A Eurosceptic vision in a europhile country: The case of the Lega Nord

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(Received 9 May 2008; final version accepted 7 April 2009)

As a consequence of Italy’s integration in the EMU in 1998, the Lega Nord shifted from a pro-European to a Eurosceptic position. The Lega’s Eurosceptic vision combines a strong identification with Europe with a hostile attitude towards the institutions of the EU. Identification with Europe expresses in the first place the party’s geopolitical view of Padania as a European and hence modern and entrepreneurial region. Its critique of the EU incorporates numerous, sometimes contradicting influences such as the neo-liberal vision of a free-trade based Europe with minimal rules and regulations, and a protectionist defence of northern Italian economic interests. It is in particular the party’s institutional vision that attributes centrality to the right of Padania to autonomy and self-government which leads to its rejection of the centralism and dirigism of the European Union.

Keywords: Lega Nord; ideology; Euroscepticism

Introduction

Many scholars have discussed the Lega Nord’s transition around 1998 from a pro-European to a Eurosceptic political position. Several authors have convincingly explained the Lega’s programmatic transition by referring to Italy’s acceptance in the EMU in 1998 (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001: 108; Conti 2003; Chari, Iltanen, and Kritzinger 2004; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). This acceptance invalidated one of the Lega’s favoured arguments for secession, namely separate EMU accession for northern Italy. Before 1998, the party emphasised the incapacity of Italy as a whole to enter the EMU, because of the burden of the state debt, assumed to result mainly from efforts to subsidise the South. From this perspective, it proposed the secession of northern Italy (‘Padania’) and its separate integration in the EMU as an alternative that could be presented as economically attractive and politically necessary.

While this interpretation highlighting changes in the political opportunity structure explains why the party was obliged to abandon its previous programme that had become obsolete, it does not clarify why the party opted for Euroscepticism, especially taking into account the marginality of Euroscepticism in Italy (Conti 2003). Interestingly, attempts at such a clarification offer quite different interpretations. Conti (2003, 28) argues that the more mainstream profile adopted by its electoral competitors, Forza Italia and Alleanza nazionale, may have obliged the party to take a radical right-wing stance, of which its hard
Euroscepticism is but one expression. Chari, Iltanen, and Kritzinger (2004), on the other hand, suggest that the Lega opted for a Eurosceptic discourse because the party intended to re-establish its alliance with Forza Italia and Alleanza nazionale: for these parties Euroscepticism was more acceptable than secessionism.

Besides referring to the political opportunity structure, scholarship on party-based Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2003) also relates Eurosceptic positions of political parties to their ideology. Euroscepticism, however, corresponds with a panoply of ideological positions and attitudes towards the European Union and is advanced by parties with opposing ideologies. In the case of the Lega, the difficulty of classifying the party in ideological terms complicates even more the issue, especially since the party has a well-deserved reputation for political and also ideological volatility (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001, 42–66; Tambini 2001, 1–7). In its early years it combined its original ethno-regionalism (sometimes with the rhetoric of the more leftist ethno-regionalism of the 1970s), with economic liberalism. In the 1990s, it developed an ethno-nationalist discourse based on a mythic Celtic past. From the late 1990s onwards, coinciding with its shift towards Euro-scepticism, the party has increasingly expressed extreme-right viewpoints, a mixture of an outspoken xenophobic, anti-immigrant and anti-Islam stance combined with a strong defence of Christian values (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001, 127–35). The relationship between the party’s ideology and its attitude towards Europe likewise defies easy classification. The early pro-EU stance may have reflected the dominant attitude of regionalist parties in Europe (Gómez-Reino 2006, 252). The Eurosceptic turn may be related to the party’s adoption of an extreme right ideology (Conti 2003), or understood as a rediscovery of territorial politics in the context of globalisation (Ruzza 2006). Giordano (2004) relates this shift rather to a nascent scepticism of regional parties towards the EU, because of the unfulfilled promise of a Europe of the Regions. Spektorowski (2003) interprets it as a new ethno-regionalism, inspired by the ideology of the New Right that is supportive of a regionalist Europe of the peoples.

These contrasting interpretations of the Lega’s Eurosceptic transition seem to confirm the difficulty of the party’s ideological classification and even more drastically the party’s patent instrumental use of ideologies. Such a reading, however, underestimates the importance the party has (and even more so a group of intellectuals, members and sympathisers of the party have) attributed to the intellectual grounding of the party programme. They clearly consider this production of ideas a necessary condition to establish and give intellectual credentials to the northern Italian/Padanian identity the party proposes. The party leader, Umberto Bossi, has authored (generally together with the journalist Daniele Vimercati) a number of books that present the Lega’s vision of society and Italian politics (Bossi and Vimercati 1992, 1993, 1998; Bossi 1995a, 1995b). Starting from 1995, much of the literature on Padanian identity has been published in the theoretical review edited by party sympathisers, Quaderni padani (Padanian Notebooks). The review (edited by the Libera Compagnia Padana, the Free Padanian company) focuses on the elaboration of a Padanian identity by establishing the specificity of its history, culture, folklore and dialect. The editor of the review, Gilberto Oneto, is also the author of the book that proposes the most systematic elaboration of Padanian identity, L’invenzione della Padania. La rinascita della comunità più antica d’Europa (Oneto 1997). Together with Giancarlo Pagliarini, he also authored the document 50 buone ragioni per l’indipendenza (Oneto and Pagliarini 2005) that gives a compendium of pro-independence arguments.
This body of texts produces the best instrument to interpret the party’s views on Europe and European integration. These views are related to a key concern of this literature, the relationship between northern Italy/Padania and outsiders, including its neighbours. Party discourse and party literature display a constant, inherent tension on this issue. One dimension emphasises cooperation and integration, highlighting Padania’s insertion in the global economy and its essentially European identity. Another dimension insists on the defence of the Padanian nation and its identity, proposing protection against the intervention of intrusive non-Padanian institutions but also economic protectionism. Concerning Europe, the tension between insertion in Europe and protection not only from the Italian state but also from interference of European institutions has been a constant in the Lega’s outlook. Rather than expressing a drastic ideological shift, the Lega’s Eurosceptic turn can thus be read as a shift of priorities, as different choices made within a set of eclectic and often contradicting visions on the Padanian nation and its geopolitical and economic position.

This article analyses the body of texts articulating a political and ethnic identity produced by Lega-related intellectuals, and especially the contributions that concern the EU, the place of Padania in Europe and, more generally, the process of globalisation. These writings have always conceived the Padanian nation-building process in a broader context in which both Europe and globalisation play a crucial role. Although they are less focused on European integration, they nevertheless regularly pay attention to Europe and the EU. The books (co-)authored by Bossi contain frequent references to the European Union. In recent years, Quaderni padani has published three special issues (nos 43–44, 45 and 55, published respectively in 2002, 2003 and 2004) devoted to Europe that intend to give intellectual substance to the party’s recent Euroscepticism.1 In my analysis of these texts, I first point out how the party’s identity discourse embeds Padania within Europe, and which understanding of European identity it implies. By discussing the Lega’s institutional and economic arguments against the EU, I then analyse why this identification with Europe is combined with a Eurosceptical political stance. I conclude by outlining the main dimensions of the Lega’s Eurosceptic discourse.

Nation-building in a post-national and European context

The Lega’s discourse constructing a national identity for northern Italy includes two dimensions. It affirms, on the one hand, the socioeconomic modernity of the region, and, on the other, its deeply rooted cultural identity (cf. Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001, 105–38; Gómez-Reino 2002, 79–115). The party consistently locates its nation-building discourse in a broader geopolitical context. It argues that the demise of the geopolitical order of the Cold War should lead to the disappearance of the centralised, artificial and Jacobin nation-state. The party understands itself as an exponent of the revival of peoples that rediscover their individuality and therefore acquire the right to autonomy or even independence (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 127–30). Like other regionalist parties, the Lega interprets this revival as a European event, which should lead to the creation of a Europe of peoples and regional states (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 208). While favouring the self-government of peoples and respect for their cultural diversity, and thus rejecting processes of cultural homogenisation, the Lega has for a long time been favourably disposed towards economic globalisation and a liberal economic order, and it has
understood its political project as inserted in this global context (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001, 139–72; Huysseune 2006, 180–91). In recent years, the party has taken a protectionist turn and has started questioning the dogmas of economic liberalism (cf. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005, 964). *Quaderni padani* contributions, however, still defend economic globalisation as a crucial process that has weakened the authority of the nation-state and has enabled peoples to acquire more liberty (e.g. Bassani 2007, 4–7).

Within this post-Cold War timeframe, the Lega has steadfastly opposed Padania as a self-governing community to the ‘Jacobin’ Italian nation-state. Particularly in the early years of its existence, critiques of the inefficiency of the Italian state and its cumbersome bureaucracy, and of the corruption of Italy’s political establishment, were a central feature of the party’s discourse. The party explains these vices of the Italian state by referring to its highly centralised structure, whereby the national government and the central bureaucracy exercise control over the decision-making process at the local and regional levels. The Italian state and its bureaucratic tutelage, according to the Lega, deprive society of its liberty. Italian public opinion widely shares this critique, frequently confirmed by scholarship highlighting the inefficient absolutism of the Italian state (cf. Huysseune 2006, 107–17). In the early 1990s, this critique was extended towards the traditional strong state interventionism in the economy. The Lega’s proposals for the privatisation of the Italian economy’s extensive public sector (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 192–4) reflected, in fact, hegemonic neo-liberal opinion on this issue.

This ideological climate has also favoured the Lega’s attack on the state’s redistributive policies. The Lega has constantly accused the predatory Italian state, *Roma ladrona* (thieving Rome) of depriving the North of its wealth, concurring with a widespread anti-redistributive revisionism of neo-liberal inspiration. Because of the economic divide between northern and southern Italy, this critique of redistributive policies is based on the assumption that these policies favour the South.² The Lega illustrates its critique of these redistributive policies with references to well-known examples of public spending in the South characterised by waste and corruption. These facts have given credibility both to the Lega’s representation of northern Italy as a cow perpetually milked by the Italian state to subsidise the parasitical South and to its proposals for fiscal federalism.

In proposing a northern identity corresponding with the region’s socioeconomic modernity, the Lega has in fact reproduced a pre-existing and broadly accepted discursive framework contrasting a modern and entrepreneurial northern society to the backward (and implicitly ‘southern’) state. Within this framework, the Lega argues that the Italian state discourages the autonomous development of the North, and does not provide adequate support to the northern economy (e.g. infrastructure, support of export). This discourse implies a self-evident identification of northern Italy with Europe and modernity, facilitated by the longstanding habit of rhetorical identification of southern Italy with Africa because of its presumed backwardness, and hence its symbolic exclusion from European modernity. The party makes use of the image of the *popolo produttore* (the ‘production people’), to describe the strong labour ethic and entrepreneurial skills of the Padanians. This argument is all the more credible since they correspond with scholarly descriptions of diffuse industrialisation in northern Italy (Huysseune 2006, 176–7). By suggesting that these virtues are similar to Max Weber’s protestant entrepreneurial spirit, the Lega moreover manages to root northern identity firmly within a modern (northern) European cultural context.
The dynamics of identity affirmation has enhanced the articulation of a more elaborated and coherent vision of Padania. For this purpose, Oneto (1997, 65–6) argues that the dialects of the regions north of the Apennines are more related to Occitan, Catalan and French than to Italian, and therefore form a separate language, Padanian. This definition excludes the central regions, in socioeconomic terms similar to the North, but facilitates the establishment of a coherent cultural identity. It also interprets language as a marker of a deep identity, rooted in history, and one that expresses inherited cultural traditions. Within this ethnonationalist discourse, the origin of Padania’s ethnic identity is identified with the pre-Roman Celtic presence in these regions. This discursive framework assimilates contemporary Padanian with ancient Celtic virtues, arguing that both Padanian entrepreneurship and autonomism are inheritances from originally Celtic ethnic values.

The Lega’s discourse argues that identities are deeply rooted in history and embedded in a territory. The party certainly does not pretend that the region developed in complete autarchy, since such a viewpoint would be blatantly counterfactual. It nevertheless clearly distinguishes economic and cultural contacts with the North and Western Europe in general from those with the South and Mediterranean regions. The slogan più lontano da Roma, più vicino all’Europa (further away from Rome, closer to Europe) aptly indicates the orientation of the Padanian ‘nation’ (cf. Tambini 2001, 111). It values the links of the region with northern and central Europe (‘Celtic’ France but also ‘Mitteleuropa’ and the Habsburg Empire), and highlights correctly how the Alps, rather than forming a frontier, historically have been a transit zone through which cultural influences from these regions have reached northern Italy. The Celtic ancestors of the Padanians are for the Lega crucial to establish the territory’s links with Europe (Busi 2002). The Lega’s discourse tends on the contrary to ignore the North’s history of contacts with the South and the Mediterranean regions, or to evaluate them in negative terms: the Roman conquest, the impact of the Italian state and that of immigration.

Both in its more pro-European early years and in its later Eurosceptic phase, the Lega has thus emphasised the European-ness of northern Italy, arguing even that Padania is the heart of Europe (Oneto and Pagliarini 2005, 22). The Lega associates Europe with modernity, a rich man’s club to which Padania has a right to belong. It therefore constantly emphasises its sameness to the rich core territories both in socioeconomic profile and in cultural and historical terms. As a token of Padania’s modernity and European-ness, the Lega as a rule rhetorically accepts what are supposed to be the core European values, even when it is sometimes uncomfortable with liberal-democratic values like gender equality (Huysseune 2006, 187–8). Its attitude towards cultural diversity is more problematic. The party’s discourse that identifies Padania with Europe and defends at the same time cultural diversity within Europe is not entirely incompatible with mainstream presentations of Europe that emphasise its unity in diversity. The Lega is aware of internal diversity within Padania, and accepts the presence of ethnic and religious minorities with a longstanding presence in northern Italy, the Ladino-speaking communities, Waldensians, Armenian Christians, Slovenians, Croatians and Jews (Oneto and Pagliarini 2005, 9). The Lega is, however, not ready to integrate groups (including partisans of the radical left) that threaten what it assumes to be the core values of Padania and of Western modernity. Its main foes nevertheless have always been immigrants, including southern Italians. In recent years in particular the party has
constantly emphasised the need to exclude alien, non-European cultures from its territory and refuses to accept multiculturalism and any cultural melting-pot model.

Both the Lega’s construction of a Padanian nation and the embedding of the nation within Europe are in fact clearly based on the parallel construction of ‘Others’ presumed to be less or non-European, namely southern Italians and immigrants (and the party has hence questioned the presence of both groups in northern Italy and Europe). Such construction profits from the ambivalence that mainstream discourses in Europe display in their understanding of ‘Otherness’ (cf. Stråth 2000; Zemni 2002). The Lega indeed attempts to formulate its discourse of exclusion in terms that make it palatable for mainstream opinion. In recent years, paralleling a more widespread tendency in European public discourse, the party has thus increasingly placed in the foreground Europe’s Christian identity (Lottieri 2002; Gulisano 2004). This new element is undoubtedly related to the priority of the party’s present anti-immigrant discourse, in which the ‘Othering’ of Islam has taken a central place. The Oriental and Islamic ‘Others’ have, for the Lega, in fact become the main foes of Europe and Padania, and logically the party campaigns against the EU membership of Turkey (Busi 2003; Bontempi 2004), as well as against the presence of Islam within Europe. In this way, the Lega proposes a more extreme form of contemporary mainstream discourses on European identity that highlight Europe’s problematic relation with Islam, as a rule embedded in Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilisations’ framework (Zemni 2002).

Compared with its systematic ‘Othering’ of non-European immigrants (cf. Gómez-Reino 2002, 117–39), the party’s categorisation of southern Italians is much more ambivalent. Party discourse undoubtedly defines southern Italy in contrast with a modern and European Padania. The Lega does highlight all phenomena of economic underachievement and of inadequate governance and of course the presence of organised crime in the South, all considered as expressions of the region’s distance from Europe (Huysseune 2009). The Italian bureaucracy is itself interpreted as the expression of a southern and Levantine culture: the Lega argues that southern Italians have never really acquired the Calvinist labour ethics of modern northern Europeans and continue to display oriental passivity. The party, however, also regularly states that the region is as much as the North a victim of the process of Unification. Even when arguing that the Italian state expresses southern dominance, it is also obliged to acknowledge that its centralism results in fact from European influences, namely the French Jacobin tradition. When the Lega attempts to find political allies in the South, it moreover downplays cultural differences or partly de-territorialises them.

The Lega’s interpretation of the South’s difference relies on cultural arguments, but party literature is not very consistent on the issue. Oneto and Pagliarini (2005, 7) are exceptional in conceptualising southern Italy’s distance from Europe. They explain the South’s ‘Otherness’ by referring to its cultural traditions and notably the influence it has in the past undergone from Islam and Orthodox Christianity, which have ‘contaminated’ its Catholicism. This suggests a vision (which is also present in mainstream discourses on European identity; cf. Stråth 2000), that establishes a frontier zone of transition between Europe and its ‘Others’. While mainstream versions of this vision essentially concern south-eastern Europe, the Lega also locates southern Italy in this frontier zone. The peoples of this frontier zone are not explicitly excluded from Europe and may potentially reach the standards of European culture. However, these peoples are viewed as contaminated by non-European, Mediterranean and Islamic culture. The theme of
contamination is indeed prominent in the Lega’s discourse, which perceives the Padanian nation as perpetually in danger of being subject to the negative influence of alien cultures and ideologies that threaten to undermine the values of the popolo produttore. It envisions both Padania and Europe as fortresses to be protected against intruding outsiders.

Accepting European identity – rejecting the European Union

The nation-building discourse of the Lega clearly locates Padania within Europe, and this European-ness forms a crucial feature opposing Padania to potential or real ‘Others’ deemed to be non- or only partially European. In its early years, the party translated this identification into support for the EU. Before 1998 the party’s programme centred on the necessity of northern Italy seceding in order to join the EMU, and its early claims for federalism or the independence of northern Italy highlighted the region’s integration in the EU. In those days, the party also frequently defended the European Commission as an authority whose beneficial influence countered the Italian state. It also supported EU policies and argued that EU regulations, for example in agriculture, protected the North against the Italian authorities (Chari, Iltanen, and Kritzinger 2004, 427).

Even before 1998, however, support for the EU was not unequivocal. Party literature already criticised a centralist Europe, subordinated to the interests of its bureaucracy, high finance and the multinational corporations (e.g. Bossi and Vimercati 1992, 202; 1993, 208–9). From its origins, this literature reflected perplexity regarding the European Union present amongst its sympathisers (Chari, Iltanen, and Kritzinger 2004, 430–4). Since 1998, the party has separated its identification with Europe from support for the institutions of the European Union. This shift has obliged the party to develop an elaborated justification of its stance against the EU, which includes both institutional and economic arguments. It now views the EU, like the Italian state, as a centralist institution and an antagonist of the aspiration for self-government of the Padanian and other European peoples. By their excessive centralism and interventionism, the EU and the Italian state express the negative inheritance of Jacobinism – and the institutions of the EU are sometimes even rhetorically identified with communism (Locatelli 2002; Bracalini 2004). Lega member and then Minister of Justice Roberto Castelli (2002) for example has pointed out that the institutions of the European Union and specifically the Council of Ministers are anti-liberal and function in an undemocratic way.

Much of the critiques of the Lega concerns the excessive regulatory tendency and technocratic nature of the EU (e.g. Locatelli 2002). The Lega has in fact constructed its critique of the EU and its regulatory tendencies analogously with its arguments against the Italian state. The Lega projects the image of the latter as an interventionist entity that produces a considerable quantity of laws, rules and regulations on the EU. As a consequence, it can suggest that the EU administration resembles the plethoric, interventionist and inefficient bureaucracy of the Italian state. By pointing out these presumed negative similarities between the European Union and the Italian state, the Lega has thus provided a justification for Euroscepticism until then absent from Italian public discourse.

Since the party rejects the institutions of the EU, it pays only limited, if any, attention to the development of a regional level of governance, or more in general to the workings of the European institutions. Its affirmation of a Europe of the Regions implies in fact a
completely different, confederal institutional model, generally only described in a very sketchy way. Bossi, for example, outlined in 1993 an institutional model for a Europe of the Regions, based on a bicameral system, a European parliament with real powers and a senate of the regions. These supranational institutions would, however, only have relatively limited competences (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 208–12). More recent proposals envision a united Europe modelled on Switzerland in which the constituent units, the peoples of Europe, retain autonomy, and in which cultural differences are respected (Oneto 2002; Pagliarini 2002; Stucchi 2003). These proposals express the Lega’s understanding of the principle of autonomy which it interprets as political and economic liberty and the right to self-government.

Claims for economic liberty and more general economic arguments play a central role in explaining the Lega’s hostility towards the institutions of the European Union. The logic of these arguments is, however, beset with contradictions since the Lega criticises the EU from both a libertarian and protectionist perspective. Rhetoric identification with economic liberalism has always been part of the party’s discourse. In its early years, Lega writings frequently referred to economic liberalism and to the necessity of the successful integration of Padania in a globalised world economy. The party’s Eurosceptic turn and its increasing defence of protectionism have not eliminated its use of liberal rhetoric. What has changed is the evaluation of the EU. Previously, the EU was perceived as an adequate framework to support the process of globalisation. A more recent article in Quaderni padani interprets the EU, conversely, as a protectionist cartel opposed to real globalisation (Stagnaro 2002). Like the dominant discourse of British Euroscepticism (see e.g. Lewis 2002), recent contributions to Quaderni padani occasionally refer to a mythical, libertarian model of absence of state intervention, an ideological reading of liberal governance that does not, in fact, correspond to existing practices. For sure, this libertarian vision is incongruent with the interventionist liberalism of the EU, a regulatory authority that intends to assure the fairness and the equitable nature of the market through an elaborate set of rules and regulations.

One dimension of the Lega’s discourse continues to envision its nation-building programme within a neo-liberal globalised world economy, now also contrasted with the encumbering rules and regulations of the European Union. It legitimises independence by the need to prepare Padania for the challenges of globalisation. The Lega’s model of a Europe of Regions and small states offers in fact an alternative economic model, as a group of communities freely competing, without the restraints of unnecessary rules and regulations, for economic success and to attract investors. In this model, small states like Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Estonia – if possible corresponding with peoples – can be more successful competitors, because of their leanness and their need to open up to international markets (Lottieri 2004, 45). Their allegedly spontaneous and market-determined development is contrasted with the unsuccessful assisted development of the Mezzogiorno (ibid., 44–5). This view is an explicit critique of state interventionism and the redistributionist programmes of the welfare state but implicitly also of the EU, its rules and regulations and structural funds.

This libertarianism is, however, only one dimension of the Lega’s discourse. Particularly in recent years, it has increasingly and consistently proposed a protectionist economic programme. In fact, the party defends economic liberalism only as long as it perceives it to be advantageous to its constituency, the small and medium entrepreneurs of northern Italy which the party intends to represent. Within Italy, its liberalism has thus
intended to express the party’s opposition to state support to the South, but also to large firms in the North like FIAT. The party has on the contrary always defended policies that support smaller entrepreneurs. Some of its proposals are fairly mainstream, and related to the externalisation of the costs of entrepreneurship, and fall within the general lines of business-friendly policies. However, the Lega also proposes to defend the small and medium enterprises of the North against the strongest corporations (and stronger economic actors in general), traditionally supported by the Italian state. Within the EU, the Lega has, since 1998, more explicitly defended the right of Padania to defend itself from overpowerful competitors, such as Germany and France (Bossi and Vimercati 1998, 139–45). The Lega has always (realistically) pointed out both the strength and weakness of Padania. Party discourse has displayed the region’s strength in the argument that independence is economically feasible, its weakness in highlighting the need to defend regional economic interests. In recent years, this defence has been increasingly in the form of explicit economic protectionism: the demand for tariff barriers against imports from China has thus become a central feature of the Lega’s propaganda. In contrast with its ideological liberalism, the Lega thus proposes specific protection for the economy of northern Italy and its small entrepreneurs.

In the Lega’s logic, the defence of Padania’s economic interest implies self-government. More than an economic doctrine, the party’s liberalism expresses its opposition to rules imposed by external authorities. This explains its aversion towards the institutions of the European Union, which prohibit the unilateral establishment of economic and trade rules. Since 1998 the Lega has argued that the EU defends the interest of strong actors within the Union, thus harming smaller nations like Padania. This logic also explains why the Lega has become more and more sceptical about the Euro. As long as Italy had not been accepted into the European Monetary Union, the Lega was able to focus its criticism on Italy’s alleged inability to fulfil the Maastricht criteria. After Italy’s acceptance into the EMU, the Lega started critiquing the very acceptance of a single currency. It argues on the one hand that the exchange rate Lire–Euro accepted by the Italian government burdened the northern economy (Oneto and Pagliarini 2005, 31), and that only the North should have been accepted in the EMU (Pagliarini 2002). But it also rejects the principle of the Euro, which for the Lega has been imposed by Germany and France (with the connivance of Italy) to facilitate their economic penetration of Padania (Bossi and Vimercati 1998, 144). In this debate, the experience of the devaluation of the Italian lire of 1992 has played a crucial role: this devaluation resulted in a boom in northern exports, and therefore the impossibility of any longer using the same instrument unilaterally is perceived to be a serious constraint. The Lega therefore argues that Padania should be in charge of its own currency, so as to be able to use devaluations to improve its competitiveness (Bossi and Vimercati 1998, 48–62, 139–45).

The Lega’s protectionism is, however, essentially reserved for the Padanians. From its origins, it has emphasised that the South should undergo a drastic economic cure inspired by neo-liberal models: exemption from taxation of profits of northern investors, reduction of social costs and the containment of labour costs by regionally differentiated wage scales (Bossi and Vimercati 1993, 194–6; Pagliarini 1996, 44–8). It has proposed similar policies for Slovenia and Croatia, acceptable partners within a European framework and good business partners for Padania if they accept a liberal model that favours Padanian investors (Vitale 1997, 1998). The Lega thus proposes a hierarchy within Europe in which its frontier zones have to submit to outside interventions from which Padania has the right
to protect itself. In the case of southern Italy, such a programme is presented as redemption from the ‘cultural contamination’ of the region as a frontier zone. Padanians on the other hand have a right not only to economic but also to social protection, e.g. concerning pensions, housing and support to families (see e.g. Bossi and Vimercati 1998, 56). Social protection, however, should be distributed according to ethnic criteria. Following a radical form of welfare chauvinism, the party proposes the exclusion from welfare allowances of outsiders and certainly of non-European citizens. Economic and social protectionism in fact parallel the Lega’s cultural protectionism, i.e. the right to protect Padania against intruding outsiders and cultural deviants.

The Lega envisions Padania as a community that has a right to be protected by its authorities and that should not have any obligation to follow rules imposed upon it by outsiders. It thus proposes a worldview based on competition and economic liberalism while vindicating the right to shield Padania from the economic and social consequences of global competition. At first sight, this unilateral right to protectionism that should be given to Padania in a global community regulated according to the laws of the market appears as a logical aberrance. In its asymmetry such a programme mirrors, in fact, practices of the United States and the European Union in international trade relations (UNDP 2005, 111–48). It is, however, difficult to envisage how a much smaller and less powerful Padania would ever be able to implement such policies.

Conclusion

An instrumentalist logic undoubtedly explains the Lega’s choice of Euroscepticism. However, the choice equally reflects the Lega’s ideological background and, even more importantly, its understanding of the economic and geopolitical location of Padania. In its discursive construction of the identity of the Padanian nation, the Lega continues to emphasise its European nature, notwithstanding the party’s scepticism towards the EU. Identification with Europe is multifaceted: party writings link Padania with Europe’s historical, cultural and religious identity. Reflecting Christian-democrat and conservative mainstream discourse, in recent years the party has in particular emphasised Europe’s Christian identity. It also strongly identifies with European sociocultural modernity and entrepreneurial spirit, and adheres (rhetorically at least) to economic liberalism, but it displays less interest in the values of political liberalism. In its European identification the Lega emphasises the opposition between Europe and its ‘Others’, a theme more subdued in mainstream discourses but of primary importance in extreme right ideology. From its origins, however, party discourse has highlighted identification with Europe not only for anti-immigrant purposes. European-ness understood as modernity is also what, according to the party, distinguishes northern Italians from southern Italians and the Italian state, and therefore constitutes the very essence of their identity. The Lega therefore logically tends to identify Europe in the first place with Western Europe (including the German-speaking Mitteleuropa), a territory that incarnates the core values of Europe’s modernity. In this vision, the position of southern Italy and Eastern Europe remains ambivalent, since they are rarely completely excluded from the European space. The party nevertheless implicitly proposes a hierarchical order of territories, whereby the Western European core in which Padania is located takes a superior place because of its economic successes and its cultural excellence.
The party’s geopolitical outlook implies a strong identification with Europe. Its economic vision likewise inserts northern Italy in a globalised economy and more specifically Europe. Its institutional vision that attributes centrality to the right of Padania to autonomy and self-government has on the contrary implied a critical stance towards the centralism of the European Union. The continuity of this anti-centralism and hostility to all forms of external interference (and in particular rules and regulations that hamper the economy of Padania) enables a new understanding of the discourse shift of 1998. The earlier pro-EU stance resulted from a strong identification of northern Italy with Europe. This support was, however, from the start ambivalent, since the Lega also critiqued the EU for copying the centralism of nation-states. The changed opportunity structure after Italy’s accession to the EMU enabled the party to resolve this ambivalence and to adapt its public view on the EU to its core institutional vision. By emphasising the similarities between the European Union and the Italian state, the Lega was able to reject both as entities dominated by a centralist bureaucracy that imposed unnecessary rules and regulations on the population. By anchoring its anti EU discourse to the widespread hostility towards the Italian bureaucracy, the party has been able to embed Euroscepticism in a national context where it has traditionally been very weak and where the party that proposes this discourse itself offers strong identification with Europe.

The Lega, however, lacks a coherent and credible alternative to European integration. It cannot easily translate into reality its ideal of self-government without outside interference and unnecessary rules and regulations in an alternative European institutional model. It proposes on the one hand a Europe of freely competing communities and regions that reflects its rhetorical adherence to neoliberalism. Following the logic of regional self-government, it affirms at the same time the importance of regional sovereignty which includes the right to economic (and cultural) protectionism. By vindicating the right of Padania to be protected from market forces, the party assumes that Padanian economic actors should be exempted from the obligations and responsibilities of a market economy. Party discourse ignores the contradictions between these models. It implicitly offers a solution, a hierarchy of communities with asymmetrical rights and obligations and with Padania in the most privileged position, but never really dares to propose this solution explicitly.

Notes
1. This discursive construction of Padanian identity the Lega and its fellow-travellers propose is by no means a homogenous process. There has undoubtedly been a constant tension between the group of intellectuals who contribute to Quaderni padani and the party leadership. The former are focused on identity-building and favour an ethno-regionalist outlook. They consider themselves as watchdogs of Padanian nationalism and hence frequently criticise the party’s opportunism and intellectual shallowness (e.g. Brenno 2007), and in recent years several of them have increased their distance from the Lega. Quaderni padani also presents an ideologically more pluralist profile than the party, which in recent years has articulated an outspokenly rightist political discourse. The special issues of Quaderni padani on Europe that are analysed here, however, do not dissent from the party line and include, moreover, contributions from prominent Lega members.
2. For a discussion of this allegation, see Huysseune (2006, 114–5). The overall picture of the redistributive policies of the Italian state certainly appears to be more nuanced than the northern discourse of victimisation suggests.
3. The ethnic Padania outlined by the Lega more or less corresponds with the territory of the regions north of the Apennines: Valle d’Aosta, Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna and Trentino (but without Alto Adige).

References


