

The "Ursula" affair splits Italian populism (and the left)

Aug 21st, 2019 / Teresa Pullano & Angelo Mastrandrea

It is August 21, 2019, and at 15.09 in the afternoon **the news of the day in Italy** are the undocumented migrants who jump into the water near the island of Lampedusa out of the Open Arms ship that rescued them. The Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs and deputy Prime Minister, as well as head of the governmental party of the Northern League, Matteo Salvini, forbid the entry of the NGO boat into the harbor of Lampedusa. This was possible thanks to the law voted by the yellow-green alliance (5 Stars Movement and Northern League) in the Italian Parliament on August 5, a law that prevents NGOs saving migrants at sea to enter into the Italian territory. Five days after the entry into force of this law (called "decreto sicurezza bis"), Matteo Salvini declared the end of the government and asked the Parliament for a vote of no confidence against the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. At the same time, Salvini solicited new political elections and he requested "full governmental authority" for himself, repeating the exact words Benito Mussolini used in November 1922, after the fascist March into Rome.



© European Union 2019 – Source: EP

This is why, at 15.09 on August 21, the Prime Minister of the yellow-green government starts his prolusion in front of the Italian Senate to respond to the no confidence vote. Seating in the Italian Senate, Conte has, at his right, Matteo Salvini, wearing a green tie – the colors of the Northern League – and at his left the other deputy Prime Minister, Luigi Di Maio, leader of the 5 Stars Movement, wearing a grey tie. Conte himself wears a red tie. All of them are dressed with a white shirt and a black suit. It is the same image everyone saw when the three of them seated in front of the Italian Parliament on July 4, 2018, after the electoral victory, to present the first experiment of a sovranist-populist government in Western Europe. Fourteen months ago, the first act of the Ministry of Interior Salvini was to block the access to all Italian ports to the Diciotti, a **ship carrying 177 undocumented migrants** and entering the Italian waters.

At the end of the fifty minutes of the discourse of Giuseppe Conte, a discourse in which he declared closed the experiment of the yellow-green government, the Prime Minister accurately avoided to pronounce the word "immigration". While the Italian ports remained closed for the persons trapped into the NGOs boats – the main argument that animated the fourteen months of Conte's government, as well as the actions against the undocumented migrants that reinforced the popularity of Matteo Salvini exponentially during his time as Ministry of Internal affairs – the crucial theme of migration has been deliberately ignored by Giuseppe Conte. Nevertheless, since Salvini opened the political crisis, Conte and the 5 Stars Movement obliged Salvini to let 27 minors get off from the Open Arms.

On the opposite, through the whole discourse of Conte, the real reason for which this government fell filtered, and it is the question of the positioning of Italy and therefore of his government towards the European Union. In particular, Conte expressly names the current President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, declaring that he endorsed her nomination on behalf of Italy so to avoid solutions that would have put Europe's cohesion and integration at risk. Von der Leyen has been elected with a majority of only 7 votes at the European Parliament, and therefore the votes of the European MPs of the 5 Stars Movement have been crucial for her nomination. We need to recall that, when the first MPs of the 5 Stars Movement were elected at Strasbourg, they tried to make an alliance with the Eurosceptic group of Nigel Farage. In his discourse in front of the Italian Senate, Conte says that his position is the one of a critical Europeanism, since it is time to get rid of a blind Europeanism but also of a nationalist Euroscepticism. Conte, in the same passage of his discourse, quotes Habermas and says his own government has been inspired by the values of a "new humanism" (Nuovo umanesimo), which has in the two principles of reason and the constitution the guiding values of the action of government. In such a way, Conte brought back Italy, which, he reminds, is one of the founding members of the EU, into the core principles and values of the European alliance, and clearly rejects Matteo Salvini's presumed alliance with Putin's Russia and with all the forces who aim at disintegrating the EU at present.

Officially, Matteo Salvini opened the crisis after the vote of the 5 Stars Movement against the TAV, the fast train between Turin and Lyon, which is extremely contested by the ecologists and by the citizens of the Val di Susa, where the tunnel for the train should be dug. In reality, though, the real disagreement between the two parties forming the government started the day after the European elections, held at the end of May 2019, when the **"formula of Mediterranean populism has been reversed"**, as we wrote in our report. Indeed, Conte in his speech of August 20, speaks as a guardian of liberal democracy and in particular of that specific kind of

constitutional democracy which is enshrined in the post-war Italian constitution. He attacks Salvini's attitude of invoking the streets against the institutions – indeed Salvini called upon a citizen's insurrection in case of an institutional solution to the current crisis –, then Conte summons Salvini to respond, finally, in front of the Italian Parliament of the "Russiagate", that is the suspicion that, through the figure of Gianluca Savoini, the Northern League received a huge bribe from Putin's entourage to prepare his own electoral campaign. Because of the dangers of authoritarianism and of disruption of the framework of constitutional democracy in Italy, as underlined by Conte himself in his discourse, many forces, also from the left, are very skeptical on calling for political elections in the country in the coming autumn of 2019.

In his reply to Conte's resignation, Matteo Salvini though leaves the door open to those, in the 5 Stars Movement, who would like to continue with the current government, without Conte and without some key ministers, such as Giovanni Tria, the Minister of Economic Affairs, who are opposed to draft an economic statement, which is due in Autumn precisely, which would go against the Maastricht economic parameters for the Eurozone countries. Salvini says in his reply that Italy cannot continue to obey to the "diktats" of Brussels, and thus to be "economically damaged" by France and Germany. Thus, his aim is to be able to strongly challenge the Eurozone parameters through a financial statement that could be issued while, at the same time, the big question mark of a possible No Deal Brexit could be taking place in the UK, that is by end of October. This offer of Salvini serves his strategy to divide the 5 Stars Movement (this refers to the failure of the hypothesis of a populism that is neither right nor left, as we previously wrote [here](#)). If the 5 Stars Movement explodes, the possibility of finding a majority of government within the current legislature, that is a majority seeing the 5 Stars Movement and the PD as allied, would definitely be averted. Doing this, in Autumn 2019, Salvini could bring to the government the post-fascist party of Fratelli d'Italia, led by Giorgia Meloni, as well as Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, together with the Northern League who could incorporate the right of the 5 Stars Movement. Precisely to avoid the split of the 5 Stars Movement, Beppe Grillo, the former comic actor who is the funder and charismatic leader of the movement, he gathered the main MPs of M5S in his house on the shores of Tuscany, in Bibbona, and suggested not to go to elections after this crisis and to find a political agreement with the PD to form a government.

On the other side, there are two options currently open. The former Prime Minister from the Democratic Party (PD), Matteo Renzi, calls for an institutional government supported by the PD, the radical left (LEU), the 5 Stars Movements as well as Berlusconi's Forza Italia. This would be a transitional emergency government, that could be only formed by the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, and it would not see political forces directly involved in it but rather "experts" or technocrats. Renzi is thus foreseeing a political movement that recalls the one of Emmanuel Macron, with political figures coming from all the spectrum of political forces but the post-fascist and the Northern League. This would mean splitting the Democratic Party, within which the debate on the issue currently rages. The Secretary of the Democratic Party, Nicola Zingaretti, who is not an MP, expressed himself in favor of political elections in Autumn, nevertheless he declared to be open to a legislative government. This option would though mean that the M5S would have to give up on many issues, probably migration, and on the leaders: Zingaretti made clear that neither Conte nor Di Maio could be part of a new executive within the present legislature, to give a sign of deep discontinuity with the yellow-green one.

The majority of the PD, and his main leaders, from Romano Prodi to Enrico Letta, push for a political agreement including the 5 Stars Movement. Prodi declared that this alliance could be called "**Ursula coalition**". The radical left (LEU) expresses itself as well against new elections, since this, at the moment, would be a gift to the radical right. On the opposite, some Italian left-wing intellectuals, such as the former leader of the Italian Communist Party, Emanuele Macaluso, think that the "Ursula" coalition would reinforce once again an anti-elite, anti-EU feeling within the people, thus **strengthening Salvini's populism even more**. Macaluso declared: "Comrades, do not be afraid of the People".

Quelle: <https://www.rosalux.eu/en/article/1479.the-ursula-affair-splits-italian-populism-and-the-left.html>