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The year of covid-19. Italy at a crossroads

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*Original*

The year of covid-19. Italy at a crossroads / Giovannini, A.; Mosca, L.. - In: CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN POLITICS. - ISSN 2324-8823. - (2021), pp. 1-19. [10.1080/23248823.2021.1911026]

*Availability:*

This version is available at: 11381/2957952 since: 2024-11-22T17:55:06Z

*Publisher:*

*Published*

DOI:10.1080/23248823.2021.1911026

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02 May 2026

## **Introduction. The year of Covid-19. Italy at a crossroads<sup>1</sup>**

*Arianna Giovannini and Lorenzo Mosca<sup>2</sup>*

### **2020: an exceptional year**

No one doubts that 2020 has been an extraordinary year. For the first time since the Second World War, a global crisis – namely, the Coronavirus pandemic – initially arising outside Italy's borders, has literally overwhelmed the country. This special issue, which hosts the 2021 English-language edition of the well-known volume in Italian, *Politica in Italia* (Pit), therefore reflects the unusual nature of the year on which it focusses. Traditionally, the aim of Pit has been to provide analysis and interpretation of the main events of the year to which it refers. In the case of 2020, it has been necessary to abandon this approach and to treat the Covid-19 pandemic as a single key event conditioning *all* the events of that year.

Taking this as our starting point, this introduction aims to set out the analytic framework conceived for the special issue, defining the Covid-19 crisis as a critical juncture. Thereby, we aim to cast light on what made 2020 exceptional and to provide an initial overview and analysis of the main political, social and institutional developments taking place during the year. This will prepare the ground for the analyses carried out in the subsequent articles, while making clear the logic driving the selection of topics chosen for inclusion in the issue. We argue that its considerable duration and the fact that it was unforeseen meant that the pandemic dramatically undermined fragile equilibria, profoundly affecting the country's politics, institutions and civil society. As we shall see later, while in the immediate term there were a number of unexpected changes, by the end of the year pre-existing features of the Italian system were decisive. This did not mean that the processes of change came to a halt; rather, that it was apparent that the most significant challenges created by the Covid-19 crisis as a critical juncture would be played out in the long term.

This article seeks to develop this idea by focussing on three issues. First, the section that follows introduces the notion of a critical juncture, illustrating it also by reference to similar past events and their consequences. We shall argue that the scale and the effects of a critical moment, like the one that challenged institutional, political and social processes in 2020, cannot be understood without taking account of the context in which it occurs.

Second, we shall discuss the 'evolution' of political relations within the governing coalition, seeking, in particular, to assess the ability or otherwise of the political actors most directly involved in managing the Covid-19 crisis to instigate a virtuous circle between 'capacity' and the 'legitimacy

of governance' (on which see the article by Ceccobelli and Vaccari in this special issue). We identify four key phases in 2020: a pre-pandemic phase; the first wave of infections; the slowing down in the rate of infection and the lifting of the initial lockdown measures; the second wave of infections.

Finally, against this background, the subsequent section considers in more depth the institutional legacy of the crisis, focussing especially on multi-level governance and the relations between central and regional government. This will allow us to throw light on one of the most delicate and controversial aspects of Italy's institutional framework, namely, the constant tension between a constitution that promotes territorial autonomies and a form of regionalism that, in practice, remains incomplete and inconsistent. This will facilitate understanding of, on the one hand, the changing relations between the different levels of government during 2020, and on the other, the impact of change on the country's political stability.

For obvious reasons, our analysis cannot cover the long-term effects of the pandemic because the health crisis is still on-going. It will, however, enable us critically to assess the short- and medium-term impacts, which we shall consider in the section that concludes this article.

### **The critical juncture of Covid-19**

A critical juncture can be defined as a breaking point: a large-scale event of profound significance that undermines and obstructs the normal functioning of the political, institutional, social and economic systems of a country, thereby disrupting the status quo and existing relationships of power. For this reason, a critical juncture is not merely a 'crisis' but one of those rare moments in which institutions, norms and practices become intrinsically unstable, giving rise to new and unforeseen opportunities for change (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). A critical juncture is often created by a large-scale exogenous shock, generating long-lasting and wide-ranging political and policy impacts. It has the effect of placing a country's political system on a trajectory whose direction is in normal circumstances determined by the functioning of its institutions (Capoccia 2016; Stark 2018). The same critical juncture can, however, have radically different effects depending on the country's pre-existing political, institutional and socio-economic circumstances. A critical juncture thus represents a sort of crossroads: a moment of profound change in the dynamics of a political system, pushing it in new, hitherto unknown directions, which are, nevertheless, influenced by pre-existing conditions of path dependency (Capano 2020). The level of preparedness of a country in seeking to meet these 'structural crises' and the responsiveness of its institutions thus play a fundamental role in determining the path it will take (Gaskell *et al.* 2020). Nevertheless, it remains difficult to predict the

likely direction of this path, precisely because its outcomes only become apparent once the event that initiated them is over.

History is replete with examples of such events. The bubonic plague pandemic (often referred to as the ‘Black Death’) which, beginning in central Asia, spread to Europe half way through the fourteenth century, is a vivid example of a critical juncture<sup>3</sup>, when an exogenous shock disrupted in a most profound way the political and socio-economic order of medieval society. In all the countries affected by the plague the feudal system’s foundations were subverted. However, the trajectory of each country was essentially determined by its ability or otherwise to exploit to its own advantage its institutional peculiarities – with enormous differences between, for example, the countries of Western and Eastern Europe (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

The parallels between the bubonic plague and the Covid-19 pandemic, beginning as it did in Wuhan in China before spreading in the space of a few months to the whole of the rest of the world, are so obvious as to seem almost macabre. Indeed, the Coronavirus pandemic seems to reflect all the characteristics of a critical juncture described above. The momentum and rapidity of the virus’ spread gave rise to a shock so severe that it disrupted global equilibria, profoundly affecting both domestic politics and the foreign relations of every country hit by it. Yet, in line with the theoretical assumptions set out above, the Covid-19 pandemic had very different implications depending on the context. Paradoxically, China, the country in which the virus first appeared, turned out to be much better prepared than others: clearly, an authoritarian regime can impose draconian restrictions much more quickly and with much less political and social resistance than is possible in a liberal democracy. In Italy – the first European country to be affected by the virus – the same critical juncture hit a very different institutional context and took the country by surprise.

As emphasised by the editors of the last edition of Pit, the events of 2019 served as a reminder ‘that Italy’s perennial political instability prevents serious attempts at resolving Italy’s most important problems’ (Moschella and Rhodes 2020, 113). A whole series of pre-existing conditions made these problems worse. They included: growing electoral volatility; the success of populist and anti-system parties; the presence of unwieldy and fractious coalitions; an electoral system in a constant state of crisis and reform; the persisting effects of the great recession of 2008 and of a policy of austerity grafted onto a structural economic crisis; the concealed attempts by central government to claw back powers from sub-national levels of government; the systemic problems of coordination between levels of government generated by attempts at reforming regional governance that had never been fully realised, and, more generally, the growing crisis of confidence in politics and public institutions. This combination of factors helps us to understand on the one hand, the specific trajectory of the

country deriving from Italy's past political choices, and, on the other, the country's lack of preparedness in seeking to manage the pandemic when first affected by it in February 2020. In short, the critical juncture brought on by the outbreak of Covid-19 was grafted onto a fragile structure, meaning that the political system had to deal with a challenge for which, as would soon become apparent, it was largely unprepared (Capano 2020; see also Bull in this special issue).

From this point of view, the critical juncture brought on by Covid-19 represented a considerable test of the resistance of the country's socio-economic and institutional architecture, throwing a question mark over the way in which the functioning of the Italian political system had traditionally been understood. In this way, the pandemic threw an unforgiving light on the political apparatus and its leaders, exposing, without any filter, their strengths and weaknesses in their attempts to manage the crisis. The responses to this 'critical moment' are precisely what will – at least potentially – determine the country's new direction of change, with institutional effects and legacies that will make themselves felt in both the medium and long term as well as in the short term.

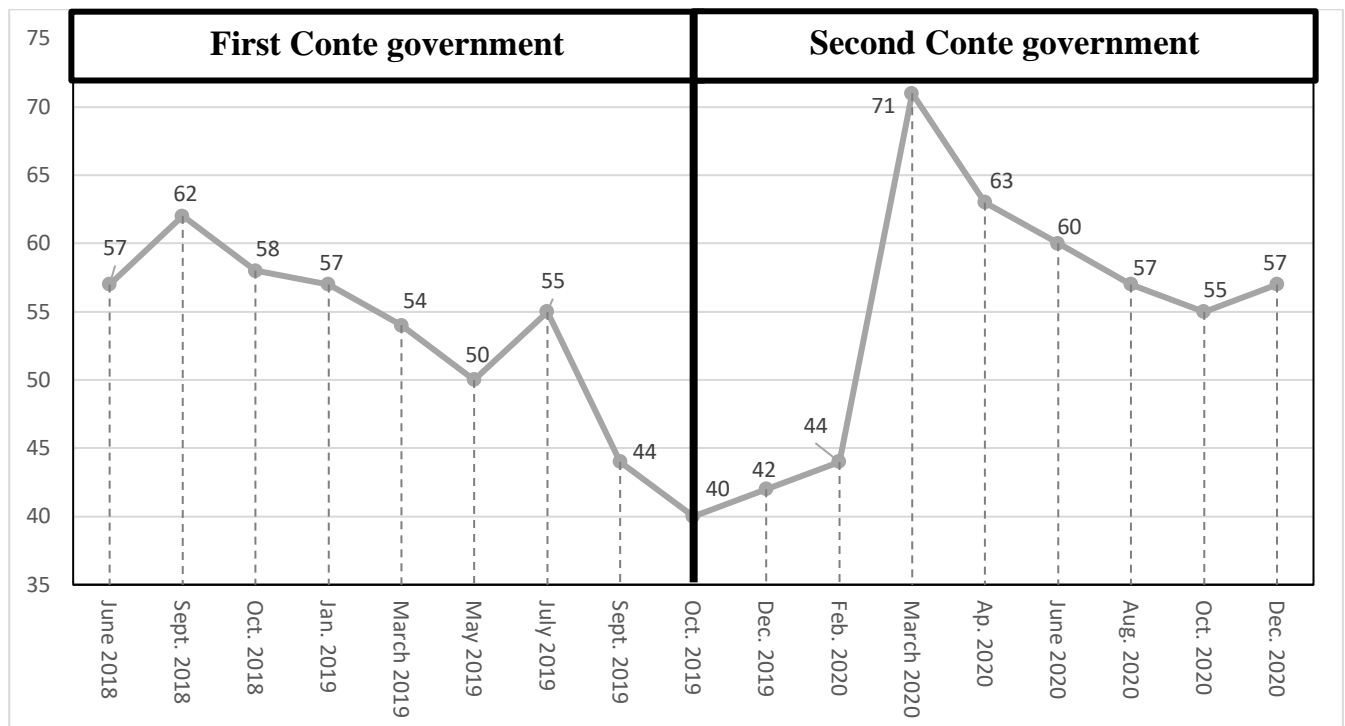
### **Capacity and legitimacy of governance of the second Conte government**

This section considers how the balance of forces within the governing coalition changed during the course of 2020, focussing especially on the pre-pandemic phase (January), the first wave of infections (from February to May), the slow-down in the rate of infection and the easing of the lockdown (from June to September), the second wave of infections (from October to December). We shall consider two issues in particular: public perceptions of the Conte government, and relations between the main governing parties. In this way, in line with the approach outlined in the previous section, we shall provide an initial assessment of the relationship between the capacity and the legitimacy of governance of the second Conte government as it attempted to manage the Covid-19 emergency.

*Before the start of the pandemic.* It should be emphasised that before the start of the pandemic, the 'yellow-red' government seemed extremely fragile, both in terms of public support and in terms of relations between its component parties. Although Conte had long managed to shake off the images of 'paper pusher' and 'puppet' that had characterised media representations of his role during his first term of office, and though he regained political credibility as a result (Moschella and Rhodes 2020), public support for his new government was not particularly great at the beginning of 2020. Between September 2019 and February 2020 the government's approvals ratings fluctuated between 40 and 44% as compared to percentages of between 50 and 62% for its predecessor (Figure 1). Despite the

growth in popularity of the Prime Minister (on which see the article by Bull in this special issues) until this moment the second Conte government had met with lower levels of public approval than the first.

Figure 1 – Favourable assessments of the Government  
(percentages giving at least a passing grade)



Source: Demos & PI (December 2020).

Public perceptions of the government’s weakness reflected inter-party relations that stood out for their litigiousness and for the growing conflict over government policy in a number of different areas. One of these concerned the electoral system. Though the governing parties had, with considerable difficulty, reached agreement on a reform designed to render the electoral law (the so called ‘Rosatellum’) more proportional and intended as a starting point for parliamentary debate, newspapers carried reports of considerable dissent on the part of *Liberi e Uguali* (Free and Equal, LeU) and of much grumbling on the part of the party led by Renzi<sup>4</sup>. A few days later, Renzi’s *Italia Viva* (Iv) had voted with the centre right in the judicial committee, in order to obstruct justice minister Alfonso Bonafede’s reform of the statute of limitations, whose terms would no longer be applied to cases having resulted in a conviction in a court of first instance. While spokespersons for Renzi’s party denounced the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, PD) for having supposedly abandoned a commitment to defendants’ rights, claiming that it was becoming ever more like Beppe Grillo’s

*Movimento 5 stelle* (Five-star Movement, M5s), the PD in its turn denounced the ‘betrayal’ of the former prime minister in supporting the centre right<sup>5</sup>.

In the pre-pandemic phase, there had emerged further difficulties for the governing parties, associated with the varied nature of their alliances at sub-national level. At the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna, for example, the PD’s candidate, Stefano Bonaccini, was supported by Iv, while the M5s decided to field its own candidate (see the article by Vampa in this special issue) achieving a very disappointing result. The elections had nonetheless marked a setback for Matteo Salvini’s attempt to undermine the government. It was the second political mistake the League leader had made after his failed attempt to force early elections by bringing down the first Conte government. In this situation, the centrifugal drives triggered by the governing parties’ disagreements with each other were offset somewhat by the regional election outcomes, which, however, aggravated the problems of the M5s. Luigi Di Maio, anticipating the party’s decline in the region that had been its birthplace (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013), had resigned as head of the Movement’s governing contingent (to be replaced by Bonafede) and as its ‘political leader’, ceding this role – in accordance with the party statute – to the oldest member of the Safeguards Committee, Vito Crimi, who was due to remain in office as interim leader until the end of the year.

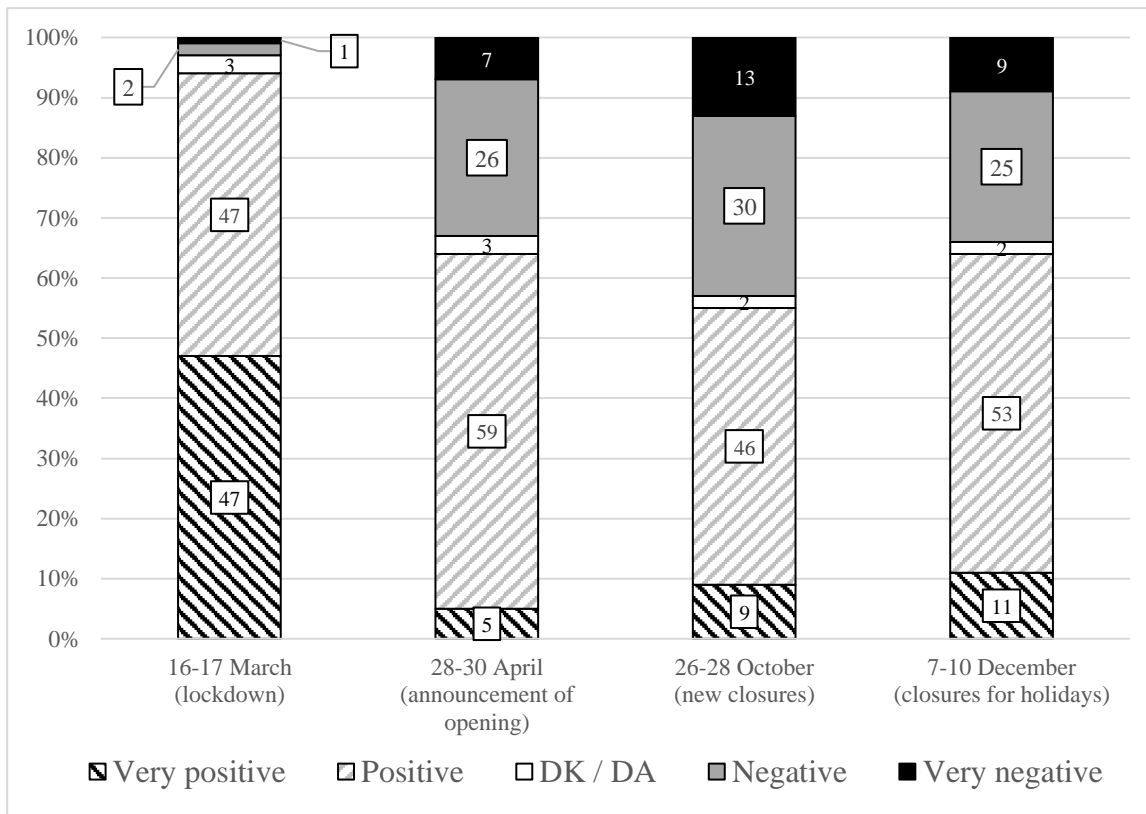
In this initial phase, therefore, there was little public support for the government – reflecting a policy-making capacity that had been much weakened by the litigiousness of the parties supporting Conte and by the internal difficulties of at least some of them.

*The first wave of infections.* The second phase had begun with the declaration of the Covid-19 emergency at the end of January. Despite the gravity of the situation on the health front, press reports were of a governing majority teetering on the brink<sup>6</sup>. At the beginning of February, during the first meeting of its national assembly, Iv had reiterated its total opposition to reforming the statute of limitations, threatening to withdraw its support for the government in the Senate where the small size of the executive’s majority meant that Iv’s votes were decisive. Despite attempts at mediation, differences remained so huge that a few days later Iv tabled a parliamentary motion of no-confidence in Bonafede and again voted with the opposition to block reform of the statute of limitations. The media revealed that a meeting had taken place between the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister to discuss how to deal with the government’s increasingly tenuous hold on office. Unconfirmed rumours alluded to discussion of the possibility of carving out a new majority by relying on the support of the so-called *responsabili*: senators outside the governing majority who might be relied upon to vote ‘responsibly’, so condemning Iv to irrelevance<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile, when it came to

working out the alliances to be fielded at the regional and local elections in the autumn, the M5s sought once again to create autonomous political space for itself by declaring, ‘In Puglia we’ll never support Michele Emiliano: we are the only alternative, both on the right and on the left’<sup>8</sup>.

The convulsions within the governing coalition and the fear of its collapse at the hands of Iv quickly died down with the arrival of the pandemic. The new political climate was reflected in the opinion polls, which suggested that approvals ratings for the Conte government had risen to 71% in March as compared to 44% the month previously (Figure 1). Moreover, ‘positive’ and ‘very positive’ judgements of the government’s measures hit a record high of 94% (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Opinions concerning government measures



Source: Demos & PI (December 2020).

This high level of support seemed to give the government greater cohesion. The exceptional nature of the circumstances seemed to have placed its internal conflicts on hold, temporarily inoculating it against the many elements of friction that threatened to undermine it. At the beginning of March, the constitutional referendum on the reduction in the number of parliamentarians which was to have taken place at the end of the month was postponed – as were the regional elections due to be held in Campania, Liguria, Marche, Puglia, Tuscany and the Valle d’Aosta. Thereby, the

governing majority was able to avoid, until a date to be determined, elections that everyone knew would be divisive for it. Also postponed were the election of the M5s' 'political leader' and the conclusion to the lengthy process of internal reorganisation. Following creation of the *team del futuro* (literally: 'team of the future')<sup>9</sup>, the party postponed the meeting of the convention (the '*Stati Generali*'), that was to have drafted a new political programme for the Movement and to have taken a number of strategic decisions concerning its organisation and attitude to alliances.

If therefore the state of emergency had brought greater government cohesion, reducing the stridency of opposition both within the executive and without (on the reactions of the centre right see the article by Albertazzi *et al.* in this special issue), at the end of April Renzi went on the attack again. This time he criticised the government for its handling of the crisis and for the continuing imposition of lockdown measures, declaring that 'If those who have died in Bergamo and Brescia could speak, they would tell us to end the restrictions' and telling Conte that 'we did not deny complete power (*pieni poteri*) to Salvini only to give it to others'<sup>10</sup>.

In the second phase there was therefore an 'unexpected change' arising from the critical juncture associated with Covid-19, placing normal political assumptions in abeyance and focussing public attention on the government's response. Consequently, support for the government grew and there was a considerable reduction in the political room available to both its internal and its external opponents.

*The slowing down in the rate of infection and the relaxing of restrictions.* Although, during this phase, the political waters remained relatively calm, the elements of friction within the majority smouldered beneath the surface, threatening to reignite at the first available opportunity. Conflict first emerged over a proposal, advanced by Iv, to regularise the position of migrant agricultural workers, a proposal supported by the PD and LeU, but opposed by the M5s. The minister of agriculture, Teresa Bellanova, threatened to resign, thereby forcing through a compromise acceptable to all the governing parties. However, the issue threatened to reignite the conflict between the more progressive and the more conservative wings of the M5s<sup>11</sup>.

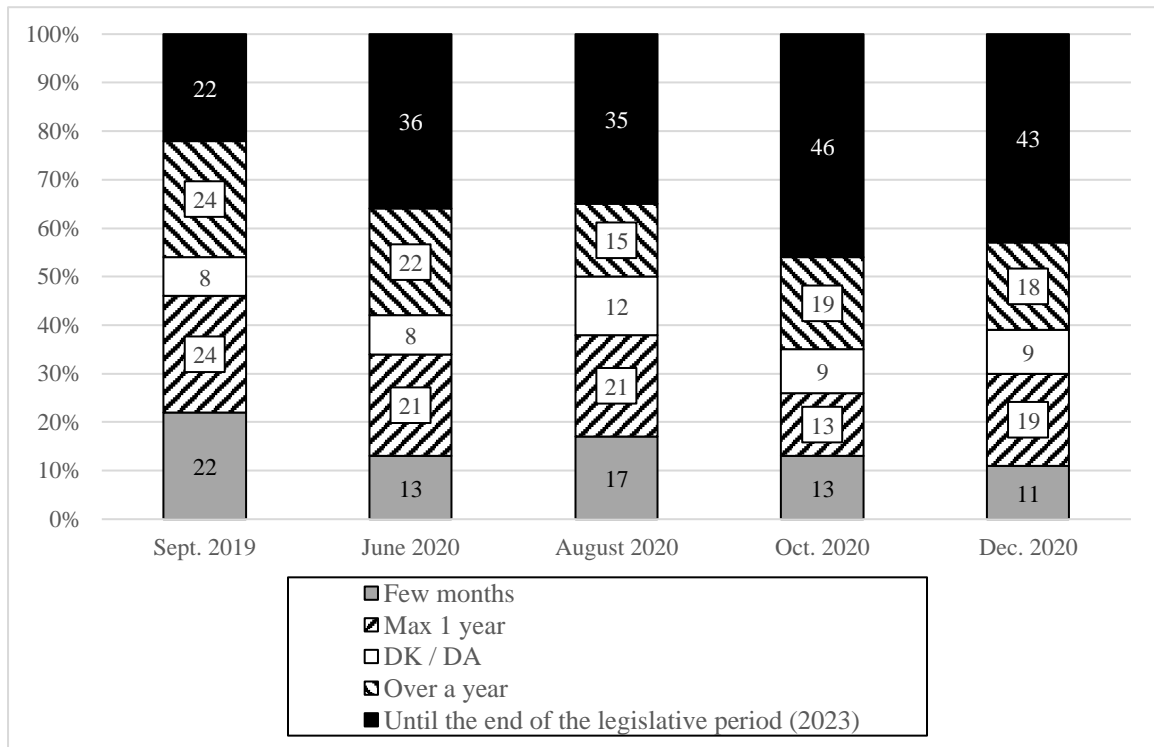
There were other issues on the government's agenda threatening to rock the boat – from renewal of the contract with *Autostrade*, the private company with responsibility for managing the country's principal motorways, to the matter of whether or not to make use of loan facilities provided by the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). At the beginning of June, there was tension between the PD and Conte arising from the announcement, without the blessing of the PD's general secretary, of the convening of a meeting of economic stakeholders, the so-called *Stati generali dell'economia*,

that would gather ideas from all the interested parties about how to use money made available through the EU's Recovery Fund. At the same time, a number of PD spokespersons expressed criticism of the citizenship income, one the M5s' flagship measures. Shortly afterwards, at the first meeting of party's executive to be held online, general secretary Nicola Zingaretti called upon the government to make a 'qualitative leap', demanding that it draw upon ESM facilities since, as he put it, 'the absence of any strings attached means that it has become an important element of leverage for the public health service'<sup>12</sup>.

After several failed attempts to resolve the problem of the motorways contract, a solution – involving the Benetton family assenting to a gradual reduction in its financial stake in *Autostrade* – was agreed to. Its stake would be taken over by the *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* (Deposits and Loans Fund) and the company would be floated on the stock exchange<sup>13</sup>. The ESM issue, however, remained unresolved and continued to be the subject of periodic spats between the governing parties.

In this phase, public support for the government continued to grow, with expectations as to its likely longevity becoming more optimistic as a consequence. While in September 2019 46% thought that government would survive for no more than 'a few months' or 'a year at most', by June 2020, the corresponding percentage was down to 34, while 58% thought that the government would survive for 'more than a year' or 'until the end of the legislature' (Figure 3). 64% greeted 'positively' or 'very positively' the government's announcement of its plan for the relaxation of the lockdown measures (Figure 2).

Figure 3 – Public expectations concerning the government’s likely longevity



Source: Demos & PI (December 2020).

It was against this background of heightened public support for the government that, on 22 July, Conte announced to Parliament the ‘historic decision’ taken by the European Council following the positive outcome of its negotiations concerning the EU Recovery Fund. This would make available €209 billion to Italy (see the articles by Jones, and Pianta *et al.* in this special issue) and represented an undoubted diplomatic success, one recognised even by the government’s detractors. However, its new-found unity was destined to be temporary. Reform of the electoral system once more rose to the top of the political agenda, this thanks to the likelihood that the referendum on the reduction in the number of parliamentarians, postponed to the autumn, would deliver a majority in favour of the proposal. Notwithstanding the fact that the governing parties had already reached agreement on the issue in January, a debate now took place around two alternative proposals. One, tabled by the M5s deputy, Giuseppe Brescia, envisaged a proportional system with a 5% exclusion threshold and rights of representation for the best-placed losers (the so-called ‘Brescellum’). The other, tabled by Renzi, envisaged a majoritarian system. In an attempt to obstruct the PD’s efforts to resolve the matter, Iv voted with the opposition in the constitutional affairs committee. Zingaretti reacted by accusing Renzi of betraying the agreement that had already been reached<sup>14</sup>.

Meanwhile, in mid-August, a members’ ballot had been held on the M5s’ Rousseau platform as a result of which there would be a relaxation of the term limits applied to the party’s local

councillors (the so-called *zero mandato*) and alliances with the traditional parties would now be possible for local elections<sup>15</sup>. The vote was a significant one as it revised two of the Movement's founding principles. This phase came to an end with an important symbolic victory for the M5s: the constitutional referendum majority in favour of the reduction in the number of parliamentarians. This meant that, beginning with the nineteenth legislature, Parliament would consist of 200 Senators rather than 315, and 400 Deputies rather than 630. If the referendum outcome represented a clear victory for the Movement, the regional elections held on the same day represented a further setback both for Grillo's party (see the article by Vampa in this special issue) and for Salvini's League. As with Emilia-Romagna at the previous round of regional elections, Tuscany had become the site of a highly symbolic challenge to the government. Here too, the PD candidate – Eugenio Giani – had carried the day. Strengthened by the outcome of the regional elections, Zingaretti had demanded a rebalancing of power relations between the governing parties and a rapid conclusion to negotiations concerning reform of the previous, 'yellow-green', government's 'security decrees'.

In this third phase, the effects of the critical juncture were still apparent: with renewed energy and heightened public support thanks to the Recovery Fund agreed to in Brussels, the government seemed to have the wind in its sails. However, relaxation of the Covid restrictions and the gradual return to normality led to the re-emergence of interlocking vetoes and divisions between the governing parties.

*The second wave of infections.* This phase began with the measures designed to contain the second wave and with reform of the yellow-green government's security decrees. The reform entailed a considerable reduction in the fines payable by NGOs involved in rescuing migrants at sea and the re-adoption of 'humanitarian aid' as an important guiding principle in the management of immigration<sup>16</sup>. The new anti-Covid restrictions provoked protests and social unrest in the cities of Naples, Turin, Milan and Trieste<sup>17</sup>. Renzi criticised the new *Decreto del presidente del consiglio dei ministri* (Prime ministerial decree, Dpcm), demanding that Conte relax its restrictive measures and provoking an angry response on the part of Zingaretti who exclaimed, 'to have a foot in two shoes at the same time is ethically intolerable!'<sup>18</sup> Despite the social and political tensions, polls suggested that 55% were willing to express a 'positive' or 'very positive' judgement of the new restrictions (Figure 2).

Towards the end of November, the tensions surrounding the ESM re-emerged following a statement by the minister of health, Roberto Speranza, that he was keen to use the loan facilities to finance the health-care system, provoking an outcry on the part of the M5s<sup>19</sup>.

A short while later, following a series of accusations concerning funds supplied to Davide Casaleggio's Rousseau Association, the entrepreneur took to the Five-star Movement's web site, '*il Blog delle Stelle*' strongly to defend the role of the Association in the Movement's internal life. The Movement's safeguards committee reacted by challenging his right to use the blog as a vehicle for 'his personal messages not endorsed by the party's committees'<sup>20</sup>. The tensions arose from the long-postponed convening of the '*Stati Generali*'. Just before the start of the public debate, which would lead to several important new developments, Casaleggio had taken to Facebook to announce his unwillingness to participate in the discussions because 'many decisions [had] already been taken as foregone conclusions'<sup>21</sup>. The summary document would be voted on in December by the members' assembly, ratifying both the transfer to a collective body of the functions previously exercised by the 'political leader', and the decision to regulate the party's relationship with the manager of its web platform through an explicit service or partnership agreement<sup>22</sup>.

The month of December was also marked by growing conflict surrounding the Recovery Fund: Iv had strongly opposed Conte's idea of appointing a task force to manage the funds. The agriculture minister, Bellanova, had branded the proposal as 'obscure', claiming that there were reasons to doubt its constitutionality because it involved the creation of 'parallel structures' that would 'by-pass the Cabinet, the ministries and members of Parliament'<sup>23</sup>. In the days following, Renzi threatened the resignation of his party's ministers and the withdrawal of his party's support for the government<sup>24</sup>. If at the end of the year all of the government's attention seemed focussed on the restrictive measures aimed at avoiding a peak in infections coinciding with the festive season, then the divisions within the governing majority had come to appear unbridgeable. Desperate attempts to bring into being a group of *responsabili* in the Senate were in vain. However, despite the government's imminent collapse, its approvals ratings rose to 57% (Figure 1), while 61% of respondents remained optimistic about its prospects, believing that it would survive for 'more than a year' or 'until the end of the legislature'. The percentage was only slightly below the 65% registered in October and remained above those registered by all the other surveys taken since September 2019 (Figure 3). Finally, 64% of respondents expressed 'positive' or 'very positive' attitudes towards the restrictions imposed during the festive season (Figure 2).

In this fourth phase, the unexpected change triggered by the pandemic seemed to have faded rapidly. Neither the gravity of the situation created by the second wave of infections nor the support of public opinion was sufficient to hold back the centrifugal forces that were created by the issue of the Recovery Fund and that soon after led to the government's collapse.

In conclusion, the tensions within the governing majority were temporarily relaxed by the health emergency, which appeared to open a window of opportunity by reinforcing a majority that was otherwise extremely fragile, heterogeneous and conflict-ridden, and enabling the government to benefit from considerable public good-will. However, despite this unexpected and positive effect on support for the government triggered by the Coronavirus emergency, disagreements continued to smoulder beneath the surface, growing with the passage of time and resurfacing when management of the European funding to deal with the fallout from the pandemic rose to the top of the agenda. This exposed not only the problems within the coalition but also the phenomenon of path dependency, revealing the inability of the Italian political system to provide effective governance. In the section that follows we shall attempt to shed further light on the ‘contrasting dynamics’ generated by the critical juncture of Covid-19.

### **The impact of the pandemic on multi-level governance and on relations between the regions and the government**

Like any crisis of global proportions, the pandemic placed the systems of government of the countries affected by it under severe pressure, and Italy was no exception. From this perspective, the management of the Covid-19 crisis affected the entirety of the administrative machine, involving all levels of government and requiring policy makers to make unprecedented, rapid and risky decisions (Di Giulio 2020). This section assesses these processes, focussing on multi-level governance and on relations between the central government and the regions – outlining how these relations have evolved during the pandemic, and offering some reflections on the institutional legacy of the critical juncture of Covid-19 in Italy<sup>25</sup>.

Due to the ‘boundary spanning’ (Carter and May 2020) nature of the Coronavirus pandemic, the specific multi-level governance structures of a country, their fragility or strength, play a crucial role in determining its ability to respond effectively to the crisis (Gaskell *et al.* 2020; Oecd 2020). In other words, the depth and spread of power, decision-making points, collaboration, resources and capacity are crucial in shaping the effectiveness of policy and political responses, especially in periods of deep crisis.

In the case of Italy, one of the most critical factors in this regard concerns the shortcomings of the arrangements for managing central and regional governments’ relations, and especially the effectiveness of the asymmetric form of regionalism that has emerged since the 2001 reform of Section V of the Constitution (Di Giulio 2020) and the distribution of competences between the two

levels that stems from this. In short, the incremental and ‘unfinished’ nature of the Italian process of regionalisation remains one of the most pressing unresolved problems of multi-level governance in Italy (for a more detailed analysis see Giovannini and Vampa 2019). At the fiftieth anniversary of the formal creation of the ordinary statute regions, celebrated in 2020, centre-regional relations had ‘not yet been consolidated, oscillating between the incomplete federalism of the 2001 constitutional reform and the more recent drive towards variation in the powers conferred on the regions’ (Baldi and Profeti 2020, 278).

In essence, the ambiguities enshrined in the 2001 reform fostered a (self-selecting and competitive) process of asymmetric regionalism – aimed at transferring further competences and more autonomy – which is supported ‘from below’, especially by regions in northern Italy, but still lacks the parliamentary support necessary to be put into practice. In addition, the greater powers conferred on the regions by the reform have prompted new ‘regional divides’ especially in the area of health (Casula *et al.* 2020; see also Toth in this special issue) – heightening pre-existing disparities in the institutional and policy performance of regions (Vampa 2016). At the same time, and especially since the economic crisis of 2008, drives towards further regional autonomy had often been in conflict with attempts at re-centralisation on the part of the government, paralysing the process of regionalisation and paving the way for the emergence of considerable legal uncertainty in the area. The precariousness of these underpinnings meant that joint decision-making between the government and the regions was already difficult long before the start of the pandemic. Back to the argument proposed by Gaskell *et al.* (2020), these systemic weaknesses played a key role in stimulating ineffective political and policy decisions during the Covid-19 crisis.

These preliminary observations help us to understand why the institutions of multi-level governance in Italy were unprepared to meet the challenges of the pandemic and would soon run into serious problems of coordination between the regions and central government (Capano 2020, 336). Indeed, the unresolved problems of the past all quickly made themselves felt. In terms of the periodisation outlined above, the first phase, before the pandemic outbreak, was marked by the ‘Sardines’ protests (see the article by Caruso and De Blasio in this special issue). These were prompted by the first round of regional elections held in 2020, which were characterised by a growing political divergence between national and regional levels (see Vampa in this special issue). Regionalism seemed to have reached a turning point, with a new draft of framework legislation, tabled by the minister for regional affairs, Francesco Boccia, ready for Parliament’s consideration<sup>26</sup>. The government, however, still struggled to reach agreement on the matter of ‘differentiated autonomy’ between regions – especially after shows of resistance put up by the M5s and Iv.

The second phase, which began with the start of the pandemic half way through February, undermined these processes. The gravity of the crisis forced the government to take charge of the situation by progressively concentrating decision-making power at the national level (a process culminating in the national lockdown beginning on 9 March), even in policy areas within the purview of the regions. The government also began to rely on the advice of new ‘task forces’ of experts of various kinds (see Galanti and Saracino in this special issue). Management of the crisis at local level remained crucial, however, especially in key areas such as health (see the article by Toth in this special issue). Consequently, the tensions that underpinned a system of multi-level governance that sought to reconcile the national imposition of uniform measures with a model of regionalism based on varying degrees of autonomy, immediately made themselves apparent (Baldi and Profeti 2020; Capano 2020). Moreover, the varying rates of infection across the regions – with the northern regions most severely hit – created additional coordination problems. On the one hand, the government continued to base its approach on national measures, centrally imposed, demonstrating, in the words of regional affairs minister, Boccia, that ‘the state [was] alive and well and [would] exact compliance’<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand, the regions, whose presidents were on the front line, began to go their own ways – both as compared with each other and with respect to the national government – in some cases making their own decisions regardless of, and/or in open conflict with, national-level guidelines<sup>28</sup> (see the article by Toth in this special issue, and Baldi and Profeti 2020). Thereby, the ‘lack of co-ordination between the country’s decision-making levels’ stood out in sharp relief<sup>29</sup>.

Phase two was thus marked by an important change of direction: in the first instance, the critical juncture of Covid-19 placed back in the hands of the central authorities a whole series of decision-making and legislative powers, something which in normal circumstances would have been unthinkable. The regions followed – but at the same time deviated from – this process. However, they also remained vigilant and some – at least those in which the pressures for autonomy were greatest – began to see an opportunity to re-open the question of regional self-government.

During the third phase, beginning in June, the slowdown in the rate of infections relieved some of the pressure on regional health systems. However, relaxation of the lockdown measures gave rise to a new discussion between the regions and the government concerning the easing of restrictions and the economic impact of the crisis. In particular – again in the wake of disparities, especially between north and south, in the rates of infection – the regions sought to regain autonomy by insisting on their powers to regulate local economies (Baldi and Profeti 2020). Once again, the regional presidents played a key role in this process, using their positions to give voice to local discontents and to exert pressure on the government. This led to a further change, reversing the trend that emerged in the preceding phase. Now the government began to accept regional differences in processes of

decision-making, adopting an approach based on negotiation which allowed the regions themselves to decide ‘the dates on which restrictions would be lifted consistent with the epidemiological trends in their areas and in accordance with national safety protocols’ (ibidem, 292).

Old grievances did not disappear however, as the regional elections of 20 September illustrated clearly. This round of elections saw the dealignment between national and regional political dynamics grow larger, furthering a process of regional ‘presidentialisation’ (see the article by Vampa in this special issue). The electoral appeal of leaders such as Luca Zaia (Veneto), Vincenzo De Luca (Campania), Michele Emiliano (Apulia), Giovanni Toti (Liguria) – but also Stefano Bonaccini (Emilia-Romagna) already from January – began to grow just when the second Conte government’s hold on power began to loosen, as discussed in the previous section. Some regional presidents – especially in areas like Veneto where they had managed the crisis effectively (and autonomously) up until this point, and the election results had revealed their great popularity – were thus able to ‘exploit’ the critical juncture of Covid-19 to advance their own interests, using it to put asymmetric regionalism back on the agenda<sup>30</sup>. It was no accident that, at the end of September, the minister for regional affairs, Boccia, announced that he wanted to re-open discussion of framework legislation concerning regional autonomy, assuring his listeners that the government was ready to pass the measure quickly<sup>31</sup>.

Conflicts continued to emerge in October when the start of the second wave of infections marked the beginning of the fourth phase. The question of financial support for the regions – which now began to feel the effects, in terms of income and expenditure on public services, of the restrictions imposed earlier in the year – became ever more pressing. This led regional presidents to demand greater support from the government, which, however, was slow to supply it. At the same time, the regions demanded greater discretion in managing the second wave of the pandemic, especially with regard to the restrictions to be imposed on local enterprises. These issues became caught up in the debate on regional autonomy, with the Conference of the Regions asserting that ‘limiting the powers of the regions would be injurious from a practical point of view and illegitimate politically speaking’, especially given the outcome of the vote in September<sup>32</sup>.

However, the new peak in infections towards the end of 2020 shifted public attention to the practical implications of crisis management. Collaboration between the government and regions remained a live issue, and regional borders (physical and administrative) played a crucial role in the implementation of the new area-restrictions (with their distinction between yellow, orange and red regions) according to rates of infection. The government thus continued to recognise the key role played by the regions in the response to the pandemic. At the same time, however, the growing

problems within the coalition, discussed in the previous section, forced the government to attempt to come to terms with new divisions threatening its hold on office. Consequently, the promises of the minister for regional affairs, Boccia, of framework legislation providing for regional autonomy, were not kept and the issue of regionalism was once again put to one side and left unresolved. The events of the end of the year therefore suggested that the legacy bequeathed to the Italian model of governance by its past, had got the better of attempts at reform and that, once again, decision-makers were at the mercy of the structural characteristics of policy making and the ‘political gaming’ that flowed from them (Capano 2020; Gaskell *et al.* 2020).

To sum up, the critical juncture of Covid-19 had contrasting impacts on the institutional dynamics of Italy’s system of multi-level governance. From an initial position of openness to reform, apparent at the beginning of the year, in its attempts to manage the crisis, the government was unexpectedly driven in the direction of seeking greater centralisation. The unresolved tensions between the government and regions, as well as the systemic weaknesses deriving therefrom, were not long in making themselves felt in the management of the crisis – giving rise to new pressures for greater regional autonomy. In the second part of the year, however, the same critical juncture offered another possibility for change running in the opposite direction. The government recognised the regions’ important role; the regions demanded more powers and greater discretion; and there was draft legislation on regional autonomy ready to be debated in Parliament. Yet, faced with this opportunity to embrace a new strategy, finally concluding a process of regional government reform that had for too long remained incomplete, the government froze, the victim of its own internal fragility.

### **A year lived dangerously: the institutional legacy of the pandemic**

The editors of last year’s edition of *Pit* perceptively observed that ‘most of the policy challenges that put relations between the M5s and the League in Conte I under strain [had] not disappeared, threatening not only the stability of the new government but, more importantly, the country’s future’ (Moschella and Rhodes 2020, 113). While, in the previous government, competition between the two principal coalition partners – the League and the M5s – was particularly intense, the yellow-red coalition that held office in 2020 was marked by a lesser degree of diversity in terms of the programmatic objectives of its component parties (Tronconi e Valbruzzi 2020), while the two largest parties sustaining the government – the PD and the M5s – seemed less litigious. However, as we have seen, the main threats to Conte’s position came from one of the coalition’s minor parties, *Iv*, which had considerable blackmail power. A number of commentators have compared the part played by

Renzi's party to the one played by *Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Refoundation, Rc) in the first Prodi government from 1996 to 1998. However, while Rc had influenced Prodi's government from the outside, without any cabinet ministers or undersecretaries (Hine and Vassallo 1999), Renzi had created his party having resigned from the PD shortly after the second Conte government took office, and had joined the government with two cabinet ministers and one undersecretary. From the beginning, Iv had made clear that, unlike the PD, it did not consider the alliance with the M5s to be a strategic one, but rather a temporary agreement that would come to an end with the end of the legislature.

As we have seen, the critical juncture that was created by the pandemic temporarily silenced the internal and external opposition to the Conte government, which enjoyed a high level of public support. However, the easing of restrictions soon gave new energy to the critics and to centrifugal forces, bringing the government's term of office to an end.

If the critical juncture had the effect of revealing unexpected crisis-management abilities on the part of a coalition that was extremely fragile and litigious, such abilities appear to have been limited to the day-to-day aspects of crisis management. As Newell (2021, 2) observes:

while the Government had reacted well to the arrival of the Coronavirus, it lacked much by way of a capacity to be proactive: to pursue a legislative strategy according to a clearly discernible programme ... in relation to 'Next GenerationEU' which by near consensus offered the country a unique, unlikely-to-be-repeated, opportunity to use recovery from the pandemic as a launching pad for getting to grips with long-standing issues of economic decline.

Such political shortcomings were also apparent in relation to multi-level governance as highlighted by our analysis – on the basis of which we can draw some preliminary conclusions concerning the institutional legacy of the critical juncture of Covid-19. In the first place, from the point of view of relations between the government and the regions, the crisis seems to have had contrasting effects, increasing the prospects for institutional reform in the short term (first in the direction of centralisation, then in the opposite direction), but bringing the country back to the initial point of departure in the medium term. The reform of regional governance in Italy therefore remains incomplete – but that does not mean that the forces driving it have exhausted their potential or that the tensions between government and the regions have been resolved. Second, relatedly, in the short and medium terms the crisis has reinforced the role, the influence and the profile of the regional presidents, especially of those whose administrations – like those of Veneto and Emilia-Romagna – have acted autonomously in responding to the crisis, and who were long at the forefront of calls for

further regional autonomy. Third, these factors in combination point in the direction of an increasing degree of institutional and political dealignment, not only between the regions and the government but also between the regions themselves. On this front, there was a great deal at stake. On the one hand, returning to the past and closing down discussion on the reform of regionalism risked creating further division and fuelling new centrifugal forces and demands for autonomy – undermining national and inter-regional solidarity just at a time when the country was facing a systemic crisis arising from the pandemic. On the other hand, agreeing and implementing reform was still a considerable challenge, because at the end of 2020 the political system – and especially the government – was fractured to a degree that made resolving conflicts and taking decisions, difficult in the extreme.

As we have said, critical junctures represent moments of profound change in the dynamics of political systems, creating for them new trajectories which nevertheless remain subject to path dependency and the influence of pre-existing conditions. We must therefore ask ourselves about the nature of the trajectory on which the Italian political system found itself in 2020 and about the impact of reactions to the pandemic.

Our analysis has demonstrated that the direction of change was almost ‘circular’. At the critical juncture of Covid-19, the Italian system initially changed in new and unexpected ways – as shown by Conte’s success in holding together an extremely fragile and heterogeneous coalition which, despite everything, survived a year of considerable political complications. At the same time, however, the signs of internal friction re-emerged, growing increasingly apparent as the months went by. The analysis of relations between the government and the regions suggests that aside from management of the crisis in the immediate term, pre-existing structural problems (such as the incomplete and asymmetric nature of Italian regionalism, with its threat to undermine centre-periphery relations still further) remain unresolved. These observations are supported by the analyses developed in the remaining articles contained in this special issue. These begin by considering the pre-pandemic context, focusing on ‘new’ political development such as the emergence of the ‘Sardines’ movement (Caruso and De Blasio) – and then proceed to assess the most significant events and processes of ‘the year of the pandemic’ itself: the results of the regional elections (Vampa); change and continuity within the parties of opposition (Albertazzi *et al.*); the political communication of Prime Minister Conte (Ceccobelli and Vaccari); relations between Italy and Europe (Jones); the government’s economic-policy response to the crisis (Pianta *et al.*); how the health systems of a number of key regions responded to the pandemic (Toth), and the task forces that advised the government when it came to make key policy decisions (Galanti and Saracino).

In conclusion, then, despite the initial successes, pre-existing circumstances (notably the almost congenital tendentiousness of inter- and intra-party relations and of relations between the government and the regions) led to the re-emergence of stalemate with important consequences for politics and democracy that in all likelihood are destined to re-emerge in the near future.

This is, perhaps, the greatest challenge posed by the critical juncture of Covid-19, and as the year came to a close, the political system seemed unable to rise to it. Yet it seems premature to draw any definitive conclusions in this respect. At the end of 2020, the Covid-emergency was far from being over and many of its effects would make themselves felt for a long time to come.

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<sup>1</sup> We wish to thank the members of the editorial board of *Politica in Italia* and especially Andrea Pritoni for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. Our heartfelt thanks also go to the discussants of the papers on which the articles in this special issue are based: Silvia Bolgherini, Giorgia Bulli, Rosanna de Rosa, Erik Jones, Emmanuele Pavolini, Stefania Profeti, Claudio Radaelli, Antonella Seddone and Salvatore Vassallo.

<sup>2</sup> The authors are listed in alphabetical order and have contributed equally to the writing of this article.

<sup>3</sup> Though obviously not the only one. Another is the so-called 'Spanish flu' which between 1918 and 1920 affected a third of the world's population in four successive waves.

<sup>4</sup> 'Legge elettorale, Pd e M5s inaugurano il Germanicum: proporzionale con soglia al 5%. Fdi e Salvini: «Per inciuci e ribaltoni»', [www.ilfattoquotidiano.it](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it), 9 January 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>5</sup> L. Milella, 'Prescrizione, Pd e M5S bocchiano l'emendamento Costa. Italia Viva vota con opposizioni. Renzi: «Il Pd insegue il populismo giudiziario M5s»', [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 15 January 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>6</sup> A. Gagliardi, 'Prescrizione, è scontro tra Iv e M5s. Renzi: fermatevi. Bonafede: no a ricatti', [www.ilsole24ore.com](http://www.ilsole24ore.com), 1 February 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>7</sup> 'Accordo sulla prescrizione. Ma è scontro Conte-Renzi: governo in bilico', [www.lastampa.it](http://www.lastampa.it), 13 February 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>8</sup> [www.ilblogdellestelle.it](http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it), 15 February 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>9</sup> This was a body consisting of 204 national- and regional-level 'facilitators' whose purpose was to 'provide support at ground level and to draft a coherent and effective programme to be pursued at all levels, national and sub-national, of government' (<https://rousseau.movimento5stelle.it/organization>).

<sup>10</sup> C. Vecchio, 'Governo, ultimatum di Renzi a Conte: «Non abbiamo negato i pieni poteri a Salvini per darli a lei». Il premier: «La maggioranza c'è ancora»', [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 30 April 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> A. Custodero, 'Migranti, scontro nella maggioranza, Crimi (M5S): «No a sanatoria». Bellanova (Iv): «Valuto dimissioni»', [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 6 May 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>12</sup> M. Rubino, 'Direzione Pd, Zingaretti: «No a contrapposizione con Conte, ma al governo serve salto di qualità»', [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 8 June 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>13</sup> 'Autostrade, c'è l'accordo per la transazione: a Benetton quota sotto il 10%. Entra lo Stato', [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 14 July 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>14</sup> 'La forzatura di Zingaretti sulla legge elettorale danneggia il Pd (e Conte)', [www.editorialedomani.it](http://www.editorialedomani.it), 24 July 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>15</sup> 'Voto nazionale: mandato comunale e alleanze locali con i partiti tradizionali', [www.ilblogdellestelle.it](http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it), 12 August 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>16</sup> V. Spagnolo, 'Stop ai Dl sicurezza. Dal governo il nuovo Decreto immigrazione: tutte le novità', [www.avvenire.it](http://www.avvenire.it), 6 October 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>17</sup> V. Giannoli, 'La protesta infiamma le piazze: incidenti a Milano, Torino, Napoli e Trieste', [www.avvenire.it](http://www.avvenire.it), 6 October 2020, accessed 25 February 2021; [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 26 October 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>18</sup> 'Zingaretti a Renzi: «Intollerabile stare con i piedi in due staffe». La replica: «Non siamo yes man»', [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 26 October 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

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<sup>21</sup> Untitled Facebook posting, [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com), 14 November 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Conclusione Stati Generali ed elezione tesoriere: i risultati delle votazioni’, [www.ilblogdellestelle.it](http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it), 11 December 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Task force sul Recovery, Italia viva di traverso. Bellanova: «Se la norma va in manovra, non la votiamo». Provenzano: «Divisioni deprimenti»’, [www.ilfattoquotidiano.it](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it), 7 December 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Renzi: «Governo cade se Conte non arretra». La replica di Orlando: «No al Papeete natalizio. Altrimenti votiamo con l’attuale legge»’, [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 11 December 2020, accessed 25 February 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Although multi-level governance also involves local and provincial councils as well as quangos of various kinds, in this section our attention is confined to government-regional relations, as these were the most crucial ones from the perspective of the pandemic and its management on the ground. Space limitations mean that we can only consider the main features of government-regional relations in 2020. For more detailed accounts see Baldi and Profeti (2020), Cammelli (2020), Capano (2020), Casula *et al.* (2020), Toth and Vampa in this special issue.

<sup>26</sup> G. Trovati, ‘Autonomia di nuovo al Cdm con due correttivi’, *il Sole 24Ore*, 12 February 2020, accessed 17 February 2021.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Coronavirus, nelle Marche riaprono scuole e musei: Tar sospende l’ordinanza della Regione. Boccia: «Stato c’è e si fa rispettare»’, [www.ilfattoquotidiano.it](http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it), 27 February 2020, accessed 17 February 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Emblematic, in this respect, were regions like Friuli-Venezia Giulia (which declared a state of emergency without clearing it with the government), Marche (whose decision to close schools was subject to a legal challenge by the government) and Veneto (which instituted its own testing regime, disregarding national guidelines): *il Sole 24 Ore*, 28 February 2020; also see the article by Toth in this special issue.

<sup>29</sup> N. Barone and M. Bartoloni, ‘Coronavirus, dal panico allo scontro con le Regioni’, *il Sole 24 Ore*, 28 February 2020, accessed 17 February 2021.

<sup>30</sup> <http://regioni.it>, n. 3912, 22/09/2020.

<sup>31</sup> <http://regioni.it>, n. 3914, 24/09/2020 e n. 3918, 30/09/2020.

<sup>32</sup> <http://regioni.it>, n. 3914, 24/09/2020 e n. 3918, 30/09/2020.