

Social work, exclusionary populism, and xenophobia in Italy

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Abstract:	The relationship between the emergence of political populism and social work is still little studied- The article reports the results of research conducted by means of in-depth interviews and questionnaires on a sample of 80 social workers employed by municipalities governed by populist parties in Italy, where the phenomenon of xenophobic politics has recently grown to particularly worrying proportions. The article describes the effects of populist programmes on social work and highlights the different reactions of social workers in response to the new scenario. .

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Introduction

In recent years, the debate on changes in social work has concentrated mainly on the effects of globalization and on the reorganization of social services in neo-liberal terms (Dominelli 2010). However, in many European countries the principles of the welfare state have been called into question by another phenomenon which is assuming worrying proportions. Since the mid-1990s has been a progressive growth of populist political ideologies which has been paralleled by an increase in prejudices against immigrants and the 'diverse'. In Italy, this phenomenon has assumed particularly striking proportions with the rise to power of the Northern League and the centre-right coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi. The Italian case is emblematic of the challenges raised by emergence of these new political ideologies for social work at international level. The article reports the results of an empirical survey conducted on a sample of 90 social workers employed in local administrations governed by declaredly populist coalitions. The study highlights how social workers are directly affected by the advent of populist politics, what their reactions to this new scenario are, what types of behaviour they adopt to cope with the new political and normative framework, and what risks and what opportunities they foresee for the profession.

Populism and xenophobia in Europe

In the past ten years, migratory flows to Europe have been characterized by an intensity only slightly attenuated by the effects of the world economic crisis (Eurostat 2011). Also in the last century, immigration to the European countries encountered resistance from public opinion, but the climate of intolerance has recently exacerbated.

There are various causes for the increase in intolerance. The date which marks the symbolic watershed between, on the one hand, the European society of the post-Cold War period based on the principles of universalism and citizenship, and on the other contemporary society, has been

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3 identified by many authors in 11 September 2001. The terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of
4 New York, which were followed in Europe by an increasing series of episodes of ethno-religious
5 violence has had two effects. The first has been the declaration of war on Islamic terrorism and
6 the symbolic construction of an imminent clash of civilizations which has exacerbated hostility
7 towards Muslims. The second effect consists in the onset of what Bunyan (2010) has called the
8 'surveillance society' characterized by the proliferation of social control measures which have
9 heightened the public's sense of insecurity. The political debate has ridden this wave of public
10 fear, and many countries have seen radical revision of the universalist discourse and the
11 democratic principles on which the societies of the second post-war period were constructed.

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14 In many countries, the political agendas of the parties in government have been characterized by
15 a concern to reassure citizens in regard to the control of migratory flows. A recent report by
16 Amnesty International (Amnesty International 2011) has signalled an increase in Europe of
17 legislative measures intended to curb immigration and to demonstrate to public opinion that
18 governments are determined to keep the phenomenon under control.

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21 This has happened, for example, in France with the repatriation of Roma immigrants ordered by
22 President Sarkozy or in Germany with Chancellor Angela Merkel's speech on the failure of
23 multiculturalism. As Castles has pointed out (2006 760), it is by now evident that immigration
24 policies have returned to their objective of forty years ago: that of "importing labour but not
25 people".

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28 The new political climate in the old Europe, the 'cradle of the welfare state', is therefore
29 changing the ideas of the 'open society', universal citizenship and social rights, while the
30 worsening of the economic crisis has furnished further grounds for criticising the old concept of
31 universal rights (Fetzer 2011). Amid cuts in social expenditure and increased unemployment,
32 public opinion often perceives immigrants as competitors. Politicians are thus encouraged to
33 emit populist messages intended to assert the legitimacy of a new model of social protection
34 based on the idea that social rights have ethnic and cultural bases as well, and that citizens who
35 have lived longer on a particular territory, and who have common cultural origins, are more
36 deserving of protection than others. Betz (2005) has called this ideology "exclusionary
37 populism", thereby underlining the discriminatory character of this rhetoric, and warning of the
38 danger that it represents for the democratic bases of the institutions of the modern European
39 countries.

Populism and xenophobia in Italy

Italy is one of the countries in which the success of populist parties has been greatest (Ruzza and Fella, 2009). The largest populist party is the Northern League, which was created in the 1980s with the objective of increasing the political and economic autonomy of the northern regions from the central government, accused of privileging the southern regions in the distribution of resources. Since the mid-1990s, the political agenda of the Northern League has been characterized by outright xenophobia towards immigrants and minority groups such as Sinti or Roma (Beirich and Woods 2000).

In 2002 and 2006 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), composed of independent experts of the Council of Europe, denounced a “particularly intense use of racist and xenophobic propaganda” by the leaders of the Northern League.

Populist pressure radicalized after 2007, when the Northern League for the third time formed part of the national government headed by Silvio Berlusconi. The exacerbation of the xenophobic campaign has recently culminated with the expulsion of refugees from North Africa.

The influence of populist policies is not restricted to the approval of laws discriminating against immigrants; it has contributed to creating a climate of widespread hostility in public opinion against immigration (Transatlantic Trends 2010). In the recent regional elections of 2010 the Northern League profited from this climate of increasing intolerance by gaining election to government in all the largest industrial regions of the North – where the highest rates of immigration are recorded – obtaining more than 35% of votes in Veneto and Lombardy. Italy is therefore today the European country in which populism has achieved the greatest success and has exerted the strongest influence on national policies. Also after the fall of the Berlusconi government and the inception of the new one headed by Mario Monti local level a large number of local regional administrations and municipalities are governed by the Northern League with its populist propaganda.

Social work in Italy

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3 In Italy, social work is undertaken by a specific practitioner known as an *assistente sociale*
4 (Campanini 2007). Exercise of the profession of *assistente sociale* requires a tertiary-level
5 qualification; and its exercise in the public sector requires the passing of a specific state
6 examination. Since the 1970s, the main source of employment for social workers has been the
7 public sector after the creation of a nationwide network of social services. Recent surveys report
8 that around 85% of the social workers in service are employed by public services, and
9 particularly by local municipalities (Facchini, 2010)
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11 The professional culture of Italian social workers is therefore closely centred on the principles of
12 universalism, the protection of social rights, and respect for the law. These values are widespread
13 among social workers, and they contribute to defining their professional identity (Fargion 2008).
14 The universalist values of social work were strongly endorsed at the end of the 1990s by
15 enactment of the first national framework law on social policy (Law 328/2000) consequent upon
16 a strong reformist drive by centre-left governments. The advent of centre-right coalitions and of
17 the Northern League brusquely interrupted reformist policies in the welfare sector and
18 drastically reduced the state financing of social services..
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20 Besides budget cuts in the regions governed by the Northern League, social workers have also
21 had to deal with the change of political climate at local level and the introduction of measures
22 discriminating against immigrants and members of ethnic minorities like Roma or Sinti.
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24 Empirical study of the Northern League's policies reveals that local welfare policies are
25 characterized by radical changes in regard to social rights (Redattore Sociale, 2011). Access to
26 social services by immigrants has often been restricted, and budget appropriations for
27 integration programmes have been invariably disputed. The restrictive criteria for access to
28 welfare often concern essential services like social housing, family allowances, and early
29 childhood services. In some regions, initiatives against immigrants have assumed explicitly racist
30 tones through the start-up of initiatives with a strongly symbolic impact: for instance, anti-
31 immigration counters where citizens can report irregularities by immigrants, or the institution of
32 the so-called "*Padana ronde*" consisting of voluntary vigilantes who patrol neighbourhoods to
33 prevent crime by illegal immigrants.
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35 How have these profound changes affected the profession of social worker? How do social
36 workers perceive these changes? How is their work conditioned by the new political
37 programmes? What strategies do they adopt to pursue their profession in the new scenario?
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The research

The survey conducted to examine the impact of populist policies on social work covered 90 social workers employed by the social services of 64 municipalities governed by a Northern League political majority in Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont, and Friuli Venezia Giulia.

The sample was constructed by randomly selecting 100 municipalities administered by the Northern League. Contacted to participate in the research was one social worker for each municipality, or more than one in the cases of municipalities of larger size. 71% of the subjects contacted agreed to participate. The research was conducted between the months of January and July 2011.

The interviewees were all social workers, and more than 90% of them were female. 51% of the subjects in the sample were aged between 35 and 45 years old (46), 27% (24) were aged under 35, and 22% (20) were aged over 45. The social workers with management or coordination roles were 11 in number, while those with operational or front-line roles numbered 79.

All of the interviewees worked in the social welfare departments of the municipal administrations, which, in Italy, furnish basic services such as economic assistance or care services for minors, the disabled, and the elderly. Half of the interviewees worked in urban municipalities, and the other half in small rural ones (fewer than 5000 inhabitants).

The first phase of the survey consisted of in-depth interviews of a duration varying between one hour and two and a half hours.

The purpose of the interviews was to investigate the following topics:

- i) conceptions of social rights and the principles of social work
- ii) perceptions of change in the organization and regulation of local social services,
- iii) attitudes to change
- iv) the strategies adopted to cope with the new work conditions.

All the interviews were conducted outside the workplace, the purpose being to restrict the risk of distortions in replies to questions about job satisfaction asked during working hours. Given the sensitive nature of the survey, to avoid problems of participation in the research, a written

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3 guarantee of anonymity was given to the interviewees. Moreover, this guarantee also stated that
4 when the interviews had been transcribed, they would be sent to the participants to obtain their
5 consent to treatment of the data. Despite these reassurances, more than one-third of the
6 interviewees initially selected refused to participate in the research and had to be replaced.
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10 In the second phase of the survey, the interviewees completed questionnaires with standard
11 questions constructed on the basis of the main themes that emerged from the qualitative
12 interviews, the purpose being to compare and measure some specific results.
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17 **The overall picture**

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21 The first part of the interviews and the questionnaires concerned the interviewees' perceptions
22 of the consequences on local social policies of the advent of populist local governments.
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25 The new administrators had a 'very' or 'quite' negative effect on local social policies and the
26 organization of social services for 26% and 37.5% respectively of the interviewees, and a
27 'positive' effect for 8% of them. 27.5% of the interviewees instead judged the situation as similar
28 to, or the same as, the one before the election of the populist local government.
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32 Some 77.5% of the interviewees stated that social programmes for immigrants, Sinti or Roma
33 had been reduced since the advent of the Northern League. 49% reported the elimination of
34 programmes for these categories of users (compared with the 19% who reported the elimination
35 of social programmes addressed to the local population as a whole). 61% said that access to
36 services for immigrants, Sinti and Roma had been restricted (compared with the 30% who said
37 that that access had been restricted for the entire local population). Finally, 39% of the
38 interviewees declared that the new political situation had blocked new projects or ones already
39 ongoing in the sector of services for immigrants, Roma or Sinti, whilst only 18% spoke in general
40 of a block on projects for the population as a whole. In numerous municipalities (22), moreover,
41 the Northern League administrations had halted projects for the territorial coordination of public
42 and private services to immigrants.
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52 The majority of the interviewees considered the policy directions of the populist governments
53 as exacerbating an already difficult economic situation. Many interviewees stressed, however,
54 that cutbacks in financial resources for municipalities had heightened discriminatory measures
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3 against immigrants and ethnic and social minority groups which were already in place before the
4 crisis.
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9 *Our town has been governed by the League for seven years. Initially, there was none of this hostility*
10 *against immigrants, but the educational assistance services for immigrant children were*
11 *immediately cut. Of course, the politicians now do everything they can to reassure people, and*
12 *immigrants become the scapegoats. "It's the immigrants that get the public money, but we want*
13 *give it to our own people first", so they think about gaining votes, and people back them because in*
14 *this period of economic crisis... But foreigners were disliked also previously.*
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21 The restriction of social programmes for immigrants was often based on an attempt to
22 distinguish rhetorically between schemes for regular immigrants – the so-called “good workers”
23 – and illegal ones, as well as “socially irrecoverable subjects” like Sinti or Roma. In reality, this
24 distinction served mainly to give numerous administrations an aura of institutional legitimacy
25 towards public opinion, but it was often disavowed in everyday practice.
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32 *They say that they differentiate between workers and illegals, that they want to guarantee law and*
33 *order but they're not racist. But in the past two years the school integration projects for foreign*
34 *children haven't been renewed. And these are the children of regular immigrants, some of their*
35 *families have been living here for ten years.*
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41 Various interviewees also emphasised the systematic use of episodes involving a minority of
42 immigrants to exploit residents' fear of new arrivals.
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47 *There was serious crime committed in a town near here last year, a very brutal murder by a gang of*
48 *Slavs, and it was a turning point. The mayor immediately seized on people's fears and began to*
49 *make speeches about the municipality's responsibility to halt the flow of immigrants who come to*
50 *live here and exploit the services provided by the municipality.*
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56 The anti-immigration propaganda of Northern League administrators was therefore not only
57 rhetorical in nature. An aspect repeatedly stressed by the interviewees concerned the media
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3 impact of Northern League programmes on the local community. The insistence on a “threat of an
4 invasion” by immigrants had bred intolerance of immigrants among many members of the local
5 community. The effect was that in many peri-urban or peripheral districts it had become more
6 difficult to activate informal support networks to help immigrants or the members of minority
7 ethnic groups.
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14 *It used to be much easier to set up reception schemes. People were willing help immigrants as well.*
15 *You now feel the intolerance growing day by day. During the last electoral campaign the mayor*
16 *kept on saying that Middle-Easterners took jobs away from local people and that he would stop the*
17 *invasion. So he only stoked fear, and minor episodes of racism multiplied.*
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23 This increase in discriminatory decisions by many of the new local administrators was matched
24 by increased attention paid to the needs of the native population. Numerous administrators
25 showed great concern to satisfy the social demands of residents. In the sector of local social
26 policies, however, this often led to increased interference by politicians in decisions relative to
27 the allocation of resources and services. According to many interviewees, the effect of the
28 political application of the principle “Our own people first” was an intensification of clientelism
29 intended to favour residents closest to the administrators in their political ideas, or to gain their
30 electoral support.
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34 Moreover, interference by the new administrators was often perceived as an arbitrary attempt to
35 limit the professional autonomy of social workers. More than one-third of the interviewees
36 declared that the advent of Northern League administrators had reduced the level of a social
37 worker’s professional autonomy.
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45 The perception of social workers that they can exercise autonomous control over their work is
46 one of the most important motivational factors in their professional commitment (Giffords 2009).
47 Various interviewees felt a strong sense of frustration at the increase in political clientelism,
48 which had negative effects on their work motivation.
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53 **The reactions**

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The social workers interviewed had developed diverse strategies in response to the new scenario. Four main categories can be identified (fig,1):

- the supporters;
- the frustrated;
- the pragmatic;
- the activists.

<p>The supporters</p> <p>endorse the ideology of discriminatory programmes</p> <p><i>Conception of rights</i></p> <p>Social rights are not equal for everybody</p> <p><i>Professional profile</i></p> <p>brief professional experience</p> <p>medium-low specialist training</p> <p>work with greater isolation within the service</p> <p>experience mainly within a single service</p>	<p>The frustrated</p> <p>they think that the new discriminatory programmes have worsened the conditions of social service but do not know how to react</p> <p><i>Conception of rights</i></p> <p>Social rights should be equal for everybody</p> <p><i>Professional profile</i></p> <p>experience mainly within a single service</p> <p>mainly medium-low specialist training</p>
<p>The pragmatists</p> <p>do not actively react against discriminatory programmes but continue to deal with the traditional beneficiaries of services in accordance with to the profession's principles</p> <p><i>Conception of rights</i></p> <p>Social rights should be equal for everybody</p> <p><i>Professional profile</i></p> <p>medium-high specialist training</p> <p>medium-long period professional experience</p> <p>more accustomed to working in teams</p>	<p>The activists</p> <p>actively react against discriminatory programmes</p> <p><i>Conception of rights</i></p> <p>one must work to ensure that everyone has the same rights</p> <p><i>Professional profile</i></p> <p>work mainly in municipalities of medium to large size</p> <p>medium-high specialist training</p> <p>more advanced professional skills</p> <p>professional experience in several services</p> <p>more accustomed to working in teams</p> <p>have greater experience of working with local</p>

	associations and community networks
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The supporters

A first group of interview (9 individuals) consisted of supporters of the new policy direction. These were mostly social workers with less experience and training who often worked in small municipalities with few contacts with colleagues.

Some interviewees believed that immigrants, especially if Muslim, were damaging to the resident population because they made undue use of the welfare system and did not contribute to its funding with their labour. Several interviewees attributed the overall worsening of their working conditions to an excessive increase in immigrant users. Indeed, the number of immigrant users of social services is much higher than the total of immigrant residents. This mainly happens because welfare problems are more frequent among immigrants. In recent years, family reunifications have greatly increased in Italy, and this has fostered the spread of integration problems especially among immigrant children. Also as a result of recent measures enacted to curb public spending, many social workers have heavy workloads, and they see the Northern League's anti-immigration programmes as a source of reassurance in regard to the increasingly difficult management of their work commitments.

I must say that the service has recently had to deal with some very difficult cases. The last one was a couple with four children. The father had previous convictions for drug-dealing, the mother was unemployed and didn't speak Italian. They lived hand to mouth in a caravan on benefits from the municipality or the parish. Now the mother is expecting a fifth child. And they came to ask for social housing. But I ask myself whether it's right to give a house to people who live off the community without giving anything back, or whether it wouldn't be better to give the house to one of us, who works and can't make ends meet.

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3 Moreover, several interviewees belonging to the group supporting the new political
4 administration admitted personal and professional difficulties in relating to immigrants. In some
5 cases, interviewees explicitly declared that they felt outright prejudices towards certain
6 categories of immigrants, such as Muslims or members of minority groups like the Sinti or Rom
7 Others instead complained that, as service workers and professionals, they were unprepared to
8 handle the complex issues raised by immigration.
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18 The frustrated

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21 A second group of social workers (24 interviewees) was instead critical of the new methods used
22 to manage local welfare policies, and it expressed both personal and professional animosity
23 towards the new scenario.
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27 These interviewees accused the new administrators of indifference towards the social services.
28 The institutions and the administrators were often accused of treating social work as a “second-
29 class” profession, underestimating its complexity and importance. The perception of unfair
30 treatment is always a cause of severe stress among social workers (Dierendonck and Schaufeli
31 2001). Many interviewees therefore expressed severe frustration at the scant recognition
32 afforded to their profession. This frustration was heightened by increased political interference
33 at the professional-technical level which reduced the autonomy of social workers. The
34 discriminatory measures against immigrants and minority groups caused a twofold sense of
35 discouragement.
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43 On the one hand, several interviewees considered such measures to be ethically reprehensible,
44 and as contrary to the principles of welfare and the social work profession. On the other hand,
45 these measures were also perceived as an arbitrary attack on professional autonomy by persons
46 not authorized to interfere in technical-operational decisions. The predominant attitude of this
47 group of interviewees was one of ‘passive victimism’. They felt themselves to be victims of a
48 change whose rationale they did not share, and which they deemed injurious to their
49 professionalism. At the same time, they were so demoralized that they desisted from actions to
50 alter the situation, and some of them thought that they would quit their jobs in the near future.
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3 *Working in this way has become too frustrating. Social work isn't respected anymore. When I hear*
4 *councillors and managers sneering out loud at our users, I feel completely out of place. I don't see a*
5 *future for my profession.*
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10 The pragmatic

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14 The third group of interviewees (26 individuals) can instead be called more 'pragmatic'. These
15 were usually social workers with several years of professional experience, accustomed to
16 working in teams, and some of them had coordination and management roles in their
17 municipality's social services department.
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21 Also many of these interviewees criticised the new administrators. The predominant attitude,
22 however, was not passivity or victimism. As one interviewee put it: "*We simply keep on doing our*
23 *jobs*". Some interviewees did not notice any particular differences between the new
24 administrators and those who had preceded them. They emphasised the persistence of distance
25 or an instrumental relationship between politicians and social workers.
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30 An example of this pragmatic attitude is provided by the following interview extract:
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34 *We social workers are overloaded with cases but we try to find a dignified solution for all those that*
35 *reach the services. If then someone on high decides that certain services can no longer be delivered*
36 *to some categories of people, so that they have to look after themselves or receive less, it's certainly*
37 *not our fault. The job that I do personally I try to do as well as I can, and I think the users realize*
38 *this.*
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45 These social workers therefore still found their work motivation in furnishing services to
46 people in difficulties. They compensated for their perception that the founding principles of
47 social work were being violated at macro level with the satisfaction of being able to respond to
48 social needs at micro level amid organizational and managerial difficulties.
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52 The activists

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3 Finally, the fourth group of interviewees (31) consisted of social workers critical of Northern
4 League policies and who had developed strategies of active resistance against the new political
5 situation.
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9 The activists were generally social workers with greater professional experience and more
10 advanced specialist skills, who usually worked in teams and who had more direct contacts with
11 the local community. The majority of the activists worked in urban municipalities where the
12 networks of associationism and the third sector are denser, and the culture of the population is
13 more open.
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18 One strategy employed to oppose populism was exploitation of the margins of discretion
19 typical of so-called 'street-level bureaucrats'. Coined by Lipsky (1980), this expression refers to
20 public professionals who work in direct contact with citizens and have the task of putting
21 decisions taken at political level into practice. The criteria for access to services are often not
22 defined unequivocally, and social practitioners can use their discretion to identify solutions that
23 respond to the needs of citizens with formal difficulties in accessing services. In these cases,
24 social workers exploit a mismatch between the formal and substantial levels of policies, assuming
25 the role of democratic guarantors of rights of access to social services for all citizens in need. In
26 Italy, these social workers most frequently work in municipalities of medium to large size, where
27 hierarchical control by politicians and managers appointed by politicians is less strong.
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36 A second strategy consisted in an increase of trade-union political commitment. In reaction to
37 discriminatory measures against particular categories of people, some social workers used their
38 greater technical-legal abilities to hinder or obstruct the implementation of political decisions. In
39 this case, the role of the social worker was expressly political and highlighted the difference in
40 objectives and values between the professional mandate, with which the profession must comply,
41 and the mandate of the institutions in open conflict with it. In other cases, the social workers
42 assumed the role that Noble (2009) has called of "activist social-worker practitioners". These
43 perform functions of advocacy and defence of minority groups. Their commitment takes concrete
44 form in, for example, free consultancy to immigrant associations to advise them on their rights;
45 or it consists of first-person participation in organizations conducting awareness-raising
46 campaigns on integration and social rights.
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56 The third strategy to resist populist policies consisted in the construction of alliances with the
57 third sector and civil society. In areas with a strong presence of associationism, the social
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3 workers could often find important allies in serving the needs of people discriminated against by
4 the public services. In some cases, relationships with the third sector had already been
5 established before the advent of the new political class. In others, the formation of alliances was
6 obligatory for professionals who found themselves unable to respond to social demands because
7 of the restrictions in the organizational contexts in which they worked. A worsening of working
8 conditions in the public services had therefore obliged social workers to recast their role by
9 recovering a space for action that an excess of bureaucratization had often led to being
10 considered marginal or unnecessary.

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12 The final strategy adopted to oppose populism consisted in an attempt to establish dialogue
13 with the new political administrators in order to separate the symbolic dimension of
14 discriminatory politics from the practical one. Some interviewees had been able to establish trust
15 relations with politicians which enabled them to persuade the latter that the integration of
16 immigrants and members of minority groups was preferable to their exclusion. In other cases,
17 once the new administrators had been furnished with information and explanations with which
18 to appraise the positive social impact on the local community of certain services, they partially
19 modified their perceptions of the problems concerning the social integration of immigrants or
20 members of minority groups.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 **Concluding remarks**

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39 The diffusion of populism in Italy has had a direct impact on the practice and culture of social
40 work. Populist ideology challenges the founding principles of social work and the traditional
41 conceptions of universalism and social rights by increasing political interference in professional
42 practices for long-term residents, to the detriment of immigrants and marginal social groups.

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45 If not countered with solid preparation and professional ethics, populist doctrine exhibits an
46 unexpected capacity to influence the culture of social workers. Some practitioners merely
47 continue to do their jobs well without openly opposing the populist programmes, which in some
48 services have lesser impact on everyday work practices.

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Other, less prepared practitioners indeed perceive the destructive potential of populist doctrine for the values of social work, but they regard the new political framework as yet another burden in their everyday work and tend to surrender to victimism and frustration. One element which

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2
3 requires careful reflection is that the spread of populism may, in the current economic and social
4 situation, engender a dangerous 'erosion' of the ethical and cultural bases of the profession. This
5 applies particularly to younger social workers, less prepared and less supported by more
6 experienced colleagues. For these practitioners, populism is an 'escape route' from the increased
7 work stress due to spending cuts and reform of the public services. Nevertheless, the changed
8 circumstances in which social workers perform their duties are not only potentially destructive
9 but also regenerative of the principles of social work
10

11 The strategies adopted to oppose populism call into question the figure of the professional
12 'technocrat', who relies solely on his/her specialization to furnish solutions to individual social
13 cases. A new figure that emerges as a reaction to populism is that of the social worker who
14 assumes the role of a moral and political practitioner. In response to the indifference and
15 ostracism of many administrators, social workers are induced to rediscover what Polkinhorne
16 (2004) has called a profession based on "moral judgment". Social work ceases being only a
17 rational-technical practice and once again becomes a political-moral one centred on the
18 inalienable rights of individuals. Moreover, many interviewees had been induced by populism to
19 shed the role of the professional bureaucrat and embrace that of a forger of alliances with the
20 local actors and a mobilizer of community resources. As a result of populism, therefore, social
21 work seems on the one hand to be languishing in crisis; but on the other, it is rediscovering a role
22 that the development of the Western technocratic systems of welfare has often pushed into the
23 background. The consequences of this situation on the education and training of social workers
24 are obviously harmful. This study has shown that the reactive capacity of social workers to the
25 new populist tide is connected with specific professional competences like networking, the
26 ability to build alliances with the local actors, negotiating skills, and the ability to reason and
27 persuade. Considering that populism is becoming a critical feature of many Western countries,
28 and that current social and economic process will strengthen the trend in the near future, it is
29 important that social workers be able to cope with this new scenario, and that their training
30 furnish the competences that enable them to do so.
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For Peer Review