

## *Special Section: Alpine Populism*

# **A Weekend in Padania: Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord**

Duncan McDonnell

*University of York*

This article argues that the Lega Nord is best understood, first and foremost, as a regionalist populist party. Following a brief discussion of the importance of the territorial reference in explaining the Lega, the article examines its populist discourse using material from the party's newspaper *La Padania* over the three days in June 2005 around the annual Lega rally in Pontida.

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### **Introduction**

Like the Lega dei Ticinesi (LDT) (examined by Daniele Albertazzi in this issue), the Lega Nord (Northern League) in Italy has built its success over the last 20 years on a regionalist populist critique of the state and its political class. As Cas Mudde has discussed, however, there is a descriptive and interpretative babel around what he classifies as 'the extreme right party family' and the Lega Nord has been variously defined and categorised (Mudde, 1996). For example, the Lega is included by Andrej Zaslove in his list of 'radical right' parties (Zaslove, 2004), by Jens Rydgren among the 'extreme right-wing populists' (Rydgren, 2005) and by Alfio Mastropaolo among the many 'antipolitical' new forces on the right (Mastropaolo, 2005). Most recently, Pippa Norris acknowledges the ambiguity of the Lega Nord, but nonetheless deals with both it and the Lega dei Ticinesi (LDT) under the umbrella term of 'radical right' (Norris, 2005).

There is not the space here for a lengthy discussion of definitional problems and solutions, so I will adopt the recent approach of Anthony J. McGann and Herbert Kitschelt who, in considering the *Freiheitspartei Österreichs* (FPÖ, Austrian Freedom party) and *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (SVP, Swiss People's party) focus on 'whether various concepts are descriptively useful' and conclude that 'new radical-right' suits those parties best (McGann and Kitschelt, 2005, p. 148). Following that logic, I believe that the most descriptively useful term for the Lega remains that of 'regionalist populist', as used by Roberto Biorcio (1991). Simply put, it is impossible to understand and explain the Lega from its foundation to the present day without explicitly highlighting the party's 'regionalist' character. The Lega Nord arose in a specific political and socio-economic environment and its elaboration of themes is still developed, first and foremost, with reference to the territorial context of its heartland (Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001). The party frames the problems of the north as a centre-periphery question within a 'people' v. 'the elite' populist discourse. The 'radical right' label and the others listed above thus



diminish this crucial territorial aspect of the Lega and its history as a movement constantly committed to some form of northern autonomy (whether federalism, independence or, since 2000, 'la devolution'), seen as an essential part of the solution to the problems of northern Italy (Diamanti, 1996).

The second key element of the Lega is its populism. Again, there is not the space for a detailed discussion of the elusiveness of that term. However, if we focus on discourse, we can use a definition which, like populism itself, is flexible and can accommodate a wide range of populist movements. For the purposes of this article, therefore, populism is considered as, above all else, a discourse which pits a virtuous, homogeneous people against a set of self-serving '*poteri forti*' ('powers-that-be'), as the Lega Nord describes them. These *poteri forti* are depicted as conspiring, in a time of (perceived or real) crisis and change, not only to deprive the people of what is rightfully theirs in terms of their economic and social standing, but to suppress their values, their voice and their very identity. This view echoes that of Mudde who says populism 'considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite"' (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

In order to test the 'populism' of the Lega, I will focus on the party over the three days around its annual rally in Pontida, held on Sunday 19 June 2005. Pontida is the 'cathedral' of the Lega, where celebrations are held and changes in strategy decided, with the 'sacredness' of the place in *Leghista* rhetoric conferring legitimacy on them (Biorcio, 1997, p. 198). To avoid being conditioned by the hostile filters employed by much of the Italian media when dealing with the party, what follows is based solely on material from its official newspaper *La Padania*. This publication is funded by the Lega and its editors are chosen (and dismissed at will) by the leadership. It seems legitimate therefore to take its reporting of the Pontida weekend as faithful to the party line. Our conclusion is that the Lega Nord represents a clear example of a movement that is best viewed as, first and foremost, regionalist populist.

## The Lega Nord in its own words

### The people and the Lega

Consistent with Paul Taggart's observation that in the populist imagination of the heartland there resides 'a virtuous and unified population' (Taggart, 2000, p. 95), since its inception, the Lega Nord has used a framework of interpretation in which a positively evaluated 'us' or 'the people' – honest, hard-working and simple-living northern Italians attached to their local traditions – is posited as prey to a series of dangers orchestrated by the powerful enemies of 'them' or the '*poteri forti*'. The identity of these *poteri forti* may shift over time with the 'friends' and 'enemies' of the people even interchanging (e.g. Berlusconi, the EU etc.), but what does not change is the juxtaposition in Lega discourse of a corrupt, self-interested elite with an 'under-threat' people whose interests, values, security and identity can only be safeguarded by the actions of the party and the superior vision and wisdom of its leader, Umberto Bossi. In this discourse, the people are characterised in three main interconnected ways, all of which involve threats or betrayal: (1) the people as a

class – with small northern family enterprises economically under threat from big business and globalisation; (2) the people as a nation – the homogeneous identity and culture of which is threatened by a series of ‘others’; (3) the people as sovereign – betrayed by the corrupt, liberal, conspiring elites in Rome and Brussels (Mény and Surel, 2004, p. 257).

The Lega and Bossi stand alone with the people against its many enemies. As Bossi says in his autobiography: ‘I feel that there is good where the people is. Evil nests in the corridors of power’ (Bossi and Vimercati, 1992, p. 187). Not only is the Lega ‘of the people’ and ‘with the people’, but the party and its leader are cast as the very incarnation of the people. As the MEP Mario Borghesio declared at the Pontida rally, ‘the Lega is the people, Bossi is the people’ (*La Padania*, 20 June 2005, p. 4). Eschewing the obtuse language of professional politicians, the Lega ‘tells uncomfortable truths’ (*La Padania*, 20 June 2005, p. 5), according to the *Leghista* Minister for Justice, Roberto Castelli. The Lega MP Luigi Peruzzotti asserts that the party ‘is the only political force which speaks the language of the people’ (*La Padania*, 20 June, p. 7).

Having been in government since 2001, however, the Lega has to show its supporters that association with the trappings of power in Rome has not tainted it and that it is still ‘of the people’. The party’s ministers thus portray themselves as ‘reluctant politicians’ (Taggart, 2000, p. 61), who would much rather be at home in the provincial north than among the despised ‘professional politicians’ in the capital. When asked how he likes life in Rome, the Lega Minister for Welfare, Roberto Maroni, replies that it is something which has always irritated him, ‘because Rome is the home of politics conducted in corridors, in the drawing rooms of the elite: it is the hushed politics of hidden plots. Pontida is the exact opposite: it is the revenge of the ordinary people’ (*La Padania*, 19 June 2005, p. 6). As we have argued elsewhere, the Lega of government thus has to be seen to remain a ‘fighting Lega’, battling against the corrupt professional political class in Rome and Europe (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005).

### **The enemies of the people**

As Mudde says, ‘populism presents a Manichean outlook, in which there are only friends and foes. Opponents are not just people with different priorities and values, they are evil!’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). The people and the Lega have enemies, not opponents. However, as mentioned earlier, the enemies of the people in Lega discourse have changed over time. For example, for much of the 1990s, the Lega claimed that the corruption and backwardness of ‘Rome’ and the south of Italy were imperilling northern participation in European integration and European Monetary Union (EMU) and that, should Italy fail to meet the criteria for EMU, the north (Padania) would have to declare independence. Although, like regionalist parties such as Plaid Cymru (Hoppe, 2005), the Lega supported an eventual ‘Europe of the regions’, the EU and the integration process were characterised as providing a lifeline for northern Italy against state centralism and inefficiency. Following the Prodi government’s successful negotiation of Italian acceptance into EMU in 1998, however, the Lega moved swiftly towards a position which, irrespective of the differences between the two definitions, fulfils the criteria both for

what Kopecky and Mudde term 'Eurorejectionism' and Szczerbiak and Taggart 'Hard Euroscepticism' (Kopecky and Mudde, 2002; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2003). The Lega now not only rejects EMU, further integration and enlargement, but would repeal many of the powers (e.g. in the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) pillar) which have been devolved to an 'undemocratic' and 'corrupt' Brussels.

This anti-European position is expressed through the populist discourse of 'the people' versus 'the elite'. Interviewed in *La Padania*, the Minister for Reform, Roberto Calderoli, announced the launch of 'the Lega's crusade against the Euro and the European superstate', adding that Europe may have 'taken away the people's identity, currency, and sovereignty, but not their common sense' (*La Padania*, 18 June 2005, p. 6). Calderoli's colleagues are all similarly 'on message'. Despite the party's favourable position on EMU prior to entry, Maroni now blames Prodi, who 'fixed Italy's entry into the Euro at the wrong time and in the wrong way' (*La Padania*, 19 June 2005, p. 8). On the same day, Francesca Morandi writes that 'the Lega has battled against the European superstate, against an elitist and centralist Europe made up of financial and political lobbies' (*La Padania*, 19 June 2005, p. 5). Similarly, Castelli warns that 'the *poteri forti*, high finance, major industry, and the press will not give up on this project lightly' (*La Padania*, 19 June 2005, p. 7). More crudely, Borghezio refers to the 'lobbyists in Brussels, this criminal band, these hidden powers, these gnomes of high finance who control the strings of power as if the peoples of Europe were just puppets' (*La Padania*, 20 June 2005, p. 4).

Another 'enemy' of the people, which has gained in prominence since the party toned down its 'anti-southern Italian' rhetoric (upon its return to the centre-right alliance in 2000) and, in particular, following September 11th, is Islam and immigrants of that faith. The Lega's position on immigration tallies with what Hans-Georg Betz and Carol Johnson describe as 'selective exclusion', according to which 'certain groups cannot be integrated into society and therefore represent a fundamental threat to the values, way of life and cultural integrity of the "indigenous" people' (Betz and Johnson, 2004, p. 318). We can see this position clearly in an article by the Lega former junior minister, Stefano Stefani, who stresses that the party's opposition to immigration is not based, 'as our opponents speciously claim, on blind xenophobia, but on the self-evident fear that it will soon be "too late"' (*La Padania*, 18 June 2005, pp. 1–2). Stefani argues that 'not all immigration is the same, not all those who want to enter the country are equal' and proposes therefore that Italy should instead encourage and facilitate the return of those of Italian descent in South America with whom there are 'common cultural, historical and religious roots'.

The Lega's position on immigration is characterised by welfare chauvinism and denials of biologically based racism while espousing the type of 'cultural racism' or 'ethnopluralism' formulated by the *Nouvelle Droite* (Rydgren, 2005, p. 427). As Bossi says: 'the blackest of the black should have the same rights as my next-door neighbour. But in his own home' (Bossi and Vimercati, 1998, p. 14). In the pages of *La Padania*, the associations made with 'immigration' revolve exclusively around crime, fear, incompatibility and a situation that is out of control. For example, all the reports in the *cronaca* (news) section on 19 June 2005 deal with crimes sup-

posedly committed by immigrants. In the same edition, the federal president of the party, Angelo Alessandri, talks of the need to defend northern identity against 'Muslims and all those who want to suffocate us' (*La Padania*, 19 June 2005, p. 2). Displaying the populist unease with the principle of minority rights (discussed by Albertazzi, 2006), Castelli refers in his Pontida speech to 'a world in which if you are a foreigner and an illegal immigrant, you have all the rights. However, if you are born on your own soil, you have only obligations, you are more a subject than a citizen' (*La Padania*, 20 June 2005, p. 4). The 'people' are thus portrayed as victims of the value systems of the politically correct elite. Like the LDT, the Lega does not advocate a neoliberal vision of a truncated welfare system so much as a regionalised one where services reflect local tax revenues and priority and the full range of benefits are available only to 'natives'.

### The leader

The Pontida rally also marked the official return, after a long illness, of the Lega leader Umberto Bossi. Pontida therefore represented an opportunity for the party and the people not only to reaffirm their dedication to one another but, crucially, to Bossi. The cornerstone of Bossi's relationship to his people/heartland is that, while remaining one of them, his unique qualities mean that he is their only possible saviour. As Max Weber says, whether or not the charismatic leader really possesses the qualities he claims is not so relevant; the important factor is that his 'followers' are convinced that he is their 'man of destiny' (Weber, 1995, p. 238). In the case of Bossi, the grass-roots of the Lega accept his decisions because, in addition to looking and sounding like them, he is held to possess extraordinary personal qualities and a *fiuto politico* (political sixth sense) which put his actions and U-turns beyond reproach.

During the days around Pontida, the senior members of the party all emphasised Bossi's role within the movement. Roberto Cota, secretary of the Lega Nord Piedmont, says 'let us not forget that Bossi is the true interpreter of the mood of the Lega Nord' (*La Padania*, 19 June 2005, p. 6). The secretary of the Lega Nord in Veneto, Gian Paolo Gobbo, talks of the 'far-sightedness of Umberto Bossi, who has always had the ability to see things long before everyone else' (*La Padania*, 18 June 2005, p. 7). Bossi was regularly referred to in the paper over the weekend simply as the *capo* (leader) and even the *guerriero* (warrior). As Margaret Canovan says, 'populist politics is not ordinary, routine politics. It has the revivalist flavour of a movement' and 'associated with this mood is the tendency for heightened emotions to be framed on a charismatic leader' (Canovan, 1999, p. 6). Indeed, Yannis Stavrakakis hypothesises 'that it might be necessary to distinguish populism not only in terms of its discursive structure but also in terms of its intensity, the nature of the investment leaders and followers exhibit in their identifications' (Stavrakakis, 2004, p. 264). We can see this intensity in Bossi's appearance at Pontida. Introducing him, Daniele Belotti (a regional councillor) tells the crowd: 'he is our guide, our hope of freedom, our hero, our leader' (*La Padania*, 20 June 2005, p. 3). Igor Iezzi writes that the crowd can feel the atmosphere of 'a page in history being written. The hundred thousand have tears in their eyes' (*La Padania*, 20 June 2005, p. 3). In the same edition, we read that Pontida is a day of coming

together for those who 'have bound themselves irrevocably by oath to their movement and their great leader' (*La Padania*, 20 June 2005, p. 14). This devotion and faith is clear in the comments by a member of the crowd who says that Pontida is an occasion when, 'thanks to the essential instructions of the Leader, we can understand what is really going on behind the scenes in politics and how the movement's strategy will develop as a result' (*La Padania*, 20 June 2005, p. 13).

## Conclusion

As Taggart says, 'populism is *always* partially constituted by aspects of the environment in which it finds itself' (Taggart, 2000, p. 4). As that environment changes, as different niches expand and contract, populists have to reformulate their focus on different issues. There is a structure and agency interplay here: when populists contribute to profoundly changing the structure around them as the Lega did in the 1990s, they then have to re-establish themselves in opposition to new political realities and reassert their position as the sole defender of the threatened/betrayed people. This carries the risk of an inflationary spiral in which the populist party goes too far and we can perhaps see this in the Lega's secessionist phase in the second half of the 1990s.

Despite the changes in the Lega's list of friends, enemies, themes and aims over the last two decades, however, two main elements have remained at the forefront: its regionalist and populist character. As Marco Tarchi argues, the Lega can change its political alliances and enemies, condemn those whom it had previously praised and vice versa, 'but what it can not allow itself to do is to abandon the style, mentality, jargon and rhetorical registers of populism' (Tarchi, 2003, pp. 154–155). Similarly, it cannot afford to dilute its commitment to its territorial heartland by attempting to appeal to areas beyond it. Beyond this, however, the Lega has a great deal of flexibility. It can flirt with both left and right and make U-turns justified by the vision of 'the far-seeing leader' and the argument that 'all we have ever wanted is more autonomy for our people. Everything else is secondary'. Indeed, in a recent interview with this author and Daniele Albertazzi, the Lega MP and former minister Giancarlo Pagliarini speculated that the party could even support a centre-left administration after the 2006 elections in return for further decentralisation reforms.<sup>1</sup> Having walked the populist tightrope of government participation for four years without slipping and having even seen its vote rise while that of its coalition partners has fallen (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005), the Lega might just continue defying those for whom the fate of such populists 'is to be integrated into the mainstream, to disappear, or to remain permanently in opposition' (Mény and Surel, 2001, p. 18).

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Giancarlo Pagliarini conducted in Chiavari on 1 November 2005.

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