Facing the New Far Right in Southern Europe

Analysing the Rise of the Extreme Right After the Financial Crisis

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The Italian Radical Right: going mainstream?

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Introduction

The 2018 general elections in Italy saw the emergence of what has been called the first populist government of Europe (Garzia, 2019). Given the hung parliament after the elections, an alliance between M5S and Lega led to the so-called Government of Change. The new coalition government configuration could be considered part of a broader realignment taking place in the Italian party system post-2008, with the 2013 general elections constituting a turning point. Even if they parted ways after the summer of 2019, the govern experience of Lega under Salvini's leadership made the party the undisputable leader of the right in Italy.

In this chapter we explore the characteristics of the Italian radical right and the complex organisational milieu since 1990s until its current populist form, considering the post-2008 political opportunity structure elements that facilitated its growth and provide the context for its growth into wider relevance in the party system in its current populistic form. Additionally, this chapter will examine the relation of the radical right with populism in parties like Lega and its experience in power. As it will be seen, throughout this chapter the Italian radical right is a heterogenous galaxy of actors involving a plurality of actors, from institutional to non-institutional, from offline to online. In what remains of this introduction, we will describe the guiding concepts employed throughout the empirical overview.

Guiding Concepts

Even though the terms 'extreme right', 'far right', and 'populist radical right' are often used in the literature to refer to the same empirical object, in this chapter we use 'radical right' to refer to those groups that exhibit in their common ideological core the characteristics of nationalism, xenophobia (ethno-nationalist xenophobia), anti-establishment critiques and socio-cultural authoritarianism (law and order, family values) (Mudde 2007). The term extreme right includes groups well beyond the legal boundaries of democratic politics (e.g. violent direct actions or even terrorist attacks). Therefore, we prefer to use the label 'radical right' to describe those parties that are located toward one pole on the standard ideological left-right scale. Recent academic attempts to define the (new) radical right have tended to shift attention from "old" fascism to "new populism". If the "old" radical right was identified with ultranationalism, the myths of decadence and of rebirth, conspiracy theories and anti-democratic stances (Eatwell 2003), then the current "populist radical right parties" (Mudde 2007) combine populist anti-establishment critiques with ethno-cultural nationalism (nativism), xenophobia and socio-cultural authoritarianism (law and order, family values) (Mudde 2007, 21; Rydgren 2007; Loch and Norocel 2015). Populism and ethno-cultural exclusionary nationalism are increasingly indicated among scholars as distinguishing populist radical right parties from parties of the mainstream (Rydgren 2006).

Nonetheless, to fully understand and characterize the ongoing realignment of the Italian landscape, we need to look beyond institutional politics. This entails an analysis of not only the emerging parties, but also radical right grassroots groups and social movements without a clear link with institutional politics (Caiani et al. 2012). Over the last decade, various groups, such as CasaPound, not only became

prominent as they established links with various political parties. With this respect, recent research on the radical-right has tried to close gap between disciplinary approaches that tend to focus either on political parties or on civil society/social movement actors. The adoption and adaptation of the concept of movement-party to characterise these groups and link the two spaces improves our understanding of the current political dynamics (Caiani and Cisar, 2018; Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2018a, 2018b). These groups should be considered not only because of their *movement-party* configuration/hybridisation (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro, 2018b), but also due to the importance of these actors in bringing and framing issues that not only reflects a particular context (e.g. migrant/refugee crisis), but also influences the discourses in the public sphere that reaches a wider audience. In fact, the radical-right in Italy comprehends a heterogeneous and diverse space that includes a variety of political parties, social movements and subcultural groups (counter-cultural and anti-systemic) and in recent years situates itself between electoral and protest politics.

The Radical-Right in Italy

A Pre-Crisis Overview: a heterogenous galaxy

As it has been noted, the radical right is not an homogeneous 'family' in any European country, and this is even truer in Italy, when the 'galaxy of the radical right is extremely fragmented and includes several different types of groups of institutional, non-institutional and subcultural actors (Caiani and Parenti 2013). Apart from various political parties, its movement network includes 'cultural' associations, revisionist and 'negationist' groups, but also music bands and football ultras. This variety of labels, political parties, groups, and movements exists, often characterized by scarce contact between them and divided by long-standing ideological battles (Caldiron, 2001).

In the 1990s, as the traditional parties vanish, the post-1994 right comes to be dominated by Forza Italia media magnate Silvio Berlusconi for the next 15 years (Pasquino, 2019). Upon this change, Italy was the first European country in the last 50 years in which the radical-right reached full political and institutional recognition, with a stable presence in centre-right governments after 1994 (Caldiron, 2001, 15). It could be said that in the 1990s the Italian radical right had two souls. On the one hand, the heirs from the *Movimento Social Italiano* (MSI) - the post-war neo-fascist

party - were strong advocates of "nation-state nationalism, law-and-order policies, and strong family values" (Ruzza, 2018: 506). These were (1) the more "moderate" National Alliance (AN), and (2) *Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore* (founded in 1995 by some ex-AN members who refused to follow AN's path of moderation and distancing from the fascist past). On the other hand, the ethnonationalist parties such as Lega Nord which espouse an independentist and autonomist programme that opposed "nation-state-nationalism, considering the historical process of Italian unification to be fundamentally unsuccessful and misguided" (Ruzza, 2008: p. 507). [Baldini 2001, 2]).

Table 1. Right-Wing forces results since 1994

	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
Forza Italia	21.01	20.57	29.43	23.72			14.43
Alleanza Nazionale	13.47	15.66	12.02	12.34			
Lega (Nord)	8.36	10.07	3.94	4.58	8.3	4.08	17.61
PdL					37.39	21.53	
FdI						1.95	4.26
Total	42.84	46.3	45.39	40.64	45.69	27.56	36.3

In the 1994 national elections, AN reached 13.5 per cent of the vote and LN 8.4 per cent, forming, together with Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing coalition. In 1996, both the AN and the LN confirmed their electoral success, gaining respectively 15.7 and 10.1 per cent of the vote. Furthermore, the neo-fascists of MsFt obtained 0.9 per cent (Carter 2005). Both AN and LN occupied important ministerial positions in the Berlusconi government after the 2001 national elections, among them the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence.

This situation also meant that extra-parliamentary radical-right groups could be called as a potentially powerful political ally. As a case in point, the radical right not only includes political parties geared towards elections and public office but also social movements or 'networks of networks' that aim to mobilise public support, and a conglomeration of subcultural groups and groupuscules (Caiani and Parenti 2013; Gattinara et al. 2018).

As far as the extra-parliamentary radical-right is concerned during this period, we can mention *Fronte Sociale Nazionale* (founded in 1997, following a split within the MSI-FT), *Forza Nuova* (originating from the MSI diaspora in the transition to AN), *Liberta` di Azione* (led by Benito Mussolini's grand-daughter, Alessandra), and some very recent groups such as, e.g. *Rinascita Nazionale*. In the category of political groups, we find a series of youth organizations, connected to political parties and some political newspapers. Next to these political parties and movements, we have the category of nostalgic, revisionist, and 'negationist' organisations. These are groups that constantly refer to the 20 years of fascist rule in Italy and the Salo` Republic and that are apologists of Benito Mussolini.

In Italy the radical right is not only highly influential in national politics, but is also characterized by enhanced communication between established political parties and grassroots movements and small counter-cultural groups. In Italy, in fact, populist radical right parties enjoy much electoral support and access to the public sphere, while also maintaining a privileged channel of communication with the social movement arena. In Italy, involvement in the extreme right ranges from activism in the various youth groups associated with the fascist Italian party, MSI, (such as 'Azione Giovani' and 'Azione Studentesca')—which make explicit references to the fascist past (Caldiron 2002, 80)—to the more recent squatted social centres (Di Tullio 2006). A broad range of 'young' and subcultural extreme right organizations includes skinhead groups, politicized hooligans, and music groups, with numerous contacts between them (Caiani and Wageman 2007).

Online Galaxy

The virtual community of the extreme right in Italy appears highly fragmented, and it is not focused around a few central organizations that are able to monopolize the communicative exchange within the sector. Previous work (Caiani and Parenti 2013) reveals only some political parties (such as for example Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore and Forza Nuova) occupy central positions in the network; most are located on its periphery (see Fronte Sociale Nazionale, Azione Sociale and Rinascita Nazionale). Political party organizations and political movements emerge as split into different clusters within the net; they are not considered as the main points of reference (partners) for contacts with the other Italian extreme right organizations. Rather, the core of the network consists of neo-fascist/neo-Nazi organizations, and some nostalgic and revisionist organizations that have prominence in the network. Second, the overall network of the Italian extreme right

is characterized by a loose chain and a 'policephalous structure' (Diani 2003, 309; Caiani and Wagemann 2009)— that is, both centralized and segmented. Although most of the organizations participate actively in exchanges within the network, many organizations at the periphery are not directly connected with the central ones. Therefore, many actors can only communicate with each other via long paths.

Although no organization is completely isolated from the overall network, it is worth noting the marginal position of the subcultural youth organizations (for example, the websites of the squatters' centres and music groups Casa Pound, Casa Montag, Lorien), which together form a cluster. These types of organizations remain peripheral and are integrated into the network only with a very low number of ties. The impression of a segmented network is confirmed by the average degree, which is 5.3, indicating that every Italian organization has on average around five links with other organizations. Finally, the online network of the Italian extreme right has a moderate level of centralization. The level of segmentation in a network reflects the degree to which communication between actors is hindered by barriers. These may reflect ideological differences between various actors or may be due to varying levels of concern for a particular policy (Diani 2003, 306).

Yet another category of the galaxy of the Italian radical-right contains neo- Nazi groups and websites. The main difference from neo-fascists groups is that these websites did not refer to contemporary political intervention (Caiani and Parenti, 2013). These refer to German National Socialist ideology, the Third Reich, and Hitler. Furthermore, it is possible to identify a broad range of 'young' sites that includes skinhead, hooligans, and music groups. These groups consider music and sport as their main interests, and their sites were characterized by fascist or Nazi symbols or by symbols taken from Celtic mythology. Contacts between skinheads and some football hooligan groups were frequent (Gnosis 2006). Finally, organizations that collect and sell military souvenirs (e.g. uniforms) ('militaria') also existed.

The main issues of the revisionist and 'negationist' websites are historical revisionism and the denial of the holocaust; the proposal to re-write history; and the documentation of the crimes of communism. Furthermore, there are some more specifically cultural organizations which can be divided between traditional associations and New Age and 'neo-mystic' groups. Above all, the latter are characterized by their frequent reference to Celtic mythology or a kind of new spiritualism that challenges the official Christian religion (Caiani and Kroel 2014).

Post-Crisis Realignments

A major shift happened in the Italian party system after 2008. Parallel to other southern European countries in the shadow of the Eurozone crisis, decades of corruption, a technocratic government supported by the mainstream parties in Parliament, and the failure of the governing parties to manage the various crisis (economic, refugees and democratic legitimacy), new political parties espousing an anti-establishment populist rhetoric became increasingly visible. It was in 2013, in the most volatile elections to date in Italy, that the backlash against traditional parties and transformation of the party system started to be more clearly identifiable, with a previously bipolar party-system becoming tripolar (Chiaramonte et al., 2018; Garzia, 2019; Pasquino, 2019). Even if without previous representation in the Italian Parliament, the M5S entered the parliament obtaining 25.6% and competing directly with the traditional center-right and center-left coalitions. This result led to a hung parliament without clear majorities. The legislature unfolded with three different governments led by the PD (Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni) supported by other parties. Renzi, who was a popular figure, promoted economic and political reforms, but nevertheless lost the constitutional referendum in December 2016 and resigned. This situation boosted the anti-establishment rhetoric from populist parties and helps explaining the outcome of the 2018 elections (Chiaramonte et al., 2018).

The 2018 elections repeated and reinforced the trends from 2013. It is important to notice that the centre-right runs in an unified coalition that "represented the four 'spirits' of the Italian centre-right, as created 25 years earlier by Berlusconi: the post-fascist area now represented by Fratelli d'Italia (FDI, Brothers of Italy); the post-Christian Democratic Noi con l'Italia-Unione di Centro (NCI-UDC, Us with Italy-Union of the Centre); the pro-free market FI—Berlusconi's own party; and the Lega" (Chiaramonte et al., 2018).

As in 2013, the elections resulted again in a hung parliament that despite the rising prominence of new parties somehow kept the same three poles from 2013. Nonetheless, there is a major shift towards populist parties with a distinction between "old politics" and "new politics": while the mainstream parties (PD and FI) lost seats, the two parties, with different strands of populism, the M5S and Lega improved their results. Furthermore, new cleavages seem to be implicit in the results: while the results of Lega seem to be feed by cultural populism (nativism, anti-immigrants), the voters of the M5S follow a political populism (anti-corruption,

anti-establishment, democracy) (Corbetta et al., 2018). Despite the differences between the two parties, after months of negotiations, there was an agreement on forming a coalition government.

It is important to notice that the results of the right did not improve in comparison with the 1990s. The difference is that there is a shift in the pole - the Lega under Salvini becomes prominent . Nonetheless, data seems to suggest that the realignment is far from finished and that Lega might become the hegemonic actor (Chiaramonte et al., 2018).

From liberal to neo-fascist?

It could be argued that the transformation of the right-wing pole in Italy is going from liberal, under Berlusconi, to "neo-fascist". This is turn is marked by the increasing relevance of grassroots groups and hegemony of Lega at institutional level (De Giorgi and Tronconi, 2018). As stated before, the radical right in Italy is a heterogeneous space and after the crisis the increasing relevance of political parties such as FdL, Fratelli d'Italia and Lega, but also by grassroots activism like CasaPound (Caiani et al. 2012; Gattinara et al., 2018).

In 2007, a new federation of political parties on the right (which included Forza Italia and National Alliance) - People of Freedom - was created with the purpose of reinforcing their joint position in the upcoming 2008 elections. The next year, this federation merged into a new political party, with all the parties disbanding. Nonetheless, Forza Italia was revived in 2013 and PdL became again a centre-right coalition, while the former members of the National Alliance formed a new party called *Fratelli d'Italia* with clear neo-fascist inclinations. Until the demise of Berlusconi (due to corruption scandals), this coalition of conservatives/old-fashioned fascists and liberals ruled the country for 20 years (Ruzza, 2018).

Over the last decade, with the demise of Berlusconi, Lega became the leader of the right-wing pole. Quite interestingly, not only Lega is not a new party as it is currently the oldest party in Italy. Created in the 1980s as a regional party defending the independence of Padania (Northern Italy), it integrated Berlusconi Forza Italia governments since the 1990s. In fact, during this period, even if espousing an ethnonationalist position, it converged with the neoliberal ethos of Forza Italia (Ruzza, 2018).

However, the Lega did not have an easy path after the burst of the 2008 crisis. Amidst a corruption scandal the party crumbles in the 2013 elections: from 2008 when their results amounted to 8.3% (60 seats), they face a steep decline in 2013 where they had 4.09% (18 seats). Nonetheless, Matteo Salvini, a long-time party member, became the leader of Lega in 2013 and redefined the party's image in the Italian political landscape: instead of a regionalist party, the party focuses now on Europe and immigration to the image of *Front Nationale* in France and leaves aside their northern credentials to target the whole country. This could be summed up as nationalising and de-territorialisation while integrating "transnational" influences (Caiani 2018b).

This redefinition of their image was initiated with the creation of a sister-party (Us with Salvini) in southern Italy, to give the idea that the party's "enemy" was not the south anymore. Moreover, in 2017 they ditched the word north from their name and Salvini started a campaign to become prime-minister, while reinforcing their nativist and law-and-order radical-right positions.

In the 2018 general elections, after running in a coalition with other right-wing parties (FI, FdL, Us with Italy), they become the 3rd largest party in Parliament and the "leader" of right-wing pole. Lega becomes the main force within the coalition dethroning Berlusconi's leadership. This strategy led to an increase in voting, with 17. 4% and 125 of the seats in Parliament. Since the elections, and assuming office, Lega became the leading party in the polls.

But the crisis also led to a re-emergence and re-creation of the neo-fascist right, such as CasaPound and Forza Nouva, who keep connections with Lega and FdL (De Giorgi and Tronconi, 2018; Froio and Gattinara, 2015; Gattinara et al., 2018). Created in 2003, but getting its official status as an "association of social promotion" only in 2008, CasaPound is a political group that originates from pre-existing neo-fascist parties (Caiani and Parenti 2013) and connects subcultural activities (such as music), with grassroots activities and political actions. It assumes itself as a fascist movement (rejecting left-right labels) and opposes neoliberalism, with its discourse being "largely inspired by the experiences of 1970s youth Neo-Fascism, thus attracting both nostalgic Neo-Fascists and younger recruits". (Gattinara et al. 2018). It is important to notice that their activities and discourses are not solely cultural or nativist in nature, but in fact their members claim that the group started due to the poor housing conditions for the Italians. Moreover, they promote an anti-liberal and anti-EU stance. Gattinara et al. (2018) point out that their ideology is a kind of fascism *a la carte* that picks up on aspects of fascism that fit the
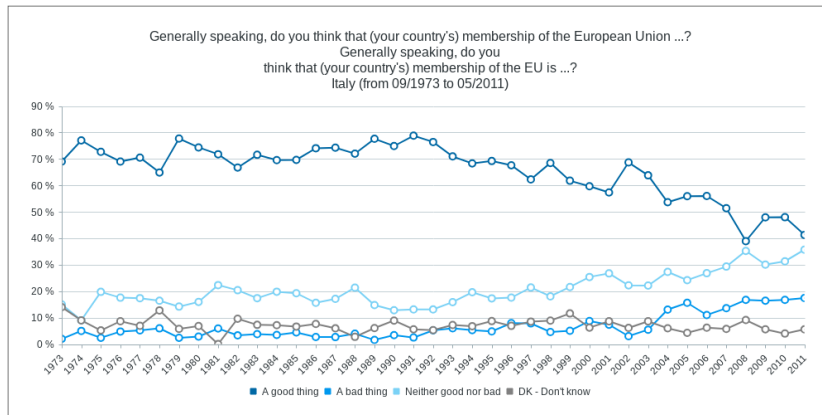
current political environment, while leaving aside proposals that could endanger the group's legitimacy. They situate themselves between protest and electoral politics (despite the little success in the latter) fitting the definition of movement-party given in the introduction.

It is important to notice that CPI often allies with Lega Nord: "Lega Nord needed CasaPound and its network of associations, sport clubs and concert halls to extend its influence on southern regions in Italy, while CasaPound benefited from the nation-wide visibility offered by the joint-venture with a formerly governing party. For Lega Nord, this meant abandoning its original secessionist stances in favour of a new, nationalist rhetoric based on full-fledged Euroscepticism. For CasaPound, instead, this alliance enabled approaching topics that – until then – had been tackled only marginally by the group, most notably the immigration issue" (Froio and Gattinara, 2015). Furthermore, as De Giorgi and Tronconi (2018) argue: "the resurgence of the radical-right represents a new reality and a possible source of danger but also of opportunity, especially for the League and FdI. The importance (only in terms of media coverage for the time being) of political groups that until now have been marginalized suggests that there is a growing electoral pool into which the mainstream parties might be able to reach. However the new competitors on the political scene might pull consensus away from the center-right parties or restrict their room for maneuver. And all this exists without even considering the serious questions and concerns that the legitimization of these political groups must raise about the state of health of Italian democracy".

Nativist turn and Europe

Since 2008 that the EU played an increasingly significant role in domestic politics in the Southern European countries. Three crises play an important role in the discursive opportunities taken by the parties that now dominate Italian politics: eurozone, migrant/refugee crisis and democratic legitimacy (Gattinara, 2017). In addition to these overlapping crises that affected the country and are linked to the EU, in the context of the Eurozone crisis, the country had a technocratic government implementing a program directly linked to the EU.

Figure 1. Attitudes towards the EU in Italy (1973-2011)

Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership of the European Union ...?
Generally speaking, do you
think that (your country's) membership of the EU is ...?
Italy (from 09/1973 to 05/2011)

■ A good thing ■ A bad thing ■ Neither good nor bad ■ DK - Don't know

Figure 1 shows that since the early 2000s increasingly less Italians consider the membership of the EU a good thing. If until the beginning of the century approval values averaged around 70%, in the peak of the crisis in 2011 it was circa 40%. This fact opens the discursive structure of opportunities for the emergence of Eurosceptic positions at the national level, an issue that was consensual until very recently.

Pirro and Kessel (2017) argue that populist actors frame these crises as a way to "voice dissent against the EU". Salvini's discourse is clearly sovereigntist and nativist using the expression "Italian's First". He criticizes Europe for "consisting of bureaucrats and technocrats who work against the real interests of the European people(s)" (Pasquino, 2019). In this context it is important to mention, that in the ongoing process of realignment, given the opportunity structure, the emergence of tensions and conflicts "may also have consequences going beyond the domestic context. If the eurosceptic parties continue to prevail, the relationship between Italy and the EU will undergo increasing tensions and may even put at risk the very existence of the Union in its present form" (Chiaramonte et al., 2018).

Following Bressanelli and de Candia (2019) it could be argued that the positions taken on the EU by Lega reflects the strategies and electorates at the national level, which is directly translated into their current politics of alliances at the European level. Corbetta and colleagues (2019), based on Lega electoral results

of 2018, show that Lega explores cultural populism (nativism) in their alliances and criticism of the EU making alliances with nativist parties across Europe.

Under Salvini's leadership, Lega went from being a regionalist party, that focus on the interests of northern Italy and demanding independence for the so-called region of Padania, to become a national party. This scale-shift led also to a change and transformation of the frames and discourses of the party: the party de-nationalisation created a new "enemy", as the establishment is now considered the EU that acts against the interests of the Italians instead of Rome. However, it was not the crisis that triggered the nativist and anti-Europe turn as their position was already slowly shifting since the 1990s from an EU-optimist organisation to an Eurosceptic one.

In the 1990s, given their regional views, they criticized the "undemocratic super-state" that acted against the interests of European people. Nevertheless, until the eruption of the crisis, the party never called for an exit from the EU or the Eurozone as "neither the EU nor its policies were deemed directly responsible for the economic situation of the country" (Pirro and Kessel, 2017). The radicalisation of their discourse against the EU comes after 2013 with the election of Salvini as party leader. Austerity and European policies were now deemed responsible for the crisis at the national level and the party called for an exit of the EU and the Eurozone. Pirro and Kessel suggest that this radicalisation can be "read through the domestic political context" as the EU-loyalty amongst voters declined and opened the way for these frames to become prominent. It is also important to note that due to their affiliation to center-right coalition, during the electoral period of 2018 they had to restrict their more eurosceptic views. Nonetheless, after the elections and as they become the major party of the coalition and integrate government they became less restrained in their critiques to the EU and use it for electorate purposes.

In terms of their affiliation in the European Parliament, until the emergence of crisis, Lega Nord was part of various groups. If initially these were pro-European groups, the party slowly integrates eurosceptics ones. Following the 2009 European elections the party joined the newly created "Europe of Freedom and Democracy" integrated by parties like UKIP and The True Finns. In the 2015, the party integrates the Europe of Nations and Freedom, a radical-right alliance led by Le Pen and Wilders. In line with this, Lega's European elections manifesto stressed the role of their Christian roots, the defense of national identity, underlining the supremacy of the Italian constitution over European directives. As a consequence, these manifesto was strongly against immigration, EU integration and austerity policies.

Populist Radical Right in Power: what consequences?

As the South of Europe was hit the hardest by the 2008 financial crisis and recession many people saw living standards shrink, the centrist parties that had governed hitherto – and the Eurocrats in Brussels with their clipboard austerity – became an obvious target. In Italy, decades of corruption, mismanagement and the impact of the 2015 refugee crisis resulted in the anti-establishment, tax-and-spend Five Star Movement sweeping to power last year in an unlikely coalition with the far-right, anti-immigration Lega. More specifically, in the 2018 Italian general election the outsider Five Star Movement improved its performance since last 2013 national elections (from which their already received a strong political legitimation as the third most important party of the country) by obtaining 32% of votes. In the same elections, the radical right populist party Lega (for more details see Caiani 2019) reached an unprecedented 17%. The M5S and the Lega despite long negotiations, ultimately joined forces to implement a shared government agenda: an 'all-populist' government (Pirro, 2018). As such, the current Italian government is based on a fragile, strategic, convenient, but also conflictive compromise between two forms of populism. In this section we will focus on the policies of the cabinet and the influence of Lega in the government.

In what concerns, *the welfare and social policies* of the 5SM-League coalition cabinet in Italy are marked not only by an overall turn against austerity measures of previous cabinets, but also by an overt conflict with the EU budgetary rules, which could be interpreted as, overall, regarding both parties, a typical anti-elitist populist position translated at the supranational instead of national level. Their government program and inauguration stated explicitly the objective of fulfilling their electoral promises of recovering the Italian economy and to move Italians out of poverty. As a result, in January 2019, the government announced two major reforms: the citizens' income (an old M5S promise which Di Maio called a "New Welfare System")[1] and the pension reform. These two measures were core electoral promises of each party, since as stressed in a joint press conference in 2019 "Italy can't concentrate only on financial stability, we also need to look at social stability" (Speak, 2019). In addition, these policies target the specific electorate of each party: while the Citizens Income is directed towards the poorest populations of the south that tendentially votes for the M5S, the pensions reform targets Lega's oldest voters.

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[1] *The Citizens' Income consists of a "basic monthly income, provided recipients actively seek work" (Adler, 2018). However, this policy as drafted it is not a universal basic income, but rather a new policy scheme designed to support those citizens living below the poverty line (Girardi, 2019). It is also important to notice the discourse behind the promotion of this new programme, as the government stresses that it is for "Italians only" (even if it is available to non-EU foreigners if they are residents for 10 years).*

In terms of *immigration and integration policies*, the coalition program, with Minister of the Interior under Salvini's command, targeted this issue directly, with a nativist turn. The Lega's action on immigration policies stretches between *i.* punctual sensationalist actions and announcements (or propaganda), and *ii.* securitization and criminalization decrees that effectively reduce migrants' rights. In the former we found repeated episodes such of closing down ports to refugees boats or announcing a census of Roma people (which did not happen); in the latter we find decrees (as the so called so-called Salvini's decree, in Fall 2018) that narrow asylum rights, prevent rescue at sea and punish survivors and rescuers. In details, the decree led to: (1) the restriction to "obtain a humanitarian visa to remain in Italy" if not related with political reasons or war; (2) the limitation of adequate shelter for asylum seekers; (3) the doubling of the amount of time people can be detain before deportation (90 to 180 days); and (4) the expansion of the list of offenses for which refugee status can be revoked, allowing the dismissal of asylum claims (it is enough to be charged) (Sunderland, 2018). Furthermore, the Minister of the Interior legitimizes the measures with a discourse that classifies migrants and asylum seekers as criminals, and connects migrants with the mafia and people's smugglers (Zampano, 2018). In the case of Lega, it radicalises its public populist discourse on migration, while materialising it on policy-making as shown above.

Conclusion

As Ruzza points out: "the recent trajectory of the Italian radical right and its main formations - FdL and LN - is marked by the loss of relevance of Berlusconi's party following the 2013 elections and the expulsion of Berlusconi from the Senate after he was found guilty of tax evasion" (Ruzza, 2018: 508). Together with the crisis ridden demise of Berlusconi, it should also be taken into account Lega's process of rebranding under Salvini's leadership, Lega became the main right-wing party. Even if currently the Italian right has a smaller share of the votes than in the 1990s, there was a rupture with liberal politics of Forza Italia and a radicalisation towards radical-right, nativist and eurosceptic positions, with an increasing visibility of neo-fascist grassroots movements and collaboration with institutional actors which constitute an important auxiliary force on the ground (De Giorgi and Tronconi, 2018).

Moreover, it could be argued that the realignment process is still underway, and more changes will be seen in the future as the ongoing political process unfolds. After the 2019 European elections Salvini's European elections striking win (34%) the 'bloc'

of right consolidated under his leadership. Until the breakdown of Government of Change in the summer of 2019, Salvini's message gave voice to a social bloc that was infused with fear and with poverty. Salvini's strategy occupied the media and built a political hegemony over the center-right and the 5SM, with a lib-pop agenda that mixed liberalism with populism in social policies, i.e., while attempting to liberalize the economy, he would provide the support to the middle-class and the losers of globalisation in the amidst of his profusing immigration campaign. We will now need to wait to see what happens.

In Italy, as for the *public discourse* on sensitive topics for populists such as immigration, we have to consider that the refugees crisis had a strong and concrete impact on the country, fueling a discourse against immigrants which is at the basis of the Lega positions (and, partially, the M5S). Lega espouses a clearly nativist view which puts the "Italian first", however much of this public discourse was already present before the coalition government, fueled by the emergence of Salvini as leader of Lega. Ultimately, Lega makes use of immigration to engage in a conflict with the EU. Holding to their Eurosceptic credentials in government, Lega's objective is to change the European institutions from the inside (Jones, 2018).

Finally, even if in Italy, (radical right) populism is not attempting to change and control country institutions. Nonetheless, in the report from the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2018 Democracy index shows a drop of the country from the 21st to the 33rd position, since, as commented Italy appears characterized by "increasing support for 'strongmen' who bypass political institutions" (The Local, 2019). In addition, the use of anti-migrants/foreigner rhetoric reveals a disregard from civil and humanitarian rights (The Local, 2019).

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