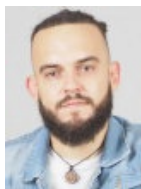


The failed integration of an anti-system party: Where Luigi Di Maio and the Five Star Movement went wrong



Luigi Di Maio is expected to resign as leader of Italy's Five Star Movement later today. [Mattia Zulianello](#) writes that Di Maio's resignation will represent the latest twist in the story of an anti-system party that has suffered from a failed attempt to integrate into the system it previously opposed.

According to reports from several Italian media outlets, Luigi Di Maio is about to resign from his role as leader of the Five Star Movement (M5S). This raises the question of why, in contrast to other populist parties, the M5S appears to have imploded while in office.

The Five Star Movement has been characterised as a '[valence populist party](#)'. Not all populist actors are 'left' or 'right'. Some of them predominantly, if not exclusively, compete by focusing on non-positional issues such as the fight against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform and moral integrity. These parties may adopt specific positions (e.g. advocating a basic income in the case of the M5S), but their primary and prevailing competitive emphasis is placed on their competence and performance in achieving goals that are widely shared by voters (i.e. valence issues).

Overall, the policy stances of valence populists are informed by an unadulterated conception of populism (with other ideological elements, if any, playing a marginal or secondary role), and are therefore flexible, free-floating and often [inconsistent](#). The M5S is a paradigmatic example in this respect. What is peculiar is that valence populist parties are quite common in Eastern Europe (e.g. [ANO 2011 in the Czech Republic](#)), but the M5S is the only (contemporary) case of this populist variety in the West.

The M5S originally emerged (and remained until 2018) as an [anti-system party](#) that rejected cooperation with the other parties in the system and presented itself as a separate pole in opposition to both the centre-right and centre-left. At that time, it declared that it would only cooperate with the other parties on a strict issue-by-issue (and law-by-law) basis. The M5S rejected the legitimacy of the other parties in the strongest terms and fully-fledged cooperation was [out of the question](#).



Luigi Di Maio, Credit: [Democracy International](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0)

However, anti-system parties often eventually [integrate into the system](#) they previously opposed. This is especially true for populist parties as they are the 'new normal' in European party systems and governments today. The integration and legitimisation of populist parties can be a long or short process, according to the various incentives of the political system and electoral results, and is usually accompanied by a series of programmatic and organisational reforms.

The zenith of the integration of populist parties is represented by their eventual [entry into national office](#). In many cases, populist parties are indeed able to [survive office](#), and even to gain votes in subsequent elections. Italy's Lega is a case in point. After a first disastrous experience in office (1994), the Lega, over time, benefitted from a 'learning process'. It now has a long record of government participation and dominates the Italian agenda. According to all the polls, the party led by [Matteo Salvini](#) is by far the strongest in the country today (estimated at [32%](#)).

The astonishing success of Salvini is the story, first of all, of a successful process of organisation: via the centralisation of the party machine, a cohesive dominant coalition, the socialisation of its activists and elites via value-infusion, and the persistence of various structures and purposes of the 'old' mass party, it is capable of acting as a strategic actor well beyond the short-term, and converting sudden pressures or shocks into competitive weapons by making them fit its narrative. The [Gregoretti 'trial'](#) is a case in point.

The crisis that the M5S has experienced since 2018, culminating in Di Maio's expected resignation today, is the outcome of a failed process of [integration by an anti-system party](#). It has occurred despite the organisational reforms and programmatic adaptation that it pursued before entering office. Indeed, although it has implemented a form of top-down management through a strictly [centralised structure](#), internal conflict has been a constant for the M5S: its dominant coalition lacks cohesion, and it lacks the instruments to ensure value-infusion among elites and activists. Its public image remains that of a [conflict-ridden party](#).

These problems are the consequence of a flawed organisational project, which is incapable of effectively absorbing internal conflict. But they are also linked to the peculiar nature of the Five Star Movement's ideological profile. Valence populist parties seek to transcend left and right, and the integration into the coalition game with other parties implies choosing between one of the two sides. The M5S first governed with the right-wing Lega, then with the centre-left Democratic Party (PD).

The PD had long been the 'sworn enemy' of the M5S, but cooperation between the two parties was not necessarily doomed to failure. In many cases, parties can successfully cooperate after years of reciprocal hostility. However, in the case of the M5S it led to a fiasco for two interconnected reasons.

First, the absence of mechanisms to appropriately absorb internal conflict made it impossible to effectively explain to voters the rationale, expectations and benefits of its strategic repositioning. The M5S failed to articulate a coherent and consistent message, something that was made exceptionally difficult by the organisational chaos it operated under. Second, the very nature of a valence populist party is linked to the idea of communicating competence and performance in achieving widely shared political goals. Again, the flawed nature of the Five Star Movement's organisational project made this task impossible.

The outcome is what we see today: a party that lacks a clear direction, is plagued by internal conflict, and which has experienced a string of electoral debacles. In sum, agency matters, and parties remain the masters of their own success or failure.

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