

Administrative reform under mutating populism in office: insights from Italy (2018-2022)

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Abstract

This paper tracks the dynamics of administrative reform across two areas (civil service, simplification) in Italy, focusing on the XVIII parliamentary term, characterized by the presence of populist parties in three different coalition governments (Conte I, Conte II, Draghi). The alternation in power between different governments occurred in a context marked by the shift of the EU economic governance from a logic of conditionality to a logic of solidarity in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. After a decade of EU-led austerity, the shift of EU economic governance was expected to support and enable administrative reform at the national level. Our findings reveal that the structural lack of time induced the Draghi government to focus administrative reforms on a limited number of domains to produce quick and relevant results. This selective approach focusing on capacity building was an improvement in patterns of administrative reform if compared with what happened under the Conte I and II governments, which displayed a marked chasm between the level of talk and the level of action. This was due partly to populist parties not having pursued a distinctive agenda in matters of administrative reform despite their bold words, and partly to EU fiscal constraints.

1. Introduction

Uniquely in Europe, Italy witnessed five coalition governments dominated by populist parties in the period 2000–2021 (Berlusconi II, Berlusconi III, Berlusconi IV, Conte I, Conte II). The grand coalition government chaired by Mario Draghi (2021-2022), former President of the European Central Bank, also encompassed three populist parties in its parliamentary majority (Forza Italia, or ‘Go Italy’, FI; Lega Nord or ‘Northern League’, LN; the Movimento Cinque Stelle, ‘Five Star Movement’, FSM). The only party in opposition during the reign of Mario Draghi’s government, the post-fascist populist party Fratelli d’Italia, or ‘Brothers of Italy’, FdI, followed the pattern typical of the Italian party system in which new populist actors react to the success of their fellow populist parties that enter coalition government (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016).

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Against this background, the XVIII parliamentary term (2018-2022) offers an extraordinary research window for scholars interested in the behaviour of populist parties when in government, and their impact on the making of administrative reforms. First, this parliamentary term was marked by considerable instability, with three successive government formations (Conte I, Conte II and Draghi governments) and three different ministers for public administration (Bongiorno, Dadone, Brunetta), who were the expression of three different populist parties (LN, FSM and FI, respectively). Second, in two out of the three governments (Conte II and Draghi), the presence of populists was balanced by the presence of mainstream parties (e.g. the Democratic Party, PD; +Europa; Liberi e Uguali, LEU, and other parliamentary groups created during the term) and technicians in key cabinet positions (in the case of the Draghi government, both the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Economy and Finance), with whom they had to come to terms. Finally, the context in which the XVIII parliamentary term unfolded was studded with extraordinary circumstances that were at once a challenge and an opportunity for the Italian PA (and for those in government, too). On the one hand, the management of the pandemic emergency due to the Sars-Cov2 virus (for which the Italian populist parties expressed diametrically opposed positions, cf. Russo and Valbruzzi 2022) and the consequent need to launch a credible recovery plan are particularly complex tasks for a country with reduced administrative capacity like Italy; on the other hand, the gradual shift at the European level from austerity to a solidarity-oriented approach paved the way for breaking with a long season of budget cuts, thereby opening a window for reforms that addressed some of the underlying problems of PA dysfunctions, such as staff shortages and the progressive ageing of civil servants (Ongaro, Di Mascio and Natalini 2022).

Based on these premises, in this article we aim to track the strategies for administrative reform pursued by the three consecutive governments during the XVIII parliamentary term in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. During the XVIII parliamentary term, given the succession of governments and the changing contextual conditions, did the salience of administrative reforms change as part of the government agenda?

RQ2. With representatives of different populist forces taking over the leadership of the Ministry for Public Administration in three cabinets that differed markedly with respect to their composition, did the impact of populist parties on administrative reforms change during the XVIII parliamentary term?

In order to answer these questions, an analytically grounded account for each of the cabinets during the 18th parliamentary term is provided. Actions taken by the PA ministers were traced by looking at three dimensions that are key to grasping the relationship between populist parties and public administration: a) the type of interventions proposed, b) the kind of rhetoric used and c) the attitude towards bureaucracy (see section 2). Empirically, the focus was on administrative simplification and civil service reform, two policy priorities that rank high on the agendas of the Italian populist parties (Di Mascio, Natalini and Ongaro 2021). Data were collected using source triangulation so as to ensure the validity of findings: the review of official documents (e.g., primary and secondary legislation) was coupled with the analysis of institutional monitoring reports and ministerial hearings recounted in the national press, as well as with a number of

interviews with key informants that brought to light issues that could not be deduced from the documentary analysis. More specifically, between December 2021 and May 2022, ten open interviews were carried out with ministerial advisors and senior civil servants of the Civil Service Department.

The article is structured as follows: section 2 offers a brief review of the literature on the relationship between populist parties and public administration, while section 3 illustrates the state of the art of administrative reforms in Italy. Section 4 presents the results of the empirical research, analysed for the three governments in office during the XVIII parliamentary term. Finally, section 5 discusses the findings in the light of the research questions outlined above and conjectures about future developments.

2. Literature review on populism and public administration

Over the past few decades, populist politicians have steadily increased their support, entering government in many democracies. Public administration reform projects inspired by the New Public Management paradigm that offered to measure performance objectively but failed to do so, that proposed to listen to the people but often did not, and that advocated policy driven by evidence but often failed to deliver, have fed cynicism about mainstream governing practices later exploited by populism (Stoker 2021). Populist politicians often joined the call for a ‘Post-NPM’ approach to the public service aimed at attenuating the negative consequences of New Public Management like increased fragmentation of governance or inadequate political control of civil servants (Reiter and Klenk 2019).

Given that policymaking relies to a great extent on bureaucracy, an emerging research agenda explores the implications of populism for governance (Rockman 2019; Bauer et al. 2021; Caiani and Graziano 2022). Theoretically, this stream of the literature revolves around two perspectives, exceptionalism and normality, that describe the effect of including populists in government (Askim, Karlsen and Kolltveit 2022). Many populist parties that enter government have a history of expressing dissatisfaction with civil servants, who are seen as part of the corrupt establishment. According to the exceptionalism perspective, there is a strong incentive to continue the opposition role while in government to reassure core voters that the party has not sold out to the establishment. This is expected to imply an increasing level of patronage, with populist politicians appointing as many loyalists as possible in government, complemented by centralization of decision-making and reduction of accountability.

Conversely, the normality perspective assumes that executive politicians from a populist party behave like those of any other party in government. First, populist parties vary in their outlook on public administration, and their views on the state are likely to differ, and upon entering government these differences will eventually come to the fore. Populist parties that call for more efficient governance, in particular those with a technocratic bent, need to ensure that experienced civil servants provide advice if they want to have any chance of implementing policies. Second, although at the heart of the populist rhetoric lies the idea that bureaucracy is part of the corrupt establishment, populists in government have often displayed a lack of interest in reforming bureaucracy, which is seen as a technical issue that their core voters do not perceive as salient (Peters and Pierre 2019). Third, most populist parties entering government have done so as

coalitions with mainstream parties. Tight interactions with mainstream coalition partners that are needed to search for compromise between different policy options may have sobering effects on populist parties in government. Finally, populist parties' room to manoeuvre may be limited by a robust administrative order, which comes with legacies and path dependencies that constrain the administrative choices available. This may prevent populists in government from undertaking strategies like 'capturing' or 'dismantling' bureaucracies that go far beyond ordinary measures of enhancing political steering capacities (Bauer and Becker 2020).

As acknowledged above, when populists enter government this may not result in an overhaul of bureaucracy; it rather depends on their conduct in office. Politicians in general have three general choices after entering government: sidelining, empowering, or using bureaucracy (Peters and Pierre 2019). The first scenario is that of the marginalization of bureaucracy whose top officials are sidelined, leaving room for outsiders linked to populist parties to obtain positions in the nodal ganglions of the public sector. Upon being included for the first time in the executive government, populist parties can be incentivized to rely on the advice and the networks of institutional relations provided by senior civil servants. However, they often prefer instead to trace a clear dividing line with the old ruling class, of which the top administrative officials are an important part. This scenario can take place in several ways. First, sidelining can be more or less intrusive. Depending on the institutional context, the power of appointment may in fact be subject to rules, even constitutional ones, that safeguard merit or in any case make problematic the replacement of even a few top executives or entire ranks of public officials using trust-based criteria. Secondly, depending on the various types of populism, the style of appointments can be very different. In some cases, appointments may concern technically qualified individuals who, due to their skills, can take root in the ranks of civil service. In particular, this is the case where populist rhetoric focuses on the stereotype of lazy and incompetent bureaucrats that the new governing parties replace with skilled and virtuous individuals. In other cases, populists can even appoint poorly qualified people to the top echelons of administrations in order to be able to count on the personal and/or political loyalty of those who must lead the process of change within hostile offices where the power of the old ruling class is entrenched.

In the second scenario, the populist parties in government assign more powers to the bureaucracy. Once in office, populist parties may actually want to implement their policy priorities. In this scenario, it is important for populists in government to gain the consent of the bureaucracies within a tight schedule in order to be able to launch the new public policies expected by citizens as soon as possible. In this perspective, public managers, especially if they are inclined to maintain a neutral but supportive position with regard to the democratically invested political leadership, can be useful allies for populist parties. This can lead to a strengthening of the bureaucracy with the aim of enabling it to perform its task in the best possible way. One variant of the empowering scenario is that populist leaders coming into office will not be interested in governing or that they will focus only on a few policy domains such as immigration and leave much of the rest of government unattended to. The absence of effective leadership and direction from the top may enable some form of 'bureaucratic government' to appear, in direct contradiction to the rhetoric of populist parties that denigrates bureaucracy.

In the third scenario, the populist parties in government use the bureaucracy they inherited from their predecessors. This scenario can take place due to the cynicism or incapacity of the ruling populists. In the former case, the anti-statalism that characterizes populism is nothing more than a rhetorical device to stir up protests and gain the consent of dissatisfied citizens. Once in power, especially in countries with authoritarian tendencies, the logic of the past is reproduced (only with a different interpreter at the head of power). The same effect of leaving the role of bureaucracy unaltered can be brought about by the incapacity and inexperience of populist actors. In this case, populist leaders who neither have the necessary knowledge about administrative procedures nor know an adequate number of potential appointees who can help them design and implement new public policies end up using the people they find in public offices.

3. Mutating populism and public administration in Italy

Italy is a case of ‘mutating populism’ where diverse populist parties emerged as different incarnations of a consolidated anti-establishment ethos (Bobba and McDonnell 2015; Verbeek and Zaslove 2016). The success of populist parties is in part traceable to certain long-term determinants of political dissatisfaction characterizing modern Italy (Morlino and Tarchi 1996). The poor delivery of public services resulting from traits typical of Southern European bureaucracies— clientelistic patterns of personnel recruitment, formalism and legalism complemented by informal shadow governance structures, uneven distribution of resources, organizational fragment and insufficient mechanisms for policy coordination — is one of the key factors of chronic dissatisfaction with political parties and elites (Sotiropoulos 2004). A key feature of the Italian bureaucracy is the lack of an administrative elite: until the early 1990s the Italian administrative elite constituted an elderly ‘ossified world’ displaying extremely rare horizontal and vertical mobility, and was dominated by the legalistic outlook of personnel coming almost exclusively from the underdeveloped South. This low level of professionalism allowed the higher civil service to form a pact with politicians of reciprocal self-restraint: public managers renounced an autonomous proactive role in processes of policy making, while politicians refrained from interfering in the management of career advancements based on age and length of service (Cassese 1999).

The lack of integration between political and administrative elites made governments reluctant to ‘use’ the established bureaucracy. The general approach to the bureaucracy has been to ‘sideline’ it, meaning that governments filled ministerial cabinets with hundreds of loyal party officials, setting up a parallel advisory structure. Ministerial cabinets were a substitute for the ordinary bureaucracies and exercised executive tasks, thus also blurring the lines of accountability between politics and the administration. Given the legalism of the administrative system, professional corps (e.g., Council of State, Court of Accounts, State Attorney), whose staff are all trained in law, constituted the privileged recruitment pool, yielding heads of cabinets who provided ministers with advice about the legal aspects of the policy-making process (Di Mascio and Natalini 2016).

Since public sector organizations were often utilized by political parties to cultivate their clienteles, no government was able or willing to undertake administrative reforms until the early 1990s when the abrupt collapse of the Italian party system opened a

window of opportunity for administrative modernization. Policy entrepreneurs like the Ministers of Public Administration Cassese in 1993 and Bassanini in 1996-1998 exploited the political crisis to deliver long-awaited administrative reforms. The success of Italian policy entrepreneurs has depended heavily on their ability to repackage the internationally widespread New Public Management (NPM) doctrines as technical and bipartisan, drawing on their a priori expertise on the conditions and problems of public administration in Italy (Mele and Ongaro 2014). Policy entrepreneurs also exploited the intensification of the European integration process to strengthen their capacity to act in relation to a major problem of structural adjustment like the quality of public services, by weakening the position of opponents of administrative reforms (Natalini 2010).

Administrative reforms aimed to radically change the organization and functioning of all areas of public administration. The reform of the higher civil service was meant to be the point of departure for long-term administrative modernization, as reformers conceived it as the trigger for further reform in the other domains of civil service. The traditional subordination of senior civil servants to ministers was eliminated, meaning that managers were in charge of making decisions about the utilization of resources for achieving the objectives set by the political principals, and new specialized advisory bodies were introduced to appraise their results. However, a significant percentage of reform initiatives launched in the 1990s suffered from an 'implementation gap' (Ongaro and Valotti 2008), originating from the high level of political instability that determined a lack of political incentives to implement reforms. The new specialized bodies did not produce the directives, targets and indicators that should have oriented the performance evaluation of public managers, as politicians displayed a keen reluctance to cease meddling with administrative management. Since the confirmation of incumbent public managers did not become subject to thorough appraisal of results, the temporary nature of managerial positions was exploited by political elites to maintain control over administrative elites.

The implementation gap of administrative reforms contributed to the persistent deficit of economic competitiveness, which has kept budgetary pressures intense. As a consequence, a repertoire of across-the-board cuts has been progressively entrenched as it proved to be effective in containing government spending in the aftermath of the 1992 currency crisis that forced the Italian lira out of the European Monetary System. Across-the-board cuts were enacted as a response to the austerity imposed by the Eurozone governance on the Italian budget in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial meltdown (Di Mascio, Natalini and Stolfi 2013). The austerity imposed by the Eurozone governance on the Italian budget has been a major target of populist campaigning, which has fed into the perception of the Euro as a painful constraint afflicting the stagnating economy (Ongaro, Di Mascio and Natalini 2022).

While Euro-sceptic rhetoric has been a unifying feature, populist parties differed on the emphasis that should be given to different areas of administrative reform. Centre-right populist parties shared the call for a deregulatory approach, which was complemented by different reform targets: FI prioritized civil service reform in an effort to increase productivity and reward merit by curbing the influence of trade unions over public employment regulation, the LN focused on the structure of government, with a view to devolving competences and resources to regional governments (in line with its

history as the regionalist party of the north). The FSM endorsed a more statist approach to public policy, alongside an emphasis on transparency and anticorruption as key topics of its broader approach to legality via the implementation of digital tools. The following empirical analysis highlights that, once in power, populist parties encountered turbulence within cabinets originating from the incoherence of policy positions.

4. Empirical section

4.1. Conte I government

The most noticeable element in the Conte I government was the abandonment of NPM recipes in favour of interventions perceived as simpler and more direct. Unlike previous administrative reform efforts, the new rules governing public sector employment did not represent the core of the measures in matters of personnel. Dissatisfaction with the complexity of NPM, in doctrine and practices, was epitomized by the emphasis on ‘concrete’ actions for raising the productivity of public employment displayed by the Minister for Public Administration Giulia Bongiorno, a prominent criminal lawyer who was elected senator among the ranks of the LN. In particular, a ‘Unit for Concreteness’ was introduced at the Ministry for Public Administration, which was supposed to ensure the implementation of the measures envisaged in a three-year Plan of ‘Concrete Actions’. This Plan, to be adopted by ministerial decree, was supposed to verify the correct application of the provisions on the organization and functioning of the administrations as well as to ensure the improvement of their efficiency, with an indication of the timeframe for the implementation of corrective actions. To do this, the Unit for Concreteness, with 53 staff members, was supposed to carry out inspections and visits in order to monitor the state of implementation of the provisions by the administrations, identifying the methods of organization and management of human resources according to criteria of efficiency, effectiveness and economy. Non-compliance with the corrective measures indicated by the Nucleus following its inspection should have been a source of managerial or disciplinary responsibility and should have led to the inclusion of the non-compliant administration in a list published on the website of the Department of Public Administration.

These provisions were never implemented, also due to the short duration of the Conte I government. However, even if these measures had actually been introduced, they could at best have allowed the incumbent government to show itself as a champion of public virtue and efficiency with respect to individual cases that ended up in the media spotlight. The small size of the structure and the manifest inadequacy of the powers conferred on this Nucleus would in fact have made it impracticable to monitor an even minimally significant percentage of the thousands of units that compose the fragmented Italian administrative system.

In keeping with the fight against absenteeism that marked previous governments led by Silvio Berlusconi, the Conte I government also introduced biometric detection tools and cameras to monitor access of public employees to the workplace (Law No. 56/2019). This measure provoked harsh reactions from trade unions in the public sector and in particular in the school sector as it was claimed that the measure violated

employee privacy and was an unjustified form of criminalization of bureaucracy. In fact, this measure was also never implemented.

As regards simplification policies, on 26 February 2019, Minister Bongiorno called a meeting to define the ‘Simplification Pact for the three-year period 2019-21’. The meeting was attended by around one hundred representatives of public administrations and with the plan to also involve business associations, citizens and professional categories. The final approval of the Pact came on 25 July 2019 in the Unified Conference. In line with the Simplification Agendas pioneered by previous governments, the Pact for Simplification contained a programme of new simplification measures, with the identification of timeframes, targets and responsibilities. This programme identified four priority areas of intervention: the electronic business dossier, the business information portal, the simplification of controls, and the standardisation of forms.

In the field of public infrastructure construction, the traditional instrument of simplification has been the introduction of extraordinary commissioners to whom the specific regulations have assigned more or less broad powers to accelerate the implementation of procedures, or to derogate from the regulations in force, including environmental and landscape issues. The commissioner, however, has often lacked the skills and resources to solve the problems of planning works. In fact, the frequent recourse to this remedy (which by its very nature should have been extraordinary) contributed to the lack of concentration of effort on increasing the efficiency of ordinary administration, for example by increasing their powers. In an attempt to accelerate procurement procedures for the realization of public works, Decree Law No. 32/2019 (Sblocca Cantieri) curbed the regulatory powers of the Italian anticorruption authority (ANAC). This provision was pushed by the LN with the declared objective of deregulating and boosting growth, even though the higher corruption risks resulting from this change, highlighted by the President of the ANAC Raffaele Cantone before his resignation in the summer of 2019, were in stark contrast with the FSM’s call for further delegation of powers to the ANAC. The FSM had also campaigned for a significant reduction of senior civil servants’ salaries, but this issue was removed from its agenda when it entered government.

4.2. Conte II government

The new Minister for Public Administration, Fabiana Dadone, a lawyer elected to the Chamber of Deputies among the ranks of the FSM, shared with her predecessor the reluctance to launch ambitious reforms that aimed to radically change the organization and the functioning of the public sector. Unlike her predecessor, however, the new Minister downplayed the fight against absenteeism in favour of interventions aimed at boosting the digital transformation of the public sector. In particular, the new Minister put emphasis on the diffusion of ‘agile working’ — a species of remote working that had been introduced by law n. 81/2017 - across Italian public administrations for the purpose of facilitating work and family balance, on the one hand, and enhancing environmental sustainability, on the other.

Agile working is primarily characterized by the absence of place and time constraints and also by an organization by phases, cycles and objectives agreed between the worker and employer with a view to increase productivity. It differs from ‘telework’,

which is defined as working remotely from a fixed work station with equipment provided by the employer and involving the same working hours and conditions as in the office. After the introduction of law n. 81/2017, public administrations were expected to identify the activities that can be carried out through agile working and establish annual implementation objectives on a voluntary basis. However, the limited number of public administrations that had trialled agile working before the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic limited themselves to compliance with the law, without any review of the organizational models or revision of the performance evaluation system that was needed to measure results rather than hours worked.

The COVID-19 crisis and the consequent policies implemented by the Conte II government to allow remote work as a substitute means of carrying out public services caused an explosion in 'agile working'. However, the latter was implemented as an emergency measure without the features required by the legislation like individual agreements between workers and administrations and the adoption of an internal organizational plan. In an attempt to transform agile working from provisional measure to being commonplace for public administrations, the Conte II government introduced in 2021 the three-year 'Organizational plan for agile work' (POLA) as a section of the Performance Plan that requires public administrations to identify objectives, targets and indicators for the progressive application of agile working. The introduction of the plans was meant to supersede the emergency regulation which allowed the public sector to use agile working without collective and individual agreement and with simplified regulation. From 30 April 2021, the new regime was expected to overcome the provision of agile working as a common working pattern for the public sector and the minimum mandatory share of 50% of employed staff in favour of greater discretion in the use of agile working on the basis of the specific needs of each public administration. However, despite the Minister's rhetoric about the radical transformation of public administration unleashed by the diffusion of agile working, the voluntary nature of the Plans and the absence of enforcement limited the effective spread of this form of remote working across public bodies.

As regards administrative simplification, the presence of a Minister elected to the ranks of the FSM marked some change in the rhetoric behind reform measures. On the one hand, administrative simplification, besides being a tool to relaunch the country's economy, was framed as an opportunity to 'build a new relationship of trust between administration and citizens'¹ primarily through completing the path towards full digital transition. Several online consultations of citizens and stakeholders were launched by the Department of Civil Service (DFP) between the end of 2019 and mid-2020 to map critical issues and priorities for action, albeit with little success in terms of participation (only 103 respondents including citizens and companies) (DFP 2020). On the other hand, in line with FSM's manifesto, simplification cannot coincide with unbridled deregulation that would undermine transparency.² In this regard, an ad hoc Commission was set up, composed of 17 experts tasked with proposing solutions for simplification that were compatible with rules on the prevention of corruption. However, proposals from this Commission did not turn into any legislative initiative.

¹ Hearing of Minister Dadone by the Parliamentary Simplification Commission, 13 January 2021.

² *Ibid.*

When tested against the facts, however, the actions taken by the Conte II government show less discontinuity than declared: the demands for procedural simplification from the various administrations (local ones in particular) during the pandemic, and the need to get public works back on track to relaunch the economy after the emergency, led to a renewed focus on temporary deregulation, which was not too dissimilar to the ‘Sblocca Cantieri’ Decree.³ Indeed, besides introducing some measures to facilitate citizens’ access to all PA digital services, in July 2020 the so-called Simplification Decree (DL 76/2020, later converted into Law 120/2020) introduced again some relaxations on public contracts and constructions, with an extension of the use of direct entrusting and simplified procedures without a call for tenders. With regard to long-term actions, the same Decree provided for the launch of the 2020-2023 Simplification Agenda, a blueprint document that was to define a road map with clear objectives and timeframes. In continuity with the past, the Agenda (approved by the Unified Conference on 23 November 2020) resulted from a concerted process led by the Technical Table for Simplification already set up in 2015, made up of representatives of the DFP, the Conference of the Regions, Anci and UPI. Some targeted actions were envisaged such as the simplification and re-engineering of procedures, the standardization of digital forms, the elimination of unnecessary burdens, the measurement of the actual length of administrative proceedings, as well as the implementation of the ‘once only’ principle, whereby the administration does not ask citizens and enterprises for the information and data it already has. The anticipated demise of the Conte II government on 13 February 2021 blocked the Agenda roadmap, which was later taken over — albeit with some modifications — by the Draghi government. However, the concrete feasibility of the proposed interventions within the cabinet’s lifespan was questionable in any case, given the persisting separation between the fields of administrative modernization and digital innovation (both in terms of planning and implementation responsibilities) and the lack of digital skills across the public sector, both typical traits of the Italian case (Natalini 2022).

4.3. Draghi government

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRPP) elaborated by the Draghi government differed substantially from the draft that had been elaborated by the Conte II government in the emphasis placed on administrative reforms. Administrative modernization was identified by the Draghi government as a key area for structural reform, affecting horizontally all missions in the NRPP funded by the EU to sustain economic recovery. However, concern for the quick implementation of measures in the early stage of NRPP implementation led the Draghi government to downplay post-pandemic recovery as an opportunity for sweeping change. In keeping with the previous cabinets, the Draghi government pursued incremental targeted measures primarily aimed at (re)building the capacity of the PA after austerity cutbacks. Indeed, the strategy of breaking away from the all-embracing (and for that reason non-implementable) administrative reforms of the 1990s was explicitly asserted by the new Minister for

³ ‘I lavori pubblici tra Covid e decreto semplificazione’, *lavoce.info*, 3 August 2020.

Public Administration,⁴ Renato Brunetta, elected within the ranks of FI having previously served in the same role under the Berlusconi IV government (2008-2011).

During his former mandate, Brunetta had distinguished himself by a very adversarial approach to trade unions, launching a package of managerial-inspired reforms focused on increasing the individual productivity of civil servants (epitomised as ‘slackers’) and severely reducing the scope of collective bargaining (Di Mascio, Natalini and Ongaro 2021). Instead, under the Draghi government, with a broader and more composite majority and in view of the conspicuous resources made available by the NRRP, his approach somewhat followed in continuity with the two previous cabinets, moving away from the NPM’s tenets and shifting the spotlight from individual performance to the capability of structures and to human capital. This trend was particularly noticeable in recruitment: on the one hand, the first steps of the new government in the field focused on fast-track (let’s say emergency) measures such as the unblocking of recruitment and the hiring of temporary staff, at once necessary for the implementation of the NRRP and easier to realise as they were welcomed by all stakeholders (Di Mascio, Natalini and Profeti 2022); on the other hand, the Draghi government marked a return to concertation with the public-sector trade unions: negotiations for renewal of contracts for 2019-2021 began with the ‘Pact for Innovation in the Civil Service and for Social Cohesion’ signed at Palazzo Chigi on 10 March 2021 by the government and the main trade union confederations, the final agreement being reached between ARAN and trade unions on 9 May 2022. In addition to providing for salary increases and the acknowledgement of retrospective pay, the agreement incorporated some regulatory innovations introduced as part of the Mission of ‘Digitalization, Innovation and Security in the P.A.’ of the NRRP, such as a new four-area personnel classification system, the strengthening and reorganization of the training system, an extended protection for vulnerable workers and, last but not least, the regulation of agile working after the pandemic emergency.

It was precisely agile working (or, more generally, remote working) which was the thorniest issue in the relations between Minister Brunetta, who — unlike his predecessor — showed himself to be inwardly hostile to generalized remote work, and the trade unions, who instead continued to call for greater recourse to agile working given the flare-up of infections. The very harsh media clash, in which the Minister dusted off the old rhetoric on slackers depicting workers ‘locked up at home, with their smartphones on their milk bottles, pretending to do remote work’,⁵ and called for a return to 100 per cent presence from 15 October 2021, does not, however, fully match the facts. Indeed, in the same time span (late 2021-early 2022) the government agreed with unions on some guidelines for the ordinary use of agile work in the PA that provided for its activation on an individual and voluntary basis, with staff rotation and to the maximum extent of 49%, just as ARAN signed an agreement, again with the unions, for agile work in the collective agreement for the civil service sector. Very little or anything, though, has yet been done to enable conditions to make agile working more productive, be they technological, organizational or training-related: the implementing regulation of the PIAO (integrated activity and organization plan), i.e. the document that according to Decree Law 80/2021 would incorporate and replace a whole series of compulsory acts for public

⁴ ‘PA, Brunetta: no grandi riforme ma strappi innovativi’, *La Stampa*, 7 March 2022.

⁵ ‘Smart working, Brunetta: ‘Basta far finta di lavorare’. Ira sindacati’, *Adnkronos*, 4 February 2022.

administrations including POLAs, was only approved at the end of June 2022 (less than a month before Draghi's resignation), and single administrations are still moving ahead in short order.

As regards administrative simplification, instead, the measures proposed by Brunetta were in full continuity with the Simplification Agenda 2020-23, envisaging the completion of a national catalogue of 600 simplified and standardized procedures by mid-2026, and the achievement of the full interoperability of desks and platforms so as to ensure compliance with the once-only principle. The only relevant change is that, thanks to the financial resources made available by the NRRP, streamlining initiatives were now complemented by ad hoc technical assistance to the public administrations involved in the implementation of the NRRP, in particular the local ones. Strong continuity with past government is also recorded on the governance side: the creation of an ad hoc Unit for the Rationalization and Improvement of Regulation at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers to serve the purposes of the NRRP did not challenge the DFP's guidance in the simplification domain, and the pivotal role of the Technical Table as a venue for concertation with local governments and stakeholders (Di Mascio, Natalini and Profeti 2022).

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has investigated the impact of populist actors in government on the Italian public service during the XVIII parliamentary term and has highlighted some traits marking their influence over administrative reforms as well as some features of Italian populist parties. First, the salience of administrative reforms as part of the government agenda has steadily increased after the formation of the Draghi cabinet within the frame of the new EU governance for post-pandemic recovery. However, the emphasis on the success of administrative reforms as an enabling factor for the implementation of the NRPP has implied only an incremental restructuring of policy-making patterns during the XVIII parliamentary term. Administrative reforms undertaken by the Draghi government can be qualified as loosely interconnected and piecemeal rather than as a set of interventions coalescing around NPM doctrines, and this marks a departure from the course of action pursued by the governments in office in the 1990s.

The shift from a pattern of comprehensive administrative reforms targeting every area of the public sector to a pattern of selective administrative reforms targeting only specific areas was already underway in Italy where populist parties in government shared a lack of concern for long-term administrative modernization. Whereas the emphasis of concrete actions by populist actors was due to their broader lack of expertise and their reluctance to apply complex theories like the NPM, the course of action pursued by the Draghi government seemed to reflect and incorporate some stock-tacking from previous reform exercises whose implementation gap had brought discredit to the prospect of long-term administrative modernization.

Second, the succession of three governments in the same parliamentary term has further enhanced the reactive nature of reform sequencing in Italy, meaning that the administrative reform trajectory is marked by reversals that make reform issues more or less salient. Given the different reform priorities endorsed by populist parties with regard to the reform of public employment, this area has been marked by intense reactive

sequencing as highlighted by the reversals that marked the trajectory of policies aimed at curbing absenteeism (from the Conte I to the Conte II government) and promoting the shift to agile working (from the Conte II to the Draghi government). Conversely, populist parties shared a focus on a deregulatory approach and this has made the area of administrative simplification less exposed to reform reversals. In light of the enduring demand for populism in the Italian electoral market, it is likely that reactive sequencing will persist after the XVIII legislature, thus decreasing the chance that the incremental interventions launched by the Draghi government will eventually embed in a coherent cumulative reform trajectory.

Third, our analysis highlighted that populists in government talked more than they acted, a finding much in line with what happens in other countries where the rhetoric about administrative modernization has not been matched with consistent action (Peters and Pierre 2019). The decoupling of talk and action on the issue of administrative reform has been greatly enhanced by the mutating character of Italian populism, in a context marked by the fragmentation of the party system. As highlighted by the inconsistency exhibited by Brunetta in his relationships with the trade unions, populist actors are extremely fluid on the recipes to be proposed for the modernization of the Italian public administration, supporting tactical conveniences of the specific political phase.

Fourth, the Italian bureaucracy has not been radically reshaped by populist parties in government and this finding resonates with the normality perspective reviewed in section two. The XVIII parliamentary term was marked by a lack of any significant reform effort in two key areas that are typically targeted by populist parties in government that aim to ‘dismantle’ or ‘capture’ the state, namely the appointment of senior civil servants and the reorganization of the state apparatus (Bauer and Becker 2020). In particular, our empirical analysis has found no trace of reform in the area of the senior civil service. This has implied that populist parties in government recruited top officials for ministerial cabinets from the professional corps at the core of the Italian state, in continuity with practices that date back decades. The established pattern of a bargain between political power and job security has also been reproduced: higher civil servants have been ‘sidelined’, meaning that they have been deprived of an autonomous role in policymaking, while politicians have refrained from practising a major turnover in top posts. On the one hand, the reproduction of this bargain was due to the inability of populist parties in government to recruit technically qualified outsiders. On the other hand, seemingly of equal importance was the lack of any overt reaction of top Italian civil servants in a country like Italy where public managers are used to serve different political masters in the context of well-entrenched distrustful politico-administrative relationships.

Finally, our empirical analysis highlighted that the shift in EU governance had significant consequences for the dynamics of administrative reforms in Italy. It may be conjectured that administrative reforms after the XVIII parliamentary term will be shaped by the dynamics of the two-level game at the EU Member States interface. This means that the EU will have to find the right balance between sticking to the original timetable for the implementation of agreed-upon investments and reforms, on the one hand, and being flexible towards the latest developments, including the formation of a new government in Italy. It also implies that administrative reforms will be shaped by the reaction of populist parties in government to the strategies pursued by EU-level policymakers.

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