

# Padania - Utopia or Reality

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In early August 1996, the striking double of the Lega Nord (Northern League), Umberto Bossi and Irene Pivetti, the young Speaker of the House of Representatives, suddenly parted ways. After the last Parliamentary elections in Italy, in April 1996, Bossi and Pivetti always appeared together at all meetings and rallies of the Lega Nord. Bossi remained true to his idea of detaching the northern part of Italy from the rest of the country and turning it into a separate geopolitical entity. Actually, Bossi initially upheld a federative idea, which Pivetti endorsed, together with the other members of the League. However, when Bossi radicalized his ideas to the extreme, calling for the partition of northern Italy, Pivetti dissociated herself from him and left the leadership of the Lega Nord.

The Italian Government took Bossi's statements at best half-seriously, since one of his main arguments for separation from Italy was the need to put an end to the drain of money from the rich North to the South, which is inactive and has been living for decades on allocations from the state budget. Partly to blame for this situation in the South are the local criminal organizations: the Sicilian Mafia, the Neapolitan Camorra and the Calabrian N'drangheta, which have thwarted all serious state projects in the Italian South, leaving the population destitute and unemployed, and living in constant fear.

## STORIES OF SECESSION

The Government was aware that the South was partly living off the North, starting from the higher taxes and other levies that the inhabitants of the North had to pay out of their higher incomes in order to maintain a tolerable living standard in the southern part of the country. Recognizing the truth of at least some of Bossi's slogans about the poor South ruining them all, together with Rome, which - as Bossi persistently claims - "steals" money from the North in order to maintain its enormous and inefficient administration, the Italian Government did not respond to Bossi's frequent pronouncements, in which the leader of the Lega Nord was no longer satisfied with stories about the federation but made increasing references to secession - finding more and more sup-

porters of this idea. Some claimed that Bossi was deliberately holding out for more but would be satisfied with less, i.e. that he was demanding separation from Italy in order to obtain a federation. However, it was shown that Bossi genuinely wanted more than a federation, when, about a year ago, he started to speak openly about the possibility of seceding.

Taking advantage of the involvement of other political leaders in their own power struggles, during the electoral campaign he openly endorsed the separation of the northern part from the rest of Italy and called for the establishment of the state of Padania, a name derived from the fertile region along the River Po (Lat. Padus), even naming September 15th, 1996, as the date when the people of "Padania" would finally opt for a state of their own. Some of the media recorded Bossi's pronouncements with more or less mockery, naming all the various reasons why a secession was unfeasible. Other media, however, warned that this was a serious issue.

As the day of September 15th, 1996, neared, the Italian Minister of the Interior Giorgio Napolitano became increasingly convinced that the situation was grave and warned Bossi to be careful about what he was saying. The problem was also augmented by the fact that August is the holiday month, that all politicians were absent from Rome, and that all kinds of rumours were circulating in the newspapers. By the time the politicians reassembled in Rome there were only about 15 days left till the announced act of secession. The question was: if Bossi proves to be serious about it, will there be enough time for effective counteraction, or at least for prevention, and whether anything might happen that would earn negative international points for Italy. Matters became radicalized to such an extent as to induce Bossi to declare he would demolish TV transmitters in the North because he did not want state television programmes to be aired in "Padania".

Bossi even went so far as to call Italian President Scalfaro an opponent, albeit a "correct" one. Scalfaro, for his part, congratulated Napolitano for not disregarding the problem of secession. Prime Minister Prodi also went public, stating he was permanently in touch with the Minister of the

Interior and that "matters were under control". In short, Bossi's words spread fear, but what was even more alarming was the state's inertia, according to the rightist factions, who blamed Minister Napolitano for not having raided the headquarters of the Lega Nord and taken other serious steps, which would have been more appropriate than his declaration that the Government was prepared to deal with any violations of the law before, during and after September 15th, 1996. Scalfaro had, namely, never permitted even the mention of secession, while leaving room for talk about a federation. Moreover, at a June rally, he said: "Woe to those who aim to break national and state unity", referring to Bossi, and added that even the very idea of separation might lead to "punishable lawlessness".

#### THE UNDERESTIMATED ISSUE OF PADANIA

By mid-August all media were following developments by reporting Bossi's and other politicians' statements, not because it was the "silly season" and there was no important political news but because the secession issue had really become the hottest political topic. The Minister of Public Works Antonio Di Pietro openly threatened Bossi with criminal prosecution like Craxi and Forlani unless he gave up his secessionist intents. Prime Minister Prodi continued to advise people to keep a cool head and, if they wanted to defeat Bossi, to start being serious about federalism. In mid-August, the Speaker of the Italian Senate Nicola Mancino proposed a referendum asking the citizens if they supported secession. As usual, half the people accepted the proposal, while the other half rejected it, because some thought this would only help Bossi while others claimed that the referendum would put an end to the story about secession in Italy. But Bossi's words could not be ignored. Bossi was backed to some degree by the Mayor of Milan Marco Formentini (who was more in favour of federalism, less of secession), and he was also promised support by the leader of the Italian radicals Marco Panella. The National Secretary of the Lega Lombarda Roberto Calderoli accused some influential politicians of using "Stalinist methods" when they demanded from the Minister of the Interior not to trust the mayors of those towns which supported Bossi.

In spite of the markedly theatrical nature of his appearances, Bossi pursued a very definite goal: secession. The events of the 1990s seemed to have lent him a hand. Some of the "imperial" ideological constructions, like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, fell apart, giving rise to national

states, one after the other. Global economic reasons impose new alliances in Europe, weakening both the old and the new states, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural. Bossi was aware of all the problems (which actually acted in his favour): the Italian intellectuals complain about the loss of national identity; the business community is watching the growing gap between the Italian South and North; politicians admit increasingly candidly the inefficacy of the state machinery; trade unions stress the damage done by centralized government; the young do not recognize in the present state the purpose and meaning it ought to have; and public opinion demands literally tangible changes. Bossi was therefore more than justified in adopting such a position, for the "patience which was running out" was on his side. This required a political answer from the state, but it failed to come about. Namely, as serious observers of the Italian scene remark, if the state thought that Bossi's outbursts were just plays from the summer repertory, why was the Minister of the Interior asked to take decisive action? If a threat is considered real, then politicians do not take a summer vacation but stay on their job.

On the other hand, Mancini's proposal to hold a referendum on secession also had its weaknesses. If a referendum had been called, namely, Bossi would have probably lost, but he would have become a victim - which would equal heroism in the current Italian situation. If Mancini had had his way, all Italians would have had to say whether they wanted a parliamentary or a presidential Republic, whether they wanted a President of the Republic or a Prime Minister, a federal or a confederal state, etc. Italy could not go on living for ever with the secession issue hanging over its head, without knowing the actual views of that part of the population who endorsed it or what boundaries such a structure would have. This, too, indicated that the problem of Padania was underestimated. It was argued that Bossi was incapable of conducting "constructive" policies. However, he might win if he could prove that the government was incompetent and that the ruling class was inert - and he was quite close to proving just that, as he himself knew.

Finally the 15th of September 1996 dawned, the day Bossi had named as the day the North would secede from the rest of Italy. Some were curious, some a little apprehensive, the rest were indifferent. In Venice, Bossi read out the declaration of independence from Italy. The police ensured peace and order, no major incidents occurred. Members of the Lega Nord held rallies in

all larger towns in the north. Television showed the newly printed Padanian banknotes with Bossi's picture, as well as subscription forms for Padanian television, which seemed to leave the audiences unimpressed. On the same day, in Milan, the leader of the rightist party Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) Gianfranco Fini rallied over one hundred thousand of his own followers to call for national unity against Bossi's secession. Their real motive, though, was to accuse their centre-left political opponents in the Government for having done little or nothing to oppose secession and preserve national unity. In this manner, Fini and his supporters made use of Bossi's rallies to promote their own party.

President Scalfaro spent September 15th, 1996, in Bari, where he opened the autumn fair and spoke about the attempt to break up Italy and about the foreseeable consequences of such an act, stressing that upholding federalism was one thing and trying to split the country was a different matter. Scalfaro then went on to say that any manifestation aimed at the free expression of views must be permitted, whether we like it or not, and nothing must be done to prevent it. However, if this should turn into incitement to commit unlawful acts, the judiciary was competent to deal with such cases and to apply the criminal code, because, as he put it, "a democracy that would hesitate to apply the criminal code would not deserve to live". If everybody does his duty, democracy will not be in jeopardy, Scalfaro insisted, adding that Italy had been through other pathological times in its history but had transcended all of them. The Italian President did not spare the journalists either, accusing them of having built a climate of unease by writing, especially in recent times, almost exclusively about the partition of Italy. Instead of this, it would be better to think about the problems of Southern, Central and Northern Italy, about the great problems of education, health, and above all of unemployment. For this reason, the idea of federalism should be endorsed, which has no opponents in Parliament. A day later, all Italian newspapers were full of reports about the secession of Padania. A war of numbers broke out. According to official reports by the Ministry of the Interior, a little over one hundred thousand members and supporters of the Lega Nord had gathered on the River Po, while Bossi claimed there had been over one million of them. At his press conference he attacked the journalists, calling them servants of the state, unfair and cheats. After Bossi's announcement that he would set up a "people's mi-

lizia", the so-called Green Shirts, the Ministry of the Interior threatened both Bossi and his future Padanian militia with arrest. To make matters even worse, this was not only the attitude of the courts in Rome but was also upheld by the courts in Mantua, the city which Bossi has designated as the seat of the Padanian Parliament.

#### **BOSSI WANTS TO NEGOTIATE**

Three days after Bossi's declaration of independence, the police paid visits to several offices of the Northern League. This was done clumsily, and only served Bossi's cause. At the League's headquarters in Verona a scuffle developed between the police and members of the Lega Nord. Roberto Maroni, one of the key figures in the Lega, had to be taken to the hospital. Bossi immediately charged the Ministry of the Interior with abuse of power and civil rights violation, and even accused the state of introducing a "fascist regime". The hasty decision of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Verona to search the premises of the League met with public disapproval, all the more so as the Minister of the Interior dissociated himself from the raid, saying that the search warrant had not been issued by him but by the Public Prosecutor in Verona. This, again, helped Bossi's cause, and the incident was discussed in the Italian Parliament, since the Members demanded an explanation about the police raid and about the Government's stance towards the Bossi phenomenon in general. This was also prompted by the statement made by President Scalfaro, who joined Prime Minister Prodi in saying that the Lega needed a political response, thus implying that Bossi's Padania could not be regarded as a momentary political fad.

Bossi signalled he wished to negotiate. A day after the police raid in Verona, Bossi sent a message saying that, in response to the appeals by President Scalfaro and Premier Prodi, he was willing to sit down with them at the negotiating table and discuss new legislation and the new Constitution. On Sunday, September 22, 1996, at the closing ceremony of the "Unita" Festival in Modena, the leader of the Party of the Democratic Left D'Alema first used the "stick", saying that it was time to stop the exhibitionism (referring to Bossi), but then used the "carrot", stating that there existed "dangerous problems and that joint effort is necessary in order to resolve them" (again referring to Bossi, but taking him seriously this time). What D'Alema calls exhibitionism, Bossi calls a political act. A dialogue can only take place if the other party participates in it. "If

D'Alema is Italy", Bossi states, "I am only the Ambassador of Padania, its humble servant". This was the signal Bossi sent to Rome, indicating he wanted talks, not police repression. It is now up to Rome to make the right step, otherwise there is no alternative to secession. The leader of the Lega Nord will not tolerate Rome's disparaging remarks about the events in the north. If Rome continues to mock them, then, according to Bossi, there will be no chance of negotiations. For the time being, in Bossi's opinion, two legislations are in force in Italy, the Padanian and the Italian. A way ought to be found to unify this dualism, and the invitation to political talks about the necessary new laws and constitutional amendments should come from the parliamentary majority, i.e. from the left centre.

In mid-November 1996, the spokesman of the Lega Nord Roberto Maroni gave a press conference in Milan and announced that voting for the "Padanian Parliament" would be held on 9th March 1997. A total of 260 members of parliament would be elected, and all persons over 16 years of age would have the right to vote. "We shall call the election for the Parliament of Padania - Maroni said - because we think that no good can come for Padania from Rome. All citizens who have reached the age of sixteen will be able to vote because Padania counts a great deal on young people". In Maroni's estimate, the electorate would number some 28 million people from the provinces of Piedmont, Liguria, Valle d'Aosta, Emilia Romagna, Friuli, Venezia Giulia, Veneto, Lombardy, Trentino, South Tyrol, Umbria, Marche and Tuscany. And this is not all: on September 14, 1997, a year after the manifestations for secession, "the peoples of the North will be called to the second decisive event, the referendum on self-determination". The question that will have to be answered by the voters of Northern Italy on that occasion will be: "Do you wish to put into effect the declaration of independence and sovereignty of September 15th, 1996, and to make Padania a federal republic within regional Europe and the Europe of nations as of today?" Maroni also announced that the referendum would be ensured by "delegations of foreign states and perhaps by a UN delegation". He also stated that "contacts at international level, leading to the establishment of a committee for the creation of a democratic party of European nations" were in progress, in the light of the 1999 European elections.

At the same time, in mid-November, the Italian political scene was marked by a conflict

between two large opposing political groupings, the left centre and the right centre, a conflict full of tension and uncertainty. In the Italian Parliament, namely, no agreement could be reached on the famous "la finanziaria", the state budget. The government of the left centre, headed by Prime Minister Prodi and the leader of the democratic left D'Alema, were in great distress because the adoption of the budget involved drastic tax increases and other burdens imposed on the citizens as a condition of entry into the European Union. The right centre (Berlusconi) took advantage of the dissatisfaction this caused and organized demonstrations, which brought into the streets of Rome the impressive figure of between 800 thousand and one million citizens. The government found itself torn between two threats: on the one hand the fear that it would be overthrown, and on the other the fear that it might not be able to fulfil the promise given before the elections that it would lead Italy into Europe. In this awkward political moment the representatives of the Lega Nord again raised their voices, encouraged by the chaotic situation and by the fact that the Government was too busy to pay much attention to them (with the exception of President Scalfaro, who constantly pleaded for national unity). In addition, commentaries full of warnings appeared in the Italian press, saying that the referendum announced by the League was either a meaningless farce or an issue to be taken very seriously indeed, and suggesting that Rome's view on Padania inclined towards the former interpretation, namely, that it was a farce.

#### INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

It would seem that both the Government and the media underestimated the meeting of the League held on 15 September 1996 when they dismissed it as a failure. But the Lega Nord is in no hurry. Furthermore, it has already succeeded in transforming secession from a taboo topic into a legitimate project, which can be the subject of discussion and around which people can be rallied, regardless of how many of them there are. The war of numbers is senseless, for whether there were 2000 or 200,000 independence-seekers who gathered by the River Po, the fact remains that this was a kind of legitimization and also exposed Italian institutions to ridicule. In the meantime, the League managed to collect 10,000 names of applicants for the "National Guard", one-third of whom were not even supporters of Bossi. Although it is true that Bossi is no Napoleon or Cavour, it is also true that he is the only Italian

leader with a concrete project, and this was reflected in the elections as well as in the latest opinion polls. Bossi is good at finding his way through the Italian political-institutional chaos. He will most probably not lead Padania to independence, because public opinion in the North would probably not endorse him. But, for Bossi, the League is a means to unsettle and expose to ridicule the Italian governmental machinery, but it will be probably left to somebody else to lead the way to a possibly independent Padania. After all, having once opted for secession, the League cannot go back. One does not even have to know Italian his-

tory too well to realize that any federal project at regional, or even municipal, level would mean the disintegration of the state. A debate about Italy as a "central" or a "federal" state is practically meaningless, especially if it is conducted in ideological terms. What would be much more important would be to restore the legitimacy, prestige and effectiveness of Italian national institutions. In other words, the choice is not between "federalism" and "centralism" but between Italy and anarchy. Time will soon show which of the two will prevail. ■

## State Intervention and Economic Development

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