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Italians Knock on Transparency's Door, but Get Few Answers

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By Alessandra Galloni

ROME – With his Five-Star Movement's surprisingly strong showing in Italy's February elections, comedian Beppe Grillo tapped into many Italian frustrations – including a desire for more transparency in government.

There's a long way to go, according to a new report.

Non-profit organization Diritto di Sapere, or Right to Know, spent the past couple of months testing how responsive different branches of Italy's public administration are to requests for information. The organization kept track of 300 requests that individuals representing civil society, the media and general public made to local, regional and federal authorities seeking information on topics ranging from health inspections in restaurants to public spending on temporary hosting centers for immigrants and financial investments.

The requests were filed in two ways: according to the guidelines set out in a 1990 Italian law on citizens' right to access information – a law that requires information-seekers to explain why they want the data — and according to international access standards in which motivations need not be demonstrated. Italian law requires public institutions to answer such requests within 30 days of submission.

Of the 300 requests filed, 73% didn't receive a satisfactory answer – meaning the response was incomplete, inadequate or didn't answer the original question, according to the report published this week by the group. Sixty-five percent of the requests weren't answered at all within the legal time limit, the report says, adding that only 13% of the requests received a full answer. The remaining requests received partially satisfactory answers or a written refusal.

Since its 1990 law on access to information, the Italian government has taken further steps to improve transparency. A recent law introduced by the outgoing government of Prime Minister Mario Monti – which was dubbed "Transparency Decree" and came into effect this month – tried to step up the openness of Italy's public administration. It gives public offices – from ministries to local administrations — stricter rules about what they must disclose regarding their activities and spending. If a public administration doesn't do so, citizens can request that the information be made public, and they don't have outline the motivation behind the request. The entity is legally required to provide the data.

It remains to be seen what happens with the new law; after all, Italy has never had trouble promulgating laws – the problem is that they are often left to gather dust.



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In its report, Diritto di Sapere says the new law is a step forward. But it warns that it stops short of being a true freedom of information act, or FOIA, similar to those that exist in the U.S. and other countries.

The success of Mr. Grillo's Five-Star Movement in the February elections – and a generational renewal in other key parties – means the country's new parliament is the youngest-ever here. A new government is on the cusp of being formed. There is more and more talk about the need for more transparency in Italy. Let's see what happens.

Beppe Grillo, Five-Star Movement, Italy, Italy Vote, italyvote, Right to Know

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