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THE FLUCTUATING FORTUNES OF THE LEGA NORD

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Introduction

In February 2013 the Lega Nord lost half of its electorate compared with the 2008 elections, gaining 1,390,156 votes or 4.1 per cent of the total of votes cast, as against 3,026,844 or 8.3 per cent in 2008. Already in 2011–12 the party had witnessed a series of setbacks at the polls and was rocked by a major financial scandal involving links to the Calabrian Mafia, which struck at the heart of Umberto Bossi’s leadership, forcing him to resign as general secretary. These crucial two years also marked the fall of the fourth Berlusconi government and its replacement by a technocratic government headed by former EU commissioner Mario Monti, in what is widely considered as the dissolution of the political and party system – generally known as the Second Republic – that in the early 1990s had succeeded the First Republic, itself marred by a major financial scandal. Twenty years later, history appears to have repeated itself, this time engulfing, in an ironic twist of events, the very party that in 1992 had been at the forefront of the protest against systematic corrupt deals between business and politics, often involving criminal organizations.

The events of 2011–13, therefore, provide a good vantage point for attempting to achieve an overall assessment of the politics and policies of the Lega Nord since its inception. On the one hand, its political influence kept increasing, especially after the party struck a deal with Berlusconi and later joined his centre-right governments in 2001–6 and again in 2008–11. Similarly, its media exposure was constantly on the rise, not least thanks to its many publicity stunts, controversial statements and aggressive style of leadership. Conversely, its growing influence and public notoriety have been accompanied by fluctuating electoral fortunes over the years, as well as significant shifts in political strategies and policies, which has led to its veering towards an extreme-right ideology and platform. These shifts gave rise to some scholarly controversy concerning the definition and interpretation of the Lega Nord as a specific type of party. Furthermore, the party has often appeared to prioritize media-grabbing statements and stunts over concrete and effective policymaking, which has led some scholars to refer to its politics as ‘symbolic’ or ‘simulative’.

This chapter will examine and assess the trajectory of the Lega Nord from the early 1990s to the present in the light of the above issues and taking into account scholarly debates and
interpretations. In particular, it will analyse this party’s role in attacking and bringing down the First Republic, its preferential relationship with a specific electoral and territorial constituency, its ideology and rhetoric, its alliance with Berlusconi and resulting policy impact within the centre-right governments and finally its current predicament and likely future scenarios.

The early years: reasons for success

The Lega Nord was formed in December 1989 as a merger of previously distinct regional leagues, including the Lega Lombarda, formed in 1985 by Umberto Bossi, a long-time student-worker who had become an enthusiastic believer in regionalist and autonomist movements. The new party’s breakthrough came at the 1992 general election, when it unexpectedly gained 8.7 per cent of the votes nationally and 17.3 per cent in the North, becoming the fourth party after Christian Democracy, the Democratic Party of the Left and the Socialist Party. At the 1993 administrative elections, in which voters directly elected the local mayors, the Lega triumphed in the North, especially in the provincial capitals and smaller communes. Its biggest success was in Milan, where Marco Formentini was elected mayor, with the party list securing 41 per cent. In light of such a positive performance, heralding dramatic future events, what factors allowed this newly formed party to emerge as a significant player in Italian politics?

Most commentators agree that the electoral success of the Lega Nord in the early 1990s must be explained on the basis of both structural and agency factors. At the structural level, the crisis of the Italian state, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Tangentopoli scandal of 1992, opened the door for new political actors to enter the electoral market, as witnessed two years later even more spectacularly with the emergence of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia. In addition, the burgeoning state deficit, together with the increasing fiscal pressure experienced by both ordinary citizens and business people, created the preconditions for an anti-tax protest movement, especially in those northern regions whose model of economic development rested on a myriad of small and medium-sized firms which, after two decades of export-oriented growth, towards the end of the 1980s had started to experience increasing competition from abroad. According to Biorcio (1997: 123), in 1991 half of northern voters supported requests for tax reductions, while a third were in favour of greater regional autonomy, which thereby indicated the potential for the success of a new party ready to intercept these sentiments.

However, structural factors do not in themselves explain the success of a political actor. Bossi’s entrepreneurship cannot in any way be underestimated, especially in constructing a ‘Northern Question’ in opposition to the classic ‘Southern Question’. Specifically, he combined a strong fiscal protest and a headlong attack upon the political class, seen as guilty of leading the country towards bankruptcy, with an ethno-regionalist ideology and a populist stance. In 1991, at the first Congress of the party, Bossi made it clear that ethno-federalism, while justified by the existence within Italy of different ‘ethnic nations’, with the productive North exploited by the parasitic South, represented primarily ‘an instrument for attacking the centralist state’ as well as for controlling the public purse.

The Lega was aware however, that there was a consensus among both voters and parties in favour of public spending and that the only way it could gain substantial electoral support would be through mobilizing those voters who could regard themselves as net givers as opposed to receivers. Thus the party pitted business people and entrepreneurs based in the North in areas of small-scale industrialization against all those voters who could be portrayed as ‘parasites’ living off the state: public sector employees, people on the dole or receiving benefits, and more generally southerners. As for the remedies advocated, these ranged from full-scale privatizations to radical reforms of the pension, health and labour systems, to draconian measures against tax evasion.

The fluctuating fortunes of the Lega Nord
and organized crime, all of which, the *Lega* argued, would only be possible through a federalist reform of the state accompanied by fiscal responsibility. Its proposal was to divide Italy into three macro-regions, each of which would have responsibility for most policy areas, leaving the ‘federal’ level responsible only for a handful of matters.

The remedies put forward to the diagnosed ‘Italian malaise’ were thus in many respects Thatcherite (Agnew, 1995: 168; Gilbert, 1995: 61). They were innovatively associated by Gianfranco Miglio, the *Lega*’s most influential thinker during this early phase, with the ideas of libertarian federalism and radical liberalism promoted by the Austrian classical school of Ludwig von Mises. Yet the party also adopted a crude populist language and style which bordered on racism in its negative portrayal of lazy and Mafiosi southerners as opposed to hard-working and law-abiding northerners. Xenophobia was also already in evidence, albeit to a much lesser extent than it was to become in later years. Nevertheless, the *Lega* made it clear that immigration had to be curbed and that immigrants had to be fully assimilated into the host society, while simultaneously excluding some groups a priori as non-assimilable.

In terms of the party’s electorate, the early years saw a preponderance of young, male, less-educated voters from the lower-middle, the independent-middle and the working classes, who had previously voted for Christian Democracy (Mannheimer, 1991, 1993; Diamanti, 1991). The majority resided in areas of small-scale industrialization, especially in Lombardy and the North-East and held inward-looking attitudes towards foreigners and immigrants, as well as deep-seated feelings of distrust towards state and political institutions (Mannheimer, 1991, 1993; Diamanti, 1993; Cento Bull, 1992, 1993; Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001). Hence the *Lega* clearly succeeded in tapping into these voters’ material grievances and cultural values, offering an innovative response to both in the guise of ethno-federalism.

Membership rose rapidly, from 18,000 in 1989 to 40,000 in 1990 and 140,000 in 1994 (Gold, 2003: 88), consisting mainly of people who were new to political participation and prepared to dedicate time and resources to the party. As for organizational structure, at the 1991 Congress Bossi made it clear that he would not take over the post of party secretary unless he were in a position of pre-eminence vis-à-vis the secretaries of the various regional leagues. Bossi got his way, since the party’s 1991 statute established that its secretary had the power to request the Federal Congress to dissolve, by simple majority, any ‘national’ councils ‘operating in contrast with the political, moral and administrative line established by the Federal Congress’ (Art. 12) and had ‘coordination and supervisory functions towards all the organs of the movement’. Furthermore, Bossi made systematic use of expulsions to eliminate possible rivals and impose his strategy upon the party. As Dematteo (2011: 62) remarked, ‘In the *Lega Nord* expulsion has always been the means by which internal conflicts are managed, thus confirming the absence of a democratic culture at the level of the party leadership.’

An important question related to this early period concerns the role played by the *Lega Nord* in bringing down the First Republic. The general consensus among scholars and commentators is that the rise of the party contributed to, but did not in itself cause, the demise of the old political system. However, there is no doubt that Bossi’s entrepreneurship and his party’s electoral success, mainly at the expense of Christian Democracy, accelerated the dismantling of the political system that had sustained the First Republic, opening the way for other political actors to enter the fray.

### The *Lega Nord* between 1994 and 2001

After 1994 the party underwent a significant shift in its ideological and political position, with a dual move away from neo-liberal values towards a radical right-wing stance and away from
federalism towards secessionism. This shift must be explained at least in part by Berlusconi’s decision to form his own party, Forza Italia, and to stand at the 1994 elections, proposing similar themes to those advocated by the Lega and competing for the same electorate.

The year 1994 turned out to be a crucial one. In January, Berlusconi took the decision to form a new party and Bossi accepted his offer of an electoral pact, being afraid that direct competition with Forza Italia would consign the Lega Nord to a marginal position, particularly in view of the largely majoritarian electoral system introduced in 1993. Berlusconi devised a three-way pact that saw Forza Italia in coalition with the Lega in the North and with Alleanza Nazionale (AN), the heir to the neo-fascist party Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in the South. This convoluted pact reflected the deep differences that existed at the time between a northern-based, pro-free market party like the Lega and a southern-based, statist party like AN. The new elections saw the triumph of Forza Italia and the MSI-AN with 21.0 per cent and 20.3 per cent of the votes respectively. The Lega Nord, with 8.4 per cent, managed to remain at the level of the 1992 elections but could no longer aspire to become the main party in the North. Bossi went on to form a government with Berlusconi which proved short-lived, as in December of the same year he decided to withdraw from the coalition, losing more than fifty MPs, who opposed this decision, in the process. In retrospect, it is easy to understand how irksome the cohabitation between these three parties turned out to be, as well as the embarrassment of the Lega in finding that the new government was more interested in occupying the state than cutting it down to size (Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001: 36).

The following years were to prove especially difficult for the Lega. In electoral terms, a remarkable success at the 1996 general election, when the party obtained its best result to date, with 10.1 per cent of the votes, was not sufficient to allow Bossi to play a pivotal role in the new legislature. It was followed by a steep decline at the 1999 European elections and a debacle at the 2001 elections, when the party had to settle for a meagre 3.9 per cent, losing votes heavily in its northern heartlands. In terms of its political strategy and ideology, the Lega embarked on a secessionist campaign, engaging in highly choreographed nationalist rites which culminated in the proclamation of the independence of Padania in September 1996. This campaign was aimed primarily at galvanizing its activists and supporters, as well as relaunching the Lega as the true interpreter of the identity and interests of the North (Giordano, 2000). Furthermore, secessionism reinforced the Lega’s ability to make people think of politics in terms of territorial, as opposed to social, issues (Agnew and Brusa, 1999; Dickie, 1996; see also Chapter 13 in this volume).

This phase also marked a process of radicalization of the party. Internal expulsions became more frequent and a strident nationalist discourse was adopted. Globalization, once portrayed in apolitical terms, was redubbed ‘mondialism’, following the terminology of the French New Right. Immigration and multiculturalism became the spectre of the future, to be resisted at all costs. European integration, viewed favourably prior to Italy’s entry into the Eurozone, not least in the belief that it would promote greater regional autonomy, was now viewed with suspicion, as leading to the creation of a centralist superstate. Instead of hailing the cohesiveness, inventiveness and success of the Northern community of producers and entrepreneurs, the Lega now lamented its fragility and vowed to protect it from both internal and external threats. Thus the twin themes of fear and security rose to the top of the party’s agenda, where they were to remain dominant for more than a decade.

The Lega’s ideological steer towards the extreme right was accompanied by a change in the composition of its voters, losing support among business people but gaining the votes of ‘workers and artisans living in small towns and working in or for the myriad of small and medium-sized factories located throughout Lombardy and the northeast’ (Beirich and Woods, 2000: 132).
According to the authors, in 1996 the *Lega* had become ‘Italy’s largest working-class party’, as a result of a fear of globalization and its impact.

It is in light of this political and ideological shift that we ought to examine Bossi’s decision to ally himself once again with Berlusconi’s coalition for the 2001 general election. At one level, in fact, the decision marked the end of the secessionist phase and signalled the return of the party to its early dual goal of reining in the public deficit and implementing federalism (now renamed ‘devolution’ to distinguish it from the federalist reform introduced by the centre-left government in 2000). An electoral pact, signed on 5 April 2001, put devolution at the top of the agenda, together with new legislation aimed at curbing immigration, which seemingly indicated that the *Lega* was prioritizing reforms of a substantive nature over any identity politics. At another level, however, the politics of identity was retained and even emphasized, which constantly interfered with the party’s reforming drive. This raises the issue of whether the party in government subordinated its populist rhetoric to mainstream and pragmatic policy initiatives or, conversely, whether its rhetoric and ideology took precedence over any functional policymaking. In order to address these questions, we need first to examine the role and impact of the *Lega* in government.

**Participation in government**

The *Lega Nord* took part in the second and third Berlusconi governments (2001–6) and, after a brief period when the centre-left was back in power, participated in the fourth Berlusconi government (2008–11). On both occasions, the party prioritized two specific policy areas, immigration and federalism, in exchange for a series of legislative measures that were of interest to Berlusconi. At the same time, the *Lega* strove to differentiate itself from its coalition allies and to preserve its distinctive identity, both by behaving as an ‘opposition within government’ and by retaining its image as a party of the periphery, alien to Rome’s corrupt ways (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005).

In 2001–6 the *Lega* shared power with *Forza Italia*, AN and the *Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e di Centro* (UDC), a centrist Catholic party. This made for an uneasy alliance, as the UDC was adverse to the populist radical-right posturing of the *Lega*, while AN’s leader Gianfranco Fini was opposed to any reform that would weaken the central state. The party controlled key ministerial posts, with Roberto Castelli as Minister of Justice, Roberto Maroni responsible for Welfare and Bossi Minister for Devolution, the last determined to devolve exclusive powers in health, education and local policing to Italy’s regional governments. However, negotiations within the coalition turned out to be complex and protracted, and Bossi had to give in to the requests of his allies. Hence, ‘Everyone obtained something, and in the end this reform was an absolute dog’s dinner of contradictions’ (Donovan, 2010: 494). In 2006, the reform was put to the test of a national referendum, as required by the Italian Constitution, but failed to achieve the support of voters, except in Lombardy and the Veneto, the *Lega*’s own strongholds.

The party was more successful with its anti-immigration policy, as it gained approval for a new law, known as the Bossi–Fini from the names of its proponents. Introduced in 2002, the law envisaged tough sanctions for illegal immigrants and paved the way for their expulsion from the country. However, it was widely considered ineffective, especially in view of a substantial increase in immigration in the following years, as well as the government’s subsequent decision to regularize the situation of almost 700,000 immigrants.

While the party’s performance in terms of policymaking was not a clear-cut success, the *Lega* was, nevertheless, able to place the blame for any failure upon its allies and, thus, to preserve its distinctive and ‘pure’ political image. As a result, the party fared much better than its coalition
partners at the 2005 local and regional elections, which signalled an overall loss of support for the government.

In 2008, following a strong performance at the general election of that year, when it secured 8.3 per cent of the votes, the Lega was back in power, in alliance with the Popolo della Libertà (PDL), the party formed by a merger between Forza Italia and the AN. The pact between Bossi and Berlusconi continued to revolve around the former’s support for federalism and anti-immigration measures in exchange for policies aimed at solving Berlusconi’s personal and judicial problems. This time the Lega announced that it would focus on ‘fiscal federalism’. In May 2009, a framework law established the guidelines for financing local and regional governments, based upon the calculation of ‘standard costs’, applicable to all communes and regions, with a view to cutting spending. Given the complex nature of this reform, the government set up a Bicameral Commission with the task of producing detailed proposals within two years. As in the case of the devolution bill, the Lega was at risk of reaching the end of the legislature without a tangible result in this priority area.

The party also focused on new anti-immigration measures, known as the ‘security package’, introduced in August 2009. In an even more draconian manner than the Bossi-Fini legislation, the new law aimed at curbing the entry of new immigrants and facilitating the expulsion of illegal immigrants. As had happened with its predecessor, it gave rise to strong criticisms and protests, and incurred the same accusations of being largely ineffective, constituting primarily a form of ‘symbolic politics’. We will come back to these issues in a later section.

After a period of popularity, the government started to lose internal cohesion and electoral support. On 15 November 2010, the leader of the AN, Gianfranco Fini, and some MPs left the government in protest, because of irreconcilable personal and political differences with Berlusconi. At the local elections of May 2011, both the PDL and the Lega lost votes, the latter even in its traditional strongholds. In the course of the same year, the government was seemingly caught unawares by the gravity of the financial crisis and it was increasingly seen as unreliable by its European allies. Amid repeated calls for Berlusconi to stand aside, the governing coalition barely survived a vote of confidence on 14 October. Finally, on 12 November Berlusconi handed in his resignation and was replaced by Mario Monti at the head of a technocratic government. While the PDL decided to support the new government, the Lega went into opposition, a decision adopted at least in part to regain credibility among its voters through resuming its autonomist stance.

Quite apart from these dramatic events, the Lega’s participation in the fourth Berlusconi government was less beneficial to the party than its previous collaboration. The reason is twofold. First, the party found it more difficult to behave as an ‘opposition within government’, blaming various allies for any policy failure, given that the UDC was no longer part of the coalition and Fini had left the government. Second, the long delays in introducing fiscal federalism and the inability to cut back the public deficit did not sit well with the Lega’s northern constituency. Hence the voters punished the Lega as much as the PDL at the polls in 2011, unlike in 2005. However, much worse was to come.

The Lega in crisis

An issue which had been brewing for some time within the party exploded in January 2012. This concerned the excessive influence exercised by the so-called ‘magic’ circle surrounding Umberto Bossi, made up of his wife and children as well as his closest friends, which had been set up ever since a stroke, suffered in March 2004, had left him severely impaired. The fact that Bossi managed to continue to lead the Lega after this episode is nothing short of miraculous.
and owes much both to his charismatic image and to his wife, who ensured that only the most trusted allies (and her own children) would exercise power alongside her husband.

Opposition to the magic circle revolved around former Interior Minister Roberto Maroni, who seized his chance early in 2012, when a financial scandal involving payments from party funds to Bossi’s children and even corrupt deals with the Calabrian Mafia rocked the party. Maroni publicly declared that he would clean up the Lega and restore it to its original mission and ‘purity’. He then proceeded to dismantle the magic circle and put himself forward as candidate for the party secretariatship. However, this did not prevent the Lega from losing votes heavily at the April 2012 local elections, with its candidates failing to be elected mayors even in its heartlands, with the exception of Flavio Tosi, a close ally of Maroni, in Verona. How much this was due to the scandal that had engulfed the party is unclear, but the Lega clearly failed to profit from its intransigent opposition to the Monti government.

After becoming party secretary in July 2012 and relegating Bossi to the newly created role of honorary President, Maroni claimed that his new Lega would focus on becoming the main party of the North and resume its original mission of representing the interests of northern society and citizens, with particular attention paid to the needs of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs. He then decided to stand as candidate for the presidency of the Lombardy Region, declaring that his party wanted to create a strong and autonomous Euroregion of the North. After the fall of the Monti government in November 2012 and with new elections scheduled for February 2013, Maroni opted to resume an alliance with Berlusconi, despite strong opposition from the grass roots. As it turned out, this alliance secured Maroni election as regional president and consoled the party for its heavy loss of votes elsewhere in the North.

Having analysed the party both in opposition and in government, we must now examine the nature of the Lega Nord in both these roles and assess how it can best be defined and categorized. We will then explore where the party currently stands and its likely future trajectory.

Categorizing the Lega in opposition and in government

In light of the above analysis, it is now possible to address the moot question of whether the Lega Nord can be located within one of the established party families and, if so, to which it actually belongs. Initially the Lega was included in the category of ethno-regionalist (De Winter and Türsan, 1998) or subcultural parties (Natale, 1991; Cento Bull, 1992, 1993; Messina, 1998). However, the most influential interpretation categorized it as a populist or regional-populist party (Biorcio, 1997; Leonardi and Kovacs, 1993; Diani, 1996). One strand of scholarship viewed it more specifically as a radical-right populist party, in view of its xenophobic and quasi-racist stance (Betz, 1994; Kitschelt, 1995; Taggart, 1995). Recently, there was renewed controversy over whether the Lega should be categorized as a regionalist-populist party (McDonnell, 2006; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2011) or an extreme-right one (Zaslove, 2004, 2007).

What at times risks appearing as sterile polemics masks in fact an interesting dilemma: is the Lega to be considered as belonging to the European New Right or has it made use of populism in an opportunistic manner? If the former, did the party embrace an extreme-right ideology from its inception or following its ‘turn to Padania’? These questions have wider implications as regards the Italian political system, not least because they are closely linked to the issue of the future direction and even survival of this party in light of its internal turmoil in 2012.

It is the view of this author that the Lega Nord can indeed be classified as a party of the radical-right variety (see Chapter 4 in this volume). A recent study by Passarelli and Tuorto (2012) in fact revealed that nowadays its voters and supporters, as well as its elected
representatives, place themselves and the party well on the right of the political spectrum. Indeed Woods (2009: 176) argued that the *Lega*’s antiglobalization and xenophobic stances were in evidence from its inception, even though they took centre stage only from the mid-1990s. However, it seems important to distinguish between two phases of development in the party’s history. In the early 1990s the *Lega Nord* was the first and only party to have squarely identified in the huge public deficit the primary source of Italy’s socio-economic problems, innovatively proposing (ethno)-federalism as the remedy. While these were to remain key themes for the *Lega*, the events of the following years, above all Berlusconi’s decision to enter the field of politics, growing immigration, increasing economic competition and an uncertain outlook for the areas of small-scale industrialization that formed the backbone of the party’s electoral support, all combined to convince Bossi to veer to the right, prioritizing a politics of identity. Padania was no longer the means through which the party was to attack and dismantle the centralist state, but a nation under threat from internal and external ‘Others’.

We can therefore agree with Albertazzi and McDonnell that the *Lega* has proved opportunistic in its approach to politics. Yet the above-mentioned study by Passarelli and Tuorto also indicates that a change of strategy and ideology would not be an easy task to accomplish, unlike in the 1990s, because the *Lega* is now much less a movement than a structured party. Furthermore, the unexpectedly strong performance of the *Movimento 5 Stelle* at the 2012 local elections and above all at the 2013 general election, due in great part to its ability to attract votes from the whole of the political spectrum, shows that the political space has already been occupied by a new populist player in direct competition with the *Lega*. Thus a repositioning of the latter along the left–right axis is severely constrained both by the current nature of the party and its supporters and by the electoral and political context in which it operates.

Another important issue concerns the overall assessment of this party’s role in government.

Did the party pursue a radical-right agenda in government or did it carry out fairly mainstream policies? This question has been addressed by scholars largely with reference to immigration policy, because of the *Lega*’s intransigent stance on this issue. While Zaslove (2004: 114) argued that the *Lega*’s extreme-right ideology had indeed influenced public policy, Ruzza and Fella (2009: 231) distinguished between ‘symbolic’ politics and policymaking, stating that the *Lega* had in fact implemented ‘mainstream conservative policies’ (2009: 190). Other commentators (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005; Geddes, 2008; Woods, 2009) argued that the policies implemented by the government responded to functional socio-economic needs and/or to the logic of intra-coalitional bargaining rather than being inspired by an extreme-right ideology.

This author (Cento Bull, 2010: 429) put forward a somewhat different interpretation, acknowledging the largely ‘simulative’ character of the *Lega*’s policymaking in the field of immigration, yet also arguing that it has had a real and concrete impact, establishing a differentiated system of rights and ‘creating an entire category of workers who are easily hired and fired’. Furthermore, the *Lega*’s intransigence has prevented any changes to the country’s citizenship laws, which are among the most hostile in Europe to immigrants and their children. Therefore, at least in the short run, the party’s radical stance addressed ‘both the material and economic needs of the *Lega*’s electorate, as well as their anxieties and fears concerning culture and identity’ (430).

**Conclusion: whither the *Lega Nord***

While the outcome of the 2013 elections showed a substantial decrease in electoral support compared with 2008, the party was still at a higher level than in 2001, from which it managed to recover. It is therefore too early to assess the long-term consequences of the important events
of 2012, not least as regards the possibility that they marked the beginning of the end for a party that had dominated Italian politics for over twenty years, consistently grabbing the headlines and punching above its weight.

Maroni’s strategy to relaunch the party represented a balancing act between strengthening the Lega’s northern identity and federalist mission, though stopping short of secessionism, on the one hand, and regaining consensus among its traditional supporters by focusing on concrete socio-economic policies on the other. Hence his slogan ‘The North First’ and the idea of a macro-federation of the North. Maroni’s victory in Lombardy seemingly vindicated this strategy, as the Lega ended up controlling the three main northern regions. However, while the party retained considerable support in Lombardy, it lost heavily in Piedmont and above all in the Veneto, where Beppe Grillo, leader of the 5 Star Movement, successfully campaigned on a platform of lower taxes and anti-politics, thus stealing the Lega’s thunder. Hence even in its strongholds the party was no longer perceived as a radical alternative and it was challenged by new populist actors untainted by corruption charges.

In the course of 2013, amid worsening living standards and rising levels of social protest, the Lega Nord steered further to the right and attempted to relaunch its radical vocation. The new strategy was strengthened by the election of Matteo Salvini as general secretary on 7 December, when he won 82 per cent of the vote and relegated the historic leader, Umberto Bossi, to a marginal position with only 18 per cent of the vote. Salvini’s triumph marked yet another U-turn in policy, as he openly denounced the years spent in government, stating that the Lega ‘tried to change things from Rome but failed, what with devolution and the referendum they took us for a ride for the last 14 years’ (Madron, 2013). He then asserted that the way forward consisted in pursuing the independence of Padania. Salvini linked independence to a battle against the euro, which he dubbed ‘a crime against humanity’. By joining a new pan-European alliance between radical right parties spearheaded by the French Front National and the Dutch Freedom Party, the Lega Nord headed by Salvini was obviously trying to capitalize on a wave of anti-EU sentiment ahead of the 2014 elections to the European Parliament (on this alliance, see Mammone, 2013; Muller, 2013).

We can envisage two main scenarios. The first is that Salvini’s strategy proves successful and the party starts to recover consensus in the North, riding on a popular wave of anti-politics, yet also managing to re-establish links with its traditional socio-economic electorate. Alternatively, the Lega may continue to lose ground and ultimately become a spent force, with voters deserting it either in favour of other populist players, especially Beppe Grillo’s movement, or indeed in favour of more mainstream conservative parties, including Berlusconi’s re-formed Forza Italia and the new party created by Angelino Alfano, the Nuovo Centro Destra (New Centre Right, NCD).

Whether or not it survives or even manages once more to thrive in electoral terms, the party which started out to change the nature and functioning of the Italian state and aggressively redress the public debt cannot attract a positive overall assessment in terms of its substantive performance. It proved innovative in terms of political style and discourse and contributed to accelerating the end of the First Republic, but it was unable to tackle the deficit, lower the fiscal pressure or indeed renew the political system along federalist lines. While it succeeded in putting the ‘Northern Question’ centre stage, taking on the representation of the interests and anxieties of much of the northern electorate, it ultimately failed to address the root causes of its malaise.
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Note


Bibliography


