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## *Prima gli Italiani*

### The new Lega at the intersection of banal nationalism, neo-Fascism and selective populism

#### Short table:

- From *prima il nord* to *prima gli italiani*
- Discursive representation of nationalism and a neo-Fascist agenda
- Selective populism: against *clandestini* and *centri sociali*

#### Summary:

In the previous chapter, the authors observed the contents and construction dynamics of the ethno-nationalist and anti-immigrant ideology of the Italian separatist party *Lega Nord*. The central hypothesis was that this ideology is shaped by the reproduction of binary oppositions between social groups in the party's populist rhetoric. More precisely, the focus has been on the way the ideology of NL shapes around an idea of *otherness* and penetrated into the national political debate and the policy making process. In doing this, the authors firstly outlined the construction of social others/enemies characterizing the party's early agenda by looking at the narratives that reinforced the forcefull rhetoric of North versus South in Italy's social, cultural, economic and political history. Secondly, the authors analysed the stereotypical production of *multiple others* through the ethnicisation and essentialisation of non-EU immigrants, and the criminalisation of Muslims and Gypsies. The focus here has been put on the party's idea of ethnic homogeneity with regards to the most recent immigration flows, and the construction in the public discourse of a *metaphysical enemy* threatening the national community. Lastly, the chapter concerned limited analysis over the most recent period in the political history of Lega Nord characterized by a new ideological conception that sees Southerners as being part, together with Northerners, of a populist conflict against the central state on matters of immigration and ethno-cultural diversity.

The next paper aims at providing an update of the political discourse and agenda of Lega Nord. Starting from the epochal change in the party identity marked by the centralised personalisation of Matteo Salvini, the paper focuses on the way Lega Nord takes its contemporary role of leading subject in the right-wing spectrum, and communicates its agenda and claims in the current public/political debate in Italy. The hypothesis is that the new Lega operates at the intersection of three discursive, ideological and political identity dimensions including banal nationalism, neo-Fascism and selective populism.

Salvini adopted the continuous representation of **banal nationalism** in the media, popularising a specific form of national identity based on strong ethnonationalistic and

ethnocentric perspectives. The leader also re-shaped – or better reinforced – the party agenda and claims along the principles of **neo-Fascism**. However, Salvini directs his discourse towards a specific – although increasingly large – portion of the population, while excluding another part, including his opposers, through forms of **selective populism**. Nationalism for Salvini is equal to the affirmation of concrete sociopolitical measures inspired by the original ideals of the Fascist-right updated to the contemporary national and international scenario. These principles include: strong protection of the national economy and domestic market, anti-globalisation and anti-Europeanism; strong support for personal security measures including the right to self-defense and free use of weapons within private property; abrogation of the labor reform (so-called *Legge Fornero*) and of other political-economic measures considered as anti-social (including a tax amnesty); radical stop to immigration, forced repatriation for undocumented immigrants and abrogation of any kind of policy and public support to refugees and asylum seekers.

The political agenda and claims of the Lega are shared and popularised through a strong presence of the party leader in the public and media debate, including large participation to talk shows and social networks as well as a number of political rallies across Italy. Salvini always engages into strong arguments and employs an aggressive approach in his public appearances. Salvini also imposed a radical change in the party's North-centric perspective. This dynamic has been characterized by aesthetic/symbolic changes in the communication strategy (e.g. : the party was renamed *Lega*, erasing the word 'north' in order to take a national dimension); by the separation from historical leaders including Umberto Bossi and the relative marginalisation of anti-South hardliners party members; by several but relatively unsuccessful attempts to campaign in the South of Italy with the aim to take the lead of the centre-right coalition in the country. Lega's traditional claim *prima il nord* (the North first) has been rephrased as *prima gli italiani* (Italians first) an employed as main slogan in the party's communication strategy and political agenda.

The main topic in the Lega's attempt to claim priority for Italian citizens is the representation of immigration as a threat. Indeed, one element in particular is characteristic of Salvini's communication strategy, as well as it marks a sort of linearity with the traditional communication principle of the party: the creation of *others* and their exclusion from the civic life and political representation. In continuity with the Lega Nord's original message, Salvini is focused on the reproduction of binary oppositions between social groups within a populist perspective. At the same time, Lega's leader wants to embody and represent the people's will and to protect them against political and bureaucratic domination, while adopting a form of populism that is selective and discriminatory. The objects of this discrimination are, of course, different categories of foreigners, often represented as reduced to the status of *immigrati clandestini* (clandestine or undocumented/illegal immigrants). All the sociopolitical measures highlighted above, even including incentives to the use of weapons against intruders in private property, are articulated towards immigrants as both an undesired social group and as an element in the political and policy action, philosophical and ideological debate and, last but not least, as the topic on which to define good and bad citizens. The public approach and action towards the issue of immigration, depending on whether it is positive or negative, is elaborated by Salvini as an indicator to define and select the people to protect or to exclude from civic life and political representation. This means that Lega's main claim *prima gli italiani* does not only entails an idea of exclusivity or priority for Italians, but also a specific selection operated within the Italian population. In particular, Salvini constantly articulates his rhetoric and criticism against the anti-Fascist *centri sociali*, which flourished in the last years as important hubs for sociocultural activity and sociopolitical mobilization. Emerged as one of the few social contexts where forms of horizontal solidarity

have developed in the last years, *centri sociali* are taken by Salvini as a generalized category to define and stigmatise any militant individual or group involved in concrete help to immigrants in needs including refugees and asylum seekers. It is important to remark that Salvini's persistent harsh criticism of *centri sociali* is not only a clear expression of the anti-immigration stance, but also and more broadly an attempt to delegitimize the anti-Fascist mobilization taking place in contemporary Italy.