

6 The League of Salvini

From a Europe of regions to a Europe of nations

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The League back again on stage

The electoral rise of Salvini's League is one of the novelties on the Italian political scene. In the past, the League Nord took a prolonged part in centre-right governments led by Silvio Berlusconi. As of 2018 it became the main member of the centre-right coalition and, the following year, the top Italian party. For roughly a year it formed an alliance with Movimento 5 stelle (M5s) – which had polled the most votes in the 2018 general election – and managed to govern the country, pushing through some contested measures of debatable utility (most of all, the Security Decree to manage migrant flows, which brought Italy under scrutiny by international human rights organisations and clashes with European institutions). Following its coup in the 2019 European elections (34.3%), the League challenged the government it belonged to on a confidence issue and tried to force an early election on the crest of its electoral triumph, but was compelled to rejoin the opposition. Its successes at by-elections that same year did nothing to change the national political equilibrium. In 2020, Salvini's party has gone ahead with its bid for hegemony in government and the centre-right coalition, although having to face the rise of a potential right-wing competitor, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI). The League's plans for consolidation and return to power have been further complicated by the grave health and economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 epidemic. Though creating opportunities to delegitimise the government in office, the emergency has highlighted the limitations of being in opposition, cut off from decision-making and unable to control the political agenda. This has lost the party much of its media visibility.

The chapter sets out to explore the reasons behind the Salvini League's attainment of national, and on some occasions even international, prominence; what resources it deployed to tackle and surmount the critical phase in the first period; and the prospects and limitations it faces in Italy's present socio-political and economic predicament. Besides reconstructing what changes have occurred in the electoral line-up in broad outline, the League's own internal organisation and the policies it is pursuing, the following pages will concentrate on one particular aspect: the European side to the League's

plans. In the course of time, its relations with Europe have fluctuated wildly, from initial overtures to later scepticism. While the institutions of Europe have been a principal target of verbal party broadsides, a web of alliances with other Eurosceptic and sovereignist formations continent- (and even world-)wide has increasingly affected the League's political strategy, providing it with a platform which it hitherto lacked, or could not exploit.

The Northern League in the Italian political context: from the early years to the crisis of 2012

Formally, the Northern League was founded in 1991,¹ though its roots were inextricably planted in the independence and autonomy movements arising in the 1960s–1980s in several northern Italian regions, especially around the *Liga Veneta* (LV, or Venetia League). Initially it was a story of organisational difficulties and meagre electoral results. Only by the political exertions of Umberto Bossi, its founder and historical party secretary, did the party manage to weld together the many localist formations that had been vying for hegemony. The political target was to reactivate the territorial cleavage² that split northern from southern Italy. That historic fault-line had been smoothed over (before any talk of a divide) in the second half of the 19th century by national unification, handled with military abruptness under fascism, and eventually given formal recognition in the 1948 Constitution of the Republic, thanks to its introduction of a regional design which would be formally adopted in 1970. From the separate autonomy movements, the Northern League inherited policies and values that would see it through the ensuing years of political competition, down at least to the early years of the new millennium: the importance of regional identity and self-government, above all. Further to these basic values, it developed outspoken criticisms of the party system, the centralising state and the corrupt 'consociationalism' or power-sharing habits of the ruling class. These points would reappear in the future in the guise of populism and anti-partyism.

Come the general election of 1992, the party gained excellent results in the northern regions such as Venetia (17%) and Lombardy (23%), its presence hastening the crisis and the end of the First Republic's political system in Italy. The League functioned as a political detonator, giving electors who no longer identified with the party they had come from a chance to make their views heard. Some of those who abstained on principle found it an option for returning to the urns; while it offered a clear choice for those who felt that policies which Italy had never known (federalism, for instance) needed to be represented. One of the main rallying calls that the League used, at least in the very early days, was the rediscovery of local identities through use of dialect, the promotion of local history, along with an aggressive stance towards non-natives. To begin with, the southerners were targeted in deliberately racist terms serving to amplify the claims of Lombardy, and hence the whole North, to a central role in politics and the economy.³

The founding of Silvio Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, came as a challenge to the League's electoral expansion. Allying with Forza Italia in 1994 earned it a place in government, but the alliance was short-lived. The entente broke down partly owing to Berlusconi's entanglement with the magistracy, but above all in light of the 1994 European election result, where Forza Italia came out ahead of the League. Fearing some of his voters might be siphoned off, Bossi broke with the coalition. Friction between the two formations brought the government down and caused the centre-right to lose an early election in 1996. For the League it was the start to a period of paradoxes. They polled more voters than ever, despite standing aloof from the other groupings and pressing ahead with a more and more extreme demand for the northern regions – Padania – to secede from the rest of Italy and set up a federal Po Republic. The swing towards local independence marked a *de facto* transition: from being the party representing a federation of regional leagues, it became a kind of 'union' party for the North as a whole. But despite the early promise of the polls, absence from government and non-participation in coalitions made it hard for the League to carry through its policies and stand up to the challenge of Forza Italia. Isolated and beginning to lose electoral ground, Bossi forced the party and its grumbling grassroots into yet another U-turn when he signed a pact with the Polo della Libertà (the centre-right coalition).

The 2001 general election brought a majority in parliament for the coalition and the right to govern the nation. For the League it was a paltry outcome, the worst in its history (only 4% of the poll), but its place in the alliance earned it three ministries and a political-institutional role that far outweighed its electoral substance. Throughout that mandate it focused chiefly on two policies – curbing immigration and devolution – which culminated in the passing of two bills. In the first matter, the party's efforts secured the approval of a clamp-down on foreigners entering and settling in Italy. The second consisted of a constitutional reform whereby, among other things, the regions were granted exclusive legislative powers over certain sectors (education, administrative police, health). The new political turn of events spelt the end of the party's marginalisation. If one discounts the parenthesis of 2006–2008 (the electoral defeat of the centre-right, allowing in a centre-left government), the League can be said to have remained in government for nearly the whole first decade of the millennium. And as of the victorious 2008 election, it entered a new period of expansion: the League's *third wave*,⁴ during which the party found a foothold in areas outside the 'red' region of Emilia Romagna.⁵ In just over twenty years, the Northern League had gone from the role of a small system-challenger to being the longest intact formation in the whole national political system; from a nondescript force concentrated in a handful of provinces, to a key player in the nation's centre-right coalition.

To judge the League's performance before Matteo Salvini raised the tempo, one has to reconstruct the way the party's aims, ideas and strategies developed over time. As already outlined, the League phenomenon can be traced back

to a family of regionalist parties that forced themselves into the public eye on a European scale within a few decades.⁶ That it should have caught on even outside these original regions is nonetheless intriguing. Unlike other parties of the kind, the League Nord arose in an area rather weak in historical and cultural identity; it managed to achieve an impressive electoral result and earned its place in the governing line-up, projecting issues of territory and decentralisation onto a national platform. To use a classification scheme that already exists,⁷ it should be ranked among the 'challenger' parties expanding from their presumed ethnic group and taking up political issues that range from post-materialism (environment, civil rights, abolishing nuclear energy) to anti-modernism (curbing immigration, security, law and order). On the one hand, the League intercepted, interpreted and extended the northern protest from an anti-political slant, using localism against the state and the traditional political system and stoking the centre-periphery controversy. On the other hand, electoral support for the new League has gone on expanding, shifting its territorial anchorage.

In time, the original independence movement has turned into a 'catch-all party for the scared', funnelling fear of globalisation towards right-wing populism. In this slow but steady evolution, the key date was 11 September 2001 when the West came under attack, an event from which the party wove its Christian-nationalist identity. Halting immigration and defending the local dimension have always been League policies. In Bossi's view, the party must stand guard over the local territory, with its identity and traditions. But only since 2001 has such group conflict taken on the guise of a clash of civilisations, the West versus Islam. This shifting of the battlefield from the social to a cultural and identity plane has enabled the League to extend into swathes of the population sensitive to issues other than territorialism. In League propaganda immigration has become a danger, no longer for northern Italy, but for the whole nation and the West at large. That is why its foreign policy has gradually shifted and broken with the past. Whereas the League of the 1990s stood out as opposing the Gulf War and supporting Milošević, Serbia in the Balkans War, 2001 marked a distinct about face in its position: support for the war in Afghanistan and the ensuing missions in Iraq in the name of a common identity and the higher Western interest.

This shifting order of priorities among the basic values (from the local community to the primacy of a people/civilisation) is completed by a party swing to anti-Europeanism. Until Italy joined the Eurozone, the League was broadly pro-European Union. In that period, the party was in favour of continent-wide integration as a key serving the northern regions (*L'Europe des régions*) as a potential option for leaving the nation state.⁸ That pragmatic strategy had been maintained throughout the phases when the party was in government. On the foreign front, the European Union was the butt of political attacks in defence of Northern identity and independence for its 'peoples'. But on the home front the party toed the coalition line with hardly a murmur. There are several classic instances of this attitude of simultaneous revolt and

acquiescence: a vote for the European Constitution being approved, and for the Treaty of Lisbon, on which internal party discord was scotched for overriding political reasons. During the governments led by the centre-right coalition the League had had a chance to play the card of intransigence-on-principle, only to show loyalty and compliance, in actual fact, by toeing the proposed line. Pragmatism twinned with a party penchant for tough talk *but within government*: keeping a high profile of external protest so as to tranquillise its electors, but meanwhile negotiating with allies towards a stance justified by the *raison d'état*. Partnership with a party like Forza Italia, which took issue with some policies but broadly aligned with the European Popular Party, yielded a perfect combination of extremism and moderation which suited both leaderships. Only later, once Italy had joined the Euro Club, placing the independence issue in jeopardy, did the League begin to speak out in tough terms against a European project which it found inimical to the various peoples and their traditions.⁹

The last years of Bossi's League coincided with a period of acute difficulty for the country. In 2011 the Berlusconi government, which included the League, was compelled to surrender the helm to the new technical government of Mario Monti. With his past record as a European commissioner, Monti was, to the League, the ideal whipping-boy, an expression of international finance, power in the hands of the Central European Bank and the bureaucrats of Brussels. The emergence of a technical government supported by both sides gave the League a chance to stand as sole opposition, banking on failure by the Monti cabinet and popular discontent with its policies. This bid by the party to cash in on the crisis came to an abrupt halt in 2012 when an internal scandal burst (an inner circle of League leaders found to be investing in diamonds and using party funds for personal reasons). This spelt *débâcle* for Bossi – hitherto the unquestioned leader – and paved the way for a new phase under Matteo Salvini.

The new League in the Europe of radical-right populism: the acceleration of a process

The moral crisis became an electoral crisis and, after a short period of transition, the leadership passed into the hands of Matteo Salvini, who made drastic changes to alliances, organisation and guidelines. Under Salvini, the party went more vertical, slackening the ties that bound the central office to grassroots activism and the administrative moves of local party leaders. The balance tipped towards the person in full charge of the dominant internal coalition, marginalising the old guard and all who were not solidly behind him. For external relations, the party secretary set up a communications staff and cultivated his own profile, first on the TV channels and then the social networks. The new image was of a politician who could tackle and solve issues close to people's daily reality and within the bounds of common sense. From Bossi's charisma over his own people, the new, more populist

leadership addressed the electorate at large. Having wrested internal control, Salvini went on successfully to carry out his declared intent: to put the League Nord behind him and introduce change whilst keeping continuity by exacerbating processes that were already operating and made all the more evident by external circumstances (a global economic crisis, stumbling blocks dogging the European project). The party as it emerged from this operation was clearly national/nationalist, and more markedly right-wing.

The first point of change was radical. As outlined in the first section, the League was founded as a federalist, autonomist and secessionist movement bent on detaching the northern regions institutionally from the rest of Italy. The utopia of independence failed to take off and foundered for want of allies prepared to boost it on a national and international scale. That stalemate, and the altered background circumstances, explain why Salvini upped the tempo: from the early slogan of 'North First' to 'Italians First', which meant a more overtly nationalist and sovereigntist stance.

The decisive move consisted of giving greater weight to the issue of immigration, projecting it as a matter of national defence. Even in the past the League had waved the banner of anti-immigration, although the plans it advocated were tailored to the North. The new twist consisted of heightening distrust of Europe and the single currency. This took the issue onto a platform where parties of the populist radical right had gained continent-wide consensus and set up a sturdier network of alliances than in the past. Opposition between local and global was already part of Bossi's League; now it was transposed into a crusade involving whole nations – and no longer regions within nations – seeking to extract themselves from would-be supranational control. In this case, Salvini's strategy was clear-cut, entailing the tactical abandonment of the secessionist cause by a rather high-handed elimination of the party symbol and the word 'Nord' from its name. For the League, independence gave way to a campaign against globalisation, immigration and a single-currency Europe. The whole framework was a new one: the 'party of the North' faded into a project for nationalising programmes, watchwords and above all consensus. But though this change of tack was enough to make the League nationalist, it was not yet national. Although support began to grow throughout the country, the actual 'nation' was North Italy, not to be blazoned as such in political parlance, but to be defended against global competition by economic policy and investment. As for the rest of the country, it remained an appendix serving the cause of electoral expansion. And in that light one should interpret the resumption of the political battle for 'differentiated autonomy' with a demand to increase the number of issues on which regions should have legislative, organisational and budgetary independence as well as decision-making powers.

The League's second identity question has been over where it stands in terms of political ideology. Over the years Salvini has strengthened links with European populist radical-right formations. This has gone ahead even where the nationalist leanings of that political family clash or jar with the party's

original stance. Data on electorate attitudes show that since 2012 the League has swung distinctly rightwards, completing a process that was already under way a decade earlier (see Figure 6.1). In the 1990s, votes came from the centre of the ideological and political spectrum; thereafter, more extreme attitudes have begun to be the rule. League propaganda has increasingly highlighted immigration, and that is the issue on which the transformation can most easily be read. Outright xenophobia was there from the beginning but has gradually reached the point where the League electorate is more hostile to immigrants than the average Italian and even the other centre-right parties. It is a striking fact that the party's growth in the ballot has brought not a softening of key issues, but further extremism and harshness of line. This feature regards not just attitudes on immigration but 'cultural' questions such as the campaigns against abortion and in favour of traditional families against homosexual couples.

The new League has made the field of the extreme right in Italy more accessible,¹⁰ partly because it has managed to give it a supranational setting. Like other European leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Salvini has enabled the right-wing option to be judged via opportunities that each crisis has brought. Hostility towards minorities has become justified as the need for collective protection against the uncontrolled effects of globalisation, and for rebooting the nation as a place of localism, not globalism. As with the Front National/Rassemblement National (FN/RN), the League may be described as post-ideologically cashing in on right-wing extremism – a political object that is normally hard to manage but can be launched anew or tailored according to circumstances or political expediency. But unlike the FN/RN, the League can here trade on its undeniable experience in playing the party of 'protest within government' and 'opposition within the institutions'.

Another line of interpretation worth considering links the party to populist movements, such as the case of the Five Star Movement in Italy.¹¹ Some of the hallmarks of populism were present from the outset: aversion to politicians and intellectuals, harking back to local tradition, reference to charismatic figures, common sense, the language that people speak. But the League of the early days had no marked nationalism or anti-communism, or indeed any clear right-wing affinities on the part of its electors.¹² That interpretational puzzle gradually began to clear when, halfway through the 'Noughties', the League radicalised its political programmes, bolstering ties with a distinct area of European populism, the new Right with its penchant for nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism which had not been associated with other political expressions of populism.¹³ *De facto* the League joined the sovereigntist club without possessing any national identity value in its background. Ideal allies were Marine Le Pen's FN/RN, the Belgian Vlaams Belang, and Austria's FPÖ. In 2017 it joined 'Europe of nations and freedom', a political group within the European Parliament. Other relations were secured with political entities broadly belonging to the so-called Visegrád Group (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary). In this, the League jumped on the

bandwagon of a long-established trend among extreme-right parties, namely using denunciation of the 'European threat' as a key factor in building political success.¹⁴ Reference to these alliance scenarios amplified what was only a latent streak of populism in the present League's right-wing nationalist anti-Europeanism. Emphasis on the corruption of politicians actually applies more to transnational elites than to the Italian political cadre, showing how adoption of sovereignty chiefly stems from the need to move the party onto a *European* scale.

As a member of the populist radical right, the League grasped the importance of broadening its consensus to a popular electorate abandoned by the Left and penalised by the crisis. Other European parties of the same family also display this quality, profiting especially from the decline of the socialist parties.¹⁵ As things stand, the League's operation is only half completed. Its leaders have painted the image of a party seeking to be interclass, a receptacle for electors linked by their values and viewpoints rather than by objective conditions. But survey sampling suggests that the party core has changed relatively little: it is still largely composed of middle-aged electors in mid-career or close to retirement, fairly secure in their jobs and concerned at their salary losing its purchasing power. As in the past, the League has gained votes among the ranks of the self-employed, especially in small and medium business enterprises. The worker component (salaried workers in the main) has slowly become more sizable but not yet preponderant and certainly not enough to support the claim that the party has invaded the factory floor or caught on among the lower classes (see Table 6.1). Again, it is still struggling for a foothold among public employees, especially at executive level, or indeed among the precariously or un-employed.¹⁶

Salvini's new corporative plan to harness the 'animal spirits' of national productive capitalism (against supranational economic elites) along with the socially 'left behind' impoverished by the crisis, is proving a thorny conundrum as to the kind of policies to promote and interests to defend. One of the catch-all issues the party has exploited is anti-Europeanism, as mentioned previously. As a different approach to tackling the social and economic discontent felt by part of the country, the League has scaled up the local-global opposition, turning regionalist claims into a protest by the entire nation state against Europe and its policy of austerity. Euroscepticism has increasingly become a core topic of League propaganda. Compared with the other Italian parties, League voters prove to be far more hostile: one-third deem European integration a misfortune for the country, while over half voice criticisms of the euro (see Table 6.2). Such attitudes have grown more deeply rooted, merging with a more general state of disaffection. Since 2000 the percentage of Italians who identify with Europe and support the Union has slumped from a high of 60% to one of the lowest levels on the continent (just over 30%).¹⁷ For the League voters, the effect of criticising Europe has been, more than in other parties, to view their territorial roots in almost completely national terms with minimal sense of the supranational. Historically the League

Table 6.1 Sociodemographic profiles: age, occupational status, social class (%)

	<i>Vote for League</i>	<i>All voters</i>
<i>Age</i>		
18–30	13.0	18.0
31–60	46.8	47.8
>60	40.2	34.2
Total	100	100
<i>Occupational status</i>		
Employed	69.2	67.4
Unemployed	30.8	32.6
Total	100	100
<i>Occupation classes (% of those employed)</i>		
Clerical workers, public sector	14.6	23.7
Skilled and unskilled workers, small industries	22.9	19.8
Skilled and unskilled workers, big industries	36.5	37.0
Self-employed (autonomous, professionals, managers, etc.)	26.0	19.5
Total	100	100
<i>Social class (% of those employed)</i>		
Bourgeoisie	26.7	20.6
Clerks	38.2	48.4
Trades and crafts	10.5	9.6
Working class	24.6	21.4
Total	100	100
(N)	(276)	(1869)

Source: Itanes, Post-electoral survey 2018 CAWI (unweighted data).

Table 6.2 Positions on European integration and the euro (%)

	<i>Vote for League</i>	<i>Vote for other centre-right parties</i>	<i>All voters</i>
<i>Italy's membership of the European Union is:</i>			
Positive	19.0	36.7	45.6
Negative	36.3	26.1	21.4
Neither positive nor negative	40.3	35.2	29.1
Don't know	4.4	2.0	3.9
Total	100	100	100
<i>Having the euro is:</i>			
Positive	19.0	33.4	41.0
Negative	55.4	43.9	33.6
Neither positive nor negative	22.3	20.2	21.6
Don't know	3.3	2.5	3.8
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(273)	(199)	(1850)

Source: Itanes, Post-electoral survey 2018 CAWI (unweighted data).

elector felt strongly anchored in his/her home territory. Over the course of time a different sense of belonging has set in, focusing on the nation and by contrast hostile to Europe.¹⁸ Small wonder, then, that fear of losing Italian identity through membership of the European Union (a cultural fear, and absolute) should be one of the most constantly voiced concerns, together with fear of seeing one's own or one's country's interests undervalued by supra-national institutions.

Its stance on Europe is one of the most emblematic expressions of how the League sees its political role today. The League brand of anti-Europeanism includes a range of different nuances and positions, the full extent of which can only be gauged by reconstructing party development over the years leading to a different kind of territorial identification and claims from in the past. As the previous section made clear, the League's position on Europe was not always one of protest but a means to an end in achieving domestic objectives. The years of crisis were an important testing-ground for the party. That was the period when anti-Europeanism became more explicit, a brand of 'populism' arising in opposition to Brussels bureaucracy, national anti-development policies and supranational overriding of the nation's claims.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the basic party line does not substantially differ from the past. In Europe, the League sticks to *opposition in word*, enabling it to demand autonomy yet stay in government. Showdown is confined to a symbolic level, always kept to a national dimension as a device for putting 'pep' into the coalition and among the electorate. The League viewed Europe first as a way of heightening sub-national nationalism (the regional identity of the North); then it contrasted European 'bureaucracy' with the alleged manufacturing specialty of the Padania area, and finally, when the mirage of secession evaporated, it pinned its colours to nationalism. In other words, Salvini is banking on representing an Italy standing out against Brussels, that symbol of supranational integration which would take the edge off identity and make nonsense of representing socially and geographically grounded interests.

Much like Euroscepticism, sovereignty has served as a tool to turn the League into a catch-all party on the Italian political scene. By standing out for sovereignty, the party has been able to make clear its position on economic issues and welfare. The prevailing attitude of the League voter is still distinctly pro-market and pro-private, above all as concerns labour relations and support for measures to reduce taxation (see Table 6.3). However, in line with the trend of other populist radical-right parties, that position has combined with a new sovereigntist idea as to the need to defend the home market (Italy's companies and its workforce against the threat of globalisation), even extending to forms of statist and interventionist policies that are alien to the traditionally liberalist conservative Right. On a social protection ticket, the bid to broaden the electoral basis and include salaried workers, women and families has led the party to take an overtly chauvinistic approach. Preferential treatment for Italian citizens in the labour market and in access to welfare, social security and even health programmes has made it possible to combine policies to cut

Table 6.3 Positions on economic issues

	<i>Vote for League</i>	<i>Vote for other centre-right parties</i>	<i>All voters</i>
<i>The government should intervene in the economy</i>			
In favour (%) (6–10)	54.5	57.8	69.4
Average score (on a scale of 0–10)	6.2	6.3	6.9
<i>Taxation should be lowered even at the cost of reducing public services</i>			
In favour (6–10)	52.5	51.9	26.9
Average score (0–10)	6.5	6.3	5.1
(N)	(273)	(199)	(1850)

Source: Itanes-SWG, panel 2013–15.

social costs with a new form of protectionism for Italians alone. The League is in good company here across the continent, where its closest international allies like FN/RN have long militated for national preferentialism. Such a position is no doubt effective in providing a solid identity basis for political action but proves unsuitable when it comes to going international. The great drawback of national chauvinism is that, by its very nature, it is ill-equipped for striking up alliances, taking joint decisions or producing esprit de corps within its own ranks.

The League in perspective: is a Eurosceptical national party a solution for a regional issue?

After having put paid to the interlude of government with Movimento 5 Stelle, Salvini's League has been confined to the opposition. Although out of the national limelight, it is still credited with a great following and rated the first party in the land. From this perspective, one can but speculate where this project of the leader's is leading: viz. once again to build up a party that is both a protest movement and a governing force, inside yet against the institutions, able to outstrip the conservatives and launch the challenge of sovereignism Europe-wide. By way of answering, let us begin from the national arena and then go into the niceties of the international position.

On the home front, then, Salvini's party faces a dual challenge, both inside the party and in relation to the other political competitors. Within the League the vertical structure he imparted gave Salvini great visibility in the media. But with the demise of the coalition government, the scheduled rise to sole command of the country has met with a considerable reverse. The prolonged absence from decision-making and uncertainty as to the timing of the next ballot have once again sparked off internal tension among party members; and part of Salvini's difficulty in responding is that he can no longer count

on support from the hard core of activists, which has dwindled over the years and is less solidly entrenched across the country. Add to this the effect of the health crisis that has blown up since March 2020. The two northern regions under League administration – Lombardy and Venetia – have handled the Covid-19 emergency with differing degrees of effectiveness: Lombardy has performed poorly, Venetia much better. This has rekindled smouldering conflict among party factions and thrown up schemes alternative to Salvini and more on the old federalist League model (in the present instance represented by the Venetia governor, Luca Zaia, his political rival).

The other challenge concerns relations with (former) allies. After the coalition government with M5s collapsed, the chief dilemma has been relations with Forza Italia. Outside so-called Padania, the League is still conditioned by the influential presence of Silvio Berlusconi in regions where Salvini's party cannot go it alone (the South). Then there is right-wing competition from Brothers of Italy (FdI), the post-fascist formation led by Giorgia Meloni (shades of another woman, Le Pen). FdI holds the advantage over the League in embodying the traditional or classic version of the Right which is better placed to handle the North-South cleavage and intercept those southern voters who are as yet unsure of the League's programme. Besides its competitive edge in the Italian South, FdI is a challenge to the League over the role of the State in terms of policies, symbols and foreign policy (for example, it has adopted a less cowed stance towards Russia and is more open to relations with Donald Trump).

The national outcome be what it may, the League's future prospects hang very much on international relations. For all the sound and fury of past years and the anti-European back-up guaranteed by the US and British governments, the poor performance of the sovereigntist bloc at the 2019 European elections was a grave setback to its ambitions of storming the Union institutions. Though the League and the FN/RN did well in their respective countries, the populist radical right as a whole had its wings clipped in terms of lobbying and influence in Brussels. This was partly due to inner divisions over certain key issues. There are differences, for example, on public spending, with southern Europeans favouring expansion policies, while the northern are more inclined towards austerity. On immigration there is friction with the Hungarian leader Orbán, who is against reforming the Treaty of Dublin which obliges refugees to stay in their Mediterranean countries of arrival. Lastly, problems have arisen over relations with Putin: the League is favourable, but many East European formations are dead set against. The overall conclusion must be that the sovereigntist internationale has no shared European programme, but is made up of individual national projects agreeing on one objective: to use nationalism to destabilise, replace or transform the various conservative parties, with each sovereigntist branch pursuing its own political interest at home rather than creating a European front. But even this broad goal is by no means certain if one looks at the tragic turn of events in 2020. The health and economic emergency caused by Covid-19 has further

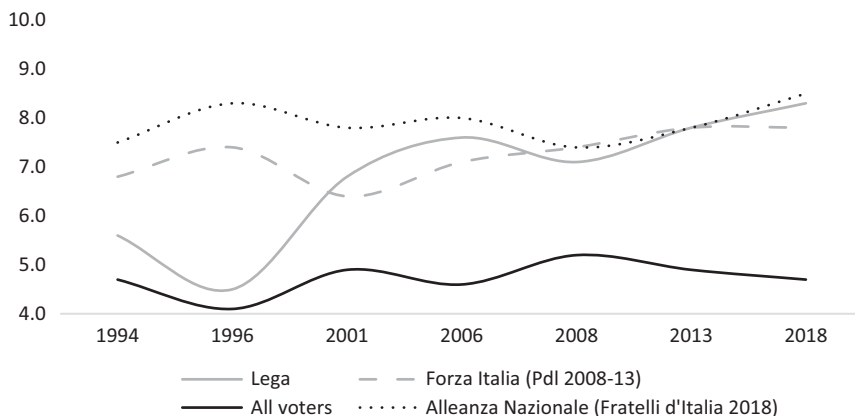


Figure 6.1 Left-right self-placement, voters for the League, for other centre-right parties and all voters. Period 1994–2018.

Note: Left-right score (scale 0–10) on Y-axis.

Source: Itanes.

weakened the challenger parties who are absent from the control room and unable to voice proposals in the European Parliament. Fear of the pandemic has made secondary the issues of the traditional battle-cries of the populist radical right, such as immigration scaremongering. The extraordinary injection of public funds earmarked for rebooting national economies has come to the assistance of national governments, cancelling austerity measures, especially in Mediterranean countries where the populists were on the rise. Still, it is true that the as yet unforeseeable effects of the crisis will multiply conflict and cause political, social and economic destabilisation. And the challenger parties are ready to pounce on any opportunity that may come their way.

Notes

- 1 Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto, *Lega & Padania. Storie e luoghi delle camicie verdi*, (il Mulino 2012).
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