1. Context and Background

1.1. The 2014 European Elections: "This time it's different!"

In May 2014, 500 million Europeans were called to choose their representatives in the European Parliament: the eighth direct elections since they were held for the first time in 1979. But this time they were somewhat different, given the more direct and democratic process and the context of unprecedented crisis in which they took place. Faced with allegations that the European institutions had always lacked democratic legitimacy, policymakers set up an election campaign focused on the message that "This time it's different"[2]. These elections marked a 'first', as they indirectly determined the person who would lead the European Commission, the EU executive, for the period of 2014-2019. In line with the provision of the Lisbon Treaty (art. 17(7) TEU) and the EP resolution of 22 November 2012, for the first time, European political parties were asked to nominate candidates for the Presidency of the Commission, with the explicit aim of "reinforcing the political legitimacy of both Parliament and the Commission by connecting their respective elections more directly to the choice of the voters", making the functioning of the EU more similar to the traditional mode of representative democracy adopted by member states at the national level. These new circumstances framed by the Treaty provided Europarties[3] with a mandate to assume a new role, enabling them to campaign. In practice, this led Europarties to nominate their frontrunners (the German term Spitzenkandidaten was widely used in the media) for the position (sometimes after conducting primaries), to campaign in their names and to present their frontrunner as the future President of the Commission in case of victory.[4] This resulted in making it, for the first time, a full-fledged European campaign that complemented and went hand in hand with all national campaigns in the majority of the Member States. However, beyond personalities, what was at the centre stage

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2   Vincenti Daniela, "European elections 2014: different this time?", Euractiv website, 11 September 2013, http://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2014/linksdossier/european-elections-2014-different-this-time/ (accessed 2 February 2017).
3   We refer to Europarties as those political party organisations operating transnationally in Europe and in the institutions of the European Union, which form the parliamentary groups of the European Parliament.
4   Ibid.

of all the European elections in all member states was the economy. Nearly every national election since the onset of the Eurozone crisis in 2010 had fought between the poles of austerity versus growth policies. At a time when the effects of a devastating financial crisis were still being felt in all European countries, leaving many Europeans face unemployment, uncertainty and growing inequality, the citizens' trust in the European Union as well as towards their national governments was reaching historically low levels: social unrest and unease which was translated into a sharp rise of populist, Eurosceptic and far-right parties all over Europe. They typically include a motley crew of parties, such as the Dutch Socialist Party, Alternative for Germany, the Finns Party, the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and so on. Increasingly, European economic issues were dominating political discussions in all countries, particularly in Spain, France, Italy and Greece where the debate was constantly based on the choice of a Europe that wanted to maintain rigorous austerity measures and another one which challenged the European rigour dogma in order to boost spending, confidence, growth and reduce unemployment. The populists and Eurosceptic movements' narrative was exactly based and built on the public dissatisfaction with both the European and national elites' modus operandi in dealing with the European financial crisis and on the assumption that the European institutions lacked a real democratic legitimacy. Their entire electoral campaign and communication was, thus, clearly centred on such discourse which, as we later saw, bore fruit: a new narrative that countered and challenged the common values and cultural unity that bind European citizens together, advocated by both centre-right and centre-left parties for such a long time.

The European election of 2014 resulted in a Eurosceptic surge: parties sceptical of the European Union, both on the left and right wings of the Parliament, saw a dramatic increase of their number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and even won unprecedented victories in countries such as the United Kingdom, France or Denmark. They came to represent almost a quarter of the newly-elected parliament, signalling, once more, a rising sentiment of protest and dissatisfaction towards the institutions and the "elites" of both the centre-right and centre-left parties.

The results were very satisfying for the EFDD (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, formerly EFD). Despite losing several member parties, the group created around the UKIP of Nigel Farage managed to attract several smaller parties such as the Sweden Democrats but above all created an unexpected alliance with the Italian

Five Star Movement. With 48 MEPs (+17 compared to the previous legislature), this was an undeniable success for the EFDD: it became, thus, 'the' Eurosceptic group of the Parliament. However, what really struck the public opinion was the aforementioned alliance between the Italian Five Star Movement, an 'eurocritic' party who merely wanted to change the EU functioning and UKIP, a party clearly running to dismantle the EU: a difference that reflects the deep ideological gap on other matters, such as economic policies.

For the scope of this work, we will concentrate particularly on this alliance, looking firstly at the origins and ideologies underpinning the two movements and analysing, afterwards, their narrative, their discourse and how they both communicated on Europe in the run-up to the elections: a communication strategy that, nonetheless, resulted in being, so far, very successful in responding to the needs of the hard-hit European people.

1.2. The Five Star Movement

Beppe Grillo is one of the first politicians among others (such as the Pirate Party or the Tea Party to name but a few) to have embraced a transformational change on how to do politics in some of the most democratic ways. Over the last few years, his movement has grown from practically nothing to a major political force in Italy.

In a blogpost dated 9th September 2009, Grillo, a former popular Italian comedian and blogger, announced the creation of the Five Star Movement (abbreviation: M5S). It began like this:

> "On 4 October 2009, a new National Five Star Movement will be born. It will be born on the Internet. Italian citizens without a criminal record and who are not members of any political party can join… the parties are dead. I do not want to found 'a party', an apparatus, a structure of intermediation. Rather I want to create a Movement with a programme."[5]

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5 Free Translation from Beppe Grillo, 'Comunicato politico numero venticinque', blog, 9 September 2009, www.beppegrillo.it/2009/09/comunicato_politico_numero_venticinque.html (accessed 10 July 2015).

Since then, Grillo has reiterated many times that his intention has never been to create a political party, but rather a new movement that changes the political party system in Italy[6], one that gives more power to ordinary people – a new version of direct demo-cracy. Well before its important success in the 2013 Italian elections, Grillo's blog was already the most visited political blog in Italy and the launching pad for other online and offline initiatives. Through the blog, Grillo encouraged democratic discussions, mobilised activity at grassroots level on different political topics raised in his blog, for example arranging piazza events, local meet-ups, demonstrations, offline events and encouraged readers to organise a series of offline events and activities using meetup. com. In 2007, Grillo organised an event called 'V-Day', which brought the movement to a much wider media and audience. V-day, as Grillo explained in his blog, was short for 'Vaffanculo Day' ('Fuck-off Day'), a message directed in particular towards the Italian political party class. The event, which was later replicated in many different cities in Italy, had as its main objectives to conduct a campaign for a ban on politi-cians with a criminal record serving in Parliament, prohibiting parliamentarians from serving more than two terms, and a return to an electoral system which would allow citizens to choose their representatives (rather than the closed lists system introduced in 2005).

Since the founding of the movement (and even well before that, through its blog which first started in 2004), Grillo has been able to transform this online following and support into real world political impact, due partly (but not solely, as we will see below) to its innovative direct-democracy approach based on new and cutting-edge online communication techniques that have the use of the Internet at their core. As a matter of fact, Beppe Grillo's blog has always played a pivotal role in the movement, being the platform for the starting point from which all initiatives and offline acti-vities first originated. The blog as well as the guidelines of the movement's actions have always been managed and dictated by Grillo and his co-founder and collabora-tor Gianroberto Casaleggio, a communication guru who had a key role in building and shaping the Movement's ideology. Casaleggio, inspired by Marshall McLuhan's theories, has published several books, acclaimed by many as the theoretical foun-dations of the movement, advocating how the Internet and technological revolution

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6   It is fairly visible a link between Grillo's own vision and Gramsci's metapolitics, a concept based on the need of a cultural and ideological revolution inside the civil society that excludes any political means or aim and can bring a real change in any political action only in the long term.

of today would lead to deep changes in our lives and to a new form of direct democracy. More particularly, in his book "Dietro Beppe Grillo", Casaleggio developed his theories of direct democracy application through the Internet. This concept served as the basis for the innovative approach that Grillo and his movement took during the following years[7]. An approach reaffirmed in the 'non-statute' nature of the movement, stating that, rather than having the goal to become a party in the future, the Five Star Movement seeks to be 'an avenue for achieving an effective exchange of ideas and democratic debate using the Internet as the means of communications normally assigned to political representatives'[8]. By adhering to this principle, standing on an anti-establishment platform and using modern communication means, Grillo and Casaleggio combined medium and message to create a novel type of movement which has been able to speak directly to millions of people, especially those who are disenchanted with existing political structures.

The Movement's support started to rise considerably during the regional elections in 2010 as well as in the local elections held in the following year. However, its real success arrived in the February 2013 general elections following the end of the technocratic government led by Mario Monti, established in November 2011, immediately after the resignation of Silvio Berlusconi. The Five Star Movement became the third party by getting a quarter of the votes (25.6%) in the Italian General Elections held in February 2013. This was no coincidence as Grillo had distinctly identified all the political themes that tapped into the concerns of many Italians by making them mainstream: corruption, bribery, sexual scandals, the politics of privileges and favours that created the so-called 'Casta' and particularly the austerity agenda introduced by Mario Monti's technocratic government in 2011. This last aspect was, in fact, a key factor that helped the Five Star Movement's rise in 2013. The technocratic Prime Minister had been passing laws on various austerity measures and related reform initiatives which Italians had been forced to accept very bitterly as they required enormous sacrifices. As this resentment towards the Mario Monti's austerity package and the centre-right and centre-left parties that had brought Italy on the brink of economic collapse

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7 Zucca, Claudia, Il movimento cinque stelle: radiografia di un partito, LUISS School of Government, 2014, pp. 3-1.

8 Bozkurt-Güngen, Sümercan, Crisis and search for political ALTERNATIVES in Southern Europe: SYRIZA, Indignados and Five Star Movement, Middle East Technical University, 2014, pp. 496-499.

grew, as pointed out by Bordignon and Ceccarini, more than any other party, the Five Star Movement managed to capitalise on the window of opportunity offered by the economic crisis and the social discontent coming both from the left-wing and right-wing electorate about the new government's austerity measures, in addition also to the climate of increasing hostility towards the traditional parties that were at the centre of investigations into corruption charges. Consider splitting this sentence.

This last aspect served as a key dynamic that provided a solid basis for the rise of the Five Star Movement. Even though the strengthening of the Movement has been closely related to the increasing discontent against the austerity measures put in place, those policies have remained less pronounced as a point of criticism in the movement's agenda compared to Grillo's strong critique of 'political mismanagement'. In fact, the main target of the Five Star Movement's criticism was and continues to be the existing political parties, particularly the 'political elite', the 'political class' or the 'Casta'. Parties and politicians have been largely criticised as being illegitimate, self-seeking, corrupt and non-transparent[9].

The Five Star Movement's issue-based agenda contained plenty of such mixed signals and ambiguities framed with an 'anti-politics' agenda based on opposition to political elites (policymakers) and to parliamentary/representative democracy (policy-making processes). This opposition to policy-makers has been based on a dichotomy established between the ordinary/undifferentiated Italian citizens, the people, versus the corrupt elites/power holders, both national and European politicians. This 'anti-elitist' approach has led many observers to identify the Movement as populist, comparing it with other European populist parties.[10] In this regard, Beppe Grillo recognised and even characterized the Five Star Movement as a movement of 'raging populists'. He commented:

> "Sure, we are populists and we recognise true democracy in the will [of] people. Sure, we are raging against these parties that have plundered the country and are now making themselves out to be the saviours. Sure, we are

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9   Bordignon Fabio, Ceccarini Luigi, Five Stars and a Cricket: Beppe Grillo Shakes Italian Politics, South European Society and Politics, Volume 18, Issue 4, 2013, pp. 5-7.
10 McDonnell Duncan, Bartlett Jamie, Froio Caterina, Littler Mark, New political actors in Europe: Beppe Grillo and the M5S, Demos 2013, pp. 18-21.

raging populists and when we have the majority, we will delete this political class out of history. Raging populists? I like that!"[11]

But the implications of Grillo's success go far beyond Italy. Many of the concerns of Grillo's supporters were, in fact, already shared by people across Europe in a time where trust in the EU and national governments and parliament had been on a downward trend across the whole continent. While in 2002, 42 per cent of Europeans trusted the European parliament; in 2012 only 28 per cent did so.[12] This, coupled with falling party membership and voter turnout, suggested that the appeal of movements like the Five Star Movement – which combine an anti-establishment rhetoric with smart ways of using modern media – could grow and was already growing across Europe. In this sense, Grillo's and the movement's critique of the European institutions within the context of the crisis was also very marked by this distinction between people and power holders reduced to institutions such as the European Central Bank, their representatives and more prominently their national 'puppets' [13]. Grillo had already quite often expressed criticism of the EU bureaucracy and the Euro, evoking and denouncing the German-centric authorities of the European institutions and the need of a referendum on the euro currency. On 6 November 2012, Grillo wrote on his blog:

> "The decision whether to remain in the Euro should be taken by Italian citizens via a referendum. I believe that Italy cannot afford the luxury of being in the Euro, but it should be the Italians who decide this and not a group of oligarchs or Beppe Grillo." [14]

As Europe financial crisis continued and, with it, the Germany-led austerity policies imposed by Brussels, his views on the euro and on the European Union grew increasingly harsher, leading the Five Star Movement to become and be considered today

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11 Grillo Beppe, "Raging Populists", December 2013, http://www.beppegrillo.it/en/2013/11/raging_populists.html (accessed 08 July 2015).
12 European Commission, "Public opinion in the European Union", Standard Eurobarometer 57, spring 2002, a. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb57/eb57_en.pdf (accessed 14 December 2012).
13 McDonnell Duncan, Bartlett Jamie, Froio Caterina, Littler Mark, New political actors in Europe: Beppe Grillo and the M5S, Demos 2013, pp. 10-11.
14 Grillo, Beppe, "Grillo for dummies", November 2012 http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/11/grillo_for_dummies.html (accessed 08 July 2015).

as a full-fledged Eurosceptic movement. This was an assumption that was soon to be confirmed, as we shall see, with the alliance the movement stroke with right-wing Eurosceptic party UKIP at the European Parliament.

1.3. The UK Independence Party

The UK Independence Party, unlike the Five Star Movement, is a standard political party as we know them, and has existed for more than 20 years. Its key policy, as its name implies, is to leave the European Union, resulting in stopping payments to the EU and the withdrawal from EU treaties, while maintaining trading ties with other European countries. According to the party, Britain can get a "simple free trade agreement" and negotiate its own free trade agreements around the world without participation in the EU. That is a simple and understandable message, which has led the party to gain increasing support in the European elections, culminating in it topping the vote in May 2014. The UKIP has, over the years and with bigger efforts lately, spent considerable energy on broadening its appeal, spelling out how leaving the EU is the answer to a whole range of issues, notably controlling immigration, while also outlining plans to cut taxes for middle earners, speaking up for grammar schools and opposing gay marriage.[15]

The messages that its leader Nigel Farage – a star who has continued to rise and has made a name for himself in recent years taking his party to a second place finish in the 2009 European elections and a near-victory in the Eastleigh by-election in 2013 – have been repeatedly sending lately (missing?) seem to have struck a chord with disenchanted voters from the big three parties in the UK[16]. In fact, it became clear already in 2013 that UKIP, rather than Westminster's official Labour opposition, seemed to have become the party of choice for the anti-government vote and the anti-politics vote, thanks also to the party's huge campaigning efforts that have become far more professional and well-funded in the past

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15 Hunt, Alex, "UKIP: The story of the UK Independence Party's rise", BBC website, 21 November 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-21614073 (accessed on July 15 2015).
16 Taylor, Adam, "I've just got to get a message to UKIP: what is your communications strategy?", Speaker's chair website, 21 January 2014, http://www.speakerschair.com/post/i-ve-just-got-to-get-a-message-to-ukip-what-is-your-communications-strategy (accessed on July 15 2015).

three years. But UKIP is not an overnight success or, as it can sometimes seem, a one-man party. It has had a lot of splits and schisms in its 20-year history.[17]

UKIP was founded in 1991 by the historian Alan Sked as the Anti-Federalist League, a single-issue Eurosceptic party, which opposed the recently signed Maastricht Treaty and sought to sway the governing Conservative Party toward removing the United Kingdom from the European Union. At a league meeting held in the LSE in September 1993, the group was renamed the UK Independence Party, deliberately avoiding the term "British" so as to avoid confusion with the far right British National Party; the party adopted a wider right-wing approach and gradually increased its electorate over the coming two decades.[18]

UKIP contested the European Parliament election in 1994 with little financing and much infighting, ultimately securing 1% of the UK's vote and becoming the fifth largest party. The party continued to grow, being characterized by much internal fighting and changing constantly its leader. UKIP was already establishing itself as a Eurosceptic political force just like its opposition to the United Kingdom's continued membership of the European Union (UKIP's core issue) being "central to the party's identity". In this, UKIP has always been characterized by its great Eurosceptic emphasis to a far greater extent than any of Western Europe's other main radical right parties. In 2006, the lower-key Mr Knapman retired, to be replaced by Nigel Farage, an eye-catching media performer who pledged to make UKIP a "truly representative party", ending its image as a single-issue pressure group[19]. Under Farage's leadership, from 2009, the party tailored its policies toward a politically disenfranchised white working-class support base, before making significant breakthroughs in the 2009 European elections and the 2013 local elections. Since then, UKIP has witnessed a constant growing support and far greater coverage entering, de facto, mainstream politics. UKIP has continued to perform fairly well both at local, national and European elections, earning the BBC award of "major party status" for the 2014 European Elections. As a matter of fact, UKIP went into the 2014 European elections in a far stronger position than they did five years earlier and managed to get 27.5% of votes. In consequence, this unexpected surge led many insiders and journalists to think that Cameron's historic pledge

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17 Hunt, Alex, "UKIP: The story of the UK Independence Party's rise", BBC website, 21 November 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-21614073 (accessed on July 16 2015).
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.

to hold and an in/out referendum on UK membership of the EU if the Conservatives won the next election was no more than an attempt to halt the rise of UKIP, which senior Tories feared could prevent them from winning an overall majority in 2015[20].

The reasons behind this success are multiple. First of all, Euroscepticism, UKIP's core stance, was the most powerful factor explaining the UKIP vote, along with other important ones such as dissatisfaction with mainstream parties and attitudes to immigration. The party had been already making increasingly bigger gains, not only among ex-conservatives but also and among the working class, especially those who were traditional Labour voters.

The main issues that provoked such a rise were material: immigration, the economic crisis (unemployment, falling income, household inflation, housing etc.), crime and the power of the European Union. More particularly, UKIP appears to have struck a chord with many voters on the issue of immigration, which was the focus of its European election campaign in 2014, arguing that it was in favour of a sensible "managed" migration policy, something Mr Farage argued was not possible while Britain remained in the EU: according to Farage, leaving the EU would be the only way to be able to control who moves to the UK from Europe and it would boost the UK's border force to crack down on illegal immigration. However, although UKIP widely said to have gained support as a result of its tough talk on immigration, it has also been a key part of Nigel Farage's strategy to broaden its narrative to encompass civic nationalist, economically liberal, and socially conservative beyond its core issue of leaving the EU. However, a disconnection persists between the views of many in the UKIP leadership who favour Thatcherite economic policies and are socially liberal, and UKIP's socially conservative, working class supporters. However, the party's 2014 local and European election manifestos have a sharper focus on 'working people betrayed by Westminster politicians' than previously. This, of course, has played a role in securing UKIP's success, a growth that also brought pressure for organisational change in the party and tougher selection procedures, a way to demonstrate that

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20 Ford, Robert, Matthew Goodwin, "Before you predict defeat for Ukip in the Euro elections, remember: it's a party with a history of late surges", The Telegraph website, 19 February 2014, http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/ukipwatch/100260326/before-you-predict-defeat-for-ukip-in-the-euro-elections-remember-its-a-party-with-a-history-of-late-surges/ (accessed on 17 July 2015).

UKIP candidates are quite different from the rest at Westminster. This latest aspect has been lately reiterated many times by Farage who told BBC Radio 4's Today in 2013 that he was "odd" but in the sense that it was "odd" to be a politician "not doing this for a career... I'm here as a campaigner. I want to free this country from the European Union and then I want us to have a much smaller level of state interference in our lives in this country"[21].

Another reason behind UKIP's success could lie in its achieved attempts of building a strong and authentic relationship with voters, especially at domestic elections: as Charlie Beckett says in his article, in an age of scepticism, one value that the voters want – authenticity – is rendered undeliverable by a professional political class that seek to secure their power with a non-interactive communication and, in this sense, Farage has been able to appeal to voters of its genuine and unrehearsed attitude, leading the public opinion to have a perception that UKIP is still a party outside the political mainstream.[22] This has been enhanced by the fact that so many people still feel a certain degree of hostility to a political structure and a public sphere that fails to address their concerns, a sentiment where UKIP has found it easy to tap into.

Nigel Farage could indeed be seen as an English version of Grillo. He understood that to be successful, he had to look and sound different from the others and he did so by rejecting the very professionalisation of political public relations and the corporatisation of political ideology and, instead, focusing on a strong personalisation of political discourse. This is something that mainstream politicians are not very good at due to their refusal of the logic that the medium is the message. In this sense, Farage's core concept of his communication has approached very nearly the one used by Grillo, one of the few aspects that draw them fairly closer. But we will go in depth into this last particular feature in the following chapter.

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21 Hunt, Alex, "UKIP: The story of the UK Independence Party's rise", BBC website, 21 November 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-21614073 (accessed on July 16 2015).
22 Beckett, Charlie, "Political communication in the age of austerity", LSE blog website, 8 May 2013, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/05/18/political-communication-in-the-age-of-austerity-unless-you-can-claim-genuine-authenticity-like-ukips-nigel-farage-then-you-will-struggle-to-convince/ (accessed on 2 February 2017).