



Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche - Cattedra di Political Science

**“The Sardines: a case of online social movement and its causes  
in contemporary Italy”**

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## 1 – Introduction

The 2020 regional elections in Emilia-Romagna catalyzed the Italian media's attention for months. The absolute protagonist of the electoral campaign, other than Matteo Salvini, were the so called "Sardines". The Sardines were defined by their founders as a "motion of re-appropriation of thoughts, of ideas of society", which "is more attributable to a social phenomenon than to a political movement"<sup>1</sup> (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). Why did the Sardines become such a significant phenomenon in the period preceding the day of the elections in Emilia-Romagna? Because they were able to gather thousands of people in the squares of Bologna first, then in the region, and then throughout the whole country. On November 14th 2019 Mattia Santori, future *de facto* political leader of the Sardines, created a Facebook event inviting the citizens of Bologna and Emilia-Romagna to gather in the Piazza Maggiore square in Bologna as a sign of protest against the populist rhetoric that invaded Italy and many other European countries during the last few years. The movement's name derives in fact from the will to gather as many people as possible in a square, in order to be "packed in like sardines". Their aim was to make their voice heard and suggest another way to do politics as an alternative to the communication style used by Salvini (Giuffrida, 2019), who normalized the use of an aggressive tone as well as the exploitation of arbitrary events for political purposes (Stille, 2018). The Sardines instead, argue for "transparency in the use that politics makes of social networks", and demand that "violence, in all its forms, be excluded from the tones and contents of politics". According to Santori, even the choice of a fish as the symbol for the movement is not arbitrary: sardines are silent and peaceful beings, two characteristics that Santori's followers see as totally opposed to Salvini's rhetoric. The more moderate citizens to whom the Sardines appeal the most to are nowadays often silent or unheard, especially on social media, where "traditional" parties (as opposed to populist ones) struggle to find an effective communication strategy, and are often incapable of interpreting and coordinating the voices of their electorate. On the contrary, populist rhetoric and themes seem to thrive on social media: Matteo Salvini is the most followed European politician on Facebook (Pinna, 2020). Salvini's strategy apparently paid off: at the general elections the center-right coalition, in which the League represented the main party, collected more votes than any other coalition or party for the first time in history (Il Resto del Carlino, 2018). The Sardines, alarmed by the possibility that the "red" Emilia-Romagna could elect a right-wing governor, exhorted all the anti-populist citizens to go to vote,

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<sup>1</sup> "moto di riappropriazione di pensieri, di idee di società: è riconducibile più a un fenomeno sociale che a un movimento politico."

and to actively take part in the region's political life by participating at their event. The void created by the absence of guidance from traditional or mainstream parties, especially on social media, was somehow filled by the Sardines movement, which demonstrated how the moderate voters still exist and want to engage, but they are scarcely and poorly coordinated by those who should be their political leaders. The Sardines succeeded in transforming moderate voters from "being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life" (Tilly, 1978, 69).

The aim of my work is that of reconstructing the history of the Sardines as a political science phenomenon by pinpointing their main events and successes, from their first rally in Piazza Maggiore to the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna, until the most recent events available. The aim of this thesis is to find an answer to the questions: Who are the Sardines? What are their objectives, and have they achieved them? What are the events or the phenomena that led to their emergence? Therefore, after having described their story, I will establish if the Sardines are a movement, and what kind of movement they are or are related to. Then, I will identify and analyze the causes that triggered the birth of the Sardines movement: first I will discuss Salvini's rhetoric and agenda, and then the withdrawal of the people and the elites which I believe can be identified as the underlying causes of the birth of a movement like the Sardines.

In this thesis, I will retrace the Sardines' history by illustrating their origin, along with the main events and assemblies that they hosted all over Italy. I will also report the content of the Sardines' revendications and ideas. Reconstructing the Sardines' political path is necessary to better understand them and the reasons why they are worth studying.

After having introduced the Sardines by describing their main demonstrations and ideas I will continue the thesis by clarifying what the nature of the Sardines' phenomenon is. In fact, even though I have often previously referred to it as a "movement", as I mentioned, Mattia Santori refers to the Sardines as a "social phenomenon" avoiding the word movement, perhaps in order to distance himself and the Sardines from other entities such as the Five Star Movement. However, most observers, journalists and scholars have defined the Sardines as a movement. Therefore, I am going to present the most famous definitions of the word "movement" to clarify its nature, and to establish if it is the most suitable word to define the Sardines. I will also make an excursus on the history and evolution of movements with the aim of identifying the category of movements to which the Sardines could belong to. Revising the history of movements is also necessary to understand where the Sardines have their roots, and with which movements they share some characteristics.

After that, I will move on to analyze the causes that prompted the emergence of the Sardines. I argue that there are two fundamental matters that can be identified as the reasons for which the Sardines were born. The “apparent cause”, or the most immediately attributable cause of the movement’s birth is the rise of right-wing populism, in the specific variation adopted by Matteo Salvini. In order to understand the Sardines’ concerns about his party’s rise to power in their region, I will briefly introduce the theory around populist parties, and then thoroughly analyze Salvini’s online communication strategy. The techniques and the kind of language used by the Captain, as his followers call him on social media, are particularly concerning according to the Sardines, who focus to a great extent on the language used by Matteo Salvini. Another concern is the League’s leader’s agenda, which includes highly controversial issues such as immigration and security.

I believe that the “root cause” that explains the Sardines’ genesis lays deeper than under Salvini’s rhetoric. In fact, I argue that, just like populism, the Sardines movement is a symptom of the profound evolution that party democracy is experiencing. The inadequacy of traditional parties to interpret and elaborate contemporary citizens’ ideas, along with their disengagement from mainstream politics are signs of the passing of the era of parties as the main actors of politics. Parties, which should have the role of protagonists in the political life of Western democracies, do not seem to be efficient in connecting institution with citizens anymore. This transformation is exemplified by the decline of voter turnout in the past decades and by the citizens’ apathy towards politics, which calls for new ways of participation and inclusion in the political sphere.

## **2 – Chapter one - The Sardines’ history**

The Sardines’ history is still quite short, as it only starts at the beginning of November 2019. However, it is very dense. Many important events were organized in a few months, each of them being meaningful for the not-movement. Each step was fundamental to enlarge the number of participants or to better define the Sardines’ point of view.

The origin of the Sardines movement is described thoroughly in their manifesto “Le Sardine non esistono”: four thirty year olds sitting around a table reflecting on their role as citizens, the wave of populism that hit Italy in the last decade and the incumbent regional elections in Emilia-Romagna, where they were born and currently live. The founders stress their personal and professional background: none of them was ever a politician: Roberto Morotti, engineer; Giulia Trappoloni, physiotherapist; Andrea Garreffa, hiking guide; and Mattia Santori, part-time employee (Garreffa,

Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). The four friends all agreed on two ideas: firstly, they abhorred the eventuality of the League's candidate winning the regional election in Emilia-Romagna because of its leader's agenda and rhetoric. Secondly, they all perceived the need of a more participatory political environment, aimed at making citizens express themselves more than with just an "X" on the ballot (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). It is possible to identify one triggering event that caused the creation of the Sardines by the four founders: The League's rally at the PalaDozza, in Bologna. Why was that so significant for the four founders, and what is the context leading to that event?

## **2.1 – The context of the Sardines' emergence**

During the final months of 2019, the electoral campaign for the upcoming regional elections on January 26th, 2020 began in Emilia-Romagna. The current governor of the region was Stefano Bonaccini, the candidate of the Democratic Party, the largest center-left party in Italy. Bonaccini was elected in 2014 with 49% of the votes (Regione Emilia Romagna, 2014). The 2014 regional elections were characterized by record low voter turnout: only 37% of the people of Emilia-Romagna decided to go to the polls to vote (Regione Emilia Romagna, 2014). He ran for office again in 2020 at the end of his term, being supported once again by the centre-left coalition. The leader of the right coalition, which is the other main political force in the region and therefore Bonaccini's direct opponent, was Lucia Borgonzoni.

Lucia Borgonzoni is a senator and was the center-right candidate in the 2020 regional elections. She was supported by Forza Italia, Brothers of Italy, but *in primis* by Salvini's League, the party to which she belongs in the Parliament. Matteo Salvini was very active in Borgonzoni's electoral campaign: Emilia-Romagna is traditionally one of the most leftist regions in Italy, and electing one of his party's exponents as the Governor would be an incredibly powerful message to send to the current government supported by the center-left coalition between the Democratic Party and the Five Star Movement. Turning the "red" Emilia-Romagna into a "green" region would be the perfect empirical proof of the League's political strength.

Moreover, the Emilia-Romagna regional elections happened just a few months after Salvini's failed attempt at going to elections after having overthrown the national government (Curstodero & Rubino, 2019). While his party, the League, supported the Conte government along with the Five Star Movement, Salvini's support at the polls at the European Parliament elections during the spring of 2019 was strikingly high, reaching 34% (Ministero dell'Interno, 2019). If he had managed to bring all those supporters to vote for him in new national elections, he could have created a one-party

government, or at least a coalition government joined by another right-wing party. Unfortunately for him, after the government fell the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party joined forces to support a second Conte government, avoiding the possibility of having new elections (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2019). The regional elections of Emilia-Romagna were the first big opportunity for Salvini to show the new government the magnitude of his support, as a win in that region would have been culturally revolutionary.

Therefore, the effort put by the League into Borgonzoni's electoral campaign was enormous. As the Sardines' founders report in their book, the capital of Emilia-Romagna was "covered with posters of the League that read "Liberiamo l'Emilia-Romagna" ("Let's free Emilia-Romagna")" (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020) describing all the precedent left-wing governors of the region as part of a ruling caste that needs to be taken away from positions of power. During the campaign, Salvini will instrumentalize many news stories to get visibility and make Borgonzoni become more popular: the Bibbiano case for example, a scandal that involved cases of alleged abuse in the custody of minors in the town of Bibbiano, was central in Salvini's speeches. The leader of the League falsely accused the center-left administration of the town to be linked to the cases (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2019). Salvini also tweeted "#BorgonzoniForPresident: Among the first measures there will be the attention to the weakest, the hospitals will be open at night, on Saturday and Sunday, as in Veneto."<sup>2</sup> (@matteosalviniofficial, 2019) implying that hospitals are not open at nights or during weekends in Emilia-Romagna. Moreover, he exploited the citizens' worry about criminality and drug dealing by going to the problematic neighborhood "Pilaastro" in Bologna, ringing the doorbell of an Italian-Tunisian family looking for a young man whom he accused of drug dealing (Giordano, 2020).

Tired of the events and the people of Emilia-Romagna being instrumentalized by Borgonzoni's electoral campaign to fuel hate, the founders of the Sardines decided it was time to act. In their manifesto, they comment on their awakening by writing "From now on, we will prevent politicians from mocking the population by manipulating objective data for the use of their sordid propaganda."<sup>3</sup> (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). But where could they begin?

## 2.2 – The first events

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<sup>2</sup> "#BorgonzoniPresidente: Tra i primi provvedimenti ci sarà l'attenzione ai più deboli, gli ospedali saranno aperti di notte, di sabato e di domenica, come in Veneto."

<sup>3</sup> "da oggi in avanti si impedisce al politico di turno di prendere in giro la popolazione, manipolando dati oggettivi a uso della propria squallida propaganda."



On November 14, 2019 Salvini would have organized a rally in Bologna to officialize Lucia Borgonzoni as the League's candidate at the regional elections (La Repubblica, 2019). The place chosen to host it was the PalaDozza, which can contain up to 5570 people. The Sardines founders thought the key to undermine Salvini's communication strategy was to contrast the fake news he spreads with facts and numbers. If the PalaDozza could host no more than 5570, their challenge would have been to gather more people on the same day, in the same city. So, on November 6 they created a Facebook event called "6000 Sardines" which would have taken place in Piazza Maggiore on the same day as Salvini's event (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). Piazza Maggiore had been instrumentalized by Salvini, who once declared it hosted 100000 people in one of his demonstrations. The four founders knew that was impossible, and that even 6000 people would be hard to fit in the square: hence the name Sardines. As previously mentioned, the founders have stated in many interviews and in their book, the name derives from the intention to gather as many people as possible in Piazza Maggiore, so the participants would be "packed in like sardines". Sardines are silent and peaceful beings, two characteristics that the Sardines see as totally opposed to Salvini's rhetoric (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). Moreover, sardines are small and weak when alone, but much stronger if they move together in a shoal. The goal of the Sardines will therefore be to stay united against the bigger danger, represented by Salvini and populism. In the webpage of the event, they write:

"The last time Salvini came to Bologna he said that there were 100,000 people in Piazza Maggiore to support him. A colossal hoax (they must have been 10.000 at best) which is in line with the style of the League of building consensus by exploiting gut feelings and lies.

On Thursday, November 14 Salvini will come back to Bologna, and this time he's serious: he wants Emilia Romagna, he wants us. But this time he can't cheat on numbers. He can't cheat on numbers. Because the Paladozza has a maximum capacity of 5,570 people. You can't go any further, because of safety and especially space problems. That's why we want to launch a flash-mob: we've measured that there is enough space for up to 6,000 people on the Crescentone of Piazza Maggiore. Nice and tight, of course, but these days it's better to tighten up than to get lost. Don't you think so?

How many times did you want to show your face and then changed your mind? How many times did you get a bellyache reading the comments under the League's posts? How many times did you say, "This can't be true"? Well, the time has come to change the inertia of populist rhetoric, to show that numbers matter more than bullying, that the head comes before the belly and that people come before social media accounts. And above all, the time has come to show that in BOLOGNA there's more of us than of them.

We're asking you 20 minutes today to save 5 years of YOUR future. We'll have cameras, video cameras, brains. We'll testify to everything. No flags, no parties, no insults. Create your own sardine and join the first fish revolution in history. If you don't have time to make your own sardine, we'll give out a thousand of them so we won't leave anyone out of the shoal.

At 8.30 p.m., when the "others" will enter the bubble of Paladozza to admire their nothingness, we will climb on the Crescentone, we will squeeze in until the signal comes loud and clear:

WE ARE 6,000 AND WE ARE REAL, what about you?

Who is joining the first fish revolution in history?" (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020)

The first event organized by the Sardines was a success: fifteen thousand people were present in Piazza Maggiore (Santarpia, 2019), and it received an enormous amount of media coverage. The newspapers, politicians, TV news who had tried to contrast Salvini's rhetoric finally found a spontaneous movement to side with, one that managed to gather more people than Salvini in a rally. Thanks to the media coverage they received, the Sardines movement became incredibly popular all over Italy. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of November in fact, The Sardines posted a message against populists on their Facebook page, to celebrate the first event's success and to declare their intentions.

"Welcome to the open sea.

Dear populists, you got it. The party is over.

For too long you have pulled the rope of our feelings. You strained it too much, and it broke. For years you have overturned lies and hatred about us and our fellow citizens: you have united truths and lies, representing their world in the way that suits you best. You took advantage of our good faith, our fears and difficulties to get our attention. You have chosen to drown your political content under an ocean of empty communication. Nothing remains of those contents.

For too long we have let you do it.

For too long you have ridiculed very serious issues to protect yourself by muddying the waters.

For too long you have pushed your most loyal followers to insult and destroy the lives of people on the web.

For too long we have let you be, as we were amazed, stunned, horrified by how low you could get.

Now you have awakened us. And you are the only ones who must be afraid. We gathered in a square, looked at each other, counted ourselves. It was pure energy. Do you know what we understand? Just look around to find out that we are many, and much stronger than you.

We are a people of normal people, of all ages: we love our homes and our families, we try to engage in our work, in volunteering, in sport, in leisure time. We are passionate about helping others, when and how we can. We love fun things, beauty, non-violence (verbal and physical), creativity, listening.

We still believe in politics and politicians with a capital P. In those who try it wrong, who think about their personal interest only after thinking about that of everyone else. Few remain, but they are still there. And we will return to give them courage, saying thank you.

There is nothing you need to free us from, we must get rid of your overwhelming omnipresence, starting from the internet. And we are already doing it. Because thanks to our fathers and grandparents you have the right to speak, but you do not have the right to have someone listen to you.

There are already hundreds of thousands of us, and we are ready to tell you, enough. We will do it in our homes, in our squares, and on social media. We will share this message until you get seasick. Because we are the people who will sacrifice themselves to convince our neighbors, relatives, friends, acquaintances that you have lied to them for too long. And rest assured that we will convince them.

You have gone too far from your murky waters and your safe harbor. We are free sardines, and now you will find us everywhere. Welcome to the open sea.

It is obvious that to think is inconvenient, even if the thinker is silent as a fish. Indeed, it is a fish. And like fish it is difficult to stop, as the sea protects it. How deep the sea is.

Signed, 6000 sardines”

[@6000sardine, 21/11/2019, Facebook]

The first rally of the Sardines was the first milestone for the movement. It prompted a great response all over Italy and spontaneous branches of the movement started to appear all over the national territory: in one month the protests organized by local Sardines will take place in 92 cities, even abroad (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). The four original Sardines write about this transition in their book. The main strength of the Sardines movement is the spontaneity of people's participation to the demonstrations: there is no point in institutionalizing the movement, creating hierarchies and formal mechanisms. The people who wanted to create a demonstration in their own cities simply had to contact the founders to have their event included in the Sardines' official Facebook page (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). But the activities of the demonstration would be entirely up to the local organizers, so they could guarantee real participation from the population, and adapt the beliefs of the Sardines to their own city. Active participation and inclusion through engaging activities remained the goal in all 92 cities, and the movement managed to remain credible and spontaneous in each rally. Some of the cities in which the Sardines gathered were Modena, Ferrara, Milan, Turin, and abroad in London and Berlin. After one month of demonstrations, media exposure, and interviews, the Sardines felt that it was time to organize a rally in Rome in order to officialize their presence at the national level and to have even more participants in a square than they ever had before. Moreover, the Sardines had received many critiques since their first event: the main one was that they had no contents to offer to the Italian political scene, and that they were only a movement "against" something, with no clear purpose. The Rome demonstration was therefore the right opportunity for the Sardines to propose their ideas to the public.

### **2.3 – The Sardines, a nationwide movement**

On 14 December 2019, exactly one month after their first flash mob in Bologna, the Sardines gathered again for a demonstration in Rome at Piazza San Giovanni. The event was supposed to coincide with the universalization of the movement, which had started only to prevent the rise of the right-wing coalition in Emilia-Romagna, to extend it to the whole country. According to the organizers, almost a hundred thousand people joined the rally in Piazza San Giovanni (Giuffrida, 2019). Rome's demonstration served the purpose of better clarifying the political stances of the Sardine movement. In fact, during the demonstration, Mattia Santori presented the movement's proposals to the people in

the square and to the Italian media, as reported by La Repubblica (2019). The proposals were articulated in six essential points that I have reported here translated in English.

1. "We demand that those who have been elected go to institutional headquarters to do politics instead of campaigning permanently".
2. "We expect anyone who holds the office of minister to communicate only through institutional channels".
3. "We demand transparency in the use that politics make of social networks".
4. "We demand that the world of information protect, defend and come as close as possible to the truth".
5. "We demand that violence, in all its forms, be excluded from the tones and contents of politics".
6. "We ask the political representatives to review the concept of security and, therefore, to repeal the security decrees currently in force"<sup>4</sup>.

As it is evident, five out of the six provisions expressed by the de facto leader of the Sardine Mattia Santori, which have been reported to be agreed on by the founders (La Repubblica, 2019), focus primarily on political communication, or on the formal aspects of politics. This appears to be a novelty: a social movement that advocates primarily against the use of certain words and tones used by politicians and for political transparency, condemnation of hate speech, laws against verbal violence is unprecedented in the Italian political scene.

What is even more surprising is the fact that so many people across the country were interested in the topic. This is a testimony of how much the right-wing populist rhetoric has impacted Italian politics, and how social media are rapidly changing the way leaders approach political communication. Online

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<sup>4</sup> 1. "Pretendiamo che chi è stato eletto vada nelle sedi istituzionali a fare politica invece che fare campagna elettorale permanente".

2. "Pretendiamo che chiunque ricopra la carica di ministro comunichi solamente su canali istituzionali".

3. "Pretendiamo trasparenza nell'uso che la politica fa dei social network".

4. "Pretendiamo che il mondo dell'informazione protegga, difenda e si avvicini il più possibile alla verità".

5. "Pretendiamo che la violenza, in ogni sua forma, venga esclusa dai toni e dai contenuti della politica".

6. "Chiediamo alla politica di rivedere il concetto di sicurezza e, per questo, di abrogare i decreti sicurezza attualmente vigenti".

communication strategies have become one of the most important factors for success in politics, and enormous amounts of money are being spent on them (Il Post, 2019). Because of the freedom and the immediacy of communication with the public provided by social media and the internet is general, the tones used in political communication have radically changed, becoming more direct and less institutional. This evolution is ideal for populist parties, which, in general, seek a more down to earth communication (Gerbaudo, 2018). The fact that the social media presence of politicians is becoming so crucial for their success is pushing them to “campaign permanently” as the Sardine said, and to make use of sensationalistic language as well as to exploit political events and themes to push their ideology.

The sixth point is the most specific one and it is also the only one that tackle a specific issue by proposing the repeal of a decree currently in force in Italy. The decree in question is about the management of security and immigration in the country: the so-called "Salvini Decree", which was approved under the first Conte government, supported by a coalition made up of the Five Star Movement and The League, and contained new provisions that abolished many protection measures for migrants and made it easier for the Italian state to deport them. With this stance, the Sardines take a step away from the anti-immigrant policies approved by right-wing populist. So, even though the movement claims to be independent from any formal political affiliation (De Marchis, 2019), the opposition to one of the key points of the contemporary Italian right-wing parties' agenda inevitably manifests the cultural and political roots of the movement. The Sardines movement, therefore, does not only oppose the formal aspects of right-wing populism, but rejects at least in part its ideology too (De Blasio, Giorgino, Mazzù, Orsina, 2020).

The day after the Rome demonstration the Sardines had their first national assembly in the Spin Time Labs building in Rome, an occupied building used for cultural and political purposes by the citizens. There, the organizers of the various events all over Italy gathered to discuss what had happened during the previous month, as well as the priorities for the future of the movement. Many interesting events were proposed at the assembly, all of them being thought out for the specific area in which they would take place. From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, for example the “Sardines’ relay” took place in Sicily. The Sicilian organizers described it as a “a journey all over Sicily to report infrastructural delays and tell the most urgent problems in each province. A hitchhiker Sardine will travel by different means and will visit municipalities or areas that are symbolic in regards to the crucial issues of the island: fight against the mafia, protection of the environment, solidarity and reception of migrants, work and development of the territory, the right to health, emigration.” (ANSA, 2020). This kind of events, being

organized by locals who know the inhabitants of their region, as well as the most crucial problems afflicting them are particularly effective in stimulating active participation.

In fact, after their biggest event and during their first national Assembly in Rome, the Sardines decided to focus not only on cities which had been their primary battlefield for the previous month, but also on peripheries and towns. These realities are often left out and they are the ones that feel the most abandoned. In these contexts, often isolated, populism can creep in more easily, since the occasions to connect with one another and discuss issues are more limited than in cities. From the 5th of January onwards, the Sardines organized walks, visited towns and workers to stimulate smaller realities to take part in the movement too. For example, they organized an 11 km walk from Castiglione dei Pepoli to Rasora, two towns in the Appennino mountains, in Emilia-Romagna. When interviewed by Open, Mattia Santori commented: "it was a prototype of the events that we would like the local sardines to organize. The beautiful thing about today that I will always keep in my heart is that it was not a flash mob of a few minutes. There was a special energy, even deeper than the one we breathed in the squares of Italy and the world: spending seven hours together, walking and talking without haste generated a confrontation full of ideas and proposals..." (Florio, 2020).

#### **2.4 – The latest events before the elections**

As the regional elections approached, the Sardines prepared the final events, to contrast the last rallies Salvini organized. To do so, they had to put all their effort in Emilia-Romagna again. On the 19th of January 2020, a new rally took place in Piazza VIII Agosto, in Bologna. This demonstration was different from all the others, as many nationwide famous artists performed on the stage in support of the Sardines' revendications. The square is symbolic for the citizens of Bologna, as it is dedicated to the day in which the partisans defeated the German troops and made them flee, liberating the city from the Nazi occupation. With the choice of this specific place for one of their most important demonstrations to date, the Sardines underline their political roots, which heavily draw from the Italian anti-fascist tradition.

Finally, the last day of electoral campaign came. On the 23rd of January, Salvini had organized his final rally in Bibbiano, which I already mentioned. The leader of the League had used the controversy about the children being taken away from their families on multiple occasions, because the town was at the time of the abuses administrated by the Democratic Party (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2019). The Sardines considered this strategy as an instance of manipulation of reality and instrumentalization of the whole community of Bibbiano. In order to understand the town's community better, the founders

organized an assembly inviting the citizens to tell their stories. Finally, after trying to book the square where Salvini and Borgonzoni would host their last events, but failing to do so, they sent a public message to the leader of the League through social media, saying that they would give up hosting a rally there if Salvini did the same (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). They received no response to the message. Therefore, they decided to organize a counter rally in another square in the town of Bibbiano, on the same day of the League's. It is important to observe how, even on the last day of electoral campaign, the two squares hosted the same battle that characterized it for the previous months: Salvini versus the Sardines, instead of Borgonzoni versus Bonaccini. The two candidates to the presidency of the region stayed in the shadow of these two opposed forces, but they made evidently different communicative choices. The right-wing candidate exploited the explosive presence of Salvini, which in turn was keen to be the protagonist of the election since he hoped that getting his candidate elected would grant him more power at the national level. On the opposite side, Bonaccini relied on a quieter campaign, centered on the successes of his previous mandate, and most importantly keeping distance from the Sardines. Bonaccini understood that being linked to the movement would undermine the Sardines identity as a spontaneous manifestation, and therefore nullify their activity. Salvini and Borgonzoni's rally heavily instrumentalized on the stories of the children's cases, aiming at the left-wing administration of the town. According to the founders, their demonstration gathered an enormously greater number of participants (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020).

After this extenuating electoral campaign which catalyzed the attention of the national media, the 26<sup>th</sup> of January arrived, and after the polls closed, the results started to come in. This was a topic moment in the Italian political scene. As I mentioned, the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna were relevant at the national level for two main reasons: on one side, if Borgonzoni won, Matteo Salvini could have assessed a heavy hit on the Conte government, as he could have claimed to have not only won in most of the Italian regions, but also to have brought a right-wing leader in the "red" Emilia-Romagna for the first time in republican history (Castigliani, 2020). On the other side, if Bonaccini won, it would have been a powerful signal from the Democratic Party, which had consistently reduced its consensus and the number of its supporters at the polls at national level. Additionally, since Salvini had been so present in the electoral campaign, many media reported that the public perceived the election as some sort of referendum on his overall popularity (Rubino & Testa, 2020), similarly to what happened in 2016 with Matteo Renzi, when the constitutional referendum held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December turned to a survey on his government.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, Stefano Bonaccini was re-elected as the governor of Emilia-Romagna, winning over Lucia Borgonzoni by approximately 8 percentage points (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2020). The



media attributed part of his success to the Sardines, who greatly contributed to contrasting Matteo Salvini's appeal on social media (Horowitz, Povoledo, 2020). Even though the concrete Sardines' contribution is hardly measurable, a number that helps understanding the impact of the movement is the voter turnout percentage: while at the regional elections of 2014 it was 37.76%, in 2020 it increased by 29,91% reaching the much higher 67,67% (Regione Emilia Romagna, 2020). Although of course many factors can contribute to the increase or decrease of voters, it is very likely that the Sardines had an impact in stimulating more people to go to the polls, both by encouraging active citizenship and by simply making the elections themselves way more visible by appearing on TV and newspapers. It is possible to state that the Sardines' main objective of making politics more participatory was accomplished.

## **2.5 – The aftermath of the regional elections**

After the regional elections, the public wondered what would be of the Sardines. Their social media remained very active after January 26, and on the 4th of February they announced their intention of becoming a more organized entity, but with the ambition of retaining their spontaneous character. To do that, they wrote on a post that they will undergo a process of “nationalization” of their themes, as well as deepen the relationship with the peripheries and local realities all over the Italian territory. Here I report part of the post in which the Sardines declare their future objectives.

“The target? To transform a phenomenon of genuine but uncontrolled social awakening into an organized and long-lasting reality, which will be able to take root in the territory and express its skills. To act as an embankment to demagogy. At the moment we have the engine of a Ferrari mounted on a Fiat 500 (which is better than the other way around) and from here to Naples we have to [metaphorically] build a house where anyone who believes in the values of sardines can feel welcomed.”<sup>5</sup> [6000sardine, 4/2/2020]. However, the advent of coronavirus underlined the limits of the Sardines movement. Since the beginning of March 2020, in fact, the DPCM of the 4<sup>th</sup> of March prohibits public demonstrations and rallies in Italy, and one of the main pillars of the Sardines movement collapsed. They had always insisted on the importance of being physically active in squares, as bodies cannot be manipulated like information online (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). People meeting in the main squares of Italian cities was the main factor contributing to the Sardines' visibility, as they were able to create an alternative to Salvini's rallies, and to mobilize

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<sup>5</sup> “Al momento abbiamo il motore di una Ferrari montato su una 500 (che comunque è meglio del contrario) e da qui fino a Napoli dobbiamo costruire una casa in cui chiunque crede nei valori delle sardine possa sentirsi accolto.”

citizens like only populist politicians usually manage to do nowadays. When this element could not be present anymore in the Sardines' strategy, they disappeared from the media for months. However, this does not mean that they did not make any progress: the founders published their book "Le Sardine non esistono" which tells their story and their main successes, and they experimented with new ways of manifesting ideas. For example, on the 12th of May they announced a flash mob in Piazza Maggiore, where the movement held its first event, with the aim of raising money to finance local theaters, which were obviously heavily impacted by the coronavirus pandemic (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2020). The atypical flash mob consisted in placing six thousand plants on the Crescentone, the central part of the square, and selling them. Acting on their declaration of intents that they posted on the 4th of February, the Sardines founders along with their local collaborators are now focusing on the next regional elections, on which they hope they will continue to have a positive impact in making people participate. Finally, on the 28th of May, the official Facebook page 6000 Sardine announced in a post that they had redacted twelve points of their new manifesto, which would be published one by one in the following days. The change from the six points elaborated for the rally in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome is astounding, and reflects the evolution of the movement, which gained a lot in complexity. I report them here.

- “1. Sardines believe in the protagonism of citizens. They promote active citizenship as a political practice, as an antidote to indifference, as a form of resistance to all kinds of populism, sovereignism, individualism and, in general, self-centered attitudes.
2. Sardines identify the soul of their Manifesto in the Italian Constitution: they promote its defense, its study and its application in everyday life.
3. Sardines repudiate all forms of violence: physical, verbal, digital, moral or methodological. If hatred is used to gain political consensus, Sardines respond by condemning it with creative actions based on the power of #participation and listening.
4. The Sardines were born in the physical world, and it is there that they intend to carry out their main action. The use of the web is instrumental in the pursuit of this goal as well as in the promotion and diffusion of initiatives that put beauty and critical thinking first and foremost.
5. Sardines stand for and defend the right to communicate information freely and accurately, protecting and supporting the democratic life of the country. They oppose fake news and desire everyone to be able to access information that is transparent and objective.
6. Sardines dialogue with all kinds of associations, civic and institutional, as long as they are openly anti-fascist. The dialogue takes place without any political, cultural, religious or gender-identity

prejudice. The main goal of the dialogue is to learn from reciprocal experiences and to acknowledge the value in diversity.

7. Sardines consider listening, solidarity, innovation and consciousness fundamental premises of all kinds of personal, social, economic and political development.

8. Sardines defend the ethical and cultural dimension of politics. They appreciate politics that make use of an accurate lexicon, acknowledge the importance of tones, and show respect towards all democratic institutions.

9. Sardines acknowledge complexity of problems as an opportunity to improve, learn and grow. In particular they invite to a collective reflection to free the public opinion from the influence of a disjunctive and reductionist mindset.

10. Sardines are people. As such, they accept fragility, they carry their burdens with fatigue, they welcome emotions.

They take care of themselves, of others and of the communities in which they live, compatibly with their resources and possibilities. Sardines value empathy.

11. Sardines do not talk about ecology: they practice it. They are not just anti-fascist, but openly non-violent and committed to a constant effort to be creative.

They are not happy only with the concept of "Europe", but they imagine a world as a "common home", in which privileges given at birth are seen as such, and therefore questioned.

Sardines do not swim on the surface of social relations, but they dive deep into human relations. They do not fear crises, but incompetence, easy consents and men who command alone.

Sardines do not define their political positions in words but in facts.

12. The Sardines do not exist: the symbol, the flag, and the mask you wear do not count. What counts are the concrete actions that every individual takes in their own community to protect the common Good, human dignity and collective well-being.” [6000sardine, from 29/5/2020 to 11/6/2020, Facebook posts]

## **2.6 - The Sardines on Television**

By reading the previous pages, it would be easy to think that the Sardines' popularity was entirely gained on the internet, thanks to the events published online and elaboration of their ideas on their accounts. However, that is not entirely true. The element that prompted the extraordinary rise to

notoriety of the Sardines was the consistent media coverage that they received on television (Falcioni, 2019). Right after the first rally organized in Piazza Maggiore, television was captivated by the Sardines phenomenon. Mattia Santori became the designated spokesperson for the Sardines movement: in November he took part to even three television shows per day (Falcioni, 2019). The first talk show to which he participated as a sardine was “Agorà” on November 18, where he declared that he did not want to gather people in Piazza Maggiore to go against politics but to "give a wake-up call to the people who slept and who allowed all this aggressive rhetoric that invades the web, squares, sports arenas to go on" (Santori, 2019). According to Massimo Falcioni, the networks in which the Sardines, or Santori specifically, appeared the most were La7 and the Rai channels, while Mediaset networks were deserted by the movement. The talk shows, much like newspapers, were enthusiastic to have found a spontaneous phenomenon to discuss and to counter Salvini’s massive media presence. Santori was always asked about Salvini, and often shown videos of him criticizing them, to which the Sardines’ spokesperson reacted live (Falcioni, 2019).

After the end of the election, the Sardines’ media exposure on television decreased significantly, as their presence on talk shows was only functional to tell about their rallies during the political campaign. However, there were a few exceptions. The Sardines underwent a ritual of passage in the Italian TV: they made an appearance in Maria De Filippi’s *Amici*, an extremely popular talent show watched by millions of people and particularly popular among the youth (La Repubblica, 2020). Other future important names in Italian politics appeared on the show and made a speech: the most famous one was Matteo Renzi.

### **3 – Chapter Two – The Sardines as an online social movement**

As I previously stated, in their book “Le Sardine non esistono” the founders of the Sardines state that theirs is not a movement. That may be because they fear the comparison with more structured and centralized movements that are present in the Italian political scene, like the Five Star Movement. They define themselves as a “motion of re-appropriation of thoughts, of ideas of society.” (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020). Is this auto analysis accurate in political science terms? The Sardines have been referred to as a movement in all the many articles that were written about them, as they seemed to embody the political role of a movement during the period preceding the regional elections of Emilia-Romagna.

### **3.1 – Social movements**

The “Sardines” are unanimously described as a movement. That is because they display a set of behaviors or a repertoire of contention, for example gathering in squares to communicate their message, or show their power, that are usually associated with movements (Tilly, 1986). However, because of the limited time they had to develop, it is hard to tell if they are going to fully develop into a movement with all the proper characteristics and what the future holds for them in Italian politics. It is necessary, then, in order to see if the Sardines share any characteristics with social movements, to briefly recall the history of social movements, as well as to analyze the reasons why they develop and their most common characteristics.

Social movements are a fundamental element for the functioning of democracies: they represent a spontaneous way of aggregating the citizens’ interests and they contribute transforming them into requests and eventually in reforms. In fact, non-institutionalized forms of participation, such as demonstrations, strikes and protests have an enormous impact on a country’s political life and on the formation of public opinion (Habermas, 1964).

Scholars do not unanimously agree on a single definition of social movement, as the subject is extremely faceted and continuously evolving. However, there is a general agreement on some of the basic functions and characteristics of social movements. The most exhaustive definition in this regard is the one elaborated first by Rootes (1999) and then by Diani (2000), which describes a social movement as a network of individuals, groups and organizations united by a common interest or concern for a single or a set of political issues, acting together “independently, but not separately from the realm of governmental institutions” (Meuleman and Boushel, 2014, 3). This general description includes all forms of activism under the name of social movements: from complex problems like climate change which involve multiple sub-issues, to movements focusing on a single, localized problem like the No-TAV in Northern Italy. The internal organization can enormously vary too: social movements can have different degrees of institutionalization, ranging from the highly institutionalized ones to the almost completely unformalized Sardines movement, which is what this thesis is going to focus on. Tilly (1977) attempts to define a “repertoire of contention”, which he speaks of as a “the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests”, which create a solid basis to analyze social movements based on their actions. Most of these are non-institutionalized, like protests, strikes and pamphleteering. However, the repertoire is continuously changing, as it is tied to the social context in which the movement exists in and the technologies available to it. In fact, even though it was met with

the disapproval of many scholars, the discourse on the repertoire of actions used by social movements is rapidly shifting to online action. There are many theories that have been influential in the realm of social movements and activism, and, because of the digital revolution many more are being developed as an attempt to explain its consequences on social movements.

### **3.2 - Social movements' history**

Many political and social processes are closely related with social movements' history. Tilly (2004) describes the processes that brought to the emergence to the phenomenon of social movements. The first modern social movements were in fact greatly influenced by the urbanization process, which started in the nineteenth century, and that led to larger human settlements, which aggregated people that were originally from different places but shared the same problems and goals. It is in fact in urban areas that early social movements developed thanks to the increased opportunity to interact, gather and organize. Another process that had a great impact on the emergence of social movements was that of industrialization, which created a new social class composed by city-based factory workers, or proletarians. Proletarians had the chance to organize their collective interests successfully, creating the most successful movements in the twentieth century. Economic wellbeing and material development were in fact the main themes tackled by social movements in that era, before shifting to non-material issues in the second half of the century (Pichardo, 1997). A huge contribution towards this shift was given by mass education policies and universities, which sensitized large parts of the population to postmodern themes such as climate change, women's rights, gay rights, and coordinated them.

The advent of the internet has allowed a great evolution in the way people communicate and how they form networks: anyone, including political leaders can speak their mind without having to be filtered by intermediaries, and citizens can join political groups or online movements with just a couple of clicks. This had repercussions on social movements, even though scholars do not agree on how deeply and substantially they were changed by the new media. Some scholars have in fact been skeptical about the future of movements in social media: Diani (2000) made a series of predictions about it, some of them proved to be true, like the possibility of designing more precise and faster political campaigns. However, some others were completely discarded, and, if looked at today, give us an idea of how fast social media and the internet's importance grew, becoming one of the greatest means of networking of the contemporary world. Diani predicted in fact that emotional involvement would be impossible to achieve, and that online "communities" would only be a continuation or the reflection of the ones already existing in the physical space (also Stromer-Galley, 2000), while nowadays it is clear that many

new communities flourished on the internet, especially thanks to social media and the faster spread of news and communication, originating new meanings and extremely impactful movements, making mobilization extremely easy.

It is essential to rely on a clear definition of what constitutes an online movement. According to Loader, “the term online social movements refers to the adoption and use by social movements and community activists of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as the internet and the World Wide Web” (Loader, 2003, p. 1319).

This includes both social movements that use ICTs as well as social movements that take place (exclusively) on the internet. In fact, the media used, the messages conveyed, the techniques of communication and the relationship between physical and virtual spaces all changed significantly.

The use of social media has heavily influenced the way in which social movements communicate their positions and their agenda. Nowadays, we witness the emergence of important social movements online, like the #MeToo and the Black Lives Matter movements. These movements articulate their thoughts primarily online, moving to physical demonstrations in a second phase. However, this was not always the case.

One of the first ever movements that grew in importance thanks to the use of rudimentary online tools is The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN movement in Mexico. It is typically identified as the first or one of the earliest manifestations of online activism (Sandoval-Almazan, Gil-Garcia, 2014). Even though the movement started off with violent political action, it was the communication of uncensored information via email that allowed the spread of news about the treatment of indigenous populations outside of the country and mobilized forces outside of it. In this case, the use of the internet is only limited to text sent via email. It was revolutionary because it allowed the spread of information despite the measures put in place by the government to prevent that. In this early stage, the internet and communication online were only seen as a “backup plan”: the main expression of the movement, and the way it originated were physical. The idea of using electronic mail only came up as a response to the impossibility to develop the movement further in its physical manifestations (Sandoval-Almazan, Gil-Garcia, 2014). So, although emails were essential for its success as they provided international significance and political pressure to the Mexican government, they were considered as the last resource, and the concepts and ideas promoted by the movement already existed, and did not undergo major changes under the influence of the internet.

The use of online tools by movements has immensely evolved since then. One peculiar example is represented by the Obama 2008 presidential campaign. Bimber (2014), who studied both the strategy

of 2008 and 2012 Presidential campaigns, wrote: “for many citizens favorable to Obama, the 2008 campaign exhibited some of the characteristics of a social movement, especially a sustained sense by a wide range of organizations and people that long-term problems in the status quo could be changed through public involvement” (Bimber, 2014, p 133). In this case, the internet was chosen as the primary medium to spread information about the aims and themes of the future president’s campaign. For the first time, the internet was not considered as an accessory, instead it was completely trusted as the main source of political affirmation and resource gathering medium. In this sense, it was hugely innovative, and it is often compared to the use of television by Kennedy in 1960 (Bimber, 2014).

One of the most common predictions made about online social movements by academics in the early days of research on the topic was that they are only a mere extension of existing offline environments and will fail to overcome the existing social structure (Stromer-Galley, 2000). However, the most recent and substantial development in online activism on brought to life most of the main contemporary social movements, including the Sardines. For these movements, the internet (and social media especially) is not only a way to expand a pre-existing movement’s horizons, or to have debaters engage on a pre-existing theme. Instead, we have new meanings and concepts originating on the internet, as well as new communities forming. For this type of movements, the online world is essential, and even when they organize physical demonstration in squares, their aim is often to become viral on the internet through the physical event: they make constant use of slogans, provocations, creative signs and catchphrases. Even though they pack squares, they look for real legitimation on the internet: the rallies are only instrumental to produce content that will go viral online. The demonstrations organized often consist of flash mobs, instead of the long demonstrations or marches that characterized traditional social movement. These flash mobs often include creative activities that the participants take part in, which are always filmed and photographed (De Blasio, Giorgino, Mazzù, Orsina, 2020).

### **3.3 – Classifying the Sardines as a Movement**

How can we classify the Sardines? They certainly share many characteristics of online social movements, as they were born on Facebook and because they share most of their ideas online. However, their communication does not only revolve around social media, but also around their many TV appearances. The Sardines in fact owe most of their success and visibility, especially at the national level, to traditional media. The movement received massive media coverage right after their first event, which made it be known by the public. Therefore, they are not comparable to those movements who developed entirely through discussions on the internet for years, and only after that they received media



coverage. Because of these reasons, the Sardines can only be partially described as an online social movement, especially if compared to complex and affluent phenomena like the BlackLivesMatter movement.

The Sardines have also been defined a grassroots movement, because of how they originated and their modus operandi. This classification seems to be very accurate when we compare its definition to the Sardines' actions and strategies.

According to the Webster's dictionary, a grassroots movement is one in which the people in a small area, or a region, constitute the basis for a political or social movement. Grassroots movements use collective action of a community at the local level to affect the national, international, or even global level (Gove, 1961). Grassroots movements work by elaborating strategies based on bottom-up decision-making, and for this reason are they are often considered more spontaneous than those which act according to traditional power structures. (Yenerall, 2017)

Grassroots movements encourage the members of a community to contribute to public life by taking action for their people and the places they live in. This definition describes very well many of the actions and behaviors of the Sardines: the six points of their program, for example, were decided by being discussed with the participants of the movement, and even though the Sardines started off as a movement with a local influence and aim, it then developed in order to count on a national level, proposing an alternative to populism to the whole country. Among the strategies utilized by grassroots movements we also find many other points in common with the strategies used by the Sardines, like fundraising and or encouraging political conversation. Finally, they focus primarily on increasing mass participation in politics.

Grassroots movements benefited immensely from the rise of social media and the usage of the web. In fact, they often use hashtags to organize on a large scale on social networks. Some examples include the BlackLivesMatter movement and the MeToo movement, which promoted their values and ideas through the use of hashtags and tweets. This aspect is evident in in the Sardines movement too, which gained its initial success by posting its first event on Facebook and explaining their vision and goals online, so that everyone who shared the same concerns as them could have the opportunity to engage and participate.

Astroturfing refers to political action that is meant to appear to be grassroots, that is spontaneous and local, but in fact comes from an outside organization, such as a corporation or think tank (Barkan, 2012). It means pretending to be a grassroots movement, when the agenda and strategy are controlled by a hidden, non-grassroots organization like parties or lobbies. This critique has been addressed to

the Sardines movement too, in various occasions: they were in fact accused by Matteo Salvini of being financed by center-left parties like the Democratic Party.

Finally, it is possible to state that the Sardines are an online social movement, as they share many characteristics with contemporary movements of that kind such as the #MeToo movement. For example, they organize their events and elaborate their ideas primarily online. Moreover, their demonstrations are often short, and thought out to become viral on the internet. As for their aims, the Sardines also share some aspects with grassroot movements, as they are locally based. However, they are better identifiable as online social movements.

#### **4 – Chapter Three - The causes of the Sardines’ birth: Matteo Salvini’s League**

I believe that the Sardines’ emergence can be traced back to two main causes. One, which was explicit and declared by the founders of the movement, was the fight against Salvini’s rhetoric and agenda, carried out specifically by stopping his party’s candidate Lucia Borgonzoni, from being elected as governor of Emilia-Romagna. Salvini’s party, the League, has often been addressed to as populist exactly because of his way of communicating and because of the main themes of his political agenda. I have already described the context in which the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna took place, along with the reasons why Borgonzoni winning could have represented a great opportunity for Salvini. This could be defined as the contingent event that facilitated the Sardines’ development as a movement. However, many of the Sardines founders’ declarations suggest that the cause for the creation of their movement might be much deeper. I have already reported the most striking one: at the beginning of their book they tell an anecdote about how days before founding the Sardines they were asking themselves when the last time they felt like active citizens was. They could not find an answer to this question. The second, more profound cause of the Sardines’ birth is related to the crisis, or simply the evolution, of party democracy.

In the following pages, I will go on and analyze both the causes that contributed to the birth of the Sardines movement. Firstly, I will analyze the League’s agenda and rhetoric after having given an introduction about populist parties. Secondly, I will present an overview of the second cause, explaining how parties, citizens and elites have changed in the past decades, and how their evolution has produced a new political context which I believe is linked to the emergence of the Sardines movement.

## 4.1 – Populist parties

To reach the aim of describing the Leagues' political agenda and its communication strategy, a general introduction to populist parties is needed first.

Populist parties characterized the political arenas of most European countries during the last decade (Mudde, 2016). Although they are currently at the center of attention, populist parties have been around for a long time. In fact, one of the first attempts to conceive of populism as a uniform phenomenon goes back to 1956, when Edward Shils defined it in very negative terms as “an irrational protest ideology”, comparing it to Nazism. However, even though populism as a political phenomenon has been part of the academic debate since then, it remains a highly contested concept and has been described as a ‘notoriously vague term’ very often. (Canovan, 1999)

Thus the precise definition of populism remains rather obscure also to the general public, who got used to the term being used on television to describe certain parties during the past decade, although what characterizes a party as populist was never totally clear. That is because populism manifests itself differently depending on the contextual conditions (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, Büchel, 2017): it can be right-wing populism, represented by parties such as the League in Italy, or National Front in France; or left-wing, two of the most prominent cases being Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain (other than South American populist parties). Even this distinction, however, remains too generic: among right-wing populist parties, for example, there are some for which the anti-immigration element is the point of their agenda (just like for Salvini's League), and others for which the most important themes to push forward is the anti-EU sentiment (UKIP in the UK). This variety of intents and ideas perhaps makes it even more difficult for the general public to identify populist parties, thus contributing to it being a recurrent phenomenon.

Even considering the big differences that set European populist parties apart, it is still possible and extremely useful to try to formulate a definition for populism and delineate some basic common traits. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) introduced one of the most well-established definition of populism. They describe populism as an ideology which distinguishes and opposes a virtuous, victimized and homogeneous people from a set of privileged elites and dangerous ‘others’ (which might be immigrants, or the EU for example) who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.

## 4.2 – The League’s Communication strategies

Populism can thus be understood as a ‘thin’ (or less elaborate) ideology (Mudde, 2004), which is what gives its main actors the necessary flexibility to adapt their beliefs in the most convenient way according to the situation, and to enrich it with ideas from ‘full’ ideologies like nationalism, socialism, or liberalism (Kriesi, 2014). That is the reason why it sometimes appears that populist parties from different countries have little in common.

Kriesi’s main critique to new social movements theory (which can be extended to the whole discourse related to contemporary movements) is that research is based on and extends primarily to leftist political phenomena. That is because it tends to only look at typically left-wing repertoires of action: occupations of piazzas, for example. That does not mean, however, that the citizens who “belong” to other parts of the political spectrum do not have their own alternative ways to express their rage or disappointment with the *status quo*.

In fact, according to Kriesi (2014), during the digital age, and especially with the emergence of right-wing populism, right-wing politicians have been at the center of attention, using the new social media strategically and gathering their voters online. The new communicative style has been extremely successful and has given voters the opportunity to express their opinions in new ways.

For the purpose of this thesis, the right-wing populist party that I will take a closer look at is obviously the League, and its Leader Salvini, the main target of the Sardine’s criticism. Specifically, it is extremely important to understand The League’s communication strategy online, which was and remains a fundamental factor for its success, and that the Sardines critique harshly.

Similarly to other populist leaders who seem to work very well with social media (Gerbaudo, 2018), Matteo Salvini, the leader of the right-wing Italian populist party The League, has the most followed Facebook page as a politician in Europe, with a total of four million likes, leaving far behind respectable colleagues such as Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron (Pinna, 2020). Salvini’s communicative strategy completely revolutionized the party itself, which from an ethno-regionalist party advocating for the independence of the north of Italy became an anti-immigration national populist right-wing party (Albertazzi, Giovannini, Seddone, 2018). This transformation is not to be taken lightheartedly: a complex and sophisticated political and communicative strategy has been implemented by Salvini and his staff to achieve this profound change. Their effort was repaid as the League resulted to be Italy’s first party throughout all 2019 (YouTrend, 2019). This huge success in terms of approval by the public is substantially due to the Captain’s (how Salvini is referred to by his supporters on social media) way of communicating on the internet.

As I previously stated, the populist rhetoric is easily translated into social media content, in the form of words, photos and videos (Gerbaudo, 2018). Populist parties in Europe have been quicker to spot the many opportunities new technologies, specifically social media platforms, present to mobilize the constantly increasingly disenchanted electorate. In a reinterpretation of Bracciale and Martella's work (2017), Sorice and De Blasio (2018) provide a table of "indicators of populist style" which can be useful to analyze populist parties' and thus Matteo Salvini's communication on social media. Many of them perfectly describe Salvini's published content.

The many characteristics reported by Bracciale and Martella range from the "simplification" of complex concepts in order to exploit them to create content understandable by the generic internet user (Gerbaudo, 2018) and polarize their opinion, to "taboo breaking" used to fight political correctness and take sides against the elites.

Salvini's content on social media (which is homogeneous across all platforms regardless of the different types of users that use them) is typically populist according to almost all these criteria, however some of them reflect particularly well his way of communicating. I argue that four indicators are particularly appropriate to describe it.

**Victimhood** is constantly present in Salvini's account, who often responds to his critics. His goal is to embody the figure of the leader who does not hold back when faced with adversities, and who keeps fighting with and for his people. When attacked, for example when he appeared simultaneously on many magazines' covers that tried to discredit him, he tries to be superior by answering with benevolent statements such as:

"To hate and disdain we reply with a smile and with forgiveness! I love you Friends."<sup>6</sup>

—Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] 26/07/2018, Twitter

which make him look both kind and unapologetic. Moreover, when Salvini's opponents try to attack him (often using mass media and verified sources), the only result is that he gets even more attention, as well as the chance to reply to the critics on his own social media pages, which favor him. For example, when commenting the possibility of being processed for not letting an Italian military ship full of migrants dock in an Italian port, he stated in an Instagram post:

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<sup>6</sup> "A odio e disprezzo rispondiamo col sorriso e col perdono! Vi voglio bene Amici."

“(...) Let them process me and incarcerate me if they want, I always acted in defense of my Country and in favor of Italians’ security. And I would do it, or rather I will do it again, a thousand more times.”<sup>7</sup>

—Matteo Salvini [ @matteosalviniofficial] 23/12/19, Instagram

**Emotionalization.** Building an emotional link with his supporters is clearly one of Salvini’s main communication tools. This is achieved by sharing touching experiences, frequently using emojis, evoking nostalgia for a bygone era, or even by publishing pictures of pets and children, which are assured to go viral in social media platforms and make him appear as an empathetic, kind person. For example, he posted a picture of him and his daughter hugging, and he commented:

“By taking my princess in my arms, all the insults and threats against me disappear.

I love you, friends.”<sup>8</sup>

—Matteo Salvini [ @matteosalviniofficial] 19/08/19, Instagram

According to a study conducted by Brader (2005), while negative feelings get the attention and engagement in media, it is the positive feelings that create consensus and approval. Moreover, when the public is first stimulated with content that conveys fear, but then reassured with positive, calming statements or pictures, it will be likely to trust and “like” the person who is publishing the content.

**Instrumental actualization**, which is the act of exploiting specific events in order to support a certain political thesis, cherry picking suitable occurrences to convince people that they are right (Krämer 2014). This technique is particularly effective because internet users tend to live in their filter bubbles, and they are rarely able to encounter different perspectives on issues (Pariser, 2011). Salvini uses this technique to keep his public constantly entertained and engaged: he chooses a “fight of the week” to create new enemies for his followers to rage against. Some examples include other politicians, specific cases of crimes committed by immigrants, or political movements (like the former ally Five Star Movement, or the Sardines movement). Even the importance of the events he chooses can vary: sometimes it is an occurrence of international importance, while in other occasions he opts for a random episode of violence or malfunctioning in institutions. For example, on the 31<sup>st</sup> December of 2019 he posted a video on Instagram, commenting:

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<sup>7</sup>“Mi processino e mi incarcerino pure se credono, ho sempre agito a difesa del mio Paese e della sicurezza degli Italiani E lo rifarei, anzi lo rifarò, mille volte.”

<sup>8</sup> “Prendendo in braccio la mia principessa, tutti gli insulti e le minacce contro di me scompaiono d’incanto. Vi voglio bene Amici.”

“Near Cosenza, three boys beat up a disabled elder. For fun. And they posted the videos of the violence on social media. I’m disgusted. Rather than civic education in school, maybe a year of military or civil service would have stopped them from becoming criminals”<sup>9</sup>

—Matteo Salvini [@matteosalviniofficial] 23/12/19, Instagram

As it is evident in the post, even though the issues raised by the League’s leader are generally controversial and highly polarizing, his solutions are packaged in a way to be viewed as common sense. Instrumental actualization never ceases to be useful to a populist: even when he was part of the government for more than a year between 2018 and 2019, Salvini still managed to identify an external enemy to blame for the people’s problems. This allowed him to overcome the risk of changing his image and becoming too close to the elite, and eventually becoming the part of the system he needs to shun to get votes.

**Informality** is probably the most striking characteristic of the Captain’s social media accounts. Even his nickname was carefully created by his staff to make him seem friendly to the eyes of his followers. His videos and his live streams are purposefully created to look unprofessional and like any common citizen could have posted them. This apparent unsophistication brings people closer to him and reinforces his image of “common man” who is guiding his peers toward a goal. A relevant percentage of his posts does not directly relate to any political issue, having the only aim of being “relatable” to his followers in every possible way, not just ideologically.

“Ready to roll the dough! Who else is cooking?”<sup>10</sup> —Matteo Salvini [matteosalviniofficial] 15/12/19, Instagram

“Waiting for Ibra...”<sup>11</sup> —Matteo Salvini [matteosalviniofficial] 27/12/19, Instagram

In fact, Salvini shares pictures of his food (which is a hundred percent made in Italy, as he often reminds his public), of his kids, of his favorite football team and of the places he visits. The message that is constantly being conveyed is “I am one of you, you can trust me.” His goal is in fact to build a high degree of intimacy with his supporters by making them feel like they share aspects of their life, interests and goals.

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<sup>9</sup> In provincia di Cosenza tre ragazzi picchiano un anziano invalido. Per divertimento. E pubblicano i video delle violenze sui social. Che schifo.

Oltre all’Educazione Civica a scuola, un anno di servizio militare o civile forse gli avrebbe impedito di diventare dei criminali.

<sup>10</sup> Pronto per tirare la sfoglia!

Chi di voi sta cucinando?

<sup>11</sup> “Aspettando Ibra...”

### **4.3 – The Sardines’ communication style and Salvini’s response**

As I already pointed out, the language used by Salvini in his social media accounts is one of the main problems in Italian contemporary politics according to the Sardines. Issues related to communication, the use of words, or more in general issues that are apparently formal, prevail in their “program” composed by six main points. This could appear as an exaggeration on their part, but it underlines a fundamental evolution in the contemporary political scene: the traditional media and language, as well as the conventional way of checking and spreading news are losing their authority, leaving space for the explosive and innovative communication of social media. For the Sardines, this a heartfelt issue.

But how does the Sardines’ communication style differ from the one used by Salvini? Did they find a way to propose an effective political communication that does not involve the typical populist rhetoric? It is very evident that the Sardines’ style is the opposite of the one employed by the League’s leader: even by just giving a glance to their Instagram and Facebook pages we notice some evidently different features. The frequency with which the Sardines post is extremely lower compared to Salvini. The green leader posts on average once every two hours, while the Sardines publish content on their pages a lot less frequently (Falci, 2018). Visually, the two accounts are very different too: the Sardines’ page’s graphic is very curated and cohesive, while Salvini’s seems purposefully made up by unrelated posts, and lacking an overall styling in order to look more genuine to his public. Unsurprisingly, the most striking difference when confronting the two pages is the language used and length of the posts. While Salvini’s captions are often very short and concise, the Sardines articulate long comments, refusing to deny the complexity of certain issues. Their online communication reflects the ninth point of their manifesto very well: “The Sardines acknowledge the complexity of problems as an opportunity to improve, learn and grow. In particular, they invite to a collective reflection to free the public opinion from the influence of a disjunctive and reductionist mindset.”[@6000sardine, 6/6/20, Instagram]. The first text that they posted on their Facebook page to promote their event in Piazza Maggiore was a long reflection on active participation and populism. That event being the one that sparked the interest in a grassroots movement like the Sardines, makes it possible to affirm that the Sardines’ followers are interested in seeing complex thoughts on the internet, as well as having productive discussions on important themes.

Social media constitutes the realm in which the Sardines were born and in which they could explain their objectives in the most convincing way possible, so much that they were able to gather more than six thousand people in a square when they organized their first event. However, television was essential



for the continuative success of the Sardines, especially when the movement started to gain participants from outside the Emilia-Romagna region.

The leader of the League was visibly worried about the impact that the Sardines could, and in fact had, on the citizens of Emilia-Romagna. He responded to the Sardines through various posts and live streams on his social media. The day after his event at the PalaDozza he accused them of having organized a violent rally.

(...) no respect for those who, while protesting against us, throws rocks and bottles against the police and the Carabinieri. (..)<sup>12</sup>

Matteo Salvini [@matteosalviniofficial] Instagram post, 15/11/19

A few days later, he launched a social media campaign with the hashtag “#gattiniconsalvini” or “#kittenswithsalvini”, posting a picture of a cat eating a sardine. The caption of the image reads:

“what could be sweeter and more beautiful than kittens?

p.s. Do your feline children like sardines and little fishes? post the picture in the comments on my Facebook page or on Twitter! Meow!”<sup>13</sup>

Matteo Salvini [@matteosalviniofficial] Instagram post, 19/11/19

The hashtag was used during the whole electoral campaign, with Salvini and his followers publishing pictures of cats eating sardines.

The most politics-related critique moved against the Sardines by Salvini was the accusation of astroturfing. Salvini publicly accused the movement of being financed by the Democratic Party, as an attempt to undermine their credibility as a spontaneous, and independent movement. The Sardines’ spokesperson Santori immediately denied this, and counterattacked by accusing Salvini of, once again, spreading news without having any proof (Il Post, 2019).

#### **4.4 - The crisis of party democracy**

In their book, the four founders of the Sardines state many times that they are “four normal thirty-year old”<sup>14</sup> (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020), to underline the normality of the people who

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<sup>12</sup> “Nessun rispetto per chi invece, per protestare contro di noi, lancia sassi e bottiglie verso Polizia e Carabinieri.”

<sup>13</sup> “Ai vostri bambini felini piacciono sardine e pesciolini? Mettete la foto nei commenti! Miaow! 🐱  
#gattiniconSalvini”

<sup>14</sup> “ci siamo noi, quattro trentenni come ce ne sono tanti in Italia.”

participate in the movement. The substantial objective of the Sardines is in fact making common citizens become politically active, helping them become participants in their country's social and political life. So, while it can be stated that the short-term aim of the movement was to not let Salvini's party win the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna, I believe that the long-term project of the movement consists in radically changing the approach of Italian citizens to politics. Their short term goal can be said to be motivated by the affirmation of populism on social media, and by the language it uses, but the long term one is linked to another substantial issue which characterizes many contemporary political systems: the crisis of parties as the traditional definition describes them (Mair, 2013).

Nearly all Western democracies are based on the system of representativeness, or indirect democracy: the citizens, rather than taking action directly by voting laws or participating in the government, delegate elected officials as their representatives. This kind of democracies are founded on the principle of distinction, described by Manin in 1997. According to the author, "representative government was instituted in full awareness that elected representatives would and should be distinguished citizens, socially different from those who elected them" (Manin, 1997, p 94). At the center of representative democracies' political life are parties, whose role is to interpret and elaborate the citizens' needs and ideas, and to represent them in the parliament (Sartori, 2005). In a representative democracy, the fundamental political action is the vote: citizens elect the candidates who will represent their interests in the parliament, who will formulate laws, and be part of the government. However, voting turnout in the majority of countries that adopt this system has been constantly decreasing in the last decades (Mair, 2005), with the exception of those countries in which voting is mandatory.

Many critiques have been made to the contemporary representative system. According to Robert Michels in fact, most representative democracies follow a path of centralization of power until they evolve into oligarchies, even though they maintain their formal democratic structure. The sociologist states that all the organizations, such as parties and states end up being ruled by a leadership class. This class, even though it is elected, does not absolve the function of "serving the people" and does not necessarily pursue their interests (Michels, 1993). This phenomenon is called "Iron law of oligarchy" by Michels. Adolf Gasser, who drew on Michels' studies, elaborated a list of characteristics that a representative democracy should have to avoid evolving into an oligarchy. The core of his theory can be expressed with one concept: society must be built from bottom to top (Gasser, 1947). The participation of the citizens to the public sphere is what makes the difference and prevents representative democracy from being an "empty" concept.

#### **4.5 – Popular withdrawal**

In his book *Ruling the void: the hollowing of party democracy*, Peter Mair describes the phenomenon of “popular withdrawal” (Mair, 2013), or the increasing disengagement from mainstream politics in nearly all western democracies. He identifies a series of more or less evident trends, describing them as the symptoms of the people’s growing disinterest in politics. As I previously mentioned, voter turnout has been slowly but steadily decreasing in western countries. Even though the percentages of the decrease differ among them, the last decade has been the one which saw the least amount of participation in terms of voting since the afterwar period (Solijonov, 2016). One of the other trends that underline this phenomenon are the steep decline in party membership. That is related to the fact that party loyalty is quickly declining as well. If in previous decades voting for a certain party was part of an individual’s identity, now this is becoming less and less observed in the newer generations. What is increasing instead, is the electoral volatility, or the propension of voters to change their political preferences multiple times throughout their lives. In fact, more and more citizens choose the candidate or the party they are going to vote for days before the elections, showing little attachment to any political side (Mair, 2013). But what is this change of behavior due to? Many scholars have proposed their explanations, although all of them remain partial and in any case too complex to be thoroughly explored in this thesis. However, I will report some examples of the reasons that are considered to have at least in part contributed to the declining rate of turnout at elections and to overall participation to “mainstream” or party politics. One of the most striking ones is the frequency with which government coalitions can change and involve parties that on paper should be opposed to each other. The most recent example of this phenomenon is the change from the “green-yellow” government to the “red-yellow” one in Italy in the past two years. In 2018, the Five Star Movement was the first party at the Italian political elections, followed by the Democratic party, and then by the League (*Dipartimento per gli Affari Interni e Territoriali*, 2018). The Five Star movement and the League created a coalition in the Parliament and formed a government, with Giuseppe Conte as the President. At that point Conte was an underdog, and he was considered a good candidate by both the yellows (Five Star Movement) and the greens (The League), who knew that their leaders, respectively Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini, would have had important ministries in the government. In the summer 2019 the yellow-green government collapsed under the will of Salvini, who was hoping to return to the polls as soon as possible in order to bank on his growing success and approval rate (Custodero & Rubino, 2019), and finally form a government without having to compromise with another party. Surprisingly, Italy did not go to vote again: a new coalition formed by the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party emerged. The two parties were able to form a new government, leaded once again by Giuseppe Conte.

Therefore, Conte has been the political leader of the country alternately receiving the support of all three major parties in Italy. If the prime minister does not change when the coalition in the government changes, why should the citizens be bothered with voting?

As I previously mentioned, the Sardines' founders describe their feelings about the lack of participation of citizens in politics in their book *Le Sardine non esistono*:

“We wonder if we remember the last elections in which we took part as active citizens, as people with something to say and do, as well as material executors of an eloquent calligraphic trait: “X”. An “X” which is certainly a sign of participation in the democratic life of the country, but this time it will not be enough. We are afraid that the “X”, which only thirty-seven percent of the people of Emilia-Romagna decided to put on the ballots at the last round of elections, is now not enough to defend the fundamental principles and values of the land that raised us. We feel that this “X” has been experienced for too long as an expression of a sort of social illiteracy, a ritual in which many recognize the exhaustion of rights and duties of citizens, when that sign should instead be a simple starting point. The question we ask ourselves anticipates an almost obvious answer: no, we do not remember elections experienced by citizens as protagonists”<sup>15</sup> (Garreffa, Morotti, Santori, Trappoloni, 2020).

This is the fundamental cause of the birth of the Sardines Movement: other than the destructive attempt of the contemporary populist parties at making citizens engage in politics by exploiting the most critical issues in the national public debate, there has been no attempt from the so called “traditional parties” to reinvent themselves. No serious attempt has been made to make political life in Italy participatory again.

#### **4.6 – The evolution of parties**

I have stated that political parties are the main actors in a political system based on representation. But what exactly should the functions of political parties be? Many political scientists have answered this

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<sup>15</sup> Ci chiediamo se questo messaggio sia accettabile, se ricordiamo le ultime elezioni alle quali abbiamo preso parte come cittadini attivi, come persone con qualcosa da dire e da fare, oltre che come esecutori materiali di un eloquente tratto calligrafico: «X». Una «X» che è certamente segno di partecipazione alla vita democratica del paese, ma questa volta non basterà. Ci attraversa il timore che quella «X», che solo il trentasette per cento degli emiliano-romagnoli ha deciso di apporre sulle schede all'ultima tornata elettorale, ora non sia sufficiente a difendere principî fondamentali e valori propri della terra che ci ha cresciuti. Ci attraversa la sensazione che quella «X» sia da troppo tempo vissuta come espressione di una sorta di analfabetismo sociale, un rituale nel quale in tanti riconoscono l'esaurirsi dei diritti e dei doveri dei cittadini, quando quel segno dovrebbe essere invece un semplice punto di inizio. La domanda che ci poniamo anticipa una risposta quasi ovvia: no, non ci ricordiamo di elezioni vissute da cittadini «protagonisti».

question: the following list of tasks carried out by parties in representative democracies is a synthesis of the works of Sartori and Mair.

The most prominent function of parties is the articulation of their voters' interests and issues (Sartori, 2005). Based on those, political parties should proceed to articulate programs oriented at their own version of the 'common good': they should therefore come up with policies aimed at realizing the citizens interests. Another aspect of political parties' action is the search and recruitment of political leaders, as well as their mobilization towards the vote.

Finally, political parties should improve the fundamental aspect of participation of citizens in the public realm (Mair, 2005). Parties should act as motors of public participation, and they should educate citizens and their members to the principles of democracy. In this normative description, parties are fundamental to include citizens in decision making, and therefore to avoid the realization of the "Iron law of Oligarchy".

The reality of political parties is very different from the theory that describes them. Even though they have the role of elaborating the interests of the citizens, they seem inadequate to address the urgent problems of our times. It seems that parties are not capable of promoting the political participation of the citizens: not only citizens have gotten more and more indifferent to politics (Mair, 2005), but they also do not care about elections, and the voter turnout has never been lower (Solijonov, 2016). It looks like parties are undergoing substantial transformations, and the gap between what they should do according to the normative description of parties by political scientists and what they realistically do is widening.

The "popular withdrawal" phenomenon is only one side of the coin when referring to the crisis of party democracy. As I mentioned earlier, contemporary parties are very different from the ones of the past decades, and they have extremely different functions from the ones that characterized postwar democracies (Mair, 2013). Contemporarily to popular withdrawal, in fact, we are also witnessing the "withdrawal of the elites" (Mair, 2013). The ruling class is losing its role as representatives of the people that elected them, and so are the parties. Mair (2013) stated that parties, because they are unable to perform their normative functions, instead of being the link between citizens and institutions they are becoming an instrument of the state. As this concept becomes more and more established, the people chosen to govern and the ones that are part of political institutions are perceived as part of an elite.

With the elites withdrawing in institutions as a branch of the state and citizens disengaging from conventional politics, a void is created (Mair, 2013), which I believe until now has been filled in two ways.

#### **4.7 – The consequences of the crisis of party democracy**

When the political class is perceived as distant and labeled as a caste or more vaguely as an “other”, in this case an elite, citizens look for an alternative that they perceive is closer to them. In this political context, it becomes very easy for populist leaders to take on the role of the genuine leaders who are close to the people and understand them unlike the elites. Populist will attribute to this “elite” all kind of problems and make themselves appear as the true representatives of the people instead. On the right side of the Italian political spectrum, this is the strategy used by Salvini in Italy. The League’s leader uses the techniques I described in chapter four in order to keep people engaged.

On the left, instead, all attempts of political engagement were unsuccessful. The left side of the political spectrum has been the target of all sorts of accusations: on various occasions mainstream leftist parties have been described as detached from reality, both by populist leaders who describe their political opponents as a caste to appeal to the lower classes who feel betrayed by them. This kind of critiques have been addressed to them by scholars too. For example, in the book “Sardine: fenomenologia di un movimento di piazza”, Giovanni Orsina describes the contemporary leftist parties as a political entity that lost an important pillar of its identity, the representation of the lower classes, in favor of other principles, such as the international dimension (De Blasio, Giorgino, Mazzù, Orsina, 2020). This theory shares a lot with the concept of “withdrawal of the elites” described by Mair in his posthumous book.

The Sardines, however, tried to fill the void of participation from below by stimulating genuine participation instead of from above, by creating a party. A party, or another institutional instrument that would be tied to the “elite”, would have been inadequate to tackle the issue of scarce participation in traditional politics. Therefore, they created an alternative to right-wing populism that was able to engage citizens without making use of the populist rhetoric, which they find destructive. However, it seems that this aspect is not fully engrained in the Sardines’ political conscience. In fact, one interesting aspect about the Sardines movement is that they “demand”, as in their six points, that politicians work and communicate exclusively through official institutions. However, they were a successful political entity because they did the exact opposite, just in a different way from their natural enemy Salvini. If they became a party, like many commentators suggested after the successful experiment of participation in Emilia-Romagna, they would lose the spontaneity that characterized them (De Blasio,

Giorgino, Mazzù, Orsina 2020). The Sardines are the embodiment of a new way of engaging citizens which is the opposite of what mainstream parties are doing. They represent not only the evolution of party democracy, but also the more constructive alternative to populist parties, which need to use cherry-picking of events, spectacularize politics and to use other strategies elaborated to keep their electorate engaged. The Sardines, instead, do not subscribe to this method, and instead do not attack elites, but want to stimulate discussion and participation to public life.

## **5 – Conclusion**

The report on the events and ideas proposed by the Sardines was a fundamental point of reference for the analysis of the movement as a political subject, as it was useful for both purposes of clarifying its nature as a social movement and of identifying the causes of its birth. In fact, after having retraced the Sardines' history by describing their main events and their various manifestos, I can state that the Sardines are a movement, specifically an online movement initially focused on a local problem. While tackling the local issue, however, they managed to involve an enormous number of citizens throughout the country, discovering that their cause was important to many outside their area too. The movement was heavily influenced by social media and the internet, which were necessary but not sufficient for their success. The Sardines were in fact granted a great amount of media coverage by television and newspaper, which was highly beneficial to the movement. Their main objectives consisted in preventing the League's candidate from winning the regional elections, and in making the citizens of their region participate more actively in politics. Although there is no research on the impact that the Sardines had yet, given the publicly available data about the Emilia-Romagna regional elections, it is possible to say that the main goals of the Sardines have been achieved. Stefano Bonaccini won the elections Emilia-Romagna collecting 51% of the preferences, and voter turnout increased from 37% in 2014 to 67% in 2020 (Regione Emilia Romagna, 2020) proving a substantial shift in participation. In the thesis, I have also investigated the causes of the emergence of the Sardines. First, I have analyzed what is considered the most direct cause, which is Salvini's rhetoric and agenda, pinpointing the reasons why the Sardines thought his party winning the elections would have been dangerous. I have found that many of the communicative strategies used by Matteo Salvini on social media are based on precepts shared by all contemporary right-wing parties, such as the attack of the elites and the defence of a common identity of the people from an external menace. In the analysis, it is easy to identify those elements that constituted a concern for the founders of the Sardines: his tendency to decontextualize single events in order to promote his political agenda, his aggressive tones and his indiscriminate attacks to the "elite". Finally, I exposed what I identified to be the deeper reason at the basis of the

Sardines' birth. The crisis of traditional parties, and the concepts of withdrawal of the people of the elites are what triggered the need for a spontaneous movement that aims at making people engage more with politics. The Sardines unconsciously attempt to solve a profound and deep issue that characterizes all Western democracies by suggesting their way of filling the void created by the distancing of parties from citizens, and by the disengagement of the latter from traditional politics. To them, the solution to this problem is the creation of a network of local organizers and active citizens, who will take part in demonstrations, flash mobs and activities in general that have been specifically thought out for their territory and community. This creates a link between citizens and the movement, and hopefully stimulates them to participate in politics. The experience of the Sardines is for all these reasons extremely valuable, especially to those movements and parties who will attempt to create an alternative to populism. To conclude, although their short-term aim was achieved, the Sardines can still make an impact on Italian politics. As they have recently announced, they will start to renovate the content of the movements' agenda and will focus on the next regional elections. Whether they will continue to be relevant in the Italian political scene or not, a lot can be learned from the Sardines' experience: making people engage with mainstream politics, and finding an alternative to populism in western democracy is possible.

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## **7 - Summary in Italian**

L’elaborato si articola in tre capitoli con scopi diversi: il primo capitolo intende ricostruire puntualmente la storia delle “Sardine”, e inserirle nel contesto più ampio delle elezioni regionali in Emilia-Romagna nel 2020. Il secondo capitolo è invece dedicato all’analisi delle Sardine in quanto soggetto politico, con lo scopo di classificare il fenomeno in quanto movimento. Infine, il terzo capitolo della tesi investiga e analizza le cause per le quali il movimento delle Sardine si è sviluppato. Lo scopo della tesi è quello di chiarire quale sia la natura delle Sardine in quanto movimento, comprendere i loro obiettivi e analizzare le cause che hanno portato al loro sviluppo.

Nel primo capitolo ripercorro e commento gli eventi principali che hanno caratterizzato l’operato delle Sardine, dalla prima manifestazione in piazza del 14 Novembre 2019 fino al manifesto in dodici punti pubblicato sulla pagina Facebook “6000sardine” dal 28 Maggio al 13 Giugno 2020. Per perseguire questo obiettivo è necessario illustrare il clima politico che circondava le elezioni regionali in Emilia-Romagna nel 2020: per la prima volta nella storia repubblicana la regione “rossa” per eccellenza era realmente contesa tra il Partito Democratico e la Lega. Il presidente in carica Stefano Bonaccini sostenuto dal centro-sinistra rischiava di essere spodestato dalla candidata del centro-destra Lucia Borgonzoni. Per Matteo Salvini, inoltre, vincere le elezioni in Emilia-Romagna sarebbe stata un’occasione politica importante dopo la fine della sua esperienza di governo nell’estate 2019. Secondo le Sardine al contrario, una vittoria della lega Sarebbe stata inaccettabile, in quanto considerano la retorica e l’agenda politica della Lega pericolosa e distruttiva. Il racconto dei principali eventi del movimento mette in chiaro quali siano i suoi principali obiettivi: impedire la vittoria della Lega in Emilia-Romagna e rendere la politica più inclusiva e partecipata dai cittadini.

Nel secondo capitolo proseguo con lo studio delle Sardine prendendo come punto di riferimento

i principali autori in materia di movimenti sociali. Nonostante le Sardine vengano definiti dai media nazionali ed esteri come un “movimento” all’unanimità, i fondatori Garreffa, Moretti, Santori e Trappoloni sono refrattari nell’ adottare questa denominazione, probabilmente per timore di essere accostati a un’entità come quella del Movimento 5 Stelle, molto lontana dalle loro rivendicazioni. I fondatori definiscono le Sardine come un “moto di riappropriazione di pensieri, di idee di società”. Trovo necessario chiarire questo aspetto in modo da poter analizzare le Sardine in quanto soggetto politico. Per questo motivo credo sia utile proporre le definizioni più famose di movimento, insieme alla storia e all’evoluzione dei partiti politici. La definizione di “*social movement*” su cui la tesi è basata è quella di Rootes, poi rielaborata da Diani, che concepisce i movimenti come una rete di individui, gruppi o organizzazioni uniti da un interesse comune da perseguire in termini politici. Dopo aver enunciato le principali caratteristiche dei “*social movement*”, la tesi prosegue con un excursus sulla storia dei movimenti. Iniziando con i primi movimenti, che secondo Tilly si sarebbero sviluppati durante la prima rivoluzione industriale in Inghilterra, fino ai *social movement* contemporanei che tendono sempre più frequentemente a svilupparsi quasi interamente sul web. A questo tipo di *social movement* viene riservata particolare attenzione all’interno del capitolo, in quanto apparentemente molto vicini al movimento delle sardine, anch’esso sviluppatosi su Facebook. Per studiare nel dettaglio quelli che definisco “*online social movements*” ho fatto uso di vari esempi: innanzitutto descrivo il movimento EZLN, considerato da molti studiosi come l’origine dei movimenti online, poiché negli anni ’90 fece uso di strumenti tecnologici rudimentali per raggiungere i suoi scopi politici. Il movimento utilizzo le e-mail per attrarre attenzione dall’estero in modo da esercitare pressione sul governo nazionale. Da quel momento in poi l’uso di internet e dei social media da parte dei movimenti politici è diventato sempre più comune, e i movimenti contemporanei spesso nascono addirittura sui social network, articolando le proprie rivendicazioni online. Il movimento delle Sardine è chiaramente da inserire all’interno del gruppo dei social media online: le idee dei fondatori e dei partecipanti sono principalmente elaborate online. Gli eventi del movimento vengono inoltre postati sulla pagina Facebook “6000sardine”, che è il punto di riferimento e il canale di comunicazione primario delle Sardine a livello nazionale. Anche i flash mob nelle piazze d’Italia organizzate dal movimento sono molto simili a quelli organizzati da *social movements* come quello dei *Fridays for Future*: gli slogan, i manifesti e le attività sono pensate per essere fotografate, filmate e diventare virali online. Allo stesso tempo però, non si può affermare che le Sardine debbano il loro successo esclusivamente alla loro presenza online. Se i loro eventi contano migliaia di partecipanti in tutta Italia infatti il merito va in parte attribuito alla massiccia copertura mediatica che essi hanno avuto durante tutto il periodo elettorale, da novembre a gennaio. Infine, il capitolo si conclude con la mia classificazione definitiva del movimento delle Sardine. Credo che la denominazione migliore sia comunque quella di “*online*

*social movement*”, anche se il movimento condivide alcune caratteristiche con i “*grassroot movements*” che spiego essere un movimento nato con uno scopo preciso e locale, che nel caso delle Sardine era quello di impedire alla candidata leghista Lucia Borgonzoni di diventare presidente della regione Emilia-Romagna stimolando la partecipazione attiva dei loro concittadini. I *grassroot movements*, come le Sardine, hanno spesso una forte presenza online, essendo l’uso dei social media oggi il mezzo di comunicazione più efficace ed economico per un neonato movimento.

Nel terzo capitolo, il focus della tesi si sposta sulle cause della nascita del movimento delle Sardine. Le cause da me identificate e analizzate nel testo sono due: la prima, quella più apparente e immediatamente identificabile è la combinazione della strategia comunicativa e dell’agenda politica del leader della lega Matteo Salvini. La seconda, più profonda, è la crisi della cosiddetta “party democracy” e del sistema rappresentativo nelle democrazie occidentali. Per arrivare all’analisi della prima causa è necessario introdurre il concetto di populismo e le fondamentali caratteristiche dei partiti a cui viene attribuita questa denominazione. La definizione di Mudde concepisce i partiti populistici come entità politiche non aventi un’ideologia pienamente sviluppata, ma piuttosto una “*thin ideology*”, basata su pochi concetti e per questo fluida e facilmente modellabile. Tra le caratteristiche comuni a tutti i partiti populistici di destra contemporanei ci sono la definizione di un’*élite* estranea al popolo da combattere, la difesa dell’identità nazionale, e la difesa del popolo da un agente estraneo, in molti casi l’immigrazione. Il capitolo prosegue con l’analisi della strategia comunicativa del leader della Lega Matteo Salvini sui principali social media. Proprio a lui appartiene il primato di pagina di un politico più seguita in Europa. Il suo modo di utilizzare i social network esalta e coincide con i principi del populismo precedentemente enunciati. Attraverso vari esempi, la tesi analizza nel dettaglio la retorica e il linguaggio impiegato da Salvini che ha suscitato le critiche da parte delle Sardine. Tra le caratteristiche principali della sua retorica troviamo l’uso di un linguaggio informale per avvicinare i suoi seguaci, ma anche la decontestualizzazione di singoli, l’attacco alle *élite* e la vittimizzazione di sé stesso. Successivamente il testo mette a confronto la strategia comunicativa sopra citata con quella degli account social delle Sardine, che sebbene non siano ancora stati analizzati accademicamente, sono un ottimo esempio per esplicitare ulteriormente la natura delle Sardine. A differenza delle pagine del “Capitano” quella delle Sardine mostra una grande cura nella grafica e dell’aspetto estetico, che dà l’idea di un progetto unitario. Una differenza immediatamente evidente tra il profilo di Salvini e quello delle Sardine è la lunghezza dei post: quelli del leader della Lega tendono a essere brevi e concisi, mentre gli altri molto lunghi, essendo spesso volti a spiegare idee o addirittura a enunciare manifesti. Il linguaggio è forse la divergenza più lampante: Salvini fa un grande uso di emoticon e di vocaboli molto semplici, mentre le Sardine preferiscono un linguaggio più complesso e citano spesso canzoni e opere d’arte. L’ultimo paragrafo riguardante la prima causa della nascita delle Sardine spiega la



reazione di Salvini al movimento delle Sardine, soffermandosi in particolare sull' *hashtag* “#gattiniconsalvini” lanciato dal leader della lega sui social, accompagnato da immagini di gatti che mangiano sardine.

Il capitolo prosegue con la spiegazione della seconda causa da me considerata responsabile della nascita del movimento delle Sardine: la crisi dei partiti e conseguentemente della democrazia rappresentativa. In questo tipo di democrazia, proprio di quasi tutti i paesi occidentali contemporanei, ha come azione politica principale il voto. I cittadini infatti eleggono i propri rappresentanti in parlamento, il principale organo legislativo, attraverso il voto. Nonostante l'importanza del voto, però, negli ultimi decenni l'affluenza alle urne è diminuita in tutti i paesi occidentali: lo scorso decennio è stato quello con più bassa affluenza in assoluto. Secondo Robert Michels, tutte le organizzazioni compresi gli stati subiscono un processo di accentramento del potere, per cui la classe dirigente, eletta per “servire” il popolo, comincerà progressivamente a perseguire i propri interessi. Per evitare questa eventualità, la partecipazione dei cittadini è fondamentale. Peter Mair, nel suo libro postumo “Ruling the void”, denomina il fenomeno di allontanamento dei cittadini dalla politica “*popular withdrawal*”, che comprende, oltre alla diminuzione dell'affluenza alle urne, anche altri segnali che testimoniano l'affievolimento dell'interesse dei cittadini nei confronti della politica tradizionale. Alcuni esempi sono la volatilità delle preferenze espresse col voto, che non corrispondono più a un'identità politica definita, e la diminuzione degli iscritti ai partiti. La sezione successiva del capitolo è dedicata alla descrizione delle funzioni che i partiti dovrebbero assumere secondo i principali autori che si sono espressi in merito. Tra di esse spiccano come principali la rappresentazione dei cittadini in parlamento, il reclutamento di individui da inserire nella futura classe dirigente, e l'inclusione della popolazione nello scenario politico. La funzione reale dei partiti all'interno della società odierna è però molto diversa da quanto descritto sopra. Secondo Mair, infatti, ad accompagnare il fenomeno del “*popular withdrawal*” è il “*withdrawal of the elites*”, inteso come il ritiro della classe dirigente e dei partiti all'interno delle istituzioni. Secondo l'autore infatti, negli ultimi decenni i partiti hanno abbandonato gran parte delle loro funzioni, concentrandosi esclusivamente su quelle istituzionali. I partiti, non ricoprendo più il loro ruolo di “connettori” tra i cittadini e la politica mainstream, sono diventati de facto parte delle istituzioni stesse. L'ultimo paragrafo discute infine delle conseguenze di questa evoluzione dei partiti e della democrazia rappresentativa. La mancata assunzione del ruolo di “link” tra società civile e istituzioni da parte dei partiti e l'allontanamento dei cittadini dalla politica generano un vuoto di partecipazione, che a mio avviso è stato finora colmato in due modi. Il primo è quello adottato dai partiti populistici, che accusano *l'élite* proponendosi come i veri rappresentanti del popolo, facendo uso della strategia comunicativa analizzata in precedenza nello stesso capitolo. Il secondo è invece quello incarnato dal movimento delle Sardine, che desiderano riaccendere la passione e la

partecipazione alla politica da parte dei cittadini, usando i social media come canali per la promozione della cittadinanza attiva. Nonostante la volontà dichiarata delle Sardine di rendere la politica più partecipata, sembra che i fondatori del movimento non abbiano ben chiaro il loro obiettivo pratico. Facendo riferimento ai sei punti esposti da Santori durante la manifestazione di Roma, la tesi sostiene che le Sardine auspichino per i partiti e i leader politici un ritorno alla comunicazione istituzionale, anziché un'evoluzione verso la partecipazione attiva, che è in effetti ciò che si è rivelato efficace per il loro movimento stesso. Le azioni e le manifestazioni delle Sardine sono spesso più forti e incisive delle loro dichiarazioni: la politica che funziona è quella che coniuga gli eventi locali studiati ad hoc da e per i cittadini del posto in cui vengono organizzati, con un obiettivo comune ad ampio respiro a livello nazionale.

Nella conclusione della tesi si trovano le considerazioni finali riguardo l'analisi del movimento delle Sardine. In primo luogo, è da sottolineare il fatto che gli obiettivi delle Sardine siano stati raggiunti, anche se solo temporaneamente: la possibilità che la lega prendesse la guida dell'Emilia-Romagna è stata sventata, e, visti i dati di influenza alle urne, che è cresciuta notevolmente rispetto alle elezioni precedenti, si può dire che le Sardine abbiano raggiunto anche il loro scopo di avvicinare i cittadini alla politica stimolando la cittadinanza attiva. Il racconto puntuale degli eventi e delle idee proposti dalle Sardine è stato un essenziale punto di riferimento per l'analisi del movimento in quanto soggetto politico, utile sia per inserire il movimento nel contesto degli “*online social movements*” che per identificare le cause della nascita dello stesso. È infatti possibile, visti i mezzi di comunicazione utilizzati dalle Sardine, affermare che queste si annoverino tra i contemporanei *social movements* (come ad esempio *BlackLivesMatter* e *#MeToo*) sviluppatisi principalmente su internet, dove elaborano le proprie idee e rivendicazioni. Ho osservato inoltre una forte somiglianza delle Sardine alla categoria dei “*grassroot movements*”, anch'essi articolati principalmente online nel mondo contemporaneo, con cui condividono l'obiettivo principalmente locale e l'attività di fundraising. In seguito, ho analizzato i fenomeni che hanno portato alla nascita delle Sardine. Per meglio comprendere le preoccupazioni del movimento e le sue rivendicazioni ho analizzato le caratteristiche dei partiti populistici e la strategia comunicativa di Salvini. Nell'analisi è facile individuare gli elementi che le Sardine trovano pericolosi: la tendenza a decontestualizzare singoli eventi per promuovere la sua agenda, i toni aggressivi e l'attacco indiscriminato alle “*élite*”. Infine, l'analisi della causa più profonda della nascita delle Sardine evidenzia un problema sostanziale che caratterizza quasi la totalità delle democrazie occidentali: la crisi della democrazia rappresentativa. Le Sardine tentano inconsapevolmente di risolvere un problema profondo e complesso, suggerendo il loro modo di colmare il vuoto creato dall'allontanamento dei partiti dai cittadini e di questi ultimi dalla politica, che consiste nel creare una rete di organizzatori e partecipanti a manifestazioni pensate per un territorio

specifico. L'esperienza delle Sardine è sicuramente di valore, e potrà essere d'esempio per futuri movimenti e partiti che vorranno proporsi come alternativa al populismo.