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“Self-Other, and the Oppositional Discursive Logic behind Populist Foreign Policy. The Case of the Lega Nord”

Federico Petris

INTRODUCTION

The Italian populist party ‘Northern League’ (*Lega Nord*, hereafter LN) was officially founded in 1991 through the merging of several smaller regional parties that were independently operating in Northern Italy, and that shared the ambition of autonomy and self-governance (Biorcio, 1997; Ruzza & Fella, 2009). The individual projects were unified in a single Statute which centred around the shared goal of achieving the independence of the so-called *Macro Regione del Nord*,¹ as clearly expressed in the opening articles of the party’s Statute (Lega Nord, 1991: 1). Thereafter, the party sought legitimation for its demand for autonomy in the claim

¹Also known as *Macro Regione*, but more commonly referred to as ‘Padania’.

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that the Northern regions hold a distinct identity and culture that “naturally” (Lega Nord, 2014a; Salvini, 2013) sets them apart from the rest of Italy (see Ruzza, 2000). In this regard, the dialects that were (and still are) spoken in the North are presented by the party as the clearest sign of the allegedly ‘natural’ cultural distinctiveness of the people from the North, and the emphasis on the linguistic element is such that scholars interested in the LN case have argued that references to language worked as a crucial referent point for the party, giving to it a unitary vision (Diamanti, 1991, 1993) and ‘glueing’ the party together through the years (Biorcio, 1997). Most pertinent to the present discussion is that the linguistic element forms a composite part of a broader populist rhetoric that builds (discursively) on elements such as the contrast between the frugal, hardworking North and the lazy, spendthrift South (for an analysis, see Biorcio, 1997; for an empirical example, see Salvini, 2013); and the parallel antagonism between the ‘authentic people’ of the North and the “corrupt” (*ladrone*) government in Rome, a government guided by “Ministers of the South” who implement policies that privilege ‘the South’ while ignoring the will of the ‘alpine communities’ (Zaia, 2019). Building from these elements, the literature on populism has presented the LN as a good exemplar of a party that employs a nativist approach, thickening the traditional populism ‘of the right’ (Chrysogelos, 2017) by defining the authenticity of the people not only on moral criteria but also on claims to naturalness.

Specifically in relation to the foreign policy (hereafter, FP) of the party—understood here as the “intentions and actions of an actor directed at the actor’s external world” (Neack et al., 1995: 18)—the literature on the LN has analysed the party’s FP in terms that resonate with the broader scholarship on populism. That is, scholars have resorted to the “ideological bedfellow” of the movement and posited it as an independent variable to predict its FP positions. This meant that the people vs elite dynamic has been translated linearly from the domestic to international context (for an analysis, see Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015; Woods, 2009), hence treated as a substantive ideology. Contra these expectations, though, the case of the LN shows a complexity that is not readily admissible within the above frameworks as it empirically presents us with a variety of FP preferences that do not fit into the identified linear logic. Exemplary are the 2017 amendments to the party’s Statute – specifically to Art. 1 “Purpose” and Art. 2 “Organisational Structure”. There, the LN opened its agenda towards the “South” in a bid to national government aspirations, but this occurred as members of the party continued to present the South as

‘Other’, and the people from the North as “naturally” distinct from the very communities that the party was now seeking to represent. This problematizes the above expectations, even more so because the changes in FP preference are registered as the LN continued to articulate ‘the people’ in nativist terms via reference to language diversity *and* via uses of language that perform that difference. Beyond the ‘South’ question, the LN’s wedging of people-elite does not translate into substantively coherent FP positions also in relation to the European Union (EU). Once again, in a period in time when the party never officially amended its approach to the definition of ‘the people’, the EU is presented as ‘coloniser’, ‘the number one enemy’, an ‘engine for growth’, and ‘not the number one enemy’—predicates that I elaborate in Sect. 5.5.

Rather than rallying around claims of ‘directionless’ of populist FP (see Hughes, 1975: 106), these examples present us with an empirical puzzle that highlights the need to go beyond and complicate assumptions regarding the influence that pre-conceived substantialist ideologies have on FP decision-making. That is, a shift away from understanding the FP of the LN as having a substantively fixed content—FP as outcome—and rather analyse it as a process—FP as constitutive—where the party (re)negotiates its identity. Starting from the observations that the party continues to articulate the authenticity of ‘the people’ in nativists terms—more specifically that the party establishes the Northern dialects as carriers of authenticity, and that ‘non-speaker Others’ are constructed as both threats and potential allies—in this chapter, I will attempt to overcome the barrier of expectation between domestic and foreign policy positions. In order to connect shifting articulations of people vs elite dynamics to the development of broader (international) social arrangements, this chapter develops a theoretical framework that foregrounds the performative-iterative dimension of parties’ self-understandings within social arrangements, and the articulation *in communication* of the ‘people vs elite’ antagonism. In this way, substantive fixity in antagonism is discarded, and change over time is investigated by tapping into the processual relational space that communication creates for the production of populist ideas through spoken words.

I develop this argument in five steps. In Sect. 5.2, I briefly introduce the working definition of populism that the present analysis employs. This allows me to foreground the importance of ‘acts of demarcation and differentiation’ in populist rhetoric, and how these acts produce and perform populist ideas. I then highlight how those acts form a composite part of an

iterative, performative identificatory practice that inherently intertwines subjects ('the people') and the surrounding society ('the elite', the Other), hence how they can be expected to intertwine with FP positions. After an overview of the LN's nativist rhetoric, in Sect. 5.3 I discuss the interrelation between communication and decision-making, which justifies the decision to empirically investigate the influence that communication has on FP by attending to decision-making processes. In Sect. 5.4, I present my methodology. The chapter then moves to the analytical section, and the resulting claim is that the Lega-Self is organically linked to group identity developed at home, whereas the party articulates the 'Other' according to an oppositional discursive logic that allows the 'Other' to remain constitutively empty and to receive substantive content only in specific policy field through particular policy decisions. On these terms, I conclude by arguing that the influence of populist communication is not a substantive ideology resulting from linear translation of self-other/people-elite antagonism, but forcing FP into a variable self-other oppositional *logic*.

ON POPULISM AND NARRATIVES

The LN has been defined by the specialised literature as a populist party (e.g. Ruzza & Fella, 2009). To define a political party as populist implies that the party employs a people-oriented and anti-elite discourse. More specifically, it suggests that the party makes recourse to a rhetoric that centrally features the separation and polarisation of society into two antagonistic sides—the pure people and the corrupt elite. Beyond this common denominator, and as highlighted also in the Introduction to this Volume, scholars have then disagreed on how to best describe populism (examples include Laclau, 2006; Roberts, 1995; Mudde, 2017; Ostiguy, 2009). Acknowledging the contested nature of the concept—and recalling that the goal of the present analysis is to investigate the influence of communication and language on the FP of the LN—in this chapter I follow an ideational approach as developed by Kirk A. Hawkins (2009). This is because the approach has been described as easily operationalizable, hence well suited for empirical analysis, but even more so because it clearly foregrounds the discursive construction of the divide between the two antagonistic sides, thereby making the framework well suited for investigating the specific puzzle presented by the LN.

In more explicit terms, the ideational approach foregrounds *ideas* as the main driving force behind other material features of populism (see

Hawkins, 2009), and it broadly understands ‘populism’ as a combination of ideological and rhetorical elements (Hawkins, 2009, esp. pp. 1044–46). It is defined as a rhetorical device for it separates society into two antagonistic groups—‘the people’ and ‘the elite’—to appeal to the ‘common’ people (see Hawkins et al., 2018; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2017). Furthermore, it holds that populist parties employ a transgressive rhetorical style as a performative mode of political representation through which they define ‘the people’ as the ‘authentic’ element in society (see McDonnell & Ondelli, 2020) whose sovereignty is threatened by a dangerous Other (Löfflmann, 2019). From there, populists vow to bring about a new political order that best represents the interests of ‘the people’ (Oliver & Rahn, 2016), thence centralising in decision-making the *volonté générale* [general will] (see Mudde, 2004: 543–545; Hawkins, 2009: 1045). It is in this respect—that is, in holding a set of fundamental beliefs on how the world works—that, according to the ideational approach, populism resembles an ideology without being as programmatic and conscious as more traditional ideologies (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 516). These definitional specifications have already been discussed in relation to the case of the LN, but what is important to acknowledge before proceeding to the FP dimension is that the LN has been classified specifically as a ‘nativist’ populist party ‘of the right’. This is meant to highlight that the sentiment of anti-elitism and the transgressive rhetorical style are accompanied by nativist beliefs where the party lends political significance to evocative narratives in order to exclude cultural, linguistic, and/or racial minorities (see Bonikowski, 2017). Furthermore, by constructing ‘the people’ as “naturally” authentic, the nativist approach adds to the central antagonism since ‘the elite’ becomes corrupt also *because* they are not authentic (Mudde, 2017, p. 29, emphasis added), and this thickens the ‘thin’ veneer of populism offered by the ideational approach.

In the case of the LN, an exploration of the nativist elements finds in the definition of ‘the people’ is warranted for it allows to better understand how communication creates a space for the iteration of populist ideas *through spoken words*; hence, in a second moment, the influence of communication on FP. Indeed, while the ideational approach has emphasised how particular ideas motivate action (FP as outcome), that scholarship has under-emphasised the understanding of ideas as embodied *in* language. In this respect, the narrative developed by the LN brings the history of the party back to around 1176, when the German army of

Frederick I Barbarossa, in an attempt to expand southward, attacked the independent municipalities in the northern Italian territories (Percivaldi, 2009). On that occasion, however, the German army retreated after clashing with the resistance posed by the numerically inferior troops of the then *Liga Lumbarda* (Lombard League) guided by Alberto da Giussano (Percivaldi, 2009). According to the narrative employed by the now-LN, the *Liga* is the historical predecessor of one of the six movements that in 1991 founded the LN, and the victory against the German army is portrayed as exemplifying the nature of the people of the North *hence* their innate desire for independence (Percivaldi, 2009). Recalling what has been hinted in the introduction, the LN presently contends that such “biological nature” of the people has been passed on from one generation to another, and the party supports this contention by emphasising the continued use of dialects among its members (Lega Nord, 2014a, p. 7). Indeed, from the explicitly articulated beliefs that “identity is established in language” (Salvini, 2014), and that “the biological nature of man (sic) is transmitted through words” (Lega Nord, 2014a, p. 7), the local dialects that are presently spoken in the Northern region are constructed by the LN as a “language of affects that crosses generations and draws together grandparents and grandchildren” [...] *so that* the authenticity of the people remains “expressed in their [dialects] use” (Lega Nord, 2014a, p. 7). As such, it surfaces that dialects are mobilised as a marker of belonging to an allegedly biological category, and the nativist approach is consolidated in dialects’ *uses* since their actual use *performs* authenticity rather than merely advancing claims to it. What can be argued, then, is that the LN gives an appearance of naturalness to the authenticity of the people by making language *use* an act of identification in itself. This effectively transposes the past into the present, thereby providing an appearance of historical continuity to the party. As I elaborate in the coming Sections, history is naturalised, historicity is extinguished, and the ‘present-past’ allows the party to naturalise the course of future action (future-past), from where it is possible to shed light on the influence that communication has on FP preferences.

COMMUNICATION AND THE INFLUENCE ON FOREIGN POLICY

Beyond the case of the LN, what the above discussion highlights is that communication plays a crucial role in populist rhetoric for it deepens the wedge in society by performatively contributing to the construction and

stabilisation of identity by the group.² On this ground, my contention is that communication’s work can be analytically understood as that of a sense-making device that—through spoken words—*performs* an act of demarcation and differentiation that intertwines targets (the ‘people’) and the surrounding society (the ‘elite’ as the Other). More specifically, and in accordance with the assumptions of this Volume (see Introduction), my suggestion is to understand communication as actively contributing to the party’s production of identity. However, ‘identity’ is now understood as part of an irreducibly relational process that intertwines actors and society, and that is stabilised through ‘acts of demarcation and differentiation’. Consequently, the very notion of ‘identity’ is analytically replaced by the far-richer concept of “bundle of identification” (Bucher & Jasper, 2016: 393–396, 406), and the added value is that the study can now be empirically directed at observable articulations—so-called acts of identification (Bucher & Jasper, 2016)—that refer to identity without partaking in its essentialisation.³ Consequently, a populist party within social formations (International politics) becomes visible not as an original and unitary presence that pre-exists the analysis, but as a “complex bundle of coordinate processes” (Rescher, 2000: 9). That is, as an intersection of constitutive interdependencies (Elias, 1978) that is stabilised (also) in Foreign policy decision-making. On these terms, not only does communication become a cardinal point for studying FP, but the analysis is shifted from a focus on a self–other dichotomy (in the singular) towards studying *identifications in figurations*, or, more precisely, in foreign relations (in the plural). This moves away from understanding FP as outcome towards an understanding of FP as process, and it directly complicates the expectation of a linear translation from domestic to international.

²For a more detailed analysis of populist performance of identity, see Aiolfi (Chap. 11, this volume). Importantly, the discussion developed here differs from and adds to Aiolfi’s approach by investigating language *uses* as a particular aspect of performativity, a dimension largely overlooked in extant literature.

³The specialized literature has proceeded on the assumption that populist FP preferences are derivative of preferences on domestic policy issues (e.g. Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015); that is, that they are extrapolated from the interaction between populism’s “thin ideology” and the thicker ideological position to which a movement is attached (Chryssogelos, 2017). However, by positioning the ideological bedfellow as independent variable for the study of a parties’ behaviour in the international arena, the analyses have shored up a substantialist way of thinking that ultimately fails to delve into processes of emergence that justify and sustain the wedding between the “thin veneer” and the thicker ideology.

Furthermore, the understanding of language used as a means for the production of “the people” must be read alongside the assumption that populists vow to bring a political order that best represents the demands of the “authentic people”. What this means is that communication creates a space from where to represent the will of the authentic majority, so that an interrogation of populist dynamics (which extends to FP as herein defined) should involve the study of this communicative dimension. However, and to reiterate, by focusing on relations over time, the aim of this approach is not to add yet another layer to the study of foreign policy by privileging the domestic. Rather, the aim is to investigate how bundles of identifications are temporarily (and always incompletely) tied together and privileged *in* foreign policy decision-making processes, thereby foregrounding communication’s intrinsic relation *with* foreign policy. Critically, and to conclude, to focus on identification practices centralises the temporal fixing of meanings and the practices of boundary-drawing, and this has the distinct advantage that the study can retain a focus on empirically observable actions as these “acts” characterise political (hence also foreign policy) decision-making processes (Bucher & Jasper, 2016).

Importantly, the fruitfulness of foregrounding the element of communication is supported by insights from an emerging literature within the International Relations (IR) discipline. Similarly discarding conceptualisations of actors’ identities in causal and individualistic terms, and rather focusing on the production of identity in terms of its narrative construction, scholars have already argued in favour of focusing on the co-constitutive relationship between actors’ acts of identification and the “social contexts” in which these acts emerge (see Allan et al., 2018; Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009). Of relevance is the claim therein advanced that actors must not be studied apart from social contexts, but rather they must be conceptualized as “bundles of coordinated processes” (Rescher, 2000: 9) that emerge through discursive practices and that exhibit various degrees of stability across time (Bucher & Jasper, 2016). These claims hint at the relevance of foregrounding communication since the approach allows to emphasise how the ‘people vs elite’ dynamic itself is part of an irreducibly relational process. This is a fundamental observation for investigating the *continued* influence that communication has on FP preferences. It points to the fact that the above acts are iteratively articulated in relation to “Others”, so that it is not sufficient to highlight how an ‘Other’ occupies centre stage in FP in a point in time. Rather, it must be investigated how ‘Others’ are *moved* to the foreground; on which terms is the

relation between the Self, Other and the external world articulated in the ‘acts’; and the relation between past, present, future Self and the external world (Bucher & Jasper, 2016: 398). This is what will allow me to uncover FP preferences as they emerge and evolve in communication. Lastly, by placing populist parties’ self-understandings within social formations—International politics –, the policy-positions that the LN takes become visible not as an original presence, but they become necessarily visible as an intersection of constitutive interdependencies (Linklater, 2011) and they are consequently studied for how they are stabilised (iteratively) in decision-making. In its togetherness, therefore, this approach allows me to steer away from holding pre-formed expectations regarding linearity of translation between ideology and FP.

Before turning to the empirics, it must be mentioned that the above framework has been developed for the study of FP behaviour specifically in international arenas, so that the LN’s relation to the ‘South’ would exceed the intended analytical scope. In relation to the domestic/international divide and the exclusive focus on what occurs at the international level, I contend that the strict division domestic/international is placed in the background once we elaborate on the assumptions that inform the overall approach. In this regard, a “social context” of interest has been defined as a “stability pattern of variable processes” wherein the development of an actor is tied to that of its social arrangement (Rescher, 2000: 13). On these terms, the divide is a second-order difference introduced by the researcher’s own question of ‘*who acts?*’, or better, whose ‘acts of demarcation and differentiation’ attempt to draw political boundaries in the external world. Therefore, the State and formal institutions are no longer the sole actor engaging in FP, as FP becomes more broadly defined as a forum in which leaders of identity-based movement iteratively attempt to stabilise their proposal (Balci, 2017). The analysis can therefore proceed with the case of the LN.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to explore the case of the LN through this framework, I employ a methodology that is inspired by the ethos of Grounded Theory (GT) approaches. That is, a methodology characterised by an abductive, iterative-dynamic research process that requires constant interplay between data collection, analysis, and concept formation (Glaser & Strauss, 1999;

Wilson, 2012).⁴ This effectively favours a processual perspective over a linear-consecutive interpretation of the data, which allows me to produce intertextual (hence cross-time) links that are important for highlighting the temporal shifts in FP positions, and for tracing these changes to the communicative production of ideas. In strict methodological terms, the approach involves a twofold research procedure. Firstly, to abductively gathered references to the production of FP preferences by the LN, I investigate the selected material by asking a number of questions that allow me to know acts of demarcation and differentiation when I see one. This refers to the boundary-drawing exercises through which the LN establishes the authenticity of the people, and consequently the action proposed to protect the ‘general will’ therein defined. The second procedure refers to the exposition of intertextual linkages and cross-references within the overall body of material. Here, the goal is to highlight the temporal-processual dimension of change in the backdrop of a high degree of institutional sameness, which allows me to control for the influence of external factors—hence to better understand the influence that communication has on the FP of the party. Regarding the body of material, I turn to acts of demarcations that have been carried out in decision-making as encapsulated in electoral programmes issued since 2012, in public statements that have been released at party conferences and the yearly ‘Pontida’ event, and lastly when the party was member of the coalition government after the 2018 general elections. This gives me a strategic five-year time-frame around the central year of 2017, the time when the LN opened to the South and pursued national aspirations.⁵

THE CASE OF THE LN

The discussion on the populist rhetoric of the LN has highlighted that the traditional wedge between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ has been deepened by a nativist approach that gives an appearance of naturalness to the authenticity of the ‘alpine communities’. This is specifically accomplished through the establishment of what I have defined ‘present-past’; that is,

⁴For a similar approach, see Bucher and Jasper (2016), and Allan et al. (2018). For a discussion of FP as a field for identity-based movements, see Balci (2017).

⁵Destradi et al. (Chap. 15, this volume) expand on the literature on the LN by studying the rhetoric of the party in diplomatic relations after the 2018 elections. Albeit proceeding from different theoretical assumptions, an interested reader might find the study relevant for the empirical material it presents.

the narrative connection between the 1176 battle of Legnano (fought by the historical alliance who defended the autonomy of the Northern territories) and the foundation of the LN in 1991. As argued, the pragmatic situation allowing for this nexus is one informed by the belief that the “biological nature of man (sic) is transmitted through words” (Lega Nord, 2014a, p. 7), so that the continued use of dialects—a “language of affect”—testifies to the continued authenticity of ‘the people’ (Lega Nord, 2014a, p. 7). I have hinted at how this recollection also naturalises the course of future action. In this section, and turning to the process of decision-making, I focus on the relation between the LN-Self and alterity in order to investigate how communication intertwines with and influences FP positions. The resulting claim is that the LN articulates the ‘Other’ according to an oppositional discursive logic that allows the ‘Other’ to remain constitutively empty and to receive substantive content only in specific policy fields through particular policy decisions.

Relation to Alterity and Exteriority in Foreign Policy

Within the body of data that has been gathered in relation to the ‘South question’, a recurrent element regarding the relation that the LN has with the ‘South’ is that its Otherness is constructed *ex negativo*. That is, the Southern regions are referred to as those territories whose mayors “do not speak our [LN’s] language”, “do not share our same accents” (Salvini, 2014), and “do not have our Milanese accent, or the one from Veneto, Friuli, or Ligure” (Salvini, 2016). Similar references to language are scattered throughout the documents analysed; most relevant, though, is that they are maintained even in the latter part of the timeframe when labels of ‘spendthrift’ and ‘lazy’ have gradually been replaced by narratives of the South as being itself tired of the “colonialism” exercised by the elite in Rome (Fontana, 2019a). On this basis, a central observation is that the nativist approach to the definition of ‘the people’—centred around matters of language—implies in itself a process of Othering. More specifically, it leads to the formation of what I define here as a ‘monolithic Other’ that is identified—*ex negativo*—through *qualitative* characteristics. An implication is that its substantive content is maintained unaltered throughout the period of interest. Indeed, even when the LN effectively opened towards the South in 2017, the semantics employed indicate that ‘the South’ continued to belong to an outgroup, not least because their accent continued to be singled-out as symbol of difference, and the shift in

rhetoric is rather registered in the contention that those ‘tired populations’ must be rescued from the “*malgoverno*” in Rome (Fontana, 2019a). Hence, the sought-for openness towards ‘the South’, rather than a betrayal of ‘the people’ points to a broader dynamic.

Understood as acts towards the actor’s external world, hence specifically in terms of FP, the relevance of the above observations has to do with the fact that the acts of demarcation and differentiation envisioning a relation to the external world did connect the LN to exteriority. However, they never semantically linked alterity (in this case, the ‘South’ as Other) to notions of hostility. In other words, the South-as-Other was never constructed as an ‘alter’ that threatens ‘the people’—or their sovereignty—*because* it is not authentic, as nativist approaches suggest (see Mudde, 2017). Rather, the hostility was an outgrowth of the measures adopted by a second ‘alter’: the elite in Rome. As I illustrate, the alterity of the latter has been elaborated not on monolithic terms, but via parallels with a mythical past that establish a cross-historical relation of similarity between the government in Rome and Frederick I Barbarossa. More specifically, the LN constructs ‘the elite’ in Rome as a “Barbarossa” that threatens the natural authenticity of ‘the people’, and that *therefore* must be opposed. I define this entity as ‘historical Other’, an empty signifier that is given different substantive content depending on the policy arena at stake. Further testifying to its malleability is that the Barbarossa-Other is also found in FP decisions adopted in relation to another actor, the EU, thence strengthening the claim that FP positions are forced into a variable logic that is re-articulated and re-contextualised in a variety of situations starting from group identity developed at home.

Returning to ‘the elite’ in Rome who “robs us [*Padani*] year after year” and stands in the way of the exercise of the sovereignty by the people and for the people’s needs (Tosi, 2013), I will now turn to the contentions that LN’s members use to justify specific actions in order to study the role that the revival of the past has in legitimising present action. Pragmatically, the revival of the mythical past of the party establishes a degree of similarity between present and past contexts of operation; “We have a history, our history is that the Liga [*Liga Lumbarda*] was born to pursue freedom, to set free the North, and today we continue the fight” (Calderoli, 2016). Building on this pragmatic background, the LN then justifies its relation to exteriority by defining a functional similarity between the actor who historically threatened the (natural) authenticity of ‘the people’—that is, Barbarossa—and the actor who is presently threatening the (equally

natural) authenticity of ‘the people’. In the particular case of the above utterance, the elite in Rome. Through this mechanism, the LN naturalises the future course of action since “we [the people] are the grandchildren of those who fought against the army of Barbarossa one-thousand year ago, so today, just like before, we are ready to fight” (Bossi, 2016). Similarly, after claiming that “the people from Padania took an oath against *Roma ladrona*”, the contention is that, “the Lega was born to set free an enslaved country; we are now called to fight, and we will fight as we have already fought in the past” (Bossi, 2017). It is instructive therefore to highlight that in proposing action against particular policies—which in this case referred to the national redistribution of tax-payer money—the critiques are seldom directed at any specificity of the system criticised. Rather, the emphasis is strongly on the fact that ‘the people’ are made “slave” by a government who *therefore* is corrupt.

As can be seen, the South itself is never the ‘protagonist’ of the FP discussions of the LN. Rather, its alterity is brought centre stage whenever it is privileged by the Barbarossa-esque elite. Importantly, what is maintained of this ‘historical Other’ is solely its mode of existence vis-à-vis the LN-Self, hence its hostility towards the (natural) condition of autonomy which defines the natural authenticity of ‘the people’. It is on this basis that my claim here is that the Barbarossa-Other works as an empty signifier that is given materiality whenever a functional similarity to the mythical past is established, and the collapse it performs serve to ‘naturalise’ future action—to force action into an oppositional logic. That the Self remains organically linked to group identity developed at home is visible in the justification that members of the LN provide for Matteo Salvini’s mandate in the aftermath of the 2018 general elections, when the LN’s leader has been equated to the leader of the *Liga Lombarda*: “Alberto from Giussano left Pontida and fought for the independence of the *Lombardia* against Barbarossa; today Matteo [Salvini] from *Milan* will leave Pontida [the 2019 edition] and fight for our autonomy against the Barbarossas [originally in the plural] of the government” (Calderoli, 2019). Once again, the emptiness of the ‘historical Other’ gives it malleability, to be re-contextualised and re-articulated in a variety of situations, depending on the policy area, and FP positions are then forced into this variable. Further examples are the “Barbarossa del governo” (Zaia, 2018) who denies the validity of the referendum for independence that ‘the people’ have won, “there are 1.5mln people ready to fight, today like before. Yesterday it was against Barbarossa, today it is against a colonial state” (Zaia, 2018). The

same Barbarossa then “colonises” the Northern regions by prohibiting the use of dialects in public spaces such as schools, a decree that is seen as a clear attempt to cancel the culture distinctive of the people: “colonialism always starts from the language, and it is from there that they [Barbarossas-Other] are now seeking to cancel our culture” (Bossi, 2014). As I discuss next, it also refers to the Barbarossa in Brussel who forces the Italian government into disadvantageous agreements that would allegedly undermine the country’s cultural richness by standardising it, and that *therefore* must be voted against.

The European Union as Other

Let me briefly summarise the argument developed thus far. The Otherness of the Barbarossa-Other is not linked to qualitative characteristics of an ‘alter’, but it rather plays on the *functional similarity* of a relation of hostility towards ‘the people’. That is, the LN does not define an ‘as such’ of the hostility of the Barbarossa-government, but it articulates it in view of how the elite, as ‘alter’, impacts the general will of the people—which remains organically linked to group identity developed at home. Because hostility is not essentialized in the monolithic-Other, the relation towards it is not defined a priori, which explains why it is not necessarily linear across policy areas and throughout time. It is therefore at the imbrication of the two key rhetorical elements—that is, uses of language to perform authenticity and references to language to establish cross-historicity—that communication delineates and sustains an oppositional logic onto which to force FP positions that stabilise bundles of identification. Moving beyond the South question to showcase that the logic extends to FP broadly defined, I now move to the LN’s rhetoric towards the EU as this policy-arena provides a good example of how the oppositional logic works.

Also in this second case, the members of the LN justify the party’s FP positions by playing on a functional similarity established between the actors involved. The mechanism is straightforward in the opening lines of the party’s programme for the 2014 EU election. There, the party contends that “Europe (sic) represents the new Holy Roman Empire, centred in Brussel, with the ‘European Court of Human Rights’ representing the new papacy, centred in Strasburg” (Lega Nord, 2014b, p. 22). Specific opponents are then categorised as “parties of the past” and on this basis it becomes imperative to not “vote German” (Salvini, 2014). Furthermore, the historical-Other receives substance as militants are exhorted to recall

the “reckless members who challenged Barbarossa, defeating him and changing the course of history” because “today [2019 elections] as well our desire must be to change the course of history, and do not accept what others impose on us” (Giorgetti, 2018). It is clear therefore how FP preferences are influenced by a relation of *functional similarity* established by acts of demarcation and differentiation that imply both ‘the people’ and exteriority. This is furthermore visible in the syntax of the contentions; “as you all know, we, the people from the Lega, we were not born to be slaves, *therefore* we will vote against Merkel, against Macron” (Fontana, 2019b, emphasis added). However, precisely because such a mechanism does not imply an ‘as such’ of the hostility of the Barbarossa-Other, the relation towards that entity is not necessarily coherent across time.⁶ Exemplifying this is the economic measures implemented by the EU are problematic only when they negatively affect ‘the people’; when they do not, the EU wears the hat of “a driving force for development” (Lega Nord, 2018a), “an opportunity” that offers a “competitiveness that allows for a proper development of Italian firms, which can become the engine for growth of the country, and a pivotal point in the economy of the EU as a whole” (Lega Nord, 2018b). For these opportunities, it seems, the EU loses the hat of a Barbarossa-esque enemy. However, as soon as the hostility is perceived against the people, the EU re-turns into “the number one enemy” (Calderoli, 2016) to be fought.

CONCLUSION

This chapter started by observing that the LN has adopted a nativist approach to the definition of ‘the people’, and that it posited the uses of local dialects as a marker of belonging to an allegedly biological category. In this mechanism, *uses* of dialects played a central role in establishing the appearance of historical continuity in the party’s existence. At the same time, in 2017, the party pursued national government aspiration, thence opening towards the South-as-Other. However, it did so while maintaining consistency with the nativist approach. Notwithstanding these observations, the specialised literature lacks a coherent picture on the influence that communication has for the production of populist ideas, and how these are reinforced in FP preferences. This gap is surprising considering

⁶Importantly, this is different from claiming the ‘directionlessness’ of the FP of populist parties.

the acknowledged importance of language within the rhetoric of the party. As I argued through a review of the extant literature, existing theories are ill-suited for addressing this dimension for they proceed on a number of assumptions that give to the party a self-evident character, thereby blinding studies to an investigation of the processes which justify and sustain the wedding between thin veneer and thick ideology. I have then argued in favour of understanding communication as ‘acts of demarcation and differentiation’ that drive a wedge in society at the same time as it intertwines ‘the people’ and exteriority. This allowed me to analytically study FP as process rather than outcome, and empirically direct the investigation at the emergence and evolution of FP positions in a way that foregrounds the *continued* influence of communication. When applied to the LN case, what surfaced is that the party, in mobilising ‘acts of demarcation and differentiation’ establishes a present-past that self-legitimises the course of future action. It does so by drawing a constitutively open ‘historical Other’ that only receives substantive content in specific policy fields. This is supported by the functional similarity that LN establishes between present ‘Others’ and Frederick I Barbarossa, the historical actor against whom the mythical precursor of the LN has fought. On this evidence, the resulting claim is that while the Self is organically linked with conceptions of group identity that are developed at home, the articulations of the ‘Other’ are informed by the particular policy field at hand, and the overall structure is then actualised in the policy arena through specific policy decisions. As such, the influence of populist discourse on FP amounts to the forcing of FP into a variable Self-Other *logic*.

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