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How Exogenous Factors Redirect Voter Preferences: The Case of Italy and Lega Nord

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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**Abstract**

The current rise of far right populist parties in Europe has touched the Italian political scene during the 2018 national elections, when Lega Nord (Northern League) reached 17.35 percent of support from all over the country. This thesis will strive to understand how it was possible that a former regional party like Lega was able to exponentially increase its electoral support, especially in the traditionally antagonistic Center and South of Italy. In fact, the evolution of Lega through its foundation under Umberto Bossi's leadership until the leadership of the current Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini shows patterns that are worth researching. To establish a link between the change of discourse and the redirection of preferences of Italian voters, especially the ones from the Central and Southern regions, critical discourse analysis was applied to speeches given by Bossi and Salvini in the time span between 2007-2018. In addition, electoral data was used as supporting evidence to trace Lega voting patterns of Italians, focusing on the specific regions, between 2008 and 2018.

The main findings of this work show that there is a plausible link between the presupposed change of the "self-other" representation and the increase of Lega electoral share in the Central and Southern regions. Relying on the Lega Nord scholarship and the data collected from Bossi's speeches, it was possible to determine that the original identity of supporters of the party was built through their differentiation and opposition towards the Center and the South of Italy, often with uncouth ranting directed to the Southerners. This process allowed the creation of a "self-other," that is a Northerners against Southerners dichotomy. Nevertheless, this articulation was drastically changed by Salvini. The politician was able to switch the "other" representation to an exogenous "enemy," that is the migrant. Moreover, this change of discourse started almost at the same time of the beginning of the 2013 migrant crisis. The change of discourse by Salvini was reflected in the voting patterns of Southern Italians, that were able to put behind the past insults by Lega and redirect their votes in a united front against the most modern perceived "other."

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis will address a series of events that took place in Italy since 2013. One of the main actors of this thesis will be Lega Nord (Northern League). The party, from its official foundation in 1991, was addressed to the electoral population of the North of Italy, especially under the direction of Umberto Bossi, when the party relied on the mythical concept of the recreation of *Padania* (the Plain of the Po). Lega Nord survived through six electoral mandates, when the average life of a party in the country is 1.2 mandates<sup>1</sup>. Nonetheless, Lega Nord gained 4.09% in the national election in 2013, a result that was, more or less in line with the ones from the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the end of October 2017<sup>2</sup>, the new party secretary – Matteo Salvini, changed the official name from Lega Nord to Lega. In the last election on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the first one that was targeting a wider electorate, Lega reached a total of 17.35 percent of support. This result looks even more interesting considering that Lega's votes did not come just from the *Padania* area, but also from different areas of the country<sup>3</sup>, including the Centre and the South. Moreover, the support for Lega keeps increasing week by week, being now the first party in Italy with over 30 percent of national share<sup>4</sup>.

Indeed, a signifying exogenous event took place since 2013: the refugee crisis. Due to its geographical position, Italy – and especially Southern Italy – has been one of the main recipients of migrants during the aforementioned ongoing European migrant crisis. The newly elected Lega Secretary Matteo Salvini has reversed the rhetoric of Lega Nord and himself, which has always been extremely aggressive, derisive and insulting towards the South and its inhabitants into a new rhetoric where the target has transformed (mainly) to migrants. Indeed, is it possible to state that this change in Lega's discourse and narrative affected the Italians' voting behavior, especially in the South? Which mechanism affected the voters' patterns in the 2018 election?

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<sup>1</sup>“La breve vita dei partiti”, available at: <https://www.agoravox.it/La-breve-vita-media-dei-partiti.html>

<sup>2</sup>“Lega: nuovo simbolo senza <Nord>. Salvini: <Sarà valido per tutta l'Italia>”, available at: [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/10/27/news/lega\\_nord\\_nuovo\\_simbolo-179501278/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/10/27/news/lega_nord_nuovo_simbolo-179501278/)

<sup>3</sup> All electoral results are available at: <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php>

<sup>4</sup>“Intenzioni di voto – 2 aprile 2019”, available at: <https://www.istitutoixe.it/2019/04/02/intenzioni-di-voto-2-aprile-2019/>

The relevance of this thesis lays in its up-to-date significance on Italian domestic politics applicability, and possibly, foreign ones especially in relation to the European Union. Undeniably, the phenomenon of Lega Nord has been researched during the years by different scholarship (Gianluca Passarelli, Anna Cento Bull, etc.) Nonetheless, being the unfolding of the nationalization of the party so recent in the Italian scenario, scholarship has superficially focused on this process and on its consequences. Indeed, Daniele Albertazzi et al. analyzed the shift from a regionalist party to a national one. On the other hand, Marco Brunazzo and Mark Gilbert studied the shift to a populist party with an accent on Euroscepticism. Nonetheless, the thesis wants to connect the dots between the specific use of the refugee crisis narrative and the following xenophobia as an opportunity to shift the concept of antagonism, from an internal one (the South) to an external one (the refugees), changing the self-other representations and affecting the voting preferences.

In conclusion, the research question is: how exogenous factors redirect voter preferences? My hypothesis is that the exogenous factor (the migrant crisis) allows the possibility of a shift of the semantic of antagonism from an internal adversary to an external one. As a consequence, voters' preferences were redirected towards a party that changed radically its own narrative, taking advantage of the exogenous factor, in order to widen its electoral pool.

This thesis will be structured as follows: first it will be conducted a literature review on the main scholarship stream regarding far right (globally and in Italy), voting behavior and (political identity) and ethnopolitical identity between the South and the North of Italy; secondly, the concepts and theories that form the basis of this work – far right, voting behavior and refugee crisis will be analyzed in application to the research problem and hypothesis of the thesis; then, the methodology of critical discourse analysis, with an accent of Fairclough will be introduced, as well as the dataset to be analyzed. The dataset will consist in official speeches of the two Lega Nord leaders Umberto Bossi (from 2007 to 2012) and Matteo Salvini (from 2013 to 2018), and the electoral results of national elections for the Chamber of Deputies and the European Parliament. The core of the work will consist in the critical discourse analysis of the aforementioned data. Finally, the conclusions and limitations of this work will be discussed.



## **2. Literature Review**

This literature review used for this thesis will include an excavation of a plethora of theoretical backgrounds. The first of which will be that of far right studies, applied to the case of Italy. The next is voting behavior studies and its interconnection with political and social identity, with the addition of some notions of ethnopolitics related to the Italian peninsula, which could be divided in North and South.

### **2.1 Far Right**

The far right has played a role in European politics since the end of the Second World War; nonetheless, the success of these parties has come in waves, whereas the last one is in place since the 1980s (Golder, 2016, p. 478). Since this decade, far right parties in Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, and many other countries have participated in government coalitions or have sustained a minority government, as well as have significantly influenced the national politics (Rydgren, 2007, p. 242). This process has attracted the attention of global scholarship on the spreading contemporary consensus for right wing parties in Western and Eastern Europe.

Modern scholarship has tried to theorize the far right, its emergence, its success and how these variables can change from country to country. The literature on the most recent developments of extreme right agrees on the fact that there is no unanimity on the central core of party ideologies and definitions. Indeed, different scholars consider diverse features of right-wing parties as their ideology core. For example, Cas Mudde argues that reducing the foundation of far right parties to single characteristics (i.e., xenophobia, hostility to progress) makes the introduction of the term far right superfluous as well as gives a distorted image of it (1995, pp. 205-06). The complexity and the diversity of far right ideology are exemplified by Mudde's work in *Right-Wing Extremism Analyzed* where 26 definitions from various scholars on extreme right ideology are taken into consideration. As a conclusion from his research, Mudde defines far right parties' main ideology as centered on five principle features – nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and a strong state, with a predominance that varies from party to party (1995, p. 218). Later on, Mudde has improved

his far right theorization by stressing the role of nativism, with xenophobic implications, as one of the core ideologies of the extreme right in Europe (2007).

The scholar Jens Rydgren follows Mudde's ideas and challenges this uncertainty on the theorization of far right parties underlining that the new radical right parties have made an accent on ethno-nationalism that aims to give an homogenous ethnicity to their homeland (with the emergence of xenophobia) and to bring back traditional values as their core. Moreover, Rydgren emphasizes the recent populist standpoint that far right has acquired (2007, p. 242). Markedly, the Italian scholar Piero Ignazi divides right wing parties in two categories – the ones inprinted on a fascist standpoint and the ones that lack fascist connections but instead reveal an antisystemic attitude. Following this theorization, the second type of right wing party is considered to be the one that emerged in the late 80s (Ignazi, 1992, p. 3).

While this thesis will deal with the Italian case of Lega, we will also briefly look into comparable situations on a European scale.

### **2.1.1 Italy**

The tradition of far right parties in Italy began since the 1920s, whereas the theorization of Ignazi is still applicable nowadays with a minority of parties that lean towards a neo-fascist position or claim it as their driving force (CasaPound, Forza Nuova) and the more recent and popular antisystem ones (Lega, Fratelli d'Italia.) Nonetheless, the main point of interest for this thesis will be Lega. Different scholars have tried to conceptualize the development of the party through the years. In particular, it has been studied the shift from a regional party to a national one (Albertazi, Giovannini, & Seddone, 2018; Longo, 2016) and the swing towards a Eurosceptic standpoint (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2017). Ignazi claims that there is a misconception in the early years in the categorization of Lega Nord as an (extreme) right party, especially on the side of non-Italian scholars, like Hans-Georg Betz (1993). Ignazi states that Lega Nord was exempt from the fascist imprinting at the beginning, and, as such, it could be repudiated from the Italian extreme right party section (2003, p. 35). The predecessor of Lega was born as Lega Autonoma Lombarda in the spring of 1985 and from that same year, it took 2.5 percent of votes and a place in the local assembly of Varese (Cento

Bull & Gilbert, 2001, p. 9). The party of Lega Nord itself was founded by Umberto Bossi in 1991 and since 2008 it is the largest and oldest party to be represented in the Italian parliament. On the one hand, some scholarship claims that Bossi's leadership made regional populism the main standpoint of Lega Nord, where the territorial reference is pivotal in the conceptualization of the party (McDonnel, 2016). On the other hand, other scholar suggest that Bossi's leadership brought a re-articulation of the ethnocultural discourse of Lega Nord, restructuring the territorial belonging within an economic framework (Ignazi, 2003, p. 54). However, regionalism could be considered the main driving force of Lega Nord since the North was presented as ontologically diverse from the rest of the country (Albertazzi, Giovannini, & Seddone, 2018, p. 648). Ignazi also claims that Bossi's protests were in a certain sense regionally driven, as the leader was attacking "the lazy, parasitic, inefficient, welfare-scronger southerners—concentrated in the public sector—contrasted with the hard-working, entrepreneurial Lombardy people" (1992, p. 54). This approach was fused together with a stable aggressive feeling towards the Southerners, which represented almost a third of Lombardian population (Ignazi, 2003, p. 55). Undeniably, Bossi's leadership was focused on the Padanian or Alpine myth and identity and on the northern Italian question (Husseyne, 2010, pp. 355-56). However, through the 1990s, Lega Nord started to drop the xenophobic attacks towards the South of Italy and migrants in favor of a more anti-systemic and anti-political populist approach (Ignazi, 2003, p. 55). Until this moment, also the electoral pool of Lega Nord was likewise focused in the northern regions. The strategy adopted by Lega Nord allowed the party to gain around 8 percent in the national election of 1992 and 1994, and in 1996, Lega Nord increased its share of the votes to 10 percent. Actually, especially in the beginning of its history, Lega Nord was not rejecting alliances neither with the left nor the center-right. Nevertheless, these tense balances never lasted and brought to a hard break-up and the isolation of the party (Ignazi, 2003, pp. 56-57). Bossi also refused a categorization of Lega Nord as a left or right wing party in many instances, defining it as "at the center and above." The self-induced isolation that Lega Nord faced brought back a revival of the regional element in the party discourse, bringing with it as a consequence underlying xenophobic feelings (Ignazi, 2003, pp. 57,59), whereas its utilization of messages with racist undertones was described as having "its bark was bigger than its bite" (Brunazzo & Gilbert,

2017, p. 625). The early share of success of Lega Nord collapsed eventually in 2001, when the results dropped under 4 percent. It was only in the 2006 election that Lega Nord gained the 8 percent of votes. However, in the next election in 2013, Lega Nord results dropped to less than 5 percent<sup>5</sup>. The party needed a change, in order to renovate its ideology and try to bury the recent scandals, connected to the use of taxpayers' money for personal needs of the party representatives and unclear founding to associations linked to organized crime in Tanzania and Cyprus.

As a result, the Padanian trend of ideology started to weaken in the last years of Bossi's control of the party and concurrently changed with the election of the party secretary Matteo Salvini in 2013. The leadership of Salvini brought a harsh change in the direction of the party's ideology, because of which the less explicit xenophobic feelings, the center-leaning alignment, and the regional characteristics were substituted by an overt racism, an extreme right alignment, and national and nationalistic outlook. In addition, Salvini's change in party line strengthened feelings of Euroscepticism. This switch from a regional party to a national one led to a change in idealization of the enemy, which was no longer the central government in Rome, but was replaced with Brussels and the institutions of the European Union. Nonetheless, it would not be wrong to admit that in the Bossi era Lega Nord took an anti-system position that clashed with the European Union as well. However, Bossi never took any concrete action other than being vocal about some issues that were affecting his voters personally. On the other hand, Salvini situated Lega as a fierce adversary to the European Union, which he often blamed for Italian economic and social problems (Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2017, pp. 625-626). The 2018 national elections, the first one under an established Salvini's leadership made of Lega Nord, which in the meanwhile changed its name to Lega, was the first party in the center-right coalition with over 17 percent of the voting share. Nonetheless, the literature seems to be lacking a clear investigation on the factors that brought to such an increase of vote shares, and how much the shift towards a national party, opposed to a regional one, as well as the shift of the representation of the other (from the South to the migrants), has influenced the results of the last election.

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<sup>5</sup> All electoral results are available at <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/>

### **2.1.2 Europe**

The success of Lega in Italy reflects the momentum that the far right is experiencing in Europe; as a consequence, the parties that held power since the end of the World War II (Social Democrats and Christian Democrats) are losing their electoral support with a following weakening of central positions. On the other hand, extreme ideologies on the left and the right are spreading across the continent, even if there is more of a predominance of the radical right. For example, in Switzerland in 2015 the extreme right reached 22 percent of voting share, in the 2017 German Bundestag elections AfD got 12.6 percent of support, and in the 2019 Estonian national elections EKRE attracted 17.8 percent of voters; similar results are reported in Finland, Netherlands, Denmark and Austria. However, although the contingent success of the radical right, some political scientists believe that the extremist parties will never reach more than 30 percent of support (Baier, 2016, p. 49). Baier individuates the success of far right parties in attracting working class voters from the old leading parties like the Social Democrats (2016, p. 49). Moreover, according to Lubbers and Coenders (2017), the fact of being part of large community such as the EU has given some ground of opposition from the extreme right, which stressed the micro-regional or national identities and configurations of social and cultural life in opposition to one that is perceived as destructive toward these differences. However, Lubbers and Coenders found out that identifying with the nationhood of one's own country has a small correlation with voting for the far right; on the other hand, what was determined to play a bigger role in directing voter toward the radicalism is the concept of national pride (2017, p. 114). While defining general reasons that are pushing new voters to align with radical right could vary from country to country, the scholarship is trying to analyze party strategies (e.g., the use of Internet) and structures, and to focus on dynamic evolutions of these (young) parties.

### **2.2 Voting Behavior**

Voting behavior studies have intensified since the 1920s to the present day. The voting behavior studies go beyond examination of voting records and statistics; indeed, this area of studies intertwines with psychology and tries to look into emotions, perceptions, and motivation of the electors (Eldersveld, 1951, pp. 70-71). Different theories have emerged

since Eldersveld's work, where there is a clear complaint on the lack of a specific voting behavior theorization. The spatial model of voting was introduced by Downs in 1957. According to this theorization, voters tend to vote for parties that resemble their ideology (Abou-Chadi & Helbling, 2018, p. 689). The spatial model of voting has received critics as it has often remained theoretical since presuppose that voters vote almost merely ideologically. The scholar Paul W. Thurner has applied empirically the spatial theory of voting and has reached the conclusion that party loyalty is a much more influencing factor in voting behavior than ideology (Thurner, 2000, p. 515). However, this statement is not entirely supported by all the voting behavior experts, especially if the voting behavior is put in the context of post-ideology studies (Caprara, *et al.*, 2017). As a result, some scholars prefer to employ a less structured model that takes into consideration how much an issue can affect the voters' decisions (Abou-Chadi & Helbling, 2018, p. 700).

Other factors that need to be taken into consideration when determining the voting behavior rely also on social class (actual or self-identified), culture class, and material class (D'Hooge, Achterberg, & Reeskens, 2018, pp. 72-73). Finally, according to other scholars, voters tend to vote differently in relation to the kind of election (local or national), having different criteria to direct them in their decision (Andreadis & Chadjipadelis, 2006, p. 13)

### **2.2.1 Shifts**

It is empirically believed that the personal belief of voters tends to be consistent over time. This assumption is verified by the research of Brody and Sniderman in the late 70s, as well as the one of Franklin, and Plutzer at the beginning of the 21st century. These political scientists have determined that the results of elections predict the turnout of the subsequent one (Coppock & Green, 2016, p. 1044). Nonetheless, it would be reductive to state that voting behavior is stable, and voters' choices are not subject to change. As already mentioned, issue voting has a pivotal role in determining the turnout of elections. The actor who decide which issues are more salient than others is the party elite. Indeed, issues that may have not been contentious in the past could be raised as very salient by the party itself (Abou-Chadi & Helbling, 2018, p. 689). This scenario would fit the one for this thesis, where Lega raised the saliency of the immigration issue and made it into a consistent part of its electoral campaign.

### 2.2.2 (Political) Identity and Voting Behavior

(Political) identity plays a significant role in determining and understanding the voting behavior and voting patterns of individuals. The modern conception of identity is based on the social identity theory, elaborated by the social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s. Tajfel stated that identity is derived through the one's self-perception, which is a result from the participation in social groups. This theory is considered to be easily applicable to political science studies since it comes with testable hypothesis easily applicable to every kind of group interaction (Huddy, 2001, p. 128). The scholars Ben-Bassat and Dahan believe that group membership plays a pivotal role in determining the voting behavior of individuals. In fact, they take into consideration also the social pressure theory, the instrumental motive and the group-rule-utilitarian approach (Ben-Bassat & Dahan, 2012, pp. 195-196).

Political identity can be conceived through the political spectrum ideated by the psychologist Hans Eysenck in his 1956 *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology*. According to this chart, the individual can be radical versus conservative and authoritarian versus democratic. Nonetheless, as already stated, the current scholarship cannot find an agreement on what influences the most voters when they go to the polls. At the same time, if one takes into consideration the concept of issue voting, the diagram ideated by Eysenck loses validity and effectiveness. Due to its recent date, the 2018 Italian elections voting behavior has not being thoroughly studied, even if some scholars (Cerruto & Raniolo, 2018) have analyzed the reaction of South Italy to the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) and its success, this is not put in the context of a newly adapted Lega discourse on the meridional Italian region. According to many Italian journalists and to the Five Star Movement leader Luigi di Maio,<sup>6</sup> this newly expressed voting pattern represents the beginning of the Third Italian Republic. The national prominence of Lega was made possible by the ideological realignment that occurred with the collapse of the Second Italian Republic, the end of which was determined

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<sup>6</sup> "Italian populists declare new epoch after election victory", available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/italian-populists-declare-new-epoch-after-election-victory/2018/03/05/12885254-2096-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.a0d6a4894654](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/italian-populists-declare-new-epoch-after-election-victory/2018/03/05/12885254-2096-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd_story.html?utm_term=.a0d6a4894654)

by the failure of Matteo Renzi's constitutional referendum and the approval of the new electoral law called Rosatellum.

### **2.3 Ethnopolitics**

For the purpose of this thesis, ethnopolitical studies will serve as a reference framework for studying the split between the North and the South of Italy, as well as the one between Italians and immigrants. The cleavage between the North and the South of the country is not to be considered as based on ethnicity; one could argue that this split can be dated back to the historical background of the two factions. On the other hand, the distinction between Italians and migrants can be reduced to both ethnic, cultural, and religious means. One could think that this overall homogeneity of Italian ethnic, cultural, and religious make up would prevent any possible split. Instead, the revindication for autonomy, both in the Southern and Northern regions, show that the duality between the two blocks, as well as the individual ambitions of the single regions is still present in current Italian society.<sup>7</sup>

#### **2.3.1 Italy**

The question of a divided Italy is well present in Italian studies and many scholars have analyzed the reason for this divergence especially in the past. The sociologist Enzo Mingione has described the Italian society as a fragmented one based on a dual system of integration. According to this framework, Italy is determined to be a fragmented society since it is increasingly less divided through a horizontal class-like means; in addition, it is a failure of the nation state with economic pressure coming from the top and the rise of social clusters from the lower level. The dual model of integration is connected to the two entities in which Italy it is formed by: North and South. On one hand, the North was characterized by a high industrialization and an integration obtained through the means of the tertial sector. On the other hand, the South was lacking industries and was a land of emigration, as well as based on a political patronage finalized to deruralization (Mingione, 1993, pp. 305, 310). It is

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<sup>7</sup> Look at the 2017 referendum for regional autonomy in Veneto and Lombardy, and the talk without referendum held by Emilia Romagna, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/22/world/europe/lombardy-veneto-referendums.html>



important to take into consideration that the model offered by Mingione may be outdated, but it is still historical relevant for the purpose of the thesis.

Other scholars see an identitarian crisis going on in the Southern people, exacerbated by the extremely negative stance that some scientists, as Cesare Lombroso, took on the South since the end of the XIX century. The Italian studies expert Salvatore Di Maria recalls how the separatist attitudes are also to be found in the South framework, such as the Neoborbonic Movement (Di Maria, 2014, p. 804), and not just in the North.

The second split that this thesis will look into is the one between migrants and Italians. The “other” is seen different in terms of culture, ethnicity, and religion. The rhetoric of exclusion is not a phenomenon that just pertains to the Italian political scene but can be found in the far right framework all over around Europe, and some scholars directly link the Lega xenophobic discourse to the French *Nouvelle Droite*. This school of political thought brought to its extreme the concept of ethnopluralism, putting the emphasis on the purity and separation of ethnicities and fixed difference between cultures, as it comes clear from the “Europe of Hundred Flags” project (Richardson & Colombo, 2013, p. 185; Bar-on, 2011, p. 208). Eventually, the rhetoric of exclusion creates a framework where the motto is “we have to defend ourselves against them” (Wodak, 2015, p. 21). Nonetheless, the current scholarship seems to be missing a detailed analysis on the tools that were employed to shift the perception of the other in the Italian case, as well as how this phenomenon is affecting the ethnopolitical situation in Italy.

### **3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 Far right**

The conceptualization of the far right is necessary for the purpose of this work since the actor is considered to be a far right party itself. Especially because of its fluctuation between a regional entity to a national one, while maintaining the core ideologies of a far right party as discussed by Mudde, the following framework is required – one understanding of the far right as a nationalist, nativist, xenophobic and anti-immigration actor – in order to fully analyze the discursive strategy employed by the party with the objective of enlarging the

electoral spectrum. While within this extreme right paradigm, there can be a bifurcated anti-migration or xenophobic and nativist-nationalist right, which, although different, have many overlaps. These intersections can be seen in the configuration of the two ideologies themselves.

Nativism can be defined as “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). Indeed, the nativist philosophy puts in the first place the needs and the interests of lawfully citizens of the country opposed to the ones of who is not considered a proper native. The nativist perspective intertwines with the anti-immigration position, as Mudde stated in his studying of single-issue voting in extreme right parties. The author claims that the anti-immigration sentiment in far right parties is a mere reflection of a broader nationalist or nativist ideology (Mudde, 1999). Moreover, since Mudde has served as the main reference for the conceptualization of the far right actor of this thesis, it is important to note that Lega Nord is presented by the author as one of the main far right party in the Italian political scenario, together with the late Alleanza Nazionale and Fiamma Tricolore (Mudde, 2007, p. 56). This classification seems to be still valid since Lega is the only party still intact after twelve years from Mudde’s categorization of Italian extreme right parties, making Lega a very durable party for Italian standards.

The anti-migration connotation of Lega Nord has been present also before Salvini imposed his leadership on the party and the consequent shift, as shown by Richardson and Colombo, who investigated the Lega Nord anti-immigration campaigns between 2001 and 2008. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the migrant, as intended in Lega’s discourse, reflects the “other,” is an individual that does not belong in the nativist framework of reference, transforming them in exogenous factors. Considering this and acknowledging the extreme hostility of Lega Nord towards the South, especially in the Bossi’s period, Southerners were considered an “other,” as the current migrants and refugees are considered as “others.” The fact of considering Southerners as migrants was proposed by the scholar Hans-Georg Betz

when he was studying Lega Nord under Bossi's leadership and his failed attempt to nationalize the party (1993).

As already stated, the conception of far right as nativist will be employed in this work. In fact, Lega Nord is treated under the lens of the shift to a nativism that was placing the core of the party and its members in the Padania region to a full peninsular Italian national focus. Markedly, this was an attempt to transform a regional party to a national one, as the changing of the party itself – from Lega Nord to Lega also shows. However, some reservation can be held about this shift that occurred in a relative short time. Indeed, the party leadership did not change intensely, since Salvini himself has been a member of Lega since almost the foundation of the party. Moreover, the tremendously harsh accusations and mockeries of Lega Nord towards Southern Italians crossed in numerous occasions the boundaries of the politically correct behavior and they are hardly forgettable. Consequently, was it possible for Lega Nord to come out clean from this turbid performance? Was Lega successful in, on the one hand, enlarging the spectrum of who is considered a native, and on the other hand, to enlarge also the range of who is considered as the “other”? This process was carried out with different steps and, likely, Lega Nord is continuing nowadays the nationalization of the party.

Finally, Lega will be considered as having a top-down and centralizing nature as discussed by McDonnell & Vampa (2016); indeed, this specific party organization is not only pertinent to the Italian party, but studied also in the context of the wider European far right. For example, David Art (2018) analyzed the issue of the importance of far right party organization in pivotal time like elections. The author concluded stating that without a strong central organization most far right parties did not survive the incumbency task. Now, with Lega holding a key position in the government; it seems that the strong party structure has made it viable not only as an opposition party, but also as one in power.

The conceptualization of Lega Nord as a far right, nativist, anti-migration, nationalist, and hierarchical party will serve as a framework of reference for the critical discourse analysis that will be conducted in the context of this work.

### **3.2 Voting Behavior**

This section will deal with the conceptualization of voting behavior, in order to survey the possible reasons of Lega's nation-wide success at the 2018 national elections. The results of Lega changing its discourse through the years are indeed shown in the party political success. Framing the voting behavior is useful in order to present the most accurate analysis of the outcome of the discourse change on the other; as the result, this work would be applicable to the current society and serve as a basis for future studies in this area.

In the literature review section, the main relevant scholarship on voting behavior was presented. In relation to this thesis, however, it would be interesting to conceptualize the matter of ideological voting contraposed to issue voting. Indeed, ideological voting, as described by the scholars Abou-Chadi and Helbling, represents the process of voting for a party which resemble the ideology of the voters themselves. On the other hand, there is issue voting, which has been again conceptualized by Abou-Chadi and Helbling, which presupposes that voters are going to vote specific parties, if they give relevance to the issue they repute the most significant in society. Taking into consideration the major change in Lega's targeted voters (the complete Italian population) after the Lega Nord pursued other (the Southerners), it would seem uncommon to state that the people from the Southern regions started to vote Lega for ideological reasons. As scholars argue, on the one hand, it is presupposed that the ideological stand on the voter will remain consistent in time; while on the other hand, it is thought that ideology may change through time. However, how long it takes for ideology to change is not investigated, and how voters start to ideologically support a party that only a few years before was mocking and insulting them constantly is not covered in contemporary scholarship.

Nevertheless, the stance of ideological voting could be valid if applied to those regions who have always voted for Lega Nord in the past and Lega in the last national and regional elections; however, this precise situation may overlap with another topic very present in voting behavior studies – party loyalty. Party loyalty is intertwined with the concept of party identification, which can be defined as: “the sense of personal attachment which the individual feels towards the [party] of his choice” (Thomassen & Rosema, 2015, p. 4). This

feelings go beyond the issue voting and are referred as religious sentiments by scholars such as Warren Miller and Merrill Shanks (1996) – whose connotation of party identification is explained by stating that: “I am a Roman Catholic” has the same ideological weight of stating: “I am a Democrat.”<sup>8</sup>

In the light of these definitions, it would be relevant to think that more voters in the South decided to give their electoral support to Lega due to issue voting. However, the scholar Aida Just, who presents in her study how voting for a radical right party eventually means voting for a xenophobic ideology, states that when new voters give their support to such a political party, the spiral of silence theory may play a role (Just, 2017, p. 509). This theory, as Just recalls, was first idealized in the late 70s by the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. According to Just: “those who hold unpopular (in this case, xenophobic) views but were previously afraid to express them may become more vocal, as they realize that they are no longer part of a small minority and have gained access to important policy making institutions” (Just, 2017, p. 509). Consequently, involving the spiral of silence theory in the framework of this work may beget a new interpretation of the reasons of the increased political share of Lega in the past national elections. In the current climate of open xenophobia against foreigners, many more voters, including those who were neglected and harassed by Lega Nord in the previous years, may have felt confident enough to express their ideological stance against the migrant other.

### **3.3 Refugee crisis**

The conceptualization of migrant, refugee, and refugee crisis is necessary for the purpose of this work since they represent some of the objects of Lega Nord analyzed discourse. Nonetheless, the notion of migrant and refugee may change if taken in the context of international protection law and in the internal dynamics of a country or a national party. Therefore, a conceptualization proposed by international entities, e.g. the UNHCR, and the one proposed in the specific case study of this thesis – that of Lega Nord – will be provided.

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<sup>8</sup> Miller and Shanks study party identification in the American context, which may result as an easier task, due to the nature of bipartisanship of the United States.

### ***3.3.1 Refugee, migrant according to international law***

The concept of the refugee is widely agreed upon by both the academic scholarship and the wider society as someone that was forced to flee their own country due to violence or persecution, which can be of nationality, political, racial or sexual nature. Nowadays, most refugees come from Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria, Somalia and South Sudan (UNHCR, 2019). Before obtaining refugee status, a person is considered to be an asylum seeker, and during this probational period, the authorities take into consideration the petition and the possibly grant refugee status (Amnesty International, 2019). The refugee crisis that has been affecting the Europe Union since 2013 has been prompted by the widespread conflict in the Middle East, Africa, and South East Asia, even if the Syrian conflict is considered as the biggest contributor to the crisis situation, as the former UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres said in 2013 (Phillips, 2013). However, also before 2013, there were arrivals of displaced people fleeing the Arab Springs events.

The concept of migrant is much more comprehensive and can be stretched to many meanings. Indeed, the International Organization of Migration defines a migrant as it follows: “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.”<sup>9</sup> This definition overlaps the refugee category, making it into a sub-group of the migrant one.

### ***3.4.2 Refugees and Migrants according to Lega Nord***

Although international organizations try to give guidelines to the nation states, these are not always taken literally, as it is clear within the Lega Nord context that will be presented with the aid of some concrete examples. Indeed, especially after the nomination of Salvini as Italian Minister of Interior, the refugee and migrant crisis has become one of the hot topics of Italian news and has served as one of the focus of Salvini’s electoral campaign for the

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<sup>9</sup> Definition available at: <https://www.iom.int/who-is-a-migrant>

2018 national elections. However, even in the context of Lega Nord and then Lega, the concept of migrant, as well as the consideration of that social group, saw a few shifts.

As already stated at the beginning of this chapter, Lega Nord was considering not just the those who were crossing the Italian national border from abroad but also Southern Italian people that were moving to the North, usually for economic reasons, as migrants. This conceptualization of Southerners as part of the general migrant group put foreigners and national people from a different geographical area of the country at the same level; therefore, the meridional citizens were undoubtedly perceived as a kind of foreigners themselves. It is also important to state that Lega Nord was not seeing Southerners as migrants, if they were living in their home regions, since according to the party values, the nation perceived as homeland was the North of the peninsula, the mythical Padania. Nonetheless, this step of equalization of internal migrant and foreign migrant is important to uncover this latent xenophobia. Xenophobia has been conceptualized widely by far right studies as a characteristic of the far right, as it is discussed in Mudde's categorization. Xenophobia, indeed, is related to the "fear, hate, hostility regarding 'foreigners,'" and it is thought to be related to ethnocentrism (Mudde, 1995, pp. 212-213). The ideology of ethnocentrism contributes to composing the puzzle of Lega Nord identity. In order to pinpoint the presence of ethnocentrism in Lega Nord, one can take into consideration Rydgren's statement, "The new radical right-wing parties share an emphasis on ethnonationalism rooted in myths about the distant past. Their program is directed toward strengthening the nation by making it more ethnically homogeneous and by returning to traditional values" (2007, p. 242). This definition fits perfectly in the "old" Lega Nord Padania narrative.

There are plenty of examples of insults and mockery towards the Southerners before the critical change from Lega Nord to Lega, some will be transcribed in this section in order to give a better conceptualization of the xenophobia and ethnocentrism of Lega Nord. In 2009, during the celebrations after the Pontida reunion, a video of Salvini singing with a group of party supporters: "Smell the stench – the dogs are running away – because the Neapolitans are arriving; they are infected, shaken by earthquakes, and never washed with soap [...]" (in Italian: *senti che puzza, scappano anche i cani, stanno arrivando i napoletani, sono colerosi,*

*sono terremotati, con il sapone non si sono mai lavati)*” and it goes on with profanity that are not appropriated for this work<sup>10</sup>. The animosity of Lega Nord was directed also toward the city of Rome, often referred to as scoundrel thief, as Bossi recites: “Rome is a thief, and Lega will not forgive you; in Italian: *Roma ladrona, la Lega non perdona*)<sup>11</sup>”. These examples seem to be sufficient to show the perception of Lega Nord towards Southerners, as well as its detachment from the group perceived as foreigner and other – interestingly the stereotype of the “dirty, scoundrel, thief other/migrant” is present in different cultures. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to raise a point that could contradict this rhetoric by Lega Nord – in the official Padanian constitution, the integration of migrants would have been allowed, and whoever wanted to join would have had the chance to do it, without exclusions of geographic provenience. In addition, *ius soli* was part of the legislative makeup of this constitution.

This trend changed abruptly in 2015, when Salvini released a press conference to ask forgiveness for the past mockeries against his co-nationals from the meridional regions. However, the excuses were a deflection since Salvini said that these disparagements were directed not to the people but to the bad political situation and administration of those regions.<sup>12</sup> From this moment on, the previous motto of Lega Nord “First the North, in Italian: *prima il Nord*,” or the Lega Nord t-shirts emblazoned with “Padania is not Italy” were not anymore used as a status symbol by the party elite. Instead, a new motto started to be used: “Italians first, in Italian: *Prima gli italiani*”; becoming the battle cry for the last electoral campaign. There is not anymore a Padania, there is not anymore the North versus the South; there is just Italy, nevertheless now that the meridional people were elected to be part of a greater community, who became the only scape goat? The foreigner migrants became the new object of attack by Lega.

At this point, it is necessary to define the modern concept of migrant and refugee for Lega. According to Salvini’s words, it seems that there are different categories that can be drawn

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<sup>10</sup> “Salvini coro contro i napoletani (Lega Nord – Pontida 2009)”, video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thBnp-cuTo0>

<sup>11</sup> “Roma ladrona”, video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGxtwCBOGOk>

<sup>12</sup> “Salvini: chiedo scusa al sud e ai meridionali”, video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKCV9IUeHKg>



upon the concept – the one made up by “fake” refugee, often referred as *vacanzieri*, that is on holiday, and the ones that are running away from wars.<sup>13</sup> The refugees *vacanzieri* are thought to be, by Lega, the one that after asking for international protection go back to their home countries “on holiday,” often arriving to the Italian shores through NGOs saving them in international waters. On the other hand, the “real” refugees are the ones that get to Italy through humanitarian corridors and official institutions, such as the UNHCR. After the closure on NGOs ships trying to dock in Italy, highly wanted by Salvini, Lega faced serious criticism from the internal opposition and from the EU organs.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, this mentioned classification of refugees was reiterated, and “promotional” videos of the Minister of Interior welcoming “true” refugees were made.<sup>15</sup>

For the purpose of this work, it will be difficult to distinguish the category of refugee from the one of migrant, as in Italian current political debate, they are used almost as synonyms, as the same UNHCR states.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it is also necessary to state that the discussion on migrants and refugees is mainly about the ones that come from countries less economically developed than Italy. However, it seems that the “fake refugees” could maybe be comprehended in the category of the economic migrant, since according to Lega discourse, the fact of going back to the home country after having obtained international protection deletes the authenticity of the refugee status.

#### 4. Methodology

The research design of this thesis is a single-case study with in case observations, using a cross-temporal comparison of different cases. For the purpose of this thesis, discourse analysis will be used as its guiding methodology; the type of discourse analysis that will be utilized is the critical discourse analysis. This approach has been selected over the other

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<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1018188369443082241>

<sup>14</sup> E.g., “Italy’s Matteo Salvini shuts ports to migrant rescue ship”, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44432056>

<sup>15</sup> Salvini welcomes fifty-one Niger refugees arrived through the UNHRC at the military airport of Rome. Available at: [https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/18\\_novembre\\_14/roma-salvini-accoglie-51-migranti-niger-arrivati-corridoi-umanitari-448ad8e8-e801-11e8-b8c4-2c4605eeaada.shtml?refresh\\_ce-cp](https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/18_novembre_14/roma-salvini-accoglie-51-migranti-niger-arrivati-corridoi-umanitari-448ad8e8-e801-11e8-b8c4-2c4605eeaada.shtml?refresh_ce-cp)

<sup>16</sup> Available at: <https://www.unhcr.it/news/rifugiati-e-migranti-faqs.html>

qualitative methods, e.g., qualitative content analysis since the research question employed in this work is a “how” question instead of a “what” question (Schreier, 2012, p. 48).

#### **4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis Theorization**

In addition, the type of critical discourse analysis that will be used in this thesis is the one proposed by Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak. The two scholars describe critical discourse analysis approach to discursivity as “language as a social practice” (Wodak & Fairclough, 1997), as well as stressing the cruciality of the context of language. Fairclough describes critical discourse analysis classifying the three-component structure of this methodology: an analysis of language text, analysis of discourse practice, and analysis of the discursive event (Fairclough N. , 2013). Likewise, Fairclough emphasizes the role of interdiscursivity, defined as “how different genres, discourse, and styles are articulated together” (Fairclough N. , 2001, p. 8).

Critical discourse analysis is considered to represent the most appropriate method of analysis in this thesis case since its approach aims to include in the sociocultural context in the picture, as well as the connection between power, dominance, discrimination and discourse, and the rhetoric behind the set of discourse practice that will be serve as the dataset (Wodak, 2011, p. 2; Fairclough, 2013, p. 178). To clarify the last point, Wodak recalls the words of Jürgen Habermas: “language is also a medium of domination and social force. It serves to legitimize relations of organized power. In so far as the legitimations of power relations, ... are not articulated... language is also ideological” (Wodak, 2011, p. 3).

The main feature that differences critical discourse analysis from discourse analysis is the “critical” connotation of critical discourse analysis itself; as stated by the philosopher Hermann Krings, the aforementioned adjective refers to the linking of “social and political engagement” with “a sociologically informed construction of society.” In addition to this point, Fairclough asserted that, “in human matters, interconnections and chains of cause and effect may be distorted out of vision. Hence *critique* is essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things” (Wodak, 2011, p. 3). Finally, critical discourse analysis methods aim to combine the social and the linguistic analysis of discourse, incorporating the macro and micro levels of social action (Henderson, 2005, p. 13), as well as the dynamic

interactions of the macro political sphere and the micropolitical sphere of everyday life (Luke, 2002, p. 100).

In conducting critical discourse analysis on the aforementioned data, it will be looked for different indicators that have been studied and expanded by Fairclough and M.A.K. Halliday, respectively in the works *Language and Power* (1989) and *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2004). The list of features that are worth to be considered when conducting critical discourse analysis can be summarized in:

#### A. Vocabulary

1. What experiential values do words have?
2. What relational values do words have?
3. What expressive values do words have?
4. What metaphors are used?

#### B. Grammar

5. What experiential values do grammatical features have?
6. What relational values do grammatical features have?
7. What expressive values do grammatical features have?
8. How are (simple) sentences linked together?

#### C. Textual structures

9. What interactional conventions are used?
10. What larger-scale structures does the text have?

Fairclough describes the adjectives “experiential” as the “trace of and a cue to the way in which the text producers experience of the natural or social world is represented. Experiential value is to do with contents and knowledge and beliefs;” “relational” as the “trace of and a cue to the social relationships which are enacted via the text in the discourse. Relational value is (transparently!) to do with relations and social relationship”; “expressive” as the trace of and a cue to the producer’s evaluation (in the widest sense) of the bit of the reality it relates to. Expressive, value is to do with subjects and social identities, though only one dimension of the latter concepts is to do with subjective values (Fairclough N. , 1989, pp. 110-112).

Finally, the employment of the critical discourse analysis technique to far right studies has been consolidated by different authors, such as the already widely called upon Ruth Wodak, especially in *The Politics of Fear: What Right Wing Populism Discourse Means* (2015), where the author analyzes the development in discourse and the normalization of topics such as xenophobia, nationalistic, and antisemitic rhetoric employed by different European far right parties. The collective of scholars Moufahim, Humphreys, Mitussis, and Fitchett studied the discourse of the Flemish far right party Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang and its use of a market-oriented approach as a persuasive tool (2007). Lastly, the political scientist Cinzia Padovani, applied the critical discourse analysis to the Italian far right scenario, in particular in relation to the immigration discourse conducted by the self-defined fascist party Casa Pound Italia (2016)

#### **4.2 The Dataset**

Considering all the peculiar connotation of critical discourse analysis, it seems the best qualitative discourse analysis to be applied to the set of data collected for the purpose of this work. Indeed, the dataset that will serve as the bulk of the investigation of the research question will consist in official speech given by the Lega Nord party leader, Umberto Bossi (before 2013) and Matteo Salvini (after 2013). Both leaders produced and keep producing, especially now, with the increasing importance of social media as communication vectors, a generous amount of discourse. The decision to analyze only Bossi and Salvini, and no other Lega politicians came from the hierarchical nature of the party, wherein the dominant role is embodied by the party secretary. Moreover, the centralization of Lega Nord is discernable from the fact that often the party leaders have ignored the party rules (McDonnell & Vampa, 2016, pp. 111, 114-115). Nevertheless, for reasons of time and dimension, this work will take as a sample of the Lega Nord leaders discourse the annual speech of Pontida<sup>17</sup>, the integrity of the speeches will be taken into consideration when conducting the discourse analysis. The

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<sup>17</sup> The Pontida annual reunion is the official event of Lega Nord, that celebrates the Oath of Pontida (1167) with which the Lombard League was created; eventually the Lombard League would join the forces against Frederik Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor and defeat him at the battle of Legnano. The symbolic remembrance of this historical event started to be celebrated by Lega Nord since 1990.

annual speech of Pontida seems a valid example of the general discourse of Lega Nord, since it encompasses the balance of the previous year's events while also acting as the place where the leaders define the future trajectory of the party. Moreover, the Pontida annual congress represents the biggest and most symbolic reunion for Lega Nord politicians and supporters from all over the country and has the chance to integrate and shorten the distance between the leaders and the voters (Marzano, 1998)

The timeframe for the selection of the Pontida speeches will range between 2007 and 2018. This time span is considered to be suitable for the purpose of the thesis since it covers two electoral mandate under Bossi's leadership and two electoral mandates under Salvini's leadership. Moreover, these years are thought to cover a proper arc of time, in order to provide a reliable overview on the changes and trajectories of Lega Nord discourse on the topics that are relevant for the research question of this thesis – first the othering and mistreatment of Southerners followed by an inversion of the address of the othering towards the migrants and refugees.

Bossi's Pontida speeches will be retrieved from two sources, the official web site of Lega Nord<sup>18</sup>, which has a dedicated section for the speeches of the former leader Bossi, as well as from YouTube, where many supporters of Lega Nord filmed the speeches and shared them on their channels or posted the TV live transmission of the event. On the contrary, Salvini's Pontida speeches are not found anywhere on the Lega Nord official website, while are largely present on Youtube, both on Salvini's own official channel<sup>19</sup>, and on supporters' channels.

In conducting critical discourse analysis, the ten aforementioned questions proposed by Fairclough (1989, p. 110) will be applied. Specifically, indicators that match the actors involved in this work will be searched for – the South, the North, migrants, refugees, the other; and how these are involved in the party leaders' discourse. The analysis will cover the vocabulary (which are the metaphors, what is the value of the words used; etc.), the grammar

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<sup>18</sup> Official Lega Nord website, available at: <https://www.leganord.org/index.php>

<sup>19</sup> Matteo Salvini official YouTube channel, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/matteosalvinimi>

(which verbal tense is used, which adjective are employed, which synonyms are used; etc.), and the textual structures (how the text interacts with the audience, etc.).

To explain better the work that will be conducted in the following section of this thesis, an example will be provided here. The speech taken into consideration is the 2008 one by Bossi. In this piece of discourse, Bossi uses a very simple vocabulary - there are no technical terms or complex ones; on the contrary, the wording is very linear and it presents idioms and expressions widely used in the Italian language (*partire da zero, non arrivare a fine mese, neri di rabbia* – respectively: start from scratches, make ends meet, purple with rage). this wording shows Bossi's experiential understanding of the conditions of Lega Nord supporters– as people that are having economic troubles because of their “slavery to Rome”, and for that they should be outraged and be ready to free themselves.

Moreover, Bossi give a specific expressive value to the Pontida Oath past events, which are put in relations to the present time, linking directly the fight of Lega Nord for freedom from Rome and the Lega Lombarda for freedom from the Holy Roman Emperor Barbarossa as actions with the same ideological value. This equivalation of the two historical moments is even more accentuated by Bossi's claim of knowing that there are “*centinatia di migliaia, forse milioni di uomini pronti a battersi* – hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of men ready to fight”, giving in this way a martial inflection to the political fight. Finally, the social identity of supporters of the Lega Nord is seen as Padanians that are directly connected to the Middle Ages warriors at the Legnano battle.

Finally, the relational value that emerges from the analyzed text is the one of Lega Nord being a big brotherhood – Bossi iterates the word “*fratelli* - brothers” when referencing to the public. This socially constructed family is utterly opposed to who is not Padanian, not Northerner; these others are the ones to be fight since they are preventing the North from being free, especially economically free.

The second block of data that will be analyzed are the quantitative results of the Lega Nord party support. The electoral results are, indeed, the best way to quantify the widening of the Lega Nord electoral pool. The period for this data portion would be the same one as for the

critical discourse analysis one that is between 2006 and 2018. However, in this case, it may be useful, to add an additional year (2019), in order to quantify the trajectories of Lega Nord support after the 2018 national election that brought the party to be the second most-voted one. The kind of elections that will be taken into consideration for the purpose of this study are the European ones and the Chamber of Deputies (*Camera*) ones. The choice to include the *Camera* electoral result is due to the fact that the number of voters is expected to be higher, since the Camera can be voted also by young adults that are younger than twenty-five years old (just people over twenty-five years old can vote for the Senate of the Republic (*Senate*)). For the year 2019, the elections that would be taken into consideration are the regional ones, in particular of the following regions: Abruzzo, Sardegna and Basilicata. However, the usage of regional electoral results is an exception due to the extraordinary case of checking the consent of Lega, after the national elections, in such regions were the party was very lowly represented in the previous years. The choice of the aforementioned regions is due to the fact that they are the only regions to have had regional elections in 2019. For the purpose of this thesis, the voting results coming from Italians living abroad will not be taken into consideration, since they do not fit in the framework proposed.

For the quantitative analysis, the data will be coded in order to show the candidacy or not of Lega Nord, as well as the percentage of increased or decreased support towards Lega Nord. In fact, in the national elections, there are voting circumscriptions that overall match the regional divisions. The electoral results that will have a heavier impact for this work are the ones of the Center and South of the country, as the outcome of the othering shift primarily involves them.

This set of quantitative data will reflect, in the framework of the research problem, Lega Nord electoral results in comparison with its discourse both on the South and on migrants, formalizing the link between narrative and voting. Keeping all the other factors constant, it is thought to see an increase of Lega Nord electoral consent in the years after the Salvini's discourse change on the South, in the Southern regions of the country themselves. Although it is possible to pinpoint the recent expansion of Lega in the South to many different reasons

(e.g. the party did not present itself in the studied regions in the past); for the purpose of this work, the first theorization will be held as the leading one.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 Bossi's Era

First, it is relevant for the purpose of discourse analysis to take into consideration who is the public that attend the annual Pontida speech, as usually, speakers adapt their speech in relation to who is listening. In this case, the public is composed of devoted Lega Nord supporters, who travel from many different regions of Northern Italy to the little town of Pontida on the outskirts of Bergamo in Lombardy. Moreover, all the videos of the speeches and the textual transcriptions are in Italian, and as the author of this thesis speaks Italian as her native language, she used her own translations when needed in the analysis section. Finally, terms like “experiential, relational and expressive” will be used according to Fairclough's conceptualization of critical discourse analysis.

#### 5.1.1 2007 Pontida Speech<sup>20</sup>

The first speech taken into consideration for the analysis section of this work is the 2007 Pontida speech, given by the former party secretary, Umberto Bossi. This speech, as the ones that will follow, deeply reflect the precarious Italian political situation of the time. At the time there was the Legislature XV with Romano Prodi as Prime Minister and Giorgio Napolitano as President of the Republic, and this legislature was the second shortest in Italian history, lasting for a little less than two years, between mid May 2006 and the beginning of May 2008.

The 2007 speech is relatively short compared to the ones that will follow in the next years, lasting around six minutes. Bossi shares immediately his preoccupations about the unsteadiness of the current government “*il paese è in grave difficoltà,[...] il governo non ha i numeri*” ( the country is facing huge difficulties, the government does not have the numbers), and the situation is described with a metaphor as muddy; all these claims can be

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<sup>20</sup> “Discorso Bossi Pontida 2007” video on YouTube, retrieved at:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osu8C08ahcE>



read as experiential understanding of the existing scenario. Once more, as presented in the practical example from the methodology section of this work, the politician talks in a simple way without using any technocratic terminology. Markedly, while the focus of Lega Nord at this time is just the Padania region, Bossi refers to the *Paese*, the country as a whole when pointing out the problematic scenario, and not just the North. Once more, he says that “*le elezioni hanno chiarito che la gente vuole le elezioni politiche*” (the elections showed that the people want political elections); overlooking the fragile logical composition of this sentence, it is important to notice that *la gente*, the people is used without any adjective referring to the geographical provenience. In fact, it seems that the party secretary is here addressing the whole Italian population and not just the residents of Padania. In order to strengthen his political accusation towards the current government, Bossi addresses directly the president of the Republic by his official title, maybe to keep a relational distance, and never with his name.

The expressive reading of Bossi’s words give a precise scenario, composed by “us”, which seems to include the totality of the Italian people, in contraposition with the government (which Lega Nord was part of both in the Chamber and the Senate). The “country” and the “people” are called upon many times in the speech, especially in the context of accusing the government and the President of the Republic of not respecting the rights of popular sovereignty that are present in the 1946 Italian Constitution. Going on with the speech, a mention Padania emerges for the first time “*tutto il paese, anche la Padania*” (all the country, also Padania) when reiterating the need for a change in government formation. The issue of “not having the numbers” is reiterated numerous times, blaming the government for slowing down democratic processes to the detriment of the people.

Just after the sermon that includes all the Italian people, Bossi starts a chant saying “*Padania Libera! Lombardia Libera!*” (Free Padania! Free Lombardia!) with the public participating animatedly alongside him. It could seem that the politician needed a handhold to go back to “his” Padanian people, bringing back an “us” now composed by the people of the North, instead of all the Italians against central Rome and the government. This grasp back to Bossi’s own people is present also in his upcoming words, which are less intelligible as they

are partly in Lombard dialect and shift from a serious topic (even if presented with plain and reiterated words), which concerns the whole country, to some jokes about the marriage relationship of an upcoming woman speaker. Moreover, unexpectedly, Bossi shows his expressive understanding of society when he starts praising women as not to be considered the “ *Sesso debole*” (weaker sex) but actually being stronger than man, since without them, there would not be functional homes and families.

### 5.1.2 2008 Pontida Speech<sup>21</sup>

April 2008 saw the birth of Legislature XVI, which officially lasted until March 2013. It saw two governments – Berlusconi IV until 2011 and that of Monti until 2013.

The 2008 Pontida speech begins on a different note than the previous one as Bossi directly refers to the “ *Padani*” who are there; therefore, he stresses his expressive evaluation of the public as part of his own familiar sphere of social identities. The politician creates again, an “us,” made of the Padanian people, versus “the other,” which encompasses the government and who is not Padanian. Interestingly, Bossi addresses Padanians as if they are all supporters of Lega Nord, just because their origin demands it: “ *I padani amano la Lega, [...] la capacità di difendere la loro gente*” (Padanians love Lega and the possibility of defending their people). In the speech, it is made clear that being Padanian is a matter of nature, more than nurture: “ *La nostra natura ci ha creati liberi, quando uno mette la camicia verde è proprio per questo, perché è simbolo della natura e della libertà*” (our nature created us free, when one wears the green shirt [editor’s note: green is the party color of Lega Nord], it is exactly for this reason, because it is the symbol of nature and of freedom). This sentence connects to one of the already quoted articles (Husseyne, 2010), where the importance of the natural landscape of Padania, being a plain rounded by the Alps in the North, plays a pivotal role in the social identity construction of Lega. The clear difference between Padanians and Italians is stressed when Bossi refers to some other “ *molti popoli italiani*” (many Italian populations), emphasizing the expressive evaluation

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<sup>21</sup> The text of the 2008 Pontida speech is available on Lega Nord official website at: [https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/Presidente\\_Federale/discorsi\\_pontida/2008\\_1giu08.pdf](https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/Presidente_Federale/discorsi_pontida/2008_1giu08.pdf)

of Italian ethnopolitical scenario as constituted by various groups. Taking into consideration the previous speech, where the Italians were called as a whole body to act against the bad government, one could say that the differentiation of the Italian populations is, in this instance of Lega Nord discourse, more by provenience, than by values.

The vocabulary used by the party secretary is harsh and full of links to the belligerent past of the Legnano battle – *“facciamo paura”* (we scare them), *“scatenarsi, conquistare la libertà”* (incite [the fight], conquer freedom), *“l’alternativa [...] è la lotta di liberazione”* (the alternative is the fight for freedom); *“prepariamoci alla lotta”* (get ready to fight). These Bossi’s words would remind one of a separatist paramilitary group along the lines of IRA or ETA. However, later on, Bossi states that Lega Nord fights for freedom in a democratic fashion, lessening so the claims for a possible physical contact. Indeed, it seems that Bossi shares his experiential knowledge of what the Padanians could do get to their scope, but at the same time he diminishes when he evaluates (expressively) the Italian reality, which is far away from the Northern Irish or Basque one.

Moreover, in the speech, there are numerous references to the family sphere and future generations. The future success of the relational domain is sustained by the choice of standing between Lega Nord lines, as Bossi says: *“Ho portato qui persino il più piccolo dei miei figli, perché la via di Pontida, la via della Padania, è quella giusta”* (I have brought here even the youngest of my children, because the way of Pontida, the way of Padania is the right one). The act of being a good Lega Nord supporter it does not have an end in itself, it something that is presented as transcending the temporality and places itself in a utopic (according to Lega Nord) future, where *“un giorno eravamo schiavi di Roma, ma ora abbiamo finito di esserlo”* (one day we were slaves of Rome, but now we stopped that). The usage of simple tenses and not conditional ones underlines the certainty that Bossi want to instill in his supporters.

### 5.1.3. 2009 Pontida Speech<sup>22</sup>

The 2009 speech starts with a historical introduction on the *Lega dei Comuni*, confirming how the historical narrative is a pivotal identity marker of Lega Nord itself, comparing Bossi to Alberto da Giussano.<sup>23</sup> The introductory speech states that Bossi, like da Giussano, was born to lead his people to freedom. The party leader himself starts his speech praising Lega Nord because its “*zoccolo duro non si è venduto*” (hard core was not sold out). This statement will be shaken up when Salvini will take the leadership of the party, bringing to rupture between the current secretary and the former one.

Bossi praises Roberto Maroni, the current Lega Nord Minister of Interior, for having stopped the “invasion.” The speaker refers to the issue of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea and arrive to the Italian shores,<sup>24</sup> a phenomenon that will become a central tool in the realization of the Salvini’s electoral campaign. However, in this discourse, the immigration issue has just a single reference, being not central to the speech. On the contrary, Bossi spends more time talking about his relationship with Maroni and how he gave the Minister of Interior his position and made him the man that he is now. In this way, it seems that Bossi puts on a more relevant position the relational understanding of the stopped invasion – who made it possible and why, than a mere experiential one that gives data and facts.

Going further in the speech, the sphere of “us” versus “them/the others” is widened again, on the “other” side, including also the journalists and the press. These categories are accused of being controlled by the government and of not understanding what Lega Nord really want to say. However, there is a government actor that could be placed in the middle between “us” and “the others,” and this is Silvio Berlusconi, since he is praised of having kept his word about some agreements in facilitating the legal framework for the implementation of fiscal

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<sup>22</sup> “Pontida 2009 – Quindicesima parte”, available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YG9NK9VqdzI&list=PL45C602A69C6BC9C2&index=15>

“Pontida 2009 – Sedicesima parte”, available at:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5goCH\\_W8fWU&list=PL45C602A69C6BC9C2&index=16](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5goCH_W8fWU&list=PL45C602A69C6BC9C2&index=16)

<sup>23</sup> Alberto da Giussano was the Guelph commander that fought against the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa with the Lombard League. He is depicted in Lega Nord emblem.

<sup>24</sup> Probably Bossi refers to the May events that saw the rejection of 227 migrants, who were sent back to Tripoli. Article available at: <https://www.repubblica.it/2009/04/sezioni/cronaca/immigrati-6/barconi-a-tripoli/barconi-a-tripoli.html>

federalism that Lega Nord wanted. Positioning Berlusconi in the middle ground could bring to a simplistic reading of Bossi's expressive evaluation of social realities, creating a new category for the ones that are accommodating or useful according to the Lega Nord perspective, opposed to the ones that are not (the others). This statement is corroborated by Bossi saying: "*noi trattiamo bene chi ci tratta bene*" (we treat kindly those who treat us kindly).

In the second half of the speech, Bossi uses again, like in the previous year sermon, references to the family sphere, e.g., invoking the Padanian brothers and brotherhood. In this instance, Lega Nord itself is characterized as a family, where Padania could be considered as a developing embryo in the mother's womb, but at the same time a long desired child. Bossi says: "*la lega e unita dall'amore per la Padania*" (Lega is united by the love for Padania). In addition, Lega Nord supporters are thanked for having stood next to Lega also when there were difficulties, reminiscent in this way of the relational dynamics of a family. In these perspectives, the other parties could be considered other "rival families," in a world made of duels, fight for lands, traitors, and alliances. This issue takes even more significance if one takes into consideration the medieval connections that Lega Nord wants to establish in most of the analyzed speeches.

Bossi shows his preference for presenting not just facts in his words, but also emotional stories that are filled with what he believes are the most important successes of Lega Nord. Finally, after talking about the upcoming regional elections and how much Lega Nord candidates are able to do for Padania, the speech is closed with an uncouth statement of masculinity: "*La Lega ce l'ha duro!*" (Lega has it hard [has an erection]), meaning that Lega can keep up with the challenges. This sentence shows that the choice of Bossi's vocabulary is transgressive and not erudite like the one of the other political leaders of the time (Zaslove, 2011, p. 86).

#### 5.1.4 2010 Pontida Speech<sup>25</sup>

The 2010 speech recalls all the usual points that Bossi discussed during the previous years, showing a thematic trend, as well as a specific way of communication style. Indeed, the party leader keeps avoiding political or economic technical terms, as he employs words that are easily intelligible by everyone in the audience, no matter the age or the educational background. Moreover, noticeably in the 2007, in the 2009 speech, and in this 2010 speech, Bossi uses some sort of regional dialect (here speaking mainly to his fellow Lombards) or evokes traces of popular knowledge or myths. For example, in the 2009 speech, Bossi talks about the Nostradamus prediction of the city of Adria being the last one standing at the end of the world; in the 2010 discourse, the leader informs the audience on the myth of the Saint Giacomo statue of Pontida being able to predict the weather. All these bits of everyday life seem to be inserted spontaneously in the speech, which clearly resembles a conversation that two non-politicians could have. Indeed, the language of Bossi was studied by the already quoted scholar Andrej Zaslove, who affirms that the success of the rhetoric of Bossi is based on his simplicity and being a man of the people, more than a detached technocrat: “Lega talks and thinks how Lombards talks and thinks”. (2011, p. 85).

Bossi, thorough the speech, mixes experiential and expressive indicators. Usually, the program of the party is (mainly) experientially presented with hard core facts – for example, the leaders proudly states that all the lakes and rivers of Lombardy and Piedmont are now property of the regions and not anymore of the state. On the other hand, the expressive indicators could be seen in the adding of pathos in most of the discourse: “Non vi lasceremo soli” (we will not leave you alone) and similar sentence, that are used to fill the speech, together with the chants of “*Padania libera!*”, “*Roma Ladrona!*”, “*Umberto, Umberto!*”, “*Redentore, redentore!*”<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the story of Lega Nord keeps being dramatized and filled with emotional connections, creating almost an exceptionalism for the party in the Italian

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<sup>25</sup> “Discorso Bossi a Pontida (1 parte) 20-06-10”, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDJXQyeaM\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDJXQyeaM_A); “Discorso Bossi a Pontida (2 parte) 20-06-10”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Htle2i9yCBU>; “Discorso Bossi a Pontida (3 parte) 20-06-10”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1XxX6NX7E>

<sup>26</sup> “Redentore – redeemer” may refer to the Church of the Santissimo Redentore in Legnano or, maybe, even to Bossi as a savior.

context. Bossi states that there are no other parties whose political history is based on freedom like Lega Nord. This exceptionalism pushes the party secretary to put himself and Lega Nord on a pedestal (especially if one takes the “*redentore*” as an appellative for Bossi), showing anger and resentment towards the supporters that doubted him or his doing; for example, he says “*Mi sono arrabbiato* (I became angry) when talking about the recent time when people thought that he was betraying them. Again, further on in the speech, Bossi recalls the past merge with the Lega Veneta, showing resentment and anger towards the people that thought he was making a mistake, and the politician accuses these people, calling them “*loschi individui*” (scoundrels), even if these events happened decades before.

In general, Bossi’s speeches are stretched between different poles – “us” versus “them,” and “past” versus “future.” In the last example, it could be counter-intuitive for a party to focus intensively on the past and on history, but not for Lega Nord. Indeed, the past glorification of the roots of the party play a pivotal role in increasing this exceptionalism, together with the unblinding of some “historical truths”. For example, that the Savoia dynasty made a mistake in declaring Rome as the capital during the Kingdom of Italy, and they did it because of the fear of the Hapsburg Empire, and even that Camillo Benso di Cavour did not want to form Italy as it became, but he wanted a form of federalism instead. In fact, the party leader wants to correct these mistakes and bring back the glory to the most important Italian cities, like Milano, Torino, and Venezia, but leaving outside important cities of the Center and South of Italy (Firenze, Napoli, Palermo).

Finally, the speech leans back to another largely used theme – the fight for freedom. However, Bossi states, “*Avevamo la scelta del fucile o della tranquillità, ma abbiamo scelto la via pacifica, che è la migliore*” (we had the choice of the gun or tranquility, but we choose the pacific way since it is the best one). Although giving this pacifist statement, Bossi keeps relying on the hypothetical millions of men that would be ready to fight for Padania freedom.

### 5.1.5 2011 Pontida Speech<sup>27</sup>

The 2011 speech begins with an accusation towards journalists, who are addressed very vulgarly for writing fake news about Lega Nord having troubles in maintaining a collaborative relationship with the government. Already in the 2009 speech, Bossi clearly placed journalists and the press in the “other” category, together with the government and everything that is not Padania or the North. Here journalists are considered “*lecchini di Roma padrona*” (bootlickers of Mistress Rome), differently in the 2009 speech, when they were claimed to be used as puppets by Rome. The stress on the “us” versus “them” appears to be the major thematic trend of the 2011 speech, where “them” is the government. The aforementioned actor is accused of “*metter in ginocchio il Nord*” (bring the North to its knees) and of not working in the best interest of the citizens. The majority of the speech deals with the treatment that people who failed paying taxes should get from the government. Bossi, as a matter of fact, claims to be on the side of the people, stating that the people “*anche quando sono debitori dello stato, sono cittadini, non schiavi dello stato*” (even when they owe money to the State, they are citizens, not slaves). The concept of slavery to the state is not new in Bossi’s discourse, and he provides a repertoire of images, as already discussed in the 2008 speech. Moreover, outside this dataset of Pontida speeches, but still in the correct temporal framework, Bossi defamed the Italian national anthem for the slavery concept comprehended in it in more instances;<sup>28</sup> the leader also proposed to change the national anthem to *Va’ Pensiero* by Giovanni Verdi.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Bossi presents Lega Nord and Padania almost as martyrs persecuted by Rome. In addition, when the leader states that “*Abbiamo dovuto farci carico dei problem di tutto il paese*” (we had to take the burden of the problems of all the country). The speaker underlines with his lexical and verbal choices that they did that, not out of kindness, but because there were no other choices, and the country is described like a train that needs all its components to be functioning in order to travel.

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<sup>27</sup> “Pontida 2011. Il discorso di Umberto Bossi” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiC-2JlyL5I>

<sup>28</sup> “Bossi insulta l’inno italiano”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iF9p5sJxfNM;>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.repubblica.it/2009/08/sezioni/politica/lega-fiction/lega-inno-scuola/lega-inno-scuola.html>



The government it is turned into an alien entity, which benefits only itself and its politicians. Markedly, Bossi and other Lega Nord party representatives are part of the government, being in ministries, but they put themselves on a different ideal and ethical level. For example, Bossi complains about the waste of money in Rome. The political leader claims that that money could be easily not squandered if politicians used their own car, instead of the “*auto blu*,” which is the official state car. Bossi, altogether with this statement, grasps back to his humble root of man of the people by saying that he is refusing to use official state car, and instead, he drives his own Audi. This last statement by the politician builds the construction of Bossi’s image as a *homo faber*, who created himself his path in life and his wealth. Despite where the political success led him, he is still next to his people. In this optic, one can read Bossi’s expressive understanding of supporters as family, as well as his vocabulary choices being simple and accessible to everyone, together with the sporadic cursing or uncouth exclamations.

Finally, the party secretary introduces a theme that is very relevant for the purpose of this work – the migrant one. The 2011 speech places itself in the period right after the First Libyan Civil War. Italy, both for its geographical position and economic ties with Libya was highly involved in the matter. According to Bossi, what was still involving Italy is the waves of “*clandestini* - clandestines” arriving to the Italian shores. However, Bossi does not take any harsh position on this issue; he presents very little data and facts in a way that one could call experiential. The politician inserts this intervention in the frame of the money waste in Rome, stating that the war in Libya cost one million euros and that all peace missions are too expensive. Clearly, the immigration issue does not represent a staple of Bossi’s discourse.

#### **5.1.6 2012 Federal Congress Speech<sup>30</sup>**

The year 2012 represented a quite troubled period in Lega Nord’s history. Indeed, this is the year when Bossi resigned his role as party leader, creating a vacuum of power that was briefly taken into the hands of Roberto Maroni. The reasons for the collapse of the Bossi’s era could be seen two main points – his increasingly weaker leadership and an impressive scandal that

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<sup>30</sup> “Congresso Federale 2012 Umberto Bossi” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyQDWjbpBV4>

questioned the moral integrity of the party secretary.<sup>31</sup> The scandal and the Bossi's resignation occurred in April and, as a consequence, the Pontida event was put off to the following year because of the tension in the core of the party. Nonetheless, it seemed still appropriate to analyze Bossi's intervention in order to close the party secretary cycle of leadership. The former leader gave a speech at the *Congresso Federale* (Federal Congress) of Lega Nord, which is thought to represent a suitable substitute for the methodological framework of this work.

The party leader, talking from a green stand with the motto "*Prima il Nord*" (First the North) emblazoned upon it, starts his speech with the biblical story of the judgement of King Solomon, narrated in 1 Kings 3:16-28. Bossi shortly recalls the story of the two women claiming to be the mother of the same child they brought to the Solomon and how the wisdom of the ruler in commanding the baby to be cut in half, in order to determine who was the real mother, solved the argument. After the narration, Bossi compares himself to the real mother of the baby that is willing to renounce to the child if that means he will live. Bossi states, referring to the baby, that "*l'ideale, il sogno ideale che deve realizzarsi*" (the ideal, the ideal dream that needs to come true) is more important than anything else in the picture is. The Lega Nord former secretary compares the party ideology and the party itself to the baby. King Solomon is interpreted by the government, who, according to Bossi, wanted to destroy Lega Nord. Bossi claims that Rome wanted to destroy Lega Nord and that was the only solution for him to save it. The former leader skips what Fairclough would define the experiential explanation of the situation, as he presents only his interpretation that one could call the expressive one. According to his reading of events, the government is the actor that is trying to sabotage Lega Nord while he represents the victim (here the parallel with the real mother from the bible story.)

## 5.2 Major points

According to the material collected through the analyzed speeches, the issue of the cleavage between North and South of the country emerged in a subtle way. Indeed, as the congress of

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<sup>31</sup> "Umberto Bossi resigns as leader of Northern League amid funding scandal", available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/05/umberto-bossi-resigns-northern-league>

Pontida was a party official celebration, the tones may be less strong than in some other occasions were Bossi openly bad-mouthed the Southerners (e.g., when insulting the Italian Republic President Giorgio Napolitano he said “*nomen omen, terun*”, where “*terun*” is a disparaging term for Southern Italians, as the surname of the former president means “Neapolitan” ).<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the approach of the party secretary to the South seems to be leaning towards a condescending attitude, almost if the North had to take the burden of the South to bring it on the right path of development (e.g., “we needed to take the burden of the problem of all the country.”) On the other hand, the clear “other” in Bossi’s discourse is the system and the government in Rome. The party leader’s discourse is rooted in the differentiation between Lega Nord and the government, even if Bossi and other party representatives were at the time active government members. However, when government officials sided with Lega Nord (i.e., Berlusconi), Bossi placed them in a mid-ground between “us” and “them.” The position acquired, though, is not concrete, as the secretary threatens to take them away the privilege of not be considered “others” if they do not follow Lega Nord requests. Another common trend of the speeches is the push for a free Padania, which is not specifically geographically determined but includes for sure Lombardy, Piedmont, and Veneto. The need for a free Padania is defined through glorious historical comparisons and the present economic situation, identifying the Po valley region with the most industrially and agriculturally advanced and yet vexed by the central government with its overbearing presence and taxes.

At level of vocabulary, Bossi speaks plainly, mostly avoiding the use of political terms, if the employment of these technic words is needed, the speaker uses examples to be clearer in his talking, often repeating more than once the example. The secretary uses colloquial words and imprecations, creating an atmosphere that resemble more the one of a pubs filled with good friends and relatives than a political congress. In addition, Bossi creates a familiar allure, addressing his constituents with words such as “brothers,” resembling the dynamics of a

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<sup>32</sup> “Bossi: <Napolitano, nomen omen. Terun>”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-bMEYNTU3M>

patriarch that talks to his relatives. For example, Bossi treats Lega Nord as a family that does not let anyone behind and a family that is always there to fight for its members.

## 6.2 Salvini's Era

Salvini gained the leadership of Lega Nord in 2013. During the short period between Bossi and Salvini, Roberto Maroni was elected party secretary; however, he resigned from his role after a few months. Subsequently this event, the party scheduled a congress in December 2012 to elect the new secretary, and both Salvini and Bossi presented themselves as candidates. Bossi stated that Lega Nord needed a secretary that was able to unite the party lines, which had been broken by internal disputes. Maroni claimed he wanted a fresh face for secretary, who could leave behind the nostalgic past and give to the party the future it deserved.<sup>33</sup> Salvini, who was openly endorsed by Maroni, ended up winning the election with 82 percent of votes.<sup>34</sup>

### 6.2.1. 2013 Pontida Speech<sup>35</sup>

From the beginning of the speech, Salvini presents a quite different approach from that of Bossi, even challenging the leadership model of the late secretary. First of all, the speaker addresses the audience with “*ragazzi*” (guys), posing himself on a horizontal, more than vertical hierarchy. Salvini uses, as his predecessor, simple words with frequent repetitions of the concepts that he considers to be pivotal in the speech. The leader takes a harsh position towards the past of Lega Nord, which was recently shaken by internal conflicts: “*Non è più tempo di slogan, non possiamo più venire sul palco di Pontida a dire <viva la Padania!>, punto [...] come ci arriviamo [alla Padania]? Ci arriviamo uniti [...] a Pontida ci sono i leghisti, non ci sono maroniani o bossiani*” (It’s not anymore, the time for slogans, we can’t come to the Pontida stage and say <long live Padania!>, full stop [...] how do we get there [to Padania]? We get there united [...] in Pontida there are Lega supporters, not Maroni

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<sup>33</sup> “Lega, il congresso a metà dicembre. Bossi: <Mi ricandido a segretario>”, available at: [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2013/09/22/news/lega\\_il\\_congresso\\_a\\_met\\_dicembre\\_bossi\\_mi\\_ricandido\\_a\\_segretario-67015778/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2013/09/22/news/lega_il_congresso_a_met_dicembre_bossi_mi_ricandido_a_segretario-67015778/)

<sup>34</sup> “Matteo Salvini è il nuovo segretario della Lega Nord: <No all’UE, è un gulag>”, available at: [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2013/09/22/news/lega\\_il\\_congresso\\_a\\_met\\_dicembre\\_bossi\\_mi\\_ricandido\\_a\\_segretario-67015778/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2013/09/22/news/lega_il_congresso_a_met_dicembre_bossi_mi_ricandido_a_segretario-67015778/)

<sup>35</sup> “Pontida 2013 – Intervento di Matteo Salvini”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GqcZ2mGWUg>

supporters or Bossi supporters). As one can see here, Salvini tries to draw a new path for Lega – the relational understanding of his intervention shows a united front against everyone else; this may seem similar to the Bossi’s approach, however, the current secretary does not put himself on a pedestal like the late one did. On the contrary, Salvini puts the party on the pedestal. The leader claims his priorities to be unity and concreteness – which it lacked during the past direction of the party.

The speaker, in the course of the speech, quotes historical figures or documents that fought for freedom of choice while practicing disobedience – Don Milani, the Chivasso declaration, and Bobby Sands. The first, Don Milani, was a priest that fought for conscientious objection and was tried by the State; the Chivasso declaration was a document written by the World War II Alpine Resistance partisans against Fascism, which asked a federal or canton system for the Alpine populations that had particular linguistic, ethnic and cultural characteristics; Bobby Sands was a member of the IRA and member of Parliament, who died on a hunger strike in the beginning of the 80s. Indeed, Salvini’s choice of recalling these specific people or events could be a consequence of the expressive understanding of the world from his days in the Young Padanian Communists in the late 90s. However, these narratives are not widely articulated but only touched upon as symbols of disobedience, defined by the speaker as something towards which Lega Nord supporters and politicians need to aim. According to Salvini, the way to make Lega Nord’s words count in Rome is not only through disobedience towards the government but also obedience towards the party, creating in this way an unstable duality in Lega Nord identity.

Finally, Salvini employs harsh words towards the central government and even Italy itself: *“L’Italia e fallita, l’Italia e uno stato marcio [...] e una palude di parassiti”* (Italy failed, Italy is a rotten country [...] it’s a swamp filled with parasites). The answer to the decadence is the North, a Lega Nord united in disobedience towards the government. Salvini claims he would be proud and honored to go to jail due to persecution by the Italian state, showing an experiential understanding of the reality closer to that of Bobby Sands than that of Bossi, where the pacifistic way is abandoned for a more activist one. Salvini’s reading of reality

seems to be an “all or nothing” one, concluding his speech with “*chi si arrende è perso*” (who gives up is lost).

### 6.2.3 2014 Pontida Speech<sup>36</sup>

The 2014 Pontida Speech was held just a few weeks before the European elections, giving the congress a theme of “Another Europe is possible”, a Europe that clearly does not have the single currency, since Salvini presents himself on the stage with a “No Euro” t-shirt. Salvini begins his demagogic speech by thanking all the people that came to Pontida and at the same he launches a campaign against migrants coming to Italy and receiving an amount of money per day. The speaker, since the beginning, starts establishing the pattern of “us” versus “them,” as already seen in previous speeches, but here, the “other” is clearly represented by the (recent) migrants. Salvini does not spare harsh words against the migrants’ treatment, accusing the government of “racism towards Italians.”

The party leader dwells on the concept of patriots and freedom fighters, recalling for the second year in a row the story of the Irish Bobby Sands. Indeed, Salvini develops the narrative of a rightful fight for one own’s ideas, but it is not clear anymore (after Bossi’s resignation), which local entities are sanctioned in their aspirations to be independent. Salvini’s period seems to represent a liminal and experimental stage of, on the one hand, opening the borders of Lega to all Italians while on the other hand, it would keep the North as the main driving force of the party. Markedly, 2014 is the year when Salvini founded the Us with Salvini (*Noi con Salvini*) branch directed towards the central and southern regions of the country. However, Salvini will come back on this topic later on, justifying his upcoming trip to Sicily as a way to help “*la gente perbene*” (the respectable people) of the region. As one can see, there is a small opening to the South, but still, only one category of respectable people (where no indicators of what take to make someone respectable are given) can breach from the “other” of the South to “us.” The speaker states that Lega will always be independence-oriented, federalist, and autonomist and they will be able to help other regions in achieving their goals (if similar to those of Lega). Salvini almost takes, as Bossi, this mission – of saving the

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<sup>36</sup> “Pontida 2014 – Intervento Matteo Salvini”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0OkJS1TcXg>

South – as a burden, but one that will eventually benefit everyone. Eventually, the leader will state that Lega is the party of “normal people,” automatically classifying as abnormal who does not belong to the same political establishment. The speaker keeps going back and forth with to whom is he speaking (the Italians? The Northerners? The Lega supporters? The Lega opponents?), peaking with saying that he believes in the concept of “*patria*” (fatherland) because it can have different meaning for different people; by saying this, it seems that the expressive understanding of social realities for Salvini is not stable and differently constructed from individual to individual.

Going on with the speech, Salvini seems to take back the Bossi’s approach to the familiarity of the party in different instances – inviting on the stage mothers and kids, remembering the death of a woman close to Lega, and stating that the party is first of all a family and a community based on values. However, this family component is transformed in a way to incite voters against the European Union and the single currency, showing how, in Salvini’s mind, the relational understanding of Italian society and the expressive understanding of the EU are intertwined and almost indivisible. Indeed, this year signaled when Lega got closer to the far right, xenophobic and populist establishment with which it allied for the EU elections. As the speech was held in a sensitive time for elections, it turned in an electoral campaign, calling for freedom from the oppressive government, the taxation of prostitution, and a renunciation of the single currency (“*l’euro è la moneta della fame e della disoccupazione*” [the Euro brings starvation and unemployment]). Salvini tries to incite people to go voting for the EU elections, calling them a “referendum between the past and the future,” and a way to bring Italians to freedom and to give them the chance to work.

The vocabulary of Salvini is abundant with slang, swearing, and expressions in the Lombard dialect, with frequent repetitions of concepts and words that are considered to be pivotal in the speech. Moreover, Salvini employs the quotations of famous people many times, including some from Pope John VI, the writer Oriana Fallaci, and the jurist Gianfranco Miglio.

#### 6.2.4 2015 Pontida Speech<sup>37</sup>

In the 2015 Pontida speech, Salvini characterizes the strategy of nationalization of the party in a more open way compared to the previous year. Indeed, the concept of “Padania” is completely abandoned in the name of “Italia” as a whole entity. The secretary starts his speech saying that he is there to “build the Italian future” and, along the same lines of the 2014 speech, he calls on the stage families with children, but this year, they will stay next to Salvini throughout the whole discourse. However, there is no particular interaction between the children surrounding him and himself, showing an instrumentalization, or even exploitation of the children. In fact, Salvini takes advantage of the families on the stage to address a hot topic, which is still debated at the present day – the traditional family. The politician explains his expressive understanding of reality by connecting together the future of the country, which is made by the family, which is composed by normal people. The reiterated category of “normal” is implicitly explained as being a supporter of Lega, being Italian, and having a traditional family.

However, Salvini’s speech is filled with contradictions; for example, if on one hand he supports the homogenous category of “normality,” he on the other hand blames the EU for killing diversity by comparing the EU with the USRR: “*l’Europa è un’Unione Sovietica criminale*” (Europe is a criminal Soviet Union). Markedly, the theme of Russia comes back another three times in the speech – one praising Vladimir Putin as a “normal” president (not like the current Democratic Party Italian PM Matteo Renzi), invoking the lift of sanctions on Russia (but only for economic reasons), and then finally blaming NATO for placing troops at the Russian borders (since it could cause a war). This back and forth towards Russia show an ambiguous expressive evaluation of the country – where Putin is a model of reference, but a dangerous one.

Salvini then, presents many points of the electoral campaign of Lega, even if the elections are still four years away, until he arrives to the forte of his rhetoric – clandestine migrants. The topic is touched upon through a different perspective than the previous years. The

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<sup>37</sup> “Intervento di Matteo Salvini a Pontida 2015”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4i7O6NnZM8>



politician shields himself from the attacks on how he deals with the migrant issue by attacking the current government that is seen as responsible for the five thousand migrants that died in the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea between 2014 and 2015.<sup>38</sup> The defensive strategy on the matter continues, with Salvini sharing a peculiar expressive understanding of current migrations from Africa as a resurgence of colonialism, while what he suggests – “*aiutiamoli a casa loro*” (let’s help them in their homeland) – is what “good” people do, finally asking to close the ports because opening them means destroying the future of the children. The politician is then able to revert this rhetoric of exclusion in name of one of inclusion, where “*chiudiamo i porti*” (let’s close ports) becomes “*apriamo le porte [del partito]*” (let’s open the doors of the party). This final climax of Salvini reconnects with the beginning of his speech calling for a united Italy. Indeed, he states that right and left do not exist anymore, and implicitly Lega is placed above this division; on the other hand, the secretary states that there are “*produttori e parassiti*” (producers and parasites) and the party sides with the producers from “South to North.” It is not explained who the producers are and who the parasites are, but one could think that the producers, or “us,” are the Lega supporters while the parasites, or the “other/enemy,” is the Italian government, migrants, and the EU. More interestingly, Salvini shows his relational understanding of Italians as not anymore divided by geographical provenience but by their understanding of work ethic. In addition, there is a huge leap towards the South inclusion, with Salvini calling Sicilians and inhabitants of Campania “brothers.” The politician openly asks his supporters to exchange telephone numbers with the people in the public to build new future connections that go across all Italy, overcoming the past regional differences, as well as of not being afraid to confront with “different” people. This speech marks clearly the open inclusion of Southerners in the “us” category. However, once more, the ambiguity of Salvini’s speech emerges by privileging the overcoming of one diversity (Northerners vs. Southerners) instead of the other one (Italians vs. migrants.)

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<sup>38</sup> “Mediterranean Update – Migrant Deaths Rise to 3,329 in 2015”, available at: <https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-update-migrant-deaths-rise-3329-2015>

### 6.2.5 2016 Pontida Speech<sup>39</sup>

The 2016 Pontida Speech core theme can be traced to the gradual nationalization of the party at the moment split between the main Lega Nord and the branch of Noi con Salvini, directed to the central and southern regions of Italy. Although exposing the symbol of Noi con Salvini through all the congress, Salvini never mentions it, while at the same time he refers to the party as a unitary Lega Nord. The second protagonist of the speech is the electoral promises that the politician does to its constituents. Both themes are intertwined with the “us” vs. “them” conceptualization.

Indeed, Salvini’s keyword for this speech, which shows a simple expressive and relational understanding of the world, is “*libertà*,” (freedom). The entities and people that stands between “us” and freedom, according to Salvini, is “them”, that is the current government, the EU and the migrants. The “enemy” European Union is here repeatedly denigrated, as “*peggio della massoneria, [peggio] dei comparatori di popoli, [peggio] dei lavatori di cervello di memoria orwelliana [...]*,” (worse than Masonry, [worse than] the people-buyers, [worse than] the Orwellian brainwashers), and it ends with vulgar insults towards George Soros and Angela Merkel. The rhetoric against the EU is then intertwined with the anti-migration one, where Salvini calls people to defend themselves from the “ethnic cleansing” that is happening against the European people in favor of new slaves (the migrants) that the EU wants to exploit for meager salaries. Moreover, Salvini frames migrants as economic parasites for whom the EU spends “a thousand and a hundred euros per month to sustain” while the Italian disabled children only get a three-hundred euros pension per month. In this context Salvini praises the alliance with Marine Le Pen and the populist parties around Europe, who are choosing themselves whether to welcome refugees and migrants or not.

The secretary tries in order to “normalize” Italy as a unitarian concept, and he proposes the Lega Nord as a unitarian force able to perform this task. In fact, the politician states that the party needs to be “like one person” when it acts. The speaker then reiterates a topic from the previous year – the party is considered as unitary also because, according to Salvini, it does

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<sup>39</sup> “Matteo Salvini – Pontida 2016 – intervento”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vH7Jmyez1qI>

not pertain to the divisions of left and right or communism and fascism, but there are “*servi e globalisti*,” (slaves and globalists) vs. “*uomini liberi*,” (free people). In this new dichotomy proposed by Salvini, where the “us” vs. “them” configuration is still the same, but with different words, the “slaves” are the migrants and the “globalists” are the people with pro-EU sentiments, whereas the “free people” are the Lega supporters (even if Salvini states that these kind of sentiment transcend even party affiliation.)

Finally, the speaker goes back to the enlargement of the “us” that now needs to include all the Italians. Markedly, just the year before Salvini gave a press release where he was apologizing for the insults toward the South. Here the politician calls for the communities of the North and the South to respect themselves and then blames the economical difficulties of the South on the corrupted government and the criminal organizations that colluded with the government; in addition, the European Union is accused of exploiting the Southerners. Salvini states that the South is made by “*fratelli, ma con bandiere diverse, ognuno con la sua dignità*,” (brothers, but with different flag, everyone with their dignity). Lastly, he calls for the establishment of twin cities between different municipalities in order to try to erase the old Bossi dichotomy of Southerners vs. Northerners. However, at the same time, Salvini seems to refuse an exclusive Italian identity, following the lead of the old Lega Nord values.

#### **6.2.6 2017 Pontida Speech<sup>40</sup>**

The 2017 speech represented a pivotal point for Salvini as it was the last one before the national elections of March 2018 and, in addition, the *Noi con Salvini* branch of the party becomes less and less present in the political strategy since the party changes its name from Lega Nord to Lega. The speech is a proper electoral campaign, where Salvini points out thematically the points of the party program. This year, there are not anymore children on the stage, but Lega supporters, mainly young adults, holding a “Salvini Premier” signs that resemble the “Trump President 2016” one.

The politician employs, as during the previous year speech, a clear articulation of the “us” vs. “them” rhetoric. Indeed, the expressive evaluation proposed by Salvini includes a praise

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<sup>40</sup> “Intervento di Matteo Salvini dalpalco di Pontida”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HX2tt2EQ5j0>

for diversity, but only if diversity is coming from the natives. In fact, the speaker says: “*il mio orgoglio è vedere qui mischiate tante bandiere diverse [...] l'Italia è fatta da ottomila lingue differenti, cucine, culture, [...] e Brussels vuole eliminarlo,*” (my pride today is to see here so many different flags [he refers to regional flags] [...], Italy is made up by eight-thousand different languages, cuisines, cultures, [...] and Brussels wants to eliminate this). Indeed, this quotation is along the same lines of the previous year one denouncing an ethnic cleansing by the “European Soviet Union.” In the discourse, “us” needs to be different, because it is by the nature of the country, however, “them” cannot be different from “us.” Nonetheless, the diversity of “us,” according to Salvini, can be overcome when people have the same values, like freedom and justice. Indeed, the prohibition of the ethical diversity in “them” is shown towards the end of the speech, when the speaker states that he is willing to welcome migrants that are “*perbene*” (respectable), and this implies having the same values as “us;” for example, a respectable migrant would not complain about having a crucifix in school classrooms, according to the politician. The articulation of the “us” vs. “them” in this speech does not pertain only to ethical reasons but also economical ones as well. In fact, it is again lamented the injustice in giving more funds to cooperatives that host migrants and refugees than to Italian disabled people’s pension funds. The anti-immigration discourse is for the first time here intertwined with the highly discussed topic of pro/anti-vax stances. Salvini, who called for freedom of childhood education and health-related choices to depend on the parents and not on the state, states that anti-vax parents are not safe anymore because migrants are accused of infecting Italians with diseases that were eradicated in the past. The “other” is represented as a danger for “us” in numerous ways – economic, cultural, sanitary and health-related, creating the basis for a strong xenophobia in Lega constituents.

Moreover, the migration issue is blamed not only if it is coming from the outside to Italy but also inside the country and from Italy to foreign countries. The electoral program includes points in order to prevent Italian people to have to move from their home regions for state jobs, such as teachers and law enforcement jobs. Salvini, in addition, points out the injustices of young Italians forced to emigrate to find a job. As a consequence, the line on immigration

and emigration seems to be particularly hard on both sides since the emigration would likely weaken the “us” in favor of “them.”

### **6.2.7. 2018 Pontida Speech<sup>41</sup>**

This Pontida speech was the first one after the 2018 national elections that brought Lega to be the leading party of the center-right coalition and to their alliance with the Five Star Movement. At the time of this speech, Salvini was Minister of the Interior and Vice Prime Minister, a title shared with Luigi Di Maio. After long negotiations, the Prime Minister position was given to the law professor Giuseppe Conte.

Indeed, as Salvini was in a first position in the government, the main theme for this speech is about what Lega will do when ruling. The first words of the leader are: “*Qua c’è amore, non c’è invidia, non c’è gelosia, non c’è rancore. La vita è troppo breve per perdere tempo odiando, lasciamo che siano altri a farlo, a minacciare, a rosicare*” (here there is love, not envy, not jealousy, not resentment. Life is too short to waste time while hating, let the others do that, to threaten, to be envious). In this segment, “others” seems to be referred to the political adversaries of Salvini, as even later in the speech, he will say that he received a vast amount of insults in one month, but he is proud of it. The “other,” in this case, cannot be anymore the central government of Rome, as Salvini is one of the key government representatives and nor can be the South of Italy, since the slogan of Salvini’s Lega says, “Italians first.” Instead, the “other” is here represented by the European Union and the migrants coming Africa. In this speech, Salvini presents what looks like an electoral program, as he does not discuss the values or the ideology of the party, but on the contrary, it could be an expressive reading as a presentation of what are thought to be problems and the solutions that Lega proposes. The relational understanding of Salvini is made clear as he states that he is talking not a party but to a community, and, further on, he compares the Pontida reunion to a family event. However, there is almost an emotional detachment in how Salvini talks to his voters; he does not share any personal comments or feelings if not until the end of the

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<sup>41</sup> “Matteo Salvini a Pontida, il discorso integrale dal palco leghista”, available at: <https://www.bergamonews.it/2018/07/01/matteo-salvini-pontida-discorso-integrale-dal-palco-del-raduno-leghista/285598/>

speech. Here, he claims to always have with him a rosary made by an exploited woman (likely in sex trafficking), but, nonetheless, even this personal touch leads to a political claim of making sure no woman will be exploited anymore.

In this speech, there is not anymore an Italy that is a dead and corrupted entity as this role is taken by the EU. According to Salvini, the only hope for the European Union is to take the the same ideological direction as Lega. This does not imply the EU should fail, in the speaker's words, but to make it possible that "*anche l'Europa sia comunità di popoli che torneranno ad amarsi e volersi bene*" (also Europe will be a community of people that will go back to love each other). The division between North and South is completely absent, and the leader claims that "*i gazebo dalla Lombardia alla Sardegna non ci dividono più*" (the [electoral] stands from Lombardy to Sardinia do not divide us anymore). Salvini recycles the Lega resentment towards the South and Rome and turns it towards a bigger enemy, which is the EU. The second scapegoat for Salvini are the migrants and the people that are thought to be speculating in the "immigration business." However, the speaker seems to be resentful only towards the migrants that arrive through the sea: "*Se i porti si chiudono o si aprono lo decide il Ministro dell'Interno*" (if the ports are open or closed, it is decided by the Minister of Interior). Actually, Salvini claims that Italy is always open for the women and children that flee their countries from the war, but they need to arrive by plane. Further on in the speech, the narrative of "help[ing] them in their country" emerges, strengthened by the claim that he will do everything in his power to allow people to be happy in their own country. This strategy of almost blowing hot and cold on the immigration issue employed by Salvini ends with him denying being a xenophobe since he loves diversity, and it was the love of diversity itself to have him brought where he is now. Indeed, Salvini tries to appeal to a completely different audience than that which constituted the audience for the original Lega Nord, as the Bossi expressed his disagreement with the current secretary for his positions on immigration. It seems that Salvini was testing the waters in order to see his audience reaction in order to maximize his consent.

## **7. Electoral data**

In this section Lega's electoral results through the years that correspond to the time frame of this work will be monitored. The kind of elections that will be taken into consideration are the national elections for the Chamber of Deputies and those for the European Union. Moreover, the regional elections that were held subsequently the 2018 national elections will be exceptionally taken into the analysis; the regions that fall in this category are Sardinia, Basilicata, and Abruzzo.

The national elections took place in 2008, 2013, and 2018, while the European Union elections took place in 2009 and 2014.

### **7.1 Chamber of Deputies Elections**

The Chamber of Deputies elections of 2009 (cf. Figure 1, p. 56) did not see any Lega Nord presence further south than the Marche region; in particular, the central and southern regions where the party did not have any candidates were Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia. Nationally, Lega gained 8.03 percent of the share. The Chamber of Deputies elections of 2014 (cf. Figure 1, p. 56) witnessed the candidacy of Lega in the Center and South. The results were very scarce, having had a vote share under 1 percent in each of these regions. Nationally, Lega reached 4.09 percent of overall support. The Chamber of Deputies elections of 2018 (cf. Figure 1, p. 56) saw an exponential rise in Lega electoral support in the Center and South. The results were comprehended between 4 percent and 14 percent. The impressive exponential rise of Lega support in the South, was not replicated in the North (cf. Table 2, p. 56), where the fluctuation was present, but Lega was already a well-established party; on the other hand, in those central regions where Lega was present already in 2008, the oscillation between the past elections and the 2018 one was more visible. Overall, Lega gained 17.35 percent of votes.

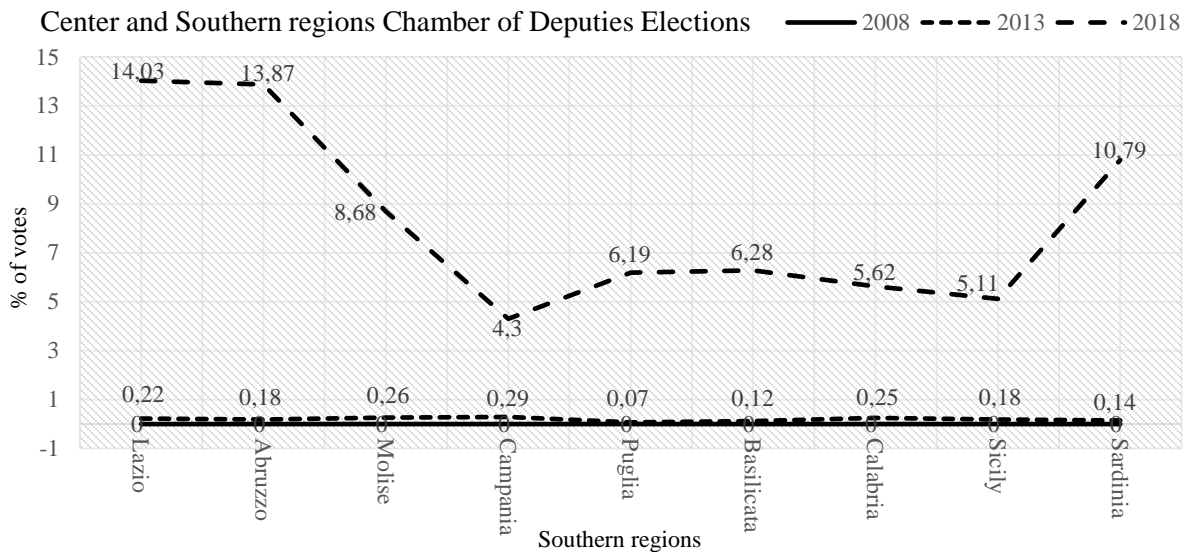


Figure 1. Central and Southern Regions Chamber of Deputies Elections 2008, 2013, 2018

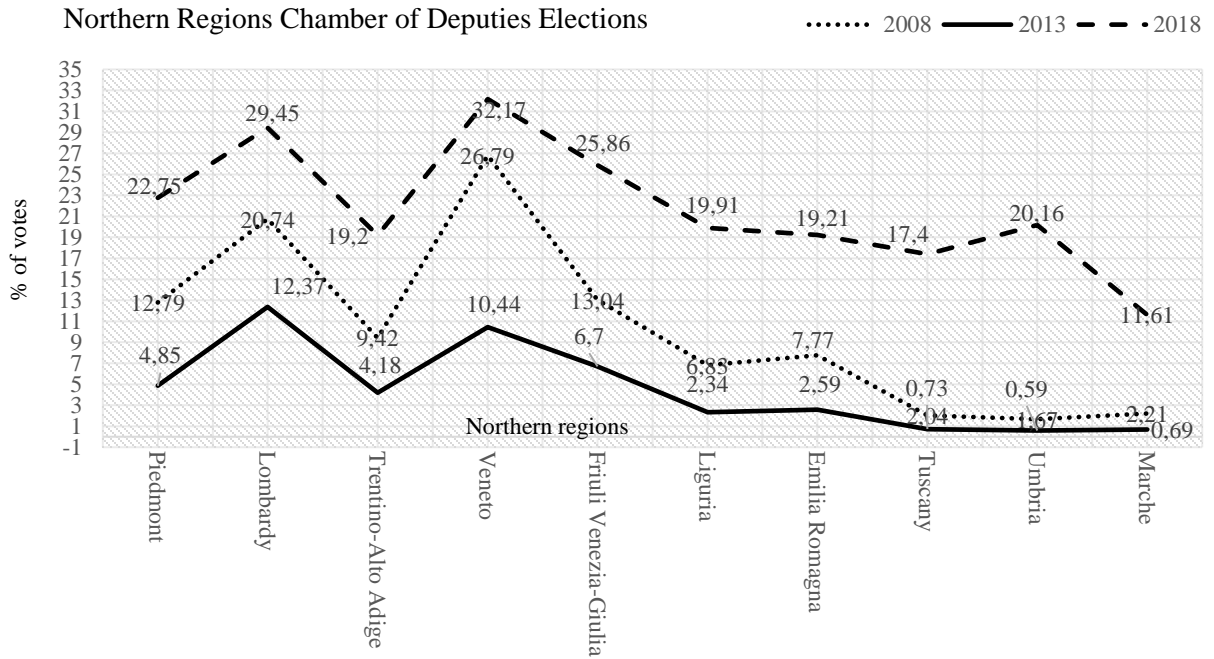


Figure 2. Northern Regions Chamber of Deputies Elections 2008, 2013, 2018



## 7.2 European Elections

During the 2009 European elections, Lega presented candidates in the Central and Southern regions like Lazio, Molise, Basilicata, etc.; the results were scarce. Markedly, after these elections, Lega was not present in local elections in the already mentioned regions until the national ones of 2013. The 2014 European elections followed the same voting patterns of the 2013 national elections. Finally, in comparing the two elections, it is possible to see a slight increase from 2009 to 2014 (cf. Figure 3.)

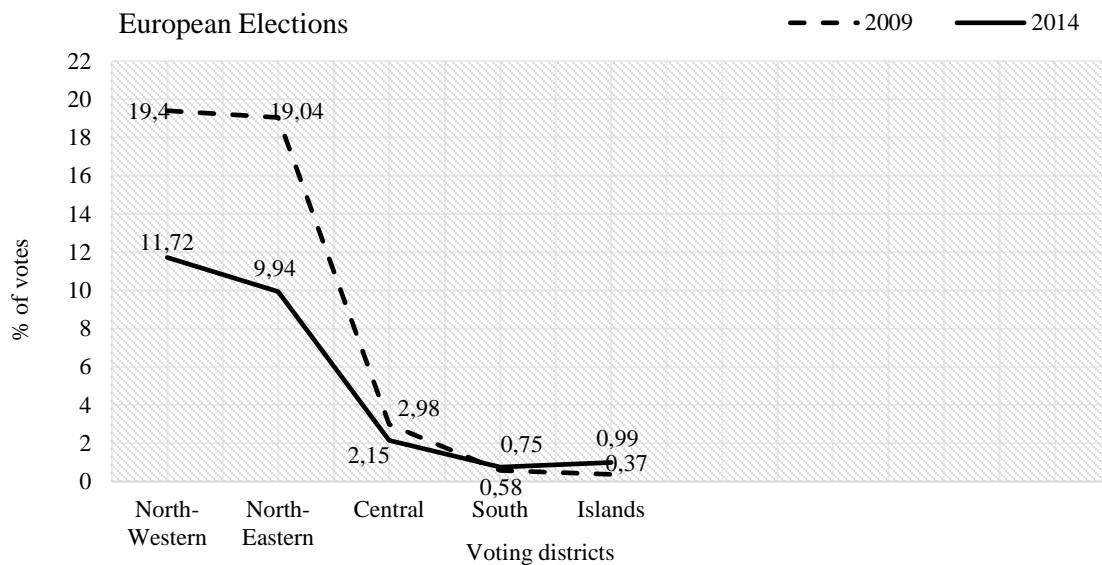


Figure 3. European Elections 2009 and 2014

## 7.3 Regional Elections

The 2019 regional elections in the three regions taken into consideration, Abruzzo, Sardinia and Basilicata, showed an increase in Lega's electoral support if compared to the 2018 national elections (cf. Figure 4, p. 58.)

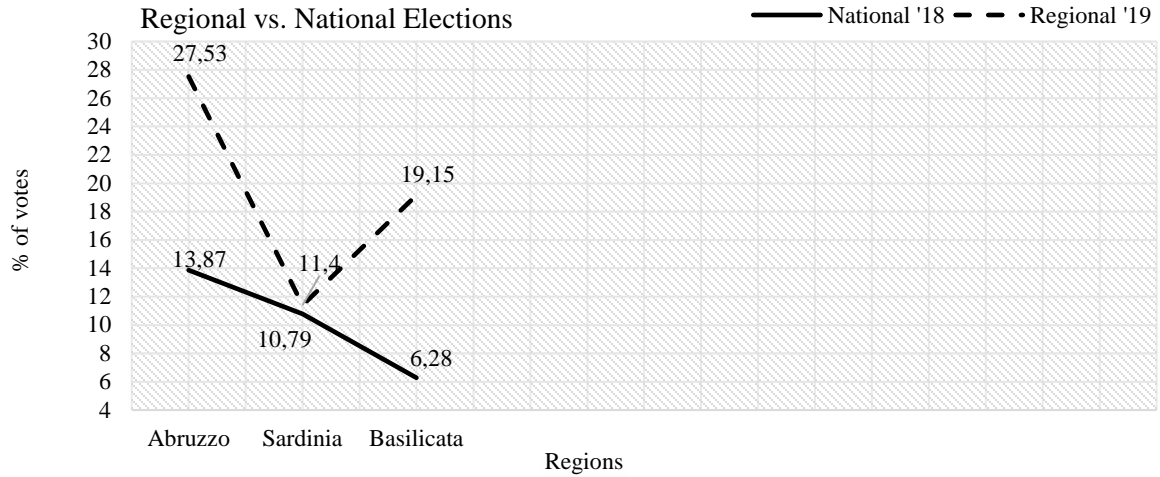


Figure 4. Regional vs. National Elections

## 8. Conclusions and Limitations

This section will go through the main conclusions of this work, where the possible causes that led Lega to a leading position in the current government were analyzed, and it will be tried to answer to the research question “how do exogenous factors redirected voter preferences?”

It is necessary to state that this paper only takes into consideration a small fragment of the entirety of discourse produced by Bossi and Salvini, and it does not analyze other prominent Lega representatives’ speeches and interventions in congresses or media-related interviews and debates. Nevertheless, this work could be widened by further studies by extending the time-frame and enlarging the data collection of speeches.

The analysis of the party leaders’ discourse showed noticeable differences in the approach towards the audience and in the ideas that they delivered to their audiences at Pontida. On the one hand, Bossi seemed to be more ideological and attached to the mythical glorious past from which Lega Nord arose; on the other hand, Salvini detached himself from mere ideology and historical references while trying to propose a more concrete approach to political matters. In reference to the guiding question of this work, some considerations need to be made. Bossi’s conceptualization of North and South seemed to be very sharp and necessary

for the definition of the Padanian ideology in the first place. Even if, during the Pontida speeches the speaker never openly insulted the South, it was often implied how much the South was a burden for the rest of the country. Moreover, the characterization of the “other” by Bossi seems to be more pertinent with the government, which he often referred to as “Rome,” almost making the “other” representation coinciding more with the system than the Southerners. Bossi was, indeed, the revitalizer of the anti-systemic sentiments in Italy, which were derived not from an extreme right position but from the need of creating an “other” to be contraposed to the Padanian identity.

On the contrary, Salvini left behind Bossi’s tradition quite quickly, shifting Lega to the extreme right and populist positions. Indeed, the widening of the party to the all country made it not possible anymore to insult the South, and the try to reach power in Rome made it inconvenient to overly blame the national system. As a consequence, the enemy in the Salvini era openly shifted to the European Union and to the immigrant waves coming to the Italian shores. Indeed, Salvini took advantage of the distrust of Italians in the EU<sup>42</sup> and of the worries and rising xenophobic feelings generated by the migrant crisis, in order to create a narrative that would have put behind the past scorns between North and South and united the Italians against a common “other.”

When the data collected from the discourse analyses is put in comparison with the electoral data, it emerges that, actually, Salvini was able to widen the electoral support in every district of the country, increasing Lega’s numbers especially in the Center and South. However, it is necessary to state that the enlisting of Lega in the Central and Southern regions was already put in place by Maroni during the 2013 elections, even if with really low positive results. If on one hand, the vote share in the Center and the South increased exponentially, on the other hand the North did not follow the same extreme evolution patterns, showing a growth pattern not as significant as its counterpart, although the 2013 elections reported one of the worse historical results for Lega Nord. These electoral data show that the narrative employed by Salvini was particular successful to re-establish the voters’ trust in the old Lega’s voting pool

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<sup>42</sup> “How has your trust in the EU changed during the last years?”, available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/781028/trust-in-the-european-union-eu-in-italy/>

and create (almost from zero) electoral confidence in the South of Italy. The European Union elections showed to be in line with the national ones, and the 2009 ones saw a huge decrease in Lega Nord's support, which could be compared to the national 2008 one. The regional elections were taken into consideration as markers of the Lega support after national elections. The three regions that went through local elections – Abruzzo, Sardinia and Basilicata – reported an increase in Lega's votes (and a decrease of the first party in the national elections – Five Star Movement), being in line with the national consent towards the current government.

The expansion of Lega in the Center and South seems to have failed under the leadership of Bossi in 2009 with EU lists and then those of Maroni in 2013 with national elections. On the contrary, Salvini's attempt to extend the electoral pool to the critical area of the Center and the South of the country revealed to be the most successful. What did Salvini do differently from Bossi and Maroni? The politician was able to change drastically what was the core narrative of Lega (as a regional and federal party), to a national one. Indeed, the concept of a modern, common, external "enemy" (the migrants) present in most voters' daily life, was pivotal in redirecting the animosity that was once destined to the Southerners. As a consequence, Southerners found Lega's narrative not anymore excluding them and marking them as "others", but instead they were included in the "us" with their fellow Italians and they were all contraposed to the "other." Linking the voting behavior theories with the data collected, it is likely to state that the Southerners did not vote Lega out of party loyalty while this theory it is plausible when speaking about the North voting patterns. The South could have voted by issue, that is, privileging the party that was addressing the most up to date and relevant matters for the voters, and in this case that was the migration issue. Finally, it could be possible, but only the future outcome of elections will prove or disprove it, that a new political and ideological conscience is forming in southern voters. However, as the South is the most volatile electorate of the country, which could presuppose a matter by the matter voting pattern, the issue voting theory might seem the more plausible. Nevertheless, this preference redirection would have likely not been possible without the reversal of the "self-other" articulation started by Salvini.

The results of this work need to be taken not as definitive since there might be other reasons that could have led to the increase of Lega's voting shares (e.g., economic reasons, distrust in other parties...). However, this work could show some future implications relevant for the future of Italy and the EU. Indeed, the Eurosceptic stance taken by Lega, which is intersected with the distrust in how the EU regulations deal with migrant flows, might worsen the trust in the European Union and in its competencies, placing Italy in closeness to the positions already taken by Poland and Hungary while strengthening the anti-system alliances within other European countries (e.g., France). A result of this matter could be already seen in the move to develop a European right wing alliance<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, an Italy ruled by Lega could pose a challenge to EU cohesion in Russia matters, as Salvini is already often proclaimed to be a Putin supporter. Finally, Italian internal political situation might result in a gradual weakening of the left (already started in the 2018 elections with one of the worst historical results for the Democratic Party) with a converse strengthening of populist, extremist parties led by Lega while the answer to this possible situation could bring to the establishment of a strong polarization of extreme parties with a lacking stable central core. However, the system established by Lega in the past elections could seem to be dependent on the figure of Salvini, showing that this current situation could be a temporary phase based more on a political personality than a deep ideology. Nonetheless, only the future elections will be able to tell what the future of Lega's support in the South will be, if it will be short-lived like the Movimento 5 Stelle.

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<sup>43</sup> "Salvini makes moves to forge a European right-wing alliance ahead of EU elections", available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/04/08/salvini-makes-moves-to-forge-a-european-right-wing-alliance-ahead-of-eu-elections>

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