



# Conte bis: Normalisation of Popular Rage within the EU

Department of Foreign Affairs

Summer loves always end as the lovers go back home. The populist experiment in Italy was no different and it crumbled in a weird coalition crisis on the beaches of August.

The PCI welcomes the end of the populist Conte I Cabinet, but cannot rejoice for the birth of a Europhile Conte II Cabinet. It seems to us that within the EU a country can change its Government, but not its policies. We want here to explain the coalition crisis and our position towards the Conte II Cabinet to our comradely organisations abroad in occasion of the XXI IMCWP.

## Strange Bedfellows

The Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Northern League (Lega) emerged as major parties in the May 2018 elections for the Italian parliament (respectively 33% and 17% of the popular vote) as they channelled a legitimate popular anger. The Italian people decisively rejected the previous 7 years of EU-imposed austerity and reactionary policies, implemented by the centre-left Democratic Party (PD). The PD collapsed to 19% of the vote, down from 41%. However, M5S and Lega were strange bedfellows: the M5S is a post-ideological catch-all protest party, while the Lega is a former regional party evolving into a nationalistic one. A coalition contract was eventually agreed upon and an independent prime minister appointed (Giuseppe Conte), but tensions were always present.

We stress here that the PD is responsible for the growth of populist and nationalist movements in Italy. It combined reactionary economic and social policies with a liberal rhetoric on human rights, leaving ample room to the right and disappointing the popular electorate. Beppe Grillo, the founder of the M5S, is himself a former candidate to the national secretary of the PD, who protested to its neoliberal turn. At the same time, the PD blocked more traditional left-leaning alternatives, hypocritically accusing them to split the democratic field against a resurgent fascism.

## Much Ado About Nothing

The policies of the Conte I Cabinet have disattended the needs of Italy's popular masses, but they were not fascist or antidemocratic as often depicted. The Government produced some half-baked measures to revert the reactionary course of the PD : the Fornero reform of pension was partially rolled back, a modest universal basic income was introduced to fight extremely low wages and Italy initially pursued a multilateral and peaceful foreign policy (e.g. memorandum on the New Silk Road with China, support for Maduro in the Venezuela Crisis, dialogue with Russia). However, this was too little, too late and half-hearted. The Lega exploited the internal weakness of the M5S to defend monopoly powers (toll roads owned by the Benetton family), to limit fiscal transfers across regions (differentiated federalism), to lower taxes for the rich (flat tax) and to criminalise the poorest (immigration, housing crisis, LGBTs). At the same time, sections of the M5S wanted to prevent a confrontation with the EU and return to "responsible" economic policies.

## A Crisis on the Beach, a Plot in the Palace

Tensions increased after the May 2019 elections for the European Parliament, when the Lega performed exceedingly well (34%). Powerful sections of the Lega used the hubris of its national secretary, Matteo Salvini, and pushed him to abandon the coalition contract; these sections represented vested interests of large companies in the Northern regions (Lombardy and Veneto) and wanted the differentiated federalism and large infrastructure expenditure that the M5S was blocking. Salvini infamously pulled the plug of the Conte I Cabinet from the beach, drinking mojito and playing the DJ at a famous club.

Meanwhile, the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, had been pushing the "responsible" sectors of the M5S for months to abandon the Lega and veer towards the PD. Mattarella, a member of the PD himself,

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had always sought to contain Eurosceptic tendencies within the Lega and the M5S by forcing them to enter coalitions with Europhile forces, respectively Forza Italia (Berlusconi's party) and the PD. Mattarella found support within the M5S from the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and from the President of the Parliament Roberto Fico, who both sought to undermine the political chief of the M5S Luigi Di Maio.

The PD wanted to avoid an election, against its national secretary, and dropped its long-standing opposition to a coalition with the M5S. Namely, Nicola Zingaretti had recently replaced Matteo Renzi as national secretary and sought new elections to change the PD's parliamentary delegations in favour of his own faction. Elected members close to Renzi, a majority in the PD's parliamentary delegations, decided thus to support Mattarella's plan for a Conte II Cabinet and forced Zingaretti to form a coalition with the M5S. As soon as the new cabinet was sworn in, Renzi left the PD, having avoided elections and placed his allies in the new cabinet.

Also a small parliamentary group of the radical left (LeU) announced its support, reverting its anti-austerity positions. Here, the PCI sees a deep misunderstanding of the difficult but possible cooperation with non-communist and moderate left-wing parties, since there is nothing left-wing in the PD besides the position of its seats in the Parliament.

This palace coup aimed at reining in a populist experiment and preserving the political establishment against newcomers. Powerful groups in both Lega and M5S sought to undermine their national leaders, Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio. Renzi wanted to preserve his internal faction. Mattarella wanted to re-align Italy to Germany and France.

### Normalisation of a Populist Experiment

The Conte II Cabinet is thus born in perfect continuity with the previous 4 Governments of the PD, which implemented EU-imposed austerity and reactionary policies. The PD is the guarantor of external constraints on Italy's economic policy and real democracy, bearing the responsibility for the current crisis and for the rise of hard right movements. The M5S exhausted its populist charge and discovered himself Europhile and Atlantist, showing all its internal weakness as a post-ideological party. The M5S assumed that there were no left-wing or right-wing policies, but only correct and incorrect ones: this helped its growth in opposition, but made it so fragile as it began to govern that it was easily co-opted by the same elites it was fighting against.

We signal here some points in this regard:

- The Conte II Cabinet recommended former Prime Minister and Secretary of the PD, the Count Paolo Gentiloni Silverj, to be Italy's nominee in the EU Commission and he was appointed as EU Commissioner for Economy. The PCI believes that Count Gentiloni will be in charge of disciplining Italy into austerity, as he did while Prime Minister.
- Danilo Toninelli, former M5S Minister for Infrastructure, was replaced by Paola De Micheli of the PD. Toninelli had fiercely resisted cementification, wasteful infrastructure projects and Private-Public Partnerships. He also sought to re-nationalise the national toll roads system. De Micheli's first act was to publicly reject the whole work of Toninelli.
- The new Minister of Economy, Roberto Gualtieri (PD), is nominally a Deputy Director of the Gramsci Institute Foundation, but in reality he is a leader of austerity, imperialist and neoliberal measures in the EU. He took part in the establishment of the "Fiscal Compact" (a cornerstone of EU-driven austerity) and is associated with NATO. He famously chaired the EP Financial Assistance Working Group, established to monitor the implementation of third Greek bailout program. He also took part in the Brexit negotiations between the EU and the UK.
- Teresa Bellanova, a former uneducated trade unionist among peasants, was appointed Minister for Agriculture. Bellanova, of the PD, rose through the ranks of trade unions, only to abandon them and become one of the fiercest supporters of laws against the labour movements, workers' rights and peasants.

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The Conte II Government represents a new kind of liberal centrism, which moves within the EU constraints. It will remove all the distasteful aspect of Salvini and deliver reactionary social policies with white gloves and a sparkle of human rights. This may rein in populist forces now, but it will breed them even more for the future towards dangerous and potentially antidemocratic positions. Indeed, we see no changes in the official policies promoted by the PD, aimed at cutting wages and public expenditure.

### **Role of Italy's Communists**

The crisis of the Conte I Cabinet and the birth of the Conte II Cabinet draw one important lesson for the PCI. We must give the Italian working class a solid ideological education to change the world and fight capitalism. Ideological preparation must go hand in hand with our mobilisation of the popular masses.

First, a lack of ideology exhausted populist charge of the M5S as it could not resist the arguments and the temptations of power. Secondly, a hypocrite ideology allowed the entry in the Conte II Cabinet of many who declared or still declare themselves communists (4 ministers still declare so), despite pursuing reactionary policies for years. Some of these even claimed to be to our left not so long ago. The PCI thus aims at a solid ideological preparation of the Italian proletariat to resist the established powers, understand the nature of class and fight off hypocrites pretending to be hard-liners.

The PCI will be in opposition to this government, building an alternative to its EU-mandated austerity policies. The PCI seeks real change for the country, breaking with the prevailing liberal culture and the centrality of the market. We want a revival of the role of the State in finance and economy, a new model of sustainable development (with labour and nature united against capitalism) and the end of subjection to EU and NATO imperialism.

Austerity and imperialism have destroyed the rights, the dreams and the livelihoods of the Italian working masses. Communists could not before, but now must channel this legitimate anger. It is time to mobilise, fight and win back our future.