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Italy's Five Star Movement wants to be taken seriously

James Politi in Rome

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Protest group has come a long way since its eccentric start and is now the country's second party



When the populist Five Star Movement burst into Italian politics in 2009 during the financial crisis, it was defined by uncompromising protests and the burly, sardonic figure of its leader, the comedian Beppe Grillo.

But the Five Star Movement is now attempting to change its face from that of one of Europe's most eccentric — even clownish — political parties. The transformation aims to achieve what seemed like a fantasy only a year ago: to govern the country and challenge the centre-left government led by prime minister Matteo Renzi.

Mr Grillo, 67, has removed his name from the party logo,

signalling that he may soon step aside. His most likely heir is Luigi Di Maio, a 29-year-old smooth-talking Neapolitan with polished looks, tight-fitting dark suits and moderate tones.

“The perception of the movement has changed,” Mr Di Maio tells the Financial Times. “At the beginning there was the idea that this was a protest movement . . . But we crashed through that wall. We want to govern.”

The odds of that happening are increasing. The Five Star Movement is now Italy's second party. After trailing Mr Renzi's Democratic party by nearly 20 percentage points a year ago, recent polls suggest the margin has shrunk to about 5 percentage points — 32 per cent to 27 per cent.

“The Five Star Movement is certainly in the best shape of all of Renzi's challengers, and he is scared of them,” says Gianfranco Pasquino, a professor of political science at SAIS-Europe in Bologna.

That the Five Star Movement even has a shot at threatening Mr Renzi says much about the waning political momentum suffered by the 40-year former mayor of Florence, who took office in February 2014 amid high hopes that he could transform Italy.

The economy is growing again after years of stagnation and recession. But the gains have not been broadly felt. “People are discouraged, disappointed and still angry,” Roberto D'Alimonte, a political-science professor at Luiss university in Rome, says. “The recovery has not filtered down.”

Mr Di Maio has certainly been honing his message against the prime minister. “Renzi seemed like a new face but it didn't take much to understand that he was moving in the direction of the same old way of governing this country,” he says.

But convincing Italians that the Five Star Movement is a credible alternative remains a tall order since many still see it as a party of pure obstruction and opposition. Mr Grillo's best known political slogan when he launched the movement was “*vaffanculo*” — an earthy expletive aimed at the establishment. And he has refused to consider being part of any coalition government.

Gradually, however, the Five Star Movement has won a few municipal races — clinching control of small cities such as Parma, Livorno and Ragusa. The results have been mixed. The mayor of Livorno, for example, has faced harsh criticism after a scandal over uncollected rubbish broke out in the Tuscan port city.

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- Luigi di Maio, Five Star Movement

“Their vagueness, their incompetence and their inappropriateness are visible to everyone,” says Alessia Rotta, a Democratic party lawmaker close to Mr Renzi.

A bigger test of the Five Star Movement's strength is to come next year, when local elections will be held in some of Italy's largest cities. The big prize is Rome, the scandal-ridden capital where Five Star has been riding high in the polls after the resignation of Democratic party mayor Ignazio Marino in October.

“The other parties are scared of governing Rome, but we believe it's an opportunity to measure ourselves,” says Mr Di Maio, the son of a real estate entrepreneur and a high school teacher who grew up in Pomigliano d'Arco, a city in the shadow of Mt Vesuvius most famous for being a big manufacturing hub for Fiat. He studied law and opened a marketing business before entering politics.

The Five Star Movement's platform has been based on a few key pillars that have drawn supporters from both the right and the left: opposition to corruption, environmentalism, and a referendum on euro membership, which Mr Di Maio blames for many of Italy's economic woes.

“The real failure of monetary union is to think that countries in the south should travel at the same speed as the ones in the north,” he says.

Lately, his party has been lashing out at Italy's rescue of four small banks, which wiped out thousands of retail investors holding junior debt .

“Their goal was to save the bankers, not the citizens,” Mr Di Maio wrote on his Facebook page last week. There are some signs he has tried to moderate Mr Grillo's sharper edges. Mr Di Maio recently helped broker a deal with Mr Renzi's PD for the appointment of three constitutional judges. And after the Paris terror attacks, for example, he denied support for withdrawing Italy from Nato — an idea advocated by Mr Grillo.

“This is not in question,” he says. Instead of bombing, he says the west needs more “human intelligence” and has to quash Isis's financing sources in the Gulf. “It's true that Isis is terrorising us, but it has 80,000 people on its side, which is a neighbourhood of Naples,” Mr Di Maio says. “Strong measures to undermine their finances would deflate them like a balloon,” he adds.

And he is keen to distance himself from another populist party shaking Europe's establishment, France's far-right National Front. Its rise reflects a “climate of general indignation”, says Mr Di Maio. Yet the Five Star Movement, he insists, is not a populist toxin but its antidote: “We're the natural spokesman of citizens. We are a barrier against hatred and extremism”.

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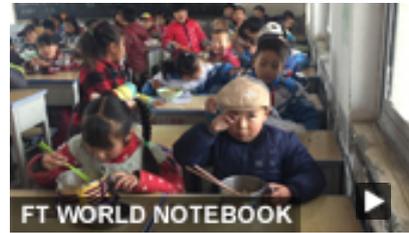
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