

The Northern League: Bossi, Salvini, and the Many Faces of Populism

by *Marco Brunazzo*

1. *Introduction*

The Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) is the oldest party of the so-called “Italian Second Republic” inaugurated in the 1994 general election. This is a quite paradoxical result for a party that started as a protest movement. Born in Northern Italy as a group of regional autonomist leagues that were gathered into a single political party in 1991, it transformed itself into one of the most prominent parties of the new party system that emerged in Italy in the early 1990s and into a key component of several government coalitions.

The LN was the main defender of the interests of the “imagined community” of Padania, corresponding more or less, to the regions touched by the Po River. However, the defense of Padania’s interests was not a completely new issue in the political and intellectual debates in Italy. One of the future main intellectuals of LN, Gianfranco Miglio, wrote in 1945 that so-called “Padania”, though loosely defined,

“Has a specific *raison d’être*, its own historical economic and productive—and even linguistic—physiognomy, so it can ask—for the purpose of its full development, and also for the benefit of the whole nation—for a clear and specific position within the new emerging Italy. Italian unity will not function on any other basis ... Northern Italy as a whole ... constitutes a geographical, economic, ethnic, and spiritual harmonious unity, which deserves to be governed by itself”¹.

Miglio was not alone in asserting Padania’s distinctiveness from the rest of Italy: in the post-war period, several local movements (particularly in the northern provinces of Como and Bergamo) managed to build (short-lived) electoral success on anti-Southern prejudice and an assertion

¹ G. MIGLIO, *Unità e federazione*.

of northern regional identity². However, it was not until Bossi appeared on the political scene in the mid-1980s that northern regionalism took the national stage.

Moreover, it was only after the crisis of the Democrazia cristiana (Christian Democracy, DC) and the loss of its connections with the electorate from Northern Italy—a trend that did happen with the LN and which is central in most relevant analyses of it³—that a new potential political space was available for the development of *legghismo*. To be successfully occupied, it required a work of political mobilization⁴, which was done through the creation of regional leagues, dominated by one of them, the Lega Lombarda run by Umberto Bossi, until the gathering of most of them into one single political party, the LN.

In the general election of 1987, the Lega Lombarda obtained its first *deputato* (6.7% in the local electoral constituency of Como-Sondrio-Varese) and *senatore* (Umberto Bossi himself, 7% in the constituency of Varese). United regionalist and autonomist movements of Northern Italy, already members of an electoral coalition in the European elections of 1989, decided to merge into one single movement, the LN, during its founding congress in Milan December 7-9, 1989. The LN was officially presented in a congress in Milan February 8-10, 1991. Since then, the consensus with the LN has known different fortunes. However, this party was successful in becoming a pivotal party in several government coalitions, specifically those led by Silvio Berlusconi, which were in power between 2001 and 2006, and again in 2008 and 2011.

In 2012, a political scandal concerning the mismanagement of public funds by LN politicians and by members of Bossi's family jeopardized the future of the party. Specifically, judicial investigations conducted by two different public prosecutor's offices (in Naples and in Milan) determined that the son of the LN's charismatic leader and member of the Lombardy Regional Council, Renzo Bossi, had utilized the funds aimed at covering the party's electoral expenditures for personal reasons. Moreover, these investigations demonstrated that such behavior was widespread among the closest collaborators of Umberto Bossi, the

² C. BOUILLAUD, *Les antécédents idéologiques*.

³ I. DIAMANTI, *La Lega*.

⁴ M. DIANI, *Linking Mobilization Frames and Political Opportunities*.

so-called *cerchio magico* (magic circle) that had gained much power after the leader's illness.

As a consequence, the shocked LN electorate started to show a profound dissatisfaction towards a party that was supposed to be “different” from the others. In the May 2012 administrative election, the LN lost more than 50% of its votes in comparison to the 2010 regional election (Istituto Cattaneo 2012). Only in the smallest municipalities did the LN confirm its previous electoral performance. Moreover, the LN won only in those big municipalities (such as Verona) where the candidates had shown a certain degree of autonomy from the party. Umberto Bossi resigned as secretary to become the president of the party, a position that moved him away from the strategic decisions. Many of the leading party members were expelled from the party. The traditional annual meeting in Pontida was “temporarily” cancelled. Many commentators (like Ilvo Diamanti in the pages of the newspaper “La Repubblica”) defined these events an “earthquake” and started to prophesize the end of the LN. The percentage of votes (4,1%) obtained in the 2013 national election confirmed the crisis.

However, the new LN secretary, Matteo Salvini, who was elected in December 2013, has managed to overcome the crisis. Taking advantage of the dismantling of Forza Italia (FI) and the end of Berlusconi's leadership of the center-right coalition, Salvini turned the LN into the inevitable ally for any new coalition between the center-right parties. Moreover, building on the results obtained in the European elections of 2014 showing an unprecedented capacity of the LN to acquire new electoral consensus in areas traditionally less inclined to vote for the party, Salvini defined a new national strategy and reframed the LN's political discourse with a more evident national and Lepenist accent⁵.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first presents the populist rhetoric of the LN under Bossi. The second focuses on the three challenges the LN has faced since the beginning of the new century and the answers provided by Matteo Salvini. The third illustrates an example of the shifting rhetoric of the LN, examining how the LN framed its discourse on EU integration. The general assumption of this chapter is that the LN is a populist party showing an uncommon

⁵ M. BRUNAZZO - M. GILBERT, *Insurgents against Brussels*.

capacity to adapt its stances to the changing conditions of Italy and to the perceptions of its electorate, even if these stances are at times contradictory⁶.

2. *The LN's populist ideology*

The origin of the traditional LN ideology is based upon three pillars. First, from a cultural and identity viewpoint, there is a Northern people distinct from the “Italian” people living in the rest of Italy: people from “Padania” share common historical roots, relative linguistic peculiarities, the same ethos of good workers, and a tradition of local freedom⁷. Second, from an economic perspective, the North, within Italy, is a loser in the game since it produces a great deal but pays too much tax, providing the South with money that is not well spent. Third, in political terms, the unitary Italian state is the source of the northern regions’ problems because of its incapacity to govern well and because of its corrupt political class that does not take into account the real needs of Padanian citizens. As a consequence, the northern regions need a political emancipation under the minimal form of federalism, which can turn into secession if northern claims are not satisfied. Protest against fiscal policy, state centralism, southern and then foreign immigration, and European integration are progressively combined into a distinctive political program supported by an efficient aggressive and populist tone and a rigorous party organization (from the party itself to its many satellite-organizations like trade-unions, journals, youth organizations, and so on)⁸. As Brunazzo and Gilbert point out, Umberto Bossi’s political genius—and the source of his domination of the movement—lay in his undeniable capacity to combine all these (sometime contrasting) elements into a single and distinctive political offer, even if he was sometimes compelled to undertake very “risky” ideological shifts and simplifications⁹.

⁶ *Ibid.*

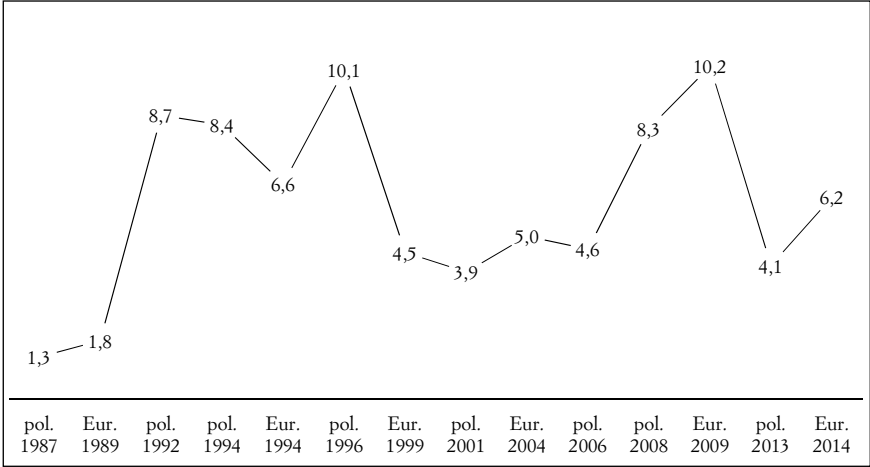
⁷ G. ONETO, *L'invenzione della Padania*.

⁸ R. BIORCIO, *La rivincita del Nord*.

⁹ M. BRUNAZZO - M. GILBERT, *Insurgents against Brussels*.

As a consequence, many authors have pointed out the inconsistency of this political program¹⁰. The artificiality of the identity-building process (the invention of the “Padanian”) has also been emphasized several times¹¹. Moreover, its relative heterogeneity has fueled the debate about the correct labels to apply to the party itself: is the LN a regionalist, autonomist, federalist or, even, secessionist party? Is it a populist, extreme-right wing, or even left wing party? However, this ability to combine different elements into a distinctive political offer¹² was greatly helped by the sudden vacuum brought on by the breakdown of the so-called “First Republic”, i.e. the system of powers that lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1990s¹³. This crisis caused the disappearance between 1992 and 1993 of all political parties that dominated post-war Italian politics, at the same time providing the LN with new political opportunities that it was able to exploit, as both a promoter and a beneficiary of the crisis. Figure 1 gives a general view of the electoral performance in general elections (both chambers) and European elections held in Italy between 1992 and 2014.

Figure 1. *Votes for the LN in the general and European elections*



¹⁰ M. BRUNAZZO - C. ROUX, *The Lega Nord*.
¹¹ L. DE WINTER - H. TURSAN (eds), *Regionalist Parties*.
¹² M. HUYSEUNE, *A Eurosceptic Vision*.
¹³ S. FABBRINI, *Quale democrazia*.

Two main general observations can be drawn from these figures. First, the League is a stable political competitor in the Italian political game. It has participated in all major elections and has always obtained a significant percentage of votes. This is particularly relevant if it is taken into consideration that the LN presented candidates only in the northern regions and that it has been substantially absent from Florence southwards. Second, the electoral dynamics are not linear: rather, they are cyclical. After a surprisingly high score in the 1992 and 1996 general elections, electoral results were more modest in 2001 and 2006 before a good performance in 2008. More specifically, in 2008 the LN was one of the only five political parties present in the Italian Parliament, i.e. a dramatic change compared to the previous fragmentation—a success which has been linked to the LN's populist style, as suggested by some scholars¹⁴. Again, it is important to underline the LN's strategic shifts according to the electoral cycles. While it has been a traditional ally of the center-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi's party for some years, in other periods it strongly criticized Berlusconi, breaking up the political alliance with him.

Corbetta identifies some specific features of the traditional LN electorate: 1) it is based in the northern regions, living mainly in small towns and villages rather than in big cities; 2) in terms of socioeconomic and cultural profile, it tends to be less educated and formed by autonomous workers active within small firms and, to a lesser extent, small employers; 3) it is not necessarily influenced by the job of the LN's local administrators; 4) it does not show a strong pattern of party identification even if it does express a strong sense of belonging to local identities, which is a genuine particularity compared to those citizens who vote for other parties¹⁵.

Looking at the party manifestos and at a post-electoral survey on the LN's electorate, Bulli and Tronconi have concluded that the LN is “a multifaceted party, where elements of localism and regionalism are present alongside traits of populism and characters common to other European far-right parties, especially as far as immigration policy is concerned”¹⁶.

¹⁴ P. CORBETTA, *Le fluttuazioni elettorali della Lega Nord*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ G. BULLI - F. TRONCONI, *Regionalism, Right-wing Extremism, Populism*.

Emphasizing the role that the LN has played in the Italian political system in the last fifteen years, other authors¹⁷ have tried to understand if the LN is a *partito di lotta* or a *partito di governo*, concluding that these two souls are inextricably interlinked in this party: if, on the one hand, the LN is a party that wants to be in government in order to realize its political program, on the other hand it uses a language typical of parties characterized by antagonist and antisystemic positions. For this reason, the LN can be considered the only Italian party successfully able to walk the fine line between playing the role of the “opposition in government” and showing that they too can be responsible members of government, capable of governing as mainstream political actors¹⁸.

The ability of the LN to combine all of these elements together at the same time is the result of a long process of adaptation to the different phases of the Italian political system. However, the LN’s behavior has sometimes appeared quite schizophrenic. Represented in government for the first time in March 1994 supporting the first Silvio Berlusconi cabinet, in December of the same year it decided to abandon this experience by refusing to approve a reform of the pension system and a decree modifying the legislation concerning preventive custody for corruption offences. The exit from the government in 1994 was not only due to their wish of not being “corrupted” by “Rome” (the Italian capital in the LN rhetoric is synonymous with old-style politics and corruption) but also by the need of maintaining a distinction from the Berlusconi’s party, FI¹⁹.

Between 1994 and 1998, the LN preferred to renounce being part of a stable coalition, triggering the electoral defeat of the center-right coalition. However, if at the national level the LN opted for going it alone and independence from the other parties, at the local level it pursued the political line of “free hands”, choosing its allies according to its specific interests and to the local political dynamics. During this period, at the national level the LN radicalized its position and argued in favor of the

¹⁷ D. ALBERTAZZI - D. McDONNELL, *The Lega Nord in the Second Berlusconi Government*.

¹⁸ D. ALBERTAZZI - D. McDONNELL - J. NEWELL, *Di lotta e di governo*; M. BRUNAZZO - C. ROUX, *The Lega Nord*.

¹⁹ G. BULLI - F. TRONCONI, *Regionalism, Right-wing Extremism, Populism*; R. BIORCIO, *La rivincita del Nord*.

independence of Padania. However, in September 1998 Bossi addressed the militants at the traditional summer meeting in Venice calling for a new attempt at creating a coalition with the center-right parties. The new coalition went on to win the 2001 general election and the LN played a relevant role in the second Berlusconi government.

Between 2001 and 2006, the LN backed the reform of the judicial system requested by Berlusconi, asking in return for devolution, which was finally approved in 2005 (but rejected in the 2006 confirmative popular referendum). At the same time, it played the role of the anti-system party, severely criticizing its junior coalition partners, the Christian-democratic Union of Center Democrats (Unione dei democratici di centro, UDC) and the post-fascist National Alliance (Alleanza nazionale, AN). Playing this double role of credible ally of Berlusconi and severe critic of the more traditional parties, the LN preserved its distinct identity within the House of Freedoms (Casa delle Libertà, CDL) alliance. At the same time, the LN

“was able to establish a certain ‘issue ownership’ and high visibility on questions regarding immigration (particularly Islamic immigration), constitutional reform (particularly devolution), protectionism (mainly against Chinese products), the Euro, and the European integration process (with the LN vehemently against the single currency and both the widening and deepening of the integration process)”²⁰.

In opposition during the 2006-2008 period, the LN went back into government in 2008, as part of a Berlusconi-led coalition. The composition of that new government very well reflected the changed attitude and strategy of the LN in terms of governmental positions. If in the past, the party had tried to maximize its numerical presence in terms of governmental posts, in 2008 Bossi's party decided to increase its qualitative presence by occupying ministries focused on issues that were highly salient for the party: the ministry of the interior (covering issues such as criminality, law and order, immigration, etc.) and normative simplification (one of the main refrains of the LN is that Italy has an overwhelming number of norms and laws that impede the development of the enterprises), and institutional reform (that is to say, first of all, federalism)²¹.

The 2013 election pushed the LN to the opposition. The political scandal explained above and the leadership change challenged the support

²⁰ D. ALBERTAZZI - D. McDONNELL - J. NEWELL, *Di lotta e di governo*, pp. 14-15.

²¹ M. BRUNAZZO - C. ROUX, *The Lega Nord*.

of the LN, at the same time offering the opportunity of adopting a new political profile. An opportunity that the new secretary Matteo Salvini seized.

3. *Three challenges for the LN*

Three developments pushed the LN into rethinking its role²². The first was the approval of the 2001 quasi-federal reform of the Italian Constitution²³. With the confirmative referendum of October 7, 2001, Italy formally abandoned its once traditional model of a unitary state, which became decentralized after a 1970 reform instituting regional government. Even if this reform has fallen short by far in reaching all the outcomes proposed by its promoters²⁴, it transferred more competencies to the regions in areas such as public health and in all subject matters not expressly covered by state legislation. This reform altered the relations between the national and the regional governments, making the LN's campaigning for federalism and devolution more difficult. In fact, the subsequent (further) federal reform in 2006 of Title V of the Italian Constitution, strongly pursued by the center-right government, which included the LN, was not approved by the Italian electorate in a second constitutional referendum. Moreover, in the debate concerning the new 2016 proposal for constitutional reform (rejected on December 4, 2016), the critiques (even those coming from the LN) were primarily focused on the limits of the proposed new senate of the regions and the majoritarian electoral law instead of the neo-centralistic reform of the Title V of the Constitution.

The second challenge posed to the LN arose from the sudden success of Beppe Grillo's party, the 5 Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) in the 2013 national elections. This party challenged the Lega on its own field: the LN was no longer alone in asking for the change of the Italian political system and the political class. Since its inception in 2009, the M5S narrative has successfully combined elements of a new form of direct democracy with popular disgust at the political

²² J. DEL PALACIO MARTÍN, *La Nueva Lega Nord*.

²³ S. FABBRINI - M. BRUNAZZO, *Federalising Italy*.

²⁴ S. VASSALLO (ed.), *Il divario incolmabile*.

elites. Its anti-establishment, anti-globalist, and Euroskeptical narrative attracted supporters from across the political spectrum and from all Italian regions. The M5S might have been a perfect partner for the Lega. However, it refused to accept any form of political alliance with traditional parties (including the LN).

Finally, a further challenge was posed by the Lega itself and, more specifically, by the political scandal which erupted in 2012 concerning the mismanagement of public funds operated by Lega politicians and by members of Bossi's family²⁵. After more than twenty years, the charismatic leader Umberto Bossi resigned. Therefore, Roberto Maroni became Lega's federal secretary in 2012, followed the next year by Matteo Salvini after the first primaries ever organized by the party.

Taking advantage of the dismantling of Forza Italia and the end of Berlusconi's leadership of the center-right coalition, Salvini has made the Lega the inevitable ally for any new coalition between the center-right parties. Moreover, building on the results obtained at the European election of 2014 showing an unprecedented capacity of the Lega to acquire new electoral consensus in areas traditionally less inclined to vote for the party, Salvini defined a new national strategy and reframed the LN's political discourse with a more evident nationalistic and Lepenist accent.

Salvini started a revolution not only for the LN but also, and more in general, for the Italian center-right. The new secretary tried to make the LN competitive outside the regional territories where it was traditionally stronger, transforming the Lega into a national party, representing a national (and not only northern) interest. In Salvini's new rhetoric, there is no room for an anti-Italian accent. If Bossi acquired visibility thanks to his vehement attacks on the *il Tricolore* (the Italian flag), Salvini tried to build a political discourse in which nationalism substituted secessionism and separatism. Salvini did not renounce its populist and anti-systemic style, but he preferred to focus on issues perceived as problematic in the entire Italian territory, such as Italian participation in the Euro and immigration.

Nowadays, the enemy is no longer Rome: it is Brussels and the European institutions that threaten national sovereignty and national interests²⁶.

²⁵ ISTITUTO CATTANEO, 9 maggio 2012: *Elezioni comunali* 2012.

²⁶ M. BRUNAZZO - M. GILBERT, *Insurgents against Brussels*.

This ideological revolution has mirrored the transformations of other right-wing parties in Europe. It also reflected the traditional capacity of the Lega to “listen to the voice of the people”. If, at the beginning of the 1990s, relations between the center and the peripheries were politically salient in many European states, today the fight against the austerity imposed by the EU and, more generally, the risks posed by globalization to the national economies and sovereignties are more rewarding in electoral terms.

4. *The LN and the political discourse about the EU*

Cento Bull explains the plasticity of the LN’s political offer as a case of “simulative politics”, that is to say “a form of political communication that ... articulates demands which are not supposed to be taken seriously and implemented, but which are nevertheless constantly rearticulated with politicians being criticized—as part of the performance—for not implementing them”²⁷. The LN’s EU policy is an interesting example.

Three periods can be distinguished in the LN’s discourse about European integration. The first goes from its foundation at the end of the 1980s to Italy’s entry into the common currency in 1998. During this period, the LN’s position toward the EU was largely in favor of EU integration. As Huyseune²⁸ points out, in this period the LN considered the post-Westphalian nation-state to be definitely outmoded. The end of the Cold War opened up new possibilities of self-determination for the European territories and regions. Globalization and EU integration pushed for the marginalization of centralized nation-states. In other words, the EU created the condition for a stronger Padania in a weaker Italian state. According to the LN, the problem was once again Italy. With its highly bureaucratic institutions and its territorial imbalances, Italy obstructed the development of Padania, the only fully Europeanized area in the country: the level of economic well-being was one of the highest in Europe and the entrepreneurial skills well known even outside Europe. Moreover, Padanians shared with the peoples living north of the Alps the

²⁷ I. BLÜHDORN, *Sustaining the Unsustainable*, pp. 267-268, quoted in A. CENTO BULL, *Addressing Contradictory Needs*, p. 431.

²⁸ M. HUYSEUNE, *A Eurosceptic Vision*.

same labor ethic²⁹ and, therefore, it was much more similar to Northern and Central Europe than to Southern Italy, which, on the contrary, was closer to Africa and to the Mediterranean countries³⁰.

In this period, the LN supported the idea of stronger EU regulations against corruption (useful for the Southern Italian regions while undermining Padania's economic development). It was also in favor of stronger EU institutions, considered a constraint to Italy state's power. Moreover, the LN was in favor of Italy's entry in the first group of countries adopting the common currency: the "convergence criteria regarding deficit and debt reduction would help decrease wasteful state expenditures while preventing competitive devaluations (which promote inflation) from being pursued by Rome"³¹.

Things changed when the EU refused to recognize Padania as an independent state after the secessionist turn of the LN and when Italy entered the Economic and Monetary Union. As Bossi stated in the federal assembly in Milan in March 1998,

"[T]he idea born in the postwar years to abjure new wars between European states is now giving birth to a monster that will breed neither democracy nor stability nor economic benefits for all. It can't bring about democracy since its parliament won't legislate: it will be a Europe of big capital. The people—artisans, entrepreneurs, ordinary citizens— will not be included either now or in the future because a genuine European polity is not going to be born ... No matter how you look at it, this Europe is undeniably a mere defense of the European market, that is to say an act of protectionism, and like all protectionist measures it will favor big business, the great enterprises who have the nation-state as their interlocutor. These are the same powers who currently thrive thanks to the money of the states they dominate, and they are making monetary union in order to strengthen their hold over the nation-state"³².

Moreover,

"By entering Europe, Italy will no longer possess the tool of monetary policy. In other words, if it doesn't have enough cash it won't just be able to print off government bonds, and won't be able to help the economy by devaluation, but since it will only have fiscal powers left to work with, it will have to find the cash it needs by filching it

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁰ B. GIORDANO, *The Politics of the Northern League*.

³¹ R.S. CHARI - S. ILTANEN - S. KRITZINGER, *Examining and Explaining the Northern League's 'U-Turn' from Europe*, p. 428.

³² U. BOSSI, *Discorso*.

straight from the pockets of the people, which obviously means increasing the burden of taxation”³³.

The year 1998, in other words, marked the beginning of the LN’s Euroskeptical narrative. However, contrary to its self-definition as the harshest opponent of Community policies and integration, the LN’s political action remained nuanced. For example, the LN still claimed not to be against “Europe per se”, but against the allegedly undemocratic nature of the “continental super-state”: “from a purely theoretical point of view Europe might be the right way (*sintesi ideale*) to fully achieve the federal model of unity between Europe’s peoples. Wrongly, the idea that the LN is to be considered one of the so-called Euroskeptical political movements is common sense”³⁴. In addition, the LN voted in Parliament to adopt both the Nice and Lisbon treaties, under the pressure of its allies together with the parliamentary center-left opposition. As these episodes show, the LN endorsed Euroscepticism when the EU attracted popular resentment, but was open to compromise in times of low salience of EU issues³⁵.

However, the end of Berlusconi’s government in October/November 2011 and, more importantly, the appointment of the ex-European commissioner Mario Monti as prime minister offered the LN the possibility of becoming the main party opposing European integration in the Italian parliament. However, even in this case, the position of the LN was initially schizophrenic: on one hand, the party leader at the time, Roberto Maroni, denounced the “financial powers that destroyed the life of families, companies, and public accounts”, and claimed “fierce opposition” to the “technocrat” Mario Monti; on the other hand, he assured the LN’s support for the approval of the stability law and the other measures imposed by the European Central Bank. In an interview with the national newspaper “La Repubblica”, Maroni declared, “We will respect the choices of the President of the Republic: in Parliament and will vote in favor of the Stability Law, but we won’t give our vote of confidence to the new government”³⁶.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ R. MARRACCINI, *L’Europa che vogliamo*, p. 60.

³⁵ J. BARTLETT - J. BIRDWELL - D. McDONNELL, *Populism in Europe*.

³⁶ R. SALA, *No dei lumbard a Monti*.

From that moment onwards, the LN's Euroskeptical stances grew progressively. In the 2013 general election, the LN proposed the development of a "Europe of the peoples", based on a number of macro-regions³⁷ and called for a referendum to decide whether to stay in, or withdraw from, the Eurozone. All of this, however, was framed without the party officially defining itself as "anti-EU"³⁸. Quite the opposite: the LN declared itself to be in favor of a different Europe, less technocratic and more transparent and democratic: "We ask that the peoples of Europe should be allowed to express their opinion on the Euro and on the future of Europe. We believe in a different Europe, alternative to the one envisaged by Monti and the European Central Bank"³⁹. At the same time, 2013 the LN's electoral program suggested pro-integration reforms of the EU political system⁴⁰:

- going beyond the austerity policies of the EU;
- rapid action to strengthen political, economic, banking and fiscal union;
- action to give the BCE the role of lender of last resort, on the model of the American Federal Reserve;
- introduction of Euro bonds and project bonds to create welfare and development in Europe;
- not counting spending on public investment for the purposes of the EU's stability pact;
- direct popular election of the president of the European Commission and increased legislative powers for the European Parliament;
- creation of a European sovereign ratings agency;
- central role for Italy in the EU, in the Atlantic alliance, in the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue, and in relations with Eastern Europe;
- Italy to take the lead in Europe and in the world in defending freedom, democracy, human rights, and religious freedom.

³⁷ R. DEHOUSSE, *Europe at the Polls*.

³⁸ P. CASTELLI GATTINARA - C. FROIO, *Opposition in the EU*.

³⁹ "La Stampa", September 9, 2012, quoted in P. CASTELLI GATTINARA - C. FROIO, *Opposition in the EU*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ LEGA NORD, *Programma elezioni politiche 2013*, p. 3.

After the unsatisfactory results of the 2013 election (only 4.1% of the votes), Euroskepticism became much more pronounced and explicit. It is plausible that this shift was also a consequence to the challenges posed by the M5S. Moreover, it is possible that the LN tried to gain consensus from the disillusion of the Italian electorate after several years of economic crisis and inconclusive political negotiations⁴¹. However, it is clear that, under the leadership of the new federal secretary (and member of the European Parliament) Matteo Salvini, the LN launched a number of anti-EU campaigns, including the No Euro Day on November 23, 2013. The EU was openly defined a “dictatorship” and the LN proposed the reform of “all EU treaties”. On the occasion of the 2014 European Parliament election, the LN announced its complete opposition to the common currency, defining it as “a crime against humanity”, on the grounds of which the “EU-criminals, thieves, and murderer bureaucrats” have justified “coups d’état” and “genocides of families and entrepreneurs” across the continent⁴².

Euro difficulties have been considered as caused by the EU itself: for this reason, the LN has committed itself to the project of “dismantling Brussels”. In addition to that, the party has undertaken close talks with the Front National of Marine Le Pen and the Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV), and it has joined the Eurosceptic coalition European Alliance for Freedom in the European People’s Party (EPP). Independence from Rome is nowadays not sufficient: Italy (and eventually Padania) has to be independent from Brussels, too. Matteo Salvini, the leader of a party long identified by its wish to dismantle the Italian state, has ironically become one of the most vocal backers of Italian national sovereignty⁴³.

5. Conclusion

The Lega has for a long time been defined as a populist movement. Cas Mudde’s famous definition of populism perfectly “fits” the Lega. In his view, populism is:

⁴¹ M. BRUNAZZO - V. DELLA SALA, *Italy between ‘trasformismo’ and Transformation*.

⁴² P. CASTELLI GATTINARA - C. FROIO, *Opposition in the EU*, p. 19.

⁴³ G. SPINA, *Svolta nazionale della Lega*.

“[An] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”⁴⁴.

Albertazzi and McDonnell (among the most important experts of the LN’s history) offer another carefully crafted definition of populism that fits Bossi and Salvini’s movement precisely:

“An ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice”⁴⁵.

However, there is one key aspect of populism that the definitions of Mudde or Albertazzi and McDonnell do not consider: that fact that populism is somehow independent from the content of the message itself. In fact, Bossi’s LN was the fiercest defendant of Northern Italy’s interests; Salvini is now one of the leader of the Italian *movimento sovranista* (sovereignist movement). Bossi was in favor of a “different Europe”, Salvini supports the idea of dismantling the EU. Brunazzo and Gilbert openly state,

“Few people who follow Italian politics closely would dispute that something important has changed and that, under Salvini’s leadership, the Lega has morphed into a force whose populism is harder-edged and—perhaps—dangerous for the stability of Italian democracy”⁴⁶.

The LN has already offered a lot of food for thought to political scientists and scholars of populism. It is plausible that this will continue in the future.

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