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ARTICLE



A “stylistic anti-populism”: an analysis of the Sardine movement’s opposition to Matteo Salvini in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the Italian movement of the Sardines that emerged in November 2019 as a reaction to the Lega, the radical right populist party led by Matteo Salvini. On the one hand, it shows that the movement was born out of the incapacity of Italian political parties to articulate an anti-populist response. On the other hand, it demonstrates that the movement was an expression of stylistic anti-populism. As such, the role of the Sardines was to promote a respectful and kind language, the physical mobilization of citizens that contrasted with Salvini’s massive use of social media and defend the idea that politics is a complex issue.

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Introduction

On 14 November 2019, first day of the campaign for the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria, the Italian Sardine Movement (*Movimento delle Sardine* or *6000 Sardine*) emerged as a reaction to the populism and Sovereignism of the *Lega*, the radical right party led by Matteo Salvini. An allegory chosen by the movement’s founders: Mattia Santori, Andrea Garreffa, Roberto Morotti and Giulia Trappoloni, the sardines represent the thousands of citizens who gather on squares and are pressed against each other to stand against populism. The election in Emilia-Romagna was an occasion for the Lega to test the level of its popularity. Salvini hoped that a victory of his party in this region governed by the left for seventy years would provoke the fall of the government and lead to the holding of anticipated elections that he thought he had realistic chances of winning. The Lega’s candidate Lucia Borgonzoni eventually lost to the incumbent president of the region, Stefano Bonaccini, who is from the center-left *Partito Democratico* (PD). However, what made the electoral campaign so remarkable was the mobilization of the Sardines. Indeed, the movement is a blatant expression of anti-populism, a phenomenon that has been growing in Western Europe but that is still under-researched in academia [Table 1](#).

While it is well-known among scholars that populism divides the political world between the unscrupulous ‘elites’ and the good ‘people’ considered the sole holder of sovereignty (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) and that it is chameleonic (Taggart, 2000) enough to be hosted by right-wing, left-wing or centrist ideology (Otjes & Louwerse, 2015), anti-populism remains an academic niche (Moffitt, 2018). The literature explains some of the

strategies of mainstream parties to contain populism in Western Europe but without framing them as anti-populism. Demonizing populist rivals (Stockemer, 2017) or adopting part of their program or rhetoric (Mondon, 2016; Carvalho, 2019) are the main methods to defeat them. Alternatively, mainstream parties can wait until the populists get discredited when they disillusion voters by failing to provide results or keep their promises (Aslanidis & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; Damiani, 2020; Taguieff, 2014). As for the studies that more explicitly discuss ‘anti-populism’, they have shown that it consists in constructing populism as an irresponsible behavior and a political anomaly or disease (Karavasilis, 2017; Miró, 2019; Mouffe, 2005; Revelli, 2015; Stavrakakis, 2014). Therefore, the adjective ‘populist’ is often used by anti-populists to discredit a party, movement or politician that claims to defend the people and the idea of popular sovereignty.

Anti-populism is an opposition to populism that revolves around three main axes: the fear and subsequent denunciation of political extremism (physical violence, discrimination or hate speech), the argument that politics is technical and complex and the legitimation of the role of political elites over more direct forms of popular sovereignty (regular referenda, citizens’ contribution to the legislative process etc.). Anti-populists consider that the populist critique of elites and institutions is a threat to democracy and the economic order. According to them, populist leaders are incompetent or malignant demagogues that will lead countries to disaster by implementing oversimplistic measures and granting too much decision-making power to laypersons. Indeed, for anti-populists, political and economic issues are too intricate and should be handled by experts rather than the common people or ‘unprepared’ populist leaders. Overall, anti-populism, as suggested in the existing literature, is characterized by a political demophobia and a strong trust in the political, economic and media establishment.

Yet, previous studies have not sufficiently addressed how anti-populists present themselves. Little is said about their way of being, speaking and moving when they confront populists or try to differentiate themselves from them. In other words, we lack knowledge on what is an anti-populist style or what is called in this article ‘stylistic anti-populism’. A stylistic anti-populism is made of formal and pro-institutional language, has a technical or intellectual approach to politics, encourages respect towards political elites and favors composure over exuberance. Analyzing anti-populism as a style is important since it shows that systematic opponents of populism also have their own codes, behavior, mannerisms, and a specific rhetoric that set them apart from their populist counterparts. In that sense, anti-populism is more than just the mere critique of populism. Also, it allows to highlight the fact that the anti-demos posture in anti-populism can be more implicit or weaker, especially when the opposition to populism is more bottom-up or comes from civil society rather than elite circles.

Italy is a relevant case to analyze stylistic anti-populism. While political actors who oppose populism seldom use the adjective ‘anti-populist’ to characterize themselves or their policies, the Sardines break with this trend and clearly position themselves as an anti-populist movement. Moreover, as they seek to bring citizens on the street, their anti-populism is based on style rather than on the political exclusion of the ‘people’. The article therefore answers the following questions: why did a bottom-up anti-populism emerge in Italy and what were its specificities? In order to answer this question, the article will be divided in two parts. The first section will highlight the different facets of Salvini’s populism, from its ideological position to his performances and self-portrayal on social

media. It will do so by looking at his discourse and visuals (pictures, colors, font etc.). The second part is the analytical core of this article and will focus on stylistic anti-populism by examining the Sardines' contrast to the Lega's populism. Also, it will explain the movement's relevance and role in Italian politics.

Theoretical framework

The theorization of stylistic anti-populism necessarily draws on the existing theorization of populist style as the two concepts are antithetical but intertwined. There is indeed no systematic anti-populism without a successful or well-rooted populism. A populist style 'features an appeal to the people versus the elites' (Moffitt, 2016, p. 43) and specific 'manners' such as 'slang, swearing, political incorrectness and being overly demonstrative and "colorful", as opposed to the "high" behaviors of rigidity, rationality, composure and technocratic language' (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 392). According to these authors, populism is one style among several others, with each one having its 'own specific performative repertoires and tropes that create and affect political relations' (2014:387). In that sense, political style is close to political communication (Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Similarly, Pierre Ostiguy (2017:77) identifies 'high and low' politics which 'have to do with ways of relating to people', 'issues of accent, levels of language, body language, gestures, and ways of dressing'. Following the typology of Ostiguy, populists should be put in the low category for their behavior is often informal and unpolished.

Populism, when defined as a style, is about performance, visuals and aesthetics (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 389) and is mainly a media show whose principal protagonist is the political leader who mobilizes the people against the elites (Moffitt, 2016). However, style and discourse are indissociable since style contains 'substantive message' and is 'rhetorical' (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. 3). Also, several indicators of political style such as language register, appeal to emotions or storytelling (de la Torre, 2010; De Blasio & Sorice, 2019; Bracciale & Martella, 2017) pass through discourse. Therefore, the article's theorization of stylistic anti-populism consists in considering presentational elements (visuals, movements) while focusing on different aspects of discourse (lexicon, tone, language register).

Stylistic anti-populism means proposing a contrast to the populist leader that is considered loud, colloquial, and hateful by instead being polite, formal, and encouraging trust in institutions and mainstream politicians. Besides, while many populist leaders heavily rely on Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp,² stylistic anti-populism can break with online politics by encouraging the political participation of physical bodies. Indeed, it can organize peaceful citizen demonstrations to contrast with populism that invades the virtual arena of social media.

Methods and data

The article is built on a comparative analysis of Italian populist style and stylistic anti-populism but puts more emphasis on the latter. Firstly, Salvini's populist style is examined, mostly through his social media posts. Twitter, in particular, is crucial to understand his style as he massively resorts to it to create proximity with the 'people' and *perform* populism. Salvini has published an impressive amount of online messages over the years. Consequently, in order to identify more efficiently the discursive and visual components of

his populist style and also avoid the “cherry-picking” procedure, a set of key words were entered in the search engine: *immigrati/clandestini, stranieri, ius soli, sovranità/sovranoismo, popolo italiano, Unione Europea, poltrona, sardine, baci/amici, pasta*.³

These words were chosen based on the recurrent issues identified in the scholarly literature on *Leghista* populism and the national press coverage of Salvini and the Lega. These issues mainly relate to the Sovereignist and radical right position and well as to the informal behavior of Salvini (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2017; Lorenzetti, 2018; Tintori, 2018; Proglia, 2019; Corriere della Sera, 2018; La Repubblica, 2020). All posts had to be recent enough (between 1 January 2017 and 25 February 2020) to be representative of the current state of *Leghista* populism. In total, 93 posts were selected based on the relevant information they gave on key aspects of Salvini’s style and ideology. Overall, the section shows that Salvini’s populist style is not only radical right but also glitzy and provocative.

Secondly, stylistic anti-populism is scrutinized. Because anti-populism is the main topic of this article and since the Sardine movement is much less known than the Lega, more material was used. 141 pieces of data that were produced between 14 November 2019 and 25 February 2020 were collected and analyzed: all the messages from the 6000 *Sardine* Facebook account (83), all the posts from the 6000 *Sardine* Twitter account (47), one manifesto (also called six programmatic points), one letter addressed to the newspaper *La Repubblica* and all the television interviews (9) of Mattia Santori, the most media-friendly co-founder of the movement, conducted in national infotainment programs and talk shows.⁴ All the interviews can be found on the video-sharing platform YouTube or the website of the Italian TV channel La7 (only the talk show *Che tempo che fa* is available on the website of Rai2).

The part on the Sardines was built on an inductive method and all the data related to the movement were coded, leading to the identification of three categories that compose stylistic anti-populism and allow to operationalize the concept. These are i) kindness and elegance ii) the politics of the body and iii) the promotion of complexity and intelligence. The Sardines promote a polite and pro-institutional language and want to encourage the physical mobilization of citizens to oppose the recent hegemony of online populist politics. Also, they want to re-establish seriousness and intelligence in Italian politics which they think is not as simple and trivial as Salvini claims.

Salvini’s style: radical right and glitzy populism⁵

Populism is a prevalent phenomenon in Italy and has been located on the entire political spectrum (Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Panarari, 2020). Since the 1990s, the country has witnessed the rise of parties and movements seeking to break with the political status quo and making a strategic use of the (social) media. *Forza Italia* led by Silvio Berlusconi emerged in 1994 as a right-wing kind of populism built on communication and supported by a business empire, following the collapse of the former corrupt party system of the so-called First Republic (Bull & Rhodes, 1997; Diamanti & Lazar, 2018). More recently, in 2009, the *MoVimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) (Five Star Movement) was co-founded by comedian Beppe Grillo and entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio. It was born as an anti-establishment movement that massively resorts to digital tools and whose ideology is hybrid and even inconsistent (Corbetta & Vignati, 2014; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019).

Even the mainstream, center-left *Partito Democratico* (PD) had a populist phase at the time Matteo Renzi was Prime Minister and Secretary of the party. Indeed, between 2013 and 2016, he intended to sweep the PD's old guard and made some decisions without following the party's electoral program (Capelli, 2018) while adopting a 'simple, popular and feeling-oriented language' (Biancalana, 2020, p. 235). Very recently, Italian politics has reached the acme of populism. Between June 2018 and September 2019, the country was co-governed by the Lega and the M5S. Since the fall of the coalition and the subsequent alliance between M5S and the PD, the M5S has been facing a sharp and steady electoral decline and Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Lega, has been the main figure of populist politics in Italy.

The *Lega* emerged in 1991 as a regionalist party that demanded the secession of Padania from the South of Italy considered an economic and fiscal burden. Since Salvini took over as Secretary of the *Lega* in December 2013, the electoral weight of the party has dramatically increased, going from 4.1% in 2013 to 17.4% in the 2018 legislative elections. Under his leadership, the party has undergone a complete reorientation that explains in large part its success. The former *Lega Nord* has indeed become a nationalist party, revoking its old separationist ideology, with Southern Italy not being a foe or a scapegoat anymore as this role is now held by the European Union and the Eurocrats (Albertazzi et al., 2018).

The concept of national sovereignty has been put at center of the Lega's program and of the Italian political debate (Pasquino & Valbruzzi, 2019). Sovereignty is understood as the 'popular control over the main political decisions' and Sovereignism is based on the 'claim that the people have been dispossessed of their sovereignty (whether by the EU, globalization and/or private interests)' (Borriello & Brack, 2019, p. 842). Like most populist leaders, Salvini has regularly claimed that 'the only judgment that matters is that of the People'⁶ and that 'sovereignty belongs to the people'.⁷ Overall, since the end of the Bossi era, the Lega has adopted a radical right, sovereigntist, and Eurosceptic position and Salvini has claimed to defend the Italian people against the wrongdoings of Italian elites (G. Diamanti & Pregliasco, 2019; Franzi & Madron, 2019).

In accordance with his ideological position, Salvini has consistently defended Italian identity, which has led him to talk extensively about immigration policy and the control of national borders. He has claimed that 'elites are incompetent at protecting the people against the alleged threat of immigration', which is typical of radical-right populism (Béland, 2020, p. 167). Salvini has strongly opposed the *ius soli*, the possibility for foreigners born and raised on the Italian soil to access citizenship.⁸ Also, he has justified his anti-immigration policy by highlighting the misconducts of non-European residents in the country.⁹ When he was Minister of Home Affairs between 2018 and 2019, he suggested the idea of a census of Roma population in the country (La Repubblica, 2018). Moreover, the *decreti sicurezza* (security decrees) were passed at the time he was in office. These decrees – among other restrictions – prohibit the access of humanitarian NGOs carrying migrants to Italian waters.

Like many populist leaders, Salvini has had a very antagonistic discourse towards 'the establishment' represented by Italian politicians and the European Union. He has attacked Italian traditional parties for being self-serving¹⁰ and submitted to Brussels, Paris and Berlin and said that disobeying the European Union's immigration policy for the benefit of the people is necessary.¹¹ He also compared the supranational institution to

an 'anti-democratic cage', accused it of being responsible of poverty and unemployment and of being controlled by 'lobbyists, bankers and Masons'.¹²

Salvini is a leader in the literal sense of the term, as shown by his nickname *Il Capitano* (The Captain) and his surname on the party's logo: *Salvini Premier*. As for his political style, it is very exuberant, theatrical, and colloquial. As argued by Bracciale and Martella (2017, p. 1320), he resorts to 'vulgar language' and puts 'greater focus on policy issues related to current events and/or local interests to create a communication style' that illustrates the daily issues and problems faced by Italians. In the era of digitalism, populist style gets even more visibility. Bobba (2019) says that 'Salvini is the most active Italian political leader on social media and especially on Facebook'; like most of populist politicians, he has used them 'as key means for placing the blame on political opponents'. During the 2019–2020 regional electoral campaign, the leader of the Lega 'owned' the digital arena with '5.22 million interactions related to the elections in Emilia-Romagna' even more than his own candidate Borgonzoni (2.6 million)' (La Repubblica, 2020). In that sense, Salvini is an omnipresent figure of Italian politics whose populism consists in saturating the web.

Salvini has built the Lega around his persona. He is the main discursive and visual format of the party's populist politics. On social media, he presents himself as someone close to the people as he regularly publishes posts in which he is pictured drinking and eating (La Repubblica, 2019).¹³ He films himself and many of his speeches with his own phone or camera, sometimes in random places, in an informal rather than institutional way, to discuss various topics. Most of the time, his style of communication deliberately looks raw and immediate as he directly speaks to the Italians via social media live streams. It can also be more elaborated and look like a well-prepared *mise en scène* but in a way that still illustrates what he claims are the daily life concerns of Italians. Indeed, during the electoral campaign for the regional elections, he stirred controversy with the episode known in Italy as the *citofonata* (intercom call). Accompanied by TV cameras on 21 January 2020, the leader of the Lega called a family of Tunisian descent to bluntly asked them if they 'were dealing drugs'.

On his social media accounts, Salvini performs what is called in this article a glitzy populism. Indeed, the leader of the Lega has a tabloid style that conveys catastrophism and sensationalism. He uses big, bright, and colorful font to highlight his opinion, facts, or events that he wishes to denounce or shame representatives from other political parties.¹⁴ Salvini also uses social media to send kisses to his supporters and to his adversaries in a provocative fashion (Proglío, 2019). Similarly, he publishes greetings cards in which he sends love to his followers or in which he poses in front of a starry background,¹⁵ alone in front of a landscape¹⁶ or in a casual style (shirtless on the beach),¹⁷ which can seem garish or kitschy compared to the high style of certain mainstream politicians and technocrats. In addition, he likes to use humor and mockery to combat his adversaries or illustrate his policy choice.¹⁸ This is what he did against the Sardines. In one of his numerous Twitter posts, Salvini ironically called Mattia Santori *Capopesce* (Fish Boss).¹⁹ Similarly, he celebrated the 'Day of the Cat',²⁰ spread a photomontage of kittens eating sardines,²¹ adopted the hashtag *#gattiniconsalvini* (kittens with Salvini) and dubbed the Sardines *pesciolini* (little fishes).²²

Party opposition in Italy has already hinted that Salvini's and the Lega's style lacks seriousness and is exaggeratedly colloquial. Virginia Raggi, the M5S Mayor of Rome mocked Salvini on Twitter, saying that he 'played on Facebook, declared war to "migrant" nuts and Nutella' and advised him to 'try to work for once in his life'.²³ During the campaign in Emilia-Romagna, Stefano Bonaccini declared that Lucia Borgonzoni posted about 'kittens, puppies and food she eats' instead of making propositions on health, employment or environment.²⁴ Yet, the Sardines are the ones who systematically oppose Salvini's populist style by displaying an stylistic anti-populism as this will be demonstrated in the last part of this article.

The Sardines: proposing a stylistic anti-populism against Salvini

A progressive movement in support of the PD

The Sardines position themselves as an anti-populist movement, which is quite rare in the political arena. They claim to stand against the 'populist drift and against the spread of sovereigntist and racist ideas'²⁵ to 'be a barrier against the advance of populism'²⁶ and to 'have awaken anti-populist conscience' in Italy.²⁷ They also say that populism is a 'pathogenic virus like the Xylella'²⁸ and that they are an 'anti-body'²⁹ against it. This means that populism is a disease – a medical metaphor commonly used by anti-populists. Although they do not have any party affiliation, the movement's members are ideologically close to the center-left PD. Both Mattia Santori and Jasmine Cristallo, the Coordinator of the movement in Calabria, declared in the media to be left-wing or Gramscian³⁰ while the movement has used a similar rhetoric to the center-left's. The PD declares to be 'anti-Fascist' in its party status approved on 17 November 2019³¹ while the Sardines use the same terminology.³² A progressive movement, the Sardines consistently claim to be 'open to diversity'³³ and against any kind of discrimination based on race, gender, or sexuality.³⁴

The Sardine movement sheds light on an important aspect of Italian politics which is the incapacity for political parties, including the PD, to carry an anti-populist agenda or have a convincing anti-populist discourse. In Italy, top-down strategies to counter populism are not very visible since all parties have been populist at some point in their trajectory (although at varying degrees). Moreover, while there has been a systematic cordon sanitaire in Western European countries such as France and Belgium (Betz, 2007; Taguieff, 2014), this has not been the case in Italy. Mainstream 'right-wing parties have treated the Lega as a normal party that even joined the government' (Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2009, p. 354) and the PD has formed a governmental alliance with the M5S despite their strong rivalry since the electoral rise of the latter in the 2013 general elections.

The argument defended in this article is that because of its alliance with a populist party and its recent populist phase, the PD was not sufficiently credible to present an anti-populist agenda and contain the right-wing populist wave incarnated by Salvini. Also, there are other reasons that account for the difficulty of the PD to carry a coherent or solid anti-populist campaign. Indeed, the party since its creation in 2007 has been structurally flawed, unable to overcome its discrepancies and unable to make a substantial impact on Italian politics. As explained by Ventura (2018, pp. 181–182),

‘despite some electoral achievements’ (...) the party ‘has failed to establish itself as the party of the majority; it has failed to carry through any fundamental institutional reform; and it has failed to consolidate bipolarism’. Besides, in recent years, its electoral weight has been significantly reduced. Following the 2018 general elections, its influence further decreased as a new ‘balance of power’ emerged within the party system, ‘with the center-left dropping from first to third position, the center-right rising from second to first, and the M5S from third to second (Chiaramonte et al., 2018, p. 493).

As the PD has had difficulties in mobilizing the masses under its label, an anti-populist opposition was more likely to emerge at a bottom-up level and convince citizens to gather on the street to voice their discontent towards populism. According to Gianni Cuperlo, member of the party’s National Direction, if the call for demonstration in Bologna would have been made by the PD rather than the Sardines, less people would have come to the squares.³⁵ The Sardine movement also confirms an important tendency in Italian politics. As argued by Mastropaolo (2008, p. 41), the center-left since the early 2000s has indirectly relied on civil society to revitalize itself and combat center-right rivals.

Although the Sardines kept some distance from the PD during the campaign, as they claimed to be a non-partisan movement (*movimento apartitico*),³⁶ their objective was still to support the center-left party and carry the anti-populist agenda. Yet, their anti-populism has certain specificities. The Sardines propose a counter-political style, a stylistic anti-populism that is threefold. Firstly, they seek to re-introduce politeness and respect in the discourse by contrasting with the exuberant style of Salvini. Also, they present a different aesthetics by delivering a clean and sober language that breaks with the Lega’s noisy and talkative habits. Secondly, they intend to re-mobilize citizens as physical persons by organizing peaceful demonstrations that counterbalance Salvini’s visibility and ubiquitous presence on social media. Thirdly, they seek to put back complexity at the center of politics and to break with the simplistic and Manichean populist discourse.

Political kindness and elegance

The Sardines declare to be against verbal violence that according to them has pervaded Italian politics. They seek to ‘defend the use of a new political language, based on knowledge, culture and non-violence’³⁷ and declare to be ‘tired of the aggressive language of the politics of hatred’.³⁸ They also claim to be ‘armed with kindness and bring to the square another idea of politics: participatory and inclusive, with words of hope and not of hatred’.³⁹ The Sardines intend to combat Salvini’s populism by polishing the current Italian political style. In other words, they want to encourage courtesy and moderation in the discourse. As this was said on their Twitter account and by Mattia Santori on the talk show *Che tempo che fa*:

Let’s remember that the 6000 Sardines were born to counter this kind of [violent] language that has taken the upper hand in the Italian political debate’.⁴⁰

We have sought to make kindness part of our revolution (...) to have an accumulation of words, not of hate but of respect, a certain style, a certain elegance. We tried to teach a lesson of style to the political world and I think that somehow, it has worked.⁴¹

[The Sardines are] a social movement that reaffirmed very simple concepts by presenting them in a clean, elegant, and unadorned way [that] succeeded in defeating the populist force.⁴²

In these quotes, the word ‘style’ clearly shows the stylistic approach adopted by the anti-populist Sardines. The word ‘language’ indicates that their objective is providing an alternative discourse. They suggest that there is a strong difference between the supposed gaudiness of Salvini’s populism and their ‘elegance’. The idea of ‘cleanness’ is opposed to a populism that is seen as vulgar, inappropriate and dirty. The fact that the Sardines’ style is unadorned means that Salvini’s is unsubtle and full of exaggeration. The Sardines have also criticized the leader of the Lega’s ‘shopping center style’⁴³ and branded Salvini an ‘erotic hick’.⁴⁴ This means that right-wing populism is tacky and glitzy while the Sardines are classy and more sophisticated than the Lega whose only existence is based on what the anti-populist movement calls *salvinate*,⁴⁵ a neologism for describing Salvini’s antics. Likewise, the Sardines wish to reduce Italian politics’ sound and re-claim a ‘political scene left for too long to professional screamers’.⁴⁶ They want to regulate populist loudness by instead being ‘silent’⁴⁷ and ‘mute’⁴⁸ as they affirm that ‘there is no need to yell to be heard’.⁴⁹

According to the Sardines, the political game should be a respectful one and politicians who hold public offices must behave in a poised manner. Likewise, the movement is committed to the defense of institutional politics and the language that goes with it, which is a salient feature of anti-populism. While many populists like to talk directly to the ‘people’, anti-populists prefer the solemnity of official communication. Also, in accordance with their promotion of a polite and gentle language, they want populists to stop denigrating mainstream politicians on a constant basis. These two aspects are highlighted in the Sardines’ six-point program and in one of their Facebook posts:

We demand that those who were elected go to institutional bodies to do politics instead of campaigning on a permanent basis. We demand that whoever holds the office of minister only communicates through institutional channels.

Let’s not leave our politicians on their own. Because they need us. They really struggle to defend our territory and make sure that our children live a better life, they are on the front line. Let’s thank them instead of constantly accuse them.⁵⁰

In these quotes, the Sardines demand more formalism and officialdom. Salvini who behaves as if he was on a ‘permanent campaign’ and whose style is too effusive and flamboyant is repulsive to anti-populists. Also, the movement asks for more kindness towards the political establishment. What is specific about the Sardines is that they do not directly criticize the idea of ‘people’s power’ defended by populists. In fact, the Sardines do promote citizen participation, inclusion, and solidarity⁵¹ and do not adopt an overtly pro-elite stance since those who participate in the anti-populist movement are ordinary citizens. Instead, they frame their support of traditional politicians as respect and benevolence. The quotes confirm that on the one side, the Sardines mobilize to make Italian politics more respectful and that on the other side, they prefer formal settings such as the Parliament and reject the vulgar ‘online style’ of Matteo Salvini.

The Sardines and the politics of the body

The second objective of the anti-populist Sardines promote what is called in this article the politics of the body. Contesting Salvini's 'social media style',⁵² they consider that excessive online politics is damaging since, according to them, populists often resort to Facebook and Twitter in a malignant way. Three quotes support this idea:

We have been thinking about the relationship between reality and the virtual world. We know that in the virtual world in Italy right now, there is a big problem; we all see it on Facebook but not only. We have decided to fight against the beast of populism by bringing physical bodies; for a specific reason – because the physical body (...) is not something that can be manipulated.⁵³

Unfortunately, we have gotten used to the politics of images; the Sardines have proven that they want to change this by bringing to the squares, persons of flesh and bones.⁵⁴

[We are] free to peacefully express a thought and to do it with the body, against any attempted manipulation that comes from the narcissistic tunnels of social media.⁵⁵

In these quotes, the Sardines criticize the populists' use of social media and the hegemony of virtual politics in Italy. They are not against the existence of social media tools since they use them as well but say that they 'have come together to combat all forms of aggressive political communication, (...) verbal or physical, online or offline'.⁵⁶

For the Sardines, social media cannot replace physical political participation. The 'virtual against the body' is thus the dichotomy emphasized by the anti-populist movement. They claim that the 'flesh' is more important than the 'images', underlining the fact that politics should be done in real life and not behind a screen. According to them, this would reduce the risk of manipulation and the propagation of untruthful information. For the Sardines, online politics strongly favors cyber-bullying, insults, and improper conduct (Corriere della Sera, 2020). As a result, they condemn 'Salvini's media meat grinder'⁵⁷ and denounce the fact that populism is a 'beast that spits fire on the web'.⁵⁸

Since its creation, the stylistic contrast that the movement has offered is also visual. While Salvini's image is all over the Internet, which is why the Sardines accuse him of 'only speaking in front of a smartphone',⁵⁹ the anti-populist demonstrators propose a 'multitude' of bodies against the omnipresent (digital) figure of Salvini. They declare that 'the Sardines do not hate' but 'multiply'.⁶⁰ They also say that they 'squeeze together' and 'rediscover the sense of community' to 'stop the advance of populism'.⁶¹ The movement's style therefore consists of visually combatting the populist leader through an 'accumulation' or a crowd of citizens. If Salvini requisitions the virtual world of social media, the anti-populist Sardines invade the physical space of the *piazze* (squares) as they say: 'we are all little fishes, our strength is the number' and add that 'no one will ever be left alone again at the mercy of the storm of hatred'.⁶² In this sentence, populism is the 'storm of hatred' and the many fishes contrast with the overwhelming figure of Salvini.

The Sardines’ plea for ‘complexity’ and intelligence

The last important aspect identified in the Sardines’ stylistic anti-populism is the re-establishment of complexity in Italian politics. Populists tend to delegitimize intellectualism and ‘technical policy initiatives’ (Taggart, 2002, p. 76). In the meantime, anti-populists reproach their adversaries for being too simplistic. A similar argumentation is found in the Sardines’ discourse:

The head will be stronger than the belly. If we want it, politics will become serious again.⁶³

Dialogue is the only way forward to try to address the complexity of problems.⁶⁴

The Sardines have come together to combat all forms of aggressive political communication, (...) continue to present an alternative to the beast of sovereignty and the easy promises of simple thought.⁶⁵

We have discovered that populism is a noisy but fragile beast, an overbearing child who when they are defeated, thump their fist on the table and accuse the teacher of being biased (...). The sirens of demagoguery do not appear where there is physical presence, empathy, and complexity of reasoning.⁶⁶

The Sardines denounce populists’ political and economic vision which they think is caricatural. In the first quote, they oppose the ‘belly’ to the ‘head’. In fact, they suggest that populists seek to arouse the instinct of the people and not their cerebral parts. For the Sardines, the ‘belly’ is not logical or rational and for this reason should be disregarded. Populism is slammed for being a ‘simple thought’ that lacks intellectual depth and makes ‘noise’ rather than presenting constructive and nuanced argumentation. Anti-populists make populists look like animals or thoughtless creatures. The word ‘demagoguery’ is also typical of the anti-populist lexicon. Populists are always depicted by anti-populists as charlatans who make promises that they will not be able to keep or propose unrealistic measures.

In addition, comparing populists to a child signifies that they are immature and therefore unfit to govern. As for the word ‘empathy’, it refers to the fact that the anti-populist Sardines, compared to right-wing populism that excludes or neglects the most marginalized groups of society, have genuine compassion and interest for those who suffer and are discriminated. The Sardines, rather than being a typical protest movement, pretend to be an intelligent ‘tool for dialogue, comparison, analysis’, and ‘constructive criticism’.⁶⁷ During some of their demonstrations, they brandished books, which was a way to counter Salvini with knowledge and intelligence (La Repubblica, 2019) and send the message that populism is ignorant, racist and unintelligent. This is again, a typical component of the anti-populist rhetoric. Overall, for the Sardines, politics is a complicated issue, even though populists claim otherwise. The solutions that Salvini proposes such as: drastically reducing immigration, leaving the European Union (or gaining independence from it), constantly blaming opponents, or accusing foreigners of threatening Italy’s interests are too simplistic recipes to deal with deep and intricate issues.

Populist style and stylistic anti-populism’s salient traits		
	Salvini’s populist style	The Sardines’ stylistic anti-populism
Party family	Radical right	Center-left
Doctrine	Sovereignism	Progressivism
Typical Mobilization ¹	Social media	Piazze (squares)
Visuals	Salvini’s persona	Multiple physical bodies (anti-populist citizens)
Language and behavior	Colloquial; exuberant and provocative	Formal and institutional; moderate and ‘kind’

Conclusion

Anti-populism is under-researched in academia and while some authors have discussed the phenomenon, they have hardly analyzed or defined it as a style. The article consequently sought to fill this gap by **coining and operationalizing the concept of stylistic anti-populism. Using the Italian Sardines as a case-study**, the article showed that the movement provides a discursive, visual, and sonic contrast to the Leghista populism that is nestled in the virtual world of social media. Anti-populism has become a widespread phenomenon in Western European politics, but very few actors label themselves or their actions 'anti-populist'. This is not the case of the Sardines whose objective is clearly to be a stylistic anti-populist movement opposed to Matteo Salvini. Yet, as the Sardines' anti-populism comes from civil society and mobilizes Italian citizens, it has a less elitist and anti-popular connotation.

While this analysis of the Sardines contributed to the literature on anti-populism, it also illuminated an aspect of Italian politics. Indeed, it related the rise of the social movement to a structural unwillingness or incapacity of political parties to be anti-populist. Due to a party system that is inundated with populism, no partisan organization, including the PD could genuinely endorse anti-populism. Also, the center-left party has lived a decade of vicissitudes and has not fared well in the 2018 general elections. The argument defended in this article is that because of the characteristics of the Italian party system and the political state of the PD, left-wing civil society was more likely to lead the anti-populist camp.

Finally, the analytical framework that was used for the Italian Sardine movement could be applied to other cases. In some Western countries where populism is successful or is making inroads, anti-populists combat the style and manners of populist leaders and militate to re-instate politeness or respect in the political arena. The concept of stylistic anti-populism could be used to study forms of mobilizations and performances that promote tolerance or trust towards the establishment. Similarly, the concept could be utilized to analyze how anti-populist actors develop new tools of communication to defeat or discredit populists.

Notes

1. On the relation between populism and social media, see Engesser et al. (2017) and Waisbord and Amado (2017).
2. In English: immigrants/illegal immigrants, foreigners, *jus sanguinis* ('right of blood'), sovereignty/Sovereignism, Italian people, European Union, seat, sardine, kisses/friends, pasta.
3. *Omnibus*, 19 November 2019; *Piazzapulita* 21 November 2019; *Che tempo che fa*, 1 December 2019; *Otto e mezzo*, 5 December 2019; *DiMartedì* 6 December 2019; *Che tempo che fa*, 19 January 2020; *Che tempo che fa* 9 February 2020; *L'aria che tira*, 12 February 2020; *Piazzapulita*, 16 February 2020.
4. 'Glitzzy' is an informal adjective of the English language but was chosen for its colloquial tone that suits Salvini's style.
5. Twitter, 13 February 2020.
6. Twitter, 6 September 2019.
7. Twitter, 27 December 2017.
8. Twitter, 17 February 2020.

9. Twitter, 1 September 2019.
10. Twitter, 10 April 2019.
11. Matteo Salvini, European Parliament, 15 March 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGnxss02bP4>
12. Twitter, 6 August 2018; Twitter, 30 January 2020; Twitter, 10 February 2020; Twitter 11 February 2020.
13. Twitter, 19 August 2019; Twitter, 20 December 2019.
14. Twitter, 4 February 2020.
15. Twitter, 26 January 2020.
16. Twitter, 28 July 2018; Twitter, 5 August 2018.
17. Twitter, 24 June 2018.
18. Twitter, 19 February 2020
19. Twitter, 17 February 2020.
20. Twitter, 19 November 2019.
21. Twitter, 8 February 2020.
22. Virginia Raggi, Twitter, 14 December 2019. In December 2019, Salvini criticized the fact that Turkish rather than Italian nuts were being used to make Nutella, Italy's famous spread.
23. Stefano Bonaccini, Repubblica TV, 4 January 2020.
24. Facebook, 30 November 2019.
25. Facebook, 5 December 2019.
26. Mattia Santori, *Piazzapulita*, November 2019.
27. Twitter, 20 February 2020.
28. Ibidem.
29. Mattia Santori, *Piazzapulita*, 21 November 2019; Jasmine Cristallo, *Otto e mezzo*, 25 January 2020.
30. 'Il Partito Democratico è un partito antifascista che ispira la sua azione al pieno sviluppo dell'Art. 3 della Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana'. 'Statuto del Partito Democratico: Testo approvato dall'Assemblea Nazionale il 17 novembre 2019'.
31. Facebook, 10 December 2019.
32. Facebook 16 December.
33. Facebook, 19 February.
34. Gianni Cuperlo, *Otto e mezzo*, 22 November 2019.
35. Jasmine Cristallo, *Piazzapulita*, 28 November 2019.
36. Facebook, 9 December 2019.
37. Facebook, 11 February 2020.
38. Facebook, 6 February 2020.
39. Twitter, 8 February 2020.
40. Mattia Santori, *Che tempo che fa*, 9 February 2020.
41. Ibidem.
42. Facebook, 26 December 2019.
43. Mattia Santori, *Piazzapulita*, 15 February 2020.
44. Twitter, 27 January 2020.
45. Facebook, 5 December 2019.
46. Facebook, 26 December 2019.
47. Facebook, 28 December 2019.
48. Facebook, 28 December 2019.
49. Facebook, 20 November 2019.
50. Twitter, 1 December 2019; Facebook, 12 February; Twitter 16 February 2020.
51. Twitter, 12 February 2020.
52. Mattia Santori, *Che tempo che fa*, 1 December 2019.
53. Twitter, 3 February 2020.
54. Letter addressed to national newspapers La Repubblica, 20 December 2019.
55. Facebook, 15 December 2019.
56. Facebook, 20 November 2019.

57. Facebook, 24 January 2020.
58. Twitter, 30 November 2019.
59. Facebook 1 December 2019.
60. Facebook 5 December 2019.
61. Facebook, 7 January 2020.
62. Facebook, 20 November 2019.
63. Facebook, 17 December 2019.
64. Facebook, 15 December 2019.
65. Facebook, 4 February 2020.
66. Facebook, 11 February 2020.
67. 'Online politics' and 'squares' are the typical and most recurrent modes of mobilization of Salvini and the Sardines, but they are not the only ones.

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