

'No regionalism please, we are *Leghisti*!' The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini

Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini & Antonella Seddone

To cite this article: Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini & Antonella Seddone (2018) 'No regionalism please, we are *Leghisti*!' The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, *Regional & Federal Studies*, 28:5, 645-671, DOI: [10.1080/13597566.2018.1512977](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2018.1512977)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2018.1512977>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 03 Sep 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2183



View Crossmark data [↗](#)




Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



'No regionalism please, we are *Leghisti*!' The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini

Daniele Albertazzi^a, Arianna Giovannini ^b and Antonella Seddone^c

^aDepartment of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; ^bPolitics and Public Policy, De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; ^cDepartment of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, Turin, Italy



ABSTRACT

Whilst the Lega Nord has traditionally been defined as a regionalist populist party, since Matteo Salvini became its leader in 2013 it has undergone a process of profound ideological transformation. This article assesses this momentous change and the impact it could have on the future of the Lega, drawing on a content analysis of Salvini's and the party's Facebook posts, as well as interviews with regional leaders. It argues that, under Salvini's personal style of leadership: (a) regionalism has been replaced by an empty form of nativist nationalism, which fails to address socio-economic issues related to the North–South divide; (b) populism remains central to the party's strategic communication, but the EU has taken Rome's place as the people's 'enemy'; (c) this ideological shift has paid-off at the 2018 general election, but is underpinned by latent fractures between the leader and regional representatives which could have profound implications in the future.

KEYWORDS Regionalism; nationalism; Lega Nord; populism; personalization

Introduction

Many parties have come and gone in Italy since the collapse of the so-called 'First Republic' at the beginning of the 1990s. Not so the Lega Nord (LN – Northern League). Founded by Umberto Bossi in 1991, by 2008 it had become the oldest party group in the Italian parliament. At the general elections held in March 2018, the LN gained over 17 per cent of the national vote – i.e. 7 per cent more than its previous best result in a general election back in 1996 (10.1 per cent). Importantly, under Salvini the party performs strongly in

CONTACT Arianna Giovannini  arianna.giovannini@dmu.ac.uk  Politics and Public Policy, De Montfort University, Leicester LE1 9BH, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

the central regions of Italy that had once been dominated by the left and has also managed to establish a presence in the South – a ‘no-go area’ for the Lega under Bossi. In addition, the LN has already accumulated considerable experience of government participation. Over time, it gained the governorship of some of the wealthiest regions in the country: Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto. It also served in national governments and, after a long gestation, as of May 2018 it is back in power for the fifth time, now in a coalition government with the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S – Five Star Movement).

The ‘Bossi era’ came to an abrupt end in April 2012, as a damaging fraud scandal led to Bossi’s (basically forced) resignation as party leader (La Repubblica 2012, 2017). Following a brief interim period, in December 2013 Matteo Salvini was elected leader by party members with 80 per cent of the vote (against Bossi, who was attempting to stage a ‘come back’), and was confirmed for a second term in May 2017 (with 82.7 per cent).

If the distinctiveness of Bossi’s LN resided in its ideology, which was best defined as ‘regionalist populist’ (McDonnell 2006), as well as its unwavering reliance on the ‘mass party’ organizational model (Albertazzi 2016), both party ideology and organization appear now to be in flux under the new leader. Indeed, the main finding of this article is that the LN now stands out as the only Western ‘regionalist’ party to have turned to nationalism – a unique case on which, to date, very little is known. Our aim here is to discuss the party’s development, by assessing the changes that have affected it, with a specific focus on ideology and the way the party communicates, while leaving the discussion of party organization to a subsequent article.

The article will be organized as follows. The first section places the LN within the academic literature on ‘regionalist’ and ‘populist’ parties, offers an overview of the relevant debates on definitions and theoretical issues, and, in light of such discussion, assesses its key features under its founder, and, until 2012, only leader: Umberto Bossi. This allows us to clarify what we are comparing Salvini’s LN *with*. In the second section, we summarize Salvini’s strategy since he became leader. The third section introduces our methodology, whilst the following ones analyse Salvini’s (as well as the LN’s) discourse on social media through a content analysis of Facebook, and draw suggestions from elite interviews with the leaders of some of the party’s regional branches. We show that the request for greater northern autonomy (which once was the key issue defining the LN’s agenda) has vanished from Salvini’s communication. Lastly, we assess the implications of such developments for the LN, and argue that: (a) the party has now dismissed the regionalist element of its ideology, embracing what we define as ‘empty nationalism’, which lacks substance and fails to address social and economic issues related to the North–South divide; (b) populism remains central to the party’s strategic communication and values, however there has been a substantial shift in the cleavage that underpins the Lega’s message, as the EU has taken Rome’s place as the people’s

'enemy'; (c) this ideological shift has paid off at the 2018 general election, but is underpinned by latent fractures between the leader and regional representatives which could have profound implications in the long term. Throughout the article, we argue that this radical shift has been made possible by Salvini's 'personalisation' (Musella 2015) of his party – something which, so far, has given him considerable room for manoeuvre.

The Lega Nord under Umberto Bossi: a regionalist populist party.

The Lega Nord was born in 1991 by bringing together under the leadership of Bossi's Lega Lombarda (Lombard League) a wide range of autonomist movements and 'leagues' that had established a presence across northern Italy since the 1970s (Cedroni 2007). After its foundation, the party was very successful in forcing two issues to the top of the national political agenda (Bulli and Tronconi 2011): what would be known as the 'northern question' (Diamanti 1996), that is the growing economic and social gap between a wealthy North and a much less developed South of Italy; and the rapidly growing sense of discontent, and even hostility, towards the political elites and institutions that had lingered on for a long time in public opinion, only to reach a peak at the end of the 1980s (Bulli and Tronconi 2011, 51). Such 'resentment' towards the traditional political class soon translated into support for new parties, such as the LN, and was instrumental in bringing down the so-called 'First Republic' (Ginsborg 1990).

The intrinsically regionalist character of the LN can be assessed by making reference to the relevant literature. Following the definition offered by Mazzoleni and Mueller (2017, 5–6), in essence,

regionalist parties are political parties that (a) demand more regional power who [sic] are neither (b) organised on a nation-wide scale nor do they (c) possess the ambition to represent the interests and people over, of and in the whole territory of a country. Instead, regionalist parties are organised exclusively on a regional basis and aim to cater for a regional electorate only. (...) [They also] have fully subscribed to the territorial ideology of regionalism: they aspire to government of, by and for the region.

The objective of governing on behalf of a region is usually pursued through claims for regional autonomy and authority (in the form of shared- or self-rule) to be gained by a regional community, via the creation of institutions able to reflect and cater for specific regional needs (Mazzoleni and Mueller 2017, 6; Keating 2013). Calls for autonomy are typically based on the assertion that a region enjoys a distinctive sense of collective identity, grounded in some combination of ethnic, linguistic, economic, geographic, religious and historic traits, with some of these (say, a distinctive language) being activated in one context, but being irrelevant in another.

Based on this framework, Bossi's LN satisfied all the criteria of a regionalist party. It advocated a territorial cause, stood to defend and promote what it saw as 'its' regions (broadly defined as 'the North' and/or 'Padania'), consistently presented them as ontologically different and distinctive from the rest of the country (Keating 2009, viii; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005) and argued that the centralization of political authority and economic resources had damaged 'northern regional interests and identity' (Spektorowski 2003, 61–2).

Indeed, the LN elaborated its key themes by territorializing policy-making (Hepburn 2010), and did so with reference to the territorial context of northern Italy. Like other regionalist parties, under Bossi the LN also aimed at altering the vertical allocation of power between the centre and the periphery, by seeking some form of autonomy for the North (whether by advocating federalism, devolution, or even independence, depending on changing circumstances and political opportunities) (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015, 42–4). Crucially, the LN has also long been characterized by regional exclusivity in organizational terms (De Winter 1998, 211), by filing candidates only in northern regions – a couple of unsuccessful and short-lived attempts at creating 'sister league movements' in the South during the 1990s notwithstanding.

Regionalist parties often present themselves as 'anti-system' (Hepburn 2009), and the LN under Bossi was, again, no exception. This links to the second defining characteristic of the party, which is populism. In classic populist fashion (Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000), the LN has always justified its juxtaposition of northern Italians with 'Rome' by positing the former as a homogenous, hard-working community of people attached to their distinctive traditions, and the latter as the place where the political and cultural elites running the country (to the benefit of the South) could be found (Spektorowski 2003, 62–3). Despite the 'elites' having stolen much of the people's material wealth and even self-respect (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015, 42–4), northern Italians could still save themselves, it was argued, by 'regaining control' from the centre. Therefore, we subscribe to the view that 'Bossi's Lega' should be best understood as a regionalist populist party, above and beyond any other label (McDonnell 2006), as its regionalist and populist claims were profoundly intertwined, fed on each other and could hardly be dissociated.

The LN's ideology started to shift during the last years of Bossi's leadership, in ways that prepared the terrain for its further radicalization under Salvini. Arguably, 9/11 was a godsend for the Lega, as it helped justify radicalizing the party's position from being critical of how immigration had been managed by successive governments, to framing it as an existential threat to the very survival of the identities and cultures of northern Italians, thus tapping into the increasing fear and resentment of the local population towards foreigners. As for the party's leadership, after Bossi was forced to

resign, the Lombard faction of the LN remained in charge. Following an interim period in which the party was steered by the former Minister Roberto Maroni, Matteo Salvini won a closed primary election and became leader at the end of 2013, thus heralding a substantial generational renewal. Salvini combined a long experience in the City Council of Milan with roles at national and European levels. This allowed him to promote a new focus on the national level, as we will see, while maintaining – at least at the beginning – strong ties with the local dimension of the LN and its powerbase of Lombardy.

'North first no more'? Salvini's (re)definition of the Lega Nord.

Salvini's victory in December 2013 can be read as the natural result of a process of party renovation, both in generational and ideological terms, which was perhaps inevitable in order to turn the page and relegate scandals to the past (Vercesi 2015).

Despite delivering his maiden speech as leader at the LN Conference of December 2013 under a banner that read 'The future is independence' (Lega Nord 2013), only a few days later Salvini went on to apologize for the insults he had directed at southerners throughout his political career and claimed to have become persuaded that, either Italy saved itself *as a nation*, or else all of its regions, without exception, would face ruin (Il Sole 24 Ore 2014). The main argument here was that, even if it could go it alone, the North would still be the victim of regulations imposed by a 'totalitarian' EU (Salvini 2016, 138), and would also have to use a currency allegedly set up to advantage the German economy: the Euro. In this way, the EU (rather than 'Rome') came to be portrayed as the *locus* of real power. Speaking at the LN Conference in July 2014, Salvini clarified the strategic implications of this change of direction, by hailing the forthcoming creation of 'one or more movements' across the whole of Italy which would ally themselves with the Lega in the fight against the then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (seen as being 'pro-EU'). Shortly afterwards, 'Noi con Salvini' (NcS – Us with Salvini), was set up. Since then, NcS has fought some subnational elections in central and southern Italy, where the LN did not normally compete, however its performance has been less than impressive (Biorcio 2017; Tronconi 2015). As the 2018 general elections approached, NcS suddenly disappeared, by merging with Salvini's 'new' League.

The debate around the 2018 general election accelerated the pace of a change that was already affecting the LN's ideology and, again, Salvini played a leading role in this process. Hence the increased focus on immigration, identity issues and law and order, perfectly consistent with the changes that had already been noted during the last years of the 'Bossi era', was accompanied by a development which radically contradicted the party's

raison d'être under Bossi: the shelving of calls for regional autonomy/reform for northern Italy, and a distinct focus on the national dimension. As a result, the LN filed candidates for the 2018 general election not just in the North, but across Italy. This process culminated just before the election with Salvini's decision to drop the term 'North' altogether from the electoral symbol of the party (Il Giornale 2017) – allowing him to strengthen the personalization process by adding his name on the logo of the party as its candidate for the premiership (i.e. 'Lega Salvini Premier')¹. As such, the Lega has come to epitomize the rather unique case of a regionalist party that is 'going national' (although through an uneven and complex path), leaving its original claims for northern regional autonomy, and the cleavages underpinning these, behind. Bossi's claim that 'if Salvini brings the party to the South the Lega is over' (Ansa 2017) further reinforces the idea that this is a tectonic shift in the party's history (see also Diamanti 2017; Vampa 2017). And yet, in 2018 the LN put in its best electoral performance ever (Table 1), vindicating Salvini's decisions. The Lega overtook its long-standing coalition partner Forza Italia for the first time since the 1990s, hence becoming the main party on the right. In addition, as Table 2 illustrates, the LN has achieved this result by increasing its support across *the whole country* (to varying degrees, but without exception). The party performed extremely well in the North (e.g. in its traditional strongholds of Lombardy and Veneto), it grew in traditionally 'red' regions (e.g. Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche), and it also established a presence in the South and the islands.

Therefore, since the election of Salvini as the new leader, the LN appears to have developed a Janus-faced character. It maintains its traditional structure as a party rooted in the North, however this is now mirrored by a much lighter organization, which fields candidates across Italy, including the South. Here, a weaker (or even non-existent) territorial presence has so far been offset by heavy reliance on the leader's ability to communicate, including via social media, with a view that his popularity would (as it did in 2018)

Table 1. LN's electoral performance in General elections (1992–2018).

| Year | % |
|------|------|
| 1992 | 8.7 |
| 1994 | 8.4 |
| 1996 | 10.1 |
| 2001 | 3.9 |
| 2006 | 4.6 |
| 2008 | 8.3 |
| 2013 | 4.1 |
| 2018 | 17.4 |

Source: Italian Interior Ministry.

Note: General election results refer to the Chamber of Deputies. In 1994, 1996 and 2001, results refer to the proportional share of the vote only

Table 2. LN's electoral performance in the General elections 2013 and 2018, by region (Chamber of Deputies) – %.

| Region | 2013 | 2018 |
|-----------------------|------|------|
| Aosta Valley | 3.29 | 17.5 |
| Piedmont | 4.8 | 22.6 |
| Lombardy | 12.9 | 28 |
| Liguria | 2.3 | 19.9 |
| Veneto | 10.5 | 32.2 |
| Friuli-Venezia Giulia | 6.7 | 25.8 |
| Trentino-Alto Adige | 4.2 | 19.2 |
| Emilia-Romagna | 2.6 | 19.2 |
| Tuscany | 0.7 | 17.4 |
| Umbria | 0.6 | 20.2 |
| Marche | 0.7 | 17.3 |
| Lazio | 0.2 | 13.4 |
| Abruzzo | 0.2 | 13.8 |
| Sardinia | 0.1 | 10.8 |
| Molise | 0.2 | 8.7 |
| Campania | 0.3 | 4.3 |
| Basilicata | 0.1 | 6.3 |
| Apulia | 0.1 | 6.2 |
| Calabria | 0.3 | 5.6 |
| Sicily | 0.2 | 5.2 |

Source: Elaboration from Vampa (2018)

deliver some degree of electoral success (see Vercesi 2015). The *trait d'union* between the LN's arguably irreconcilable 'souls', is, therefore, Matteo Salvini himself. Thus, personalization serves to sustain and enliven mobilization (Karvonen 2010) within the LN, and to widen its geographical spectrum. Bringing his message (and persona) to the South allowed Salvini to paint on a blank canvass, and gave him the opportunity to define the identity, values and agenda of a 'reinvented' *national* Lega as he saw fit. However, this, in turn, impacted on Salvini 'the *leghista* leader' (i.e. the leader of a party still rooted in the North), as the latter could only act in ways that did not end up weakening the credibility of the former.

Another development brought about by Salvini, which is crucial to our argument, concerns the party's communication. This now relies to a great extent on the opportunities for permanent campaigning provided by social media (SM), thus allowing Salvini to completely dominate the LN's communication with help from a professional team of SM specialists. With 2.6 million likes on Facebook and almost 800 000 followers on Twitter (as of June 2018), Salvini's personal accounts can withstand comparison with those of the major political leaders in the country.² This helps him shape (and, indeed, dominate) national debates on issues concerning identity, immigration, and law and order, as the controversial remarks made via his SM accounts are immediately picked up by the press and television news.

Online activity does help party leaders to increase their approval and involve new supporters (Kruijkemeier et al. 2013). In particular, SM facilitate

the personalization of politics, offering party leaders new arenas in which they can nurture direct connections with sympathizers, bypassing the party's organization (Lachapelle and Maarek 2015). 'Going social', therefore, represented a strategic choice for the LN leader, allowing him to take control of the party's message, and to reach areas beyond the North that would otherwise have remained off-limits. Salvini's decision to heavily rely on SM – and his ability to do so effectively – also helps to explain why he could bring about such a profound ideological shift so quickly, without relying on any intermediaries. Salvini's deployment of Facebook will be discussed in more detail in the next section, which assesses the extent to which the Lega's message has changed under the new leader.

Methods

This section discusses the results of a content analysis, assessing what themes Salvini and his party have chosen to emphasize in their communication, via a study of a large sample of Salvini's, and his party's, Facebook (FB) posts. Given the party's complete reliance on its leader's ability to communicate, the study of these sources provides us with the opportunity to understand changes in the party's ideology and message since Salvini took over as leader (Bobba 2018; Enli and Skogerbø 2013). To reflect upon the significance of our findings, in the following section of this article we also draw suggestions from an analysis of elite interviews with the leaders of four LN regional branches.

Considering the wide popularity of Facebook in Italy, we carried out an extensive content analysis of both the party's and the leader's FB pages.³ We downloaded all FB messages posted between 14 December 2013 (when it emerged that Salvini had won the primary election), and 15 May 2017 (the end of Salvini's first mandate) – with a total of 63 162 posts from the LN's account and 11 603 from Salvini's. We are therefore able to cover Salvini's first mandate as LN's leader in full.⁴ A sample of 30 days was randomly selected for each year (between 1 and 4 days per month), allowing us to analyse 4768 messages posted by the LN and 1052 by Salvini. Next, we conducted a human content analysis of these posts, with the unit of analysis being the post itself. Our codebook focused on themes that we consider key to the party's strategic communication under Bossi: (i) issues related to security, terrorism and immigration; (ii) references to Europe, the EU and the Euro; (iii) issues concerning the economic crisis; (iv) references to the territorial dimension, with a focus on distinctions between Italy's North, Centre and South. Furthermore, we added the category 'northern interests, needs and values' so as to assess the changes occurred within the LN's narrative (full details of the codebook and the content analysis are provided in the Annex). While mentions of the alleged 'need to achieve autonomy/federalism'

were counted as instances of this category, so too were references to values such as the willingness to work hard, efficiency, readiness to abide by the rules, etc. – that is, principles that Bossi's Lega has always argued to be *distinctive* of the peoples of the North (Diamanti 1996). This allowed us to account for the focus (or lack thereof) on the needs and identity of northern Italians in Salvini's and the LN's communication. To mirror this, we also added another analytical dimension related to 'national interests, needs and values', thus identifying instances of messages concerned with the alleged specificity of Italian culture (*vis-à-vis* others). In this way, we were able to quantify references to the need to 'defend' or 'value' Italy and its identity, and any mentions of policies that were said to be necessary to help Italy as a whole. All variables were dichotomous, meaning that we registered the presence of references (=1), or their absence (=0) to each of the abovementioned categories.

Finally, we relied on a series of semi-structured interviews with party representatives who, at the time of interview, were leading four of the LN's regional branches in order to find confirmation of our reading of the findings (or not, as the case might have been) and check how high profile respondents justified the radical changes affecting the Lega. The following regional leaders were interviewed between June and October 2016: Paolo Grimoldi (Lombardy), Riccardo Molinari (Piedmont), Edoardo Rixi (Liguria) and Gianluca Vinci (Emilia).⁵ The interviews focused on the following themes which are relevant to this article: (a) the LN's position on achieving greater autonomy/federalism for northern Italy; (b) the reaction of grassroots members to Salvini's redefinition of the party's ideology; (c) the party's (and the leader's) deployment of social media. The leaders of regional branches provide the link between the national leadership of the party and its grassroots (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015, 132–141). Not only are these respondents able to explain the official party line and assess the communicative strategy adopted by their leader, but they are also aware of the members' reactions to the changes the LN has embarked upon. While we do not claim our sample to be representative of the entire regional leadership of the party, relying on interviews with high profile informants has helped us interpret our results and reflect upon the reasons underpinning Salvini's strategy.

Findings

Analysis of Facebook posts

Figures 1–3 present the findings of the human content analysis of the party's communication conveyed by Facebook and that of its leader.⁶

The data reveal the following features of Salvini's, and his party's, communication:

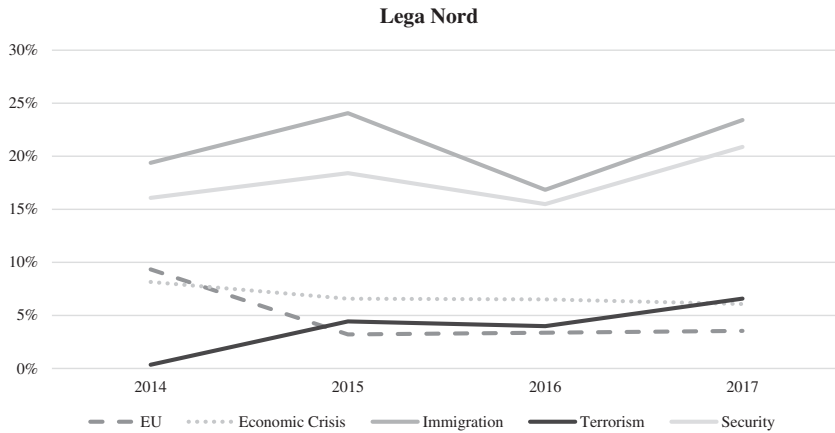


Figure 1. Lega Nord's posts on Facebook: thematic categorization (January 2014–May 2017).

- The three intertwined themes of immigration, security and terrorism – which the electorate recognizes as being fully 'owned' by the LN (Bobba and Seddone 2015) – are prominent in both accounts, especially after 2016. This shows the continued salience of these themes for the LN, particularly in light of the intensification of terrorist attacks throughout Europe. Such trend is even more marked in Salvini's case.
- Despite its importance to the revamped LN's ideology as the focus on the elites 'of Rome' is replaced by criticism of those allegedly based 'in Brussels', the actual space dedicated to the EU by both accounts remains rather modest, and is certainly quite secondary when compared to immigration and security issues.

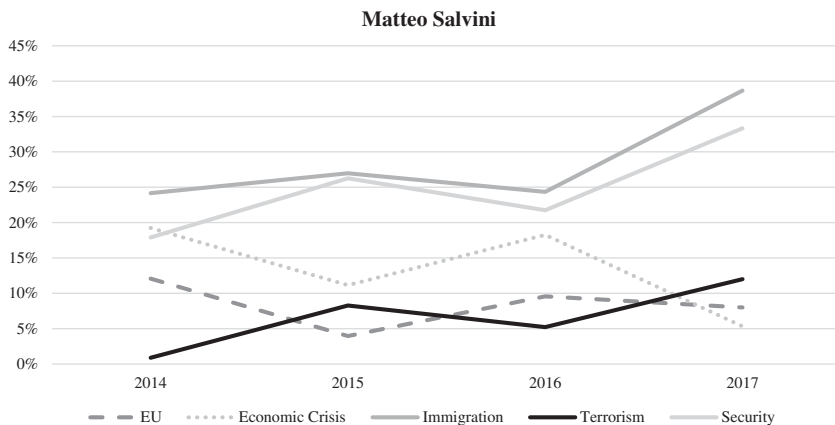


Figure 2. Matteo Salvini's posts on Facebook: thematic categorization (January 2014–May 2017).

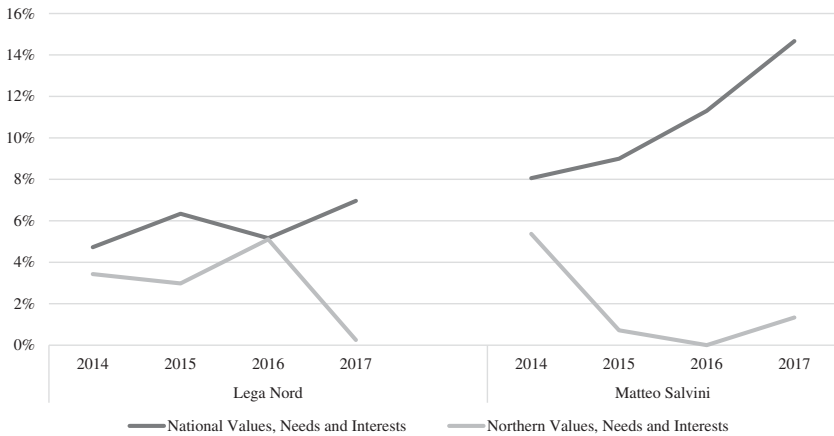


Figure 3. Lega Nord's and Matteo Salvini's posts on Facebook: National and Northern Values, Needs and Interests (January 2014–May 2017).

- Overall, the amount of attention dedicated by the LN and Salvini to both northern and national 'values, needs and interests' is limited. However, the focus on national interests is clearly more pronounced than that on northern ones, and the gap between the two tends to increase as the years go by. In particular, it seems that both the LN and its leader do not overly engage in discourses focused on regionalist claims. With few exceptions, indeed, the northern question remains pretty marginal. There are, however, some differences in the narrative emerging from the two FB accounts. On the one hand, Salvini appears more attentive to propose messages that make reference to national values, needs and interests, by adopting a nativist strategy. On the other, the party communication on SM seems to privilege, instead, themes that are more in line with 'traditional' LN claims, such as security or immigration – leaving more in the background references to national/Italian interests.

Taken together, these points suggest that traditional issues such as the emphasis on northern interests, needs and values have lost salience over time and tend to remain in the background especially within Salvini's communication. At the same time, though, claims concerning security are central to the LN's and its leader's narrative. Most importantly, they are framed within a *national* dimension, rather than a local/northern one.

Figure 4 helps to back up the last claim. It provides data about the geographical focus of the communication under discussion, showing whether the party or its leader – in those cases in which this is made explicit – make references to specific locations in northern Italy, or in the centre/south of the country. As Figure 4 indicates, both Salvini and the LN have dedicated

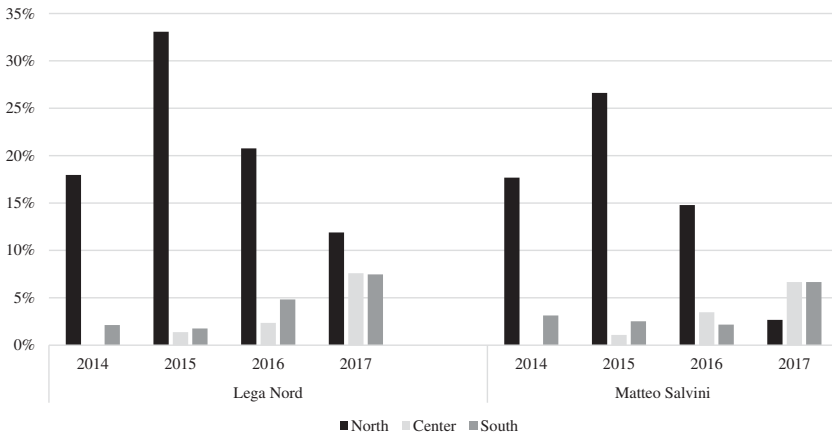


Figure 4. Geographical focus of the Lega Nord's and Matteo Salvini's posts on Facebook (January 2014–May 2017)

increasing attention to central/southern Italy in the last years to the extent that Salvini now talks more frequently about these areas rather than the North. This confirms our initial claim about the presence of a crucial shift in the territorial focus (and relative cleavage) that defined the Lega under Bossi, highlighting the extent to which Salvini deliberately wants his message to resonate well beyond the borders of 'the North'. The same trend can be noticed in the LN's case, but it is less marked – suggesting that, whilst the focus on the national scale is 'pushed' into the narrative of the party as a result of the growing salience of issues concerning security, the 'North' has not been abandoned altogether. Thus, while the leader 'detaches himself' from the North in a gradual yet steady manner (especially from 2016 onwards), the party 'follows him' – but only to a certain (and lesser) extent.

Who's standing up for 'the north'? The views of regional leaders.

Following on from the analysis of Salvini's and the party's discourse on Facebook, this section draws on interviews with high profile informants, i.e. some of the LN representatives that were leading its regional branches at the time of interview, and discusses the implications of Salvini's change of strategy.

First of all, it is useful to stress that none of our respondents denies that federalism/autonomy is no longer the focus of the party's communication.⁷ According to our interviewees, however, this should be seen as a matter of short-term tactic, meant to help Salvini rebuild support for the LN, and not as a sign that the party has stopped caring for the autonomy of the North altogether. Vinci's explanation is very clear, and to a large extent emblematic of the views of all interviewees on the topic:

given that federalism is anyway the foundation of our movement [...] we do not think that it is the key theme, in this historical moment, to attract the consensus that will allow us to govern. Concentrating our efforts exclusively on federalism would not pay off just as much as the campaign launched by Salvini on immigration and law and order is paying off right now, and these [i.e. immigration/security] are themes that, for obvious reasons, need to be addressed at the national level [...]. These are themes that affect the entire country.

Rixi and Grimoldi further reinforce this view, arguing that federalism 'remains in the Lega's DNA', with the latter adding 'Europe' to the list of 'culprits' the party has chosen to focus on, claiming that 'we prefer to stress the problems caused by the Euro, Europe, immigration'. Playing down the significance of this 'strategy of silence' on regionalist issues, Molinari says that the LN is merely 'adapting its message to a changed world'. Like Grimoldi, he voices concerns about the loss of sovereignty experienced by Italy due to its membership of the EU. He also underlines how the country's interests have been damaged by the imposition of sanctions on Russia – an important market for Italian producers – and the lifting of tariffs on certain Indian agricultural imports. By focusing on these themes, he argues, the LN can provide an alternative people can embrace.⁸

Claiming that federalism 'does not sell' in the current context is an extraordinary admission for a party that has spent decades arguing in favour of further autonomy for the North, and confirms the change of strategy we have detected in our analysis. Indeed, Bossi saw the achievement of federalism as essential and as the only way for the country to regain 'its international prestige in a European context' (Bossi 1996, 133). Interestingly, though, whilst Salvini presents, and in many respects embodies, a strategy of 'nationalisation' of the Lega, party elites – structured and rooted in the North – still recognize the regionalist dimension and identify with it. Thus, they may conceivably support the leader's approach primarily for instrumental reasons, i.e. because Salvini's strategy is expected to pay off (as it did in March 2018) in electoral terms.

The findings discussed above help to shed light on another significant point. As previously explained, under Bossi the LN's agenda was defined by the cleavage between Rome and the North. Now, the 'instrumental' support of regional leaders for Salvini's newfound national mission means that they seem prepared to concede that 'the enemy' against which the Lega has to fight its political battle is to be found outside the country, in supra-national and somehow more abstract dimensions – i.e. 'Europe' and 'immigration'. As such, the territorial cleavage has not disappeared from the LN narrative, but it has been pushed further afield so as to adapt/respond to changed 'global conditions' that appeal to a larger section of the electorate. This, in turn, helps to clarify how and why regionalism has been replaced by a form of nationalism imbued with nativism. This is strongly promoted by Salvini,

and embraced by all the regional representatives we interviewed, due to the alleged need to address and stop what Molinari calls the ‘planned, meaningless invasion [by foreigners] that is creating huge social and safety problems in our cities’. Rixi and Vinci echo this claim, emphasizing that the problem of immigration is strongly felt by people. It is inevitable that the LN’s communication has to focus on these issues, Rixi says, not least because no other party (let alone national and EU institutions) is paying sufficient attention to it.

Interestingly, Vinci also underlines that, had the party spent days discussing this tactical choice at one of its conferences, the media (and also party members) would have concluded that it was indeed changing its identity for good ‘and becoming a national party [...] a party of the nation’. As we mentioned above, the interviewees present the shift towards the national dimension as a temporary, strategic choice that does not change the League’s original mission. And yet, the recent amendment to the LN symbol before the 2018 election show that Salvini does not see these changes as temporary after all, having *de facto* transformed the mission and identity of the party by bypassing those who, at the local level, still appear to be attached to the idea of a regionalist Lega.

A legitimate question – given the extent and speed of the change imposed by Salvini to the party – is whether party members have accepted the idea that the LN should show concern *for* – and talk *to* – Italy as a whole, or may rather feel that its original values have been ‘betrayed’. While rejecting the suggestion that these changes may have caused problems to activists, our interviewees are open about the fact that they are impacting on the *kind* of support the LN is able to attract. For example, according to Vinci those who join the Lega today are ‘very sensitive to issues such as security and immigration’. Moreover, Molinari admits that people approaching the LN sometimes take it for an extreme right party, ideologically not dissimilar to some neo-fascist groups. He argues that:

When people join and think they have joined Casa Pound [a neo-fascist organisation], or a right wing party, we immediately tell them that the Lega is something else [...]. I mean, the Lega is an autonomist party, we explain the party’s history to them, certainly this is a party that focuses on identity, but not a right-wing anti-immigration party, which is something else. So it is up to the local branches, the local leaders to explain to the young people who join us now what the Lega actually is.

This points to a clear division of roles between a leader who is free to set a new agenda via means of communication (SM) he and his team control, and the regional and local branches, which still strive to keep the regionalist flame alive also among an emerging new generation of *leghisti* that is often alien to the party’s ideological roots. Interestingly, in the view of a prominent regional leader such as Molinari, these new ranks may have to be ‘educated’ to the regionalist cause. This is perceived as one the main roles of the party on

the ground, whilst Salvini's role is to reach out and gain electoral consensus more widely. On this, our interviewees are very clear: communicating with the electorate and shaping the members' views on political developments simply cannot be done by relying *exclusively* on new technologies. Therefore, while, according to Vinci, it is certainly very useful that 'Salvini is on everyone's mobile phones and laptops' as this helps to widen electoral support, the party must remain a territorial organization. Similarly, Molinari says that he welcomes:

Having Salvini who acts as a megaphone, who is omnipresent on television, social media, who is working really well and our task as local leaders [...] is to work on the ground, that is to contact people directly, by being present, by talking, by seeking people out, seeking votes out, one by one.

He also adds:

I belong to the old school, rather than going on television [...] or using Facebook, I still prefer to speak in a square, or to shake hands in the local market [...] The work of the leader [i.e. Salvini] needs to be supported by work on the ground.

Rixi has a similar view, and explains that 'you cannot replace a public meeting with social media'. Thus, in the view of the regional party representatives that we interviewed, the mass party organizational model set up by Bossi has to be maintained and defended, and plays a specific role which cannot be fully substituted by Salvini's personal style of leadership, mediated via SM.

Overall, these findings confirm that the LN currently has two contrasting, yet coexisting souls, building on similar 'exclusionary' values but showing allegiance to different 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991): the 'nation' as far as the leader is concerned, 'northern regions' in the case of party elites. This latent fracture between the leader and the party on the ground currently remains on the backburner, mainly due to the excellent performance of the LN in the 2018 general election – but could have profound implications for the future of the party.

Discussion and conclusions

Our article has shown that the core theme defining the regionalist character of the LN under its previous leader – i.e. the call for federal reform/northern autonomy – has been put aside by Salvini, and replaced with an agenda that has a broader national focus, and embraces nativist and protectionist motifs.

According to Mudde (2007, 19), nativism is an ideology

which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state.

This justifies the proposal of welfare chauvinist policies and is the basis for the nativists' claim that national cultures need 'protecting' (Ivaldi 2004). As the opportunity presented itself for a party to 'own' the nativist agenda in Italy, Salvini moved in and made sure *his* LN would occupy that political space. In a context characterized by an entrenched economic crisis, heightened levels of migration and mounting terrorist threats, nativist nationalism was evidently seen as having the potential to 'sell' better than regionalism, thus giving the LN's leader a chance to boost the party's electoral performance and stamp his name on its 'reinvention'. The data presented in this article clearly show this, emphasizing both the salience of 'external threats' to national identity and the shift in the territorial focus of Salvini's discourse. Thus, the LN's leader has remoulded his party's ideology through a nativist lens which works well with, and in many respects complements, the other original character of the party: populism. From a party that, in the 1990s, wished to represent the dynamic and successful enterprises of northern Italy, and thus appeared willing to recognize the advantages of immigration to Italian industry (if perhaps grudgingly), the LN has now become one that embraces the rejection of foreigners *per se*. In other words, both the party's inflexibility on issues having to do with identity and culture and its authoritarian conception of society (based on compulsory heterosexuality and the traditional family, as well as law and order) have turned it away from the much-proclaimed liberalism of the first half of the 1990s. Therefore, if the essence of the populist radical right resides in a combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007), there does not seem to be any reasons not to include the Lega into this party family today.

This development has important implications for both the party Salvini leads and, more generally, regionalist parties. As for the LN, the process of increased personalization (Karvonen 2010) that has characterized it in recent years has been key in enabling Salvini to bring about the radical ideological change outlined above at great speed, and without any in-depth discussion with the party's elites about the strategy being embarked upon. It is then for the party on the ground, as some of our interviewees have pointed out, to 'educate' new members about the LN's traditional, regionalist, northern values. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly Salvini who shapes the strategy of the party today, sometimes even announcing radical changes before they are officially agreed by the party's ruling bodies – as it happened with the introduction of the 2018 party electoral symbol, which was announced by Salvini on television and brought before the LN Federal Council only the following week. However, it is important to stress that regional representatives have not gone away, and that their power bases remain the northern regions (where, even today, the Lega still attracts the lion's share of its vote, cfr. Table 2). Our interviews suggest that regional representatives seem to recognize that personalization is a vital electoral asset for the LN. Thus, they may

support Salvini's message and his style of delivery – but without 'forgetting' the party's regionalist roots. Therefore, it would be a mistake to go as far as conceiving Salvini's Lega as a fully-fledged 'personal' party in which regional power bases have become irrelevant (Kefford and McDonnell 2018). After all, the party's expected lifespan still very much depends 'on the collective nature of its organization' (Calise 2015, 303) and is not seen to be, either by commentators, party representatives or members 'as dependent on the political lifespan of its founder leader' (McDonnell 2013, 222). Personalization may well play a crucial role in the contemporary context, but *only* as part of a specific electoral strategy embodied by the leader. The fact that Salvini dominates media communication fosters his role in framing the overall party message, as it is typical of processes of personalization (Farrell and Webb 2002). However, the process does not go any further – at least for the moment. Hence LN regional governors (and the leaders of the party regional branches) still enjoy some degree of autonomy, mobilize in the name of federalism and take initiatives to increase the power of their own regions. The recent referendums held on 22 October 2017 in Veneto and Lombardy on whether these regions should be given more powers by the central state, are a case in point. While the two LN governors at the time, Luca Zaia (Veneto) and Roberto Maroni (Lombardy), actively campaigned in favour of further regional autonomy and fully 'owned' the results, Salvini was noticeable for his silence and jumped on the bandwagon only after the vote was taken and won.⁹

Until now, this 'internal fracture' has not taken overtly antagonist connotations, and has remained latent. Indeed, the results of the 2018 elections have provided a powerful incentive to hush Salvini's critics. However, such fracture could increase in salience and create issues for the LN leader in the future – especially considering the contradictions that underpin the ideological shift of the party under his leadership. In particular, Salvini's complete silence on how Italy should deal with the huge and still unresolved regional divide that has characterized the country since unification (Ginsborg 1990), and still constitutes the key challenge to be faced by any governing coalition, has been deafening. Hence Salvini's nativist nationalism remains, in many respects, an empty vessel, because it fails to address the thorny issue of what constitutes 'Italian identity', and how the North and South of the country can be (economically and socially) reconciled. Considering that, since May 2018, the LN is in government with the M5S, it is likely that the issue of how to allocate resources to develop the economy of the South (and, crucially, *where* such resources are to be found) will have to be addressed soon¹⁰. When this will happen, Salvini's Lega will have to take sides, and this could upset the fragile equilibrium between the party leadership and its regional branches in the North that seems to have held during Salvini's first term as leader.

Our analysis also suggests a broader reflection on regionalist parties. To some extent, the Lega has always been an interesting case, due to its 'double ideological base', i.e. regionalism and populism. The literature shows that it is quite common for regionalist parties to experience shifts in their agenda especially when competing at general elections, mainly because claims aimed at challenging the vertical organization of power within states are not very likely to win a large amount of votes (Elias and Tronconi 2011; Hepburn 2010). Regionalist parties also 'use' the European dimension in different ways to advance their territorial projects (Hepburn 2010). In the contemporary context, and in line with our analysis, broader themes such as immigration or the economy have gained greater salience, and often become *the* issues around which the electorate polarizes. As a result, voters tend to support those parties that are perceived to be most credible on these themes. In practice, this means that regionalist parties have a strong electoral incentive to focus on issues that 'sell better', rather than pursuing only a territorial agenda (Elias and Tronconi 2011).

Regionalist parties can thus strategically shift the focus of their agenda to include broader issues (e.g. Europe, immigration) but, crucially, their overarching mission (i.e. represent a distinctive territory and its 'people') remains untouched. This largely reflects the strategies adopted by the LN under Bossi. Following a period of electoral decline and political isolation, exacerbated by the effect of Bossi's fraud scandal on the LN's image and credibility (Vampa 2017), the party certainly needed a 'wave of change' to regain support. And yet, in taking up this challenge, Salvini has taken the LN a step further than any other regionalist party we are aware of, by changing its very identity (i.e. shelving the party's commitment to the 'cause of the North' and embracing nativist nationalist stances instead). The other side of the original LN's ideology – i.e. its populist and thus intrinsically chameleonic 'soul' (Taggart 2000) – has been key in allowing this momentous transformation. The 'us versus them' narrative that underpins both regionalist and populist claims (and provided the glue between the two during the Bossi era) has strategically been shifted. The 'internal enemies' (the Italian state, the corrupted elite in Rome, and southern Italians) have been replaced by 'external ones' (the EU and the corrupted elites in Brussels), which are now portrayed as the culprits of the country's major ills – from sluggish economic growth, to austerity and 'uncontrolled' migration. Within this frame, the centre-periphery cleavage has not disappeared, but has moved up towards a supranational dimension. As a result, the regionalist cause was dropped and replaced by an 'empty nationalist' and nativist one – thus transforming in a most profound way one of the key components of the LN's ideology, to the extent that, as we have seen, the party can be included in the populist radical right party family.

The idiosyncrasies implicit in the LN's ideological shift under the leadership of Salvini have been held off, at least for the moment, by the unprecedented result achieved by the Lega in the 2018 general election. However, now that the party is back in government, it will have to deal, one way or another, with Italy's most pressing socio-economic problem: the North–South divide. As this article has argued, this is likely to put a strain on Salvini's 'reinvented' Lega and finally force it to address its contradictions.

Notes

1. Interestingly, 'Lega Salvini Premier' has also been registered by Salvini as the name of a brand new party. In its statute, any explicit reference to 'the North' has been removed and replaced with the more general aim of 'transforming the Italian state into a modern federal state' – thus including all Italian regions (Gazzetta Ufficiale 2017). Some political commentators have speculated that the creation of 'Lega Salvini Premier' may be a strategic move to partially avoid the consequences of the scandal that led to Bossi's departure, such as the requirement that the Lega reimburses 40 million Euros to the state (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2018).
2. For instance, the Five Star Movement's candidate for PM at the 2018 elections, Luigi Di Maio, is 'liked' by 1.6 million people on Facebook and has 340 000 Twitter followers, whilst M5S' co-founder, Beppe Grillo, has 2 million likes on Facebook and 2.5 million Twitter followers. Matteo Renzi, the former PM/leader of the Democratic Party, has 1.1 million likes on Facebook and is followed by 3.4 million people on Twitter.
3. According to InternetWorldStats, in June 2017 there were 51 836 798 million internet users in Italy, namely 86.7% of the population. Of these, about 30 million were Facebook users. Source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm> (accessed 10 May 2018).
4. Since the collection of ex-post data on the number of followers per page is not possible on FB, we provide a proxy in the form of the average number of likes gained by each post, giving an idea of the exposure of each post. We have therefore counted an average of 19 638 likes per post on the FB's page run by the LN, which published an average of 49 posts per day throughout the period under investigation. As for Salvini's FB page, averaging nine posts per day, we counted 89 850 likes per post (again, on average). This is significant, as it is four and a half times higher than that of his party.
5. As our list of interviewees shows, we were able to speak with leaders of regional branches representing some of the party's traditional strongholds, such as Lombardy and Piedmont (Diamanti 2003), but also leaders based in regions where the LN has only grown in recent years, such as Emilia and Liguria (cfr. Table 2). The regional leader of Veneto (another key LN stronghold) was contacted too, but he did not accept to be interviewed. All interviewees gave their explicit consent to be identified in this and subsequent publications.
6. Data are presented per year. In the interest of comparability, we present the data from 2014 onwards, since only less than a month of posts from 2013 was relevant to this study (as Salvini was elected in December that year).
7. As mentioned earlier, the LN's has used different terms (e.g. regionalism, federalism, devolution, secession) to frame the issue of northern autonomy that

underpinned their narrative of territorial distinctiveness. Since, in their interviews, party representatives use the term ‘federalism’ as a proxy for the broader regionalist aims of the party, we also consistently deploy this term in this section.

8. There is more than an echo here of the slogan of the Leave Campaign before the ‘Brexit referendum’ of 2016, i.e. ‘Take Back Control’, and also of Bossi’s motto in the 1990s that northern Italians should become, once again, ‘*padroni a casa nostra*’ (‘masters in our own homes’). However, Bossi saw the party’s opponents as being the elites based in ‘Rome’.
9. The (consultative) referendum for further regional autonomy was won by very large margins (98.1% in Veneto, on a turnout of 57.2%; and 95.3% in Lombardy, although with a lower turnout: 38.3%). During the week leading up to the vote, we found just one tweet on the topic by Salvini, and one short video on his Facebook page.
10. It is worth noting that the M5S’s success at the 2018 election draws largely on the wide support it gained in southern regions. Thus, it is apparent that the LN’s coalition partner has a strong interest in bringing the ‘southern question’ to the table whilst in government.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Davide Vampa and the anonymous reviewers for their useful feedback on a previous version of this article. The usual disclaimers apply.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Arianna Giovannini  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3301-0681>

References

- Albertazzi, D. 2016. “Going, Going, ... Not Quite Gone Yet? ‘Bossi’s Lega’ and the Survival of the Mass Party.” *Contemporary Italian Politics* 8 (1): 1–16.
- Albertazzi, D., and D. McDonnell. 2005. “The Lega Nord in the Second Berlusconi Government: in a League of its Own.” *West European Politics* 28 (5): 952–972.
- Albertazzi, D., and D. McDonnell. 2015. *Populists in Power*. London: Routledge.
- Anderson, B. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Ansa. 2017. “Salvini: ‘Stop ad alleanza con Alfano anche in Lombardia.’” Accessed October 16, 2017 <https://goo.gl/kZEyAb>.
- Biorcio, R. 2017. “The Northern League.” In *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe: Dimensions of Success*, edited by O. Mazzoleni and S. Mueller, 135–151. London: Routledge.
- Bobba, G. 2018. “Social Media Populism: Features and ‘Likeability’ of Lega Nord Communication on Facebook.” *European Political Science*. doi:10.1057/s41304-017-0141-8.

- Bobba, G., and A. Seddone. 2015. "Issues Without Owners, Candidates Without Ownership. An Analysis of 2013 Italian General Election Campaign." *Quaderni di Scienza Politica* 22 (1): 37–60.
- Bossi, U. 1996. "Autodeterminazione della Padania – Risoluzione presentata alla Camera, 10 gennaio 1996." In *Il mio progetto – Discorsi su federalismo e Padania*, by U. Bossi, 130–135. Milan: Sperling & Kupfer.
- Bulli, G., and F. Tronconi. 2011. "The Lega Nord." In *From Protest to Power. Autonomist Parties and the Challenges of Representation*, edited by A. Elias and F. Tronconi, 51–74. Wien: Braumüller.
- Calise, M. 2015. "The Personal Party: an Analytical Framework." *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 45 (3): 301–315.
- Cedroni, L. 2007. "Lega Nord." In *I Partiti Italiani. Iscritti, Dirigenti, Eletti*, edited by L. Bardi, P. Ignazi, and O. Massari, 247–268. Milano: Ube-Egea.
- De Winter, L. 1998. "Conclusion: a Comparative Analysis of the Electoral, Office and Policy Success of Ethnoregionalist Parties." In *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe*, edited by L. De Winter and H. Türsan, 204–247. New York: Routledge.
- Diamanti, I. 1996. *Il male del Nord. Lega, localismo, secessione*. Roma: Donzelli.
- Diamanti, I. 2003. *Bianco, rosso, verde... e azzurro. Mappe e colori dell'Italia politica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Diamanti, I. 2017. "'La Lega oltre Bossi e la Padania.'" *La Repubblica*, March 17, 2017.
- Elias, A., and F. Tronconi. 2011. *From Protest to Power: Autonomist Parties and the Challenges of Representation*. Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller.
- Enli, G. S., and E. Skogerbø. 2013. "Personalized Campaigns in Party-Centred Politics: Twitter and Facebook as Arenas for Political Communication." *Information, Communication & Society* 16 (5): 757–774.
- Farrell, D. M., and P. Webb. 2002. "Political Parties as Campaign Organizations." In *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, edited by R. J. Dalton and M. P. Wattenberg, 102–128. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gazzetta Ufficiale. 2017. "Statuto del movimento politico "Lega per Salvini Premier"." December 14, 2017. Accessed February 5, 2018. goo.gl/sWnt5n.
- Ginsborg, P. 1990. *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics: 1943–1980*. London: Penguin.
- Hepburn, E. 2009. "Introduction: re-Conceptualizing sub-State Mobilization." *Regional & Federal Studies* 19 (4-5): 477–499.
- Hepburn, E. 2010. *Using Europe – Territorial Party Strategies in a Multi-Level System*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Il Fatto Quotidiano. 2018. "Lega, Salvini schiera il "partito parallelo"." January 24, 2018. Accessed February 5, 2018. goo.gl/j8Pmgi.
- Il Giornale. 2017. "Lega, ecco il nuovo simbolo: ufficiale l'addio al Nord." December 21, 2017. Accessed December 21, 2017. goo.gl/jwYxgN.
- Il Sole 24 Ore. 2014. "Salvini: "Sul Sud abbiamo sbagliato, Italia si salva intera. Con Renzi il patto del Nazareno lo farei sul lavoro"." December 1, 2014. Accessed October 16, 2017. <https://goo.gl/h1e5LT>.
- Ivaldi, G. 2004. *Droites Populistes et Extrêmes en Europe Occidentale*. Paris: La Documentation Française.
- Karvonen, L. 2010. *The Personalisation of Politics. A Study of Parliamentary Democracies*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Keating, M. 2009. *The Independence of Scotland – Self-Government and the Shifting Politics of Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Keating, M. 2013. *Rescaling the European State. The Making of Territory and the Rise of the Meso*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kefford, G., and D. McDonnell. 2018. "Inside the Personal Party: Leader-Owners, Light Organizations and Limited Lifespans." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. doi:1369148117750819.
- Kruikemeier, S., G. Van Noort, R. Vliegthart, and C. H. De Vreese. 2013. "Getting Closer: The Effects of Personalized and Interactive Online Political Communication." *European Journal of Communication* 28 (1): 53–66.
- Lachapelle, G., and P. Maarek, eds. 2015. *Political Parties in the Digital Age: The Impact of New Technologies in Politics*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- la Repubblica. 2012. "Scandalo Lega, Bossi si dimette." April 2, 2012. Accessed July 10, 2017. <https://goo.gl/k5TjkW>.
- la Repubblica. 2017. "Spese personali con i soldi della Lega: 2 anni e 3 mesi a Umberto Bossi. Condannati anche il figlio e Belsito." July 10, 2017. Accessed July 10, 2017. <https://goo.gl/uRkBSJ>.
- Lega Nord. 2013. "Lega: Salvini, non ci fermiano fino all'indipendenza." Accessed July 10, 2017. <https://goo.gl/HZVJem>.
- Mazzoleni, O., and S. Mueller. 2017. "Introduction: Explaining the Policy Success of Regionalist Parties in Western Europe." In *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe. Dimensions of Success*, edited by O. Mazzoleni and S. Mueller, 1–21. London: Routledge.
- McDonnell, D. 2006. "A Weekend in Padania: Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord." *Politics* 26 (2): 126–132.
- McDonnell, D. 2013. "Silvio Berlusconi's Personal Parties: From Forza Italia to the Popolo Della Libertà." *Political Studies* 61 (S1): 217–233.
- Mudde, C. 2004. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39 (4): 542–563.
- Mudde, C. 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Musella, F. 2015. "Personal Leaders and Party Change: Italy in Comparative Perspective." *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 45 (3): 227–247.
- Salvini, M. (with M. Pandini and R. Sala) 2016. *Secondo Matteo: Follia e Coraggio per Cambiare il Paese*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Spektorowski, A. 2003. "Ethnoregionalism: The Intellectual New Right and the Lega Nord." *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 2 (3): 55–70.
- Taggart, P. 2000. *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Tronconi, F. 2015. "Bye-Bye Bipolarism: The 2015 Regional Elections and the New Shape of Regional Party Systems in Italy." *South European Society and Politics* 20 (4): 553–571.
- Vampa, D. 2017. "Matteo Salvini's Northern League in 2016: Between Stasis and new Opportunities." In *Italian Politics 2016*, edited by A. Chiamonte and A. Wilson, 32–50. New York: Berghahn.
- Vampa, D. 2018. "Il centrodestra a guida leghista." In *Il vicolo cieco. Le elezioni politiche del 2018*, edited by M. Valbruzzi and R. Vignati, 57–77. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Vercesi, M. 2015. "Owner Parties and Party Institutionalisation in Italy: is the Northern League Exceptional?" *Modern Italy* 20 (4): 395–410.

Annex

Data collection

The analysis focused on the Lega Nord's and Matteo Salvini's Facebook pages. We downloaded all FB messages posted between 14 December 2013 and 15 May 2017 using the Netvizz application, therefore gaining a total of 63 162 posts from the LN's account and 11 603 from Salvini's. A sub-sample of 30 days was randomly selected for each year (namely, between 1–4 days were covered for each month). The final data set included a total of 4768 messages posted by the LN and 1052 by Salvini. Next, a human content analysis of these posts was carried out, with the unit of analysis being the post itself.

Codebook

Table 1a. Reports the details of randomly selected days for each year.

Details of the sample: list of randomly selected days covered per each year

| 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| 15 December | 03 January | 03 January | 03 January | 03 January |
| 27 December | 18 January | 18 January | 18 January | 18 January |
| | 19 January | 19 January | 19 January | 19 January |
| | 21 February | 21 February | 21 February | 21 February |
| | 21 March | 21 March | 21 March | 21 March |
| | 03 April | 03 April | 03 April | 03 April |
| | 11 April | 11 April | 11 April | 11 April |
| | 21 April | 21 April | 21 April | 21 April |
| | 03 May | 03 May | 03 May | 03 May |
| | 23 May | 23 May | 23 May | |
| | 12 June | 12 June | 12 June | |
| | 14 June | 14 June | 14 June | |
| | 19 June | 19 June | 19 June | |
| | 06 July | 06 July | 06 July | |
| | 10 July | 10 July | 10 July | |
| | 12 July | 12 July | 12 July | |
| | 28 July | 28 July | 28 July | |
| | 04 August | 04 August | 04 August | |
| | 06 August | 06 August | 06 August | |
| | 26 August | 26 August | 26 August | |
| | 10 September | 10 September | 10 September | |
| | 18 September | 18 September | 18 September | |
| | 27 September | 27 September | 27 September | |
| | 03 October | 03 October | 03 October | |
| | 19 October | 19 October | 19 October | |
| | 21 November | 21 November | 21 November | |
| | 23 November | 23 November | 23 November | |
| | 28 November | 28 November | 28 November | |
| | 09 December | 09 December | 09 December | |
| | 12 December | 12 December | 12 December | |

All FB messages included in our sample were analysed through a human content analysis. We identified a set of dimensions to provide an overview of the LN's and Salvini's political discourse during the period covered in the analysis. In particular, we relied on different variables by focusing on the following dimensions: Europe, Economic Crisis, Immigration, Terrorism, Security, National Values, Needs and Interests, and Regional Values, Needs and Interests. As these variables are dichotomous and not mutually exclusive, it is in fact common for the same message to contain two or more of them at the same time.

Table 2a. Codebook details (coding, coding instructions, examples).

EUROPE

[1= Reference to EU or EU related issues; 0= No reference to EU or EU related issues]

Coding instructions

This is a dichotomous variable identifying the presence of explicit or implicit references to the European Union, Euro, EU funds, EU commission or other EU institutions/political actors. It also includes those posts focusing on domestic issues that make reference to the role of the EU. Moreover, it has to be underlined that, taking into account external events that may have occurred during the period considered, in some cases we registered posts making reference to other European political actors (i.e. references to Angela Merkel declarations) as related to Europe.

Examples

- Lega Nord FB page (May 2016): SALVINI: NON VOGLIO CEDERE ULTERIORE SOVRANITÀ ALL'EUROPA OGNI VOLTA ABBIAMO SOLO SUBITO FREGATURE. L'Europa faccia poche cose e le faccia bene. Dalla Bolkestein all'immigrazione fino alle folli direttive sulla nostra pesca e sulla nostra AGRICOLTURA abbiamo sempre subito INGIUSTIZIE. Basta cedere sovranità. [translation: SALVINI: I DO NOT WANT TO CEDE FURTHER SOVEREIGNTY TO EUROPE, EVERYTIME WE JUST GOT RIP-OFFS. Europe should do few things and should do them well. From Bolkestein to immigration, not to mention crazy directives affecting our fishing industry and our AGRICULTURE, we only suffered INIQUITY. Enough of giving our sovereignty away]
- Salvini's FB page (July 2015): Formaggio senza latte vino senza uva cioccolato senza cacao. Se è questo che ci impone l'Europa come denunciano la Coldiretti la Lega e tanti altri ANDIAMOCENE!!! [translation: Cheese without milk, wine without grapes, chocolate without cocoa. If this is what Europe imposes on us, as Coldiretti, the Lega and many others are saying, let's leave!!!]

ECONOMIC CRISIS

[1= Reference to the economic crisis or bad economic situation for the country; 0= No references to economic crisis or bad economic situation for the country]

Coding Instructions

This is a dichotomous variable identifying the presence of explicit or implicit references to the economic crisis. In particular, we coded posts focusing on issues such as: unemployment, unemployment rates, shrinking of the welfare state, austerity policies, industrial production, taxes, the job market.

Examples

- Lega Nord's Facebook page (January 2016): Troppe tasse: gli italiani riducono anche le spese per addobbi e alberi di Natale. [translation: Too many taxes: Italians are even cutting down on Christmas decorations and Christmas trees]
- Salvini's Facebook page (January 2015): I negozi degli immigrati aprono i negozi degli italiani chiudono. O gli italiani sono diventati incapaci o gli stranieri fanno i furbi. Chissà ... [translation: Immigrants' shops open while Italians' shops close. Either Italians have become incompetent or foreigners are playing tricks. Who knows ...]

IMMIGRATION

[1= Reference to immigration or refugees crisis; 0= No reference to immigration or refugees crisis]

Coding Instructions

This is a dichotomous variable identifying the presence of explicit or implicit references to content related to legal/illegal immigration, refugees, asylum seekers.

Examples

- Lega Nord's Facebook page (November 2016): Clandestino stupratore già espulso torna in Italia e chiede ancora asilo. [translation: *Illegal immigrant, rapist, already expelled, comes back to Italy and applies for asylum again*]
- Salvini's Facebook page (January 2017): INCREDIBILE a Reggio Emilia. Dopo aver protestato in Questura per la qualità del cibo ai PRESUNTI PROFUGHI ospiti della Coop Dimora Abramo è stato assegnato uno CHEF specializzato in piatti africani e pachistani. Cioè questi fanno casino e invece di espellerli gli mandano il cuoco!?! Con tanti italiani che crepano di fame ... Vergogna! [translation: *UNBELIEVABLE from Reggio Emilia. After protesting with the Police for the quality of the food they receive, the SUPPOSED REFUGEES, who are guests of Abramo Dimora, were assigned a CHEF specialized in African and Pakistani cuisine. What? They cause a mess and instead of expelling them a chef is sent over!?! With so many Italians starving in the meantime ... Shame on them!*]

TERRORISM

[1= Reference to terrorism; 0= No reference to terrorism]

Coding Instructions

This is a dichotomous variable identifying the presence of explicit or implicit reference to content related to terrorism, bombing, suicidal attacks, ISIS, radical Islam.

Examples

- Lega Nord's Facebook page (June 2016): L'ASSASSINO DI PARIGI GIÀ CONDANNATO PER TERRORISMO: EURO2016 SARÀ UN CIMITERO Larossi Abballa combattente dello Stato islamico era stato condannato nel 2013 come appartenente a una rete jihadista tra Francia e Pakistan. [translation: *THE KILLER IN PARIS HAD ALREADY BEEN FOUND GUILTY OF TERRORISM OFFENCES: EURO2016 WILL BECOME A CEMETERY Larossi Abballa was a fighter for the Islamic State and had been sentenced in 2013 for joining a jihadist network operating in France and Pakistan*]
- Salvini's Facebook page (January 2015): Solo oggi scopriamo che alcuni potenziali terroristi giravano tranquilli per l'Italia frequentavano moschee si organizzavano. Ma come le moschee non sono mica oasi di pace??? Prevenire controllare difendere i confini espellere. Prima che sia tardi. Buon lunedì ... [translation: *Only today we find out that some potential terrorists were travelling through Italy undisturbed, they were attending mosques, they were getting organized. Weren't mosques supposed to be oases of peace??? We must prevent, control, defend the borders and expel. Before it's too late. Have a good Monday ...*].

SECURITY

[1= Reference to security issues (crimes); 0= No reference to security issues (crimes)]

Coding Instructions

This is a dichotomous variable identifying the presence of explicit or implicit references to security issues (i.e. murders, robberies, muggings, rapes, drug dealing, violence, etc.).

Examples

- Lega Nord's FB page (November 2016): Lo scempio della Milano di Sala: gang latine padrone della città [translation: *The mess that Sala's Milan is today: gangs of Latinos control the city*].
- Salvini's FB page (November 2016): A Milano 45 arresti per droga (quasi tutti immigrati). A Milano pattuglie coi militari in zona Padova Corvetto e San Siro. Ma come il sindaco Renzi e Alfano dicevano che va tutto bene! Servirebbe una bella PULIZIA GENERALE altro che balle. Non vedo l'ora di cominciare. [translation: *45 people arrested in Milan for drug-related offences (almost all of them immigrants). Military patrols in the Padova Corvetto and San Siro areas of Milan. What? Mayor Renzi and Minister Alfano said that everything was fine! Some WIDESPREAD CLEANSING badly needed no more bullshit. I cannot wait to start.*]

NATIONAL VALUES, NEEDS AND INTERESTS

[1= Reference to national values, needs and interests; 0= No reference to national values, needs and interests]

Coding Instructions

This is a dichotomous variable identifying the presence of explicit or implicit references to content related to Italian culture, values, needs and interests. This category includes all messages which focus on preserving Italian culture (i.e. Catholic values, language), as well as mentions of national sovereignty or Italian economic interests.

Examples

- Lega Nord's FB page (December 2014): #Salvini: Maggioranza degli italiani sono persone perbene. IL PRIMO LADRO È LO STATO. [translation: #Salvini: the majority of Italians are good people. THE THIEF IN CHIEF IS THE STATE].
- Salvini's FB page (April 2016): Se devo essere processato perché difendo gli interessi degli italiani allora processatemi domani mattina! [translation: If I have to stand trial because I'm defending the interests of Italians then put me before a judge tomorrow morning!]

NORTHERN VALUES, NEEDS AND INTERESTS

[1= Reference to Northern values, needs and interests; 0= No reference to Northern values, needs and interests]

Coding Instructions

This is a dichotomous variable identifying the presence of explicit or implicit references to content related to Northern culture, values, needs and interests. This category includes all messages which focus on preserving and defending Northern interests and what are said to be specific needs of the North, such as autonomy or federalism. Similarly, all messages referring to what are posited by the speaker as northern values, such as a willingness to work hard, efficiency, a readiness to abide by the rules, were coded under this variable.

Examples

- Lega Nord's FB page (March 2016): Simona Bordonali: Per garantire la sicurezza ai lombardi dobbiamo trattenere le nostre tasse in Lombardia. [translation: Simona Bordonali: To guarantee the safety of Lombards, we must keep our taxes in Lombardy]
- Salvini's FB page (January 2014): Se non si paga il PIZZO allo Stato ladro un litro di benzina (a Livigno) si paga 1 euro. L'Indipendenza conviene! [translation: If you don't pay a BRIBE to the thieving state you'll pay 1 euro for a litre of petrol (in Livigno). Independence is worthwhile!]

Intercoder reliability

The sample of FB messages was analysed via human content analysis. Data coding was carried out by one-single coder. Intercoder reliability was checked via an ex-post test. A sub-sample of FB messages was randomly extracted (10% of the overall dataset; n= 580) and these were coded again by a second coder. All the variables obtained satisfy KA values (> 0.70).

Table 3a. reports the Krippendorff Alfa for each variable reported in the article.

| Intercoder reliability test | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Name of the variable | % Agreement | Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal) |
| Europe | 98.3% | 0.88 |
| Economic Crisis | 97.4% | 0.828 |
| Immigration | 97.6% | 0.932 |
| Terrorism | 96.9% | 0.727 |
| Security | 97.8% | 0.928 |
| National values, needs, interests | 97.9% | 0.866 |
| Northern values, needs, interests | 97.8% | 0.712 |