

## **Insurgents Against Brussels:**

### **Euroscepticism and the Right-Wing Populist Turn of the Lega Nord since 2013**

## **Ribelli contro Bruxelles:**

### **L'euroscetticismo e la svolta della destra populista della Lega Nord dal 2013**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini the Lega Nord has shifted away from its previous political identity as a voice for Italy's North and has placed hostility to the policies and institutions of the European Union (EU) at the heart of its rhetoric. Nowadays, the enemy is Rome no longer: it is Brussels, European institutions, and the threat to the national sovereignty posed by the EU. Borrowing from the Italian political philosopher Nicola Matteucci, we would describe Salvini's Lega as a 'populist insurgency'. That it is to say, it is a populist party that marries the traditional populist evocation of the virtues of the people against the corrupt elites, with a pervasive *glibness* of analysis.

Sotto la guida di Matteo Salvini, la Lega Nord si è allontanata dalla sua precedente identità politica per cui dava voce alle proteste del Nord Italia per porre l'ostilità alle politiche e alle istituzioni dell'Unione Europea (UE) al centro della sua retorica. Oggi il nemico non è più a Roma: è Bruxelles, le istituzioni europee, e la minaccia alla sovranità nazionale posta dall'UE. Adottando la prospettiva concettuale del filosofo politico italiano Nicola Matteucci, descriveremo la Lega di Salvini come una "rivolta populista", ovvero come un partito che sposa la tradizionale evocazione populista delle virtù del popolo contro le élite corrotte con una pervasiva superficialità di analisi.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Populism, Lega Nord, Italian politics, Euroscepticism, national sovereignty

The spectre of right-wing populism is stalking Europe and Italy's Lega Nord does not want to be left out. Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, a 44-year-old who ousted the party's founder and long-time leader Umberto Bossi in 2013, the Lega has shifted away from its previous political identity as a voice for Italy's North and has placed hostility to the policies and institutions of the European Union (EU) at the heart of its rhetoric.

Outside Italy the Lega Nord is probably still best known for its quixotic attempt in the late 1990s to invent a new nation, 'Padania', and for its policy of urging secession for Italy's prosperous northern regions. Beneath the absurd fake-Celtic pageantry associated with this policy and beneath the concurrent slightly comical efforts of the party's amateur ethnographers to illustrate Padania's ethnic diversity from the rest of Italy, the party leadership's main practical ambition was to establish itself as the equivalent of Bavaria's CSU. Its goal, in short, was to be a hegemonic, or at any rate pivotal, party of government throughout the North that could also ensure that the region's interests were represented at national level by the party's centrality in the right-wing coalitions led by Silvio Berlusconi that were in power between 2001 and 2006, and 2008 and 2011. Bossi's Lega was often crude, especially over immigration, but – and this point cannot be stressed too strongly – its bite was bigger than its bark. In addition to controlling at various times the presidency of several regions and numerous provinces and major cities, the Lega provided several key ministers to Berlusconi's cabinets, notably Roberto Maroni, the long-time Interior Minister, and Roberto Calderoli, the Lega's guru on matters of electoral law, even though its share of the vote was long a small fraction of Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Bossi himself was Minister for Reform under Berlusconi and became an indispensable ally for the Milanese tycoon – more of an ally, in fact, than most of Forza Italia's litigious party hierarchs (Brunazzo & Roux 2012).

Salvini, by contrast, has increasingly opted to identify with the right-wing insurgencies (a word that we shall return to below) that are gaining ground across Europe. Salvini has openly sought the endorsement of the French Front National. The political goal underlying this swerve rightwards is plainly to supplant Berlusconi as the national leader of Italy's divided and disputatious right wing, to set off a voter rebellion able to drive the current centrist government from office, and to challenge the rival populism of the Five Stars Movement (M5S) on its own turf: the disaffected from all parts of the country, not just the North, with the political elite and its failings.

The Lega's shift in the direction of right-wing populism is most glaring in its attitude towards the EU. Before 2013 the Lega often thundered against Brussels – Bossi was at least Salvini's equal as a demagogue – but its actions spoke louder than words: a point that has often been missed in the

academic literature, which has tended to take the Lega's Euroscepticism somewhat for granted. While in government, the Lega broadly acquiesced with the external constraints imposed upon the Italian government by the EU, especially in the sphere of macroeconomic policy – although that did not prevent it from transforming certain issues where the EU was unpopular with key constituencies, notably milk quotas, into highly divisive (and ultimately expensive for the Italian taxpayer) campaigns against Brussels (Lizzi 1997).

Since Salvini became leader, however, the gloves have come off. The Lega is now as strident an opponent of the EU as any party in Europe. Brussels has substituted Rome in the movement's propaganda as *the* place where incompetent and corrupt elites exploit ordinary citizens (the victims are no longer merely the good cittadini of northern Italy). Convinced that across Europe 'citizens are fed up and they are awakening populistically and nationalistically', Salvini has made denigrating the EU and its core policies the centrepiece of his wider political strategy to launch a Trump-style outsiders' revolt against all Italy's established political forces, be they of the left or the right (Salvini 2016). Like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson or Geert Wilders, Salvini has discovered that snap solutions uttered in media soundbites and provocative tweets are efficacious with the contemporary electorate. He has also discovered that the EU is a perfect 'sitting duck' for his attacks (Canovan 1999, 6). Deriding the EU, with its highly paid (foreign) bureaucrats, burdensome regulations, obsession with fiscal rigour, and incomprehensible jargon is, as Italians say, like 'shooting at the Red Cross'.

With the above introduction as a premise, we think that the 'populist turn' of the Lega Nord under Salvini's leadership generates three points of interest for scholars of contemporary European politics. The first point is empirical but it has definitional implications. It means that 'Padania' and the hitherto tirelessly evoked popolo del Nord have been eclipsed in the Lega's propaganda at least, although it is highly unlikely that they will be neglected in the Lega's concrete political actions. If Salvini has his way (and he may not), the Lega will become less of a 'regionalist populist' party (Biorcio 1991; McDonnell 2006). The second, essentially empirical, point is that the shift in attitude towards the EU under Salvini has been much more radical than the existing literature has supposed.

The third point is an observation on the political style of the new Lega. Borrowing from the Italian political philosopher Nicola Matteucci, we would describe Salvini's Lega as a 'populist insurgency' (Matteucci 2008). That it is to say, it is a populist party that marries the traditional populist evocation of the virtues of the people against the corrupt elites, with a pervasive *glibness* of analysis. Umberto Bossi, who by now can be cast almost as a shrewd old moderate, thinks Salvini is in 'too much of a hurry'. In Bossi's view, it is necessary to say 'we are here [in politics]

because we want to do certain things' (Cremonesi 2016, 13). This notion of the Lega as a programmatic party, an aspect of the Lega's political *modus operandi* upon which Cento Bull and Gilbert (2001) strongly insisted, now looks decidedly superseded in the case of the Lega, and not only the Lega, of course. Salvini is making policy on the hoof, trusting to his instinct of what will strike a chord with the citizens' mood of anger and resentment. The case of the EU illustrates this perfectly. Salvini says he wants 'another Europe', but what that Europe might look like, and how it would work, is nowhere defined, any more than the populist insurgency of 1968 (which was Matteucci's original target) advanced practical suggestions for reform in the universities. It is enough to know what one is *against* and to whip the indignant mood of the righteous people against those who defend it. This article is structured in such a way as to demonstrate both this point and the two more empirical observations mentioned previously.

#### FROM REGIONALIST POPULISM TO LEPENISM à L'ITALIANA

It is often forgotten that the Lega is the oldest party of the so-called Italian Second Republic, which began in 1994 with the election of Silvio Berlusconi and the emergence of a new party system. For a movement that has always aimed at transforming Italian politics, this resilience can appear a paradox. Born in Northern Italy in 1991, the Lega established itself as a pivotal party in the parliaments elected in 1994, 1996, and 2001. Berlusconi could not govern without the Lega and accordingly it became a key component of the governmental coalitions he led. By unabashedly representing the interests of Northern Italy and, for this reason, collecting consensus overwhelmingly from that part of Italy ('Padania', in the Lega's rhetoric), Bossi's movement represented a territorially concentrated electorate. For this reason, it has often been defined as a regionalist party (De Winter and Tursan 2003).

The defence of Padania's interests was not a new issue. As early as 1945, Gianfranco Miglio, a political philosopher who would briefly become the Lega's guru in the early 1990s, wrote that so-called Padania, though loosely defined, 'has a specific *raison d'être*, its own historical economic and productive – and even linguistic – physiognomy, so it can ask – for its full development, and also for the benefit of the whole nation – for a clear and specific position within the new emerging Italy. Italian unity will not function on any other basis. (...) Northern Italy as a whole (...) constitutes a geographical, economic, ethnic, and spiritual harmonious unity which deserves to be governed by itself' (Miglio 1945). Miglio was not alone in asserting Padania's distinctiveness from the rest of Italy: in the post-war period, several local movements (particularly in the northern provinces of Como and Bergamo) managed to build (short-lived) electoral success on anti-Southern prejudice and an assertion of northern regional identity (Bouillaud 1998). However, it was not

until Bossi appeared on the political scene in the mid-1980s that northern regionalism took the national stage. In the general election of 1987, the Lega Lombarda obtained its first representative in the lower chamber of the Italian parliament (Giuseppe Leoni) and in the Senate (Bossi himself; he has been nicknamed il senatur ever since). Bossi shrewdly capitalized on the Lega Lombarda's success to unite the various northern autonomist movements (most notably the Liga Veneta) under his leadership in February 1991, when the Lega Nord was formed. The creation of the Lega Nord was timely. When scandal hit the ruling four-party coalition in 1992, the Lega was ideally positioned to scoop up disenchanted voters. In the April 1992 general elections, Bossi's movement scored almost 9 percent of the vote and broke Christian Democracy's decades-long hold on power in northern Italy. There is truth to Bossi's claim that the 'Italian revolution' of the early 1990s would not have occurred had the Lega not existed (Bossi 1993, 5–6; Gilbert 1995).

There were three key pillars to the Lega's ideology. First, Lega intellectuals (they did exist) argued that there is a popolo del Nord (living in 'Padania') that is made up of several regional components who nevertheless share fundamental common cultural features distinct from the peoples of the rest of Italy: common historical roots, relative linguistic specificities, a strong work ethos, and a tradition of local freedom and self-rule (Oneto 1997). Second, from an economic perspective, the Lega contended that the north of Italy was unfairly losing out since it produced a disproportionately large amount of Italian GDP but it could not profit from its prosperity because the resources it created were being drained off to finance the South. Third, the Lega suggested – or militantly asserted – that the fundamental source of this misrule was the unitary Italian state, which had proved incapable of governing Italy's highly diverse territorial reality and which was in the hands of a corrupt, largely southern, political class that was guilty of neglecting the rights of northern citizens.

The Lega concluded, logically enough, that the northern regions need political emancipation under a strong form of federalism which might turn into outright secession if 'Rome' (the national government) did not accommodate the Lega's requests. Fiscal policy, state centralism, immigration and European integration were all issues progressively combined into a distinctive political agenda supported by aggressive political rhetoric and a meticulously structured party organisation that enabled the Lega, alone among the principal Italian parties, to maintain a genuine grassroots presence (Biorcio 2010). Umberto Bossi's political genius – and the source of his domination of the movement – lay in his undeniable capacity to combine all these (sometime contrasting) elements into a single and distinctive political offer, even if he was sometimes compelled to undertake very 'risky' ideological shifts and simplifications (Huyssseune 2010). Nevertheless, it is crucial to underline that under Bossi the Lega was a party with a programme. In some ways, it resembled, in miniature, the old PCI in as much as it was a tightly organized

movement whose leadership had a broad ideological goal – federalism – and practised an acute form of ‘democratic centralism’ in which the central leadership laid down the ‘party line’ and brooked little internal dissent (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001, 42–66).

The Lega’s ideological coherence and tight organization enabled it to survive intact through two decades of mixed electoral fortunes (tab.1). The movement’s record at the polls can only be described as one of alti e bassi:

Fig. 1. LN electoral performance in general (both chambers) and European elections (1987-2014).

Year	General election	European election
1987	1.3%	
1989		1.8%
1992	8.7%	
1994	8.4%	
1994		6.6%
1996	10.6%	
1999		4.5%
2001	3.9%	
2004		5.0%
2006	4.6%	
2008	8.3%	
2009		10.2%
2013	4.1%	
2014		6.2%

Source: authors’ calculation on Italian Interior Ministry data.

Two main general observations can be drawn from these figures. First, the Lega has cemented its position in the Italian political process. It has participated in all major elections and has invariably obtained a significant number of votes, although it is substantially absent from Florence southwards. Moreover, it has been able to take part in the centre-right coalitions and become essential for forming several national governments – although, paradoxically, the period in which its political influence was greatest was during the second Berlusconi government (2001–6), when its share of the vote was lowest. Many Lega voters never fully digested Bossi’s opportunistic transformation from being Berlusconi’s most brutal (and vulgar) critic to becoming his trusted consigliere and confidant.

Second, the figures show that its electoral performance is not linear: rather, it is cyclical. After a scoring well in the 1992 and 1996 general elections, electoral results were more modest in 2001 and 2006. Subsequently, the Lega registered a good performance in 2008 – the election after which the League was one of the only five political parties present in the Italian Parliament – a success that may well have something to do with the Lega’s adopting a more overtly populist style (Corbetta 2010). It is a lesson that Salvini has seemingly taken to heart.

Indeed, scholars of the Lega have made its fundamental ambiguity – is it a party of government or an anti-system party – the focus of their analysis. This can lead to definitions that are more accumulative than precise: after looking over the party’s manifestos and conducting a post-electoral survey on the Lega’s electorate, Bulli and Tronconi (2012) concluded that the Lega was ‘a multifaceted party, where elements of localism and regionalism are present alongside traits of populism and characteristics common to other European far-right parties, especially as far as immigration policy is concerned’. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2005), among others, have tried to discern whether the Lega is primarily a ‘campaigning party’ (*partito di lotta*) or a ‘party of government’. They have broadly concluded that it is both. On the one hand, the Lega is – and always has been – a party that wants to be in office in order to realise its political programme; on the other hand its rhetoric is often that of a party that is antagonistic towards the system of government in which it finds itself. For this reason, the Lega has been identified as the only Italian party successfully able to walk the fine line between playing the role of the ‘opposition in government’ and showing that it too can be trusted with power and be a political force capable of governing alongside other mainstream political actors (Albertazzi et al. 2011). Yet whether the Lega was in government or out of it, one issue was central to its political discourse between 1987 and 2013: the interests of the northern Italian regions and peoples, and their alleged victimization by ‘Roma ladrona’ and the sleazy politicians of the South. Whatever else it was, the Lega was a party of the north, of Padania, and of the ‘peoples’ who live there.

In hindsight, three developments pushed the Lega to re-think its role as the raucous voice of the north in the corridors of power (del Palacio Martín 2015). In temporal terms, the first of these developments was the approval of the 2001 quasi-federal reform of the Italian Constitution (Fabbrini e Brunazzo 2003). With the confirmative referendum of 7 October 2001, Italy formally abandoned its traditional unitary model of the state, which had been partly decentralized after the 1970 reform instituting regional government, but which had nevertheless remained one of the most centralist (and centralizing) administrative structures in Europe. Even though this reform has been far from reaching all the outcomes proposed by its the promoters (Vassallo 2013), it transferred substantial competencies to the regions, notably in areas such as public health, and gave the regions the power to legislate in all subject matters not expressly covered by State legislation. This reform, while far from the federalist model generally preferred by the Lega, did alter the power relationship between the national and the regional governments, and hence to some extent stole the Lega’s clothes. Its principal policy – the one that differentiated it from the ‘Roman’ parties – had been appropriated by its rivals.

Worse, the new quasi-federal system was anyway something of a flop with public opinion. Indeed, a subsequent attempt to strengthen the federalist aspects of title V of the Italian Constitution,

which was strongly pursued by the centre-right Berlusconi government at the behest of the Lega, was overwhelmingly rejected by the electorate in a second referendum in 2006 (Vassallo 2006). During the interminable debates over the Renzi government's proposal for constitutional reform (rejected on 4 December 2016 after yet another referendum), critics (including Lega spokesmen) directed their fire primarily against the defects of the proposed new 'Senate of the Regions' and against the majoritarian electoral law (Italicum) rather than attack its neo-centralist revisions of Title V of the Constitution. Federalism has lost its gloss and is no longer a sure vote winner.

The second development that has prompted the Lega to re-think its stance is the sudden success of Beppe Grillo's party, the M5S, in the 2013 national election. This party has challenged the Lega on its own terrain, namely, that of the need to sweep away the Italian political system and the political class. Since its inception in 2009, the M5S has successfully combined new forms of direct democracy with popular disgust at the political elites. The anti-establishment, anti-globalist and Eurosceptic tone of its propaganda attracted supporters from across the political spectrum and from every Italian region. The M5S might have been a perfect partner for the Lega. However, it refused to accept any form of political alliance with the traditional parties, including the Lega, and has emerged as an authentic competitor. Beppe Grillo's young Turks made Bossi look old and compromised and this robbed the Lega of momentum.

Last but not least, the Lega and Bossi himself dramatically lost the aura of relative honesty that they had won over two decades of hard campaigning. In 2012 a political scandal concerning the mismanagement of public funds by Lega politicians and by members of Bossi's family jeopardised the future of the party. More specifically, judicial investigations conducted by two different public prosecutor's offices (in Naples and in Milan) found out that Renzo Bossi, the son of the Lega's charismatic leader and a member of the Lombardy Regional Council, had been utilizing public funds for personal reasons. Moreover, these investigations demonstrated that such behaviour was widespread among Umberto Bossi's closest collaborators, the so-called cerchio magico ('magic circle'), which had gained much influence as Bossi, whose health problems had caused his powers to wane, exercised a looser grip on the party. A shocked Lega electorate and grassroots membership swiftly demonstrated their profound dissatisfaction with these events, which seemed to give the lie to the party's claim to be 'different' from the others (Istituto Cattaneo 2012).

Umberto Bossi, whose charismatic leadership had been synonymous with the Lega for more than 20 years, was forced to resign. Bossi's long-time number two, Roberto Maroni, became the Lega's federal secretary (leader) in 2012, but after Maroni stepped down to concentrate on the presidency of the regional government of Lombardy, the leadership was seized by Salvini, who overwhelmingly defeated Bossi (by 82 to 18 percent) in the first primaries ever organized by the



party. The movement's grassroots membership clearly wanted a radical change of direction and a new, less discredited public face for the party.

From the first, Salvini gave them what they asking for. Taking advantage of Forza Italia's weakness, as Silvio Berlusconi's position was eroded by his political failures and judicial woes, Salvini aggressively set out to make the Lega the pivotal party in any future coalition between the centre-right parties. Moreover, after the 2014 European Parliament elections showed an unprecedented capacity of the Lega to attract voters in areas traditionally less inclined to vote for the party, Salvini devised a new national strategy and reframed the Lega's political discourse with a more evident 'Lepenist' accent. The gunfire of Salvini's demagogy is aimed at new targets. Whereas Bossi acquired visibility thanks to his vehement attacks on the tricolore, and Italian unity more generally, Salvini has relied upon a political discourse in which the former policies of secessionism and separatism have been substituted by nationalism. Salvini has kept the Lega's populist and anti-systemic style (indeed, as we shall see, he has ratcheted it up several notches), but he has preferred to focus on issues that are perceived as problems throughout Italy, such as the participation in the Euro and mass immigration.

Nowadays, the enemy is Rome no longer: it is Brussels, European institutions, and the threat to the national sovereignty posed by the EU. This ideological revolution has mirrored the transformations of the extreme-right parties in Europe, which are now much more anti-globalization than in the past, but it has also reflected the Lega's traditional ability to listen to the electorate's concerns and put them on the political agenda. While, at the beginning of the 1990s, the relationship between central government and the periphery was a hot button issue in many European states, now attention has shifted to the struggle against the austerity being imposed by the EU and, more in general, to the risks posed by globalization (and immigration) to national economies and sovereignties. The French newspaper *Le Monde* was quick to note this transformation and dubbed Salvini 'le 'cousin italien' de Marine Le Pen' (Mestre & Ridet 2014).

#### FROM A 'EUROPE OF PEOPLES' TO A 'CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY'

Matteo Salvini signalled that he would be taking a hard Eurosceptic line from day one as leader of the Lega. On the day of his election he proclaimed that under his leadership the Lega would make 'reclaiming sovereignty' from Brussels its first priority. In colourful language, he added that 'Brussels is busting our balls by telling us how to live, the whole thing is a gulag' (RQuotidiano 2013). Salvini's attitude towards the EU, and its central role in his political rhetoric, are in fact one of the best indicators of the broader shift we have identified in this article: the transformation of the Lega from a regionalist-populist party into a populist insurgency.

One can distinguish three distinct periods in the Lega's attitude towards the EU. The first goes from its emergence as a political force at the end of the 1980s until 1998, just prior to Italy's entry into the common currency. Throughout this period the Lega was largely favourable towards European integration and the institutions of the EU. As Huysseune (2010) points out, in this period the Lega considered that the end of the Cold War had produced the end of the post-Westphalian nation states and had opened up new opportunities for sub-national European territories and regions to achieve self-determination. Globalization and EU integration (interpreted as a product of the former) were contributing to the marginalization of traditional centralized nation states. In other words, the EU was creating the condition for a stronger Padania in a weaker Italian state. Indeed, the Lega went so far as to argue that the Italian state had obstructed the development of Northern Italy. In the Lega's view, Padania was an already fully Europeanized area: the level of economic well-being matched Germany or the Netherlands and the region's entrepreneurial skills were well known even outside Europe. Moreover, Padanians shared with the people living above the Alps the same labour ethic, rooted in what Max Weber would have called the 'protestant entrepreneurial spirit' (Huysseune 2010, 66). From this vantage point, Northern Italy seemed much more similar to Northern and Central Europe than to Southern Italy, whose work ethic and level of development were, on the contrary, regarded as being closer to Africa and to the Mediterranean countries. For the Lega, at any rate in the early 1990s, Europe meant modernity, and since Padania was the most 'modern' part of Italy the Lega deduced that it could be even more modern in a federal Italian state and in a Europe of regions and people (Giordano 2004).

This narrative explains why the Lega was in favour of stronger EU regulations against corruption (tolerated by the Italian state especially in the Southern regions and prone to undermine the development of the Northern regions), and also in favour of stronger EU institutions able to weaken the Italian state's power. Moreover, this understanding of the significance of the developments set in train at Maastricht also explains why the Lega was strongly in favour of Italy's entry in the first group of countries adopting the common currency: the 'convergence criteria regarding deficit and debt reduction would help decrease wasteful state expenditure while preventing competitive devaluations (which promote inflation) from being pursued by Rome' (Chari, Iltanen & Kritzing 2004, 428).

Things changed when the EU refused to recognize Padania as an independent state after the secessionist turn of the Lega and when Italy successfully entered the Economic and Monetary Union. Speaking in prophetic tones Bossi told the federal assembly in Milan in March 1998:

[T]he idea born in the post-war years to abjure new wars between European states is now giving birth to a monster that will breed neither democracy, nor stability, nor economic benefits for all. It can't bring about democracy since its parliament won't legislate: it will be a Europe of big capital. The people – artisans, entrepreneurs, ordinary citizens – will not be included either now or in the future because a genuine European polity is not going to be born... No matter how you look at it, this Europe is undeniably a mere defence of the European market, that is to say an act of protectionism, and like all protectionist measures it will favour big business, the great enterprises who have the nation state as their interlocutor. These are the same powers who currently thrive thanks to the money of the states they dominate and they are making monetary union in order to strengthen their hold over the nation state (Bossi 1998).

Moreover, Bossi perceptively argued that membership of the EU would damage Italy's flexibility and ability to remain competitive:

By entering Europe, Italy will no longer possess the tool of monetary policy. In other words, if it doesn't have enough cash it won't just be able to print off government bonds, and won't be able to help the economy by devaluation, but since it will only have fiscal powers left to work with, it will have to find the cash it needs by filching it straight from the pockets of the people, which obviously means increasing the burden of taxation (Bossi 1998).

The year 1998, in other words, marks the beginning of a Eurosceptic tone to the Lega's public position. However, despite its self-definition as the harshest opponent of Community policies and integration, the Lega's political action remained nuanced. For example, the Lega still claimed not to be against 'Europe per se', but rather against the allegedly undemocratic nature of the 'continental super-state': at least one Lega document dating from this period went out of its way to claim that 'from a purely theoretical point of view Europe might be the right way (sintesi ideale) fully to achieve the federal model of unity between Europe's peoples' (Marraccini 2009, 60). In addition, it is worth underlining that the Lega voted in the Italian parliament to ratify both the Nice and Lisbon treaties, under the pressure of its allies and together with the parliamentary centre-left opposition. As these episodes illustrate, the Lega was willing to flirt with Euroscepticism when the EU attracted popular resentment, but was still open to compromise in times when EU issues were of low salience (Bartlett, Birdwell & McDonnell 2012).

However, the downfall of Berlusconi's government in October-November 2011 and, more important, the appointment of the ex-European commissioner Mario Monti as prime minister, offered the Lega the opportunity to position itself as the principal party in the Italian parliament

opposing European integration. Even in this case, however, the position of the Lega was initially schizophrenic: on the one hand, then party leader Roberto Maroni denounced the ‘financial powers that have destroyed the life of families, companies and public accounts’, and asserted the party’s ‘fierce opposition’ to the ‘technocrat’ Mario Monti; on the other hand he assured Monti of the Lega’s support for the approval of the tough fiscal measures imposed by the ECB (Sala 2011). The Lega subsequently followed the strategy also adopted by many Italian leftists (notably the daughter of Altiero Spinelli, Barbara) and claimed that they were good Europeans, but not in favour of the ‘Europe of austerity’ ushered in by the measures taken to save the Euro. In the 2013 general elections, the Lega proposed the development of a ‘Europe of the peoples’, based on a number of macro-regions (Dehousse, 2013) and called for a referendum on the membership to the Eurozone. All of this, however, was framed without the party officially defining itself as “anti-EU” (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014, 18). Quite the opposite: the Lega declared itself to be in favour of a different Europe, more democratic and less technocratic: ‘we ask that the peoples of Europe should be allowed to express their opinion on the Euro and on the future of Europe. We believe in a different Europe, alternative to the one envisaged by Monti and the ECB’ (*La Stampa* 9/9/2012, cit. in Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014, 18). Simultaneously, the Lega’s electoral programme suggested a number of quite cogent integration-oriented reforms to the EU (Lega Nord 2013, 3):

- Going beyond the austerity policies of the EU.
- Rapid action to strengthen political, economic, banking and fiscal union.
- Action to give the BCE the role of lender of last resort, on the model of the American Federal Reserve.
- Introduction of Euro-bonds and project bonds to create welfare and development in Europe.
- Not counting spending on public investment for the purposes of the EU’s stability pact.
- Direct popular election of the president of the European Commission and increased legislative powers for the European Parliament.
- Creation of a European sovereign ratings agency.
- Central role for Italy in the EU, in the Atlantic alliance, in the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue, and in relations with Eastern Europe.
- Italy to take the lead in Europe and in the world in defending freedom, democracy, human rights, and religious freedom.

After the dismal results of the 2013 elections (only 4.1 percent of the vote), Euroscepticism became much more pronounced and explicit. It is plausible to explain this shift in terms of electoral calculations. The M5S's anti-EU stance won kudos with the voters in 2013, it accordingly made sense for the Lega to steal its clothes not least because the disillusionment of the Italian electorate with the EU after several years of economic austerity was becoming an unmistakable political fact. Italians are no longer natural Europhiles, but in many ways are as sceptical even as the British about the EU's value (Brunazzo and Della Sala 2016). With Salvini to the fore, the Lega launched a number of anti-EU campaigns, including the 'No-Euro Day' on 23 November 2013. The EU was now openly described as a 'dictatorship' and the Lega proposed the blanket reform of 'all EU treaties'. During the 2014 EP election campaign, the party attacked the Euro in terms that Nigel Farage might have found a tad extreme; among other choice insults, Salvini called the single currency 'a crime against humanity', in the name of which the 'EU-criminals, thieves and murderer bureaucrats' have justified 'coups d'état' and 'genocides of families and entrepreneurs' across the continent. (Castelli Gattinara & Froio 2014, 19). Subsequently, Salvini has claimed that the common currency is a 'criminal instrument' by which the national government is keeping *Padania* subjugated. In electoral terms, this rhetorical onslaught indisputably worked. The Lega's support revived from its poor showing in the 2013 elections and by 2015 had soared to even higher levels than after the launching of *Padania* in 1996, although the party does seem to have reached a ceiling of approximately 13 percent of committed voters.

The Lega has, moreover, broadened its fire to encompass the wider problems affecting the EU as a whole. In recent months, the Lega has committed itself to the project of 'dismantling Brussels'. The party has undertaken close talks with the Front National of Marine Le Pen and the Dutch PVV of Geerd Wilders, and has joined the European Alliance for Freedom in the EP. On 21 January 2017, the leaders of Western Europe's principal right-wing populist parties, including Salvini, met in Koblenz, Germany, to mount a collective challenge to the 'neoliberal' doctrines of the EU and, in Salvini's words, to 'oust (cacciare) the Merkels, Hollandes, and Renzis' (Mastrobuoni 2017). Independence from Rome is nowadays not sufficient: Italy (and eventually *Padania*) has to be independent from Brussels too. The leader of the Lega, a party long identified by its wish to dismantle the Italian state, has ironically become one of the most vocal backers of Italian national sovereignty (Spina 2017).

Euroscepticism is not the sole position Salvini shares with other European populist parties, especially those of extreme right. His lurid campaigns against immigrants, whom he depicts as the principal cause of social insecurity and as synonymous with delinquency; his proximity to Vladimir Putin's government, which has prompted him to request the removal of EU sanctions on

Russia; his fierce attacks on globalization (in particular upon globalized financial markets) are just some examples of the provocative stances taken by Salvini's new Lega.

## A POPULIST INSURGENCY

The words 'new' and 'provocative' are important. They bring us to the distinction between populism and *insurgent* populism that we identified at the beginning of this article.

The Lega, it should be said, has some claim to be regarded as the quintessential contemporary populist movement. If one looks at widely used definitions of populism, one sees that they 'fit' the Lega perfectly. In Cas Mudde's view, populism is:

[an] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people (Mudde 2004, p. 543).

Albertazzi and McDonnell, two leading experts on the Lega (as well as populist movements more generally), offer another carefully crafted definition of populism that fits Bossi and Salvini's movement precisely:

An ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, p. 3).

As we have seen, the gist of Salvini's condemnation of the EU (but one could add his policy against refugees and migrants) is to appeal to the fearful and angry piccoli borghesi of Italy and claim that they are being traduced by the elites – and that the EU is the biggest elite scam of them all. The Euro, in particular, is being imposed upon the peoples of Europe against their will, to their financial disadvantage, and at the behest of cynical bankers and deluded bureaucratic elites. Whether they know it or not, the will of the people is being thwarted. Since its origins, the Lega has consistently claimed to represent 'the people of the North' even when many northern Italians have never voted for it and many Lombards or Venetians despise it for being racist and reactionary (Bull & Gilbert 2001, 120). The Lega has always claimed to represent what its chosen 'people' should want even if their real will, expressed at the ballot box by fallible human beings, is different.

Definitions such as Mudde's or Albertazzi and McDonnell's derive from an analysis of what populists say (and to some extent how they say it). If a political movement has a pronounced Manichaeic understanding of the world and portrays its political mission as a crusade against imminent catastrophe in which the good guys and the bad are sharply delineated – you can stick the populist label on it. The problem with this approach is that it makes it impossible to distinguish between Bossi's Lega and Salvini's Lega. The Lega has always been a populist party in the sense of Mudde or Albertazzi and McDonnell's definitions. Yet few people who follow Italian politics closely would dispute that something important has changed and that, under Salvini's leadership, the Lega has morphed into a force whose populism is harder-edged and – perhaps – dangerous for the stability of Italian democracy.

The contention of this article is that a clue to the nature of this perceptible but hitherto unremarked difference can be found through an analysis of the critique made by Nicola Matteucci, an Italian political philosopher who was one of the founders of an important political magazine, Il Mulino, of the 1968 movement in Italy, which he described as a 'populist insurgency'. Historians and social scientists don't normally associate the sessantottini with populism, preferring to highlight the idealism of the anti-war movement, and the many benefits brought to the closed society of 1960s Italy by student radicalism, but from the point of view of this article it does not matter whether Matteucci was accurate or misguided in his analysis of the 1968 events. The point is that his analysis is entirely applicable to Salvini (and we would claim to the other right-wing populist movements that are currently shaking up European politics, but that is a broader subject).

In substance, Matteucci looked upon the 'movement' with disdain. The radicals occupying Italian universities claimed to be Marxists, but, in Matteucci's view, their Marxism was 'vulgar' and had been digested 'in pill form' (Matteucci 2008, 89). Rather than propose carefully thought-out reforms to the university – and like Raymond Aron or the American philosopher John Searle, two other powerful critics of the movement whom he somewhat resembles, Matteucci was a strong proponent of university reform – the radicals of 1968 were merely proposing vague, doctrinaire and contradictory plans, and often wanted to sweep away that which was good. They were an expression of a 'new climate of simple ideas'. The insurgents possessed an 'authoritarian drive' (volontà autoritaria) that was increasingly contemptuous of the slow pace of reform in constitutional democracies. They also reflected a 'widespread anti-intellectualism' and disdain for 'critical reason', which translated into a 'revolt against the specialist, the expert, the scholar, in the name of elementary or primitive sentiments or passions' (*Ibidem*, 65-66).

Underlying Matteucci's analysis was a somewhat aristocratic conception of political freedom as something that is won, every day, intellectually and through *moral effort*: merely enjoying the benefits of

a liberal democratic society is not the activity of a free person; we should not confuse being able to vote, speak freely, join political parties, take part in rallies and so on as being the essence of liberty. They are rather necessary guarantees. Much more is needed, Matteucci argued:

Without powerful religious or ethical beliefs, without healthy moral passions capable of transcending the animal side of human nature, without the search for truth, for that which is good, beautiful, a democracy does not thrive (vive), but caves in upon itself (sprofonda in se stessa), and is willing to be governed by any more or less intelligent despot. (*Ibidem*, 62)

Political freedom, in other words, flourishes only in societies characterized by *intellectual rigour*. Insurgent populism, by contrast, in Matteucci's reading, is ultimately an attempt to escape from the burden of freedom (and from the burden of complexity). It thrives when there are classes of people disenchanted with existing society, but who are too mentally lazy to challenge the demagogues produced by such a society. It is a symptom of a society that has lost its compass and prefers *glibness* to the compromises of government, or the hard slog of mastering a difficult brief. It is a politics of the transient, of the knee-jerk solution, of the soundbite; in short, the exact opposite of a 'true and authentic politics', which must necessarily be anchored in 'a sense of realism and of history' (*Ibidem*, 85). In poche parole it is the politics of irresponsibility, or, as Matteucci puts it, of 'unproductive wishful thinking' (sterili velleitarismi, *Ibidem*, 85).

We think that Anna Cento Bull was expressing a similar intuition when, following the German social theorist Ingolfur Blühdorn, she wrote:

[The] ... Lega Nord's political offer can be defined as a form of simulative politics, that is to say 'a form of political communication that... articulates demands which are not supposed to be taken seriously and implemented, but which are nevertheless constantly rearticulated with politicians being criticised – as part of the performance – for not implementing them' (Blühdorn 2007, 267–8, cit. in Cento Bull 2010, 431).

It is precisely this aspect of the Lega Nord's 'political offer' that has become predominant since Salvini took over from Bossi, which is why the Lega seems – indeed, is – more extreme. There has always been a performative element about the Lega, epitomized by the theatrical solemnity with which it proclaimed the impossible (Matteucci would say unhistorical) project of declaring the independence of 'Padania' in 1996. Its actions, however, as its European policy emphatically showed, often belied its words. It was well capable of being contemporaneously a hard-headed party of government and a movement that, in the words of the radicals of 1968, proclaimed 'soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible'.



We do not want to imply that the Lega has entirely lost its underlying pragmatism. Proximity to power would compel it to be more circumspect. It remains true, however, that in 2018 Salvini might be called to turn rhetoric (the intoxicating quick solutions to complicated problems that he has blurted out during debates in the salotti televisivi, or in provincial rallies) into reality – or risk losing the support of the voters he has stirred into a mood of indignation. Reliance on the tactics of insurgency inevitably creates an intellectual path dependency that will structure the movement’s future choice of allies and may condition future government policy. If Forza Italia allies with the Lega and the Fratelli d’Italia in (or after) the forthcoming 2018 elections, rather than seeking a post-electoral deal with the Partito Democratico (PD), it will have to swallow a more Eurosceptic position than many of its moderates would like. Between now and the elections, Salvini will doubtless strive to appear more statesmanlike on the European question, and will disguise his positions under a cloak of respectability by borrowing the arguments of academic economists who advocate an end to the ‘fiscal compact’ and EU–imposed austerity (see Borghi Aquilini 2017). It is nevertheless difficult to see how the Lega can backtrack on the essence of its Euroscepticism without losing all credibility.

One final point should be made. The Lega’s attitude to the EU since 2013 is a flashing dashboard light telling us that Italian society, overwhelmed by twenty years of economic stagnation and political bickering, is indeed beginning to ‘cave in on itself’. The fact that Salvini’s adoption of insurgent populism has tripled the Lega’s standing in the polls (albeit in a country where the ‘don’t knows’ are now the largest segment of the electorate and where total uncertainty reigns over voters’ real intentions), despite the concurrent even more dramatic rise of the M5S, is a development that should give pause to analysts of Italian politics and society. A ‘new climate of simple ideas’ is dictating opposition politics in Italy. Salvini – and like him, Grillo – are symbols of a deep political malaise.

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