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**THE EFFECT OF CRISES ON SUPPORT OF POPULIST
RADICAL RIGHT: A CASE STUDY OF LEGA NORD IN ITALY**

Master's thesis

International Relations and European-Asian Studies

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the paper independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors has been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading. The document length is 16.698 words from the introduction to the end of conclusion.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
INTRODUCTION	5
1. POPULISM	8
1.1. Literature Review on Populism and Populist Radical Right	8
1.2. Ideological Division of Populism	9
1.3. Three Effective Populist Party in Italy.....	11
1.4. The Changes Salvini Introduced on Populist Lega.....	13
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	16
2.1. Losers of Modernization Theory	16
2.2. Rational Choice Theory	18
3. LEGA PARTY	20
3.1. Historical Development of the Lega Party	20
3.2. Ideological Foundations.....	24
3.3. Its Place in Italian Politics.....	26
3.4. Recent Developments	27
3.5. Lega Leader Matteo Salvini.....	28
3.6. Xenophobia in Salvini's Statements.....	33
3.7. Content Analysis of Salvini's Disclosures	34
3.8. Critique of Salvini's Views	35
4. CRISIS INFLUENCE ON LEGA.....	36
4.1. The 2009 European Debt crisis.....	36
4.1.1. Crisis Effect on Italian Economy	36
4.1.2. European Debt Crisis Effect on Lega's Votes	37
4.1.3. Conclusion: Economic Crisis Influence on 2013 Elections.....	38
4.2. 2015 Immigration Crisis	39
4.2.1. Italy's Situation	40
4.2.2. National Election Results	40
4.2.3. Matteo Salvini's Actions About Refugees	41
4.2.4. Conclusion: Refugee Crisis Influence on 2018 Elections.....	42
4.3. Covid-19 Crisis	43
4.4. Analysis of Impact of Three Crises to Lega	45
CONCLUSION	46
LIST OF REFERENCES	49
APPENDIX	59

ABSTRACT

The populist radical-right party, the Lega Nord in Italy started to transform itself from a regionalist party to a more nationalist party under its new leader Matteo Salvini. Since the Second Italian Republic, populism has become a permanent feature of Italian politics. In the thesis populism and whether “Losers of Modernization” and “Rational Choice” theories can explain the rise of right-wing populist parties and the change of discourse before and after Salvini's leadership on populist Lega is examined. The thesis concludes that the mentioned theories can partly explain the rise of right-wing populist parties.

The aim of the thesis is to understand how the 2009 European debt crisis, 2015 migration crisis, and covid-19 crises influenced the support to populist radical-right parties by the case of Lega. In this study, the case study method is used. The main finding is that Lega benefits from the crises if it places the crisis at the center of its political agenda, continues its populist discourses by creating a common enemy, and emphasizes “us” and the “others” during crisis time. Moreover, Lega's leader and the other parties' stances against these crises are crucial.

Keywords: populism, radical-right parties, Lega Nord, crises, European debt crisis, migration crisis, covid-19

INTRODUCTION

The Northern League for the Independence of Padania (Italian: Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania), shortly the Lega Nord was established as a federalist and regionalist political party in Italy in 1991. In 2013, Matteo Salvini took over the party which was under financial corruption allegations. Salvini changed the party's goals and stances. Although the party's name officially stays The Northern League for the Independence of Padania, its current leader Matteo Salvini dropped the term "Nord" from the party's brand name. He embraced a more nationalist view. Salvini softened its anti-southern view, as he saw the south as an unused opportunity for development.

Before Salvini, the party was supported by an only small minority of pro-autonomist northerners. As Europe started to get more migrants from the Middle East and Africa, Salvini saw the opportunity, expanded the party's message to include an incisive nationalism (and, in the process, dropped the North from the party's name) (Walt 2018). He seized on Italians' anger over debt-laden economy, slow growth and a more than one-third youth unemployment rate and minted a new slogan with Trumpian echoes: "Italians first." (Walt 2018). He wanted to change EU by teaming up other EU populist nationalist right-wing parties and restoring the European soul that has been "sold out" by the governors of the Union.

In the 2018 Italy national elections, Lega increased its votes by more than 13% according to previous 2013 elections and became the third largest party in Italy with a popular vote of more than 17%. Matteo Salvini became Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior from 1 June 2018 to 5 September 2019.

My research objective is to study how the economic, migration and covid-19 crises influenced the support to populist radical-right parties and my purpose is to study it by the case of Lega. It is aimed to contribute to the literature to better recognize and interpret the populist movements which can be seen in Italy if Lega becomes stronger.

The rise of populist right-wing parties makes these parties no more smaller parties by attracting protest votes. For this paper, Lega was selected because not only its votes increased enormously in the 2018 national elections and entered the coalition, but also it is becoming a mainstream party, and it makes the current mainstream parties' political stance harsher. Previous studies show mixed

results about the reasons of rise of populist right-wing parties; however, I would like to examine Lega's political stance after the 2009 European debt crisis, 2015 migration crisis, and covid-19 crisis and how these political stances affected Lega's popularity.

The main idea this paper is built on is that the 2009 European debt crisis, the 2015 migrant crisis, and the covid-19 crisis are the main factors contributing to the rise in popularity of Lega. The paper aims to show that Lega's popularity is affected by mainly its populist rhetoric, populist campaigns, and party program during these crises time. It is the expectation of this study to explore more about these crises' impacts and whether "Losers of Modernization" and "Rational Choice" theories can explain the rise of right-wing populist parties.

My Research Question is "How did the European debt crisis, 2015 migration crisis, and Covid-19 crisis influence the votes of Lega in 2013 and 2018 Italian national elections?"

The subject will be examined by a qualitative content analysis and discourses analysis by making a literature review of research on populism and theories which may explain the rise of Lega and by analyzing national elections and Eurostat data. The crises' effect on the votes of Lega will be examined.

In this study, case study method will be used for analyzing crisis' effect on populist radical-right parties. A case study is portrayed as a kind of phenomenon that occurs in a bounded context (Miles & Huberman 1994 ac cited in Njie & Asimiran 2014, 36). The aim of using the case study is to get in-depth details as much as possible about an event, person or process (Njie & Asimiran 2014). I selected case study method, since case study method provides comprehensive, rich in-depth explanation of how a regionalist party under Umberto Bossi as transferred to radical-right under Salvini, and how populist stance affects the party's support and similar processes took place throughout Europe.

There were some limitations in this research. I collected data from the speeches of Salvini and Bossi and other party officials, interviews of Salvini, Eurostat and Italian state websites. I mostly used resources which are accessible in English. The second limitation was, the numbers of researches about Lega related to covid-19 cases are quite limited.

The paper consists of four parts. In the first part, I will have a literature review on populism.

In the second part, I will discuss the "Losers of Modernization" and "Rational Choice" theories. The advantages and disadvantages of these theories and how these theories explain the rise of right-wing populism will be discussed.

In the third part, I will examine the transformation of Lega party to a radical-right party and the role of its current leader Matteo Salvini in detail.

In the fourth part, I will examine Lega's stance about the 2009 European debt crisis, 2015 migration crisis, and covid-19 crisis and how these stances affected Lega's votes.

1. POPULISM

I will present a literature review on “populism” and “populist radical right” to provide a background for the analysis of the Lega. Lega is mostly accepted as “populist radical-right” in the literature. It is generally accepted that Lega Nord was transformed from an autonomist regionalist party to a populist radical-right party under the leadership of Salvini (Oner 2020, 2).

1.1. Literature Review on Populism and Populist Radical Right

Laclau (2005, 87) defines populism as the border construction that divides society into two camps in parallel and the discourse between the “power holders” and the oppressed. Laclau (2005) also defines populism as the unmediated social expression of popular sovereignty as an "empty signifier" that can unite multiple, sometimes contradictory, elements attached to a particular social identity into a single entity called the people.

There are three different concepts of populism: populism as an ideology, populism as a discursive style, and populism as a political strategy.

Mudde (2004, 543) describes populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups – the ‘pure people’ versus the corrupt elite – and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” Mudde & Kaltwasser,(2013) defines populism a thin-centered ideology. Albertazzi& McDonnell (2008, 3 as cited in Caliskan 2018) claim populism is an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous “others” who together deprives the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice. A populist party claims to represent “the people,” and it is exclusive; the “other” can variously be “the elite,” “foreigners” “Eurocrats,” “the establishment,” and “immigrants” (Balfour 2017, 56). Directly representing “the people” enables them to bypass institutions, demonize opponents, and polarize the debate between “us” and “them,” “the people versus the enemy.” (Balfour 2017, 56)

Lega embraced nationalism after Salvini became a leader. It was a separatist party, defending the elite North is superior to the south of Italy, claiming the hard-working people of the North Italians do not have to take the burden of the lazy South Italians. It can be said that Lega differentiated

“the pure people” (Northern Italians) and the “corrupt elite” (political elite) but now it differentiates people “us” and the “others” by systematically accepting Italians as “us” and immigrants as “others”.

For populism as a discursive style, Hawkins (2010) defines populism as “a worldview and is expressed as a discourse”. Kazin (1995 as cited in Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013, 8) characterizes populism as a language used by those who claim to speak for the majority of the people. Especially after Salvini embraced nationalism he used populist discursive style more, supposedly speaking for the majority of Italian people. For Laclau (2005 as cited in Caliskan 2018), the symbolic distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ constitutes populist discourse. In the third chapter, I will examine how populism as a discursive style affected Lega’s votes.

For populism as a political strategy, Taggart (1995) asserts that populist parties are centralized organizational structures headed by a strong charismatic leader. Pappas asserts that “leadership offers a key analytical variable in both understanding populism and assessing its successes, or failures (Pappas 2012, 2 as cited in Caliskan 2018). Lega’s current leader Salvini was nicknamed “The Captain” by his supporters. During his leadership, Lega embraced a nationalistic view rather than a regionalist separatist view and appealed to wider voters. In the third chapter, I will examine how Salvini as a leader uses populism as a political strategy.

1.2. Ideological Division of Populism

Populism is not a new phenomenon; in Europe, it has been an object of studies since the 1980s. Margaret Canovan is one of the most important classics of the sociological concept of populism. Canovan (1981, pp. 9, 139, 297) presented the dichotomy as an invariable component of populism in her article about the links between the populist mobilization of the masses and their disillusionment with the social functions of the political elites. Ernesto Laclau (1977) studied Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Laclau (1980) also studied on populist rupture and discourses. Dix (1985), Mouzelis (1985, 1989), Spourdalakis (1989), Lyrintzis (1987) studied on populism in 1980s.

Lega is accepted as a populist party, but it has some different characteristics from other populist parties.

Populism can be left-wing or right-wing.

March (2007, 66) argues left-wing populists emphasize egalitarianism, and identify economic inequity as the basis of existing political and social arrangements and the “moral people versus corrupt elite” dichotomy is central to the ideology of left-wing populists (Caliskan 2018). Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain are left-wing populist parties in Europe. According to Mouffe (2019), while left populism deepens democracy, it creates a hegemony to be built against the oligarchy in the collective consciousness (including the unsecured such as immigrants, refugees and workers).

Mouffe (2019, 90-91) underlines that there is never a populist regime establishment among the aims of left populism, the development and deepening of democracy in order to create the collective subject is the main goal, and Bernie Sanders is a good example for the USA While left-wing populism refers to socio-economic issues, right-wing populism generally refers to ethnicity-nation (Caiani 2019, 238 as cited in Yigit Uyar 2021). According to Akkerman, while right and left populism complain about the corruption of political elites; left populism rather articulates the situation created by large institutions within the dominant economy; Right populism, on the other hand, expresses ethnic and new minorities immigrants, which is seen as cultural threat by them (Akkerman 2003, 147- 159 as cited in Yigit Uyar 2021). While left populism defines society with classes, it opposes the economic elite as “elite”; while right-wing populism defines society as a whole, it targets the cultural and political elite as the “elite”. Werner (2017 as cited in Yigit Uyar 2021).

For right-wing populists, “the people” are under attack by “others” such as immigrants and welfare abusers who do not share the values of the people (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015, 5). The main difference between the two groups is inherent. Anti-immigrant stance is their key feature (Caliskan 2018). The AfD in Germany, the FN in France, the PVV in the Netherlands, the FPÖ in Austria are some right-wing populist parties in Europe.

Wodak (2015, 1) mentions that right-wing populism produces a policy of fear, thus persuading the public to more security. Populist radical-right parties combine populism, nativism, and authoritarianism when nativism and authoritarianism combined with populism are the characters of radical right specifically (Caliskan 2018). Norris & Inglehart (2016) establishes the relationship between populism and authoritarianism, especially in their recent studies.

For contemporary populist radical-right parties, nationalism is the primary political factor that determines their policy preferences and their “opposition to immigration is consistent with the idea that diversity threatens the nation-state” (Eger & Valdez 2019, 383 as cited in Oner 2020, 2). And they argue that populist radical-right parties’ neo-nationalism occurs when national boundaries are perceived to be under threat such as from immigrants (Oner 2020).

1.3. Three Effective Populist Party in Italy

Italy's overall vote for populists rose from 30% in the 1994 general election to almost 70% in 2018. The demand for populism in Italy stems from a traditional distrust of the politics of Italian society (Vercesi 2021). Since Second Italian Republic (proclaimed in 1994) three big populist parties emerged, Forza Italia, Lega Nord and 5 Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) in Italy and become permanent feature of Italian politics. All three parties' discourses and ideologies are different.

Lega Nord and Forza Italia were established in 1990s after the collapse of First Italian Republic. The Lega Nord was established by Umberto Bossi in 1991. M5S is relatively new, established in 2009.

Lega Nord was regionalist and a right-wing populist party. While Forza Italia was not regionalist and was mainly liberal conservatist. All populist parties need charismatic leaders such as Berlusconi, Grillo and Salvini. Forza Italia leader Silvio Berlusconi had an image of businessman and came to power many times. M5S had also a charismatic leader, Beppe Grillo who claims it is political movement to demolish traditional political parties (Kvirkvelia 2014, 61).

Forza Italy (later the People of Freedom) described “people” as productive people, M5S described “people” as honest people, while Lega described “people” as ethnic (first) /national (in Salvini’s leadership) community. Forza Italy/ People of Freedom described “elite” as public establishment, M5S described “elite” as political establishment and Lega described “elite” as political center-Rome/ Brussels (Vercesi 2021).

Forza Italy accepts the freedom of individuals and freedom is not graciously conceded by the State, because it comes before it. The party believes that the State should be at the service of citizens, and not citizens at the service of the State. The citizen is sovereign. For this, it believes concretely in the individual (The Belief of Forza Italia 2004). As a businessman, Berlusconi described

“people” as productive people, promised new jobs and fight against unemployment problem. Forza Italy placed more emphasis on campaigns against state bureaucracy and the intellectual elite (Vampa 2018).

M5S is against all previous political powers. It criticized previous inefficient governments and the political and economic elite in general. Grillo claims to be a representative of simple people. Grillo said he was not one of the political leaders who is taking the reimbursement of electoral expenses, which in some cases is a source of income for political organizations (Kvirkvelia, 2014). He wanted to put honest people into power (like “the people” in Italy) because the corrupt do not think they’re corrupt and use public funds for their business think it’s their money (Politi 2015).

Till Salvini’s leadership “the people” were Northern Italians but Salvini embraced “the people” as all Italians. The “elite” was Rome, the political elite who were responsible of socio-economic or political problems facing the North. Now, Salvini claims to represent the whole Italian people against the corrupted elite in Brussels-EU.

Active use of media was used by both Forza Italia and M5S. Lega Nord started to use active media by its recent leader Salvini. Lega Nord, at that time, focused on promoting party ideology rather than leader and was not using media on the same scale as Forza Italia and M5S (Kvirkvelia 2014, 61).

Associating Europe with security and Eurosceptic discourses is mostly made by FI and LN. Although M5S sometimes participated in cultural protectionist discourses, M5S did not undertake the rhetoric of extremism as much as other parties. Although M5S occasionally made anti-refugee rhetoric, their ambiguous stance continued on this issue as well; In general, it opposes the Dublin Convention and EU immigration policies. The success of M5S in the 2013 and 2018 elections is closely related to the implementation of the popular-centrism principle, which is the basis of populism, in a programmed way. The determination of party program/election manifestos on the platform where the public can express their own opinions has shown parallelism with the people-centered rhetoric. Although M5S is the most populist party in Italy, the parties that assumed the most marginalizing and exclusionary rhetoric were FI and LN (Yigit Uyar 2021, 201). The LN received the most votes in its history in the 2018 elections by bringing up its agenda the groups they marginalized the most. (Yigit Uyar 2021, 201).

While FI/PDL focuses mostly on the “elite”, LN puts a similar emphasis on both “elite” and “others”. Moreover, the LN pays much less attention to the "left" in its discourse on the "elite" than to the FI/PDL. (Bobba & McDonnell 2016, 282). FI established an identity as a “liberal

populist party” while LN was defined as “ethnoregionalist populist” (Spektorowski 2003 as cited in Bobba & McDonnell 2016). For liberal populist parties, neoliberalism rather than nativism is central to their ideology (Mudde 2007). Neo-liberal conservative platform of FI resembled ‘the mainstream European centre right’ (Pierre-André Taguieff 2003, 104 as cited in Bobba & McDonnell 2016, 283). LN, with its nativist and authoritarian positions, is more radical type of right-wing populist party than FI/PDL (Bobba & McDonnell 2016, 284).

From May 2006 to May 2008 (Prodi center-left government), FD/PDL and LN were opposition parties. From May 2008 to November 2011 (Berlusconi government), PDL and LN were in the government. From November 2011 to December 2012 (Monti government till April 2013), PDL was majority providing parliamentary support for the Monti technocratic government, while LN was in opposition (Bobba & McDonnell 2016, 284). Lega Nord and Forza Italia participated 2013 elections through collaboration. M5S got big support in 2013 elections, became the second party and in 2018 elections became the most voted party.

1.4. The Changes Salvini Introduced on Populist Lega

Lega was founded by Umberto Bossi as a protest party against the corruption and fiscal overreach of the government in Rome (Stille 2018). Bossi identified Northern people are different from other Italians, and this became the basis for establishment of strong regionalist political party (Spektorowski 2003, 62). “Us” rhetoric was Northern Italians. “Others” were Southern Italians, and the political elite who are responsible of socio-economic or political problems facing the North (Kvirkvelia 2014). Bossi’s insulting discourse about southern Italian peasants and his failed efforts to set up a separatist Padanian parliament “fatigued” voters (Stille 2018).

When Salvini took over the party, he moved the Lega from regional separatism to a nationalist party. He changed the party’s slogan to “Italians first”. He shifted the ‘us’ to all Italians. “Others” were mainly immigrants. The enemy was no longer Rome, but Brussels, international banks and multinational corporations. His new target was immigration, Roma encampments and the indifference of the European Union to Italy’s problems (Stille 2018). Attacks on migrants (and Islam, gay marriage and criminals) have taken the place of separatism (Stille 2018).

Salvini also changed the communication strategy of the party. He intensely used social media. He is a very active user of Facebook. Despite his strict and provocative rhetoric on immigration,

Salvini presented himself as a softer and more approachable figure to most Italians in the contrast with Bossi, the Lega's founder, "who carried himself like a barroom brawler, threatening to punch protesters at public rallies and making free use of obscenities and insults" (Stille 2018). However, Salvini came across as the good guy living down the block, giving blood and organizing blood-donation events, and making frequent references to "mamma" and "papa", to goodness and generosity (Stille 2018).

Bossi was more bad-mouthed and his some attitudes and discourses were insulting. In 2001, Bossi said he only used the Italian flag to "wipe..." (Stille 2018). In July 2008, Bossi made an offensive hand gesture to the Italian national anthem in a publicity campaign (Italymagazine 2008). However, Salvini presented himself as a softer and approachable person in the contrast with Bossi, "who carried himself like a barroom brawler, threatening to punch protesters at public rallies and making free use of obscenities and insults" (Stille 2018). On the other hand, Salvini came across as the good guy living down the block, giving blood and organizing blood-donation events, and making frequent references to "mamma" and "papa", to goodness and generosity (Stille 2018).

Bossi used a language of the Northern working classes – a language one would expect to see used in pubs, based on exaggeration and deliberate opposition to ideas thought to reflect the Left's rules of "political correctness" (Ruzza 2008 as cited in Ruzza C. & Balbo L. 2013). Salvini's language is not politically correct either, on the other hand he uses a softer language.

Umberto Bossi can easily represent himself as the heirs to a heroic civic tradition (Huyseune 2002). Bossi sometimes used a kind of regional dialect (here mainly addressed to his Lombard friends) and some myths. For instance, in his 2009 speech, Bossi mentions the Nostradamus prediction of the city of Adria, being the last city standing at the end of the world. In his 2010 speech, he informed the audience about the myth that Pontida's statue of Saint Giacomo can predict the weather (Manara 2019). Since Salvini adopted more nationalistic approach, he addressed to all Italians.

Bossi put Southern and ruling Rome as the "other". The party's slogan was "Roma Ladrona" (Rome's a big thief). He was also against the immigration and EU. He described the Nice Treaty as a "text written by communists and freemasons (Harding 2002). Lega's nativist program promising a "revolution of common sense" (la rivoluzione del buonsenso) puts Lega in line with the main representatives of radical right populism in Western Europe. While Bossi's Lega Nord had nothing to do with Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, Salvini tried to collaborate with Marine

Le Pen the leader of National Front which has the affinity regarding immigration, sovereignty and Islam (Betz 2018).

Bossi received a one-year suspended prison sentence for incitement of violence in 1998. At a Lega Nord meeting he said "We must hunt down these rascals [neo-fascists], and if they take votes from us, then let's comb the area house by house, because we kicked the fascists out of here once before after the war." (Peoplepill 2022). In 2003, when he was the Reform Minister, he ordered the Navy to fire real bullets to boats having illegal immigrants, with a saying "After the second or third warning, bang... we fire the cannon" (Peoplepill 2022). He used more violent words than Salvini.

One of Bossi's quotes was "It's not that we're racist, we're just against indiscriminate immigrationI mean immigration which can't integrate. Integration is more difficult for insistence, in a white society for someone who is black. Immigration always poses problemsI mean it was enough to bring here to the north all those Sicilians and Calabrians, to create problems we all know about . . ." (Montalbano 1991). Bossi also mentioned "Lombardy and the Veneto are closer to Middle Europe than to Rome. The south looks like North Africa," (Montalbano 1991). He was not only opposed to foreigners' immigration in a very strongly discriminative way but also opposed to southern Italians to immigrate to the north. On the other hand, his main target was southern Italians not immigrants. Salvini has also stable harsh attitude towards non-Italians' migration and his first target is migrants.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, I will review theoretical aspects about how Lega can prevail in elections. Two theoretical frameworks “Losers of Modernization” and “Rational Choice” theories will be discussed. These theories contribute to my paper since I aimed to analyze how feeling as disadvantaged “other” or the fear to become disadvantaged “other” in the society, contributes to the populist Lega party.

I chose Losers of Modernization Theory to see if it can explain the impact of the crisis on Lega votes since economic deprivation and social injustice can create “losers of globalization” and these voters may vote for the populist right-wing parties. I chose Rational Choice Theory since the theory is based on optimization, voters calculate their cost and benefits among the alternative parties, and if Lega creates an opportunity for individuals to express their views that have been ignored by leaders in mainstream political parties. Both theories partly explained the rise of Lega votes. The combination of these theories gives better results. Losers of Modernization Theory explains the populist radical-right parties to rise when voters feel economic deprivation or injustice. Rational Choice Theory makes the populist radical-right parties to rise if mainstream parties ignore the voters’ anger after social crisis and voters think populist radical right-parties can express voters’ views.

2.1. Losers of Modernization Theory

In the early twentieth century, Europe had a fast industrialization, development, and modernization. By a rapid increase in globalization and modernization in the 1980s unemployment increased fast among unskilled workers. In Italy, in 1987, more than 75 percent of the unemployed were estimated to have at the most completed eight years of education, 45 percent not even those grades (Frey 1988, 38 as cited in Betz 1994, 31).

Betz's (1994) main explanation for the rise of ring-wing populist parties is “losers of modernization” theory which is based on economic deprivation. Betz (1994) explained Losers of Modernization as when society changes through globalization, unskilled workers face unemployment or lower income and are unable to cope with the acceleration of economic, social,

and cultural modernization and become victims. Hage & Powers (1992 as cited in Betz 1994, 32) explains that “the technological elimination of unskilled and semiskilled jobs means that a great many people will be caught in a world of despair, lacking marketable skills or hope for the future”.

After the 2008 financial crisis and 2009 European debt crisis, some European economies and employment levels became vulnerable. Poli (2016 as cited in Godal 2020, 14) claims the crisis exposed the failures of the European project, unable to deal with those with serious economic problems. Before the crisis, Italy was already struggling with economic problems, and it is also one of the most affected countries in Europe from that global economic crisis.

Losers of modernization is not only the unskilled workers in crisis time. Feelings of social injustice cause frustration when people feel deprived of some status or identity relative to their position in the past (Walker& Pettigrew 1984 as cited in Quinones&Tcherneva 2020). Moreover, in prosperous times, people who think they are not benefitting equally to other groups can also be losers of modernization.

Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria pulled a huge number of refugees and undocumented immigrants to Italy since it is geographically at the edge of Europe. Some Italians think this immigration will be a huge problem for the economy and labor market as well as culture. The populist right-wing parties advocates themselves perfectly as protectors of “the people” and the “losers of modernization” as right-wing voting is frequently addressed as a result of political frustration and protest voting (Coffé 2004 as cited in Godal 2020, 15).

The disadvantage of this theory is during prosperous times the theory is arguably capable of measuring the rise of populist right-wing parties. Basic economic indicators such as unemployment levels or Gross Domestic Product may be well, but the populist radical right may still be on the rise. Furthermore, some argue that populist right-wing parties in a substantial welfare allocated country will get fewer votes since there are fewer disadvantages from being unemployed. Some claim the opposite of that, substantial welfare programs reinforce “losers of modernization theory” as it can be observed in Scandinavian countries (Godal 2020).

This theory can partly explain Lega’s success. The theory is mainly based on the idea economic deprivation and social injustice can create “losers of globalization”, who feel themselves as disadvantaged “other” in the society, and may vote for the populist right-wing parties. According to this theory after the 2009 European debt crisis, Lega’s votes would increase since so many Italians became victims of globalization, but Lega’s votes decreased. On the other hand, after the 2015 European refugee crisis, Lega’s vote increased. According to some voters, refugees would

be an economic burden on the state, job market competition would increase, and refugees would diminish the social welfare of voters, so these voters became losers of modernization and voted for Lega.

2.2. Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory assumes that all actions are fundamentally rational in character and that individuals calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do and complex social phenomena can be explained in terms of the elementary individual actions of which they are composed (Scott 2000). The theory assumes individuals make choices based on the available set of alternatives according to their cost and social welfare (Hindess 2014 as cited in Drabiuk 2019, 7). Some theorists have seen rationality as a result of psychological conditioning while others assume individuals act as they are completely rational (Scott 2000, 11).

Voters make their individual selections in the elections, calculating their costs and benefits among the alternative parties. In addition, right-wing populism encourages optimization, as it creates an opportunity for individuals to express their views that have been ignored by leaders in mainstream political parties (Drabiuk 2019, 8).

Some critics of the theory are some rational choice theorists “reduce voters to material interests” claiming the politicians’ and voters’ behaviors as attempts to maximize votes or wealth (Hawkins& Kaltwasser 2017, 536). Rational choice theories cannot clarify the origins of social norms, especially those of altruism, reciprocity, and trust (Scott 2000, 11). Some argue uncertainty and the socioeconomic environment play a crucial role in the determination of the choices made by diverse individuals (Hindess 2014 as cited in Drabiuk 2019, 7).

Moreover, as some theorists explained rationality as a result of psychological conditioning the theory is lacking in explaining the rise of populist right-wing parties in some countries with a high threshold in the proportional election system. As Duverger’s Law assumes proportional representation favors multi-partyism, small parties are able to get seats. But with high thresholds, the mainstream parties are overrepresented in the parliament while the small parties are underrepresented or not have a chance to be presented. If the voters believe the small populist right-wing parties are able to pass the threshold, have seats in the parliament, they think their vote will not be “wasted” and vote for these parties. However, if they believe these parties are not able

to get sufficient votes, voters will not waste their votes for these parties. Thus, we cannot reduce the voter behaviors to individualistic cost and benefit analysis. The voters can be affected from polls and media and change their minds. In Italy, electoral thresholds are respectively low. Chamber of Deputies it is minimum 10% for a coalition and minimum 4% for any party not in a coalition for 2017 electoral law. With the 2020 Italian constitutional referendum, democratic representation will decrease by lowering the number of lawmakers in the 2023 elections.

Individuals do not only behave as rationalists, but numerous people also behave according to their emotions, and society's attitudes have a big impact on individuals' choices. Moreover, some voters are ossified voters and do not change the party they support, indifferent from the political situations and the stances of political parties. Individuals make optimization among alternatives however media can influence their emotions enormously. Their optimization is very open to media abuse. And especially in crisis time, media channels serve more click-bait sensational news to get advertisements. Lega benefitted from sensational news, the more sensational Lega's behavior, the more media attention it got, and became the topic of the political news. Thus, voters became aware of Lega more and Lega became known by wider voters.

As Psychologist Daniel Kahneman won Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, people do not make rational choices based on their self-interest instead, people often make decisions "using rules of thumb (based on practical experience rather than theory) rather than rational analysis, and they base those decisions on factors such as fairness, past events and aversion to loss" (Smith 2002).

This theory can partly explain the popularity of Lega. Lega encourages optimization by creating an opportunity for voters to express their views which are ignored by mainstream parties. Voters who feel themselves as disadvantaged "other" or having the fear of becoming the disadvantaged "other" in the society, could vote for Lega as they think if Lega becomes stronger, they would benefit from Lega's promises such as strict immigration policy which Lega see as an economical and cultural threat.

According to Rational Choice Theory, we expect Lega voters vote for Lega according to their "rational choice" by calculating their own cost and benefits. On the other hand, voters are not "fully" rational, and can behave according to their emotions, their practical experience, the society's reactions and can easily be affected by the media. If the media had not covered news about Lega, or if there had been strong public protest against Lega, voters who had rationally chosen Lega might not have voted for Lega.

3. LEGA PARTY

Towards the end of the 1980s, it is seen that radical-right parties started to rise in Europe. In many countries such as France, Austria, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Scotland, there was an increase in the voting rates of radical-right parties.

It is observed that the radical-right parties operating in European countries have been in a remarkable increase in votes in recent years. Especially since the beginning of the 1990s, the fact that the activities of radical-right parties in European countries became visible and gradually institutionalized and began to be seen as a problem. It can be said that the issue of the radical right in Europe has been an area that has been frequently discussed and examined in different aspects in the literature (Betz 1993, 415).

The failure of the mainstream political parties is effective in the rise of radical-right parties in Europe. Mainstream parties' inability to find solutions to the problems caused the radical-right parties to get stronger. Radical right movements are the reflection of the economic, political, and social dissatisfaction of the people. Unless the public can find what they hope for from the mainstream political parties, they turn to radical right politics. In recent years, a tendency towards authoritarianism has attracted attention due to this effect in European politics. It is possible to see the effects of authoritarianism, especially in topics such as immigration and integration, law and order, and national security since 1980s, and after 9/11 policies shifted even further which has led to the securitization of various other policy fields (Mudde 2013, 9).

3.1. Historical Development of the Lega Party

Looking at the historical origins of the Lega party, it is possible to see that it is based on the Lombard League. The party's historical roots include the Aosta Valley Union movement, which advocated the autonomy of the Aosta Valley, which was located in a region close to the French-Swiss borders, and therefore French is widely spoken and wanted its annexation to France in some periods (Bull and Gilbert 2001, 10 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 4).

In 1979, the Union of Aosta Valley (UV) tried to enter the European Parliament by bringing together the regional political parties that were in favor of autonomy under its leadership but it failed. However, the alliance called the Europe of Autonomy is important in terms of laying the foundations of the formation that will form the Lega in the future. Umberto Bossi, convinced by the then leader of the UV Bruno Salvadori, will emerge as the leader of the Lombard League and the Lega in the future. It will bring Padania, the imaginary country built in the northern region of Italy, to the agenda of the country. In 1979, the Northwest Lombard Union, known as Unolpa for short, was founded by Bossi. The movement, which failed in the local and regional elections of 1980, witnessed an important stage in the history of Lega (Tarchi 1998, 143 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 3).

Movements that emerged regionally and turned into political parties during these years did not achieve significant success. The most important reasons for this can be listed as the bipolar structure of Italian politics in those years, secondly, the fact that its political tendencies were not adopted by the public, and the regional identity discourses did not receive the expected attention by the people they represented. The activities of these political movements such as meetings, political demonstrations highlighting local characteristics, and political slogans using local dialects were not adopted by the public (Tarchi 1998, 144 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 3).

The first steps for the success of the regional parties and the tradition that formed the Lega were the discourses developed against the Southern Italian immigrants and their critical discourses against the political parties based in Rome. Unolpa transformed into the Lombard League in 1984 and succeeded in sending a deputy and a senator to the Parliament in the 1987 elections. Two years later, he received 6.5 percent of the vote in the Lombardy region in the European Parliament elections. After gaining strength, six political movements operating in Northern Italy came together to form the Lega (Farrell and Levy 1996, 135 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 3).

The Lega was initially formed as a federal organization and was described by some commentators as a multi-regional federation. Umberto Bossi continued to be president of both the Lega and the Lombard League. The start of Operation Clean Hands and then the beginning of the period called the Second Republic and used as an important opportunity by Lega. The eruption of traditional politics and party corruption scandals in this period led to a strengthening in the Lega. After the increase in the reactions in the northern regions, the rhetoric of the Lega progressed to the extent of separatism. This situation led Lega to gradually turn from regional to nationalism and become an important variable in Italian politics. As a result of this process, Lega received more than 8

percent of the nationwide votes in the general elections held in 1992. In this election, the rate of votes increased to 20.5 percent in Lombardy, where the Lega was born (Bull and Gilbert 2001, 135 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 4).

The Lega achieved greater success in the 1993 general elections and reached the position of the strongest party in the Milan city council, which is called the industrial capital of Italy. Milan is regarded by Lega as the true capital of the country. The Lega continued its political development. In the 1994 general elections, he allied with the Forza Italy party led by Berlusconi and took part in the PdL coalition. After long discussions, Forza Italy formed two separate coalitions covering the southern and northern regions. As a result of this alliance, 80 percent of the candidates in Lombardia and 65-70 percent in the other Northern regions were allocated to the Lega. After this alliance, Lega became the largest group in the parliament with 117 deputies and 61 senators in the 1994 elections and achieved historical success (Tarchi 1998, 145). In this election, it was seen that there were dramatic vote losses in the regions where Lega was effective. A natural result of this situation Lega has become influential in central politics, not relying on the power it draws from its traditional base. This will also lead to the weakening of regional discourses. Interestingly, the Lega continued to perceive Forza Italy, its coalition partner, as its strongest enemy, and continued its opposition within the coalition (Farrell and Levy 1996, 145 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 5).

This disagreement between Lega and Forza Italy led to the disintegration of the coalition government, like the short-term governments of the First Republic. Although the disagreement mainly stems from the political power struggles within the coalition, Lega's nine macro-regional federalism plan, which was prepared based on the historical period map before the national political unity of Italy, was also effective in the disintegration of the government. When Lega left the coalition, Forza Italy had to decide for early elections. Lega continued its success nationally and received 10.4 percent of the vote. Lega received 30 percent of the vote in the Veneto region and 25 percent in the Lombardy region. The fact that Lega did not join the alliances after this election brought the left alliance Olive Tree (Ulivo) to power (Andrews 2003, 3 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 6).

The Lega suddenly started to put forward separatist policies after its strengthening, especially after 1996. The Lega, which introduced federalism as a radical policy in the early periods, started to defend the independence of the fictitious Northern Italian country, which it called Padania, by making its policy more radical after the implementation of the reforms in terms of federalism of the left coalition that came to power. Building a new nation by constructing a common history,

common symbols and even rituals in an area that has become homogeneous to a large extent and integrated with the rest of the peninsula in more than a century, and whose borders are not precisely defined, has been defined as “virtual nationalism” (Tambini 2001, 1-25 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 6).

The separatist policies advocated by the Lega in this period caused the Lega to lose power and some regional leagues allying broke away from the movement. There were public opinion surveys that showed that the regional and separatist policies advocated by the Lega had no equivalent for both the people of the region and the Italians in general. The separatist policies of Lega both failed to find support from its own base and caused reactions and divisions within the party. An important reaction against the party came from the voters during the 2001 general elections. The increasingly radical policies of the Lega, which increased its votes with its reaction against the system during the Operation Clean Hands period, caused a serious loss of votes in the 2001 elections. The Lega, which received 5 percent of the vote in the 2000 regional elections, decreased to 4 percent in the 2001 general elections.

The Lega, which largely abandoned separatist policies and returned to federalism after the decline in 2000 and 2001 and approached the center right (Arisoy 2010, 8). It is seen that in the 2001 elections, Lega took part in the PdL coalition, which was previously disbanded. This coalition, under the leadership of Berlusconi, remained in power until 2006, making history as Italy's longest-lived government. In this election, Lega's participation in the elections together with the radical-right National Alliance (AN) did not cause a problem and it was not necessary to go to an alliance in two poles. The Lega took over the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Reforms, and Devolution during this period of power. The Lega, which was integrated into the system during this period, still did not give up its separatist approach. Going further, the party changed its name to the “Lega Nord for the Independence of Padania” in 2002 (Arisoy 2010, 9). In the first article of the party's charter, the party stated that it aimed for Padania's independence and recognition as a sovereign federal state and expressed its desire to achieve this goal through democratic means. Lega's votes did not increase significantly. The party gained 5.1 percent of the votes in the 2004 European Parliament elections, and 5.6 percent in the 2005 regional elections. In the 2006 elections, Lega changed its policy. Despite the alliance, Lega, which entered the election with the Autonomy Movement from Sicily, was able to get 4.5 percent of the vote. It can be said that this movement of the Lega played a role in the loss of power to the right coalition, as in the past. In Italy, which was ruled by the left alliance in the 2006-2008 period, the Lega, which was included in the right alliance again before the 2008 elections, received 8.3 percent of the vote

at the national level (Arisoy 2010, 8), again changed tactics in the regional elections in March 2010. The party, which went to the elections with separate alliances in each region, won 26.2 percent in Lombardy, 35.2 percent in Veneto, 10.2 percent in the Liguria region of Genoa, 16.7 percent in Turin-based Piemonte and Bologna-based Emilia-Romagna. It received 13.6 percent of the vote. The Lega received 6.4 percent of the vote in Tuscany, 6.3 percent in Marche, and 4.3 percent in Umbria (Archivio Storico delle Elezioni 2010 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 10).

The Lega continued to be an important party for Italy in the 2013 general elections. Despite the falling vote, the party managed to send 20 deputies to the House of Representatives. The party, which received 4.3 percent of the votes in the Republican Senate elections, sent 18 representatives to the Senate. In the 2018 elections, it is seen that Lega made a big vote explosion. The party, which received 17.4 percent of the votes in the House of Representatives election, ranked third and sent 124 deputies to the parliament. In the Republican Senate elections, the party received 17.6 percent of the votes and elected 58 senators. The Lega won 5 deputies with 6.2 percent of the votes in the 2014 European Parliament elections and 28 deputies with 34.3 percent of the votes in 2019. The last election shows that the Lega Nord has risen to an influential position in Italy. The Lega has taken on three ministries in the government established in February 2021 by former European Central Bank President Draghi, whom President Sergio Mattarella mandated to form the government.

3.2. Ideological Foundations

While discussing the ideological orientation of the Lega Nord party for the Independence of Padania; Populism, ethno-regionalist, neo-federalist, new right, chauvinist, radical right even racism are described (Arisoy 2010, 10).

Uncertainty and flexibility are among the remarkable features of the party. It is seen that the blurring of right and left ideological distinctions in Italian politics since the Second Republic period also affected Lega. The fact that the main discourses of the Lega, which initially emerged as anti-system but later included in the political system, are still based on system opposition can be explained in order to define the party itself outside of classical ideologies. The Lega is gaining votes with the discourse of the new formation. The Lega, like all radical-right parties, feeds on the failures of the system parties and gathers strength (Farrell and Levy 1996, 132 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 11).

Interestingly, Lega used the separatist discourse-based power it gained in the northern regions as a result of flexibility in political negotiations, maneuvers, and tactical changes, and tried to use regional power in the national sense. It is observed that the party has been successful in this. Another feature of the Lega is that it is organized in the form of the upper political structure of regional parties. This situation, which is compatible with the historical development of the party, is considered important. During the system crisis that coincided with its establishment, Lega achieved success by utilizing the opportunities of the period with the discourse of anti-systemism rather than separatism and regionalism (Parker 2006, 247 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 11).

Lega confronted the system, which was known with political crises and scandals and was shaken, with different and postmodern discourses, which can be called new, and thus gained success. In a process where the system parties are collapsing due to corruption, it channeled protest votes against the system with its harsh propaganda language and its sometimes rude structure (Farrell and Levy 1996, 143 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 11). After the corruption scandals, the slogan of “Thief Rome” produced by the party appealed to the middle classes especially in the industrialized northern region. Lega also appealed to big business owners and entrepreneurs with its anti-globalization rhetoric. Northern entrepreneurs were under the pressure of increasing competition in the process of globalization on the one hand and the European single market on the other hand. The overlapping of the northern entrepreneurs' expectations for the flexibility and federalization of the state organization and the discourses of the Lega Nord in the same direction were also effective in the success of the movement in this first period (Bull & Gilbert 2001, 2; Farrell and Levy 1996, 143 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 11).

Demanding the full implementation of the free market economy, advocating tax cuts, favoring privatization, and downsizing the state were seen as positive statements by northern businessmen. Businesspeople believed that the secessionist policies of the Lega were important if the country could not adapt to the European single market and was pushed out of the EU system, amid concerns that Italy would not meet the Maastricht Criteria. Northern Italy business people would be in danger of being isolated from their main market and ostracized from Europe (Tarchi 1998, 150; Bull and Gilbert 2001, 108 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 12). Northern regions were able to meet the requirements of the single market in terms of economic performance. Therefore, existing alone in Europe without carrying the burden of the south was very attractive and “profitable” to these people (Arisoy 2010, 12).

The Lega produced a discourse by combining Italy's north-south divide with the Euro-Mediterranean divide. The south is described as lazy and backward in this discourse, while the north is presented as an example of production, industry, and development. This attitude of the party was considered by some as a neo-orientalist perspective towards the south and as a polite expression of racism by others (Farrell and Levy 1996, 141 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 12).

For Lega, regional discrimination is supported not only by folkloric elements and opposition to the south but also by production relations, level of development, and trade. According to this view, northerners are compatible and show similarities both in terms of their historical, ethnic, and cultural structure and in terms of production relations. This situation is also called the Germanic renaissance (Miglio 1994, 91-92 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 13).

On the other hand, the discourse and policies of separatism, which the Lega has brought to the agenda for years and even changed its name were not supported by the party base. It was seen Northern League's own elite is not very sincere about separatism and uses the "separatism card" as a bluff to gain power in the center (Arisoy 2010, 13). While the policy of separatism continued, the alliance with Sicily was found interesting. In this context, the discourse began to be put forward that the northerners represent values such as honesty, hard work, and thrift instead of geographical belonging, and that the Italians who carry these values can see themselves as supporters of the Lega. In this process, negative rhetoric towards southerners shifted to refugees and illegal immigrants from outside the EU, and xenophobia started to increase (Andrews 2003, 3 as cited in Arisoy 2010, 13). Here, it is seen that discrimination in the traditional discourse of Lega was reproduced through refugees.

3.3. Its Place in Italian Politics

The Lega has an important place in Italian politics. Despite its controversial political rhetoric and maneuvers, the party filled an important gap in the Italian right-wing politics. The party, especially with its harsh and populist rhetoric, fulfills the function of preventing the masses who are against the negativities of the system from turning to alternatives outside the system. The Lega uses a discourse that is claimed to be outside the system and wins the votes of those who are angry with the current system. However, when its place in political alliances is examined, it is seen that the Lega party has shifted to the center right as its vote rate has increased over the years and will use

rhetoric again it is out of the system as its votes decrease. In this sense, it is considered that the most important function of the party is to pull protest votes that are angry with the current system.

The Lega, which interprets postmodernism effectively and applies it to its policies, shows that the voters prefer to confront classical ideologies and parties with different and populist discourses, which shows that it has its own characteristics in Italian political life.

The Lega has also demonstrated a reality in its attempt to cause the government to disintegrate by breaking its alliance with Forza Italy. It emerges as truth, uncertainty, and flexibility. Despite being criticized, the party has the agility to boldly resort to new and radical changes and methods. By advocating regionalism and separatism for many years, Lega can increase the game on the national level or enter into alliances with political movements in a targeted region such as Sicily. Such unexpected exits and initiatives somehow attract the voters and allow Lega to continue its activities as one of the distinctive political parties of the Second Republic (Arisoy 2010, 14).

It is possible to say that the need for the Lega party will continue for a long time in Italian politics, with its political instability and its compulsory nature of alliances. The party has become a key party by revealing the dynamics of change in its policies, at least on the plane of populism. Examples include winning elections to the left coalition by not joining the alliance, disbanding the government by withdrawing from the alliance, being a decisive and key party.

The most distinctive feature of the post-1948 period in Italian politics is instability. In Italy, where the 67th government came to power in 73 years, the Lega party is gaining success with its unstable and flexible rhetoric. In a sense, the Lega, which has the appearance of a party that benefits from instability, embodies the basic features of the country's politics.

3.4. Recent Developments

The most important development in the Italian political system in recent years is the disappearance of the bi-block structure in the political system. Particularly, Italian politics, which was divided into communist and anti-communist blocs until Operation Clean Hands and divided into center-right and center-left blocs in the Second Republic Period, has recently evolved into a different dimension with the inclusion of three new actors. This change represents a first in the democratic system that Italy has maintained since 1947. The high vote rates of Forza Italy, which entered

politics after Operation Clean Hands, and the Lega and M5S parties, which gained strength show that a new understanding of politics has emerged in the country (Akman 2020, 1614).

Italy's electoral reform Rosatellum which was accepted in 2017, has created controversy in the country. The main reason for this is that the M5S strongly opposed this reform. M5S opposes the law, which is supported by the Democratic Party, Forza Italy, and the Lega. At the center of the important political debates in Italian political life since the Second Republic period is election system reforms (Akman 2020, 1617). The main criticism of the electoral system in Italy is that it encourages alliances by increasing the number of parties and creates instability by leading to weak short-term coalitions. The period of the Second Republic began to be called the period of alliances and coalitions as a result of electoral reforms. However, in terms of office, it can be said that the terms were longer compared to the period of the First Republic. While the average period of power was 322 days between 1948/1994, it increased to 523 days in the period covering 1994-2006. This period has been extended and increased to an average of 729 days in the 2006-2014 period (Mis and Duran 2018, 24 as cited in Akman 2020, 1620).

In this period, Lega has always gained an important place among right-wing coalitions.

3.5. Lega Leader Matteo Salvini

Matteo Salvini is the leader of the Lega Nord for the Independence of Padania since December 2013. Between 1 June 2018 and 5 September 2019, Salvini served as Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of Interior. He also serves Member of the Senate of the Republic. He was member of the European Parliament between 2004 and 2018.

Salvini has a harsh attitude towards the European Union. Salvini, who expressed opposition to the Euro system, is known as a politician with a skeptical approach to the European Union. Salvini has come to the fore with his harsh and anti-refugee rhetoric, especially with the influx of immigrants to Italy in recent years. It should be noted that Salvini strongly opposes the policies determined by the European Union and the European Commission towards immigrants. Salvini is seen as one of the most important leaders of the populist political movement not only in Italy but also in Europe. Salvini, who is also expressed as the leader of the radical right-wing and neo-nationalist movement that emphasizes localization and protectionism in the face of globalization, is among the most important actors of right-wing politics in Italy.

Leader of the Lega, Salvini is referred to by his political supporters as Captain (Il Capitano). Salvini is seen as a powerful and authoritarian politician (Mattioli 2018). Especially after 2018, he started to be considered as one of the most influential politicians in Italy (Kirchgaessner 2018).

In 2013 Roberto Maroni, announced that he would leave the party leadership. In December 2013, Salvini was elected leader, defeating Umberto Bossi by a large margin of 82 percent. Salvini has since described the Euro issue as a crime against humanity and has started to make a strong opposition. Likewise, opposition to the European Union began to come to the fore in the party's policies. Salvini collaborated with French right-wing party leader Marine Le Pen and Dutch right-wing party Leader Geert Wilders (tmnews.it 2013), and this is how the 2014 European Parliament elections were held. Salvini, who received 6.2 percent of the votes and 5 deputies in the European Parliament elections, suffered a defeat compared to the previous elections. The party's votes had fallen by 4 percent compared to the 2009 elections. However, this result was more successful than the 2013 general elections. The party congress convened in July after this election approved Salvini's political rhetoric, a flat tax proposal, and a plan to establish a sister party in south-central Italy and the Insular Italy. In the Emilia-Romagna regional elections held in November, an important threshold for Salvini's national project was crossed. The Lega became the second party with 19.4 percent of the votes. This result paved the way for Lega to pretend to be a national party. The sister party NcS, which was decided in the congress in December, was established. Election polls conducted during this period revealed that Matteo Salvini's popularity continued to increase continuously. Salvini's vote rose from 28 percent to 33 percent. Salvini began to come to the fore as a rising power and leader in Italy.

Salvini organized a rally on the issue of illegal immigrants, which came to the fore in 2015 and came to the world's agenda. The 28 February 2015 rally was held in Rome. Although there were important struggles and divisions within the party in the regional elections in 2015, Lega gained an important position by receiving very high votes in cities where it was weak such as Veneto, Liguria, Tuscany, Marche, and Umbria.

In December 2017, Salvini introduced the new logo of Lega, prepared for the 2018 general elections, to the public. For the first time, the Lega party logo did not include the word "north". The party decided to compete in all constituencies of the country with this logo. It was stated that the logo was inspired by Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign (biografieonline.it 2021).

The Lega showed great success in the 2018 elections. The party managed to become the third party in Italy by receiving 17.4 percent of the votes. The party received most of its votes in the Northern

regions. However, the main success of the party was the votes received from the central and southern parts of the country. The Lega received significant votes from central and southern Italy, but also logged in the rest. 20.2 percent of the votes were received in Umbria, Central Italy, 13.8 percent in Abruzzo, Southern Italy, and 10.8 percent in Sardinia. Matteo Salvini was elected leader of the right-wing coalition with the most votes. Parties that could not form a government and compromise for a long time led to an important political crisis. In May, the Five Star Movement and the Lega announced that they had agreed on a new government.

During the leadership of Matteo Salvini, very important corruption charges were also claimed against Lega. Salvini began to shift party members and channel financial resources to the established parallel party. The confiscation of the accounts of the Lega was discussed. On February 22, 2019, the Italian magazine L'Espresso publicly announced secret cooperation between Lega and Putin administration-related organizations. Kremlin-linked organizations were providing 3 million Euros of financing to the party under the sale of diesel fuel. It was claimed that the money would be used to finance the election campaign. It was stated that the investigation of the Italian judicial units on this issue continues (Tizian&Vergine 2019).

The illegal funding of \$65 million by Russia to Lega's major investigation into the financial structure of Lega was opened. The formal cooperation agreement signed between Lega and the ruling United Russia Party confirmed the allegations (Tondo 2019).

In December 2019, a new financing scandal emerged. This time, Lega was ordered by Italy's highest court to repay €49 million in illegally obtained funds. Manager Belsito was sentenced to prison by this court (Jones 2019).

In the 2019 European Parliament elections, Salvini sought to unite the radical-right parties in a pan-European alliance. In this context, he founded the European Peoples and Nations Alliance. Despite the accusations against him, Matteo Salvini achieved a very important success by getting more than 34 percent of the votes in the European Parliament elections in Italy. The European Coalition for Identity and Democracy, of which the Lega is a member, has become the fifth largest group in the EP (Barry 2019).

Salvini, who was sworn in on 1 June 2018 and took office as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, declared that his most important goal is to greatly reduce the number of illegal immigrants coming to Italy. Italian media wrote that Salvini placed himself in a more dominant role than Prime Minister Comte and set the country's agenda.

Salvini sparked a diplomatic crisis with Tunisia. Minister Salvini announced that the Tunisian government is sending convicts to Europe only to commit crimes. Salvini's statements and actions that set the agenda on immigration continued. Salvini pointed out that every country in Europe determined its own policy and announced that Italian ports were closed to immigrants. The ship, which was being brought on a ship by the international aid organization and carrying 600 immigrants, was rejected by the Italian authorities. The ship was accepted by Spain the next day (bbc.co.uk 2018).

Salvini has previously said he is considering action against organizations that rescue migrants at sea. He has accused them of being in cahoots with people-smugglers. He said that Italy was saying "no to human trafficking, no to the business of illegal immigration". Salvini refused to let the ships in, saying: "Saving lives is a duty, turning Italy into a huge refugee camp is not." "Italy is done bending over backward and obeying - this time There Is Someone Who Says No" he wrote on Twitter, with the hashtag #closethedoors (bbc.com 2018).

On June 16, 2018 Salvini stated that the government would hold a census of Roma in Italy to deport anyone illegally present in the country. He said "It is not our intention to register or take fingerprints on anyone - he specified - our goal is a reconnaissance of the situation of Roma camps. We intend to protect first of all thousands of children who are not allowed to attend school regularly because they prefer to introduce them to delinquency. We also want to check how the millions of euros that come from European funds are spent" (Custodero 2018). Salvini's proposal created significant controversy in the country. This census was opposed, stating that race registration in Italy is prohibited by the constitution. Prime Minister Conte forced Salvini to withdraw his offer. The opposition also reacted harshly to Salvini.

In September 2018, the Council of Ministers approved the "Salvini Decree", which ended the practices that provided basic protection to immigrants and ensured the deportation of immigrants. The decree also included the suspension of refugee applications that were deemed socially risky. In June 2019, Matteo Salvini's government came to the fore with a new immigration scandal. The ship Sea Watch 3 took 53 immigrants off the coast of Libya and headed for the port of Lampedusa. However, the Italian administration did not allow immigrants to enter Italy. On June 29, the captain of the ship docked the ship without permission. Captain Rackete was arrested by the Italian authorities. Salvini, on the other hand, accused Rackete of trying to sink the Italian boat, claiming it was an act of war. Making a call to the Netherlands, Salvini had to release the captain after the court's decision that the law had not been violated (euronews.com 2019).

In August 2019, Deputy Prime Minister Salvini wanted to carry out a political operation against Prime Minister Conte. It was commented that Salvini, who submitted a motion of no confidence against Conte on the grounds of increasing tension within the coalition, aimed to have an early election decision. However, Prime Minister Conte accused Salvini of opportunism and stated that he was fueling the political crisis to serve his own interests. Later, Prime Minister Conte began negotiations with the center-left coalition to form a new government. This attempt by Salvini failed and Salvini, who was the deputy prime minister, fell into opposition. After the establishment of the Conte 2 Government, Salvini began to harshly criticize the new government for its immigration policies (rainews.it 2019).

Salvini's economic policies can be listed as fiscal federalism, flat tax, tax reduction, protectionism, transport, and reform in agriculture. Salvini, who is against same-sex marriage, supports the legalization of brothels. Arguing that gun laws should be relaxed, Salvini brought this issue to the agenda when he was Minister of Interior. Salvini also criticizes the necessity of the vaccine after the coronavirus epidemic. Among his interesting practices, he retweeted a message on his official Twitter account in 2016 calling for "the shooting of communist judges". Salvini said one of his staff members sent the call by mistake (ansa.it 2016).

Salvini opposes Turkey's EU membership in foreign policy (ansa.it 2019). He accused France of bringing mass immigration to Europe (Shaw 2019). Salvini also supported Saudi Arabia's coup attempt against Qatar. Salvini, who first praised Saudi Arabia during his vice-premiership, later praised Qatar for balancing it against Saudi Arabian extremism (lapresse.it 2018). Salvini also supported the decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital (Momigliano 2018). He supported the radical right Bolsonaro government in Brazil (terra.com 2018).

Salvini, who has been among Russian President Vladimir Putin's main supporters in Western Europe, has pledged to help refugees fleeing Ukraine from the Russian invasion. forcing some to abandon their previous allegiance to Putin. Salvini has previously worn t-shirts depicting Putin on Red Square in Moscow and at the European Parliament, and has stated that he prefers him to Italian President Sergio Mattarella. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has thrown several far-right movements across Europe into disarray, Salvini said, there was "clearly an attacker and an assaulted" and that Italy should side with the latter, without saying Russian President Vladimir Putin's name (Amante 2022).

3.6. Xenophobia in Salvini's Statements

On January 24, 2020, Salvini rang the bell of a Tunisian production house and asked the family if they sell drugs. He said “I'm glad I rang the bell. I don't regret it. It doesn't matter if the drug dealers are Italian or Tunisian. Drugs kill. Those who vote for the League Party choose to wage war against drug dealers.” (Congar 2020). He emphasized immigrants and foreigners as being linked to criminal activities.

Among the main factors that feed xenophobia is the portrayal of immigrants and foreigners as being linked to criminal activities. Although there are no concrete rates and indicators showing that crime rates are related to immigrants, making this accusation is among the classic discourses of xenophobic politicians (Yilmaz 2008, 4).

In this discourse of Salvini, another indicator of xenophobia, the behavior of defining oneself with the declared "other" is seen. The behavior of marginalizing those who are not like themselves becomes the most important motivation source that feeds discrimination, especially in societies where the culture of living together is not assimilated. The other is shown as the source of all kinds of evil in discourse and action (Hudson 2004, 311).

In another controversial statement, he answered the question "Do you eat Nutella" by his supporters, who attended a rally held on December 6, 2019, "There is Turkish hazelnut in it, it would be better if it was Italian hazelnut". Salvini made this controversial statement because he wanted to help Italian farmers. Salvini said at a rally in Rome in November 2019, “The efforts to bring Turkey into Europe are insane. I would rather talk to Russia or Israel than to deal with an Islamist state.” he said. With this statement, Salvini targeted Turks, Russian-Orthodox, and Jews (Samar 2019). In another statement, Salvini targeted Muslims in Europe and said "It is not something I want to leave European cities with an Islamist caliphate governed by sharia law behind us and I will do my best to prevent it" (Gunduz 2019).

Another controversial action of Matteo Salvini is the act of not allowing immigrants transported by ships to the territorial waters of the country to Italy by international aid organizations. Making a statement about this event, which occupied the agenda of Europe and Italy for days in July 2019, Salvini made the statement that "It is my duty to control the number of immigrants while millions of my citizens are looking for a job in my country" (Koyuncu 2019). Salvini also commented on the criticism of the famous actor Richard Gere about the rejection of immigrants to Italy, "The generous millionaire Open Arms has openly expressed his demands for the future of his

immigrants. We thank him. He will take everyone (immigrants) on his private jet to his villa in Hollywood. Am I wrong?" replied (Congar 2019).

3.7. Content Analysis of Salvini's Disclosures

The discourse and activities of the Lega Nord Party Leader, Matteo Salvini, provide important data in terms of explaining xenophobic political movements in Italy and Europe. Salvini's publicly controversial statements draw attention with their xenophobic content, as well as their populist content.

Based on Salvini's statements, it has the subtext that Italians are the real owners of Italy and that the Italian people are economically damaged and corrupted due to the influence of immigrants and foreigners. From this point of view, the solution to the problems of the country is presented as a country free of immigrants and non-Italians. In Salvini's discourses, it is argued that the main cause of economic problems, criminal acts, cultural corruption, and related problems is immigrants. It can be said that these discourses generally include expressions that are not based on concrete data and consist of slogans. It can be interpreted that populism is clearly seen in Salvini's statements.

There is a perception of being superior in the subtext of Matteo Salvini's ideas and discourses. It is seen that the idea of superiority, which has become entrenched in Europe since the colonial period, has important effects on Salvini's intellectual infrastructure. The message that the representatives of an inferior culture will harm the superior culture is often given in the discourses. The foundations of the idea of defending the high and sacred culture against the representatives of the lower cultures and nations that would harm them and trying to prevent the effects can be found in the colonial period.

Many of Salvini's statements are ridiculed and belittled by his opponents. Such statements and attempts of Salvini, which can also be used as a humor element from time to time; seem possible to have outputs such as gaining the middle and lower classes. On the other hand, when we compare the discourses of the founder of Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi and Salvini we can see that Bossi's discourses are much harsher than Salvini.

3.8. Critique of Salvini's Views

The views defended by Matteo Salvini are constantly on the agenda of Italy and the European Union and create controversy. Salvini's pursuit of alliances with radical right and ultra-nationalist political parties in the countries forming the union also draws attention and threatens European values. In this context, the criticism of Salvini's views is important.

It is seen that Salvini has been doing politics with a populist, and pragmatist approach throughout his political life. In this context, although the views and policies he advocated have changed over the years, it is seen that these orientations have never changed. Salvini, who came to the forefront with regional discrimination in the first periods he entered politics and demanded the independence of Padania with the slogan "North First", changed this slogan to "Italians First" after a while and turned regional discrimination into xenophobia.

Ensuring the continuity of European values, security and democracy require such an assessment of radical-right parties. In this study, while the history of fascism and the role of the Lega Nord Party in this process are discussed, it is seen that the movement threatens European values.

European values are listed in the second article of the Treaty on European Union. The second article of the agreement states, "The Union is founded on the principles of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to member states in a society where pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men prevail" (ab.gov.tr 2020). When the Lega Nord and Matteo Salvini are evaluated with this definition, it is seen that almost none of the basic values are included in the party program.

4. CRISIS INFLUENCE ON LEGA

In this chapter, I will analyze how and why Lega's votes changed after the 2009 European debt crisis and 2015 Immigration crisis in Europe. I will also shortly examine Lega's popularity after the covid-19 crisis. I used the term immigration crisis rather than the refugee crisis, despite immigrants can be economic migrants who have less opposition than refugees. On the other hand, these economic migrants' families who came to Italy by family unification or asylum seekers/refugees are opposed more. As Table 3 in 4.2.3rd part shows for Lega supporters, immigrants from the same ethnicity/race are only 10% more favorable than immigrants from different ethnicities/races and poorer countries outside the EU.

4.1. The 2009 European Debt crisis

With the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and after great losses in the real estate market, banking and financial crisis emerged in the United States and globally affected the world. Euro also suffered from this crisis and the European debt crisis emerged at the end of 2009. Greece and Spain are the most affected countries in Europe. Italy is the eurozone's third-largest economy despite Italy's economic situation was not so well before the crisis. Italy was hit hard by the European debt crisis and its effects are still ongoing.

In economic crisis, individuals compete about limited resources. In these conditions, groups blame the outgroup for economic problems (Golder 2016, 483). Golder emphasizes that unemployment causes the rise of right-wing support only when immigration is high enough. He argues if unemployment's reason is labor market rigidities voters have little incentive to support right-wing. But if voters believe unemployment is high because of immigration, then they support the right-wing parties (Golder 2003 as cited in Golder 2016, 484).

4.1.1. Crisis Effect on Italian Economy

In 2010, Italy needed to confront the deepest and longest recession in its history in the context of the Euro crisis (Guiso et al. 2017). Italy's Government Debt to Gross Domestic Product increased sharply after the 2008 economic crisis (Trading Economics 2020).

Italy has a big decrease in GDP growth after the 2008 economic crisis. Italy's annual GDP growth decreased by 5,281% in 2009 (World Bank 2020). But from the unemployment levels, we can say that the situation is stabilized, and Italians are not feeling the crisis as it was in the first years of crisis. Italy's unemployment rates increased from 8.4% in 2011 to 12,7% in 2013 and decreased to 9,3% in 2020 (Statista 2022). On the other hand, youth unemployment rate in Italy was so high. It was more than 20% in 2008 and hit 29% in 2011, with steadily increasing numbers it was the highest in 2014 with 42,79% (Macrotrends 2022).

In the beginning of the crisis Lega was led by Umberto Bossi and was in the government coalition with The People of Freedom (Italian: Il Popolo della Libertà, PdL) led by Silvio Berlusconi. The government took austerity measures such as pension reform (e.g., deindexation from cost of living, increase in pensionable age), new taxes (e.g., property, financial assets, financial transactions), and cuts to social and health services (Giglioli 2022).

4.1.2. European Debt Crisis Effect on Lega's Votes

As Table 1 shows, Lega's votes decreased by 4,21% in the Chamber of Deputies and 3.73% in the Senate of the Republic from 2008 national elections to 2013 national elections after the European debt crisis. It does not seem that the European debt crisis is a contributing factor to the popularity of the Lega in Italy (Lee 2020).

Table 1. Lega's results from 2006 to 2018 national election

LEGA'S VOTES FROM 2006 TO 2018 ELECTIONS					2015 Migrant crisis	2009 European Debt Crisis	
		2006	2008	2013	2018	'13-'18 Change	'08-'13 Change
Chamber of Deputies	Total votes	1.769.501	3.026.865	1.392.918	18.091.104	16.698.186	-1.633.947
	Popular votes	4,58%	8,30%	4,09%	17,35%	13,26%	-4,21%
	Number of seats won	26	60	18	125	107	-42
Senate of The Republic	Total votes	1.550.785	2.644.361	1.416.461	16.875.971	15.459.510	-1.227.900
	Popular votes	4,48%	8,06%	4,33%	17,61%	13,28%	-3,73%
	Number of seats won	14	25	18	58	40	-7

Source: Lee (2020, 30)

In 2013 national elections, votes went less to candidates promising to soften or contest austerity, than to those saying, or hinting, that they would reject it. Mario Monti, the head of austerity policy in Italy, was ousted and Beppe Grillo's (former leader of M5S) promise of a referendum on the

euro certainly played a role in the success of this move. This was an Italy that said no to austerity (the guardian.com 2013).

In the 2013 elections, Lega's electoral program did not mention the crisis and it was not able to use the crisis theme in its favor recording one of its lowest electoral results. A new party The Five Star Movement (M5S) became the largest party in Italy (Guiso et al. 2017).

I am aware that only economic crisis factor did not affect Lega's votes. Its votes depend on many other factors. For instance, it was a more regionalist and separatist party and did not embrace nationalism. But in this debt crisis, we saw that voters cast the ballot for parties which are against the austerity measures. If Lega's party program and leader's rhetoric include populism and create an enemy like in the 2015 migration crisis, maybe Lega's votes would be higher.

4.1.3. Conclusion: Economic Crisis Influence on 2013 Elections

The economic crisis has affected Italian democracy in different ways and the economic crisis caused the political crisis. The economic crisis affected by reshaping of political alternatives, development of an opposite trend (toward unitarianism), development of protest parties (Morlino & Piana 2014,17).

Economic Crisis revealed a picture of declining participation, systematic incumbent punishment, frequently without an increase in support for official opposition, and the rise of challenger parties (Bosco & Verney 2012 as cited in Bosco & Verney 2013, 398).

When the global economic crisis hit Italy, Berlusconi's government resisted it by supporting banks and big firms and cutting public expenditure. This policy was also supported by the Opposition but the way the Government put it into practice was opposed about lack of transparency, inefficiency and inequity (Di Quirico 2010, 3).

The unexpected end of Berlusconi's government in 2011, the period of transition under Monti's technocratic government by austerity measures and the rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S) as a new competitor strongly influenced voters' party evaluations (Passarelli & Tuorto 2014,147). Moreover, during Monti government, Lega became the main parliamentary opposition since PdL supported the government and worse was come to Lega "in 2012 with the revelation of party

misuse of public funds, in particular by figures close to Umberto Bossi (including two of his sons)” (Bartlett et al. 2011, 21). Bossi resigned in April 2012 and Maroni was elected as new Federal Secretary at the party congress in July 2012.

For the first time in 20 years a party outside the two main center–left and center–right coalitions, the M5S, gained enormous level of support.

Passarelli & Tuorto (2014,156) shows that “(1) only some of the voters who were most critical towards the parties’ management of the economy chose the mainstream opposition; (2) non-voting absorbed only a part of the discontent; and (3) many voters (above all, the component who were the most politically aware) preferred to express their discontent by voting for a radical party (M5S), rather than by abstaining.” and voting for MS5 suggests the emergence of a new model of retrospective economic voting, which challenges the traditional interplay between the incumbents and the typical opposition.

Despite MS5- a populist party, gained a strong rise in 2013 elections we saw that Lega lose 4% of support according to 2008 elections.

4.2. 2015 Immigration Crisis

The crisis started in 2015 when Europe saw a steep increase in the number of refugees seeking asylum. The majority of these refugees came from regions affected by conflict, specifically Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq being the top three sources of fleeing citizens looking for safety and shelter on European territory, as reported by Eurostat (2016 as cited in Damoc 2016, 22). The European Union’s plan was to increase border control, security checks, and filters in order to better manage the refugee inflow as well as combat smugglers and human traffickers (European Commission press release 2015 as cited in Damoc 2016, 22). The most controversial point was distributing the quotas to countries which was approved by the European Parliament with a total of 449 votes for and 130 against (‘Parliament agrees on binding refugee quotas’, 2015 as cited in Damoc 2016).

4.2.1. Italy's Situation

Italy is geographically on the edge of Europe and a “gate” to the European Union. Refugees from the Middle East and Africa following the path through the Mediterranean were common but after civil wars in Syria and ongoing conflicts in Africa the number of refugees increased numerously. Syrian refugees came through Turkey to Greece and Italy.

More than 700.000 refugees arrived to Italia by sea from 2014 to 2021.

Table 2. Sea Arrivals to Italy in 2020

Previous years	Sea arrivals	Dead and missing
2014	170,100	3,093
2015	153,842	2,913
2016	181,436	4,578
2017	119,369	2,873
2018	23,370	1,311
2019	11,471	754
2020	34,154	955
2021	67,477	1,496

Source: UNHCR (January 17, 2022)

Italy has been also one of the most applied countries for asylum seekers in the European Union. In 2016 and 2017, Italy is the second most applied country for asylum applications after Germany among EU (Eurostat 2022).

4.2.2. National Election Results

After the immigration crisis, from 2013 national elections to 2018 national elections, Lega's vote increased by 13.26% in popular votes for the Chamber of Deputies and a 13.28% in popular votes for the Senate of the Republic. We see a positive correlation between the increase in Lega's votes and the onset of the immigration crisis. Lega has its biggest gain in popular vote percentage during the years that correlate with the immigration crisis (Lee 2020).

Despite Lega’s center of campaign was anti-immigration before the 2018 elections, I am aware that the immigration crisis was not the only factor that contributed to Lega’s success. This success depends on many other factors such as other parties’ political campaigns and the electoral system. On the other hand, when I compared the Lega party program and the leader’s rhetoric during the 2009 European crisis and the Covid-19 crisis, I see that populist rhetoric and creating an enemy as “others” helps Lega to increase its support from the voters.

4.2.3. Matteo Salvini’s Actions About Refugees

Italian soil is one of the most places of entry in the EU. The issue of immigration was one of the most debated topics since the start of the migrant crisis in Italy.

Lega used anti-immigration rhetoric to get votes. Lega leader Matteo Salvini used one of the basic features of populist parties, the rhetoric of “the people” and “the others”. Although the party’s name officially stays Lega Nord, he dropped the name “Nord” from the party’s brand name and embraced a more nationalist view as mentioned in previous chapter. But he mostly opposes the naturalization period of immigrants and accepts Italian as a heritage issue. After embracing nationalism, the immigration crisis emerged, and the party put the issue of immigration at the center of its campaigns in order to gain the votes of anti-immigrationists.

As expected, in 2018 ESS survey, Lega voters perceive immigrants as a negative thing. The general attitude about immigration is estimating Lega supporters’ general opinion on how good or bad immigration is for the country. The most outstanding results about immigration among Lega supporters are, they think immigration makes the country a worse place to live.

Table 3. Immigration views of the Lega voters

Question	Allow many/few immigrants of same race/ethnic group as majority	Allow different race/ethnic group from majority	Allow from poorer countries outside Europe	Immigrants bad or good for country's economy	Cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants	Make country worse or better place to live
Results (Average)	2,59 allow some-a few	2,95 allow a few	2,94 allow a few	3,45 bad	3,16 bad	2,88 worse
Values Category	1 Allow many to come and live here	1 Allow many to come and live here	1 Allow many to come and live here	0 Bad for the economy	0 Cultural life undermined	0 Worse place to live
	2 Allow some	2 Allow some	2 Allow some	10 Good for the economy	10 Cultural life enriched	10 Better place to live
	3 Allow a few	3 Allow a few	3 Allow a few	-		
	4 Allow none	4 Allow none	4 Allow none			

Source: Acar Tiryaki (2022); author’s calculation (European Social Survey, Dataset: ESS9-2018)

4.2.4. Conclusion: Refugee Crisis Influence on 2018 Elections

Masseti (2015, 486–87 as cited in Dennison& Geddes 2022, 443) argued that immigration “had turned the electoral advantage of the radical right vis-à-vis other parties (especially those on the center-right) into an office advantage of the center-right coalition”.

The increased politicization of “irregular” arrivals into Italy after 2015 changed migration from a relatively “quiet” policy issue to one of “loud” politics meaning that it was highly salient to the public. This salience significantly advantaged the Lega, which could now campaign successfully nationally and dominate the nominal “center-right” coalition (Dennison& Geddes 2022). When Lega was in government from June 2018 to September 2019, policies focused solely on prevention and removal were imposed for migrants and asylum seekers and ended what remained of prior policy drift (Dennison& Geddes 2022).

M5S was the most voted party, got more than 30% of the votes as single party. M5S had “ambiguous” attitudes to migration and blaming the “migration crisis” on poor state management, but by 2018 in government this transformed into a more explicitly nativist position (Dennison& Geddes 2022, 444).

The second most voted party was center-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), although it lost 7% of the votes according to 2013 elections. PD was supporting the integration of immigrants although after 2015 migration crisis it embraced stricter immigration policy. Voter turnout in 2018 elections was the lowest percentage since 1948 (Internazionale 2018 as cited in Belardo 2019), according to an Ipsos survey, more than a fifth of the voters of center -right coalition decided to abstain (Belardo 2019, 40).

A substantial novelty is the ability that the Lega to erode the Pd electorate. The issues of immigration control is evidently issues that arouse the attention and concerns of the left electorate, which in partly attracted by those who - like the Salvini’s Lega- placed these issues at the center of the political agenda (Belardo 2019, 43).

The most benefitted party from the 2015 migration crisis is Lega. Lega increased its votes by more than 13% from 2013 national elections to 2018 elections. Lega was in center-right coalition with Forza Italia, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI), Us with Italy (Noi con l'Italia, NcI)-Union of the Centre (Unione di Centro, UdC). Lega got 17% and Forza Italia 14% of the votes. Lega formed

a government coalition with M5S without its center-right allies, dominated the government, and attempted to bring down the M5S-Lega coalition. The government could only live for one year.

4.3. Covid-19 Crisis

Covid-19 started in China in the last months of 2019 and became a pandemic in a short time. Italy was the first heavily affected country in Europe. It is Italy's biggest crisis since World War II (Pisano et al. 2020). In March 2020, Italy declared a lockdown. The Italian government was criticized for being too late to take the necessary precautions.

Matteo Salvini wrote a Facebook message on January 31, 2020, in which he claimed that the virus had been invented in Chinese laboratories (Engel 2020 as cited in Wondreys & Mudde 2022). Lega claimed the inferiority of the Chinese and the superiority of Italians. The League governor of Veneto, Luca Zaia, claimed the superiority of the Italians over the Chinese in terms of personal hygiene and cleanliness (tgcom24.it 2020 as cited in Wondreys & Mudde 2022).

In line with its nativism, the League initially saw the “foreign” virus as a significant danger—some local leaders referred to it as the “Chinese virus” (il Messaggero, February 21, 2020 as cited in Wondreys & Mudde 2022), however but with time party opinions on COVID-19 started to fluctuate a lot, including across various regions. The most affected regions in Italy were governed by the League (Lecca 2020 as cited in Wondreys & Mudde 2022). The party went from Salvini's alarmist appeals to close the borders and ban the Chinese New Year -after the first two cases in the country, which were two Chinese tourists in Rome- to claims that the virus was not that bad by the Lega governor of the hardest-hit province, Lombardy (Fanpage.it 2020 as cited in Wondreys & Mudde 2022).

Salvini accused the EU of being nothing more than a “lair of serpents and jackals” (Betz 2020c as cited in Wondreys & Mudde 2022) and the EU has abandoned Italy in the face of the covid-19 pandemic.

On 21 February 2020, Salvini criticized the government's decision of voluntarily quarantining for people returning from China on his Facebook account. He said the health of “our people” comes first. He said he was going to get vaccinated but also wanted the freedom of all and did not want his 18-year-old son “being chased by a syringe”. In his statement on 15th July 2021, he said he did not want to hear about closures, curfews, red and orange zones and he lashed out to Green Pass

"The hypothesis of a green pass for the vaccinated is "crazy", which "would create a total mess" (Forgnone 2021).

Lega wanted to take advantage of the situation and wanted to gain voters who are opposing anything mandatory when it comes to vaccinations. (Lettig 2021).

Lega lost three percent (from 30 to 27 percent) poll average between March and June 2020 (Wondreys & Mudde 2022, 101). On the other hand, a smaller right-wing party in opposition Brothers of Italy (FdI) increased its votes by 2 percent. Despite Salvini's radical opposition, the FdI was known as moderate, but FdI leader speaks of a "hypocrisy circuit" which discriminates against Italians, by allegedly not enforcing the lockdown rules among immigrants (Wondreys & Mudde 2022).

I believe the populist rhetoric helps FdI to gain voters and Lega loses votes because of Salvini being more moderate. Again, the more a radical-right party emphasizes "us" and "them" more and uses more populist harsh statements, the more votes they get. After the European migrant crisis 2015, the Lega's votes increased during it had populist discourses about immigrants and after the European debt crisis Lega's votes decreased when it did not have populist discourses about economic crisis.

Moreover, since there was not a national election after the covid-19 crisis, I will examine the results of the 2020 Italian constitutional referendum which was postponed to September 2020 from March 2020 because of lockdown.

The referendum was about reducing the number of MPs in the parliament by a third. This means to get elected parties must win more votes which was criticized by minor parties. On the other hand, reducing the number of MPs will reduce the cost of politics. The referendum was proposed by Democratic Party (PD)-Five Star Movement (M5S) coalition government and proposed by populist MS5 before the 2018 general elections. Lega supported the reducing of the number of MPs. The referendum was approved by a majority vote.

On the same day local elections were held. Before the elections, polls showed that Lega could win the Tuscany region, one of the strongholds of the left. However, the candidate of the left was elected with over 48 percent of the votes. The results of the referendum and local elections were evaluated such as "Elections gave the government a breathe", "PD stopped Salvini (League)", "Elections strengthened the government" (Pinar 2020).

As we see, moderate rhetoric and actions during the Covid-19 crisis gave mixed results to Lega. The referendum was approved as Lega supported but Lega lost votes in regional elections and in election polls.

4.4. Analysis of Impact of Three Crises to Lega

After the 2009 European debt crisis, the national elections were held in 2013 in Italy. Italy was one of the most affected countries from the crisis. Lega was not able to use the crisis theme in its favor recording one of its lowest electoral results. Its electoral program did not mention the crisis and it can be observed that voters cast the ballot for parties which are against the austerity measures.

Lega is the most benefitted party from the 2015 migration crisis. Lega increased its votes by more than 13% from 2013 national elections to 2018 national elections. Furthermore, it can be observed that Lega is able to erode the Pd electorate. The issues of immigration control are on the attention and concern of the left electorate, which in partly attracted by Lega which placed the immigration issues at the center of the political agenda. After the elections, despite being a short-lived government, Lega formed a government coalition with M5S without its center-right allies, dominated the government, and Salvini attempted to bring down the M5S-Lega coalition.

Lega's moderate rhetoric and actions during the Covid-19 crisis gave mixed results to Lega. Lega lost votes in regional elections and in election polls but the 2020 Italian constitutional referendum was approved as Lega supported.

CONCLUSION

The Lega Nord was established by Umberto Bossi as a federalist and regionalist political party in Italy in 1991. Party used one of the basic features of populist parties, the rhetoric of “the people” and “others”. “The people-Us” were Northern Italians who were superior to “lazy” Southern, and “others” were Southern Italians and the political elite in Rome. Lega leader Matteo Salvini took over the party in 2013. He embraced a more nationalist view; he dropped the name “Nord” from the party’s brand name although the party’s name officially stays Lega Nord. “Us” became all Italians while “others” were mainly immigrants. The second “others” were Brussels-EU which is indifferent to Italy’s problems and betrayed European soul. The party got enormous support during Salvini’s leadership.

The findings of the paper show “Losers of Modernization” Theory and “Rational Choice” Theory can partly explain the popularity of Lega.

According to “Losers of Modernization” Theory, after the 2009 European debt crisis, Lega’s votes would increase since so many Italians became victims of globalization because of the global economic crisis, however Lega’s votes decreased in 2013 elections. On the other hand, in 2018 elections after 2015 migration crisis Lega’s votes increased. According to some voters, refugees would be an economic burden on the state, job market competition would increase, and refugees would diminish the social welfare of voters, so these voters became losers of modernization. In 2018 elections, we saw that Lega got the protest votes of even center-left party supporters since Lega positioned itself as protectors of “the people” and the “losers of modernization”.

Rational Choice Theory can partly explain the popularity of Lega. Lega encourages optimization by creating an opportunity for voters to express their views which are ignored by mainstream parties. According to Rational Choice Theory, we expect Lega voters vote for Lega according to their “rational choice” by calculating their own cost and benefits. However, voters are not “fully” rational, and can easily be affected by the society’s reactions and the media. If the media had not covered news about Lega, or if there had been strong public protest against Lega, voters who had rationally chosen Lega might not have voted for Lega.

My research question was “How did the European debt crisis, 2015 migration crisis, and Covid-19 crisis influence the votes of Lega in 2013 and 2018 Italian national elections?”. The paper shows that the rhetoric of the leader and the party program is so crucial as well as the governing parties. Lega benefits from these crises, if it places the crisis at the center of its political agenda,

can create a common enemy and emphasize “us” and the “others” during crisis time. Moreover, Lega’s leader and the other parties’ stances against these crises are crucial.

It can be seen that after the 2009 European debt crisis, the votes of Lega decreased but after the 2015 migrant crisis the votes of Lega increased. There were also mixed results after the covid-19 crisis.

After the European debt crisis, in the next elections in 2013, Lega’s electoral program was not mainly about the economic crisis and Lega recorded one of its lowest electoral results. During Monti government, Lega became the main parliamentary opposition since PdL supported the government. During crisis time, Lega’s fiscal federalism idea did not seem possible. In 2012 it was claimed that Lega misused public funds, particularly by the figures close to the leader Umberto Bossi. Then Bossi resigned and Maroni was elected as new Federal Secretary. In 2013 elections Lega led by Maroni lost votes. If Lega’s party program and leader’s rhetoric had created an enemy as in the 2015 migration crisis, maybe Lega’s votes would have been higher.

Italy is geographically on the edge of Europe and a “gate” to the European Union. Refugees from the Middle East and Africa following the path through the Mediterranean were common but after civil wars in Syria and ongoing conflicts in Africa the number of refugees increased numerously. Some Italians think this immigration would be a huge problem for the economy and labor market as well as culture. Matteo Salvini saw the opportunity, put anti-immigration as the main perspective of the party, emphasized “us” and the “others”. “Us” were all Italians, “others” were mainly immigrants and the EU. Moreover, he embraced a nationalist view rather than its previous regionalism. Thus, he can appeal to more voters He campaigned successfully nationally and dominated the nominal “center-right” coalition. The most benefitted party from the 2015 migration crisis was Lega.

Lega increased its votes by more than 13% from 2013 national elections to 2018 elections. In the 2018 elections, it shows how important the leader is on the rise of Lega. Moreover, the issue of immigration control arouse the attention and concerns of the left electorate. A substantial novelty is the ability that the Lega to erode the PD electorate.

During covid-19 crisis, at first Lega had harsh rhetoric, claiming Italians’ superiority to Chinese people and a conspiracy theory that virus was invented in China laboratories. Salvini also blamed EU for abandoning Italy in the face of the covid-19 pandemic. There has not been a national election after the covid-19 crisis, but 2020 referendum and the local elections were held. In this crisis, we see how important the mainstream governing parties’ attitudes are and again the Lega’s

electoral rhetoric. Salvini stayed in the middle, not harshly criticizing the governing parties but also not approving them about the measures taken about covid-19 crisis and vaccination. His statements about “our people’s health first” become “freedom for all” about vaccination certificates. The governing populist party Five Star Movement (M5S) introduced the reducing the MPs of the parliament and this was supported by Lega. The referendum was approved as Lega supported, but Lega lost votes in regional elections and in election polls.

As we see, moderate rhetoric and actions during the Covid-19 crisis give mixed results to Lega. The referendum was approved as Lega supported but Lega did not get its desired votes in regional elections.

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