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Looking at right-wing nationalism with a longer term perspective: the Lega in Italy

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Abstract

The Lega, founded in 1991 under the name Lega Nord, is amongst the oldest populist and Eurosceptic parties in Europe. An analysis of the history of the party and the evolution of its political discourse allows a better and more context-embedded understanding of its Euroscepticism, especially since in its early years the party's programme was rather pro-European.

The Lega's sometimes contradictory stances on Europe are the outcome from conflicting dynamics that guide the party's politics. Its identity discourse has constantly emphasized the European-ness of northern Italy, since the party professed to associate northern Italy with Europe, its modernity and economic success, as opposed to the Italian state and southern Italy. This European-ness has increasingly been understood in culturalist and exclusionary terms.
The party's economic discourse, for a long time focused on the defense of the interest of small and medium entrepreneurs in northern Italy, has articulated contrasting views on Europe and the European Union. It has understood Europe as a market, and the European Union as a body that should offer protection to northern Italian entrepreneurs from presumed unfair competition. It has in a first stage envisioned the EU as an institution that could protect the north against the Italian state, but increasingly as a bureaucracy that favours the larger states in Europe. The party has in particular been critical of the Euro, interpreted as a currency that favours Germany, while it renders competitive devaluations (previously often employed by Italian authorities and advantaging the export-oriented entrepreneurs of northern Italy) impossible.

Keywords: Lega, northern Italian identity, European identity,

Introduction: situating the Lega's discourse

The Lega remains in many ways an anomaly in the European party landscape. The party is difficult to classify, since it seems to belong to many party families, and its discourse includes elements of regionalism and populism (Biorcio 1997; 2010). In more recent years, references to extreme right ideologies and nativist nationalism have become predominant themes. The northern Italian or Padanian identity the party has claimed to incarnate has perplexed many commentators who frequently interpret it as a mere invention. The volatility of the party ideology, its identity discourse and its politics, including the recent shift from a frequently anti-Italian regionalist discourse to Italian nationalism, has equally bewildered commentators. There is for sure a post-rational dimension present in the discourse of the Lega, but this discourse with its strong us-them logic has also been able to create a community with a strong immunity from external criticism (Bonazzi 2016; Carmagnola 2012).

Rather than emphasizing the presumed irrationality or aberrant nature of the Lega's political discourse, my approach to analyse it rather emphasizes its "normality", the way it deploys and transforms arguments and reflections also present in mainstream discourse (cf. Huysseune 2006). Rather than focusing on how the Lega has been increasingly influenced by new right ideology (cf. Spektorowski 2003), I intend to highlight how its discourse interacts with varieties of mainstream discourse. Within the Italian context, it is only one of the many articulations of populist rhetoric that have become predominant in Italian politics, and that originated before the Lega, with the socialist party leader Bettino Craxi (Desideri 2016). Its identity discourse can best be interpreted taking into account existent articulations on Italian national identity and differentiations within the Italian nation, as well as social science considerations on northern economic and social development (Huysseune 2006). In a broader context, the identity articulations of the Lega reflect broader processes of identity construction in Europe, both at the national and regional level (cf. Stråth and Triandafyllidou 2003; Rost et al. 2007). Following Bo Stråth (cf. Stråth 2000; 2017) and informed by postcolonial theory, I will point out how the Lega's identity construction reflects broader contradictions within European identity discourses, with an emphasis on the relation with the Others implied in these discourses.

My contribution is essentially based on a critical analysis of the Lega's discursive production. To create a community and a new national identity, the party has constantly been concerned to justify its political stance. In it early years, the then party leader Umberto Bossi authored (generally together with the journalist Daniele Vimercati) several books that

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articulated the Lega's vision of Italian politics and of northern identity (Bossi and Vimercati 1992, 1993, 1998). From 1995 on, the party attempted to develop more systematically a Padanian identity, to sustain the claim for northern independence the party actively promoted in the late 1990s. For this purpose, it supported the review *Quaderni padani* (Padanian Notebooks), edited by the *Libera Compagnia Padana*, the Free Padanian company). The review explicitly functioned as a tool for the elaboration of a Padanian identity highlighting the specificity of the history of Padania, its culture, folklore and dialects. Its editor, Gilberto Oneto, also authored a systematic elaboration of Padanian identity, the volume *L'invenzione della Padania. La rinascità della comunità più antica d'Europa* (The invention of Padania. The rebirth of the oldest community in Europe, Oneto 1997), and, together with Giancarlo Pagliarini, a compendium of pro-independence arguments, *50 buoni ragione per l'indipendenza* (50 good reasons for independence, Oneto and Pagliarini 2005). Once the Lega started downplaying the idea of northern independence, at the turn of the century, it stopped attempting to provide a systematic and argued account of its ideas (and relations with the editor of the *Quaderni padani* in fact deteriorated from then on). Certainly in recent years, the social media have become predominant in the party's communication strategy. Nevertheless, previous elaborations of the party programme continue to condition its present programmatic articulations. On specific programmatic features, in particular its anti-Euro stance, the party has nevertheless taken care to provide intellectually informed backing of its arguments.

My analysis contains three sections. In a first one, I focus on the northern Italian (or "Padanian" identity discourse of the Lega. I analyze this discourse highlighting its European embeddedness, and parallels between its construction of an us/others dichotomy and European identity discourse, and propose a tentative interpretation of the party's recent Italian national turn. In the second section I locate these identity discourses within the broader geopolitical vision of the party and its attitudes towards Italian and European institutions. In the third section I analyze the economic programme of the party, with a particular focus on the tension between economic liberalism and protectionism that is characteristic of the party's economic views. In the conclusion, I propose some reflections on the relevance of the case of the Lega for understanding contemporary right-wing nationalism in Europe.

The Lega's identity discourse

The elaboration of the Lega's nation-building discourse has been possible because of the specific nature of articulations of Italian identity. After Unification (1860-1861), the Italian state actively promoted the divulgation of this identity. At the same time, confronted with the strong heterogeneity of the territory and the difficulties of the state to affirm its authority in the newly acquired southern territories, an alternative discourse distinguishing the modern and superior North from the backward and inferior South came into being (Petracconi 2000). It is this alternative discourse, diffusely present both in intellectual reflections on the country and in northern popular culture, that the party has been able to activate in a context (from the late 1980s on) of increasing dissatisfaction with a corrupt and inefficient political system, flaws that the party was able to associate with the South.

The Lega's articulation of a northern identity from the early 1990s on could hence adapt a pre-existing discursive framework. It contrasted a modern and entrepreneurial northern society to a backward (and implicitly "southern") state. The party deploys the image of the *popolo produttore* (the producing people), to describe the presumed strong labour ethic and the entrepreneurial skills of northern Italians. The Lega moreover associates these virtues with Max Weber's protestant entrepreneurial spirit, rooting again northern identity firmly within a modern, (northern) European cultural context. This emphasis on northern Italian socio-economic virtues has the added value that it corresponds with scholarly descriptions of the societal embeddedness of diffuse industrialisation in large parts of northern Italy (Huysseune 2006, 176-7). This discourse identifying northern Italy with Europe and socio-economic modernity, at the same time associates southern Italy with backwardness and its symbolic exclusion of Europe, reviving a long-standing rhetorical identification of southern Italy with backwardness and Africa. The Lega's identity discourse hence contains two dimensions: the affirmation of the socio-economic modernity of northern Italy and its deeply rooted cultural identity (cf. Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001, 105-38; Gómez-Reino 2002, 79-116).

The 1995 turn of the Lega towards independentism and the development of a Padanian identity necessitated the articulation of a more elaborated and coherent vision of Padania, and of the Padanian nation as a historically rooted ethnicity. A first feature that was emphasized was language. Gilberto Oneto has for this purpose developed a distinction between the dialects of the regions north of the Apennines, arguing that they are more related to Occitan, Catalan and French than to Italian, and therefore constitute a separate language, Padanian (Oneto 1997, 65-6).[1] This definition of Padania on the one hand excludes the Central Italian regions, in socio-economic terms similar to the North, but facilitates on the other hand the creation of a more coherent cultural identity, with language as a marker of a deep identity, rooted in history and in inherited cultural traditions. This ethnonational discourse locates the origin of Padania's ethnic identity with the pre-Roman Celtic presence in these regions. This discursive framework considers contemporary Padanian virtues as a Celtic inheritance, arguing that both Padanian entrepreneurship and autonomism have their origins in Celtic ethnic values.

The Lega certainly does not argue that the territory of Padania developed in complete autarchy, since such an affirmation would be blatantly counterfactual. It nevertheless makes a clear distinction between contacts with the

North and Western Europe in general, and those with the South and Mediterranean regions. The party's slogan *più lontano da Roma, più vicino all'Europa* (further away from Rome, closer to Europe) is indicative of the orientation of the Padanian nation (cf. Tambini 2001, 111). It values the links of the region with northern and central Europe, the "Celtic" territories of north-west Europe (Busi 2002) and also "Mitteleuropa" and the Habsburg Empire. It correctly argues that the Alps have historically been a transit zone through which cultural influences from Europe have reached northern Italy (Huysseune 2010b). Northern Italy's history of contacts with the South and Mediterranean regions is on the other hand either ignored, or described in negative terms: the Roman conquest, the centralism of the Italian state, immigration.

Throughout its history, both in its more pro-European and Eurosceptic phases, the party highlighted the European-ness of northern Italy, stating even that Padania is the heart of Europe (Oneto and Pagliarini 2005, 22). To justify the location of northern Italy with Europe, the party emphasises its similarity to the core territories of northern and western Europe both in socio-economic profile and in cultural and historical terms. Especially in its early years the Lega, to prove Padania's modernity and European-ness, rhetorically expressed in its acceptance of core European values, even when it was uncomfortable with some of them like gender equality and even more LGBT rights (Huysseune 2000; 2006, 187-8). The principles of the party's discourse are not entirely incompatible with mainstream presentations of Europe that emphasise its unity in diversity. The Lega accepts the presence in northern Italy/Padania of ethnic and religious minorities with a longstanding presence, the Ladino-speaking communities, Waldensians, Armenian Christians, Slovenians, Croatians and Jews (Oneto and Pagliarini 2005, 9). The Lega is, however, much less ready to accept populations that it perceives as a threat to the core values of Padania and of Western modernity. This category includes non-European immigrants from poor countries. In its more centrist phases it tended to accept their presence on condition of their cultural integration, but otherwise the desire prevails to exclude alien, non-European cultures from its territory and the refusal of multiculturalism and any cultural melting-pot model. Its attitude towards Europeans from peripheral regions, southern Italians and Europeans from the Southern Balkans and the East, is more ambivalent, and especially concerning southern Italians in practice the party is prepared to accept their presence in the North, on condition of cultural assimilation.

With its recent national turn, the Lega seems to have discarded this northern identity discourse (Mazzoleni and Ruzza 2018). Some caution, however, is due. Its core membership of party militants and cadres in the northern Italian regions where the party has strong local roots certainly has not abandoned its regionalist perspective, and tends to interpret the party's present line as temporary tactics (Albertazzi et al. 2018). The present party leadership is moreover cautious enough to articulate its Italian national discourse in terms that are not too blatantly and overtly contradicting its previous northern identity discourse, taking care to reaffirm the traditional opposition to state centralism and solidarity with other European nations without a state (Mazzoleni and Ruzza 2018). The party's identity discourse has moreover already in the past been characterized by a notable flexibility. While it is systematically constructed around the opposition us-others, the identity but also the nature of this Other has frequently changed over times.

A fundamental feature has remained constant, namely the location of identity within Europe, and the construction of Others as less or non-European. Such construction profits from the nature of mainstream discourses of European identity and their implicit foundation of a distinction between Europe and its Others (cf. Stråth 2000; Zemni 2002). Mainstream discourses of European identity are ostensibly un-ethnic and framed in universalist terms, but they frequently imply an assumption of civilizational superiority, of Europe as a post-modern polity and a normative power. Recent years have undoubtedly witnessed the rise of alternative European identity discourses, generally following a civilizational logic inspired by Samuel Huntington. Linkages of Europe with a Christian identity were obviously reinforced with 9/11 and the construction of Islam as a hostile other, while in recent years non-Western immigrants and refugees have been increasingly included in this category in right-wing oriented nativist affirmations of national and European identities (Stråth 2017).

In the Lega's construction of otherness, all these elements are present. While in its early years, the party focused its hostility towards southern Italians, immigrants soon became another target for its discourse of othering. The increasing importance given to anti-immigrant rhetoric corresponds with the party's evolution from an ostensibly centrist towards an increasingly right-wing profile. Certainly after 9/11, the party has foregrounded northern Italy's and Europe's Christian identity (Lottieri 2002; Gulisano 2004). The Oriental and Islamic Other have for the Lega become the main foes of Europe and Padania, and as a consequence the party has campaigned against the EU-membership of Turkey (Busi 2003; Bontempi 2004), as well as against symbols of the presence of Islam, for example mosques. Attitudes towards non-Islamic non-Western immigrants is in general hardly more positive, at best they are tolerated as a necessary workforce, but without political rights and as much as possible excluded from social rights, essentially a workforce to be exploited (cf. Gómez-Reino 2002, 117-40, Huysseune 2010b). The logic of its politics is one of inequality, and in its intentions which it is presently trying to implement, it may be compared to historical examples of institutional discrimination such as segregation in the United States.

The party's categorization of southern Italians is much more ambivalent than those of non-European immigrants. Its interpretation of the South's difference relies on cultural arguments, but is not always consistent on the issue. Party discourse for sure contrasts southern Italy with a modern and European Padania, and understands the region's economic underachievement and inadequate governance, and particularly organized crime, as signs from its cultural

distance from Europe and the North (Huysseune 2008). Oneto and Pagliarini (2005, 7) have attempted to provide a historical explanation for the South's Otherness, highlighting the influence the region has undergone from Islam and Orthodox Christianity, that have contaminated its Catholicism. This explanation reproduces a discursive feature also present in mainstream discourses on European identity, the presence of a frontier zone of transition between Europe and its Others (cf. Stråth 2000). While mainstream versions of this vision locate this frontier zone in south-eastern Europe and the Balkans, the Lega also tends to include southern Italy in this category. While these peoples are viewed as contaminated by non-European, Mediterranean and Islamic culture, they are nevertheless not explicitly excluded from Europe and they are assumed to have the potential to reach the standards of European culture. This is also the case in the Lega's discourse. The party has moreover also articulated more inclusive discourse on southern Italy. Whenever the Lega attempts to find political allies in the South or to create its own constituency in those regions, it downplays cultural differences within Italy, and as such the new Italian nationalist discourse of the party has precedents in the party's past. The historical discourse the party developed in the past also provided an instrument to redeem the South. In this discourse, hostility towards the state was projected on the process of Unification during the Risorgimento, which in the Lega's rhetoric had artificially brought together distinct nations. In this discourse, however, the South (conquered by Garibaldi and Piedmont) was of necessity seen as much as northern Italy as a victim of the process of Unification and interestingly enough, the Lega cites with approval narratives of southern victimization to sustain this view (cf. Huysseune 2008).

Specific of the Lega's discourse of otherness is that it also includes institutions, the Italian state in the past, and those of the European Union more recently and in the presence. Besides critiques of specific politics (see next section), this particular dimension of the Lega's discourse is based on another discursive opposition (with a libertarian background), that between society and state, the healthy community of producers against the bureaucrats of state institutions. In the case of the Italian state, this othering also included an ethnic dimension, since the state and its bureaucracy were interpreted as under southern influence and the expression of a southern and Levantine culture (although the party was also obliged to admit that the centralism of the Italian state originated from European influences, namely the French Jacobin tradition). In the case of Europe, notwithstanding occasional references to German domination, such an ethnic profiling is absent, since it would contradict the European identity-vocation of the party.

Compared with its ethnic identity discourse, the party's attitude towards institutions is more volatile, marked by the dynamics of the political opportunity structure and the specific political demands the party articulates. It includes two somewhat contradictory components, claims against interfering authorities discouraging the autonomous development of society, and claims against an authority not providing adequate support and/or protection to society. A constant and crucial feature of the party's discourse has nevertheless been the defence of northern economic interest, with a specific focus on the region's small and middle entrepreneurs. These articulations of northern interest are themselves, however, embedded in broader geopolitical considerations.

The Lega's geopolitical views and its relation with Italian and European institutions

The Lega has consistently attempted to locate both nation-building discourse and its policy proposals in a broader economic and geopolitical context. Its rise coincided with the demise of communism and the independence wave of new nations in post-communist Europe. In this context it proposed itself as an example of a people rediscovering its individuality and therefore acquiring the right to autonomy or even independence (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 127-30). It also deployed in this context the rhetoric typical of European ethno-regional parties on the necessity to create a Europe of peoples and regional states (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 208). It favours the self-government of peoples and out of respect for their cultural diversity rejects processes of cultural homogenisation.

The Lega has for a long time opposed northern Italy or Padania as a self-governing community to the Jacobin Italian nation-state. In its early years, it argued that the demise of the geopolitical order of the Cold War would lead to the disappearance of the centralized, artificial and Jacobin nation-state. During those years, the party's discourse focused on critiques of the inefficiency of the Italian state and its cumbersome bureaucracy, and on the corruption of Italy's political establishment. For the Lega, the Italian state with its centralized structure, with the national government and the central bureaucracy exercising control over the decision-making process at the local and regional level, deprived society of its liberty. Particularly in the early period, the party linked the inefficiency of the Italian state to its allegedly southern nature (referring in particular to the overrepresentation of persons with southern origins in public administration), and as hence contaminated by southern culture, opposed to the modernity and efficiency of northern society.

Because of the strong European component in its identity discourse, the Lega originally held a more benign view of European institutions. During those years, it associated its claims for federalism or the independence of northern Italy with the idea of its integration in the EU, as a region or as a member states. It also argued that European institutions functioned as a counterweight to the Italian state, and that its regulations protected northern Italy against Italian authorities (cf. Chari et al. 2004, 427). However, even in those years party literature critiqued the EU for its

centralism, and its subordination to the interests of its bureaucracy, high finance and the multinational corporations (e.g. Bossi and Vimercati 1992, 202; 1993, 208-9). Since its Eurosceptic turn in 1998, the party views the EU, like the Italian state, as a centralist institution, opposed to the aspiration for self-government of European peoples. The Lega's critique of the EU parallels in fact its arguments against the Italian state. It considers both as institutions that produces an excessive quantity of laws, rules and regulations, while it suggest that the EU administration resembles the plethoric, interventionist and inefficient bureaucracy of the Italian state. They both incarnate the negative inheritance of Jacobinism, and Lega authors have also sometimes rhetorically identified European institutions with communism (Locatelli 2002; Bracalini 2004). Lega member and then Minister of Justice Roberto Castelli (2002) argued that the institutions of the European Union are anti-liberal and function in undemocratic ways, while present party leader Matteo Salvini describes them as enemies of the cultural identity of peoples.

The Lega has articulated a number of institutional reform proposals, both at the national and European level. At the national level, these proposals have been characterized by their high volatility and limited consistency, with anti-redistributionism as the only important constant feature. At the European level, the party has only shown limited interest in the development of a regional level of governance. Like other regionalist parties, it has proposed the creation of a Europe of the Regions which would follow a more confederal institutional model, some of these proposals have been inspired by the Swiss example of federalism (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 208-12; Oneto 2002; Pagliarini 2002; Stucchi 2003). These proposals, both at the national and the European level, express the Lega's understanding of the principle of autonomy as political and economic liberty through the right to self-government. The logic of the Lega's programme goes even beyond national or regional self-determination. The strong localism of the party implies the idea of local self-governing societies, with an implicit centrifugal dynamic of fragmentation since the party omits reflections on how such self-governing entities should cooperate (or at best assumes that the shared ethnic identity will render such cooperation self-evident) (cf. Vandelli 2002, 67-71).

One of the striking paradoxes in the history of the Lega is how the party managed to combine for such a long time a rhetoric hostile towards the Italian state with its regular participations to Italian national governments. As such, the Lega's history seems a precedent for what is a striking characteristic of new-right nationalism: its capacity to maintain its credibility through an anti-establishment rhetoric while at the same time cooperating and being part of this establishment. It is also in this light that the Lega's anti-European rhetoric needs to be interpreted, rather a bargaining tool than a real intention to break with the European Union and the Euro.

The Lega's economic views

It is in its economic proposals that the tension and contradictions of the Lega's politics become clearest. It is also the field where the party's politics are most concrete, linked to the expectations of its core constituency of small and middling entrepreneurs and their labour force in peripheral northern Italy, and as such they also reflect the contradicting demands of this constituency.[2] These oscillate between a liberalism which, more than a political or economic ideology, reflects the desire of economic actors not to be disturbed by rules and regulations or other forms of state interventions, and the need of these very same actors to receive (economic and/or social) support of external institutions.

In its early years, the Lega rhetorically favoured economic globalization and the creation of a global liberal economic order, in which it inserted its political project (cf. Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001, 139-72; Huysseune 2006, 180-91), and in those years the party's programme broadly corresponded with more mainstream programmes for economic reform (cf. Huysseune 2006). This liberalism focused on critiques of the in Italy traditional strong state interventionism in the economy, and was translated into proposals for the privatization of the Italian economy's extensive public sector (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 192-4). The liberal ideological climate of the early 1990s was also a favourable breeding ground for the Lega's attacks on the state's redistributive policies. The party attacked *Roma ladrona* (thieving Rome), the predatory Italian state accused of depriving the North of its wealth. Its critique of redistributive policies was based on the assumption that these policies favour the South, and is supported by references to well-publicized examples of waste and corruption in public spending in the South.[3] Such examples give credibility to the Lega's representation of northern Italy as a cow milked by the Italian state to subsidize the parasitical South. At the same time, the Lega accuses the Italian state both of discouraging the autonomous development of the North, and of not providing adequate support to the northern economy (e.g., infrastructure, support of export). This ambivalence on state intervention also characterizes the party's attitude towards welfare provisions. In its early years, the party abundantly deployed mainstream rhetoric of the dangers of "assistentialism", abuses of welfare provisions allegedly predominant in southern Italy. However, rather than opposing welfare, the party has defended position of welfare chauvinism, i.e. the exclusion of immigrants of the attribution of welfare benefits (see e.g. Bossi and Vimercati 1998, 56).

The party has over time become increasingly critical of economic globalization: it has started questioning the dogmas of economic liberalism and has become increasingly favourable to protectionist policies (cf. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005, 964). Rhetoric identification with economic liberalism have nevertheless not disappeared entirely from the party's discourse. They correspond with the desire to represent the northern Italian economy as strong and able to face the challenges of globalization. In such context, economic globalization can still be defended as a process

that weakened the authority of the nation-state and increased the liberty of peoples (e.g. Bassani 2007, 4-7). However, while the EU was initially perceived as favouring globalization, more recent literature rather perceives it as a protectionist cartel opposed to real globalization (Stagnaro 2002). The Lega's defence of a Europe of Regions and small states implies in fact an alternative economic model, of communities freely competing without unnecessary rules and regulations for economic success and to attract investors. Small states like Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Estonia – supposed to be corresponding with ethnic communities – are given as examples of successful competitors, because of their leanness and the necessity they have to open themselves to the international market (Lottieri 2004, 45). This contribution contrast their allegedly spontaneous and market-determined development with the unsuccessful state-assisted development of the Mezzogiorno (ibid., 44-5). Revealingly, however, the Lega is cautious to propose such a model for northern Italy itself since it assumes, notwithstanding its professions of economic liberalism, that northern Italian entrepreneurs do have a right to state support and state protection.

Over the years, the Lega has indeed increasingly become favourable to more protectionist policies, reflecting also the increasing competition from outside Europe northern Italian industry has been confronted with. As a consequence, demands for more explicit economic protectionism and for European tariff barriers against imports from China have become a more prominent feature of the Lega's programme. While counting on protectionist measures from the EU, the party has also expressed its desire to defend northern Italy from over-powerful competitors within the EU, like Germany and France (Bossi and Vimercati 1998, 139-45). The Lega, however, reserves its protectionism to (northern) Italy. In its early years, it argued that southern Italy should undergo a drastic neo-liberal economic cure: exemption from taxation of profits for northern investors, the containment of labour costs by the introduction of regionally differentiated wage scales, and the containment of social costs (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 194-6; Pagliarini 1996, 44-8). Following a same logic, it has also described Slovenia and Croatia as acceptable partners within a European framework and good business partners for Padania, if they would accept a liberal model that favours Padanian investors (Vitale 1997, 1998). The Lega thus proposes an asymmetric and hierarchical model of globalization, in which peripheral regions in Europe have to submit to the interest of foreign investors while Padania preserves a right to economic protection (Huysseune 2010a). This protectionist view has moreover broader implications, since it also implies the right to social protection and welfare provisions for ethnic Padanians, as well as to cultural protection against outsiders and cultural deviants.

The concerns for European competition were not coincidentally first voiced in 1998, when the Lega initiated its Eurosceptic turn. This turn was for sure determined by a changing political opportunity structure related to the Eurozone: while before 1998 in light of Italy's difficulties to fulfil the conditions of the EMU, the party could argue for a separate adhesion of Padania (northern Italy) to the EMU, Italy's successful inclusion in the EMU in 1998 rendered this argument obsolete (cf. Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001, 108; Conti 2003; Chari et al. 2004; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). The Lega's Euroscepticism and later its critical stance towards the Euro, however, also reflects the specific economic conditions of the strongly export-oriented northern Italian industry: while before the Euro northern entrepreneurs were occasionally able to profit from unilateral devaluations of the Italian currency, the introduction of the Euro has rendered this policy option impossible.

The Lega's economic policies have thus been marked by contradictory options: economic liberalism based on a nationalist belief in a strong northern economy, and protectionism based on the awareness of its vulnerability. The tension between these two beliefs has also marked the Lega's reaction towards the 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath. The former belief motivated the party's identification with the austerity policies of the EU and a desire of association with the northern European "ants", while the latter dimension motivated a more critical stance towards the EU and a certain solidarity with the "crickets". Because of the tension between these two dimensions, the party's reaction to the crisis have been ambivalent and oscillating. During the first period, the traditional anti-southern rhetoric was reiterated, whereby the North was dissociated from the southern "crickets" and the need of a stronger autonomy or even independence of the North was proclaimed (e.g. Dussin 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). Some contributions proposed, like the Lega's programme before 1998, that the North would continue to be part of the Eurozone, while southern Italy would be included in a zone accepting another weaker currency (Lega Nord 2012; Garibaldi 2012). Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, this more critical stance prevailed leading to the affirmation of a strong anti EU and anti-Euro rhetoric. Concerns about EU policies, economic imbalances within the EU and German predominance, had already been voiced before Salvini took over party leadership in 2014 (Huysseune and Dalle Mulle 2015). Salvini radicalized this stance in an effective at least rhetorical rejection of the Euro. In light of the predominance of social media communication of the Lega in recent years, it is revealing that he took care to provide for academic backing of this hostility towards the EU, in a booklet by the economist Claudio Borghi Aquilini (Borghi Aquilini 2014, and for an analysis Huysseune and Dalle Mulle 2015). Interestingly enough, this booklet reproduces the ambivalence on northern Italy's economic status that has characterized the Lega's discourse in the past. While its argumentation against the Euro is based on a reflection on the imbalances within the Eurozone and the impact of EU economic policies on peripheral regions, it at the same time proposes northern Italy as an advanced economy. This stance suggests that also under the Salvini leadership the conflicting readings of particularly northern Italian economy, both as strong and as in need of protection from stronger economic actors, will not be discarded. It remains to be seen whether the newly adopted Italian national discourse will lead to a real shift in the economic perspective of the party, or whether under the cloak of Italian nationalism the emphasis will remain on the defence of what are presumed to be northern

economic interests. There are certainly some indications that the party will follow as much as possible the latter option.

Conclusion

The Lega appears as a case where right-wing nationalism cannot be understood as merely in opposition to European values and a European post-national identity. One of the core features of the northern Italian identity discourse the party articulated has always been the identification of this territory with Europe and European values. As such, it exemplifies the fact that in European regions deemed to be more peripheral or which consider themselves to be frontier regions, the cultivation of European identity is a crucial element of self-inclusion, and the eventual exclusion of the Other considered to be beyond the frontier, a mechanism for example particularly present in the former Yugoslavia during the Balkan wars, but characteristic also, for example, of post-communist identity articulations in Hungary (cf. the contributions in Stråth. and Triandafyllidou 2003). These cases reveal the ambivalences that are in fact inherent in the European identity construction, between a rhetoric of cosmopolitanism and one of civilizational superiority which the Lega, like other right-wing nationalist parties, has radicalized into an identity discourse with a barely hidden racist undertone.

The history of the Lega also sheds light on how to interpret the anti-elite and anti-institutional dimension of right-wing nationalism. Throughout its existence, the party has had few qualms to cooperate with economic and political elites in Italy, and there are certainly some indications suggesting that beyond its anti-Europe rhetoric the party and its present leader are ready to accommodate themselves with European elites. Rather than a rejection of the EU it may, like other right-wing nationalism, perhaps better be considered as an attempt to reform the EU in a state-centric and culturally exclusivist direction, a direction which – paraphrasing Andrew Moravcsik, we could frame as illiberal intergovernmentalism. The Lega's anti-institutionalism is equally ambivalent. It is the expression of an ideological view of a virtuous society not in need of state intervention, of the belief in the self-governing capacities of local societies, a belief contrasted and even contradicted by the regular demands for state support. The party's limited interest in institutions may, however, also be read in a different light, expressing like other right-wing nationalist parties a vision whereby power is exercised with little regard for the traditional checks and balances of liberal institutions or for other forms of social mediation.

An analysis of the discourse of the Lega also provides food for thought concerning the European impact of right wing nationalism and the eventual emergence of a new illiberal intergovernmentalism. The Lega's programme based on a defense of national economic interest (be they "Padanian" or "Italian") is in itself not incompatible with the European project, where these interests have always preserved a prominent place. What is more problematic, is the party's assumption that its territory of reference has a (more or less) exclusive right to economic privileges denied to other territories. As such, it suggests a more radical defense of national interests than is common practice in the EU, and it is worthwhile raising the question of whether this could be typical of right-wing nationalism. Recent events have shown that beyond the common anti-immigrant rhetoric there is little solidarity between European governments in which right wing nationalist parties take a prominent place. At a point of time where the economic crisis of 2008 has already made cooperation between European countries more contested and more problematic, the rise of a new illiberal intergovernmentalism would put European integration even more in jeopardy.

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[1] The ethnic Padania outlined by the Lega broadly corresponds with the Italian regions located north of the Apennines - Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna and Trentino, with the exception of the predominantly German-speaking province of Alto Adige (South Tyrol).

[2] The relation between the party and northern economic interests is of course more complex, and its opponents have frequently claimed that the Lega does not really represent these interests. Overall, it nevertheless seems that the party has a capacity to represent issues that are particularly relevant for its core constituency of small and medium industries.

[3] For a discussion of this claim, see Huysseune 2006, 114-5. Analyses of the redistributive policies of the Italian state certainly outline a more nuanced picture than the one of the northern discourse of victimization.