

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE LEGA NORD PARTY BETWEEN MARCH 2018 –AUGUST 2020 AND THE EFFECTS ON THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL SPECTRUM\*

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**Abstract:** *The rise of parties, leaders and movements challenging the political direction of the European Union is the certainty of recent years. The large ideological variety characterizing the Member States of the Union has revealed the competition between traditional and reformist political parties, on the background of the declining confidence in the virtues of democracy to avoid the existing social and ethnic cleavages. Political radicalism, assimilated to recent pan-European political developments, is the result of the indecision of traditional parties to reach a consensus on the future of the European Union. The example of the Lega Nord in Italy is the subject of this article: the ideology, government program and strategies to consolidate the mass support implemented by this party show that some events at the European level (the economic crisis, then the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic) have long-term effects on the policy at the level of each Member State, and the anti-system behavior acquires completely new coordinates. Political changes at regional or national level have consequences for the entire European spectrum, requiring an approach to the phenomenon through democratic methods: negotiation, consensus, limited majority and ensuring citizens' rights and freedoms.*

**Keywords:** far-right populism, hybrid ideologies, regionalism, European consensus, political instability.

### Literature review. The far-right populism in Europe

One of the evolutionary trends noted by researchers is the grafting of populism on existing radical ideologies, thus reaching hybrid orientations, in which traditional principles and “dogmas” of the far-right are associated with populism and new populism and propose alternative models for the creation of a united Europe. Recent

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comparative politics studies highlight the resurgence of a culture of extremism at the European level, being a phenomenon that starts from within the masses and finds representatives in the sphere of political elites, and leaders who manage to exploit certain discontents and frustrations of society and give an ideological form, threatening the project of European integration<sup>1</sup>.

Grafting populism onto far-right ideologies is complicated and controversial, and this complexity is evident in the consolidation of the regionalist identities. Piero Ignazi argues that the new right-wing extremist parties, such as the Lega, have fascist ideological origins or, rather, represent a radical post-industrial orientation defined by the fusion of anti-establishment and neoconservatism attitudes<sup>2</sup>. Hans-George Betz and Paul Taggart completed Ignazi's formulation by introducing the populist factor<sup>3</sup>.

From a theoretical perspective, populism was framed as a political rhetoric marked by “the unscrupulous use and instrumentalization of diffuse public feelings, anxiety and disappointment”<sup>4</sup> and “the recourse to the power of the people to challenge the legitimacy of the existing political order”<sup>5</sup>. From another point of view, populism appears as a poorly articulated ideology<sup>6</sup> that considers society to be “ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the *pure people* versus the *corrupt elite*, and who argue that politics must be the expression of the general will. of the people”<sup>7</sup>. Elements regarding the structure and exercise of power in society are the references to the antagonistic relations between elites and the masses, the ideal of restoring “popular sovereignty” and the conception of the “people” as a homogeneous body. A special feature of populism is the indeterminacy that “responds to its need for adaptability”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Nora Langenbacher, Britta Schellenberg (eds.), *Is Europe on the „Right” Path? Right-wing extremism and right-wing populism in Europe*, Berlin, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Forum, 2011; Ralf Melzer, Sebastian Serafin, *Right-wing Extremism in Europe. Country Analyse, Counter-Strategies and Labor-Market Oriented Exit Strategies*, Berlin, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Forum, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Piero Ignazi, *The silent counter-revolution*, “European Journal of Political Research”, vol. 22, nr. 1, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Hans-Georg Betz, *The Two Faces of Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, “The Review of Politics”, vol. 55, nr. 4, 1993, p. 663-685; Paul Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe*, “Journal of Political Ideologies”, vol. 9, nr. 3, 2004, p. 269-288.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, London, MacMillan, 1994, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Koen Abts, Stefan Rummens, *Populism versus democracy*, “Political Studies”, nr. 55, 2007, p. 407.

<sup>6</sup> Manuela Caiani, Paolo Graziani, *Varieties of populism: Insights from the Italian case*, “Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica”, vol. 46, nr. 2, 2016, p. 244.

<sup>7</sup> Cas Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, “Government and Opposition”, vol. 39, nr. 3, 2004, p. 543.

In the Italian case, when the populism of parties such Lega combined with the extremist image of the “nation”, they managed to inoculate the idea of an Italian exceptionalism within the European Union, in a deep identity crisis. Cas Mudde states that the discourse construction allowed the party to expose the nativist nationalism to the public. He argues that it is an ideological construct in the midst of which is the idea that any state must be ruled and inhabited primarily by “native” citizens and that outside individuals, foreigners endanger the stability of the homogeneous nation-state<sup>9</sup>.

For the Lega Party, however, Roberto Biorcio uses the term “regional populism” to describe the origin and ways of expansion. The regionalism-populism dialectic is relevant as Lega evolved in a specific political and socio-economic environment, in which it had the opportunity to develop its themes by referring to the territorial context, and glorifying Northern Italy to the detriment of the South. The Lega Party emerged as an alliance of regional groups, with an institutional history dominated by localism<sup>10</sup>.

### **The political context 2018-2020**

The Italian government formed by the Lega Party and the Movimento 5 Stelle in 2018, whose prime minister is currently Giuseppe Conte, was the most “right-wing” government after the Second World War in this country. The academic community states that it falls into the category of the far-right, if we use the traditional scheme of classification<sup>11</sup>.

Following the 2018 Italian parliamentary elections, Salvini and the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban announced that they would form a common front in the fight against immigrants in Europe, contradicting the position of other member states on this issue: “United on anti-immigration policies and the constant ironies on the European Union, the two right-wing politicians called for the creation of a pan-European alliance against immigrants, aimed at the prevention of the migration on the continent of those coming from regions in military conflict, in this case Africa and the Middle East. (...) Salvini stated that he wants a future alliance that excludes the socialists and the left in general, and brings back to the center of attention the values that their parties represent. At the same time, Orban called on the European People's

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<sup>8</sup> Carlos Ruzza, Stefano Fella, *Re-Inventing the Italian Right: Territorial Politics, Populism and Post-Fascism*, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Cas Mudde, *Populist radical right parties in Europe*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Roberto Biorcio, *La Lega Come Attore Politico: Dal Federalismo Al Populismo Regionalista*, in Renato Mannheimer (ed.), *La Lega lombarda*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1991, p. 34-83.

<sup>11</sup> See Cas Mudde, *Populist radical right parties in Europe*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Party, of which his party FIDESZ is member, to take a strong position against illegal migration”<sup>12</sup>.

However, the year 2019 brought a governmental crisis, at the end of which Salvini and his party came into opposition. “After 14 months of bickering, Italy’s government collapsed on Tuesday, plunging a key European nation already hobbled by financial fragility and political chaos into a renewed period of crisis and uncertainty”<sup>13</sup>. In this new context, “Giuseppe Conte's new government is a coalition between unlikely allies: the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and center-left Democratic Party. The alliance follows the withdrawal of Matteo Salvini's League party”<sup>14</sup>. But the extremist leader preserved his discourse and tried to throw the responsibility on the other EU Member States: “Salvini, who now sits on the opposition sidelines, labelled the new administration <a government produced by Paris and Berlin, born out of fear to give up power, without dignity or ideals, with the wrong people in the wrong places>”<sup>15</sup>.

Salvini received another blow in the January 2020 regional elections, when the Lega lost one of its traditional strongholds, the Emilia-Romagna region. “Salvini put on a brave face, telling reporters he had done “everything humanly possible and even a bit more”, to win the region and he was “absolutely satisfied” to have eroded the left’s support”<sup>16</sup>. Lorenzo De Sio, politics professor at Rome’s Luiss University, said “the result has hurt Salvini’s aura of invincibility”<sup>17</sup>. It was the beginning of the erosion of his political narrative’s credibility.

The popularity of Matteo Salvini has decreased due to the unexpected COVID-19 crisis. In this context it was a confrontation between the dramatic reality and the Salvini’s demagogic political discourse. The drama of the Italians was so profound that the bombastic speech of the Lega leader did not have the expected effect. His narrative has lost the sense and appeared disconnected from the immediate reality.

<sup>12</sup> *Viktor Orban and Matteo Salvini strive to forge new European anti-migrant alliance*, “Deutsche Welle”, <https://www.dw.com/en/viktor-orban-and-matteo-salvini-strive-to-forge-new-european-anti-migrant-alliance/a-45262151>, accessed 4 September 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Horowitz, *Italy’s Government Collapses, Turning Chaos Into Crisis*, “New York Times”, 28 August 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/world/europe/italy-pm-giuseppe-conte-resign.html>, accessed 7 September 2020.

<sup>14</sup> *New Italian government formed, allying M5S and the center-left*, “Deutsche Welle”, 14 September 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/new-italian-government-formed-allying-m5s-and-the-center-left/a-50287864>, accessed 7 September 2020.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Gavin Jones, *Italy’s Salvini loses 'aura of invincibility' in Emilia setback*, “Reuters”, 27 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-politics-salvini-idUSKBN1ZQ1RX>, accessed 8 September 2020.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

The Lega's message has remained unchanged: it is still a firmly anti-migrant, anti-European, and anti-globalist movement. "The COVID-19 outbreak, in fact, is the last case in point, with Salvini using the pandemic as an excuse to spread fake news about migrants being disease carriers, thus ostracising the Chinese community in Italy"<sup>18</sup>.

But with Italians looking for a more solemn leadership style during the coronavirus crisis, Salvini's populist playbook has fallen flat, exposing his vulnerabilities. Unable to focus the national debate on immigration and denied political rallies and other opportunities to press the flesh, Salvini has slumped in the polls<sup>19</sup>. Since the virus hit Italy, the lockdown has damaged the former interior minister's ability to connect with the public, Jacopo Morrone, a senior League MP, told POLITICO: "The strength of Salvini and the League is out in the field, showing our faces. We are always in the *piazze*, we are close to the people"<sup>20</sup>.

The polls, by party, still show the League in first place, but steadily losing its lead. Last August, the League had a 15-point advantage over the second-place Democratic Party, which has now been cut in half<sup>21</sup>. Though the League remains Italy's strongest party, "POLITICO's Poll of Polls puts its support at 27 percent, down 4 percentage points from the end of February and 10 points from its peak last summer. Its lead over the center-left Democratic Party has narrowed from 15 points to 6"<sup>22</sup>.

## Conclusions

It's much too soon to count out Salvini or his League, or for that matter to draw any definitive conclusions about who will ultimately be the winners and the losers after a pandemic that is still devastating people's lives. But the dent in Salvini's political standing confirms that the coronavirus has put the entire board in play. Former predictions no longer hold. Anything is possible.

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<sup>18</sup> Nikos Chircop, *Twenty-First Century Italy: A Case of Chronic Populism?*, "The New Federalist", 20 March 2020, <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/twenty-first-century-italy-a-case-of-chronic-populism?lang=fr>, accessed 8 September 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Roberts, *Matteo Salvini's coronavirus slump*, "Politico", 3 June 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-matteo-salvinis-league-coronavirus-slump/>, accessed 12 September 2020.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> Frida Ghitis, *How COVID-19 Scrambled Italy's Politics and Dented Salvini's Appeal*, "World Politics Review", 7 May 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28742/how-covid-19-scrambled-italy-s-politics-and-dented-salvini-s-appeal>, accessed 12 September 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Roberts, *Matteo Salvini's coronavirus slump*, "Politico", 3 June 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-matteo-salvinis-league-coronavirus-slump/>, accessed 13 September 2020.

Negative attitudes and behaviors towards the European democratic model are therefore the defining components of the Italian political sphere at the moment. Challenging the establishment is the dominant trend and certain social categories, permanently excluded from the governing programs of traditional parties, are now “revolting” by choosing to go to those who question not only the values and principles of democracy, but also the political system itself. Inevitably, Italy is among the countries that want a paradigm shift on the part of the European Union in addressing the public agenda. In the absence of an effective self-protection mechanism, the democratic community model is put in a position to compete with alternatives that call into question its efficiency and the opportunity to continue on the same path.