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ITALIAN RIGHT WING POPULISM

Right wing populism and Euroscepticism have experienced an important growth in the last decades all around Europe. Italy has also been highly affected by this phenomenon and, since the early 1990s, various populist parties appeared on its political scene. Since the early 1990s Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, Umberto Bossi’s Lega Nord and Gianfranco Fini’s Alleanza Nazionale became the hegemonic forces of the conservative political area. However, since 2012, Beppe Grillo transformed Italian politics introducing a new form of populism: his Movimento 5 Stelle, not following the traditional left-right paradigm, represented a shock in the static world of the Italian politics.

The working paper is going to focus on the phenomenon of right wing populism and Euroscepticism at national level, exploring the reasons for the success of Forza Italia, Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale- Fratelli d’Italia.

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I. INTRODUCTION

While the 1970s had been, after the educational revolution of the late 1960s, characterized by the diffusion of the values of individual autonomy and free choices over lifestyle, the 1980s were characterized by conservative counter-movements and the revival of far-right ideologies.¹

As a matter of fact, immigration offered to the right-wing parties the possibility to criticize the libertarian left and to rehabilitate a form of extreme nationalism that, since the end of the Second World War and until that moment, seemed to be banned from the current political debate.²

Jean Marie Le Pen in France, Filip Dewinter in Belgium and Umberto Bossi in Italy are some of the most popular right-wing politicians from the 1980s and their speeches were characterized by racism, machoism, anti-Semitism and sometimes even by denial of the Holocaust.

In the French legislative elections of 1978 the Front National of Jean Marie Le Pen used the slogan ‘One million of unemployed is one million of immigrants in excess’: it was one
of the first slogans to correlate the presence of foreigners and the rise of unemployment.\textsuperscript{3}

In the last thirty years parties and political leaders changed and also the approach of the right-wing leaders towards the public opinion has become extremely different. As a matter of fact, the legislation forced many politicians and parties to change their language in order to be more respectful and, also for this reason, they became more respectable in the eyes of the public opinion. Those parties that, in the 1980s, were depicted as fascist and anti-democratic, nowadays do not scare anymore the public opinion and it has become difficult for mainstream parties to curb their rise.\textsuperscript{4}

Italy has not been saved by this tendency and, instead, according to some observers, populism found its `paradise` and its `richest testing ground` in Italy in the late 1990s.\textsuperscript{5}

The combined total vote for populist parties exceeded the 50% of the votes for the first time in occasion of the 2013 national elections\textsuperscript{6}, after getting close to that result in 2008, when the populist parties already got an astonishing 48.1%.\textsuperscript{7}

Many researchers have already made studies on the phenomenon of populism in Italy at national level (Roberto Biorcio, Giuliano Bobba, Cento Bull, Duncan McDonnell, Marco Tarchi and Dwayne Woods among the others).

The paper is going to investigate the Italian political arena, with the aim to analyze the characteristics of the three main right-wing populist parties and the reasons of their success.

\section*{II. ITALIAN RIGHT WING POPULISM}

According to Guy Hermet, `Italy has transformed itself into the site \textit{par excellence} of populism triumph over the classical parties`.\textsuperscript{8}

There are many reasons that let populism to be so successful in Italy.

The most important fact to take into account when analyzing Italian politics is the radical transformation that characterized Italian politics in the early 1990s. While, on the one side, the Italian Communist Party was directly affected by the end of communism in Eastern Europe, on the other side, other parties were shaken by the anticorruption operation `Mani Pulite`, that put under pressure the Christian Democratic party (\textit{Democrazia Cristiana}) and the Socialist Party (\textit{Partito Socialista Italiano}). The corruption scandals have contributed to fasten the collapse of the so called `Prima Repubblica` party system. A system that was already suffering a crisis of credibility in the previous decade: as a matter of fact, the 1960s and 1970s Italian economic boom had created a new urban middle class that did not feel anymore represented by the traditional left- Christian Democratic division that characterized the political life of the country until that moment.\textsuperscript{9}
The Italian political system has always been characterized by a lack of civic culture, by strong regional disparities and by strong ideologization. Parties had remediated to this situation integrating politically Italian population, thanks to the widespread presence on the territory of associative networks and party offices.\(^{10}\)

However, the post-Tangentopoli crisis\(^{11}\) did not have the same effects in all the political spectrum. As a matter of fact, in the early 1990s, the crisis of identification in the parties affected more the Catholic and Christian-democratic voters of Democrazia Cristiana than the right or left-wing voters.\(^{12}\)

The Communist party remained anchored to old ideological schemes and underwent a transformation toward a moderate Social democratic party. The right-wing nationalist Movimento Sociale Italiano undertook a transformation in order to represent a European moderate right. It is important to say that the term ‘right’, in the Italian political jargon, had always been used to identify the extreme right and the neo-fascists. The right-wing parties, because of the legacies of the Fascist period and of the figure of Benito Mussolini, have always been isolated and viewed with suspicion by the mainstream parties.\(^{13}\)

The moderate area, that before was represented by the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, was the one characterized by the most radical changes. Both parties were destroyed by the judicial investigations: an investigation led by the magistrates of Milan, demonstrated the existence of political corruption and of an illegal party’s financing system, backed by private companies and entrepreneurs.\(^{14}\)

The moderate and conservative voters did not have anymore any party representing them and it is in that context that Lega Nord and Forza Italia, the two most successful Italian populist parties for at least two decades, emerged. The two parties were able, better than the left, to respond to the problems that the Italian society was undergoing in that moment and to the anti-political sentiments that were spread among the population in that historical moment; in addition to that, both the parties were able to reflect the conservative values were still important for the Catholic electorate.\(^{15}\)

The electoral reform of 1993 was another factor that heavily affected Italian politics: it provoked a bipolar tendency and it gave more visibility to the leaders of the coalitions. The latter condition has been a fundamental factor on the rise of Berlusconi that, as a television and newspaper tycoon, did not have many problems to impose his personality in the new system where the political competition was based on the personality of the single candidate, situation unknown in the `Prima Repubblica`.\(^{16}\)

2.1. **Lega Nord**

2.1.1. Creating a new Padanian identity

Lega Nord has been considered one of the most successful regionalist parties of Europe
and it is classified as an `ethno-regionalist` populist party. Their politicians have created a national identity for Northern Italy, whose regions, however, are characterized by different historical patterns. Politicians of Lega Nord created the name of Padania for the territory of Northern Italy, however, until that moment, the world Padania had only a geographical meaning (referring to the valley of the Po River) but, since Lega Nord started to use it, the nation of Padania started to exist in the collective imagination of the Italians. The fact of being able to create, in a couple of years, the sense of a Padanian identity, was one of the biggest achievements of Lega Nord. The party was able to create an identity with a process that, under some points of view, proved to be more successful than the one of the creation of an Italian identity. Starting from the socioeconomic modernity of the region and its higher level of economic development compared to the rest of Italy, their regionalist discourse strictly connected this reality to a supposed common historical heritage. This framework assimilated Padanian people and entrepreneurship to the virtues of the Celtic people that originally inhabited the territories of Northern Italy. In addition to that, Gilberto Oneto, an intellectual of the party, argued that the dialects spoken in the regions located North of the Apennines are more related to Catalan, French and Occitan than to Italian. The importance of this theory is that it allows to identify Northern Italians with Europeans not only on the roots of the historical heritage of the Celtic people but also from a cultural point of view. Moreover, both the theories allow to distinguish the people from Padania from Southern Italians; while Northern Italy is assimilated with Europe and modernity, Southern Italy, due to its backwardness, is linked to Africa.

2.1.2. Padanians and their enemies: `us` against `them` In his early speeches, Umberto Bossi, the main creator of the Lega Nord, used to point out that Lega was not a party but only a popular movement of people from Northern Italy that embodied the need of that part of the country to have more freedom from the corrupted party system based in Rome. Lega Nord took advantage of the general disaffection toward politicians that was particularly strong in the early 1990s and accomplished to represent the political elites as groups of people interested in exploiting the resources of Northern Italy and enjoy privileges in Rome. The rhetoric used against the political elites in those years would have been used with many other people and enemies in the following years. Bossi and the other members of Lega Nord used a strategy common to the other populist parties, according to which the Northern Italians had always to face some enemies that wanted to menace the democratic rights and the economic prosperity of their regions. The Northern Italians became a group of people (`us`) that
needed to be defended from the others (‘them’). Lega Nord, also in the political debate, does not have opponents but only enemies.24

Together with the political elites, another big ‘enemy’ dominated the party’s rhetoric in the early 1990s: the Southern Italians. While people from the North of the peninsula was represented as productive, hardworking and honest, Southern Italians were represented as corrupted, parasitical and somehow ethnically different from the Italians from the North.25

However, by the late 1990s, politicians and Southern Italians were not the most dangerous enemy anymore: immigrants had become the new risk for Padania. Those people, coming mostly from non-European countries, represented a danger: not only they were stealing jobs from Padanians but they also posed a threat to the social benefits of Northern Italians. This attitude became even more aggressive after 9/11: as a matter of fact, from that point on, Lega Nord started to associate all immigrants with terrorists.

Since that moment on, Lega Nord focused mainly on the Muslim immigrants, representing them as a double threat. Firstly, suspecting that many of them had contacts with international terrorist organizations, they were represented as a danger for the security of the Western world. Secondly, due to their faith, they were a danger for the Christian identity of Italy and Europe.26

The party states that it does not exist a problem of integration because integration is not possible, as certain cultural differences are not possible to overcome. Umberto Bossi defines himself as a racial egalitarian and objects that no race is better than another, but he promotes a vision according to which every person should continue to live in its own motherland.27

In the last years the party has also focused its attention on the Roma people. Roma people in Italy live in conditions of extreme poverty and degradation, mainly in camps located in peripheral areas, in many cases without having access to the minimum standards of social assistance. The anti-gypsies propaganda started to be particularly vigorous especially since the election of Matteo Salvini as new leader of the party (2013); he has participated to many public events wearing sweaters with the word ‘Ruspa’28 experiencing great appreciation among its voters, to the point that the motto “Ruspa, Ruspa” has become a slogan of Lega Nord voters.

The dislike for the immigrants allowed Lega to accuse another historical enemy of the party: the political left. As a matter of fact, the party propaganda has linked the continuous flow of immigrants with a scheme of the left-wing parties that would enable those same parties to take over the political control of the country.29

Finally, it should not be forgotten that Lega Nord is considered to be an Eurosceptic party: according to this, also the European institutions are considered as something from
which the Padanian people should be defended.

As said before, Lega Nord emphasizes the fact that Northern Italy is deeply connected and has right to be part of the European Union, as it considers it as a ‘rich man’s club’ to which Padania has the right to belong. However, since the late 1990s (more precisely since 1998, when Italy was accepted in the EMU), its position towards the European institutions changed. As a matter of fact, in its early days, Lega Nord saw the European Union as a possibility to create a Europe of the Regions, in which Padania would have been considered as a separate entity from the rest of Italy. This did not happen and, since that moment, the party started to have an Eurosceptic approach.

From that moment on, Lega Nord suggested the idea of two different ‘Europees’: a virtuous one, the ‘Europe of peoples’, that could allow Padania to get closer to the central European people and markets. A second negative Europe, the ‘Europe of the institutions’, represented by the European Commision, the European Central Bank and the European Court of Justice. The party started to identify the ‘Europe of the institutions’ in the same way it used to represent the party system in Rome in the early 1990s. Accordingly, Brussels became the new enemy, more than Rome, and the European institutions have sometimes been rhetorically identified with Communism and its centralism and interventionism.

2.1.3. Lega Nord evolution: from a local to a national party

As said before, Lega Nord is not the only right-wing populist party existing in the Italian political panorama. However, the ideas and solutions proposed by a regionalist party as Lega Nord differ greatly from the ones of the other two right wing populist parties, Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale- Fratelli d’Italia. Nevertheless, the three parties have created coalition governments at national and local level.

Without a conceptual glue that could hold together those three parties, the success of the Italian populist right would have never been possible and the ‘Berlusconi phenomenon’ probably would have never existed. According to Fella and Ruzza, this conceptual glue was the populist approach of those three parties.

Lega Nord had an important role in shaping the right wing political panorama in the last decades; as a matter of fact, Umberto Bossi’s party transformed the right-wing culture of Northern Italy. It scaled down the Italian nationalist patriotism and promoted a regionalist sentiment, focusing increasingly on the immigration problem. This attitude allowed the party to win votes in some regions of central Italy that cannot be considered Padania such as Tuscany, Marche and Umbria.

It is not surprising that, since 2014, the party does not refer insistenty anymore to the North. The discourse of the party has become more nationalistic and this helps to
understand how it is possible that Lega extended its territorial area of influence. The problems of immigration and of the rules applied by Brussel regarding all the Italian territory and the party does not want to lose the opportunity to expand its influence at national level.

Soon after 2014 European elections, the new party leader Matteo Salvini created a new sister party for the regions of Central and Southern Italy where Lega Nord was not active\textsuperscript{37}: this party, called \textit{Noi con Salvini}, proposed Eurosceptical and anti-immigration theories and led Matteo Salvini, in a speech in Palermo, to apologize for the past rhetoric of Lega North against Southern Italy.\textsuperscript{38}

The interest to transform Lega Nord from a regional and regionalist to a national and nationalist party can be interpreted in reason of the fact that over the years the electorate of Lega Nord changed deeply. While in the mid-1990s Lega Nord got most of its votes from the moderate electorate, in the last years the party got a lot of support from the former right-wing supporters and lost the one of the traditional electors of center and center-left parties.\textsuperscript{39}

The huge success of Lega Nord can be better explained also in reason of some important features that the party introduced into the Italian politics.

Firstly, Lega Nord was able to become a mass party because voters felt its politicians closer to them than the ones of other parties. Lega Nord has followed the legacies of the \textit{Democrazia Cristiana} and of the \textit{Partito Comunista Italiano} that, in the Italian collective opinion, represented not only parties but, due to the widespread presence on the territory of their associative networks and party offices, had also a role of political socialization. Lega Nord was the only party of the `Seconda Repubblica` that continued with a widespread presence on the territory and, accordingly, people started to look at it as the only one that really cared about the real necessities and problems of the Italians. The big difference between the \textit{modus operandi} of \textit{Dc} and \textit{Pci} and the way of behaving of Lega Nord was the fact that the final target of Lega Nord was not a stable participation of the citizens but only to obtain electoral support.\textsuperscript{40}

Being perceived as the party that `defends the citizens and the territory` allowed Lega Nord to be, in some occasions, incoherent between what was said (or made, when part of the government) at national and at local level.

Another characteristic attitude is the use of simple slogans and to appeal to the common sense of the Italian people.\textsuperscript{41}

This is a typical populist technique. However, it appeared to be extremely successful in the Italian politics, as a similar communicative style has been used by Silvio Berlusconi. The strategy of using the simple language of the `ordinary man of the street` proved to be successful also because it was used in opposition on what was happening during the `Prima Repubblica`, when it was even created a world (\textit{politichese}) in order to
describe the political jargon that was used by the politicians until that moment. Both Lega and Forza Italia, thanks to their simplifying approach, promoted the idea that many Constitutional norms (such as the judicial independence and the system of check and balances) were superfluous.

In addition to that, the party distinguished itself by its rejection of the institutional figures and procedures of the Italian state and in more than one occasion Lega’s politicians addressed insulting remarks to the Italian head of State, the President of the Republic.

Lega maintained this simplifying approach also in regard to the economic issues. As noted by Bobba and McDowell, in the 2008-2011 period, the party avoided discussing economic issues, preferring to delegate those topics to the Popolo delle Libertà, the party founded by Silvio Berlusconi in 2007 by merging his party with the post-fascists of Alleanza Nazionale and other Catholic and liberal parties. It preferred to focus on its strong topics of immigration and Euroscepticism. The only few times in which the issue of the economic crisis was approached, it was represented as a consequence of the unfair competition of Eastern European countries or China. Later on, when, after 2011, the economic crisis become stronger, Lega presented it as the result of the politics imposed from Brussel and strongly opposed, albeit being part of the government, to the changes required by Europe.

Finally, it is worth to take into account what Passarelli and Tuorto stressed in their article “The Lega Nord goes south. The electoral advance in Emilia Romagna: A new territorial model?”. Their research has underlined how some common voting trends are emerging when the performances of Lega Nord are analyzed (their analysis covered Veneto and Emilia Romagna regions). Accordingly, the party gets, in both regions, more support in the small towns and in the mountainous and foothill areas.

This trend could be extended to most of the regions in which Lega was able to rally electoral support. As a matter of fact, the two regions in which the investigation was conducted are part of the so called “Third Italy”: an area that corresponds roughly to the regions of Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino Alto Adige, Emilia Romagna, Marche, Umbria and Toscana. A territory characterized by an industrial development based on a dense network of small firms concentrated in industrial districts and by a special social structure, with the absence of class polarization and strong familiar and interpersonal ties.

However, this model turns out to be valid for North-Western Italy too. Lega Nord obtained astonishing results also in that region, that presents a different socio-economic background, with a prevalence of the big industries to the small and medium sized enterprises. Interestingly, it was in those territories (mainly in the foothill areas of Lombardia and Piemonte) that the
phenomenon of the regional leagues started, in the mid-1980s.\textsuperscript{49} Areas that in the `Prima Repubblica` were strongholds of Democrazia Cristiana and that, outside and in contrast to the metropolitan regions of Milano and Torino, were characterized by small industries and by a social structure similar to the one of the `Third Italy`.

Those were the typical environments in which, in its early years, Lega Nord was able to collect the majority of its votes. That was the starting point from which Umberto Bossi has then been able to create a party that would have heavily influenced the Italian political life in the following decades.

2.2. \textit{Forza Italia}

\textbf{2.2.1. Berlusconi`s personal party: a reaction to Lega Nord success} While Lega Nord is considered an ethno-regionalist populist part, Berlusconi`s Forza Italia has always been categorized as a moderate populist party. The party is defined as `liberal-populist` and `neoliberal populist`.\textsuperscript{50}

This definition has proved to be controversial as Forza Italia has taken illiberal positions in more than one occasion, expressing its intolerance towards some Constitutional norms that are at the base of the Italian democracy.\textsuperscript{51}

While Lega Nord is considered to be one of the most successful European regionalist populist parties, Forza Italia is acknowledged as one of the best examples of populist personal parties.

The first scholar to refer to Forza Italia as a personal party was Norberto Bobbio in the 1990s. Personal parties proved to be a successful tool in the Italian politics, as in the 1990s other similar parties characterized the Italian political arena.\textsuperscript{52}

In those parties the figure of the leader proves to be fundamental: the appeal of the party is not based on any electoral program or ideology, but on the personal charisma of the party leader, that is represented as the perfect person in order to resolve the problems of the country.\textsuperscript{53}

Berlusconi created a party profiting of some of the core elements of populism; however, he made this mainly for tactical purposes.\textsuperscript{54} Forza Italia was established before 1994 elections, in a period in which the popularity of Lega Nord was growing strongly. Berlusconi was interested on winning the votes of the former Christian-Democrat and Socialist middle-class voters that until that moment had chosen Lega Nord.\textsuperscript{55} Taking advantage from the crisis of the party system, he offered Italians a new form of political representation, through its personal party.\textsuperscript{56}

Unlike Lega Nord, in his party the `us` versus `them` strategy had only a marginal importance. Forza Italia is seen as a populist actor for its rejection of the political elites, and not for its redefinition on who belongs to `the people` and who not.\textsuperscript{57}

However, although not being a founding part of the party`s rhetoric, the `us` against `them` strategy was also used by Berlusconi`s party.
While Lega Nord has been changing target during the years, Berlusconi has always been attacking judiciary and the political left. It is worth to note that, over the years, the anti-communist rhetoric has been joined by an anti-Islamic and anti-gypsy propaganda: the electoral successes of Lega Nord pushed Forza Italia to approach to those positions. As Lega Nord created the myth of Padania in order to give consistency to its political message, Forza Italia proposed a revision of Italian twentieth century history. As remarked by Galli Della Loggia, Berlusconi used anti-communism in the same way that politicians of the `Prima Repubblica` had used anti-fascism.

Berlusconi promoted revisionist campaigns in regard to the fascist regime and of the Resistance. In addition to that, the 1960s and 1970s were represented as a period in which the country became controlled by the left-wing forces: taking the control of schools, press, universities and Judiciary, those political forces took the control of the Italian culture.

The media-tycoon repeatedly labelled his left-wing opponents (and the members of the Judiciary) as `terrorist`, comparing them to the left-wing subversive organization of `Brigate Rosse`. The attacks to the Judiciary has always been important in Berlusconi rhetoric and he often accused judges to persecute him as a vengeance for his fundamental role in the post-Tangentopoli period politics.

Berlusconi used this anti-communist stance also for another strategic reason: revising contemporary history allowed him to legitimate the post-fascists in the political arena.

The political system after `Mani Pulite` was characterized by a bipolar competition between left-wing and right-wing parties, with the absence of any party collocated at the center of the political spectrum. For this reason, Berlusconi tried to leverage key issues of the right-wing and nationalist parties, in order to get the votes of the right-wing electorate of the Movimento Sociale Italiano.

In the early 1990s, the post-fascist party, under its leader Gianfranco Fini, underwent a radical transformation. Because of this huge transformation, of the crisis of the political system and of the benevolent attitude of Berlusconi, the post-fascists abandoned the marginalized position that characterized the Movimento Sociale Italiano until the late-1980s and became a fundamental actor in the Berlusconi project and in his governments.

Another clear difference between Bossi’s and Berlusconi’s parties is the fact that, while Lega Nord uses clear populist stances in its political program and activities, the case of Forza Italia is more controversial: in its documents, the party proposes itself as a mainstream center-right party. The populist attitude emerges in Berlusconi’s and in the party politicians´ communication style.

The populism of Forza Italia is different from the one of Lega Nord as the two parties
are addressing their messages to a different target of voters. While Bossi´s party refers to a particular geographical area, Forza Italia refers to all the Italian citizens. Berlusconi, as a media tycoon, addressed his message to the wide audience of his televisions: some scholars referred to Forza Italia as an example of ´Television Populism´.  

Similarly to Umberto Bossi, Berlusconi introduced a new communicative method in the Italian politics. Using simple and direct messages, which can be easily understood by the entire population, Berlusconi was proposing himself as the defender of the Italian society from the danger of communism. In his message, he was linking the values that until that moment inspired Democrazia Cristiana to his party, stressing that Forza Italia would have been the political actor fighting for them from that moment on. In his electoral manifestos, using a typical strategy of the populist parties, Berlusconi is talking directly to the voter, in first person (´I hope´, ´I am convicted´) and he is usually portrayed as a `normal` person, as a friend that will save Italy.  

Placing himself at the head of the party, Berlusconi used his image of successful businessman as a guarantee to his voters. This allowed him to propose a political manifesto that eluded any political connotation. ´Creating one million of new jobs for the Italians´ was one of the most famous slogans of the Forza Italia´s leader in the 1990s: through this slogan Berlusconi wanted to steal to the left-wing parties one of their traditional issues and his personal charisma allowed him to do so, without being perceived ambiguous by his voters.  

2.2.2 Berlusconi’s catch-all political project  

The concept of ´freedom´ has been fundamental on Berlusconi’s political agenda: Forza Italia promised freedom from taxes and bureaucracy, from judicial prosecution and from fear. Thanks to those promises and through those messages, Berlusconi was appealing to a wide audience of voters: business people, ordinary citizens or people that had been involved in corruption scandals.

The message of Berlusconi was universal and he was trying to get the support of the broadest field possible of voters. Through the alliances with Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale, he constructed a kind of center-right catch-all ideological house.

Berlusconi message was also universal under a geographical point of view: while Lega Nord focused only on Northern Italy electorate, Berlusconi aimed to create a party that could be successful in all the Italian territory. In order to do so, he was making different kind of promises in the various parts of Italy. If, on the one side, he was promising tax cuts to the Northern middle class, on the other side, he was ensuring conservative and state-dependent voters from the South about the construction of major infrastructural structures.

While Lega Nord solutions were aiming to a greater regional autonomy and a clamping-down of immigration, Forza Italia was
proposing reduced taxes, a cut to bureaucracy and the promotion of public works.\(^6^8\)

The position of the party in respect of the European Union is of moderate skepticism. Forza Italia, as part of the EPP (European People’s Party), sees the European Union as an instrument to support and reinvigorate freedom. However, in the party rhetoric, Germany, the Euro and the European Central Bank are, in more than one occasion, represented as responsible of the Italian problems.\(^6^9\)

The adoption of Euro, together with the unstable international situation and the unfair competition from India and China, were indicated as reasons for the poor economic performances of the country during the Berlusconi’s governments.\(^7^0\)

In order to better understand the Forza Italia’s phenomenon, it is important to take into consideration the party structure. Forza Italia has always resembled more to a company of Berlusconi than to a party. As a matter of fact, it was organized using the financial resources and the experience of Fininvest (Berlusconi’s holding). For this reason, the party has always been assimilated to its leader that represented any election as a referendum on his person.\(^7^1\)

Accordingly, the party statute gives a central role to the party leader. The leader is responsible to nominate several relevant organization roles, having limited internal controls over his/her action.\(^7^2\) In the early 1990s, due to its peculiar organizational structure, the party was represented as a movement that would have had a marginal and temporary role in the Italian politics. The fact of having such a cumbersome leader, moreover without any previous experience in the politics, seemed to be a problem for Forza Italia. On the contrary, the figure of Berlusconi became fundamental for the party, and most of the electoral successes are attributable to his leadership and charisma: such a personal success was mainly attributable to his personal experience as a media tycoon and his effective communicative strategy.

However, Berlusconi proved to be the undisputed leader not only of Forza Italia but of all the center-right coalition. This was evident in November 2007, when Berlusconi announced that his party would have formed, together with Gianfranco Fini’s Alleanza Nazionale and other minor Catholic and liberal parties, a new party called Popolo delle Libertà (The People of Freedom). Casini and Fini had initially ridiculed this initiative, but afterwards they underwent to Berlusconi will: Alleanza Nazionale merged with Forza Italia while Unione Democratica di Centro remained an independent party, however bound to Berlusconi initiatives.\(^7^3\)

Noteworthy, after 2013 national elections and 2014 European elections, the media tycoon still maintained his position as party leader, despite the poor electoral performances. This gives the measure of how Berlusconi is an indispensable figure within the party.\(^7^4\)
2.3 Alleanza Nazionale

2.3.1. Italian Right in the early 1990s: from Movimento Sociale Italiano to Alleanza Nazionale

Alleanza Nazionale is the third right-wing populist party that characterized the Italian political scene in the last decades. However, the classification of the Alleanza Nazionale as a populist party is more problematic than the cases of Lega Nord and Forza Italia.

As seen before, in the Italian politics, the term ‘right’ had always been used to identify the extreme right and the neo-fascists. In addition to that, MSI, as a neo-fascist party, had always been isolated and none of the major Italian parties wanted to have any official relationship with it.\(^75\)

Accordingly, for MSI it was impossible to take the populist attitude that characterized the Front National in France: the memory of the Civil War and of the Resistance was still too fresh in the collective opinion and a similar populist attitude would have not been tolerated in the Italian political arena.\(^76\)

Because of its ideological basis, the party could have easily assumed populist stances and this strategy would have been endorsed by many of the party members. However, party leaders preferred to follow another strategy and tried to give to Alleanza Nazionale an image of responsible party.\(^77\)

Already in the late 1980s, in the context of the crisis of the ‘Prima Repubblica’, the Movimento Sociale Italiano undertook a deep transformation, taking a moderate stance and proposing ideas similar to the ones of the other Right-wing European parties.

The early 1990s represented an historical moment for the Italian right: the crisis of the traditional parties transformed the political arena, that became a bipolar system based on the political confrontation between the conservative and the center-left coalition.\(^78\)

The nationalists had the opportunity to become a leading player in the Italian party system, getting out from the condition of isolation that had always characterized the MSI.\(^79\)

In 1995, after the Fiuggi convention, Alleanza Nazionale took the place of MSI. The foundation of the new party represented a turning point for the Italian right, that distanced itself from its fascist past.\(^80\) As a matter of fact, Alleanza Nazionale was conceived as a party that shared the values of Western classical conservative right.

This transformation was seen positively not only by the general opinion but also by left-wing parties and opinion leaders. This positive attitude can be explained with the widespread desire in the Italian politics of overcoming the divisions in regard to the fascist past of the country.\(^81\)

Accordingly, Alleanza Nazionale was perceived more as a new right-wing party than as a continuer of the fascist past. However, most of the components of the party were still the same politicians that occupied prominent positions in the MSI.

The greatest revolution introduced by the new party was the fact that the relevant
positions in its leadership were occupied by a new generation of politicians (the leader Gianfranco Fini was in his mid-forties). While most of the activist and politicians of the MSI adhered to the fascist party and took part to the fascist experience, the young generation of AN politicians had no connection with the fascist past.

According to Ignazi, the party emerged from its founding congress with ambiguous cultural and ideological references. While, on the one side, the final document was declaring an acceptance of democracy and the importance of the anti-fascist struggle in order to restore the Italian democracy, on the other side, it was expressing loyalty to the MSI post-fascist heritage and referred to Julius Evola and Giovanni Gentile, thinkers that had influenced the Fascist regime.\(^{82}\)

However, the party was giving a new ideological imprinting to the Italian politics. Already in its early stages, Alleanza Nazionale aimed to distinguish itself from Lega Nord and Forza Italia, addressing its message to a different target of voters and trying to propose itself as a valid alternative to right-wing voters.

2.3.2. **Alleanza Nazionale: the moderating soul of Berlusconi`s governments** The party supported the traditional family as a pillar of the Italian society, the importance of Catholicism and criticized the libertarian revolution of the late 1960s. AN was presenting conservative ideas, putting a special emphasis on the national identity. However, in the Berlusconi´s right-wing coalition, Alleanza Nazionale had a moderating centrist influence: Lega Nord and, in some occasions, Forza Italia presented more radical stances.\(^{83}\)

The leadership of Gianfranco Fini was fundamental on the process of institutionalization of the party. Although not being a ´populist style´ charismatic leader, Fini became a symbol of the legitimation of the right into the Italian and international establishment. His efforts, aiming to achieve personal and partisan legitimization, let him become one the most respected figures of the Italian right and of the Berlusconi`s governments: achievements that allowed him to get the charge of Minister of Foreign Affairs before and of official representative of the Italian government in the European Convention after.\(^{84}\)

AN represented the most moderate-conservative element of the right-wing coalition and this attitude was particularly evident on the party´s positions in regard to immigration, European Union and Constitutional norms. Those three issues have always been part of Lega Nord populist discourse and lately Forza Italia has followed a similar path too. On the contrary, the approach of Alleanza Nazionale has always been more cautious.

Probably because of the memory of its fascist past, the party has always been respectful of the Italian constitutional norms and proprieties.\(^{85}\)
In regard to immigration, both AN and MSI have never adopted a xenophobic agenda, preferring to link the issue of immigration to the chain of exploitation created by the capitalist economic system.\(^{86}\) This attitude has always distinguished the two parties from the other post-Fascist European parties. MSI, already in the 1980s (when Italy, for the first time, had to deal with migratory waves), had connected the problem of immigration to the capitalist domination of the world. In this respect, the party called for a more balanced relationship between the North and the South of the world\(^{87}\): a surprising position for a right-wing party. However, this theory is not surprising nor inconsistent: as a matter of fact, the problems of the social inequality and unequal distribution of wealth had already been addressed by the Fascist ideology (the same Benito Mussolini was a Socialist in his early life). Some of those theories continued to be used by the neo-Fascist MSI that melted its nationalist ideology with the concept of social justice. Even the name of the party, with the term `Sociale`, aimed to recall this very issue.

In the early 1990s, the party had a positive attitude towards the European institutions. The European Union was called `European Club` in the Fiuggi programme, giving the impression that being part of the European project was a privilege for selected few. Being AN a nationalist party, this kind of attitude seems to be contradictory. However, the Fiuggi programme explains that Alleanza Nazionale is in favor of a Union that promotes a `Europe of the Fatherlands` and where the policies at European level respect the national interests.\(^{88}\)

Anyway, it must be emphasized that even Gianfranco Fini`s party, in some occasions, has assumed populist stances. This happened mainly in regard to the rejection of the former political elites and on the representation of the left-wing parties and politicians.\(^{89}\)

As seen before, in November 2007, AN melted with Forza Italia in order to create the new party of the Popolo delle Libertà. Gianfranco Fini, after losing his party leading position, started to heavily criticize Berlusconi`s leadership, accusing the media tycoon to do nothing in order to better develop the new party and to impede internal democracy.\(^{90}\)

It was the first time that some leading figure of the center-right coalition was criticizing Berlusconi leadership: the friction would have led Fini, in 2010, to leave the PDL and create a new group, called Futuro e Libertà per l`Italia. This event represented a split also in the old leadership of Alleanza Nazionale, as only a part of the old Fini party merged in Futuro e Libertà per l`Italia, while the rest remained in the Popolo delle Libertà. Initially, the decision of Fini seemed to be unimportant for the survival of the Berlusconi government. However, the center-right government did not last long: in the following months other politicians followed Fini`s example and left Popolo delle Libertà, leaving Berlusconi`s government with a narrow majority. The 2011 financial
crisis, together with the external pressures from the European institutions and the financial markets, worsened the situation and finally led to Berlusconi’s resignation.

III. CONCLUSION: THE CURRENT STATUS OF ITALIAN POPULISM

After having analyzed the three souls of Italian right-wing populism, some conclusions about the current status of Italian populism can be drawn.

While, as seen before, Lega Nord is trying to extend its popularity in the rest of the Italian peninsula with the Noi con Salvini movement, the Popolo della Libertà is not existing anymore.

After the resignation of Berlusconi as Prime Minister in 2011, the internal divisions of the Popolo delle Libertà became even harsher: as a consequence, the party dissolved in 2013.

This led to the creation of many parties representing the Italian center-right. Berlusconi recreated Forza Italia, while the Nuovo Centrodestra now represents the most moderate and Catholic part of the former Popolo della Libertà. Finally, Guido Crosetto, Giorgia Meloni and Ignazio La Russa created Fratelli d’Italia, a party whose target is to represent the nationalist and conservatives, carrying on the heritage of Alleanza Nazionale. The party has taken anti-immigration and anti-Euro stances and the party’s president Giorgia Meloni has in more than one occasion endorsed the views of Front National’s president Marine Le Pen. However, the changes occurred within the center-right have not been the most remarkable phenomenon of the last years. As a matter of fact, the static world of the Italian politics had to deal with Beppe Grillo’s Movimento 5 Stelle. Another populist movement which, however, has revolutionized the Italian way of doing and perceiving politics.

With the typical approach and rhetoric of the populist movements, the M5S has used the tool of the internet in order to create a new anti-establishment movement, in which every ‘normal’ citizen should have the opportunity to achieve a leading position. M5S has shown that the populist phenomenon is not only for the benefit of the right and it started to get consent both from left-wing and right-wing former voters.

The rise of the M5S is a clear signal of the fact that the right-wing populism did not solve the crisis of representation of the Italian politics.

M5S success was also favored by the fact that the populism of Lega Nord and Forza Italia promised a lot but ultimately delivered very little. In addition to that, the dissatisfaction in politics grew exponentially due to many scandals that interested the Bossi’s and Berlusconi’s parties after 2008. The appeal of the right-wing populism in the last decades was strictly related to the fact that those parties seemed to better understand and to propose more effective and concrete
solutions to the insecurities that troubled Italian voters. However, right-wing populist parties will now have to face the serious challenge of the M5S populism; an extremely competitive opponent that, not following the traditional left-right paradigm, can count on a very broad potential electoral pool.
Notes

1 Simon Bornscher, “Why a right-wing populist party emerged in France but not in Germany: cleavages and actors in the formation of a new cultural divide”, *European political science review* (2012), at 123.
6 The combined total vote of the Popolo delle Libertà, Movimento 5 Stelle, Lega Nord, Fratelli d’Italia and La Destra was 53.8%.
7 Sum of the votes of the Popolo delle Libertà, Lega Nord and La Destra- Fiamma Tricolore. See also Giuliano Bobba and Duncan McDonnell, “Italy- A strong and enduring market for populism”, *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession* (2015), at 159.
11 The political crisis that followed the discovery of widespread corruption among Italian political parties and which led to a disintegration of the established party system.
12 Biorcio, ibid.
16 Ibid., 174-175.
17 Bobba and McDonnell, ibid., 160.
20 Benito Giordano, “Italian regionalism or Padanian nationalism- the political project of Lega Nord in Italian politics”, *Political Geography* 19 (2000), at 447.
22 Ibid., 66.
23 Woods, ibid., 35.
26 Ibid., 38-39.
27 Ibid., 38.
28 The Italian for bulldozer, that in the imaginary of Lega Nord supporters should be the means used to destroy the Roma camps.
30 Huysseune, ibid., 67.
31 According to Lega, the natural allies and counterparts for Padania, much more than the rest of Italy.
33 Huysseune, ibid., 69.
34 Fella and Ruzza, ibid., 160.
35 Biorcio, ibid.
36 Caiani and Graziano, ibid., 6.
39 Biorcio, ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Fella and Ruzza, ibid., 166.
42 Ibid, 165.
44 Bobba and McDonnell, ibid., 167.
45 Ibid.
48 Passarelli and Tuorto, ibid., 420.
50 Bobba and McDonnell, ibid., 161.
51 As seen before, this attitude was shared with Lega Nord.
52 Antonio Di Pietro’s Italia dei Valori and Clemente Mastella’s Udeur were the most important.
54 Woods, ibid., 40.
55 Verbeek and Zaslove, ibid., 308.
56 Woods, ibid., 41.
57 Bull, ibid., 219.
58 Biorcio, ibid.
60 Bull, ibid., 223.
61 Ibid., 222.
62 Telepopulismo was the Italian term used in this regard.
63 Caiani and Graziano, ibid., 15.
64 Biorcio, ibid.
65 Bull, ibid., 222.
66 Woods, ibid., 45.
67 Fella and Ruzza, ibid., 167.
68 Bobba and McDonnell, ibid., 162.
69 Caiani and Graziano, ibid., 14-16.
70 Bobba and McDonnell, ibid., 162.
71 Biorcio, ibid.
72 Caiani and Graziano, ibid., 17.
73 McDonnell, ibid., 218.
74 Bobba and McDonnell, ibid., 173.
76 Biorcio, ibid.
79 Fella and Ruzza, ibid., 168.
81 Ignazi, ibid., 336.
82 Ibid., 338.
83 Fella and Ruzza, ibid., 169.
84 Ignazi, ibid., 339.
85 Fella and Ruzza, ibid., 159.
86 Ignazi, ibid., 341.
89 Fella and Ruzza, ibid., 168-169.
90 McDonnell, ibid., 219.
93 Woods, ibid., 47.
94 Ibid., 45.
95 Lega Nord credibility has been weakened by the scandals of misappropriation of public funding that affected Bossi’s family, while some of PDL politicians were involved in corruption scandals. In addition to that, Berlusconi’s sexual scandals had a great emphasis in the Italian media, weakening his public image.
96 Fella and Ruzza, ibid., 172.
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