

# **‘No Federalism Please, We Are Leghisti!’**

## **The Lega Nord under Matteo Salvini**

**Author:** Daniele Albertazzi, Senior Lecturer in European Politics, Department of Political Science and International Studies (POLSIS), University of Birmingham.

Email: d.albertazzi@bham.ac.uk; Twitter: @DrAlbertazziUK

Paper Presented to the Panel: The Italian Constitutional Referendum of 2016: the Birth of the ‘Third Republic’?, held at the PSA Annual International Conference 2017, 10-12 April 2017, Glasgow.

**\*\*PROVISIONAL DRAFT.**

**PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT THE AUTHOR’S PERMISSION\*\*<sup>1</sup>**

### ABSTRACT

Since 2013, the ideology of the Lega Nord (LN – Northern League) has changed under the influence of its new leader, Matteo Salvini. Having abandoned the claim that Italy should become a federal state and having embraced nationalism, Salvini has focused his party’s message on immigration/law and order and started to collaborate at various levels with extreme right organisations, both inside and outside Italy. In so doing, the LN’s leader has sought to capitalise on the state of disarray which has recently characterised the LN’s former ally in government and competitor on the right: Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (FI). Based on empirical data collected in 2016 and 2017 via an analysis of the party’s strategic communication, and elite interviews with LN regional leaders, this paper explores the extent to which the LN’s ideology has changed under Salvini and how recent developments are seen within his party. It concludes by arguing that Salvini’s Lega Nord now fulfils the criteria to be included in the ‘populist radical right’ party family.

---

<sup>1</sup> Earlier drafts of some sections of this paper were presented at the Conference ‘Current Populism in Europe: Impact on the Political Landscape’, held in Prague on 23 and 24 May 2016, and the Conference ‘Populism and Democracy’, held in Zurich on 28 and 29 June 2016.

## *Introduction*

Many new 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). Created by Umberto Bossi in 1991, it became the oldest party group in the Italian parliament by 2008 and, as polls have consistently shown, it has a realistic chance to gain over 12 percent of the vote in the forthcoming general election to be held by the spring of 2018 (*Corriere della Sera online*, 2017). If this came to pass, such performance would be the best by the party in a national election since its creation.<sup>2</sup>

It is also worth noticing that the party has already accumulated considerable experience of government participation (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). Under Bossi's leadership, it took part in the first government of the 'Second Republic' in 1994, to then go on and serve in government again for eight of the ten years between 2001 and 2011. Indeed, in terms of institutional roles occupied at national and subnational levels, the Lega has been one of Europe's most successful regionalist parties to date, by holding Ministries such as Welfare, the Interior and Constitutional Reforms, as well as the governorship of the wealthiest regions in the country.

As it is well known, the 'Bossi era' came to an end in 2012, as the LN's founder was forced to step down due to a damaging scandal. Following a brief interim period during which the party was steered by the former minister Roberto Maroni, Matteo Salvini was elected as leader by the party members at the end of 2013. If the distinctiveness of Bossi's LN resided in its ideology, which was best defined as 'regionalist populist' (Biorcio, 1991; McDonnell, 2006), as well as its unweaving reliance on the 'mass party' organisational model, both party ideology and organisation appear now to be in flux under the new leader. The aim of this paper is to focus on the changes affecting the LN's ideology in recent years, leaving the discussion of its organisation to a subsequent article.

---

<sup>2</sup> However, since it is not clear under what electoral law the forthcoming elections will be fought, and neither what electoral alliances will be created before it, pollsters should be careful about trying to make predictions about the results.

In the remaining sections of this paper, the discussion will proceed as follows. In the first section, I will briefly summarise the key features of the LN under Bossi, thus making clear what I am comparing Salvini's LN *with*. The second section will substantiate the claim that the request for greater northern autonomy has simply vanished from Salvini's communication – despite the full, official name of the party still being 'Lega Nord per la liberazione della Padania' (Northern League for the Liberation of Padania – i.e. Northern Italy). Next, the paper will consider how LN regional leaders see - and justify - the ideological revolution their party has embarked upon. Finally, the last section will discuss the implications of such developments for the LN and argue that it now satisfies the conditions to be included in the 'populist radical right' party family, as defined by Cas Mudde (2007), something that was still problematic when Bossi was leading it.

### *The Lega Nord under Umberto Bossi*

Leaving aside the many iterations and spin-offs of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI – Italian Communist Party), which eventually gave birth to the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD – Democratic Party), the LN has been the only party of the so-called 'Second Republic' to have demonstrated an unshakable faith in the advantages of the mass party organisational model (Albertazzi, 2016).

Hierarchical and rooted on the ground, the LN always invested time and energy shaping the views of its members via a variety of activities and meetings (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: Chapt. 3). It asked members to contribute a lot to the life of the party, but also gave them plenty of opportunities to discuss political developments with party representatives at all levels (whether MPs, regional councillors, or party functionaries) (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2014: 14). Indeed, in the LN, people could (and still can) achieve the status of full members only through activism (see Lega Nord, 2002: Art. 29 and 30; reiterated in Lega Nord, 2015: Art 33). This constant engagement with members fulfilled two important functions: it strengthened their trust in party leaders by putting flesh on the bones of Bossi's claims that the Lega was a 'community of equals' in which no-one was too important to remove himself, or herself, from 'the people';

and helped the party shape their interpretations of political developments, including the inevitable setbacks (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010: 1330–5; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: Chapter 3).

While other protagonists of the 1990s (read: Silvio Berlusconi, the founder of Forza Italia) were testing the effectiveness of a very ‘light’ organisational model that relied on the unmediated relationship television could foster between a leader and ‘his’ electorate, rather than rootedness on the ground (Albertazzi and Rothenberg, 2009), Bossi was adamant that engagement with members and voters – no matter the costs and organisational efforts needed to achieve them – were essential for a party that wanted to be ‘of the people’ (Bossi, 1992). As for its ideology, Bossi’s LN never deviated from the regionalist populism the party had been imbued with from the start. Therefore, the LN’s communication constantly juxtaposed northern Italians, posited as a homogenous, hard-working and simple living community, with the centralising and undemocratic elites ‘of Rome’, accused of stealing from ‘the people’ their material wealth, values, way of life, and even self-respect (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: 42-4). Although they were under threat, northern Italians could still save themselves, it was argued, by gaining more autonomy from ‘Rome’. This is a quest that the LN variously defined as the struggle to gain ‘federalism’, ‘devolution’ or even ‘independence’, depending on the changing circumstances of Italian politics. After decades in which territorial politics had been restricted to peripheral regions of Italy, *the North* was therefore turned by Bossi into a community of ‘interests’ and ‘values’, and pitted against the Italian state and the South (Diamanti, 1994: 672). During the final years of Bossi’s leadership, LN activists regarded the quest for ‘autonomy/federalism’ as *the* issue that *defined* the Lega, and said they were attracted to the party mainly by its positions and proposals on this theme, as well as what it had to say about immigration/law and order (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: Fig 7.1, 133). In recent years there has been a lot of debate about the party’s position on Europe and the Euro, and much interest has been shown by the international media for Salvini’s claim that a referendum on Euro membership should be held in the country. However, although the LN did become increasingly critical of the Euro since the end of the 1990s, and even more so since Salvini took over as leader, the

issue was never a defining one for the party's identity, and neither it is today (see the data provided below). Indeed, under Bossi, the LN argued not to be 'against Europe *per se*' (Lega Nord, 2009: 60), but rather oppose to the creation of 'a genuine continental super-state in which democracy is, in practice, non-existent' (Ibid.). The kind of Europe the Lega said it dreamt of at the time was one in which local areas were appreciated 'as essential reserves of identities, cultures, values and traditions' (Lega Nord, 2011: 30). On the contrary, the party argued, the EU had been a key promoter of globalisation, a process which was said to pose a particular threat to the people, as it sought to 'create a single world – the global world – in which differences were evened out and slowly eliminated' (Lega Nord, 2011: 8).

However, the LN started changing its ideology during the last few years of Bossi's leadership, in ways that prepared the terrain for its further radicalisation under its current leader. Arguably, 9/11 was a godsend for the Lega, as it helped it shift its position from being critical of how immigration had been managed, to framing it as an existential threat to the very survival of the identities and cultures of northern Italians. Not unexpectedly, from then on the LN also started attracting voters holding more radical views on issues such as immigration, economic liberalism, civil rights, and democracy (Passarelli, 2013). Moreover, the attitudes of its party representatives on the same topics also hardened (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012: 195-6). In this sense, Salvini's further radicalisation of the party's ideology did not constitute a change of direction for the Lega. What is remarkable, however, is that the increased focus on immigration, identity issues and law and order came alongside the sudden abandonment of the quest for federal reform. Such 'disappearance' is the topic of the next section.

### *North first no more?*

Salvini's Lega has yet to produce any substantial documents spelling out what it wants, such as, for instance, an electoral manifesto.<sup>3</sup> As far as the party's focus on the needs of the north is concerned, however, the new leader has been very explicit that it belongs to the past. For instance, immediately after being

---

<sup>3</sup> The LN's leader says that a manifesto will be published soon, though (see Senaldi, 2017).

elected leader, Salvini went as far as apologising for the insults he had directed at southerners throughout his political career, and said that he had become persuaded that, either Italy saved itself *as a nation*, or else all of its regions would face ruin (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2014). The LN leader elaborated on this idea in July 2014 at the conference held in Padua by his party. On this occasion, Salvini hailed the forthcoming creation of ‘one or more movements’ across the whole of Italy, ready to ally themselves with the Lega in the fight against the then PM Matteo Renzi (Lega Nord – sezione di Zogno *online*). This opened the way for the setting up, by the LN, of an organisation called ‘Noi con Salvini’ (NcS – Us with Salvini), which would fight elections in central and southern Italy. Backed by a small team based in Rome (*Il tempo.it*, 2016), NcS has fielded candidates in subnational elections where the LN does not normally compete, albeit, so far, with very modest results. For instance, while in the regional elections of November 2014 the LN did well in Emilia-Romagna, by increasing its vote share from 13.6 to 19.4, a few months later, i.e. in May 2015, NcS only managed to gain 2,4 per cent of the vote in Apulia. The organisation has its own online presence, too, with a limited following of about 7,000 people on Twitter and 35,000 on Facebook. Given its complete identification with the LN’s leader, after whom it is named, it is however safe to assume that those wanting to hear from NcS will probably follow Salvini’s *own* Twitter and Facebook accounts. With almost 360,000 followers on Twitter and 1,8 million likes on Facebook, Salvini’s accounts not only dwarf NcS’ in terms of popularity, but those of all other LN leaders, too.<sup>4</sup>

With Salvini, therefore, the personalisation of both the LN and its offshoot NcS has been stepped up a gear: the new party leader is not only very aware of the opportunities offered by the new media for effective communication and permanent campaigning, but also more than able to make best use of such opportunities. Having put himself forward as LN’s/NcS’ spokesman, via his social media accounts and frequent appearances on television and in the press, Salvini has deployed a strategy that has been well tested by other populist leaders before him: that of making controversial, head-line grabbing remarks on themes

---

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the already cited Maroni, a previous minister who was interim leader of the LN in-between the Bossi’s and Salvini’s eras and is now Governor of Lombardy, can only boast circa 80,000 followers on Twitter and 34,000 on Facebook.

such as identity, immigration, and law and order, thereby setting the agenda of the political debate in his country more or less at will.

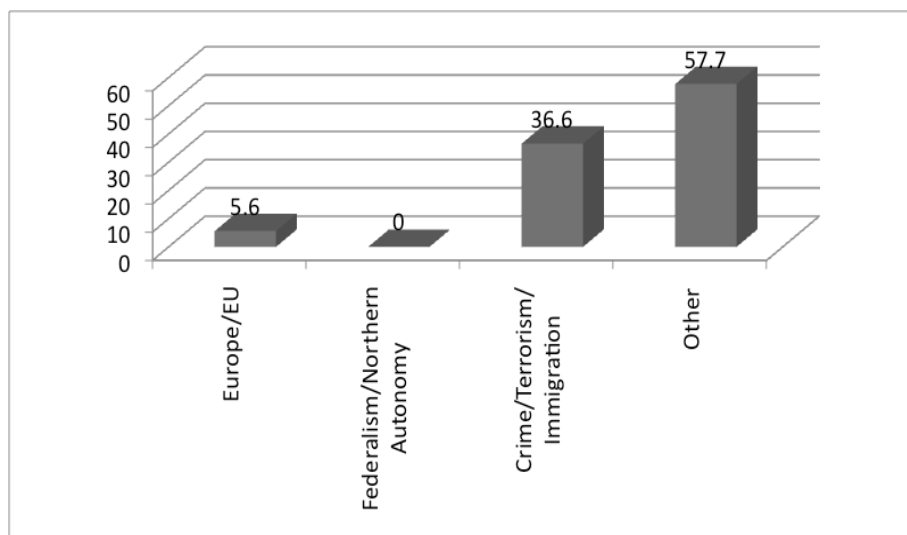
To explore Salvini's (hence the party's) rhetoric and assess the weight of attention dedicated by him to a selection of key themes that had characterised the LN under Bossi, and to different locations in Italy and abroad, I have conducted a thematic analysis of a sample of 453 tweets sent by him during three two-month periods covering the last year and a half. Figures 1-3 provide a classification of Salvini's tweets according to their theme during the selected periods, allowing us to compare the *relative* importance that some selected topics have acquired in his communication in recent months. Far from providing an exhaustive list of the themes Salvini has been talking about, this quantitative study only assesses the relative weight of a selection of themes that past research has identified as being at the core of the party's identity and ideology under Bossi. These are: a) Federalism/Northern Autonomy; b) Crime/Terrorism/Immigration; and c) Europe/EU (see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: 42-49).<sup>5</sup> The findings are provided in Figures 1-3 below.

---

<sup>5</sup> Figures 2 and 3 differ in one respect from Figure 1 because of the addition of the category 'Constitutional Referendum' to them; furthermore, the category 'Vote Now' was added to Figure 3. This was done to assess the attention given to the Italian Constitutional referendum and its fallout (including the party's request for immediate elections) in the period preceding and following the vote. As for the category defined as 'Other', besides tweets on the economy, agriculture, the traceability of food, and other topics, it hosts a large amount of tweets that merely advertise the events Salvini attends on a weekly basis, either around the country or on television.

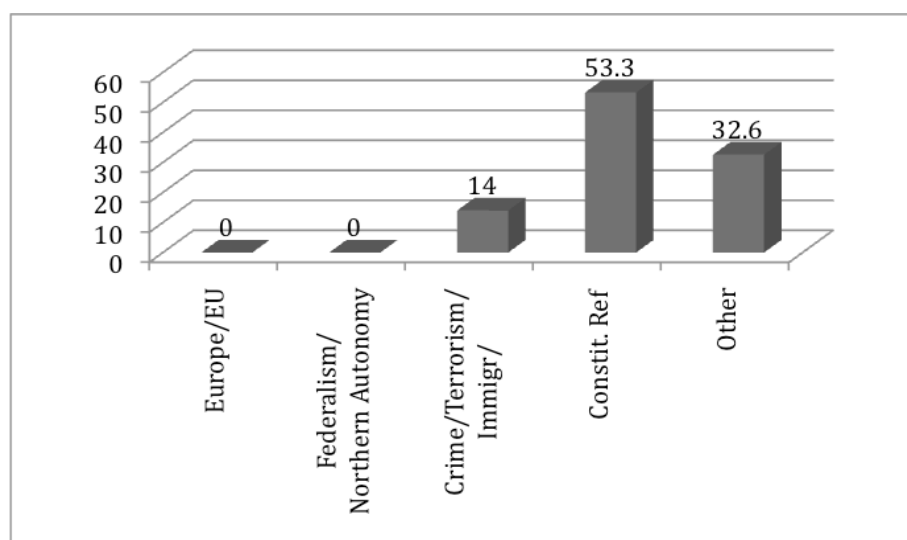
- FIGURE 1 -

**Caption:** Categorisation of Matteo Salvini's Tweets, according to theme. Period: March and April 2016 - Random selection. Tot: 142.



- FIGURE 2 -

**Caption:** Categorisation of Matteo Salvini's Tweets, according to theme. Period: October and November 2016 - Random selection. Tot: 150.

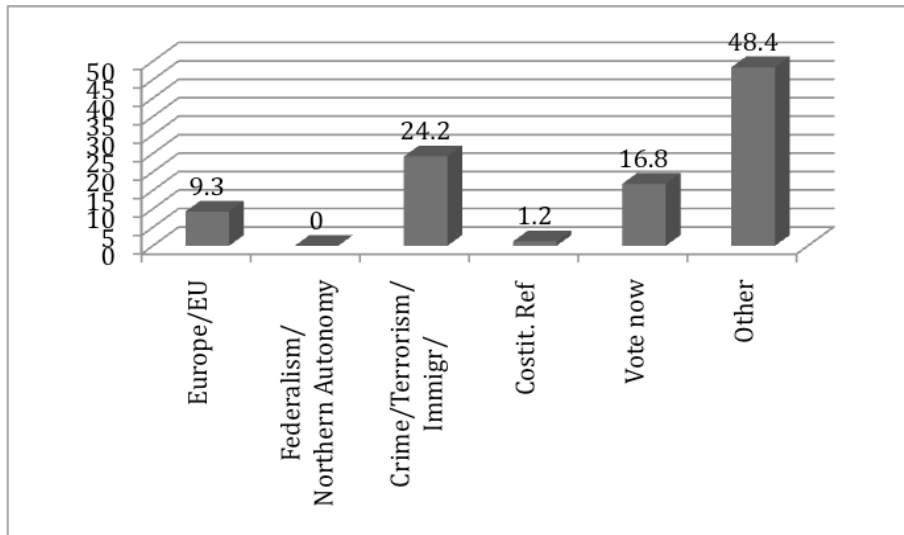




- FIGURE 3 -

**Caption:** Categorisation of Matteo Salvini's Tweets, according to theme.

Period: December 2016 and January 2017 - Random selection. Tot: 161.

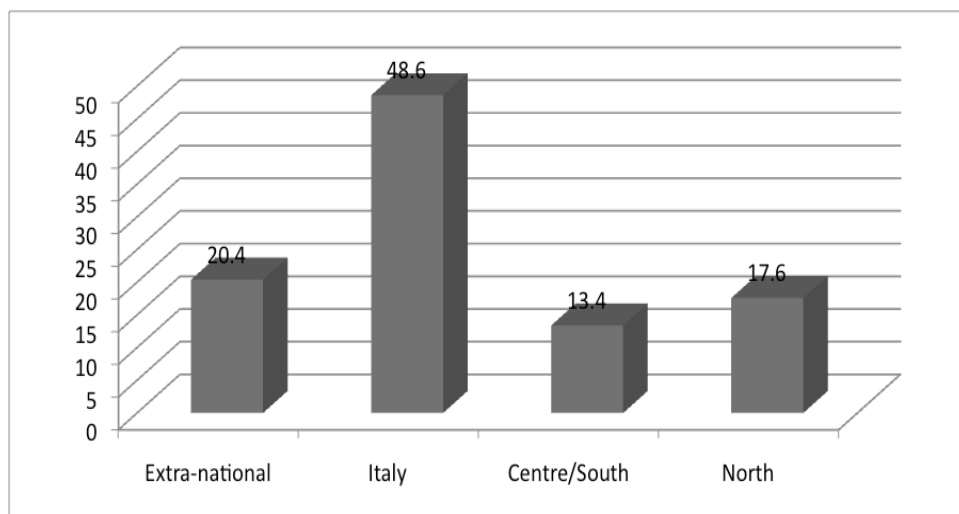


As Figures 1-3 show, the discussion of 'Federalism/Northern Autonomy' has not just been toned down in Salvini's rhetoric: it has vanished completely. In addition to this, it is worth noticing that the topic of 'Europe/the EU' remains secondary in quantitative terms – and is not even mentioned at all in certain periods (e.g. Fig. 3). As for 'Crime/Terrorism/Immigration' (here seen as one single category because of the treatment these topics receive by Salvini), it maintains an important presence throughout (if, naturally, with variations depending on circumstances) (compare Fig. 1 with Figs. 2 and 3). In particular, the theme starts receiving less attention as the Constitutional Referendum (to be held on 4 December 2016), and the LN's request for fresh elections that followed that vote, take centre stage (see the categories 'Constitutional Referendum' and 'Vote now' in Figs. 2 and 3). It is not surprising that the focus of Salvini's messages should change so much depending on circumstances – the ability to react to events and shape the conversation around them being the whole point of using the social media in politics. It is, however, very interesting that a theme such as 'Federalism/Northern Autonomy' is nowhere to be found, whatever the period under consideration.

Figures 4-6 provide evidence on the extent to which Salvini's messages cover events/ideas/proposals *concerning*: a) a location in either northern, or central/southern Italy; b) Italy as a whole; c) countries other than Italy, or international bodies/organisations. Here tweets were *not* classified according to the location they were sent *from*, but the one they were concerned *with*. In other words, when Salvini sent a tweet advertising, say, his appearance at a rally, or an initiative taken by a regional government, or a natural disaster, what was recorded was the location of these events, not the location of the speaker while tweeting. The results are presented in Figures 4-6 below.

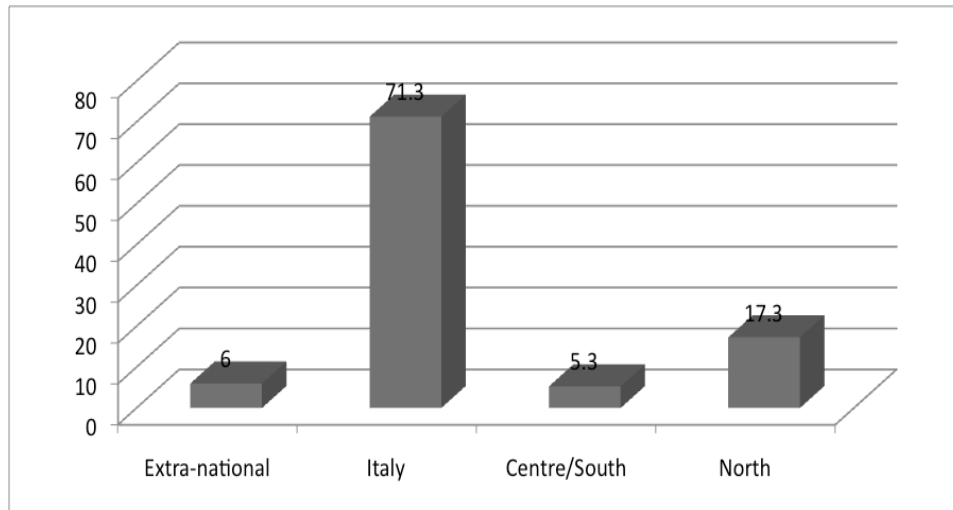
- FIGURE 4 -

**Caption:** Categorisation of Matteo Salvini's Tweets, according to location.  
Period: March and April 2016 - Random selection. Tot: 142.



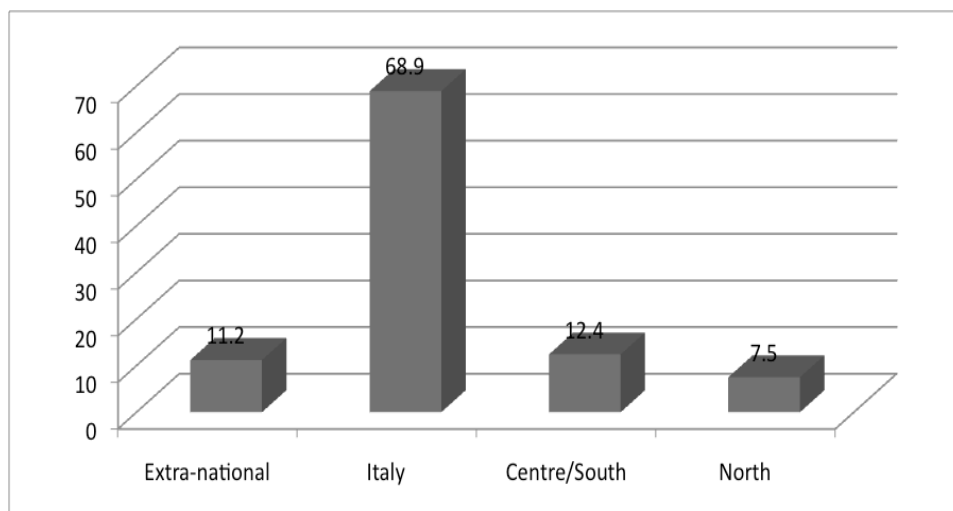
- FIGURE 5 -

**Caption:** Categorisation of Matteo Salvini's Tweets, according to location. Period: October and November 2016 - Random selection. Tot: 150



- FIGURE 6 -

**Caption:** Categorisation of Matteo Salvini's Tweets, according to location. Period: December 2016 and January 2017 - Random selection. Tot: 161.



The evidence provided in Figures 4-6 suggests the following considerations:  
Firstly, in the periods covered by Figs. 5 and 6, an absolute majority of tweets

focuses on the country *as a whole*; in Fig. 4 the 50 per cent mark may have been missed, however only by a very small margin. Secondly, although tweets concerning a specific part of the country are more likely to focus on the north rather than the centre/south, this does not happen in each period (e.g. Fig. 6) and, in some cases (e.g. Fig 4), the difference between the amount of attention dedicated to the two macro-areas is actually small. In other words, the data presented here provide confirmation of Salvini's reiterated claim that, while he is obviously not going to ignore his party's traditional strongholds of the deep north, his aim is now to speak *to*, and *about*, Italy as a whole. This is entirely consistent with his decision to drop claims that 'the north should come first' from the party's discourse.

A comprehensive analysis of the reasons why Salvini may have decided to change direction so rapidly and radically, by abandoning the distinctly 'pro-north' focus of the LN's rhetoric, is beyond the scope of this paper. In short, one could point out that the opportunity for the LN to grow by attracting former Forza Italia's voters is there for the taking now, due to the total lack of direction demonstrated by FI since the fall of the last Berlusconi government in 2011. Of course, whatever Salvini does, the LN's growth is bound to be hampered in the short and medium term by the presence of another vociferous populist party that has also been very critical of the political, financial and media 'elites' that are said to govern Italy, as well as the impact of the Euro on Italy's economy and, albeit to a lesser extent, 'uncontrolled migration'. This is of course Beppe Grillo's Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement), which recent polling data show to be enjoying the support of over 32 per cent of the electorate vs. 26.8 per cent for the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party), its most important competitor (*Corriere online*, 2017). As FI remains in limbo, and despite competition by the M5S, it is at least possible for Salvini to increase his party's popularity among right wing voters, and even aspire to lead a future centre-right alliance.

Having said all this, there is no denying that the dropping of 'Federalism/Northern Autonomy' as a campaign theme has been a momentous decision for a party such as the LN. The next section investigates how such

change is understood and justified by the top leaders of the party at the regional level.

*North first no more: the view from regional leaders*

This section of the paper draws on a series of interviews with LN regional leaders on the party's strategic direction. The names of the interviewees, and the regional branches they led at the time of the interview, are as follows: Paolo Grimoldi (Lombardy), Riccardo Molinari (Piedmont), Edoardo Rixi (Liguria) and Gianluca Vinci (Emilia). Semi-structured interviews were held between June and October 2016 and focused on the following themes: a) the LN position on federalism; b) the reaction of grassroots members to recent developments; c) party organisation; d) the party's deployment of the social media; e) possible alliances at national level; f) (specific to the region) the outcome of recent elections. Only the first of these themes will be discussed in this paper, in line with its stated aims.

LN regional leaders provide the link between the top leadership of the party and its grassroots. They state that they spend most of their time travelling through their regions, that they know most of their most committed activists by first name (of which there are only a few hundred in each major region), and that they meet them frequently – something party members confirm (see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: 132-141). Not only are these respondents able to put forward the party's official explanation behind its strategy, but they are also very aware of the members' reactions to political developments.<sup>6</sup>

The first, important point to stress about these interviews, is that none of the respondents takes issue with the correctness of the findings presented in the previous section. In other words, none of them argues that federalism maintains

---

<sup>6</sup> The LN is a 'confederation' of regional parties. However, since it defines Italy's regions as 'nations', its regional leaders are called 'segretari nazionali' – i.e. national secretaries. Lombardy and Veneto have been the LN's strongholds since its foundation, with Piedmont having positioned itself as the third most important region for the party, both in terms of votes and members. As for the Emilia region, it is a bellwether of whether the Lega can move beyond its traditional strongholds. The LN finally started growing in Emilia during the last years of Bossi's tenure as leader, and continued to do so under Salvini, following a long period in which the strength of the left in the area had seemed to pose an almost insurmountable obstacle to its success.

an important place in the party's communication. According to all respondents, however, this is a matter of short-term tactic - one meant to help Salvini rebuild support for the LN – not a fundamental change in the party's ideology. Vinci makes this point very clearly in the following excerpt from his interview:

Well, this is not actually a change of strategy, meaning that we believe (and we have decided this and explained it more than once within the party)... in this moment, given that federalism is anyway the foundation of our movement and is mentioned in our statute and rules of procedure, 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 Matteo Salvini on immigration and law and order is paying off right now, and these [i.e. immigration/law and order] are themes that, for obvious reasons, need to be addressed at the national level [...]. These are themes that affect the entire country.

Thus the dropping of federalism should be seen as a tactical move allowing the party to focus on issues affecting Italy as a whole that people are concerned about. Grimoldi agrees, remarking that 'federalism remains the Lega's DNA' and that it is not the first time the party changes the focus of his communication. He also argues that this should not be seen as a substantial change in the LN's ideology: 'our grassroots, our elected representatives, our people have that DNA [i.e. they are in favour of federalism] and you cannot change it overnight'. Molinari makes a similar point, by arguing that the LN is merely adapting its message 'to a changed world', while Rixi also agrees, bluntly pointing out that federalism would not 'sell' right now. As he suggests in his interview, the country is in a state of emergency due to the problems caused by immigration and lack of security. This, in his view, needs to be the focus of the LN's communication at present, also because no-one else is paying attention to it - let alone, he says, the state. Had the party spent days discussing this tactical choice at one of its conferences, the media (and its members) would have concluded that it was indeed changing its identity for good. As he says:

To make this official via a party congress [...] would have meant really changing direction and expect the whole movement to change. On the contrary, the movement is still heading in the same direction, we have simply adjusted the course slightly.

While not disagreeing with Vinci's claims, Molinari frames the issue in different terms. He also stresses that the party's 'final objective is federalism' and that 'fiscal federalism would be in the interest of the south, too', but says that the LN's focus on immigration and the EU is being driven primarily by what these topics reveal about the country's loss of sovereignty. Examples of how the EU has allegedly damaged the interests of Italian firms and unduly affects what happens in the country are the imposition of sanctions on Russia (an important market for Italian producers) and the lifting of tariffs on a series of agricultural imports from India (affecting the agricultural sector in Molinari's own region of Piedmont). By focusing on these themes, Molinari claims, the LN provides an alternative people can understand to the current state of affair of a loss of control.<sup>7</sup>

Respondents accept that the focus on immigration/law and order and the EU inevitably attracts a different kind of voter (and indeed member). However, they all reiterate that federalism would not have any traction among voters right now, hence will need to be put at the centre of the debate again at an unspecified later stage. There is no denying that this constitutes an extraordinary admission by a party that has spent decades arguing that federal reform would mark a completely new beginning for Italy. For decades the achievement of more autonomy for northern regions was defined by the LN as essential for a resolution of 'the problems facing us' (Bossi, 1995, cited in Bossi, 1996: 133), indeed the only way left to Italy to regain 'its international prestige in a European context' (Ibid.). Suddenly, as things stand today, there appears to be

---

<sup>7</sup> There is obviously more than an echo here of the slogan devised by the Leave Campaign before the Brexit referendum of 2016, i.e. 'Take Back Control', and also of Bossi's invitations to northerners back in the 1980s that they should become, once again, 'padroni a casa nostra' ('masters in their own homes'). However, Bossi saw the party's opponents as being, first and foremost, the elites based 'in Rome'.

agreement among LN representatives that fighting 'for the north' would constitute a huge obstacle to the LN's success. What this says about the Lega's direction of travel today is covered in the next, and last, section of this paper.

### *Discussion and conclusions*

On the basis of the evidence provided so far, it is clear that the LN has abandoned its core defining theme of federal reform/greater northern autonomy, apparently to focus on the needs of Italy as a whole. None of the *segretari regionali* (regional secretaries) interviewed for this paper has denied that this has happened; however, they vigorously defend this choice and argue it is essential to keep the party relevant today. They also say that it is a matter of tactic, not long term strategy.

Confirming the LN's personalistic nature under its new leader, the struggle to gain meaningful federal reforms has thus been dropped by the party seemingly overnight, despite the fact that securing no less than *independence* (let alone federalism) remains the official aim of the Lega - see Article 1 of its latest statute (Lega Nord, 2015). Therefore, while at the party Congress held on 15 December 2013, which rubberstamped his election as leader, Salvini reiterated his total commitment to the separatist cause (Lega Nord, 2013), a few weeks later he was already asking his party to perform a u-turn on the matter (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2014). The LN thus appears to have reinvented itself even more rapidly than the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI - Italian Social Movement) did in the 1993-1994 period, when it changed its name to Alleanza Nazionale (AN - National Alliance), supposedly moved 'beyond' its fascist past and allegedly embraced liberal democratic values. At least the MSI held a party congress in 1995 at which the change of name and ideology was endorsed by a majority of delegates. Admittedly, AN never reassessed its history and fascist roots (Cento Bull, 2008), but at least followed the right procedure as it embarked on a process of radical change, making sure its party delegates had formally agreed to it. The same cannot be said of the Lega Nord's change of direction in recent years, which has been carried out almost 'by stealth'. There has been no formalised and systematic engagement by the leader with the party grassroots on the matter of



party's ideology and strategy. Moreover, there has been no proper attempt to rethink the LN's position on crucial issues that inspired the creation of the Lega in the first place (Diamanti, 1993; 1996), such as Italy's huge regional divide (*Economist*, 2015). The question of whatever role the government (and indeed, northern Italian regions) should play in helping the south kick-start its economy, through what policies and by investing whose money, has so far been avoided. In the end, therefore, Salvini's newly-discovered Italian nationalism has only been defined in the vaguest of terms. While no-one can doubt that joining EMU has brought with it formidable challenges to Italy *as a whole* (*Economist*, 2017), it has obviously not determined the disappearance of those profound economic and social differences between northern and southern regions that Bossi had focused on relentlessly as leader.

Salvini's 'strategy of silence' on federalism has allowed the LN to engage in close collaboration with nationalist (and, in some cases, openly neo-fascist) organisations, such as 'Casa Pound', by holding joint demonstrations with it (e.g. in Milan on 18 October 2014), and by welcoming the latter's delegations to the party's demonstrations (e.g. in Bologna on 8 November 2015). Even more importantly, the LN was instrumental to the creation of the 'Europe of Nations and Freedom Group' (ENL) in the EU Parliament, of which Salvini is the Vice-President. This has brought the LN together with France's Front National (FN – National Front), the Netherlands' Partij Voor de Vrijheid (PVV – Party of Freedom Party), Austria's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ – Freedom Party of Austria), Belgium's Vlaams Belang (VB – Flemish Interest), and others. While Bossi had always been careful to distance himself from the likes of Jean-Marie Le Pen (e.g. Bossi, 1992: 143), and while 'his' Lega had always been suspicious of the extreme right's faith in the alleged virtues of centralisation and the 'strong' state, Salvini has professed admiration for Marine Le Pen, and has had no hesitation in collaborating with extreme right parties, within Italy and beyond. If these choices provide an ideological blueprint for the future, then the LN can be said to have finally completed its journey towards becoming a member of the 'populist radical right' party family (Mudde, 2007). Under Bossi, the party had notoriously been difficult to categorise as belonging to the 'extreme right' and/or the 'radical right' (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: Chapter 3). It was not clear it

could be described as 'populist radical right' either, as Cas Mudde (2007: 56) points out, despite eventually deciding to include it in his detailed study of these parties. The reason why Bossi's Lega did not fully belong in this family was that, 'while populism has always been a core feature of the LN and its dominant leader Umberto Bossi, authoritarianism and nativism have not' (Ibid.). However, as we have seen above, things have changed rapidly since Bossi had to step down.

Populism has always been the most important defining feature of the LN's ideology since its foundation as Lega Lombarda in the 1980s (Diamanti 1993; 1996; Biorcio 1997; Tarchi 2008), and this has not changed. As for authoritarianism, which Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik and Daniel J. Levinson define as 'a general disposition to glorify, to be subservient to and remain uncritical toward authoritative figures of the in-group and to take an attitude of punishing out-group figures in the name of some moral authority' (cited in Mudde, 2007: 56), it is questionable to what extent it characterised the LN of the origins. Indeed 'Bossi's Lega' had often been at loggerheads with the Italian state, showing considerable suspicion for its repressive apparatus, which Bossi considered to be subservient to 'Rome'. On the contrary, in recent years Salvini has resolutely embraced authoritarianism, and launched campaigns on the following themes:

a) The traditional family, framed as the bulwark against changes proposed by allegedly 'out-group figures', such as the representatives of the LGBT community (e.g. on the right of adoption, or the so-called 'gay marriage');

b) The alleged need for a strong response to 'Islamic terrorism' by state institutions and the police ;

c) The 'right of self-defence' (read: the right to shoot trespassers), as well as advocating harsher sentences for criminals, such as chemical castration for sexual offenders.

Finally, Salvini's Lega has fully embraced nativism, too. According to Mudde (2007: 19), nativists hold 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'. It is, again, open to discussion whether the LN of the 1990s, a party wishing to represent the dynamic and successful enterprises of northern Italy

(Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001), and recognising, if grudgingly, that northern Italian industry needed migrant workers, could be defined as 'nativist'. However, since 9/11, and even more so in more recent years, the party appears to have embraced the rejection of foreigners *per se*, and grounds its views primarily on security and cultural reasons – essentially, Islam's alleged incompatibility with Catholicism (or, alternatively, and sometimes in the same sentence, liberal values). Salvini's strategy derives from a recognition of the importance of identity and cultural issues in contemporary politics. As Inglehart and Norris (2016: 13) have shown in a recent wide ranging reassessment of the 'cultural backlash thesis', 'populist support can be explained primarily as a social psychological phenomenon, reflecting a nostalgic reaction among older sectors of the electorate seeking a bulwark against long-term processes of value change, the 'silent revolution', which has transformed Western cultures during the late twentieth century'. These groups, according to these authors, are 'most likely to feel that they have become strangers from the predominant values in their own country, left behind by progressive tides of cultural change which they do not share' (Ibid.).

Salvini's recent campaigns online and on television, of which he remains the most important, if not the only, protagonist, focus relentlessly on this sense of alienation, which is allegedly also felt by many in Italy. In this context, his attempts to reach out to the south by focusing on the defence of *Italian* identity, religion and culture have led the LN on a 'non-federalist' path. Whatever the electoral success of this strategy, which remains to be seen, there is no denying that this development constitutes a major break with the Lega Umberto Bossi created and led for over two decades.

*Acknowledgments:* I am very grateful to the LN representatives who agreed to be interviewed for this article.

## 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, pp. 1-16.
- Albertazzi, D. and McDonnell, D. (2010) 'The Lega Nord Back in Government', *West European Politics*, (33) 6, pp. 1318-1350.
- Albertazzi, D. and McDonnell, D. (2015) *Populists in Power*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Albertazzi, D. and Rothenberg, N. (2009) 'Introduction: This Tide is not for Turning', in Albertazzi, D. et al. (eds.) *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi (2001-06)*. London and New York: Continuum, 2009.
- Biorcio, R. (1991) 'La Lega come attore politico: dal federalismo al populismo regionalista', in Mannheimer, R. (ed.) *La Lega Lombarda*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Biorcio, R. (1997) *La Padania promessa. La storia, le idee e la logica d'azione della Lega Nord*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.
- Bossi, U. (1992) *Vento dal nord. La mia Lega la mia vita*. Milan: Sperling & Kupfer.
- Bossi, U. (1996) 'Autodeterminazione della Padania – Risoluzione presentata alla Camera, 10 gennaio 1996', in Bossi, U. *Il Mio Progetto – Discorsi su federalismo a Padania*. Milan: Sperling & Kupfer.
- Cento Bull, A., and Gilbert, M. (2001) *The Lega Nord and the Northern Question in Italian Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cento Bull, A. (2008) *Italian Neofascism The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation*. New York-Oxford: Berghahn.
- Corriere della Sera online* (2017) 'I Cinque Stelle mai così in alto - Staccano il Pd di oltre 5 punti', [http://www.corriere.it/politica/17\\_marzo\\_20/i-cinque-stelle-mai-cosi-alto-4aff1508-0db1-11e7-a60b-8fc97ae3c91d.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/politica/17_marzo_20/i-cinque-stelle-mai-cosi-alto-4aff1508-0db1-11e7-a60b-8fc97ae3c91d.shtml), 20 March, seen on 1 April 2017.
- Diamanti, I. (1993) *La Lega – Geografia, storia e sociologia di un soggetto politico*. Rome: Donzelli.
- Diamanti, I. (1994) 'Lega Nord: un Partito per le Periferie', in Paul Ginsborg (ed.), *Stato dell'Italia*. Milan: il Saggiatore.
- Diamanti, I. (1996) *Il male del Nord. Lega, localismo, secessione*. Rome: Donzelli.
- Economist*, the (2015) "A Tale of Two Economies", 16 May 2015.
- Il Sole 24 Ore* (2014) 'Salvini: «Sul Sud abbiamo sbagliato, Italia si salva intera. Con Renzi il patto del Nazareno lo farei sul lavoro»', 1 December 2014. Available

at: [http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2014-12-01/salvini-sul-sud-abbiamo-sbagliato-italia-si-salva-intera-renzi-patto-nazareno-farei-lavoro-163538.shtml?refresh\\_ce=1](http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2014-12-01/salvini-sul-sud-abbiamo-sbagliato-italia-si-salva-intera-renzi-patto-nazareno-farei-lavoro-163538.shtml?refresh_ce=1), seen on 16 May 2016.

*Il tempo. it* (2016) 'Ecco tutti i candidati di 'Noi con Salvini' nei Municipi', 4 March. Available at: <http://www.iltempo.it/politica/2016/03/04/ecco-tutti-i-candidati-di-noi-con-salvini-nei-municipi-1.1515565>, seen on 16 May 2016.

Inglehart, R. F. and Norris, P. (2016) 'Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash'. Faculty Research Working Paper Series. Cambridge MA: Harvard Kennedy School.

Lega Nord (2002) 'Statuto della Lega Nord per l'indipendenza della Padania'. Milan: Lega Nord.

Lega Nord (2009) 'Proposte e Obiettivi'. Available at: [http://www.leganordtrentino.org/allegati/200904119080824\\_97proposte%20e%20obiettivi001.pdf](http://www.leganordtrentino.org/allegati/200904119080824_97proposte%20e%20obiettivi001.pdf), seen on 1 August 2012.

Lega Nord (2011) 'Scuola Quadri Politici'. Available at: [http://www.padaniaoffice.org/pdf/scuola\\_politica\\_federale/firenze\\_29\\_01\\_2011/Volume\\_Toscana\\_Firenze.pdf](http://www.padaniaoffice.org/pdf/scuola_politica_federale/firenze_29_01_2011/Volume_Toscana_Firenze.pdf), seen on 1 August 2012.

Lega Nord (2013) 'Lega: Salvini, non ci fermiano fino all'indipendenza', 15 December. Available at: <http://www.leganord.org/notizie2/11657-lega-salvini-non-ci-fermiano-fino-all-indipendenza>, seen on 19 May 2016.

Lega Nord – sezione di Zogno (2014) 'Congresso federale Padova - Intervento di Matteo Salvini', 21 July 2017. Available at: <http://www.leganordzogno.org/notizie-lega/congresso-federale-padova-intervento-di-matteo-salvini>, seen on 28 March 2017.

Lega Nord (2015) Statuto della Lega Nord per l'indipendenza della Padania. Milan: Lega Nord. Available at: <http://www.leganord.org/lo-statuto-della-lega-nord>, seen on 1 April 2017.

McDonnell, D. (2006) 'A Weekend in Padania: Regionalist Populism and the Lega Nord', *Politics*, 26(2), 126–132.

Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Passarelli, G. (2013) 'Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe: the Case of the Italian Northern League', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 18 (1), 53-71.

Passarelli, G. and Tuorto, D. (2012) *Lega and Padania – Storie e luoghi delle camicie verdi*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Passarelli, G. and Tuorto, D. (2014) 'Before and After... Mass Parties. Meaning of Party Membership in Italy between the Golden Age and the Contemporary

Politics', presented at the Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium of Political Research, Salamanca, April 10–15.

Senaldi, P. (2017) "Da Leghista a leader nazionale: è l'unica via per l'indipendenza << Amo l'Italia e la libererò dall'Europa Pure Bossi tentò lo sbarco al sud Ecco il mio Programma di governo>>, *Liberò*, 3 April 2017.