

Forget about Strasbourg, it's Rome that will make or break the Five Star Movement

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On 9 January, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe rejected a request from Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S) to join the group in the European Parliament. [Daniele Albertazzi](#) states that although the incident constituted an embarrassment for the M5S at the European level, a far more pressing priority for the party will be to ensure it can maintain its anti-establishment appeal among Italian voters.



Beppe Grillo's [failed attempt](#) to leave Nigel Farage's group in the European Parliament (the EFDD), and join the Liberals of ALDE instead, took everyone by surprise. This includes the Five Star Movement's own MPs, who had [not been consulted](#) on the move. After all, as the media have reminded us for months, the M5S wants to call a referendum on Italy's membership of the euro, while ALDE is among the most Europhile groups in the EP. In the end, it was a rebellion by ALDE's own MEPs that put an end to the attempt, despite M5S members having [approved the move](#) by a large margin in an online vote. There is no denying that this whole saga has left the Five Star Movement out in the cold looking directionless. Somewhat unconvincingly, it blamed the "[establishment](#)" for what had happened.

The attempt to join ALDE appears to have been driven by Grillo's willingness to retain influence, and the many benefits (including financial ones) that are part and parcel of belonging to a group in the European Parliament (EP), given that the EFDD may soon reach the end of the road. The UK is about to lose its representation in the European Parliament following Brexit, and that will include UKIP's MEPs. Having been rejected by the Greens, the M5S thus tried to find a new home within ALDE, but, as we now know, failed.

One should not read too much into Grillo's decision, however, nor overestimate its consequences. More specifically, it is very unlikely that this move was meant to signal a change of direction for Grillo's party, and push it towards more "moderate" and Europhile positions (something ALDE's MEPs appear to have grasped).

Few voters in Italy know which EP group their party belongs to; on the other hand, however, and more importantly, the evidence shows that there is still some huge political space in the country for anti-establishment, anti-corruption parties attacking the "*casta*" (that is, the political elite). Trust in political parties and institutions such as the government, which has always been low, is at [rock bottom](#), and the governing Democratic Party needs to find a new purpose after Matteo Renzi's [recent resignation](#).

The ideology of Grillo's party has always been a collage of ideas from both left and right: in other words, the eclecticism shown in recent days is anything but new. Those within the party see this as its main strength, and indeed proof that the M5S has positioned itself beyond, or perhaps above, what are regarded by many as the outdated categories of left and right.

Grillo has certainly been creative in mixing the defence of small businesses, protectionism and harsh words on illegal immigration – all meant to please his right-wing supporters – with the environmentalism and calls for direct democracy that appeal to the left. But what has kept the various M5S factions together (at least so far) have been the attacks against the *casta*, and the call for traditional parties to be swept away by a bottom-up revolution, facilitated by the internet.

Unfortunately for the M5S, however, these calls to "clean-up politics" have started to ring increasingly hollow in recent months, following developments in Rome. Having won the mayoralty of the city (together with Turin, and

other smaller cities) following the local elections of June 2016, the M5S spent the following six months looking clueless as to what to do in power, and has been beset by a series of scandals and investigations. These have forced several people within the party's governing team [to resign](#) amidst accusations of corruption, with some even being arrested.



Virginia Raggi, Rome's Mayor, whose administration has repeatedly come under fire in recent times. Credit: M5S (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Arguably, this is *the* really important issue the M5S needs to address, and quickly. Entertaining as recent events have certainly been, what EP group Grillo's party belongs to is a side-show for voters, and it is not going to be at the top of their agenda for very long.

It is, of course, always challenging for a radical populist party to move from opposition into government; however, what a party like the M5S *cannot* afford to do is to lose the only glue that has kept it together so far: its "purity". For a populist party in government – whether at the national or the local level – to start resembling the mainstream parties that it has spent years attacking and accusing of incompetence and corruption is tantamount to writing a suicide note.

In other words, for all the inconsistencies, lack of coherence and ideological "creativity" which the M5S has got us accustomed to, what cannot change is the party's anti-establishment nature. The M5S will be judged by the electorate on the basis of how it performs in local government, not only in Rome, but also in Turin and other smaller cities. While it can make a fool of itself in Strasbourg, it simply cannot afford to fail in Italy's capital.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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