

European interview

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“In the Lega-M5S government contract something is gaining power: populocrazia”

Interview with Marc Lazar, Professor of History, Political Sociology, Director of the Centre for History at Sciences Po and Chair of the Scientific Council of the School of Government of the Luiss (Rome).

1. The government agreement concluded between the Lega and M5S seems to be a heterogeneous document merging the campaign promises of both parties. And yet can the latter really conciliate their points of view for them to govern together?

Indeed, it will be difficult for these two parties to govern together – for three simple reasons. The first of these is that their programmes really do differ. For example, the Lega, which lies on the far-right is rather more neoliberal from the economic and security points of view and it is extremely anti-European – in its rhetoric at least. The 5 Stars Movement which is “neither on the left or the right” comprises a developed social tissue and is very oriented towards the ecology. These differences are also linked to their electoral base. The M5S is established across all of Italy, but it won on 4th March last in the South. Yet, those voters want the protection and assistance of the State, which is incompatible with the expectations of the Lega’s voters in the north – small traders, craftsmen, business leaders, who continue to make up the main base of this party despite its recent breakthrough in central Italy and some high scores in the Mezzogiorno. Finally, there is the personal and political rivalry between Luigi Di Maio, the leader of the M5S and Matteo Salvini, the secretary of the Lega. However, this marriage of the carp and the rabbit should not mask the fact that they do have significant points of agreement as far as Europe is concerned – the lifting of sanctions against Russia, the fight to counter what they call “the immigration business”, the need to extend the practice of the referendum to introduce forms of direct democracy, etc. Moreover, all criticism on the part

of their Italian adversaries and the warnings issued by the European Commission and some European capitals have caused the opposite effect from the one desired: it is strengthening their unity. Normally, this government will only last but a short time. But then we never know. Especially since either one or the other will have to choose the moment of scission, because at least for the time being, public opinion widely supports their government agreement. In this regard their aim is clear to me it seems. They are governing together in order to establish themselves at the heart of the political system, then they will separate, hoping to found a two-party system that will marginalise the Democratic Party and Forza Italia. The Italians would then have a choice between the Lega and the M5S.

2. Giuseppe Conte, a lawyer without any political experience has been chosen to be President of the Council. What room to manoeuvre will he have, what will his autonomy be regarding the M5S-Lega government agreement?

This is the question. He may very well become the notary who implements the government agreement. He will then be under the control of the Lega and the M5S since Luigi de Maio, as Economic Development and Labour Minister and Matteo Salvini, as Interior Minister are both Vice-Presidents of the Council. It will not be simple because they will disagree, and he will have to be the arbiter. He is said to be a diplomat, a skilled negotiator and leans towards meditation. He has to prove this. The President of the Republic reminded him of the terms of article 95 of the Constitution, and that it is the President of the Council who defines government policy. Will Giuseppe Conte be able to impose his authority, win his autonomy, and

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make his mark? This remains to be seen, especially since he will have to work with a team comprising ministers from the Lega, the 5 Stars Movement and some experts.

3. What does this clearly anti-system, populist movement think of Italy's present situation and more widely within the European Union?

The formation of this unnatural government illustrates the power of populism, whatever its shape or form and its specific features. Italy's economic and social situation is improving but this country experienced years of recession, a contraction in its GDP, high unemployment, increasing inequalities of all kinds, an increase in poverty. The mistrust of traditional parties and of the political classes is extremely high. The malaise felt about Europe is increasingly evident. Immigration, whether it is legal (5 million people, four times that of 2001, 8% of the total population) or illegal (estimated at 500,000 people), in addition to the arrival of flows of migrants, Islam, that is associated, in the eyes of most Italians, with violence and terrorist attacks have caused and are still causing fear that is exacerbating populism. This is growing in power constantly, more than 32% of the vote went to M5S in the last elections on 4th March for the House of Deputies and more than 17% to the Lega, in the knowledge that in the polls now it is gaining ground. We might push this analysis even further. The Lega and M5S's ideas, which are both opposite and convergent, are imbuing society; their themes are entering political agendas, their style is widely copied by their rivals, their temporality, that of urgency, is winning through. Especially since they have understood that the digital sphere is a revolution. Our societies are now « désintermédialisées » and as a result, via the impact of the social networks, proposals of direct and immediate democracy, asserting the sovereignty of the people to the detriment of the rules and procedures of liberal, representative democracy, which is part of the government contract between the Lega and M5S, is gathering considerable power. It is what Ilvo Diamanti and I call “popolocrazia” [1]. Of course, this has not yet completely triumphed in Italy. The devices and rules of liberal, representative democracy are still there

obviously. And the President of the Republic, like the other institutions, and a share of public opinion, will continue to defend it. But a dynamic is now underway. Italy has many evident specific features. However, the worst mistake would be to think that it is an anomaly. No, it is a laboratory. Everywhere populism is rising. Everywhere where they are in power or not, they are changing the base of our democracies.

4. Beyond the fact that they are against system, the Lega-M5S coalition is also extremely Eurosceptic. Italy is however one of the founding countries of the European Union and for a long time the Italians were amongst the most Europhile populations in Europe. How should this change be analysed and especially, what political consequences might we foresee for the future of the European project?

Italy slipped into euroscepticism a few years ago now. This started with Italy's accession to the euro zone after a great deal of sacrifice. For most Italians the euro meant a loss of purchasing power, even though economic data counter this perception. In fact the euro revealed the structural weaknesses in the Italian economy and instead of pinpointing these precisely to palliate them, the eurosceptics prefer to challenge the single currency. Moreover, the South has undoubtedly benefited the least from the structural funds. A certain number of acknowledged personalities have advocated that Italy leave the euro, which however has not won over the Italians, a relative majority of whom, the weakest however in all the euro zone, want to continue using the single currency. The crisis that started in 2007-2008 caused enormous discontent regarding the EU because of the austerity policy. The disillusion with the EU worsened with the massive arrival of migrants off the Italian coasts. Not only is Italy afraid, but it has felt abandoned by its partners, notably by France. Several parties turned criticism of Europe into a major political resource. This was the case in the elections of 2013: Forza Italia, the Northern League, the 5 Stars Movement, with common and different arguments, constantly berated the European Union. Matteo Renzi understood this rise in euroscepticism

1. Ilvo Diamanti, Marc Lazar, *Popolocrazia. La metamorfosi delle nostre democrazie*, Laterza, 2018.

very well and tried to play on two levels when he was in office between 2014 and 2016. On the one hand, he criticised Brussels, the European Central Bank and Germany regarding austerity as well as migrants. On the other, he stood as the best possible Europe, trying to revive the federalist tradition and the idea of the “United States of Europe”. Now Italy has quite a baroque government since it has some pro-Europeans and some Eurosceptics. It will therefore have to clarify its position regarding the European Union. The President of the Republic will be extremely vigilant on this issue and moreover a relative majority of Italians intend to remain in the euro zone. For their part, Forza Italia and the Democratic Party say that they are the most ardent defenders of the European project. But they lack credibility. The result of this is that the Italians are now more Eurosceptic than the French. To reverse the trend, the pro-Europeans will have to engage in real political and cultural battle and not just content themselves in taking up the usual arguments that no longer have any effect.

5. In Italy the weight of the debt totals 132% of the GDP and the banking system is still weak. The country is the euro zone’s third biggest economy. The M5S-Lega’s agenda announced that it was counting on growth to reduce the Italian debt. Do you believe that there is a risk of an inevitable economic crisis, which might spread through the euro area?

The risk is considerable. Because in addition to that the banking system is fragile. If Italy sinks into a serious economic and financial crisis, there will be repercussions for the euro zone and more generally, across all of Europe: Italy is the euro area’s third economic power and the second biggest industrial power. However we must expect to see what this government decides. But the days of last week on the financial markets clearly showed that Italy cannot just do anything it wants.

6. Does the Italian coalition endanger Emmanuel Macron’s projects to revive the European project? In virtue of this, is the idea of the strengthening of ties with Italy to consolidate the latter via the

adoption of the Quirinal Treaty about to fall by the wayside?

The formation of this new Italian government is bad news for Emmanuel Macron. His projects are being opposed in the countries of the north for different reasons from those in Central and Eastern Europe. Germany is reluctant because of the rise of the AfD and the internal quarrels within Angela Merkel’s party, whose authority is no longer what it used to be. And so, Italy will not help Macron at all, it might even fight him. As far as the Quirinal Treaty is concerned the group responsible for writing it is continuing its work and this should lead to a text. But what will the new executive in Rome do with it? We have to wait and see, but I fear that it will not really be that enthusiastic. However, the composition of the government with some pro-Europeans and some eurosceptics, possibly opens up a slight margin of freedom for the French President. Some proposals in the Lega and 5 Stars Movement government contract for the re-direction of the European policy converge with his. But to do this it supposes that this Italian government shows its unity, its reliability and its credibility. And that has not yet been demonstrated.

7. The M5S and the Lega both support lifting sanctions against Russia. In this regard might there be a rapprochement by Italy with countries like Hungary?

Indeed, it is possible. Italy might draw closer to Hungary, the Czech Republic and even Austria – for political reasons – and for geopolitical reasons too, in its history, Italy has often had a MittelEuropa tropism. But the reasons are also economic, Italy is the second trading partner of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after Germany. However, the President of the Republic will be extremely vigilant about everything regarding foreign policy.

8. The question of immigration played a central role in the Italian election. The Lega advocated and counts on introducing strict measures for a tighter control of illegal immigration, and the Dublin regulation is being challenged by the new coalition. What answers can or should

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Italy's partners, notably France, but also the EU, provide?

Matteo Salvini will undoubtedly want to implement all of the measures announced against illegal migration and the arrival of migrants. We shall have to see what this will mean in reality beyond highly mediatised operations

and sensational declarations. At European level I believe that the only answer to give is to bring these questions to the table of the European Councils and to try and find common solutions. Otherwise we are going to run into serious problems, with Italy being tempted to allow migrants to pass through to other European destinations.

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