6. The Organisation of the Movimento 5 Stelle: Disintermediation or New Forms of Intermediation?

1. Introduction

Italy is one of the countries in Western Europe characterised by the highest percentage of votes expressed for new political parties (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2016). The most successful new party[41] that recently appeared in the Italian political system is the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S). The M5S was founded in October 2009 and at the February 2013 elections obtained 25.5 per cent of the votes in the Chamber of Deputies and 23.8 per cent of the votes in the Senate of the Republic. This was an extraordinary electoral success: the highest figure ever recorded in Western Europe for a new party at its first national electoral test[42]. Five years later, at the 2018 general elections, the M5S achieved another extraordinary result. On that occasion, unlike other new parties during their second national electoral test, it managed to increase its votes by 7.2 per cent, obtaining 32.8 per cent in the Chamber of Deputies (Biancalana and Colloca 2018) and entering government at the national level for the first time.

The M5S presents a unique internal organisation, combining horizontality and verticality: at the time of its foundation, its leader defined himself as a simple "megaphone", its elected representatives presented themselves as mere "spokespersons", allowed to serve as representatives for a maximum of two terms, and its rhetoric was characterised by horizontality, transparency and an emphasis on online direct democracy. But, at the same time, the M5S has always had an opaque internal decision-making structure, in which the leaders played a very relevant role (Passarelli, Tronconi and Tuorto 2013 and 2017; Caruso 2015; Ceccarini and Bordignon 2016; Biancalana and Piccio 2017).

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41 Deschouwer (2008) points out that there are three different dimensions of "newness" to consider: the age of the party, its ideology and the type of party organisation, and the M5S can be considered new in all the three aspects. As is known, the M5S rejects the label of "political party", preferring that of "movement" or "non-party". In this work, however, following the well-known definition by Sartori (1976), we will define it as such.

42 To have a comparison, Forza Italia obtained 21 per cent in the 1994 elections, the first of the so-called Second Republic.

I defined disintermediation strategies as rhetoric or practices developed by parties in order to stage or deliver an unmediated relationship between leader and followers, which happens through the weakening of the party's intermediate organisation. The aim of this chapter is to examine the evolution of the M5S's organisation in order to analyse whether and how a new party employs disintermediation strategies in its organisation. Moreover, studies on political actors born in opposition to mainstream parties, which are characterised by an organisational model based on grassroots democracy, have demonstrated that these parties' participation in institutional politics led them to centralise their organisation over time (Frankland, Lucardie and Rhioux 2001; Rhioux 2001; Poguntke 2002). It is therefore interesting to examine which dimension of disintermediation prevails among those outlined and if there are changes over time in the M5S's organisation.

My analysis of the M5S's organisational history will be carried out using Pedersen's "lifespan model" (1982), as adapted by Rihoux (2001). The lifespan model is a tool that has often been used to analyse the evolution of new parties, as it allows an examination of the different phases of party development, linking them with the organisational evolution of these actors. According to Pedersen, during their evolution, political parties pass through a number of phases, or thresholds. Not all thresholds are necessary for a political party to exist, and not all thresholds have the same weight, but there is a given sequence in the parties' evolution, and crossing some thresholds is considered to be particularly critical for the parties' development.

Adapting Pedersen's model, Rihoux identifies five thresholds: declaration (the decision to take part in national elections); authorisation (the acquisition of the formal requirements to be allowed to compete in national elections); representation (entering the parliament); institutionalisation (the first national electoral confirmation); and government participation. According to Pedersen, each of these steps will bring about the emergence of new challenges and will determine different organisational changes, in order for parties to cope with the new functions that they will have to enact. Consequently, we can expect that, with the passing of these different thresholds, the internal structure of the M5S would become more complex and develop new forms of intermediation.

Five dimensions will be analysed for each phase: the selection and role of the leader; the role of party members; the selection of candidates; the determination of policies; and the role and characteristics of the party's intermediate bodies. The analysis will be carried out by comparing two

types of sources: on the one hand, the party's official documents; on the other hand, interviews with privileged witnesses and party members. As highlighted by Katz and Mair (1992), party statutes tell only one side of the story, which is why it is then useful to compare them with the accounts of party members and party personnel regarding the actual distribution of power within the party. This is particularly true for a party such as the M5S, whose structure is very different compared to traditional parties. Moreover, we have seen that it is crucial to understand how actors perceive the stimuli that lead to change and the reasons for some strategic choices, as well as the discourses that surround party organisation: interviews are the most appropriate tool with which to do this.

2. The Genetic Phase (2005–2009)

The M5S was officially born on October 4th, 2009. However, at that time, it already had a history whose prominent aspects are worth mentioning. As highlighted by Panebianco (1988), the genetic phase of organisations marks them and influences their evolution in the following years. For the M5S, this phase corresponds to the years between 2005 and 2009. In 2005, the meeting between Beppe Grillo, a famous Italian showman and comedian, and Gianroberto Casaleggio, an entrepreneur and owner of the company for online strategies Casaleggio Associati, led to the opening of a website (*Beppe Grillo's Blog*), through which Grillo began to carry out an activity of counter-information on issues such as transparency in politics and environmental protection (Vignati 2015a; Ceri and Veltri 2017).

Neither Grillo nor Casaleggio are professional politicians. Grillo is a famous comedian who has always paid close attention to social and political issues in his shows. For instance, in the eighties his shows were even removed from public television because of his satire on government parties. Casaleggio, who started his career as a software designer, was an entrepreneur and a web expert: it was Casaleggio who proposed Grillo should open a blog. Through his website, Grillo also encouraged its readers to mobilise (as, for instance, in the case of the "Clean Parliament" initiative[43]) and to physically meet using the online platform *Meet-up*. This

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43 In 2007, groups related to Grillo's blog collected 350,000 signatures in order to present a popular initiative law to prevent the election of convicted MPs, to set a limit of two mandates for MPs and to reintroduce preference votes in the electoral system.

led to the foundation of the "Friends of Beppe Grillo" groups in many Italian cities, heterogeneous groups of people that coordinated themselves through *Meet-up*, and in many cases overlapped with pre-existing associations and protest committees (for the case of the No TAV movement in the Piedmont region, see Biancalana 2020). In these groups, the interest in the issues raised by Grillo linked to existing territorial mobilisations.

> [the first groups] came from a certain type of background that was "movement-like". But it is natural, you first agglomerate those who already have a political and social conscience of a certain type; they are the first ones to commit (Int. 8).

Some events testify to Grillo's attempt to influence politics from the outside in the first period. The failure to achieve results in this way might have led to the decision to create a new party. For instance, in 2006, Grillo met the prime minister Prodi, in order to present him the results of some discussions that took place on his website, but without a result. Moreover, in 2009 Grillo tried to present his candidacy to the Partito Democratico's open primaries, but it wasn't accepted. Faced with the parties' and the institutions' lack of responsiveness to the requests made by Grillo and his audience, the project to move from an activity of "external pressure", as it had been until then, to direct participation in electoral competitions began to take shape, because "being only movement-like was not enough" (Int. 8).

A first step in this direction took place between 2007 and 2009, when Grillo launched the idea of the "Five Stars[44] Civic Lists" "certified" by him. The aim of the civic lists was to bring ordinary citizens into institutions: the candidates that satisfied some requirements, such as having a clean criminal record and not having been previously elected with other parties, could autonomously create a civic list and take part in local elections with a unitary symbol, and benefit from the visibility of Grillo's blog. The permission to use the symbol was given by Grillo, which is the "certification".

> [The role of Grillo and Casaleggio was] to give us a chance, that is to say: if you want, we can enter the municipal councils, with civic

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44 The five stars represent the five most important issues carried out first by Grillo and then by the M5S. They are: public water, defence of the environment, free internet connectivity, sustainable development and sustainable public transportation. These issues can be considered to belong to the so-called post-materialistic left. Despite the changes in the M5S's agenda, and the broadening of its scope with respect to its origins, the name of the party didn't change until 2021.

lists and with a well recognisable symbol at a national level, and then we can put into practice what we think, i.e. we make proposals with tangible acts, since the others don't, of what we would like to do. And that was their role in the organisation: the input (Int. 2).

Overall, the genetic phase of the M5S was already characterised by some characteristics that were to mark the organisational evolution of this player. From the very beginning, we see a combination of horizontality and verticality. On the one hand, through his blog, Grillo connected people belonging to civic associations and, in general, the social movements' world, fostering civic participation and the autonomous development of organisations in the territory from below. For this reason, the M5S has been likened to social movements (Mosca 2015)[45], as its aim was to skip traditional forms of representation and to bring citizens directly into institutions, in a sort of DIY politics. On the other, it is Grillo who guided this development, and decided from above on the most important organisational issues, such as the creation of civic lists, the definition of the requirements for their certification, as well as the drafting of the programmatic points of the civic lists (the so-called Florence Charter, *Carta di Firenze*), which were presented during a meeting in Florence in March 2009. In summary, we can see that Grillo's aim was to bring citizens directly into the control room of politics, without the need for a party organisation, which is replaced by the internet, but under his supervision.

3. Declaration (2009)

On October 4th, 2009, at the *Smeraldo* theatre in Milan, Beppe Grillo, alone on the stage, announced the foundation of the Movimento 5 Stelle. "It was a political communication event", "a show", recounted an activist present that day. On that occasion, there was the presentation of the political programme and the statute of the party (significantly called Non-statute). The foundation of the party happened indeed in a decidedly top-down way: the 120 programmatic points that—according to official announcements—came from the proposals made by activists in the comments on

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45 For these reasons, some scholars have defined the M5S as a movement-party (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2016). For a critique of the use of this category in the case of the M5S, see Biancalana and Piccio 2017.

the posts written by Grillo on his website, seem assembled in an arbitrary and non-transparent way.

> At the time, Grillo's blog was very lively in the comments section; there was a debate there, there were many *Meet-ups*, and there was turmoil and discussion. And Grillo read, around, on the net; obviously he didn't participate, but he read at that time; we discovered that he had read things that we had written, and then, probably, in that mass of thoughts they decided "let's do it". Of course, Casaleggio, who was the organisational and even theoretical mind, chose the form that he felt was best, and in fact already at the beginning there were controversies because all this stuff that came from above, some people said "we had to be part of it too" (Int. 7).

The same applies to the rules contained in the Non-statute, a document that was never discussed or voted on within the party. In clear contradiction to the rhetoric of horizontality and leaderlessness carried out by Grillo, who used to state that "there is no leader in the M5S, the leader is the Movement […]. I'm not a leader, I control the situation" (Corriere della Sera, October 14th, 2014), according to the statute he is the owner of the "right to use the symbol" (article 3) and his website is considered the "headquarters" of the "non-party" (article 1). The M5S is described not as a party but as a "consultation tool" (article 4), a "centre for candidate collection", a "tool" (article 7) for the selection of candidates for elections. The candidates will be "authorised each time and in writing to use the name and symbol" (article 7). The identity and destiny of the organisation are therefore closely linked to those of its leader, whose role and selection are incontestable. Furthermore, procedures for his recall are not specified. However, this contradiction between rhetoric on horizontality and the presence of a strong leader doesn't seem to bother the interviewees.

> [The M5S] is something that they [Grillo and Casaleggio] invented; then one could join or not. When they founded the M5S, they stipulated these four or five rules; all the people who joined and who decided to become a candidate did so in full knowledge that those were the rules (Int. 4).

> Grillo is the owner of this brand. For anyone who wants to use it, it is enough to make himself or herself available. There are rules. If they need to be respected, they must be respected (Int. 10).

A second relevant organisational aspect is the absence of statutory provisions regarding the so-called "party in the central office". The M5S is char-

acterised by a strong anti-party stance, which is also mirrored in its internal organisation. Indeed, in contrast with traditional party organisations, no internal bureaucracy or intermediate structures (such as local and regional branches) are formally established. According to official documents, the M5S is made up of three subjects: the leader (the owner of the party symbol, who has the power to place it on the lists of candidates that want to take part in elections with the M5S), the elected representatives, who are authorised each time to use the symbol, for a maximum of two terms, and the members, who are connected through the internet.

The internet, according to article 4 of the Non-statute, has an acknowledged "central role in the phase of registration with the M5S, in consultation, deliberation, decisions and election". "The role of government and direction normally attributed to a few" is acknowledged as being attributed "to the totality of the internet users" (article 4). Indeed, it is only possible to become a member of the M5S online, and this membership "does not require more formalities than registering on a normal website". Registration is free of charge, and the only requirement is not to belong to political parties or associations which have an object or purpose that contrasts with those of the M5S (article 5). The rhetoric of the M5S on the internet has been defined as "cyber-optimist" (Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani 2015): in the absence of intermediate structures, direct democracy can be achieved thanks to the connection between citizens and power that takes place online.

But if the "role of government" is acknowledged as being attributed to the "totality of internet users", only members, through an online participation platform (which has been called *Rousseau* since 2015), can take part in internal decision-making processes. Indeed, it is only possible to take part in the national decision-making processes of the party online. According to the party's rhetoric, in the absence of a central structure, similar to that of traditional parties, citizens can directly influence politics, either by entering into institutions or giving directions to elected representatives, through the party's online participation platform. It is crucial here to highlight that the management of the platform, as well as of all the sites connected to the M5S, was at that time in the hands of the company Casaleggio Associati (owned by the co-founder of the M5S, Gianroberto Casaleggio), which in the absence of any other intermediary structure acted as a sort of surrogate of the party in central office: it managed online registrations, the participation platform, as well as the certification process of the lists of candidates that wanted to take part in elections under the M5S's symbol.

The "staff" are Casaleggio's employees; it's Casaleggio who pays them; they help him with the management of the website, Twitter, in managing the certified lists, when there are problems and then with the expulsions; that's the staff, but how many of them are there, fifteen? I don't know. But they support us, and they don't take a euro from us. They are paid by Casaleggio [...]. We do not pay a euro to the Milan organisation (Int. 2).

[The role of Casaleggio Associati is a role] of IT support, but it also goes beyond this: Gianroberto was the founder of the M5S together with Beppe Grillo, so this is clear; it must be clear (Int. 9).

At a local level, the situation appeared decidedly less controlled from above. In fact, if at national level it is possible to join the Movement only through the websites managed by Casaleggio Associati, and participation in decision-making processes is only possible online, at a local level it is possible to become an "activist" by taking part in face-to-face activities in the territories[46]. Formal registration with the M5S is only required, according to the rules of the party, to become a candidate. Indeed, in this phase, at the local level, activists organised themselves autonomously; there were no official sections or branches[47], or specific rules that apply to this level, except for those relating to the process of candidate selection. Since the local groups had no place in the organisational structure, no decision-making power was granted to them. Only members, intended as individuals, could participate in the national decision-making processes that happen online. The only official representatives of the M5S in the territories were candidates and elected representatives, who were also the only ones authorised to use the symbol.

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46 We will call the ones that are officially registered with the M5S through the website and have the right to take part in online decision-making processes "members". In contrast, we will call those who, whether or not officially registered, take part in face-to-face activities in the territories "activists".

47 The *Meet-up* platform was, at least initially, the main tool through which the M5S's activists organised themselves in the territories. However, these local groups do not represent an official local branch of the M5S. This is certified by a post dated July 19th, 2015, *A letter to the Meet-ups*, in which it is specified that the *Meet-ups* don't have the right to officially represent the Movement (for instance, they can't use the party logo), as the only ones entitled to use the symbol are the candidates and the elected representatives, who have obtained the "certification", i.e. specifically the authorisation to use the party symbol.

> If you come to our meetings, I won't ask you if you have already
> registered. So in reality the meetings are always open to everyone and
> we do not have a "register" of the people who reside in the city and
> are officially members of the M5S. There are some people who maybe
> participated for months and then they tell us; maybe it happened
> when we drew up the lists for the elections, and to become a candidate
> it is necessary to be registered: "But I'm not registered yet" (Int. 4).

To sum up, the Non-statute ratified what was already implicit in the genet-
ic phase of the M5S. According to the 2009 statute, Grillo is the leader and
owner of the M5S, with significant power in deciding on national policies,
and members don't have the chance to remove him. Moreover, there is
no structure comparable to that of traditional parties. All the key national
decision-making process of the party (starting, as we have seen, from party
enrolment) take place online and are managed by a private company
owned by the co-founder of the M5S, Gianroberto Casaleggio. On the oth-
er hand, according to the statute, party members have significant rights.
In particular, there is the idea that citizens can directly influence politics
through digital tools.

   At the local level, despite the fact that local groups do not represent offi-
cial branches of the M5S, activists can organise themselves autonomously,
hence deciding on local candidates and policies. We can find, then, the
two dimensions of what I called disintermediation strategies: great powers
are given to the party leader (disintermediation from above) and to party
members (disintermediation from below). In the case of the M5S, the
intermediary role of the party is not simply weakened: according to party
documents, in this political actor there is no party structure at all. In
the next paragraphs, we will see whether and how this changed with the
passing of some important thresholds.

4. Authorisation (2010–2012)

In this second phase, which ended in 2012 with the M5S's participation
in the 2013 general elections, we find the first signs of the emergence of
an (albeit informal) internal organisational structure, also driven by the
growing number of local elections in which the M5S took part, often
with considerable successes. For instance, the M5S elected representatives
in the regional councils of the Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna regions
in 2010, and in Sicily in autumn 2012; in the administrative elections of
spring 2012, Federico Pizzarotti became mayor of Parma. We see that,

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after passing the declaration threshold, the procedures for the selection of candidates for elective offices (local, regional and then national) became defined more clearly. Nevertheless, in this phase, the procedures were often specified near elections, through a post on Grillo's blog; only later were they included in the party's rules.

Again, in this phase, at the local level, in order to take part in elections under the symbol of the M5S, certification (authorisation to use the symbol) is required. To obtain it, it is necessary to send the necessary documentation to the Casaleggio Associati offices[48], which are responsible for the process. At this level, in most cases activists formed electoral lists and defined the programmes in a completely autonomous way, with internal voting taking place in offline assemblies. However, when more than one list of candidates wanted to run for elections under the M5S symbol in the same city or in large cities, where it was difficult to organise offline consultations and where the centre wanted to control local decision-making processes, candidates at the municipal level were selected through online consultations. At this stage, and at least until 2014, even because of the small number of activists, the selection of candidates for the regional elections also took place mainly through consultations in offline assemblies.

At the national level, however, the internet replaced the assembly. For instance, the procedure for the presentation and selection of candidates for the 2013 general elections, which took place from December 3rd to 6th, 2012 (the so-called *Parlamentarie*), was completely online. Among the requirements to become a candidate, there was: to have previously taken part in an electoral consultation under the symbol of the M5S or the civic lists and not to have held a position as an elected representative on the date of October 29th, 2012; in order to take part in the selection of candidates it was instead necessary to be enrolled in the M5S by September 30th, 2012, just two months before the consultation.

As the selectorate was not extended to the M5S's "voters", as in the Partito Democratico, this cannot be considered an open primary; however, members of the M5S had a considerable decision-making power in the choice of their own candidates for parliament. Nevertheless, if the inclusiveness of the selectorate was guaranteed, the "rules of the game" were

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48 To become an M5S candidate, it is necessary: to not be a member of other parties, to not have completed more than one electoral mandate and to not have been convicted. The fact that it was Casaleggio's company that managed the process was not codified officially, but it was clear to activists: when they talk about the certification process, they say they have to send the documents "to Milan".

neither shared nor previously discussed with the activists, but simply pub-
lished in a post by Grillo. Moreover, we must say that online consultations
are a problematic tool, given the private ownership of the IT system that
manages the operations and the absence, with only a few exceptions, of
an external agency that controls the regularity of the vote. This task was
entrusted to Casaleggio Associati's staff, who may engage in manipulation
(see Mosca, Valeriani and Vaccari 2015; Deseriis 2017a).

On the other hand, the procedure for the definition of the programme
at the national level was decidedly not inclusive: the twenty programmatic
points for the 2013 elections were simply communicated by the leaders,
without an actual programmatic discussion. "They come out of the hat", as
an MP, who was later expelled, remembers (Int. 6). We have to note that
for a party such as the M5S the procedure that defines the programmatic
agenda is of particular importance. As we have said, elected representatives
are considered mere "spokespersons" of citizens' requests and they are
bound to respect the established programme. Especially in the presence of
such a "binding mandate", the fact that programmatic decisions are in the
hands of the leaders reveals a highly centralised structure.

Lastly, with regard to the emergence and characteristics of intermediate
bodies, we can note the first signs of the formation of a sort of "coordi-
nation network" within the party, albeit a completely informal one. In
the absence of a formalised structure, the elected representatives at the
local level became organisational reference points and carried out coordi-
nation activities (this has also been highlighted by Vignati 2015b). These
transformations were not codified in official documents but emerged from
interviews with privileged witnesses and activists.

> In 2010, the first regional councillors were elected in Piedmont and
> Emilia Romagna and therefore they became a reference point certainly
> at the regional level, but the two presidential candidates, Bono and
> Favia, also became a national reference point at the time, until 2013 of
> course, until the general elections. [...] In 2013, 160 MPs were elected
> and therefore the focus shifted a little. In the years between 2010 and
> 2012, there were very few of us, Bono and Favia were a reference
> point for everyone, and it was really difficult for them to combine
> their activity in the regional council, their activity at the municipal
> level, their coordination activity at national level and so on. [What is
> this "national coordination"?] Basically, it does not exist [...] the fact is
> that if there are problems, if there are issues, or simply journalists, or
> anything else, in 2012 they called Bono or Favia and now they call Di
> Maio or Di Battista (Int. 9).

In this phase, the contours of the organisation are defined more clearly. In the first place, we see that members have relevant decision-making powers regarding candidate selection: all the M5S's candidates are chosen by members through online or offline consultations. On the other hand, this this does not mean less power held by the leaders, who have not only the power to decide on the definition of the national electoral programme, but also to control above all the decision-making processes that take place online, and to give local groups permission to use the party logo. As regards the growth of an internal organisation, faced with the absence of an official intermediate structure, the first locally elected representatives (Davide Bono and Giovanni Favia, elected to the regional councils in 2010) began to play an informal coordination role. This—as we shall see— will be amplified in 2013 with the passing of the representation threshold by the M5S and the election of more than 150 MPs at the national level.

5. Representation (2013)

According to Pedersen, the passing of the threshold of representation constitutes one of the most significant moments in the evolution of a political party. This threshold was crossed by the M5S during the parliamentary elections of February 24th and 25th, 2013 (ITANES 2013). This was an extremely significant step forward for this political player, which partially unexpectedly gained more than 150 elected representatives in the two branches of the Italian parliament. Given the way in which the party was founded, the elected representatives did not share a common political culture. This was their first political experience, and they had arrived in parliament unexpectedly in many cases: "with a handful of clicks [...] we were put on the list". They were "neophytes", people who "cross a *stargate* and find themselves in another universe" (Int. 8).

A few days after the elections, Grillo published the *Code of Conduct* for the newly elected MPs on his website. In addition to the prohibition of associating with other parties or groups if not for votes on individual shared points, to the obligation of resigning after a first-degree conviction and to the commitment to reduce their salary, some specifically organisational rules were defined in this document, such as the principle of rotating the figure of the party whip and spokesperson in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate. Moreover, it established that decisions on institutional offices will be taken by MPs by majority.

It is difficult to give an unambiguous interpretation of these choices. On the one hand, similar decisions, especially the one on the rotation of offices, recall some practices that were common in Green parties (including the Italian Greens). These were aimed at avoiding hierarchies, centralisation and the emergence of strong personalities within the party. On the other hand, the horizontality that such practices would like to preserve in a context of authentically bottom-up parties is likely to turn into forms of uncontrolled and uncontrollable centralisation if introduced into an organisation, such as the M5S, in which from the beginning the leader was of great relevance. Preventing the formation of internal "intermediate bodies", in fact, would prevent the formation of groups or factions within the party, and hence the risk of the leadership being criticised or deposed. It was not by chance, in fact, that the great electoral success and the considerable media exposure of the new party led to the expression of internal dissent by MPs critical of the party line being discouraged. In the M5S, dissent was punished with expulsion, which was proposed by the leader and ratified by members with an online vote. As noted in the interview below:

> [2013] was also an excuse used by the leadership of the Movement to eliminate any kind of internal discussion and thus to create a party made of people who obey, so there has been a cultural transformation. To begin with, we preached active citizenship, the fact that citizens must know, must be distrustful of power, understand if what the rulers say is true and have their own opinion. Suddenly it has become: "we must all be aligned, we must not have different ideas, we must repeat what the leaders say and never make any criticisms; if not, we help newspapers that hate us" and so on. And so, there is precisely an anthropological change (Int. 7).

Among the provisions present in the *Code of Conduct*, we can also mention MPs being prohibited from participating in talk shows or the decision, taken by Grillo, to form two "communication groups", whose composition was also defined by the leader, one for the Chamber and the other for the Senate, to manage the party's external communication. The same provision was inserted into the *Code of Conduct* for EMPs in 2014. The 2014 *Code* also stipulated a fine of 250,000 euros if the norms are not respected.

In this phase, we do not find any further formal changes with respect to the dimensions examined, even though, as it has been noted with respect to the local level in 2010, with the entry of more than 150 MPs

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into parliament we see, despite rhetoric contrary to personalisation, the strengthening of some personalities that, thanks to their visibility, became prominent figures in the M5S. Therefore, there started to be a sort of "intermediate structure" within the parliament, which will later be called the "coordination structure" of the M5S.

> Di Maio, Di Battista and Fico are the three who have taken on importance... Especially Di Maio and Di Battista, and so, by now, they are quite on their own, they have their networks in the parliamentary groups... (Int. 7).

6. *Institutionalisation (2014–2017)*

According to the lifespan model, the passing of the institutionalisation threshold corresponds to the confirmation of the party's parliamentary presence. In the case of the M5S this took place on the occasion of the elections of March 4th, 2018 (Valbruzzi and Vignati 2018). However, since 2013 there have been various local and regional electoral competitions: the M5S took part in them, obtaining fluctuating results (Colloca and Marangoni 2017). On the one hand, the European elections of May 2014, in which the party achieved a good result, were a confirmation of the electoral strength of the M5S at the national level[49]. On the other hand, at the local level, over the years the M5S has had numerous municipal and regional councillors elected as well as a number of mayors, including Turin's (Biancalana 2019) and Rome's (De Rosa and Quattromani 2019). We can thus consider 2014 as the starting point of the institutionalization phase. This is a phase full of organisational changes for the M5S, which are even present for the first time in official party documents.

The party rules of the M5S were indeed published in December 2014. For the first time, the rights of members (article 1) were codified. The M5S's members have the right to: discuss and determine the political direction of elected representatives through the party's online participation tools; take part in online consultations; become candidates. Neither the powers granted to the leadership, nor the mode of its selection changed; on the contrary, Grillo's figure as the incontestable "political leader" (*capo politico*) of the M5S was established formally, including his relevant powers

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49 21.2 per cent of the votes; the outcome was, however, perceived as a defeat because of the high expectations that were placed on these elections.

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over the organisation such as the power to authorise the use of the symbol, the power to call an online consultation and the power to start an expulsion procedure.

We can also observe a succession of the "dynastic" type following the death of Gianroberto Casaleggio, which occurred in April 2016. Although, at first, his role had not been formalised, over time his son Davide—also a member of the family business: he had been involved from the beginning in the management of the blog and in the development of the online participation platform—also started to represent the M5S, taking part in official events and press conferences. The role of Davide Casaleggio in the organisational structure of the M5S was formalised in 2016. In that year, Associazione Rousseau (*Rousseau Association*) was created: this is a private association that had the task of managing the online participation platform of the M5S. Davide Casaleggio is the president both of the association and of the company Casaleggio Associati.

At the national level, the candidates' selection process remained substantially unchanged and happened through online consultations. At the 2014 European elections, those who had been members of the M5S since at least December 31st, 2012, and did not hold any elective office could become candidates and be voted by other members. Those who had been members since at least June 30th, 2013, could vote. Furthermore, the party rules published in December 2014 officialised the procedure of online voting for the selection of regional councillors.

With regard to the procedures used to define the party's programme and its policy agenda, they seemed to move in a more inclusive direction. We have seen that the electoral programme presented by the M5S for the 2013 general elections had been defined "from above". However, starting from 2014, the M5S began to use online consultations more systematically, giving members the opportunity to decide on topics such as the electoral law, the abolition of the crime of illegal immigration and civil unions. In addition to the definition of electoral programmes and policies, online consultations were used to select candidates for elective offices, to ratify the expulsions proposed by the leader, to decide on matters of alliances and strategies as well as, as we will see, for the election of the members of the new-born intermediate organs.

Such practices of inclusion of members in the decision-making processes of a political party are unprecedented in Italian political history and constitute a significant innovation introduced by the M5S. At the same time, this opening of the decision-making processes is controversial because the content of the consultations, as well as the options on which it is possible

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to vote, are decided "from above", "from Milan", as highlighted in this excerpt.

> The rule was that everything that goes beyond our five stars, our issues, our lines, it's to be voted for on the blog so the request started from us, or we said, "we would do this", and from Milan they would say to us "yes, but it is better to vote for it" (Int. 8).

As observed by Mosca (2015a), in fact, online voting is a problematic consultation tool from many points of view, including transparency, timing, choice of topics and incomplete and asymmetric information regarding the issues to be voted on, as the leader's ideas are always highlighted more than those of the opposing positions.

> But in the end this stuff [online votes] is now only a façade; when you want or need legitimation, maybe to overcome an internal obstacle or to make a good impression with the newspapers then we vote; if you are afraid of the result, consultations are not organised (Int. 7).

Last but not least, in this phase the control of the regular unfolding of online votes was entrusted to Casaleggio Associati staff, which could allow for manipulation of the results. In addition to the increase in the number of online consultations, in this phase the entire online participation platform of the Movement (since July 2015 renamed *Rousseau*) was extended with new functions and tools. For example, *Lex* allowed members to express their opinions on the laws that national elected representatives or regional councillors intend to present; *Lex iscritti* enabled members to propose draft laws; in *E-learning*, online courses for newly elected representatives were offered; *Sharing* allowed representatives to share their activities and the proposals that they presented in the assemblies.

The most important organisational change, however, relates to the emergence in this phase of official intermediate bodies for the first time. In November 2014, the so-called *direttorio* (directorate) was created. It was defined in a post on Grillo's blog (post *Political statement no. 55*) as the "representative structure" of the M5S. It was composed by five people who were to become a "wider reference for the M5S", meeting regularly with Grillo "to examine the general situation, to share the most urgent decisions". A sort of intermediate structure besides the leader and the Casaleggio Associati, even if not formalised in the Non-statute, was thus created, and was formed by MPs, formalising the role that some figures (Di Maio, Di Battista, Fico) assumed in the M5S. However, the methods

of selection are also interesting: it was a closed list of five people[50] defined by the leader, who the members could only accept or reject with an online vote. Grillo announced the dissolution of the *direttorio* in an interview in autumn 2016.

> At national level, there is no organised structure, hierarchical structure; we have chosen to do so, and this has meant that then, at some point, some sort of leadership is necessary, and, in the end, you see that the *direttorio* is born (Int. 5).

> Casaleggio decided, he saw the chaos that was there; the idea of rotating the whip didn't work and so he thought: if we have to have leaders, it's better that I choose them and that I trust them (Int. 7).

> Who chose those people? They chose them because they are trusted people... They needed someone to call and say, "take care of this" (Int. 8).

Only a month later, in December 2014, the appeal committee (*comitato d'appello*) was created. The new intermediate body, established in the party rules of the M5S (a document never voted on or discussed by members), had the task of examining the contested expulsions, contrary to what happened previously, when the expulsions decided by the leader were unquestionable, and of acting as a guarantor in the case of modifications to the rules. The appeal committee was composed of three MPs, two of whom were chosen by members among a list of names proposed by the leader, while the third was nominated directly by the leader.

A third intermediate body was established as a result of an update of the party rules and of the statute, which took place in September 2016. On this occasion, members had the opportunity to approve or reject the new version of the statute and to choose between two different versions of the party rules with an online vote. Following this update, a new intermediate body was created: the board of advisors (*collegio dei probiviri*), composed of three MPs chosen with an online consultation on the proposal of the political leader of the M5S. The board of advisors had the task of managing disciplinary sanctions, including expulsions (whose re-examination, in the event of a dispute, was the task of the appeal committee).

From 2016, therefore, there are three intermediate bodies of the M5S: the assembly of members, that is, all the members of the M5S who had

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50 The members of the *direttorio* were: Luigi Di Maio, Alessandro Di Battista, Roberto Fico, Carla Ruocco and Carlo Sibilia.

the right to vote in online consultations; the board of advisors; and the appeal committee. These are intermediate bodies "without any directive or representative function" (Party rules, article 1bis). At this stage, there was also the creation of an informal network of elected representatives that act as internal reference points of the M5S. This is what is called, informally, the "coordination structure" of the M5S (post *The future of the M5S*, 12/9/2016). It is a sort of structure composed by some elected representatives that, as in the case of the *direttorio*, perform some important "functions". In this case, no online consultation was organised. The elected representatives seem to have been simply chosen by the leader, using non-transparent methods.

> They are functions, we have solved the problem in that way, precisely because we want to be a movement in theory without leaders, then television creates the leaders anyway, but we tried to propose a series of functions that we must necessarily have […] and therefore, in this sense, it is a response by the M5S to the need, on the one hand, to organise and, on the other, not to be structured in a party-like way, because we realise very well that there are difficulties, there are some shortcomings on the part of the M5S, when you choose not to have a party structure (Int. 9).

In this phase, members' rights were clearly defined for the first time and, as we have seen, they included a vast array of powers. However, rights were granted to members as individuals and could be exercised only though an online platform controlled by the leaders. Moreover, the statutory changes that occurred in this phase could be seen as the first steps towards the formation of an intermediary structure in the M5S, albeit different with respect to those of traditional parties. But we have seen that the members of these intermediate bodies, despite being elected with online consultations, were in reality substantially chosen by the leader. Furthermore, it is necessary to remember that the M5S's intermediate bodies were composed of MPs who, according to the rules of the party, can complete a maximum of two mandates.

Therefore, the emergence of such an internal structure didn't essentially change the M5S's disintermediation strategies. As we have seen, these strategies consist in replacing the traditional party structure with an internet-based one, since members can have a say on political and party decisions through the platform *Rousseau*. This can be seen as a prevalence of the dimension of disintermediation from below. However, we have also

seen that the leaders strictly control the platform, and the decision-making processes that happen within it are guided from above.

7. *Government Participation (2018)*

At the 2018 general elections, the M5S obtained 32.8 per cent of the valid votes (more than ten million) and had more than 300 MPs elected (Biancalana and Colloca 2018). Contrary to its precedent provisions and principles on alliances with traditional parties, in June 2018 it formed a coalition government with Salvini's Lega (League), and in September 2019 with the Partito Democratico. In both cases, the prime minister was expressed by the M5S: he was Giuseppe Conte, a law professor near to the M5S but without any previous political experience, has become one of the most important characters in Italian politics over time, also because of his role of PM during the first outbreak of the pandemic[51].

After one year in government, in May 2019, the M5S participated in the European elections, losing 15.3 per cent of the votes, and achieving its worst result in a national electoral competition (17.1 per cent). We know that in the life cycle of all new parties, crossing the threshold of government marks the start of a crucial and completely new phase. It can be suggested that the first experience of government is especially problematic: it represents a completely novel set of circumstances—circumstances of which the parties concerned have no experience and for which they have no established routines. It can affect the parties' internal organisation and their relations with other parties, especially when, as in the present case, the other parties' members in the coalition have more experience.

The phase that preceded the 2018 elections was full of organisational changes. At the end of 2017 a new statute was released, and this brought many innovations to the internal structure of the M5S. In reality, a major change had already occurred in September 2017, when Luigi Di Maio, a young MP elected in 2013, without any previous political experience, was elected as the M5S's candidate prime minister in an online vote. This seemed to herald a more relevant role for Di Maio within the organisation, and that is precisely what happened three months later, with the publishing of the new statute.

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51 His increased political experience, media exposure and approval rating among citizens and members led him to try to take over the party in early 2021.

The first thing to note is that, just like all other M5S's documents, the content of the 2017 statute (the name Non-statute was abandoned) was not subject to a public discussion. It was simply published, and even the positions that, according to it, were supposed to be elective, were already set. The two most important organisational novelties recorded by the statute were the growth and institutionalisation of intermediate bodies and the formalisation of two different roles of leadership, Grillo's and Di Maio's. On the one hand, we witness a detachment of Grillo from the M5S, also indicated by the fact that, in January 2018, he separated his personal blog from that of the Movement; on the other, this did not result in less centralisation of the party.

As regards intermediate bodies, six internal organs of the M5S are listed in the new statute: the guarantor; the political leader; the treasurer; the members' assembly; the guarantee committee (*comitato di garanzia*); and the board of advisors. The guarantor, Beppe Grillo, has the task of protecting the fundamental values of the M5S and has the power to interpret the rules of the statute. He remains in office indefinitely and can be removed by the proposal of the guarantee committee by an absolute majority of its members; the decision should be ratified by an online consultation of the members. The political leader, Di Maio, is the legal and institutional representative of the M5S, in charge of ensuring the unity of the political address of the M5S. The political leader is elected by the members, holds office for 5 years and can be re-elected once. He has many powers including deciding to hold online consultations and a sort of veto power over candidacies. He can be removed following a decision by the guarantee committee or the guarantor, and the decision must be ratified by an online consultation.

Moreover, the guarantee committee supervises the correct application of the rules of the statute, decides on the existence and loss of the requirements to become a member or a candidate, and approves the regulations and codes proposed by the political leader. The three members of the guarantee committee are elected by the members: they can choose them from a list of six names, decided by the guarantor. It lasts 4 years and is not renewable; from the next election, its members can't be elected representatives. Finally, the board of advisors imposes disciplinary sanctions. It is composed of three members elected through an online consultation; members can choose them from a list of at least five names proposed by the guarantor.

As regards the procedure of candidate selection, even in the case of the 2018 elections it happened completely online. Compared to the 2013 and

2014 ones, we witness further opening of the decision-making processes, but also closure of them: *all* members, without restrictions, could vote and be voted for, but the political leader had a sort of veto power over candidacies, and can directly decide on the candidates of the single-member constituencies (37 per cent of the seats according to the current electoral law). Even in the case of the selection of candidates for the 2019 European elections all members could be voted for and vote, but the political leader had the power to decide the names of the first candidate in the list of each constituency autonomously.

In contrast to 2013, the programme for the 2018 general elections was the subject of a discussion within the party, since a series of online consultations were held on *Rousseau* during the year preceding the elections. Starting from December 2016, the members of the M5S had the opportunity to vote on sixteen points of the programme. It should be noted, though, that these were votes on predetermined options, the answers to which could often only be "yes" or "no". Despite these limitations, we can say that the M5S notably opened its internal decision-making processes, regarding the definition of the programme. In the case of the European elections of 2019, where the programme was less significant, members had the opportunity to choose the "priority actions" that the future European MPs would carry out in Europe.

In the *Code of Conduct* for MPs, renamed *Code of Ethics*, the provision of the rotation of the assignments within parliamentary groups was maintained. Nevertheless, the names of the representatives holding that position had to be chosen from a list prepared by the political leader, who also had the power to decide on the first party whip and spokesperson, who will last 18 months. Also, communication groups, whose composition is again decided on by the political leader, were maintained. Moreover, MPs were required to finance the platform *Rousseau* monthly, which is intended as the official means of communication for MPs.

As regards participation in TV programmes, it is allowed, but MPs are obliged to coordinate their participation with the national communication managers of the party, who are in turn designated by the party leader. Finally, in this new version of the statute the role of the Associazione Rousseau, whose president, as we have seen, is Davide Casaleggio, was officialised as the manager of the IT system (the platform *Rousseau*), through which all the decision-making processes of the M5S pass (article 1c). This is relevant because Associazione Rousseau is an entity detached from the M5S, which basically manages the entire decision-making process of the party, and over which members have no form of control.

To sum up, with the publication of the new statute, the organisational structure of the M5S became more complex. The 2017 statute gave the M5S an almost party-like shape, at least on paper. Although Grillo's position remained unquestioned, we witness a veritable change of leadership as more and more and more power is held by Di Maio, also thanks to his prominent role both in the governments with the Lega and the Partito Democratico. But the change of leadership and the enlargement of intermediate bodies did not change the essentially centralised nature of the party. It is true, on the one hand, that individual members had a vast array of rights, but when the stakes were high (for instance, decisions on key positions within the party, or in the case of the most secure candidacies), the leadership retained its power, also with respect to the elected representatives.

8. *The Reform and Refoundation of the Party (2019–2020)*

After the disappointing results of the 2019 European elections, Di Maio started a process of reform of the organisation that was to shake the very foundations of the party and led, in the first half of 2021, to the veritable refoundation of the M5S. In summer 2019, not only was an exception to the limit of the two terms for municipal councillors introduced (the so-called *mandato zero* or "zero term"), but the role of the "facilitator" was also created. The facilitator is a sort of coordinator of the party, and a transmission belt between the centre and the territories. According to the party's rhetoric, his task is to "support" the political leader and to "listen to the requests from below […] and transform them into activities such as organising events, training moments, communications, etc. to be carried out in the territories". Indeed, facilitators can operate at the regional or national level. While regional facilitators have the task of reinforcing the linkage between the centre and the territories, national level facilitators are responsible for the organisational aspects of the party and for the articulation of policies.

The creation of regional facilitators relates to the relevant aspect of the relationship between the local and the national levels in the party. We have seen that the local level is crucial for the M5S in many respects: it was at the local level that the M5S originated, through the autonomous formation and self-organisation of groups of active citizens, who later participated in local elections. At this level, the party has always worked essentially as a "brand-giver": candidates that wanted to stand in local elections had

to request a certification in order to use the party logo. Besides this, local groups, although they do not represented official branches of the party, organised themselves autonomously, and there was not a structure, except for the elected representatives. Apparently, the position of the facilitator was conceived to fill this gap.

There are two types of national level facilitators: six are responsible for the organisational aspects of the party (the six areas of action are: communication; training and staff; local activism; election campaigns; support for local authorities administered by the M5S; and coordination and internal affairs[52]), while twelve are responsible for the articulation of policies. Thematic facilitators[53] are supported by an 8-people group of experts. Together, the facilitators compose what has been called the *Team del futuro* (Future Team), which can be considered a new organisational structure of the M5S. Nevertheless, these changes were not to be codified in the party statute. Facilitators are essentially coordinators with no formal rights or duties, but they testify to the growth of an internal structure in the party and the attempt to create a more widespread structure of power, albeit strictly controlled from above.

As regards the control from above, it is worth mentioning the selection procedure of the members of the Future Team. In the case of the organisational facilitators, the choice left to the members was only to accept or refuse them in full, while in the case of the thematic ones, members had the opportunity to propose themselves and to form a group composed of other members. Different groups and projects were subsequently voted for online. In the case of regional facilitators, members had the opportunity to propose themselves and vote, but in the end it was the leader that had the power to choose the facilitators from the three voted for most by members. Needless to say, the leadership could screen candidacies and thus exclude candidates at any time.

Di Maio resigned as political leader in January 2020, on the occasion of the public presentation of the regional facilitators. The reasons for his resignation were the Movement's electoral defeats and the loss of members in the parliamentary groups. According to the statute, his role was taken

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52 The six facilitators are all elected representatives except Elena Sabadini, the facilitator in the area dedicated to coordination and internal affairs. She is a close collaborator of Davide Casaleggio.

53 The twelve thematic areas are: agriculture and fishing; the environment; the economy; foreign affairs and the European Union; justice and institutional affairs; business, innovation; education, research and culture; work and family; health; security and defence; transport and infrastructure.

on by Vito Crimi, as a senior member of the guarantor committee. Consequently, a meeting of the base was called for the spring, the so-called *Stati generali*, a kind of party congress. This was a very important step for the party, which had always kept his distance with respect to traditional political actors. For this reason, the Movimento 5 Stelle had never had a real congress. It had only held some annual meetings, called *Italia 5 stelle*, that were more a matter of communication than of decision. The congress was called for the spring, but the outbreak of the pandemic stopped the process and, in the end, the *Stati generali* were held online between October and December 2020.

With regard to the process, the congress had three main steps. In the first place, in October 2020 regional facilitators called for regional online meetings, which were open to registered members resident in the region. The task of the meetings was to prepare a regional document, based on three areas: rules and principles, organisation and structure, and political agenda. In the same meetings, 305 delegates were elected by the regional assemblies to represent the requests of the region in the next phase of the congress. According to the party, 8,000 members participated in this phase. There were three types of delegates: members, elected representatives at the local level, and elected representatives at the regional, national and European levels; each type of actor could elect only his type of delegates.

Second, in two days in November 2020, the regional documents were discussed by delegates in order to create a single synthetic document. The phase was managed by Avventura Urbana, a company specialising in participatory processes. Finally, the third step, in December, was the members' online vote. 23 proposals were prepared by the political leader on the basis of the document, which were consequently voted on via *Rousseau*. In February 2021, after an online vote, six new points were added to the statute. In the month of December, the party also opened a second phase of the *Stati generali*, in order to create the new political agenda of the party from below. This phase was also open to non-members.

The *Stati generali* testify to a deep change for the party. In the first place, in terms of procedures, for the first time the focus was on deliberation rather than on decision, and the existence of forms of delegation was acknowledged. If it is true, on the one hand, that in the end the points were assembled by the political leader and voted on on the platform with Yes/No votes, the points of the proposals stem from a deliberative process that involved registered members first and then delegates. The "rules of the game" came from above, and the structure remained centralised, but it was

a rather inclusive process from below, which took into consideration the requests of the base within a codified process.

Even with regard to content, the *Stati generali* represented a real Copernican revolution for the M5S, although it occurred in the wake of the process of reform started in 2019. In the final document, we can read that members asked for the principle of collegiality to inform all the decision-making and governing organs of the party, including the party leadership. This was an important novelty for a political actor that had always placed great importance on the figure of the leader. As regards intermediate organs, members asked for their number to be enlarged, to also structure them also at the regional level, and for the opportunity to recall them. Moreover, they asked for the formalisation and strengthening of the party's territorial structure, for instance with the acknowledgement of the role of local groups, even when they don't have an elected representative. Against the backdrop of a party born in opposition to party structures, this testifies to a clear need for intermediation expressed by party members.

Finally, a last point made by members during the *Stati generali* regarded the relationship of the party with Davide Casaleggio and Associazione Rousseau. In the 2017 statute, it is written that all the decision-making processes of the party have to pass through *Rousseau*, which is managed by Associazione Rousseau. One of the outcomes of the congress was the request to regulate this relationship with a formal contract: "Relations with the platform manager must be governed by a specific service contract or partnership agreement that defines the services, roles and reciprocal duties". Indeed, the relationship between the M5S and Associazione Rousseau is a thorny one, as many MPs over time criticised the role of Casaleggio and his association with the party. As early as autumn 2020, MPs in the Chamber of Deputies changed the statute of the parliamentary group, stating that the group's means of communication shouldn't be only those managed by Casaleggio, such as the site and the platform.

For his part, on October 4th—the anniversary of the birth of the M5S—Davide Casaleggio wrote a post on the blog recalling that the Movement should not become a party, and that "if the transformation into a party starts" Associazione Rousseau will no longer support such a political actor. Coherently with these positions, he decided to leave the party in June 2021, also ending the collaboration between Associazione Rousseau and the M5S.

> The M5S was born with some promises […]. The first of these is that we would never become a party. The party has a group of a few people who decide everything for everyone. Electoral lists, appointments, pro-

grammes, electoral alliances in the various cities. In the Movement, on the other hand, power is exercised from below and there are ways to ensure transparency and the sharing of choices among members. The party believes in delegation to a representative, the Movement in the active involvement of individual participants. The party takes public funding, creates salaried structures for former elected officials, does not believe that there are limits to parliamentary mandates and creates decision-making structures that expropriate citizens from their role of direction and choice. We will guarantee the activities that will be requested by the political leader of the M5S […] for the realisation of the path that the Movement wants to take, but if, for some reason, the transformation into a party starts, our support will no longer be guaranteed (Post *Noi siamo Movimento*, October 4th, 2020).

To conclude, we see that the passing of the last threshold and the first years in government contributed to completing a course already undertaken by the party. With the 2017 statute, the creation of the facilitators, and the outcome of the *Stati generali* we see clear enlargement and strengthening of the party's intermediate structure. As we could expect on the basis of the literature on new parties' evolution, this was an inevitable step, since the Movement increased its electoral strength and acquired government responsibilities. Despite Casaleggio's views on the future of the M5S, even members' requests testify to a need for organisation and intermediation. However, at least until the end of 2020, this did not change the fundamentally centralised nature of the party, in which the leader retained great shares of power.

With respect to what we could define as the party in central office, that is, members of the intermediate structure, the political leader has the power to propose and, in some cases, choose them. With respect to elected representatives, he has relevant decision-making powers regarding their communication. With respect to members, he has the power to call online consultations through which they could express themselves on various party issues. Finally, we should not forget that, although some procedures for his removal formally exist, in the 2017 statute Beppe Grillo was appointed indefinitely as guarantor of the party with relevant decision-making powers. So, if centralisation was one of the main characteristics of the M5S at the end of 2020, we can say that the clashes between Conte and Grillo, as

well as the refoundation of the party on the figure of Conte in the summer 2021, confirm once again this trait of the party[54].

Studying Italian politics is like chasing the future; therefore, I cannot analyse in detail here the most recent evolution of the M5S or the new statute released in the summer 2021. However, summing up the transformations until the end of 2020, we can say that in this phase members had the opportunity to vote extensively on candidates and policy selection, and on important party decisions. For the first time, they also had the opportunity to express themselves on the party's structure, through a codified and structurated process that led to important (albeit short) statutory changes, such as the proposal of collective leadership. Nevertheless, we can conclude that even in this last phase the dimension of disintermediation from above prevailed. Members' power, that is, disintermediation from below, was limited by the fact that the "rules of the game", and the infrastructure in which their decision-making occurs, are strictly controlled by the leadership. It remains to be seen, and it will be the task of future research, whether and in which ways the new structure of the Movimento 5 Stelle led by Conte will resemble its predecessor.

9. Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to analyse the organisation of the M5S and its evolution in order to assess whether or not it makes use of disintermediation strategies, how they are interpreted by this political actor, and which dimension prevails among those outlined. From the very beginning, the M5S made use of disintermediation strategies. The will to create an unmediated link between citizens and power is, according to the official

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54 In July 2021, after a series of clashes between Beppe Grillo and Giuseppe Conte, the former PM and new leading figure of the Movement, a new statute was presented by Conte. Beppe Grillo will remain guarantor but, in line with the evolution underlined in this chapter, the new statute paves the way for an internal organisation of the M5S more similar to that of a traditional party. For instance, territorial groups are acknowledged for the first time, as well as a national council of the party. In the month of August, the statute was approved by members through an online vote on SkyVote, a voting platform managed by a private company that, differently from Associazione Rousseau, is completely detached from the M5S. A few days after, again through an online vote on SkyVote, Giuseppe Conte was elected as president of the party with a 92,8 per cent approval rate. This step, which cannot be analysed here, represents the last step in the institutionalisation of the party.

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rhetoric, the main aim of this political actor and is mirrored in its organisation, which, at least initially, is made up only of the leader, members and elected representatives, who are connected by the internet. Disintermediation strategies can be defined precisely as rhetoric or practices developed by parties in order to stage or deliver an unmediated relationship with citizens. In particular, we have seen that disintermediation in party organisations involves the weakening of the party's intermediate organisation, through greater powers given to the party leader (disintermediation from above) and party members (disintermediation from below).

In order to understand the prevailing dimension of disintermediation, we can go back to the five dimensions taken into consideration within the course of this analysis. As regards the candidates' selection process, we have seen that the M5S's members have always had a lot of power at the local[55] and national levels. This is true, especially in the last period, regarding the definition of programmes and policies too. On the other hand, the prerogatives of the leadership remained relevant and substantially unchanged until the end of 2020. Despite the formal leadership change from Grillo to Di Maio, the leadership retained significant powers and control over the organisation. Notwithstanding the discussions on the creation of collective leadership during the first congress of the Movement, the *Stati generali*, the recent clashes between Beppe Grillo and Giuseppe Conte over the future of the M5S testify once again to the importance of personal leadership for this political actor.

Although a new statute was presented by Conte only a few months after the statutory changes had stemmed from the congress, the *Stati generali* represented an important moment of change for the Movement. If until the end of 2020, the internal rules of the M5S, starting from its founding documents, weren't the object of a real discussion, but were simply presented to members, this started to change with the *Stati generali*, both in method (deliberation instead of decision) and in substance (requests for intermediation instead of disintermediation). Moreover, an important step towards the institutionalisation of the party emerged with respect to the IT

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55 We must specify that, in some cases, the influence of the centre on the territories was relevant. For instance, in 2016, Grillo upset the result of the online consultation for the candidate mayor of the city of Genoa. In 2018, but this had also happened various times in the past, he decided not to give "certification" to two local groups (Siena and Vicenza) that wanted to participate in local elections. This decision was neither shared with nor explained to the local groups. They, as we have seen, are for the moment not formalised in the party model and have no codified way to make claims to the centre.

infrastructure in charge of managing the decision-making processes of the Movement. Following the exit of Davide Casaleggio from the M5S, the online decision-making processes of the Movement are no longer controlled by Associazione Rousseau: the Movement will collaborate with private companies for the managing of online votes. This can be seen as a sign of enfranchisement of the Movement not only from one of its founders, and thus a decrease in the dimension of disintermediation from above, but also from the most radical promises of online direct democracy.

We have seen that with the evolution of the organisation, we witness a growing presence of intermediate bodies in this political actor. As expected, with the passing of the various thresholds identified by Pedersen, and in particular with the passing of the last one, that is, government, the organisation of the M5S has gradually become more complex, both through an informal "coordination structure", not formalised in official documents and with the codification of more formalised internal organs. With respect to its origins, the M5S now has an almost party-like structure. But, in terms of the characteristics of that structure, we have also seen that it is substantially different from a traditional one, as until the end of 2020 it was the political leader who had significant powers in appointing its members. Moreover, the M5S continued to be different with respect to traditional party actors in many respects, first of all with respect to the two-term limit for elected representatives. It remains to be verified if the forthcoming formalisation of the new party structure in 2021—with territorial groups and a national council—could imply a sort of return to "old" forms of intermediation.

To sum up, we can affirm that in the M5S's disintermediation, strategies from below and from above coexist, but that until now disintermediation from above has prevailed. On the one hand, this is not a "memberless party" (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017). Through the internet, members have significant decision-making powers, compared to those traditionally granted to party members. However, on the other hand, the structure within which they can exercise their power is highly centralised. This party did not present a structure similar to that of traditional parties: the M5S, at least at the beginning, was composed only of the leader, the elected representatives and members, who were connected with the internet. It is through the internet that an unmediated connection between citizens and power, but also between leader, elected representatives and members, was created.

In the M5S, we are not faced with a simple attempt to *weaken* the party's internal organisation. From my analysis of party documents, we

can see that this political actor, at least at the beginning, did not present an intermediate structure or a middle-level elite at all, which were replaced by an internet-based organisation. The request for collective leadership, an outcome of the *Stati generali*, could be seen as a sign of the weakening of the dimension of disintermediation from above that has long been present in this political actor, not through more disintermediation from below, as promised by the party rhetoric, but with more intermediation. Future analyses of the new party documents presented by Giuseppe Conte will tell us if this is the case.

Finally, in addition to the intermediate bodies created after 2017, we can say that over time new and old forms of intermediation emerged. In the first place, if the internet can be seen as a tool of disintermediation, it can also represent intermediation of a different kind. I will analyse this point in detail in the next chapter, which is dedicated to the M5S's online participation platform *Rousseau*, but we have already seen that Casaleggio Associati and Associazione Rousseau acted as powerful gatekeepers in the party's decision-making processes. In the second place, we have seen that even in an organisation that presents strong rhetoric on leaderlessness and that affirms it is contrary to personalisation and opposed to traditional party organisations, forms of formal and informal leadership and an internal organisation have emerged over time. This is true not only with respect to Grillo and Casaleggio, who had a recognised and codified role in terms of leadership from the beginning. Over time, and we will see this in the chapter dedicated to the M5S in Turin too, elected representatives start playing coordination roles and later have relevant formal positions in the organisation, such as in the case of Luigi Di Maio or, more recently, Giuseppe Conte.

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