

Beppe Grillo's Bitter Moment of Truth

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Roberto Orsi](#)

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The European election results in Italy have been rather surprising. In the context of today's three-party political landscape (the centre-left Democratic Party, Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, and Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*), most pre-vote polls indicated a rise of Grillo's movement, closing in on current PM Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party, and with Berlusconi's faction below 20%. Instead, results have been surprisingly in favour of the ruling establishment, while Grillo has suffered a defeat which, while not so substantial in terms of sheer numbers, entails a deep political cost. Grillo himself appeared confident that his movement might become the first party in Italy. However, the Democratic Party reached 40.8%, against 21.6% for the Five Star Movement, and a meagre 16.8% for Berlusconi. The Northern League has been recovering from a series of scandals and electoral defeats, scoring 6.2% at national level.



There are several lessons which can be drawn from these results. The first one is the slow but constant decline of Berlusconi's party and his personal power. Since Berlusconi stepped down as PM in the dramatic days of a financial tempest in November 2011, apparently under unprecedented international pressures, he has been convicted for fiscal evasion, deprived of his passport and expelled from the Parliament.

More remarkable is the Renzi-Grillo contest, which was the central question in the EU election for Italy. While Grillo has presented this vote largely as a political test for the current government, Renzi has clearly managed to overcome the hurdle with a stunning success. The Democratic Party had indeed never attained such a percentage of the vote, and even considering the relatively low electoral turn out, down to 58.7% from 66.4% in 2009, it is a spectacular victory. There may be several reasons why so many Italians have decided to back Renzi.

First, it has to be noted that Renzi enjoys the unanimous and almost uncritical backing from the mainstream press, to the point of embarrassing [cult-of-personality-like](#) articles, a mix of former Eastern bloc techniques and post-modern, multiculturalist and *kitsch* content.

More importantly, the whole Renzi government, in charge now for little more than three months, has been successfully engineered as a public relations operation, in order to provide a new row of frontline faces to the same policy line, as Monti and Letta rapidly became too unpopular. Renzi, albeit belonging to the same political area and being connected to the same prominent allies both at home and abroad, has constructed over the years an image of *homo novus*, which, despite its disputability and long-term fragility, was enough to gain the vote of many citizens, exhausted from the political and economic situation and inclined to accept any appearance of "change".

While both Grillo and Renzi insist on the unavoidability of such "change", their narratives thereof are very different. For Grillo, the country is already hopelessly bankrupt, and it has consequently to look beyond the current disaster to a period of deep and painful reconstruction. For Renzi and the Democratic Party, Italy is a ["great country"](#) with a series of problems, which can however be solved through a number of moderate (to the point of cosmetic), slow-motion "reforms". But overall, their narrative is that the country is fundamentally fine as it is at the present. Indeed, the Democratic Party has presented the electoral contest as one between "fear" and "hope".

Not surprisingly then, the majority of Italians, who remain moderate (also because of demographic reasons), have preferred Renzi's promise of slow, almost imperceptible reforms which would gradually lift the country out of today's predicament, without any serious challenge to the status quo. The Democratic Party's message was certainly appealing to its core electoral base (pensioners, public employees), to the elderly, and more in general to those who intend to defend their current socio-economic position in the face of the most serious crisis ever in Italy during peacetime.

On the other hand, Grillo's alarming tones, albeit certainly reflecting the anger of the non-guaranteed, particularly the younger generation and a large part of the small business owners, who are bearing the brunt of the crisis' costs, proved unpalatable to most voters. Grillo's campaign was also excessively polemical to the point of hysteria. More importantly though, his diagnosis and vision of the country's future is simply too bitter to accept, even if arguably closer to the reality than Renzi's. It requires an almost heroic ethical stance, which is unlikely to be prevalent in Italy. This can actually be Grillo's main political problem: while his project is squarely grounded in the idea of mobilising the Italians for the sake of national reconstruction (even without nationalism), he may well realise that such mobilisation is not attainable in the way and duration he wishes. More broadly, the whole idea of radically changing the country "from below" appears historically and politically weak, as the Italians and their prevalent political culture, as [already argued in this blog](#), are actually the problem, and not the solution.

While in theory the exponential economic and social damage caused by the crisis should favour Grillo in the long run, revealing how the country is indeed so much compromised that any talk of "recovery" coming from the establishment is pure nonsense, Grillo may eventually never see a historic turn in the direction he is favouring, as more and more Italians, especially those unable to emigrate, will fatalistically surrender to a narrative of a present and a future which *embrace* degradation and steep decline as the way forward. Indeed, if that is to appear as the "unavoidable" direction of events, it seems certainly easier to accommodate such a trajectory, rather than to fight it. Those who are too ambitious to accept the end result of such a process may well leave the country, as is already happening.

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