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(Article begins on next page)

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From the Lega Nord to Salvini's League: Changing Everything to Change Nothing?

Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto

1. Introduction

The electoral growth of Matteo Salvini's Lega is one of the most consequential new developments on the Italian political scene in recent years. Serving in governments led by Silvio Berlusconi (1994-1995; 2001-2006; and 2008-2011), the party spent a long period in power, before in 2018 overtaking Forza Italia in the leadership race for the center-right coalition. For a year or so, the party entered into an alliance with the 5-Star Movement (the formation that polled the highest number of votes in the 2018 Italian general election), governing the country and bringing in controversial measures of limited effectiveness (notably, the Security Decree for managing migration flows, which resulted in international human rights organizations putting Italy under surveillance, and plunged the country into conflict with the European institutions).

After triumphing at the 2019 European elections with 34.3%, the Lega toppled the government it was itself part of, attempting to hasten early elections and exploit this wave of success; ultimately, however, the party was forced to return to opposition, unable to convert its electoral success at local elections that year into changing the nation's political equilibrium.

Faced with the rise in 2020 of a potential competitor, the Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) party led by Giorgia Meloni, Salvini's party continued seeking to exercise hegemony over the center-right coalition. The Lega's attempt to bolster its position was subsequently hampered by the emergence of COVID-19 and the severe crisis it caused in healthcare and the economy. Although it presented scenarios favorable to attempting to delegitimize the serving government, the pandemic highlighted the limits of a position in opposition, notably a lack of control over the political agenda, resulting in a reduction of media visibility for both party and leader. When Mario Draghi's executive came to power in February 2021, despite the presence of technocrats and EU sponsorship, the Lega surprisingly agreed to join the governing coalition.

This, in essence, sums up the different periods the Lega has traversed during its long political history. Focusing on its most controversial moments, this essay seeks to analyze elements of continuity and discontinuity between the party of today and the party of yesteryear, the strategic choices that have enabled the party to overcome a variety of electoral, political and moral challenges, and the perspectives and limits of the Lega project in Italy and Europe during the 2010s.

There are many aspects for us to explore: identity, ideology, political themes; the model of rising vote numbers locally and across a national electorate; central and local party organization, and the figure of the leader.

Adopting a diachronic view and examining past and present together enables us to better reconstruct how the party's positions have evolved, reflect on the motives for the Lega "changing its spots," and return to where it all started. This circular process counterintuitively continuing to garner support, we interweave these developments into the context (perhaps it would be fairer to say "contexts") and attempt to present the party's story through its historical bywords.

Since the 1980s, the North, Italy, and Europe have been the natural backdrop against which the party has defined itself, consistently resetting its affiliations. The context influenced the timing and manner of these changes, in turn transforming the Lega's long tail and making it more complex to reconstruct the chronology of how the party has evolved.

2. From Regionalism to Nationalism (and back)?

The Lega's story may be traced back to a family of regionalist parties that, in recent decades, has gained visibility on the European scene (De Winter and Türsan 1998). However, the fact that the Lega was established outside a region per se makes it a particularly interesting case. Unlike other parties of this ilk, the Lega came into being in an area that only had a weak historical and cultural identity. Nevertheless, it achieved impressive electoral results, becoming a party of government and putting decentralization and issues important to its local area on the national agenda.

According to an existing classification (Tronconi 2009), the Lega should be considered a "challenger" party, one that has broken out of its presumed ethnic reference group by appropriating political themes that range from post-materialism (the environment, civil liberties, abolition of nuclear energy) to anti-modernism (fighting against immigration, security, law, and order). On one hand, the party intercepted, interpreted, and amplified issues relating to the north of Italy, using protest in the North as an act against politics, pitting its local base against the State and the traditional political system to exacerbate conflict between the center and the periphery. On the other, as its territorial anchorage has continued to evolve, the Lega's votes have undergone a geographical shift. Although from the outset the party's objective was to redefine the balance of power in Italy between the center and the periphery to benefit the country's northern regions, rather than being a pure regionalist party, the Lega has framed itself as a "populist regionalist party," in which the two constituent dimensions are intrinsically intertwined (McDonnell 2006; Albertazzi et al. 2018).

The party's initial utopian push for independence soon ran aground on the complexities of implementation, owing to a lack of domestic and international allies prepared to back it. A prolonged stalemate prompted the Lega's leadership to rethink its strategy and identity as a separatist party, progressively substituting these issues with a nationalist/sovereignist profile and policies. The party replaced its initial slogan, "Prima il Nord" [the North First], with "Prima gli italiani" [Italians First],

an expression conceived to underscore the relevance of immigration and anti-Europeanism, the two main planks of Lega policy. In a reversal of its past outlook, Salvini's Lega strategically chose not to relaunch a party of the North and instead pursue multiple, nationally-allied iterations of the party. This led to the birth of a parallel organization known as "Lega per Salvini premier," and banishment of any reference to the North in the party's electoral symbol. Among other things, this helped the new political entity to release itself from an obligation to pay the State back 49 million euros in electoral expenses (D'Alimonte 2019).

The Lega's transition from a regionalist to a national/nationalist perspective is hardly an anomaly within the European context. Although only rarely do regionalist parties manifest the ambition to represent the interests and citizens of an entire national territory (Mazzoleni and Muller 2017), it is equally true that, during a phase of generalized Euroscepticism, such parties may consider defending the national interest to be a desirable option, given that it allows them to address issues that matter to them (e.g., immigration control by strengthening domestic borders). According to Mazzoleni and Ruzza (2018), such adaptations appeal to populist regionalist parties because they can easily incorporate other cleavages, such as left-right (generally espousing positions on the radical right), and claim to represent the people against elites at the various territorial scales (regional and national) in which they compete with the other parties. For the Lega, the secessionist agenda that was the party's rallying cry in the second half of the 1990s could continue to be a useful way of mobilizing its northern base, while at the same time citing regionalism as an approach it wishes to apply to the country as a whole.

The formation to emerge from this revamp deliberately took on a national/nationalist mantle, its new positioning finding an empty space to occupy in Italy against a backdrop of generally changing conditions (economic downturns, uncertainties regarding Europe, the institutional deficit). Through this decisive new departure, the Lega managed to transform into a nationalist party, without ever quite becoming a national party. Despite its countrywide electoral successes, the party's "nation" is still Northern Italy. Even if in its political discourse it no longer focuses on the North, beyond its rhetoric the party seeks to defend the region from global competition through economic policies and investments; the rest of the country is merely an appendage functional to its plans for electoral expansion. The party has revealed this in a number of ways in recent years, from relaunching its political battle for differentiated autonomy to protecting northern economic interests via its ministers in the Draghi government. Management of the PNRR COVID recovery funds and the priorities the party champions for the post-pandemic economic recovery confirm a neo-regionalist position that evidently thrives behind a veneer of nationalism or, if you prefer, a careful strategy of balancing plans

for a national expansion of its polling with a defense of specific regional claims (regarding the North), a project legitimized by Salvini's presence as a mediating figure.

3. A Right-wing or Post-ideological Party?

To understand the party's nationalist evolution, we must examine its political-ideological positioning, which has veered sharply to the right. Over the past few years, Salvini has strengthened ties with formations on the populist European radical right, despite the fact that this political family's nationalist orientations were dissonant, if not opposed, to the party's original scope. In the 1990s, Lega votes came from the center of the political-ideological spectrum; in subsequent decades, more extreme positions began to prevail and gradually account for a majority of its voters.

The new Lega has made the extreme right more accessible in Italy, in part by successfully framing it at a supranational level. Leveraging opportunities opened up by economic, social and political crises, Salvini has reinterpreted the party's status as a right-wing option. Positioning the party on the right-wing has been presented to the general public as a project in which the party's most divisive values (for example, hostility to minorities) are justified in terms of economics, social relations, a need for collective protection against the uncontrolled effects of globalization, and revival of the nation as a place for localism rather than globalism. Much like the Front National, we may, however, for the Lega posit an instrumental, post-ideological use of a political object – right-wing extremism – which, even if it is revamped or blunted by circumstance and convenience, is tough to manage and wield for political success.

Following an approach that looks more to the future than the past, the party's rightwards shift was reinforced by riding the populist wave that swept through European politics for a number of years. The Lega has always relied on populist elements in its discourse: an aversion to politicians and intellectuals, a return to community traditions, a reference to charismatic personalities, common sense, and everyday language. In its early years, prior to the clear rightward tilt of its constituency (Ignazi 2006), the party did, however, lack a sense of nationalism and anti-communism. Such interpretative doubts gradually fell away in the mid-2000s, when the Lega radicalized its political platform and strengthened contact with a very specific area of European populism associated with the new right, in which elements of nationalism, nativism, and authoritarianism averse to other political expressions of populism prevail (Kriesi and Pappas 2016; Zanatta 2013; Mudde 2007).

Despite the party not having a national identity background, by allying with Marine Le Pen's Front National, Belgium's Vlaams Belang, and Austria's FPÖ, Salvini's Lega effectively joined a club of sovereignists. In 2017, the Lega became a member of the recently-formed "Europe of Nations and

Freedom" political grouping in the European Parliament, and established relations with political actors from the so-called Visegrád Group block of countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary). In so doing, it intercepted a long-standing trend among far-right parties to heap criticism upon the "European threat" as a key way of building political success (Caiani 2014).

Through such alliances, the Lega converted its right-wing, nationalist anti-Europeanism into a way of amplifying its ever-present populism, shifting its emphasis on corrupt politicians more to transnational elites than the Italian political class, and taking on sovereignist positions primarily as a result of the party's need to reposition itself at European level. Although this has not always and not necessarily been overt and voiced, belonging to the world of the populist radical right played out on the domestic front in Italy, where the Lega was able to call on its long experience of "struggle in government," of opposition from within the institutions, to create discontinuity in the continuity of the center-right alliance. Rather than representing a constitutive and immovable component, the party wielded its political-ideological identity strategically, using circumstances to legitimize apparently contradictory positions and decisions such as remaining part of the group of sovereignist formations in Europe, yet supporting the Draghi executive in Italy. This mix of ideology and pragmatism reached its acme under the secretaryship of Salvini, the most voted-for and most right-wing of all Lega secretaries.

4. Lega Issues: A Limited Number of Fixed Points Amid Multiple Ambiguities

The Lega's political agenda has changed a great deal over time. Issues that in the past did not crop up at all have taken on new centrality, while others previously in the forefront have been reinterpreted to reflect emerging opportunities and constraints. In a reconstruction of the party's agenda-setting, some issues are more germane than others to the Lega's aptitude for instrumental shifts, reorienting its positions to cater to contingencies in the political debate.

Growth in the importance of immigration as a theme in the Lega's political rhetoric is perhaps the element that, more than all others, is of help in gauging the party's transformation. The Lega's long-held attitude of closure toward foreigners has gradually become more central, particularly in its highly-symbolic aspects (for example, perceiving immigration as a cultural peril). The Lega's electorate has long been more hostile toward immigrants than the Italian electorate as a whole, or indeed the electorate of other center-right parties (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012; 2018). Far from creating a distancing effect, this clear, solid position has helped fuel the party's success. Growth over the two-year period 2018-19, when the party polled more than 30% of the vote in Italy, occurred despite (indeed, thanks to) the fact that the Lega had taken up clear positions on "umbrella" issues,

topics capable of providing explanations of and solutions to economic, social, and cultural crises. Instrumentally repositioning the party further towards the right-wing was put to the general public without qualm, transmuted into a project in which the most divisive value components (for example, hostility to minorities) are justified at the level of economics, social relations, the need for collective protection in the face of the uncontrolled effects of globalization, and a revival of the nation as a place of localism rather than globalism.

Since the Lega's origins, when it sought to attract voters to an autonomist project, the party has transformed over time into a "catch-all party for fears" generated by globalization. The event that started the party on its slow and progressive evolution to staking out a Christian and nationalist identity was the September 11, 2001 attack on the West.

The Lega has always used its fight against immigration and defending the local as political slogans – for Bossi, the party existed to stand guard over its local area, identity and traditions – but it was only after 2001 that inter-group conflict took on the form of a clash of civilizations between the West and Islam. Shifting the conflict from social to cultural identity enabled the Lega to expand its appeal to sectors of the population beyond those who cared solely about the local area. In the Lega's rhetoric, immigration is a danger not just to the identity of Northern Italy but to the nation and indeed the West as a whole. The Lega has agitated on the immigration issue before now; the difference is its intensification of its mistrust of Europe and the single currency. Seeking to push back against supranational prerogatives of control, the clash between local and global, which was already apparent under Bossi's party chairmanship, has been repurposed into the terms of a struggle by entire nations rather than parts of nations.

As is true of other challenger parties, the Lega's focus on immigration has been accompanied by emerging anti-Europeanism. The party's relationship with Europe has taken on profoundly different meanings over time: initially openness, then deep skepticism. Until Italy's entry into the Eurozone, the Lega was essentially pro-EU. At that time, the party considered integration on a continental scale in a positive light, as an instrument of use to Italy's northern regions ("a Europe of the regions") and a precursor to leaving the national State (Conti and Verzichelli 2005). This pragmatic, strategic attitude continued throughout the time the party was in government, when, despite some contrary positions within the party, it approved the European Constitution and ratified the Lisbon Treaty: its association with Forza Italia made for a perfect combination of extremism and moderation. Only later, after Italy joined the club of Euro countries, and when the autonomist perspective risked becoming a dead end, did the party begin adopting extreme tones to oppose an idea of Europe perceived as being an enemy of peoples and traditions (Bellucci 2005). This new polemical approach reached its zenith

in 2011, during the technical executive helmed by Mario Monti, whose pedigree in international finance and the powers of the European Central Bank made him an ideal bugbear for the Lega.

The crisis years proved to be an important testing ground for the party. During this period, the party's populist opposition to the Brussels bureaucracy became ever more explicit (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017). This watershed in the party's political messaging went on to be symbolically extended to the national sphere as a tool for relaunching the party, not just within the coalition but to appeal to the electorate. Initially, the Lega had viewed Europe as a resource for exalting sub-national nationalism (the regional identity of the North), before tarring Europe with the brush of bureaucracy, promoting the presumed (productive and working) qualities of the Padania regions. After the Lega set aside its vague secessionist ambitions, the party took a wager on nationalism, and Euroscepticism became a central plank of its rhetoric, helping it to make inroads among an electorate increasingly hostile to European integration, critical of the Euro, and inclined to conceive territorial issues at a national rather than international scale. Seeking a different approach to addressing social and economic discontent in other areas of Italy, the Lega relaunched the local/global dichotomy on a massive scale, repurposing its regionalist claims as the struggle of an entire nation-state against Europe and its austerity policies.

The issues of immigration and Euroscepticism are helpful to understand the party's positions on one final and crucial issue: the economy. Once again, the concept of sovereignty is key. By playing the sovereignist card ("masters in our own homes," "Italians first"), the Lega was able to redefine its positions within the European center-right political family. As an exponent of the populist radical right, the party acknowledged the importance of widening consensus among a working-class electorate abandoned by the left and suffering the effects of the economic downturn. While the Lega continued to appeal to promarket segments of the population, it increasingly combined its positioning with new ideas that emphasized the priority of domestic markets, defending domestic companies (and the domestic workforce) exposed to globalization even if it sought to do so through forms of dirigisme, interventionism, and Statism foreign to the traditionally liberal conservative right.

The party rounded off this complex picture with policy orientations on welfare policies and social protection. To build a broader electoral base that would appeal to wage earners, women and families, the party espoused a chauvinistic approach, one that it had already taken up in the past, but it now did so in a more explicit and direct form. A preference for Italian nationals in the labor market, access to welfare, social security and even healthcare made it possible to combine a reduction in social spending costs with an Italian-only neo-protective approach.

The Lega's ruling class revamped the party's image with interclass appeal, offering itself as a landing place for a populace united more by values and perceptions than objective conditions. That said,

sample surveys show that the party's electoral base has changed relatively little: it continues to be composed largely of middle-aged voters, in the middle stages of their careers or nearing retirement, who are relatively secure in their jobs and concerned about the loss of their wages' purchasing power. As in the past, with its increasing votes, the Lega continues to attract a large number of the self-employed, especially small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs. Its share of workers has become significant too: without becoming a prevalent choice, it has ensured a breakthrough among the working classes (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018, 87). Back in 2008, during its previous electoral peak, the Lega presented itself as a combative entity whose natural environment was the factory. Even back then, this interpretation was not borne out by the data, merely by limited local instances that could certainly win over a left-wing electorate circumscribed to specific geographical areas and productive sectors (for example, workers at small firms in the Veneto region). As Salvini openly declared, his aspiration was to represent both the "animal spirits" of northern capitalism, and the social classes impoverished by the crisis (the "left behind"). Having such a cross-sectional appeal to voters was an ineluctable goal, even if it was by no means easy to achieve for a party initially founded to represent Northern Italy's manufacturing bourgeoisie. In recent years, the Lega has become the alternative go-to party for Italy's more wealthy voters, who were looking for something other than the Forza Italia party.

5. Local Electoral Success: The Challenge of Penetrating the South

The uncertainties that have beset the Lega and its hopes have been amplified by the matter of where its votes are based. On one hand, the party has explicitly sought national appeal, going beyond its northern enclaves to achieve hegemony (or at least self-sufficiency) over the center-right coalition. However, despite making some progress, electorally the Lega still seems a long way away from achieving this goal. In point of fact, results from the 2018 general elections saw strong consolidation in traditional areas (Lombardy-Veneto) and significant growth in Italy's former "red" regions (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany above all) and central Italy, in the latter case partly due to appealing to former and post-fascist voters. However, penetration in the South, the country's most problematic area, has continued to lag, polling far lower percentages than elsewhere.

If by nationalizing its vote we mean a territorially homogenized electoral result (vote numbers in each region do not differ, or differ little from the national average), then for the Lega it is indeed fair to speak of change, albeit over a broader temporal perspective. Since the start of the Second Republic, Lombardy-Veneto has always accounted for a very high proportion of the party's votes, greater than 90%, except in 2006 when that figure dipped to 80%; in 2018, 61% of the party's votes were

concentrated in the North, and about 20% in Italy's red zone. Stripping out elections when the party did not present its own candidates and lists, and which therefore are less well-suited to a fully diachronic comparison, with the exception of 2018, central-southern voters have always been far lower in importance to the Lega.

The socio-territorial characteristics of the Lega's voting patterns required it to choose one of two potential scenarios: expanding within a geographical basin whose socioeconomic traits and political traditions reproduce the party's characteristics in the North or, on the contrary, seeking a more adaptive penetration, modeled to the specificities of local contexts in Southern Italy by interacting with a wide, diffuse area of hardship and marginality. Of the two, the former prevailed, at least during the party's more robust penetration during the 2018 elections. Research indicates that Lega vote percentages rise in areas (provinces) where the labor market is healthier, that is, where employment rates are higher and unemployment rates lower, and where the number of active businesses is greater (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018, 131). The party has consequently failed to achieve success in Southern areas subject to greater poverty, where the 5 Star Movement did very well, but in more solid, economically-advanced areas. This trend mirrors the party's original trajectory in the North (it was founded in industrialized valleys packed with small businesses), an approach that, given the Lega has consolidated its role as a force of local government, now appears to be largely outdated.

Another aspect of the territorial spread in Lega voting concerns the party's appeal along the urban-rural continuum, moving from small to large towns. Here, data for the South clearly appears to differ from the North, with no traditional decrease in vote percentages as municipality size increases. No particular curve is discernible in the Center-South, and especially in the South. What this indicates is that the Lega's penetration is cross-cutting and homogeneous, achieving significant diffusion even in metropolitan cities. In all likelihood, this is at least in part because in these areas of Italy, the party had no original base from which to radiate outwards. In other words, the South lacked the community proximity that originally allowed the party to massively increase its votes in the valleys and foothills of Northern Italy. This element implies that penetration into previously non-Lega areas may reflect a pattern of diffusion that is less constrained by the characteristics of a given local area, and more closely correlated with media messaging.

At the most recent European elections in 2019, the party achieved its highest numbers ever, polling over 30% as its center of gravity underwent a decisive shift and its electoral base broadened in southern regions that had previously belonged to the Lega's former ally, the Movimento 5 Stelle (which had taken almost 50% of the votes cast in this part of the country). Regional and municipal elections later in 2019 saw the party have governors and mayors elected for the first time in the South. Considering the small number of party branches opened and difficulties in establishing a local

political class (with the exception of areas inherited from other formations or imposed by the central party), despite these signs of becoming a national party, the Lega's increase in votes did not correspond to an ability to organize in areas beyond its northern strongholds. These difficulties have, in this part of the country, forced the Lega to enter into alliances, often in a subordinate position to candidates from Silvio Berlusconi's party, who are still locally influential, while suffering competition from Fratelli d'Italia on the right. It should therefore come as no surprise that alongside the narrative of the Lega as a "party of the nation," conflicting messages confirm its vocation as a party of and rooted in the North. It is likely that given the southern electorate's volatility, the party may well retrench to the Alpine valleys and industrial districts of Lombardy-Veneto, among "its people."

6. The Organization: Toward a Party at the Service of its Leader

Right from the start, the Lega's institutionalization has manifested particular characteristics. The Lega began life as a party characterized by strong, personalized leadership; within a few years, it succeeded in constructing a formal organization similar in some ways to a mass party, more solid than so-called personal parties, such as Forza Italia, which was also founded around this time.

Like Forza Italia, the Lega is a highly-centralized, vertical organization. Symbolic, organizational and political power is formally exercised by the *party's central office,* which for the Lega corresponds to its Secretary, Federal Secretariat and Federal Council.

The central party exercises top-down control over resources (particularly financial), candidacies, regional regulations and even communications, rejecting content that is deemed unsuitable. This high degree of centralization has, however, been flanked by the parallel actions of the *party in public office* at local and regional level which, in order to counterbalance the central party's vertical instincts, has sometimes resulted in tensions and clashes, and generated a structure of alternative factions.

In a complex process, imbued with unquestioned authority, the party's charismatic leader is the unifying symbol. Centrally managing the party and exercising wide-ranging autonomy, appointing loyalists and imposing political strategy, over time the Lega's original leader, Umberto Bossi, was able to ensure a relationship between the party's center and periphery by overseeing its spheres of uncertainty (Panebianco 1982). Like all parties characterized by strong, personalized leadership, the party ran the risk of dying out when its leader and founder went into political decline. Unlike a purely personal party, the Lega managed to survive and grow stronger, undertaking major organizational changes and revamping its identity (Vercesi 2015). Since late 2013, the party's formal and informal governing structures have strengthened. Salvini greatly accelerated the process of verticalization,

replacing the previous collegial apparatus with one tied to the leader's persona. Signs of these changes are evident above all in the party's statute, which governs regulations, symbols, member recruitment, candidacies, and conflict resolution methods in an ever more top-down manner. For example, in the run-up to the 2018 elections, the decision was made to put up candidates nationally while establishing two different party structures: a more traditional one in the North, and, organizationally speaking, a more lightweight one in other regions (Albertazzi et al. 2018), unified by the leader's "personal party."

The party's new plan to become (truly) nationalized, having hitherto been macro-regional, entailed tackling the hardly insignificant matter of establishing itself in areas where it did not yet have votes. Almost like a new party, a shift in scale from the local to the national brought the matter of institutionalization to the fore, requiring progressive organizational consolidation, establishing lines of authority and allowing legitimate power to be preserved. Institutionalization leads to stabilization, internally and toward the outside world (Randall and Svasand 2002), while internal development is a matter of a party's ability to become a system, usually by creating a more solid organizational structure, adopting routines to guide members' behavior, and creating a hierarchy of benchmark values that ensure cohesion.

Externally, the party has developed relations with society and the institutions in which it is embedded, while also independently exercising a certain degree of decision-making in finance and recruitment. In addition to establishing a presence in the external environment, a party expresses its autonomy when members develop an interest in the party's survival regardless of its current leadership (Panebianco 1982).

Under Salvini's stewardship, the party has approached this through clear verticalization, easing ties that bound the *party in the central office* with activism at the base and local ruling classes' administrative actions. Although the centralization of Bossi's Lega was counterbalanced by grassroots activism and decentralized structures, in Salvini's case the balance has shifted further toward the leadership, which has complete governance over the party's dominant coalition. The new leader's dirigiste line has led him to politically marginalize the old guard and anyone not strictly aligned with him (previous Secretary Roberto Maroni, rival Flavio Tosi, Mayor of Verona, and Luca Zaia, Governor of Veneto).

As a man who has held many offices within the party, Salvini has succeeded in achieving this by leveraging his knowledge of the Lega's administrative, organizational, and political structure while, at the same time, maintaining links with the base, with the militants who kept the movement alive after scandals in previous years.

When it comes to external relations, the Secretary has established his own communications staff and sought to raise his profile, first on TV, subsequently via social media. Salvini's strategy has been a rolling relaunch of his image as a politician capable of tackling and solving issues that affect common people in everyday life. There may be nothing particularly new and original about this, but it has been sufficient to conquer a confused and disillusioned electorate. Under Salvini, the party has shifted from the charismatic leadership of Bossi, targeted primarily at the party's tribe and people, to a new model of a popular – in many ways populist – leader who speaks to a mass electorate, a transformation necessary to meet the challenges of maximizing vote numbers nationwide, at whatever the cost.

7. Conclusions

What is the outlook for the Lega? How likely is it to achieve hegemony over Italian politics?

To fully assess the party's scope in terms of opportunity and the limits of its action, it is worthwhile distinguishing between the domestic and international spheres. Within Italy's political context, Salvini's party has long faced a two-fold challenge: internally, within the party, and externally, its relationship with political competitors. The Lega's extreme internal verticalization has had a major impact on its internal organization, resulting in the almost total catalyzation of attention and resources on the party leader, allowing him to rise to prominence in the media and stay in national view. When the coalition government with M5S came to end, the party's attempt to wrest solo command of the country resulted in a major setback. Prolonged absence from the national decision-making sphere and uncertainties about when Italians will return to the polls have led to tensions among elements within the party. Salvini has responded by closing ranks and proposing a return to a local focus, launching political marketing drives to guarantee votes from the base. This decision has, however, been ineffective because the verticalized party no longer has the same presence and grassroots coverage as before.

This was the situation prior to the Covid emergency. Differing results in managing the Covid pandemic in the two symbolic Northern regions the party has administered for decades – Lombardy and Veneto – have exacerbated a conflict that has always existed between elements within the party, leading to a resurgence of internal currents and policy proposals alternative to Salvini that are more closely aligned with the Lega's old federalist model.

After calling time on its brief period in government with the 5 Star Movement and then serving a short stint in opposition, Salvini found an unexpected way out. Taking advantage of the major window of opportunity presented by the pandemic, the Lega chose to support the Draghi government, albeit with some distinctive positions. This – and perhaps this alone – has boosted the party's decades-old positioning as a party of struggle and government, within and against the institutions, able to go

beyond the conservative field while at the same time setting aside its sovereignist battle in order to tackle the national emergency and post-pandemic recovery.

The party's relationship with (its former) allies is another challenge. After the breakup of the coalition government with M5S, the party's main dilemma is its relationship with Forza Italia. Outside the so-called Padania area, the Lega is still conditioned by the (symbolic) presence of Silvio Berlusconi, who, sometimes beyond his true electoral strength, remains influential in regions where Salvini's party is not self-sufficient. The party is also facing competition from the right with Fratelli d'Italia. Compared with the Lega, Giorgia Meloni's party has the advantage of embodying a classic, traditional right-wing party, one that is better able to take Italy's North-South divide in its stride, picking up votes from a southern electorate still not entirely convinced about what the Lega has to offer. In addition to its competitive advantage in southern parts of the country, Fratelli d'Italia challenges the Lega on the role of the State, its policies, and symbols, including its foreign policy (for example, its willingness to take up freer, less constrained positions regarding Russia, and a greater openness toward relations with Donald Trump).

Regardless of how national events develop, the Lega's outlook for the future will be determined by international relations. After grand proclamations in recent years and anti-European backing from US and British governments, poor results by the sovereignist bloc in the 2019 European elections proved to be a major setback to the ambitious project of gaining a foothold within the EU's institutions. Despite the Lega and Front National's success in their respective nations, these populist, radical right formations have seen their influence and lobbying powers on Brussels politics wane, not least because of internal divisions on a number of key issues.

On the economy, for example, divergent positions have emerged on public spending: southern European groups are more favorable to expansionary policies, while northern groups are more inclined to support austerity measures. On immigration, the main cause of friction is Hungarian leader Orbán, who is hostile to reforming the Dublin Treaty, which obliges refugees to remain in the Mediterranean countries where they first set foot in Europe. Links with Putin, which the Lega supports but many Eastern European formations are strongly opposed to, is another problem.

Overall, international sovereignists may find themselves without a common European agenda, merely bearers of individual national schemes that converge with one another on a single goal: rather than to create a European front, to use nationalism to destabilize, replace, and transform conservative parties in different countries to the benefit of their own national policy goals.

Such an outcome is by no means a foregone conclusion, particularly considering the tragic events of 2020. Health and economic crises amplify the political weakness of challenging parties, absent from the decision-making sphere and unable to express proposals and solutions through the European

Parliament. As fear of the pandemic has swept through the populace, even traditionally strong flagship topics for the populist radical right, such as immigration, have taken a back seat. Extraordinary injections of public spending to boost national economies have shored up national governments, overturning austerity policies especially in those Mediterranean countries where populist forces had been on the rise.

It remains true, however, that the still-unpredictable effects of the crisis may end up being a multiplier of conflicts and political, economic, and social destabilization. If this proves to be the case, challenger parties will always be ready to take advantage of the opportunities as and when they crop up.

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