



A sovereigntist revolution? Italy's foreign policy under the "Yellow–Green" government

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Abstract

In Italy, the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Northern League (LN) formed a coalition government after the legislative elections of March 2018. What has been the actual impact of the populist executive in the Italian foreign policy? Relying on the (few) existing analyses that have developed specific hypotheses on the expected international *repercussions of populist parties-ruled governments*, the paper examines Italy's foreign policy under the Italian "Yellow–Green" cabinet (June 2018–August 2019). The manuscript advances three hypotheses. First, the foreign policy of the Conte's government has been featured by a personalistic and a centralized decision-making process. Second, the Yellow–Green executive has adopted a vocal confrontational stance on the world stage, especially within multilateral frameworks, to "take back control" over national sovereignty. Third, such sovereigntist foreign policy was largely symbolic because of "strategic" populist attitudes toward public opinion and due to domestic and international constraints. The manuscript—which is based on secondary and primary sources, such as interviews with former ministers, MPs, and diplomats—aims at offering a new perspective on populist parties and foreign policy, alighting the rising debate on foreign policy change.

Keywords Italy · Populism · Sovereignism · Five star movement · League

The political forces that make up this government have been accused of being "populist" and "anti-system". If "populism" means the ruling class listens to the needs of the people [...and] if "anti-system" means to aim to introduce a new system, which removes old privileges and encrusted power, well these political forces deserve both these epithets.

(Giuseppe Conte, inaugural speech, Senate, Rome, 5 June 2019)

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Introduction

In Italy, the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Northern League (LN) formed a coalition government after a “perfect populist storm” (Baldini and Giglioli 2019, 2) occurred in the legislative elections of March 2018. Giuseppe Conte, an almost unknown law professor, was named for the premiership. The two populist parties appointed the first cabinet in Western Europe that does not include any mainstream party. Thus, Italy became “the only Western European country governed exclusively by anti-establishment forces” (Orsina 2019, 1). It is puzzling that, at first sight, despite the so-called Yellow-Green¹ executive adopted a narrative based on the idea of change (e.g., *il governo del cambiamento*, the “government of change”), aiming to “take back control” over national sovereignty, Italian foreign policy did not witness any remarkable discontinuity, especially in multilateral frameworks as NATO or the European Union (EU). Thus, what has been the actual impact of the populist coalition in the Italian foreign policy?

Relying on the (few) existing analyses on populist governments and international affairs (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015, 2017; Balfour et al. 2016; Chryssogelos 2018; Destradi and Plagemann 2019a, 2019b), the paper aims at answering the research question by examining Italy’s foreign policy under the Italian “Yellow-Green” executive (June 2018–August 2019).

The manuscript advances three hypotheses. First, the foreign policy of the Conte’s government has been featured by a personalistic and a centralized decision-making process. Second, the Yellow-Green cabinet, rather than making “concessions” on global governance issues, has adopted vocal adversarial attitudes on the world stage, especially within multilateral frameworks, to “take back control” over national sovereignty. Third, and relatedly, such sovereignist foreign policy was largely symbolic because of a) instrumental and “strategic” populist attitudes toward public opinion and b) institutional and structural constraints—at domestic (e.g., the President of the Republic) and international level (e.g., the EU)—that limited the degree of change.

The manuscript—which is based on secondary and primary sources, such as interviews with former ministers, deputy ministers, MPs, and diplomats—is structured as follows. After a review on the existing attempts at theorizing the impact of populism on foreign policy, highlighting also the scholarly debate on Italy, Five Star Movement and Northern League, the paper presents its main expectations about the influence of the M5S-LN government on Italian foreign policy. The hypotheses are then assessed in the empirical section, which focuses on European Union policy, multilateral, and bilateral relations. The conclusion summarizes the main findings, paving the way for further research on the foreign policy of populist parties.

The paper aims at providing four main contributions. First, the manuscript offers a new perspective to the growing debate on populist parties and foreign policy. Second, it fills a gap regarding the brief populist experiment in Italy (D’Alimonte 2019, 114): despite a growing interest related to the Italian “all populist executive”

¹ “Yellow” is the colour associated with the M5S while “Green” is related to the LN.



(Garzia 2018), the foreign policy of the Yellow-Green government attracted limited attention.² Third, the paper provides an updated contribution to the literature on post-Cold War Italian foreign policy. Finally, due to the role played by domestic and international constraints in affecting foreign policy making, the findings could be generalizable to other “middle powers,” contributing to the rising debate on foreign policy change (Haesebrouck and Joly 2020), examining under what conditions populist governments affect the degree of transformation—in terms of commitment, tools, aims, or re-orientation (Hermann 1990)—of their country’s international politics.

The impact of populism in foreign policy and the case of Italy³

Despite the rising attention on the role of parties in foreign policy (Wagner et al. 2018), and the immense scholarly debate on populism (Mudde 2004; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Rooduijn et al. 2019), the foreign policy of populist parties has been rarely analyzed in details. Some authors (Balfour et al. 2016; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017) have illustrated the problematic attempt to classify a “populist foreign policy” because of the considerable variance in the “host ideology” (e.g., nativism, socialism, etc.) of the populist parties (Mudde 2004).⁴

Recent research has started to investigate populist parties-led foreign policies. For instance, Destradi and Plagemann (2019a, b) identify possible common features of populist foreign policy that are independent of the different host ideology. Starting from core dimensions of populism (anti-elitism and anti-pluralism), Destradi and Plagemann argue that populists in power will: “be less likely to make concessions on global governance issues,” privilege “bilateralism over multilateralism,” diversifying relationships and international partnerships, and embrace “a centralized and personalistic” decision-making process, (2019a, 286–288).⁵

Relying on the theoretical expectations identified by the recent scholarly debate on populism and foreign policy⁶—as well as on the literature that deals with the Italian case and the two populist parties—we can develop our hypotheses on the impact of the “Yellow–Green” government. Finally, by looking at the research that investigates foreign policy change, we can also better understand the degree of change promoted by populist actors in the global arena.

² Exceptions are Nelli Feroci (2019), Carati and Locatelli (2020), and Giurlando (2020).

³ For a more detailed discussion see the Introduction to this special issue.

⁴ Moreover, few parties—such as the M5S, which seem nor left nor right (infra)- do not present a clear “host ideology”, due to their “hybrid nature” (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013).

⁵ The authors (who examine non-Western states) find relevant novelties but they also stress that populist actors reinforce existing trends rather than change entirely foreign policy. However, the authors recognize that non-Western countries, due to the limited integration to international institutions, can be affected by less opposition to the perceived lost of national sovereignty.

⁶ For the common analytical framework developed for this SI see again the introduction.



Populists, personalisation, and foreign policy

The literature has widely stressed the relationship between personalization and populism, focusing—especially concerning the case of Latin America—on communication and style. More recent analyses (Lacatus 2021) have highlighted the direct appeal to the public by populist leaders to mobilize support for foreign policy.

Cadier (2019) examines the style of populist leaders in foreign policy, emphasizing how such actors conceive foreign policy as the continuation of domestic politics by other means. Also for Segatti the populist foreign policy is generally “strategic” (2018, 47), mainly aiming at affecting public opinion for domestic consensus rather than influencing concrete politics at international level.

As said, Destradi and Plagemann (2019b, 14) consider centralization and personalization as “core features of populism”, illustrating the imagined contrast between populist leaders as “true representative of the people” and “unelected foreign policy bureaucrats” and diplomats. Thus, the authors expect populist leaders to disempower the foreign policy community (which is conceived as representative of elitism and globalism) over-centralizing foreign policy decision-making. Destradi and Plagemann (2019b) highlight how the growing personalization of politics in Western democracies has fostered a lively debate in the literature, which has also focused on the ways through which “political outsiders” and “charismatic leaders” criticize the mainstream political elites in world affairs.⁷ However, the authors state that personalization/centralization promoted by populist leaders is “more pronounced”, because of the “more personal” (Destradi and Plagemann 2019b, 14) involvement of populist actors who tend to marginalize traditional foreign policy elites.

Moving to Italy, the literature has already examined the trend of personalization of power/centralization in the hands of the Prime Minister, and its impact on foreign policy (Coticchia and Davidson 2019). The Yellow–Green government has attracted attention on this aspect because, since the very beginning, it strongly put at the forefront of public communication its three populist leaders (the Prime Minister and the two deputy Prime Ministers, also leaders of the two parties), while appointing “minor” political actors at Defense and Foreign Affairs (Feroci 2019; Giurlando 2020). Although coalition dynamics play an important role, we should devote priority attention toward the interplay between party ideologies. In fact, for Cladi and Locatelli (2020, 37), the “political synthesis of the coalition results from the ideological homogeneity of the cabinet” that mainly attains at its “sovereignist views” along the demarcation–integration dimension, concerning attitudes toward globalism and the EU (Giannetti et al 2021). Moreover, in line with Destradi and Plagemann (2019b), we can expect—exactly because of the above-mentioned forms of “populist personalisation”—a constant *personal* involvement in foreign policy issues not only by the Prime Minister but also by Salvini and Di Maio, marginalizing the Defense and Foreign Affairs ministers.

In sum, we can develop our first hypothesis as it follows. H1—In line with a populist “personalistic and a centralized” decision-making process, the foreign policy

⁷ For a review see, among others, Coticchia and Davidson (2019).



of Conte's government has been *directly* guided by political leaders (i.e., the Prime Minister and the deputy Prime Ministers Di Maio and Salvini), rather than by ministers and ministries (Foreign Affairs, Defense, etc.).

Sovereignism

Along the lines of Mudde,⁸ populist parties may project at international level the opposition between the “pure people” and the “corrupted elites” (Chryssogelos 2018). Wojczewsky (2019) emphasizes the populist antagonism against multilateral organizations and globalist establishment. Chryssogelos states that the focus on national sovereignty could illustrate a shared skepticism among populist parties toward increasing role of transnational governance and supranational institutions in foreign policy, demanding a “return to re-territorialized political rule where the sovereignty of government and people become coterminous again” (2018, 2).⁹ While “scepticism about the merits of international cooperation is nothing new, and countries” national interest has always been at the heart of international politics, what is new, however, is the increasing politicization of international cooperation” (De Vries et al 2021, 2). Indeed, political entrepreneurs mobilize the discontent over existing forms of cooperation (De Vries et al 2021), also due to “perceived gaps in the in-group’s exercise of sovereignty” (Jenne 2021, 326), promoting change in foreign policy to satisfy marginalized constituencies and obtain domestic benefits (Chryssogelos and Martill 2021). *Sovereigntist actors* adopt frames of “incomplete sovereignty”, prescribing—symbolically or materially- foreign policy revisionism, “rejecting the authority of supranational actors” or even “turning away from allies who are seen in limiting the sovereignty” of the “authentic” state community (Jenne 2021, 332). For the purpose of this article, we can define *Sovereignism*¹⁰ as:

“a form of grievance, a reaction that aims at *bringing back control* within a specific territory, namely the nation state. [...] The focus on the recovery of a (real or imaginary) past explains why sovereignism has a peculiar meaning, and cannot be considered as a proxy of a nationalist claim” (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020, 6).¹¹

In terms of impact on foreign policy we can thus expect an attention devoted to the “perceived” enemy outside the country—namely the supranational institutions as well as the forces behind the globalization process” (Vittori 2017, 157) rather than to other traditional features related to nationalism (e.g., the homogeneity of the group).

⁸ For Mudde populism is a “a “thin-centred” ideology, which “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups—“the pure people” and the “corrupt elite” and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (2004: 543).

⁹ According to Kallis, sovereignism is “what actually bonds together all populist movements” (2018, 294). For Chryssogelos populism is indeed “a discourse of social sovereignty that challenges supranational institutions and transnational government networks” (2018,2).

¹⁰ Jenne (2021) considers populism and nationalism as forms of sovereignism.

¹¹ On sovereignism and euroscepticism (which does not necessarily include specific counter-proposals for the distribution of authority) see Basile and Mazzoleni (2020, 6).



For Chryssogelos, from “sovereigntist” parties, we would expect a foreign policy that reflects “a preoccupation with popular sovereignty and unmediated projection of popular demands and national interests” (2018). Moreover, we may suppose a significant opposition toward the growing influence of “international bureaucracies” in limiting room of maneuvering and national sovereignty (Zurn 2004).

In the case of Italy, despite such growing debate over the Five Star Movement and Northern League, few analyses (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Balfour et al. 2016; Coticchia and Vignoli 2020), have examined the foreign policy views of the two parties. However, a plausible common ideological feature emerges: their “domestic sovereignism” (Vittori 2017).

The literature has attempted to highlight the ideological traits of the two populist parties. The definition of the *Lega* as a “populist right-wing sovereigntist party” is widely shared (Rooduijn 2019). Many authors emphasize the current identity of the LN to a nationwide radical right party (Mudde 2010; Passarelli and Tuorto 2018; Zulianello 2019; Albertazzi and Zulianello 2021). There is also a scholarly consensus on the evolution of “Northern League” into “the League”: from a populist regional party (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001)—or a nationalist party of the North (Zaslove 2011)—“to a populist radical right party” (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017, 28). Matteo Salvini, who became the new Secretary in 2014, led the transformation of the League “into a nation-based party, waving the motto “Italians first!”” (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020, 4). While scholars agree on categorizing of the (current) LN as Eurosceptic (Rooduijn 2019), in the 1990s the Northern League was pro-Europe, viewing the EU as an alternative to the corrupt national politicians and an instrument in promoting regional autonomy. LN supported the Maastricht treaty (1992) and the treaty of Nice (2002) but it shifted to open euroscepticism, denouncing the euro and its damages for Italy (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015).

While there is consensus on the “anti-establishment character of the M5S” (Mosca and Tronconi 2019, 19) and its populist nature (Tarchi 2015), scholars have developed different views on the “host ideology” of the party (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; Caiani and Graziano, 2019). The ideological positioning of the M5S remains yet complex to categorize due to its post-ideological nature. For Mudde (2010), the M5S is a rare example of a pure populist party *without* a definite host ideology. The majority of authors agree on the “ideological neutrality” of the M5S, whose leaders have constantly—and strategically—adopted the mantra of being beyond left or right (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2016). Zulianello considers the M5S as an example of “valence populism”, parties that cannot be classified as right or left, that predominantly competing “by focusing on non-positional issues, such as the fight against corruption” (2019, 5).

D’Alimonte (2019) affirms that despite their “different kind of populism”, the LN and the M5S “hold in common a vision of democracy based on a holistic conception of popular sovereignty”, and they “share a common target: national and international technocracies”. Among such technocracies, viewed as the enemy of the people (Vittori 2017), the European Union clearly holds a special place. Sovereignism is more related “to the right of people to decide rather than to positive evaluations of “the Nation”: so “the label “sovereigntist”—rather than “nationalists”—is



more appropriate for the M5S” (Vittori 2017, 142).¹² Also LN is largely conceived as “sovereigntist” (Gianfreda and Carlotti 2018; Orsina 2019). The League opposes transfer of national sovereignty to supranational bodies as the EU, emphasizing in an adversarial way its anti-globalization sentiments (Henke and Maher 2021). Destradi and Palgemann highlighted the “*sovranismo*” in the Salvini’s rhetoric due to the emphasized “threats” posed by international institutions (2019a, 10). For Giurlando, the League and M5S are “vectors for to the opposition to national and international elites” (2020, 14).

Thus, our second hypotheses is the following: H2—Because of the shared “sovereignism”, the “Yellow-Green” government, rather than making “concessions” on global governance issues, has adopted vocal adversarial attitudes on the world stage, especially within multilateral frameworks, to “take back control” over national sovereignty.

Constraints

For some authors, the foreign policy adopted by the Yellow-Green coalition represented a “substantive rupture” with the predecessors (Giurlando 2020, 3), an “impressive re-orientation” (Carati and Locatelli 2020, 36). If we aim to assess the degree of impact of the “Yellow-Green” executive on Italian foreign policy we should firstly unpack the concept of foreign policy change, also looking at the peculiarities of the Italian context. Thus, we should take into account the possible “levels of change,” as well as the constraints that—beyond the potential novelties brought by new cabinets—inevitably limit the room of maneuver of Italian foreign policy.

The literature has provided several definitions of “foreign policy change” (Hermann 1990; Gustavsson 1999; Haesebrouck and Joly 2020). Hermann (1990, 5) differentiates between “*adjustments*” (limited to the level of commitment and to the style), changes of programmes and goals, and re-orientation of states” role in world affairs. The scholarly debate has clustered parameters of foreign policy change according to their domestic and international origins (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014). For Haesebrouck and Joly, “foreign policy change requires the absence of inhibitors at the international (e.g., structural constraints), domestic and individual (e.g., veto players) levels” (2020, 7). According to Blavoukos and Bourantonis (2014), we should carefully assess the relevance of each parameter of foreign policy change on a case-by-case basis.

Therefore, what about Italy’s foreign policy change case? The (paradoxically limited)¹³ scholarly debate has emphasized the relevance of two sets of constraints for post-cold War Italian foreign policy. The first attains at the limitations posed by regional and international contexts toward a middle power like Italy. The literature largely agrees on the role played by international constraints—from the EU membership to the transatlantic alliance—to restrain the room for maneuver for Italian

¹² For a different view see Gianfreda and Carlotti (2018).

¹³ A recent exception is Coticchia and Vignoli (2021).



decision-makers in global affairs.¹⁴ Italy, as the other EU member states has delegated selected powers to the EU (e.g., commercial policy, currency) and—consequently—Italian leaders have limited autonomy in those foreign policy sectors. Moreover, the possibility of privileging bilateralism over multilateralism (Destradi and Plagemann 2019a, b) has been scarce because of status and role of Italy.

The second set of constraints are related to the peculiar structure of the “Yellow-Green” government, which was correctly defined by several authors (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019) as a sort of chimera, a body with three heads: M5S, LN, and an “institutional third head” that was promoted by the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, who is “a strong advocate of cooperative relations with EU institutions” (Nelli Feroci 2019), fostering continuity in foreign policy.¹⁵ Giurlando emphasizes how the “Mattarella’s muscular exercising of the powers of his office” deeply shaped the composition of the Yellow-Green government, forcing the coalition to appoint technocratic ministers (2020, 10). In other words, “Mattarella made it clear before the government was formed that his red line was Italy’s membership in the Euro-zone” (2020,10).

Therefore, the first Italian cabinet without mainstream party families allows examining the actual influence exerted by institutional actors (e.g., possible pressure by Mattarella or diplomatic elites in case of clashes with allies or with the EU) to keep a certain degree of foreign policy continuity. In sum, because of the above-mentioned factors, we can expect an “adjustment change” (Hermann 1990, 5) rather than a more significant transformation in terms of foreign policy goals, programs, and orientation.

H3: The vocal attempts to “taking back control” of “national sovereignty” abroad have been largely symbolic because of the instrumental views of populist foreign policy and especially due to the existence of significant domestic and international constraints. Thus, the actual level of foreign change has been limited.

Empirical analysis

What has been the impact of the “all populist government” in the Italian foreign policy? The empirical analysis—which covers the time span that corresponds with the government duration (June 2018–August 2019)¹⁶—aims to answer this question, testing our hypotheses. This section relies on secondary and primary sources, such as official documents, parliamentary votes and debates, and fourteen semi-structured interviews with former ministers, Deputy Ministers, MPs in Defense and Foreign Policy Committees, diplomats, members of the staff, scholars, experts from the most important Italian research centers, journalists, and leaders of NGOs. By examining

¹⁴ On this point see especially Verbeeck and Zalsolve (2015) who had examined the influence of the LN on the Berlusconi’s international politics, emphasizing domestic and international constraints.

¹⁵ For a review on bureaucratic constraints see Haesebrouck and Joly (2020).

¹⁶ In August 2019 Salvini withdrew his support to the government. Thanks to the parliamentary sustain of the Democratic Party a new “Conte’s government” started.



in details the decision-making process, the paper aims to trace the presence of the hypothesized mechanisms: the growing personalization/centralization of foreign policy, the vocal confrontational stance in multilateral contexts to take back sovereignty, and the domestic and international constraints to foreign policy change.

In line with the research tracks identified in the Special Issue, we focus on the foreign policy decision-making process regarding: European Union policy, alliances, multilateral, and bilateral relations. Such areas are selected also due to their relevance for the foreign policy of a middle power as Italy, relying on similar examples in FPA (Haesebrouck and Joly, *forthcoming*).

The Yellow–Green government

In the Italian general elections of March 2018, “different kinds of populism” won (Caiani 2019, 73). The M5S secured more than 32% of the votes, while the League obtained the 17,4%, overtaking Silvio Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* in the center-right coalition (D’Alimonte 2019). The new government was formed in June 2018 after weeks of negotiations between the two parties). In his first speech before the Senate, Conte proudly claimed to guide “a populist and anti-system” coalition.¹⁷

According to Fabbrini, a “sovereigntist government” is “unprecedented” in Italy as in the other founding members of the EU” (2018, 133). Yet, populist parties are nothing new in Italy (Tarchi 2015; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). However, the 2018 elections undisputedly represent a “populist boom” (Caiani 2019, 73) that marked “the arrival of the long-term trend toward increasing destruct of traditional party actors” (Garzia 2018). The M5S was created in 2009 by the comedian Beppe Grillo and four years later became the party attracting the single highest vote share at the national elections in the Chamber of Deputies (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2016). Contrary to the M5S, the League had a significant experience of governing (both at regional and at national level).¹⁸

The 2018 electoral manifestoes of the two parties have already illustrated how sovereignty was the most relevant shared view on foreign policy. The narrow manifesto of the LN (along with the center-right)¹⁹ devoted few lines on foreign policy and Europe, putting emphasis on the need to “retrieve sovereignty” and “protect national interest”. The manifesto crafted by the M5S²⁰ also focused on the defense of “sovereignty,” which was voted online by members among the most salient foreign policy issues.

LN and M5S signed a “contract”²¹ before forming the government. The contract “makes limited, vague and generic mention of foreign policy” (Nelli Feroci 2019),

¹⁷ G. Conte, inaugural speech, Senate, Rome, 5 June 2019.

¹⁸ The Lega entered in parliament in 1992, and it is the oldest existing Italy party. While the M5S ruled several Italian cities, this was the very first time at national government. This aspect can potentially reinforce our expectation of contrast between populist leaders and foreign policy establishment.

¹⁹ See: “Il programma del Centrodestra”, *Il Post*, 2 Febbraio 2018.

²⁰ See: “Il programma del Movimento 5 Stelle”, *Il Post*, 2 February 2018.

²¹ “Contract for the Government of Change”, 18 May 2018, available at: https://download.repubblica.it/pdf/2018/politica/contratto_governo.pdf.



revealing the overall low salience of the issue for the new cabinet: foreign and defense policy (without the EU) deserve only 2 pages out of 58. Moreover, the contract affirms that foreign policy will be based on *national interest* and its promotion at bilateral and multilateral level.²² The need of “taking back control of sovereignty” was highlighted and contrasted to the current state of relationship between Italy and multilateral institutions, as the EU.

Europe

Several observers have stressed the Yellow-Green “scepticism” and “pronounced hostility” toward the EU,²³ portrayed as “a supranational institution lacking democratic legitimacy and ruled by unelected euro-bureaucrats” (Nelli Feroci 2019). The words of those who worked in the government (or were part of the majority coalition) illustrate how Italy tried to “defend in a stronger way the national interest within the EU”.²⁴ As recognized by the MP Formentini (Lega), “the most shared issue between the two parties was the idea of *defending the national interest, especially in the EU context*”.²⁵ According to the Minister of Defense, Elisabetta Trenta, the Yellow-Green government believed that Italy “would have always had the possibility to act—according to its strategic interests within the EU context—without necessarily following traditional alignments”.²⁶ The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Manlio Di Stefano, defined *the defense of national interests* as the way to “affect the EU in order to obtain advantages for Italy”.²⁷

Beyond the general “protection of national interests”, the “adversarial relationship” with the EU is crucial to understand the ways through which the “national sovereignty” was defined and defended by the cabinet. The “antagonism” (Nelli Feroci 2019) of the cabinet toward the EU—in line with our second hypothesis—is well exemplified by the “battleground” on the 2019 Italian budget law. The EU Commission complained that the Lega-M5S government was “blatantly violating the Growth and Stability Pact as well as commitments made by previous governments” (D’Alimonte 2019).²⁸ The clash with the Commission—despite it ended only with

²² In a country where the concept of “national interest” has been removed for decades from the public debate, for political and cultural reasons after the WWII and fascism (Coticchia 2013), this is an interesting novelty.

²³ Author’s telephone interview, Claudio Bertolotti—former Director Researchers of the Cemiss (Italian Centre of Military Studies) 2018/2019, former Counter Intelligence Section Chief and Security Officer at RC-C HQ, ISAF 2007/2008—23 October 2019. Author’s telephone interview, Nicoletta Pirozzi, Research Fellow, IAI, 24 October 2019.

²⁴ Author’s interview with former anonymous staff member at the Ministry of Defense (2018–2019), Rome, 7 November 2019.

²⁵ Author’s telephone interview, Paolo Formentini, Deputy President of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Northern League, Chamber of Deputies, 5 November 2019.

²⁶ Author’s interview, Elisabetta Trenta, Minister of Defense (2018–2019), Rome, 31 October 2019.

²⁷ Author’s telephone interview, Manlio Di Stefano, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (2018–), 17 December 2019.

²⁸ The draft of the Italian budget law “was a deliberate violation of the EU’s fiscal rules. The threat by the Commission to open an infringement procedure for excessive debt provoked an immediate negative



the partial revision of the Italian budget—led to an “unprecedented conflict” with the EU (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019, 134).

Also on migration, the (mainly symbolic)²⁹ Salvini’s decision to “close the Italian harbours”—by refusing allowing NGOs to disembark—alimented tensions with the EU. The adversarial attitudes were deeply related to the need to “take back control” over national borders and sovereignty. Di Maio even menaced to withdraw the Italian economic contribution to the EU do to the lack of solidarity by Brussels in contrasting illegal migration (Nelli Feroci 2019). In front of the EU Parliament, Conte replied to the charges of “being inhuman” on migration, affirming that the “austerity was the real inhuman face of Europe”.³⁰ Conte openly justified his efforts within the EU, claiming that he “just defended Italian *national interests*”.³¹ For Formentini, “Italy is not a branch of Paris and London and this is why the *defense of national interest* is crucial.”³² Finally, also the former Minister Trenta stressed how Italy should have acted within the EU with the same dignity of other countries”.³³

The expected adversarial stances by the populist cabinet unfold when the Italian government clashed several times also with EU members and traditional allies, such as France. Macron has been defined by Di Maio as the “n.1 enemy of Italy” (Bressanelli and Natali 2019). The Yellow-Green government attacked Paris on very different issues: the “anti-Italian” role in Libya, neo-colonialism and Africa, and the extradition of Italian terrorists to France.³⁴ Even the Berlusconi’s executives “had never put under discussion the whole EU structure”, clashing in such way with EU members.³⁵ For instance, the Di Maio’s visit to the leaders of the Gilets Jaunes “caused a real diplomatic crisis with France for a while”.³⁶ Indeed, French Ambassador was called back to Paris after Italian “unprecedented” attacks to Macron and France”.³⁷ For Cladi and Locatelli—while tensions with France were nothing new, coalition leaders of the populist government “deliberately escalated tension with Paris, *with a view to increasing internal consensus*” (2020, 36).³⁸

Footnote 28 (continued)

reaction from financial markets which fretted about the stability of Italy’s public finances [...] The government was hence forced to quickly revise the draft budget (Nelli Feroci 2019).

²⁹ Hundreds of migrants arrived in Italy without being shipped by NGOs.

³⁰ G. Gaetano, ‘strasburgo, “processo” a Conte’ *Il Corriere della Sera*, 12 Febbraio 2019.

³¹ G. Conte, letter to *La Repubblica*, 18 July 2019.

³² Author’s interview, Paolo Formentini.

³³ Author’s interview, Elisabetta Trenta.

³⁴ For a summary: “Libia, Conte e Salvini: “No a interventi militari”. *La Repubblica*, 3 September 2018; “La Francia richiama l’ambasciatore a Roma”. *La Repubblica*, 7 February 2019.

³⁵ Despite clashes occurred in the past with Brussels, the *vocal* battle fought by the Conte’s government was framed around the need to “*take back control of the sovereignty*”. Moreover, “Berlusconi was strongly connected with the PPE while the Yellow-Green Government was marginal to the EU agenda”. Author’s interview, Nicoletta Pirozzi.

³⁶ Author’s interview, Stefano Pioppi, Italian journalist (*Formiche*) expert of defense policy, 23 October 2019.

³⁷ “La Francia richiama l’ambasciatore a Roma”. *La Repubblica*, 7 February 2019.

³⁸ While the authors stress a significant level of foreign policy change, they recognize the instrumentality of the moves by the Conte’s cabinet, partially in line with our third hypothesis.



In sum, in line with our second hypothesis, the government undertook a “sovereigntist battle” within the EU context. This “Italy’s revolt against the EU” (Jones 2018), in conformity with our first claim, was conducted by Conte, Di Maio and Salvini. While the rhetoric developed by the two leaders was featured by “harsh and repeated rhetorical assaults on ‘European bureaucracy’” (Nelli Feroci 2019), the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Moavero Milanesi (who was not related to any parties), adopted a very low profile, being often bypassed on several issues. Furthermore, the two deputy Prime ministers directly shaped the agenda intervening in policies *not* related to their ministries, thus fuelling tensions. For instance, despite the opposition of the Minister of Defense, Salvini strongly pushed for ending the “naval component” of the EU missions Sophia, thus stopping its actual activities at sea, which were perceived as a pull factor for immigration.³⁹ Due to the vocal activism of Salvini and Di Maio—and “the centralization of decision-making in the hand of the Prime Minister”—the “role of the Minister of foreign affairs has been downsized regarding the Italian political agenda in the EU”.⁴⁰ Moreover, such actual “marginalization of the Minister of Foreign Affairs was viewed in a very negative way by the Italian diplomats”.⁴¹ While bureaucratic politics can play a role in explaining the above-mentioned contrasts, the Salvini’s style of personalisation and centralisation in foreign policy decision-making,⁴² by alighting a direct contact with the public to represent “true people against foreign policy elites”, confirm our hypotheses. For instance, among the manifold contrasts between the leader of the League and the minister Trenta (and the armed forces), the (purely symbolic) proposal of a return of conscription, “for better promoting education to the young generation” well illustrates the peculiar style of Salvini’s activism.

In line with our third claim, the attempts made by the Italian populist to “beat the EU establishment” (Zingales 2018) have been mainly vocal and symbolic due to strategic and instrumental views as well as for domestic and international constraints. Several interviewees confirmed that the discontinuity in the EU politics “was referred *more to rhetoric rather than to contents*”.⁴³ As stated by an anonymous high-level diplomat, “the emphasis on national interest has been a mantra empty of contents [...] The rhetoric of the government, such as the reform of the EU treaties, was simply not feasible”.⁴⁴ For several authors, the conflict with the EU was *strategically aimed to enhance domestic support* (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019, 135) “for electoral consensus”.⁴⁵ The campaign for the European parliamentary elections increased competition between the *Lega* and the M5S with the effect of multiplying attacks on the EU. There was also a “pendulum” between the harsh rhetoric and

³⁹ F. Sarzanini, Trenta: “Avvisai Matteo sulle ong”, *Il Corriere della Sera*, 7 July 2019.

⁴⁰ Author’s interview, Nicoletta Pirozzi.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² See: “Salvini vuole il ritorno della leva”. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 12 August 2018.

⁴³ For example: author’s telephone interview, Francesco Vignarca, Coordinator Italian Disarmament Network, 5 November 2019.

⁴⁴ Author’s interview, anonymous high level diplomat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 31 October 2019, Rome.

⁴⁵ Author’s interview, Claudio Bertolotti.



the actual behavior, from the criticism toward the EU Commission to the decisive vote (by the M5S) to the new Van der Leyen Commission.⁴⁶ This vote is generally conceived as the “breaking point”⁴⁷ between the two parties. At one moment the euroscepticism of the two parties started to diverge in different directions, with less anti-European attitudes gradually adopted by the M5S.⁴⁸ For the Lega MP Formentini, the M5S’s vote was “one of the causes of the crisis” between the two parties.⁴⁹

This gap between rhetoric and votes/behavior can be explained—as advanced in our third hypothesis—also by looking at international and domestic constraints. First of all, “the President of the Republic was crucial to maintain a clear direction in foreign policy”⁵⁰ while institutions (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), “which are get used with political instability and uncertainty, continued in their usual job, even without a specific political direction”.⁵¹ The Deputy Minister Di Stefano openly recognized that in the government there was a “*quota del Quirinale*”, with Tria and Moavero⁵² who “maintain an institutional approach dear to the view expressed by the President”.⁵³ Mattarella, as illustrated in a speech at 13th Conference of Italian Ambassadors (24 July 2019), altered the government’s narrative based on the sovereigntist idea of “taking back control of national sovereignty” from Brussels, affirming that “it has been possible to project our national interests” thanks to the EU membership.

Despite the severe criticism toward the EU, as well as the vague attempts to redefine alliances (e.g. the “fascination” with the Visegrad Group), there was “no real change” on European policies, like austerity (Bressanelli and Natali 2019). While some authors disagree—emphasizing a “profound discontinuity” on the EU with past government (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019, 145)—two elements seem to discard their perspective. First, also previous governments have strongly accused (although with different tones) the “EU bureaucrats”.⁵⁴ Second—and more importantly—despite the open conflicts on the budget, at the end (also due to the pressure by markets) Italy made an agreement with the Commission to avoid procedure of infraction.⁵⁵ Paradoxically, the main consequence of the Yellow-Green government’s EU policy was a “marginalization”⁵⁶ of Italy. Even within the government it was recognized the limited results obtained at the EU level due to “the mistake of open too many fronts, creating too many enemies, with a exaggerated harsh rhetoric”.⁵⁷ In the

⁴⁶ Without the 14 votes from the M5S the Commission would have not been approved.

⁴⁷ Author’s interview, Nicoletta Pirozzi.

⁴⁸ Author’s telephone interview, Alessandro Marrone, Research Fellow, IAI, 21 October 2019. The foreign policy of the Conte II clearly confirms such trend.

⁴⁹ Author’s interview, Paolo Formentini.

⁵⁰ Author’s interview, high-level diplomat. See also Nelli Feroci (2019).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Author’s interview, Manlio Di Stefano.

⁵³ Author’s interview, Nicoletta Pirozzi. Tria was the Minister of Economy and Finance.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, the EU policy of the Renzi’s government. See Coticchia and Davidson (2019).

⁵⁵ L. Castellani, “Barbari romanizzati”, *Huffington Post*, 5 July 2019.

⁵⁶ See Nelli Feroci (2019) and author’s interview, Nicoletta Pirozzi.

⁵⁷ Author’s interview with former staff member at the Ministry of Defense (2018–2019).



last months before the crisis Conte tried to “repair the damages done by the harsh rhetoric and by the absence at key diplomatic tables”.⁵⁸ Italy “decided to be outside to several processes, making impossible for Rome to influence their development”.⁵⁹

Thus, on the whole, the analysis of the Italian foreign policy in the EU under the Yellow-Green government confirms our hypotheses.

Multilateralism and bilateralism

In line with our hypothesis, we expect that—rather than making “concessions” on global governance issues—the Yellow-Green executive to have adopted adversarial attitudes to “take back control” over national sovereignty. The Conte’s government actually assumed some peculiar positions on global governance issues. In fact, Italy a) was absent in Marrakesh for the approval of the so-called Global Compact on migration⁶⁰; b) did not support the vote at the UN on the illegality of having nuclear weapons⁶¹ and the request made by several states for a stronger action on climate change⁶²; c) opposed the continuation of the employment of naval assets of the mission Eunavformed-Sophia, thus causing the operational end of the intervention; d) expressed his fierce criticism toward the CETA treaty⁶³; and finally f) did not adhere to the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), also because the request of “an Italian leadership in the Mediterranean for the *defense of its vital interests*” was not satisfied.⁶⁴

Some analysts even talked about a “crisis of the multilateral Italian foreign policy”.⁶⁵ However, the members of the executive and the MPs of the then majority coalition justified—in line with our second hypothesis—the above-mentioned decisions focusing on the “*defense of national sovereignty*” rather than invoking a general “opposition to multilateralism”. The Minister Trenta said that the executive shared the idea that in “that each country should count in the same way in the global

⁵⁸ Author’s interview, high-level diplomat. Salvini did not attend the 85% of the EU meetings. “Il buon-senso in Europa di Salvini? Saltare l’85% dei vertici EU”, *The Vision*, 18 June 2019. Conte denounced the “betrayal” of the LN on the vote for the new Commission. See: G. Conte, letter to *La Repubblica*, 18 July 2019.

⁵⁹ Author’s interview, high-level diplomat. For instance, by searching closer ties with the Visegrad group, which aimed to keep relocation under voluntary base, the possibility to impose a majority on a binding agreement regarding migration (e.g. European Council 28 June 2018) was missed.

⁶⁰ Marrakech, 10–11 December 2018, see: <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/intergovernmental-conference-2018>.

⁶¹ See: <https://www.disarmo.org/ican/a/43793.html>.

⁶² Washington (April 2019), see: https://www.cape4financeindustry.org/coalition_of_finance_ministers. See also M. Agostinelli, “Dove era l’Italia quando a Washington si prendevano impegni per il clima?”, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2 May 2019.

⁶³ See the comments made by the Minister Di Maio, quoted by Bressanelli and Natali (2019).

⁶⁴ Author’s interview with Elisabetta Trenta. According to other scholars, the shared anti-French attitudes in the cabinet played a relevant role for explaining the Italian decision. Author’s interview, Alessandro Marrone. The new Conte’s government, which was supported by M5S and the PD, officially entered in the EI2 in September 2019.

⁶⁵ Author’s interview, Nicoletta Pirozzi.



arena”,⁶⁶ stating the need for Italy to affirm its *national interest as other states do*, revealing again the view—which was deeply shared among the two parties and their voters—that Italian interests and national sovereignty had been damaged for years in multilateral contexts. Trenta illustrated how the cabinet had assessed the military operations abroad *in line with the national interest*.⁶⁷ Moreover, the MP Formentini, showed how the executive concerned about the possibilities that the non-binding provisions of the Migration compact, which “defines migration only in positive terms” would have become a sort of “soft law”.⁶⁸

Some of the above-mentioned decisions also elucidate, in conformity with our first claim, the personalistic decision-making process of the Italian populist government. Again, the “very low profile”⁶⁹ adopted by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Moavero (who “was not defended by any parties”⁷⁰) was mirrored by the diplomatic activism especially shown by Salvini, who “acted like the Prime Minister” from Washington to Tripoli, causing resentment and clashes within the cabinet. As mentioned-above, Salvini “imposed his line on migration”⁷¹ (e.g., causing the end of the naval component of the operation *Sophia despite* the opposition by the Minister Trenta), directly “managing the Italian foreign and defense policy”,⁷² especially in Libya,⁷³ opposed possible cuts to military programmes,⁷⁴ and contrasted the reforms advocated by Trenta,⁷⁵ fostering constant clashes with the Minister and even with the armed forces.⁷⁶ Also Di Maio “dictated the direction of some policies related to [military] procurement to the Minister”.⁷⁷ In fact, in Summer 2018, the former leader of the M5S suddenly announced the cut of military programmes (which then did not actually happen).

In line with our third expectations, as occurred in the EU, the defense of “national sovereignty” has been related “more to narratives”⁷⁸ than to actual policies. Domestic and international constraints, as well as a “strategic” populist foreign policy aimed at affecting public opinion, emerge as main mechanisms that explain such outcome. Three elements should be emphasized. First, Italy did not prefer bilateralism over multilateralism: because of its status Italy simply “cannot afford bilateralism”

⁶⁶ This resonates well with the M5S slogan: “one counts one”. Author’s interview with Elisabetta Trenta.

⁶⁷ Minister of Defense before the Defense Commissions (Senate, Chamber of Deputies, 26 July 2018).

⁶⁸ Author’s interview with Paolo Formentini.

⁶⁹ Author’s interview, Alessandro Marrone.

⁷⁰ Author’s interview, Manlio Di Stefano.

⁷¹ Author’s interview, Claudio Bertolotti.

⁷² Author’s interview with former staff member at the Ministry of Defense.

⁷³ During a cabinet meeting on Libya, Salvini sent the deputy minister Volpi “as his representative”. See: C. Fusani, “Guerra alla Difesa”, *Tiscali news* 31 July 2019.

⁷⁴ G. Zappa, “F35, ecco i tagli progettati”, *Start Magazine*, 15 March 2019.

⁷⁵ Author’s interview with Elisabetta Trenta.

⁷⁶ Salvini ordered to Italian navy to block NGOs with a ministerial directive. The Chief of Staff Vecciarelli called the Minister of Interior for expressing his concern. “Salvini ha fatto arrabbiare l’esercito”, *Il Post*, 17 April 2019.

⁷⁷ Author’s interview with former staff member at the Ministry of Defense.

⁷⁸ Author’s interview, Nicoletta Pirozzi.



as other great powers.⁷⁹ As questioned by an anonymous high-level diplomat: “bilateralism with whom?”⁸⁰ As expected, the new “Italian sovereignism” in foreign policy was largely based on “flexing muscles” (*battere i pugni sul tavolo*) without building consensus or coalitions”,⁸¹ also due to the “actual isolation” of Italy in strategic regions (e.g., Mediterranean) “without established allies”.⁸² So, even new special bilateral relationship (e.g., Hungary) were “not formalized alliances”⁸³ but “bilateralism through words”,⁸⁴ grounded on symbolic initiatives (e.g. the shared fund for the Christians persecuted worldwide). Moreover, while the rhetoric by the “Yellow-Green” government seems to illustrate the willingness to defend national interest damaged by the European sanctions toward Russia,⁸⁵ Italy did not oppose them (voting for the renewal), due to the political costs related to such eventual decision that would have caused the end of the EU sanctions.⁸⁶

Once again, in conformity with the third hypothesis, international and domestic constraints influenced the outcomes. The Italian diplomats, who “have a multilateral background”, guaranteed a substantial continuity in foreign and defense policy.⁸⁷ Mattarella emphasized the need to provide “continuity to military operation in multilateral context”.⁸⁸ NATO and the EU were frequently stressed by Mattarella (and by Moavero) as “crucial pillars for Italian defense”.⁸⁹ Moreover, members of the Ministry of Defense, as well as leaders of pacifist organizations, highlighted the fierce internal resistance by armed forces to the plans of reforms (e.g., the new doctrine, etc.) supported by the Minister of Defense.⁹⁰ Finally, the pressure from above (NATO, EU, allies) to maintain or enhance commitment has been constant (Nelli Feroci 2019). The continuity in the Italian security commitment emerges both in the evolving EU defense—which was interpreted by the majority coalition as “a way to support the national interest”⁹¹—as well as in military missions abroad, which have been renewed and sustained without any drastic reduction or improvise withdrawal.⁹² In order to balance the new institutional role with its original “pacifist

⁷⁹ Author’s interview, Stefano Pioppi.

⁸⁰ Author’s interview, high-level diplomat.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Author’s interview with Elisabetta Trenta.

⁸³ Author’s interview with Pietro Batacchi.

⁸⁴ Author’s interview, high-level diplomat.

⁸⁵ For instance Conte, (June 8 2019) agreed with Trump on the come back of Russia in the G7.

⁸⁶ E. Rossi. “Certe affinità non porteranno Roma verso la Russia. Parla Mikhelidze (IAI)”, *Formiche*, July 5 2019.

⁸⁷ Author’s interview, high-level diplomat.

⁸⁸ *Consiglio Supremo Difesa*, 25 June 2019.

⁸⁹ S. Pioppi” *La Nato conta*”, *Formiche*, 24 July 2019.

⁹⁰ Author’s interviews with Francesco Vignarca and with a former staff member at the Ministry of Defense.

⁹¹ Author’s written interview with Gianluca Rizzo, MP (M5S), President Defense Commission, Chamber of Deputies, 15 December 2019.

⁹² Italy deployed 7.967 units in 2018 and 7.434 in 2019. All the missions (which were contrasted by the M5S in the past) were confirmed. Senate of the Republic, 13 May 2019.



DNA”,⁹³ the M5S developed a strategy based on delays (postponing decisions on military programmes and promoting “technical assessments” of controversial acquisitions, such as the F35 or the Tempest warplane)⁹⁴ and on symbolic policies related to a vague “para-pacifist narrative”.⁹⁵

In sum, has the overall degree of foreign policy change concerning bilateral and multilateral relations been limited? The empirical analysis doesn’t allow supporting here *completely* our third hypothesis on “adjustment foreign policy change”. Indeed—on the one hand—the “sovereigntist foreign policy” was basically related to style and rhetoric, while the “pillars of transatlantic relationship and the EU”⁹⁶ still played a vital role. However—on the other hand—a transformation in the Italian external relations occurred. If the controversial ties with the Russian government still need to be properly clarified after scandals,⁹⁷ the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China on the so-called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI—March 2019) is certainly a relevant foreign policy change. The decision to sign the MoU, which is strategic partnership in several sectors as infrastructure, development, and trade (Casarini 2019; Dossi 2020), can be considered as the unique foreign policy act by the Conte’s government that was actually “beyond the traditional perimeter of Italian alliances”.⁹⁸ Italy was the first country in the G7 to sign such a MoU.

Why did the government signed the Memorandum? Casarini connected the decision to the sovereigntism of the executive and to its “Italy first approach”, aimed to enhance market access in China for Italian companies: “By officially endorsing the BRI, the Italian government helps China drive a wedge into the Euro-Atlantic alliance” (2019, 14). Dossi, who examines the parliamentary debates, agrees with such perspective, stressing how “some sectors of the majority—especially in the M5S—identified closer relations with China as crucial for a more proactive foreign policy, as opposed to the alleged subservience of the center-left governments to the US, the EU institutions, Germany and France” (2020, 10). Since the Euro crisis, Italy has increasingly perceived China as a source of capital for its economy, in a context marked by strict financial constraints (Dossi 2020). Also according to Giurlando, “Italy was signalling [to Germany and France] that being a privileged partner of China gave it leverage to use in negotiations over other issues”, following “the playbook of populists in soft balancing”, strengthening links with external powers to contest ideological rivals (2020, 6). Moreover, Dossi highlights the vital role played by government members (the Minister Tria and the Undersecretary Geraci) who had close ties with China and were “extremely vocal in supporting” Italy’s involvement

⁹³ Author’s interview, Alessandro Marrone.

⁹⁴ S. Pioppi, “Ecco i programmi che saranno finanziati dalla Difesa”, *Formiche*, 21 June 2019.

⁹⁵ Author’s interview, Francesco Vignarca.

⁹⁶ G.Conte, Senate of the Republic, 20 August 2019.

⁹⁷ “The Full Transcript Of The Italian Far Right And Russia Oil-Deal Meeting”, *Buzzfeed*, 10 July 2019.

⁹⁸ Author’s interview with Pietro Batacchi.



in the BRI (2020, 10). For Di Stefano, “the defense of national interest, in the form of trade promotion”, was the reason behind the signature of the MoU.⁹⁹

In other words, the *sovereignism* of the Conte’s executive, as well as the need to overcome the existing constraints, are vital to understand the Memorandum. The decision seems in line with hypothesis of diversification of partnerships advanced by the literature on populism and foreign policy (Plagemann and Destradi 2019a, b; Jenne 2021). However, our third hypothesis is not discarded. In fact, although the MoU illustrates a higher degree of change than expected, it is too early to identify, only by looking at this single decision, a re-orientation of Italian foreign policy, while some crucial aspects of the agreement (i.e., the degree of access provided in the communication sector) are vague and still need to be verified to assess their impact. In addition, the pressure made by existing constraints was significant. Washington expressed deep concern, forcing the Italian leaders to try to reassure the ally.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, “Italy’s interest in establishing close ties with Beijing is not new. Paolo Gentiloni, Italy’s former Prime Minister, attended the first “Belt and Road Forum” in Beijing in 2017, the only leader of a G7 country to do so” (Carini 2019, 1).

In sum, while there were government’s attempts to “take back control of national sovereignty”—limiting the “concessions” on global governance issues—the changes (partially with the exception of the relationship with China) mainly occurred in terms of personalization and narratives. As expected, domestic and international constraints restricted the room of maneuver and the degree of foreign policy change.

Conclusion

The Yellow-Green government represented a peculiar and brief “populist experiment”. What has been the impact of the populist coalition over the Italian foreign policy? The paper has answered this question by examining the Italian foreign policy regarding European Union, and multilateral and bilateral relations.

The main finding of the manuscript is that the overall degree of foreign policy discontinuity of the (first) Conte’s government mainly consisted of (with the possible exception of the MoU on the BRI signed with China) a symbolic and harsh style, along with a personalistic decision-making process, through which national sovereignty has been defended abroad, especially in multilateral frameworks. Moreover, the paper has identified the relevance of domestic and international constraints, which can also be generalized to other cases, investigating for instance the influence exerted by allies and multilateral frameworks as well as by key domestic actors. For example, bilateralism can be extremely complex for small or medium states, even

⁹⁹ Di Stefano stressed how the MoU of the BRI was not a trade agreement, which is delegated to the EU, but rather an agreement for trade promotion. He also emphasized how Italy was able to add a “European wording (e.g., on workers’ rights, etc.) in the MoU. Author’s interview, Manlio Di Stefano.

¹⁰⁰ See, F. Bechis, “L’Italia è nel mezzo di una Guerra Fredda. Parla Charles Kupchan”, *Formiche*, 29 March 2019.



ruled by populist coalitions. Likewise, the presence of institutional actors that aimed to guarantee political continuity, or the role of high-level bureaucracies that are getting used to a constant political instability, could play a similar effect in tempering the impact of populist parties in foreign policy. Finally, a comparative analysis of the impact of the populist parties toward defense policy (missions, procurement, etc.) or aid (resources, strategic areas, etc.) could address additional gaps in the literature.

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