

# FROM PONTIDA TO BRUSSELS: THE NATIONALIZATION AND EUROPEANIZATION OF THE NORTHERN LEAGUE

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**Abstract** The article deals with the multifaceted reasons for the transformation of the Northern League from a Padanian regionalist and separatist party to an Italian nationalist sovereignist party which is gathering allies that want to bring the European Union back to its pre-Maastricht state. An analysis of electoral manifestos, the effects of Europeanization on party competition, party system change due to leadership change and of the impact of court cases on party life has shown that the Northern League has not been following a long-term trend of policy change but has done so under its new leader Salvini. Salvini has partially imported a sovereignist, nationalist vision from the EU party scene and nationalized the party on the national scene due to the power vacuum left after Berlusconi's resignation. The transformation combined Salvini's personal worldview with the pragmatism associated with the struggle to survive due to dangers of sequestration. The new Northern League is now capable of becoming a leading right-of-the-center party in Italy and of playing a decisive role in the rallying of hard Eurosceptics ahead of the 2019 European election.

**Keywords** Northern League, Euroscepticism, party system change, Europeanization of political parties, Italy, European Union Manifesto Project

## Introduction

The Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN), a regionalist and at times even separatist party representing the interests of northern parts of Italy, has undergone radical transformation under its new leader Matteo Salvini, who took over in 2013, having beaten the party's "eternal" leader Umberto Bossi in a primary vote, securing the support of over 80 percent of full party members (ANSA 2013). The 2013 primaries were triggered by the decision of Roberto Maroni (governor of Lombardy, the biggest region ruled by

the *Lega Nord*, yet a clear example of an interim party leader) who took over the position of the federal secretary of the party<sup>1</sup> from Bossi in 2012, to leave the post by Christmas of 2013. Salvini has changed the name, imagery, and ideological outlook of the party. Under his leadership, the party has expanded its reach beyond Northern Italy, it has become staunchly Eurosceptic, nationalist

<sup>1</sup> In the tradition of Italian political parties, the general (or in the case of the Northern League, federal) secretary is the number one person in the party, and not the party president.

**Table 1.** National Electoral Success and Party Leadership of the Northern League, 1992-2018

Election	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Party Leader
1992	C 8.6 <sup>*</sup>	C 8.7	Umberto Bossi
	S 8.2	S 7.9	
1994	C 8.4	C 18.6	
	S 42.7 <sup>**</sup>	S 19.0	
1996	C 10.8	C 9.4	
	S 10.4	S 8.6	
2001	C 3.9	C 4.8	
	S 45.6 <sup>***</sup>	S 5.4	
2006	C 4.6	C 4.4	
	S 4.5	S 4.1	
2008	C 8.3	C 9.5	
	S 7.9	S 8.3	
2013	C 4.1	C 3.2	Roberto Maroni
	S 4.3	S 5.7	
2018	C 17.4	C 19.7	Matteo Salvini
	S 17.6	S 18.4	

\* C – Chamber of Deputies, S – Senate.

\*\* Percentage of the vote for the whole Pole of Freedoms center-right coalition, led by Silvio Berlusconi.

\*\*\* Percentage of the vote for the whole House of Freedoms center-right coalition, led by Silvio Berlusconi.

Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2018.

instead of regionalist, and has dramatically increased its importance in Italian, and consequently European Union party politics.

The new course of the Northern League, once "warriors of the new Pontida" (Gilbert 1993),<sup>2</sup> who conjured up a distinct Northern Italian, Celtic identity and a distinct territory called Padania (see more in Raos 2014), has led them to become a nationalist, sovereigntist party that attracts voters from all over the Apennine Peninsula, mobilized by strong anti-immigrant views and opposition to supranational decision-making in Brussels.

<sup>2</sup> Pontida is a locality in the province of Bergamo (Lombardy) where the Lombard League, an insurgency against the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, started in 1167. Pontida is one of the key cultural artifacts employed by the Northern League in its construction of a Padanian identity.

As we can deduce from data presented in *Table 1*, Matteo Salvini's ideological shift has paid off — when he took over from Roberto Maroni, the party's popularity was in free fall, while the 2018 parliamentary election has returned so many *leghisti* to both chambers of the Italian parliament that it is now the second biggest party in the country.

Some authors have pointed out that it was precisely the 2015 migrant crisis and its high visibility in Italian media that helped the Northern League, already acquainted with harsh rhetoric and catchy electoral slogans, to exploit the salience of this topic for own gains (see Abbondanza and Bailo 2018). Others purport that this party has always had a chauvinistic streak, and that in recent years it has just shifted its focus from anti-Southernism (against Southern Italians) (*antimeridionalismo*) to

anti-immigrant, xenophobic stances (Barcellona 2018). Current research on the change experienced by this party has emphasized several elements. Vampa highlights Salvini's wish to transform the Northern League into a national party, which presupposes the dilution of its traditional regionalist and federalist narrative, as well as his attempt to challenge *Forza Italia's* status as the main center-right party (2017: 33). Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone (2018: 2-3) have pointed out that Lega Nord is the only case of a regionalist populist party that has transformed itself into a nationalist populist party. Yet, populism nevertheless remains the key element of its rhetoric, providing it with a malleable policy character. This is in line with the view that the Northern League was envisioned by Umberto Bossi as a catch-all party of Northern Italy's resistance to what they perceived as Rome's centralism, bureaucratism and inefficient public spending. Due to such a catch-all character, its ideology could, naturally, be fluid, and depend on circumstances and its leader's personal inspiration. Already in 2009, Anna Cento Bull has argued that the Northern League is a case of "simulative politics", i.e. a postmodern approach to identity and mobilization which can be rooted in pure invention and personal aesthetics and does not have to be founded on socioeconomic or other interests or concrete policy alternatives. In their explanation of the party's change under Salvini, Brunazzo and Gilbert (2017) emphasize the core characteristic of populism — the need for clear identification of "corrupt elites" against which one should rally "the people". They argue that under Salvini, the party has merely substituted Rome for Brussels and thus broadened its appeal, reflecting the broader EU context of the crisis of citizen trust in central political institutions and mainstream political parties.

In this paper, we wish to offer a more comprehensive approach to the question of the why and how the Northern League has now become a rather different kind of party under its new leader. We shall try to draw conclusions from quantitative data derived from electoral manifestos, but also consider the context of party system change in Italy and the specific circumstances of the court case the party has found itself involved in. In the concluding part of the paper, we shall try to point to some of the wider implications of such a transformation of Northern Italian regionalists.

## Research Framework

In our discussion of the transformation of the Northern League, we employ several explanatory approaches. This article claims that this party has undergone a radical makeover under its new leader Matteo Salvini due to several reasons. First, this party was always a leader-oriented, ideologically vague, chameleon party. We shall try to exemplify this through a longitudinal analysis of key policy issues based on data obtained from the Manifesto Project. Second, we use the concept of Europeanization of political parties, developed by Ladrech (2002) and employ it to explain the Eurosceptic shift of the Northern League. Third, we discuss the changes in this party because of a specific context of the Italian party system. In other words, we argue that the national and Eurosceptic shift is a reaction to the power vacuum on the right-of-the-center part of the party spectrum, that came about after the resignation of Berlusconi and the breakup of his People of Freedom (*Il Popolo della Libertà*, PdL) party, as well as a reaction to the rise of a new, populist challenger party, the Five Stars Movement. Finally, we contextualize the change of the Northern League as pure power politics and pragmatism, i.e. a

reaction to the funds scandal of former party leader Umberto Bossi and former party treasurer Francesco Belsito and the subsequent investigation and court case. Organizational and ideological changes were meant to cover up the fact that the party was facing a possible sequestration of misappropriated public funds and that it could go bankrupt in the process.

## Policy Shift

In the first step of our analysis, we look at longitudinal data obtained from the Manifesto Project, a successor of the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP).<sup>3</sup> The analysis of policy shifts of the Northern League includes nine variables, covering a period from the 1992 election (the first parliamentary election when the Northern League entered both the *Camera* and the Senate as a single party and not a coalition of smaller regional lists from different parts of Northern Italy) to the 2013 election. Unfortunately, at the time of completion of this paper, the 2018 manifesto data were still not included in the Manifesto Project repository and could not, therefore, be included in the analysis.<sup>4</sup>

When assessing Manifesto Project data, we juxtapose the results for the Northern League with values obtained

for the main center-right and the main center-left parties at each analyzed parliamentary election (1992, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2013). In such a fashion, we can look at the ideological shift of the Northern League in relation to the key elements of the Italian party system. When determining which parties should be classified as the main center-left (C-L) and center-right (C-R) parties respectively, we followed two criteria. First, we looked at the two biggest parties according to their vote share and second, we looked at their positions according to the RILE index to determine their ideological standpoint.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for the 1992 election, we included the Democratic Party of the Left (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*, PDS) (C-L) and Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana*, DC) (C-R); for the 1994, 1996, and 2001 elections PDS (C-L) and Go, Italy (*Forza Italia*, FI) (C-R); for the 2006 election The Olive Tree (*L'Ulivo*) (C-L) and FI (C-R); and for the 2008 and 2013 elections the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) (C-L) and the People of Freedom (*Il Popolo della Libertà*, PdL) (C-R).<sup>6</sup>

As already mentioned, the evaluation of Manifesto Project data includes nine variables. The variables are based on log transformations of the original dataset (see Lowe et al., 2011). Thus, we use six variables constructed from log ratios between left and right positions derived

<sup>3</sup> This international research network is based on quantitative content analysis of electoral manifestos.

<sup>4</sup> The author of this paper is personally acquainted with the Manifesto Project coding scheme. However, the author does not have direct experience with the coding of manifesto data according to this codebook (see Volkens et al., 2018a), but does possess experience with manifesto coding according to other coding schemes (e.g. the Comparative Agendas Project, CAP). It was therefore deemed methodologically unsound to add own coding of 2018 data to the existing dataset on Italian party manifestos without proper execution of inter-coder reliability tests.

<sup>5</sup> The RILE variable, used in the Manifesto Project dataset, follows a left-right ideological scale for the positioning of political parties originally developed by Laver and Budge in 1992 (see Volkens et al. 2018a: 29).

<sup>6</sup> In 2013, the Five Stars Movement received more votes than PD, yet according to the second criterion (position on the RILE Index), it turned out to be a far-left party, and not a center-left party. Later in the article, we specifically compare the Northern League and the Five Stars Movement according to their 2013 policy positions, as obtained through the Manifesto Project.

from Manifesto Project data (Lowe et al., 2011: 136) – *logeu*, *constitutionalism*, *decentralization*, *nationalism*, *multiculturalism*, and *logwelfare*, as well as three variables derived from additive indices (Lowe et al. 2011: 139-140) – *freemarket*, *logrile*, and *logplaneco*.

In this part of the analysis, we shall try to answer the following research questions: *Can we observe a trend in the League's policy positions that could explain its new ideological profile under Matteo Salvini? (RQ1) How distant were the League's policy positions from the main center-right party's positions? (RQ2)*

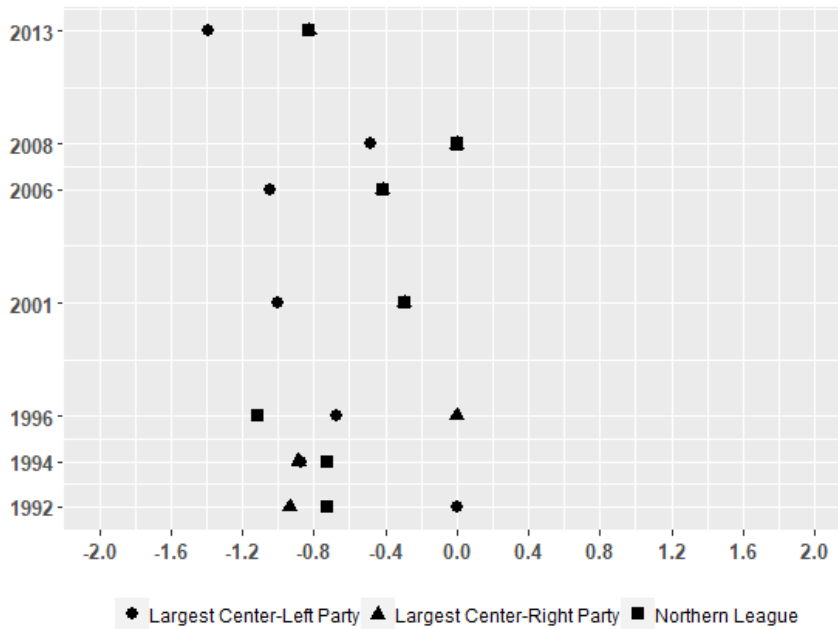
The idea behind the first research question is an assessment whether one could foresee the change the Northern League has gone through by looking at its past policy positions. The second question implies that an ideological closeness of the Northern League to the main center-right party might explain why, as we shall see in other parts of the discussion of the subject matter, the League under Salvini might wish to become the main party right of the center in Italy. Although the 2018 manifesto data were not included in the dataset, as already mentioned, we shall conclude this part of the analysis by looking at some key changes from the 2013 to the 2018 manifesto, along the categories outlined in the nine variables from the (log transformed) Manifesto Project dataset.

*Figure 1* shows the development of the parties' position on the European Union, i.e. it displays the ratio between positive and negative mentions of the EU in party manifestos (*logeu*). Although Eurosceptic rhetoric and policy positions are not something that only recently emerged among the *leghisti*, the relationship between the EU and the Northern League is a somewhat com-

plex one. In the early 1990s, it was moderately pro-EU. Later, its views became more aligned with its center-right allies and their enthusiasm about the European Union sharply dropped. Thus, from 1996 to 2006, we can see a move to the right on the *logeu* scale. Some scholars (see Huysseune 2010: 63-64) see the advent of the monetary union (first step towards the Eurozone) in 1998 as a decisive watershed between a Europhile and a Eurosceptic Northern League. Others claimed that the turn to Euroscepticism was a way to attract new allies on the right-of-the-center scene, since opposition to Brussels could serve as a binding matter, while Padanian separatism could not (Chari, Iltanen, and Kritzingner 2004). From 2001 on, we can observe almost identical views on the EU of the Northern League and the main center-right party, while the main center-left party scored further to the left of the scale, i.e. showcased more pro-EU stances. However, in 2013, all three observed parties moved in the direction of greater support of the European Union. Therefore, the strong Eurosceptic turn of Matteo Salvini is not something that could have been predicted from past trends.

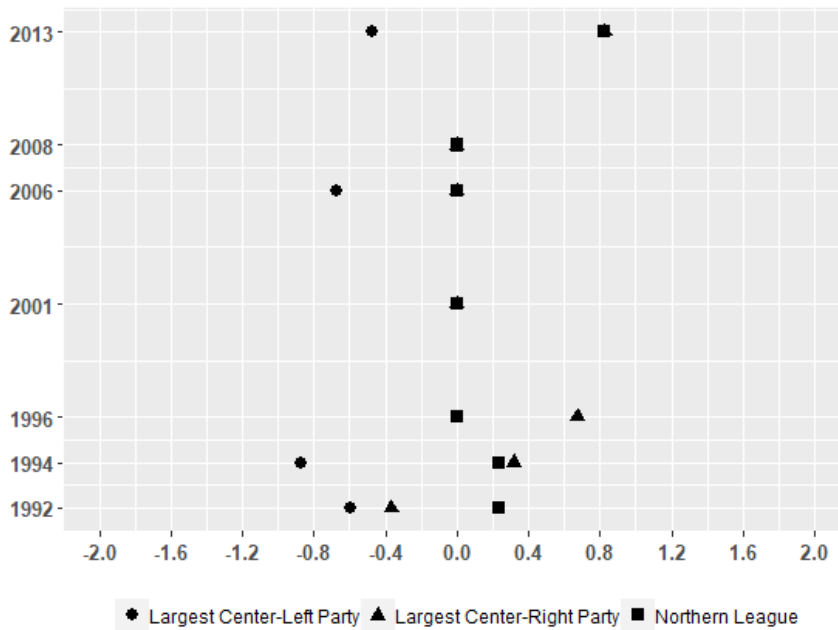
During the observed 1992-2013 period, the Northern League has maintained a rather reserved position on the current constitutional order in Italy, with manifesto positions neither showing great support for it (left-wing position on the scale), nor showing the need to criticize it or change it (right-wing position on the scale) (*Figure 2*). In recent years, we can observe a slight rightward trend towards more negative mentions of the constitutional order, which is closely aligned with positions expressed by Berlusconi's party. However, in 2013 both parties moved further to the right, i.e. started expressing more negative views.

**Figure 1.** Position on the European Union, 1992-2013



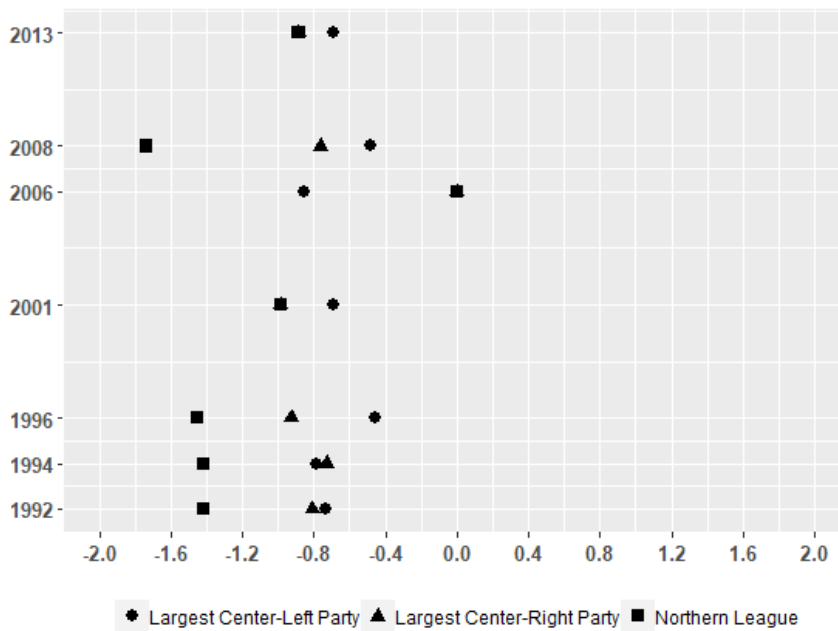
Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

**Figure 2.** Position on the Constitutional Order, 1992-2013



Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

**Figure 3.** Position on Decentralization, 1992-2013



Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

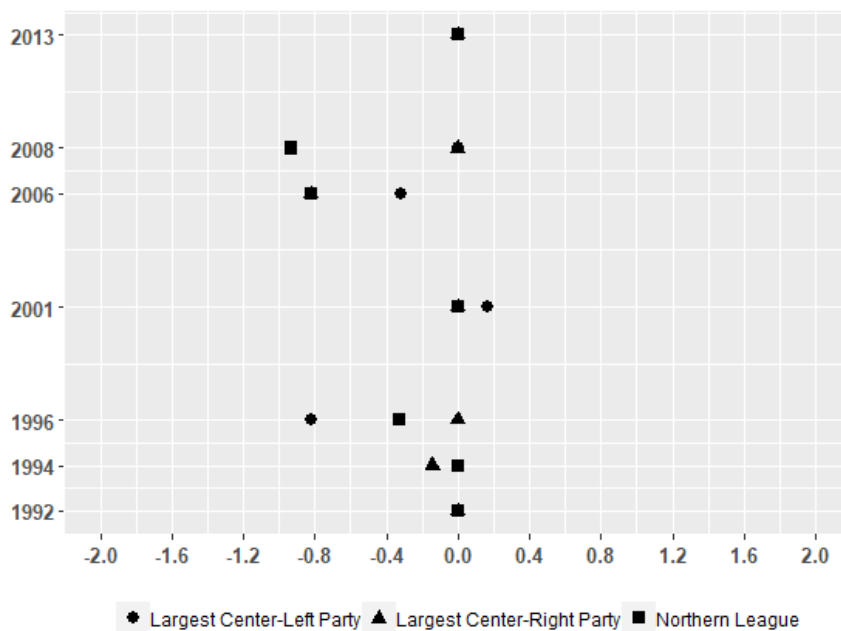
The position on decentralization (Figure 3) is one of the defining features of the Northern League as a regionalist party. An assessment of trends in the observed period shows that, indeed, *Lega* has maintained a more positive position on decentralization in its manifestos than the main center-left and center-right parties. However, just like with other policy issues, since 2001, its positions have become very similar to those expressed by Berlusconi's parties. In 2008, there was one (last) upsurge of pro-federalism in *Lega Nord's* manifesto, with another decline in 2013, i.e. a renewed alignment with Berlusconi.

The assessment of the parties' positions on nationalism, i.e. the log ratio between positive and negative mentions of the national way of life (Figure 4) is somewhat inconclusive. Namely, this variable builds upon positive/negative mentions of the following topics in elec-

toral manifestos: support for current national ideas, pride in citizenship, appeal to patriotism, appeal to nationalism (Volkens et al. 2018a: 18-19). One would expect a regionalist party like the Northern League, which has for almost three decades fought for Northern Italian distinctiveness and even tried to shape a separate, Padanian national identity, to display fewer positive mentions of the national way of life and thus achieve lower (more left-wing) scores for this variable. In most electoral years, the values for the Northern League are closely aligned with those for the main center-right party. Yet in 2008, we see a surge in positive mentions of national topics in the *Lega's* manifesto, which then drops dramatically in 2013 and reaches almost the same values as PD and PdL. This could be indicative of a rather erratic, chameleonic nature of the Northern League.

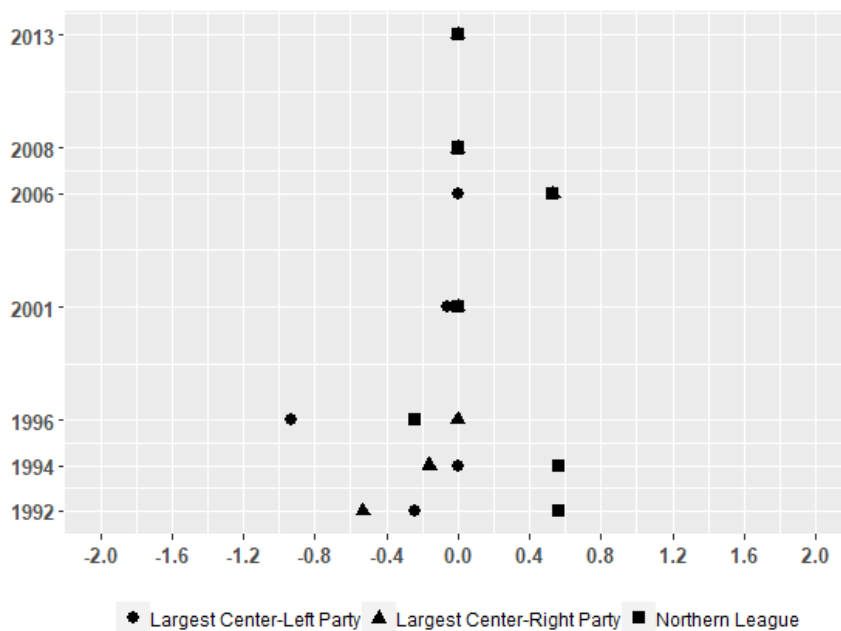


**Figure 4.** Position on Nationalism, 1992-2013



Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

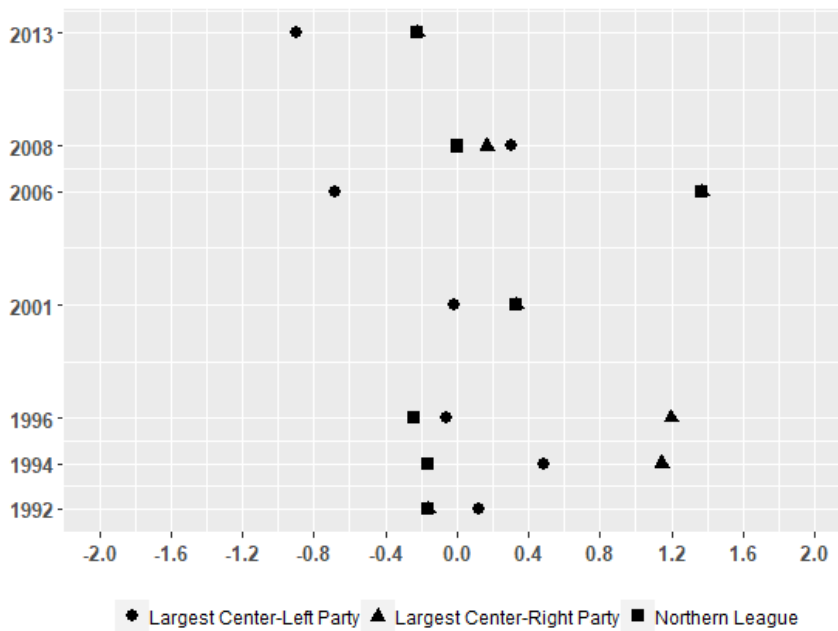
**Figure 5.** Position on Multiculturalism, 1992-2013



Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.



**Figure 6.** Position on Planned Economy, 1992-2013



Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

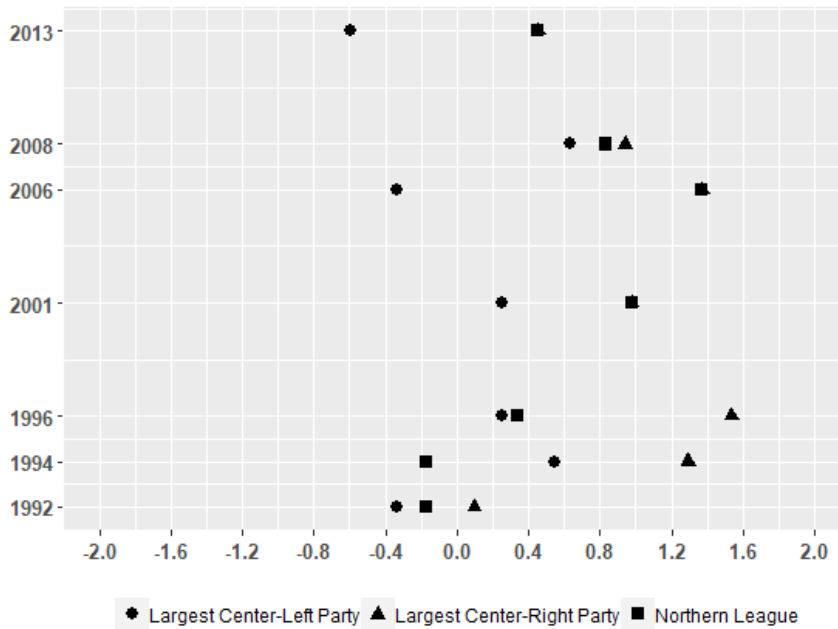
The next variable measures the parties' stances on multiculturalism. This is a rather important variable because of the increased salience of the immigration issue at the 2018 election and Salvini's shift towards strong anti-immigrant policies. During the 1990s, the Northern League featured less favorable views of multiculturalism (thus, indirectly of immigration), yet soon aligned its views with Berlusconi's parties. By 2008, there were no differences between the Northern League, PD and *Forza Italia* (later PdL) on this issue. The values hover around the 0 mark, which might imply two things. First, it means that positive and negative mentions of this issue effectively cancel each other out. Second, it could mean that the overall amount of mentions is rather small, showcasing that before the 2018 parliamentary election, which came about after the 2015 European migration crisis, the issue of multiculturalism

(closely linked to issues of immigration and integration) was not as salient in Italian party politics.

In terms of its stance towards planned economy, i.e. state intervention in the market, the *leghisti* have, over the years, made something of a U-turn. As Figure 6 shows, they have started with positive manifesto mentions of such economic policies, sharply turned away from them, only to start going back to their original positions towards the 2013 election. In this aspect, again, the values obtained for the main center-right party, especially after the "descent" of Berlusconi into politics in 1994, have largely matched those of the *Legha*. In 2013, Berlusconi's and Maroni's parties were more in favor of planned economy than PD under Pier Luigi Bersani.

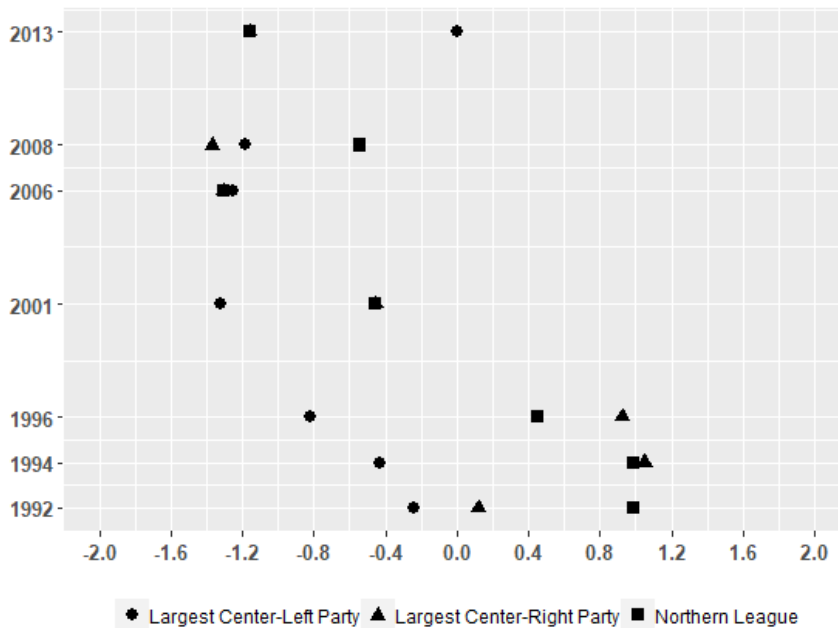
Figure 7 shows a general rightward trend, which signifies the moving of both *Legha Nord* and the main cen-

**Figure 7.** Position on Market Economy, 1992-2013



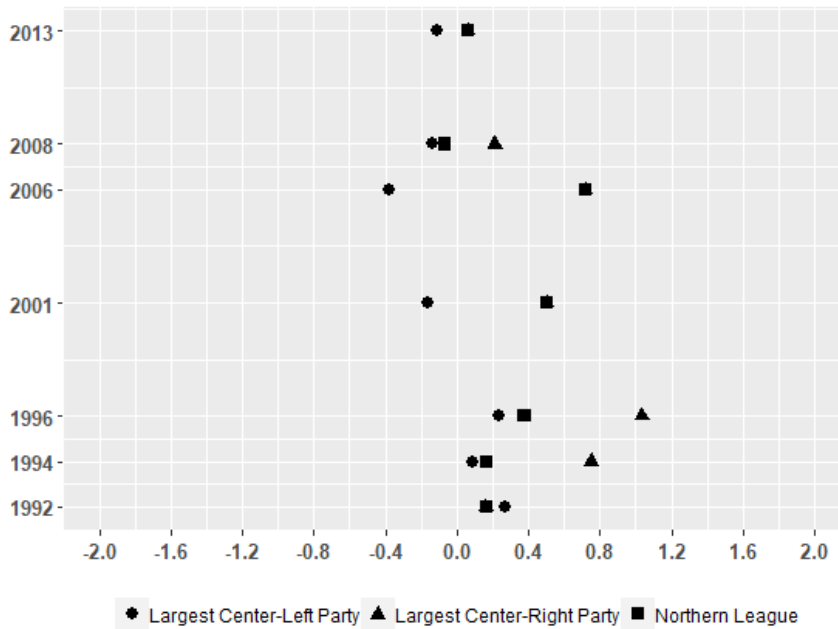
Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

**Figure 8.** Position on the Welfare State, 1992-2013



Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

**Figure 9.** Left-Right Position, 1992-2013



Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

ter-right parties towards more positive notions of market economy in their manifestos. Since 2001, we can observe a close alignment in positions of the Northern League and Berlusconi's parties. In 2006 and 2013, this key economic variable confirmed a clear economic cleavage between the economic left (main center-left party) and the economic right (Northern League and Berlusconi's party).

Regarding their position on the welfare state, during the 1990s the *leghisti* showed fewer positive mentions in their manifestos, i.e. less reluctance to accept the preservation and expansion of social transfers, which has placed them on the economic right (Figure 8). However, over the years, their position has significantly moved to the left. This was followed by a similar trend observed for Berlusconi's parties. In 2013, one could notice a stark difference between the

pronouncedly more positive notions of the welfare state expressed by the Northern League and PdL than by Bersani's PD. If one considers the results for all three economic variables, one can, once again, testify to the chameleonic nature of the Northern League – over the years it has maintained its strong support for the free market, yet at the same time started solidly endorsing the welfare state.

The changes in the position of the Northern League on the log transformed RILE Index, portrayed in Figure 9, show some interesting trends. Originally, it was almost in the center of ideological spectrum, with hardly any difference towards the main center-left party. Towards the turn of the millennium, its position on the left-right scale became closely aligned to that of its coalition partners, Berlusconi's parties *Forza Italia* and later PdL.

In 2008 it moved to the left, to the same position as the main center-left party and again aligned itself with Berlusconi's party just slightly to the right. Bearing this in mind, we can posit that the Northern League did not showcase a distinct move towards far-right positions, yet it did, in fact, occupy almost the same ideological space as Berlusconi's parties, which, eventually, made them competitors, instead of allies.

Finally, we shall attempt to evaluate the shift of policy priorities and ideological positions from the 2013 electoral manifesto (under Roberto Maroni) to the 2018 electoral manifesto (under Matteo Salvini). Building upon the previous part of the analysis, we have distilled several categories (in line with the above discussed variables) that received the most changes from one electoral cycle to the other. These categories include the European Union, the Constitutional Order, Federalism, Nationalism, and Multiculturalism.

In 2013, the Northern League called for more "Europe of the Peoples and less Euro-bureaucracy", yet also proposed "a direct election of the President of the European Commission... strengthening of the European Parliament... the transformation of the European Central Bank into a European equivalent of the Federal Reserves... the issuing of euro-bonds... and creation of a European credit rating agency" (Lega Nord 2013: 3). In 2018, the *leghisti* offered a much longer and more detailed manifesto,<sup>7</sup> which once again mentioned a "Europe of the Peoples" and spoke against "bureaucrats", but now demanded a return to a "pre-Maastricht state" of integration, which would mean a "revision of all the Treaties", with the aim of reclaiming "monetary and economic, territorial, and legislative sovereignty" and "re-

storing subsidiarity" (Lega Nord 2018: 9-10). While in 2013, the Northern League seemed to be willing to work towards improving and reforming the current European Union, in 2018, the Lega was ready to abandon several decades of development and integration and return to the European Economic Community. As opposed to its campaign rallies and slogans, the manifesto of the *leghisti* does not explicitly mention an exit from the eurozone, yet the notion of "monetary sovereignty" in fact opens the door to such a position.

Regarding the constitutional order, i.e. the institutional framework of the political system, in 2013, the party called for a "popularly elected president... stronger council of ministers ... reform of bicameralism with a federal Senate and a smaller size of both houses... abolition of provinces... a more streamlined legislative process" (Lega Nord 2013: 3). In 2018, Salvini's *Lega* wrote in its manifesto not only of a "popularly elected president", but also of a "merger of competences of the President of the State and the President of the Council of Ministers" (Lega Nord 2018: 21). In addition, the League called for the "abolition of the free parliamentary mandate... primacy of the Constitutional Court over European courts... nomination of constitutional judges by the President, the Parliament or a Conference of Regions" (Lega Nord 2018: 21). Thus, we can see how the new League under Salvini has raised the stakes on the debate about the future of the Italian political system. However, the 2018 manifesto does not explain whether such a change would create a presidential system or a semi-presidential system.

On the topic of federalism, in 2013, the party wrote of a "united, federal Italy", consisting of the "North, Center, and the South", with an emphasis on fiscal federalism, subsidiarity, as well as

<sup>7</sup> In 2018, it had 74 pages, while in 2013 it was only eleven pages long.

on development programs for southern regions (Lega Nord 2013: 3-4). In 2018, the League called for "autonomy and federalism", yet with a tailor-made approach, with "free choice for more regional autonomy... coupled with more regional responsibility", in effect calling for asymmetric federalism (Lega Nord 2018: 20). In this regard, there no is major change to be observed from 2013 to 2018.

Finally, in terms of nationalism and multiculturalism, in 2013, the party did not mention these topics at all. In contrast, in 2018, there were two separate chapters in the manifesto that deal with these issues — "Immigration" and "Cultural Goods and Italian Identity". On immigration, the party speaks of "repatriation... suppression of illegal immigration... cooperation with Russia on the Libyan issue... refugee camps in safe countries... prevention of radical Islam through control of transparent financing of the Italian Islamic community... more competences for regions and municipalities in dealing with asylum and short-term residence applications (Lega Nord 2018: 6-8). On culture and identity, the manifesto speaks of "preservation of cultural goods, especially the language... and the landscape... as pillars of Italian national identity" (Lega Nord 2018: 64-66). Here we can see how the League has seized the moment and addressed the issue which seems to have gained salience. The answers proposed by the party seem to echo similar policy proposals from sister parties from the Europe of Nations and Freedom parliamentary group, such as the National Rally (formerly National Front) of Marine Le Pen.

In conclusion, the discursive comparison of the 2013 and 2018 manifestos has confirmed a shift to nationalism, a greater emphasis on Italian culture and

an emphasis on harsh policies regarding the migration issue.

Overall, the longitudinal analysis of parties' stances on key political issues has confirmed the notion of an ideologically flexible party, one that can alternate pro-EU and anti-EU stances and combine support for the free market with endorsement of welfare state expansion. In addition, previous stances on nationalism and multiculturalism could not serve as indicators of the radical shift undertaken by Salvini. The discursive comparison of the 2013 and 2018 manifestos that goes beyond available Manifesto Project data reveals the magnitude of the shift that could not have been predicted by observation of past trends. *Thus, we may offer a negative answer to RQ1 and state that we could not observe a previous policy development that would imply the shift in 2018. Regarding RQ2, we can conclude that, indeed, the Northern League's policy positions were closely aligned with those of Berlusconi's parties, especially in the post-2001 period.*

## **Europeanization of the Northern League**

In terms of the Europeanization of the Northern League, we look at the interplay between its presence in the European Parliament and the role it plays on the national scene. We shall try to explain the new, hardliner Eurosceptic course under Salvini by looking at his 2014 European elections campaign, his record as a Member of the European Parliament, as well as the changes in membership of the Northern League in various parliamentary groups in the European Parliament. In addition, we will look at EU policy trends of the Northern League, juxtaposed with its key European Parliament ally parties. Here we will try to answer the following question: *Has Matteo Salvini "imported" his hardline Euroscep-*

**Table 2.** European Electoral Success and Party Leadership of the Northern League, 1989-2014

Election	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	European Parliamentary Group	Party Leader
1989*	1.8	2.5	Rainbow Group	Umberto Bossi
1994	6.6	6.9	ALDE	
1999	4.5	4.6	Non-Inscrits Technical Group of Independent Members	
2004	5.0	5.1	Independence/Democracy Non-Inscrits Union for Europe of the Nations	
2009	10.2	12.5	Europe of Freedom and Democracy	
			Non-Inscrits	
2014	6.2	6.8	Non-Inscrits Europe of Nations and Freedom	Matteo Salvini

\* For the 1989 European Parliament election, an electoral list called Lombard League (*Legga Lombarda*) – Northern Alliance (*Alleanza Nord*) was formed, which later merged into a single, Northern League party. Source: European Parliament, 2018b; Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2018; Lega Nord, 2018a.

*ticism from the European party scene into the national scene? (RQ3).*

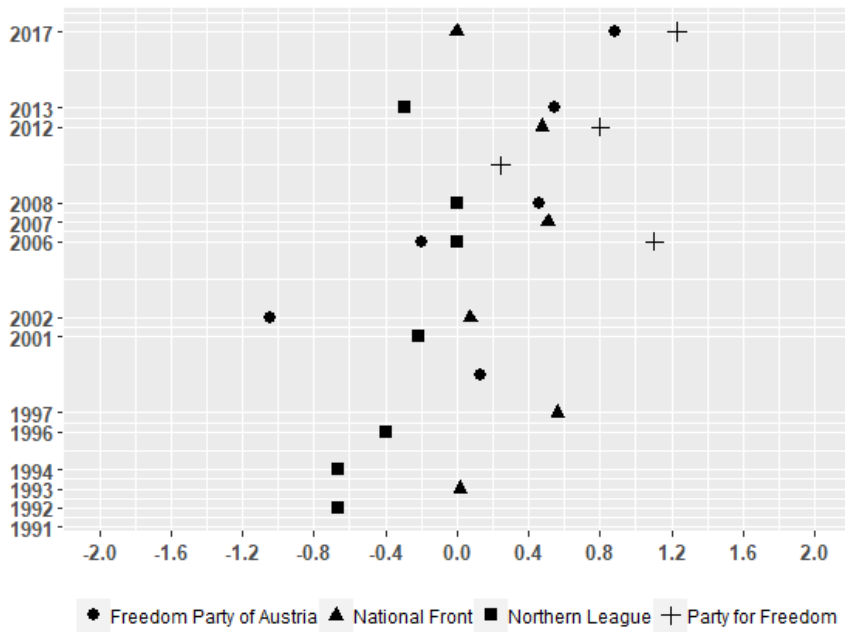
In 2002, Robert Ladrech offered an analytical framework containing five areas in which we can follow the effect of European integration, i.e. of Europeanization on parties and party systems in members states — (1) "programmatic change..., (2) organizational change..., (3) patterns of party competition..., (4) party-government relations..., (5) relations beyond the national party system" (Ladrech 2002: 396-399). In the case of the Northern League, we shall place emphasis on the first and last of these five elements, as an attempt to explain the current nature of this party.

A glance at *Table 2* reveals that, naturally, the first *leghisti* in the European Parliament joined a regionalist parliamentary group, called the Rainbow group, during the 1989-1994 term. Then they switched to ALDE, the liberal group in the European Parliament. However, since the late 1990s, Members of the

European Parliament from the Northern League have continuously drifted further to the right, i.e. towards more emphasis on sovereignty and national competence and against deeper integration and supranational decision-making which characterized the European Union. They participated in parliamentary groups led by Nigel Farage's UKIP (Independence/Democracy, later Union for Europe of the Nations, and finally Europe of Freedom and Democracy).<sup>8</sup> Yet, when he took over the party, Salvini participated in the 2014 European election with anti-euro slogans, in line with his new European ally, Marine Le Pen and her National Rally (then National Front). Le Pen and Salvini founded a new parliamentary group, Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), currently the most right-wing and most Eurosceptic of all groups in the European Par-

<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, this group is called Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, with the Five Stars Movement as its most prominent member, apart from UKIP.

**Figure 10.** Position on the European Union among the League's key European Parliament allies, 1992-2017



Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.  
 Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

liament (European Parliament, 2018a, 2018b). At the 2014 election, Salvini won less votes than Bossi in 2009 (Table 2), mainly since at that time, Renzi's PD and his government were still enjoying strong support (see Segatti, Poletti, and Vezzoni, 2015). However, he laid the foundations for his sovereigntist shift, evident in policy changes from the 2013 to the 2018 elections (see section 3), with the aim of rallying staunchly Eurosceptic forces ahead of the 2019 European Parliament election (Ceccarelli, 2018). One should note that of all the political offices he has held, Salvini has spent the most time in the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2018b). Thus, this experience and the connections he has made there, first with Farage, and later with Le Pen, have undoubtedly had a great impact on his political views and plans.

To test whether the experience of cooperation of Salvini and other *leghisti* with staunch Eurosceptics in the European Parliament has influenced the anti-EU turn of the party, we compared the log ratios of positive and negative mentions of the EU (*log<sub>eu</sub>*) for the Northern League, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the National Front in France, and the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands (Geert Wilders' party). The results, presented in Figure 10, revealed a general rightward trend of all four parties, although it was not equally dramatic in each of the four cases, with the Northern League turning to more pro-EU stances in 2013, only to turn towards hard Euroscepticism in 2018 (confirmed in the discursive comparison of the 2013 and 2018 manifestos, not included in the quantitative analysis due to missing data). Thus, we may, in broad terms, confirm that Salvini has "imported" hardline



*Euroscepticism from his allies in Brussels, as purported by RQ3, although this cannot serve as the only explanatory factor.*

### **Nationalization of the Northern League and Party System Change**

When analyzing the nationalization of the Northern League and its reaction to changes in the party system, we shall point to the personalist character of party politics in Italy, the breakup of the main center-right party, the reemergence of *Forza Italia* and the impact of Berlusconi's resignation. In addition, we shall emphasize the role of the Five Stars Movement as a challenger party that forces other populists, i.e. the Northern League, to react accordingly. The questions that arise from this part of analysis are as following: *Did the personalist nature of Italian party politics and the subsequent party system change that came about with Berlusconi's downfall enable Salvini to change his regionalist party into a national force (RQ4)? Did the Northern League turn south as a response to the rise of the Five Stars Movement (RQ5)?*

In this part of the analysis, we argue that Salvini's decision to abandon the Northern Italian focus of his party and, instead, truly nationalize the Northern League, was a response to various challenges and ruptures that occurred in the Italian party system since Berlusconi's resignation as prime minister in 2011.

In the 2011-2013 period, three key politicians on the Italian right-of-the-center party scene were forced to resign over corruption scandals, creating a power vacuum that eventually had to be filled. Umberto Bossi of the Northern League and Antonio Di Pietro from the Italy of Values party (*Italia dei Valori*, IDV)<sup>9</sup> had to leave their party leader-

ship posts because of misappropriation of public funds intended for party financing, while Silvio Berlusconi, head of four governments (1994-1995, 2001-2005, 2005-2006, 2008-2011) and perennial leader of the center-right since 1994, was convicted for tax fraud (Vercesi 2015: 396).

The resignation of Silvio Berlusconi as prime minister in 2011 created the biggest power shift in the party scene. In 2013, his PdL ceased to exist, disintegrating into a revived *Forza Italia* and a reincarnation of the far-right National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*, AN), now called Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*). Given the policy similarities between the Northern League and Berlusconi's parties, observed in our analysis of Manifesto Project data (section 3), one can assume that Salvini could realistically hope to supplant Berlusconi as the leader of the Italian right-hand side of the political spectrum.

Berlusconi's parties were a new type of party, so-called personalist parties, and have created somewhat of a model to be emulated by others (McDonnell 2013). The Northern League survived leadership change, as opposed to other personalist parties, due to its successful institutionalization and a deeper organizational structure on the ground (Vercesi 2015: 403-404). Therefore, Matteo Salvini could inherit the centralized, leader-oriented structure of the Northern League from Bossi and Maroni and use it to fundamentally reshape the party according to his own ideological tastes.

Furthermore, under Matteo Renzi, even the PD became, to a certain extent, a personalist party (Pasquino 2014). In fact, Berlusconi's impact on the patterns

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cases of the early 1990s that eventually led to the collapse of the old party system (called the First Republic) and enabled the rise of new political leaders, among others, Bossi and Berlusconi.

<sup>9</sup> Di Pietro was one of the key public prosecutors in the *Mani pulite* anti-corruption

**Table 3.** Policy Differences between the Northern League and the Five Stars Movement, 2013

Variable	Northern League	Five Stars Movement
constitutionalism	0.827	-0.554
decentralization	-0.885	0.554
freemarket	0.455	-0.898
multiculturalism	0.000	0.000
nationalism	0.000	0.000
logeu	-0.290	0.000
logplaneco	-0.221	-1.316
logrile	0.062	-0.943
logwelfare	-1.156	-1.468

Source: Author's calculations according to Lowe et al., 2011; Volkens et al., 2018b.

Note: Values above zero represent the right part of the ideological scale, while values below zero stand for the left part of the ideological scale.

of party competition and the nature of political communication gave rise to Renzi (Donovan 2015), but ultimately also Grillo, and finally Salvini. Renzi's failure to make a lasting impact and to reform the political system, epitomized in the failed constitutional referendum (see Bianchi 2017), was the final nail in the coffin of the party system of the Second Republic, paving the path to something called "bipolar populism" (Vinciguerra 2018), embodied by the Lega-M5S coalition government, led by non-partisan law professor Giuseppe Conte.

The rise of Beppe Grillo and his hard-to-classify,<sup>10</sup> Eurosceptic, anti-establishment Five Stars Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) has initiated an end of the bipolar nature of party competition in Italy (see Pasquino and Val-

bruzzi 2015). This party has managed to reach new, young voters with its black-and-white messages about "elites" and "the people" (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). It was especially successful in the south, supplanting both Berlusconi and the parties of the left. As a challenger, anti-establishment party, M5S presented a threat to the Northern League, which had to up the ante, if it wanted to prevent losing voters to this new contender. As Table 3 shows, in 2013, Grillo's and Maroni's parties were sharply divided over economic issues (especially regarding the role of the market), the log ratios left-right index indicated that the Five Stars Movement was way out on the left, while the Northern League seemed like a center-right party. However, with the advent of Salvini in 2014, backed by his anti-European allies from the ENF, the struggle for the position of the number one anti-establishment party moved from the economic and institutional to the European/nationalist ground, coupled with the issue of immigration which reached its peak in 2015, during the regional election.

<sup>10</sup> In the literature on Italian parties and on populist parties in Europe in general one might find such claims. Yet, according to the RILE Index and other economic variables of the Manifesto Project, as we shall see in the next part of the paper, it is clearly a left-wing populist party.

Already in 2015, at the regional elections, Salvini tried to rebrand his party by campaigning in the central and southern regions under the Us with Salvini (*Noi con Salvini*) banner (Albertazzi 2015). In 2014, Salvini created a sister party for the south, with him as its leader, yet without the Northern imagery, while the traditional green Lombard and Padanian color of Lega Nord was substituted with a navy hue, indicative of his attempts to rally behind himself the whole of the right-of-the-center scene and to project an image of an Italian, sovereignist, and not a Northern, separatist party (see Moroni 2018). For the 2018 election, the process of nationalization was complete, with the dropping of the designation "North" from the electoral logo and other campaign materials,<sup>11</sup> as well as of the Alpine Sun (*Sole delle Alpi*), another Padanian symbol (Lega Nord 2018b). "Italians First!" (*Prima gli italiani!*) became the new slogan, as opposed to "The North First!" (*Prima il Nord!*) in Maroni's time, and even the Southerners were invited to participate in an all-Italian rally at Pontida, previously a hotbed of Padanism (see Ghidetti 2018).

We may conclude this part of the analysis by stating that the personalist nature of party politics in Italy, epitomized by Berlusconi, as well as the previously observed (see section 3) overlapping of the Northern League and Berlusconi's party in most policy issues, coupled with the end of bipolarism that came about with the advent of the Five Stars Movement, created a power vacuum that Salvini was eager to fill. *Thus, we may offer a positive answer to RQ4 and state that the specif-*

<sup>11</sup> The party is still officially called *Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania* (Northern League for the Independence of Padania). It uses the *Lega Nord* name in the European Parliament, yet its MPs in the Italian Parliament sit in a group called *Lega – Salvini Premier*.

*ic party system constellation created by Berlusconi enabled Salvini to go through with his transformation of the Padanian regionalists. However, it remains inconclusive to what extent the rise of M5S prompted the southward move of the leghisti (RQ5). This turn to an otherwise alien electorate was more a result of the vacuum left after Berlusconi's resignation, than of the challenge posed by the grillini.*

### **Fighting the Courts: Pragmatism and the Struggle for Survival**

In this final part of the analysis we discuss the funds scandal that brought Bossi down and the prospect of sequestration of the party's accounts and property. This should help us answer the following research question: *Was the nationalization of the party and the creation of the sister party, as well as the change of the party's imagery just an opportunistic attempt to escape the worst-case scenario — bankruptcy of the party? (RQ6).*

The resignation of Umberto Bossi as federal secretary and Francesco Belsito as federal treasurer of the party in 2012 came about because of a court case that convicted them to (first-degree) jail sentences over embezzlement of public funds (electoral reimbursements received by the Northern League. Misappropriation included shady offshore investments in Chile, Tanzania, and Cyprus, as well as the use of party funds for private expenses of Bossi and his son Renzo. The idea behind this last piece of analysis is to link the aftermath of this corruption scandal and its impact on the party's finances with Salvini's decision to move from regionalism to nationalism and to engage in an Houellebecqian "extension of the domain of struggle".

While Bossi claimed that he and his treasurer had left the party with enough money and that there were no funding

problems in his era, the Review Court in Genoa was determined that the party was due up to 49 million euros of misappropriated funds that had to be returned to the State (Casadio, 2018). After his takeover of the party, Salvini had a good reason to try to distance himself and the party from the Bossi era — the looming shadow of bankruptcy that could befall the party were it to return the whole amount at once. With the impending possibility of sequestration, in late 2017, Salvini created a sister party called *Lega per Salvini Premier*, intended for supporters in central and southern parts of Italy (Bertochi, 2018). Such a move enabled him to run double treasuries (Orengo and Del Dot, 2018), in the case that the original *Lega* is faced with a court decision that would completely empty its coffers. After much protesting in the media about "politicized courts" and "unfairness", Salvini's party entrusted its legal team to reach a settlement with the Public Prosecutor's office in September of 2018. The deal they achieved includes the payment of monthly installments of 600,000 euros for the next 80 years to a dedicated account, with three million euros already paid through initial sequestration (Sazanani 2018). This settlement used the case of the Lazio football club in 2005 as legal precedent, which received 23 years extension for the clearance of its tax debt. However, back then, Salvini protested against such a decision (Testa 2018), only to accept it now as a useful tool which enabled his party to escape financial downfall.

Salvini began his turn towards the south at the European Parliament election in 2014 and then in the 2015 regional election, before the looming threat of sequestration started casting its shadow over the Northern League. *However, one cannot fail to notice an overlapping of two processes – the attempts to evade*

*financial ruin and distance oneself from the previous party leadership and the pursuit of a new ideological course that would lay the foundation for the overtaking of the key position right of the center. This offers, at least a partial, positive answer to our last research question (RQ6).*

## Conclusion

In this analysis of the reasons behind the profound transformation of the Northern League into a sovereignist, nationalist Eurosceptic party, we have looked at the policy shift in electoral manifestos, the impact of Europeanization of political parties, the context of party system change, and the court cases the party had to deal with. Assessing party manifestos, we could not observe a trend that would point towards the current shift observed under Salvini (RQ1), with clear policy movement only visible between the 2013 and 2018 elections. At the same time, we could detect a rather clear overlapping of the League's policy positions with those of Berlusconi's parties, especially after the 2001 election (RQ2). The evaluation of the impact of Europeanization has shown that MEPs from Lega Nord have consistently moved to the right and that the Brussels/Strasbourg experience had been a defining moment in Salvini's career. With his ascent to leadership of *Carroccio*,<sup>12</sup> he brought with him the spirit of Le Pen and headline sovereignist Euroscepticism (RQ3). An assessment of party system change, which started with Berlusconi's resignation as prime minister in 2011, has yielded results that point to a legacy of personalist politics and personalized parties, on both sides of the political spectrum. Therefore, Salvini could make use of such a constellation to enforce his own political views, brewed in the European

<sup>12</sup> Colloquial nickname for the Northern League, referring to the medieval war altar bearing a standard of a city or feudal lord.

Parliament, and consequently transform his party (RQ4). The idea of going south and expanding its reach was not necessarily a reaction to the rise of the Five Stars Movement, but rather a conscious attempt to nationalize the party and distance it from its original, regionalist past and Padanian separatism (RQ5). Salvini certainly did make organizational (sister party) and symbolic changes (blue instead of green, Italians First instead of the North First, etc.) not only out of ideological conviction, but also to prepare the party for the nightmare scenario of total sequestration of misappropriated funds, inherited from the Bossi era (RQ6).

In 2018, the Northern League is a leader-oriented sovereignist, nationalist populist party that seeks to impose itself as the main Italian party right-of-the-center and to play a rallying, unifying role among diverse Eurosceptic parties across the continent ahead of the first post-Brexit, post-migration crisis European Parliament election. Matteo Salvini shares a vision of Europe akin to Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders and wants to leave a lasting impact not only in Rome, but also in Brussels. To fulfill his goals, he was ready to abandon most of the things the original Northern League stood for. He gambled with the reputation of the party and the expectations of its fierce supporters and the gamble seems to have paid off.

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## Od Pontide do Bruxellesa: Nacionalizacija i europeizacija Sjeverne lige

**Sažetak** Članak se bavi višestrukim razlozima preobrazbe Sjeverne lige iz padanske regionalističke i separatističke stranke u talijansku nacionalističku i suverenističku stranku koja okuplja saveznike koji žele Europsku uniju vratiti u stanje prije Maastrichta. Analiza izbornih programa, učinaka europeizacije stranačkoga natjecanja, promjene stranačkoga sustava zbog promjene vodstva te utjecaja sudskih procesa na stranački život pokazala je kako Sjeverna liga nije pratila dugoročni trend promjene javnih politika nego se promijenila tek pod novim vođom Salviniem. Salvini je djelomice uveo suverenističku i nacionalističku viziju s europske stranačke pozornice te je nacionalizirao stranku na državnoj razini zbog vakuuma moći koji je ostao nakon Berlusconijeve ostavke. Preobrazba je povezala Salvinijev osobni svjetonazor s pragmatizmom nastalim borbom za opstanak zbog opasnosti sekvestracije. Nova Sjeverna liga sada ima prigodu postati glavna stranka desno od centra u Italiji te igrati odlučujuću ulogu u okupljanju tvrdih euroskeptika uoči europskih izbora 2019.

**Ključne riječi** Sjeverna liga, euroskeptičnost, promjena stranačkog sustava, europeizacija političkih stranaka, Italija, Manifesto project Europske unije