

## Controversy

# Beyond the Radical Right Straitjacket: A Reply to Andrej Zaslove's Critique of 'Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord'

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I would like to thank Andrej Zaslove for his critique of my article 'A Weekend in Padania: Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord' as it offers me a very welcome opportunity to expand on a number of issues which, in my original piece, I could only touch on briefly due to lack of space (McDonnell, 2006; Zaslove, 2007). Much of Zaslove's commentary discusses his own work on the Lega Nord (Northern League) as a radical right populist party, so I will limit myself here to responding to his main points regarding my article and, in the process, will add some further considerations on the Lega Nord and the different terms we use to classify the party.

Zaslove's principal criticism of my article was that I disagreed with the use of the term 'radical right' to classify the Lega Nord and argued instead that it is a 'regionalist populist' party. I should point out here that, although Zaslove repeatedly says that I categorise the Lega as a 'regional populist party', in fact, in the title and throughout the article, I used the term 'regionalist populist'. As I explained, it is impossible to understand the Lega from its foundation to the present day without explicitly highlighting its 'regionalist' identity and, whatever U-turns it may have made (for example, its position on European integration and its alliances with other parties), the key issue for the party has always been the attainment of some form of northern autonomy, whether federalism, independence or devolution.

Having outlined the importance of the territorial political reference in understanding the party, the majority of my original piece was devoted to an analysis of the populism of the Lega. To be clear, I define populism as a discourse which pits a virtuous, homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted, in a time of (real or perceived) crisis and change, as depriving 'the people' of their prosperity, rights, values and sovereignty. Like those of Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Pierre-André Taguieff (2002), this view deliberately avoids conceiving of populism in terms of specific social bases, economic programmes, ideologies and themes. To put it simply, I believe that populism should not be seen against such backgrounds, but *beyond* them. What myself and Daniele Albertazzi were trying to do in our articles in *Politics* (see also Albertazzi, 2006), and what we



have tried to do on a larger scale in our forthcoming volume (Albertazzi and McDonnell, forthcoming), is to look at populism per se in contemporary Western European democracies.

Let us turn now to the case Zaslove presents for treating the Lega as a 'radical right populist party'. The limitation may well be mine, but I have to admit that I find his logic somewhat circular and confusing. He begins by saying, 'In my opinion it is important to include the Lega within a framework that also includes other radical right parties in order to avoid treating the Italian case as an exception' (Zaslove, 2007, p. 65). This argument seems extremely circular. First of all, by referring to 'other' radical right parties, he is therefore already taking it as a given from the start that the Lega is a radical right party itself, and so it should be included in comparisons with other radical right parties. This would be appropriate if we had been told clearly (a) what a radical right party is and (b) why the Lega fits that description. However, we have been told neither. More bafflingly, Zaslove then contends that we have to classify the Lega as 'radical right' because, otherwise, we are treating Italy as an exceptional case. Perhaps I have misunderstood and Zaslove is simply saying that we need to be able to compare the Lega to other parties elsewhere, although, in that case, the label 'regionalist populist' poses no problem as there are plenty of regionalists, populists and even regionalist populists in Western Europe. In fact, my original article was followed by Albertazzi's examination of the Lega dei Ticinesi in Switzerland as a regionalist populist party (Albertazzi, 2006). Continuing with this line of reasoning, Zaslove explains that 'Avoiding Italian exceptionalism means that a close examination of the evolution, ideology and politics of the Lega can substantially contribute to our understanding of the rise of European radical right populism' (Zaslove, 2007, p. 65). Again, I find the rationale here to be highly flawed. If I have understood correctly, he is now urging us to define the Lega as 'radical right populist' so that we can better understand other radical right populist parties in Europe. Completing the circle, he then adds, 'Moreover, such a framework also more adequately captures, and explains, the current success of radical right parties' (Zaslove, 2007, p. 65). The suspicion has to be raised here that the tail is wagging the dog and that Zaslove's desire for there to be a category of 'radical right populist' parties with representatives across Europe whom he can then compare with one another is preventing him from dealing with the Lega on its own merits.

Further on, Zaslove asserts that 'populism and regionalism do not do justice to the ideology and the ability of the Lega Nord to survive. It is important to remember that it has proven to be not just a flash in the pan given that it, and the leagues before it, have been around for more than 20 years' (Zaslove, 2007, p. 65). It certainly is important. I therefore highlighted the Lega's durability in the article and noted, as myself and Albertazzi (2005) have argued elsewhere, that from 2001 to 2006 the Lega walked the populist tightrope of government participation more successfully than any other Western European populist party has done to date. In fact, contrary to Zaslove's analysis, the Lega's longevity derives precisely from its combination of regionalism and populism which, respectively, give the party a unique identity in the northern Italian electoral market and the flexibility to adapt quickly to changing opportunity structures. Indeed, had the Lega simply been a

'radical right populist' party, then it would surely have been quickly squeezed out by the emergence of Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale in the early 1990s.

Having cajoled the Lega into a radical right straitjacket, Zaslove asserts that 'this current wave of radical right populist parties constitutes a specific party family. They possess a specific ideology, they have a common mode of organisation and they receive support from similar segments of the population' (Zaslove, 2007, p. 66). It would require far too much space to express my disagreement with these latter claims but, thankfully, Piero Ignazi has already debunked some of them in regard to the Lega (Ignazi, 2006, pp. 58–61). On the issue of the Lega forming part of a 'radical right' party family, it should be pointed out that, unlike Zaslove, two of the most noted 'radical right' scholars, Herbert Kitschelt and Pippa Norris, have both recognised the problems of classifying the Lega Nord in this way. Norris (2005, p. 65) acknowledges that the party 'may not be strictly part of the radical right' and that its designation as such is 'more ambiguous than other parties' while Kitschelt (1997, p. 200) states that 'a wealth of evidence demonstrates that it would be wrong to lump the Freedom Party and the Northern League into the same group with the French National Front or the more moderate, but still new, rightist Scandinavian Progress Parties'.

Finally, it is worth noting that, as far as I am aware, no Italian scholar uses the label 'radical right' to classify the Lega Nord and, rather, it seems to be mostly those who are based in North America who apply it to the party. This is perhaps surprising given that the term originated on that continent in relation to a quite different type of political phenomenon. First used by Seymour Martin Lipset (1955) to describe Joseph McCarthy and his followers, in the ensuing years, the 'radical right' came to signify those on the right of the Republican party and within military and business elites who were strongly anti-communist, anti-welfarist and opposed to the direction of domestic and foreign policy in the US since the war under both the Democrats and the Republican Eisenhower presidency. It was a group which, as Daniel Bell (1963, p. 2) said, feared 'the collapse of its own power'. This usage of the term in fact tallies quite well with its subsequent application in the Italian case by Franco Ferraresi (1996) to denote the violent right-wing groups in the Italian First Republic which were supported (both formally and informally) in their subversive actions by similarly anti-communist and anti-democratic sections of the political, financial, media and military elites, unhappy with what they saw as excessive openings by the Christian Democrat leadership to the parties and policies of the left (Lupo, 2004).

Despite the term's quite specific original meaning, however, it has mutated in transit across the Atlantic to cover a vast range of formations from neo-fascists to 'traditional Right movements and anything else which cannot be comfortably included under the heading "conservative"' (Ignazi, 2000, p. 42). Certainly, it is hard to see what the label in its original sense has to do with the Lega Nord or, indeed, with many of the parties in Western Europe currently classified as 'radical right'. Moreover, given that Italy is one of the few remaining countries where politicians on the right still regularly warn of the dangers of the Communist left, we would expect to find extremely strong anti-communism among supporters of the Lega, if it is a radical right party in a sense even close to that discussed by Lipset and

Bell. In fact, however, as the results of a 2004 LaPolis survey show, fewer Lega voters responded negatively to the term 'communism' than those of Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale or even the moderate post-Christian Democrats of the UDC (Diamanti and Lello, 2005, p. 28). Moreover, not only has the Lega taken sides with the centre-left in the past, but in the latter months of 2006, Umberto Bossi explicitly stated that the party would consider supporting the new centre-left government in exchange for northern federalism (*La Padania*, 12 November 2006). As I argued in my original article, this type of flexibility is possible from a party which is cloaked in regionalist populism, but beyond one bound in the straitjacket of the radical right. If such a single, clearly-defined model still exists, of course. And, if, unlike Betamax videos and Region 1 DVDs, it also works in Italy.

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