

On the Historical Evolution of the Northern League in Italy

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ABSTRACT

In 2018, Italy's newly formed government, which included the far-right League, raised concerns among European political and financial elites. The international press portrayed the parties that won the elections as the (Euro-sceptic) barbarians ready to besiege the city walls of Rome. In this article, I argue that hardline anti-immigration policies were their most visible characteristic. In particular, I demonstrate that the League's xenophobic approach was not new, as its precursors already promoted discrimination, and that the party moved from regionalism to the far-right side of the political spectrum. I also question the party's recent national(ist) shift, which seems to have been made uncritically and for pragmatic, electoral reasons. The article contributes to the history of the far right since the 1980s while demonstrating the usefulness of a historical methodology for scholars from other disciplines who work on right-wing prejudice.

Keywords: the far right, racism, immigration, nationalism, regionalism

RESUMEN

Sobre la evolución histórica de la Liga Norte en Italia

En 2018, el gobierno recién formado de Italia, que incluía a la Liga de extrema derecha, generó preocupación entre las élites políticas y financieras europeas. La prensa internacional describió a los partidos que ganaron las elecciones como bárbaros (euroescépticos) dispuestos a asediar las murallas de la ciudad de Roma. En este artículo sostengo que las políticas antiinmigración de línea dura fueron su característica más visible. En particular, demuestro que el enfoque xenófobo de la Liga no era nuevo, ya que sus precursores ya promovían la discriminación, y que el partido pasó del regionalismo al lado de extrema derecha del espectro político. También cuestiono el reciente giro nacionalista (nacionalista) del partido, que parece haberse realizado acriticamente y por razones pragmáticas y electorales. El artículo contribuye a la historia de la extrema derecha desde la década de 1980, al

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tiempo que demuestra la utilidad de una metodología histórica para académicos de otras disciplinas que trabajan sobre los prejuicios de derecha.

Palabras clave: extrema derecha, racismo, inmigración, nacionalismo, regionalismo

RESUM

Sobre l'evolució històrica de la Lliga Nord a Itàlia

El 2018, el govern recentment format d'Itàlia, que incloïa la Lliga d'extrema dreta, va plantejar preocupacions entre les elits polítiques i financeres europees. La premsa internacional va retratar els partits que van guanyar les eleccions com els bàrbars (euroescèptics) disposats a assetjar les muralles de Roma. En aquest article, argumento que les polítiques antiimmigració de línia dura eren la seva característica més visible. En particular, demostro que l'enfocament xenòfob de la Lliga no era nou, ja que els seus precursors ja promovien la discriminació, i que el partit va passar del regionalisme a l'extrema dreta de l'espectre polític. També qüestiono el recent canvi nacional(ista) del partit, que sembla que s'ha fet de manera acrítica i per raons pragmàtiques i electorals. L'article contribueix a la història de l'extrema dreta des dels anys 80 alhora que demostra la utilitat d'una metodologia històrica per als estudiosos d'altres disciplines que treballen el prejudici de la dreta.

Paraules clau: extrema dreta, racisme, immigració, nacionalisme, regionalisme

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In the 1980s, a number of small autonomist leagues in northern Italy—including the Lega Lombarda and the Lega Veneta—formed an alliance against the Italian state. In their view, the latter was dominated by Roman political parties and southern elites. This federation, which was later called the Northern League for the Independence of Padania (Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania), became a proper party in 1991. Since then, it has been known simply as the Northern League (Lega Nord). This (ethno-)regionalist party promoted the wealth and interests of the northern side of the peninsula.¹ It endorsed regionalism, devolution, federalism, and—in some periods—even secession from Italy of its (mostly imagined) community, which was based in the northern territory of Padania.² The party's basic assumption

¹The LN's regionalist dimension and the myth of Padania have generated much discussion about its nature. Biorcio was one of the first scholars to have considered the party a mixture of regionalism and populism (See, for example, Biorcio, R. (2010). *La rivincita del Nord. La Lega dalla contestazione al governo*. Laterza; Biorcio, R. (2012). I populismi in Italia. *La Rivista delle Politiche Sociali* (1), 34–53). McDonnell similarly highlighted that this regionalist populism was the party's main characteristic. McDonnell, Duncan (2006). A weekend in Padania: regionalist populism and the Lega Nord. *Politics* (2), 127–130). Scholars such as Spektorowski, relate the LN to the New Right (to which I will return in this article). He wrote how “an examination of the Lega Nord's political evolution provides us with an example of how the New Right's sophisticated neo-fascism is ... shaping the ideology of what could at first be defined as a non-fascist regionalist movement” (Spektorowski, A. (2003). Ethnoregionalism: The intellectual New Right and the Lega Nord. *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* (2), pp. 55–70). Others believe that the party combined various elements: from localism to anti-immigration. However, this is not the place for a discussion of the LN's nature since its origins. What is evident is that the party has been shifting to the right over the years (Cento Bull, A. (2015).

CENTO BULL, A. 2015. The fluctuating fortunes of the *Lega Nord*. A. Mammone, E. G. Parini, G. A. Veltri, (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Italy: History, Politics, and Society*. Routledge. 205–214; Ignazi, P. (2005). The Extreme Right. Legitimation and Evolution on the Italian Right Wing: Social and Ideological Repositioning of Alleanza Nazionale and the Lega Nord. *South European Society and Politics* (10), 331–349). For a general discussion, see Newth, G. (2023). *Fathers of the Lega. Populist Regionalism and Populist Nationalism in Historical Perspective*. Routledge (specifically Chapter 1).

²See, for example, Archivio Storico del Senato, Costituzione Federale, Mario Rigo, II, 19. Movimenti federalisti, 1, Lega Nord (1989–1999).

was that the country was marked by regional differences, mostly along a geographical North–South divide, with the northern societies symbolizing the virtues of efficiency and competent administrations in contrast to the backwardness and corruption of the rest of the population.

The *padani* (Padanians) were, in sum, a sort of distinctive entity. In line with this, the party claimed to be a different type of movement. Its militants were surely the most folkloristic in Italian history, wearing green shirts and sometimes Celtic horns. From the very beginning, some Lega Nord militants colorfully portrayed themselves as the “dreaming barbarians”.³ In 1992, a headline in the Lega Nord Emilia Romagna’s bulletin proudly described the newly elected *leghisti* (namely the Lega Nord militants) in the national parliament as “warriors [descending] on Rome”.⁴

The year before the 2018 elections, the Lega Nord was simply rebranded as the League (Lega, hereafter LN).⁵ This rebranding was necessary because financial scandals hit the party hard, affecting its public image and electoral appeal. It is currently the oldest movement in the Italian parliament. It has been able to politicize, but also influence, public debates on migration, belonging, citizenship, and ethnic relations in Italian society, recently waging a fierce battle against immigrants and those supporting them. Despite its relevance, historians have shown little interest in covering its evolution.⁶ Another contradiction is that for some time, the labels “extreme right” and “far right” —which are internationally used to describe parties such as the LN—have usually been employed in Italy only for the neo-fascist groups CasaPound (CP) and New Force (Forza Nuova, FN). Similarly, the history of right-wing racism in postwar Italy has been understudied, too. This article attempts to partially fill these gaps in historiography.

In recent decades, Italy, a founding member of the European Union (hereafter EU), has periodically been considered a problematic member state. In 2018, EU elites were worried about the rise of Eurosceptic forces in the elections. Most unexpectedly, for the first time, the LN—led by Matteo Salvini—surpassed Silvio Berlusconi in their center-right alliance. The *Financial Times* portrayed these forces as the “barbarians” descending on the capital city of Rome,

Italy is on the brink of installing the most unconventional, inexperienced government to rule a western European democracy since the EU’s founding Treaty of Rome in 1957. It would consist of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and the far right, anti-immigrant League. These parties regard Italy’s modern political system as a rotten failure and the EU’s governance and policies as riddled with flaws the received wisdom in other EU capitals and financial markets was that a Five Star-League government would be the most disturbing of all possible outcomes. Now the barbarians are not merely massing at the gates of Rome. They are inside the city walls.⁷

Yet, these colorful descriptions left many questions unanswered. Rather than fully showing their anti-EU or anti-system faces, the resulting government, led by the populist Five Star

³ Polidori E. G. and Vecchi, D. (2012). *I barbari sognanti: La battaglia per la successione nella Lega*. Aliberti.

⁴ Faverio, S. (1992). 80 guerrieri a Roma. *Lega Nord Emilia Romagna*, March, 4.

⁵ I use the abbreviation LN for both the Northern League and the League. They are, in fact, sister or parallel organizations, and the former still exists. In reality, the latter’s full name is League for Salvini Premier (Lega per Salvini Premier), but it is usually called simply the League.

⁶ A recent exception is Barcella, P. (2022). *La Lega. Una storia*. Carocci

⁷ Financial Times. 2018. Rome opens its gates to the modern barbarians. *Financial Times*, 14 May. <https://www.ft.com/content/6348cc64-5764-11e8-b8b2-d6ceb45fa9d0>

Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, hereafter M5S) but heavily influenced by the far-right LN, immediately turned into the most xenophobic cabinet seen in the peninsula since the promulgation of the anti-Semitic laws by the Fascist dictatorship in 1938. Its hardline migration policy generated tensions with the EU institutions and other EU member states. However, few initially focused on the expected racist dimension or questioned the authenticity of the LN's interest in defending Italy as a nation and not just its northern regions.

While it is too early to assess the LN's national(ist) reshaping, given that its new "nationalism" seems far from reflecting or promoting national unity or an overall identity for the whole Italian population (a policy that is not promoted by many of its northern members), this article argues that the various northern leagues already embodied some sort of racialized, ethnic, rhetoric which supported the shift to a far-right racist politics well before 2018. For example, a study of the Lega Lombarda's newspaper, *Lombardia Autonomista*, published from the 1980s onward, and of *Quaderni Padani*, a bulletin that has been promoting some of the LN's cultural values since 1995, shows the building of a narrow northern (Padanian) identity and community which were allergic to external contamination.⁸ This attitude quickly materialized in forms of discrimination against foreign (non-northern Italian) entities. This policy has recently facilitated the LN's new image as the defender of those Italian citizens threatened by migrants, Islam, the EU, or globalization. The party's xenophobic rhetoric undoubtedly contributed to the rapprochement between Salvini and some of Europe's hard-right movements. Given this, I will show that the LN moved toward the far-right side of the European political spectrum.

1. THE CONTEXT

The 2018 election results in Italy truly represented a nightmare for pro-EU elites. Before the election, the then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker suggested that the EU eventually had to be prepared for a non-operative government. This fueled the propaganda of anti-EU parties, which accused the EU of interference with voters' freedom. The resulting hung parliament scared Brussels, as it soon realized that a Eurosceptic government was going to take the reins of one of the EU's founding members. One Italian out of two voted for parties ranging from the populist M5S—which became the most voted party—to Salvini's LN, from a movement coming from the neo-fascist tradition, such as Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI), to CP and FN, which promoted Euroscepticism.⁹

Following the financial crisis and the dramatic austerity measures, trust in EU institutions naturally dropped in some member states, even if in 2018 it was higher (36%) than in 2016, when it reached a negative peak of 29%. This never became a universal rejection of the EU. Polls, for example, constantly showed that Italians were inclined to vote in favor of EU mem-

⁸ *Quaderni Padani* was established by LN's sympathizers to gather intellectuals promoting northern myths, stories, values, and traditions. Some MPs and important (future) politicians contributed to the journal, along with journalists and scholars. This was a mixture of right-wingers, ethno-regionalists, ethno-nationalists, ultra-Catholics, and federalists. The first issue of the review specifically highlighted that their goal was to rebuild a Padanian identity. *Quaderni Padani*. (1995). Un'associazione per la Padania. *Quaderni Padani* (1), Summer, 2.

⁹ It is worth mentioning that, at the time of writing, FdI is running the country after winning the 2022 elections; the LN is their main coalition ally.

bership. In September 2018, only 34% of the LN's voters believed in an exit from the euro currency.¹⁰ All this was perfectly in line with the Italians' contemporary preoccupations—mostly unemployment and the economy. Yet, demagogic politicians and populist movements were successful in radicalizing debates and monopolizing media attention on both Europe and immigration. Moderate parties were obviously influenced by this overall setting.¹¹

This happened at a time of major changes in Italian politics. In November 2015, Salvini organized a rally in Bologna against Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's governmental policies on immigration and security. Although Silvio Berlusconi, the media tycoon and historical leader of the center-right coalition, was present, for the first time, he

was no longer the protagonist but, at best, the supporting actor. It was no coincidence, even from a symbolic point of view, that Berlusconi was positioned a short distance away alongside the LN's long-time leader, Umberto Bossi. Moreover, instead of cheers, his speech provoked negative reactions and protests from the public ... The Bologna demonstration clearly showed the voting public that the internal equilibrium within the center-right had shifted radically.¹²

Berlusconi had, in fact, begun his political decline. The populist demagogue was far from controlling his rightist fellows. Some former neo-fascists had already left his party to create the abovementioned Brothers of Italy in 2012. Consequently, the “moderate” center-right was moving toward the right. As Raniolo suggested,

Berlusconi appeared unable to make a clear choice between staying within the cluster of moderate right-wing European parties—and a member of the European People's Party, which he had with some difficulty brought himself to join in the mid-1990s—or joining the radical right.¹³

This was in line with similar changes happening in Europe's right-wing politics. In Italy, it was mainly Salvini who pushed the coalition toward the extreme right of the political spectrum. The novelty was that he was abandoning—at least publicly—the idea that state centralism was exploiting the northern regions and destroying their traditions.¹⁴

Given this, the LN was ready to control the right-wing opposition. In particular, it was pushing for an extremist program that went well beyond Euroscepticism, centered on anti-immigrant politics and focusing on the protection of Italians. In fact, after the election, although anti-establishment and Eurosceptic stances were always in the background, with coalition parties presenting themselves as the only legitimized representatives of the “people” and promoters of the will of the nation, they never became a real challenge to the EU. Rather, I argue that racist prejudice turned out to be the main feature of the new government.

In this article, I will demonstrate that this far-right xenophobic shift is far from surprising if one considers the historical evolution of Salvini's party since 2013, with the new leader firmly placing the LN on the far-right side of Europe's political system. Moreover, as suggested above,

¹⁰ Demos. (2018). Gli italiani e l'Unione Europea. <http://www.demos.it/a01534.php>

¹¹ Castelli Gattinara, P., Froio, C., Albanese, A. (2013). The appeal of neo-fascism in times of crisis. The experience of Casa-Pound Italia. *Fascism* (2), 234–257.

¹² Raniolo, F. (2016). The Center-Right's Search for a Leader: Crisis and Radicalization. *Italian Politics* (1), 59.

¹³ Ibid. 64.

¹⁴ A.M. (1995). La questione. *La Svolta. Giornale trentino per l'Autonomia e il Federalismo* (2), February, 16.

the party was already promoting a discriminatory policy that paved the way for this “new”, openly right-wing turn. The article shows that this rightist shift was made possible by national and international links with other right-wing, xenophobic forces.

2. THE RACIST MOMENTUM IN ITALY

On the brink of the 2018 election, the LN was on the rise on the right side of the political spectrum. Berlusconi’s allies in the center-right coalition used propaganda that focused on the “Italy first” rhetoric and rejected Muslims and refugees. They also aimed to water down the process of European integration. Their political proposals included slogans against a perceived immigrant “invasion” and the euro. The center-right coalition’s election manifesto clearly stated the need to revise existing EU treaties while giving Italy’s constitutional laws precedence over EU legislation. It also proposed deporting illegal migrants, closing borders, and preventing migrants from reaching Italy, as well as revising the law on torture. The far right therefore influenced this “mainstream” manifesto on immigration and the EU.

Salvini, for example, promised to deport five hundred thousand immigrants, calling Islam a “threat” that was incompatible with the Italian Constitution. He was also filmed saying that Italy needed “mass cleansing”. Hence, the election was clearly characterized by ethnic abuses and the spreading of xenophobic politics. In June 2018, a month after the formation of the new cabinet (self-defined as a “government of change”), a virulent far right chauvinistic political turn occurred. Salvini became the most influential politician in Italy and a major cause for concern in Brussels. His party was monopolizing the agenda on immigration and asylum seekers. Only days after being appointed interior minister and deputy prime minister, he made global headlines by denying docking rights to one of the many NGO-run rescue boats operating in the Mediterranean, the *Aquarius*, which had 629 refugees and migrants on board. He constantly criticized the EU and NGOs for rescuing immigrants and suggested that Italy should launch an information program in Africa to invite people not to leave their countries.

Given the refugee emergency, his main goal was to stop foreign naval vessels carrying migrants from docking in Italian ports. It is in this context that Salvini started his “let’s shut the ports” propaganda and policy. This gave him visibility and media attention. However, racism was developing also at a more local level. In October, in a city governed by the LN, the council implemented an apartheid-type resolution—applauded by Salvini—denying free school buses and meals to children of non-EU migrants. Moreover, the LN’s (winning) candidate in the Lombardy regional election in northern Italy, Attilio Fontana, argued for the need to defend the “white race”. He later claimed that this was a slip of the tongue because he simply meant to say that “Italian people or culture” (and not the white race) was to be defended. In his view, Italy was facing an “invasion [of migrants] which might destroy us”.¹⁵

Politically, the anti-migrant milestone of the new government materialized in December 2018, when Salvini’s decree on immigration and security became law after passing in parliament and a few street protests. It reflected the (harsh) approach of the “government of change”

¹⁵Della Frattina, G. (2018). Macché razzista, un lapsus. Io difendo il popolo italiano. *Il Giornale*, 16 February, 7.

on refugees and also turned migrants into enemies and easy targets. Bialasiewicz and Stallone suggested that the decree would

not only create illegality, it will also make migrants much more visible in the physical spaces of Italian cities, with people now thrust into abject conditions forced to survive on the streets. The desperate migrant “other” as CasaPound’s imagined fount of Italy’s urban crises has now, through the actions of the Lega, been turned into a reality.¹⁶

The LN’s impressive results in the 2019 EU elections seemed to inaugurate a new, more radical phase in Italian politics, but they affected the coalition’s stability. The elections became a crucial moment for the Italian government. The LN and the M5S showed some “increasingly open competition for voters’ support at the European elections”.¹⁷ It is no surprise that Salvini’s anti-immigration tenure symbolically finished with diplomatic frictions between Italy’s government and other EU member states such as France, Germany, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands as another rescue boat, the Sea Watch, was not permitted to approach the Italian coast in the summer of 2019. The European Court of Human Rights even questioned the Italian government on its decision not to grant these permissions. On the other hand, anti-migrant politicians like Donald Trump praised the Italian government during Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte’s first visit to the White House in late July 2018. According to Trump, Italy was “terrific”:

Both the Prime Minister and I are focused on the urgent need to protect our nations from . . . uncontrolled migration. Our countries have learned through hard experience that border security is national security. They are one and the same. Like the United States, Italy is currently under enormous strain as a result of illegal immigration. And they fought it hard. And the Prime Minister, frankly, is with us today because of illegal immigration. Italy got tired of it. They didn’t want it any longer. The people of Italy have borne a great part of the burden for Europe through the course of the migration crisis. I applaud the Prime Minister for his bold leadership — truly bold — and I hope more leaders will follow this example, including leaders in Europe. The Prime Minister and I are united in our conviction that strong nations must have strong borders. We have a solemn obligation to protect our citizens and their quality of life.

Conte similarly applauded the US president’s record on migration:

In terms of immigration, I also described to President Trump the innovative approach that Italy has put forth . . . And as you heard President Trump say, we appreciate this contribution, which is provided by the Italian government, which is providing good results. We are talking about an approach — a multi-level approach in order to try to resolve the phenomenon of immigration — not because of an emergency, but because this is a structural approach. I want to underline this is in line with the position of President Trump, which goes from the respect and dignity of people

¹⁶ Bialasiewicz, L., Stallone, S. (2020). Focalizing new-Fascism: Right politics and integralisms in contemporary Italy. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* (3), 432.

¹⁷ Cotta, M. (2020). The anti-establishment parties at the helm: From great hopes to failure and a limited resurrection, *Contemporary Italian Politics* (2), 127.

to make sure that fundamental rights are protected, and it wants to make sure that these rights aren't trampled over.¹⁸

In sum, asylum seekers and charity ships carrying migrants became the new enemy of hard-line right-wing politicians, and Italy, once again, led the way. Eighty years after the infamous racial laws and given the LN's role in the cabinet, racism was (partially) re-institutionalized in the country—even if by September 2019, the government was replaced by a more progressive Europhile cabinet, with the center-left Democratic Party acting as the main ally of the M5S.

3. THE FAR-RIGHT TURN

Since 2015, many observers have believed that Salvini's party would replace Berlusconi as the major force on the center-right. This was astonishing considering that the LN was coming from a strong political crisis, which had started a couple of years before. In particular, in 2012, it was hit by financial scandals, and this negatively influenced its powerful leader Umberto Bossi, who lost control of the party. This situation led to some electoral losses.¹⁹ However, these predicaments helped Salvini win the leadership in 2013 and begin a somewhat necessary renewal of a party in crisis.²⁰ This required changes that were favored by various factors, including the rise of another populist group, the M5S; a change in the state structure that gave more power to the regions; Berlusconi's decline, which enabled competition for the right-wing electorate; and the 2015 migration emergency, which was becoming a potent mobilizing flag for xenophobic forces.²¹ Once in power, Salvini pushed the party's focus away from the usual pro-northern themes. The idea was to start a policy of ideological radicalization and, with mixed fortunes, of territorial growth beyond its strongholds in the Po Valley.

This was a big move for a movement that was really only considered to be ethno-regionalist. Since the 1980s, the various autonomist leagues became—as the article will show—the defenders of certain northern communities, which (allegedly) shared a specific historical heritage that originated in the pre-modern epoch. Their “micro-nations” were based on clearly defined territorial units (for example, Lombardy or Veneto), which were populated by their imagined communities. Following the creation of the LN, they were replaced by the macro-area of Padania, a geographical territory that the party wanted to protect from the oppressive Italian state.

Interestingly, their approach to supranational institutions was different from that of the LN. Some *leghisti* initially saw in the European community a way to strengthen their subnational entity, or possibly even to liberate it from an oppressive, centralized (Italian) state. They were hoping that the supranational institutions would support their autonomist regionalism or fed-

¹⁸ Trump, D., Conte, G. (2018). *Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Conte of Italy in Joint Press Conference* / <https://it.usembassy.gov/president-trump-prime-minister-conte-joint-press-conference>

¹⁹ Cento Bull, A. (2013). When the Magic Wears Off: Bossi Loses His Grip. *Italian Politics* (1), 95 and 104.

²⁰ Vercesi, M. (2015). Owner Parties and Party Institutionalisation in Italy: is the Northern League Exceptional? *Modern Italy* (4), 396–410.

²¹ Brunazzo, M., Gilbert, M. (2017). Insurgents Against Brussels: Euroscepticism and the Right-Wing Populist Turn of the Lega Nord since 2013. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (5), 624–642;

Dennison, J., Geddes A. (2022). The centre no longer holds: the Lega, Matteo Salvini and the remaking of Italian immigration politics, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2), 441–460; Castelli Gattinara, P. (2017). The 'Refugee Crisis' in Italy as a Crisis of Legitimacy. *Contemporary Italian Politics* (3), pp. 318–331; Cento Bull, When the Magic Wears Off, 95–109.

eral ambitions.²² In its first issue, the *Quaderni Padani* even claimed that Italy was preventing Padania from “rejoining” Europe.²³

They also associated European integration with modernity, and they were convinced that they shared this feature with Europhiles in Brussels. In their view, Padania represented Italy’s materialization of this modernity. This fit perfectly with their idea of the South of Italy as an area embodying the vices of un-modernity.²⁴

Yet, in Salvini’s era, “Rome was no longer regarded as the main enemy; instead, another capital—Brussels—becomes the main target of Northern League rhetoric”.²⁵ Shifts in European politics had happened before. A major problem was when the EU showed no interest in an independent Padania and no support for any autonomist claim. In 2002–2003, in the middle of the debates on the European Constitution and the elaboration of the European Convention, the *Quaderni Padani*, for example, started writing about a new Europe, which it considered a genuine disaster. A unitary European, non-confederal and supranational state represented another powerful foe: “If previously we had one enemy, we now have two of them. If Rome is the thief, Brussels is surely not the home of honest people”.²⁶ In practice, the LN had to oppose the idea of Europe promoted by “technocratic elites” ready to impose a huge “continental state” and dominate European citizens.²⁷

Salvini’s “expansionism” beyond northern regions was and is even more controversial than his Euroscepticism.²⁸ He was running a movement that had to pay back millions of euros for fraud of public funds and with a negative external image. In this context, it started using propaganda based on themes such as “Nation” and “Fatherland”. The hope was to build a new party with a convincing national appeal. Given this, it established the “We with Salvini” group in 2014, which was the LN’s organization in center-southern Italy (but later replaced by the League for Salvini Premier). Salvini essentially started playing with popular fears. This was quite easy because the party was already targeting immigration and the EU. In sum, the LN was now willing to protect all Italian citizens, while publicly watering down the references to Padania and its anti-southern propaganda. The LN paradoxically became the “identitarian” party defending Italy’s values and traditions, along with Christianity and Europe’s inner soul, against Islam and progressive cosmopolitan elites.²⁹ It paid off electorally in 2018–2019; in the

²² Formentini, M. (1992). Maastricht apre al federalismo. *Lombardia Autonomista* (32). September, 4.

²³ *Quaderni Padani*. Un’associazione, 2

²⁴ Huyseune, M. (2006). *Modernity and secession: The social sciences and the political discourse of the Lega Nord in Italy*. Berghahn.

²⁵ Vampa, D. (2017). Matteo Salvini’s Northern League in 2016, *Italian Politics*, (1), 34.

²⁶ Stagnaro, C. (2003). Roma ladrona, Bruxelles anche. *Quaderni Padani* (45), February, 1.

²⁷ Brenno (2002). Lo specifico universale europeo, *Quaderni Padani* (43), September- December, 1.

²⁸ Albertazzi, D., Giovannini, A., Seddone, A. (2018). No regionalism please, we are *Leghisti!* The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, *Regional & Federal Studies* (5), 646-671.

²⁹ Identitarianism is a far-right ideology based on a xenophobic and nationalist ideology defending native Europeans. This identitarian activism developed in the early 2000s in France, starting with Génération Identitaire, which was the BI’s youth wing. Castelli Gattinara (2022) suggests that it is “a transnational far-right network of activists mobilising against globalization, immigration and Islam in Europe ... Groups modelled after the European movement emerged also in Australia, New Zealand and North America Today, the Identitarian movement represents one of the most active global networks within the contemporary far right”.

Castelli Gattinara, P. 2022. Identitarian Movements, Right-wing. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm570>. CP and BI are currently involved in this web. For an overall assessment of Génération Identitaire, see Nissen, A. (2022). *Europeanisation of the contemporary far right: Generation Identity and Fortress Europe*. Routledge.

2019 EU elections, the LN became the first party in Italy. For the first time in its history, it won more than 20% of votes in the southern Italian regions.³⁰

Lorenzo Fontana, the LN's former chair in the EU Parliament and president of the Chamber of Deputies at the time of writing this article, suggested that the party was evolving under Salvini.³¹ Since 2014, the party has been working to become a “national point of reference” for some federal and identitarian movements gathered under the new label *We with Salvini*, which testifies to Salvini's relevance in the contemporary history of right-leaning Italy.³² This became evident when, in 2014, the LN organized some demonstrations against Renzi's government. These gatherings were full of references to immigration and the EU. In February, they went to Rome, where they were joined by FdI and CP's neo-fascist hard-liners. Marine Le Pen sent a video message, while the Identitarian Bloc (Bloc Identitaire, hereafter BI) from France, the Greek Golden Dawn, and the German anti-Islam movement Pegida also attended the event. The organizers' main slogan was: “We will make History, do not miss it!”.

Some demonstrators flagged Celtic crosses and made Fascist salutes. A popular former activist of CP, Simone Di Stefano, stated that “we are Fascists” and “Salvini is fine with this”. His group shared “every word from Salvini's speech. He is our leader”. He also argued that neo-fascists supported the LN because a new “political front” had been established. CP aimed to “gather social and identitarian movements” in a bloc led by Salvini.³³

Not many people in the LN showed any concern about the presence of some of the most extreme right-wing forces in Europe. For example, Pegida—a “hybrid” right-wing group (more a social movement than a party)—was created in Dresden (Eastern Germany) in 2014 and counts football hooligans among its members.³⁴ It promotes racism and conspiracy theories.³⁵ It promotes the right to preserve native values and cultures. Fontana claimed to be glad to build a coalition with them because they were, in his words, trying to create a new Europe. For the LN, it was important that Pegida was growing in Germany while promoting an alternative vision of Europe. Both groups were fighting for the same culturally and ethnically homogeneous continent. Fontana and German activists shared the idea that Christian Europe was threatened by a clash of civilizations. Pegida invited the LN to join other European movements in a new pan-European platform, xenophobic Fortress Europe, promoting strict border controls and European culture against immigrants and Islam.

A member of the EU Parliament, Mario Borghezio, was very instrumental in the encounters with this identitarian far right galaxy. In the 1970s, he had been a member of transnational groups like Young Europe (Jeune Europe), founded by the Belgian Jean Thiriart in 1963, and the neo-fascist New Order (Ordine Nuovo). Borghezio joined the LN movement in its early days but maintained strong connections with nationalist forces, both nationally and internationally. In 2014, he was elected European MP in central Italy with the support of CP. It helped him win votes among neo-fascist sympathizers because the LN had turned its previous

³⁰ Since then, the LN has lost this electoral appeal. This vote in the South cannot be explained simply by the new nationalist rhetoric, but also by the selection of strong candidates. See De Luca, R., Fruncillo, D. (2019). Lega ‘nazionale’ di Salvini alla conquista del Meridione. *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale* (82), 48–84.

³¹ Fontana is also one of the party's national secretaries.

³² Palladino, A. (2017). Siam Leghisti. *Famiglia Cristiana*. 10 September. <https://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/all-armi-siam-leghisti.aspx>

³³ Cannettieri, S. (2015). Sfila la claque nera del Carroccio. *Il Messaggero*, 1 March, 16.

³⁴ Schmidt, I. (2017). Pegida: A Hybrid Form of a Populist Right Movement. *German Politics and Society* (4), 106.

³⁵ Salzborn, S. (2016). Renaissance of the New Right in Germany? *German Politics and Society* (2), 52.

northern regionalism into an anti-immigration, nationalist discourse.

Borghesio was also famously caught suggesting to activists from France's BI and Nissa Re-bela how to infiltrate politics and society by using a regionalist or Catholic façade. In his words, this was a good way not to be classified as nostalgic Fascists. He was invited to a BI conference, where he discussed the need for a populist, "identitarian" regeneration. BI and its Italian counterpart Generation Identity (Generazione Identitaria, GI) joined Borghesio's conference in April 2015 in Italy, which focused on the building of a "national League".³⁶

The connection with identitarian movements was also nurtured by cultural circles close to the LN such as Il Talebano, which organized a conference on the same morning of the rally in Rome, in collaboration with GI and featuring Salvini, Fontana, and some BI militants.³⁷ Their aims included, once more, the building of a federation of far right forces sharing new themes, such as ethnopluralism, or criticizing "globalism". Ethnopluralism, in particular, is a non-biological version of racism based on culture rather than on opposition to foreign ethnicities. Non-national or non-European cultures are, in this view, incompatible with European native traditions and Western societies. This ideological frame helped parties to attract conservative or moderate right-wing voters who were uncomfortable with openly ethnic propaganda.³⁸

These features were popularized by the Research and Study Group for European Civilization (Groupement de Recherche et d'Études pour la Civilisation Européenne). This latter generated the powerful New Right (Nouvelle Droite) led by Alain De Benoist. To some extent, the French philosopher was getting close to the LN; he participated in the political training of the party's youth wing and was invited to contribute to *Quaderni Padani*, where he wrote on Europe and liberal globalization.³⁹ Interestingly, Salvini met De Benoist in 2013 at a conference on "The end of sovereignty," which focused on globalization and the (negative) outcomes of liberalism. These were the days in which the LN leader admitted being ready to "discuss" the formation of coalitions with far-right parties.

It is this new "identitarian model" that, along with the New Right's themes, helped the LN to come close to and then create a bloc with foreign politicians such as Le Pen—especially from Eurosceptic, anti-multicultural, anti-globalization, and anti-liberal perspectives. Salvini's international activism was, in fact, not limited to Pegida. Before the 2014 EU election, he met the French National Front (Front National) to create a Eurosceptic parliamentary group after the elections.⁴⁰ Following the 2019 EU election, in which the LN became the first party in Italy, some far right parties joined forces, founding the Identity and Democracy Group in the European Parliament.⁴¹

³⁶ Palladino, Siam Leghisti.

³⁷ One of the founders of Il Talebano is Vincenzo Sofo, a former activist of the neo-fascist party The Right (La Destra). He became a European MP with the LN (but he is now with FdI) and was a promoter of the party's rightward shift. He is the partner of the former MP Marion Maréchal (Marine Le Pen's powerful nephew).

³⁸ Rydgren, J. (2005). Is extreme right wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family. *European Journal of Political Research* (2), 421.

³⁹ De Benoist, A. (2002). Europa e mondializzazione, *Quaderni Padani* (43), September- December, 61-64.

⁴⁰ Other parties involved in these pan-European discussions were the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Flemish Vlaams Belang, the Freedom Party of Austria, the Sweden Democrats, and the Slovak National Party.

⁴¹ Marco Zanni, from the LN, is their current president. Other members include the National Rally (Rassemblement National, the new name of Le Pen's Front National), Alternative for Germany, the Freedom Party of Austria, Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang, a rebrand of the Vlaams Blok), the Conservative People's Party of Estonia, the Danish People's Party, and Freedom and Direct Democracy from the Czech Republic.

4. NORTHERN MYTHS AND PREJUDICE

In 2018 the movement was irrefutably a far-right organization.⁴² Yet, not many seem to emphasize racism as a central feature of the LN in its early stages.⁴³ It soon became a political group promoting intolerance, constantly creating tensions with the “other” and pushing regions against the central state, peripheries against the center.⁴⁴ In fact, looking at the LN from a historical perspective, we can see that there has always been some kind of prejudice. Yet, regionalism, along with the LN’s non-traditional and unclear collocation in the political system, prevented many Italian observers from considering that its rhetoric and imagined community were embodying forms of racism (one of the foremost left-wing leaders once famously said that the LN stemmed from the left). The creation of the northern identity came along with the use of ethno-symbolism, which highlighted—if not artificially constructed—local stories, legends, regional languages, popular games, and “traditions” that usually referred to their chosen ancestors, mostly the Celts (along with the Germanic, barbaric tribe of the Longobards). In general, symbolism and common histories serve to define a territory (usually a nation) and those belonging to it.⁴⁵ In northern Italy, these historical references served some precise aims. In particular, they confirmed the non-Roman heritage of the *padani*.⁴⁶ This essentially confirmed the (bizarre) belief that northern people were ethnically “different” from the other Italians. The Celtic inheritance dissociates northerners from southerners and Padania from the Mediterranean. This difference was also used to claim “control over territory, resources and people”, because the “Celts were the primary inhabitants of the territories claimed, those with Celtic ancestry have prior right to reside within and hold power over these areas”.⁴⁷

However, the reference was not only to cultural heritage. The role of ethnicity and ethnic groups—in Smith’s “ethno-symbolic” terms—was central to the building (or, better, the invention) of the “northern nation”.⁴⁸ This is how *leghisti* envisioned or framed their imagined Padania. In the 1980s, *Lombardia Autonomista*, in fact, published articles claiming that northern autonomy was based on “ethnic” features.⁴⁹ Given this (northern/white) ancestry, Padania could only be ruled by the “native” local population with the essential subordination of the non-white (immigrant) residents or the southern Italians. This discriminatory policy resisted even when the LN played down its anti-southern rhetoric. In sum, this specific heritage was used (1) practically, to reassert “difference”, whiteness, privilege, and “priority” for the *padani* and (2) symbolically, to place the LN in some historical lineage with non-Roman populations who had succeeded in defeating the Roman Empire and its “expansionism”.

Expansionism was a major theme in the rhetoric of the northern leagues. *Lombardia Autonomista* continuously argued that contemporary politicians in Rome were (similarly) transform-

⁴² Passarelli, G., Tuorto, D. (2018). *La Lega di Salvini. Estrema destra di governo*. Il Mulino.

⁴³ Cento Bull, A. (1996). Ethnicity, Racism and the Northern League. In Levy C. (ed.). *Italian Regionalism*. Berg, 171-187.

⁴⁴ Balbo, L., Manconi, L. (1992). *I razzismi reali*, Feltrinelli, 43.

⁴⁵ Smith, A. (2009). *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism. A Cultural Approach*. Routledge.

⁴⁶ Brenno (1997). Noi, Celti e Longobardi. Ma anche Garalditani, Liguri, Veneti e Goti, *Quaderni Padani* (12), August, 1-3; Ciola, G. (1997). L’unità etno-culturale della Padania. *Quaderni Padani* (12), August, 4-7.

⁴⁷ Hague, E., Giordano, B., Sebesta, E. (2005). Whiteness, Multiculturalism and Nationalist Appropriation of Celtic Culture: The Case of the League of the South and the Lega Nord. *Cultural Geography* (2), 167.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Ethno-symbolism*, 18. Piazza, S. (1995). Nord Nazione. Aspirazione legittima. *Lega Nord*. 25 October.

⁴⁹ *Lombardia Autonomista*. (1984). Buon Anno Nuovo. *Lombardia Autonomista*. December, 2.

ing the North into a “colony”.⁵⁰ A similar belief was shared by the *Liga Veneta*.⁵¹ The leagues often claimed that center-southern Italian elites were trying to “Italianize” the Veneto through education and mass media. In 1984, the two leagues expressed the hope that their (first) electoral federation with the *Unione Piemontese* could represent the beginning of emancipation from “Roman colonialism”.⁵² Their idea was that center-southern Italian elites were promoting southern-ethnic “expansionism”. In their view, a southern-ethnic majority was essentially using national parties to gain hegemony over the country. In other words, they feared that there was a “racist will” to “cancel” northern “languages” and culture.⁵³ In such a context, mass migration from southern Italy—which mostly occurred during the postwar economic boom—had nearly destroyed the ethnic identity of northern Italians.⁵⁴ Very similar rhetoric was used in the new century, as the *Quaderni Padani* continued to claim that Padania was economically subjugated to the power of “Italian ethnicity”.⁵⁵

The response to this “exploitative policy of the Italian central state was a further call for regional self-rule, mixed with discrimination based on the cultural and ethnic differences between the people of Padania and southern Italians.⁵⁶ This created a binary, Manichaean worldview in which Bossi’s movement was “defending” the *padani* against a whole universe of enemies, namely the “other” Italians, the Albanians and Eastern Europeans reaching Italy after the collapse of Communism, and non-European immigrants, but also Italy’s state bureaucracy and the central government. They were, in various forms, (1) undermining the rights (or privileges) of *true* citizens and (2) depredating the wealth of northern regions.

This translated into a policy of giving local citizens a (racist-type) “priority” in terms of jobs, housing, welfare, and other social provisions. In other words, northerners were supposed to have “precedence” over “non-citizens” or foreigners. For some jobs, a further preference had to be given to people speaking northern dialects. The *leghisti* dreamed of a society where only northern ethnic people worked in the schools of their regions (or in the public sector, more generally).⁵⁷ Similarly, electoral slogans in the 1980s called people from Lombardy to vote only for candidates born in the region (“Sono Lombardo, voto Lombardo”), while one of their posters (from 1992) stated that citizens from the South living in the northern regions had to “go home”.

The outcome of these proposals was the creation of a pure community, free from the presence of an “other”. This was precisely because the outsider—almost any outsider—was an enemy or a genuine threat to Padania. It is interesting to note how, in their publications, the reference to immigration often mixed non-Europeans with southern Italians. Migrants were generally seen as a phenomenon with harmful consequences for northern Italy, allegedly con-

⁵⁰ Lombardia Autonomista. (1983a). Informazioni. *Lombardia Autonomista*. December, 4.

⁵¹ Diamanti, I. (1992). La mia patria è il Veneto. I valori e la proposta politica delle leghe. *Polis* (2), 225-257.

⁵² Lombardia Autonomista. Buon Anno, 1.

⁵³ Ronchi, R. (1988). Giacimenti culturali. *Lombardia Autonomista*. September, 1.

⁵⁴ Bossi, U. (1991). *Discorso di apertura del Congresso della Lega Lombarda*. Congresso Federale Ordinario. https://webcitation.org/6CdM5pjzE?url=http://leganord.org/ilmovimento/momentistorici/pieve_91apertura.pdf

⁵⁵ Quaderni Padani. (2003). La rubrica silenziosa. *Quaderni Padani* (45), February, 64.

⁵⁶ The leagues did not invent this xenophobic prejudice against southern Italians; this preexisting attitude was reactivated and exploited by politicians such as Bossi.

⁵⁷ Lombardia Autonomista. (1983b). Programma politico. *Lombardia Autonomista*. September, 2.

tributing to the decline of democracy in industrial communities.⁵⁸ This populist propaganda helped to increase the Lega Lombarda's electoral share: even if it was still a tiny group, it managed to elect Bossi to parliament in 1987 and gain four hundred seventy thousand votes in the 1989 European election.⁵⁹

The ethnic connotation was also central in the federation of the leagues. In a speech at the LN's first national congress in 1991, Bossi claimed that his Lega Lombarda's ethno-nationalism had now basically turned into a new "ethno-federalism". In his view, there was an "integral federalism" that resulted from the union of a number of ethno-nationalist movements fighting against state centralism. Equally important was the fact that these northern groups came from regions with "homogeneous" populations, which shared "ethnic affinities".⁶⁰

In other words, the rapprochement with the anti-immigration far right since 2013 has been facilitated by the LN's previous ethnic, racist rhetoric.⁶¹ The unifying theme was the "othering" of enemies and foes. Constructing a racist otherness is exactly what Salvini did in 2018–2019 with the migrant vessels⁶²

However, as mentioned above, this is also what the first leagues envisioned decades before. In 1982, Bossi already claimed that "the arrival of millions of new immigrants" meant a "disintegration" of northern societies. He explicitly suggested that there was a connection between national politics and immigration.⁶³ Unsurprisingly, one of the LN posters of the time states how the Lega Lombarda was not going to support the Italian flag if it meant being in a multi-racial country forcing northern people to (1) welcome immigrants and to (2) be subjugated to an "authoritarian state".

A major political turning point came in 1989 with the discussion of the famous Martelli Law (which was seen as favoring migrants) and continued until 1991, when thousands of migrants from Albania reached the Italian coasts after the fall of the Communist regime. Images (or fear) of immigrants entering Italy created the conditions for further radicalization as well as the racialization of the party propaganda. In 1990, in particular, the LN called for a referendum to ban the Martelli Law because it would have facilitated a huge influx of immigrants into northern Italy. Propaganda stressed the difficulty of integrating black people. In 1991, during the LN's aforementioned first national congress, Bossi again emphasized the impossibility of assimilating migrants coming from the Third World because they were a challenge to the "homogeneous" ethnic groups of Padania.⁶⁴ Additionally, immigrants faced a "hostile" (xenophobic) environment in the municipalities controlled by the LN.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Lombardia Autonomista. Informazioni, 2. This racist approach also emerged in the first party statutes, which included references to the negative influence of immigration on jobs as well as the unreasonable integration of migrants.

⁵⁹ Barcella, P. (2018). Percorsi leghisti. Dall'antimeridionalismo alla xenofobia. *Meridiana* (91), 95-118.

⁶⁰ Bossi, *Discorso di apertura del Congresso*.

⁶¹ See Newth, G. (2019). The roots of the Lega Nord's populist regionalism. *Patterns of Prejudice* (4), 383-406.

⁶² Cervi, L., Tejedor, S., Alencar Dornelles, M. (2020). When Populists Govern the Country: Strategies of Legitimization of Anti-Immigration Policies in Salvini's Italy. *Sustainability* (23), 1-12.

⁶³ Bossi, U. (1982). L'autonomia dei popoli, *Lombardia Autonomista*. October, 2.

⁶⁴ There is generally a strong correlation between voting for the LN and the immigration issue. Since 1992, the rise of immigrants (or the Muslim population) in certain areas usually increases the party's electoral share.

Abbondanza, G., Bailo, F. (2018). The electoral payoff of immigration flows for anti-immigration parties: the case of Italy's Lega Nord. *European Political Science* (2), 378-403.

⁶⁵ Interestingly, if the propaganda tends to be hostile to foreigners, in 2008, the rhetoric tended to mock the Nouvelle Droite's ethnopluralism, which exploits the idea of defending cultural diversity but, in reality, challenges multiculturalism, while supporting the separation of different communities. Richardson, J., Colombo M. (2013). Continuity and change in anti-immigrant discourse in Italy: An analysis of the visual propaganda of the Lega Nord. *Journal of Language and Politics* (12), 180-202.

The events of 9/11 represented a further step in the anti-immigration agenda. Islam became an easy target and a new “enemy”.⁶⁶ In reality, many years before, *Lombardia Autonomista* had already featured anti-Islam headlines, for example, “Is Lombardy European or Islamic?”⁶⁷ In 1999, publications such as *Quaderni Padani* highlighted the threat of Islam and its impossible integration with Europe’s values. They even envisioned the emergence of a clash between the Padanian (Christian) civilization and Islamic culture.⁶⁸ In such a context, the spirit of the Battle of Lepanto (1571)—where the (Catholic) Holy League famously defeated the (Islamic) Ottoman Empire—was invoked to fight for the defense of freedom. The *leghisti* wanted to “liberate” Padania from the assault of the “new Turks” and those Italians unwilling to support Christian civilization. Padania represented, in this sense, the bastion of the “European fortress”.⁶⁹

In sum, racism was a major feature of the party well before the notorious Bossi–Fini Law (2002), which represents the most hardline legislation against immigration in Italian history.⁷⁰ There was, then, no surprise to see LN officers openly insulting Cécile Kyenge, Italy’s first black minister. In April 2013, after she was appointed minister for integration, blogs, and social media close to the party called Kyenge a “prostitute”, “Muslim”, “illegal immigrant”, the “Minister of Congo”, and someone to be “raped”. Roberto Calderoli, the LN’s vice-president of the Senate, even compared her to an orangutan. By 2018, the party was clearly the most xenophobic force in Italian politics.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article has shown that the 2018–2019 government bloc was seen globally as one of the most perturbing political outcomes of this historical phase, but it was negatively portrayed for the wrong reasons. International elites were particularly concerned about the anti-EU populist nature of the M5S and the LN. However, not many observers seemed to have been worried about the racist policy promoted by the latter.

In truth, the government did not last long, and this political phase did not represent a massive turning point in Italian history. However, this story tells us that developments on the far-right side of the political system can strongly influence contemporary democracies as well as multicultural societies. The institutional integration of the far right does not necessarily translate into a moderation of its policies. The LN, for example, did what it was expected to do on immigration. This was one of the most extreme aspects of its experience in a government with where an inexperienced partner such as the M5S was unable to counterbalance some more moderate (migration) policies. This approach clearly shows the LN’s racist core, which is only artificially covered by references to patriotism, Euroscepticism, national identity, and sovereignty.

The historical perspective is particularly useful to understand the LN’s journey from regionalism to far right politics, and from anti-southern stances to open racism. Studying its historical background shows that prejudices have been promoted since the 1980s. This xenophobic

⁶⁶ Barcella. *La Lega*, 115–122.

⁶⁷ Corti, M. (1991). Lombardia europea o islamica, *Lombardia Autonomista*, February, 4.

⁶⁸ Facco, L. (1999). Le libertà difronte all’Islam. *Quaderni Padani* (22), May–June, 100–101.

⁶⁹ Brenno (2000). Il significato di Lepanto, *Quaderni Padani* (31), September–October, pp. 1–2

⁷⁰ Barcella. *La Lega*, 112.

stance was in line with Europe's far right policies of the time.⁷¹ The difference was that the main targets were initially fellow citizens from the southern regions and Rome, which represented the predatory central state. However, this was not only a way to negatively highlight cultural differences. As I have mentioned, there was also an ethnic dimension.

Given this ideological frame, the *leghisti* became flexible in the choice of their enemy: southern Italians, extra-EU migrants, Rome, Brussels, and Islam. In sum, the LN has embodied a racist connotation since its inception. As with other forms of right-wing extremism, one of the major points was the existence of an unassimilable "enemy". This "foe" was the reason (or one of the reasons) for the crisis of its community; it was a threat to the cohesion and purity of the northern people. Apart from the anti-southern rhetoric that still exists at the regional level, it was only when the LN was in crisis and its leader moved closer to traditional far right forces that the political struggle became about globalization versus identity and Italians versus foreigners.

However, this does not mean that the party turned into a classic nationalist movement. Not everyone shared, and currently shares, the LN's reconfiguration. In 2017, for example, the LN's former leader Bossi labeled his successor Salvini a "nationalist Fascist".⁷² There were opposing factions, with divisions between the new leader and some party elites, and much of the LN's interests were (are) still in Padania. Moreover, the Northern League for the Independence of Padania formally exists and can potentially be reactivated, abandoning the new sister party.

Salvini's strategy was successful in the sense that the movement managed to win votes and elect representatives in southern Italy, where the LN was previously non-existent. This was possible because it presented itself as a real (far) right-wing, anti-immigrant party that was defending the interests of Italy, including Italians living in the southern regions. It also had only limited competition on the far right of the political spectrum. However, leaving aside the usual anti-immigrant propaganda or regionally tailored slogans such as "Sicily belongs to Sicilians", the *leghisti* have failed to build a genuine, nationalist ideology. To use Smith's (2020) words again, their nationalism is unwilling to create a nationwide doctrine or national symbolism gathering Italians under the same banner or identity. The party's only unifying flag was the external threat of migrants and the EU. This anti-foreigner credo facilitated the rightward shift, but the LN's empty nationalism raises further questions about the seriousness or possible durability of this policy.

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⁷¹ For example, the "national preference" policy (that is, "our" citizens come first)—which is promoted by the LN—has been popularized in France by Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National since the 1980s. The party was, from time to time, accused of importing this xenophobic *Lepenism* because it was racializing the political agenda and the public discourse in a similar way. Mammone, A. (2015). *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy*. Cambridge University Press.

⁷² Newth, G., Maccaferri, M. (2022). The delegitimation of Europe in a pro-European country 'Sovereignism' and populism in the political discourse of Matteo Salvini's Lega, *Journal of Language and Politics* (2), 277-299.

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