majority of other European countries. And just as the issue of the so-called infringement of the right to the Freedom of Religion and Belief, the war to defend the Italian faith did not last for long.

NHS, the Battle of Federalism

Resilience, solidarity, unity. Italy, for a brief moment, seemed to find a way of facing the emergency by dropping the usual political fight. Commentators praised the population for its sense of responsibility, and national pride and mourning went hand in hand. But it was a short honeymoon.

The National Health Service in Italy is managed by the regional governments and by their presidents. Italy is composed of 20 regions, with a few holding a special status. The NHS accounts for a considerable chunk of their budget and, during the last 20 years, both left and right-wing parties, despite having different management approaches, cut down their funding. In Lombardy in particular, regional presidents have granted hospitals and private clinics huge resources, underfunding the smaller local and public forms of assistance, favouring big hospitals versus family doctors and big cities versus small towns. Over the years, many local hospitals have closed their doors. Consequently, when faced with the pandemic, Lombardy could not rely upon an efficient network to prevent the infection from spreading, nor could it share vital info. It became the region with highest number of infected and deaths. In addition, not knowing where to place those infected, they were sent to RSAs (residences for the elderly) with the result of spreading the infection among the most vulnerable.

The tension between central and regional government has been an historic one. As a peninsula, a composition of small entities with very different historical and cultural backgrounds, and having been conquered and occupied throughout the centuries by armies from all over Europe, it's clear that localism and small identities play a great role in Italy's self-understanding (unification is as recent as 1861). For example, most Italians speak both the national language and their dialect. Linguistically, being Sicilian or Venetian makes a great difference. This has a huge relevance in time of fluid identity. For example, the Lega Party was founded as a Liga Veneta (Venetian League), advocating for the secession. Although this regionalism has been disregarded by Salvini (who, in fact, changed the name of his party), it is still central to the political struggle.

Each region president (13 right-wing and 6 left-wing) initially faced the crisis with different approaches based on heterogeneous factors: number of infected, the advice of local groups of experts, or even for reasons of political convenience in view of forthcoming elections. When it came to reopening - partially or entirely - economic and social activities, most of the so-called Governors took individual decisions. Some opened bars but not churches, some even threatened to close the "borders of their region to people coming from the north". A mayor of a small village took advantage of the fact that there is only one road in and out by organising a "blockade" with huge stones, preventing non-residents from entering.

The government in Rome tried to formulate a common policy. The irony of the DPCM allowing people to meet congiunti (relatives) but not friends and lovers did not go unnoticed. The word congiunti is not a legal one, so it needed to be explained in detail. On the other hand, southern regions claimed that with little numbers of infected there was no reason to lockdown all the economy. In conclusion, each part of the country took different measures. What was permitted in Lombardy was

not allowed in Tuscany. This situation lasted till 18 May 2020 when Conte officially ended the lockdown (with some exclusions like schools and sports) but granted the regions the possibility of deciding otherwise. This implied that governors will also have to take on the responsibility of the re-emergence of infections. At this point, some of them who had earlier protested for a quick reopening started to look more cautious.

This scenario might help populism return.

Lega has always been on the side of federalism, which means, from an economic standpoint, that the wealthy regions like Lombardy and Veneto will hold onto their region's taxes, limiting their contribution to the central government and the poorer regions of the south. Lockdown, restriction of contacts and travel will reinforce localism.

Looking at the big picture, other elements will play in favour of a comeback of populist parties: the conflict with northern European countries (the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark) will strengthen Euro-scepticism.

As the economic crisis increases social conflict, the solidarity and unity we witnessed during these terrible months will disintegrate. Populism will then be a relief valve. And eventually, we will switch from 'Italians first!' to 'Every man for himself!'.

Some say that the lesson learned from the pandemic is that we cannot save ourselves individually, at the expense of our neighbours. We must seek a common, global approach. Will the Italians remember the lesson?