

# Fake News Provokes Anxiety in Italy Ahead of Key Referendum

## Fears in Europe that social media is being used to disseminate propaganda.

By JASON HOROWITZ

ROME — Anxiety about bogus news reports is rising in Europe, as Prime Minister Matteo Renzi of Italy and others express concern that fake news circulated over social media may influence elections on the Continent, including a critical referendum in Italy on Sunday.

The outcome of the Italian vote, which could determine the fate of Mr. Renzi's government, may also affect the stability of European financial markets and further weaken the moorings of the European Union.

Leaders on both sides of the Atlantic are trying to determine whether political parties are using social media platforms to deliberately disseminate propaganda, and whether there are connections to the agendas of outside powers, including Russia.

Analysts in the United States have suggested that Moscow injected fake news into social media sites there as a powerful weapon to influence the November election, including bogus reports that may have helped hand Donald J. Trump the presidency.

President Vladimir V. Putin's goal in Europe is to radicalize politics, analysts say, breaking the liberal consensus and strengthening his regional influence.

As early as April, Mr. Renzi complained privately to his counterparts about Russia meddling in his country's politics by supporting anti-establishment parties.

In November, he privately discussed the spread of fake news with other European leaders and President Obama at a meeting in Berlin. Mr. Obama forcefully assailed the phenomenon while standing beside Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, who has warned of Russian misinformation campaigns that "could play a role" in her own re-election bid.

Mr. Renzi's private concerns were relayed by several current and former officials with knowledge of the conversations who were not authorized to speak publicly.

His biggest domestic opponent has been the surging and anti-establishment Five Star Movement, which would benefit most should he lose Sunday's referendum on streamlining Italy's bureaucracy.

Laura Boldrini, the speaker of the lower house of Parliament, said she had no information about whether the Five Star Movement trafficked in fake news or promulgated Russian propaganda. But she did say it was a growing problem in Italy.

"Fake news is a critical issue and we can't ignore it," she said this week. "We have to act now."

On Wednesday, Ms. Boldrini met with Richard Allan, Facebook's vice president of public policy in Europe, to discuss ways Facebook could limit hate speech on its pages.

"They can't pretend that they are just a platform," Ms. Boldrini said. "They are giant media companies."

Buzzfeed and the Italian newspaper La Stampa recently reported that blogs, social media accounts and websites in Russia connected to the Five Star movement were spreading fake news harmful to Mr. Renzi across their vast virtual networks.

Russia has long had close relations with Italy, especially under Silvio Berlusconi, the former prime minister and media tycoon who was a personal friend of Mr. Putin.

These days, Mr. Putin's government appears much friendlier to anti-establishment opposition figures, like Matteo Salvini, the leader of the anti-immigrant Northern League, who opposes sanctions on Russia and speaks proudly of his visits to Moscow.

Mr. Salvini said he has never received any financial assistance from Russia and called his alignment with Mr. Putin's party "geopolitical and free." Asked if Mr. Putin could be meddling in the referendum, he said, "I don't even think he knows it's happening."

While Mr. Putin has met with Mr. Renzi, whose office denied expressing worry to world leaders about Russian meddling in Italian politics, the Russian government appears to be especially welcoming to the Five Star Movement.

The party, born as an online movement, was co-founded by the

comedian Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, an entrepreneur who died this year.

Today Mr. Casaleggio's internet and publishing company, Casaleggio Associati, controls several widely viewed websites that often pick up sensational reports found on Sputnik Italia, an Italian version of the Kremlin-created website that projects Mr. Putin's worldview.

One such website, called Tze Tze, which has well over a million Facebook followers, recently ran an article titled, "Is the U.S. trafficking migrants into Italy?"

Tze Tze makes no mention of its connection to the Five Star Movement, claiming instead to be an independent news outlet. On Friday, a good deal of the site was dedicated to excoriating Mr. Renzi.

The constellation of Five Star Movement sites recently lit up with a video that appeared on Russia Today, purporting to show thousands of people protesting against the referendum. In fact, the people had gathered in support of Mr. Renzi and his reform.

Mr. Grillo, who has the most widely read blog in Italy, recently posted a picture of a packed Naples piazza and a headline suggesting the crowds had come to protest Mr. Renzi. "A sea of humanity in the square, the people can't take it anymore."

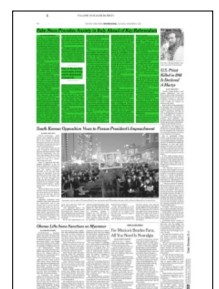
In fact, it was a picture of a large audience gathered to hear Pope Francis speak.

"The accusations of doing pro-Kremlin propaganda and spreading fake news is ridiculous," a post on Mr. Grillo's blog said this week. Supporters of the party believe its opponents have orchestrated an elaborate smear campaign in the news media.

Mr. Grillo went on to argue that the websites in question had no official link to his party, as did other leaders in the Five Star Movement, including Luigi Di Maio, a potential rival of Mr. Renzi.

In an interview, Mr. Di Maio, the deputy president of the lower house of Parliament, dismissed

Le notizie false creano un clima di ansia in Italia in vista di un referendum importante



Dir. Resp.: Dean Baquet

Italian reports linking his party to anti-Renzi sites. On the question of Russian influence, he said that his party was not “Russian-aligned or American-aligned.”

His spokesman, Augusto Rubei, underlined that there had only been only one official institutional visit to Moscow on the part of the Five Star Movement and another by a “simple deputy, who went there personally.”

The deputy in question, Manlio Di Stefano, the head of the party’s foreign affairs committee, attended a conference for Mr. Putin’s Russia United party.

He recently posted on the Five Star Movement blog that NATO was secretly preparing a “final assault” on Russia.

Lia Quartapelle, a member of Parliament in Mr. Renzi’s Democratic Party who also sits on the foreign affairs committee, said that its Five Star Movement members “are full Russian.”

She said they advocate an exit from NATO and quote Russia’s foreign minister on questions about Syria. “They use the Russian propaganda,” she said.

The Five Star Movement has a history of entertaining conspiracies.

In an interview over the summer, Mr. Renzi noted that on the anniversary of American astronauts first landing on the moon, one of the party’s members in Parliament “said it was a conspiracy by the Americans.”

“Another one of them said she believes the sirens are still in the Mediterranean,” he added.

But some of Mr. Renzi’s detractors, even in his own party, argue that he is the delusional one.

Massimo D’Alema, a former Communist who was prime minister in the 1990s, scorns Mr. Renzi as a centrist in leftist clothing and is working to defeat him in the referendum. He said he would be “very surprised” if Russia had anything to do with the fake news flooding Italy.

“I don’t believe there is dark organized center, a group of hackers in the Kremlin trying to affect the Italian referendum,” he said. “I think they could care less.”