

THE SARDINE MOVEMENT

1. A first, spontaneous “fish mob” organized during the regional by-elections in Emilia-Romagna, Italy

[The Sardine Movement](#) (Movimento delle sardine) is a civic movement born in November 2019 in Bologna, Italy, during the election campaign for the regional by-elections of Emilia Romagna. This election saw Stefano Bonaccini, the incumbent regional president and member of the Democratic Party, and Lucia Borgonzoni, the candidate of the right-wing coalition composed of Matteo Salvini's Northern League, the Fratelli d'Italia party and Forza Italia, clash.

At the time, Italy was led by a new coalition government composed of the 5-Star Movement, the PD (Democratic Party), the Liberi e Uguali party and the Italia Viva party. This "yellow-red" government had succeeded the previous government formed by the 5-Star Movement and the Northern League, in place from June 2018 to September 2019.

Even if the Northern League had finally lost power, the regional by-elections in Emilia-Romagna were to prove crucial for its leader Matteo Salvini, who had vowed to win this traditionally left-leaning region for 50 years.

At the same time, the left, which in five years has already lost nine of the sixteen regions it held in 2014, could not afford to lose this election. The election campaign took off in a tense political and social context, marked by the violence of the language of populist and extremist parties that had dominated the Italian public and political debate for several years.

It was then that four young friends, with no real militant past, decided to create a public event on Facebook and mobilize all their contacts to gather "6,000 sardines against Salvini", in Bologna, in Piazza Maggiore, on November 14, 2019. Exasperated and frightened by the tone of the public debate and political life in their country, they wanted to strongly mark their opposition to the League and compete with the political meeting organized on the same day by the candidate of the right-wing coalition Lucia Borgonzoni and which Matteo Salvini was expected to attend.

More than a flashmob, the four young organizers wanted to organize a "fish mob" where the "sardines" would be squeezed "tight, tight, as if they were in a box", to symbolize their cohesion against the far right. The gathering was to be calm, without flags and without insults, in opposition to the noise of the extreme right, as shown by their first call: "No flag, no party, no insult. Create your own sardine and participate in the first fish revolution in history!"

The rally was a huge success with more than 15,000 people gathered, and other "sardine" demonstrations followed suit and began to be organized throughout Italy. On



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January 26, 2020, the left wing led by Stefano Bonaccini finally won the elections in Emilia-Romagna with an eight-point lead over Lucia Borgonzoni.

2. A gradually structured spontaneous movement

The sardine movement was created spontaneously and in just a few days by four friends in their thirties. After the success of the first sardine gathering, on November 14th, 2019 in Bologna, other events were spontaneously organized, from Florence to Rome, without leaving out Calabria, Modena, Sorrento or even New York. These gatherings were organized in collaboration and with the support of local voluntary groups, willing to follow the movement initiated, to gather "sardines" in their territory and thus mark their disagreement with the rhetoric of populist parties in Italy.

The sardine movement, which for the moment has always refused to become a political party or to be affiliated with any particular party, is represented by its four founders and is open to all citizens who wish to propose contents and organize events. It is "structured" in the following way:

- A group composed of the co-founders who represent the movement and advise and accompany the volunteers in their production of content and events;
- An office to coordinate the writing of content;
- Two people in charge of the Instagram and Facebook profiles;
- Two graphic designers;
- A press officer.

At the end of November 2010, the movement published its first manifesto, entitled "[Benvenuti in mare aperto](#)" ("Welcome to the open sea"), in which it declared "the fight against populists".

After a period of "pause" during which it was much more discreet, the movement is back in the news in 2021. On March 26th of 2021 the new Secretary of the Democratic Party, Enrico Letta, met representatives of the movement to discuss the future of the enlarged Italian left.

3. Fighting the ideas and rhetoric of populists in Italy

The sardine movement, which defines itself as an "antibody" inspired exclusively by "the Italian Constitution", was born with the objective of fighting the populists who had become omnipresent in Italy. The founders of the movement, convinced that the elected representatives of the left cannot be left alone to face Salvini, wanted Italian citizens to reclaim their role in political life, too long abandoned in the hands of populists. As one of its co-founders, Mattia Santori, explains, "after decades of obscurantism, fear and anger, we want to start in 2020 a new decade of light and solidarity."

To achieve this goal, the movement is carrying out actions designed to:



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- "Stimulate an immediate awakening" in citizens to become "active" in politics again;
- Reunite the silent majority and "bring out of their homes the population that no longer shows itself, critical and indignant, but not resigned";
- Denounce and condemn the verbal violence that has taken hold in Italian politics;
- Recall the importance of the following values: "Solidarity, Welcome, Respect, Rights, Inclusion, Non-violence, Anti-fascism".

In its manifesto published on November 21, 2021, the movement formulates programmatic points that demand:

- A real political transparency
- The condemnation of hate speech
- A bill against verbal violence, assimilated to physical violence,
- A new policy for the management of immigration in Italy

4. Rallies to wake up Italian citizens

The sardine movement has been at the origin of many civic rallies in 2019 and 2020 that, quite surprisingly and unexpectedly, have "woken up" the Italian political news and citizens.

These events, each time gathering tens of thousands of people, showed that many Italian citizens were still willing to fight the seemingly all-powerful populist rhetoric in the country. These rallies have also, in a way, given some hope to the "moderate" political parties (especially the Democratic Party), who have seen that citizens can still mobilize when given the right messages and the right places to gather.

Some of the most notable rallies organized by the Sardines include:

- The first founding rally organized on November 14, 2019 in Bologna
- The "Global Sardinia Day", organized on December 14, 2019 in Rome which would have gathered 100,000 people
- The big event "Welcome back to the open sea", organized on January 19, 2020 in Bologna, attended by about 40,000 people and many Italian artists.

5. Gathering, without shouting

The sardine movement presents itself as an "anti-populist, festive and liberating" movement with original methods of action and mobilization:

- The organization of large gatherings in the squares:

The Sardines' rallies are organized in city squares (traditional places of politics in Italy), open to all and mediatized thanks to social networks but also thanks to the so-called "traditional" means of communication (word of mouth, door-to-door, distribution of flyers in public places, etc.).



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- The use and promotion of a peaceful and benevolent tone:

The rhetoric and speeches of the sardines must be free of violence and insults, in contrast to the methods of the populists. In this regard, former Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi said: "I have never seen a demonstration that calls for civility of tone."

- A flexible and open to dialogue operation:

The sardine movement is positioned on the left of the political spectrum, but is not affiliated with any political party. At the same time, it is in discussion with the Democratic Party and does not seem to be closing any doors regarding its political future.

6. Lessons from the Sardine Movement

The Sardine experience demonstrates that the power and pervasiveness of populists is not inevitable. To turn the tide and regain control of the public debate, we must:

- Be bold, spontaneous and "crazy" to get started;
- Create strong and unexpected images and symbols, capable of generating surprise and capturing attention;
- Designate an enemy while emphasizing positive, benevolent and non-violent discourses that are in direct opposition to the hateful rhetoric of populists;
- Organize joyful and unifying events on the ground, capable of federating the "silent majority" and creating a sense of belonging;
- Be willing to impose new themes, such as the rules of digital civility;
- Be open to dialogue with all potential political allies;
- Know how to take the time to consider all the possible outlets and developments.