

3. The UKIP-M5S Alliance Nowadays: a Forced Political Marriage?

Freedom of vote and priority over their respective national interests represented the two main features on which the UKIP-Five Star Movement alliance based itself, since its establishment. In this sense, it seems fair to investigate on how they have been voting so far and on what unites and divides them in practice. Specifically, an analysis carried out last year by VoteWatch Europe shows how divided they have been on how the EU should look like and on what the EU positions should be on global issues. The analysis refers to period that goes from July to March 2015 when the two parties voted in the same way in only 147 out of 541 roll call votes in the EP plenary, or 27%, while in subsequent instances, they either cancelled each other's votes, or one of the parties abstained. The differences are even sharper if we look at the voting record of the two EFDD co-presidents: out of the 89 votes in which both Nigel Farage and David Borrelli participated, they voted the same way in only 23 instances (25%). Such a trend seems to have continued also in 2016 (April 2016).⁴²

In almost two years the two allies have proved and confirmed to have a very different idea of Europe and the EU institutions, apart from the apparently "common" Euroscepticism. For instance, the Five Star Movement MEPS have often voted exactly like the EPP and the S&D rather than like the Greens or GUE. It seems clear, then, that the only real theme on which they agree on is their opposition to the euro: opposition that led both parties to vote against Lithuania's adoption of the euro. As for the majority of EU's main policy areas, the two parties have showed great divisions. The alliance has seen a series of internal splits on a vast array of topics such as: anti-terrorism measures (including using PNR instruments), restricting fishing in the Mediterranean sea, anti-dumping measures, establishing common import-export rules, the Palestine state recognition and many other areas. A striking example is the

42 VoteWatch Europe, "UKIP and Five-Stars agreed on only 27% of EP votes so far. What unites and what divides them?", Vote Watch Europe website, 9 April 2015, <http://www.votewatch.eu/blog/ukip-and-5-stars-agreed-on-only-27-of-ep-votes-so-far-what-unites-and-what-divides-them/> (accessed on 10 April, 2016).

UKIP refusal to back EFDD's own position on the Commission's Work Programme 2015. In January 2015, the EFDD group and each of the other six political groups proposed their own resolutions as reactions to the Commission's work programme put forward by the EU Executive. UKIP members did not support (they abstained) the text proposed by their own EFDD group (which was of critical importance to the Commission's plans) submitted by the Five Star Movement. The EFDD proposal ended up being backed by less than half of EFDD MEPs, 21 of them, while 23 other EFDD MEPs did not support it (abstained).

The analysis certainly raises questions on the credibility of the alliance which, although based on the fundamental principle of freedom of vote, often reiterated and even boasted by both parties, reinforces the assumption that sees the alliance purely as a strategic marriage with mutual benefits at financial and political level.

3.1. A Joint Communication Strategy?

When analysing the communication strategies and activities of the EFDD group, it becomes clear that they are strongly marked and, consequently, led by UKIP, the group's founding party and the largest delegation in the group.

By mainly looking at press releases, press conferences, social media and websites of both the EFDD group and of the two parties during the last two years since the start of the legislature, there is strong evidence that the two parties, as the interviewed MEPs Mr. Corrao and Mr. Helmet have stated below, do not follow a common and shared communication strategy. This is all the truer at a thematic level, if we take into consideration that the political thematic priorities pursued by each party are rather different. Therefore, although the employed communication techniques and tools are the same, the thematic approaches followed by UKIP and the Five Star Movement differ a lot, leading the two parties to carry out their own communication activities in complete separation. Although this is also the case for all political groups inside the Parliament - where each delegation has its own communication unit and carries out communication actions accordingly - in all other political groups, the communication strategies carried out singularly by each delegation complement and follow the overall group's main communication strategy and position.

In the specific case of the EFDD, this is partially true since the overall group lacks an overall agreed communication approach and strategy. In fact, as we shall see below, not only each of the two parties carries out their own communication actions as a complete separate delegation, the group's communication positions, campaigns and activities are in the very large majority led by UKIP and with 80% of content directly and only reflecting UKIP's political views. From the analysis we carried out on both EFDD's social media and website, it is clear that the group's communication is marked by the UKIP's political imprinting: both the website and social media of the group are managed by UKIP, mainly communicating on themes, positions, proposals etc. that are very often only UKIP's main battles. A great majority of the posts published on the website or on the group's social media only explicitly refer to Farage, UKIP and its MEPs as if the EFDD was only the representation of the UKIP party by showcasing and communicating themes and issues that are of greater relevance and have a stronger impact on the UK and Farage's own electorate.

An example of this is the particular focus of the EFDD group on social media when strongly communicating on Brexit, criticising Cameron's position about the Turkey deal and denouncing both the refugees and immigrants crisis in Europe and how this situation, along with the large number of EU immigrants moving to the UK, affects and has fiercely negative effects on British citizens and the economy. The EFDD website follows the same logic. 80% of articles, news and press releases are written by UKIP MEPS or their staff and relate to issues and dossiers affecting mainly the UK or to battles (such as the UK exit from the European Union) led and fought mainly by UKIP in the interest of their own British electorate. On the other hand, the M5S staff writes a far smaller amount of articles, news and press releases and the same is true for videos of speeches from Five Star Movement MEPs. What is more, these include only news, videos or press release for which the M5S position is shared and in line with UKIP's position.

Therefore, given that most of the EFDD group's communication is highly shaped by positions, dossiers and themes of political priority to UKIP, the real tools and platform through which the Five Star Movement communicates on its role, achievements and position is through their own European-version website, Beppe Grillo's website and their related social media channels, through presences on Italian TV channels and interviews and press conferences organised at both European and national level where they speak mainly as Five Star Movement and far less as EFDD, re-affirming again

an identity very much separate to UKIP. This is, in fact, the “general rule” across the EFDD group, which, therefore, applies to UKIP, even more so when dealing with the media. The approach can be, thus, resumed in a consolidation of two political identities that, in spite of being allies and part of the same group, communicate their proposals, actions and position that are a priority to them, their countries and electorate, always speaking separately and not in the name of the whole group.

It is relevant to note here the similarities of the two parties’ communications in terms of tone, narrative and tactics used: both parties continue to apply in the whole the principles of the Eurosceptic communication which consists in using fear-based tones mixed with accusation and denounces both the EU establishment and their respective national parties in the Parliament (The Conservatives and thus Prime Minister Cameron for UKIP and Partito Democratico and Prime Minister Renzi for the Five Star Movement) and an anti-European and anti-establishment narrative that, as we have seen in the previous chapter of this work, describes and combines UKIP’s and the Five Star Movement’s communication.

3.2. Insights from UKIP and the Five Star Movement

In order to gather direct insights and perspectives straight from the representatives of the two parties here analysed, two MEPs, Ignazio Corrao and Roger Helmer, respectively from the Five Star Movement and UKIP, were interviewed and inquired about the reasons behind their alliance as well as how such alliance is “managed” from a political and a communication point of view.

When asked about the main reasons that pushed the Five Star Movement to start having talks and consequently go for an alliance with UKIP Five Star Movement, MEP Corrao stressed that they did not have many options and therefore considered the only one that was available to them. As he put it, “the alliance with UKIP was one of those options who had to be considered since it was an option without restrictions, an “open” alliance that would have allowed the Five Star Movement to keep its own identity. Strategically speaking, the Five Star Movement needed a group to work with and a group that was not there just to take money and do nothing, that would allow them to work.”

Therefore, as Mr. Corrao put it, the reason that brought the Movement to consider the opportunity of an alliance with UKIP was mainly this: coupled with the fact that the newly elected Five Star Movement MEPs did neither have any experience in the EU Institutions nor much time to consider other options. Many options they could have chosen from were, in fact, not very open and some of them needed stronger and longer negotiations and there was no time.” Mr Corrao continued by affirming that “the Five Star Movement party did explore possibilities to go with other groups, such as the Greens”, however, as he put it, “the Greens being a very structured group with a secretariat, a presidency and a strong balance of power, they were scared of receiving a delegation of 17 MEPs who were the fresh air that could have threatened the balance of power inside the group. They knew that the Five Star Movement would be the first delegation in the group and, therefore, have the presidency and all the prerogatives that come with it, and, probably, as Corrao guesses, they were scared about this and the negotiations did not go very well.” Therefore, according to Corrao, the UKIP option was the best one because it was the only one that would allow the Five Star Movement to retain its own identity with the complete freedom of vote as well as the advantages that being in a political group gives.

In response to the same question Mr. Helmer from UKIP stated that from the UKIP’s point of view, the reasons that brought Farage to woo the M5S and, subsequently, form a group with them lie mainly on the reasoning that “one does have to try and constitute a group because one gets more benefits for running one’s political business and, therefore, one looks for parties with enough commonalities and which one agrees on particular areas”. And that was what UKIP did. Mr. Helmer continued by stating “the Five Star Movement were particularly unhappy about how the European Union was managing the currency and were unhappy with the currency. This was the main point in common with UKIP even though we disagree on many other issues.”

To the question: “what elements do the two parties have in common?”, Mr. Corrao answered that “the main one is certainly their Euroscepticism, the strongest point that binds the two parties together.” He carried on by admitting “this is, of course, a different type of Euroscepticism because UKIP is totally against the EU while the Five Star Movement tries to look for different solutions that can work.” However, in terms of the overall functioning of Europe nowadays”, he added, “the two have probably the same level of Euroscepticism because it is a Europe that doesn’t work in any area: from austerity to the lack of solidarity to the migration crisis.” Mr. Helmer simply

answered the question by highlighting, as the main commonality of the two parties, the resistance to the European Union's monetary policies.

Turning to communication, both MEPS were asked to explain the functioning of the communication activities inside the group, particularly whether they had an agreed common communication approach or if each one carried out its own communication activities separately. Both stated that they did carry out their own communications separately and that it seemed to work very well for both groups. Corrao, particularly, affirmed that, "unlike large groups, such as the S&D or the EPP where the power of the central secretariat is evident and the delegations need to stick to the secretariat's and the group's rules, the EFDD has, instead, a very light secretariat that does not act as the usual overall structure that decides and coordinates all the group actions. Each delegation of the EFDD decides and carries out its own communication on key themes that are more of interest to the delegation's national public". Mr. Corrao continued by giving practical examples of the functioning: "the group's secretariat leads the more "official" communication that relates to the "official" work carried out such as, events in the European Parliament, speeches in the plenary sessions, and so on, in a very neutral way in order to allow the group's delegations to express their own positions without being bound to an overall position of the group. Whereas, when it comes to communicating in a more political fashion and towards the general public, each one does it separately: UKIP has its own communication in the secretariat coordinated by their delegation and the Five Star Movement has its own."

Both MEPs, added, when asked whether they carry out joint communication activities on specific themes, that they did not do a lot since they were very much focused on their respective national electorate. Corrao in particular explained that in such cases (although not very frequently) there was usually coordination between the two parties' Heads of Communication if there was a specific topic/policy on which they were working altogether. As Mr. Corrao put it "they support UKIP's communication efforts in what can be communicative for the Five Star Movement since, the Five Star Movement's communication is and remains focused on European policies that matter to Italy and to the Italian audience".

The last questions both Mr. Corrao and Mr. Helmer were asked concerned how they both explained and communicated to both their electorate and the media that, although part of the same political group, they had been so far voting very differently. Mr.

Corrao answered promptly by stating that “their public is not really interested whether or not the Five Star Movement votes differently from UKIP.” He reiterated that “the freedom of vote was part of the deal and their explanation to the public and the media was that the Movement is and will not lose its identity”. Mr. Corrao recognised that, “unlike UKIP, the Five Star Movement is not against the European Union as a whole and that it is working hard to propose alternative ideas that can make Europe function better.” “At the beginning, he said, their electorate struggled to understand the reasons behind this alliance with a “xenophobic” party and this was mainly due to how the Italian media were portraying Farage in order to push the public opinion to be firmly against such alliance and condemn it.”

Of the same opinion was Mr. Helmer who, in response to the question, affirmed that “they don’t have to explain this to their electorate or media as they both have no idea what UKIP is doing in Brussels and they don’t care.” He continued by confirming, like Mr. Corrao did, that the fact that they had voted quite differently was based on their agreement which stated that they would vote together if they agreed and they would vote differently if they disagreed. He gave the concrete following example: “if The Five Star Movement wishes to table an amendment we disagree on, UKIP would say to them very clearly that it wouldn’t vote for it but we, as UKIP, wouldn’t stop them from doing it.”