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Matteo Salvini's Northern League in 2016: between stasis and new opportunities

2016 may be regarded as a year of transition for the Northern League. After reaching one of the lowest points in its history in 2012 and 2013, under Matteo Salvini's leadership the League has since then experienced a period of recovery and significant electoral successes. In 2015 many commentators expected that the Northern League would replace *Forza Italia* (FI), Silvio Berlusconi's party, as the largest party of the centre-right and Salvini would be the candidate to challenge Matteo Renzi as Prime Minister. Yet the 2016 local elections seem to mark a slowdown in the political expansion of the party. Salvini's popularity did not grow further and even started to decline. At the same time, the success of Donald Trump in the US, the outcome of the constitutional referendum in December 2016 (see chapter X by Martin Bull), and Matteo Renzi's eventual defeat and resignation as Prime Minister, may open new opportunities for the party and Salvini's leadership.

It is still too early to say whether, as a consequence of the referendum results, the League will follow a trajectory of further expansion after a period of stasis. To be sure, the party still needs to overcome two important structural constraints, which became evident during the local elections. The first one is its difficulty to expand its electoral and organisational reach to the regions of southern Italy, thus becoming a fully national(-ised) party. The second one is the new increase in electoral support for the 5 Star Movement (M5S), with which the League competes to attract the so-called anti-system or protest vote. More generally, the bloc which opposes the governmental camp is very crowded and fragmented and this poses some challenges to Salvini's populist project.

This chapter starts from an overview of the new political profile of the Northern League under Salvini's leadership. It then moves to a discussion of its electoral campaign and alliance strategies in the 2016 local elections. An analysis of electoral results and trends in opinion polls from 2013 to 2016 is followed by a section which focuses on the challenges that the League had to face after the local elections. The concluding section highlights the new opportunities arising from Trump's victory in the US and Renzi's defeat in the constitutional referendum at the end of the year.

Changing political identity under Salvini's leadership

Since 2014 Matteo Salvini has developed a strategy based on two key objectives: transforming the Northern League into a national party, thus downplaying the ideological and organisational paradigms of regionalism and federalism; and subverting the political hierarchies within the centre-right, by challenging the leading role of a declining *Forza Italia*.

The Northern League has undergone a profound process of organisational and ideological transformation. At first sight, even after moving from Umberto Bossi to Matteo Salvini, the party seems to have remained a fundamentally leadership-based, populist party [McDonnell 2015]. However, the party led by Salvini is radically different from the one created by Bossi in the 1990s. Ideologically, the themes of federalism, regionalism and eventual independence of

central-northern Italy have become less important. This has occurred in a context of economic and political crisis, which radically changed key aspects of the Italian political debate.

In the 1990s and early 2000s devolution and federalism were central issues and political competition was significantly shaped by the territorial cleavage dividing the regions of northern and southern Italy [Fargion 2005]. Despite receiving between 4 and 10% of the national vote, the League managed to have a strong impact on the political agendaⁱ. However, the post-2010 period saw the emergence of a new scenario characterised by a deep economic recession (and austerity), the increasing role played by external actors (in particular, financial markets and the European Union), the crisis of the established political system of the so-called *Seconda Repubblica* (Second Republic) and the declining legitimacy of regional institutions, increasingly associated with a rather corrupt political class. These changes were also accompanied by the rise of a new important political actor, the 5 Star Movement, which radically challenged the political establishment (including the Northern League) without placing a particular emphasis on territorial issues.

In a context of multiple political shocks, the populist message of the Northern League became less effective and appealing because, after eight years of government (2001-6; 2008-11), it was perceived as too embedded (or 'institutionalised') within the traditional political system [Verbeek and Zaslove 2016, 316-317]. After all, it was the Northern League that made a decisive contribution to the end of the First Republic in the 1990s and the emergence of a new political equilibrium [Golden 2004]. It was legitimate to assume that when the so-called 'Second Republic' also seemed to come to an end in the mid-2010s, the party's strong identification with this political phase could prove lethal. This, together with the crisis of Bossi's leadership, reinforced the idea that a significant reorientation of the League's political discourse was needed. Matteo Salvini, elected leader at the end of 2013, realised that in order to survive, the party needed to reframe the territorial dimension of its populist message. This implied a more radical change than the ones promoted by the League leadership in previous years – for instance between 2006 and 2008 or 2011 and 2013 – when the party moved from government to opposition [Bobbà and McDonnell 2016]. Salvini pushed the 'chameleonic' character of populism [Taggart 2000] to the extreme.

Rome was no longer regarded as the main enemy and another capital became the main target of Northern League rhetoric: Brussels. The territorial cleavage presented by the League was no longer about the differences between a wealthy and economically competitive North, and a poor and economically dependent South. Instead the territorial cleavage was shifted to the European arena. In this new context, Italy as a whole was seen as part of a 'peripheral' region in a European 'super-state' dominated by the 'core' countries of central-northern Europe. Therefore, the new platform of the party started placing particular emphasis on the opposition against the constraints imposed by 'central' European institutions and 'core' EU member states, accused of being responsible for Italian economic decline. This marked the end of a political transition. In the early 2000s, the League had already moved from 'Euro-positivism' (Europe seen as an ally in the political struggle against central governmentsⁱⁱ) to increasing Euroscepticism [Chari et al. 2004]. Under Salvini's leadership, it moved to even more radical forms of 'Euro-rejectionism' [Kopecký and Mudde 2004].

The outright rejection of the process of European integration was (paradoxically) accompanied by an intensification of the political relations among right-wing, populist leaders across EU member states. The French *Front National* was increasingly regarded as an ally in the fight against Brussels and as the new ideological and organisational model to follow. Marine Le Pen was seen by Salvini as ‘an inspiration for his new political project’ [Pajnik et al. 2016, 73]. The party has moved even further to the right and established alliances with an extreme right, neo-fascist movement, *Casa Pound*, with which it organised a national rally in Rome at the beginning of 2015. In January 2016, Salvini invited Marine Le Pen, Greet Wilders (leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom) and the leaders of other far right, Euro-rejectionist parties (members of the Europe of Nations and Freedom group) to an international convention in Milanⁱⁱⁱ. They launched a cross-national campaign against the Schengen treaty and called for tougher policies aimed at reducing immigration and the influx of refugees. Already under Bossi’s leadership the party had promoted intense campaigns against immigrants, who were regarded as a threat to the identity of Italians, ‘especially Northern Italians’ [Zaslove 2004, 105] and risked undermining cultural and social integrity of the *Padania*. With Salvini the same rhetoric was applied to the broader Italian community (Diamanti defines this as ‘nationalisation of fears’^{iv}) and linked anti-immigration campaigns to the re-establishment of national borders, which have been considerably loosened during the process of European integration.

This ideological shift also meant that the regionally concentrated organisation of the party had to change. On the one hand, Salvini abandoned the traditional idea of the mass party, characterised by heavy organisation. Falling membership and the sharp decline in public subsidies [McDonnell and Vampa, 2016] has forced the leadership to rely on new social media and constant presence in TV talks as part of a cheaper, but equally effective, campaign strategy. At the same time, the Northern League could advance its mission as an anti-EU party, fighting for Italian emancipation from the process of European integration, by becoming a truly national party. This required an intensive campaign in the southern Italian regions, allowing the territorial expansion of the League. As highlighted by Vercesi [2016, 400],

Salvini opened the door to the possible activation of a broader constituency on specific issues, particularly European monetary policy. The expansion strategy was closely accompanied by the creation of a parallel political list – that lacked any graphic references to the classic League – to be presented in the central-southern regions called *Noi con Salvini* (Us with Salvini)

In late 2014 numerous groups of Salvini’s supporters emerged in southern Italy and created *Noi Con Salvini* committees, suggesting that the process of ‘nationalisation’ of the party structure and political strategy was well under way. Additionally, the name and platform of the new ‘sister party’ highlighted the centrality of the leader in the process of territorial expansion and ideological transformation. In northern Italy, Salvini still had to accommodate the demands coming from well-established regional leaders, such as Roberto Maroni and Luca Zaia, who could rely on their personal support and power positions as the Presidents of the Lombardy and Veneto regions. But in the South, Salvini had the opportunity to create a

movement that was fully dependent on his leadership and reflective of his populist views. This was also possible because in the southern regions the League had never had a governing role.

These transformations were also linked to the changing coalition strategies of the League. Since 2000 the party had been a faithful ally of Berlusconi's party, the *Popolo della Libertà* (People of Freedom, PdL), which then was renamed *Forza Italia* (Forward Italy, FI). The cohesion of the alliance partly depended on the strong personal relationship existing between Bossi and Berlusconi. Yet it could also be explained by purely political factors. Indeed, the two parties came to see each other as complementary, with Berlusconi's party appealing to the moderate voters of the North but also playing a key role in southern region, while the Northern League attracted the support of key sectors of the northern Italian electorate, particular those which were more anti-establishment, radical and more opposed to Roman centralism. Even if Forza Italia alternated moderate appeals to populist discourse, its populism was very different from that of the Northern League, as Bobba and McDonnell [2016] clearly show in their study.

However, Salvini's new 'national' strategy seems less compatible with the idea of a (macro-) regionalist party allied with a statewide conservative party. This is also due to the dramatic weakening of Berlusconi's party, which no longer seems to be able to act as the main pillar of the coalition and a 'federator' of political actors with substantially different positions and long-term goals. In addition, it has become increasingly difficult for the League to reconcile a stable alliance with FI, a member of the European People's Party, since Salvini's League has adopted a political platform that is mainly focused on anti-EU issues and foresees the creation of a cross-national populist network. Therefore, the relationship with FI has become more conflictual, even though there has not been a definitive breakup of the coalition and Salvini has left open the possibility of future alliances.

The 2016 local elections: assessing the effects of Salvini's reforms

The 2016 local elections present an opportunity to assess the effects of the ideological, organisational and strategic changes introduced by Salvini, more than two years after his election as party leader. Table 1 focuses on municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants (and more than 10,000 in Sicily^v) and shows the geographical distribution of the party lists (Northern League and *Noi con Salvini*) and its coalition strategies in 2016. It can be seen that the party was present in 98% of the municipalities in Northern Italy, 76% in central Italy and only 21% in the South. In the latter two macro-areas the geographical expansion of the party has been significant, since in the previous elections the League presented its lists only in 28% and 4% of central and southern municipalities. Overall, Northern League candidates were competing in 59% of the main municipalities. This is an improvement when compared to the 44% of the previous elections, although it is clear that the party is still far from becoming a truly national party. The League is still less 'nationalised' [Caramani 2004] than FI (officially running in 64% of municipalities) and well behind its main competitors, M5S (80%) and PD (98%).

It is also interesting to see that despite Salvini's intention to run a more autonomous campaign, the Northern League formed coalitions with FI in 60% of the municipalities where it presented a list. In the remaining municipalities the League established alliances with local lists or with other right-wing parties (in some rare circumstances with centre parties). The aggregate figures did not change compared to the previous elections (when FI was still called PdL). Interestingly, however, there are some territorial divergences. In Northern Italy, the League remained an important governmental political force and it was more inclined to form coalitions with more moderate centre-right parties. In fact, the percentage of municipalities in which the League established an alliance with FI even increased from 56% to 65%. This percentage is significantly lower in central and southern Italy, where the Northern League had not traditionally played a key role in regional and local governments and, as a consequence, was less constrained by coalition obligations (and freer to adopt a more 'anti-establishment' platform). Overall, it can be concluded that there is no strong evidence of a dramatic (and territorially homogeneous) change in the relationship between LN and FI at the local level, which places Salvini's more radical rhetoric in a slightly different light.

Table 1. Territorial distribution of lists and alliances of the Northern League (and *Noi Con Salvini*) in 2016 and comparison with the previous election. Absolute frequencies in brackets.

	2016			Previous		
	List presented*	Running with FI**	Running alone or with other lists**	List presented*	Running with Fi (formerly PdL)**	Running alone or with other lists**
North	98% (55)	65% (36)	35% (19)	98% (55)	56% (31)	44% (24)
Centre	76% (19)	53% (10)	47% (9)	28% (7)	86% (6)	14% (1)
South	21% (14)	50% (7)	50% (7)	4% (3)	67% (2)	33% (1)
Total	59% (88)	60% (53)	40% (35)	44% (65)	60% (39)	40% (26)

*percentage of municipalities in which League presented its list (absolute frequency in brackets)

**percentage calculated by considering only the municipalities in which the League presented its list

Source: <http://elezionistorico.interno.it/>. Focus on municipalities above 15,000 inhabitants (above 10,000 inhabitants in Sicily).

If we focus on the four largest cities that were involved in this electoral round – Rome, Milan, Turin and Naples – it appears equally evident that the Northern League did not have a consistent coalition strategy. Whereas in Naples the party failed to present its list, in Rome Salvini opposed the candidacy of Guido Bertolaso proposed by FI. Instead, he encouraged the creation of a 'Lepenist front' led by Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the right-wing *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy, FdI)^{vi}. Eventually FI dropped Bertolaso's candidacy but did not join its former allies and decided to support another moderate candidate, leader of a local list, Alfio Marchini. The same happened in Turin, where the League and FdI decided to run an autonomous campaign and refused to support the official FI candidate, Osvaldo Napoli, a former Christian-democrat, considered too moderate and close to the political establishment^{vii}.

However, in Milan the situation was completely different, with Salvini accepting the need to form a broad coalition including moderate parties that were in the Renzi government at the national level^{viii}. The role played by Roberto Maroni, former leader of the League and current President of Lombardy, in promoting the establishment of a 'classic' centre-right coalition was crucial in this case. The Milanese candidate of the centre-right coalition, Stefano Parisi, explicitly opposed populist and extremist positions and framed his electoral campaign by referring to traditional liberal-conservative themes. This led to increasing tensions with Salvini, who ended up leading a *de facto* separate electoral campaign focused on supporting his party list rather than the candidate for mayor^{ix}.

Electoral results may provide stronger evidence of the new political nature of the Northern League. Table 2 shows the geographical distribution^x of results of this party in 2016 and in the previous local elections. It can be seen that in terms of votes there has been a slight redistribution of support from North to South. Overall the Northern league gained almost 40,000 votes, but lost around 12,000 votes in northern Italy and gained more than 55,000 in central and southern Italy. In terms of percentages, however, it is clear that the North is where the party continues to receive most of its support. In central Italy, the party received 3% of the vote from a starting point of almost non-existence in the previous elections. In southern Italy, the party remained marginal with a 0.2% of the vote. Nationally the party only increased its share of the vote by 1 percentage point and remained well behind the PD (18.6%) and the M5S (17.1%). The League did not manage to overtake FI, which, despite experiencing a collapse in its electoral support, obtained 7.1% of the vote against the 5.3% of Salvini's party. Surprisingly, *Forza Italia* almost doubled the result of the Northern League in Milan. In general, neither the radical area nor the moderate one of the centre-right bloc seemed to clearly prevail in the big cities. In Milan and Naples, Berlusconi's moderate candidates were competitive enough to reach the second round of the electoral competition, whereas in Rome and Turin they obtained fewer votes than those of the 'Lepenist' coalition (which included FdI and the League).

The results of the elections also suggest a strengthening of local lists, which are not explicitly partisan, even though they may still be linked to a particular political movement or coalition. Generally, in a context of increasing de-politicisation of the local dimension, political parties may find it convenient to "outsource" representation to lists that are not formally recognisable as 'partisan' [Vampa 2016a: 583]. This phenomenon seems particularly significant on the centre-right of the political spectrum. Indeed, across the 24 main cities (*capoluoghi*) that participated in the 2016 local elections, the three core parties of the coalition (League, FI and FdI) only obtained 18.8% of the vote (they had won 26.2% in the previous election), whereas electoral support for centre-right local(or civic) lists increased from 5 to 10.4% [Vampa 2016b, 305–306].

Table 2. Electoral results of the Northern League. Comparison with previous local elections in brackets.

	Votes	%	Seats	Municipalities won (in coalition with FI)	Municipalities won (without FI)
North	217933 (-12435)	11.3 (+0.6)	199 (+36)	16 (+8)	9 (+4)
Centre	52710 (+48179)	3 (+2.7)	28 (+26)	1 (=)	4 (+4)
South	4054 (+3623)	0.2 (+0.2)	1 (+1)	1 (=)	0 (=)
Total	274697 (+39367)	5.3 (+1)	228 (+73)	18 (+8)	13 (+8)

Source: <http://elezionistorico.interno.it/>

Table 2 also suggests that in the last round of local elections the Northern League managed to increase its institutional representation (gaining 73 local councillors). This only partly occurred as a consequence of the proportional increase in vote share, which was quite modest. Instead it was mainly due to the majority bonuses granted by the municipal electoral system to winning coalitions. Since the number of municipalities won by coalitions including the Northern League had increased (Table 2, last two columns), a consequence of the majoritarian voting system was that the number of seats obtained by the party increased disproportionately. It is interesting to note that in northern Italy, the League mainly won in 'broad' coalitions that also included FI. However, it should also be underlined that in this macro-region, the League lost one of its historic strongholds, Varese, after more than 20 years of unchallenged dominance. In central Italy, on the other hand, the party was able to win the mayoral election without formal alliances with FI in 4 out of 5 cases. Finally, the League was part of a winning coalition, including FI, only in one southern municipality, again confirming its marginal role in this part of Italy.

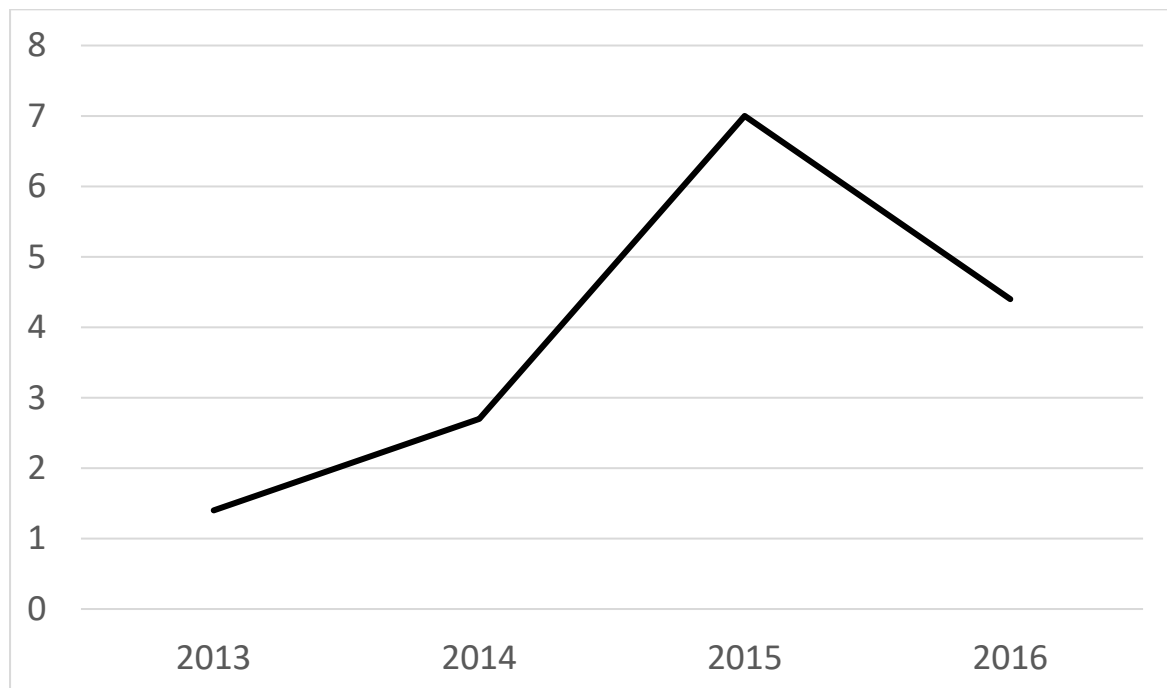
The Northern league until October 2016: losing political momentum?

Under Salvini's leadership, the League appears to have recovered from a crisis that started in 2012 when a series of scandals involving key party figures forced its founder Umberto Bossi to resign as leader after more than 20 years in control. However, the 2016 local elections suggest a slow-down in the electoral expansion of the party. In late-2014 and 2015 the party was increasingly seen by commentators as the only one that could challenge Renzi. At the same time, Salvini seemed ready to unseat Berlusconi as the leader of the centre-right coalition, with the League replacing a declining *Forza Italia* as the main pillar of that political area. Even Berlusconi started considering the possibility of 'abdicating' in favour of the League's rising star. During a press conference, the leader of FI, who often relies on football

metaphors, defined Salvini as a *'goleador'* (goal scorer) and declared to be ready to step aside and play the role of *'regista'* (deep-lying playmaker)^{xi}. This meant that Salvini could aspire to become the top representative of the centre-right coalition in the competition with PD and M5S, while Berlusconi, in his role of *'founding father'* (*padre nobile*) of the alliance, would mainly act as his strategic adviser. During this time the M5S no longer seemed to be the only effective opposition (and alternative) to the government. In fact, the rise of the League corresponded with a phase of stagnation (even crisis) for the Movement founded by Beppe Grillo. Polls indicated an increasing popularity of Salvini after the 2014 European Parliament elections, which was also evident in the outcome of regional elections in November 2014 and May 2015, when the party seemed to gain political momentum.

There are various ways to assess whether 2016 has seen a slowdown (or even reversal) of the electoral fortunes of the Northern League. The first one is to look at the percentage of votes obtained by the party in those municipalities that have participated in all electoral competitions (local, regional, national and European) from 2013 to 2016. 69 municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants can be included in this analysis^{xii}. Figure 1 clearly shows a slight recovery in 2014 (European election) from the low point reached in 2013 (general election) and a dramatic growth in 2015 (regional election). However, in the 2016 local elections, the overall share of votes in the 69 municipalities has declined by almost three percentage points from 7% to 4.4%.

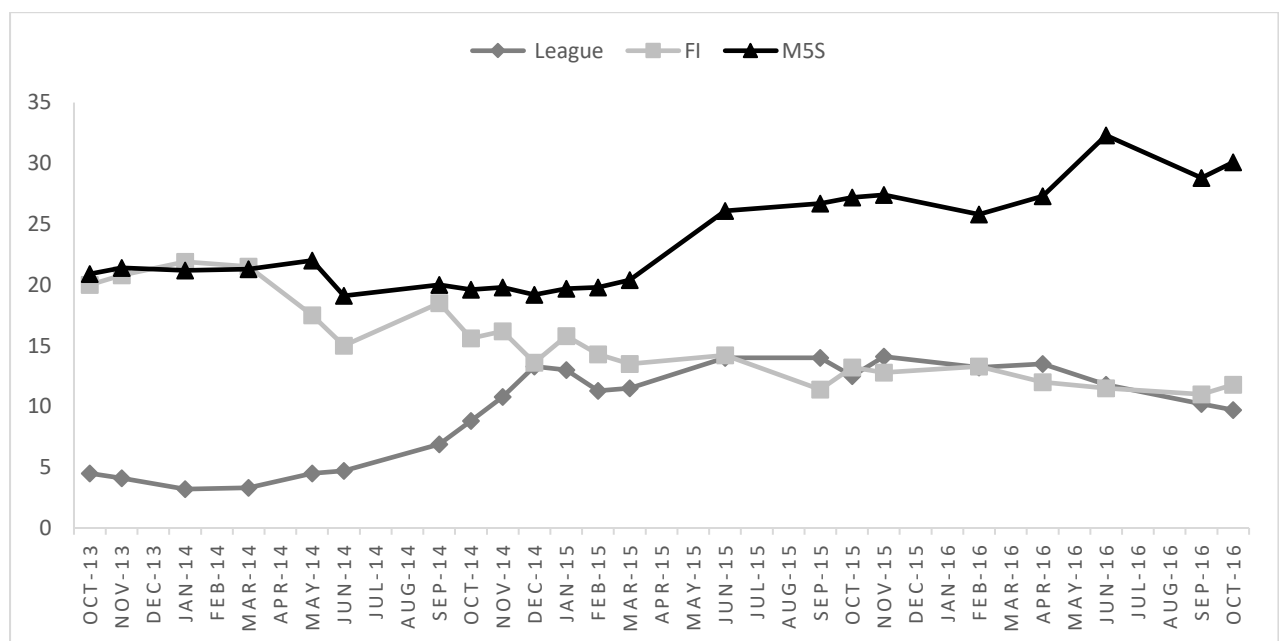
Figure 1. Electoral results of the Northern League from 2013 to 2016 in 69 municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants



Electoral polls and surveys also suggest that the Northern League might have reached the limit of its growth in 2015. The polls conducted by Ilvo Diamanti's Demos clearly show that in late 2014 and 2015 the League experienced a phase of significant electoral expansion (Figure 2), confirmed by the results of the regional elections mentioned above. This was accompanied by a sharp decline in the support for *Forza Italia*. The rise of the League also occurred in a period of crisis and transition for the 5 Star Movement, after the disappointing result of the European election. Salvini's party seemed to be able to attract some of the protest votes (particularly the 'right-wing' ones), which were abandoning, at least temporarily, Grillo's party.

However, Figure 2 also shows that in the second half of 2015 and in 2016, the League was unable to further increase its electoral support. Overall, it seems that there are some 'structural' constraints that have prevented the League from going beyond a 15% ceiling in the national vote share. These constraints are partly territorial – i.e. the inability of the party to gain substantial support in southern regions – and partly derive from the fact that the 'populist' political offer is now particularly crowded and dominated by a recovering M5S. The October 2016 poll by Demos suggested that support for the League went below 10% for the first time since October 2014, thus confirming the difficulties experienced by the party.

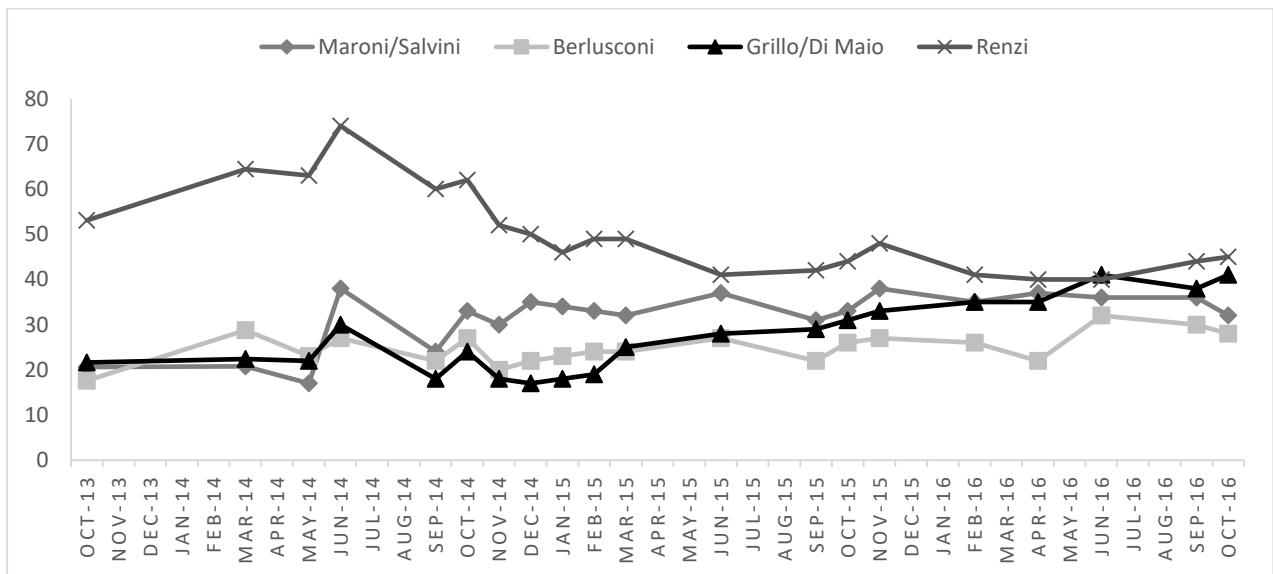
Figure 2. Voting intentions from October 2013 to October 2016



Source: Demos, Atlante Politico <http://www.demos.it/>

In 2015, polls also suggested that Salvini became the most popular politician after Matteo Renzi and, for the first time, seemed a serious contender to the premiership. Therefore, his aspirations to become the leader of the whole centre-right coalition seemed justified. However, also in this case, 2016 polls show that the picture has changed. Salvini's popularity ceased to grow (and actually slightly declined). Luigi di Maio, who has emerged as the *de facto* leader of the M5S, overtook support for Salvini in opinion polls and has positioned himself as Renzi's main competitor (Figure 3). If in 2015 it seemed that the centre-right had found a new leader in 2016 the picture appeared less clear. The centre-right remains very fragmented and Salvini is far from being unanimously considered as a possible unifying leader. In fact, he has to face increasing hostility from the more moderate faction of Forza Italia, which has turned to Stefano Parisi – who proved to be a competitive centre-right candidate in Milan – as a possible leader of the coalition (see next section). Berlusconi's limited support for the leader of the Northern League seemed to decrease further, partly as a consequence of the coalitional divisions that emerged in Rome and Turin.

Figure 3. Leaders' popularity (from October 2013 to October 2016): Renzi, Maroni*/Salvini, Berlusconi, Grillo*/Di Maio.



Source: Demos, Atlante Politico <http://www.demos.it/> *until December 2013 **until June 2015

After the local elections: challenges and rising tensions

Like Matteo Renzi, Matteo Salvini sought to strengthen his leadership by sustaining political momentum and demonstrating his direct appeal to the electorate, contrasting with the discredited elite that had led the party to the political disasters of 2012 and 2013. Activists

turned to Salvini, a relatively young politician, who had never played a key role in national politics, as the only one who could regain the trust of voters in a context of rising anti-establishment feelings and thus save the party from political extinction. However, unlike Renzi, Salvini could not rely on the control of key governing roles to counterbalance a decline (or stagnation) in his popularity. As the former Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti used to say, “power wears out those who don’t have it” (“*il potere logora chi non ce l’ha*”) and long-term opposition may in fact lead to slow political decline. The 5 Star Movement seemed to be the first victim of this phenomenon between 2014 and 2015 but then managed to reverse its political fate by gradually replacing Grillo’s leadership with a more collegial body (the *direttorio*)^{xiii} and exploiting the crisis experienced by the Democratic Party in the city of Rome. This led to victories in the 2016 local elections, which, as shown in Figure 2, marked a second wave of electoral expansion for the Movement.

With the disappointing results of the local elections, in which the Northern League even failed to obtain more votes than the declining *Forza Italia*, tensions re-emerged within the party^{xiv}. A few weeks after the election, Roberto Maroni, interviewed by the newspaper *la Repubblica*^{xv}, expressed his doubts about the ‘Lepenist turn’ made by Salvini, saying that this strategy would confuse voters and undermine electoral support for the League in its traditional strongholds in Northern Italy (defeats in Milan and his home town Varese were particularly bruising for the President of Lombardy). He also showed some interest in the more moderate (and inclusive^{vi}) project proposed by Stefano Parisi, who, after his defeat in Milan, decided to launch a national campaign for a new centre-right coalition. Parisi’s programme was more inspired by conservative and Christian-democratic traditions, in line with the ideas of the European People’s Party, and was clearly seen as incompatible with the populist and xenophobic project supported by Salvini^{xvii}. The hostility and distrust were reciprocal and Salvini declared that, unlike Maroni, he was not interested in Parisi’s platform, which he saw as too moderate (and Euro-positive) and doomed to electoral defeat^{xviii}.

The new phase also marked the return of the old leader, Umberto Bossi, who started attacking Salvini and questioning the effectiveness of his leadership. In an interview for the weekly *L’Espresso*, Bossi explicitly stated that Salvini was going in the completely wrong direction^{xix}. In the same piece, the journalist Roberto Di Caro reported some interviews with old party activists. While they recognised that Salvini’s leadership had saved the party from a decline which, after 2013, seemed irreversible, they also demanded more emphasis on issues of autonomy and regionalism. According to the more ‘traditionalist’ factions of the party, the governments of Lombardy and Veneto, led by Maroni and Zaia, should be seen as the models to follow and should not be replaced by Marine Le Pen’s populist model, which would risk relegating the party to the role of vocal, but ineffective, opposition.

In some cases, the autonomist, and even pro-independence, agenda was pushed by the regional branches of the party in traditional strongholds. For instance, in Veneto the council majority supporting Zaia passed a law that grants the status of ‘national minority’ to the people of Veneto and tried to impose the teaching of the Venetian language in schools. This law was defined by the media as the first step towards ‘Venexit’^{xx}, since a referendum will also be called to increase the autonomy of the Veneto region. Salvini will probably face the

challenge of reconciling these re-emerging centrifugal pressures with his idea of creating an Italian *Front National*, which, as the French case illustrates, is not particularly supportive of decentralization and regional autonomy [Ivaldi and Lanzone 2016].

In 2016 Salvini was also seen as totally unable to compromise with other political actors, even those ideologically close to the League, and increase the influence of the party through the establishment of strategic alliances. Even his 'Lepenist' project did not seem to succeed and give life to a broad coalition of right-wing movements. The contacts with *Fratelli d'Italia*, for instance, did not intensify after the local elections, perhaps because the decision to form right-wing coalitions in Rome and Turin did not prove as electorally successful as expected. More generally, Salvini struggled to act as a federator of the radical right^{xxi} and did not manage to unify the whole centre-right, which remained highly fragmented and unable to develop a shared political platform. Yet it is too early to say that Salvini's project completely failed and, in fact, two political events occurred at the end of 2016 may create new opportunities for the League.

New opportunities?

As highlighted in this chapter, most of 2016 was a period of *stasis* for the Northern League, which seemed unable to expand its electoral support beyond its peak of 2015. As a consequence, it struggled to play a dominant role in the centre-right political camp and in opposing the Renzi government. However, changing national and international circumstances could be exploited by Salvini to regain political momentum and relaunch his populist discourse.

The first important development was the election of Donald Trump as the new President of the United States in November 2016. The unexpected victory of a presidential candidate who was accused of racism, sexism, isolationism and right-wing populism will probably have important global consequences. European democracies are particularly exposed to the effects of radical political shifts occurring in their most powerful and closest international ally. For instance, since 2008, Barack Obama's progressive message has inspired European social democrats and liberals in search of a new political identity. Now Trump may be regarded as an equally powerful model for the more radical sectors of the European right, thus reinforcing a populist discourse that has already been on the rise in recent years.

During the presidential campaign, Salvini was the only Italian leader, who openly endorsed the American billionaire. Therefore, it is not surprising that after the US elections, Salvini portrayed himself as the 'Italian Trump'^{xxii} and fully embraced the American experience. The heavily web-based and unconventional campaign launched by the Republican nominee demonstrated that it was possible to achieve political success even without the support of the establishment and traditional media. Therefore, Trump's victory helped Salvini relaunch his leadership and reinvigorate his vision of a new anti-system, nationalist right.

The American events also played a role in the League's campaign against the constitutional reform approved by the majority supporting Renzi. The referendum held on 4th December

was seen as another opportunity to reshape the political discourse, particularly on the centre-right of the political spectrum. It is not a coincidence that immediately after Trump's victory, Salvini organised a big political rally in Florence to open his referendum campaign^{xxiii}. The choice of the location was not casual, since Renzi started his political career as the President of the Province of Florence and later became Mayor of the city. This clearly indicated that the main target of the League was not the constitutional reform *per se* but the Renzi government and some of its policies that were unrelated to the constitutional reform, in particular immigration (in the context of the refugee crisis) and EU policies. The Florentine rally was also an opportunity to strengthen the links with other parties on the right, particularly with FdI and its leader, Giorgia Meloni, who participated in the event. The faction of *Forza Italia* that was hostile to the moderate project proposed by Stefano Parisi also decided to join Salvini's campaign^{xxiv}. This once again shows that the situation on the centre-right of the political spectrum is in continuous flux.

Overall, the referendum campaign, which was mainly based on political opposition to the government rather than on the actual content of the reform, helped the League overcome a situation of political gridlock. The party seemed to benefit from the combined effect of Trump's victory and a successful referendum campaign. The November poll by Demos^{xxv} showed that the League gained 4 percentage points in one month (from 9.7% to 13.7%). Salvini increased his personal popularity from 32 to 38%, thus regaining his position as the most popular leader after Renzi. A post-referendum poll also showed that both League and M5S voters were the most mobilised against the reform (88% for both parties^{xxvi}). The results of the referendum, which saw the clear defeat of Renzi and his majority, led to the resignation of the Prime Minister and the formation of a new government led by Paolo Gentiloni, a close ally of Matteo Renzi in the Democratic Party. By intensifying his opposition to a weak government, born on the ashes of a bruising defeat, Salvini may be able to open a new phase of political success for his party before the next general election.

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- ⁱ For instance both constitutional reforms of 2001 and 2005, promoted by centre-left and centre-right coalitions, were inspired by the Northern League's 'federalist' agenda [Ambrosiano et al. 2010]
- ⁱⁱ Europe was seen as 'Europe of the Regions'
- ⁱⁱⁱ A. Mattioli, *La destra anti-Ue riunita a Milano. Le Pen: "Schengen è finito"*, in «La Stampa», 29 January 2016.
- ^{iv} I. Diamanti, *Lega, la marcia del Po 20 anni dopo: il partito anti-Stato ora nazionalizza le paure*, in «la Repubblica», 16 September 2016.
- ^v This explains some minor discrepancies with the chapter by Emanuele and Maggini.
- ^{vi} P. Matteucci, *Roma, Forza Italia conferma Bertolaso. Salvini: "Non sarà sindaco in questa vita"*, in «la Repubblica», 22 April 2016.
- ^{vii} M. Giacosa, *Salvini cambia il candidato, anche a Torino il centrodestra si divide*, 16 March 2016.
- ^{viii} For instance, the *Nuovo Centro-Destra* (New Centre-Right, NCD), led by the interior minister, Angelino Alfano, presented a list in support of Parisi. The coalition even included *Italia Unica*, a movement founded by Corrado Passera, former minister of the pro-austerity, technocratic government led by Mario Monti.
- ^{ix} O. Liso, *Elezioni Milano, gelo tra Salvini e Parisi: il referendum agita il centrodestra*, in «la Repubblica», 25 May 2016.
- ^x North: Lombardia, Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Emilia Romagna, Liguria, Trentino-Alto Adige. Centre: Toscana, Lazio, Umbria, Marche. South: Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Molise, Calabria, Sicilia, Sardegna.
- ^{xi} S. Turco, *Silvio Berlusconi: "Matteo Salvini è un goleador, a me va bene fargli da regista"*, in «l'Espresso», 25 November 2014.
- ^{xii} Within this group I have also included 14 municipalities in Emilia Romagna and Calabria, where regional elections took place in late 2014. These results have been merged with those of the regional elections in early 2015.
- ^{xiii} The M5S experienced another phase of political turbulence immediately after its success in Rome. The difficulties faced by the administration led by the newly elected mayor, Virginia Raggi, determined a crisis within the *direttorio* and forced Grillo to take back some power.
- ^{xiv} A. Madron, *Matteo Salvini, malumori Lega contro il leader che ha mancato sorpasso a Fi. Da Maroni a Zaia: chi guarda a sua poltrona*, in «il Fatto Quotidiano», 3 August 2016.
- ^{xv} M. Pucciarelli, *Roberto Maroni: "Una Lega lepenista rischia di perdere il Nord, Parisi mi incuriosisce, avanti con le primarie"*, in «la Repubblica», 30 July 2016.
- ^{xvi} For instance, Maroni has never excluded the possibility of forming coalitions with centre parties, which, nationally, are in the Renzi government and, like NCD, are also part of Maroni's ruling coalition in Lombardy.
- ^{xvii} F. Verderami, *Parisi e il futuro del centrodestra «Per noi niente modelli lepenisti»*, in «Corriere della Sera», 28 July 2016.
- ^{xviii} T. Ciriaco, *Salvini bocchia Parisi: "Modello perdente, non ci stiamo"*, in «la Repubblica», 22 July 2016.
- ^{xix} R. Di Caro, *Umberto Bossi: "Salvini sta sbagliando tutto"*, in «L'Espresso», 26 August 2016.
- ^{xx} G. Visetti, *Venexit, il Veneto vuole il bilinguismo e lo status di minoranza etnica*, in «la Repubblica», 6 December 2016.
- ^{xxi} In March 2016, even *Casa Pound* abandoned Salvini, accusing him to be 'too moderate' (see interview of Alberto Iannone, President of *Casa Pound*, to the web journal www.affaritaliani.it <http://www.affaritaliani.it/politica/casapound-gianluca-iannone-commenta-elezioni-bolzano-421251.html>)
- ^{xxii} M. Sorgi, *La nascita del partito populista*, in «La Stampa», 13 November 2016.
- ^{xxiii} G. Adinolfi, E. Ferrara e M. Mugnani, *Salvini a Firenze: "Pronto a fare il leader del centrodestra"*, in «la Repubblica», 12 November 2016.
- ^{xxiv} This faction was led by Giovanni Toti, President of the Liguria Region.
- ^{xxv} See <http://www.demos.it/a01323.php>
- ^{xxvi} See <http://www.demos.it/a01330.php>