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When words matter: narratives and strategies in the Italian Jobs Act (2014–2016)

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ABSTRACT

With the reforms of the so-called ‘Jobs Act’ (JA), Italy aimed to structurally reform its labour market and income-support system, through recalibration (i.e. a mix of both expansionary and retrenching measures) for old social policy risks, and some expansionary measures to face new social risks. The JA also became the symbol of opposite views about the Italian welfare state, being itself a reason for ideological conflict and coalition reshuffling in the Italian left. Ultimately, its increasing personalization around Renzi’s divisive figure detracted from its functional and substantive matter. Hence, the JA reform provides an unparalleled vantage point to investigate the role of narrative stories in shaping policy contents and reforms. The paper aims to contribute to the literature on social policy reforms by combining a focus on narrative stories with the analytical perspective of the Multiple Stream Framework. Through qualitative analysis of official documents, of more than 500 newspaper articles and of selected in-depth interviews to key informants, this paper reconstructs the narratives about the JA reform, considering both the supporters and the challengers. Building on the Multiple Stream Framework, the paper focuses in particular on whether and how policy entrepreneurs took advantage of windows of opportunity by shaping the narrative stories. Results are twofold. First, the paper shows the variations of social policy reform narratives across actors. Second, it demonstrates the crucial role of policy entrepreneurs in shaping narrative stories as a strategy to couple the streams of problem, policy and politics.

KEYWORDS

Labour market reform;
policy entrepreneurs;
narrative stories; Italy

1. Introduction

When it comes to tackle welfare state reform, scholars often bring into play both external and internal drivers of change (Ferrera & Hemerijck, 2003), also focusing on the matching between problems, policies and politics (Natali, 2004). At the same time, scant attention has been devoted to narrative stories in accounting for policy change, as ‘the policy of constructing policy reality’ is often underspecified (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Lane, 2013, p. 455), and especially so in social policy reforms.

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Yet, the construction of policy reality and, more specifically, the use of narrative stories, show how political actors provide a rationale for the need for reform. Narrative stories – understood as highly simplified stories about how (good or bad) things happen (Stone, 2012, p. 158) – express how political actors justify policy change as a necessity.

Hence, narrative stories may help to study how social policy reforms are communicated and to shed a different light on their political consequences in the long run. Moreover, narrative stories may reveal how policy entrepreneurs act in the promotion of policy change under conditions of ambiguity and time constraints, as theorized by John Kingdon (1995) and scholars within the Multiple Stream Framework (MSF) (Zahariadis, 2007; Zohlnhöfer & Rüb, 2016).

In this paper, we aim to contribute to the literature on social policy reforms by combining a focus on narrative stories with the analytical perspective of the Multiple Stream Framework. We address two research questions regarding Italy's recent (2014–2016) labour market reform, known as Jobs Act (JA). Consistently with the aims of this special issue, the first research question relates to the role that narrative stories play in social policy reform processes. How did political actors construct the problems of the Italian labour market through narrative stories? What was the content of the narratives of both promoters and challengers of policy reforms? Our second research question refers to the role of policy entrepreneurs and their strategies. We select our case accordingly, on the basis of the existence in this particular instance – as contrasted with other instances of labour market reform in Italy – of a clear policy entrepreneur, the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi with the utmost degree of ownership of the reform (Nannicini, Sacchi, & Taddei, 2019). Thus our question becomes: Did Renzi as a policy entrepreneur shape narratives as a strategy to 'couple the streams', and bring about his 'pet solutions' (Kingdon, 1995)? How? Did such narratives evolve with the unravelling of the reform process?

To answer these questions, we reconstruct narrative stories in one case of social policy reform – the JA – in order to show how different political actors express the necessity for reform. Moreover, we use such evidence to understand if narratives have any role in making reforms happen. Building on Kingdon view about policy change as the coupling of the streams of problems, policies and politics made by a policy entrepreneur (Kingdon, 1995), we consider narrative stories as part of the entrepreneurial strategies to achieve policy change when a window of opportunity opens (Zahariadis, 2007). In fact, it is not always clear how narrative stories and argumentations help to couple the problem with the policy solution (Blum 2018), and, at the same time, to build political coalitions. The MSF identifies 'framing' as one of the entrepreneurial strategies for the entrepreneur to couple the streams, basically dealing with problem representation that makes a difference in what people perceive to be losses or gains (Zahariadis, 2007, p. 77). Framing is a way of making sense of a complex reality: in other words, framing is the basis for the stories or narratives talked by the participants of a policy process (Fischer & Forester, 1993, p. 11). Hence, narrative stories can be considered as the result of strategic framing by purposeful policy entrepreneurs who try to emphasize the gains and to minimize the losses of the reform, also pointing to the importance of symbols to rouse emotions in order to affect the national mood, affect priming and, in so doing, couple the streams (Zahariadis, 2007, 2016).

Against this backdrop, the JA offers an interesting case to understand the role of policy entrepreneurs in the MSF and of narrative stories in shaping the reform process. The JA reform is acknowledged as a case of success in policy change

(Pinelli, Torre, Pace, Cassio, & Arpaia, 2017; Vesan & Pavolini, 2018). At the same time, it was a highly contested reform, ultimately leading to a rearrangement of the centre-left political coalition, with at least two relevant party splits on the left of the political spectrum.

The JA put forward a mix of both expansionary and retrenching measures for old social policy risks, and some expansionary measures to face new social risks (Picot & Tassinari, 2017; Sacchi, 2018). In fact, the JA reformed employment protection legislation (EPL), introduced a recalibration both within passive policies and towards active labor market policies (ALMP) and work-family balance schemes (Sacchi & Roh, 2016, p. 367).

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next session, the theoretical priors of the MSF and the role of narrative stories therein will be discussed, while case selection and methodology will be justified. In [section 3](#), the timing of the process, the problem pressure, the political drivers and the policy content of the JA reform will be described, with particular attention to the purposeful action of the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (February 2014 – December 2016) as a policy entrepreneur. [section 4](#) analyses the narratives of supporters and challengers of the reform. [section 5](#) discusses how the ideas, the timing and the strategies of the actors shape the narratives. The final section concludes.

2. Conceptual framework and methods

Following the conceptual introduction to this special issue (Blum and Kuhlmann, 2019, p. 339–355), we will focus on the narrative stories as representation of policies created by social actors. Building on the narrativist literature (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 457–458), two elements are necessary to distinguish between narratives and non-narratives, thus allowing for empirical research: the presence of a policy stance or preference; and the presence of one or more characters in the story. Additionally, other elements of narrative stories are a setting (showing social or economic conditions), a moral (showing a policy solution), a plot (a story device connecting all the elements of the narrative).

Focusing on the constitutive elements of the narrative stories in social policy reform, the policy preference usually implies a definition of a problem and a statement about a policy behavior (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 457), such as for example the assertion that young people looking for jobs deserve a more flexible employment legislation. The characters might be a hero, a villain, a victim in Stone's (2012) terms, or types of target populations such as the advantaged, the contenders, the dependants, and the deviants (Blum and Kuhlmann, 2019).

Hence, different types of social policy reform narratives may be present, according to the type of social risk (old or new) and to the direction of the reform (expansionary or retrenching). Building on the framework put forward by Blum and Kuhlmann, 2019 (p. 9), we can expect: (a) stories of giving-to-give for expansionary old-social-risks policies particularly pledging for the deservingness of the advantaged; (b) stories of giving-to-shape for expansionary new-social-risks policies especially pushing for the empowerment of the dependants; (c) stories of taking-to-control for retrenching old-social-risks policies mainly pointing to the responsibility of contenders and deviants or to the helplessness of advantaged; and (d) stories of taking-out-of-helplessness for retrenching new-social-risks policies mostly focusing on the deservingness of deviants and contenders and on the helplessness of dependants.

This framework is particularly useful to understand how policy change is communicated in the agenda and in the formulation stages, and to clarify the role of policy entrepreneurs therein according to the MSF.

By considering both external and internal drivers for policy change, the MSF proposes that policy change happens when the independent streams of problems, policies and politics are coupled due to two contingent phenomena: the policy-window or window of opportunity, and the policy entrepreneur (Kingdon, 1995) or the ‘political’ entrepreneur (Rüb, 2016, p. 56).

The policy-window is ‘an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their specific problems’ (Kingdon, 1995, p. 173). A necessary condition for policy change, a policy-window is conceived as a process that develops between an opening and a closing (Rüb, 2016, p. 62). In this sense, policy-windows can be kept opened during a ‘momentum’, defined as ‘a situation in which a chance or possibility arises, which is brought about by institutional factors or the political regimes or by external factors’ (Rüb, 2016, p. 59–60).

The policy entrepreneurs are ‘advocates who are willing to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation and money – to promote a position in return for anticipated future gains’ (Kingdon, 1995, p. 188). Furthermore, policy entrepreneurs ‘perform the function of coupling for the system’, and even if the presence of the entrepreneur cannot alone bring change to pass, ‘without the presence of an entrepreneur, the linking of the streams may not take place’ (Kingdon, 1995, p. 191). Though policy entrepreneurs are often thought of as external to political institutions, MSF scholars such as Zahariadis have highlighted that also political leaders may act as policy entrepreneurs, using strategic framing and affective priming to influence the national mood. Policy entrepreneurs are more likely to be successful at coupling if they use framing strategies and symbols to present their pet policy solutions as a radical change or ‘a large deviation from the status quo’, that is needed to face a problem perceived as a great loss (Zahariadis, 2007, p. 78).

Although the causal role of policy entrepreneurs has not often been theorized nor empirically analyzed in MSF (Jones et al., 2016), in what follows we aim at illuminating such role in the context of a single case study of labour and welfare reform. We will investigate into the import of Prime Minister Renzi acting as a policy entrepreneur for achieving change by coupling the streams in the Italian JA.

2.1 Research design and single case selection

From a research design perspective, the JA reform can be seen as a ‘least likely’ crucial case to confirm the role of policy entrepreneurs in policy change (Gerring, 2007) and to uncover the role of policy narratives in social policy reform.

As a matter of fact, the Italian labor market has experienced several attempts of reform, aiming at reinvigorating job growth and reducing labour market segmentation, but most of them were quite limited in their scope. Those in the 1990s and 2000s introduced reforms ‘at the margins’, expanding fixed-term work while leaving open-ended employment untouched, and failed both to reform income support so as to provide higher coverage for the unemployed, and to introduce ALMP (Berton, Richiardi, & Sacchi, 2012). Over the past decade, favourable conditions for the coupling of the streams have been present. As for the problem stream, the problem of the dualism between insiders and outsiders in the labour market deepened with the economic crisis (Sacchi & Vesan, 2015), and the demand

for protection against new social risks constantly rose. As for the policy stream, alternative policy solutions about the flexibilization of the labour market were present. As for the political stream, alternation in government offered several opportunities for reform. At the same time, focusing events such as the financial crisis in the 2008 provided a window of opportunity for reform, also building upon external pressures for change. Yet, all this did not yield any substantial reform with the Berlusconi government (2008–2011) (Sacchi, 2013), while under the Monti government (2011–2012) a major reform was attempted, but had then to be watered down in order to be passed (Picot & Tassinari, 2017; Sacchi, 2015).

On the contrary, during the Renzi government (2014–2016), the interplay between domestic and external factors facilitated structural change (Sacchi, 2018; Sacchi & Roh, 2016; Vesan, 2017), and, as our analysis will show, Renzi acted as a policy entrepreneur, by pushing the issue of labour market reform in the political agenda. At the same time, the Prime Minister nurtured the political debate with narrative stories, shaping those narratives according to external factors and his domestic agenda.

In Kingdon's terms, the several previous attempts of labour market reforms in Italy would be situations where many conditions for achieving policy change existed – and in particular the opening of windows of opportunity to ripe the streams – but structural reforms did not happen because of the lack of one key condition: the presence of successful policy entrepreneurs. In this particular sense, given a past record of policy failure in spite of favourable conditions, the JA represent a 'least-likely' crucial case (Gerring, 2007, p. 116–119) to confirm the importance of policy entrepreneurs in making change happen, and to uncover the role of narrative stories in promoting their pet policy solution, which Renzi also used to expand the traditional constituency of his party (the centre-left *Partito Democratico*, PD) by trying to build a new 'bloc bourgeois' (Picot & Tassinari, 2017; Vesan, 2017).

The paper will rely on a qualitative approach and on the triangulation of different sources. Parliamentary documents and hearings were used to identify all relevant supporters and challengers of the JA. Journal articles quoting political actors' declarations were qualitatively analysed and coded to reconstruct the elements of the narrative stories. Using the free online search engine of one of the main Italian newspapers, La Repubblica, we collected articles on the JA between December 2013 and March 2018¹. The initial collection of the journal articles was made by searching for a combination of keywords in the search engine of the journal, conditional to the joint presence of all these lemmas: 'Jobs act', 'surname of the political actor', 'acronym of the political party/organization/institution'. The result of the search was then qualitatively analysed, in order to isolate the elements of the narrative stories (a policy preference, a character, a setting, a moral, a plot). The selection of the articles for the qualitative analysis was not made via automated software but by the researchers themselves, in order to control for the presence of the different elements of the narratives in the quotation marks and to avoid mistakes in attributing the declarations to the political actors – since many declarations of different actors are reported in the same article. In this way, we selected more than 500 journal articles, from which we extracted quotation marks to code the elements of the narratives in more than 600 rows. Moreover, we triangulate these qualitative data with 7 in-depth interviews – conducted between April and October 2018 – to unions and

¹Among the three main Italian national newspapers, *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica* and *La Stampa*, *la Repubblica* has the most extensive free-access web search engine. Moreover, and most importantly, we only analysed actors' declarations, that is actual quotations of their utterances from direct interviews or news agencies, thereby limiting potential bias.

employers representatives, and to key policy advisors and policymakers involved in the elaboration of the JA. The interviews are aimed at highlighting the agency of the policy entrepreneurs and at understanding the motivations of actors and the role that ideas and timing have played in shaping the narratives².

3. The Italian jobs act reform: problems, politics, policies, and timing

The reform of the Italian labour market takes its name after a blueprint for labour market reform that the secretary of PD, Matteo Renzi, proposed as a symbol of its leadership of the party – and later of his government (Sacchi & Roh, 2016). The Jobs Act blueprint was drafted as a partisan document between December 2013 and March 2014. It was translated into several legislative interventions between December 2014 and October 2016³. A chronology of the approval of the different pieces of legislation and related political events is offered in Figure 1, which highlights the main windows of opportunity and of the role of Renzi acting as a policy entrepreneur.

The JA can be considered as a structural reform of several constitutive aspects of the Italian labour market (Picot & Tassinari, 2017; Sacchi, 2018; Vesan, 2016). The latter traditionally presented two features exacerbated by the crisis: strong segmentation and the prevalence of passive policy interventions through the use of short-time work (STW, *cassa integrazione*) (Molina & Rhodes, 2007; Sacchi & Vesan, 2015)⁴.

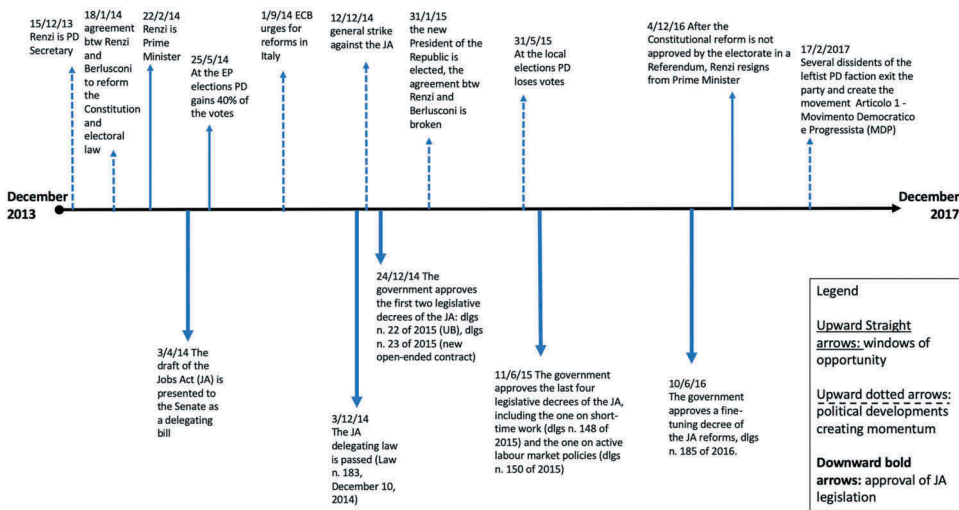


Figure 1. A chronology of the Italian Jobs Act.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

²The authors would like to thank Tommaso Sacconi for invaluable research assistance, and Arianna Tassinari for sharing the interviews conducted also for another project. A list of the interviewees is available from the authors upon request.

³The JA reform included an initial bill, in the form of a delegating law, approved by Parliament in December 2014, entrusting the government with the power to introduce implementing decrees. Eight implementing decrees were introduced between March 2015 and September 2015, plus a 'reform fine-tuning' decree in October 2016.

⁴Short-time work (from the German *Kurzarbeit*) is a scheme that replaces foregone wages of workers who are still formally employed but work reduced hours in cases of company crisis or restructuring.

After 2008, the Berlusconi government basically ‘froze’ the problem of unemployment, by an extensive use of STW and the introduction of other special forms of income support, the *ammortizzatori in deroga* (extraordinary social shock absorbers) (Sacchi, 2018, p. 32). In 2011, despite strong external pressures for reform when Italy was hit by the sovereign debt crisis, thus opening a policy-window to introduce those labour market reforms he had been trying to adopt since the early 2000s, Berlusconi was unable to bring into effect any policy change (Sacchi, 2015).

After 2012, labour policy entered the agenda for reform, with policy interventions that combined liberalization of the labour market with expansion of social rights, a mix that Picot and Tassinari (2017) define ‘embedding flexibilization’. This was the result of the interplay between domestic and external political drivers to change (Sacchi & Roh, 2016), such as the implicit conditionality that Italy had to abide by in order to get relief on its sovereign debt crisis through the help of the European Central Bank (ECB) (Sacchi, 2015, p. 77).

While the Monti government strongly acted on pensions already in 2011, a milder intervention on the labour market was introduced in 2012 (Sacchi, 2015). It was the result of a compromise to overcome the opposition of the leftist faction of PD (partner in the government coalition at the time), the one closer to the largest Italian union, the leftist *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL). The reform changed the dismissal rules for open-ended workers, but still allowed for a pervasive role of labour courts in deciding whether reinstatement could be applied in lieu of monetary compensation in the event of unlawful dismissal. Admittedly, it was a watered-down reform as contrasted with Monti’s expectations and initial draft, as recognized by Monti himself who publicly advocated for its overhaul⁵. Moreover, another initial target of the reform, STW, was left unchanged due to the opposition of both unions and employers, and ALMP were absent.

In the March 2013 elections PD became the major party in the Parliament, but the formation of a new coalition government revealed very difficult. After a few months of the Letta government, supported by a coalition comprised of PD, centrist and centre-right parties, in December 2013 Matteo Renzi became the PD secretary, and presented the JA blueprint as one of the reforms necessary to ‘restart the country’ (Matteo Renzi e-news n. 381, 8 January 2014), raising attention on the issue. At the same time, the problem of unemployment (increased to 13.7% in January 2014 from 8.5% in January 2011, Eurostat data), especially youth unemployment (under 25, from 30.7% in January 2011 to 46.8% in January 2014, Eurostat data), gained prominence in the public debate⁶.

When Renzi replaced Letta as Prime Minister in February 2014, a window of opportunity opened and the labour market reform entered at full steam into the political agenda. PD’s stunning result in the elections for the European Parliament in May 2014 (above 40% of votes) reinvigorated the Prime Minister’s action in promoting the JA delegating law.

⁵In a speech given at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2013, Monti declared that on labour market reform ‘we did not go far enough’ [because of the opposition of Cgil]. Monti: ‘Riforma del lavoro, ostacolati da Cgil’. *E la Ue mette l’Italia in mora sui diritti sindacali*, Repubblica 24/1/2013.

⁶See La Repubblica, *La politica di fronte ai dati Istat sulla disoccupazione. Camusso: Senza svolta andrà anche peggio*, 8/1/2014.

In summer 2014, the JA reform came to be driven by both external and domestic factors, thus extending the opening of the window of opportunity by providing ‘momentum’ (Rüb, 2016). On the external side, implicit conditionality was still at play, with the urge for the Italian government to be seen as trustworthy by other EU partners, so as to reduce the opposition towards the introduction of Quantitative Easing within the ECB governing board (Sacchi & Roh, 2016). Moreover, Italy started its semester of Presidency of the Council of the EU in July 2014, and the government was determined to promote the introduction of more flexibility within the Stability and Growth Pact, also through the ‘structural reforms clause’, i.e. allowing for budgetary flexibility in exchange for structural reforms. Renzi thus inserted a new, divisive and highly symbolic topic in the JA: the initial idea of a new work-insertion contract to ease transitions into the labour market became a thorough reform of EPL for all newly established open-ended contracts. This meant exempting such contracts from the provision of the so-called Article 18 of the 1970 Workers Statute on job reinstatement in cases of unfair dismissal (henceforth: Art. 18). All newly-established open-ended contracts entail no reinstatement in the event of unfair dismissal (with the exception of discriminatory dismissals), replaced by monetary compensation increasing with seniority⁷. Discretion of labour courts is drastically curtailed.

At the same time, the enhancement of the JA reform was also due to domestic drivers. With the JA, Renzi was trying to expand the constituency of the PD, catering to diverse socioeconomic categories of voters in the attempt to create a ‘bloc bourgeois’ (Picot & Tassinari, 2017; Vesan, 2017). To this aim, EPL reform could be valued by those outside paid employment, as well as by younger socioeconomic professionals and labour market outsiders, including those in non-standard employment who could see their employment chances increased by reduced segmentation. The emphasis on ALMP also catered to the latter groups, as well as the extension of unemployment benefits (UB) to include (mostly young) non-standard workers and raise benefit duration up to 2 years irrespective of age (Vesan, 2016). The expansion of social rights, mostly through new UB, also served the purpose of making the EPL reform more palatable to the more leftist faction of the PD⁸.

Domestic politics also matters to the JA reform for another reason. The JA was openly supported by the majority of PD and by the coalition center-right junior partner NCD (*Nuovo Centro Destra*), emerged from a split in Berlusconi’s camp. Confindustria and the other employers’ associations were substantially in favour of the reform. Still, the challengers were many: strong opposition came from CGIL and the more centrist *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL), and, most notably, from the minority of PD and the radical left party *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà* (SEL), both contrary to limiting the reach of Art. 18. The JA was also opposed by the opposition parties M5S and *Lega Nord* (LN), and increasingly by Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* (FI), particularly after the break-up of a deal between Renzi and Berlusconi to reform the Constitution⁹. Opposition to the JA

⁷Art. 18 is still applicable to open-ended contracts established before entry into force of the reform, in March 2015.

⁸See for instance the interview to an eminent figure of the PD left, the Chair of the House Labour committee Cesare Damiano: ‘Articolo 18, accordo possibile, ma più fondi per i sussidi’ [Art. 18, an agreement is possible, but there should be more resources for UB], *La Stampa*, 6/10/2014.

⁹Early January 2014, Renzi wrote an open letter to leaders of the other political parties, proposing an agreement to reform the Constitution and the electoral law in Parliament. While M5S shunned the proposal, Berlusconi agreed. This also translated into a milder opposition to the Renzi government, until the agreement broke in early 2015 when Sergio Mattarella was elected President of the Republic, against Berlusconi’s will.

translated into a general strike called by CGIL and UIL in December 2014. Later on, the JA became one of the main arguments of the opposition campaigns (in particular by M5S and LN) against the government: the electoral campaign for the failed Constitutional referendum (Ceccarin and Bordignon 2017), which led to the resignation of the Renzi government in December 2016, and later the general elections campaign in 2018 (Chiaramonte, Emanuele, Maggini, & Paparo, 2018).

Hence, if we capitalize on the famous metaphor of Kingdon, we can see that the rising of the problem of (youth) unemployment and the windows of opportunity and momentum – created by the external driver of implicit conditionality and the internal driver of electoral competition – matched with the policy solution of JA as a structural reform of the Italian labour market, thanks to the purposeful action of Matteo Renzi acting as a policy entrepreneur since December 2013. In this process, Renzi did not act alone – given the constant work of his advisers to draft the law and to ‘soften up’ (Kingdon, 1995) the JA as a composite policy solution. Still, it was mainly Renzi who acted to frame the JA in the public debate as a narrative.

4. The narrative stories on the Italian jobs act

Narrative stories are presented here as reconstructed from the qualitative analysis of the press¹⁰ (see section 2.1). For each political actor, we will highlight the main elements of the narrative stories: a) the definition of the problem and the policy preference; b) the character(s) of the story. We will also pay attention to the language used in the narrative stories, and in particular to the use of symbols and metaphors. Moreover, the analysis will shed light on the type of social policy reform narrative promoted by the different actors (Blum and Kuhlmann, 2019). In so doing, we will also highlight whether the content of the narratives change upon the occurrence of windows of opportunities or momentums.

4.1 The promoters and the supporters of the JA

4.1.1 Matteo Renzi as main promoter

As said, labour policies were one of the priorities of Matteo Renzi’s political proposals since the beginning of his term as PD’s Secretary and later as Prime Minister, in December 2013: ‘we have to stop the bleeding of jobs’ (8/1/2014), as Italy is a ‘Sleeping beauty’ (8/1/2014), ‘a blocked country (...) with a division between those who hold rights and those who don’t’ (1/03/2014), and thus between labour market insiders: open-ended workers, seen as the advantaged; and the outsiders: young unemployed, non-standard workers, women, seen as the dependants deserving a policy shift.

Renzi’s narrative identifies young people and women as deserving groups in a story of ‘giving-to-give’, that is, an expansion of rights through the new open-ended contract, aimed at making it easier to hire new entrants into the labour market on a stabler basis, and the extension of UB to new categories of – mostly non-standard – workers who were formerly excluded from social protection.

¹⁰Direct quotations from each newspaper article are reported with the date in brackets.

By contrast, Renzi identifies the causes of the decline in ‘the fault of the ruling class and of the unions’ (8/1/2014). These characters are negatively identified as villains and, in the case of unions, as contenders because of their ‘veto power’ (5/5/2014), and because of their defense of the insiders (interview 6): ‘where were the unions when the biggest injustice of our times came about, that between those who hold a job and those who don’t? (...) (this happened) because (the unions) have thought to fight only ideological battles and not the problems of the people’ (19/9/2014).

The emphasis on the weaknesses of the Italian labour market grows after September of 2014, when also the ECB and its President Mario Draghi said the reform of the labour market could not be postponed anymore (on 1/9/2014: see next section). Then Renzi frames the JA reform within a story of decline (Stone, 2012, p. 158) where the crisis is imposing rapid changes and also the European Union is asking for reforms. The reform of the EPL serves two political aims: to unblock Italy, rescue it from decline, and to claim credit at the European level, as ‘before changing the European Union, (we have to demonstrate to) be able to change ourselves’ (22/11/2014).

Furthermore, Renzi said that ‘the actual protection system is unequal, and being left wing means to fight inequality’ (20/9/2014). In this way, Renzi blames the status quo, and in particular Art. 18, as a driver of inequality, using symbols and metaphors to talk to the youngest and to emphasize the need to dismiss it: ‘Art. 18 doesn’t work anymore; it is like putting a coin into the iPhone, or like putting a film roll into a digital camera’ (26/10/2014); ‘a constitutional right is to actually have a job, not to have Art. 18’ (29/9/2014). Accordingly, the policy solution can be achieved only by ‘a Copernican revolution’ by ‘skipping the dialogue with the trade unions’, in a strategy of ‘disintermediation’ that implies ‘to talk directly with the workers’ and to appeal to the young and to non-standard workers (4/5/2014).

The emphasis on stories of ‘giving-to-shape’ to promote ALMP is also present, as the JA has a strong progressive component: ‘to give rights to the outsiders’, to the ‘new weak people, who need different answers than those of the past’; ‘the safety net has been broken and we need to mend it knowing that there is a friendly State to help’ (29/9/2014).

To sum up, the narrative stories of Renzi mingles stories of giving-to-give to expand employment chances and social rights and also evokes stories of giving-to-shape to backup ALMP, a scene tainted by the unions who defend the privileges of labour market insiders. This opposition between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’, and between the ‘insiders’ and the ‘outsiders’ is typical of Renzi’s political discourse (Ferrera, 2016). In the JA reform, this rhetoric is explicitly connected with the introduction of policy options to target new social needs, particularly in terms of labour market liberalization aimed at reducing dualization, but also in terms of the extension of the UB and of the introduction of more effective ALMP.

Nonetheless, the analysis of Renzi’s narratives further reveals that the focus gradually shifts towards the divisive symbol of Art. 18, and ultimately from the policy contents of the reforms towards the identification of the JA as a ‘leftist thing’, and as a symbol of his personal policy style: ‘what is the identity of the left in Italy? Giving rights and opportunities to the young (...) the JA is the leftists thing my government has done’ (31/3/2015); ‘time will tell who was right on the JA, if us or the unions (...) we had to wait until now to see this happen, and we have not allowed the unions to block this project’ (27/7/2015); ‘the JA is leftist’ (10/8/2016).

4.1.2 The supporters of the reform: International actors and junior partners in the coalition government

Renzi's narrative seems quite in line with those proposed by the International Monetary Fund ('a reform of labour market is a priority, and the JA is in the right direction' (8/10/2014)), the ECB ('structural reform on labour cannot be postponed' (1/09/2014), 'the reform of the labour market contributed to the new dynamism in the job market' (22/12/2016), and the European Commission ('youth unemployment is a priority, the implementation of the JA is the solution' (1/06/2014); 'in order to fight unemployment, let the entrance in the market be easier and allow more flexibility. JA is a key reform' (21/09/2015)).

As for the junior partners in the coalition government, the NCD Senator and Chair of the Senate labour committee until 2018, Maurizio Sacconi, was a former labour minister, and framed the problem of unemployment as the product of 'the ideological prejudices of the Left on the labour market' (24/9/2014). Art. 18 epitomizes these rigidities, and it is a 'totem to break down' (26/07/2014). His policy preference is thus for 'a necessary combination of flexibility and security to manage the crisis' (24/9/2014), with a serious investment in ALMP, making explicit reference to transitional labour markets theory (Schmid, 2006).

4.1.3 The employers' associations and the trade union CISL as supporters

The JA reform, and in particular the intervention on EPL, was supported by the employers' association, despite their ado for the 'disintermediation' strategy of Renzi which involved bypassing also such associations (interview 2; interview 3; interview 4). The employers' associations narrated a story of 'taking-to-control' that proposes liberalization as a solution to the rigidities of the labour market. Basically, Confindustria argued that unemployment is due to high labour costs, the overcomplication of labour legislation, in particular after Monti's labour market reform because it 'reduced flexibility and increased labour costs for the enterprises' (04/03/2014) and because of the 'Art. 18, a mantra (...) that curbs foreign investments' (22/9/2014). Other employers' associations in craftsmanship, services and retail were openly in favor of the JA, as it was a 'welcome reform that finally opens the door to the young people and to those who do not hold a job', in the words of one craftsmanship association (8/3/2015).

After initial skepticism, the attitude towards the government of centrist union *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* (CISL) became more openly positive with the new secretary general Anna Maria Furlan in October 2014. CISL openly criticized the other two unions, CGIL and UIL, for the general strike called in October 2014 against the JA during the Parliamentary discussion of the delegating bill. CISL considered the problem of unemployment as a priority, building on a 'giving-to-give' story that portrays the young as particularly deserving dependant characters: 'there is a generation of cheated young people (...) who do not have a salary, or social security, they have nothing. And they have to count on the new open-ended contract. To this goal, CISL is even willing to restructure Art. 18' (20/09/2014).

Hence, CISL's policy preference is to establish the new open-ended contract as the preferred option for the employers, in order to absorb 'legalized precariousness' (25/11/2015), and to make the employers, seen as contenders, more responsible: 'now with the JA the entrepreneurs no longer have excuses, they have to hire' (31/12/2014). Notably,

when new-social-risks exited the debate, CISL encouraged the government to do more for ALMP, as ‘we await the government at the gate for more financial resources on active policies’ (31/08/2015).

4.2 The challengers to the JA

4.2.1 The political opposition to the government: Forza Italia, Lega Nord, M5S

The challengers to the JA entered the public debate to react to the specific points of the reform. As we will see, the few counter-narratives available are quite similar, and point to both substantive and, most of all, identity reasons.

Political opposition to the JA by Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (FI) oscillated during the period considered. After an initial support for both substantive (‘these are the reforms we wanted, we will say yes’ (28/09/2014)) and tactical reasons (‘let’s say yes to the JA in order to break the PD (22/09/2014)), in December 2014 FI already defined the JA ‘a farce’, ‘a leftist reform that discourages hiring’ (2/12/2014). Opposition became stronger after February 2015 with the end of the agreement between Berlusconi and Renzi to reform the Constitution and the electoral law in a bipartisan way. Even more ambiguous was Lega Nord (LN): when the reform of Art. 18 entered the debate, LN declared: ‘we will cheer neither for Goofy-Renzi, nor for Pluto-Camusso (CGIL’s general secretary)’ (25/11/2014). In Parliament LN opposed the reform as ‘it does not solve the problems of the young people: of those who leave the country, and of those who remain (...): the JA creates instability’ (25/11/2014). LN harshest opposition came later on, during the campaigns for the referendum on the Constitutional reform in 2016, and for the 2018 political elections, when the JA is accused to be the cause of the insecurity that ‘forced our kids to escape the country’ (17/09/2017).

Similarly, M5S moved from indifference to the blueprint to a strong critique after Art. 18 entered the debate. M5S’ leader Beppe Grillo said that ‘Art. 18 is untouchable, and the government should explain how removing workers’ rights is of help for the economy’. In Grillo’s narrative, the true intention of the government is ‘to empty the holes of the international finance with the theft of the workers’ rights, and to turn the workers into the new slaves’ (25/09/2014), thus putting forward a conspiracy story in Stone’s (2012, 167) terms.

Summing up, there is a reactive narrative that only partially links problems to causes and technical solutions, through an over-simplified framing that equates the JA to uncertainty for the youth. New social risks are absent in these narratives.

4.2.2 The internal opposition to the government: the PD minority

In the Italian party system, PD reconciles the heritage of both the former Communists and Christian Democrats, plus former centre-left pro-market parties, and thus brings a composite identity of diverse (and sometimes opposed) symbols. In the years of the economic crisis, PD was the keystone to the coalition governments of Monti, Letta, and finally Renzi, but the dialectic between the factions of the party has always been lively. In the case of the JA reform, the minority of the party led by established old-left figures such as Bersani, and younger representatives, such as Fassina and Civati, started to openly challenge the JA after the introduction of Art. 18 revision in the debate in

Summer 2014. It has to be noticed that the JA became one of the reasons why, later on, some of these leaders left PD to create brand new leftist parties and movements.

For the PD minority, the problem was the JA itself, and in particular those policy choices, such as the limitation of the scope of Art. 18, which were labelled as ‘right-wing’ or ‘neo-liberal’: ‘the abolition of Art. 18 is a reduction of the workers’ rights and dignity, and this is the policy of the right’ (14/9/2014). These narratives present the Art. 18 as a symbol of the left, being the product of the battles of the workers. In Bersani’s words: ‘in the battle between capital and labour, I rally with labour’ (19/9/2014). In a similar vein, Fassina declared: ‘with the JA, Renzi fosters a right-wing agenda, like Monti did’ (16/9/2014); ‘this is the agenda of the power élite, the Troika agenda’ (29/9/2014). The argument proceeded with a conspiracy flavor, because the new rules on EPL are described as ‘a favor to the enterprises who fire (...) It is a regressive change, not a Copernican, but a conservative revolution (...) recommended by the Troika’ (26/12/2014).

The narrative stories of PD’s internal opposition is oriented to the old social risks, to be tackled by reinforcing existing policy instruments. In these narratives, the JA creates more job insecurity, and, most notably, it represents a betrayal of the party’s identity and ‘a loss of DNA’ (1/10/2014). As a matter of fact, several MPs participated to the general strike called by CGIL and UIL, as ‘here are the needs that a left-wing party has to listen to’ (25/10/2014).

4.2.3 The societal opposition to the Jobs Act: the trade unions CGIL and UIL

For UIL, the JA ‘impinges on already existing job safeguards’ (29/09/2014), and it will bring about more job uncertainty: ‘the JA is the scalp for the EU’ (18/09/2014); ‘the Italian way to growth is the freedom to fire’ (5/09/2015). The focus is on EPL legislation and the responsibility of the employers as contenders: ‘the winner is Confindustria, the losers are the workers’ (18/06/2015). The alternative solution is to revert to traditional protection: ‘employment is not increasing, STW is the needed instrument of protection’ (9/9/2016).

Similar – and even more severe – tones can be found in CGIL’s narratives. The problem of unemployment is due to job insecurity and the JA worsens it (22/03/2014): ‘figures about dismissals (...) confirm that (...) there is no need to liberalize dismissals’ (28/11/2014). Contrary to Renzi’s narrative, the reform is portrayed as story where the undeserving employers gain and the deserving workers, the advantaged, are the sacrificial lambs: ‘Art. 18 is a solid safeguard, the government will not silence the voice of workers’ (25/10/2014); ‘the JA is wrong, there are no progressive safeguards, there is only a liberalization of lay-offs’ (27/01/2015). Moreover, the government strategy of credit claiming from the EU is framed as a conspiracy: ‘the JA was meant to have EU’s appraisal, not to produce growth’ (10/04/2016). Instead, the only possible solution is to abandon the JA, return to STW and to other instruments of safeguards (interview 3), and possibly extend them through public spending (interview 4): ‘the JA is ineffective because investments lag behind, and particularly public investments’ (4/05/2015).

CGIL’s narrative also condemns Renzi’s attitude towards the unions, and represent him as a right-wing policy-maker: ‘Renzi looks at Margaret Thatcher’ (19/9/2014); ‘Renzi is the man of the power élite’ (29/10/2014); ‘Renzi is dividing the country’ (3/11/2014), and finally, Renzi’s impatience towards concertation ‘is twisting democracy’ (6/5/2015).

Thus, the analysis of UIL and CGIL narratives shows a common understanding of the problem of unemployment as produced by the lack of public intervention and investments. The JA is a favour to employers that implies cuts in social protection and rights. The

government, and Renzi in particular, represents a coalition of conservative interests, not labour.

5. Discussion

The analysis shows that diverse types of social policy reform narratives can coexist. Within the camp of the reform supporters, the expansionary measures for old social risks – such as the increase in UB – are presented as a ‘giving-to-give’ story that identifies the young people outside the labour market as the most deserving target population in the economic crisis. Other deserving groups such as women are cited, but a coherent ‘giving-to-shape’ story that justifies expansionary measures to cope with new social risks is scanty. By the same token, interventions on EPL (which were coupled with a very generous tax break for employers on new open-ended hires) are framed as an opportunity of more and better jobs for outsiders, and thus again as a ‘giving-to-give’ story.

As for the challengers to the reform, their narratives defy the idea the JA contains expansionary measures for both old and new social risks, and instead frame the government proposals as a retrenchment especially on old social risks, whereby the limitation of the Art. 18 does not solve the problem and rewards the employers. Moreover, these narratives strongly attack the international finance and the EU, and the promoters of the JA, in a sort of conspiracy story. The policy alternatives are not framed in terms of expansionary measures to face new social risks, but only in terms of increase in existing measures to cope with old social risks.

As for the role of Renzi acting as a policy entrepreneur in shaping the narratives to couple the streams, the analysis has revealed that narrative stories do not radically change at the occurring of events and developments potentially creating momentum, apart from a decisive twist towards the revision of Art. 18 in September 2014, driven by external factors that created a new momentum, then exploited for domestic political aims. Renzi’s narrative was aimed at showing the JA as a Copernican revolution of the youngest against the status quo, identified in unions defending Art. 18, thus confirming the entrepreneurial strategic use of framing and emotions. From that moment on, and particularly so after the approval of the implementing decrees in June 2016, the policy content of the JA loses salience in the public debate, and the content of the narratives revolves around the JA being left-wing or right-wing, and being a symbol of Renzi’s policy style. The policy content of the JA, and in particular its most innovative parts – the restructuring of UB and the design of ALMP – remained in the backstage (interview 1; interview 6).

The shift in the contents of the narrative stories from the policy issues to the personal features of the political leader corroborates the idea that the narratives of the JA reform were unable to convey a sense of future gains as a reward for present sacrifices, thus weakening the legitimacy of the reform itself. While reflecting on the hurdles of the implementation of the JA, Sacchi (2018) suggested that there was an absence of a broader ideational and discursive framework: ‘[...] Renzi’s reforms were [not] framed in a long-term, future-oriented narrative able to convey the message that, alongside their immediate payoff, such reforms would be the cornerstone of a new approach based on social investments rather than on compensation of traditional categories’.

At the same time, the narrative stories of the challengers were reactive with respect to JA’s policy solutions, and in particular to policy choices on EPL bearing strong symbolic meaning.

The clearest example is the polarization of the public debate around the issue of Art. 18. The debate instantly became a battle of symbols and identity, while the JA was labelled either as a ‘left-wing’ or a ‘right-wing’ reform, extending or reducing workers’ rights. The battle of symbols is hardly ever translated into a story about how the problem of unemployment came about, or a story about how to cope with new welfare demands or new social risks.

Therefore, the analysis of the narratives shows that the JA itself becomes a symbol of a ‘political season’ (interview 5) and ultimately of a specific political leader, Matteo Renzi. This personalization of the JA is put forward by Renzi himself, and by his political opponents on both sides of the political spectrum. This is particularly evident on the occurrence of important electoral dates (the vote for the constitutional revision in 2016, and later the general elections in 2018).

6. Concluding remarks

Overall, the analysis of the narrative stories over the JA reform seems to suggest that political actors tend to shape their arguments linking policy problems, causes and solutions to couple the streams. In particular, in the case of the JA the purposeful action of a political leader acting as policy entrepreneur shapes the narrative stories around symbols to rouse emotions, turning the public debate on the JA away from its policy content and into a symbol of his own political leadership. The choice of policy instruments progressively disappears from the narrative stories, leaving the scene to a battle over symbols and identity.

In the interplay between external and domestic drivers, the same argument can be overturned by different politically motivated actors: while the reformers argue that the JA is needed to modernize Italian welfare and gain international credibility, the challengers argue that the JA is aimed at serving external masters (the European Commission, the ECB, financial markets) at the expense of Italian workers. Hence, the very same driver (Italy’s duties as a member of the Economic and Monetary Union and, more broadly, the very stability of the latter) can be narrated as good or as evil according to context and timing.

This dynamic would help to explain the lack of a coherent narrative that links new social risks with ‘active securities’ (Schmid, 2006) and new forms of protection. As a matter of fact, the story about the dismissal of the Art. 18 tended to monopolize (and polarize) the electoral debate, without leaving much space for a positive story focused on the advantages of an expansion of protection in a wider portfolio of new social risks or about what was lacking in the reform in terms of such expansion and the desirability of a change of tack in this regard. Rather, the ‘new’ social risks were invariably seen through the lenses of the ‘old’ policy solutions.

Ultimately, to have been only partly able to legitimize what can be considered substantively innovative policy solutions, breaking away with Italy’s welfare and labour policy legacy, and rather having shifted and polarized the debate towards the JA as an act of political leadership, can be considered among Renzi’s largest shortcomings, irrespective of the quick and successful adoption of the reform. To quote Renzi’s main labour policy advisors commenting upon this issue, ‘no structural reform can survive the contradictions in its own narrative’ (Nannicini et al., 2019).

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